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PACHANGA SI!—TWO MONTHS IN CASTRO'S CUBA

I

"HOW DO YOU LIKE CUBA?"—It was an odd thing to want to know at the moment, and as just then the crowd had pushed past us chanting "*Cuba si! Yankis no!*", the question came to me both broken and improbable. Was this an attempt at polite conversation? It would have done better in a storm. We were standing at the bottom of the steep flight of stairs which leads to the Havana Conservatory, a small building at the top of a hill in the Vedado section of the city. Inside HE was making a speech, and we had just descended the stairs after being shown the door. It was the night before the last one of my stay on the island, and the ticket to the rally, which I was still clutching in my hand, had been offered to me as a privilege. And when from the top of the staircase we had faced, after leaving the building, the vague turbulence of the crowd below, I thought of my benefactor with something less than gratitude. The ticket had proved to be of no value, and even the diplomatic passports of my two Cuban friends had only gotten them as far as the guards inside the door. I should have known better. Had I not been told that the *Premierato* (the Prime Minister's office) made a mess even of letter filing? Besides I had wanted to spend the last of my stay on the island where I had spent most of it, at the tranquil *finca*, the little country place in the flat opulent countryside that stretches between Havana and Pinar del Rio. It was a charming place, and I had grown fond of it, perhaps also because besides charm it had a touch of more intense qualities. There was a rich farm in the rear and a small exotic park in front. The palms so rightly called "royal" stood off against the deep tropical sky like a circle of plumed sentinels, leaning over the pink little palace in their midst, and the walks and avenues were shaded as if by arms of creation itself, for the ceibas, the great trees which gave the nearby village its name and which lined all the alleys of the estate, rose from the ground not as one trunk but as three or four and had whole lesser plants springing from their branches. Such was my home during my Cuban vaca-

tion—both tranquil and rather gorgeous—and I felt I owed it my last Cuban days. And now in the noise and agitation of that revolutionary midnight I frankly longed for it.

“How do you like Cuba?”—I glanced at my two companions skeptically; both were Cuban diplomats, and it was the Vice-Consul of the Republic in a southern American city who had asked the question. The Vice-Consul was a lady, and she asked the question with a pinched smile, which surprised me almost as much as the question itself, for she was built like a monument, as they say in Cuba, and that smile was the only thin thing about her besides her eyebrows. The reply I had mumbled was in any case lost, for at the moment a snake of militia girls plunged between the two of us reeling like a Dionysian throng and chanting a staccato phrase, one of those that linked or contrasted Eisenhower with Castro across a string of sardonic aspirates, and we were separated. When I saw her again some minutes later, she was standing at the edge of the crowd still smiling, and as soon as I reached her side she fixed me with that pinched smile of hers, and then asked insistently, almost sternly: “How do you like Cuba?” So she really wanted to know. Just then the crowd pressed upon me, and I was thrown face to face against a young man, with a knife stuck behind his belt and a crazy look in his eyes; he threw a malevolent glance at my New York clothes, and screamed in my face assuming a sarcastic expression: “Cuba si! Yankis no! No! NO!” He had no teeth or he would have shown them. As it was I was only sprayed. I glanced around. The smile still hovered, inquiring, insisting, as imperturbable as the moon above. “How do you like Cuba?” Indeed!

II

And yet, sweet Cuba, how hard it would be not to like you—in your concern to be liked so American, in your desire to please so Mediterranean. This—that she combined the emotional vulnerabilities of two worlds—I did not find out until after coming to the island. But I remember already feeling softened when, trying to make up my mind about the trip, I took my first careful look at her position on the map. At that first and sweeping glance her very shape, her geographical posture, seemed to present an appeal. She lay at the bottom of the map under the very point of the Florida hook like an ill-fated organism, ill-shaped, helpless. Later when I came to Cuba and went to stay at a village twenty-five miles west of Havana in the center of the island, I discovered that the southern and the northern shore lie within two hours' bus ride of each other, across flat country; but even then, looking at the map, I could see that the country was almost everywhere without a real in-

terior. And that capital of hers! A book I had read called it the most corrupt city in Latin America. Was she not indeed with that impossible shape of hers, with that mild coastline, with that open country, just like an animal stuck in a blind evolutionary alley, created to be the prey and sport of the strong, that outsized capital of hers sticking out above the nonentities of the Caribbean like a dubious asset, like a lurid ambiguous attraction. Giraffe of the Caribbean! So she had seemed to me then, and so she still seems to me, after a summer's stay.

Facing actual Cuba, I found more positive reasons to feel touched by her, but as for that initial impression, which of course was purely theoretical, the further the summer progressed the more I kept on returning to it. As I roamed the country this summer Cuba met me with few attitudes of aggression. Of beards, guns, uniforms, and warlike slogans there were plenty, it is true, especially of slogans—words, bloodcurdling words, cries to the battle, words which had been uttered with a history-making air, and which are later exhibited in public signs. The *avisos* plastered on the doors of confiscated buildings are headed by the cry *Patria o Muerte*, and they read like sentences of history. They have the style of 1789. Walking the streets of Havana it is hard to escape the call of the Revolution—even when looking at the traffic. The key statement of Castro's current speech will stare at you out of the windshields of Havana's busses, where it gets pasted in the morning like an order of the day to the crowds, so that those who do not read the newspapers are also reached. Even indoors they may reach you, in your coziest retreat. The first time this verbal euphoria reached me was in my Miramar hotel room, in the afternoon of the day after my arrival. There was a phone number I was anxious to reach. When I picked up the receiver, instead of the operator's voice I heard a Spanish recitation by a lady that began with a rattle of drums and ended in the cry "*Patria o Muerte*." My heart leaped a bit to that echo of history beating at my very eardrums, and when the recital came to an end I listened to the silence—the thrill remaining with me for a while longer—and then, my thoughts returning to the business at hand, I waited with a smile for the operator. Instead there was a click, brief silence, the rattle of drums. . . . A great deal of the verbal euphoria of the Revolution reached me in the form of such mechanical intrusions. An important condition of this ineptness, perhaps the most important, soon became evident to me. The everyday moods of Cuba and all the more personal postures are at variance with the mood of posters and slogans, so much so that one begins to wonder whether the revolutionary beards themselves are not theatrical props, masks of fierceness hiding amiable or venal or merely inexpressive features. Judging by the expression on the

faces of the unveiled revolutionaries, the dominant mood among the *fidelistas* should be that of perplexity, and as for the overall mood of the city, at the time I reached Cuba, which was in the latter part of the summer, it seemed to be that of youthful bustle. Perhaps by then the mood of vengeance had played itself out, perhaps it was simply too hot. But there is also the permanent situation of Cuba, with its mixed gifts of military defenselessness and of a life whose harsh social realities are softened by the amenities of nature, and this has to be increasingly taken into account now that the initial excitement of the first revolutionary rush is over. Whether they address themselves to their own children or to strangers, the Cubans show a sardonic amiableness, a careless and relaxed humour that gives back some of the sparkle of the Cuban sunshine and some of the caress of its soft air. So many Cubans when they smile show toothless gums, but still so many smile even though they have no teeth to show. And the poor, though very poor, are hospitable in the way of those used to not having to worry about where things come from. They are as supremely carefree about the way their guest makes use of their possessions as if—surrounded by that lap of prodigality—they were imitating the gestures of nature herself. “*No importa!*” says the Cuban woman, with a shrug of shoulders that could inspire Tintoretto as you seek for an ashtray and not finding it drop the cigarette which has started to burn your fingers on to the freshly washed tiles of the floor. “*No importa!*” You hear that phrase a great deal in Cuba. It is the graciousness of the poor, the generosity of those who have little to offer.

“How do you like Cuba?”—Did she mean, as a tourist attraction? This is the permanent situation of Cuba: here ninety miles out of the United States is discovered a world more careless, more gracious, more feminine—even more harmonious. For man has lived here not altogether unresponsive to the latitude in which he finds himself. Truly like a spouse the sea lies in the lap of Cuba’s great city, and glitters at the open ends of its avenues like so many blue eyes. The city, like Mediterranean cities, is yellow. Here walls do not bounce off sunlight, as they do in northern cities, like so much rain, but absorb it. It sinks into them and glides to rest on the roofs. The Havana Libre, the liberated Hilton Hotel, glitters with a bluish green sheen like a rock risen from the universal bowels of the earth, unassimilated into the sunlit landscape, and the other skyscraper, the INRA office, which is Castro’s headquarters, does not fit the sky above it much better. Both in fact are Cuban constructions, the Havana having been built by Restaurant Workers, not by Hilton at all, and the Castro headquarters by Batista. Cubans are greatly proud of both, for they feel that these structures have given the city the air of a

modern metropolis, which they do, being products of that modern style which is supra-regional, strong on abstract technical principles, weak on history and *spiritus loci*. But the local flavour, though rather scattered, is still strong in Havana, what with the cafés and the *guajiro* pineapple vendors, and horses grazing anywhere where there are patches of grass; and even more prevalent than horses there is everywhere, like a universal tribute to the shape of life in fulness, a feeling for manifold curve: the Malecon Drive, the other and juster pride of the modern city, frames the northern end of it following the line of the bay like a parallel water causeway, irregular and capricious, narrowing, and widening, splitting into many arms as it flows around monuments—lands—or spilling into huge squares—bays—where it widens off immeasurably, the stucco façades of the palaces with their gilded roofs rising off in phantom-like isolation at the far ends like royal havens. Quite the Venice effect, those transparent and throbbing perspectives of the squares, especially evocative of the view of the Salute church, for of course nowhere along that drive is the opulent crowding of Venice to be seen, while the Salute appears isolated by virtue of its bulk and loftiness and its situation across the Grand Canal. There is a similar effect in the principal streets, a third of the width of which hides under arcades, rough structures compared to the arcades of Venice, but with the same implication of cloaking shadow. Of course in the old part of the city, around Cathedral Square, the colonial baroque is splendid. But it soon becomes clear that the feeling for the curve is not embodied in the walls of Havana alone. It first of all lives in the movement of the human body: in the dip and sway of the *pachanga*, the Cuban folk dance, which has been revived during the Revolution: in the *comparsas*, the snake dances in which all dancing invariably ends, the snaky writhing being both collective—horizontally—and individual—vertically; in the swaying bodies of militia girls loosening into a mood of surrender as they cry "*Viva Castro! Viva Fidel!*" and best of all, transcending all revolutions, in the console-like posture of the woman balancing a baby on her hip as she surveys you curiously as you pass by her doorway.

III

"How do you like Cuba?"—Did she mean the look of the country, its sights? Apart from the Revolution, Cuba is a thrill, a reanimation of the senses. To find a bit of the Mediterranean bordering on the southern extremity of the United States must be always an exciting discovery. And today, with the Revolution, that sense of discovery is intensified, doubled as it were. The world the visitor has discovered with such delight seems itself to be in the process of discovery. Cuba in revolution is discovering itself. Hence the strange, the rather happy consonance of moods be-

tween the visitor and the inhabitants. They share with him the excitement of having just found out how delightful the place is. For once, the pleasant delusion, so essential to the tourist's enjoyment of his travels—how wonderful it must be to dwell permanently in the place of his brief call—is shared by the inhabitants. They are genuinely excited showing it off, as if they were really thrilled to live in it. Of course the Cuban's enthusiastic hospitality is a part of his grave Spanish heritage. The motorcycle cop who stopped you on the highway for speeding and shows up on his day off in the butcher's truck of his brother-in-law to take you to the beach, according to promise, is in uniform. But it would be a mistake to think that his interest in you is a part of his police duty. His uniform is probably the best set of clothes he has, and his riding boots are really splendid—golden brown calf-leather, real cavalry boots. He has brought his young wife with him and two of her girl friends. No doubt he is showing off before his female folk. But the beach he takes you to has been only recently developed by the revolutionary tourist commission, and the new locker houses, the tents set up on the sand, the cabanas that rent at middle-class rates, and the restaurant away up on the hill, with a concrete roof that soars as if it were done by Nervi, are shown off like a newly-acquired possession, which in a sense the beaches are, having been either very expensive to enter or private property during the Batista regime. The beach is now free and open to anyone who wishes to use it; and for twenty cents you receive, besides the locker key, a cake of soap and a towel which are served out by a smiling man without front teeth who carries two guns at his waist.

IV

Every real revolution is of course a process of self-discovery, of sudden maturation. That theirs has been a real revolution, not a mere change of ruling groups, the frank excitement of so many Cubans with the uses and beauties of their land would indicate even to a casual observer. It is the most obvious and general sign that the band of mountain fighters masked with beards are making good their claim to historical significance. But the rediscovery of an inheritance is in itself an ambiguous blessing. It can be a stimulant or a dream-inducing intoxicant, and the Cubans' interest, this delight with their national possession, eventually began to signify for me some vast if gradual breakdown preparing in the revolutionary process itself—if, that is, a true revolution is collective self-discovery, whatever else it is.

In most general terms what I saw in Cuba amounted to this, that the earliest experience of the process, its most sensual experience, is beginning to absorb the interest in self-discovery. If Castro has uncovered for the Cubans the popular uses

of sovereignty, he has also succeeded in persuading his people that this delightful island of theirs—of whose benefits the humble natives were glad enough hitherto to be able to enjoy the good climate—is being swept by the Revolution into their lap, with all the accumulated treasure of foreign achievement. It is a wonderful gift, this jewel of the Caribbean, as the Spaniards used to call it, the nearest thing to a paradise on this side of the world. Like the South Seas Islands on the other, it has not even contained dangerous animals. These natural blessings have not been without considerable effect on the character of the inhabitants. Exploited as the common people have been, they have not had that experience of the hardness of matter, of the complexity of the effort of bringing a seed to fruition which has organized the mentality of the peoples whose environment is less well endowed by nature. This was Prospero's magic realm, according to some Shakespearean scholars! But Cuba's connection with magic goes beyond the literary—even apart from Afro-Cuban dances, which eclipse anything that Africa has sent us. I have been told by Guevara's first wife, who is Chilean, that the Cubans have the reputation of being the best-natured people in Latin American. This may well be. But they are also simple-minded, and their simple-mindedness has an aspect that is like that of the mentality of the magic-minded and of the spoiled, of those who confuse wish with deed, acquisition with achievement. Castro is indoctrinating the people with a sense of right to that treasure, and the great task ahead of course should be that of building up a new Cuban identity so that they will know how to manage that wealth in such a way as to justify and fortify its appropriation. But the Cuban people, the good-natured Cuban people, are easily distracted, and what distracts them today is the immediate glittering fact of the ownership itself.

For the average citizen, of course, the gift of a country on a daily basis becomes a pretty abstract proposition after a while, especially if he is unemployed. The Tourist Commission plays an important part in making ownership a tangible fact. Its chief appeal is directed to the Cubans themselves. Provincials are invited to Havana, where luxurious suites in the glittering Havana Libre and the elegant Nacional are available at family rates, and the Habaneros are urged to visit the Zapata marshes and Trinidad. The poor have local sights to explore. The ranches of Batista and his henchmen have been converted into co-operative and tourist centers, and people from the villages come around to have a look, to touch the stuff, to wander about in the great tree-shaded avenues and to lounge on the terraces. But this is a rather pensive, reflective pleasure at best, and it is by travelling around the country at government expense that the poor get their most convincing experience

of having come into some sort of inheritance. The poor, especially the younger ones, have swarmed into the militia, and the militia is transported all over the island in connection with mass rallies. They travel armed with rifles and pistols, besides machetes, the firearms being supplied by the government, and this for the Cuban countryman should more than make up, when I think of the gunnery shops crowded in the afternoons like bars in Manhattan after office hours, for the financial inaccessibility of cabanas. There are rallies all the time, the reason for this being that both Castro and the Cubans love them. They are a great deal of fun, and also they most directly give a collective sense of mastery over the land. To be sure, some acquaintances from the *Premierato* grumbled about them. One put it very succinctly: "How can the work be done, if there are rallies all the time?" But rallies can no longer be done away with. They are a part of the machinery of the Revolution, the stage at which Castro and the people meet. Castro and the people: the link has been forged. Not altogether to the delight of the liberal intelligentsia, who see the maturer version of the Revolution being dissipated while the vulgarities of Castro's communion with the mob are being played out. Take the confiscation scheme. Like so many of their class in Europe, the Cuban liberals scorn the dogmatic respect of Americans for property rights, and it has aroused their indignation to discover that it was only when property rights became involved that Americans began to regard Cuban affairs as being of international concern. When it became known in August, 1960, that sweeping confiscations were pending, including the universally disliked telephone company, the educated Cubans I talked to tended to assume that adequate compensations would be provided. On this basis the decree seemed right enough to them. Then came Castro's speech. It took him hours to read the names of confiscated companies; he merely recited them like a list of lottery prizes or charity gifts, and after each name the audience roared "*se llamaba*," which could be translated as "former," or "once were." It was not really a speech, but some kind of a rite of an overdue climax of frustration, with the audience a chorus, a ring of bitter, thirsty souls. And the greatest hit of the speech came when Castro announced the scheme of compensation. The audience was still, and then came laughter, the cackling laughter of a ring of perdition. At no moment had Castro been so completely united with his audience, so completely in harmony with its moods, with its expectations. The scheme consisted of a wholly specious hitching of future payments to the American sugar quota for Cuba. The Cuban friends who were listening with me appeared greatly embarrassed. Clearly they did not expect this.

I think they shuddered a bit. This group seems to have been shuddering quite a bit lately.

The least perplexed among the articulate element are those of the lower middle class whom the Revolution has raised to positions of practical significance, such as management of confiscated estates or some local work of political organization. For them the Revolution has realized itself in a matter-of-fact way they immensely appreciate, and they meet mere questions, mere intellectual searchings, with hard truculence. But the replies of the university-educated are punctured with dragging silences. First of all, there is of course something queer about Castro himself, as the whole world has been noticing, and the intelligentsia shivers with premonitions, with embarrassing perceptions. Gossip somehow gets about among them, reluctant but dark. The most sinister are the whispers about Fidel's mind having become unhinged in the solitude of his mountain exile. So good Romans must have talked about Caligula, who had shown so much promise as a princeling, when he began to show the first signs of aberration. After all, Cuba's precedent of turn-about and of limitless conduct on the part of her rulers is, in proportion to the length of her history, almost as ample as that of ancient Rome. The early popularity of Batista and the early patriotic liberalism of Machado are remembered, certainly remembered by those who read books. At the same time the book readers are fond of Fidel as their last reason for self-respect. And so their gossip exhibits a peculiar indecision, a hesitation: "He *means* well. It is the pressures on him that are to blame." "HE is decent, kind-hearted; it is they . . . Raul, the gorillas in the Security, the lubricious Dorticos." There is the story of Castro's alleged seduction of a teen-age girl, which had appeared in the Los Angeles gossip magazine *Confidential*. The story was signed by the girl's mother. "Yes, Castro knew the girl, but she was hardly more than an acquaintance", protested a Cuban friend who works for the *Premierato*. Another man was involved, an intimate aide of Castro's, a charming mulatto. The girl became infatuated, to the mother's chagrin. The mother became bitter, vengeful. "Well, did Castro protest, did he sue the magazine?" I asked. "No—that would have only made for more publicity." "Was anything done?" My friend's face fell: "Yes, the mulatto was put in jail. He has been there for months without any charges being preferred. However, he is being well treated, and now that he is coming up for trial his spirits have improved." A few weeks later I asked about the outcome of the trial. "The trial took place a week ago. But no sentence was passed." "Why not?" "There can be no sentence if there are no charges to go on." "So the man has been released?" "Oh no, he is back in jail." I did not bother

to ask about the conditions of his spirit. Thus stumbles the voice of liberal Cuban intelligentsia. Castro, the youthful *libertador*, has within a little over a year's time hardened into an idol, with a priesthood to pull the strings, and with mobs of worshippers to hold him in a mystic bondage. Perhaps the word "mob" is not altogether fair. Watching Castro at the rallies made me realize that the profoundest process of the Cuban Revolution is the dialogue between Castro and the Cuban people.

V

"How do you like Cuba?"—It was an odd moment to ask that question. But perhaps it was precisely the atmosphere of the moment that had moved my questioner to ask it. If, that is, what she had principally in mind by "Cuba" was "the people." For the people were very much in evidence that evening. Was it Castro's nearness that had endowed the crowd with that palpability? But there had been other occasions when I had also felt it. Even on an ordinary day devoid of politics, when passing through a Cuban town I would feel that palpability in its streets.

There is the inevitable plaza, truly square, laid out in flat rigid lines and framed by drab buildings of yellow clay—the unlovely center of what must have been once an impromptu settlement, nineteenth century, while the old colonial square, with its proud widths and pious heights is elsewhere, left behind on the hilly incline over which the town runs out into fields and palm and fruit groves. Here in the central square only the theater gives a touch of something fanciful, but also specious, with its bulging baroque façade, gilt, balconied, stuccoed, which makes one think of a gala provincial day, a visiting diva, the brass band out, the populace collected, the governor's coach, the landaus of the *rancheros*; but today it is only Elizabeth Taylor who is visiting, in Technicolor shadow. Outside in the square the shadow is chiaroscuro, the open space a shrieking yellow blaze and the arcades on the four sides like wave after wave of confidential murmurs; and at each of the four corners, with clusters of young men hanging around, the coffee shops, enclosed within the last three corner pillars of the arcades, illuminating the end spot at night. Pretty girls groomed like office receptionists and smiling in the manner of such functionaries sell potent black coffee in tiny cups. The young men—it is they who give the crowd in the square its special quality, this palpability of being itself, turbulence, precipitancy. They are its element, as sand is the element of a beach. They carry a furtive look, and as they pass across the square they seem always in a hurry. Are they fleeing something? As they skulk under the arcades hurrying somewhere with a bundle or an old brief case under an arm, they carry an uneasy, preoccupied

expression—males who keep themselves busy but have little to show for it, and it is the women who keep the homes together. If so many men carry that furtive, embarrassed look, women show that liability to precipitation which marks those who feel themselves victims of an unfair fate. "*Pero di Vaticano*"—it is out of a hubbub of feminine voices that the scream flies at an unlucky priest whose car has broken down in a hostile village. The women have the hardest time of it; they are the ones with responsibility, many living with their men outside marriage. The revolutionary government did something about that, conducting marriage ceremonies *en masse*. But the cost of the marriage license, though important, is only one factor. "Cuban men are *pimpos*"—the young woman has two children from two different men, and her mouth curves with scorn and bitterness as she says this.

Is it this scorn of women that makes the young men hurry so across the square? Escaping women, escaping cramped rooms into the freemasonry of the shaded arcade? But perhaps it is merely that the grace with which they move naturally carries them with swiftness; still, it is true that their haste is readily enough arrested when friends are encountered under the arcades. It is a hot afternoon, and some young men have formed a casual group around the café, a cluster of underemployed sexuality and degraded intelligence. Their appearance is correspondingly lubricacious and sharp. Neat shirt, tight trousers, buttocks showing in firm outline, pointed shoes, slightly pompadour hair. Somehow it all makes one feel that what they carry under their arms and on their backs constitutes the totality of their possessions. They are the surplus population, the fringe element, the incalculable potential. Right now in spite of the revolution they seem disengaged. Having finished their coffee, they have turned around to face the street—a ring of sarcastic bystanders waiting for something, something to happen in the street, something that will evoke their sardonic sympathy, provoke their sarcasm, confirm their skepticism of life?

For the Cuban street is not simply a place through which the crowd passes; it is a stage, and on it the crowd enacts a repetitious dialogue.

A superficial viewer, an outsider in a hurry, might see in this crowd only a quantitative force. In the Anglo-Saxon mentality the notion of "the people" stands for buyers of products, casters of votes, readers of newspapers, in fine, unrelated individuals producing momentous effects only through the sum of their actions, the meaning of which from the personal viewpoint of the individual actor may be completely trivial. But to anyone who stays to watch the Cuban street scene a more dramatic vision will come in the end. He will see that the square is not merely a

place to rush through. It is the place where the people meets, meets to be itself; while the street is a place where family life overflows and picks up the currents of collective sentiment. People are constantly coming into doors and out of them, the same people passing a dozen times in an hour, as in a less outdoors civilisation people pass from one room to another; passersby communicate with the interior through grated windows. Only the houses of the enemies of the Revolution, which are likely to be the more imposing houses in town, keep their doors and windows shut, and some of them are branded with *avisos*. Trinidad, in the southeast corner of the island, is a center of Catholic sentiment, and it contains more of those silent houses than do towns in the Havana area. One of them, the Iznaga Tower, is like the very symbol of defiance of change. Dating back to colonial times, it is somber, black in fact, and decaying; but colonialism is far from dead in Cuba, and the Tower, the seat of one of the oldest families in Trinidad, and before the Revolution one of the richest, still inhabited, rather than being a landmark or a museum is alive in the spirit of its own feudal tradition.

But now that the Revolution has taken away the family's four farms, the Tower, shut in on all sides, rises above the roofs like crumbling power, like offended pride itself. When a Cuban house shuts up, it shuts up very conclusively, and the Iznaga Tower with its shuttered windows and bolted heavy doors, dark, tall, and square as it is, and medieval in the very expanse of upper wall, seems wrapped up in its own towerliness, Spanishly, as in a mantle raised to the very eyes, as in a stifled sense of offence, and rises, a kind of sour warning or reminder, in the busy open scene. For all around it the more trivial houses are its very contrast. The open windows and huge doorways offer a view of the interior right to the bowels. In the first room, under the very window, the huge matrimonial bed, canopied in red, bulges out, as shameless and haughty as those shapeful Cuban women referred to as monuments, a fact of life dressed up for public view. That bed indeed fills the window, being as much a part of the street spectacle as objects in a shop window, an advertisement of family life. The door to the second room is open, or perhaps there is no door, only a curtain drawn aside, and from there you can see into the patio and the end of the house. In the poorer houses, where such depth is lacking and the other rooms join the first at an angle, the family can sit at home and be in the street at the same time by virtue of the device of the street wall-space being taken up entirely by a huge wooden gate which is wide open in the evening. The very poor live across railroad tracks as in any American city, but even in those back districts the streets, though grown darker, are by no means deserted. Here, at the edge of a

mud-hole filled with water from the afternoon's rain, some middle-aged men and women sit placidly in front of their darkened house; while across the street, along the brightly lit up windows and open door of their house, a few young women in gay silks have ranged their rocking chairs and, keeping them in violent motion, are pleasantly if loudly conversing with their less visible neighbours. Men stop to talk, especially if it is a weekend night, to which the girls respond in the same pleasant tones they use with their neighbours, but with an added touch of some subtle mixture, reserve, decorousness, agreement, purpose. But this is not the only place where men congregate. Over at the corner, beyond yards of untidy darkness, there is another bright spot, a booth dispensing soda and ice cream, and some young men stand there—the furtive young men. They are everywhere, in the dark back streets as well as in the illumined center, roaming the town restlessly like carriers of an indispensable impulse.

There is nothing peculiar to Cuba about these street scenes—ordinary Mediterranean scenes; and so are the people—the ordinary Mediterranean phenomenon. The people. *Il popolo. Il popolo minuto.* Not a concept but a palpable force, through which course impulses and even ideas, carried around in a perennial dialogue. Castro has entered the dialogue which goes on perennially under the arcades of any sunlit Mediterranean town square. He has recognized its political potential, and he makes use of the modern means of communication to harness it. But the tradition is of Cola di Rienzi, of the Ghibellines, of the *popolo* rushing through the streets in sun-drenched frenzy. The *popolo*, the same that had eventually hanged Cola di Rienzi by his heels, and Mussolini too. So Castro beware.

V

But that summer they were still talking about him with admiration in the streets of towns and villages. There was nothing in this of the vulgar familiarity of tabloid readers. The Cuban countryman is perhaps simple-minded, but he has his Mediterranean reserve and his Mediterranean warmth. Castro has become for many a real center of personal feeling. They pronounce his name with the sensual and respectful intimacy of admiring relatives. "Fidel, Fidel"—I overheard a middle-aged cook who is a spinster past matrimonial hopes chant to herself while she swept her kitchen as in another generation she might have muttered to herself the words of the *Pater Noster*.

At the rallies I sensed that I was witnessing a seance in which a strange intimacy was being enacted. These rallies are like tribal conclaves, like provincial congresses—even if it is a mammoth rally like the one that took place in the Sierra

Maestra on the anniversary of the movement of July 26, to which one and a half million people from all over Cuba were supposed to come. They did come—by rail, plane, the young ones even on foot, the *campesinos* from the area around on horseback, but most of the people by truck—not one and a half million, but perhaps half a million or less, which was in fact more than enough, for if even for that number food and transportation were moved with great difficulty, a million might have been a disaster.

Castro arrived early and took his place on a tall stand which stood in the center of the scorched and riddled plain that ascended like a tilted saucer towards the hills in the south. His entourage was packed tightly around him, the only group with a middle-class look about them in that roaming assemblage of mounted *campesinos*, workers, and uniformed youth. Unguarded and yet unplagued by the curious, he frequently leaned over the balustrade to shake hands with friends. Then came the speaking, with which he went on endlessly, tilting back his blunt and concave profile, saturating the air with his unmodulated, toneless voice just as the sun was saturating it with the dreary afternoon heat. The voice plodded on and on; although growing increasingly hoarse, it would pause now and then as if it had broken down, when invariably a voice would rush into the pause, shrieking something like "Castro is a worker for Cuba", a *campesino* having risen to his feet, a solitary figure above the multitude, shrieking unechoed like a man seized. Later in the afternoon, the sky having clouded over and a wind rising, Castro made a reference to his hoarseness which caused a great hubbub to mount from the crowd that prevented him from going on. As I watched these goings on, the impression was borne in upon me that in spite of the microphones and television cameras and helicopters hovering overhead, this was not a scene in the Western sense of modern mass politics. Of course he went on, and now they were simply making a genial noise, to prevent him from speaking; but as he persisted, they finally started to cry to him to go down and seek shelter. Then an anonymous arm having thrust from behind a trench coat on his shoulders, in which he wrapped himself up as in a cloak, the crowd quieted. All this was very impressive. Many false touches came into evidence that day about the public relations of the rally, but this was a very convincing scene worth all the usual trumpery. It was not rehearsed but it was perfect, and it was all nothing else than Castro and his audience playing together by ear. After this he went on and on, for several hours more, until darkness gathered and began to sop up his voice, when he stopped, either from exhaustion or from rhetorical instinct.

Of course the marathon length of Castro speeches is the wonder of the world. But the fact is that it seems to be all right with the Cubans. They do not know when to go home either. Ordinarily any meeting between a visitor from the larger world and local lights will result in a talkfest. Such conversations are not mere helter-skelter chatter. They have a ceremonious form. The worldly character is the principal talker while the local lights participate chiefly to prime him when his energies or inspiration flag, preventing the conversation from dying out unseasonably—which is a relative concept, as I discovered en route to that very rally. Arriving late at night in Bayamo, a southern town which was flooded with rally goers, I discovered that in order to persuade the authorities to give us lodgings it was necessary to wear down the listening endurance of two shifts of officials. I was travelling with two Argentinians, students from Buenos Aires, who had given evidence during the trip of educated panhandling. Immediately upon arriving, seeing the crowds in the streets, they set out with great purpose, with myself in tow, for the police station. They were of course right again. The police station was the only public place in town still in possession of spare beds, and although my friends had entered it somewhat nervously, they were soon on excellent terms with the lieutenant in charge, who eventually gave us the promise of lodgings, although not before being regaled with a highly embroidered tale of our travel adventures which took two hours to tell. We were about to set off for the assigned place of rest, which happened to be the local jail, when the captain strode in, followed by his young wife, himself a much younger man than the lieutenant, with black mustachios and a barrel chest, somewhat in fact like the young Hemingway in appearance. An imperious frown turning the lieutenant out of his seat at the desk, he retired to a chair in a corner where he immediately fell asleep while the captain, taking the vacated armchair, turned towards the foreign guests, rubbing his hands in the gesture of one sitting down to a good meal, his face beaming with genial curiosity. It was long past midnight, we had been travelling for two days and nights in an open truck, and I could speak little Spanish; so leaning over in my chair in imitation of the lieutenant, I began to nod off to an uneasy nap, but every time I woke up I could hear the voices of my two *companeros* flying bravely and sweetly above the noises of the crowded room.

It had struck me as I watched Castro's garrulous speech-making that the habit must have its roots in such convivial scenes as that. Its essential style, conversational and appealing to familiar emotions and attitudes, carries the tone, personal and ceremonious, in which the provincial Cuban in his naïve wonder about the affairs of the

world expects to be informed about them. The occasional Latin quotation is something expected of a lawyer. Castro is of course an instinctive demagogue, with as good a sense of the drift of his audience's moods as Mark Antony. But there seems to be more to him than to Shakespeare's hero. He has a genuine feeling about the masses, a trust that is strong because it is mutual. His speech on the explosion in the Courbé, which I read long after the incident, was by no means the effort of a mere rabble rouser. It was a performance: he is coming down among his people, with the mantle drawn over his face, to let them hear his complaint, his sorrowful thoughts, his indignant analysis. The pose is that of a tribune, the argument that of a lawyer addressing a jury, the rancour disciplined by the desire to exhibit the facts in the starkest light. Possibly the argument is all wrong, but there is something Athenian in its appearance of careful unfolding, in the intimate telling to the whole nation of the run of the leader's suspicions, as if they were a single street, a town, a *civitas* touched by a common disaster. Even if one reads his speech cold as I did, one easily sees that there could have been few among his audience and readers who would not have felt that they were being involved in a deliberation. And yet that there is something very wrong in the public relations of the Revolution one can tell even going by the first appearances. As the broad masses of Cubans are taking to the revolutionary process, the perennial moods of Cuban life have gone to work on it too. The puritanical image initially projected by the *barbudos* is beginning to develop a carnival grin.

Castro is perhaps still capable of inducing in his audience the most serious feelings. But outside of Castro's speeches, much of the propaganda is like a performance that has been prepared with high standards in mind, but after being constantly played before provincial audiences which are not very good at concentrating on complex plots or highly flown motivation, has become filled with horseplay and sleight-of-hand tricks. During the Sierra Maestra rally scheduled speakers, important personages, were dropped by parachute from helicopters like bags of sand or circus performers. And as for Castro himself, his speeches may still provide moments of high drama, although their length is in itself a vulgarity, but the image of him that is being presented to the public, the sheer physical image, displays streaks of vulgarity that are like first streaks of corruption. In many of the smaller eating places there were two photographs so much out of keeping with the myth of prophetic truculence that I began to regard them, especially since I saw them so often, as a sign of some kind of decay, of symbol if not of spirit. One shows him in the gesture of stretching out his little finger, holding it rakishly to his lips, a gesture of

indescribable vulgarity both because of the genteel cuteness of that little finger, and because of the expression—the lips are parted in a rather goatish smile, the smile and the outstretched finger adding up to a salacious suggestion—a dirty story has been told but the point is left on the teller's tongue to be relished there—the men will get it even if it is not spelled out and the *senoras* too, perhaps even faster than the men, as the wink indicates. The other photograph, also very much in evidence in the smaller restaurants and cafés, shows him sitting at a table surrounded by dishes of spaghetti, bottles of Pepsi Cola, and cans of sardines; the smile and the glister on the lip are there also, there is a plumpness playing around the cheeks, and he looks relaxed. I tried to buy this photograph from one of its owners, the proprietor of a small café, but he would not part with it for love or money. Neither could he tell me anything about it. Nor could the friends from the *Premierato*. Whether this is Castro being a regular guy or an advertisement of the displayed products remains one of the secrets of the Revolution.

VI

What cannot remain secret, of course, is the process of vulgarisation itself. It would be difficult to imagine Stalin or Hitler, one year after accession to power, represented in such homely poses. Everyone knows how rapidly the processes of decay work in the tropics, and I was reminded of this when at rallies I watched the horseplay, and the false pathos, and the cheap demagoguery being ladled out without limit or measure. But if taking my eye off the speakers' stand I would take in not just the performance but the response as well, I would realize that a function curious, strange but positive, is associated in that society with those seeming vulgarities. Under that glorious sky something has happened to the supremely serious-minded process of making the land the Cubans' own. It has become involved with fun making. Appropriately enough it was local rallies celebrating confiscations that revealed to me the wondrous magic that this people, generally good-humoured and life-loving, have worked with the solemn slogans and dreary moods of the Revolution. The rallies have become *fiestas*, and if there are rallies all the time it is not only because the government keeps up morale in this fashion. It is at the local rallies that the euphoria of the Revolution blends indistinguishably with the euphoria of sheer fun-making.

Confiscations, for example, did not remain confiscations for very long. They became funerals, and long before it reached the village in which I was staying the parade celebrating what in Havana had been announced as confiscation of the telephone company, or more precisely its "*intervencion*," had become a cortège, with a

hearse, a coffin, and pall bearers. The hearse in the form of a truck was coming from another town in the direction of Havana, and it was late coming to the village. But that had been in the program of every rally that had taken place there: always waiting at the crossroads under the great ceiba trees for the truck that was supposed to come on the highway from the direction of Havana, which was hard for Americans, although the natives did not mind. And that evening they minded it even less, for Ceiba, which is the village named after a tree, had fitted out its own funeral contingent, and long before the appointed hour the principals began to gather at the crossroads, in front of the army *cuartel*: mainly lantern bearers with lanterns wrapped up in a pall, but there was even somebody wearing a sort of white *poncho* like a cross-bearer's surplice who was carrying a poster fixed on a tall stick bearing the form of a donkey with a likeness of Eisenhower where the head should have been. It seemed as if the whole population was sauntering over from the village, and soon a dense crowd was milling in front of the army *cuartel* and swarming over its verandah where the soldiers were putting out rocking-chairs and handing out coffee. Truly these particular soldiers always conducted themselves—if what I saw of them should suffice for judgment—like a citizen army, which after all they had been organized to be, for they functioned as soldiers only on alternate days, helping out on the farms on the other days; but it should be also mentioned that if it was particularly hot on the army days, there would appear at the *cuartel* a widespread tendency to take off for the beach.

But on that particular Saturday of the rally they were in force, and had come out in front of the *cuartel* to play host to the gathering village in the dusk of the falling evening. The village was well represented. It had been principally the middle-aged quality that had held back: the physician, Doctor M., whose degree was American, and the apothecary, also a Doctor but of Havana; and as for the *finca* owners, I do not think any had shown up. But the young people were there in force, including the son of the doctor (the American one), himself in attendance at a southern American university, and his friends, the two brothers who owned the filling station, and even a *finca* owner's son was in some evidence, having driven up in a 1960 white convertible. So much for quality. And as for the people, the *popolo* of Ceiba del Agua seemed well represented in all its elements. The militia were there, making up no less than one third of the crowd, shabby in their blue and olive denims, drawn up in marching order and carrying ancient rifles, apparently French; and there was a contingent of village boys, not in uniform but with their shoes on, and so very smartly marching up and down, drilling with swinging arms

and singing at the top of their voices, just as in *Carmen*; and smartest of all—no, not really smart, but neat, as neat as acorns in their black and olive ensembles—the militia girls, daughters of butchers and shoemakers, wearing their uniforms with an air at the same time humorous and modest, who stood about in rather undecided poses, being young maidens, an occasional greying head among them but mostly young maidens, truly so. So many uniformed adolescents. It is this that gives the Revolution the unmistakable appearance of a modern political mass movement, linking its first impressions with Fascism or Zionism even sooner than with Communism. But youth not in uniform was also in considerable evidence—older youth. A swarm of the village's unprivileged young males, that ample *Lumpenelement*, the crowd component, the surplus population, hovering, as always around the edges of the scene, not in the militia, perhaps because they cannot afford the three dollars for the uniform or perhaps because they can not be trusted with the rifles. Some of them carried guitars, and some bongo sticks, and some drums of sorts.

At last the truck arrived, two hours late, which was good for that village, with the coffin inside and the loudspeaker on top. The *Lumpenelement* struck the strings and swung the sticks down. The coffin was jerked out of the truck, just as if it contained a real corpse, with great brutality, and we started off for the village square, a kilometer and a half away. Someone had stuck the poster with the donkey and Ike's head into the hand of a big blond boy, an American who was a college student from the Bronx. In this land of brunettes he was a phenomenon, *El Rubio*, and dazzled the eyes of girls. I mention this because it probably explains why he had stepped forward so, the moment he felt the stick in his hand, prancing and throwing out his chest, and swinging the poster above everybody's head, with enthusiasm rather than discretion. Also, however, he was a Democrat. The crowd took up the anti-American revolutionary chant: "*Fidel, Fidel, que tiene Fidel...*" We were marching rather pell mell, the militia men on the sides, the girls scattered throughout, much more at ease now that we were moving, the drum beating a marching rhythm, the *rubio* boy at the head of the marchers striding forward like a converter of Indians. But soon I sensed a more rapid movement around, a kind of scraping. The crowd had taken up the cry: "*Cuba si! Yanķis no!*" and the *Lumpenelement*, as it chanted with the rest, was doing something with its feet and elbows, like a shuffle. The girls were smiling now, swinging their arms freely, striding forward and rocking slightly to the left and to the right. "*Cuba si! Yanķis no! Cuba si! Malo Yanķis no! Bueno Yanķis si!*"—the *commandante* of the militia was waving towards the Americans with a gallant smile. I could see the lanterns swaying,

swinging to the right, swinging to the left. The *Lumpenelement* was no longer shuffling, it was tripping, tripping, one, two, and a dip. The drummmmm, the guitarrrrrr. "*Pachanga, Pachanga. Senores si Pachanga . . . Senores.*" The *Lumpenelement* was swinging right, left, elbows shuffling, heads bent back, mouths open, gaping, toothless. The girls were now also frankly tripping, tripping, and dipping. The *rubio* boy, who was flat-footed and had fallen behind to not far from where I was marching, swung round broadhipped, a *bayadere* indeed, then about three-quarters round, swayed, skidded, and then dipped but really, and as he and the poster he was carrying were sinking from view I could swear I saw the donkey kick up its heels and Ike bray from the placard. As you might expect on a sabbath. "*Senores si Pachanga, me voy para la Pachanaga . . . Pa - chan - ga. Pa - CHAN - GA.*"

"How do you like Cuba?" "Do you mean the Revolution?"—Doing the Revolution with the people of Ceiba was a great deal of fun. In Ceiba I really enjoyed the Revolution very much, thank you.