

Women and War in Mexico

Frances Calderón de la Barca

The most famous of all foreigners' accounts of life in nineteenth-century Mexico is that of Fanny Calderón de la Barca, the Scottish-born wife of the first Spanish Minister to Mexico. Her lively letters to friends and family on both social and political matters, written between 1839 and 1842, form the basis of her enduring volume, Life in Mexico (1843).

Calderón's remarks on elite Mexican women consist, as she herself admitted, of sweeping generalizations, and they betray her for what she was—an upper-class foreigner who believed strongly in certain social conventions, albeit one with a droll sense of humor and a witty writing style. Nor did Mrs. Calderón shrink from reporting on the political affairs of her day. To lightly paraphrase her remarks below: "When a woman's head is about to be blown off, it's quite natural for her to ask why." Her account here of a failed rebellion by the Liberal forces of Valentín Gómez Farías in 1840 affords considerable insight into the nature of Mexican politics in the early days of the republic. While Calderón joins the participants in the event in speaking of "revolution," the matter hardly deserves such lofty terminology. Only a small portion of the population is involved in the fray. Most of the common folk scurry to get out of the way of the contenders, apparently caring little for the stirring pronouncements issued by both sides. The reader gets the sense of witnessing a bit of political theater rather than a meaningful attempt to set the nation upon a worthy course.

July 5, 1840

You ask me how Mexican women are educated. In answering you, I must put aside a few brilliant exceptions, and speak en masse, the most difficult thing in the world, for these exceptions are always rising up before me like accusing angels, and I begin to think of individuals, when I should keep to generalities. Generally speaking, then, the Mexican Señoras and Señoritas write, read and play a little, sew, and take care of their houses and children. When I say they read, I mean that they know how to read; when I say they write, I do not mean that they can always spell; and when I say they play, I do not assert

that they have generally a knowledge of music. If we compare their education with that of girls in England, or in the United States, it is not a comparison, but a contrast. Compare it with that of Spanish women, and we shall be less severe upon their *far niente* descendants. . . . [As] to schools, there are none that can deserve the name, and no governesses. Young girls can have no emulation, for they never meet. They have no public diversion, and no private amusement. There are a few good foreign masters, most of whom have come to Mexico for the purpose of making their fortune, by teaching, or marriage, or both, and whose object, naturally, is to make the most money in the shortest possible time, that they might return home and enjoy it. The children generally appear to have an extraordinary disposition for music and drawing, yet there are few girls who are proficient in either.

When very young, they occasionally attend the schools where boys and girls learn to read in common, or any other accomplishment that the old women can teach them; but at twelve they are already considered too old to attend these promiscuous assemblages, and masters are got for drawing and music to finish their education. I asked a lady the other day if her daughter went to school. "Good heavens!" said she, quite shocked, "she is past eleven years old!" It frequently happens that the least well-informed girls are the children of the cleverest men, who, keeping to the customs of their forefathers, are content if they confess regularly, attend church constantly, and can embroider and sing a little. Where there are more extended ideas, it is chiefly amongst families who have traveled in Europe, and have seen the different education of women in foreign countries. Of these the fathers occasionally devote a short portion of their time to the instruction of their daughters, perhaps during their leisure evening moments, but it may easily be supposed that this desultory system has little real influence on the minds of the children. I do not think there are above half-a-dozen married women, or as many girls above fourteen who, with the exception of the mass-book, read any one book through in the whole course of the year. They thus greatly simplify the system of education in the United States, where parties are frequently divided between the advocates for solid learning and those for superficial accomplishments; and according to whom it is difficult to amalgamate the solid beef of science with the sweet sauce of *les beaux arts*.

But if a Mexican girl is ignorant, she rarely shows it. They have generally the greatest possible tact; never by any chance wandering out of their depth, or betraying by word or sign that they are not well informed of the subject under discussion. Though seldom graceful, they are never awkward, and always self-possessed. They have plenty of natural talent, and where it has

been thoroughly cultivated, no women can surpass them. Of what is called literary society, there is of course none. . . .

There is a little annual lying beside me called "*Calendario de las Señoritas Méjicanas*," of which the preface, by Galván, the editor, is very amusing.

"To none," he says, "better than to Mexican ladies, can I dedicate this mark of attention—(*obsequio*). Their graceful attractions well deserve any trouble that may have been taken to please them. Their bodies are graceful as the palms of the desert; their hair black as ebony, or golden as the rays of the sun, gracefully waves over their delicate shoulders; their glances are like the peaceful light of the moon. The Mexican ladies are not so white as the Europeans, but their whiteness is more agreeable to our eyes. Their words are soft, leading our hearts by gentleness, in the same manner as in their moments of just indignation they appall and confound us. Who can resist the magic of their song, always sweet, always gentle and always natural? Let us leave to foreign ladies (*las ultramarinas*) these affected and scientific manners of singing; here, nature surpasses art, as happens in everything, notwithstanding the cavillings of the learned.

"And what shall I say of their souls? I shall say that in Europe the minds are more cultivated, but in Mexico the hearts are more amiable. Here they are not only sentimental, but tender; not only soft, but virtuous; the body of a child is not more sensitive, (*no es mas sensible el cuerpo de un niño*), nor a rose-bud softer. I have seen souls as beautiful as the borders of the rainbow, and purer than the drops of dew. Their passions are seldom tempestuous, and even then they are kindled and extinguished easily; but generally they emit a peaceful light, like the morning star, Venus. Modesty is painted in their eyes, and modesty is the greatest and most irresistible fascination of their souls. In short, the Mexican ladies, by their manifold virtues, are destined to serve as our support whilst we travel through the sad desert of life. . . ."

There are in Mexico a few families of the old school, people of high rank, but who mingle very little in society; who are little known to the generality of foreigners, and who keep their daughters entirely at home, that they may not be contaminated by bad example. These select few, rich without ostentation, are certainly doing everything that is in their power to remedy the evils occasioned by the want of proper schools, or of competent instructresses for their daughters. Being nearly all allied by birth, or connected by marriage, they form a sort of *clan*; and it is sufficient to belong to one or other of these families, to be hospitably received by all. They meet together frequently, without ceremony, and whatever elements of good exist in Mexico, are to be found amongst them. The fathers are generally men of talent and learning, and the

mothers, women of the highest respectability, to whose name no suspicion can be attached.

But, indeed, it is long before a stranger even suspects the state of morals in the country, for whatever be the private conduct of individuals, the most perfect decorum prevails in outward behaviour. . . .

They are besides extremely *leal* [loyal] to each other, and with proper *esprit de corps*, rarely gossip to strangers concerning the errors of their neighbours' ways; indeed, if such a thing is hinted at, [they] deny all knowledge of the fact. So long as outward decency is preserved, habit has rendered them entirely indifferent as to the *liaisons* subsisting amongst their particular friends; and as long as a woman attends church regularly, is a patroness of charitable institutions, and gives no scandal by her outward behaviour, she may do pretty much as she pleases. As for flirtations in public, they are unknown.

I must, however, confess that this indulgence on the part of women of unimpeachable reputation is sometimes carried too far. We went lately to a breakfast, at which was a young and beautiful countess, lately married, and of very low birth. She looked very splendid, with all the . . . diamonds, and a dress of rose-coloured satin. After breakfast we adjourned to another room, where I admitted the beauty of a little child who was playing about on the floor, when this lady said, "Yes, she is very pretty—very like my little girl, who is just the same age." I was rather surprised, but concluded she had been a widow, and made the inquiry of an old French lady who was sitting near me. "Oh, no!" said she—"she was never married before; she alludes to the children she had before the count became acquainted with her!" And yet the Señora de—, the strictest woman in Mexico, was loading her with attentions and caresses. I must say, however, that this was a singular instance. . . .

There are no women more affectionate in their manners than those of Mexico. In fact, a foreigner, especially if he be an Englishman, and a shy man, and accustomed to the coolness of his fair countrywomen, need only live a few years here, and understand the language, and become accustomed to the peculiar style of beauty, to find the Mexican Señoritas perfectly irresistible.

And that this is so, may be judged of by the many instances of Englishmen married to the women of this country, who *invariably* make them excellent wives. But when an Englishman marries here, he ought to settle here, for it is very rare that a *Mexicaine* can live out of her own country. They miss the climate—they miss the warmth of manner, that universal cordiality by which they are surrounded here. They miss the *laissez-aller* and absence of all etiquette in habits, toilet, etc. They find themselves surrounded by women so differently educated, as to be doubly strangers to them, strangers in feeling

as well as in country. A very few instances there are of girls, married very young, taken to Europe, and introduced into good society, who have acquired European ways of thinking, and even prefer other countries to their own; but this is so rare, as scarcely to form an exception. They are true patriots, and the visible horizon bounds their wishes. In England especially, they are completely out of their element. A language nearly impossible for them to acquire, a religion which they consider heretical, outward coldness covering inward warmth, a perpetual war between sun and fog, etiquette carried to excess, and insupportable stiffness and order in the article of the toilet; rebosos unknown, *cigarritos* considered barbarous. . . . They feel like exiles from paradise, and live but in hopes of a speedy return. . . .

July 15, 1840

Revolution in Mexico! or *Pronunciamiento*, as they call it. The storm which has for some time been brewing, has burst forth at last. Don Valentín Gómez Fariás and the banished General Urrea have pronounced for federalism. At two this morning, joined by the fifth battalion and the regiment of *comercio*, they took up arms, set off for the palace, surprised the president in his bed, and took him prisoner. . . . Some say that it will end in a few hours—others, that it will be a long and bloody contest. Some are assured that it will merely terminate in a change of ministry—others that Santa Anna will come on directly and usurp the presidency. At all events, General Valencia, at the head of the government troops, is about to attack the *pronunciados*, who are in possession of the palace. . . .

The firing has begun! People come running up the street. The Indians are hurrying back to their villages in double-quick trot. As we are not in the centre of the city, our position for the present is very safe, all the cannon being directed towards the palace. All the streets near the square are planted with cannon, and it is pretended that the revolutionary party are giving arms to the *lèperos* [the urban poor]. The cannon are roaring now. All along the street people are standing on the balconies, looking anxiously in the direction of the palace, or collected in groups before the doors, and the azoteas, which are out of the line of fire, are covered with men. They are ringing the tocsin—things seem to be getting serious.

Nine o'clock, p.m.—Continuation of firing without interruption. I have spent the day standing on the balcony, looking at the smoke, and listening to the different rumours. Gómez Fariás has been proclaimed president by his party. The streets near the square are said to be strewn with dead and wounded. There was a terrible thunderstorm this afternoon. Mingled with the

roaring of the cannon, it sounded like a strife between heavenly and earthly artillery. We shall not pass a very easy night, especially without our soldiers. Unfortunately there is a bright moon, so night brings no interruption to the firing and slaughter. . . .

17th.—The state of things is very bad. Cannon planted all along the streets, and soldiers firing indiscriminately on all who pass. Count C—— [is] slightly wounded, and carried to his country-house at Tacubaya. Two Spaniards have escaped from their house, into which the balls were pouring, and have taken refuge here. The E—— family have kept their house, which is in the very centre of the affray, cannons planted before their door, and all their windows already smashed. Indeed, nearly all the houses in that quarter are abandoned. We are living here like prisoners in a fortress. The Countess del V——e, whose father was shot in a former revolution, had just risen this morning, when a shell entered the wall close by the side of her bed, and burst in the mattress. . . .

18th.—There is a great scarcity of provisions in the centre of the city, as the Indians, who bring in everything from the country, are stopped. We have laid in a good stock of *conestibles*, though it is very unlikely that any difficulties will occur in our direction. While I am writing, the cannon are roaring almost without interruption, and the sound is anything but agreeable, though proving the respect entertained by Fariás for "the lives, properties, and interests of all." We see the smoke, but are entirely out of the reach of the fire.

I had just written these words, when the Señora—— who lives opposite, called out to me that a shell had just fallen in her garden, and that her husband had but time to save himself. The cannon directed against the palace kill people in their beds, in streets entirely out of that direction, while this ball, intended for the citadel, takes its flight to San Cosme! Both parties seem to be *fighting the city* instead of each other; and this manner of firing from behind parapets, and from the tops of houses and steeples, is decidedly safer for the soldiers than for the inhabitants. It seems also a novel plan to keep up a continual cannonading by night, and to rest during a great part of the day. One would think that were the guns brought nearer the palace, the affair would be sooner over. . . .

19th.—. . . My writing must be very desultory. Impossible to fix one's attention on anything. We pass our time on the balconies, listening to the thunder of the cannon, looking at the different parties of troops riding by, receiving visitors, who, in the intervals of the firing, venture out to bring us the last reports—wondering, speculating, fearing, hoping, and excessively tired of the whole affair.

Gómez Fariás, the prime mover of this revolution, is a distinguished char-

acter, one of the *notabilites* of the country, and has always maintained the same principles, standing up for "rapid and radical reform." He is a native of Guadalajara, and his literary career is said to have been brilliant. He is also said to be a man of an ardent imagination and great energy. His name has appeared in every public event. He first aided in the cause of Independence, then, when deputy for Zacatecas, showed much zeal in favour of Yturbe — was afterwards a warm partisan of the federal cause — contributed to the election of General Victoria, afterwards to that of Pedraza — took an active part in the political changes of '33 and '34; detests the Spaniards, and during his presidency endeavoured to abolish the privileges of the clergy and troops — suppressed monastic institutions — granted absolute liberty of opinion — abolished the laws against the liberty of the press — created many literary institutions, and whatever were his political errors, and the ruthlessness with which in the name of liberty and reform he marched to the attainment of his object, without respect for the most sacred things, he is generally allowed to be a man of integrity, and even by his enemies, an enthusiast, who deceives himself as much as others. Now in the hopes of obtaining some uncertain and visionary good, and even while declaring his horror of civil war and bloodshed, he has risen in rebellion against the actual government, and is the cause of the cruel war now raging, not in the open fields or even in the scattered suburbs, but in the very heart of a populous city.

This morning all manner of opinions are afloat. Some believe that Santa Anna has started from his retreat at Manga de Clavo, and will arrive to-day — will himself swallow the disputed oyster (the presidential chair), and give each of the combatants a shell apiece; some that a fresh supply of troops for the government will arrive to-day, and others that the rebels must eventually triumph. Among the reports which I trust may be classed as doubtful, is, that General Urrea has issued a proclamation, promising *three hours' pillage* to all who join him. Then will be the time for testing the virtues of all the diplomatic *drapens*. . . .

20th. — We were astonished this morning at the general tranquillity, and concluded that, instead of having attacked the rebels, the government was holding a parley with them, but a note from the English minister informs us that a skirmish has taken place between the two parties at one of the gates of the city, in which the government party has triumphed. So far the news is good.

Our street has a most picturesque and lively appearance this morning. It is crowded with Indians from the country, bringing in their fruit and vegetables for sale, and establishing a temporary market in front of the church of San Fernando. Innumerable carriages, drawn by mules, are passing along,

packed inside and out, full of families hurrying to the country with their children and movables. Those who are poorer are making their way on foot — men and women carrying mattresses, and little children following with baskets and bird-cages — carts are passing, loaded with chairs and tables and beds, and all manner of old furniture, uprooted for the first time no doubt since many years — all are taking advantage of this temporary cessation of firing to make their escape. Our stables are full of mules and horses sent us by our friends in the centre of the city, where all supplies of water are cut off. . . .

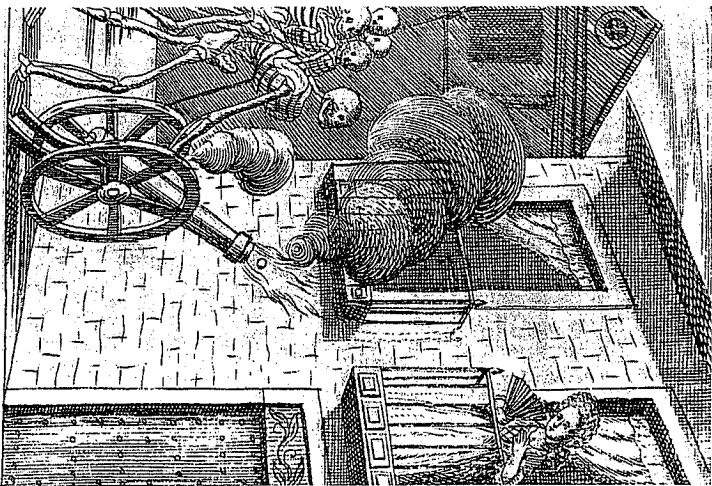
21st. — After passing a sleepless night, listening to the roaring of cannon, and figuring to ourselves the devastation that must have taken place, we find to our amusement that nothing decisive has occurred. The noise last night was mere skirmishing, and half the cannons were fired in the air. In the darkness there was no mark. But though the loss on either side is so much less than might have been expected, the rebels in the palace cannot be very comfortable, for they say that the air is infected by the number of unburied dead bodies lying there; indeed there are many lying unburied on the streets, which is enough to raise a fever, to add to the calamitous state of things. . . .

It is now evening, and again they announce an attack upon the palace, but I do not believe them, and listen to the cannon with tolerable tranquillity. All day families continue to pass by, leaving Mexico. The poor shopkeepers are to be pitied. Besides the total cessation of trade, one at least has been shot, and others plundered. A truce of two hours was granted this afternoon, to bury the dead, who were carried out of the palace. . . .

26th. — . . . Firing continues, but without any decided result. It is a sound that one does not learn to hear with indifference. There seems little doubt that ultimately the government will gain the day, but the country will no doubt remain for some time in a melancholy state of disorder. Bills are fastened to-day on the corners of the streets, forbidding all ingress or egress through the military lines, from six in the evening till eight in the morning. Gentlemen who live near us now venture in towards evening, to talk politics or play at whist; but generally, in the middle of a game, some report is brought in, which drives them back to their houses and families with all possible haste. . . .

Last night the archbishop paid a visit to the president, in the convent of San Agustín, to intercede in favour of the *pronunciados*. The mortars have not yet played against the palace, owing, it is said, to the desire of the general-in-chief to avoid the further effusion of blood.

The tranquillity of the sovereign people during all this period, is astonishing. In what other city in the world would they not have taken part with one or other side? Shops shut workmen out of employment, thousands of idle people, subsisting. Heaven only knows how, yet no riot, no confusion, appar-



Death Attacks Even the Young Woman. (From Joaquín Bolaños, *La portentosa vida de la muerte, emperatriz de los sepulcros* . . . [1792])

ently no impatience. Groups of people collect on the streets, or stand talking before their doors, and speculate upon probabilities, but await the decision of their military chiefs as if it were a judgment from Heaven, from which it were both useless and impious to appeal.

27th. — "Long live the Mexican Republic! Long live the Supreme Government!" Thus begins the government bulletin of to-day, to which I say Amen! with all my heart, since it ushers in the news of the termination of the revolution. And what particularly attracts my attention is, that instead of the usual stamp, the eagle, serpent, and nopal, we have to-day, a shaggy pony, flying as never did mortal horse before, his tail and mane in a most violent state of excitement, his four short legs all in the air at once, and on his back a man in a jockey cap, furiously blowing a trumpet, from which issues a white flag,

on which is printed "News!" in English! and apparently in the act of springing over a milestone, on which is inscribed, also in English — "100 to New York!"

"We have," says the government, "the grateful satisfaction of announcing that the revolution of this capital has terminated happily. The rebellious troops having offered, in the night, to lay down arms upon certain conditions, his Excellency, the Commander-in-Chief, has accepted their proposals with convenient modifications, which will be verified to-day, the empire of laws, order, tranquillity, and all other social guarantees being thus re-established," etc. Cuevas, Minister of the Interior, publishes a circular addressed to the governors of the departments to the same effect, adding, that "in consideration of the inhabitants and properties which required the prompt termination of this disastrous revolution, the guarantees of personal safety solicited by the rebels have been granted, but none of their pretensions have been acceded to; the conspiracy of the fifteenth having thus had no other effect but to make manifest the general wish and opinion in favour of the government, laws, and legitimate authorities." A similar circular is published by General Almonte.

Having arrived at this satisfactory conclusion, which must be as agreeable to you as it is to us, I shall close this long letter, merely observing, in apology, that as Madame de Stael said, in answer to the remark, that "Women have nothing to do with politics," — "That may be, but when a woman's head is about to be cut off, it is natural she should ask *why?*" so it appears to me, that when bullets are whizzing about our ears, and shells falling within a few yards of us, it ought to be considered extremely natural, and quite feminine, to inquire into the cause of such *phenomena*.