

Notes of a Tourist

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~~Nieuw Amsterdam~~, Feb. 17, 1939
Caribbean Sea, nearing Colon, Pan.

We had a very enjoyable visit at Havana. When we went on deck the morning of February 14, we found our ship anchored in a spot, which we were later to learn, was very close to where the warship Maine was destroyed, on February 14, 1898, just 41 years before.

For a good many years the wreck rested in the harbor, a menace to navigation, but was later floated, examined, and towed out to sea. Our lecturer yesterday stated that the plates indicated an internal explosion, and expressed the opinion that it was probably caused by smokeless power, which was then new, and later was accredited with having caused the destruction of three English warships.

The Cuban revolutionists were not novices; their fathers and grandfathers had been fighting for nearly three quarters of a century to secure freedom from Spain. As captives they were elusive, and found their way back to the fighting lines so quickly, that "Butcher" Weyler, corralled them as one would a bunch of cattle, with little more food or conveniences. The mortality was so frightful and the propagandists had done such good work that the people of the States clamored for war, as soon as their papers brought them the news of the sinking of the warship. "Remember the Maine," became an effective war cry which was heard around the world.

The years of American occupation brought peace, improved health; fine highways at least in Havana; commerce, and a measure of prosperity previously unknown to the common people. The United States has been an indulgent guardian at times, and helper always, but it has never won the love that our sacrifices merited.

There are those on the island, who speak kindly of Machado. He built great highways thruout Cuba and his expenditures, vast, and perhaps at times venal, put money in the pockets of the people. Under Batista, the sergeant who became Colonel, and ruler of the country, the expenditures are for the army.

Still one can see evidences of confidence that it is hard for us of the States to understand. Many beautiful new homes have recently been built, some of them far more modern in external appearance than anything we have in Lawrence. Merchants declare that business is only so so, but that sounds like talks with some home folks. The old days when men were inclined to become enthusiastic in discussing business seems to have passed with the Dodo, and the popular thing now is to play things down a bit.

The Cubans are great for sports. The races are popular, the beaches are filled, the casino draws its crowds and turns millions annually into the government treasury. The cock pits still have their devotees, but we find Batista credited with trying to dignify his country a bit. Among other things he has discouraged diving for coins and there were two lone divers about our boat, where formerly there would have been a swarm.

We had for our auto companions for the drive, Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Schlesinger, of Denver. We enjoyed their acquaintance, and Mr. Schlesinger's knowledge of Spanish helped a bit. Our driver is an asset to Cuba. His Lincoln car was old, but he showed a keen delight in letting us see worth while things, often away from the beaten paths.

At a plantation fifteen or twenty miles inland we were shown many tropical trees and plants and had them explained to us by a youth who spoke slowly and distinctly. We saw miniature bananas, in which the tree or stalk grows to maturity and bears one bunch of fruit in a year. The stalk is then cut as it otherwise would die. We saw orchids, pineapples, coffee trees, tobacco, cocoanut and other palms, hemp, agave, and many other tropical growths. At the close of our visit we were shown a boxing bout between two game cocks.

In place of boxing gloves their spurs were taped to prevent injury to the birds. A man put on an exhibition with a game cock that we saw duplicated at a circus in Brainerd, Minn., last year, in which the bird acts as if hypnotized, remaining with eyes shut in the position in which he is placed until a snap of the fingers indicated the show was over. The bird seemed to enjoy it and emitted low tones of satisfaction at being petted.

The stores are large and with complete stocks. The shelves of piece goods might well remind one of the dry goods stores of forty

years ago. All the places we visited were one price stores, which did away with the unsatisfactory methods of bargaining for each purchase.

Both the senoritas and the young men are fine looking. Their English is far better than our Spanish, but none too good. Strangely enough we found shopping far more like it is done in Lawrence, than like we shall see this afternoon in Colon.

There were many delightful features of our day's ride, but none of greater interest than our visit to the country home of the widow of a former vice president and later president of Cuba. Filled with many precious things our chauffeur and the native attendants seem to have free run of the place. There were old silver, mahogany furniture, tapestries, fine china, wonderful bed rooms, the private office of the former owner with its priceless equipment and so on.

Certainly the owner has perfect confidence in those in charge. There was no charge for admittance, and a little gratuity to the attendants was received with appreciation.

It seemed to us that nearly everything we saw was different from what we had been shown nine years ago, when we paid our first visit to the Pearl of the Antilles. We left with pleasant memories and would enjoy a return visit.

W.C.S.