

The Argentine Republic and English Radical Reformers

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The writer of the following pages, having lived for many years in the Argentine Republic, where, almost from the establishment of its independence, the whole so-called Radical programme of this country has been in practice, wishes to point out how utterly useless all political reforms are while economic conditions are opposed to freedom. This they will see by a plain statement of facts as to what has fallen under the writer's own notice in the Republic.

But first I must show how thoroughly "free" the country is in a political sense. You have, in the first place, a republic modelled after the United States, with a fine free Constitution (on paper), which declares all men free and equal, and the rest of it. Then you have universal suffrage for all native-born citizens, or foreigners who choose to be naturalised, which these latter very seldom do, there being a very great advantage in not possessing a vote, as I shall prove further on. Then you have vote by ballot, and an arrangement by which minorities shall be secured representation. You have free education in public schools. Land is free, and is sold freely in the market like any other commodity. There is no law of primogeniture, a man's property being divided equally among all his children if he dies without making a will, and if he makes one, the law only allows him to dispose of a small percentage away from them.

Again, every Province - which corresponds to "State" in the United States - has its own executive, ministers, Senate, and House of Representatives, but no house of hereditary legislators as in England. There is no Ireland there to lift a Parnell into popularity or power for his noble efforts in her cause, or a Grand Old Man verging on eighty years of age who has suddenly found out the justice of it. The members of these legislative bodies are all paid, and paid well; and every five years there is a fresh election (more's the pity).

All this we have, and more also; and yet in that favoured land the rights and feelings of the poor are trampled on by the rich and powerful in a way which would be incredible except to one who, like myself, has seen it with his own eyes. The right of suffrage, also, far from being an advantage, has been and is a dreadful disadvantage to the poor man possessing it.

In the year 1871 I landed in Buenos Aires, in the month of July, and in the month of October I started with an expedition of English engineers to cross the Pampa to Chile and survey a line of railway then projected. Mr. Robert Crawford, a well-known civil engineer, was chief of

the expedition, and it was considered to be difficult and dangerous work, owing to the line running through country continually traversed by the Indians. The *personnel* were numerous, and a medical officer was required, whose appointment I received.

The starting-point was Chivilcoy, the most westerly point of the Western Railway of Buenos Aires, and there we were informed we should find carts, cattle, and *peons* (native labourers) waiting for us. And sure enough there they were, particularly the *peons*, who had been carefully lodged in jail pending our arrival! On enquiry, Mr. Crawford was informed that it was the usual thing to do in such cases, as otherwise these free citizen-voters might repent and give up their engagement.

Does this seem incredible? No doubt it does; and it was very surprising to us, who had just come from a benighted country where universal suffrage and republicanism were unknown; but you will find by the sequel that such treatment of our peons is merely typical of what the class receives in all respects and on all occasions. Mr. Robert Crawford, after his return to England, published a book, 'Across the Pampa and the Andes,' in which he relates the history of the expedition, and in which will be found mention of the circumstance I have just stated. I found it particularly strange myself, as I had a short time before terminated a three years' residence in the United States, and believed at the time that republicanism and universal suffrage were not vain words. I thought that the vote was a protection to a man against such treatment, and I found myself at a horrible disadvantage when arguing afterwards with members of the staff who upheld rival institutions.

Well, before I recovered from the shock of this disposal of our free voters, I was called by the commissary officer of the expedition, Mr. Bookey, son of an Irishman born in the country, and who acted as our interpreter, to introduce me to a fine old Quixote-looking officer in uniform kept and cavalry sword. This I was told was Captain Cabrera, commanding officer of the peons of the expedition! that is to say, the Argentine peons or workers, the freemen brought up in the enjoyment of universal suffrage and republicanism; the foreign workers, of whom we had about twenty, English and Germans, were not expected to submit to the orders of the captain. Cabrera was an officer of the National Guard only, but it was quite sufficient that he wore a uniform and a sword, for the *peons, accustomed to the most slavish submission to authority*, to obey him unquestioningly, and as we have seen, to submit to be thrust into jail by him, for *fear* they might break their contract.

Well, we started after much delay, owing to the villainy of the Government contractors, who supplied us with almost useless animals at the price of good ones. But we did not cross the Pampa as at first intended, for, when arrived about seventy leagues from Chivilcoy, the danger of being attacked by Indians was so great that the officers of the frontier declared we would require a very large escort of soldiers, and this the Government refused to give us. Consequently it was resolved to pass on from fort to fort of the frontier and get to the Andes as quickly as possible, there to join the engineers who set out from the Chilean side and do the really difficult part of the survey first. We thus had the opportunity given us of seeing what the life of the Argentine citizen-soldier on the frontier was.

And what did we find? We found the soldiers delivered into the worst kind of slavery to their officers, and no regard whatever paid to anything they had a legal claim to as "rights". They were never paid and were abominably fed and clothed. We were told by the officer at one fort that for ten months they had not had supplies of any kind, and subsisted entirely by hunting. They were retained in service as long as their officers chose, without any regard to the term of their

conscription or the time they were condemned to serve as punishment - service in the army being one method of chastising malefactors. In some places the soldiers were kept at hard labour cultivating the ground for the benefit of the commanding officer.

Is it not a wonder that the power of the vote, and the benefit of a free republican constitution, did not save these men from such injustice? Be it remembered that they were, with the exception of the criminals, free citizens, who were sent to serve their country on the frontier for three years, in obedience to the law! All will, however, be understood when you learn what the law was and the life these men lead in their homes.

Finally the expedition came to an end after nine months, and a useless expenditure of seventy odd thousand pounds, for the line was never constructed. We returned to Buenos Aires, and I settled down in a country town (Navarro). Here I was not long settled, when, one day observing unusual bustle about the *Juzgado*, which in every town is a building which includes town hall, court of justice, jail, and police barracks, I was told that the contingent for frontier service had been brought in and was as usual lodged in jail. Presently I met one of the members of the municipality, a kind, good-hearted man, who told me that in the contingent was one man that he knew, who had a wife and eight children, and that he had been dragged away from his home, and unless great efforts were made on his behalf with the authorities, he would be sent to the frontier and his family left to shift for themselves!

On enquiry then, and on frequent occasions afterwards, I find that this was a common case. There was no regulation as to age, or family, or anything else. When the contingent was required parties of mounted police were sent out, and men were dragged from their homes with as little consideration as they would be in a slave hunt in Africa. The whole thing was under the control and will of one man in the Partido, the so-called justice of the peace (*Juz de Paz*), and of course the first taken were those he had a grudge against. Glorious things, Universal Suffrage, Republicanism, and "free" institutions! I suppose part of their "freedom" consists in their gentle toleration of such little matters as this frontier service, What a vile slavery it produced, and how dreadful were its effects on the social condition and even the very character of the poor peasants! It had up to this been a source of great astonishment to me to see the slavish attitude of the poor Gauchos (another name for peasant or *peon*) in the presence of rich men or those in authority, but I now began to understand it.

Time rolled on, and the year 1874 brought with it a presidential election, and great was the excitement during the latter part of the preceding year, as the parties in favour of the two candidates, General Mitre and Doctor Alsina, were both very strong, and lively times were expected. Alsina, however, had the advantage of being supported by the Government of the Province of Buenos Aires, if he was not actually governor at the time. I think he had lately retired in favour of one of his political friends.

I cannot help recalling to mind the graceful satire of Goldsmith in his "Letters from a Citizen of the World," as I begin my task of describing a contested election in the free Argentine Republic in the year of grace 1874. I cannot but imagine the candid Chinaman, or some equally candid believer in Republicanism and Universal Suffrage, just arrived in the town of Navarro, and preparing himself to enjoy the sight of a "free" people exercising its right of suffrage, in order to choose the chief magistrate who should "preside over its destinies" for the next six years!

Free! oh yes, the ballot box was there, guarded by the agents of law-and-order, the gallant policemen of the Partido (district), every man armed with a carbine that would not go off and a

big cavalry sword that would, and that on the slightest occasion. An awkward squad, they were paraded in front of the church, and in the porch of that temple was placed the table on which rested the aforesaid box, and behind which sat the scrutineers with their president. You see how even the influence of religion was invoked, to give solemnity and safety to this solemn civic ceremony. And yet, O shade of Whang Hoam! it was observed that none came to deposit their votes in that sacred urn but those who were of one and the same political colour, and that the colour of the Mayor or Juez, and other authorities of the district!

Why was this? Were they not free to come? Certainly they were, but certain little previous incidents had shown them clearly that they were sure to have their throats cut if they voted the wrong way. They were much in the predicament of the free worker in certain other countries, who is "free" to accept the employer's terms or reject them and starve!

A few days before the election, there had arrived in the town a man well known in the district and in all the country round for the number of murders he had committed. He was one of those unfortunate victims of the hateful frontier system I have just mentioned, and of the many other injustices inflicted on the poor Gaucho. One of those, of whom I am only surprised there were not more, who, tired of injustice, and being daring and powerful, and skilful in the use of the long *facon* or dagger they use, turned out at war with society in every district. The rural police of that time were not able to cope with them, one of the favourite feats of such men as this Juan Moreira being to engage in battle with the whole police force of a district, six or seven men, and rout them after killing one or two. The feat was not so difficult as may be imagined, for the Gaucho was always well armed, and well mounted, which was of more importance still, while the police were always badly mounted and armed, and with very little desire to risk their lives in an attempt to capture a man with whom they were strongly in sympathy. They were at that time also quite unused to fire-arms, so the well-mounted Gaucho cut them up in detail, charging them when he chose on the open Pampa, or prairie, for it must be remembered that the Province of Buenos Ayres is one great flat open plain.

This Juan Moreira was known to have killed several men and one officer of police in the very same district, or Partido of Navarro, and yet here we find him coming openly to the town and taking up his quarters in the house of the Mayor! So it was; but then these were election times, and it had been the custom at all elections to make use of good fighting men, no matter what their antecedents. The fact was, that Moreira had been sent for by the chief of the government party, but, being under some obligations to the Mayor, who was in opposition, he had placed his sword or *facon* at his service, and it was joyfully accepted. He brought with him a number of men more or less of the same stamp as himself, and they began operations by killing three men of the opposite party in the suburbs of the town, and one old man in the public square, quite near to the Juzgado or Town Hall. This man, though left for dead, was not so, but died a few days after under my care. When Moreira and one of his men who accompanied him on this occasion, had retired, the police came and carried in the body to the Juzgado, and one of the policemen finding the sheath of Moreira's *facon* on the side walk, ran after him and restored it to him!

After this the opposite party hid themselves in terror, and the Mayor's party had it all their own way. Three cheers for Universal Suffrage and "free" institutions generally! A few days after this I saw Moreira and some of his companions galloping at full speed round the Plaza, or principal square, and shouting with all the force of their lungs, "Death to the Alsinistas!" I had occasion to see him more closely a little later on.

The government of the province, being a supporter of the opposite party, the Alsinistas, sent down a squad of city police (25 men) to take Moreira, and they arrived one night quite unexpectedly. They were joined on their arrival by a large number of the Alsina party, and learning that Moreira was quietly taking his glass at a small inn in company with two policemen of the town, they altogether marched up there at about eleven o'clock at night, and surprised him. They did not succeed in taking him, however, for Moreira as soon as he saw the crowd rushing into the house whipped off his poncho, and in a twinkling put out all the lights, and in the darkness and confusion managed to slip out through them all! Not content with this he turned and fired on them as soon as he reached a vacant space where he felt sure of escape. He grievously wounded one of the party with a bullet that smashed his lower jaw, but he himself was hit by a split bullet from a blunderbuss, which lodged in his face. He escaped, however, and two days afterwards I was requested by a member of the municipality to go and visit him at the house of the commander of the National Guard. I there removed from under the skin of the lower jaw half of a pistol bullet. He was a handsome, powerfully-built man, and bore the necessary operation without a grimace. After all was over he thanked me with all the grace and politeness which distinguish the Argentine Gaucho or peasant.

It would be impossible for me to describe the confusion of mind which possessed me during all these events, and on this occasion in particular. I looked upon this man at the time as a vulgar assassin, and deserving as such to be attended only in the jail, as I told the man who came to call me; but he was actually in the hands of the authorities of the town, who supported him, and in any case he was entitled to have his wounds attended to. I therefore came to the conclusion that it was my duty to attend him, as my refusal to do so could do no good in any way.

Such cases as these show plainly what law and authority really are, and how false is the pretence that they are intended to protect the weak, or serve the general good of the community. While the opposition party made use of Moreira and others, the government party released from the jails all such men as they thought they could rely on to serve them in the same way during the elections, and they do so still.

The upshot of the matter was that the opposition party took up arms, headed by their candidate General Mitre, declaring that they had been defrauded of their rights because the government party had done what the opposition had shown they were ready to do, where they had the power, as in Navarro. Then the government called out the National Guard, and the Mitre party did the same where they could. Then was seen the spectacle of the poor Gauchos dragged from their homes to fight, either for or against the government, according to the political leanings of their masters.

It was a strange and curious sight to see them mustering in Navarro. Every man came with his horse and equipment, and he was furnished with a long cane with one blade of shears fastened to the end of it by way of a lance - that was all.

However, the Government party was too strong, and the Mitristas were miserably defeated; but not before there was one small fight, in which soldiers of the line took part on both sides and several poor fellows were killed. General Mitre was taken prisoner a few days after, and all was over. Then, to smooth matters somewhat and to show clearly what a farce all their voting was, Doctor Alsina, who, according to the returns cooked up by the Government, was elected, retired, and another man of the party, Avellaneda, took his place and was proclaimed President.

Since then I have witnessed many elections, and can state without the least fear of contradiction that they have all been an utter farce, the party having the control in each district, or partido, sending in any returns they chose in utter disregard of the truth. The board of scrutineers is nominated ostensibly from both competing parties, but the ballot box is delivered up to the municipality, who arrange the matter as they choose. I have seen an election, a few years ago, where not more than a dozen men voted on both sides, and the government returns published in the papers counted them by hundreds! The President of the municipality treated the matter in my presence as a good joke, and laughed heartily when telling me how that and other like things were done. He was one of those thorough fellows who saw and did not hesitate to say that the whole thing was a farce, and as a farce he treated it. He saw plainly the utter worthlessness of the *peon's* vote, who knows nothing and cares nothing about either political party, but who is compelled to vote by his patron or the master who employs him in order to save his family from want. The vote of the *peon* places great power in the hands of the large holders of land in each district, and would make them almighty if fraud and violence were not used as some check upon them.

Here you have an instance of the omnipotence of economic causes on men's conduct, and their influence even on their ideas of morality. I remember once expostulating with one of the principal men in the town of Navarro, when Moreira was in charge there, and he strenuously defended the policy or conduct of his party in employing him. He said, "The Government party employ their assassins, having let them out of the jails for the purpose, and we have a perfect right to do the same when we can." The economic conditions are, as I have said, responsible for all that I have described, namely, the slavish condition of the *peons*, and their submission to so much oppression, the existence of such men as Moreira, and in general for the complete failure of political institutions, thoroughly free in principle as they are in the Republic, to make poor men free while such conditions exist.

In the Argentine Republic, as I believe in all Spanish America, complete monopoly of the land has been maintained ever since its first settlement. The land was conceded or sold to government favourites or rich men, and in enormous tracts of ten, twenty, and a hundred leagues. Rivadavia, the most capable of the founders of the Republic, endeavoured indeed to put a stop to it, and for a few years while he was governor of Buenos Aires, public lands were rented and not sold. But he was expelled, and the old system returned. This system of land monopoly is the cause, I maintain, of the whole social and political institutions of the people, their habits and customs, and manner of life. Being granted in such large areas to each owner, and no provision having been made, as in the United States, for the poor settler, who could thus emancipate himself from the slavery of *peonage*, the workers have been kept strictly in dependence on the owners of the land. For the same reason the industry of the country has necessarily been confined to cattle-raising. Within the last few years, since it can be done on a large scale by machinery, agriculture has received some impulse, being carried on for exportation; but this cannot last long nor go very far, the chief industry is, and will be for a long time, cattle-raising. For the same reason of land monopoly the population has been restricted, this immense country having only now about four million inhabitants. Then, the complete dependence of the workers on the owners of the land has been the cause, in a country so sparsely settled, of the frequent attempts at civil war which they call revolutions. Whenever the party in opposition to the Government found itself strong enough, that is to say having in its ranks enough of large landholders, it knew that it could count

upon enough men to make serious opposition to the Government in the field, and if not to get all, at least to get some part of the spoils of office.

They then, as we saw in 1874, declared, as was always true, that they were defrauded of their right of suffrage, and that there was no other remedy but to appeal to arms. Every man then called on his *peons* to follow him to the field, in the same way as they followed him to the polls. Every *peon* had a horse and equipment, a cane with a knife or shears on top, and provided with a lance. There was plenty of cattle to be found everywhere, on the lands of their opponents particularly, and meat with a little *yerba*, the tea of the country, is all the native *peon* requires. As a rule they knew nothing whatever of the cause of the quarrel, but they went nothing loth, for it was a jolly time of freedom and excitement, and each man having provided himself with a good horse was determined not to be the last in retreat whatever he might be in the advance. The fighting was generally very trifling, and for the reason I have mentioned, that the *peon* very properly did not care to risk his life for his masters.

In the year 1880, the authorities of the Province of Buenos Aires. took up arms against the Federal Government, and called out the militia or the National Guard. They collected over fifteen thousand men together, who were surprised one morning by a detachment of regular troops, about a thousand men and two guns, and at the first shot the whole fifteen thousand cleared for home - very properly, too.

I think I have said enough to explain the existence of such men as Moreira. Naturally, the authorities in each district were the creatures of the government and the landowners, and so the unfortunate Gaucho who incurred their displeasure was dragged off to the frontier, or in a thousand other ways rendered miserable, until finally, provoked beyond all endurance, or, after returning from the frontier to find his home broken up, and his wife, or companion (for the same vile system prevented them from marrying) living with another, then a man of spirit turned out at war with society. He levied blackmail everywhere he went, and was dependent on no man's will or pleasure. Such men were looked upon by their fellows as heroes, and not alone by their fellows, for they have found a poet (Fernandez), who in such poems as "Martin Fierro" has sung their sorrows, their trials, and their virtues; and a romance writer, Dr Eduardo Gutierrez, not the least interesting of whose romances is the life of our acquaintance, Juan Moreira. Poor Juan! His life paid the penalty of his services to his masters, while the men who employed him continued to live as honoured and honourable citizens.

Under the circumstances I have related, the possession of the vote was really a great disadvantage, and the foreigner who could not be called upon to vote was in a most advantageous position. I have often laughed when reading comments in English and North American papers about the Irishman's love of politics, and wondered what they would think if they were told that there existed a country where no inducement could be found to bring an Irishman to the polls, and not alone that, but where he did all in his power to prevent his children born in the country from becoming possessed of the right of suffrage.

The foreigner was unmolested in his home; not having a vote he incurred no hatred at election times, and for him there was no frontier nor any prosecution from the authorities whom he had voted against or failed to vote for. The consequence was that while the poor native remained poor, the foreigner could easily make an independence and even a fortune by steady industry. But this advantage, which was due to economic causes, the ignorant foreigner ascribed to some race superiority, and the rich native as a rule admitted it!

Even in such newspapers as *La Nacion*, of Buenos Aires, which belongs to and is edited by a man that should know better, I have frequently seen comparisons made between foreigners and native workers unfavourable to the latter, on the ground that they were lazy! Nothing could exceed their enthusiastic praise of the industrious Irishman, and when I mentioned the fact that in Ireland I had heard poor Irishmen continually accused of laziness by their rich masters the landlords, they would not believe I was speaking the truth.

It may perhaps be said that things have changed in the last few years, and that now there is no contingent required for the frontier, etc. My answer is that whatever change has been made such as this, has followed from economic changes which preceded it; and, that if the hold of the masters has relaxed on one side it has tightened on the other; so that I can prove if need be that the condition of the *peon* is in many respects much worse today than it was when the vile frontier service was at hand as a ready instrument of oppression.

Than of the Argentine Republic, there never was a country of which it can be more truly said, "Laws grind the poor and rich men rule the law,". In spite of all its Free Constitution, Universal Suffrage, Home Rule, Free Land, Free Education, and all the rest which the English Radical is trying to humbug the people into accepting as panaceas for all the social ills. In more primitive countries, like the Argentine Republic, the truth is more easily seen that economic causes really determine all the social and political life of a people.

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