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, 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” 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, the oldest of three sisters and at a marriageable age. In view of their straitened circumstances, then, it was probably

4 Versuch, p. 84.
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, 1915, edited by José María Valdenebro; Cartas de Fernán Caballero, Madrid, 1915, edited by Fr. Diego de Valdenegro; Epistolario de Fernán Caballero, Barcelona, 1923, edited by Alberto López Argüelles; and two collections of unpublished letters (about 500) at the library of the University of Chicago.

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mentions him 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 debut en la vida que he dado a la Clemencia de mi novela.

The “city of Puerto Rico” 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 “continen te 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:

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 descendencia 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 Mored-Fatio in his article entitled “Fernán Caballero d’après sa correspondance avec Antoine de Latour” in Bulletin Hispanique, X, pp. 271-294. The original is in the collection of the library of the University of Chicago.
11 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
12 Ibid., p. 7.
14 Unpublished letter from J. N. Böhl von Faber zu Nikolaus Heinrich Julius in the possession of the Hamburger Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek. (Thes. Epist. 57.)
15 La Farisea, pp. 15 and 57.
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 commentary 18 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-Kelly 20 made the error of assuming that the circumstances under which the young captain in Clemencia met his fate 21 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 Burial 22 of the Cathedral of San Juan and here published for the first time:

Dª Antonio Planells Capp. A los veinte y cuatro días del mes de Julio del año de mil ochocientos diez y siete; fue sepultado en el Cementerio de Sª María Magdalena de Pazzis in tiore, de esta Muy Noble y Muy Leal Ciudad de Sª Juan Bautª de Puerto Rico; el cuerpo difunto de Dª Antonio Planells de Bardaxi, Capp. de Granaderos del primer Batallón del Regimiento Infantª de Granada numero quince de Linea, natural de la Isla

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21 Fernán Caballero, Clemencia, Madrid, 1898, p. 158. (Obras completas, III).
22 4º Libro de los Difuntos Del Batallón Ligero Casadores del General. Año 1815.