

THE WOMAN BEHIND CASTRO

by Nicasio Silverio

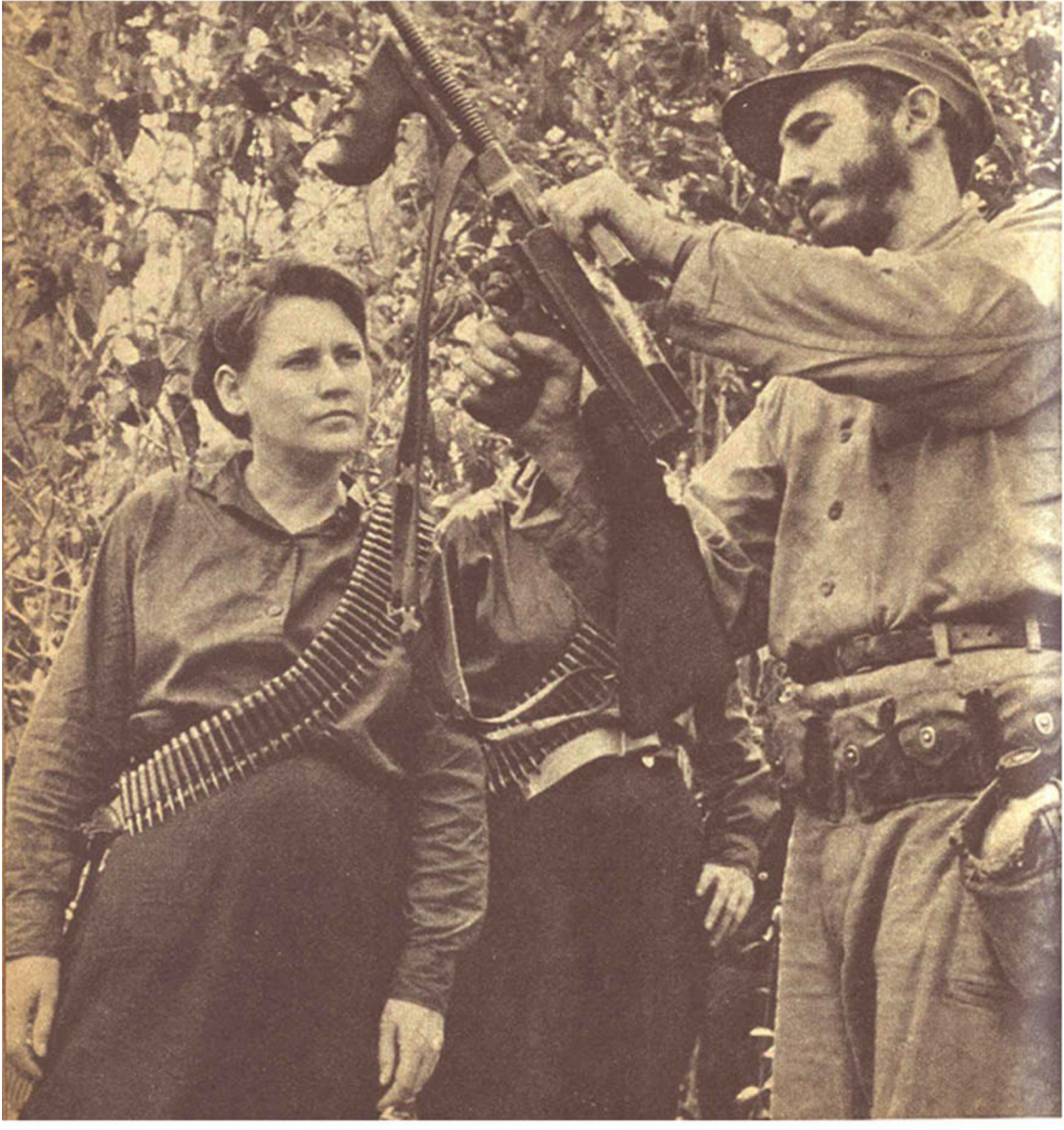
This exclusive report tells the story of the amazing woman whose resolute spirit blueprinted the movement that inspired Fidel Castro and freed Cuba from tyranny

In the last few months, millions of Americans have read millions of words about our struggle for liberty in Cuba. The bearded mountain fighters of Fidel Castro have been singled out for special praise - rightly, for they were truly heroic. But there were other heroes - the underground leaders. And the most important of these was a woman, Haydeé Santamaria.

Without her, the revolution might never have been. She was the actual founder of the freedom movement known as the "26th of July." Haydee Santamaria was known to Cubans simply as "Maria." In America, she would be called "Mrs. Hart," for she is the wife of Dr. Armondo Hart, now Minister of Education under Castro. She is 31 - a trimly built woman of medium height, with high swept-back cheek bones and intense brown eyes. Without portfolio, she is as powerful in the new government as she was in the revolution.

More than anyone else, Fidel Castro realizes the vital part Maria played in freeing Cuba. He was in constant touch with her. When his forces needed money for dynamite or equipment, the request was usually approved and the money obtained through Maria. She saved lives and money by keeping plans from crisscrossing and overlapping.

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High in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Fidel Castro shows Haydeé Santamaria his mentor, how to handle a rebel machine gun.

To comprehend Maria's position, it is essential to know what Batista never could find out, despite his torture of thousands - the organization of the revolution. In each of Cuba's six provinces, there was a Revolutionary Coordinator, a Chief of Treasury and Finance, a Chief of Civil Resistance and a Chief of Action - "action" being our euphemism for bombing, handling arms, arson and similar activities.

For over a year, María was Revolutionary Coordinator for the Province of Havana. The Chief of Action in Havana at the time, Captain René Rodríguez, used to consult with her several times a week, as did leaders like René de los Santos, who today is in charge of investigating atrocities committed by Batista's secret military police.

As you can imagine, no person remained in one job very long. There was a turnover as the leaders were killed or imprisoned or became "burned"—that is, so known to the police that they had to take refuge in the mountains with Fidel. That María remained so long in her position attests to her intelligence, her keen judgment of people and her uncanny sixth sense.

Haydeé Santamaría was born in 1928 in Las Villas Province. Her

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father was a skilled worker in the sugar industry, and María had a religious, middle-class upbringing with only sketchy schooling. She had one sister, Aida, and two brothers—Aldo, who was imprisoned three years for political “crimes,” and Abel, who was tortured to death after the attack led by Fidel on the Moncada Army barracks on July 26, 1953.

The Moncada attack was the shot heard from one end of Cuba to the other. Fidel Castro, with a band of about 160 men *and one woman*, Haydeé Santamaría, attempted to seize the army barracks and overthrow Batista. Almost all the men were killed, most of them after they had surrendered. María’s brother, Abel, died under torture, crying, “Long Live Free Cuba!” Witnesses say he also died with a word of pity for his torturers.

María’s fiancé, who had joined in the attack, was also murdered. Heartbroken, María stood trial with Fidel, his brother Raúl Castro, and the few survivors of the massacre. She listened lifelessly as she was sentenced to seven years imprisonment; Fidel to 15 years.

María was a quiet prisoner. But the date “26th of July” burned deep in her memory. She could not reconcile herself to the fact that in one day she had lost her favorite brother, her fiancé and others close to her. How could the world be indifferent to such a tragedy as Moncada?

But the massacre had not been forgotten. When María was freed from prison in 1954, after about seven months, she was hailed as “la muchacha del Moncada”—the girl of the Moncada—who would lead a new fight for liberation.

But María was ill; for a long while she wanted only to forget. Then, as her strength returned, she felt a debt to the dead and a quickening of the ideal for which they had perished at Moncada.

Once decided, María began planning and raising funds. In Cuba, there were a number of small, scattered freedom groups in the universities and towns. She united them. From the largest group, the García-Bárcena, she recruited Faustino

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Pérez, later to become Fidel's ablest lieutenant (he is now Minister in Charge of Recuperating Stolen Funds), and Armando Hart, a lawyer, whom she married in 1955. The wedding was a strange affair. The guests, most of whom were wanted by the police, ducked in and out the back door.

The plan María formed with this small nucleus of men was to be known as the "26th of July Movement."

Fidel Castro was released from jail in 1955. Before seeing him, María waited a week, during which Fidel examined the possibilities of fighting Batista through organized political action. Finally María stepped forward and challenged Fidel. Did he really believe political action could defeat Batista, who had seized power by overthrowing the freely-elected government of Carlos Prío?

Fidel didn't answer.

"Here, Fidel, is the skeleton of a movement," said María. "I have formed it with Faustino Pérez, Armando Hart and Frank País. There are many others who will follow you. Here are their names. And remember that along with these names go the names of all who died at Moncada. Their spirit is worth more than 1,000 rifles."

Fidel accepted, and thus the liberation movement became a reality instead of merely an ideal.

Later in 1955, Fidel left Cuba. He raised money in Key West, Tampa, Miami and New York, lecturing and showing films of abuses under Batista. He then went to Mexico where he trained, armed and recruited more men, planning to invade Cuba on July 26, 1956, exactly three years after the abortive Moncada attack. But in June he was jailed by Mexican police on charges of violating the Neutrality Act. The police seized his money and the arms.

Released from jail about a month later, Fidel had to decide whether to begin another odyssey in search of funds, or to accept money from Dr. Carlos Prío Socarrás, the Cuban ex-President whom Batista had

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thrown out of office. Prío, then living in Florida, was spending his time and money (he had left the Presidency with a great fortune) with the sole aim of avenging himself on Batista.

Fidel chose to contact Prío. Prío met him secretly in a hotel room in McAllen, Texas. To get there, Fidel had to swim the muddy Rio Grande—for he had no visa to the U. S. at this time. There, in the presence of Faustino Pérez (who told me this episode) Fidel and Prío agreed on a course of action to overthrow Batista. The plan consisted of three parts: (1) The invasion of Cuba by Fidel. (2) The simultaneous revolt of the army against Batista. (3) A general strike throughout Cuba.

But it was not that easy. Here is the hitherto untold story of why, after years of planning, Fidel's invasion of Cuba ended in disaster.

With 82 men, Fidel planned to land November 30, 1956 at Niquero, a small town on the rugged southern coast of the Oriente Province. But his ship, the *Gramma*, was slowed by a storm in the Caribbean. On December 2, as the ship's navigator climbed high to take sights on the Cuban coast, he accidentally fell into the ocean. Fished out in a state of shock, he was unable to speak or navigate.

Fidel had to choose between returning to Mexico or risking a blind landing. He chose the latter, and wound up with his men in the worst possible spot—a swamp. To reach shore, they had to wade through heavy marshes, losing most of their equipment. Meanwhile, Batista's air force and coast guard had spotted the boat. As the men staggered to shore, they were met with murderous fire.

But 12 of the men, including Fidel, Raúl and Faustino Pérez, survived and scattered in groups of twos and threes into the mountains. The Batista radio, to confuse the underground, announced that the invasion had been foiled and that Fidel had surrendered. (On hearing this, Raúl, who had been separated from Fidel in the flight, swore to kill his brother.)

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The plan for an army revolt and general strike were also unsuccessful. Only one city, Santiago, rebelled successfully. But this uprising collapsed after two days. Its initial success was due only to the brilliant leadership of Frank País, an elementary schoolteacher, who was then Coordinator of the Movement for all of Cuba.

María was with Frank País in Santiago when Fidel landed. When the plan failed, most of the leaders were caught and tried. They were found guilty, but one of the three judges dissented. He held that the Cuban Constitution permitted people to rise up against tyranny. The judge was, of course, quickly dismissed by Batista and had to flee Cuba. He was Dr. Manuel Urrutia Lleó, now President of free Cuba.

María returned to Havana early in 1957, and it was at this time I began working directly for her.

My job was to screen those who wanted to see María. I was the only one who could put others in touch with her. Her advice was sought and followed by everyone. Through the Havana underground Chief of Finance, Manuel Suzarte, she distributed funds wherever needed most.

Once I went with her to the du Pont company offices to order 500 yards of nylon needed for sheltering in the mountains. I knew that the director was sympathetic to the Movement, but María did not wish to reveal her function in the revolution. She said she wanted to cover a yacht.

"Five hundred yards!" he exclaimed. "That's enough for 100 yachts!"

"We're starting a business," María said, unshaken.

Since the company did not have that much nylon in stock he agreed to order it; but María cancelled the order shortly afterwards when Fidel sent word that plans were then being made for the guerrillas to carry the attack out of the mountains.

Though María was constantly hunted by the police, she could walk

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freely around Havana because she was adept at subtle disguise. She once told me that she thought disguise was much easier for a woman than a man, since a woman could change herself more strikingly with make-up, hair-do, and dress. María even changed her way of walking from day to day, or from morning to evening. With a flick of her lipstick or comb, she seemed to become an entirely different person. To this day, I do not know the true color of her hair, which she dyed from light blonde to deep brown.

María surprised me one day when she appeared with no lipstick on at all. (Women in Cuba are even more attentive to such things than American women.) When I remarked on it, she said, "I haven't a cent to buy any lipstick."

I reminded her of the \$5,000 I had seen her handling at a conference we had just left.

"That money is not mine," she said. "It belongs to the Movement."

I bought her a light pink shade of lipstick. She thanked me, for she was very proud of her appearance. Moreover, lack of lipstick might easily attract the attention of police.

One hot afternoon María met with a man name Argelio to discuss a plan of sabotage for Havana Province. When the conference was over, Argelio grew somber. "They arrested my son about a month ago," he said. "To make him say where I was, they drove him to Santa María beach, laid him down on the sand, and taped a bomb loosely to his stomach. After lighting the fuse they watched from the distance while my boy struggled with the lead pipe containing the dynamite. After he had freed himself they dragged him back to prison.

"The next day they repeated the torture, then dragged him all the way back to the car, pushing him into every cactus they found on their way. When he arrived at El Principe Prison, there were 67 cactus thorns still imbedded in his body." Argelio breathed heavily. "I know who did this. When Batista falls I'll drag these men over cactuses. I'll stick needles into them. I'll . . ."

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María interrupted. "Argelio, I'm very sorry for your boy. I hope he's well, but if you do what you say, I'll have you shot with your son's torturers. Yours will be the revenge of a civilized man. The guilty will be tried; if found guilty, they will be shot by people who have never seen them before. Cuba cannot afford to be unjust once more."

Many of the people who came to me asking to see María, wanted her permission to join Fidel in the Sierra Maestra mountains. María probably made more trips to the mountains than any other Cuban. These trips were necessary not only to keep Fidel informed of underground activities in the cities, but to cheer and encourage his men, who often felt lonely and forgotten, or had periods of despair in which they imagined that we in the cities were not doing as much as we could.

Fidel was also subject to these fits of melancholy. Once, when María arrived at Fidel's camp, the worried troops told her that Fidel had gone off walking in the hills, refusing to take an armed escort. "He's boiling mad at something," an officer said. "He wants to be left alone."

"Go back and tell him that *I* sent you," snapped María. "This is no time for moonlight strolls!"

A short time later several soldiers came back with Fidel. Gladdened by the sight of María, he apologized for his conduct and sat down to a cup of coffee.

María, as I have said, was very clever at disguises, but her husband, Armando, was impossible to disguise. His features were so distinctive that no matter what we did, Armando remained Armando. His low hairline, high cheekbones, sparse beard, light complexion and lisp always gave him away.

Armando's brother, Enrique, was a quiet, shy man who was once Chief of Action in Havana Province, and later in the province of Matanzas. There he died as a result of a bomb explosion, whether his own or that of police is not known. The police often blew up bomb-makers to hide the murder.

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Armando himself was once tried on charges of bomb-making. His escape from the courthouse was probably the most unusual escape in the revolution. He simply pulled off his prisoner's jacket, flung it at the guards' feet and strode out wearing a pull-over María had sent him the week before. The guards were so stupefied and fearful of letting the other prisoners escape, that Armando raced out of the courthouse before they could recover.

Armando was as nervous as he was lucky. Shortly after the above escape, he jumped into a police car by mistake. María, who was nearby, started calling Armando by his nickname, which was "Hyacinth." The police began laughing as she implored, "Hyacinth! Hyacinth!" Armando, then the most important person in the revolution, hopped back out of the car and strolled rapidly off with María.

I located a hide-out where Armando stayed for ten days, isolated from all visitors, as María had ordered. María was the sole exception. She visited her husband daily—and longer each day. Finally she told me with a rueful smile, "Sometimes I wish Armando were back in jail. I would work better for the Movement. With him here, I have to be both a wife and a revolutionist. I'm not performing my duties."

This, of course, was untrue. Apart from this short period of seeing Armando (he was finally caught while descending from the Sierra Maestra and imprisoned on the Isle of Pines until Batista's flight), María permitted herself few pleasures or sentiment, even though she was a woman of deep feeling. Her love for children, or perhaps for the role of a housewife that had been denied her by Batista, showed always. Whenever we visited homes where children were present, she played with them as if they were the only meaningful thing in life.

The greatest hurt which I saw María suffer during the revolution was when she received news of the death of Frank País, one of the outstanding members of the Movement. Frank was a thin, baby-faced youth

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with a shock of black hair. He was an organist in a Baptist church as well as an elementary schoolteacher. Although Batista completely controlled every means of communication, Frank possessed two telephones the phone company never knew existed. He even tapped police wires to learn their plans.

Frank liked to frighten us in Havana with outspoken telephone calls such as: "Hello. María? Say, how's the revolution going? Any excitement? What do you hear from Fidel?"

Frank was also a prolific letter writer. In one of his last letters, in July of 1957, after telling how his brother Josue was murdered, he wrote, "Enough of that. Now I must become once more the strong man that everyone thinks I am."

A few days later, Frank was murdered. On July 31, he was holding a conference in a house in Santiago—a house that was secretly connected to two other houses in case of emergency. About 10:30 A.M. police were spotted outside. Frank dismissed the conferees, moved into a connecting house, and began answering his heavy mail.

An alarmed friend rushed into the room. "Look outside."

The police were circling all three houses. Someone had betrayed the hide-out. "They have come to stay," Frank sighed. "I might fight my way out the back. But I will be of more use if I'm murdered."

With those words, he opened the door and walked out, unarmed. After a few steps, he was arrested and put into a patrol car. Fifteen minutes later a jeep arrived, carrying the corpulent José María Salas Cañizares, then Chief of Police in Santiago. Witnesses saw Cañizares order Frank out of the patrol car. Frank stood straight, arms folded across his chest. A moment later he was cut down by 12 bullets.

I received the news of Frank's death in Havana while on my way to meet María. There was no way to evade the responsibility of telling her. I chose to be blunt.

"María," I said, "they have just murdered Frank País."

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For the first and only time during my days at her side, I saw her laboring with tears. "You must be joking," she faltered. Rushing to the radio, she turned it on. The news was on the air: Frank País has been slain in Santiago. "Better go home," I said. "I'll cancel all meetings."

"No," she said firmly. "Please bring the next person over. I'm of no use to the revolution unless I work. I must work, especially now."

Cuba's reaction to Frank's death was astounding. When he was buried—in the uniform of a full colonel, a rank which was higher than any rank in the revolution—the thousands that walked behind the coffin began shouting for a general strike. The call swept through Cuba, and if the strike had not been thwarted in Havana, Batista would have been overthrown that day.

By the fall of 1958, María was so hunted by the police that, despite her disguises, it became impossible for her to stay in Havana. She flew to Miami using a forged passport, for she could not obtain a U. S. visa.

In Miami, the FBI, aided by the immigration authorities, searched in vain for her for three months while she went about her business of contacting exiled Cubans and raising money for the final assault on Batista's dictatorship.

Finally she entered the Miami immigration office voluntarily and claimed political asylum. After eight hours of questioning—during which she declined to say how she had come to Florida—the officials scoffed and said that Cuba was a free country.

María picked up the phone, got the Cuban operator and asked for her mother. After a series of clicks, beeps and hums, the operator told her there would be a one hour delay for the message to be cleared.

"There," María cried, "there is your freedom—absolute censorship! Send me back, and my blood will be on your hands!"

María was granted temporary asylum. She had won her point as she always did, not on a technicality, but on an almost fanatic faith in

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fair play. But a little more than a month later, she did return to Havana—a triumphal return with the forces of Fidel Castro, which she had helped lead to victory.

When I last saw her in Havana, María was no longer the tired, worried woman I had known. Nor was she one whit impressed by her new social stature as the wife of the Cuban Minister of Education. She was still as straightforward and unpretentious as ever. This was shown when the most widely-read social columnist in Cuba telephoned and asked for her picture. This man peddles vanity and, in a young nation such as ours, he finds many eager buyers among the newly-rich and the new in power.

“Mrs. Hart,” he said, “I’ve been trying to reach you for the last few days. Our readers are eager to see your picture in my column.”

“I don’t have any pictures,” María said tersely.

“We can send a man to your house and have one taken,” coaxed the columnist.

“The minute that I let your photographer take my picture, I am stealing from Cuba,” retorted María. “I have no time for photographers. My time is Cuba’s.”

She was about to hang up, then smiled. “I remember now that I do have one photograph. It is taken with Fidel in the Sierra Maestra. I’m dressed as a soldier and carrying a rifle. Could you use such a photograph on your society page?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” said the caller. “Well, of course we will.”

Later a florist telephoned to ask where to deliver 142 vases of flowers sent to María by well-wishers.

“Take the flowers to the Colón Cemetery in Havana,” she replied, “and place them on the tombs of Aldo, Frank País or Enrique Hart. Or, better still, scatter them all over Cuba, and they will surely fall on the grave of a Cuban patriot murdered by Batista. As for me, I have no use for flowers.”

Coronet

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