SOCIAL DISTRACTIONS AT CURACAO.

The island of Curacao is only some forty kilometers long and I think only thirteen at its widest point. At one point the island is no more than about three kilometers in width and on the narrow road that runs from one end of the island to the other at this point you can see the sea on both sides. The trade winds which blow in practically the same direction continuously day and night throughout the entire year give it a climate which is truly delightful. There is practically no rain except during about six weeks in September and October. The rest of the year one day is like another and the temperature hardly varies. There is no change of season. Such an unending sameness in the weather at times is a little irksome but the spell of the clear sunny days and the balmy caressing winds gradually grows on one.

The island is of coral formation and the harbour of Willemstad is a huge lagoon which has such a depth that it can receive the largest ocean-going vessels and is of sufficient size to permit the anchoring of practically the whole American Navy. The narrow bay which leads to it has sufficient depth and width to permit easy and safe passage to the lagoon. The harbour is one of the finest in all of the West Indies and is the principal asset of the island. The port of Saint Thomas is the only one which excels it in the West Indies. The strategic location of this port in relation with the rich countries of Venezuela and Colombia and the fact that the trade winds favored schooner traffic between these countries and Curacao have made it a very busy place. In addition it is on the direct route between Europe and the Panama Canal and it has therefore become a favorite coaling station and fueling station for vessels in this trade. It is one of the world's cross roads and the French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and American passenger boats calling there brought a variety of people not generally encountered on such a small island. Although these boats usually stayed only for a day their arrival was felt all over the island. The streets of the town were filled with groups of passengers attracted by the altogether curious and attractive aspect of the town and its houses. The shops were filled with eager buyers as practically no duties are levied in Curacao and perfumes, linens, silks and other luxuries could be had at prices which seemed ridiculously small to the tourists. Automobiles dashed from one end of the island to the other over the narrow roads to visit the ostrich farm or some of the quintas where the passengers refreshed themselves with cocoanut.
cocoanut water from cocoanuts gathered for them by a nimble native who literally walked up the side of the cocoanut palm. At the Consulate we became aware of the arrival of a ship from the early morning hours, as passengers, irrespective of nationality, seemed to gravitate towards the American Consulate. Travel was difficult in those days and passport visas were required by us from all who travelled on steamers burning bunkering coal of American origin, whether the steamers touched American ports or not. By the time that three o'clock arrived on a steamer day I would usually have a list of from fifteen to twenty people whom I had invited to dinner and the boy would be sent to the house with a list of names, so that the cook would be prepared for our guests. Dinner was always a gay meal on such days and the party that gathered about the dinner table cosmopolitan. The language was usually English and it is curious to find how much English has become the language of the international traveller and trader. I am afraid that our dinner parties were sometimes rather motley affairs, but they were always interesting and, although many years have gone by since the Curacao days, hardly a month passes but what I meet someone who sat at our board in Scharloo.

One day we had the pleasure of seeing General and Mrs. Gorgas who were returning from a trip to Venezuela, where a survey had been made of some of the yellow fever regions for the Rockefeller Foundation. He was accompanied by Dr. Guterrez, the famous Cuban doctor so long associated with General Gorgas in his yellow fever work and who formed the technical side of the yellow fever administration on the isthmus of Panama, which made them both famous. He was a charming man and one of the most modest I have ever known. General Gorgas is so well known that any words that I might add in eulogy of the man and his work would be without meaning. Suffice it to say that he and Mrs. Gorgas were with us for several days and we learned to love them both. The General seemed to be attracted particularly to Curacao, which he said had the most delightful climate as well as the most healthful of any tropical places he knew. Years afterwards I was to meet him in Brussels, where he and Mrs. Gorgas were staying for a few days prior to proceeding to Africa on another scientific mission. He was stopping in Belgium to receive an honorary distinction from the leading Belgian medical association, and also to be received by the King who had expressed a desire to see Dr. Gorgas and give him one of the best decorations in his power to bestow. I remember as though it were yesterday the picture of the General in an armchair in his sitting-room.
in the Palace Hotel and with eyes alight speaking of his plans for the African expedition. He and Mrs. Gorgas were going on a freight steamer on which special accommodations had been built in to at least provide fair comfort. Although well on in years and evidently in failing health and not at all in a physical condition to undertake such a voyage and the fatigue of the research which he intended to make, he had the same indomitable spirit. Even when talking fatigue would overcome him, and he would momentarily close his eyes to rest. In talking with Mrs. Gorgas she expressed the fear that he would never return from the trip, but said that nothing that she could do or say would dissuade him from undertaking it. She was a fit helpmate for a great man. On the last day of his stay in Brussels, Mrs. Messersmith and I took them for a drive through the Forêt de Soignes and the Bois de la Cambre, going through all the vast avenues of this beautiful forest. The General was interested and enchanted but before we had completed the trip he was peacefully asleep. It was difficult to part with him without showing the emotion which we felt when he and Mrs. Gorgas left for England, for we had really learned to love him and he was one of the few really great and one of the finest spirits that I have had the privilege to come into close contact with. As is well known, when he arrived in England he had to go to a nursing home at once, and when King George was told that the General was too ill to come to the Palace to be knighted by him, as arranged, the King went to the General's bed in his nursing home and there made him a Knight of the Order of St. Michael and St. George. A few days afterwards he quietly passed on the other side.

General Gorgas and Mrs. Gorgas were accompanied on this trip by General and Mrs. Noble, and during their stay Mrs. Noble expressed the particular desire to see Cardinal Mercier. I therefore arranged with the Cardinal's Secretary for a time when I could bring Mrs. Gorgas and Mrs. Noble. It was the first time that they were to meet a prelate of the church and they were somewhat disturbed as to what they should do. I assured them that the Cardinal, like all great men, was a very simple man and that he would address them in English and soon put them at their ease, that so far as ceremonial was concerned all they should try to remember was not to turn their back on him when they
they left the room, as this was the one thing that he
really did not like. The interview passed very pleasantly
and after about a quarter of an hour the Cardinal rose and
in his usual manner started to lead his visitors to the
door, but he had made them feel so comfortable that they
forgot the only ceremonial that they had been told of and
turned their back to him as they left the room. The Cardinal
gave me a little smile as we passed out of the room, a smile
which showed the understanding and truly sympathetic nature
of the great man.

One of our favorite amusements after these impromptu
dinners was to show our guests the kitchen in which that
dinner had been prepared. It was a large room, the whole
of one side of which was taken up by a huge built in stove and
oven. It was a very primitive affair and really consisted
only of eight square openings built into the masonry, to each
of which a narrow opening led from the front. On top of
each was an iron grate. The modus operandi consisted of
filling these receptacles or as many as would be needed with
charcoal, and there was supposed to be one boy whose sole
duty it was to sit on the floor in front of the stove with
a bellows and to supply the necessary air through these
openings to keep the charcoal aglow. The oven was a most
primitive one designed only for baking bread, as pastry and
cakes were never prepared in a Curacao home, but always purchased
at the shop. Our cook Yatchi refused to use this cumbersome
affair and our meals as a rule were cooked on a concrete
platform outside the wide door of the kitchen, where she ranged
a series of anywhere from one to five iron pots. These pots
which are used generally in some of the West Indies and in
South America consisted merely of a sort of iron basin beneath
which is a small receptacle for charcoal. The charcoal receptacle
is open on one side and when a good heat is desired the
opening is turned in the direction of the wind, and if a lower
heat is desired the pot is simply turned with a stick. It
was a rather unusual sight to see old Yatchi seated among
her pots and it was extraordinary to find what delicious meals
she could devolve by using two or three of these primitive
stoves. Sometimes before dinner, when we had an unusually large
number, I would roam into the kitchen and would protest when I
saw that a dinner for twenty or thirty was being prepared on
two or three of these pots. I was usually dismissed with a
curt question as to whether dinner had ever been late and
as to whether she had ever given us poor or cold food. This
was unanswerable as she had never failed us.

Yatchi
Yatchi as a young girl had started her career as the cook for one of my predecessors some thirty years before. She had never cooked for anyone except for the American Consul and occupied among the negroes of the island a position of unusual prestige. She had raised a large family although I never could learn of any husband, and the light color of two of them and their resemblance to a stern New England predecessor of mine whose photograph graced the walls of the Consulate, often caused me to wonder whether she was not really in more respects than one a member of the consular family. She was absolute mistress of our household outside of our living rooms, and in the servants' quarters in the rear she reigned like a queen. We never knew just exactly how many servants we had, and we never employed or discharged a single one after she came into our service. I would sometimes see a new face and then it would disappear. There seemed to be a distinct caste among them and yet she was always careful to inform us which of the servants carried and which did not, for in Curacao, as elsewhere in the West Indies, a white person must not carry any object except the purse, sunshade, or stick. To do otherwise was to lose caste, and so certain of the servants would carry a can of water or huge bundles on their head, but others would consider themselves insulted if asked to carry anything. In spite of her position Yatchi carried. I suppose it was because she felt that her position was such that she could disregard the conventions. If I remember correctly, our servants were paid on the average $1.50 a month and were given an allowance of $1.10 a day for their food.

Willemstad was a town of only 14,000 people, the whole island not having a population of over 40,000. Of these some 2,000 were white and the others represented every color between white and black. The whites were principally natives of Holland or the children of Hollanders born in the colony. While some of these were in business, most of them were in the Government offices. A very considerable part of the white population was made up of Venezuelan exiles who were not able to return to their country, being practically proscribed, but whom nostalgia kept as close as possible to their native shores. It was naturally a hotbed for political intrigue and revolution, principally on the part of the Venezuelan exiles. The great majority of the whites, however,
however, were Jews of Portuguese origin, the descendants of colonies from that country of centuries before. They were the merchants of the place and for the most part rich, cultured and travelled, knowing Paris and New York as well as they knew their own home. We found these to be in many respects a very delightful people, and some of the friendships we formed among them have only become closer through years of separation.

For the most part the white people lived in very comfortable, usually very roomy homes of one storey, all of them having a delightfully cool and attractive patio. The amusements were most simple and it was not a custom for people to dine with each other as a social diversion. The afternoon tea, such an almost universal practice, had also not touched the island. Social intercourse was practically limited to the dances and parties given in the very attractive club which they had, and to visits to each other's homes after the evening meal. After the guests had arrived at such an evening party and greeted their host and hostess, the men and woman would separate and forgather in separate rooms where they comfortably stowed themselves in deep wicker rocking chairs imported from Austria, these being equipped with huge rockers. The Curacao invitation to a party in the native dialect was in literal translation "Won't you come and rock this evening". This rocking parties were not as stupid as one might think, for I had been accustomed to knowing fairly interesting people during my life preceding to entering the Service and I am free to say that the conversation at these parties compared quite favorably in character with that found in any drawing room in the United States or Europe. People were interested in what went on throughout the world and kept in touch with it through reading and travel. They read fairly good books as a rule, spoke Dutch, French, Spanish, English, as well as their native papiamento.

As our home was well fitted for entertaining we began to give large evening parties but started the innovation of not separating the sexes. This was not taken to very kindly in the beginning, but as we persisted we were surprised to find that slowly but gradually our friends did the same thing, and in the short space of less than three years this innovation had taken complete hold of the island. We began to give dinners to which we invited the Curacao people and they took to this as a duck takes to water. Whether they had thought the giving of dinner parties too much trouble or for whatever reason they had not had them, the custom was certainly a well established one in a very short time.
The men were great gamblers as a rule in the sense that they loved to play for a stake at the club, but the ladies did not play cards. We carried our social innovations to the extent of popularizing bridge and even the so-called American national game of poker. We were genuinely fond of the people and enjoyed our intercourse with them. When we left the island the remark which was probably most frequently made to Mrs. Messersmith, was that they would never forget her as she had made their social life so much fuller and happier and taught them things for which they would be ever grateful.

Some of my predecessors and I understand some of those who followed us at Curacao found it a stupid and most undesirable post. I cannot help but think that one of the greatest mistakes a consular officer can make is to keep himself aloof from the people of the country because their customs may be different from his, or because he has a preconceived notion that the place is not worth while and the people not worth knowing. The officer who takes this attitude cannot help but show it in his daily contact with people and a few are so stupid as not to realize this attitude. This only tends to build up the wall of reserve and to emphasize the line of separation and the officer's usefulness is bound to be considerably decreased and his opportunities for happiness certainly limited. The officer has in many cases to take the initiative, and, without thrusting himself upon people, he can show that he is humanly interested in them and in their lives, and this awakens a responsive cord everywhere. When we arrived at our post, an American woman who had married a Curacao doctor very seriously proceeded to inform Mrs. Messersmith about the things she must in no circumstances do. One of these was that she must never appear on the streets or in public with another man unless I also was present. Her reputation would be eternally blasted. Mrs. Messersmith informed her that while she did not wish to shock the sensibilities of anyone, she did not believe that it would be necessary for her to adhere to such a local custom. In this connection it is interesting to note that by the time we left the island merry mixed bathing parties were being arranged as a regular practice at Caracas Bay, and I am quite sure that the morale of the participants had not suffered or deteriorated in any manner. The Curacoans changed their attitude but our American friend was convinced that the world was coming to an end when nice people openly indulged in mixed bathing parties.
Probably the only time that we really had stupid evenings were when we received an invitation to dine or take tea with the Governor. He was a bachelor well on in years and had a wonderful house furnished him to entertain. It was the protocol that when invited to the Palace one must wear black clothing, whether it was afternoon or evening. As for all other occasions, except funerals, one wore clean and cool linens. An invitation to Government House was not particularly appreciated by anyone. The meal would be eaten in a closed room and it was only later that the cigar could be indulged in on the cool balcony. Absolute discomfort and practical prostration was what one paid for the honor of an invitation to dine at Government House.