The Cuban Electorate, Its Characteristics and Composition

I have spent several years of living among the Cuban people, coming in actual touch with their daily life, where a just idea can be had of the population, as to what they are, and what their prospects are.

Having lived for five years among them, never having left the island in that time, and having gained merely a working knowledge of their language, I believe I can describe them just about as they really are.

I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I am as certain in my own mind what the future of this experiment of self-government on their part is going to be as I am that for five years last past I have been living in that beautiful island.

By the inevitable law of sequence from cause to effect, obtains here, as of course it will obtain, this experiment will be a fizzle as bad if not worse than what has gone before.

It is true, the last election in 1908 passed off quietly, that is for the Cubans. But let it be remembered it is no thing to be good, if a giant stands over you with a club, not stuffed, and politely intimates that it is for your health to walk in a certain direction, and walk straight, and see that you do it, and it is a totally different thing from being to be left to wander at your own sweet will.

Thus was the state of things during the last elections. The Cubans knew the thousands of American troops, the best soldiers in the world, self-controlled, orderly and self-respecting, offended as no other men are offended, were watching them. They knew that they would spring like a tiger at the word of command and that they would fall like one man in maintaining and enforcing the utmost order. They knew their mountain guns, carried on mule back, could penetrate every highway and byway, and could be set up in half a minute, ready for action, and could pour forth 150 shots a minute. They knew also that every mountain pass in this island was known now to our officers, since this last occupation, and that there could be no taking to the woods again, as under the Spanish rule, without being hounded at once by an irresistible foe. So it was quite the proper thing to be good, and they were, because they had to be.

CUBAN CHARACTERISTICS.

I am not writing in any spirit of unfairness toward the Cubans. They have been amusing and some engaging quite. I am simply endeavoring to tell, after an ample sojourn among them, what the real characteristics of the Cuban electorate are, as I have observed them, so that Americans chancing to read this article may be able to form a conclusion of what their political prospects are likely to be if permanently left to themselves.

In the first place they are the most excitable people, I believe, on the land world. I have circumnavigated the globe. I have been to China, and have seen also the Japanese and other inhabitants of the East Indies. I have also seen my own country from one end to the other, two territories and Alaska alone excepted, and as far as my observation goes, thus somewhat extended, these people surpass all others that I have ever seen in nervous excitability.

They tear a passion in tatters, and not only that, but they tear up the tatters themselves, fling them down and stamp upon them; they render the most ordinary sentiments or emotions in shrieks of vociferation and whirlwinds of gesticulation.

A stranger, before he has obtained enough facility in the language to understand what they are talking about, is simply dumbfounded. He does not know what to make of it.

Are they all crazy, or has some terrible or unwonted thing happened, he wonders, or are they violently angry at each other?

Nothing of the sort! They are simply exchanging the compliments of the season, remarking how pleasant the day is today, or what a heavy rain they had yesterday, or how unlucky it was that quite little incident happened; "caramba" it was "tremendo!" or how fortunate it was that other little incident happened which was agreeable, "Ave Maria" it was "magnifico," "esplendido," "delicioso," and so on, ad nauseam.

AVALANCHE OF VERBIAGE.

This state of things obtains in ordinary, casual intercourse, but when they touch on politics, as they are much inclined to do, for that is a most engaging subject with them, then look out for avalanches of verbiage, such as one never heard before, accompanied with every possible contortion and motion of the human body from head to foot.

In order to get the full effect of such an inviting political discussion, get in one of their second class railway coaches and ride awhile. Their first class coaches are only our average car, not quite that, but their second class coaches are more kinds of second class than you ever saw before. But never mind, if you are fairly well padded, and can stand a really hard seat for a while without very great inconvenience, get right in, and the chances are ten to one that before you have ridden 10 minutes the fun will begin.

Be it remembered in the first place, that railway cars here are always the scenes of noise and confusion. If you have the idea that people here quietly get in a car, take a seat, and talk in a reasonably low tone of voice to each other, as do other people, you have a very wrong idea of them. They do nothing of the kind. Every one gets in with an apparent determination to talk faster, louder and more continuously than anybody around him or her, and above everything else, to be seen, to attract attention, to be noticed to be gazed at. This is the delight of the Cuban, man or woman. If they cannot get this attention by sitting down, they will get it by standing up in their seats, in the aisles, anywhere so that only they can attract attention. This they simply must have. One favorite device, particularly with the women, is to turn over the seat and sit so that they can sit facing the whole car.

I saw one colored "lady" once go into apparently frightful spasms, after turning over her seat so that everybody could see her. The conductor in great alarm rushed a doctor in from the first class car, who after carefully examining her, declared there was not a thing the matter with her. She thereupon, seeing that her game for sympathy and attention would not work, sat up with great calmness and began arranging her hair and adjusting her numerous ribbons.

Now, remember, still further, that about every passenger in five, male or female, has one or more roosters, or fighting cocks, with himself or herself, with perhaps a hen or two besides, stowed on the seat, under the seat, or held by the legs head downward, and that those fowl add their protests to the general din, and you can then imagine that a Cuban railway car is not exactly the place for a rest cure. This state of things ordinarily obtains, without politics thrown in, and when that element enters, it certainly does seem, for a time, as if the very furies had been let loose.

This usually starts by some big negro either sitting down, or more usually standing up, throwing out his chest and beginning a diatribe against the United States. Our poor country almost always has to take it first. It is used as a kind of buffer as it were that all hands can kick at or as a kind of orchestral prelude to the coming political play. Anywise it is always lugged in, usually at the beginning. It is the Americans this, and the Americans that, with no very complimentary allusions. The brave Cubans had the Spaniards beaten to a "frazzle," to use a word of recent presidential coinage, and just then the Americano had to come and stick his nose into the fight and take all the glory away from the Cubans.

If the Cubans wanted to they could meet the Americans even handed, and drive them into the sea; they could annihilate them.

By this time excitement is pretty well started, and then they begin to quarrel about their own impalpable political differences and blackguard each other. A description is well nigh impossible. Chaos cannot be described. It must be see and heard to be appreciated. They shake their fists in each other's noses, contort their faces, roll their eyes, shiek, yell and howl. I do not know that anything more can be said, but I have not exaggerated. This is literally a calm statement of their political discussions. Any American would confirm this statement who had lived here any length of time, and had begun to understand something of the people.

CUBANS ARE UNGRATEFUL.

Another trait of the Cubans is their ingratitude; a willingness to receive anything or everything from any source as if it were a matter of right, and with no thought of thankfulness in return. I have met all sorts and conditions of men since I have lived here, and I have never heard but one expression of gratitude toward the United States, on the part of a Cuban, and that was from a man who spoke English well, having been educated as a doctor in New York.

He seemed to have some appreciation of the disinterested action on the part of our government and people, in coming to their aid when we did, freeing them, releasing them from a great burden of debt, cleaning their filthy cities and putting them in good sanitary condition, starting their public school system, organizing their postal system, building new roads, bringing in new capital, giving them every opportunity to frame their own constitution, and then voluntarily hauling down our flag and starting them on a career of self-government with every possible advantage and assistance to them and no corresponding advantage to ourselves.

It was the most unique case in history of national disinterestedness. Our reward was to have our flag insultingly hissed by the Cubans when it was lowered in the plaza of Santiago, before the embarkation of our troops. It was the most unique case in history of selfishness and ingratitude on the part of any people. But these are some of their distinct characteristics not only in their national but in their individual life.

National civic pride, such as we know it, which would sacrifice and undergo hardships and loss for our government, is utterly foreign to their habits of thought. They are for their government, or their so-called party, simply for what they can get out of it and nothing more.

I am of course writing of the people as a whole, and of their electorate as a whole.

There are of course notable exceptions. The late president, Estrada Palma, was one, and there are others. Palma, the Cubans simply hounded to his death. The epitaph recently put on his grave in Santiago is most pathetic and speaks volumes. It was put upon his monument by his family, "It is better to die in honor, than to live in ignominy."

The poor old man died of a broken heart. While there are a few other patriotic men like President Palma, they are notable exceptions, but as far as the mass of the electorate goes, in my judgment, there is no such thing as patriotism as we know it.

In the individual the same persistent trait of selfishness obtains. He will treat with great suavity a person, as long as he thinks he can make or get something out of him, and as long as he is getting something.

Nothing is too good for you, then, that is, in words, but in words only.

No kind of fawning obsequiousness is too much, providing it does not cost him anything.

But when he sees there is nothing further to be gained, and that you have given him all you are going to, his suavity is at once exchanged for brusqueness and insult. They treat each other in just the same way. You are no exception. This is their habit of mind, their characteristic, as natural to them as the air they breathe. They will profess violent friendship for each other and suddenly change to as violent animosity. They understand each other so well that this does not seem at all strange, only as a matter of course.

MERCURIAL RACE.

I have seen two Cubans quarreling to the point of actual blows one day, flinging at each other the direst maledictions. The next day I have seen them walking arm in arm in the friendliest intercourse. The affair of yesterday has apparently passed out of their minds. They have forgotten it, or at all events some new motives of self interest have intervened. They are distinctly volatile and unreliable. Like their own Cuban flea, you never know where to find them next.

I have been giving some of the prevailing characteristics of the Cuban electorate as I have observed them, and now how large is it and of what classes does it consist? Right here let me say I have not been trying to describe all the people, who live in the island. Very far from that! There is a large body of intelligent, industrious, law-abiding people, viz., the Spaniards, or those of immediate Spanish extraction.

These are the shopkeepers and their clerks and assistants, mostly in the smaller towns, but also in the large cities as well. They are also those engaged in other productive occupations, a large part of the productive labor there being Spanish. They do not vote any more than Americans do there, largely because they are unwilling to give up their native citizenship just as we Americans are, and further because of obstacles put in their way of becoming Cuban citizens. The Cubans do not want any Spaniards to become naturalized, and so perchance take away any of their opportunities for getting public office. The Spaniards attend strictly to their own business, and are many of them prosperous merchants, worthy of respect, forehanded and thrifty, forming a class of people from whom no trouble comes, and they would be a credit to any community. They are therefore in no sense a part of the Cuban electorate. The Cuban electorate consists at present of over 300,000 registered voters. Out of this 300,000 votes and over, cast in the last election, in 1908, fully four-tenths were those of as vicious, lazy, worthless and ignorant negroes, of pure African blood if such a term can be used, or of mixed blood, as anywhere cumber and burden the face of this earth.

In the province of Oriente, the eastern province of the island, where I have been living, 80 per cent and over are negroes or those of mixed blood.

In other portions of the island the proportion of native Cuban whites is much larger, notably in the province of Havana.

The so-called white part of the Cuban voting population is largely tinctured with negro blood, however, which makes it as a whole distinctly inferior to that part of the community which is Spanish. You are never quite sure whether you have the real thing or not. In my judgment, in any event, the Cuban at his best is distinctly inferior to his Spanish cousin.

It should be remembered, however, that I am writing of the people as a mass, which of course is the only way to judge them, with reference to their political capacities and prospects.

SOME ARE REFINED.

There is a part, with reference to the whole electorate, a very small part, it is true, but still a part, of refined, cultured and delightful Cuban people, particularly in the larger cities. Their proportion, however, with reference to the whole is so small in voting strength as to be practically powerless to have much weight politically. The negro vote clearly holds the balance of power. They threatened just before the last election to run a distinctively negro party of their own, and they came very near doing so. No doubt they will do it ere long, if the present government under President Gomez does not hand over to them a sufficiently large number of offices.

There is no educational qualification whatever; and all this ignorant mass of black stupidity, cupidity and viciousness, has the right to vote by the Cuban law, and besides that there is no line of demarcation between the negro and the white whatever, as there is with us and one can then form an opinion of what their future is likely to be. The negro is not only as good as a white man there, but he seems to think he is much superior.

If our experiment of universal negro suffrage, with our American negro as the factor, greatly superior as he is to the Cuban negro, and nurtured as he had been for two centuries, under the elevating influence of Anglo-Saxon supervision, proved to be but a saturnalia of robbery, misery and disintegration, threatening civilization itself until out of very self-preservation, it had to be practically abolished; it can be surmised what such a controlling element of African suffrage is going to result in here. There has got to be elimination of some sort with some difference made between the utterly ignorant at least, and those able to write their own names, or disaster utmost will follow.

History is not going to make any exception in its processes from natural causes to natural effects even to suit the convenience of the self-complacent and self-satisfied Cuban. In my judgment there is going to be but one inevitable ultimate end, and what will then happen, every American well knows. The Cubans had solemn enough warning from President Roosevelt in his message of December, 1906, where he warns them in substance that if they are not able to rule themselves this time from within, some other power will surely rule them from without.

CUBAN CUSTOMS.

A few further outlines of the Cuban on his native heath may not be amiss in addition to what I have already written.

It is an amusing thing to see the Cuban buy his groceries in the small villages and towns. In these places the grocery store is the meeting place for the natives, where they can have an opportunity to be seen and to talk, their chief delights.

They usually go to make their purchases, armed with two empty beer bottles, one for oil and one for melted lard, of which latter commodity they use immense quantities. Their food is simply reeking with it. They buy in infinitesimal quantities and make more fuss over it than if they were provisioning for twenty men. With every little purchase of rice, codfish, beans, bread, oil, lard and pork, their main staples, say a "cuartillo" or two and one-half cents' worth of each, they demand and get, too, a "napa" with each purchase. The merchant expects this "napa" business and provides for it, and indeed he could not do any business without it. They always expect they will cheat each other. No one trusts the other at all, and they are right, too, for they do get cheated and cheat. This may also be called one of their characteristics.

The merchant could no more trust one of them to be honest in any of their little purchasing transactions than he could trust them with a hundred dollar bill.

The "napa" consists of candy, a little bit of oil, a little scrap of cod fish and similar articles, which they yell and shriek for until they have gotten and claim as their right.

They try to confuse the merchant, by rapidly buying a "cuartillo" of this, another of that, and still another of another kind of stuff, in quick succession, then waiting a minute or two, until he is waiting on somebody else, and has his attention diverted, and then when he is thus busy, rapidly ordering something else. In this way they try to, and frequently do, confuse him, in the adding up of the total, so that they can cheat him out of a "cuartillo" or two. As the grocery merchants in the smaller towns are mostly Cubans, it is a case of diamond cut diamond and no sympathy need be wasted on either party.

I have seen a fine looking, well dressed white man, the owner of several large new houses in the town where he lived, and well to do, spend 10 minutes buying five cents worth of cod fish, insisting on just such and such quality, and then wrangling 10 minutes more to get just the kind of "napa" he wanted. Can one conceive of an American of any station in life doing that? Of course not. He would be simply ashamed to. But with the Cuban, the only shame consists in the fear that he has not been successful in beating the seller out of a few cents. This to him is disgrace indeed. This may be called another of their characteristics.

SINFULAR LAWS.

Again, some very singular laws still obtain here which will seem incredible to American readers. The following two, for instance, that I shall mention, are still absolutely in force. Many cumbersome and absurd provisions of the old Spanish law have been removed, by decree, by the American governors, either during the first or the last occupations, but these two extraordinary ones still remain. Our governors have had enough to do as it is. Let us hope these laws will also shortly be changed.

Woe to the poor soul who meets with an accident of whatever nature in Cuba! Are you overturned in a railway smashup and have two ribs and a leg broken for instance? If so, there you lie, it may be in scorching sunshine or drenching rain, until the nearest judge or official can be found to make an investigation of your case and certify that you came into your present condition by accident, and not by the attempt of anybody to murder you, and then he orders you to be removed to a hospital or some other place of treatment. Now suppose the judge or officer cannot be found immediately to pass on your case, or is otherwise engaged. You can certainly, you will say, be at least removed to some nearby house, or the shade of a neighboring tree where your sufferings may be eased a little. You cannot. Again, you may say, a doctor, if obtainable, can amputate your limb if necessary, before the pronunciamento of the judge or that of an officer can be obtained. He cannot. There you lie until the interminable processes of this absurd law are gone through with. Why in the name of a merciful heaven, was such a law ever put in force? Quien sabe?

Now further, in case of such a serious accident, suppose you die, which would probably be the very best thing for you to do. Can you be then left at least to be decently buried? You cannot. You have to have the top of your skull sawed open to see what you died of.

I know this seems perfectly amazing and incredible, but it is nevertheless strictly true.

I will give two cases that came under my own personal observation. For several years I was connected with the large copper mines at El Cabre, where several hundred men were employed, almost all Americans or Spaniards by the way, Cuban labor having been found utterly impracticable. One day a Spanish laborer fell down a shaft some 300 feet deep, and was killed. He was brought up to the surface stone dead. The judge of course first passed on his death and then after this examination, in order to comply with the law, a Cuban doctor, then in the employ of the company, and not having proper surgical instruments of his own, took an ordinary carpenter's saw and sawed the top of the man's head off to see what he died off. It was a gruesome sound to hear this operation thus being delicately performed. I hear it yet.

Again, at Punta Sal, where the company had large smelting works, just across the harbor from Santiago, a Spanish laborer returning from Santiago one night, loaded up with the juice that both cheers and inebriates, in endeavoring to land from the boat onto the long wharf, where the water was very deep, in the darkness of the night, slipped, lost his footing and plunged headlong into the rising tide. Numerous witnesses saw the occurrence. He was too drunk to save himself and his companions were not able to locate him in the darkness, and he naturally was drowned. Early in the educated man, a graduate of Columbia. One would suppose here certainly there was no use of any further medical investigation as to the cause of his death. But after the judicial investigation on the part of a judge who came from Santiago, with all his legal paraphernalia, the company's doctor, a highly educated man, a graduate of Columbia medical school, although a Cuban, in order to comply with the law had to open the man's skull so as to ascertain what he died of. I jokingly asked the doctor if this was not what might be called surplusage as it were. He said it was the most arrant, utter nonsense, but the law had to be complied with, before the poor devil could have his well earned certificate of death. These laws are executed most ordinarily by very intelligent persons, but frequently by such people as I have been describing, and any American can devoutly pray, I am sure, that if any very serious accident does happen to him, requiring instant relief and medical care and common sense treatment, it may in God's mercy be instantaneously fatal. It certainly would be far preferable.

CUBAN BLACK AND TANS

I have never seen such gradations of color in those belonging to the negroid, or African races as I have seen there. I have seen people purple black, I mean just what I say, black with a purple tinge. Then they range upward toward the white; yellow, brown, tan, reddish, mixed with the Indian or Caribean blood. A not unusual combination is a red-headed, freckled mulatto. Where smallpox scars are added, as they frequently are, with the loss of a tooth or two in front, the "tout ensemble" is not agreeable to the naked eye. One should wear dark spectacles there as a matter of precaution.

Now in conclusion let me say, on first going there I viewed the Cuban, with "Cuba libre" ringing in my ears, enthusiastically, then hopefully, then doubtfully, then despairingly, and now after a prolonged residence there, hopelessly. I have endeavored to portray him here in this short article, not as we used to think he was, an oppressed patriot, struggling for true liberty, which he neither was nor is, nor in my judgment with his prevailing traits what they are, ever can be ready for. I have observed him closely for those two years of my residence there, with an eye somewhat trained by extended travel elsewhere, and my own judgment is that he never will be capable of sane and continuous self-government.

Spain, no doubt has many things to repent of, but if there ever was a nation that had her chastisement, Spain certainly has had it in her continuous long attempt to handle these people and keep them quiet. They never did and do not now deserve self-government, and I believe will not have it very much longer.

The United States has tried for the last few years at great cost to start these people off in independence and keep them going, but the first two attempts failed miserably, as I believe this present one is bound to do very shortly.

ELTON HOYT.

H. PERCIVAL DODGE,
United States Minister to Morocco.

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