

CHAPTER I

THE LAND OF ARGENTINA

OF the three continental land-masses of the Southern Hemisphere, one only, South America, thrusts itself far southwards into the temperate zone. Much the greater part of this southern temperate region is occupied by the Argentine Republic or Argentine Confederation. It is a region marked out by nature to be the seat of a great civilisation mainly European in character, where the immigrant from southern Europe finds a climate resembling his own, and can follow his accustomed ways of life. Argentina, together with the small republics of Uruguay and Paraguay, forms the 'sub-continent' commonly known as the River Plate, from the great river system—one of the greatest in the world—which gives navigable access to the northern provinces and, beyond them, to Paraguay and western Brazil.

The Argentine Republic extends from latitude 22° S. to latitude 55°, from the tropical forests of the Chaco to the icy cliffs of Tierra del Fuego battered by Antarctic storms—a total length of above 2300 miles. The greatest width, in latitude 37°, is about 750 miles. The country tapers thence southwards to Tierra del Fuego and Cape Horn. The area exceeds 1,200,000 square miles, ten times that of the British Isles.

So vast a region, with so great a range of latitude and also of altitude—from the height of Mount Aconcagua, 23,000 feet above sea level, to the flat Atlantic shore—comprises a great variety of physical features, soil and products. There are lofty peaks, immense treeless plains, extensive forests, rich sub-tropical soil, salt deserts, swamps, rivers pouring voluminous waters into the ocean, and

others which lose themselves in the soil. But the country, viewed as a whole, is divided with a certain vast simplicity into mountain, forest and plain. In order to define the subject and give clearness to the narrative contained in the following chapters, it seems well here to anticipate, to begin by pointing to the end, and to give, in broad outline, some account of present conditions.

The word 'Argentina' at once calls up the image of the vast flat expanse of the Pampa; and rightly so, for although the country possesses much else besides the Pampa, it is this immense plain which has made modern Argentina and has given to the country its wealth, its chief industries and its prevailing character; the plain contains most of the great cities and the bulk of the inhabitants: it has shaped the habits and the outlook of the people.

These boundless level spaces, once covered with coarse grass, but now waving with corn in summer or green with alfalfa, have the monotony but also something of the majesty of the sea. A man may ride day after day and always alight on a spot hardly to be distinguished from his starting-point. To the eye the land is dead level, but in fact it slopes imperceptibly downwards from the Andes to the Atlantic. The plains extend approximately from the River Salado in the north to the Colorado in the south, only broken by ranges of hills in the south of the province of Buenos Aires: westward they extend to the mountains of Córdoba, which run north and south half-way across the continent: farther south, the Pampa is yet wider, reaching to the spurs of the Andes. It is stoneless and, by nature, treeless,¹ although now dotted, as with islands, by the plantations surrounding the *estancia*

¹ Near Córdoba the plain is no longer treeless, but covered in part by low scrubby woods.

THE ARGENTINE PAMPA

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houses or homesteads. The plough could be driven for hundreds of miles without meeting a pebble, a hillock or a bush.

Once the bed of an inland sea, the Pampa is covered for the most part with deep rich soil, through which the roots of wheat, maize, oats, linseed and alfalfa penetrate to the moisture beneath. In the west, where the soil is dry and rain is scanty, the need is in part supplied by artesian wells and by stored-up water, notably the great reservoir in the Córdoba hills which irrigates an extensive district. Moreover, dry tracts, once sterile, have become rich cattle lands through the almost magical effects of sowing alfalfa (lucerne). This plant sends its taproot down to astonishing depths to find water: and once the root reaches water, the plant flourishes and turns a desert into a rich expanse of green. A great engineering work has turned the region of the Río Negro, once a desert, into a garden of fruit, vegetables and corn by confining the surplus water of the river in a great natural hollow so as to control its flow and make it available for irrigation.

The plain extends northwards beyond the River Salado, along the valley of the Paraná and its tributary the Paraguay: but here the plain changes its character: it is diversified by forests, interspersed with open spaces and by many swamps and watercourses, and so stretches northwards into the Chaco, a region of thick forests, intervening savannas, swamps and sluggish rivers, where there still lurk some scanty tribes of savage Indians. But two railways now traverse the Chaco, and there are 'tame Indians' working on the cattle farms, and in factories which extract tannin from the hard quebracho timber. North-eastwards the plain stretches into the undulating and wooded country of Misiones.

To the north-west the Pampa merges into the hilly, wooded sub-tropical region of Tucumán, Salta and Jujuy. About

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Tucumán, to the east of the lofty mountain range of Aconquija, is a sugar-growing region, favoured by mists from the mountains, summer rains and a rainless winter for harvest.

To the south of the Pampa, beyond the Río Negro, stretch the bleak wind-swept terraces of Patagonia, seamed by ravines and covered with snow in winter. This country used to be called 'The Great Shingle Desert'. Darwin thought it absolutely barren. It is now a vast sheep-farm which extends through the dry region to the more grassy lands of the far south and of Tierra del Fuego. It was found that sheep could subsist on the scanty tufts of herbage even through the snows of winter: and although it takes several acres to support one sheep, the flocks amount to many millions.

The great mountain chain of the Andes stretches between Argentina and Chile for a distance of 2000 miles. In so great a range of climate there is naturally much diversity in the mountain system. In the north is the lofty barren plateau of Atacama. Southwards thence through the north-western provinces the Andine region is treeless and almost rainless, but contains oases irrigated by streams descending from the snowy heights—notably the wine-growing district of Mendoza, intersected by water cuts bordered by poplar trees. Farther south, from about latitude 36°, there is a beautiful Alpine country where the Andine peaks, here less towering in height, rise above mountain lakes surrounded by verdure.

The outstanding fact of modern Argentina is the great economic expansion, the creation of new wealth, during the past fifty years. The extension of steam navigation, the building of railways, machinery applied to agriculture, the influx of immigrants from southern Europe and of capital from northern Europe,

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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the growing demand in Europe for foodstuffs and raw materials—all these things favoured a rapid and very remarkable economic development which accompanied and aided a consolidation of the social and political fabric. This notable movement has been described in many modern books, and in consular reports which read like romances. The Pampa has become one of the great granaries of the world; and Buenos Aires, the greatest city of the Southern Hemisphere and, after Paris, the largest Latin city in the world, is the centre of a railway system 23,000 miles long, which gathers into other nuclei in the great ports of Rosario and Bahia Blanca. It is not the purpose of this book to dwell particularly on these matters, which can be studied elsewhere. But this brief preliminary survey may help the reader. Moreover this economic movement fills a large part in the political and social growth of the Argentine people.

The Argentine Republic is a confederation of fourteen autonomous provinces, every province having its own Governor and Legislature. There are besides, in the outlying and little developed parts of the Republic, ten territories (*gubernaciones*), six in the south and four in the north, which are administered directly by the federal authorities. These territories comprise three-sevenths of the area of the Republic, but contain only a fraction of the inhabitants. The capital, Buenos Aires, is a federal district belonging to the nation. Here resides the Federal or National Government, consisting of the President of the Republic, a Cabinet of eight ministers and a Congress of two Houses; also the supreme federal tribunal of the nation.

It is the purpose of the following pages to trace the origin and growth of that nation, which now numbers above ten million inhabitants.

CHAPTER II

THE CONQUEST

WITHIN twenty-five years of Columbus' westward adventure, Spanish explorers coasted all the Caribbean shores, crossed the Isthmus of Panamá to the 'South Sea' and made their way by the 'North Sea' along the Atlantic coast of South America beyond the Tropic of Capricorn. In 1516 Solís, Piloto Mayor of Spain, sailed up the great estuary which he named *El Mar Dulce*, 'The Freshwater Sea', landed on its north-eastern shore and was killed by cannibal 'Indians' who had beckoned him ashore. Three years later Magellan, seeking a passage to the South Sea and the Spice Islands, looked into the 'Río de Solís', found that this was not his way and turned southwards again. But in 1526 Sebastian Cabot or Gaboto, who had left England to take service in Spain, undertook to explore once again the westward route to the Far East, disobeyed his instructions in hopes of richer discoveries, and spent three years in exploring the immense waterways which led to the central recesses of an unknown continent and might perhaps lead, so he hoped, to the dominions of 'The White King', of whose opulent magnificence he heard tales from the Indians. Having obtained from the natives some silver ornaments, he gave to the Río de Solís its high-sounding name *El Río de la Plata*, 'The River of the Silver', a delusive title, for its shores are destitute of metals, although rich to-day in wealth of a less precarious kind. The silver had in fact come from the country of 'The White King', the Inca monarch of Peru. Gaboto carried home to Spain these first tokens of Peruvian treasure. The ruins

PEDRO DE MENDOZA

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of his fort, destroyed by Indians and its garrison slain, remained a landmark, known as 'Gaboto's Tower', for later explorers, thirty miles north of the site of the present great city of Rosario.

The reports of Gaboto, the sight of the Peruvian silver, the tale of Pizarro's recent discoveries, the hope of crossing the continent to those rich western regions, and, in addition, the rivalry of the Portuguese, who were pushing southwards from Brazil, led to the greatest Spanish expedition yet dispatched from Spain to the Indies. Pedro de Mendoza, a wealthy soldier-courtier, received in 1535 a commission to found three cities as Adelantado or Frontier Commander, to cross the continent and to occupy 600 miles of the Pacific coast. Mendoza sailed with eleven ships and probably about 1000 men,¹ also some horses and mares. He led his fleet to the low south-western shore of the estuary, the margin of the Pampa or vast South American prairie, and there he traced out a city of mud huts thatched with reeds, for the neighbourhood yields neither stone nor timber. The only inhabitants of the vast plain were groups or tribes of nomadic barbarians sheltering under rude booths of skins, and owning no domestic animals, for neither cattle, horses, nor sheep are indigenous to the country. The neighbouring Querandí Indians at first brought game and fish. When they wearied of feeding these numerous guests, forcible demands provoked a disastrous fight in which Mendoza's brother was killed by the *boleadora*, the

¹ Schmidel's estimate of 2500 has been generally accepted. But M. Paul Groussac, whose recent death is a loss to Argentine letters, has proved that this is a wild guess and puts the number at about 800. Schmidel, one of the Germans who accompanied Mendoza, wrote long after the event. He is an excellent authority for the events which he witnessed. But his chronology is confused and inaccurate and his statistics must be rejected. Mendoza undertook to find 1000 men and certainly had no more.

typical weapon of the Pampa. The Querandís, summoning more distant tribes, attacked in multitudes. The huts and some of the ships were burnt by fiery missiles. Within the earthen city wall were famine, pestilence and cannibal horrors. Expeditions sailing in search of food brought momentary relief, but some of the searchers themselves died of hunger. Mendoza led part of his men to a site higher up the river, but finally sailed homewards, to die on the voyage, leaving the most devoted of his followers, Juan de Ayolas, as Lieutenant-Governor, with orders to pursue the quest for the rich regions of the west.

Ayolas sailed northwards against the current to latitude 25° S. Here on the left bank of the River Paraguay he found Guaraní Indians, submissive or friendly or easily subdued, people living in villages and raising crops of maize. On a bluff overlooking a bay sheltered from the strong current was set up a stockaded fort, 'Santa María de Asunción'. Leaving a small garrison, Ayolas sailed north far into the tropics, plunged westward into the forest and there perished with all his company.

Ayolas had named as his deputy Martínez Irala, a typical soldier-adventurer, ambitious, self-indulgent and unscrupulous, but a capable and inspiring leader. Irala is the patriarch of the River Plate: he was now elected Governor by virtue of a royal edict which empowered the settlers to fill any vacancy, pending the royal decision; and he contrived to retain this command, with a short and stormy interval and some sanguinary faction fights, for twenty years, until his death in 1557.

In 1541 the remnant of the settlers at Buenos Aires were brought to Asunción, which thus became a 'city' with its Town Council (*Cabildo*) and two annually elected magistrates (*alcaldes*), a city which for eighty years was the capital of the River Plate.

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