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FROM SWEDEN TO EL DORADO

Impressions Of The South American Public of El Dorado

THREE years in wartime Sweden and some months in Colombia ("the Land of El Dorado") are part of the experiences of Ilma Barnes, an Australian actress who before the war gave solo dramatic recitals in England and on the Continent. Her last tour was cut short by the outbreak of war and so she remained in Sweden until an exchange of nationals was arranged last year and she was able to reach America.

"I would say that the Swedish people as a whole are definitely pro-Ally," said Miss Barnes in an interview with *The Listener*. "They were in a difficult position at the outbreak of the war, as they had no army or air force to speak of. When Norway was invaded, Sweden had to decide whether to oppose an enormous German army or whether to allow the German troops to pass through. It was necessary to make concessions, but they were not popular. The Swedish people

feel closely allied to the United States. Many families have relatives in the States and they hoped very much that America would come into the war.

"An Almost Fabulous Place"

"Colombia, in South America, is an almost fabulous place. I had the weirdest impression of it as I flew down from the States. Miles of tropical jungle in which primitive tribes still hunt, miles of swamp land, huge mountain ranges, lakes, everything you could wish in the

One of the things that struck me was the poverty which led to what seemed to me an utter neglect of the children. You find children sleeping in the streets; they apparently have no parents and just live on anything they can beg or steal. Children from six upward get jobs as door-keepers and household servants and so learn to support themselves. All the people who have any means become entirely dependent upon servants. A servant would never dream of addressing the mistress of the house without first

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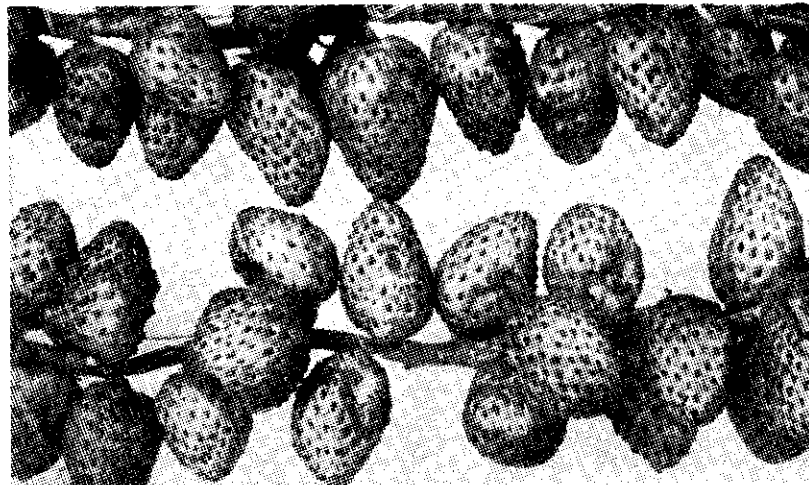
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STRAWBERRIES BY THE YARD: in the Bogota markets strawberries are strung together by their stems to be sold by the foot or yard

way of climate. It is immensely rich in all sorts of natural products—gold, oil, and precious stones, especially emeralds. At Bogota, the capital, 9,000 feet up in the Andes, you can get any tropical fruit—oranges, grapefruit, paw-paw, grapes, which grow on the lower slopes of the Andes. And you can also get apples and pears and cherries and other temperate fruits that need frost and that grow higher up the mountain. Bogota is almost on the Equator, but it is so high up that the climate is a perpetual spring. There are supposed to be two wet seasons and one dry, but actually all the time that I was there it was wet; at least it was liable to rain every day. In between it was gloriously fine and sunny and there were the most wonderful cloud effects. There is never any wind. I doubt whether there are any clothes pegs in the town. Everyone just hangs clothes over the line."

"Does the altitude affect people?"

"It certainly affected me. I suppose that those who always live there don't notice it, but I think it makes everyone rather lazy. You seldom see people running or exerting themselves."

The Three Classes

We asked about the people of Colombia. "There are really three classes in the Republic," Miss Barnes told us. "There is a Spanish aristocracy that intermixes very little with the others. These are very wealthy; they educate their children in America or Spain. The ordinary Colombian is an intermixture of native (Indio) and Spaniard, and the lowest class group is the Indio. The Indios are very poor and are mostly the servants of the other classes, and nowadays there is little if any intermixture.

getting down on his knees. I hated all this utter subservience, but it was taken for granted.

The Lake of Gold

"I didn't know until I went to Colombia that this was the land of El Dorado. I always thought this was just a myth—but it isn't. The lake of El Dorado is a little way from Bogota. The story goes that many hundreds of years ago there was a king who thought his wife was unfaithful to him, so he killed her. Afterwards he found that he was wrong in his supposition and to make atonement he got his servants to rub his body with a thick oil and then cover it with gold dust, from head to foot. Then he took his royal boat on to this lake and when he was well out he dived into the water and the gold dust was washed off and fell to the bottom. At the same time his servants and all the people threw golden offerings into the lake. This rite was carried on for hundreds of years—none knows quite how long, but by the time the Spaniards heard of it the whole floor of the lake was said to be covered with gold. Some of this was recovered by the Spaniards, who drained a part of the lake, and what is still there has now been covered heavily with silt. Before the war there was a project for recovering the gold from the bottom. You see, to the natives, gold was just valuable as an ornament. There was so much of it."

"And would you like to go back to Colombia?" we asked.

"Never," said Miss Barnes, and then added thoughtfully, "but perhaps I am prejudiced. You see, three attempts were made on my life and the third was very nearly successful. There are many other pleasanter places in the world in which I would like to live."