The News from Paraguay

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1

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One

PARIS

For him it began with a feather. A bright blue parrot feather that fell out of Ella Lynch's hat while she was horseback riding one afternoon in the Bois de Boulogne. Blond, fair-skinned and Irish, Ella was a good rider—the kind of natural rider who rides with her ass, not her legs—and she was riding astride on a nervous little gray thoroughbred mare. Cantering a few paces behind Ella and her companion, Francisco Solano Lopez was also a good rider—albeit a different sort of rider. He rode from strength, the strength in his arms, the strength in his thighs. Also he liked to ride big horses, horses that measured over sixteen, seventeen hands; at home, he often rode a big sure-footed cantankerous brown mule. Pulling up on the reins and getting off his horse, his heavy silver spurs clanging, Franco—as Francisco Solano Lopez was known—picked the feather up from the ground; it briefly occurred to him that Inocencia, his fat sister, would know what kind of parrot feather it was, for she kept hundreds of parrots in her aviary in Asunción,

but it was Ella and not the feather that had caught Franco's attention.

The year was 1854 and the forty miles of bridle paths and carriage roads were filled with elegant calèches, daumonts, phaetons; every afternoon, weather permitting, Empress Eugénie could be seen driving with her equerry. Every afternoon too, Empress Eugénie, in fashion-obsessed Paris, could be seen wearing a different dress, a dress of a different color: *Crimean* green, *Sebastopol* blue, *Bismarck* brown. The Bois de Boulogne had recently been transformed from a ruined forest into an elegant English park.

Sent as ambassador-at-large to Europe by his father, twenty-six-year-old Franco was dressed in a field marshal's uniform modeled on Napoleon's, only his jacket was green—*Paraguayan* green. He was short, stocky—not yet grown stout nor had his back teeth begun to trouble him—and his thick eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead like a black stripe but he was not unattractive. He was self-confident, naïve, ambitious, energetic, spoilt—never had anything, except once one thing, been denied him—and he was possessed of an immense fortune. Franco put the feather in his pocket and mounted his horse again. He caught up with Ella easily and followed her home.

At age ten, Eliza Alicia Lynch had left Ireland; at fifteen, Elisa Alice Lynch married a French army officer; at nineteen, divorced and living with a handsome but impecunious Russian count, Ella Lynch needed to reinvent herself.

14 MARCH 1854

A lovely afternoon! I rode the little mare again in the Bois with Dimitri. *[Ella wrote in her diary that evening.]* Each day I grow fonder of her—her mouth is as soft as silk and a touch of the rein is sufficient. Her canter puts me in mind of sitting in a rocking chair! But how can I possibly afford to buy a horse? Already I owe John Worth a fortune! Oh, how I loathe worrying about money all the time!

> Money and servants both! When I returned home and was changing my clothes, I once again had to listen to Marie complain about Pierre whom she accuses of drinking my wine and who knows what other thefts—servants are addicted to their tales of intrigue and to their jealousies! Also, Marie's chatter nearly made me late—today was the opening of the Salon! However, as it turned out, I was fortunate. The President of the Jury himself, the Count of Morny, was the first person I met and he took me by the arm and recounted how the day before, his half brother, the Emperor, had gone through all the galleries never once stopping, never once glancing at the paintings, until he arrived at the last gallery—the least important gallery, the gallery filled with the most mediocre paintings—and then the Emperor, out of duty, the count supposes, stopped in front of a hideous picture of the Alps—the Alps looking exactly like a stack of bread loaves!—and after staring at it for a good five minutes, the Emperor turned to the poor count and said: "The painter should have indicated the relative heights." I could hardly contain myself and laughed until tears streamed down my cheeks! Rain was falling when finally I left the exhibition to go to supper and of course in my haste I had forgotten to bring an umbrella but, as luck would have it, a gentleman smoking a foul-smelling cigar was standing at the door and he offered me his.

From Paraguay, Franco had brought with him crates of oranges and tobacco. On board ship, the oranges started to rot, the sailors squeezed them and drank the juice; the tobacco fared better. The tobacco (the Paraguayan leaves are allowed to mature on the stem and, as a result, contain more nicotine) beat out the Cuban entry and was awarded a first-class medal at the Paris Exhibition; the citation read, *Very good collection of leaves, especially suitable for cigars.* In addition to the tobacco, Franco had brought dozens of ponchos as gifts; the ponchos were made from a vegetable silk called *samahu* whose softness was much

admired. After he followed Ella home, he had one of the ponchos delivered to her house on rue du Bac with his card.

Pierre, Ella's valet de chambre, put Francisco Solano Lopez's card on top of the other cards on the silver tray on the table in the front hall of the house on rue du Bac; then he gave the package with the poncho in it to Marie, the maid. The poncho was badly wrapped in brown paper and, curious, Marie opened it. Also, the package smelled strange. Like tea. The color of red soil, the poncho, although soft and no doubt warm, did not look like the clothes Ella usually wore—her fur stole, her velvet cloaks and paisley cashmere shawls. Holding the poncho in her arms, Marie shivered a little and, glancing out the window, noticed that it had begun to rain, a slight drizzle. *God knows, she'll never miss it, and anyway she owes me a month's salary,* Marie said to herself as, without another thought, she slipped the poncho over her head and went out the front door to do her errands.

Everywhere he went—to the home of the Errazu sisters, who, like him, were wealthy South Americans, to the home of Countess Walewska, an Italian whose husband was Polish, to the Duchess of Persigny, married to Napoleon III's minister of the interior, to the Duchess of Malakoff, to the Marchioness Chasseloup-Laubat, a Creole whose skin was even darker than his, or to the Maréchale Canrobert, who had a large goiter on her neck—Franco took along his retinue of servants and his private Paraguayan band. Invariably, halfway through the reception, his mouth full of champagne and sticky petits fours, Franco motioned them to play, and, invariably too, it took the assembled guests a moment to realize that the tune the hapless Paraguayan band was playing on their wooden harps was "La Marseillaise."

Not only did Franco astonish French society, he impressed them with his intellect. He had read Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and could discuss the difference between "true" law and "actual" law; he had

gone up in Monsieur Nadar's giant balloon, which carried a complete developing laboratory, and could discourse on photography; still better he was an accomplished and graceful dancer. *Un, deux, trois,* he waltzed the Errazu sisters around the ballroom, *un, deux, trois,* he swung the Countess Walewska in a mazurka, then whirled the Marchioness Chasseloup-Laubat around the room in an energetic polka.

Messy, messy bang, messy bang—the only French words Justo José, one of the musicians in Franco's band, had learned, he repeated. He hated France. Always cold, the food uneatable, and the people were pale and unfriendly. Worse still, there was no *yerba maté*. At home, he drank fifteen to twenty gourds a day, the silver straw never far from his mouth. The time he tried the French drink, a dark red substance the color of blood, he was sick to his stomach and the next day he felt worse—worse than when, as a boy, he was kicked in the head by the neighbor's old burro who was blind in one eye. Another thing that bothered Justo José was the women. He had gone with one, a little blond—he had never been with a woman whose hair was the color of a yellow parakeet—he could not say her name although she made him repeat it—*Eeyon*. She had taken him up several flights of stairs to the top floor of a building; her room had a chair and a bed and a basin in it, and the first thing she did was make him wash his member in the basin, then she had lain on the bed with all her clothes on, her legs spread, and during the entire act she never moved or made a sound. Afterward, she asked him for ten francs—twice the amount they agreed on, he had held up the fingers of one hand. When he tried to leave, she stood by the door and screamed and Justo José screamed back at her: *Puta, puta,* but, in the end, he gave her the extra five francs.

At supper in Princess Mathilde Bonaparte's house on the rue de Courcelles, Ella drank too much champagne and ate too many oysters. The room was filled with Russians, Poles, Italians and filled with the noise of

silver knives and forks striking china plates, the noise of glasses clinking and being refilled, and of everyone talking too loudly and at once in different languages. The room too, with its velvet drapes, heavy crystal chandelier and arrangement of sweet-smelling lilies, felt airless and hot. Next to Ella, Jules de Goncourt was repeating the latest Paris gossip and Ella only half listened as names floated by her—the Countess of Castiglione, the Count Cavour, Monsieur Viollet-le-Duc, the Duchess of Alba, Monsieur Balzac, Monsieur Mérimée. On her other side, Adolphe de Custine was repeating to her what the Emperor had told the Count of Morny when he saw the painting of the Alps. But Adolphe de Custine was easy and charming and Ella could not help think it was a pity that he preferred young boys. Mostly during the meal, Ella kept glancing toward the dining room door. Earlier Dimitri had sworn that he would come and join her for supper but he never did. By the time she was ready to go home, Ella had both a headache and a stomachache.

"*Ma chère,* are you not feeling well?" Princess Mathilde had asked her as she kissed Ella good night.

With his unlimited bank account, Franco bought whatever took his fancy—snuffboxes, ormolu clocks and silver candlesticks, fine clothes and silk slippers, thoroughbred horses, carriages, and, more important, he bought arms and munitions (already, in England, he had negotiated a long-term contract with the Blyth Brothers, London's leading arms merchant, for the construction of an arsenal in Asunción). Also, Franco bribed officials, shopkeepers, theater attendants. When a week went by and Franco still had not heard from Ella, he went again to her house on rue du Bac. This time, he gave Pierre, the valet de chambre, ten francs to make sure that Ella received his card.

19 MARCH 1854

Last night Dimitri informed me that in a few days he will be leaving for the Crimean front to join Prince Menschikov who he

claims is his cousin (if I listened to him, Dimitri is related to all the Russian nobility including the Czar and Czarina!) *[Ella wrote]*. Still, I cannot believe it. Why? oh, why? I asked him. I tried to reason with him but that proved to be useless. I even got down on my knees, begging and pleading him to stay. All to no avail. Nothing I said or did could dissuade him. Dimitri is determined. He feels honor-bound, he says, to fight for his country. The truth is, I think, that Dimitri is bored with Paris. And bored with me. I know him well. Dimitri is the sort of man who needs constant challenge and excitement. I imagine he will find it quick enough in Crimea if one is to believe the most recent battle reports. How many dead thus far did Princess Mathilde say? Fifteen hundred? Fifteen thousand? She should know, she is in constant touch with her cousin, the Czar. But numbers mean nothing to me. When Dimitri tried to put his arms around me to comfort me, he even attempted to kiss me, I would not let him. Instead, in my distress, I reached up and scratched his face. My beloved's handsome face! I drew a little of his blood, which caused Dimitri to turn pale and push me away. Then—oh, I cannot bear to recall Dimitri's terrible words!—he called me a common whore, and without another word or glance, he left the room. I ran after him, I said how I was sorry, I said how I was out of my mind with grief and did not mean to harm him, but it was too late. I heard the front door close. Oh, what have I done? Damn Dimitri's cold heart and his hot blood. I love him.

A woman stood on the corner of rue du Bac and Boulevard Raspail—half her face was missing. Marie crossed to the other side of the street to avoid her. Still, the woman spotted her. "*Vieille conne!*" she screamed. With her fingers, Marie made a sign to ward off the evil eye. Farther down the street, she stopped at a fruit stand. She knew the fruit merchant, a big, good-natured man.

"So," he teased Marie, "what is Mademoiselle going to buy from me

today? Some strawberries, perhaps?" The fruit merchant held up a basket filled with the fragrant little *fraises des bois,* which were not yet in season in Paris.

Marie shook her head but she leaned down to smell the strawberries. "Where do they come from? The Americas?

"How much?" she also asked.

"Too much," she said before the fruit merchant had time to reply.

He laughed and offered the basket to another customer. While his back was turned to weigh the *fraises des bois*, Marie slipped an orange underneath her poncho and quickly walked away.

Marie liked the fruit merchant. He seemed like a solid and generous man; he would not be the kind of husband who would make her account for every penny she spent or every minute of her day. Also she could imagine herself in bed wrapped in his big arms and how he would smell of plum or peach or pear—depending on the season. Marie smiled to herself, in the coming months she was determined to pursue the man.

Turning around, the fruit merchant right away saw that an orange was missing from the neat mound and he knew of course. He too smiled and determined that the next time he saw her he would make Marie pay for the fruit. Pay him with a kiss, pay him with perhaps more.

When Franco saw Ella again, she was wearing a blue silk gown that matched her eyes. The dress was cut low and showed off the almost translucent whiteness of her skin. She was leaning against a young man's arm and standing with a group of people who were laughing and talking. Each time Ella finished speaking, she ran her pointed little tongue over her lips to wet them. The occasion was a reception at the Tuileries and Franco, busy staring at Ella, nearly missed his much anticipated and one chance to meet Napoleon III.

Although nearly spring, it was snowing by the time Franco left the Tuileries and was walking back to his lodgings; the city streets were cov-

ered in a luminous white film. Snow was strange to Franco and he had no idea that it was not seasonal. Tilting his head back to the sky, Franco stuck out his tongue and let the snowflakes fall and melt on it.

22 March 1854

Am I imagining this or is the man following me? I see him everywhere—at the Louvre, in the Bois de Boulogne, the other day at the Tuileries. When he speaks French, no one understands him. Worse when he speaks English. He wears the most outlandish costumes—and the way he walks in his fancy high-heeled boots as if he were not used to wearing shoes. But there is something curious about him as well, he seems oblivious of what people think, he seems not to notice they are making fun of him. Perhaps he does not care. Princess Mathilde says he is American and the Americas, she says, are full of gold. One only needs to dig in the ground a little. Gold and silver. How I wish I could get my hands on just a bit of it! I had to put Marie off for the third time by telling her I would pay her next week for certain. (How?) This morning when she was brushing my hair she was brushing it so hard I swear she meant to pull it all out. Much, much worse—a hundred, a thousand times worse—Dimitri leaves tomorrow. I weep for him already. My handsome, unreliable Dimitri! Please, please, I'll do anything, Dimitri, stay—

"Ella, my love, open the door."

On the day he left for the Crimean front, Dimitri had knocked repeatedly on Ella's bedroom door.

"Ella, my darling, I am leaving now. I've come to say good-bye," he continued, knocking louder, harder. "Please, Ella, one little kiss good-bye. One little kiss for good luck," he added.

Too proud to beg and too vain to let him see her with her eyes

swollen and red, Ella was lying on her bed, a pillow over her head, and she barely heard Dimitri's entreaties.

In the end, Dimitri had gone; his face expressionless, Pierre, the valet de chambre, had opened the front door for him.

Weeping, Ella stayed locked up in her bedroom for three days. When Marie, the maid, knocked, she yelled at her to go away. When Marie left trays outside her door, Ella threw the food on the floor. When finally Ella emerged from her room, she had lost two kilos and had resolved never again to lose her heart or a man.

But, at heart, Ella was a gambler. As a child in Ireland, she loved playing games. Her favorite was called Wanderers in the Wilderness, a board game that consisted of maps of exotic countries with numbered tracks printed on them. Each player had to move his marker in correspondence with the throw of the dice, and each number represented a site. Ella could still remember how vividly and alarmingly the sites on the map of South America were described:

Site 10—Look at the large creature swimming up the river! It is a water-serpent, 40 feet long at least.

Site 17—What cry was that? So much like a man. O! there is an opossum with a crab he has jerked out of the water, pinching his tail in self-defense.

Site 22—Hark at the horrid sounds which proceed from the forest! It is the death roar of the Jaguar which an immense Boa-Constrictor is in the act of crushing to a jelly.

Site 66 was more dangerous still:

I see the track of CAYMEN *in the mud. Ah! there is one. He plunges in the stream with an unhappy negro whom he has surprised in his tremendous jaws. Now the shrieks of his struggling victim are stifled beneath the waves.*

In Paris, games were fashionable; at parties, Ella often had to wear a mask. Now her favorite game was one in which each person was given a piece of paper with half a saying written on it: *L'amour est l'histoire de la vie des femmes* and the object of the game was to find the person who had the piece of paper with the rest of the saying on it that matched hers: *C'est un épisode dans celle des hommes.*

How she finally met Franco.

On his way to Ella's house, Franco was holding a large bouquet of roses when he saw a young woman on rue du Bac wearing the poncho made from *samahu* that he had sent Ella.

"But Mademoiselle—" Franco put out his hand to stop her—he was still holding the bouquet of roses—and the young woman reached up and took the bouquet. Franco started to protest—to tell the young woman that the poncho and the roses were not for her—instead he started to laugh—he understood that Ella was worth more.

The young woman turned and ran.

C'est un fou!

When Ella next went to the Bois de Boulogne, the gray mare she rode was gone. Furious, she waved her whip at the groom.

"You know perfectly well I always ride her," she shouted at him. "I have hired her for the season and just because I have been indisposed for a few days, you take advantage of me."

"I'm sorry, Madame, but Madame has not paid us and—" the groom tried to explain.

"Of course I will pay you!" Ella's voice was shrill. "But meantime I don't want anyone else riding her—is that understood? She is a sweet-tempered young horse and a bad rider could do her a lot of damage." Ella was close to tears. "Who did you say took her out?"

The groom shrugged. "A foreign gentleman."

"A foreign gentleman! You fool! No doubt you will tell me an American who is used to riding in the desert and chasing after cattle and has no idea how to ride a thoroughbred. Oh, how stupid, how unjust, how, how—"

Ella began to cry.

Franco had hired out the gray mare. He had bribed the groom. He trotted back to the stables, posting lightly, his reins loose and easy; he was not wearing his heavy silver spurs. The mare looked calm; she was not sweating or nervously bobbing her head up and down. "What a nice horse," Franco said, dismounting. "I think I'll buy her."

"My horse—" Ella tried to speak.

"Ah, your horse." Smiling, Franco turned to the groom. "Go ask your employer how much he will sell this horse for?"

Right away, the owner of the stables came out and named a price, a price higher than the mare was worth, and, without another word, Franco counted out the money and gave it to him. Then taking the mare's reins from the groom, he handed them to Ella.

Naked, Franco looked better than he did dressed. His big-barreled, hairy chest and his short arms and legs were strong and powerful; the rest of his skin dark and smooth. Also, he seemed more at ease. He was graceful in his movements and he was not self-conscious about his body; right away, too, without Ella having to move or touch him, he was aroused. And, it was clear too that Franco did not trouble himself greatly over his affairs with women. He was used to women. They were like bread or water for Franco. Not special but necessary. The thought of it, for a reason Ella did not try to understand, was a relief to her. It also made it easier.

Afterward, Ella did not toss and turn and worry about how to pay the rent, the servants, pay for her dresses; she slept better than she had in months. In the morning when she woke up, Franco was next to her. He was snoring lightly; his hand lay on top of one of Ella's breasts as if the breast belonged to him. It was Sunday and outside Ella heard a strange

noise. A kind of music. Still dozing she listened to it for a while, then, quietly, without disturbing him, she removed Franco's hand and got out of bed. A small crowd had gathered in the street outside her house; the crowd was listening to Franco's Paraguayan band. This time the band was playing a native tune on their wooden harps and the music sounded both shrill and sweet.

A man in the band was singing:

Tovena Tupa~tachepytyvo~
ha'emi hag~ua che py'arasy,
ymaiteguivema an~andu
heta ara nachmongevei

Standing at the window, Ella listened.

Later, when Marie made up the bed, the sheets were covered with dark hairs. If she had not already known, Marie would have said a dog or an animal with fur had slept in Ella's bed. But Marie kept her mouth shut; she had been paid finally.

That spring Paris had never seemed more beautiful; the chestnut trees that bordered the boulevards and avenues were in full white bloom; from the flower stalls along the banks of the Seine the scent of lilacs and lilies of the valley filled the air. In the parks, elegant ladies wearing huge crinolines—the latest fashion—under their dresses strolled arm in arm with handsome young men. No word from Dimitri but for once Ella was not troubled. She was ready for a change. "'Europe's decrepitude is increasing; everything here is the same, everything repeats itself,'" Ella told her friend, Princess Mathilde—she was quoting Lord Byron for more authority. "'There, the people are as fresh as their New World, and as violent as their earthquakes.'"

Even while her music teacher played a new sonata on the piano, Ella, restless, fingered the gold earrings Franco had given her and tried to conceal a yawn.

Although never in his wildest dreams—and Justo José often dreamt strange dreams like the one where he was swimming in the ocean while, in fact, in his whole life Justo José had never stepped foot in any water, even bathwater, that reached above his knees—would he say this out loud nor did he dare even think it in case the woman Ella Lynch, like the woman in his village who was thought to be a witch, could read his thoughts, nevertheless she with her blond hair the same color as a yellow parakeet reminded Justo José of the woman whose name he could not pronounce properly—*Eeyon*—whom he had had to give the ten francs to.

Worse, the woman wanted the band to learn foreign tunes: tunes by composers Justo José had never heard of and whose names he was never able to say: Stross, Bisay and Waldtoofil.

Again and again Franco told Ella how, when he got home, he would transform Paraguay into a country exactly like France. "I will build an opera house, a library, a theater, wide avenues with paved streets, parks with tall trees. In addition," he said, "I will make Paraguay the most important, the most powerful country in all of South America.

"One day, you'll see, my dear," Franco continued, "I, Francisco Solano Lopez, will be so well-known, so popular, so celebrated and famous that I will be able to do anything I want."

"Anything?" Ella started to laugh. She was remembering how, according to Jules de Goncourt, Monsieur Balzac had wished for the same thing, only he had been more specific.

"You don't believe me!" Frowning, Franco raised his voice.

Monsieur Balzac had said that he wanted to be so well-known, so

popular, so celebrated and famous that it would permit him to break wind in society and society would think it the most natural thing.

Still laughing, Ella went over and kissed Franco.

"Of course, I believe you, *chéri*."

26 September 1854

In any event if I am not happy there I can always come back to Paris. It is not "good-bye," it is merely *"au revoir!"*