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ESA SEÑORA
or that impossible Lady

THE ENGLAND of 1868 is a definite image. So too are the France of the Second Empire, the Germany of Wagner and Liszt, and the barely united kingdom of Italy, with Victor Emmanuel at Florence and Turin and Pio Nono reigning in a still Baroque Rome. Definite also in spite of their complexity are the United States at the end of the Civil War, and Uruguay, the Purple Land of W. H. Hudson. But Spain?

Seated on the throne of the Catholic kings, her portrait on the wall of every room in which two or three Spaniards are gathered together, is Isabella II, still under forty, still popular with the crowd through her pleasant smile and easy-going ways. Twenty years before, ten years before, the attachment of her subjects had been genuine and enthusiastic. To the people of Madrid she had seemed to be one of themselves. "She has all the Manolas to a woman", an English diplomat remarked to Greville in 1848, "and through them their lovers, brothers and friends; they would rise *en masse* if called upon."¹ By 1868, however, her popularity was on the wane; she was no longer respected by the more intelligent members of the public, while those who had had dealings with her in matters of government were reluctantly coming to the conclusion that she must go. *Esa señora es insuportable*, they were saying; that lady was impossible.

Yet women still had a good word for her, now and then. Pérez Galdós, the novelist, who may always be trusted to express the state of public opinion in Spain at any period of the nineteenth century, makes one of his characters put it in this way:

Only one person would be just, if they would let her, and that is the Queen. But they *don't* let her! They have got her in a regular

¹ Greville, *Memoirs*, 2nd Part, III, 119.

Chinese lantern of lies so that she can't see what's just or what's true; and so everything goes wrong.¹

Isabella is married (that unfortunate affair of “the Spanish marriage”!) to her first cousin Don Francis of Assisi, Duke of Cadiz, a pathetic youth with a high, squeaky voice, known as “Paquita” (Fanny) and believed, by the Queen-mother and some of the diplomats, to be incapable of being a father. A “wretched imbecile sulky fanatic”,² he had been known when on garrison duty at Pamplona to spend his leisure in a miniature chapel which he had had constructed in his quarters, dressing and undressing a holy image.

Much persuasion was necessary before Isabella would make up her mind in favour of “Fanny”. “Well, I'll marry him if he's a man”, she said at last, her downright and somewhat disconcerting manner made all the more equivocal by her beautiful southern voice. M. Bresson, the French minister, had been waiting in an anteroom. He was always in and out of the Palace, like a tradesman touting for orders, while his English colleague, Sir Henry Lytton Bulwer, lived like a gentleman in his country house at Aranjuez. It was after midnight³; but M. Bresson promptly obeyed the summons to congratulate the Queen—and prevent her from changing her mind.

“Paquita” was enchanted. He loved to see the young Queen (she was sixteen at the time) dressed in one sumptuous frock after another, so that he might admire the “law and poyze” of each winning movement, as she steered that plump but not ignoble frame before his enamoured eyes. Yet only a miracle, it was said, could make him a father. Isabella performed that miracle, and performed it no less than nine times. She was a vigorous and precocious young woman, by no means content to be a mere mannequin. Yet she caused a painful surprise, both to her consort and the diplomats, when four years later she showed signs that she was about to present the throne of Spain with an heir. Guizot, who had been chiefly responsible for the

¹ *Los Duendes de la Camarilla*, ch. xxix.

² Greville, III, 48.

³ Mr Bulwer to Lord Palmerston, in *The Letters of Queen Victoria* (First Series), II, 117.

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marriage, was not at all surprised; he had expected it to happen before. *On a toujours dit que si nous ne nous hâtions pas, l'héritier viendrait avant le mari*, he had said to Greville.¹ But “Paquita” was deeply offended, mortified. He suffered from the strange delusion that the child was not his, and proposed to inform all the courts of Europe that he was not the father—a somewhat unusual interpretation of the traditional code of Spanish honour. He was anxious for a council to be summoned in order that he might lay before it proofs of the Queen’s infidelity; and he even proposed to issue a manifesto to the Spanish nation on the subject. He was persuaded to desist from his scandalous intention.²

Poor “Paquita”! He had dreamed of a pure passion, quit of all earthly grossness; and now the bastard of some general or other (he thought) was to be foisted on him as his son! He expressed a wish for the dissolution of the marriage; but such a thing could not be considered for a moment. It was gravely debated (so at least the British minister was informed) whether the King-consort could not be quietly put out of the way with a cup of coffee, as being an easier and less scandalous way out of the difficulty.³ Only with considerable tact could he be persuaded to return to the Palace.

And the diplomats! Where were all those schemes for assuring the succession of a French prince, schemes which had almost led to a rupture between France and England? France and Spain were to have become one again, as they had been in the eighteenth century, so closely united that when France sneezed, Spain was bound to answer “Jesús”.⁴ To what purpose had the marriage of the Queen’s sister (the Infanta Luisa Fernanda) to the Duke of Montpensier been celebrated at the same time as the marriage of the Queen herself, in spite of the pledged word of Louis Philippe to Queen Victoria that it should take place at a later date? What, indeed, could have been better for the future of the Spanish monarchy than that the wilful,

¹ *Memoirs*, III, 32.

² *Ibid.* III, 78–9.

³ Bulwer, *Palmerston*, III, 235–6.

⁴ Proverb: *Cuando Francia estornuda, España dice ¡Jesús!*

extravagant, charitable Isabella should be succeeded by a prince whose father, the Duke of Montpensier, was so careful an administrator that he kept account of all the oranges sold from his garden in Seville, and was able when the moment came (and Isabella had gone) to finance even a revolution, so long as it seemed to offer a chance of putting himself on the throne?¹ Now everything had been upset, and the Queen after all might just as well have married the young man from Saxe-Coburg.

Legend relates that this Prince of the Asturias was brought out on a massive silver charger, to be shown to the King-consort and caressed by the ladies in waiting. Unfortunately the treatment was not beneficial, and the little prince died after two days.—Conveniently? So it was whispered, at any rate; for its survival would have removed the succession from the children of the Duke of Montpensier. The Queen in her grief vowed that on the next occasion there should be no silver dish, and that in future she would look after her children herself. This, however, is mere legend. The facts seem to be that the Queen's first child (born 12th July, 1850) died a few moments after its birth.² The "novel-reading public", however, founded on this melancholy occurrence the most horrible and absurd suppositions, which had to be contradicted publicly in the *Gazette* a few days later.³ On 20th December, 1851, the silver dish duly appeared again.

Six weeks later (2nd February, 1852), as the Queen was leaving the Chapel Royal after giving thanks, an attempt on her life was made by a priest who stabbed her as he pretended to

¹ Cf. *La Flaca*, Barcelona, 6th Feb. 1870:

Yo soy el rey naranjero
 De las huertas de Sevilla.
 Quise pillar un sillón,
 Y me quedé con la silla.
 I am the orange king
 Of the gardens of Seville (he said).
 I tried to sit on a throne,
 But was thrown on my seat instead.

² Condesa de Cerragería, *Apuntes de cronología y de historia de España*, 32.

³ Cambroner, *Isabel II íntima*, 166 (note), prints the medical report.

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present a petition. Subsequent examination showed that he had won a prize in a lottery and eked out his stipend by usury; but no motive for the crime was ever discovered, nor were there reprisals, attacks on priests or anticlerical riots. The Queen's popularity entered upon a new lease of life. Children continued to be born to her; but it was part of her tragic destiny—she has been called *La de los tristes destinos*—that only four of the nine survived. There were no baths in the Palace in those days. The windows were seldom opened. The royal family (so visitors observed) was not housed in the sunniest or airiest part of the building. There was something—it might have been the drains, if the magnificent eighteenth-century drains had been still in working order. “Rather ‘niffy’, those functions were, don’t you know?” So they were described by a lady who attended them during the next reign.

Queen Isabella, unsteady and uneducated as she was, ignorant alike of bringing up a family and of ruling as a constitutional monarch, yet had “a good heart and noble instincts”;¹ to which of the generals was it she said: “I have made you a duke, but I shall never succeed in making you a gentleman”? She also possessed a certain natural shrewdness and a truly Bourbon passion for intrigue. In matters of charity she was generous to a fault; she never knew the value of money, and her left hand never knew what her right was doing. But in matters of policy, her left hand knew only too well, and often regained by intrigue the concessions which the right had signed away. Her face, or at least her smile, might have been her fortune in the streets, as her voice was when she read her speeches from the throne. When she drove through Madrid from the Royal Palace to the gardens of Buen Retiro or the Church of Our Lady of Atocha, the compliments showered upon her were such as greet a pretty girl to-day, compliments—*piropos*—to which no nice girl would pay attention but which every intelligent girl would try to remember, whether she were aware of the picaresque implications or not. Isabella was fully aware of the picaresque implications; but her smile would only become more

¹ Bulwer, III, 236.

charming and more enigmatic, and she would nudge poor insignificant “Paquita” beside her in the carriage to make him sit up, smile and look pleasant. She liked to describe herself—and liked others to describe her—as *muy española*, very Spanish; and her tragedy was that of many of her own countrywomen. No day was hateful because she heard young men make naughty remarks about her as she passed by in the street; the hateful day was that on which no remarks were made any more, the day on which Isabella drove to the station at San Sebastian to catch the train for France.

Everything that was done in the Palace was done by backstairs influence. Direct action frightened the Queen. One of her earliest experiences (she was eleven at the time) had been an attempt to seize her on the part of two or three platoons of infantry and a dashing young general. The grand staircase was defended all night by eighteen halberdiers and their colonel; bullets frequently came through the shutters, and the plump little person of the Queen was only saved by making her lie down on the floor in a small apartment at the back. One or two bullets penetrated even as far as that.¹ It was a terrible experience. The general had to be shot, of course. She wanted to reprieve him, and for once she was wiser than her elders; for the execution of General Diego de León is now regarded as a political mistake.

Yet such direct attacks were, if anything, less dangerous than the normal procedure of the Palace. In the days of sheer absolutism the Prime Minister had been virtually a dictator. Even now, with the traditional Bourbon absolutism tempered by a struggling constitutional government, his power was little less, though it was softened and even endangered not, indeed, by Parliament but by the fear of plots within the Palace. Isabella was first the willing tool of the plotters and then their apt pupil. At the age of thirteen, when she had only just been declared

¹ Cambroneró, 78–88, prints the original report on the occurrence drawn up by the Queen’s governess, the Condesa de Espoz y Mina, an enlightened woman, afterwards the friend and helper of the prison-reformer, Concepción Arenal.

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legally of age, she lent herself to a plot which drove her minister Olózaga into exile and destroyed the government which had been formed with such care and difficulty. The young Queen was apparently induced by the *camarilla* of plotters to make a serious charge against the Premier: that he had bolted the doors of her apartment, and then, by physical violence (catching hold of her dress and seizing her hand), had forced her to sign a decree to which she had objected. The story was obviously a fabrication; the doors had no bolts. Olózaga¹ persisted in his denial, while the Queen held by the declaration which she had made on the morning after, adding, however, the puzzling admission that she and her minister had parted on friendly terms and that she had given him a box of chocolates for his daughter. When questioned on the subject in later life, Isabella was uncertain what had happened about the decree, but she was quite certain about the chocolates.² Chocolates lay about on all the chairs in the Palace. Isabella realized the ambition of every child of her own age and her own time: If only I could be Queen for one day! The days grew to years, and Isabella grew up. She was Queen, but she was never Queen over her passions. "A safe word whispered by a crawling confessor, an attack of nerves on a cloudy day, the appearance of a well-made soldier at a levee, have often sufficed to make and break administrations."³

The politics of the Palace were the politics of the bedchamber and the private chapel. Behind the throne stood Father Claret, the Queen's confessor, and Sor Patrocinio, in whose hands and feet were the marks of the wounds of Christ. Father Claret, in spite of his name,⁴ had to be taken seriously, even by the superficial and heretical English, for his time and talents were by no means fully occupied in hearing the Queen's confessions.

¹ Olózaga was the inventor of the phrase "the traditional obstacles", a formula which, as long as it remains undefined, is elastic and convenient.

² Pérez Galdós, *Memoranda*, 20.

³ John Hay, *Castilian Days*, 357.

⁴ Ven. Antonio María Claret y Clará, 1807–70. He was declared *venerable* by Leo XIII on the 4th Dec. 1899.

Moreover, he had been an archbishop in Cuba, and was now titular bishop of Trajanopolis *in partibus infidelium*. To his credit it may be said that, as President of the Escorial, he was responsible for planting ten thousand fruit trees—which failed to grow. Politically he was the greatest of the “traditional obstacles”, and at the revolution of 1868 he was attacked more fiercely than the Queen. He had led her into temptation, it was declared, and his relations with Sor Patrocinio were neither clear nor holy. His portrait,¹ with the thick, sensual lips and the expression of cunning thinly veiled by a somewhat bovine simplicity, makes it possible to believe him capable of anything.

Sor Patrocinio, the “Bleeding Nun”, although she had been prosecuted for fraud, as many saints in former centuries had been prosecuted by the Holy Inquisition,² had regained her position through sheer force of personality. Her miraculous pretensions were described by a dignitary of the Church as “a farce unworthy of a catholic nation”; but it is significant that that prelate received no higher preferment, while the doctor who had once healed her wounds was afterwards punished for his offence. The stigmata were discreetly veiled from view by mittens; but the wax-white mittened fingers were in every pie. Her power over the Queen was incalculable. With Father Fulgencio, a predecessor of Father Claret, she had succeeded on at least one occasion in upsetting a ministry for no apparent reason, putting in its place one which, though it lasted only a few hours, included so many nonentities that it brought the Crown into ridicule. Galdós has described a scene of the same kind later in the reign; it actually took place in 1865, but is characteristic of the prevailing methods of government.

Suddenly, when no one was expecting it, the government fell. *Quare causa?* No one knew; and what was worse, no one asked. We had become accustomed to governments coming and going for no other reason than the whims and fancies of the Señora. That lady was

¹ Cambroneró, 262.

² E.g. the Beata de Soto, Magdalena de la Cruz, María de la Visitación, Luisa de la Asunción, Francisca Martín. H. C. Lea, *The Religious History of Spain*, 416–20.

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certainly confused and embittered just then by the news brought from Paris by the King-consort who had been to pay a visit to the Empress Eugénie. Napoleon and his wife had given him a dressing-down for the obstinacy with which Spain refused to recognize the kingdom of Italy, a *fait accompli* which no country in Europe could consider as non-existent and remain within the comity of nations. The conduct of Spain was intolerable Quixotism. This, more or less, was what they had said to Don Francis of Assisi; and in the same form as they had urged it upon him, he passed it on to his spouse. She, however, raised her hands in horror, repeating in a trembling, frightened voice: "But we can't! We *can't!*"

Isabel II communicated immediately with her guardian angels Sor Patrocinio and Father Claret, reporting the dire communication which Don Francis of Assisi had brought from Paris. It is reported that both reverend personages pursed their lips and knitted their brows. Let Napoleon rule in his own house and leave our gracious Queen to govern in hers! Spain should remain firm in her decision relating to the so-called kingdom of Italy, and with the protection of the Virgin she had nothing to fear from the concert or disconcert of Europe...

"Narváez."

"Señora?"

"I want you now, more than ever. I have dismissed Mon. Make me any ministry you like; I don't mind what you do so long as it doesn't involve the recognition of Italy..."

Narváez took the helm of the leaking ship of state.

Some little apologies for elections were held... But... it wouldn't do. Narváez must go. She came to this conclusion two days before the opening of the new Cortes; and as she thought, so she did, offended and mortified. Narváez had decided on the evacuation of Santo Domingo, the only possible way out of a long and expensive war...

"Istúriz."

"Señora?"

"Narváez has deceived me; I must do without him. Besides, I do not agree to the evacuation of Santo Domingo. You will form me a ministry with unionist elements..."

"I, Señora, I...?"

The illustrious old man who had served the Spanish monarchy so well, both in politics and diplomacy, hesitated between his respect for the Queen and his dislike of lending himself once more to such pastry-cook's work in public... But the excuses with which his modesty and weariness would have eluded the task were of no avail; her exquisite amiability and the sweetness of her manner overcame him.

"Not at all. Not at all. I ask you this as a favour and you are not going to deny me. To-morrow, at this time, you will bring me the list of your ministry."

When the twenty-four hours were past, good old Don Javier arrived at the Palace with the list of the new ministers.

"Are they all there? Let's see... Good. I agree. What time is it? Twelve? Well, at three o'clock punctually they may come and take the oath."

But by a quarter to three she had changed her mind.

"Istúriz."

"Señora?"

"That's all settled. Narváez has been here, and oh! what things he told me! But we will leave all that for another time."

Leave it for another time! He breathed again.¹

In after years the Queen defended the memory of Sor Patrocinio, more generously, perhaps, than sincerely. "She was a very good woman," she said to Pérez Galdós when he was presented to her in Paris, "a good woman and a saint; she did not meddle with politics or things to do with the government. She did intervene, certainly, in the affairs of my family, so that my husband and I should make it up; but nothing more. Idle people have invented whole catalogues of things which have gone all over Spain and all round the world... Of course, that change of ministry was a mistake, but it was all put right the next day..."²

Yet Isabella II, in spite of her protests, had a greater intimacy with nuns than was altogether wise for a crowned head in the nineteenth century. She could turn all men round her little finger, but she herself was clay in the hands of any member of a

¹ Pérez Galdós, *Prim*, ch. xi.

² Pérez Galdós, *Memoranda*, 21.