



Source: Tom Baldwin, 'It would be nuts to bomb Iran, says Britain', *The Times* in *The Australian online*, 11/04/06.

Tags: [politics](#), [husband/wife](#), [religion](#)

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1815

Behind her, Manuela heard the doors of the convent close with a thud. In front of her, she saw the open door of a carriage.

This carriage would take her on a journey of liberation from convent walls. Her husband in waiting, in his grand house overlooking the coast north of Caracas, could be no better or worse a life than her past eighteen years. All her suffering at the hands of the nuns under orders from their god, the persecution of her Indian mother for her hapless birth, the ignorance of her Spaniard father in his imprisonment of her, all would fade into oblivion now when the doors of the patio facing Isla de la Tortuga were flung wide for her. Manuela was certain of one thing—her life would commence from this day.

A blatant arrogance upon her face was not what James Thorne had expected in his young bride. She was short and slim in stature for which he was grateful. Her hair and teeth were in good order, some might say, exceptional. Her skin had a healthy shine and paleness to it. Her eyes were brown and glistening. But her expression was one that shocked James: arrogance in one so young and with so little to offer to a man of his standing!

He met her as she left the carriage. Dutifully she bowed to him and he took her hand. 'You are welcome, Señorita to my home and my heart,' he had said he thought in a rather romantic way for an Englishman about to marry a young woman of uncertain birth.

Manuela lifted her fierce eyes, and with an impertinence that stunned the suitor, she replied, 'Señor Thorne, I wish to say that I am grateful to you, sir, for one thing only. You have liberated me from an unbearable life. I thank you. Your home I will gladly grace for you. As for your heart, keep it. I will not need it.' She bowed low again, and walked up the stone stairs to the entrance where two footmen held open the French doors.

The view to the Isla de la Tortuga was magnificent. Seeing it each morning cleared Manuela's head of the night before, of Dr James Thorne's pathetic manoeuvres to gain entry to her bed and no doubt to her heart. It was hopeless, she had warned him, but still he persisted. She suggested, 'For a man in your position, Mr Thorne, the acquisition of a mistress would suit us well. This task I will personally undertake for you.'

From the moment this small Indian woman had landed on his doorstep, James Thorne was torn between repugnance at her ideas and a deep yearning to conquer her. She was like the wild horses he had ridden at home in Middleshire, as a boy, through the fields of snow. Here in this heat, James could no longer imagine the sensation of snow. For the Europeans, the two hundred year old thriving banana trade coupled well with a burgeoning slave trade. James' father profited from both. His loyal mild-mannered son, James, had been the perfect choice to do his bidding in the Caribbean.

'Bananas, coffee and slaves, all of Africa, what a blessed and a cursed place that continent must be,' thought Manuelita. Hence, she refused to have the wretched fruit in the house, neither would she drink coffee. Her servants were mestizos, for she would not suffer the presence of poor blacks. Manuela never accompanied her husband on his business journeys, preferring to stay and read from the finely assembled, untouched library, the great works of masters and philosophers. She honed astonishing opinions and delighted in shocking. More to the point, Manuela was using her now limitless purse to support those who wanted change in these colonies.

One evening, in the salon of the Thorne mansion, the Spaniard merchant, Don Gaspar Flores, provoked Manuela into a conversation which caused tongues to wag for some time. There was talk of the uncertainties of life due to a spurt of riotous tempests in Santa fe de Bogota and Caracas.

'Take them all and shoot them in the market squares,' was Don Flores' contribution, eyeing Manuela as he sipped his anisette. 'Madam Thorne, what are your thoughts? It is said you are a woman of learning and new thinking.'

Manuela took her time crossing the small salon and seating herself with grace directly opposite the speaker. 'Don Flores, as ever, you are correct. They should all be shot in a public place. Be careful first to remove their jackets as the bullets will certainly destroy the fineness of the fabric.' People looked quizzically at each other. Manuela sipped at her Mourvèdre, 'The jackets could then be given to the poor souls who have no homes in the cities.'

Don Flores laughed, 'Madam, we are speaking of revolutionaries, like that upstart Napoleon and you speak of fashion?' Manuela stood, aware that all eyes were upon her. She raised her glass in a toast. Others followed. 'Señor Napoleon and I find agreement. The sooner we are rid of foreign invaders and rule our own destiny, the sooner we shall call ourselves a people of note!'

The listeners gasped in unison.

Hurriedly, James Thorne moved towards his wife as if to shield her, 'Madam, I beg you! There are limits, I assure you, even in this sorry excuse for a society!'

Manuela held his hand with some tenderness and whispered loudly, the heat of her breath hitting his lips, 'Ah, sir, that is where you are wrong! In this sorry society, there are no limits!'

Manuelita then moved off from the shocked gathering to the verandah to smoke a cigar in peace and look at the light of night caressing the waves of that enormous ocean. The peace would not last. The time of reckoning was imminent. As she wished, Manuelita would ride high upon a tide of change.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Miriam Taylor Gomez.