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The Inquisition in Porto Rico

Fernando Tarrida del Mármol

July-Sept 1897

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About three months ago fifty patriots issued a cry for independence in Yauco. The movement failed due to the treason of one of the conspirators, who warned the Spanish authorities.

At present it would not be prudent to name the heroes who are at the head of this movement. But we can affirm that among the 140 prisoners locked up in San Juan, Porto Rico only two were insurgents. The others were arrested simply on suspicion or following anonymous denunciations. What is more, the governor of the island sent missionaries and priests into the countryside who on the pretext of taking confession from the farmers, attempted to learn the secrets of the conspirators. This plan met with no success, for the country people of Porto Rico are no more fanatical than those of Cuba.

Since the aborting of the insurrectionary movement we have had no news from the Lesser Antilles¹ and one would have thought that the Spanish government, as well as the Captain General Sabas Marin, would not defy the civilized world by employing in Porto Rico the same procedures that made Mr.

¹Porto Rico, which belongs to the greater Antilles, is called the lesser Antilles by the Spaniards, in opposition to Cuba, which they call the greater.

Canovas so sadly famous in Barcelona, in Cuba, and in the Philippines. Unfortunately, such was not the case. A letter recently sent to a relative by an American citizen from Porto Rico, Mr. R. Nadal – which the protection of the government in Washington was able to tear from the grips of the executioners – proves that Torquemada still reigns in Spain and in all its colonies.

Here are the main passages of Mr. Nadal's tale:

“On the subject of a discussion of the “drys” and the “wets”² my interlocutor, who I didn't know, angrily responded and called three gendarmes who were nearby. They seized me, tied my arms, and issued the order to march. They took me to the torture place and there, sticking me with the point of their arms, shouted at me: *Componte*.³ One of these henchmen pushed me so hard I fell. The others lifted me with blows with the flat of their sabers and took me before a tribunal composed of a colonel of the Spanish army and three officers of the gendarmerie. They attached me to a post and while beating me and spitting in my face, the colonel called me a coward and troublemaker and cursed me.

“I remained attached to the post without food or drink for 24 hours. From time to time my guards cruelly struck me and ordered me to name the leaders of the conspiracy and the principal enemies of the *mojados* (“wets”).⁴

“Since I couldn't tell what I didn't know, I was hung by a foot near another unfortunate hung by an arm. We were tossed each other with extreme violence. Even though we asked for mercy and gave out horrible cries, our fear only made our exe-

²Names of the two political parties in Porto Rico.

³Imperative form of the verb *componerse* (to compose oneself). The word *componte* has remained and it is under this name that the martyrs currently tortured in Porto Rico designate the series of tortures I am going to describe. By extension, the tortured receive the name of *componteados*. (Note by Nadal)

⁴The conservatives.

cutioners happy. They finally decided to cut the rope, and my companion in torture and I fell unconscious to the floor.

“The next day I was stretched out on a plank and, after wrapping a rope around my body, sticks with steel points were put between my fingers. My fingers were then squeezed together with ribbons, while at the same time they gave me the names of people I didn't know but that I repeated while screaming in pain. It was only then that I was released so I could sign my declarations.

“I was sent to prison and it was there that I became acquainted with my companions in misfortune, all of whom had been mistreated and are still on the hands of the executioners. It is only to my American nationality and the scandal produced by the assassination of Dr. Ruiz that I owe my freedom and my life.

“I am not going to let the issue drop. I intend to make an energetic complaint and I hope that my government and the entire civilized world will protest against the procedures employed by the Spanish government to make the Catholic religion and conservative policies loved.

Yours truly,

R. Nadal

American Citizen.”

Let us hope that punishment will not be delayed and that after Cuba Porto Rico will also want to separate itself from the cruel and bloody metropole.

More than the movement of Yauco, the ferocious repression of the executioners will engender revolt. The unhappy children of Porto Rico will attempt to emancipate themselves by the reason of force, since they are now convinced that with the Canovist government the force of reason cannot be made to prevail.