

LIBERATORS *and* HEROES of the WEST INDIAN ISLANDS



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by

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THE STORY OF CUBA

THE story of Cuba's long struggle for independence is for us a bridge between the past and present, between West Indian and American history. It is so closely interwoven with our own history that we feel as if we were coming home. This largest island of the West Indies is our nearest neighbor across the Straits of Florida; and its wars of independence became in their final months our own Spanish-American War.

In this air age the width of the straits seems hardly any distance at all. The island is so near that Cubans fly from Havana to Miami of a morning, attend to their errands of business or pleasure, and return home that afternoon. This sense of nearness is not wholly a product of the air age. It dates back more than a century. In the period of Cuba's struggle for liberation, Key West, Miami, New Orleans, and New York City became second homes to refugees who were planning revolution. The men who are Cuba's heroes of independence walked our streets and shared their hopes and fears with American friends. Some of the most thrilling episodes of the war story have to do with expeditions which went secretly from our shores.



LÓPEZ AND HIS TIMES

He gave to Cuba her national flag.

NARCISO LOPEZ is remembered in Cuban history for the expeditions which he led in the years 1850 and 1851 and for his tragic death as a result of those efforts at revolt. But in the memories of the Cuban people he is the creator of the nation's flag, that flag which he planned and had made in a New York rooming house long before it could be flown on the island.

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I.

HE COMES TO CUBA

Narciso López was an adopted not a native son of Cuba. Born in Venezuela in 1798 or 1799, he spent his boyhood on his father's large ranch. His life there was a free, happy, outdoor one. He rode the plains with his father's men and became an excellent shot and a skillful rider. That kind of life ended when his father lost his properties early in the South American Wars of Independence. From 1810 on, Venezuela was torn by conflict. The family moved to Caracas, where his father went into business.

Narciso was a boy of fourteen or fifteen when Bolívar led an army across the Andes from the west and entered Caracas, where he was hailed as "The Liberator." But that patriot triumph was brief. New Spanish armies swept across Venezuela, and Bolívar's cause seemed hopeless. Soon young López entered the Spanish army which was in control of the province. He received his military training in those years and rose to high rank in the Spanish army. Yet when the long Wars of Independence were ended and Spain withdrew her armies from all of South America, the patriot leaders who were forming a new, independent government urged López to join them. They even offered to give him the same rank in their army of defense that he was holding under Spain.

López chose, however, to go with the Spanish army to Cuba. In following West Indian history we need to

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remind ourselves that by the end of the 1820's Spain had lost all her American colonies from Mexico south through Central and South America. Cuba and Puerto Rico were all that remained under her control. It was therefore natural that one who was loyal to Spain should go to one or the other of these islands. López married a young Cuban lady of excellent family and came to consider the island as his home.

Military orders took him during the following years to Spain, where he rose to the highest ranks in the army, awarded in recognition of his services, and also held for a time the position of governor of an important region. Returning to Cuba, he was deputy governor of the city of Trinidad, until in 1843 he was relieved of his duties by the Spanish authorities.

During these years Narciso López came to know the political corruption of the Spanish rule, both in the mother country and in Cuba. In Spain he took an active part in the efforts of liberal groups. In Cuba, after his retirement from the army, he engaged in business enterprises. But there was growing within him a strong urge to give himself to the freeing of Cuba from Spanish rule.

To understand and appreciate the work of López, we must turn back into the eighteenth century and follow the course of Cuba's history. Only so can we understand why she remained so long a Spanish colony.

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II.

CUBA REMAINS LOYAL

The Cuba to which young López had come in the 1820's was beginning to be stirred by unrest. But she had gained the name of the "ever-faithful isle" in the early years of South America's revolutions. There were several reasons why the Cubans did not attempt the break with Spain at that time. Cuba was an island colony. Revolutionary ideas were not passed about as freely as between neighbor colonies on the mainland. Then, as we shall see, any revolts could be put down more easily there than on the continent. Patriots with liberal ideas could be closely watched and taken into custody before they could escape the island. Chiefly, however, the colony remained fairly quiet even in the early part of the period of revolution because of capable governors during the later 1700's.

It is an interesting fact that Cuba's period of beginning prosperity dates from an event which the islanders had greatly dreaded.

BRITISH OCCUPATION

During the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), in which the nations of Europe were in conflict, Cubans had watched with alarm the growing power of Great Britain, whose victories over the French in North America were extending her power over Atlantic waters. Cuba was a rich prize coveted by the nations, and her inhabitants feared

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attack. In 1763 the attack came. Havana was besieged and taken by the British. (It was for this campaign, we remember, that the British colonies in America sent troops which included in their number Lawrence Washington, older brother of George, and Israel Putnam.)

British occupation, which had been so feared, proved to be of real benefit to the island. Cuba had been neglected by Spain. For the first time in her history she enjoyed a government which looked toward her progress. Free commerce, which Spain had always forbidden, was encouraged. The ports were opened to all vessels, and trade improved greatly. Roads were built across the island, and the city of Havana, which had suffered from very bad sanitary conditions, was cleaned up under an efficient administration.

The British were in Cuba for only a brief time, hardly a year. In 1763, by one of those treaties made in Europe which had such effect on the West Indies, England gave Cuba back to Spain in exchange for Florida.

Cubans and Spaniards joined in rejoicing as the foreigners departed and Spanish officials returned. But as time went on, Cuban historians agreed in saying that in this period of British rule the first step was taken toward gaining prosperity for Cuba.

LUIS DE LAS CASAS

Governor Luis de las Casas, who came to Cuba in 1790, might well be counted as one of Cuba's heroes of peace.

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Although he remained only six years, in that brief time he moved Cuba further ahead toward a life of her own than the colony had been moved in the previous century.

He came at a time when new forces were at work in the world. The French Revolution had begun. The new republic to the north was taking her independent place in the world. He favored trade with the United States and thus gave great encouragement to the sugar industry which was developing in Cuba. He gave the city of Havana a public lighting system which made the streets safer from prowlers and thieves. He established schools for poor children and founded an orphan asylum. Bridges were built during his term of office and roads were improved. He encouraged the publication of the first newspaper in Havana.

Las Casas was a broad-minded and cultured gentleman. He turned the pompous court gatherings of his predecessors in office into pleasant social gatherings in which Spaniards mingled with Cubans. The years of his rule are referred to by Cubans as the dawn of their civilization. Leading Cubans joined with Spanish officials in the measures which were of benefit to the people of the island. There grew up a feeling of pride in the colony. The comment is sometimes made that for the first time Cubans chose to think of themselves as Cubans, not simply as Spanish colonials.

Las Casas was succeeded by another good governor, the Count of Santa Clara. Thus, the people of Cuba, as they

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entered the nineteenth century, were not so tempted as were the South Americans to revolution.

SPANISH MISRULE AGAIN

Cuba's troubles began when in 1813 Spain welcomed back to the throne King Ferdinand VII, who had been deposed to make room for the brother of Napoleon. The South Americans had refused to be ruled by a Napoleon and had begun their revolts. Before long the Spaniards themselves had revolted. In 1812 they had adopted a liberal constitution. Among other reforms it made place for the colonies to be represented in the Cortes, the nation's governing assembly. Both Cuba and Puerto Rico took advantage of the chance to send representatives to this assembly during the years between 1812 and 1814. But when Ferdinand VII came back to power, he threw the liberals into jail. The Constitution of 1812 was done away with, and the colonies were back in their old position.

PLOTS AND CONSPIRACIES

From this time on, the history of Cuba is a story of plots, conspiracies, and revolts, all looking toward freedom from Spain. Secret societies were organized. One took its name from the patriot hero of South American independence and called itself *Soles y Rayos de Bolívar* (Suns and Rays of Bolívar). It planned a Cuban republic. The uprising was to take place in several cities on the same day.

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But the government found out about it. On the intended day the leaders were arrested and thrown into prison. Among them was José Maria Heredia, then twenty years old, who was to be known as Cuba's patriot poet. He was sentenced to exile for life.

Bolívar was disturbed at the plight of Cuba and Puerto Rico. When he called a conference for Pan-American unity, which met at Panama in 1826, one of the subjects for discussion was the hope for the early freeing of these two Spanish colonies.

Outside nations were watching with sympathy the efforts of Cuban revolutionaries. Mexico and Colombia were both desirous of annexing the island to their states. Many of the Cuban revolutionaries felt that their best chance of freedom lay in annexation by the United States. And France and England were watching the situation closely.

Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that the fear of losing the colony drove the Spanish king to harsher methods. From 1825 on, the island's captain general was given despotic powers. So far as the rights of citizens went, the island was practically under military rule.

Cuban dissatisfaction increased when both Cuba and Puerto Rico were shut out from the benefits of a new Spanish constitution which was adopted in 1836. If they were to win any independence, Cubans must win it for themselves. Cuban clubs—"juntas,"* as they were called

* Pronounced "hoontas."

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—were formed within the colony and also in the United States. Many exiles and refugees gathered in New York City to work for freedom from Spain and annexation to the United States.

Such was the state of affairs in 1848 when Narciso López was planning revolution.

III.

LÓPEZ IN REVOLT

After leaving the service of Spain, Narciso López had retired to his own estates where he owned copper mines. Managing them, he used them as convenient gathering places for conspirators who were planning for revolution. He was a man liked by all he met, a fine horseman among men who spent much of their time in the saddle, and a good leader.

Gradually, as the desire for revolution spread, López and his companions laid their plans. They expected to receive arms and ammunition from Americans who were in sympathy with their plans. But when the day set for the uprising came, the supplies had not arrived. The delay gave a servant the chance to learn of their plans and betray them to the government. Several of the leaders were arrested. López with others escaped to New York.

ACTIVITY IN NEW YORK

He arrived in July, 1848, and was warmly received by the Cuban juntas. As he had expected, he found that the

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idea of annexation was being much discussed in the United States. Southern leaders in Congress favored annexation, for this would add a strong slave-holding region to the Union, where the balance of power between slave and non-slave states was being closely watched. The government did not approve the idea officially but allowed the discussion and the raising of funds by the refugees to go on undisturbed.

López gained much sympathy and support for the idea of a free Cuba. The Cubans began, through his inspiration, to feel new hope. He asked his friend Miguel Teurbe Colón to design a flag for the future republic. The colors chosen were the red, white, and blue—the blue and white being in horizontal stripes, three blue and two white, while a red triangle, symbolizing the blood of patriots, bore a single white star. That flag, the same standard as of today, floated for the first time from the flagpole of the *New York Sun*, an important newspaper which was offering the Cubans encouragement.

The Cuban leader talked with many prominent people, assuring them that the people of Cuba would rise to support a revolution if one was started. He even offered the leadership of an expedition to prominent Americans but finally accepted that position himself. His first expedition never started. President Zachary Taylor refused to let it sail from an American port. Treaties between the United States and Spain would not permit a filibustering expedition to leave American territory.

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THE EXPEDITION OF 1850

In the spring of 1850 López was ready with a company of six hundred men, many of them adventurers from the West and South, some of whom had served in the Mexican War. The company had been organized in New Orleans, but it sailed for Cuba from the coast of Yucatán, directly across from Cuba. Thus the United States did not violate her treaty with Spain.

The force landed at Cardenas, a town on the northern coast of the island, to the east of Havana. There its members expected to be met and joined by eager rebels. But the people fled or hid themselves. The flag was raised and waved in the breeze, but only a few Negroes came to offer their services. General López and his men surprised the Spanish governor and the keepers of the garrison and the prison, and held them. But still no one came to join the arriving troops or rally to their support.

The answer was plain for all to see. The Cubans of this region were not ready for revolution. The soldiers began to return quietly to their ships. Word was brought that Spanish troops were approaching from nearby towns. The government had been warned by spies of their expedition and had spread the word. When most of the troops were aboard the ships, they persuaded the general and his companions to join them. As the ship on which he embarked made its way north to Key West, it was pursued by a Spanish vessel but escaped.

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THE EXPEDITION OF 1851

One would have thought General López would have been completely disheartened. But the courage and purpose of the man were unconquerable. He received word from Cuba of minor revolts which were taking place and was led to believe that there would be support if he came again to that island.

A New Orleans newspaper described him at this time: "He is apparently about fifty years of age. His figure is compact and well set. His face, which is of dark olive and of the Spanish cast, is strikingly handsome, expressive of both intelligence and energy. His full dark eyes, firm, well-formed mouth, and erect head crowned with iron grey hair, fix the attention and convince you that he is no ordinary man." The account continued with the statement that a new attempt was expected, adding, "He certainly does not look like a man easily disheartened."

In August, 1851, López was landing again on the island, this time about fifty miles west of Havana. He had a force of four hundred and fifty men, many of them Americans of fine family and high devotion to the cause of liberty. Second in command of the expedition was Colonel William Crittenden of Kentucky, a West Point man who had gained his rank in the Mexican War. Once again the people did not rally with enthusiasm to the army's support. The revolutionists were unfortunate in the weather, as a heavy rain storm ruined much of their

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ammunition. Still they inflicted considerable losses on the Spanish army that advanced to meet them. Then General López made the mistake of dividing the forces, he going by one route, Colonel Crittenden by another. Both detachments were surrounded. Colonel Crittenden and fifty young Americans were captured and shot. General López and his companions were finally taken, and he was given a public execution. The Spaniards were fully roused to their danger and were determined to make an example of any rebels.

Outwardly Cuba was not stirred. Life went on as usual in the towns and cities. Spain felt that she had won. But underneath there was a change.

The expeditions of López had failed, but he had roused by his faith the hope of final victory. Cuban patriots began to think of complete independence. The attempts had turned the eyes of Americans and people of other countries on the misfortunes of Cuba. Americans were stirred by the death of their own fellow citizens and by the martyrdom of López, who had become widely known. Conditions were changing in the United States; the War Between the States was soon to begin. But the Cuban flag which had flown in New York was not forgotten.