

MDD-13
Isaacs' Dream.

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366, Madison Avenue,
New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

"And these plains, these woods, these rivers? Can you see them and not love them?"

"Now you're talking poetry at me! And these provincials? And my relations? The heat and the loneliness? The Devil?"

Jorge Isaacs: María.

"Seen from afar, that country was Arcadia ... The tragedy of this life is not that we are deceived, but that deceptions do not last."

Mario Carvajal: Vida y pasión de Jorge Isaacs.

The dark greens and the dry browns and greys of the Sabana, the plateau on which Bogotá is built, are cold colours. They drain the life out of the few flowers that anyone plants, leaving a landscape that is subtle but never vigorous, a tired and pessimistic plain surrounded by dull mountains. But the Cauca valley is "a very Eden." It is lower, hotter, and obviously beautiful: "the eye does not see, the ear does not hear, the senses drown in their own satisfaction — the great beauties of nature cannot be seen and described at the same time." Its grass is greener, its heavier air smells sweeter, its flowers are a living scarlet. Some old trees have been spared to shade cattle, village squares and great houses. There are stands of feathery bamboo in the fields, and willows along the banks of winding rivers with Indian names: Jamundí, Timba, Pance, Lili, Dagua, Tuluá.

Over the waters of these varied but harmonious streams their branches and the creepers interlace, so that below the sun shines in patches, "as through the broken roof of some miraculous Indian temple." Of the works of human hands, the best here have the solid and noble look that comes from slave labour. They are the haciendas of the cattle ranches and the sugar plantations: not white columns and Spanish Moss, but thick walls, heavy unglazed tiles for roof and floor, verandas, patios and geraniums; still, the same shacks at the back, the same hazy country round about, a river somewhere, and that nostalgia that only Emancipations can produce. The centre of this valley is the city of Cali. Jorge Isaacs was born there a dozen years before the freeing of the slaves, when it was a low town of some twelve thousand inhabitants, with only the cathedral towers higher than the palm trees that sprouted over the rest.

"María", which he published when he was thirty in 1867, is the most famous novel of Colombia. Many have shed over it their first and last tears of sympathy, many who have never read another book. It is "La María", the one and only, the object of a cult as heartfelt as that of the Virgin, of admiration that expresses itself only in sighs and moans, the origin of a myth as powerful as the Fall.

All this from a book that reads at first like a poor provincial pastiche of Chateaubriand. How can such wooden characters arouse such emotion? How can a cast of virtuous white ladies and gentlemen, peasants industrious and deferential, well-dressed and contented negro slaves who marry in church, a social harmony rounded off with a "humble dog" that cleans master's boots with its tongue — how can such a cast have carried conviction for a hundred years? How can they believe in that odd anthology of a landscape, where the cries of the parrots blend with a distant shepherd's horn? (As one critic says, "no one had seen the Cauca valley before Isaacs.") If readers can see the heroine's "aristocratic hands, the dimples scattered over them, made to sooth the brows of such as Lord Byron", would they not rather have them described some other way? Yet the book moves Colombians, and as far as I can imagine myself a Colombian it moves me. They would not change a word of this sacred text, nor could a word be changed, certainly not Lord Byron's brow, without diminishing its appeal. Taste is character, and it is worth exploring the mechanisms of that appeal, Colombian tragedy and Colombian trappings. To know what makes people weep is rare information.

What is the plot? J.M. Vergara y Vergara, whom I quoted above, summarizes it like this:

"María and Efraín are two young people dressed in European clothes who live in a hacienda in the Cauca valley. They fall in love, he has to go away and ... why tell the end of the story? It is the prose of life seen through the glass of poetry. It is nature and society well translated." Why tell the end of the story? María is a congenital epileptic, who drops into her final decline when Efraín is in Europe, and who dies before he can get back. That is the bald and morbid tale. Only a rare treatment of it can account for the book's immediate and continued popularity.

In Isaacs "Romanticism itself lived and walked, with all its virtues and its vices." He himself wrote in a letter to his friend Luciano Rivera y Garrido "Yo era todo corazón, y así moriré — I was all heart, and I will die that way." The romanticism of Isaacs-Efrainais so strong that in the novel he orchestrates the rain, the lightning in the sky, the clouds that pass over the face of the sun, and a black bird-of-ill-omen that makes no less than four punctual appearances. The tragic love of "two young people dressed in European clothes" is too neatly balanced by the more fortunate affairs of slave and peasant, the simpler consummations of the clods:

"Are those river spirits that you talk about very beautiful," a flirtatious mulatto girl asks the young man, "do they live in the fields?"

"They live by the river banks."

"What! In the sun and the water? Then they can't be very white!"

"They are white. They live in the shadows."

The dark girl's lover carelessly sings:

"All I ask of Time is time

Time I'm given every day

But I'm no sooner given it

Than Time takes time away."

That does not worry him. His mating and the matings of his fellows the hero assists as if they were so many domestic animals. The meaning of the lines is for the listener, not the singer. The white live in the shade. Beyond the books absurdities there is a real agony, a sense of time passing and not returning, of isolation and hopelessness. Efrain must return to a house in mourning, to find his love buried amid the orange-blossoms under an imported iron cross. Isaacs was of the first generation of his family to be born in Colombia; his father was a Jew, a British citizen who had arrived there from Jamaica. This enhanced in him a feeling of foreignness that is, however, present in a lesser degree in many white Colombians, hispanic dwellers in a ruined Indian temple. Efrain and María are in the valley, not of it. One no sooner reads of the cross on her grave than one thinks of it rusting away. The inaccuracies and inadequacy of Isaacs's descriptions of the country, which the American Isaac Holton a few years earlier had said was "filled with poverty and hunger from Antioquia to Popayán," read like so much Colombian writing as if they were written by an infatuated foreigner finding a place to love.

Some of the book's success is owed to these fictions — it is even praised for its realism, "nature and society well translated." The insects — they merely buzz in the heat of the day, and at night the fireflies show their lights along the river. The hostility of nature is represented only by the noble tiger (the South American sort that has been despised by all good Europeans since Buffon), fit prey to be hunted by noble-hearted men. There is no human villain in the story. From the patriarch to the negro child, or to that humble and useful dog, they live in charity with one another. How carefully the author notes their little politenesses! The master considers all the wants of his slaves, down to asking them whether they are well-confessed: the slaves, catechized, too sinless to need much confessing, well-fed and well-clothed, are obedient and industrious in return. An opponent of slavery himself, Isaacs had a vision of how the institution could most nearly approach innocence, where the master's care for his slaves is almost an apology to them, and where they work for him in a spirit of forgiveness.

He even spoilt the unity of the narrative with a long digression on the early life of his black nursemaid.

But the peasants nearby are free men too, so Efraim must not stand on much ceremony with them. He sits down to eat at the same table, and the single napkin is laid at his place; they touch their hats when they speak to him, but they speak frankly. All know their places as well as any squire and his tenants. Efraim is the model of an English gentleman, and the Colombian son of an English Jew who emigrated to Jamaica is still that. Like any well-born Englishman he eats tinned salmon and drinks French wine with French mirrors on the walls, carries an English watch in his pocket and hunts with an English gun, both as fine as our craftsmen could make.

Father, mother, brothers and sisters and the orphan cousin María — the love-idylls of the young in the fiction of formal societies often have to be between cousins — live in the claustrophobic harmony that the Catholic church prescribes. They labour in the gardens that the Lord has provided, the women forever arranging flowers, father and son watching over the cattle and the sugar-mill, which is described as "costly and beautiful" in contrast with that of a neighbour, "expensively built but not in the best of taste."

To this sort of life many Colombians think they aspire, and some very few once achieved it. All countries have an idea of static rural bliss, some parallel to the eighteenth-century English country seat, the ante-bellum Southern plantation. The further from present or historical reality it is, the more poignant its attraction. What better life than the overseeing of a beautiful hacienda by day, the mirrors and the French wines by night, faithfully to bed with a glance at the English watch, the occasional day off shooting tiger with the precise English gun? Efraim has maps on his walls, perhaps to persuade the reader, perhaps to remind himself that this paradise really is in this world. Against this the reality: "these provincials ... my relations ... the heat and the loneliness, the terrible expense of French wine, that must come four thousand miles by sea, pay duty, and then be shaken up another few hundred miles of tropic by canoe and mule; the eternal border fights and malicious litigations — Colombians are not all lawyers for nothing — the endless childbearings and the inevitable fornications. But life in the hacienda of "El Paraiso", day in, day out, is sweet from sub-tropical dawn to dusk. It is a house of flowers.

The flower of flowers is María. María is hardly a character; she is, according to Vergara y Vergara, "the girl we all dream about when we are eighteen." Not because she passes the time "reading some chapter of the Imitation of the Virgin or teaching the other children to pray, nor because she refrains from reading Chateaubriand's Atala when she hears that "it contains a passage that ought to have been left out" — she is a dream because rarely has a virgin been described in such sensual terms. Hers is a very tropical chastity. She has "the seductive reserve of the Christian maiden." Efraim sees her shoeless, and she falls to the ground and kneels to hide her feet; in that moment "the nubile daughters of the

patriarchs, gathering flowers for the altars, were not more beautiful than she." She is always busy with flowers, putting a scarlet one in her dark brown (not Indian black) hair, scattering petals on Efraim's bath, carrying vases of them in and out of his bedroom. Night falls:

"You'd better take them out now. It's bad to sleep with too many flowers in the room."

"Yes? ... But I'll bring them back in the morning!"

"Are there many like these?"

"Lots and lots and lots!"

Her clothes are of a modest cut precisely described, and rustling scented muslin. Her lips are "red, damp, and graciously imperious," her voice "a child's voice but deeper, ready now to lend itself to all the modulations of tenderness and passion," "the voice of a dove waking in an orange-tree," and, several pages later, "sweeter than the doves in the orange-trees." Her thoughts?

"What have you been doing these last few days?" asks Efraim on his return from a tour of the properties with his father.

"Waiting for them to pass."

"Nothing else?"

"Sewing, and thinking a lot."

"What about?"

"Things one thinks about and doesn't tell!"

María. "Can it be," asked the Mexican Justo Sierra, novelist, historian and Supreme Court judge for Porfirio Díaz, "can it be that woman, who in our streets of our cities so shamelessly accepts a wretched role in the human comedy, is capable of such feelings and such purity? After reading this book we have a right to believe in heaven." "I thought myself unworthy," writes the young Colombian, "to possess such beauty and such innocence." They kiss once in the chapel, and she turns away from him to point to the image of the Virgin on the altar. Chastity, as well as promiscuity, is a Latin-American ideal. That sort of innocence means more to an uninhibited people not much given to the examination of motives, where pride stands choosing between twin conventions of good and evil, where there are almost as many nuns as prostitutes. Marias and magdalens go together. "Who has not a dead María in his heart?"

But it appears that one person who did not have a dead María in his heart was Isaacs. He married early and happily, and the few references to an earlier love in his other writings read as if they had been thought up after the novel was published. The passion he put into the novel did not have its origin in a person. María's peculiar sensuousness is part of the Cauca Valley, it is the country she moves in; the flowers she gathers in it are her scents, the birds in its trees her voice. W.H. Hudson, in Green Mansions, produced a girl mysteriously one with the Orinoco jungle, the bird-voiced Rima. María is her equivalent for white Colombia, the expression not only in her physical aspects of a landscape, but of a whole ambiente. She is lovely like that half-settled valley, and as unworldly as it is remote. Isaacs added to this an inherited and incurable sickness. Why?

He interrupts the story at one point with the cry "Strangers inhabit the house of my fathers!" Now that is accurate enough in that his family had had to sell it, but they had only owned "El Paraiso" for

three years, and had bought it as a speculation — the ancestral titles of the Colombian aristocracy are falser than most. Isaacs has the yearning for wealth and stability of a sensitive gambler. His father had gambled helplessly, and at one time went as far as empowering the local authorities to claim any sum he bet as a forfeit. Jorge himself is described as "doing business as if it were a game of chance." Some of his ideas were sound — he anticipated the scheme that made the Eders the richest men in Cauca — but he was too impatient and temperamental to put them into practice. Moreover, his coming-of-age coincided with the civil war of 1859-62, the final ruin of the elder Isaacs's unsteady enterprises. War and gambling are excluded from the idyll of "La María", though the author was his father's son, and Cauca the most bellicose state in Colombia. Debt is not: Efraín's father, that noble-hearted worker for the common weal, cannot meet his obligations to a creditor he has trusted too much (the nearest the book comes to a villain, who gets one mention and never appears). The sinister black bird flies over his stricken grey head (washed night and morning in eau-de-cologne). It appears elsewhere only in conjunction with María's attacks. Debt, one suspects, has therefore an equal tragic importance.

Isaacs's life — as was that of the other great writer that Colombia produced in the nineteenth century, the lyric poet José Asunción Silva — was a long and desperate struggle not to become poor. The Colombian rich who fall do not have the European cushion of rural retirement and retrenchment, nor the social loyalty of those of equal birth. The fight to improve one's position is there so fierce in part because not to strive has been to go downwards into limbo. There is no easy provincial society, only "the heat, the loneliness, the Devil" — truly, the province weighed on Isaacs's heart. At the time of his family's failure the rate of interest on the mortgages was eighteen per-cent. It is not surprising that he gambled and, given conditions in the valley in those years, not surprising that he lost. His loss was so heavy that he had to leave the district and wander for the rest of his life in search of other gambles. A string of strangers occupied the "house of his fathers", while he and his wife and his numerous children were frequently without a home.

Straights that drove Silva to suicide drove Isaacs into politics. He fought first for the Conservatives, at that time under the sombre leadership of Julio Arboleda, who is alledged to have avoided the losses of Emancipation by selling his slaves over the border in Peru. Later he announced that he "had seen the light," and as a military Radical became for a very short time self-proclaimed President of Antioquia. It all brought much frustration and little profit. "He was," says Carvajal, "a politician only with the dark side of his being." That was not enough. The clear side of his mind wrote in one letter:

"Liberty and ignorance put together add up to barbarism: this republic was not founded by anthropologists ... the founders built by the light of battles on the rubble of slavery."

He explored, far and wide and deep, looking for new ways of making money, some private El Dorado, but his explorations broke his health as debt had broken his heart and politics his combative spirit. He retired, wrote a good book on the tribes of the Magdalena river and another, more realistic

novel unfortunately lost. In the middle of the civil war of 1895 "those thick moustaches fell conquered in death, like palm-leaves before the hurricane." He left a style dangerous to imitate, and instructions that his body should be buried in Antioquia, where business was surer, where the rate of interest was some way below eighteen per-cent, the soberest, least Colombian part of Colombia.

María had fits: so does Colombia. The doctor advised Efraim that it was dangerous to love María too much. But "he who moves the hearts of others must first lose his own." Isaacs lost enough of his heart to write an allegory for a whole nation.

Yours sincerely,



Malcolm Deas.

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