

PICTURESQUE SOUTH AMERICAN TYRANTS

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AMONG the Spanish there exists a quaint old proverb to the effect that "One should not speak of ropes in the home of the hanged." Similarly, in turbulent South America it might be dangerous to discuss revolutions; but from the vantage point of a safe distance, one may venture to intimate that that great country has them. We have heard much during the past few years of trouble in South America. So much a matter of course has it become that most of us feel that South Americans would be enjoying too tame an existence, that their country would be failing in her romantic charm, if revolutions were not sprinkled liberally throughout her history.

However, romantic charm becomes less delightful when accompanied by economic instability. When countries fail to meet their financial obligations, an enquiry into the underlying conditions is pertinent. Present South American chaos results from the chaos of the past with its numerous revolutions.

These earlier uprisings are distinguished chiefly because of the *caudillos*, those leaders whose personalities—masterful, grimly picturesque—have given a certain amount of immortality to their work. In fact, there would perhaps have been no rebellions had it not been for these men who were so forceful that they dominated their age. To define the *caudillo* is difficult. That he is a romantic desperado no one would dispute, but opinions vary as to his characteristics. Inseparable from the horse which gave him prestige and was half of his very person, he swept aside all opposition. Brave, resolute, characterized by a ferocity that degenerated into cruelty, these men found a nucleus of armies on their own feudal estates, or set themselves up as leaders of revolutionary hordes. They sought to overthrow the old régime, however well or ill things might be progressing, but had very few ideas as to constructing other and better forms of government. Each was interested in purely personal aggrandizement; each snatched the power in his particular section of country and kept it as long as possible.

One of the most acquisitive figures among the *caudillos* was Antonio Guzmán Blanco, who desired above all else to win money,

property, and influence. To him, contentment meant the acquisition of all Venezuela as his private property. So well did he succeed that when he called in Paris upon Baron Rothschild to negotiate a loan for the country, Rothschild declared himself honoured by receiving a call from the richest man on earth. Guzmán Blanco replied, "If you have me in mind, you are mistaken. If I had all I am credited with, I should still be poor in comparison to yourself and thousands of other men." But Rothschild insisted upon the truth of his assertion, adding, "Who else has estates comprising six hundred thousand square miles of territory? Who else has an income of thirty-seven million dollars? Who else has two and one-half million slaves?" Whereupon Guzmán Blanco smiled significantly, as if to say, "I see that you understand Venezuelan politics."

Guzmán Blanco's acquisitiveness extended not alone to material possessions. He added to his glory by securing rosettes, medals, membership in all sorts of scientific and literary societies, and all the degrees of the academic world except that of Doctor of Divinity. He also craved immortality—an immortality to be gained by an extensive advertising campaign. His figure and his name must appear in conspicuous places. States, provinces, cities, theatres, bridges, railroads bore his name, and tablets were imbedded in each building erected to celebrate his achievements. The better to impress his personality upon the minds of his subjects, he assumed the title "The Illustrious American." While he was in power he required every book printed in Venezuela to bear the announcement that it was published under his administration. Every sheet of music was marked in the same way, and in a list of the telephone subscribers of the period his name appears in black capitals, like that of God in the prayer books.

As a further means of advertising, statues and portraits of Guzmán Blanco appeared on every side. One of those sycophants who hound the steps of the powerful, an artist who had been asked to decorate the church of Saint Rosalie, requested Guzmán Blanco to sit as a model for Saint Paul. Immensely flattered by the assumed resemblance, the general sat for his portrait garbed in a purple toga and carrying an open book in his hand; the finished work shows Saint Mark on one side, Saint John on the other, and Saints Luke and Matthew in the background. Though hundreds of other portraits of the dictator occupied every available location in rooms of hotels, saloons, and the private homes of his friends, perhaps the most astonishing was to be found in the hall of representatives. Guzmán Blanco here appears magnificently attired,

astride a prancing black stallion. In the foreground lie bodies of dead soldiers and dismantled cannon, over which the charger is about to leap, while above are hordes of white-winged angels with harps, chanting praises; the leader of the host holds aloft a laurel wreath with which she is about to crown the hero. It must have given the general a feeling of tremendous satisfaction to realize what a sensation was being experienced in the celestial regions over his military triumphs.

Despite Guzmán Blanco's valiant efforts for universal recognition, the best advertised tyrant in South America was Juan Manuel Rosas, since he figured as the villain in two notable classics of South American literature—*Facundo* and *Amalia*.

The people of the Argentine of his time had divided into two factions, the Unitarist and the Federalist, with their respective colours of blue and red. Rosas was a Federalist. He compelled every citizen of Buenos Aires to wear a rosette or band of red in order to show his loyalty. The necessity of yielding to the dictator's commands in this respect soon became apparent; for if any rash inhabitant forgot to display his colours, without argument he incurred imprisonment or death. Rosas would not tolerate pink; it was too colourless a shade, and too suggestive of political instability. One's manner of wearing one's whiskers under that régime had to be carefully calculated, for Unitarists wore side whiskers, and the mustache was the badge of Federalism. No man was safe who did not give his face a leonine aspect, for carelessness under this régime of tonsorial politics invited personal disaster.

Rosas was a believer in the power of scenic effects. Realizing that mystery is always attractive, particularly to the ignorant and superstitious, he rarely appeared in public, and was, indeed, toward the end of his rule almost invisible. He did not need to be visible to accomplish his ends; it was enough to be felt. Never being in any place, he was yet in all. As a means of increasing the superstitious belief of his people in his power, he allied himself with the Church. Patriot-clerical processions paraded through the streets, with fanatic hordes bearing from temple to temple the portrait of their tyrant. Arriving at altars previously adorned with red draperies and banked with masses of bright-hued flowers, they worshipped this likeness. Even Rosas's *Federacion* became a reality to the credulous common people. It represented no party, no political ideal, but rather a religious sentiment, a kindly Providence—serviceable, happy, friendly. In time of peril, instead of using the familiar *Dios me ayude*, one called for the intervention of the more potent *Santa Federacion*; upon hearing a knock at the door,

instead of the usual *Ave Maria Purissima*, one said *Viva Federacion*. When the night watchmen in their rounds called out this magic watchword, within each home fanaticism, or perhaps terror, urged the reply, *Eternamente*. Men even crossed themselves to the words, *Por la senal de la Santa Federacion*.

Rosas even succeeded in convincing himself that he possessed magic power. The Empire of Brazil had risen against him; the most outstanding of his generals had revolted; his representative Oribe had been routed. Any other man would have mobilized his forces, begged reinforcements in the provinces, and carried on invasions. He merely thundered curses with oracular meaning, firmly believing that some supernatural power would send desertion and mutiny into the ranks of his enemies. But, unfortunately, magic did not work, and Rosas was forced to retire hastily and ignominiously from his kingdom. His rebellious general Urquiza finally succeeded, in the decisive battle of Monte Caseros, in completely routing the dictator's army. Rosas, allowing his soldiers to escape as best they could, slipped quietly out of the Argentine and reformed, becoming a respectable English gentleman, the idol of London society.

Meantime, the Uruguayan Artigas rivalled the tyrant of the Argentine. José Artigas is hard to judge. He may have been a villain; he may have been a hero. His countrymen seem to have believed him a gaucho hero, who bravely and honestly defended Uruguayan liberty. Generally foreigners have portrayed him as a smuggling, murderous bandit—a traitor and criminal, who seized with glee every opportunity to outrage decency and morality. The reason for such diversity of opinion is hard to find, but one would suppose that his own countrymen would perhaps be best prepared to pass judgment. At any rate, one cannot help admiring the redoubtable courage of a man who with his band of tattered followers challenged the united armies of Brazil, the Argentine *Junta*, and the Spanish royalists. Adopting as a policy the simple expedient of diverting attack by attacking first, he aimed always to wage war in foreign territory. Uruguayan ships, report says, even annoyed the Portuguese in their own country instead of remaining at home in orthodox fashion.

Even in defeat, Artigas proved himself a persuasive and irrepressible leader. He had marked success in collecting forces. On one occasion, after defeating Artigas, Ramírez, one of his rebellious chieftains, determined to pursue him. Though he lost his general for a week, eventually Ramírez found him surrounded by nine hundred followers whom he had collected in the interim. Artigas, under his blue and white banner with its red bar, was

insolently besieging a stronghold instead of running away as he should rightly have done. Apparently he did not know the meaning of defeat.

Customarily foreigners write unfavorably of Artigas. In contrast, the impressions of J. P. Robertson, an English chronicler of the period, are of interest. Robbed by a band of the followers of Artigas, Robertson went to his camp, Purificación, to get redress:

I came to the Protector's headquarters . . . of the so-called town of Purificación. And there . . . what do you think I saw? Why, the most excellent Protector of half the New World, seated on a bullock's skull, at a fire kindled on the mud floor of his hut, eating beef off a spit, and drinking gin out of a cow horn! He was surrounded by a dozen officers in weather-beaten attire, in similar positions, and similarly occupied with their chief. All were smoking, all gabbling. The Protector was dictating to two secretaries, who occupied, at one deal table, the only two dilapidated rush-bottom chairs in the hovel. To complete the singular incongruity of the scene, the floor of the one apartment of the mud hut . . . in which the general, his staff, and secretaries were assembled, was strewn with pompous envelopes from all the Province (some of them distant some 1,500 miles from that centre of operations) addressed to "His Excellency the Protector." At the door stood the reeking horses of couriers arriving every half hour, and the fresh ones of those departing as often. . . His Excellency the Protector, seated on his bullock's skull, smoking, eating, drinking, dictating, talking, dispatched in succession the various matters brought under his notice with that calm, or deliberate, but uninterrupted nonchalance which brought most practically home to me the truth of the axiom, "Stop a little that we may get on the faster" . . . He received me, not only with cordiality, but with what surprised me more, comparatively gentlemanlike manners, and really good breeding. . . The Protector's business was prolonged from morning till evening, and so were his meals; for, as one courier arrived, another was dispatched; and as one officer rose up from the fire at which the meat was spitted, another took his place.

After the general had taken his guest the round of his hide huts and mud hovels, he said, "You see how we live here; and it is as much as we can do, in these hard times, to compass beef, aguardiente, and cigars." He then lifted up the lid of an old military chest and pointed to a canvas bag at the bottom of it. "There is my whole stock of cash; it amounts to 300 dollars; and where the next supply is to come from, I am as little aware as you are." Artigas then repaid Robertson by granting him some trading concessions, and his guest departed satisfied. This description fits no mere cut-throat and plunderer.

The last years of Artigas are surely inconsistent with the usual conception which foreigners have of the man. He fled to the kingdom of his neighbour, the tyrant Francia, where he lived in friendly service to suffering humanity. Here he practised the benevolence and charity which he had preached. He seems to have been a man as wild as the age in which he lived; but had his efforts been more successful, he might well have been hailed as the George Washington of his country.

From 1814 until his death in 1840 the sinister person of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia ruled Paraguay. Rather thoughtlessly his people had invited him to be a despot when they finally gave him absolute power in 1816; he naturally accepted the invitation. From that moment, Francia was Paraguay, and Paraguay was Francia. From an individual of most moral respectability, Francia was transformed into a tyrant through fear. Terrorized by the invasion of Paraguay by Uruguayan forces, he developed this complex which changed his life. He adopted measures calculated to prevent all future attempts of this sort. For nine consecutive days he executed each day eight of the leading conspirators. But the tortured victims had disclosed new conspirators, and the executions did not end with the seventy-two.

Fear dominated the man's whole being, and everywhere he saw treason, daggers, assassination. A possible assassin lurking behind the orange trees with which the streets of the capital were lined made it seem necessary to demolish them. Grenadiers, veritable gendarmes of proved fidelity, watched zealously over the old residence of the Spanish governors, which its proprietor had isolated by destroying the other houses nearby. There, in the company of his barber, a drunken mulatto, who served this second Louis XI as both confidant and information bureau to the public, with his insolent secretary who took revenge on the people for his master's harshness, and also attended by four slaves, Francia, always uneasy, always tormented, lived shrouded in mystery. So that no one might know where he was going to pass the night, he always slept in a different apartment. His life was austere, almost monastical.

The tyrant's fear was reflected in his subjects. As soon as he set foot outside his home, the cathedral bell would be rung, and all the inhabitants would hasten fearfully home, murmuring *El Supremo*. And woe to the one who delayed! If he should happen to meet the redoubtable cortège of the dictator and his body-guards, he would prostrate himself, not daring to raise his eyes to that icy stare which commanded silence.

Not only was Francia a tyrant through fear, but he was also despotic merely for the sake of being so. Once when his horse shied at the sight of a barrel before a door, the owner of the cask was punished severely for having dared to upset the nerves of the steed of a dictator. Furthermore, in evidence of supreme contempt for the unfortunate Spaniards who happened to be living in Paraguay, Francia issued a decree forbidding them to intermarry with white women. A relic of medieval tyranny seems his declaration that every male subject, no matter how impoverished, must wear a hat—even though this headgear consist of only a wisp of straw. The sole purpose of such headgear was that his subjects might sweep it off with obsequious flourish if their dreaded lord should pass them on the street. All this, and much that was of grimmer import, occurred in the Paraguay of the early nineteenth century.

Obsessed with the ardent desire that Paraguay should become self-supporting and independent of all other nations, Francia completely isolated his country. Not only were foreigners forbidden to enter; they were also prevented from departing if they happened to be already there. There is one amusing incident of the dictator's invading another country in search of his victim. Aimé Bonpland, the famous French naturalist, for example, had lived on the borders of the country experimenting in the raising of Paraguayan tea. Francia, fearing lest the Paraguayan monopoly might be lost, sent a company of four hundred soldiers across the Parana river, secretly and suddenly, in pursuit of this rash experimenter. Falling upon the unfortunate Bonpland, they bore him back to their country as a prisoner. There the kidnapped naturalist remained for ten years, notwithstanding the protests which flooded the mails, and which Francia ignored. Fortunately, Bonpland became so enamoured of the floral riches of his new abode that he lost all desire to return to his native land.

In spite of all this tyranny, we are told that the people of Paraguay wept at their dictator's death. This was possibly due not so much to sorrow as to fear of his resurrection.

A *caudillo* highly distinguished for drunkenness and debauchery was Mariano Melgarejo, President of Bolivia from 1865 to 1871. He was typical in his almost hypnotic power over his followers. Their blind obedience is shown by their unquestioning submissiveness. During the Franco-Prussian war, Melgarejo one night decided that it was his duty to assist the cause of France. Were not Bolivia and France actuated by common ideals? He made up his mind that the French should be aided in their struggle against the Prussians. As a result, the Bolivian army was called to arms

and marched forth in battle panoply. The wondering soldiers marched all night, quite ignorant of their destination. In the early morning a few daring officers gathered courage to ask where they were going, and upon being informed, mentioned not only the distance between Bolivia and European battlefields, but also the wetness of the intervening ocean. Melgarejo replied that the army would go by the short cut. A few hours later, however, he had sufficiently recovered from his drunken orgy to lead the army home again.

One of the most picturesque of *caudillos* was the Indian, Rafael Carrera, who gathered together a host of his fellows and marched them into Guatemala City. An excellent idea of the terror inspired by the entrance of that barbaric horde may be gathered from the account of a contemporary, Mr. John Stephens.

Among Carrera's leaders were Monreal and other known outlaws, criminals and murderers. He himself entered on horseback with a green bush in his hat, and hung round with pieces of dirty cotton cloth, covered with pictures of the saints. The inhabitants were naturally horrified to see this mass of barbarians, "choking up the streets, all with green bushes in their hats, seeming at a distance like a moving forest; armed with rusty muskets, old pistols, fowling pieces, some with locks and some without; sticks formed into the shape of muskets, with tinplate locks; clubs, machetes, and knives tied to the end of long poles; and swelling the multitude...two or three thousand women, with sacks and *alforjas* for carrying away the plunder". "Many, who had never left their villages before, looked wild at the sight of the houses and churches, and the magnificence of the city. They entered the Plaza, vociferating, *Viva la religion, y muerte a los estranjeros!* Carrera himself, amazed at the immense ball he had set in motion, was so embarrassed that he could not guide his horse. He afterwards said that he was frightened at the difficulty of controlling this huge and disorderly mass....

"At sundown the whole multitude set up the *Salve*, or Hymn to the Virgin. The swell of human voices filled the air, and made the hearts of the inhabitants quake with fear. Carrera entered the cathedral; the Indians, in mute astonishment at its magnificence, thronged in after him, and set up around the beautiful altar the uncouth images of their village saints. Monreal broke into the house of General Prem, and seized a uniform coat, richly embroidered with gold, into which Carrera slipped his arms, still wearing his straw hat with its green bush. A watch was brought him, but he did not know the use of it... Words cannot convey any idea of the

awful state of suspense which the city suffered, dreading every moment to hear the signal given for general pillage and massacre."

On the third day Carrera, having been placated by a colonel's commission, a thousand rifles, eleven thousand dollars for himself and his troops, and the official appointment to be commandant of a neighbouring province, withdrew his forces, and went to plunder elsewhere.

From this period onward, the remarkable personality of Carrera began to assert itself more and more prominently in the affairs of Central America. He became all-powerful, and was known by his native followers as *El Rey de los Indios*, the most fanatical even styling him *Hijo de Dios*. Carrera was appointed President of Guatemala for life in 1854. He died in 1865.

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These are only some of the leading *caudillos*, those whose showmanship leaves them indelibly fixed on the mind of humanity. One must, however, remember that there were many others. Of these others it is difficult to say just who were *caudillos* and who were not. In a sense, the conquerors were *caudillos*; the liberators have been called *caudillos*; each local cacique may have been a little *caudillo*; some believe that the present president of Venezuela is a *caudillo*. There would, therefore, be an element of truth in the statement that South America has been under the power of the *caudillos* since the coming of the Spaniards, and that some South American countries are so ruled to-day. Although one may say that the period between the attainment of independence and the relative stability of the modern governments was turbulent, and that it was the period when the greatest number of these most striking figures appeared, still, even to-day, similar conditions produce similarly distressing results. *Caudillos* still exist, they still lead revolutions, but they have ceased to be picturesque.