

New York Journal
October 9, 1898

Stephen Crane in Havana

HAVANA, Oct. 3.—The citizen of Havana has an extraordinary lack of what might be called the sense of public navigation. It is a common lack on all shores of the Mediterranean, and the dearth of it even extends to Paris, where it is always clear that a kind of special deity continually has to protect from the pain of collision all drivers of fiacres.

But there is no special deity for the people here. They are children of pellucid chance, and if Havana was a tub and they were a lot of rubber balls prancing and bouncing within they could not be more joyously irresponsible and incompetent.

An opportunity to view this matter to good advantage is given every Thursday and Sunday evening, when a band plays in the square. A great crowd attends, and with the lights and the music and all it is not unlike the boardwalk at Asbury Park, without the boards and without the sea.

If two friends meet face to face on Broadway their greeting, if begun in the middle of the stream, is never finished there. They instantly move to the curb or in to the walls, to the slack water. They always do it, and there is nothing marvelous about it. But you should see two friends meet here when, for instance, the band is playing in the plaza and a great crowd is strolling.

Well, for their ceremony of greeting, they camp indefinitely right in the middle of everything. Of course, in Spanish countries it is customary to express joy and welcome by rushing forward and at once engaging the other man in a catchweight wrestling contest.

Suppose that there are two hundred people coming along on the same route. They are stopped, bothered, compelled to change their gait and their course. But they say not a word. They move around the impediment in silence and patience. It does not occur to them—they have no necessity for knowing—that traffic is blocked, as we say.

Nature is usually seeking to alleviate, to mend, but circumstance is always perverse, aggravating. The English are not a particularly amiable people; at least, they are not suave, and so circumstance provides them with a pattern of railway carriage which is the cruelest test of manners which life affords.

In Havana, where people do not comprehend public navigation, this perverse circumstance provides sidewalks from eighteen to forty inches wide, upon which only acrobats can make their way.

But, at any rate, a grand mystery of Spanish romance has been cleared for one mind, at any rate, by these Spanish sidewalks of Havana. In every one of those delightful tales there was a street scene in which a gallant cavalier going one way was met by a gallant cavalier going the other way. They stopped, then the first cavalier, twirling his mustache, said: "Senor, I take the wall."

But the second cavalier, laying his hand upon his sword, invariably replied: "You are mistaken, senor. I take the wall."

Whereat they drew and fell upon each other like brave gentlemen, giving and receiving wounds in the groin, lungs, liver and heart, until one was down and after he had said, "Oh, I am dead," the other sheathed his sword and went home— taking the wall.

This fighting for the inside track, for the privilege of passing next to the wall, was a mystery and an annoyance to my boyish mind. I wanted my hero to fight over the lady behind the lattice. Anything connected with that intrigue was good cause for the gore of cavaliers.

But to go out and fight with comparative strangers over the privilege of passing next to the wall, giving and receiving wounds in the groin, lungs, liver and heart, seemed a very pointless proceeding. But it is all plain at present. It was because the Spaniard had as much sense of public navigation as he has now, and because the sidewalks of Seville were only from eighteen to forty inches wide.