

THE PORTO RICAN EPISODE IN THE
LIFE OF FERNÁN CABALLERO

THE period of Fernán Caballero's residence on the island of Porto Rico covers two of the most interesting years of her life. Her experiences there are the chief source of two of her novels. Yet the material from which the period can be reconstructed is so scanty and the documents which throw light upon it are so few that her biographers have been obliged to pass over the years briefly or to make equivocal and sometimes misleading statements concerning them. The facts, in so far as they can be determined at present, are as follows:

In the fall of 1813 Johann Nikolas Böhl von Faber, accompanied by his wife and family, returned to Cádiz after having spent about eight years in Germany. His oldest daughter, Cecilia,¹ had just finished her schooling in a French *pensionnat* at Hamburg, her father's native city. On their arrival in Cádiz Böhl found his business on the point of bankruptcy because of the generally unsettled state of Europe during the Napoleonic regime. About a year and a half later, at the "Wiedererscheinung des Höllenhundes"² during the "Hundred Days," he wrote to his friend, August Campe in Hamburg, that his export house was completely ruined and that he was barely able to support his family on the small salary paid him by an insurance company, which his friends had helped organize, supplemented by an occasional commission.

Cecilia was at the time a beautiful, intelligent girl,³ the oldest of three sisters and at a marriageable age. In view of their straitened circumstances, then, it was probably

¹ "Fernán Caballero" was the pen name of Cecilia Böhl von Faber.

² Böhl's characterization of Napoleon quoted from a letter of May 6, 1815 reproduced in [Elise Campe], *Versuch einer Lebensskizze von Johan Nikolas Böhl von Faber. Nach seinen eigenen Briefen. (Als Handschrift gedruckt)* [Leipzig], 1858, pp. 82-83. (Hereafter referred to as *Versuch*.)

³ Cf. Fernando de Gabriel y Ruiz de Apodaca, *Últimas Producciones de Fernán Caballero*. Sevilla, 1878, p. xv.

a source of gratification to her parents that her father was able to write to Campe on April 6, 1816:⁴

Meine weltliche Lage ist wie sie von der Zeit zu erwarten steht; mit einiger Anstrengung, aber in beständiger Angst zu versinken, wirft sie gerade das Nöthige ab. Meine Frau ist glücklich in ihrem Vaterlande und begnügt sich mit dem Nöthigen; meine älteste Tochter, Cäcilie, verheiratet sich mit einem schönen Grenadiercapitän von 28 Jahren, und geht mit ihm auf drei Jahre nach Puerto Rico.

The "handsome Captain of Grenadiers" who was to be Cecilia's husband was Don Antonio Planells y Bardaxí, a native of Iviza (Balearic Isles), and at the time of his marriage serving in the first company of Grenadiers of the regiment of Granada. The wedding probably took place soon after her father's letter was written, for the license to marry which is filed in the military archives of Segovia as a part of Planells' service record is dated March 30, 1816, and there seems to be no reason to assume that the matter was long delayed. It is probable, too, that, as her father implies, Cecilia and her young husband sailed for Porto Rico, where Captain Planells' regiment was assigned, shortly after the wedding.

The comments of his wife's biographers concerning Planells' character are not very flattering. Gabriel⁵ speaks of his "violencia de carácter"; Asensio⁶ describes him as being of "buena familia y arrogante figura" but "alegre un poco más de lo conveniente"; and Coloma⁷ calls him bluntly a "mozo calavera y desconocido." Cecilia herself refers to him only once in all of her voluminous correspondence which is available.⁸ The letter in which she

⁴ *Versuch*, p. 84.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. xv.

⁶ José María Asensio, "Fernán Caballero y la novela contemporánea" in Fernán Caballero, *Obras completas*, Madrid, 1893, I, p. 61.

⁷ Luis Coloma, *Recuerdos de Fernán Caballero*, Bilbao, [1910], p. 178.

⁸ This includes the *Epistolario* (Fernán Caballero, *Obras completas*, XIV), Madrid, 1912, edited by José María Valdenebro; *Cartas de Fernán Caballero*, Madrid, 1919, edited by Fr. Diego de Valencina; *Epistolario de Fernán Caballero*, Barcelona, 1922, edited by Alberto López Argüello; and two collections of unpublished letters (about 500) at the library of the University of Chicago.

mentions him⁹ is the principal source of our information with regard to the whole period of her first marriage. It was written on March 6, 1864, almost half a century after her husband's death, to her friend, the French critic Antoine de Latour. In it she speaks of her husband as a "hermoso joven de 25 años" with a promising future. Of herself she says:

Yo entonces, bien lo puedo decir, era *buena* . . . y pude sacar de mi corazón y de mi experiencia el *début* en la vida que he dado a la Clemencia de mi novela.

The "city of Puerto Rico"¹⁰ at which they disembarked must have reminded the young bride in many ways of the city of Cádiz which she had left behind. Surrounded on all sides by the sea, save for a narrow strip of land connecting it with the "continente de la isla," with its hill crowned with fortifications, its narrow streets, its blue sky and its tall palms, it had much in common with the older city which had been her home.

That Cecilia was susceptible to the beauty of the island, there can be no doubt. She has paid it her tribute in the words which she puts into the mouth of the poetic young lieutenant, Luciano Encina, at the beginning of *La Farisea*:¹¹

Todas las galas de la naturaleza se aglomeran en esta isla para hacer de ella un Edén. . . . Como raudales de líquida plata de una cueva de esmeraldas, salen sus límpidos ríos por entre esos árboles gigantes que están siempre verdes y llenos de savia como la lozana juventud; serpentean entre prados que nunca se ven secos ni exhaustos, como los corazones ricos de amor; se deslizan entre las cañas, que son dulces y flexibles, como unidas lo son la condescendencia y la bondad; y cual claros espejos reproducen, embelleciéndolos, los objetos que a su paso encuentran. Los bejucos que todo lo unen, enredan y alegran con la

⁹ A portion of this letter was published, undated, by Alfred Morel-Fatio in his article entitled "Fernán Caballero d'après sa correspondance avec Antoine de Latour" in *Bulletin Hispanique*, X, pp. 252-294. The original is in the collection of the library of the University of Chicago.

¹⁰ Cf. Fernán Caballero, *La Farisea*, Madrid, 1865, 3^a ed., p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

inimitable gracia de los niños, enriquecen aún esta poderosa y frondosa vegetación, sobre la que descuellan las altas palmeras buscando espacio para abrir sus brazos al cielo.

The climate was the only defect which she found in this paradise; she considered it enervating and unhealthful.¹²

Under auspicious circumstances the life of the officers in the provincial garrison might have seemed pleasant enough to the young bride, though it must have been somewhat circumscribed and monotonous. The wife of Don Salvador Meléndez,¹³ the Captain General of the island, was a friend of Cecilia's mother and both she and her husband treated the girl with affectionate kindness. Cecilia's father and his German friends had taught her to be interested in the culture of a people as it is expressed in its folklore, and she now learned¹⁴ for her pleasure some of the songs of the peasants in her new home. The two great industries of the island—the raising of sugar and tobacco—and a few Americanisms in the speech of the people impressed themselves vividly upon her mind and she recalls them later in her "American novel."¹⁵

Unfortunately, neither the novelty of her situation nor the kindness of her friends had it in their power to make her happy. So much is evident from Fernán's admission that she drew the story of Clemencia's debut into life from her own experiences,—an admission which has led her biographers to attribute to her in detail all of her heroine's sufferings. Thus, Asensio,¹⁶ and after him Coloma,¹⁷ tell of her husband's little tyrannies, of the jealousy and unreasonableness which he carried to the point of refusing to allow his wife to leave the house, even to attend mass. We cannot, however, accept everything in the novel as accurate autobiography. Even Fernán made the mistake

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ Gabriel, *Op. cit.*, p. xvi, and *Bull. Hisp.*, X, p. 270.

¹⁴ Unpublished letter from J. N. Böhl von Faber to Nikolaus Heinrich Julius in the possession of the Hamburger Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek. (*Thes. Epist.* 57.)

¹⁵ *La Farisea*, pp. 15 and 57.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 180 et seq.

of identifying herself so completely with Clemencia that in the letter already quoted she misstates her own age and that of her husband, making both of them younger by three years than they really were. It may be that the accounts of her marital infelicity are not overdrawn, but it is quite impossible, because of her habitual reticence, to prove that they are true. We shall probably have to be content with Gabriel's brief commentary¹⁸ that "La violencia de éste [Planells] hizo que no fuera feliz aquel enlace."

Unhappy as it was, it was to be terminated under circumstances still more painful. On July 24th, 1817, Planells died suddenly in his young wife's arms.¹⁹ "Fué la primera vez que vi la muerte," she writes, "y lo creía dormido!"

Some confusion as to the manner of his death has arisen from the fact that Fitzmaurice-Kelly²⁰ made the error of assuming that the circumstances under which the young captain in *Clemencia* met his fate²¹ were those attending the death of his prototype, and stated that Planells was "killed in action." The fallacy of this statement is implied by the context of Cecilia's letter to Latour and demonstrated unequivocally by Planells' service record and by the following entry copied from the Records of Burial²² of the Cathedral of San Juan and here published for the first time:

Dⁿ Antonio Planells Capp. A los veinte y quatro dias del mes de Julio del año de mil ochocientos diez y siete; fue sepultado en el Cementerio de S^{ta} Maria Magdalena de Pazzis *in litore*, de esta Muy Noble y Muy Leal Ciudad de Sⁿ Juan Baut^a de Puerto Rico; el cuerpo difunto de Dⁿ Antonio Planells de Bardaxi, Capp. de Granaderos del primer Batallon del Regimt^o Infant^a de Granada numero quinze de Linea, natural de la Isla

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. xvi.

¹⁹ *Bull. Hisp.*, X, p. 271.

²⁰ J[ames] F[it]zmaurice-K[elly], "Fernán Caballero" in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Cambridge, 1910, 11th ed., IV, p. 913.

²¹ Fernán Caballero, *Clemencia*, Madrid, 1898, p. 158. (*Obras completas*, III).

²² ✕ 4^o *Libro de los Difuntos Del Batallon Ligero Cazadores del General. Año 1815.*

de Ibiza, hijo legitimo de Dⁿ Marcos, y de D^a Josefa Bardaxi, de edad de veinte y nueve años, casado q^o fue con D^a Cecilia Bohl; no recibio ningun Sacramento por haber muerto de un accidente repentino; de que yo el Presb^o Capp. suplente de dho Batallon, por ausencia del propietario Dⁿ Juan Moreno Pedrosa doy fe -

Basilio Rodrig^z

After the death of her husband Cecilia stayed for some time at the Captain General's home.²³ The strain she had been under brought on a severe illness and she required thoughtful care. After some months she was at last able to return to Cádiz in company with her friends, the Hoppe family.²⁴

The literary fruits of her Porto Rican experiences, the novels *Clemencia* and *La Farisea*, matured much later. The former, which owes its characters and part of its plot to this period of her life, first appeared in print in 1852; the latter, the opening scene of which is laid on the island, was not published until 1863, when the years had extracted from her memories a great deal of their bitterness.

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²³ *Bull. Hisp.*, X, p. 271.

²⁴ Gabriel, *Op. cit.*, p. xvi.