

Spanish Prisoners of War

William Dean Howells

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LITERATURE AND LIFE Spanish Prisoners of War

by William Dean Howells

SPANISH PRISONERS OF WAR

Certain summers ago our cruisers, the St. Louis and the Harvard, arrived at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with sixteen or seventeen hundred Spanish prisoners from Santiago de Cuba. They were partly soldiers of the land forces picked up by our troops in the fights before the city, but by far the greater part were sailors and marines from Cervera's ill-fated fleet. I have not much stomach for war, but the poetry of the fact I have stated made a very potent appeal to me on my literary side, and I did not hold out against it longer than to let the St. Louis get away with Cervera to Annapolis, when only her less dignified captives remained with those of the Harvard to feed either the vainglory or the pensive curiosity of the spectator. Then I went over from our summer colony to Kittery Point, and got a boat, and sailed out to have a look at these subordinate enemies in the first hours of their imprisonment.

I.

It was an afternoon of the brilliancy known only to an afternoon of the American summer, and the water of the swift Piscataqua River glittered in the sun with a really incomparable brilliancy. But nothing could light up the great monster of a ship, painted the dismal lead-color which our White Squadrons put on with the outbreak of the war, and she lay sullen in the stream with a look of ponderous repose, to which the activities of the coaling-barges at her side, and of the sailors washing her decks, seemed quite unrelated. A long gun forward and a long gun aft threatened the fleet of launches, tugs, dories, and cat-boats which fluttered about her, but the Harvard looked tired and bored, and seemed as if asleep. She had, in fact, finished her mission. The captives whom death had released had been carried out and sunk in the sea; those who survived to a further imprisonment had all been taken to the pretty island a mile farther up in the river, where the tide rushes back and forth through the Narrows like a torrent. Its defiant rapidity has won it there the graphic name of Pull-and-be-Damned; and we could only hope to reach the island by a series of skilful tacks, which should humor both the wind and the tide, both dead against us. Our boatman, one of those shore New Englanders who are born with a knowledge of sailing, was easily master of the art of this, but it took time, and gave me more than the leisure I wanted for trying to see

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the shore with the strange eyes of the captives who had just looked upon it. It was beautiful, I had to own, even in my qua, which should humor both the wind and the tide, both dead against us. Our boatman, one of those shore New Englanders who are born with a knowledge of sailing, was easily master of the art of this, but it took time, and gave me more than the leisure I wanted for trying to see the shore with the strange eyes of the captives who had just looked upon it. It was beautiful, I had to own, even in my quality of exile and prisoner. The meadows and the orchards came down to the water, or, where the wandering line of the land was broken and lifted in black fronts of rock, they crept to the edge of the cliff and peered over it. A summer hotel stretched its verandas along a lovely level; everywhere in clovery hollows and on breezy knolls were gray old farm-houses and summer cottages—like weather-beaten birds' nests, and like freshly painted marten-boxes; but all of a cold New England neatness which made me homesick for my malodorous Spanish fishing-village, shambling down in stony lanes to the warm tides of my native seas. Here, every place looked as if it had been newly scrubbed with soap and water, and rubbed down with a coarse towel, and was of an antipathetic alertness. The sweet, keen breeze made me shiver, and the northern sky, from which my blinding southern sun was blazing, was as hard as sapphire. I tried to bewilder myself in the ignorance of a Catalonian or Asturian fisherman, and to wonder with his darkened mind why it should all or any of it have been, and why I should have escaped from the iron hell in which I had fought no quarrel of my own to fall into the hands of strangers, and to be haled over seas to these alien shores for a captivity of unknown term. But I need not have been at so much pains; the intelligence (I do not wish to boast) of an American author would have sufficed; for if there is anything more grotesque than another in war it is its monstrous inconsequence. If we had a grief with the Spanish government, and if it was so mortal we must do murder for it, we might have sent a joint committee of the House and Senate, and, with the improved means of assassination which modern science has put at our command, killed off the Spanish cabinet, and even the queen—mother and the little king. This would have been consequent, logical, and in a sort reasonable; but to butcher and capture a lot of wretched Spanish peasants and fishermen, hapless conscripts to whom personally and nationally we were as so many men in the moon, was that melancholy and humiliating necessity of war which makes it homicide in which there is not even the saving grace of hate, or the excuse of hot blood.

I was able to console myself perhaps a little better for the captivity of the Spaniards than if I had really been one of them, as we drew nearer and nearer their prison isle, and it opened its knotty points and little ravines, overrun with sweet-fern, blueberry-bushes, bay, and low blackberry-vines, and rigidly traversed with a high stockade of yellow pine boards. Six or eight long, low, wooden barracks stretched side by side across the general slope, with the captive officers' quarters, sheathed in weather-proof black paper, at one end of them. About their doors swarmed the common prisoners, spilling out over the steps and on the grass, where some of them lounged smoking. One operatic figure in a long blanket stalked athwart an open space; but there was such poverty of drama in the spectacle at the distance we were keeping that we were glad of so much as a shirt-sleeved contractor driving out of the stockade in his buggy. On the heights overlooking the enclosure Gatling guns were posted at three or four points, and every thirty or forty feet sentries met and parted, so indifferent to us, apparently, that we wondered if we might get nearer. We ventured, but at a certain moment a sentry called to us, "Fifty yards off, please!" Our young skipper answered, "All right," and as the sentry had a gun on his shoulder which we had every reason to believe was loaded, it was easily our pleasure to retreat to the specified limit. In fact, we came away altogether, after that, so little promise was there of our being able to satisfy our curiosity further. We came away care fully nursing such impression as we had got of a spec tacle whose historical quality we did our poor best to feel. It related us, after solicitation, to the wars against the Moors, against the Mexicans and Peruvians, against the Dutch; to the Italian campaigns of the Gran Capitan, to the Siege of Florence, to the Sack of Rome, to the wars of the Spanish Succession, and what others. I do not deny that there was a certain aesthetic joy in having the Spanish prisoners there for this effect; we came away duly grateful for what we had seen of them; and we had long duly resigned ourselves to seeing no more, when word was sent to us that our young skipper had got a permit to visit the island, and wished us to go with him.

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II.

It was just such another afternoon when we went again, but this time we took the joyous trolley-car, and bounded and pirouetted along as far as the navyyard of Kittery, and there we dismounted and walked among the vast, ghostly ship-sheds, so long empty of ships. The grass grew in the Kittery navy-yard, but it was all the pleasanter for the grass, and those pale, silent sheds were far more impressive in their silence than they would have been if resonant with saw and hammer. At several points, an unarmed marine left his leisure somewhere, and lunged across our path with a mute appeal for our permit; but we were nowhere delayed till we came to the office where it had to be countersigned, and after that we had presently crossed a bridge, by shady, rustic ways, and were on the prison island. Here, if possible, the sense of something pastoral deepened; a man driving a file of cows passed before us under kindly trees, and the bell which the foremost of these milky mothers wore about her silken throat sent forth its clear, tender note as if from the depth of some grassy bosk, and instantly witched me away to the woods-pastures which my boyhood knew in southern Ohio. Even when we got to what seemed fortifications they turned out to be the walls of an old reservoir, and bore on their gate a paternal warning that children unaccompanied by adults were not allowed within.

We mounted some stone steps over this portal and were met by a young marine, who left his Gatling gun for a moment to ask for our permit, and then went back satisfied. Then we found ourselves in the presence of a sentry with a rifle on his shoulder, who was rather more exacting. Still, he only wished to be convinced, and when he had pointed out the headquarters where we were next to go, he let us over his beat. At the headquarters there was another sentry, equally serious, but equally civil, and with the intervention of an orderly our leader saw the officer of the day. He came out of the quarters looking rather blank, for he had learned that his pass admitted our party to the lines, but not to the stockade, which we might approach, at a certain point of vantage and look over into, but not penetrate. We resigned ourselves, as we must, and made what we could of the nearest prison barrack, whose door overflowed and whose windows swarmed with swarthy captives. Here they were, at such close quarters that their black, eager eyes easily pierced the pockets full of cigarettes which we had brought for them. They looked mostly very young, and there was one smiling rogue at the first window who was obviously prepared to catch anything thrown to him. He caught, in fact, the first box of cigarettes shied over the stockade; the next box flew open, and spilled its precious contents outside the dead-line under the window, where I hope some compassionate guard gathered them up and gave them to the captives.

Our fellows looked capable of any kindness to their wards short of letting them go. They were a most friendly company, with an effect of picnicking there among the sweet-fern and blueberries, where they had pitched their wooden tents with as little disturbance to the shrubbery as possible. They were very polite to us, and when, after that misadventure with the cigarettes (I had put our young leader up to throwing the box, merely supplying the corpus delicti myself), I wandered vaguely towards a Gatling gun planted on an earthen platform where the laurel and the dogroses had been cut away for it, the man in charge explained with a smile of apology that I must not pass a certain path I had already crossed.

One always accepts the apologies of a man with a Gatling gun to back them, and I retreated. That seemed the end; and we were going crestfallenly away when the officer of the day came out and allowed us to make his acquaintance. He permitted us, with laughing reluctance, to learn that he had been in the fight at Santiago, and had come with the prisoners, and he was most obligingly sorry that our permit did not let us into the stockade. I said I had some cigarettes for the prisoners, and I supposed I might send them; in, but he said he could not allow this, for they had money to buy tobacco; and he answered another of our party, who had not a soul above buttons, and who asked if she could get one from the Spaniards, that so far from promoting her wish, he would have been obliged to take away any buttons she might have got from them.

"The fact is," he explained, "you've come to the wrong end for transactions in buttons and tobacco."

But perhaps innocence so great as ours had wrought upon him. When we said we were going, and thanked him for his unavailing good-will, he looked at his watch and said they were just going to feed the prisoners; and after some parley he suddenly called out, "Music of the guard!" Instead of a regimental band, which I had supposed summoned, a single corporal ran out the barracks, touching his cap.

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“Take this party round to the gate,” the officer said, and he promised us that he would see us there, and hoped we would not mind a rough walk. We could have answered that to see his prisoners fed we would wade through fathoms of red-tape; but in fact we were arrested at the last point by nothing worse than the barbed wire which fortified the outer gate. Here two marines were willing to tell us how well the prisoners lived, while we stared into the stockade through an inner gate of plank which was run back for us. They said the Spaniards had a breakfast of coffee, and hash or stew and potatoes, and a dinner of soup and roast; and now at five o'clock they were to have bread and coffee, which indeed we saw the white-capped, whitejacketed cooks bringing out in huge tin wash-boilers. Our marines were of opinion, and no doubt rightly, that these poor Spaniards had never known in their lives before what it was to have full stomachs. But the marines said they never acknowledged it, and the one who had a German accent intimated that gratitude was not a virtue of any Roman (I suppose he meant Latin) people. But I do not know that if I were a prisoner, for no fault of my own, I should be very explicitly thankful for being unusually well fed. I thought (or I think now) that a fig or a bunch of grapes would have been more acceptable to me under my own vine and fig-tree than the stew and roast of captors who were indeed showing themselves less my enemies than my own government, but were still not quite my hosts.

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III.

How is it the great pieces of good luck fall to us? The clock strikes twelve as it strikes two, and with no more premonition. As we stood there expecting nothing better of it than three at the most, it suddenly struck twelve. Our officer appeared at the inner gate and bade our marines slide away the gate of barbed wire and let us into the enclosure, where he welcomed us to seats on the grass against the stockade, with many polite regrets that the tough little knots of earth beside it were not chairs.

The prisoners were already filing out of their quarters, at a rapid trot towards the benches where those great wash-boilers of coffee were set. Each man had a soup-plate and bowl of enamelled tin, and each in his turn received quarter of a loaf of fresh bread and a big ladleful of steaming coffee, which he made off with to his place at one of the long tables under a shed at the side of the stockade. One young fellow tried to get a place not his own in the shade, and our officer when he came back explained that he was a guerrillero, and rather unruly. We heard that eight of the prisoners were in irons, by sentence of their own officers, for misconduct, but all save this guerrillero here were docile and obedient enough, and seemed only too glad to get peacefully at their bread and coffee.

First among them came the men of the Cristobal Colon, and these were the best looking of all the captives. From their pretty fair average the others varied to worse and worse, till a very scrub lot, said to be ex-convicts, brought up the rear. They were nearly all little fellows, and very dark, though here and there a six-footer towered up, or a blond showed among them. They were joking and laughing together, harmlessly enough, but I must own that they looked a crew of rather sorry jail-birds; though whether any run of humanity clad in misfits of our navy blue and white, and other chance garments, with close-shaven heads, and sometimes bare feet, would have looked much less like jail-birds I am not sure. Still, they were not prepossessing, and though some of them were pathetically young, they had none of the charm of boyhood. No doubt they did not do themselves justice, and to be herded there like cattle did not improve their chances of making a favorable impression on the observer. They were kindly used by our officer and his subordinates, who mixed among them, and straightened out the confusion they got into at times, and perhaps sometimes wilfully. Their guards employed a few handy words of Spanish with them; where these did not avail, they took them by the arm and directed them; but I did not hear a harsh tone, and I saw no violence, or even so much indignity offered them as the ordinary trolley-car passenger is subjected to in Broadway. At a certain bugle-call they dispersed, when they had finished their bread and coffee, and scattered about over the grass, or returned to their barracks. We were told that these children of the sun dreaded its heat, and kept out of it whenever they could, even in its decline; but they seemed not so much to withdraw and hide themselves from that, as to vanish into the history of "old, unhappy, far-off" times, where prisoners of war, properly belong. I roused myself with a start as if I had lost them in the past.

Our officer came towards us and said gayly, "Well, you have seen the animals fed," and let us take our grateful leave. I think we were rather a loss, in our going, to the marines, who seemed glad of a chance to talk. I am sure we were a loss to the man on guard at the inner gate, who walked his beat with reluctance when it took him from us, and eagerly when it brought him back. Then he delayed for a rapid and comprehensive exchange of opinions and ideas, successfully blending military subordination with American equality in his manner.

The whole thing was very American in the perfect decorum and the utter absence of ceremony. Those good fellows were in the clothes they wore through the fights at Santiago, and they could not have put on much splendor if they had wished, but apparently they did not wish. They were simple, straightforward, and adequate. There was some dry joking about the superiority of the prisoners' rations and lodgings, and our officer ironically professed his intention of messing with the Spanish officers. But there was no grudge, and not a shadow of ill will, or of that stupid and atrocious hate towards the public enemy which abominable newspapers and politicians had tried to breed in the popular mind. There was nothing manifest but a sort of cheerful purpose to live up to that military ideal of duty which is so much nobler than the civil ideal of self-interest. Perhaps duty will yet become the civil ideal, when the peoples shall have learned to live for the common good, and are united for the operation of the industries as they now are for the hostilities.

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IV.

Shall I say that a sense of something domestic, something homelike, imparted itself from what I had seen? Or was this more properly an effect from our visit, on the way back to the hospital, where a hundred and fifty of the prisoners lay sick of wounds and fevers? I cannot say that a humaner spirit prevailed here than in the camp; it was only a more positive humanity which was at work. Most of the sufferers were stretched on the clean cots of two long, airy, wooden shells, which received them, four days after the orders for their reception had come, with every equipment for their comfort. At five o'clock, when we passed down the aisles between their beds, many of them had a gay, nonchalant effect of having toothpicks or cigarettes in their mouths; but it was really the thermometers with which the nurses were taking their temperature. It suggested a possibility to me, however, and I asked if they were allowed to smoke, and being answered that they did smoke, anyway, whenever they could, I got rid at last of those boxes of cigarettes which had been burning my pockets, as it were, all afternoon. I gave them to such as I was told were the most deserving among the sick captives, but Heaven knows I would as willingly have given them to the least. They took my largesse gravely, as became Spaniards; one said, smiling sadly, "Muchas gracias," but the others merely smiled sadly; and I looked in vain for the response which would have twinkled up in the faces of even moribund Italians at our looks of pity. Italians would have met our sympathy halfway; but these poor fellows were of another tradition, and in fact not all the Latin peoples are the same, though we sometimes conveniently group them together for our detestation. Perhaps there are even personal distinctions among their several nationalities, and there are some Spaniards who are as true and kind as some Americans. When we remember Cortez let us not forget Las Casas.

They lay in their beds there, these little Spanish men, whose dark faces their sickness could not blanch to more than a sickly sallow, and as they turned their dull black eyes upon us I must own that I could not "support the government" so fiercely as I might have done elsewhere. But the truth is, I was demoralized by the looks of these poor little men, who, in spite of their character of public enemies, did look so much like somebody's brothers, and even somebody's children. I may have been infected by the air of compassion, of scientific compassion, which prevailed in the place. There it was as wholly business to be kind and to cure as in another branch of the service it was business to be cruel and to kill. How droll these things are! The surgeons had their favorites among the patients, to all of whom they were equally devoted; inarticulate friendships had sprung up between them and certain of their hapless foes, whom they spoke of as "a sort of pets." One of these was very useful in making the mutinous take their medicine; another was liked apparently because he was so likable. At a certain cot the chief surgeon stopped and said, "We did not expect this boy to live through the night." He took the boy's wrist between his thumb and finger, and asked tenderly as he leaned over him, "Poco mejor?" The boy could not speak to say that he was a little better; he tried to smile—such things do move the witness; nor does the sight of a man whose bandaged cheek has been half chopped away by a machete tend to restore one's composure.