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THE MAN FROM THE PAMPAS

SOME MILLIONS of worshipful and deluded citizens of Argentina have been speaking of 1964 as "The Year of the Return", in much the same way as devout Christians might await the Second Coming of the Messiah. Finally, in the last month of the year, the attempt was made.

Deposed and exiled by a military insurrection nine years earlier, Peron had tarried briefly in Paraguay, Panama, and Santo Domingo before settling down in Spain, where he established sumptuous quarters, drawing on the ample balances, filched from the Argentina economy during the years he held sway there, that he had built up in Swiss banks. He had been asked by Spain for a pledge to abstain from political activities.

It is believed he was not over-anxious to abandon his snug retreat, but ambitious partisans urged him on, pointing out that the Peronista party was clamouring for his return, and that the country was being badly governed by a weak, irresolute, but duly-elected civilian president who would not actively oppose his return. At the same time the labour unions remembered with nostalgia the period of his ascendancy when wage increases were often granted even before they were requested.

He had planned to set up his headquarters in Paraguay, a country ruled by a friendly military dictator, where he could closely supervise insurrection in Argentina without danger to himself. One factor he overlooked. His plane must land in Brazil, which was no longer under the rule of the devious and corrupt Joao Goulart—familiarily known as Jango—a former protégé of Getulio Vargas who would assuredly have welcomed him. But Goulart and his leftist group had been unseated by an honest general who had dedicated himself to cleansing the foul Augean stables, and Goulart was now a fugitive in Uruguay. Peron's plane and party were detained in Rio, he was declared "*persona non grata*", and the plane was re-routed for return to Spain, where on arrival Franco further restricted his movements because of violation of parole.

There he may continue to vegetate in luxury on his ill-gotten wealth. After the ignominious end to the well-advertised but abortive adventure, his Justicialist party in Argentina might be expected to wither away as the Peron myth fades. But for that to happen a stronger government in Buenos Aires is highly desirable.

Juan Domingo Peron, sometimes referred to as John Sunday, was of Italian immigrant stock. His great grandfather had been a senator from Sardinia, and while in Rome was reputed to have married a Scottish lady whom he met there. He himself was born in 1896 in the village of Tobos, and grew up on a ranch on the Pampas in the territory of Chubut. In 1911 he entered a military school. He remained with the army until he retired in 1945 to enter political life. During that period, he studied at the war college, served on the general staff, was military attaché to his country's embassy in Chile, and taught at the war college where he wrote a history of military campaigns.

His great opportunity came in 1939, when he was sent to Italy to study mountain warfare and where he remained until after Italy entered the World War. He was greatly impressed by the Fascist system and the way it served the purposes of its creator. Apparently he saw in it a system that could readily be adapted to the Argentine economy, with himself in the role of Mussolini.

Returning to Argentina, he taught mountain warfare in the military school, where he became friendly with General Farrell, whose views matched his own. They became involved in politics, and shortly after the military revolution of June, 1943, Farrell became provisional President and rewarded his friend by making him Minister of War.

But apparently Peron felt that, if he wished to reach his goal, he could automatically count on the military and would need the support of labour. So he got Farrell to create a new cabinet post, that of Labour and Welfare, and then was transferred to head the new department. He had played his cards carefully. Elections were shortly to be held. Farrell was ready to step aside in his favour. So he resigned as an officer in the army in October, 1945, to become the candidate for President of the Labour Party in the coming elections.

During the interim military rule, with General Farrell as provisional President and Colonel Peron as the strong man in the administration, Peron carried forward his plans to be a candidate for elected President in the elections slated for early 1946. At this time he met two previously unimportant persons who captured his imagination and had a profound effect on his future.

Miguel Miranda, of slight education and small beginnings, had built up a modest fortune conserving and canning local fruits and vegetables. He succeeded in getting Peron's ear and taught him how a President could make money for himself, how to hang on to it, and where to safely salt it away. At Peron's request Farrell appointed Miranda to the presidency of the Central Bank. It should be noted that Argentina during the long war years had continued to export, in quantity, beef, wheat, and wool, mainly to Great Britain, but could import little in return, so that by 1946 she had built up unusually large foreign credits. Miranda fully realized this bonanza-in-waiting.

The other was Maria Eva Duarte, later known as Evita. Born in 1919 in the village of Los Toldos and reared in the small town of Junin as the youngest of five illegitimate children, she ran away from home at the age of sixteen with a wandering musician. She was said then to have been a roly-poly youngster, curly-haired and brunette. In Buenos Aires she landed at the bottom, but her restless ambition ignored no opportunity to better herself. In the ten years since leaving Junin she had become slim, straight-haired, blonde, and fashionable, and had become a small-part actress on the stage and radio. She first met Peron at a party, and they soon discovered that they had common aspirations. She soon moved to better quarters and began to arrive at work in an army Cadillac.

As the campaign progressed, it became evident that a strongly Catholic electorate would find it hard to stomach this relationship. So Peron and Eva were duly and quietly married.

On the platform, Peron proved to be a rabble-rouser. His appeal was to labour, which he had helped organize, to the oppressed, to the "descamisados" —the "shirtless ones". He was aided by dissensions in the once-strong Radical party which opposed him, by his generosity in doling out government funds to labour, and by the opposition of U.S. Ambassador Braden, who took an active part in the campaign. Peron was not slow to turn this to his advantage. Appealing to the latent anti-Americanism always resentful of foreign interference, he asked the voters, "which will you have, Peron or Braden?" In the end he captured 55% of the vote cast.

I returned to Buenos Aires from New York early in 1946, after the election campaign. During the whole period of military rule our numerous public utilities had been constantly harassed by arbitrary impositions and by a refusal to adjust rates in depreciated currency. Several properties had been expropriated without legal process, without our being able to defend ourselves. It was logical to think that the strong man in the government must know of

this, if indeed he had not directly authorized it. I was to see the President-elect and seek for justice, or, in the alternative, ask, as relief from an intolerable situation, that the government should take over all our properties and interests, which had cost in excess of one hundred million dollars, at a negotiated figure.

With my local officials I went to Miranda at the Central Bank, and asked for an interview with Peron, who was then living quietly in an apartment in the residential section pending inauguration and a move to the Casa Rosada, the Argentina White House. Miranda was brusque and business-like in listening to our troubles and our request for a meeting with the President-elect. He interrupted to say: "What do you want to see him for? I can do anything for you that he can."

I said I was quite sure that was so, but my associates in New York had specifically asked me to see the incoming President. It was only later that I realized I had been offered a powerful intermediary, and perhaps a short-cut to our problem. Actually it was twelve years later before a sale to a civilian government was finally effected.

Miranda turned to the phone and asked for "La Duarte". At the end of his conversation he turned to us, saying "tomorrow at eight". I asked if that was morning or evening, and he replied, smiling, "Eight in the morning, and you're lucky he didn't make it seven; I'll be there too".

The following day, the fifteenth of May, with my local president and my general manager, I parked down the street until we saw Miranda arrive and enter. We followed after an interval and passed the scrutiny of several evil-looking volunteer guards at the entrance, advised by Miranda of our coming.

We sat about a round table, the five of us. I happened to be seated across from a portière which led to the living quarters. The conference was superficially agreeable. We were given time to state our difficulties and every time we wished to bring up a new imposition we asked permission, and he cheerfully answered "*encantado*" and listened with attention. When we had finished our list of grievances he took over, but only then. He was then about fifty years of age, tall, of military bearing, smooth-shaven, and with a ready command of language.

He stated clearly and courteously that he had no intention of taking over properties already operating in the country. His government was going to need all available funds to apply to new projects and had neither time nor money to invade private industry. He said we had been badly treated, and if he found occasion to take over any property we could rest assured it would

be properly negotiated. Everyone would receive fair treatment. We should have the security necessary to carry on and expand. He reiterated that he was not going to nationalize existing industries. It sounded like a good programme but apparently, as subsequent events demonstrated, he had no intention of carrying it out. In conclusion, he said he knew that the public utilities had been paying certain officials in government, but recognized that they were in the position of a wayfarer with a pistol pointed at his head.

Several times during our long talk, a blonde lady in a bathrobe had pushed aside the portière I faced, and looked in, but in default of an invitation from Peron had retired. Now, as we stood ready to leave, she walked right in and was presented. This was Evita, with her golden hair in perfect order, but still in her bathrobe. She announced that the Minister of War was about to arrive.

As we stood about the table, Peron came around and lightly fingered my tie. I was wearing my clan tartan, and this had caught his eye. He said, "I recognize the tartan. I myself have some Scottish blood. One of my great-grandmothers was a Mackenzie!"

In the next few days I shopped for the tartan, but it was not available in Buenos Aires. So I telephoned my New York office to secure some ties or scarves, silk preferred, and got my wife to give up the silk tartan scarf she prized, on a promise to replace. These were sent to Miranda for delivery to the Perons.

The assurances we had received proved to be without value. The new government, civilian in form, proceeded to dominate deputies and senators, and even the courts of justice. It proceeded to take over and nationalize the American-owned telephone company and the British-owned railways.

In fact, after he became the legal head of the government, he kept not a single one of the promises he made us. He organized a bureau to operate the confiscated properties. He became an absolute dictator, in the style of Mussolini, while preserving the shell of democracy. He gave Evita a desk in the Department of Labour, and from that time she absolutely controlled the department and its policies. Argentina became a police state, dominated by hoodlums. Letters were opened, and those who expressed anti-government sentiments were punished. We feared to discuss politics in public. Night after night we sat in our room in the Plaza Hotel and heard gangs roving the streets and chanting "Peron, Peron, Evita, Peron, Peron, Evita." The latter became head of the Eva Peron Foundation, and those who refused to contribute, or whose donations were judged insufficient, were visited by health

officials and their establishments closed down as unsanitary. Months later I called on Peron after he was firmly established in the Casa Rosada, and he was as smooth, oily smooth, as ever. He continued to assure a mutual friend, a Latin but not an Argentine, who had his confidence, that he would take over our properties and pay for them. But apparently his foreign credits were disappearing like snow before the spring sun; and when they were gone he took the usual course of financing by means of the printing press.

But labour was loud in his praise, the army hesitated to rebel against a fellow officer, and others were deterred by a new law (*Ley de Desacato*) which made it a punishable offence to speak or act against established authority. He had no difficulty whatever in being re-elected in 1952 for a second six-year term.

But Evita the masterful died early in his second term; her brother Juan Duarte, who was private secretary to Peron, was prevented from leaving the country, and either committed suicide or was murdered. And the army, whose officers were recruited from the best families, became increasingly restive. Only the army could unseat him, and in 1955 it happened. Peron with a few of the faithful fled to Paraguay, and after four years of travel, settled in Spain. His bank accounts were safely in Europe and he could live in luxury wherever he chose. But his lust for power, and a hot desire to punish his enemies in Argentina, involved him in the late and abortive attempt to stage a comeback. Coming to power when he did, with strong support and an overflowing treasury, he could have put his naturally rich country in the forefront of progressive Latin nations. He proved to be merely a cheap and plausible adventurer, and Argentina today is still suffering grievously from the unhealthy effects of his disastrous regime.