

# Modern History Sourcebook:

## Channing Arnold & Frederick J. Tabor Frost: The Rule of Porfirio Diaz, 1909

UNTIL 1876, when upon his distracted country Porfirio Diaz, innkeeper's son and born ruler, descended as *Deus ex machina*, the State of Mexico may be summed up in the words, "rapine, murder, and sudden death." But though Mexico has had---and the bulk of her population has had reason during the past thirty years to thank her lucky stars for him---an "iron master," the quietude of the country is only skin-deep. Law and order is represented by a blend of a rough-and-ready justice, a sort of legalized lynch-law, with an official law administration venal to a high degree. With every second *mestizo* a born robber, Mexico is no place for tedious processes with remands and committals to assizes. A man caught red-handed is usually dealt with on the spot. Such a case occurred while we were visiting the capital.

Two days after we had traveled on the marvelous mountain railway, the guards of the day train (which, by the way, always takes the bullion to the coast and has a carriage-load of soldiers attached as military convoy) saw, as they approached the steepest descent, two fellows loitering on the line, presumably wreckers. The train was stopped, and the guards and the officer commanding the convoy gave chase, and, coming up with the men, shot them with their revolvers and kicked the bodies down the precipice. The sun and the vultures do the rest, and on the re-arrival of the train in the capital the matter may or may not be formally notified to the Government. Even to the casual observer the difficulty of governing Mexico must seem inexpressibly great.

President Diaz has succeeded not so much because he does not know what mercy means or because a rifle bullet is his only answer for those who question his authority, but because he is endowed with superhuman tact. The iron heel, like that of Achilles, has its vulnerable spot if pressed too hard upon a people's throat, and so he has little dodges by which he appears to his subjects to exercise a judicious clemency. If some redoubtable criminal is captured, some monarch of murderers, Diaz knows well that among his thousands of crime-loving fellow countrymen the brute will have a large following. His execution will mean the declaration of a vendetta against the police. So he is put on his trial, condemned to death, and within twenty-four hours the president commutes his sentence to one of twenty years' incarceration in the penitentiary. After about a week there, he is taken out one evening, as usual, into the prison yard for exercise under a small guard of soldiers. One of these sidles up to him and suggests that as the night is dark he might make a bolt for it. The convict believes it a genuine offer, sprints off, and is dropped at thirty yards like a rabbit by the five or six soldiers who have been waiting under the shadow of the farther wall.

The next morning the official newspaper states, "Last night the notorious criminal So-and-So, to whom His Excellency the President recently extended clemency, made an attempt to escape while being exercised in the prison yard, and was shot dead by the sentries." Thus everybody is pleased, except possibly the convict, and the president, without the least odium to himself, has rid the country of another blackguard. Another stroke of real genius was the way in which he has succeeded in setting thieves to catch thieves. When he became president, the country was infested with bandits who stopped at nothing; but Diaz erected huge gallows at the crossways

all over Mexico, and the robbers found they had to stop at these, and stop quite a long while till the *zopilotes* and vultures had picked their bones to the blameless white to which good Porfirio Diaz desired the lives of all his subjects to attain. After some weeks of brisk hanging-business, Diaz played his trump card. He proclaimed that all other bandits, known or unknown, who cared to surrender would be enrolled as *rurales*, country police, and, garbed in state uniform and armed with Winchesters, would spend the remainder of their lives agreeably engaged in killing their recalcitrant comrades. This temptation to spend their declining days in bloodshed, to which no penalties were attached, was too much for many. Thus fifty per cent of Mexico's robbers turn police and murder the other fifty, and acute Diaz has a body of men who and whose sons have proved, and sons' sons will prove, the eternal wisdom of this hybrid sphinx of a ruler.

But there is a comic side to Mexican justice. There is a Gilbertian humor in the go-as-you-please style in which prisoners are treated. In one crowded court, when the jury had retired to consider their verdict, the prisoner was engaged in walking up and down, hands in pockets, cigarette in mouth, while the police, entirely oblivious to their charge, smoked and chatted in another part of the court. We asked one officer whether they were not afraid of the prisoner attempting an escape. "Oh, no," he said, "he'll wait for the verdict." Road-making is practically always done by gangs of convicts, and, when they think they have had enough work, they throw down their spades and picks, and warders and everybody sit down on the roadside and enjoy a cigarette and a chat. The British Minister told us that he had recently been shown over the penitentiary, in which at the moment there was a bloodthirsty rascal whose record of crime would have shamed a Jack the Ripper. The governor of the jail entered into a long and friendly conversation with him as to his wife and family, and, as the British Minister humorously put it, "We were all but presented to him. . . ."

Nominally Mexico is a republic: really she is nothing of the sort. There is a Senate, a Chamber of Deputies, periodic elections of state representatives, a governor and council in each State of the Federation; but for upwards of a quarter of a century these have all been but pawns on a chessboard--the player a man of such astounding nature that those who laughed at Mrs. Alec Tweedie's description of him as "the greatest man of the nineteenth century" laughed from the fullness of their ignorance.

Porfirio Diaz is an autocrat. He is an autocrat fiercer, more relentless, more absolute than the Czar of Russia, than any recent czar has been, almost than Peter the Great himself. He is more: he is a born ruler. He has played for the regeneration of his country. He has played, but it is too much to say he has won. Nobody could win; but he has chained the bloody dogs of anarchy and murder, chained them successfully for so many years that there are some who forget that he has not killed them outright. Diaz is literally living over a volcano: he is a personified extinguisher of the fierce furnace of his country's turbulence. But when death removes him, what then? The deluge, surely; and after that one more apotheosis of the Monroe Doctrine, and the very wholesome, if somewhat aggressive, Stars and Stripes.

You must go to Mexico and live among its people to know all this. It is singular how little the English people know of the country. Only the other day a veteran Anglo-Indian officer gravely asked us, "What is the exact position of Mexico in the United States of America?" We simply gasped: words failed in such an emergency. Before Diaz came, Mexico's history was one of uninterrupted rapine, murder, and sudden death. Out of a morass of blood he has made a garden; out of robbers he has made citizens; out of bankruptcy he has made a revenue; out of

the bitterest civil strivings he has almost made a nation. He is nearly eighty: he is upright as a dart: he has the face of a sphinx with a jaw which makes you shudder. He rarely talks, he still more rarely smiles. And yet the whole man expresses no false pride --no "wind in the head." His icy superhumanly self-controlled nature is too great to be moved by such petty things as pride and a vulgar joy in power. In manner and in life he is simplicity itself. He rides unattended in the Paseo; he comes down to the Jockey Club in the afternoon, and the members just rise and bow, and the president picks up his paper and sits quietly at the window reading. He dislikes all ostentation; his food is simple; his clothes are almost always a plain blue serge suit and dark tie; and in his winter home in the city he lives as a simple citizen. But his power is literally limitless. The Mexicans do not love him: nobody could love such a man. The lower classes fear him unreasoningly; the upper classes fear him too, but it is blended with a lively sense of what he means to Mexico. But mark you! there is nothing of the bully about him. The bully is always weak, a coward. If Diaz was arrogant, he would be assassinated in twenty-four hours. He knows that. He knows the blood of the cattle he drives. Nobody but a madman whips a blooded horse; but he must have an iron wrist and a good hold on the rein.

And that is why one can safely describe Diaz as a born ruler. He instinctively understands his subjects: he has not learned it, for he began thirty years ago. He was never educated in statecraft, for, indeed, he had no education at all; he was merely the son of an innkeeper, first sent to a Jesuit seminary, whence he ran away and joined the army. No! the man's secret is an iron will and positively miraculous tact. Whatever he does, whatever he orders, is always done so nicely. Everybody knows it has got to be done. Nobody ever crosses Diaz and lives to boast of so doing. But he gilds the pills he thinks his people must swallow, and they gulp them down and look up with meek smiles into that awful face. Here is a little characteristic story of him.

Some while back there was an election of governor of Yucatan. The Yucatecan people have always been one of the most restive of the presidential team. They nominated a man disagreeable to Diaz; he nominated a second. The election ballot took place. The Yucatecan nominee was successful by an enormous majority. The news is wired to Mexico City. Back comes the presidential answer: "Glad to know my man elected: am sending troops to formally inaugurate him." The troops came, and Diaz's man was formally installed. To the Chamber of Deputies no one can be elected against the president's wish. For the over-popular governor of a State, Diaz provides distinguished employment elsewhere. Such a case occurred while we were in Yucatan. Señor Olegario Molina, of whom we shall later speak more, has been for some years deservedly popular in Merida, for he has done much to improve it. President Diaz visited Merida recently, and on his return appointed Señor Molina a cabinet minister. When he arrived in Vera Cruz, Molina found the presidential train awaiting him, and on reaching Mexico City the president and the whole cabinet had come to the station to greet him, and drove him triumphantly to the Iturbide Hotel. Charming courtesies! how favorably the presidential eyes beam on him! Yes, but he is banished: as much banished as the shivering pauper Jew workman turned away from the London docks. He was too powerful: he is safer in Mexico City, far away from the madding crowds who would perchance have made him state dictator. A too popular cabinet minister, again, is sent as minister to Madrid: another is found essential to the pacification of a turbulent State of northern Mexico; and so the pretty game goes on, and there is literally no kicking amongst the presidential team.

But there are fiercer exhibitions of autocracy at which people only hint, or of which they speak in whispers. There is no Siberia in Mexico, but there are the equivalents of banishment and disappearance for those who would challenge the authority of the Mexican czar. Even criticism

is tyrannically repressed. There is a press, but the muzzling order has long been in force, and recalcitrant editors soon see the inside of the penitentiary. General Diaz's present (second) wife is a daughter of a prominent supporter of Lerdo de Tejada, who on the death of Juarez assumed the presidency, but was expelled in 1876 by Diaz. The alliance brought about an armed peace between the two men. But they tell this story: One day an argument arose, and hot words followed. It was at a meal; and when wine's in, wit's out. Diaz's father-in-law went far, and half in jest, half in earnest, said, "Why, Porfirio, you almost tempt me to turn rebel again." They all saw the president's face darken, but the storm blew over. That night it is said that Madame Diaz had to go on her knees to her husband to beg for her father's life. Such is the arbiter and autocrat of Mexico. What, then, is the state of the country politically, and what will be her future?

Mexico's great weakness (she has many, but this overtops all others, and lowers menacing on her political horizon) is that she is not a nation. There is no true national feeling, and a moment's thought will show that the circumstances of her population forbid the existence of such. On the one side you have the Spanish Mexicans, the white population, representing the purest European blood in the country. They are but some nineteen per cent of a population of twelve million odd. Among them, and among them alone, is patriotism in its highest sense to be expected or found. On the other side you have the vast mestizo class---the half-castes---some forty-three per cent, and then the purer Indians, forming the remaining thirty-eight per cent. Of these three classes the characteristics are sufficiently marked to destroy hope of any welding or holding together. The Spanish Mexicans are sensual and apathetic, avaricious and yet indolent, inheriting a full share of that Castilian pride and bigotry which has worked the colonial ruin of Spain. Brave, with many of those time-honored traits of the proverbial Spanish don, they are yet a people inexorably "marked down" by Fate in the international remnant basket. They have had their day. Ye gods! they have used it, too; but it is gone. The mestizos---near half the population---have all the worst features of their Spanish and Indian parents. Turbulent, born criminals, treacherous, idle, dissolute, and cruel, they have the Spanish lust and the Indian natural cynicism, the Spanish luxury of temperament with the Indian improvidence. These are the true Mexicans; these are the unrulable hotchpotch whom Diaz's iron hand holds straining in the leash: the dogs of rapine, murder, and sudden death, whose cowardice is only matched by their vicious treachery. And last there are the Indians, heartless, hopeless, disinherited, enslaved, awaiting with sullen patience their deliverance from the hated yoke of their Spanish masters, not a whit less abhorrent to them because they have had four centuries in which to become accustomed to it. The heterogeneity of Mexico's population is only matched by the depth of the antagonism of each class to each in all their most vital interests.

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