

General Sillies' Note—Will the United States War for Cuba?

[From the London Times, Sept. 23.]

The Spaniards have found their advantage in a bold display of what may, perhaps, be termed patriotism, and is certainly national courage. They have met an imagined affront with an immediate defiance, although the adversary defied was ten times as powerful as themselves. Our columns have informed the public, not only what the Spanish people thought of the American Ambassador's note, but what he himself thought of it when its effects became visible. He was manifestly alarmed at the result of his own proceedings, and requested further instructions from Washington, pending which, as we have now reason to believe, he has expressed his desire to withdraw his note altogether. If this is actually the position of the case at the present moment, Spain owes it to her fearlessness, a fearlessness which may savor of unreason, but which, at any rate, is not bravado. She has declared that if driven to it she will fight, and that she will fight is not to be doubted. That she could obtain any success in a war with the United States is, of course, out of the question; but, at the same time she stands to lose so much less than her adversary, that the Americans may fairly decline even an easy victory on such onerous and partial terms. The Spanish government has declared, and the Spanish people have resolved that they will not allow Cuba to be wrenched from their possession without making a fight for it. It is not to be imagined that the contest thus accepted could end in anything but the loss of Cuba, with probably other losses to boot; but whereas it is obvious that General Sillies expected no such resistance as his note provoked, it is possible that in the face of such opposition his proceedings may be qualified or repudiated. Indeed, it is already believed that the General exceeded his authority in the intervention which he attempted, and that the American government is not responsible for these acts of its Minister. Whatever may be the truth about the negotiations previously reported or the conditions actually suggested by the United States, it must be clear to every American that a war with Spain would cost the Union infinitely more than any compensation or guarantee by which an amicable emancipation of Cuba might be secured. It is not quite clear that the acquisition of Cuba would be any gain to the Union at all; but it is perfectly evident that the acquisition could never be worth a war. It happens also that, though the two powers are so unevenly matched, the weaker can contemplate the prospect of war with less concern than the stronger. In fact, the strength of Spain lies in her weakness—in the little margin remaining for damage to be done. The depreciation of Spanish securities could hardly be a practicable process; the decline of Spanish credit hardly a perceptible event. About the worst that could happen in such respects has happened already, nor is there much room for more mischief at home. The Spaniards are in the midst of a revolution as it is; their administration is disorganized; their finances are in confusion, and the prospects of the country are not to be fathomed by any human eye. Nevertheless, and for all this, they are better off—at any rate in their own opinion—than they were, a twelvemonth ago, and the people in their several provinces or cities either govern themselves or get along tolerably without any government at all. They have soldiers, moreover, at their command, and they have ships, and they are not afraid to employ them. A state of war would not do them much harm. Their commerce is comparatively small, and they are not exposed to invasion. They would lose their colonies, but for that they are prepared, and they would rather lose them after a fight than suffer the interference of foreigners in their affairs. * * * We should think it, therefore, not improbable that, even if General Sillies' late communication was authorized by his government—which is very doubtful—the Americans would pause before embarking in a struggle promising such slight advantage. Their interests in Cuba, as part of the American world, are unquestionable, but no good can be done to any party by precipitating events or resorting to arms. Spain and Cuba must needs settle their own affairs before long, and it is not likely that the settlement would be otherwise than favorable in some sense or other to American views. The terms offered by the Spanish government to the colonists have not been illiberal, and if the colonists desire even more that, there is little doubt, would be ultimately conceded. All that Spain resents is the threat of violent expulsion. Most Spaniards understand that sooner or later Cuba must probably go, but they would fain see the separation accomplished on terms compatible with the interests and not inconsistent with the honor of the nation. They will not, if they can help it, allow the Cubans to drive them out of the island by successful revolt; they will not, without a struggle, allow any foreign Power to interfere in the quarrel. Beyond this their pretensions do not extend, but, thus far, they have sworn to maintain them; and they would probably be as good as their word. General Sillies reckoned apparently on the embarrassments of the State to which he addressed his dictation, forgetting what boldness may come from despair itself. An enemy who has nothing to lose is a dangerous foe, and thus far Spain has actually an advantage in her present condition. A more powerful government might have hesitated longer before defying so formidable an adversary. Twice, however, lately has Spain gone to war, and apparently without feeling it. True, she took nothing by her policy, but it would be hard to prove that she lost anything. She made no impression on Chile, but Chile, like herself, was not exposed to much damage. It would be otherwise with America, as it would be with ourselves. There is no measuring the mischief which a war, even with a weak enemy, may inflict on a commercial power. The Americans, as they have nothing to be angry about, may look upon this matter with prudent indifference, and refuse to commit themselves to a needless and expensive quarrel, but we really believe that the attitude of the Spaniards has been dictated by courage alone. The genuine Castilian may probably regard the resources and prowess of Spain with a satisfied eye, and without the least disposition to accept the European estimate of his country's power. General Sillies' note offended the national pride, and the nation took fire. His own message to his own government vouches for the fact, and he was evidently astonished at the spirit he had raised. Such a spirit may not be in accordance with modern principles of peace or prudence, but it is not unlikely, after all, to avert a quarrel. We ourselves once became involved in a war because it was thought we should never resolve to fight; Spain has promptly resolved to fight, and perhaps she may escape the consequence to which we were committed. It is not every State which could venture on such a defiance with so fair a prospect of impunity; but the Spaniards are, nevertheless, entitled to the credit of national intrepidity and public spirit, whatever may be thought of the issue before them.