

“Fight for the Princess”

Brazil was at a crossroads. Republicans and reactionary conservatives dismissed Pedro II as if he were already dead. Their attacks against the constitutional monarchy were directed against the princess imperial and her consort. Isabel was labeled a religious zealot manipulating the weakened emperor to advance a radical religious and political agenda. Gaston was caricatured as a malevolent foreigner pulling his wife’s strings so that through her, he could rule Brazil. Enemies used the nation’s deepest fears and prejudices against them.

Princess Isabel, however, proved to be a formidable opponent. During the abolition crisis she preserved the peace and unity of Brazil, claimed the loyalties of what should have been the natural constituency of the Republican Party, and positioned the constitutional monarchy at the forefront of a powerful progressive movement.¹ As regent and acting head of state she broadened support for the monarchy, ushering in the nation’s greatest economic boom in half a century. Despite decades of threats that abolition would bring financial disaster, it brought unparalleled prosperity. And all her accomplishments had been done under the strict guidelines of constitutional government.

With slavery abolished, immigrants rushed to Brazil in record numbers and overseas investors were more willing than ever before to invest in a slave-free country. Still, reactionary anger against Isabel and the monarchy grew, in part because almost no one believed abolition to be the end of the revolution shaking Brazil. Following her father’s homecoming, Isabel gracefully surrendered the reins of government to him. Her devotion to her father and the constitution guided her, but monarchists were concerned. If Brazil was to be saved from the forces of reaction, the emperor needed to act firmly and decisively; but Pedro II could do neither.

Isabel’s tireless work behind the scenes to help restore her father’s health left little time to defend herself or the government. Supporters and opponents of the monarchy recognized the outcome of the escalating conflict would probably determine the future direction of Brazil. Unable to act on her own, others stepped forward to do the job for her. Joaquim Nabuco framed the context of the struggle. “I must fight for the Princess, who is our Lincoln, as I fought

for abolition.... All of my efforts are bent toward making the monarchy the creator and the protector of the only democracy that we can have in Brazil, that of the people themselves.”²

He was not alone. On December 15, 1888, the *Rio News* reported, “The premier Senator João Alfredo Correia de Oliveira celebrated his birthday on the 12th and was visited by many friends and admirers. Among the visitors was an association of freemen who have adopted the very far from euphonious name of the Black Guard.”³ The guard was one of many groups rallying to support the princess imperial. Like many free blacks, the guard felt a special loyalty toward Isabel, and a strong fear of Republicans and their planter allies.⁴ They feared both groups wanted to legally or economically re-enslave them.⁵ The one public individual they trusted to protect them, and they felt drawn to protect, was Princess Isabel.

José Patrocínio’s newspaper *A Cidade do Rio*, covering the birthday of the prime minister, wrote, “Senator João Alfredo responded agreeably to the spontaneous demonstration, wishing the Black Guard hundredfold growth in order to honor the virtues of the reigning sovereign and Her Imperial Highness, who is the angel of Brazil.”⁶

Police loyal to the monarchy ignored the Black Guard’s anti-Republican activities. Guard members were well trained, highly organized, and Masonic in their rituals and ceremonies. Part of their initiation included the following oath: “By the blood in my veins, by the happiness of my children, by the honor of my mother and the purity of my sisters, and above all by Christ who lives for centuries, I swear to defend the throne of Isabel, the Redeemer.”⁷

The antipathy many felt against the guard was caused in part by their belief that blacks were incapable of orchestrating an effective political opposition movement. *Novidades* reported that the prime minister and princess imperial had secretly organized the Black Guard “to replace the planter class as the main support of the monarchy during the third reign.”⁸ Patrocínio angrily responded, “This affirmation ... is false, very false. Actually, in the capital, there is a group of men that have sworn to defend the Princess, even if it costs them their blood, so that all those who rise behind Republican barricades might beware. This defensive society was not created by the government, but by the heart.”⁹

Verbal fireworks escalated as the Republican’s alliance with recalcitrant slavocrats grew. One Republican newspaper dismissed the disaffected socio-economic groups they once claimed to represent: “The corrupting monarchy always finds, in the uncultured classes of society, the docile instruments for the realization for its caprices.”¹⁰ Poisoned rhetoric and political tensions spilled into the streets as the Black Guard monitored and harassed Republican meetings, especially those attended exclusively by whites.¹¹ In December a black man was beaten for attempting to enter a Republican meeting in Rio de Janeiro. A riot ensued.¹² Police on the scene passively watched as shots were fired, a number of people were wounded, and one Republican was killed.

Violence threatened to spread as the emperor's involvement in the government alternated between periods of lucidity and foggy detachment. Princess Isabel and Correia de Oliveira hid the seriousness of his infirmities from Pedro II and the public.¹³ Isabel worked to keep her father mentally involved, without burdening him with the venomous propaganda of their enemies.

Support for the monarchy, the emperor, and Princess Isabel remained strong despite the fact that no member of the royal family was able to rally or build upon their natural constituency. The emperor's doctor and the prime minister discouraged Isabel from leaving her father or the capital. Empress Theresa remained in poor health, and Pedro continued forbidding his wife to travel without him. Poldie's younger son was away in the navy, and her oldest son increasingly showed signs of the mental instability that would eventually institutionalize him for the rest of his life.

With no one else able to publicly represent the royal family, Gaston reluctantly stepped forward. He wrote his father, "The situation is embarrassing, but it is essential to maintain support for the sainted emperor. Journalist and others spread the most terrible lies about Isabel, things that only a stranger could say against her."¹⁴ In March Gaston undertook a medical relief mission to Santos, where a yellow fever epidemic was raging. When he was not visiting hospitals, consulting with doctors, and distributing needed medical supplies, he tried to gauge public opinion in areas the Republicans claimed as their own.

Posters appeared throughout the city accusing Gaston of "laughing at the misery of the people" and proclaiming that the "third reign" was building itself upon the sufferings of the sick and dying. One Republican broadside proclaimed, "Let the people die without the menace of the monarchy that is worse than the pestilence."¹⁵ Despite attempts to discredit the visit, to the surprise of many Gaston was well received.

The trip proved to be a humanitarian and political success.¹⁶ Gaston wrote his father, "An effort was made by some ill bred persons to create hostile manifestations, but their efforts happily failed."¹⁷ The editor of the *Journal of Commerce* wrote, "It was fortunate that the Conde d'Eu decided to go there, showing interest in the people.... I wish that the Princess too had shown the same respect."¹⁸

Isabel's low public profile failed to curtail the hostility of her enemies or the enthusiasm of her supporters. Many of her followers began calling themselves "Isabelists." The *Rio News* analyzed part of their intense allegiance: "She has attached to herself many a subject upon whose loyalty she could never have relied, and she has made her name a household word in places among the lowliest of her people where before it was rarely heard."¹⁹ As the anniversary of the Golden Law approached, "Isabelists" viewed the princess imperial as a living symbol of emancipation, the protector of their hopes and dreams.²⁰

Privately Isabel also came to see herself as an agent for change. Like the abolitionists, she believed additional reforms necessary if Brazil were to ever

reach its full potential.²¹ The emperor and prime minister arrived at the same conclusion. In his speech from the throne on May 3, 1889, a stronger Pedro II seemed to embrace at least some of the land reform proposals advocated by Rebouças, Nabuco, Prado and other social activists. The pronouncement gave hope to supporters of the third reign, but further angered opponents.

Pedro II declared, "In order to increase immigration and agricultural labor, it is important that the proposal to regularize landed property and facilitate the acquisition and cultivation of public lands be passed into law according to your best judgment. On that occasion, you should consider the convenience of conceding to the government the right to expropriate uncultivated lands along railroad to serve as nuclei of colonization."²²

The speech caused a virtual firestorm in and out of parliament. *Novidades* thundered, "After the slave, the land: There we have it, toward the end of the Speech from the Throne, leaving no room for doubt in anyone's mind. The government understands that it has the right to attempt a criminal act against landed property, to divide it, to decimate it, to distribute it to whomever it pleases."²³ The *Gazeta da Tarde* called the government proposal a simple act of socialism. And in Minas Gerais a newspaper promised that this "bold and monstrous attack ... against the planter class ... will inevitably bring a general conflagration to the country."²⁴

A tempestuous parliamentary session followed. The renewed prosperity of the country, the increase in public revenues beyond all budget projections, and the arrival of 200,000 immigrants in the year following abolition were dismissed or ignored.²⁵ Within weeks Prime Minister Correia de Oliveira lost his working majority in the General Assembly. All efforts of reconciliation and compromise failed. The ministry that had peacefully brought abolition to Brazil resigned.²⁶

Conservatives were unable to find a leader able to mend the split within their party, and Pedro II turned to former prime minister Saraiva to form a new Liberal ministry. Saraiva, citing ill health and age, declined. But during their discussions he was asked if a third reign, Princess Isabel's, would be possible. Saraiva replied that in Brazil's politically poisoned climate he feared not, gently confiding, "The kingdom of Her Highness is not of this world."²⁷

The pessimistic words may have spurred the emperor to turn to the charismatic Liberal Party leader Afonso Celso, the Visconde Ouro Preto, who had only recently been elevated to the nobility by Princess Isabel.²⁸ He believed the third reign not only possible, but an absolute necessity in order to preserve Brazil's constitutional government. The respected resourceful leader quickly and enthusiastically agreed to form a new ministry.

Ouro Preto selected a cabinet composed of strong reformers, most of whom were recognized supporters of the princess imperial. The position of minister of empire, the "patronage rich" post controlling the nation's all important "electoral machinery," was given to the Baron of Loreto. Amandinha, his

wife, was Isabel's closest childhood friend. Such appointments caused one opposition newspaper to report the cabinet "was definitely organized not in the palace of the Emperor, but in the palace of the heir to the throne."²⁹

Gaston nevertheless was privately disappointed. He wrote the Condessa Barral, "I would have much preferred the acceptance of the most radical elements in order to satisfy the longings for reform and to compete with the Republicans. If the new ministry is going to appear, as did its predecessor, as the vehicle for the Princess's desires, nothing will have been truly gained."³⁰

As the first anniversary of the Golden Law approached, the *Gazeta da Tarde* predicted bloodshed:

The Princess is responsible for all that is about to occur, and consequently, her natural counselor the Conde d'Eu because one word from him to his wife and from her to her minister would impede this profound anarchy into which it is designed to cast Brazilian society by the establishment of a war of the races. Therefore it is necessary that the people should hold the Princess, her husband, and her minister responsible for the smallest drop of blood which is shed on the 13th, and whoever on this day loses a father, husband, son or brother, should in the interest of personal preservation make good use of dynamite against those persons who take the responsibility of so abominable an occasion doing against the Princess, the Conde d'Eu, and her minister and against the Princess's "Black Guard."

Even as the *Gazeta* railed against the violence it claimed to fear, it encouraged violence against Isabel, her family and supporters: "The Imperial family of Brazil is the only reigning family against which there has never been a criminal attempt, but it merits this since it publicly promotes a society of assassins.... Should there be blood spilled, the Princess Imperial is responsible."³¹ The Golden Law's anniversary passed with no reports of violence anywhere in Brazil. The only recorded explosion was a verbal one. In Petrópolis, the emperor was quoted in newspapers as again confirming he and Princess Isabel were fully committed to continuing the reforms begun the previous May.³²

Anger and frustration buffeted opponents of the monarchy. They felt their way of life threatened, their politicians outmaneuvered, and neglect and isolation from the center of power they had always believed was theirs alone. The Chamber of Deputies handed them their latest defeat, rejecting Republican demands for an inquiry into the state of the emperor's health.³³ The vote was a lopsided ninety-four to four. That same week newspapers reported that the size of the army, already small by Latin American standards, was below authorized troop strength. The report infuriated supporters of the military. The government had recently outlawed, then disbanded, press gangs, the only recruitment tool available to fill the army's dwindling ranks.³⁴

Republican newspapers fanned military anger by identifying the imagined villain behind such affronts. "Who does not know that, in the nominations and promotions in the army, nothing is resolved without pleasing the Marshal Conde d'Eu?... The entire career of our officer corps is in the hands of the

prince-consort.... The [position of] perpetual lord of our armed forces ... is assumed by the husband of the presumptive heiress.”³⁵ Gaston, “tired of being used as a scapegoat,” requested permission from the government to make an extended tour of the Northern provinces.³⁶ He hoped his absence would make it difficult for his enemies to blame him for meddling in political and military affairs.³⁷ The ministry soon announced the prince marshal would visit the “drought stricken districts” of the northeast. Privately Gaston hoped to use his travels to “learn the real feelings of the people regarding the succession of the Princess Imperial.”³⁸ Prime Minister Ouro Preto and Pedro II believed Isabel should also accompany Gaston, but the court doctor vetoed her participation. He feared if the emperor died suddenly and Isabel did not immediately assume power, their enemies would overthrow the constitutional monarchy.³⁹

Gaston’s four-month tour was a personal triumph, convincing him and others the monarchy retained broad popular support.⁴⁰ Silva Jardim, the firebrand radical republican, shadowed Gaston’s early itinerary in an attempt to steal headlines and disrupt his trip. He failed miserably. Jardim’s poorly attended speeches were violently attacked by pro-monarchist mobs. Within weeks he fled home, lucky to escape with his life.

The Conde d’Eu prided himself on being politically astute, but compared to his wife and even the ailing emperor, his instincts were perpetually clouded by a blind pessimism. In the midst of his wildly successful tour, he confounded an admiring crowd in Recife by volunteering the monarchy would never fight to hold onto power. He then added if elections indicated the people preferred a republic to the monarchy, the imperial family would willingly go into exile. His speech stunned his audience into silence, and gave renewed hope to the monarchy’s enemies.

Princess Isabel was deeply upset when she read her husband’s remarks. Gaston’s words discouraged their supporters and damaged the monarchist cause. The editor of Rio de Janeiro’s *Journal of Commerce* wrote in an ironic understatement, “The Conde d’Eu made in Pernambuco a speech that was politically of small prudence.”⁴¹ Rather than address the political implications of his words, Isabel wrote Gaston her personal reaction. “I well understand that, should there be another form of government, we would perhaps be obliged to withdraw, but I don’t like saying that. I am attached to the country, I was born here, and everything in it reminds me of my 43 years of happiness!”⁴² Upon reflection, Isabel decided not to send Gaston the letter but saved it in her personal papers. Princess Isabel found her future dependent on a husband willing to accept a fate that would destroy everything she had prepared her entire public life to do.

Isabel may have drawn comfort that the charismatic Ouro Preto seemed able to restore the emperor to some of his former vitality. The new prime minister counseled Pedro II, “Your Majesty has noticed that in some of the provinces there is agitated and active propaganda for a change in the form of

government.... In my humble opinion, it is important not to underestimate this torrent of false and imprudent ideas, but instead to weaken and incapacitate it.... The way to achieve this is not through violence and repression, but rather by demonstrating practically that the present system of government has sufficient elasticity to recognize the most progressive principles, satisfy all demands of enlightened public opinion, consolidate liberty, and realize the prosperity and greatness of our nation, without disturbing the internal peace.... We will reach this goal, Sir, by initiating, with strength and courage, wide political, social, and economic reforms, inspired by democratic ideals. These reforms should not be postponed.... That which today is enough, may perhaps be too little by tomorrow."⁴³

Ouro Preto's words appealed to the very roots of the emperor's best values and principles. The need for meaningful and progressive reforms and a plan to make them a reality seemed to energize the emperor. He endorsed far-reaching economic and political programs including the Jeffersonian ideals of a rural democracy advocated by André Rebouças. Pedro II may have believed an aggressive effort necessary to weaken the Republican threat and prepare the way for Isabel's peaceful ascension to the throne.⁴⁴

The agenda was radical in its design and implications, abolishing the life term of senators, reducing the power of the Council of State, granting more administrative and electoral power to provinces, and publicly allowing freedom of religion for all faiths. It promised to reform education, to reduce export duties, to improve infrastructure and transportation, the amortization of foreign debt, universal suffrage for all males, and the enactment of major land reforms to allow more Brazilians to own their land.⁴⁵ In the past Pedro II had opposed many of the reforms he now supported.

When the Liberal legislative program was presented in the General Assembly, a Conservative deputy became so incensed he declared himself a Republican, ending his harangue, "Down with the monarchy! Long live the Republic!"⁴⁶ Ouro Preto responded, "No! No! And, again No! For it is under the monarchy that we have obtained the liberty which other nations envy.... Viva the monarchy!—the only form of government to which the immense majority of the people are attached, and the only one that can make for its happiness and greatness!"⁴⁷ His remarks were met by long and enthusiastic applause. But opponents denounced reforms they once advocated when their own party was in power.

The energetic prime minister moved quickly to divide his enemies, appealing directly to the presidents of the provinces for support.⁴⁸ Since the government's finances had never been in a stronger position, he guaranteed new low interest bank loans to planters while encouraging foreign investment in agriculture, business, commerce and industry. He granted titles of nobility to those he wished to court, including some of his enemies. With parliamentary elections scheduled at the end of August, he intended to use the same tactics his

Conservative predecessors used to achieve majorities necessary to pass his reform program.⁴⁹ Ouro Preto was confident the constitutional monarchy would survive by promoting social, political, and economic opportunities built on a foundation of dramatically expanding land ownership.⁵⁰

As his health continued to stabilize, the emperor was seen more frequently in public. On July 15th, he, the empress and Princess Isabel attended the Santa Anna Theatre in Rio de Janeiro. As they left the theatre, a man shouting “Long live the Republican Party” fired a shot at their carriage. Despite the shock, no one was injured, and the emperor and princess imperial reacted with great coolness. The Republican assailant was quickly apprehended but insisted he would not miss the next time.⁵¹ It was apparent politics in Brazil had taken a dangerous turn. The assassination attempt temporarily caused the propaganda assault against the monarchy to subside. The Condessa Barral wrote the emperor, “The earth is trembling.”⁵²

When Gaston returned from his northern tour in September he seemed unusually refreshed and optimistic. He had been “received everywhere with manifestations of good will.” Even conservative planters assured him of their unshaken loyalty to the monarchy.⁵³ Gaston’s feelings seemed validated by the recent overwhelming victory of the Liberal Party, helped by the government’s full support and perhaps by the emotional backlash of the assassination attempt. Many planters, city dwellers, bankers, investors and merchants enthusiastically endorsed Ouro Preto’s reform agenda.⁵⁴

Despite vigorous campaigning, large expenditures of legal and illegal funds, and fear generating rhetoric, a badly divided Republican Party elected only one candidate to the General Assembly.⁵⁵ The demoralized Conservatives retained only a handful of their former seats.⁵⁶ Defeated candidates claimed the election was stolen, but opposition members in the legislature had few options but to pledge to work with the Liberal majority. The sheer size of the victory reassured the emperor and Princess Isabel the throne retained the wide support of the people.⁵⁷

That August Isabel took the opportunity to secretly write a letter to her close friend the Visconde de Santa Vitória. In her letter she shared her innermost thoughts and hopes for the future. She had been quietly working with a group of landowners to donate lands so former slaves would be able to make a living through farming and raising livestock. But she did not stop there, writing, “I now want to dedicate myself to freeing women from the fetters of domestic captivity. This will be possible through feminine suffrage. If women can reign, they can also vote.”⁵⁸ The letter revealed Isabel’s vision for a Brazil where economic, racial, and gender opportunities would not be bound by the prejudices and traditions of the past.⁵⁹

Princess Isabel looked to the future with great hope and confidence. *O Paíz*, the influential Republican newspaper, wrote in resignation, “The monarchy has never seemed so secure on its pedestal, so sure of its rights.... By the



"The earth is trembling," Isabel's former governess wrote following an unsuccessful assassination attempt on the royal family in 1889. Here the family gathers that same year on the steps of the Isabel Palace in Petrópolis. From left to right: seated, Empress Theresa; seated at her feet, Isabel's youngest son Antônio; standing, Princess Isabel holding onto Emperor Pedro II; seated, her second son, Luís; standing, Isabel's nephew Pedro Augusto; husband Gaston; and oldest son Pedro. Courtesy of Imperial Museum / Iphan / Ministry of Culture, Petrópolis, Brazil.

exclusion of the Republicans from the Chamber and by the formal or informal league of Conservatives and Liberals, it seems that the monarchy is firm.”⁶⁰

A month after Isabel wrote her letter to the Visconde de Santa Vitória, General Deodoro da Fonseca returned to Rio de Janeiro after a tour of duty on the Mato Grosso frontier. Since an earlier defeat for a senate seat, the popular monarchist had become increasingly outspoken in his demands for an expanded political role for the military.⁶¹ Like many junior officers, he found it difficult to accept the election results. The Liberal Party viewed the political ambitions of the military even less favorably than did the Conservatives.⁶² That week the liberal *Rio News* editorialized, “It does not appear to be ordinary common sense to fill a class with exaggerated opinions of its weight in the nation while it is really dangerous in the case of the army.”⁶³ Deodoro da Fonseca was flattered to find himself courted by a group of military officers and Republicans he had only recently scorned, but who saw in him a leader and possible ally they might use against the monarchy.

Brazilians not discussing politics found something else to talk about. A brilliant meteorite was seen streaking across the night skies before crashing to the earth. For centuries the superstitious believed such heavenly displays foretold the death of kings, natural disasters, or other impending calamities. Some held their breath, others prayed, a few decided to act.