

The Dictator and His Woman

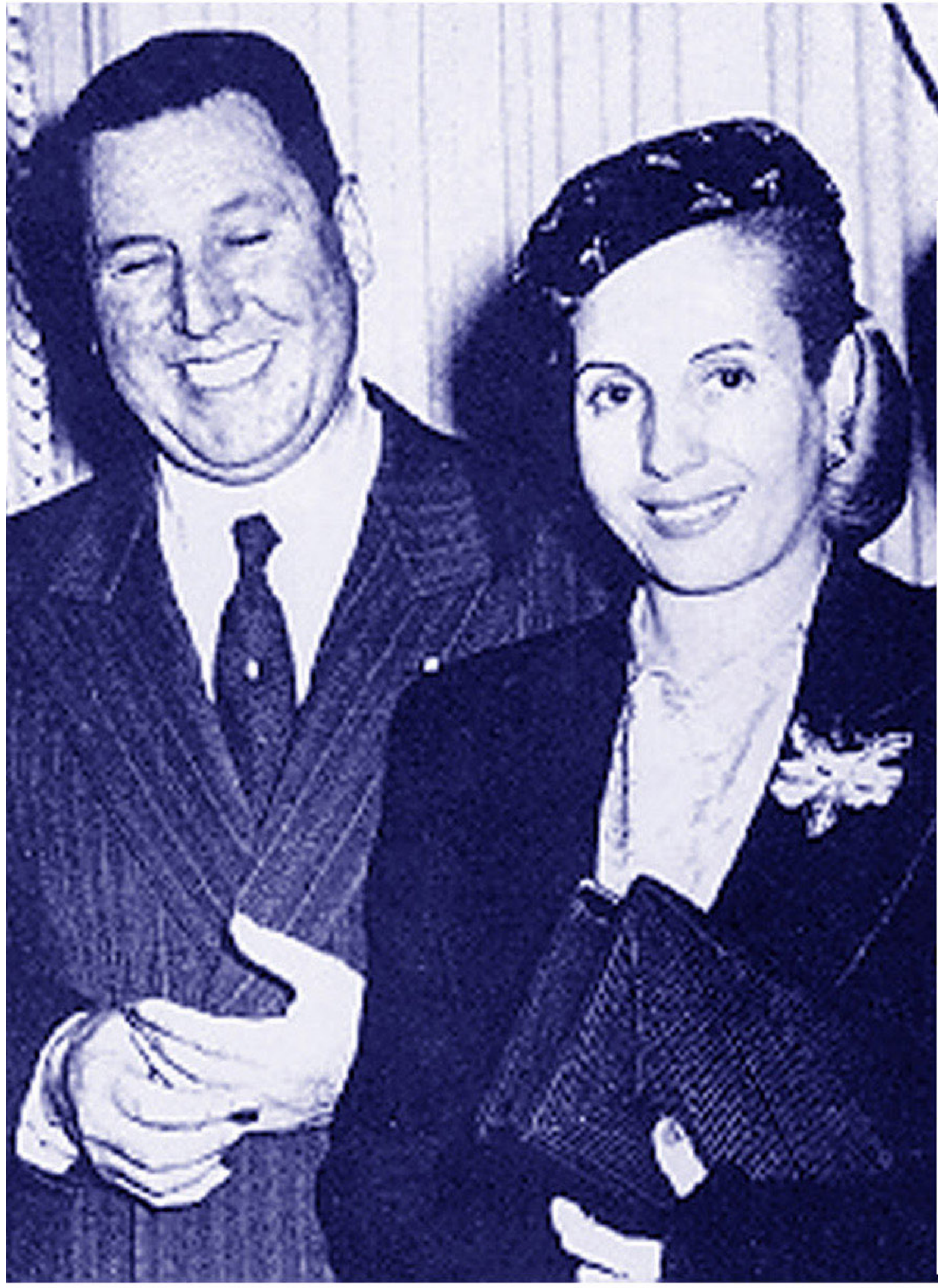


“Together we shall rule Argentina,” she boasted. But she knew his secret weakness, despised him for it—and destroyed him, even after her death

by **JOSEPH HILTON**
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SINCE THE ABRUPT ousting of Juan Perón in late September, much has been written and said about the political and economic aspects of his rise and fall as Argentina's dictator. Yet almost nothing has been made public to adequately explain why the Strong Man was suddenly revealed as simply a hollow husk incapable of dynamic action.

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The reason was María Eva Duarte de Perón—but not in the way the world thought.

That the glamorous Evita was Juan Perón's working partner in the governing of Argentina was one of the most thoroughly publicized setups of modern times. Yet the emotion-laden myth of a perfect couple dedicated to an even more mythical picture of Argentina's future was completely false. And no man knew it better than Juan Perón.

From the start, the relationship between Perón and Evita was a curious and contradictory liaison. It is true that she was still a struggling actress when Perón met her, but she had achieved a considerable reputation for spreading her favors around with a sharp eye to the future.

She knew her way in and out of the more important bedrooms of the Argentine capital, including that of the then-President Ramirez. It was due to the latter's influence that her salary as a bit actress at Radio Belgrano suddenly jumped from less than \$10 a week to 30 times that amount.

Her main claim to fame was the voluptuous beauty of her body—a beauty that had been well and fulsomely displayed in a number of "art studies" and almost equally revealing movie roles.

She was, to put it bluntly, sexiness personified. It was easily understandable that Juan Perón might desire her as a mistress; after all, he was a widower in the prime of life. Less understandable was the flagrant manner in which he conducted this illicit union.

He openly installed Evita in a suite adjoining the one he occupied in an exclusive apartment house on Calle Posadas. She was still acting on radio, but now she was driven

Evita

Power changed Eva from a fresh faced ingenue to sophisticated grande-dame with great appeal for the impoverished masses - despite the furs and jewels she flaunted

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Why? In private conversation, one of the editors of the *El Plata* in Montevideo, a man who had known Perón intimately throughout his career, offered this capsule explanation: “In the beginning, Perón thought to use Evita to help outwardly symbolize his virility. He didn't realize until too late that the

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Evita

very fact that he needed Eva for such a purpose revealed his own weakness to her. She was shrewd enough to make good use of that weakness, turning it to her own advantage."

That was the beginning. And, very shortly, it was the end of any emotional warmth between the two.

As an actress, Evita possessed only a modicum of talent; but as a personality, playing a role she had created for herself, she displayed a remarkable talent. She broke all the rules of the psychology textbooks. In the face of poverty-haunted audiences she flaunted luxurious furs and a fortune in jewelry. She got away with it.

Perón was able to read the handwriting on the wall as well as the next man. He knew that his ability to campaign successfully for the office of President was due only to Eva's ability to sway the masses.

She demanded a price—marriage. And she insisted further that Perón publicly announce their impending union as part of his campaign for the Presidency.

From that moment on, Perón was only the symbol of power; Eva Duarte Perón was the actuality. She made this clear to everyone once Perón had been installed in the Casa Rosada.

Arbitrarily, she took over the title *La Presidenta*, one never before used in the history of Argentina. She installed herself in an adjoining suite of offices, along with her own aides and secretaries. She began setting up special charities and organizations to provide blanket excuses for the extortion of heavy contributions from businessmen.

Had she confined herself to such specialized activities, Perón could have rationalized her driving ambition as the understandable work of a woman concerned with aiding the poor and unfortunate, her extravagant gestures as a means of "getting even" with the social leaders who had previously snubbed her.

But Eva wasn't interested in appeasing Perón's feelings, either in public or in private. She wanted three things—power, prestige and money.

At one of the first cabinet meetings held by the new regime, the various functionaries were startled as they were ushered into the presidential conference room to find Eva already sitting there beside Perón.

From that moment on, those who had opposed her suddenly found themselves not only out of favor but lucky to get out of the country.

PERÓN WAS CAUGHT in a trap. Outwardly, all the trappings of dictatorial power were his—he was not only the Strong Man of the Argentine but for a while threatened to be the Strong Man of all Latin America. He wore the gaudy uniforms rivaling those of fat Hermann Goering whom he openly admired. He made the dynamic speeches.

But Evita made the decisions. Blandly and blatantly, she insulted not only his manhood but his position as the country's ruler by ignoring even a surface token of respect for both roles.

Perón's inner bitterness fed on the knowledge that there was no escape from her continual domination. There was left to him only the traditional gesture of slighted husbands—that of flaunting an outside affair. He tried it once or twice, only to have Evita laugh in his face. For she knew the full truth of his inadequacy.

There was only one expedient path for Perón to follow—pretend that it was all planned that way.

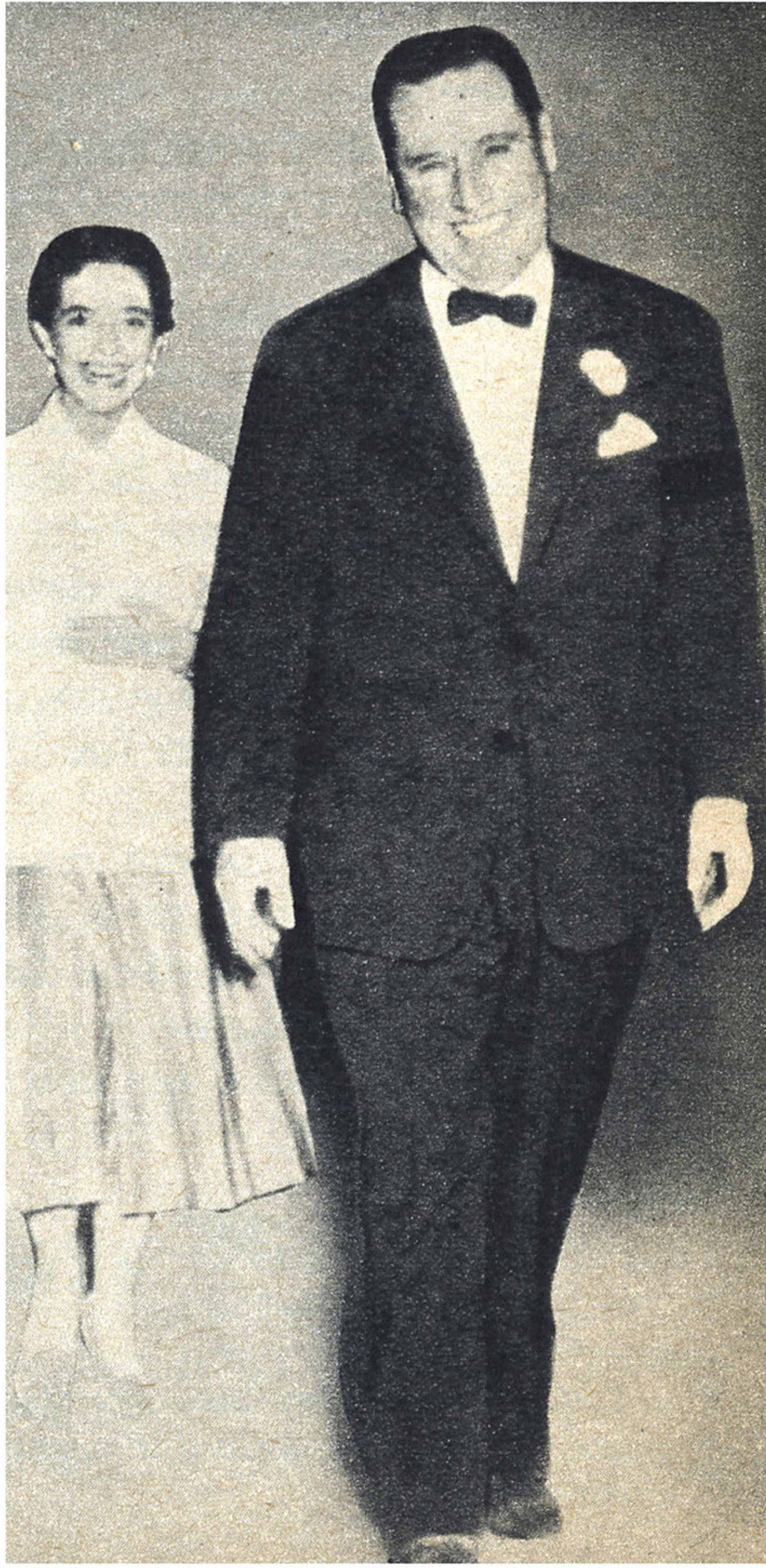
Shortly, not only in Buenos Aires but throughout the length and breadth of Argentina, billboards and every other available spot were plastered with posters bearing glamorized pictures of the couple with the identifying slogan: *Juan cumple—Evita dignifica* (Juan accomplishes—Evita dignifies).

Actually, Perón was accomplishing but very little of any positive value. He seemed destined to be a voluble figurehead, first for Evita and later for the group that kept him in power while it looted the country's wealth. And Evita, who boasted she had never worn the same evening dress twice, had certainly never dignified anything.

With the customary wisdom of hindsight, those who were in a position to observe Perón closely insist that his inward disintegration started from the day—June 4, 1946—he was inaugurated President and realized that he not only owed it all to Eva but that it was a debt she would collect 100 times over.

He was then still a comparatively young man for such an office, only 50. Born on the pampas, he kept up an active interest in every kind of sport. But, as is not unusual, when there is an overemphasis on physical strength there is often an attendant under-emphasis on virility and sexual stamina.

This, so his former associates now rationalize in private discussion, makes understandable the tawdry secret life revealed immediately after Perón's downfall—including the

Evita

Wearing his mourning band, Perón cavorted openly with teen-age girl, Nella

score or more *nidos baquicos de amor* (love nests) in which he spent so much of his time with schoolgirls.

The knowing ones now offer a pseudo-medical explanation for Perón's gradual degeneration, concealed from the public-at-large for so long. They point to the fact that with some forms of male senility there is a preoccupation, sometimes abnormal in its intensity, with young girls.

Perón, it is now maintained, was afflicted by what might be called premature senility, aggravated by Evita's attitude. She lacerated his male pride in private, humiliated him in public.

He sought another means of expression—sports—and fearlessly participated in motorcycle racing, high diving, daring horsemanship. His body was remarkably sound. But his mind was becoming progressively sick.

That was apparent in the second avenue by which Perón attempted to feed his starved ego. By its very nature it couldn't be shown in its true light as an expression of sexual senility. Had anyone suggested as much at the time it would have been set down as vicious slander.

But it isn't—and wasn't. Nor is it true, as many Perón supporters are now trying to suggest, that Perón's moral and sexual decadence was the aftermath of his grief for

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Evita

Evita following her death. True enough, the physical manifestations of his sexual senility then intensified and widened in scope, numerically speaking, but the way was prepared long before.

It started during the first months of his regime when Perón faced the bleak knowledge of his lack of stature in Evita's eyes. It was then that the first indications of his warped preoccupation with young girls appeared.

Evita's death on July 26, 1952, brought no release to Perón, either politically or psychologically. He was, instead, caught in a bitter paradox.

She was gone at last, but her spirit and influence were more powerful than ever. He was forced to grieve in public for the woman who had long since killed his masculine pride. Never, as long as he attempted to remain in a position of power, would he be allowed to forget her.

Then there was an even more diabolical twist. The masses whom Evita had befriended demanded that she be sanctified.

Perón ordered a crypt patterned after that of Napoleon and, for it, a monumental tomb with central figure—of Evita, naturally—that would be taller than the Statue of Liberty.

Now, there was no one he dared talk to frankly and openly. He had to find some release for the bitterness he could no longer contain. That was the beginning of the final tawdry chapter, the setting up of the innumerable love nests for his teen-age protégées.

When these were uncovered, following Perón's anti-climatic flight from Buenos Aires, they disclosed a curious similarity in the contents of each of the boudoirs.

All were furnished as though Evita herself had only just stepped out, leaving behind an incredible state of disorder. Paris evening gowns and expensive lingerie were scattered about—sometimes on the floor, or kicked into corners, or under the bed. Powders and perfumes, all obviously recently used, were cluttered in careless disarray on the vanity table.

The walls were mirrored and in every room there was a full-length portrait of Evita looking down on the unmade bed.

A 14-year-old girl whom Perón had "befriended" said: "Papi (Perón) liked to play. He would have us take off our own clothes and dress from the skin out in Evita's things. He'd help us. It was

Evita

a lot like play-acting and it made everything else seem natural. He was generous, too. See?"

She held out a thin wrist on which there was a jeweled wrist-watch. On the back was engraved *María Eva Duarte de Perón*.

Only a hatred that had become pathological in its thwarted intensity could have sought this manner of defiling the memory of the woman who had made him—and broken him.

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