

AGITATION AND CRUISE SHIPS

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In June of 1940, with a year of rotating internship completed, we took an eighteen-day job as ship's surgeon on the United Fruit Company's Santa Maria. The Great White Fleet of banana boats sailed regularly out of New Orleans on an eleven to eighteen-day circuit of Caribbean and Central American ports. Although they were advertised as cruise ships, the one hundred or so passengers definitely ranked below the banana in importance. Actually, the passenger business was run at a loss to the fruit company but maintained as an accommodating "good neighbor" policy, furnishing needed transportation between islands and ports then quite inaccessible.

The routine swing on one of these cruises was across the Gulf to Havana, down to Panama, then up the coast of Central America with stops at the banana ports in northern Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, over to Havana again, then back to New Orleans. At any of the ports of call, if there was ever any question of leaving a banana or a passenger, the passenger always came out second best.

The fruit company had its regular complement of ships' doctors, usually re tired or tired physicians who, for one reason or another, had resigned from the pressures of active practice and competition to enjoy the undemanding task of jockeying the ships around the Gulf of Mexico to soak up the sun, lime juice and rum, of which there was great abundance. When these men left or went on vacation, the jobs were opened up on a one-trip basis to interns and residents training in New Orleans. The jobs were eagerly sought. Not only was the trip a relaxing one at company expense, but the United Fruit Company also paid the doctor \$10 a day. At that time, the \$180 for an eighteen-day voyage was \$60 more than the Charity Hospital intern's entire salary for a year.

As a paid—even though temporary—employee of the fruit company, it was necessary, however, to join the national Seaman's Union. And it was on this occasion that we picked up an interesting bit of medical information relating to hormones. It was a theory, as far as we know, which has never been fully investigated in spite of all the money available as research grants today.

We had to go down to the dingy, old Customs House on Canal Street, and after being photographed and fingerprinted, we paid the union dues and received an official seaman's identification and logbook. The crusty, old bureaucrat behind the desk wished us luck on the trip, and as he handed over the papers, sighed nostalgically and somewhat enviously.

"You look like a nice young feller," he said. "so I'll give you some free advice. Watch out for the women on these trips . . . I don't know what it is," he continued, "but the minute a woman gets on a big ship, something happens to her hormones. And they can be any kind—young girls, widows, proper old maids, respectable married ladies and Sunday School teachers. After the ship has been under way for 24 hours, they all get to panting and want to go to bed with somebody . . . anybody."

"I've studied this a long time now, and I think it's got something to do with their ovaries. The steady vibrations of the ship's engines must work on them and keep jiggling them so that the sex hormone just pours out."

Although the collection of women on board for that particular cruise was nothing to write home about, our clinical observations over these next eighteen days certainly confirmed the old man's theory. It's high time the endocrine and fertility boys investigate this ovarian agitation hypothesis more fully.

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