

# EL ESCORIAL

## MARY CABLE



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# I

## PALACE OF KINGS

“A DWELLING FOR GOD ON EARTH”

King Philip II of Spain was dying. For years, he had suffered from attacks of gout, but now, in the early summer of 1598, the pain was constant, and he could scarcely bear to be touched or moved. Ulcerating sores spotted his legs, and despite his physicians' continual bleedings, purges, and mysterious potions, the sores were showing signs of gangrene. Realizing he had not long to live, Philip sent for his traveling chair and his usual, elaborate retinue - for even on a journey toward death, Europe's mightiest monarch had to travel in suitable style. In June, the king left Madrid, setting out across the wide plains for the slopes of the Guadarrama Mountains, where for years he had been preparing one of the most imposing burial places ever seen.

Only his intense longing to die where he had planned to enabled Philip to make the trip at all. The distance was some thirty miles, and he had often ridden it in a day - but this time, carried slowly in a chair and stopping frequently, he passed seven agonizing days and nights on the road.

It was June, a month when the countryside should have been green with ripening fields and dotted with abundant flocks of fat, shorn sheep. Instead, the king saw only signs of poverty and sorrow along the way: emaciated and ragged people, abandoned hovels, starving animals, and weeds where crops should have been growing. Spain, the richest and most powerful nation of the sixteenth-century world, was about to go into bankruptcy for the second time in forty years. Spain, whose armies were the best in Europe, had been at war continuously for almost three decades - first with the Dutch, then with the Turks, and finally with the English and French - and by 1598, Castile had been bled white of its strong young men. These were tragic paradoxes, but then King Philip had known paradoxes all his life. Even his own personality was paradoxical, for he was simultaneously one of the most hated and most loved men in Europe.

On the afternoon of the seventh day of the dying monarch's final journey, the royal entourage came within sight of its destination: El Escorial, a huge parallelogram of granite rising against a background of forest and meadow, a work of architecture so sophisticated and startling that a wayfarer who came upon it unexpectedly might have supposed it to be an unearthly

vision. Indeed, Philip himself had called it "a dwelling for God on Earth."

The king lived through that summer of 1598. Even in his extreme pain and weakness, he insisted on being carried one last time to every part of the Escorial. He knew it well, for he had watched over it closely during twenty-one years of construction. There were approximately 120 miles of corridors and courtyards; some sixteen courts, fifteen cloisters, eighty-six staircases; more than 2,000 windows and 1,200 doors - and most were like familiar faces to him. He was intimately acquainted with the church, the choir, the monastery, the royal tombs, the large collection of saintly relics, the infirmary, the sacristy, the gardens, the splendidly painted library, and the private rooms of the palace.

The whole constituted the most costly building in Europe; the equivalent of more than \$45 million - an enormous sum in those days - had been spent building and adorning it. But for the king himself, there was only a modest suite of apartments and a small bedroom from which a double door opened into the church. "He did not seem to come here as a king but as one of the severest monks," wrote one observer. When Philip had first planned the Escorial some forty years before, he had perhaps anticipated the time when he would be unable to rise from his bed in order to hear mass. And for the last weeks of his life, the aperture between his bedroom and the church was the greatest comfort that his vast creation could afford him.

In order even to begin to understand Philip II of Spain, we need to look at the circumstances into which he was born in 1527. Much had happened in Spain in little more than fifty years, chiefly owing to the efforts of Philip's great-grandparents, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. By their marriage in 1469, they had unified the two great rival states of Spain. Together they had pressured the Moors who had occupied southern Spain for more than seven centuries, and in 1492, they had succeeded in ousting the last Moorish ruler from his capital at Granada and exiling him across the Strait of Gibraltar.

Also in 1492 - and, as it developed, of greater significance - Isabella sponsored the explorations of the Genoese adventurer Christopher Columbus.