

New York Journal
November 6, 1898

Stephen Crane on Havana

HAVANA, Oct. 28.—When in other cities of the world the church bells peal out from their high towers, slowly and solemnly, with a dignity taken from the sky, from the grave, the hereafter, the Throne of Judgment—voices high in air calling, calling, calling, with the deliberation of fate, the sweetness of hope, the austerity of a profound mystic thing—they make the devout listen to each stroke, and they make the infidels feel all the height and width of a blue sky, a Sunday morning golden with sun drops. But—when at blar dawn you are sleeping a sleep of both the just and the unjust and a man climbs into an adjacent belfry and begins to hammer the everlasting, murdering Hades out of the bell with a club—your aroused mind seems to turn almost instinctively toward blasphemy. Religion commonly does not go off like an alarm clock, and, as symbolized by the bells, it does not usually sound like a brickbat riot in a tin store. However, this is the Havana method. I fancy they use no such term here as "bell ringer"; they probably use "bell fighter." But, such passion! Such fury! One can lie awake for hours and listen to the din of a conflict, which reminds one of nothing but a terrible combat between two hordes of gigantic blood-mad knights of the Middle Ages, whose armor had unfortunately been constructed from resonant metal. On feast days the clamor simply shakes out of one all faith in human intelligence. It is so endless, so inane, so like the din of monkeys with tin kettles. But the bells must be very good bells. Otherwise they could not stand these tremendous assaults. The bell fighters must be very good men. Otherwise they would soon succumb to the physical strain.

One apprehends that as soon as the tangled affairs of Cuba are arranged in some fashion there will be a considerable inflow of Americans looking for work. In a small way it has already begun. But there is no market for American labor in Cuba. Naturally, labor is the one thing that the island contains in ever-increasing abundance. There is the remnant of reconcentrados; there are the refugees returning from foreign ports; there will soon be a great mass of disbanded insurgents, and, last, there are many Spanish soldiers who intend to stay here. Labor will be for a long time almost as cheap as it is in China.

Such a thing as a clerkship will be grabbed by competent, well-educated, but financially reduced, Cubans for a wage that would not support an American. The island is not at all a Klondike, where a man might go with only his wits, a pick and a pan and yet win success.

The vanguard of a caravan of indigent Americans looking for fortune in this new country has already succumbed here, and one or two have even been shipped home by subscription of the newspaper men, cattlemen and others.

Cuba is the place for a wise investment of capital, but it offers no gold mine to the American who has none. Tobacco land, for instance, can be had very cheap, but before the appearance of the first crop a great deal of money—in proportion to acreage—has to be expended. Tobacco raising, indeed, is an expensive business, and, disclaiming all idea of

speaking with authority, it is at least proper for me to warn all small capitalists to consider the question as something beyond small farming in the United States and to thoroughly look into the matter before embarking for Cuba.

One newly arrived American announced that he had come to open a law practice. His equipments for this venture were youth, a very recent diploma, some few dollars and a perfectly ingenuous ignorance of the Spanish tongue. The fortunes of men are in the wind, and the wind blows where it pleases. No one can say that this young man may not succeed, but at least it does seem that he is a little too soon.

However, his inexperience of American practice will not militate against him here. There is nothing in the American forms of procedure that resembles the Spanish forms of procedure. As near as one may learn, the function of a lawyer in Havana is mainly that of a go-between, who arranges a dicker between the honorable court and the client who has the most money. All that will be changed? Yes, but there are a great many things in Cuba which are not going to be changed in two minutes.

When the Earl of Malmesbury was Minister for Foreign Affairs, he in 1852 wrote to the British Ambassador at Berlin about a certain political complication in the following terms: "You will, I hope, use all your influence at Berlin to show the King that the Duke of Augustenberg only delays his assent to the indemnity from a foolish hope that a row may take place somewhere and somehow among the five powers, and that in the scuffle he may get something more. It would be very desirable for the King of Prussia to make him understand that by further delays the only chance he runs is that of losing the terms now offered him."

If it would do any good the fine thing would be to have this straightforward parable printed on cardboard convenient for pasting in the hats of Spaniards here and elsewhere. They are figuring precisely on the lines of that illustrious Duke of Augustenberg. Some political miracle, some tremendous war that will force the United States to engage herself tooth and nail in the defense of her own soil, will enable Spain to sail in again and hold or regain her precious islands. It is stupid, but—what would you? The ordinary Spaniard has little knowledge of how the nations conduct their relations with each other. He interprets the mere land-hungry policy of Germany to mean a formidable enmity to the United States. He thinks the Parisian journals mean what they have said, and, meaning what they have said, that they voice a menace to the greater Republic. He thinks even that our southern states are only waiting for a supreme crisis to again disengage themselves from the Union. In fact, he dreams still of a miraculous rescue of his country from her sorry plight.

Furthermore, he drinks in every sound of the tumult in the United States over the management of our army in the Santiago campaign and over the distress and illness in the American camps at Chickamauga and other places. This uproar causes him to believe that if he had the whole thing to do over again he would have been victor. If he had known the plight of the American army at Santiago he would have done better; he would have held on; he would even have attacked. A thousand expedients occur to him now that he has all this information from inside the American lines, so to speak. And he gnashes his teeth over it.