

A STRANGE HISTORY OF A STRANGE AMERICAN REPUBLIC.

There is not we believe one grown up person out of every twenty who is thoroughly read up in the history of the insignificant republics occupying an immense portion of South and Central America. There is Paraguay, for example, a country nearly as large as England and Scotland put together, with less than one million and a half of a population; and although it has been at war with the Empire of Brazil and the Argentine Confederation for the last five years, and has fought heroically against overwhelming odds, the chances are that very few people in this country have made themselves acquainted with its past history, its present condition and its internal economy. It may be worth while, therefore, to lay before our readers some information about Paraguay—the strangest republic on the American Continent or perhaps in the wide world. The population consists of aboriginal Indians and Europeans, chiefly Spaniards, along with a variety of mixed races of the most heterogeneous description imaginable. It is a far inland region, situated between the rivers Paraguay and Parana, bounded on the North and East by Brazil, and on the South and West by the Republics of the Argentine Confederation. It was owned by Spain when that monarchy was the most magnificent in the world; and when the successors of Charles V. lost every foot of ground on the Continent of America, the Province of Paraguay set up on its own account as a free and independent nation, with very little capital and less experience of freedom to begin with.

Sometime about the beginning of the 17th century the Jesuits found their way into Paraguay, and proceeded to Christianize and civilize the aboriginal Indians. These zealous missionaries met with numerous difficulties, but through the exercise of indomitable energy, patience and perseverance they succeeded in reducing the natives to a state of absolute and unquestioning submission. The poor semi-savages were taught to live in common, to work in common, to play in common, and to regard the superintending father as the representative of the Deity. On the other hand they were fed and clothed like children, treated with gala fetes and tournaments, and were promised the joys of a never ending Paradise in return for their labour and obedience. When the Jesuits were finally expelled from the vast regions on the River Plate the social and religious fabric which they had reared in Paraguay collapsed like an air bladder. The natives were totally ignorant of the mere rudiments of government, and of the rights or privileges of human beings in society. They had been slaves, contented with their slavery, animated by sentiments of obedience and fanaticism, and utterly incapable of managing their own affairs. In these circumstances they cheerfully placed their destinies in the hands of men who ruled them with a rod of iron without fear of risings or revolutions.

When the Spanish power collapsed in the River Plate about fifty years ago, the celebrated Dr. Francis assumed the reins of government in Paraguay. In 1817 this "bold, bad man" and terrible ruler, got himself proclaimed Supreme and Perpetual Dictator of the new Republic, and from that time until the time of his death in 1840, he exercised a tyranny more absolute and more ruthless than anything of the kind to be found in modern history. Paraguay was supposed to be a country in which liberty, equality, and fraternity might flourish abundantly,

but under the iron will of Francis the unresisting people were scarcely permitted to breathe. Men and women were thrown into prison, put to the torture, or executed for the most trifling offences, and even the humblest persons ceased to find safety in their obscurity. Espionage became general and mutual confidence was destroyed. Men moved in society as if they had been in a desert—afraid to whisper a word to their dearest friends lest it might lead to their destruction. The terrible Dictator lived in a state of complete seclusion in the recesses of his palace and nobody save his confidential underlings could penetrate to his presence. He assumed, in fact, the airs of divinity, and came to be called *El Supremo* by his terror-stricken subjects. He only went out in the evening, and we are told that his progress was marked by a solitude. When he quitted his palace the bell of the Cathedral sounded, and the inhabitants of Asuncion instantly fled in terror to their houses. If some unfortunate wight, by any chance, was encountered on the streets by the *cortege* of the Dictator, the poor fellow would drop upon his knees with his face to the earth, never daring to look upon the face of *El Supremo*, and in that prostrate position he would await his fate in an agony of fear. The usual practice on these occasions was for the escort to inflict several blows upon the culprit with the flat of a sabre heartily applied, but in other cases the offenders were carried off and cast into prison where a worse fate was too often in store for them.

Such was the home policy of Francis, and his foreign policy was equally despotic. He succeeded in cutting off Paraguay from the rest of the world so far as commercial intercourse was concerned. He resolved to make his "kingdom" independent of the foreigner, who was not permitted to set foot within the boundaries of Paraguay. Even Bompiani, the companion of Humboldt, was detained a prisoner for several years for presuming to cross the Parana without permission from the inexorable Dictator. The property and even the lives of the inhabitants could not be called their own, and everything was done by fixed rules according to order. Under the pretext of embellishing the capital about 200 houses were pulled down by order of *El Supremo*, without compensating the owners or troubling himself about the fate of the ejected families. The Paraguayans submitted to all this and every other species of oppression without resistance, until death removed the Dictator on the 19th September, 1840. After a brief interregnum, the sceptre was taken up by a lawyer named Don Carlos Lopez, who proved almost as relentless and tyrannical as his terrible predecessor. Without repudiating altogether the exclusive policy of Francis in commercial affairs, the new Dictator permitted some trading with other countries, but he exhibited the greatest hatred to foreigners, many of whom he treated with barbarous cruelty. He died in 1862, and was succeeded as "President of the Republic" by his eldest son Francisco Lopez—a man who has dragged his country to ruin, and made himself a fugitive through mad ambition. No sooner did he find himself installed in the seat of power than he resolved to make himself master of the "three rivers" and the territories adjacent thereto—that is to say, master of the Paraguay, the Parana, and the Uruguay, and of all eastern America to the south of Brazil. This ambitious project led to a war of five years' duration, a history of which has just been written by Mr. George Thompson, a civil engineer, who was employed during the sanguinary struggle by

Lopez as chief engineer in the field, with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Mr. Thompson in the first place gives his readers a picture of Paraguayan society previous to the outbreak of the war, which is very striking indeed, when we take into consideration the kind of government inflicted upon the country for nearly half a century. He tells us that crime was almost unknown, and when committed it was immediately detected and punished. "The mass of the people," he says, "was perhaps the happiest in existence. They had hardly to do any work to obtain a livelihood. Each family had its house or hut in its own ground. They planted in a few days enough maize, mandioca, and tobacco for their own consumption, and the crop hardly wanted looking at till it was ready to be gathered. Having at every hut a grove of oranges and also a few cows, the country people throughout the year were under little necessity of working. As to most Paraguayans the idea of the sum of human happiness is to lie down all day on a poncho in the shade and smoke and play the guitar, they may be considered to have been very happy, as they had little else to do. No taxes were ever levied in Paraguay, and all things were paid for out of the amassed wealth in the Treasury. The only revenue of Paraguay was from the yerba or native tea, a monopoly of the Government; and Paraguay never had nor has any national debt."

This is surely the picture of Arcadia, but it wanted a back-ground to make the colours even more striking. Previous to the accession of Francisco Lopez, Paraguay never had any experience of war; but its turn came. In the course of 1864, Lopez increased his army from 28,000 to 64,000 men, and on the 14th December he commenced operations by sending a body of troops across the Paraguay to invade the Brazilian province of Matto Grosso. The fort of Coimbra, which guarded the river entrance, was carried by assault, and a few days afterwards Curumba, the chief city of the province was occupied by the Paraguayans, while a Brazilian war steamer, laden with a valuable cargo of stores and war material, was captured without resistance. On the 17th April, 1865, Lopez seized two steamers belonging to the Argentine Confederation, and war to the knife was thus inaugurated in Rio de la Plata. On the one side stood Paraguay with its million and a quarter population, and on the other side were ranged the Allies, consisting of Brazil, the Argentine Confederation, and the Republic of Uruguay, having an aggregate population of nine millions and a half, or nearly eight to one. In addition to the force of numbers the Allies had a far superior fleet to that of Lopez, and as a consequence they held command of the three great rivers which ultimately form the Rio de la Plata. On the other hand, Lopez was fully prepared for war while the Allies were not. He determined, therefore, to assume the offensive at once by invading the Argentine province of Corrientes, and if possible to carry the war into the Banda Oriental.

In April, 1865, about 37,000 men in two divisions were set in motion down the Parana, and the city of Corrientes was seized by the Paraguayans. The march was then continued, and by the 20th May Bella Vista was reached, and subsequently Goya, the extreme southern limit attained by Lopez. The danger of this advance was soon made apparent, however, by a dash of ten Allied steamers up the river to Corrientes, which was retaken, and the Paraguayans were in a manner cut off from their base of operations. The Allied fleet took up a position