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"You Must!" -- "We Can't!"

HAVANA, NOV. 4.—The dull limes in this city are in no way improved by the fact that an American commission and a Spanish commission are in a juxtaposition here which might be intended for the preservation of silence and inertia. For a long time everybody prayed for the coming of the American military commission. All would be arranged and improved immediately after the arrival of that distinguished body. The Cubans rather expected them to come with trumpeters and banners, escorted by both cavalry and infantry; field guns and warships would boom, and the Cuban populace and those Spaniards who have climbed hastily to the correct side of the fence were prepared to line Obispo street and cheer themselves black in the face. It was to be the grand emancipation, a magnificent ceremony of gold lace and cocked hats. Even the little American colony often said to itself: "Oh, just wait until the commission gets here."

The commission arrived ultimately, after we had been harrowed in proper fashion by a series of rumors and false starts. For my part, I was sitting in the Cafe Inglaterra one morning when some of the waiters suddenly crowded toward the door and stared into the plaza. Being interested in finding out what so attracted them, I looked also, and saw a young man in a white duck uniform of the American navy crossing the plaza. It was Lieutenant Marsh, of Admiral Sampson's staff.

This to the greater part of Havana was the arrival of the American commission. It was an event, of course, but never a spectacle. Havana opinion of the conquerors faded 50 per cent in a single day. The reconcentrados found to their intense amazement that on that night they were not merely as hungry as ever, but that they had now to struggle with an appetite whetted out of all proportion by a false and absurd anticipation. Really, in the strictest sense, nothing whatever had happened.

At present the two commissions are engaged in a sort of a polite and graceful deadlock. "The Americans say: "You must!" The Spaniards reply: "We can't." The Spaniards will soon have to make the best of a bad business, but they hold on with the tenacity and hopeful innocence of children. It seems impossible to beat any truth into their heads save with a hatchet. Something will turn up, they think. It is impossible to many of these minds that such a calamity as this evacuation should come to pass. France, or Germany, or civil war in the United States, or Divine Providence, will make interposition in time.

Meanwhile, although the reconcentrados are gradually getting their voids partly occupied, the people who are the greatest sufferers are the Cuban insurgents, who are still in the field. Their mental condition approximates stupefaction. They don't know whether they are afoot or ahorseback. They ask the same questions of everybody who they think is entitled to know the slightest things. "Well, what is going to become of us, eh? Are we all Americans now? What are we, anyhow? When are the Spaniards to be put out? When? When? When?"

There is a certain eloquence in the speech of a hungry, half-clad, homeless man who has lived three years in the manigua and who is wondering if the sweetheart he left long ago in town could still distinguish between him and any other. They are marvelously patient about it—the men more than the officers. Just here it might be well to interpolate that the Havana province insurgents are very different from those patriots who so successfully did little or no fighting at Santiago.

This province has been loaded, always, with Spanish troops, and the revolutionary bands have been kept on the keen jump, with perhaps a fight every day. They had none of those lovely mountain sanitariums which at critical times formed the safe abode of the Santiago warrior.

It is only fair to say that the present situation does not seem to be at all the fault of the American Military Commission. I have an idea that they are mad clear through to the bone, although they are as reticent as so many Russian diplomats. They have bucked squarely into the Spanish Commission, and have been met with the usual reply of "We can't," and also with "Wait until we hear from Madrid," and "Wait for the decision of the Paris Commissions." The usual Spanish intrenchment is "We can't;" the second is "Wait." And they fight it out on those lines with heroism.

Some day we will get over considering these people clever in some ways. As a matter of truth, they are shockingly stupid. They are of the Mediterranean, that accursed sea which in modern times bathes only the feet of liars and of men of delay. Catch any Spaniard in a lie—it may be a Havana cabman or it may be the redoubtable Weyler—and he fights you off with the unthinking desperation of a cat in a corner. He will never admit it—never—never. Confront him with proofs; show him a sworn statement signed by the flaming pen of the recording angel, but no—he looks at you with dull, senseless eyes and shakes his head eternally. "No, señor! No, señor! No, señor!" You can't move him. You can't even budge him an inch. There he sticks in his corner. You can only get a confession out of him by killing him and then journeying to hell to wrest it from his spirit.

This is about the measure of his intelligence. He has no knowledge of the tremendous and terrible art of half truth. He proceeds always on the basis of flat, wooden lying. A good many fine American tempers are doomed to be ruined in Cuba before the evacuation.

His other great principle of action is delay. Instead of opposing rational statement and argument, he will often meet the other side with seeming amiable acquiescence which is positively alluring and then he will proceed to organize a system for delaying the proceedings which can't be beaten anywhere in the world.

There are two elements at work in the Spanish mind at present. One is the dogged fatalism that Cuba will always belong to Spain. This arises simply from the fact that within everybody's recollection Cuba has always belonged to Spain. The other element arises from the opportunity, whatever betide, to pinch a few more millions out of Cuba. So naturally they have got their lies and their delays all up in harness, and are working them night and day. When our military commission returns to the United States, there won't be a sweet disposition left in it.