

# Constancia's Household

## Chapter I

Doña Constancia

SEVILLE the wonderful! Seville the beautiful! Seville the renowned! What Spaniard is not proud of this matchless city even now?

But in the times of which we write, when Spain could rival any country of Europe for wealth, commerce, political power, and the extent of her colonies, Seville was indeed a city to be proud of. Its lately expelled owners, the Moors, had lavished upon it every Oriental splendor, and Nature had not been less generous with her gifts. Nestling in gardens of orange, lemon, and pomegranate trees, its marble towers and palaces gleaming white or flushing rosy red, as the sun's rays fell upon them, gave it an appearance such as its Mohammedan masters might well believe the heaven they expected would possess.

This fierce, warlike, but industrious people, had, however, been driven from their earthly paradise, and very few "New Christians," as Moorish converts were called, were to be found there. "Old Christians"—the flower of Spanish chivalry—had taken possession of its Oriental houses, with their square courtyards, fountains, flowers, and fruit trees.

Let us glance at one of these beautiful homes as it appeared then.

The elegant *patio*, or courtyard, is the usual reception-room for guests and friends, or rather the inner division, it being separated from the outer by gates of brass or bronze. Round this square are the rooms of the house, which are bare and miserable as compared with the splendor of the *patio*.

Here is everything that can charm the senses. Its pavement of marble, and its pillars of marble or porphyry, with their silken hangings, render this open-air saloon delightfully cool, while the clear, musical plash of an elegant fountain heightens the effect. Round this grow choice exotic plants that make the languid air almost heavy with perfume, and beyond these are ranged luxurious couches, cushions, and lounges, where Spanish ladies may receive their visitors, and discuss the idle chit-chat of Seville society, concerning the newly introduced mantilla, whose graceful folds are

SALOON: *greeting hall*

MANTILLA: *a head scarf worn over a tall comb*

GRANDEES: *Spanish noblemen*

REGENT: *one ruling in place of the king*

expected to supersede the close head-dress hitherto worn. Or proud grandees may talk over the doings of their clever regent, Cardinal Ximenes, and the probability of their young sovereign, Charles the Fifth, speedily coming from Flanders—where he has been educated—to take charge of the kingdom for his mother, the almost imbecile Juana. Only as her representative are they willing to receive the young Charles; and his sending his former preceptor, Adrian, to act as co-regent with Ximenes, has already given some offence to the proud people who, as yet, knew little of a despotic government.

But the last and greatest cause of complaint is against the Inquisition. Many of those now so angrily discussing the political questions of the day in Seville are compelled to use some caution, for already the victims of this "Holy Office" number some 13,000, including Jews, Moors, and the heretics of Aragon and Catalonia.

Spain had never been entirely free from this so-called heresy, owing to the frequent emigration of the Albigenses<sup>1</sup> and Vaudois<sup>2</sup> from their native valleys to the plains adjacent. And so, for the extirpation of these, and the numberless Jews and Moors who must be converted by means of the rack or dungeon, or from whom wealth must be wrested to enrich the coffers of the State, Ferdinand, their late king, had obtained a papal bull establishing the modern Inquisition, which the

<sup>1</sup> A false religion in southern France

<sup>2</sup> Waldensian Christians

PRECEPTOR: *teacher*

EXTIRPATION: *destruction*

pope was no less willing to grant, as it was almost the last fetter required to bind Spain to the Holy See.

Most of those now assembled round the marble fountains of Seville, were engaged in making an effort to rid themselves of this terrible institution, that was crushing out learning as well as political and religious liberty in their midst. Large sums of money had already been collected to be sent as a bribe to the reigning pontiff, Leo X, to obtain from him a brief, reforming many of its abuses. The city had likewise sent representatives to meet Charles on his landing, and make him swear, before his title was confirmed by the nation, that he would at once do the same.

One of the most powerful grandees, Don Pedro de Castro, had been chosen for this difficult business, and was now about to start for Asturias, where Charles was expected to land.

It had given great pleasure to his fellow-citizens that Don Pedro had accepted this office, but it was far otherwise with his young wife. Doña Constancia expected to become a mother almost daily, and she dreaded her husband taking so long and perilous a journey at such a time. But she would not hinder him in the performance of what he considered his duty; and when, a few days afterwards, a lovely little boy was born, she almost forgot the sorrow occasioned by her husband's absence in the joys of motherhood.

BRIEF: *official letter*

A short time of retirement, and then Doña Constancia was once more able to receive her friends in the luxurious *patio*, and show them her precious treasure; and, of course, the first question asked was, its intended name.

"Oh, Pedro, to be sure," said Constancia, as she sat and played with the closely swathed baby lying in her lap.

"And his baptism, when is that to take place?" asked her visitor.

"When Don Pedro returns from his mission to our young king," answered the playful young mother, still keeping her eyes on the baby.

"Our *young* king!" said her companion. "Being a mother makes you feel old, I suppose, Constancia; for I think I have heard you were born about the same time as our Prince Carlos, and so you are both seventeen this year of grace, 1517. Wonderfully old, certainly!"

"I am wondrously happy," murmured the young mother, looking fondly at her boy, and carefully screening him from the spray of the fountain; for although they live almost entirely in the open air, the Spaniards have an almost nervous horror of water touching them.

"Well, I think if ever the saints and Santissima Maria have cause to be jealous, it is of a mother with her first baby," said her companion, after a pause, during which she had been watching her friend.

SANTISSIMA MARIA: *Mary the mother of Jesus*

Constancia lifted her large, lustrous, dark eyes inquiringly. "You do not think that possible, do you, Inez?" she asked.

"I do not trouble myself to think much about anything," said Inez; "I leave that to a friend whom I have left in Valladolid, Doña Leanor de Vibero. She has disclosed some of her thoughts to me, and I gave her warning not to speak of them too freely, as they might bring trouble upon her."

"She is a New Christian—a Jewess, I think you said. Is she likely to return to her old faith?" asked Constancia.

"Nay, I think not; but it is the strange views she holds concerning some of our Catholic doctrines," answered Inez; "views, I have heard, that are similar to those of the Albigenses, who have given so much trouble to the Holy Office."

"Ah, if they, and the Jews and Moors, had not come to our Spain, my Pedro would be with me now," sighed Constancia.

At this moment a nurse came and relieved the mother of her infant charge, and the two ladies fell into a discussion upon the news that had come of the landing of the young monarch. Beyond the actual fact that he had landed, nothing was known, and it was still uncertain how long Don Pedro would be absent.

Speaking of this, Doña Inez asked if it would not be better to have the baby baptized at once.

"Nay! indeed, there is no need for such unseemly haste," said Constancia, a little testily. "My

husband must be present when my child is baptized. If he were ill, or likely to—to die," and the fond young mother gave an involuntary shudder as she spoke, "if this were the case, I should, of course, have it done without delay."

"It were better not to delay it," said Inez; "babies sometimes die very suddenly." Constancia was at first inclined to feel offended at this speech, but the next minute burst into a merry laugh at the idea of anything like illness overtaking her chubby, healthy baby, and would by no means hear of the ceremony being performed until her husband's return, when it would at once be solemnised with becoming magnificence.

Shortly afterwards, Doña Inez took her departure, with her *duenna* and servants in attendance. Ladies did not drive out in their carriages to make morning calls, or Doña Inez would have had one becoming her station—at least, if the streets had been wide enough, which is very doubtful, for in this grand city many of them were not more than footpaths.

After the departure of her guest, Doña Constancia ordered her servants to draw the silken curtains, and then composed herself for the usual midday siesta. She was still in the midst of a happy dream, in which she saw her husband nursing his boy, when someone in a hurried and alarmed voice awoke her.

"What is it?" asked Constancia, starting to her feet as she spoke.

"The baby, Senora!" gasped the servant.

"What is the matter with my darling?" uttered the lady; but without waiting for an answer, she rushed to the door leading to her own chamber, which adjoined that appropriated to the baby and his nurse.

This rather gloomy room was singularly bare of furniture, according to our notions, and the essential necessary of every nursery, whether rich or poor—a bath—was nowhere to be seen here.

Had these highly refined people known the use of this, many an infant life might have been saved; but now, when this grave, experienced nurse saw her charge seized with convulsions, instead of unbinding his closely enveloped limbs, and placing him in a warm bath, she rolled him on her lap, calling on all the saints in the calendar to aid her in the process. Finding he did not get better, she at length despatched one servant for her mistress, and another for a priest from the neighboring monastery of St. Isidro, that the rite of baptism might be performed at once, for fear the child should die.

Constancia met this servant as she entered the chamber, but she scarcely noticed him in her anxiety for her darling.

"What is it?" she gasped, as she snatched her baby to her breast. There was no light in the widely opened, rolling eyes, and the sweet mouth, that she had fancied already formed a smile at her

approach, now worked with a convulsive motion. Constancia sank down upon a pile of cushions, and looked at the changed face.

Already the ashy greyness of death had begun to settle upon the little countenance, and before he had been in her arms ten minutes, the mouth had ceased its convulsive working, the eyes grew filmy, there was a sigh and a flutter, and the fit was over. The young mother was childless.

"He is not dead!" uttered Constancia in a hollow whisper, grasping him more tightly, as the nurse would have taken him from her arms.

"Senora, he is with"—but there the woman stopped, and, burying her face in her hands, groaned aloud. She, too, had grown to love the child, with his little winsome ways; but the words she was about to utter—words of comfort to the bereaved mother—struck like a dagger to her own heart; she could not, dare not, utter them, for the child was unbaptized!

At this moment the priest entered the chamber, and Constancia held the child towards him.

He did not offer to take it, but looked down on the little face now fast growing rigid. "The child is dead," he said, turning to the nurse.

Constancia uttered a suppressed scream.

"Nay, nay, not dead," she said; "he can't be dead; it was but an hour since I held him in my arms quite well. He will be well again, by and by; but I want him baptized now—you will baptize him



now," she said; and the proud, haughty lady, who had boasted that she had never asked a favour of anyone, fell on her knees before the priest, holding up the baby in her trembling arms.

He seemed somewhat touched by her distress, but he did not offer to take the child. "It is too late," he said, stepping a few paces backward, as though he feared contamination.

"Too late?" repeated the lady; "oh, do not say it is too late to baptize my baby! Oh, do not shut him out of heaven! I will bear the pains of purgatory twice over, if you will save him."

"I cannot," said the priest impassively. "Our loving Mother, the Church, has been waiting to receive your child ever since he was born, but you have never brought him to be embraced in her maternal bosom, and therefore this judgment has been sent upon you."

"Yes, yes, upon me! I am content, I am willing to bear this punishment of my sin; but for him, my darling, is there no remission of my sin for him?"

The nurse had taken the little corpse from her arms, but she still knelt at the monk's feet, and with clasped hands, and eyes raised in imploring supplication, she spoke in feverish haste.

The man shook his head: "I can do nothing," he said.

Constancia shivered in her terror. "Is there no hope—no salvation for unbaptized infants?" she asked; "must my darling dwell forever within sight



"It is too late," he said.

*PURGATORY: a supposed place of punishment where the dead pay for their sins before going to heaven*

of heaven's gate, but never be allowed to enter from the cold, dark region outside? Oh, save him from such a fate, and I will give all that I possess to your monastery. Say that I may but see him again, and dwell with and cherish him."

But the monk still shook his head. "I have no such power," he said.

"Nay, but the Church has power to loose or to bind at her will," said Constancia; "she can remit or impose the pains of purgatory, surely she can grant admittance into heaven to so feeble an infant as—"

"She would have done it had it been brought to her," interrupted the priest; "but she exerts not this power for those outside the true fold, as heretics or the unbaptized."

He did not wait to say more, or to see the effect of his words. He had a notion that his time was wasted here—he would lose a luxurious meal, which he knew was now being served in the refectory, and which his brethren would have no scruple in eating without thought of him, or his need of a share. So, with a hastily bestowed benediction, which no one heeded, he shuffled off, leaving the nurse and servants to recover and soothe the now fainting lady.