The Age of Pain: Mournful pages

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THE AGE OF PAIN

Mournful pages

ESTEBAN LÓPEZ GIMÉNEZ

Translated by R. Kelly Washbourne

During the change of nationality, one afternoon at three, thirteen U.S. Marines, along with Dr. Santiago Veve, occupied the village of Fajardo. Veve told them to go down to the village, take down the Spanish flag that flew at the Casa Alcaldía, and run up the Stars and Stripes.

It is said that the invited marine did not want to do so, for those were not his orders, but he gave in at the doctor's insistence, with the assurance that all the neighbors wanted him to do it and, moreover, that there was no risk, since the Spaniards had left us.

I was supremely vexed, since I had never been a sympathizer, and I was wholeheartedly sorry to change nationality. Because I loved Spain, I was not a separatist, and although I hated the governments of Spain here, I loved my mother country; my Latin American race; my Roman Catholic religion; my rich language, in which I have thought and have commended myself to God, asking him for the salvation of my soul and of my poor native land.

From the balcony of my house I bore witness to the entrance of the thirteen . . . marines, and an indiscreet tear burned my cheeks (which were red with shame) on seeing that so few people were taking possession of Fajardo.

I also witnessed the zeal of some sons of Fajardo, who cheered the gringos, the continental Americans, without knowing them or knowing if they would treat us better or worse than those who were leaving us. (They would likewise have applauded the Zulus.) Today many are probably red-faced over their premature joy that dismal afternoon! Ramón Latorre was one of the most enthusiastic.

They called me from the mayor's office three times on Dr. Veve's orders to report for duty to the new authorities. I did not want to go. My wife, fearful that my refusal would bring me to some harm, begged me to go, and so I did, to please her.

When I arrived, I went to Dr. Veve, my friend and companion, with whom I had gone around the entire previous day visiting the Red Cross hospital and other places where the stretchers would be placed, and said to him, "Here I am. Introduce me to the commodore."

Fajardo, Puerto Rico, at the end of the nineteenth century

"The only commodore here is me, a representative of the American nation," he told me most emphatically.

"My good sir," I said to him, and stood to one side, astonished at the confusion, the uproar, the comings and goings, shouts, and beer drinking.

He had sent my daughters to the country with the families of Mssrs. Barlt and Delarisse, fearful that some disturbance would arise among the villagers. Many other families had also left the village.

9

After the invaders had made for their boats, Dr. Veve was left as governor of Fajardo, acting on behalf of the president of the United States. He began to issue orders, naming field officers and soldiers for the defense of the population. The weapons consisted of the thirteen rifles that the marines had left behind—no one knew how to work them, since they were of modern manufacture—as well as some firearms picked up at the homes of several Spaniards and Spanish sympathizers and some machetes, without handles or sharp blades, that had been taken from stores.

Because I loved Spain, I was not a separatist, and although I hated the governments of Spain here, I loved my mother country.

My son Hilario joined up with Dr. Veve, who had called him to offer him protection. He named him head of a guerrilla band. The theater was fitted out as a barracks.

Around 8 P.M. the news went around that spies had told the Spanish troops in Carolina what had been carried out by the gringos and Dr. Veve. The latter sent an emissary to the boats moored in the harbor, apprising them of what had happened and asking them to send troops to defend the village if the Spaniards came.

The commander of one of the ships replied that he had no troops to send and that he would send word to Ponce to request them from General Miles.

Afterward it was discovered that the general had answered that he would not send troops, that the marines had strayed from the earlier plan, and that since they were to blame, they should fix the harm done. When the general's reply was made known to the people—that there were no troops to send on land—panic ensued that would have been laughable if the situation had allowed. There were some very comical scenes. Many who had claimed before that they could eat the Spaniards alive proved not to have the stomach for it. Another: at 10 P.M. the whistle on one of the ships blew so ominously that it sounded like the alarm "Every man for himself."

I did not lose my peace of mind. I took control of the situation, understanding that we had to prepare ourselves presently to free ourselves from a commotion caused by upset people in the village and, later, from a clash between the Spanish troops and those on board. I understood the hazard the villagers faced if the Spanish troops came and wanted to take revenge on their neighbors by plundering them.

I decided to close my house up tight and head out to the Hacienda San José to meet with my daughters, bringing my wife and two small children and getting my son Hilario's wife and children out as well.

At the village limits, on the Hatillo bridge, Evangelista Calderón and another man were on watch. The former, more dead than alive, pointed his gun at us and ordered us to halt. Afraid that, in his state of excitement, he would pull the trigger, I gave a shout to see if he recognized me, whereupon he lowered the weapon and let us pass. I always thought that his overzealousness was a result either of nerves or of alcoholic vapors on the brain.

The next afternoon the Spanish troops arrived, headed for the town hall, lowered the American flag, . . . and ran up the Spanish one to thunderous cheers that were returned by the crowd, in which stood every last person who hours before had cheered those from the mainland. How wretched these people were! That defeat of the American troops, the only one recorded in the invasion, was due, as has been made manifest, to the marine officer's having departed from the plan devised by his government and yielding to Dr. Veve's requests. Fortunately for Fajardo, some officers and military companies that had been quartered here and knew us came along with the troops, since those from the Patria battalion had resolved to make Fajardo pay for their disloyalty by sacking and razing it. Nevertheless, some outrages were committed, and because the field captains and officials had been fully briefed, they did not allow reprisals. The man heading the expedition, Colonel Pino, a man of experience and sound judgment and every inch a gentleman, spared the village's neighbors from mourning.

When I found out in San José that the Spaniards were in the village, I considered that my duty impelled me to report to the captain and offer my services as president of the Red Cross and as staff doctor, but I balked on account of the idea that I might be suspect to the Spaniards, because my oldest son was a comrade-in-arms with Dr. Veve against Spain; my son-in-law Don Enrique Bird, likewise; and my son Joaquín, the government telegrapher, could not follow the troops in their withdrawal, as per the orders from above.

My fears, as one can see, were justified, the more so because I did not know what intentions they might have, potentially falling prey to attack under those critical and abnormal circumstances.

The same priest from Fajardo, Father Vicente García, whom I asked for counsel, told me that it would be best to be outside the village when the troops arrived, since we did not have it stamped on our foreheads whether we were loyal or not and it would be natural for them to be angry, thirsting for revenge, when they made it there; he could speak of what was happening in the war, since he had been with the Carlists in Spain when they had fought with the government troops.

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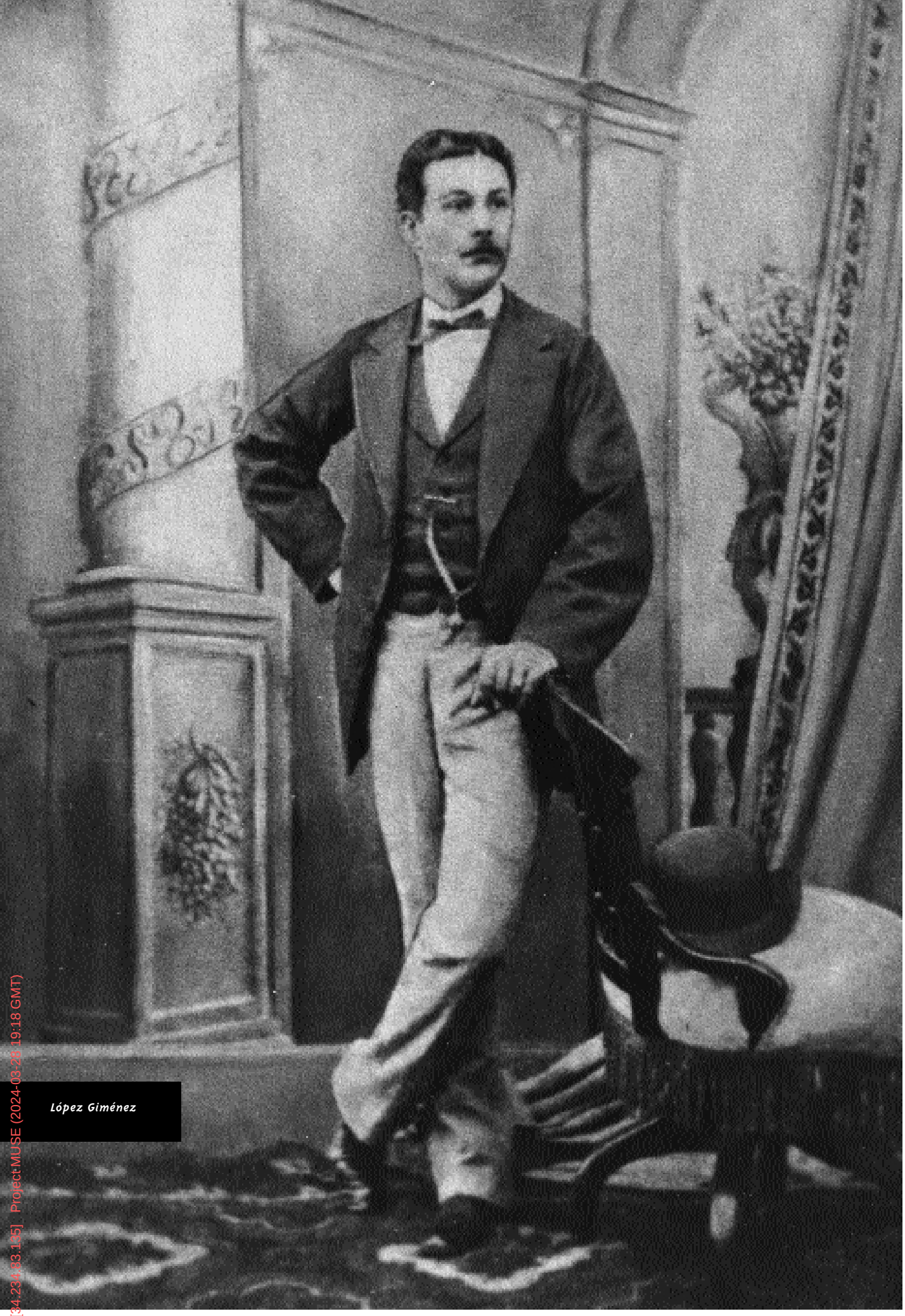
In spite of everything, since I had taken my family to safety, I resolved to discharge my duty, and to that end I told my wife that I had decided to report to Mr. Pino and that I would sooner be a victim of my obligations than have the reputation of a traitor and a coward.

And so, commending myself to Our Lady of Carmen and taking leave of my wife, I left at dawn for the village.

When I reached Hatillo, I was struck to see so many troops everywhere. There were sentries all over, ordering all who passed to halt. The houses were closed up, and everything had a forlorn and dismal air about it. One felt at once horror and sorrow.

Joaquín López Cruz, son of López Giménez and telegrapher in Fajardo



López Giménez

Because I was in my Red Cross uniform and said that I was going to report to Colonel Pino, the sentries gave me free passage. In the vestibule of the church I saw several officers and soldiers making coffee, and I went up to them, happily recognizing some of them, who in better days had been my partners at cards.

They greeted me quite coldly, standing on ceremony. They made some cutting remarks about the Puerto Ricans' patriotism.

Despite being alone among so many, I was roused to fury by this injustice. I spoke forcefully, did an about-face, and joined, a short distance away in the square, Commander Armando, who welcomed me courteously and introduced me to Colonel Pino.

I was in agony. I recalled episodes I had read in which, at the beginning of the war with Cuba, they had caught the fathers of insurgent roughnecks and mercilessly slashed them for not surrendering their sons. I thought, "How can I keep these people from venting their fury on me, the father of insurgents, and demanding that I write my son and tell him to come so I can turn him in?" At other times I would say to myself, "If they're going to kill me, who can save me; who can even explain the situation? They'll say I was insubordinate, or some such thing, and leave my family without the least recourse!"

This was my mental state on finding myself alone amid eight hundred or a thousand soldiers, some furious because of the marches they had been forced to endure and others because of Dr. Veve and the gringos' lowering of the flag. Thus I reported to the colonel to offer him my services. The first thing he told me was thank God he saw before him a respectable person from Fajardo.

Commander Armando was my friend; he knew me, and we had given mutual demonstrations of fellow feeling in the days when he had commanded the troops detached here.

Owing to that and to the fact that the colonel was a man of sound judgment, I did not have to suffer any unpleasantness.

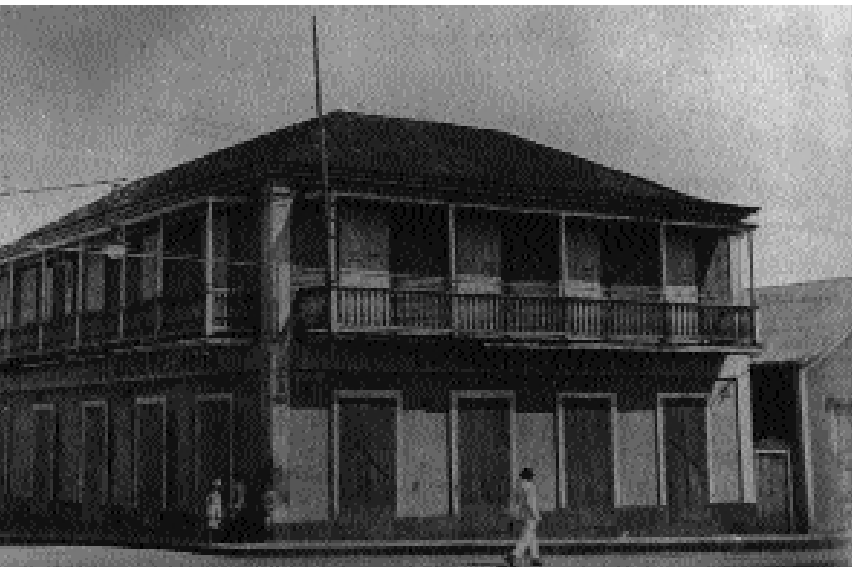
After the preliminary formalities, I asked him where I could be posted, and he told me to meet with my associate, who was in the widow Cerra's house.

I thought to ask him if they had brought their own doctor, and he answered, somewhat bitterly, "We were coming to a nation of insurgents. Don't you suppose we'd bring our own doctor?" To which I said I was not an insurgent and the proof was that I was at my post, ready to discharge my duties.

In the widow Cerra's house I asked to be announced to the expedition's doctor and was sent to the dining room, for he was there. In fact, the doctor and several U.S. officers were having coffee; I presented myself to the doctor, and he introduced me to the rest. Among them was a black-bearded captain who, on hearing my surname, said to me, "López, do you have an insurgent son?" "No, sir," I replied. "I have a son who has left me and followed Dr. Veve, who called on him to join him." At this point the gentlemen knew everything; I became certain of that while I was with them. Their spite was mainly aimed at Dr. Veve and the mayor, Don C. Andreu. If they found them, they would shoot them.

I gave a shout to see if he recognized me, whereupon he lowered the weapon and let us pass. I always thought that his overzealousness was a result either of nerves or of alcoholic vapors on the brain.

They spoke of horrors and told me how the "brave" men who had lowered the Spanish flag had not expected them; how they were a bunch of wretched cowards who had fled after committing treason and had embarked with the gringos, who were as cowardly as they. A month would not suffice to write down everything they subjected my ears to. They told me that we had all fled from the village. I told him that they had found it deserted because we had anticipated a



Casa Alcaldía [mayor's house], Fajardo, where López Giménez saw the flag of Spain replaced with that of the United States, and vice versa

clash between the Spanish troops and the Americans and, fearful that our families might come to harm, had evacuated them.

Once there, the Spaniards had opened fire from the ships, the shells passing over the village houses.

One of the officials said, "The situation is this: from shipboard they have seen the guerrilla forces making their way along the beach, and they have bombarded them." Another added, "But they aim quite high"; a third, laughing, said, "Why don't they disembark with their doctor and their mayor? It would make our day." The black-bearded captain told me, "You have a son who's a telegrapher, who refused to follow the troops as ordered. You know, López, all the evidence points against you." Then, I confess, I thought that the moment of truth was at hand for me. I found myself at a loss, but again I invoked Our Lady of Carmen, and answered the captain courageously: "Sir, that is indeed the case, but I think that when someone has done what I have done, when he might have chosen not to, it is because his conscience does not reproach him, and he who has a clear conscience, because he has fulfilled his obligations, fears not and goes where those obligations summon him."

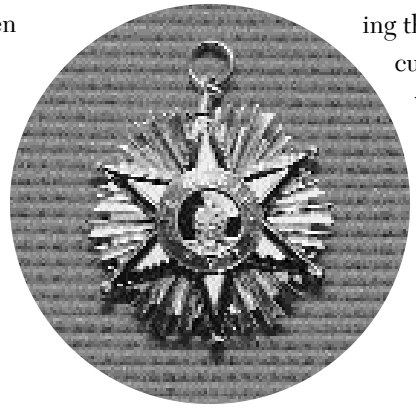
My having said this sincerely probably convinced that gentleman that I was no traitor, and then and there he changed his tune: "Actually, we've been misinformed. You haven't betrayed Spain. You are among the few loyal ones."

"I'm saved," I said to myself. Turning to the doctor, I remarked, "Doctor, where do you wish to post me among the stretchers and other equipment for attending to the wounded?"

"Go to the hospital until further notice." Immediately I mounted a horse and hastened there, where I met many soldiers who were old acquaintances, having been stationed in Fajardo for two years. Since I had treated them well and was their doctor, they gave me a hero's welcome and cheered me: "Nothing will happen to you or your family, Don Esteban; many scoundrels have come with the troops, and those of the Patria battalion are awaiting the moment of the sacking, but heaven forbid any should make it to your house. As for other houses, we aren't answerable."

I asked them what they meant by a "sacking," and they told me that in war, a half hour to an hour of sacking was conceded to the troops to gather for themselves what they needed, especially from disloyal nations. This did not sit right with me, and I began to ask them to refrain from it; those who were not involved should not be made to pay the price on account of a few fools. I was unwell, emotionally spent, and frightened, so this bit of information sank me to new depths.

Meanwhile the bullets were whizzing over the hospital, making eerie whistling sounds. I had to order the Red Cross flag with the Spanish streamer lowered, reckoning that, under the circumstances, they would fire at it.



Medal given by Queen Elizabeth II to López Giménez for his work as a doctor during the Puerto Rican smallpox epidemic of 1889

Don Carlos Just and Don Jesús Martínez

Ysabel de la Cruz

"Chucho" came to keep me company. Seeing me in such bad shape, they brought me coffee and cheered me up greatly, believing that my spirits were low because I had gotten wind of the rumor—which I had not—that my son Hilario had been killed the previous night by grenade shrapnel.

My heart condition since the invasion has improved by leaps and bounds.

My daughter Isabel, expecting her third child, was with her little ones in the lighthouse, where they had taken shelter along with many other families from Fajardo. The lighthouse was overrun with Americans.

Although I was unaware that my daughter and grandchildren were there, on the night the Spanish troops were set to attack it some secret intuition shook me, and I suffered horribly at every cannon blast—and there were more than two hundred of them, which could be heard clearly in San José.

What a night!

9

When it was known that General Miles had answered those who had requested of him troops to defend Fajardo, Dr. Veve and his staff boarded the *Amphitrite*, telling the revolutionaries to hide and it was every man for himself.

The doctor went to the hospital at twelve in the morning and told me, "There'll be no change; tomorrow we're off; go with your family to the country, and, if necessary, I'll keep you posted. Look after yourself, for you're suffering. You have nothing to fear." Before long I was at my family's side.

En route two bullets passed over me, falling beyond Don Antonio Casas's house in the Florencio neighborhood.

I do not want to fail to record a comic episode that happened to me on that raid. Since I was dressed in a Red Cross uniform, they saw me from the Hacienda San Pedro and mistook me for a Civil Guard officer. Everyone hid. Don Cayetano Rivera assured me at the time that Don Bernardo Méndez wound up under Don Pedro Calderón's bed. Méndez himself confirmed it for me later.

When I reached San José, everyone welcomed me as if seeing risen one who had been thought dead. My poor spouse confessed to me, greatly aggrieved, that when she had said good-bye to me, she had thought she would never see me again.

Around 3 P.M. my manservant, whom I had left to look after my house, appeared on

Fajardo's lighthouse, 1898

behalf of Colonel Pino, who had told him to deliver Joaquín, or else he would send for him with soldiers.

We had a dreadful moment, but soon I made up my mind. "Go," I said to him. "Just follow orders. Go, and Godspeed."

The colonel wanted him to set up a telegraphic device with which to communicate with the governor.

He did so and advised the colonel. The latter, meeting with his officers, told them to adjourn, for he had to speak with General Macías. Once in the room with the device, Joaquín said, "Colonel, my situation is critical: my brother is with the Americans; I have not followed the orders to follow the troops on account of illness. If you are not persuaded that you should trust me, you may replace me with another from your retinue."

Mr. Pino, who seemed to like this declaration, told him to have a seat; he was satisfied with his gentlemanliness and had every faith in him. The expedition's doctor went to the hospital and was quite satisfied with the order that reigned there, as well as with how well stocked everything was. He greatly praised the surgical storehouse and the resources Fajardo had at its disposal for assisting and aiding the wounded.

I had, among other things, my two amputation cases, an old portable one and a modern one, with instruments for resections and bullet extractions.

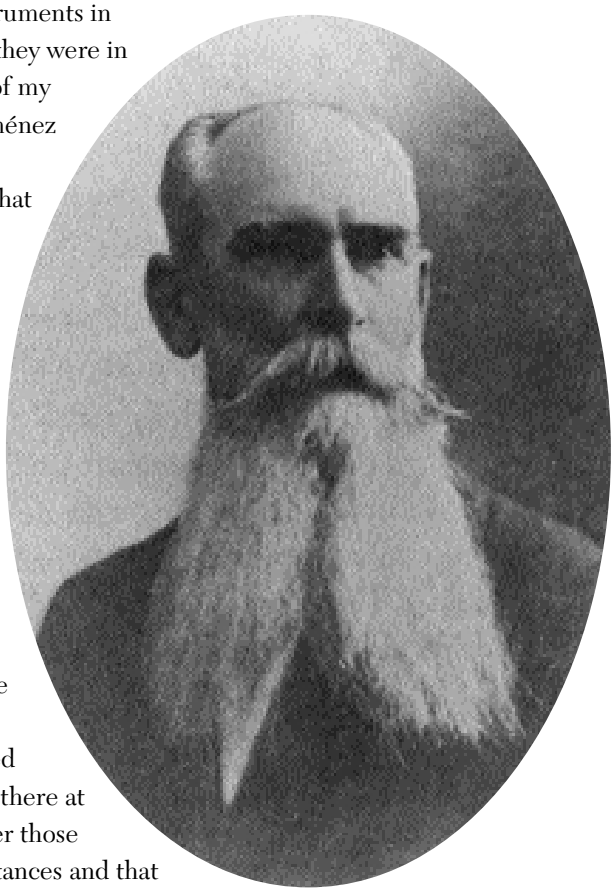
After he had left, he sent an orderly to tell the medical assistant, Reboyo, to send him the amputation case. Reboyo sent him the old one, but a short while later the orderly returned to say that the doctor needed not that one but the new one. Reboyo told him, in my defense, that the new one belonged neither to the town hall nor to the hospital but to me. Even so, the orderly said, he should send it, and pressed him for it so firmly that the assistant finally relinquished it. By the next day the troops had already left, and I went to the hospital to tell Reboyo what had transpired.

I went to Armando and Colonel Pino immediately to tell them of these events. After four or six days the colonel telegraphed me to pick up my instruments in Caguas, where they were in the possession of my nephew, Dr. Jiménez Cruz.

It seems that the doctor had tried to make off with a souvenir, but I had not known what he was up to. I had only wanted not to lose the new case.

Colonel Pino granted me a certificate in which he verified that I had been there at his service under those critical circumstances and that I had been at my post when the American ships anchored in the harbor had bombarded the village.

To recount one by one the consequences of Dr. Veve's imprudence and rashness, the dangers we faced with our families and the people of Fajardo, would be an arduous task.



Santiago Veve Calzada, who invited thirteen marines to take over Fajardo on 5 August 1898

I was in agony. I recalled episodes I had read in which, at the beginning of the war with Cuba, they had caught the fathers of insurgent roughnecks and mercilessly slashed them for not surrendering their sons.

Since that time my afflictions have worsened, my nervous system lies in ruins, and never again shall I be the man I once was.

May God forgive him as I have truly forgiven him. a