

THE KING OF SPAIN

James Howell (*c.* 1594–1666)

to John Savage (*c.* 1603–1654), Viscount Colchester

Madrid, 1 February ^{1623/1624}

Our lordship's of the third current came to safe hand, and being now upon point of parting with this Court, I thought it worth the labour to send your lordship a short survey of the monarchy of Spain; a bold undertaking, your Lordship will say, to comprehend within the narrow bounds of a letter such a huge bulk; but as in the boss of a small diamond ring one may discern the image of a mighty mountain, so I will endeavour that your lordship may behold the power of this great king in this paper.

Spain has been always esteemed a country of ancient renown and, as it is incident to all other, she has had her vicissitudes and turns of Fortune. She has been thrice overcome—by the Romans, by the Goths, and by the Moors. The middle conquest continues to this day, for this King and most of the nobility profess themselves to have descended of the Goths.

The Moors kept here about 700 years, and it is a remarkable story how they got in first, which was thus, upon good record. There reigned in Spain Don Rodrigo,¹ who kept his Court then at Málaga. He employed the Conde Don Julian Ambassador to Barbary, who had a daughter (a young beautiful lady) that was maid of honour to the Queen. The King spying her one day refreshing herself under an arbor, fell enamoured with her and never left till he had deflowered her. She resenting much the dishonour, wrote a letter to her father in Barbary under this allegory, that there was a fair green apple upon the table, and the King's poniard fell upon it and cleft it in two. Don Julian, apprehending the meaning, got letters of revocation and came back to Spain, where he so complied with the King that he became his favourite. Among other things he advised the King that in regard he was now in peace with all the world, he would dismiss his galleys and garrisons that were up and down the seacoasts because it was a superfluous charge. This being done, and the country left open to any to invade, he prevailed with the King to have leave to go with his lady to see their friends in Tarragona, which was 300 miles off. Having been there a while, his lady made semblance to be sick, and so sent to petition the King that her daughter Doña Cava (whom they had left at Court to satiate the King's lust) might come to comfort her awhile. Cava came, and the gate through which she went forth is called after her name to this day in Malaga. Don Julian having all his chief kindred there, he sailed over to Barbary and afterwards brought over the King of Morocco and others with an army, who suddenly invaded, Spain lying armless and open, and so conquered it. Don Rodrigo died gallantly in the field, but what became of Don Julian, who for a particular revenge betrayed his own country, no story makes mention.

A few years before this happened, Rodrigo came to Toledo, where under the great church there was a vault with huge iron doors, and none of his predecessors durst open it because there was an old prophecy that when that vault was opened, Spain should be conquered. Rodrigo, alighting the prophecy, caused the doors to be broken open, hoping to find there some treasure. But when he entered, there was nothing found but the pictures of Moors, of such men that a little after fulfilled the prophecy.

Yet this last conquest of Spain was not perfect, for diverse parts the northwest kept still under Christian kings, especially Biscay, which was never conquered, as Wales in Brittany; and the Basques have much analogy with the Welsh in divers things. They retain to this day the original language of Spain, they are the most mountainous people, and they are reputed the ancientest gentry, so that when any is to take the order of knighthood, there are no inquisitors appointed to find whether he be clear of the blood of the Moors, as in other places. The King, when he comes upon the confines, pulls off one shoe before he can tread upon any Basque ground. And he has good reason to esteem that province in regard of diverse advantages he has by it, for he has his best timber to build ships, his best mariners, and all his iron thence.

There were divers bloody battles 'twixt the remnant of Christians and the Moors for 700 years together; and the

¹ Roderic (*c.* 687–712), King of the Visigoths (710–712)

Spaniards getting ground more and more, drove them at last to Granada, and thence also, in the time of Ferdinand and Isabella, quite over to Barbary. Their last king was Chico,¹ who when he fled from Granada crying and weeping, the people upbraided him that he might well weep like a woman who could not defend himself and them like a man.

This was that Ferdinand who obtained from Rome the title of Catholic, though some stories say that many ages before Ricaredus,² the first orthodox King of the Goths, was styled *Catholicus* in a provincial synod held at Toledo, which was continued by Alfonso I,³ and then made hereditary by this Ferdinand. This absolute conquest of the Moors happened about Henry VII's time,⁴ when the foresaid Ferdinand and Isabella had by alliance joined Castile and Aragon, which, with the discovery of the West Indies, which happened a little after, was the first foundation of that greatness whereunto Spain is now mounted.

Afterwards there was an alliance with Burgundy and Austria; by the first house seventeen provinces fell to Spain, by the second Charles V came to be Emperor. And remarkable it is how the House of Austria came to that height from a mean earl; the Earl of Hapsburg⁵ in Germany, who having been one day a-hunting, he overtook a priest who had been with the sacrament to visit a poor sick body. The priest being tired, the Earl lighted off his horse, helped up the priest, and so waited upon him afoot all the while till he brought him to the church. The priest, giving him his benediction at his going away, told him that for this great act of humility and piety, his grace should be one of the greatest that ever the world had; and ever since, which is some 240 years ago, the Empire has continued in that house which afterwards was called the House of Austria.

In Philip II's time, the Spanish monarchy came to its highest pitch by the conquest of Portugal, whereby the East Indies, sundry islands in the Atlantic Sea, and diverse places in Barbary were added to the Crown of Spain. By these steps this Crown came to this grandeur and truly—give the Spaniard his due—he is a mighty monarch; he has dominions in all parts of the world (which none of the four monarchies had), both in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America (which he has solely to himself), though our Henry VII had the first proffer made him. So the Sun shines all the four-and-twenty hours of the natural day upon some part or other of his countries, for part of the Antipodes are subject to him. He has eight viceroys in Europe, two in the East Indies, two in the west, two in Africa, and about thirty provincial sovereign commanders more. Yet, as I was told lately, in discourse 'twixt him and our Prince at his being here,⁶ when the Prince fell to magnify his spacious dominions, the King answered, "Sir, 'tis true it has pleased God to trust me with diverse nations and countries, but of all these there are but two which yield me any clear revenues; viz., Spain and my West Indies. Nor all Spain Spain neither, but Castile only; the rest do scarce quit cost, for all is drunk up 'twixt governors and garrisons. Yet my advantage is to have the opportunity to propagate the Christian religion and to employ my subjects. For the last, it must be granted that no prince has better means to breed brave men, and more variety of commands to heighten their spirits with no petty, but princely, employments."

This King, besides, has other means to oblige the gentry to him by such a huge number of *commendams*⁷ which he has in his gift to bestow on whom he pleases of any of the three orders of knighthood,⁸ which England and France want. Some noblemen in Spain can spend £50.000, some forty, some thirty, and divers £20.000 per annum. The Church here is exceeding rich, both in revenues, plate, and buildings; one cannot go to the meanest country chapel but he will find chalices, lamps, and candlesticks of silver. There are some dioceses of £30.000 per annum and divers of £10.000, and Toledo is £100.000 yearly revenue. As the Church is rich, so it is mightily revered here and very powerful, which made Philip II rather depend upon the clergy than the secular power.

Therefore I do not see how Spain can be called a poor country, considering the revenues aforesaid of Princes

¹ Abu Abdallah Muhammed XII (c. 1460–c. 1533), Emir of Granada (1482–1484, 1487–1492), also called Boabdil, El Chico, and El Zogoybi

² Ricaredus (559–601), King of the Visigoths (586–601)

³ Alfonso I, King of Asturias (739–757)

⁴ Henry VII (1457–1509), King of England (1485–1509)

⁵ Rudolph I (1218–1291), Count von Hapsburg (1239–1291) and King of the Romans (1273–1291)

⁶ Prince Charles (1600–1649), son of King James I of England, visited Spain (Feb–Oct 1623) to negotiate marriage to a Spanish princess

⁷ *Commendam* — tenure of a benefice to be held until the appointment of a regular incumbent

⁸ The three primary military orders of chivalry in Spain — Alcántara, Calatrava, and Santiago

and prelates. Nor is it so thin of people as the world makes it, and one reason may be that there are sixteen universities in Spain, and in one of these there were 15.000 students at one time when I was there; I mean Salamanca. And in this village of Madrid (for the King of Spain cannot keep his constant Court in any city) there are ordinarily 600.000 souls. 'Tis true that the colonizing of the Indies and the wars of Flanders have much drained this country of people.

Since the expulsion of the Moors it is also grown thinner and not so full of corn, for those Moors would grub up wheat out of the very tops of the craggy hills; yet they used another grain for their bread, so that the Spaniard had naught else to do but to go with his ass to the market and buy corn of the Moors. There lived here also in times past a great number of Jews till they were expelled by Ferdinand, and, as I have read in an old Spanish legend, the cause was this: the King had a young prince to his son, who was used to play with a Jewish doctor that was about the Court who had a ball of gold in a string hanging down his breast. The little prince one day snatched away the said golden ball and carried it to the next room. The ball being hollow opened, and within there was painted our Saviour kissing a Jew's tail. Hereupon they were all suddenly disterred and exterminated; yet I believe in Portugal there lurks yet good store of them.

For the soil of Spain, the fruitfulness of their valleys recompenses the sterility of their hills. Corn is their greatest want, and want of rain is the cause of that, which makes them have need of their neighbours. Yet as much as Spain bears is passing good, and so is everything else for the quality; nor has anyone a better horse under him, a better cloak on his back, a better sword by his side, better shoes on his feet than the Spaniard. Nor does any drink better wine or eat better fruit than he, nor flesh for the quantity.

Touching the people, the Spaniard looks as high, though not so big, as a German. His excess is in too much gravity, which some who know him not well hold to be pride. He cares not how little he labours, for poor Gasçons and Morisco slaves do most of his work in field and vineyard. He can endure much in the war, yet he loves not to fight in the dark, but in open day, or upon a stage, that all the world might be witnesses of his valour, so that you shall seldom hear of Spaniards employed in night service, nor shall one hear of a duel here in an age. He has one good quality, that he is wonderfully obedient to government; for the proudest don of Spain, when he is prancing upon his ginnet in the street, if an alguazil (a sergeant) show him his vare—that is, a little white staff he carries as a badge of his office—my don will down presently off his horse and yield himself his prisoner. He has another commendable quality, that when he gives alms he pulls off his hat and puts it in the beggar's hand with a great deal of humility.

His gravity is much lessened since the late proclamation came out against ruffs, and the King himself showed the first example. They were come to that height of excess herein that twenty shillings were used to be paid for starching of a ruff. And some, though perhaps he had never a shirt to his back, yet he would have a toting huge swelling ruff about his neck.

He is sparing in his ordinary diet, but when he makes a feast he is free and bountiful. As to temporal authority, specially martial, so is he very obedient to the Church, and believes all with an implicit faith. He is a great servant of ladies, nor can he be blamed, for, as I said before, he comes of a goatish race. Yet he never brags of nor blazes abroad his doings that way, but is exceedingly careful of the repute of any woman (a civility that we much want in England). He will speak high words of Don Philip, his King, but will not endure a stranger should do so. I have heard a Basque make a *rodamantado* that he was as good a gentleman as Don Philip himself, for Don Philip was half a Spaniard, half a German, half an Italian, half a Frenchman, half I know not what, but he was a pure Basque without mixture. The Spaniard is not so smooth and oily in his compliment as the Italian; and though he will make strong protestations, yet he will not swear out compliments like the French and English. As I heard when my lord of Carlisle¹ was Ambassador in France, there came a great monsieur to see him, and having a long time banded and sworn compliments one to another who should go first out at a door, at last my lord Carlisle said, "O my lord, have pity upon my soul."

The Spaniard is generally given to gaming, and that in excess; he will say his prayers before, and if he win he will thank God for his good fortune after. Their common game at cards (for they very seldom play at dice) is

¹ John Hay (c. 1590–1636), Earl of Carlisle, English Ambassador to France (1604)

primera, at which the King never shows his game, but throws his cards with their faces down on the table. He is merchant of all the cards and dice through all the Kingdom; he has them made for a penny a pair and he retails them for twelve-pence, so that 'tis thought he has £30.000 a year by this trick at cards.

The Spaniard is very devout in his way, for I have seen him kneel in the very dirt when the *Ave Mary* bell rings; and some, if they spy two straws or sticks lie cross-wise in the street, they will take them up and kiss them, and lay them down again. He walks as if he marched, and seldom looks on the ground, as if he condemned it. I was told of a Spaniard who, having got a fall by a stumble and broke his nose, rose up and in a disdainful manner said, "This it is to walk upon earth."

The labourers and country swains here are sturdy and rational men, nothing so simple or servile as the French peasant, who is born in chains. 'Tis true the Spaniard is not so conversable as other nations (unless he has travelled), else he is like Mars among the planets, impatient of conjunction.

Nor is he so free in his gifts and rewards, as the last summer it happened that Count Gondomar,¹ with Sir Francis Cottington,² went to see a curious house of the Constable of Castile's³ which had been newly-built here. The keeper of the house was very officious to show him every room, with the garden, grottos, and aqueducts, and presented him with some fruit. Gondomar having been a long time in the house, coming out put many compliments of thanks upon the man, and so was going away. Sir Francis whispered him in the ear and asked him whether he would give the man anything that took such pains. "O," quoth Gondomar, "well-remembered. Don Francisco, have you ever a double pistole about you? If you have, you may give it him, and then you pay him after the English manner; I have paid him already after the Spanish."

The Spaniard is much improved in policy since he took footing in Italy, and there is no nation agrees with him better. I will conclude this character with a saying that he has:

Beneath the Sun there's no such man, as the Spaniard and Italian.

The Frenchman answers: You tell the truth, and reason has the first is a thief, a buggerer the last.

Touching their women, nature has made a more visible distinction 'twixt the two sexes here than elsewhere; for the men for the most part are swarthy and rough, but the women are of a far finer mould; they are commonly little. And whereas there is a saying that makes a complete woman—let her be English to the neck, French to the waste, and Dutch below—I may add, for hands and feet let her be Spanish, for they have the least of any. They have another saying—a Frenchwoman in a dance, a Dutchwoman in the kitchen, an Italian in a window, an England-woman at board, and the Spanish a-bed. When they are married, they have a privilege to wear high shoes and to paint, which is generally practised here; and the Queen uses it herself. They are coy enough, but not so forward as our English, for if a lady goes along the street (and all women going here veiled and their habit so generally alike one can hardly distinguish a countess from a cobbler's wife), if one should cast out an odd ill-sounding word and ask her a favour, she will not take it ill, but put it off and answer you with some witty retort. After thirty they are commonly past child-bearing, and I have seen women in England look as youthful at fifty as some here at twenty-five.

Money will do miracles here in purchasing the favour of ladies, or anything else; though this be the country of money, for it furnishes well near all the world besides, yea their very enemies, as the Turk and Hollander, insomuch that one may say the coin of Spain is as Catholic as her King. Yet though he be the greatest king of gold and silver mines in the world (I think), yet the common current coin here is copper. And herein I believe the Hollander has done him more mischief by counterfeiting his copper coins than by their arms, bringing it in by strange surreptitious ways, as in hollow sows of tin and lead, hollow masts, in pitch buckets under water, and other ways.

But I fear to be injurious to this great king to speak of him in so narrow a compass; a great king indeed, though the French in a slighting way compare his monarchy to a beggar's cloak made up of patches. They are patches indeed, but such as he has not the like. The East Indies is a patch embroidered with pearls, rubies, and

¹ Diego Sarmiento de Acuña (1567–1626), Conde de Gondomar, Castilian Ambassador to England (1613–1622)

² Francis (c. 1579–1652), Baron Cottington, English Ambassador to Castile (1609–1611)

³ Juan Fernández de Velasco (c. 1550–1613), Duque de Frías and Condestable de Castilla (1585–1613)

diamonds. Peru is a patch embroidered with massy gold, Mexico with silver, Naples and Milan are patches of cloth of tissue. And if these patches were in one piece, what would become of his cloak embroidered with fleur-de-lys?

So, desiring your lordship to pardon this poor, imperfect paper, considering the high quality of the subject, I rest your lordship's most humble servitor.

Joseph Jacobs, ed. *Epistolae Hoelianaë: The Familiar Letters of James Howell* (London: David Nutt, 1892), I:195–204. [modernized]