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George D. Flinter

Excerpt

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THE
PRESENT STATE OF PUERTO RICO.

CHAPTER I.
INTRODUCTORY.

An Examination of the Causes that have contributed to the recent Prosperity of Puerto Rico.

SPAIN, the discoverer and mistress of the richest and most fertile regions of the new world, attached very little importance to the Archipelago of the Antilles. The largest and finest only of those islands were selected and colonized by the Spaniards; the small and sterile they abandoned to the industry of more northern nations. The wealthy mines of the Peruvian and Mexican empires occupied the undivided attention of the Spanish government,—exciting in foreign nations a feeling of envy, which, during a period of three ages, remained undiminished.

Notwithstanding all the advantages of soil and situation, which nature has so lavishly bestowed on the island of Puerto Rico, it was considered, for the space of three centuries, only as a place of banishment for the male-

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factors of the mother country. Agriculture had scarcely emerged from its primitive state of simplicity. The inhabitants led a pastoral life, sowing only provisions barely necessary for their support. They had no stimulus to exertion. They were passive spectators of the vast riches which centred in their soil, rocking themselves to and fro in their hammocks, without making any efforts, bodily or mental. If they had a sufficiency for the present hour, they never looked forward beyond the day in which they lived. It can scarcely be said that, till within these last twenty years, the fertile fields of Puerto Rico had felt the vivifying hand of cultivation. A large sum of money was annually sent from Mexico to support the governor, the military and civil officers, and the troops; and this remittance did not cease till the year 1810, when the revolution of that country commenced. The commerce carried on scarcely deserved that name. The few wants of the inhabitants were supplied by a contraband trade with the neighbouring foreign islands of St. Thomas and Santa Cruz. Until the year 1813, the office of intendant was annexed to the person of the governor and captain-general; while the custom house was under the immediate control and inspection of the revenue officers. At this period a separation of these offices was commanded by a royal decree, and henceforward the intendency and custom-house were placed under the jurisdiction of their appropriate functionaries. Such was the confused and irregular manner in which the accounts were kept, that it would be a fruitless labour to attempt to ascertain the exact amount of imports and exports previous to that period, nor can any calculation be made which could afford any result beyond vague and uncertain conjecture. Although the intendency was made independent of the captain-general, and the custom-house no longer

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ROYAL DECREE OF 1815.

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subject to the officers of the treasury, and a numerous train of custom-house officers appointed, the finances still remained languid and unproductive. A system of fraud and speculation prevailed, without shame or disguise. Those who were paid by the king for preventing illicit traffic, were the very persons who sanctioned it by their example, and shielded it by their authority. The amount of the public revenue was so inadequate to meet the expenses of maintaining the troops in garrison, that they were reduced to one-fourth of their pay, and very often received only a miserable ration. The consequence was that an enormous debt, amounting to nearly a million of dollars, was due by the government to the officers and garrison; whilst a few avaricious individuals, forgetting their duty to their king and country, enriched themselves at the public expense. The government, perplexed and embarrassed by the want of specie, had recourse to the ruinous measure of issuing paper money. This desperate step, arising from circumstances equally desperate, not only augmented the debt, already heavy and oppressive, but materially injured the credit of the government, both in and out of the island.

Such was the depressed state of the public revenue in this island, when the royal decree of August, 1815, gave the first great impulse to agriculture and commerce. This decree, fraught with the most beneficent and enlightened views, was entitled, "Regulations for promoting the Population, Commerce, Industry, and Agriculture of the Island of Puerto Rico." It embraced every object, and provided for all the various incidents which could instil life and vigour into an infant colony. It held out to industrious and enterprising foreigners the most flattering prospects, founded on the most solid basis. It conferred on them and their children the rights and

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privileges of Spaniards in their full extent. Lands were granted to them gratis, and no expenses were exacted for the titles and legal rights of property. The quantity of land allotted was in proportion to the number of slaves which each colonist introduced for the cultivation of the land. The colonists were not subject to any taxes whatever, nor had they to pay any duty on the exportation of their produce, nor on the importation of implements of husbandry. If war should be declared between Spain and their native country, their persons and properties were to be respected ; and if they wished to leave the colony, they were permitted to realise their property and carry its value along with them, paying only ten per cent. on the surplus of the capital they had brought with them. They were exempted from the capitation tax or personal tribute. Each slave was to pay a tax of one dollar yearly, after having been ten years on the island, which could not be augmented.

During the first five years, the colonists, Spaniards and foreigners, had liberty to return to their respective countries or former residences, and in this case they were allowed to carry with them all the property and goods they had brought with them, without being obliged to pay any duties of exportation. The colonists who should die in the island without heirs, might leave their property to their relatives or friends in other countries ; and if the heirs wished to reside in the island, they enjoyed all the rights and privileges of their predecessors. If they preferred carrying away their inheritance, they might do so on paying a duty of fifteen per cent. Should the colonist die intestate, his friends and relatives, in whatever country they might then reside, could inherit his property, by adhering to the foregoing rules.

The colonists were likewise declared to be free, for

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fifteen years, from the payment of tithes ; and after the expiration of that period, they were only to pay two and a half per cent. They were equally free, for the same period, from the payment of the duty of Alcabala, on the sale of the produce of their lands and commercial effects, and after the expiration of the specified term, they were only to pay two and a half per cent ; but if they shipped their produce to Spain, they had to pay no duty whatever. The introduction of negroes into the island was to be perpetually free from duties and taxes, for the colonists and for those that traded with them. The direct commerce with Spain, and with the other Spanish islands, was to be free from all duties for fifteen years, and after that period it was to be placed on the footing of the other Spanish colonies. The whole of the concessions and exemptions by his Majesty to this island are contained in 33 articles, in all of which a spirit of the most decisive protection is evinced towards this island, and efforts made to promote its prosperity which have never been exceeded by the zeal of any other government or country.

To this signal mark of royal favour we must attribute the rising prosperity of this colony, and not to the operation of time, or to fortuitous circumstances, which could have only a partial or temporary influence. This liberal policy produced the best and most salutary effects. It was sensibly felt in every part of the island. Foreigners possessing capital and agricultural knowledge settled in the country. Their habits of industry soon began to be imitated, and their skill in cultivation acquired by the natives. A spirit of honest emulation was thus excited, which produced the happiest effects.

At the same time that I would strongly recommend foreigners who had capital to settle in this island, in preference to any other part of the globe, I reprobate the

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immigration of adventurers, who, having become bankrupts in the foreign islands, and flying from their creditors, or trying to elude the punishment due to crime, seek an asylum here. This class of people have done more injury to the colony, and thrown more discredit on its agriculture, than is generally supposed; and the reports of their failures, and the calumnies they have circulated, have prevented many useful individuals from forming establishments in this colony. Their stories have been heard and believed; no inquiries have been made into the causes of their failure; their assertions have not met with refutation, and they are commiserated as the innocent victims of an oppressive system of laws, and a despotic government. These false reports once in circulation, if they remain uncontradicted, gain ground, and occasion evils which it is difficult to remedy. Happy am I to be able to explain the origin and motives of these gratuitous calumnies, and to expose their authors to the contempt they merit.

These individuals, with the confidence and effrontery which too often characterise men of desperate fortunes and relaxed morals, purchase estates on credit, counting, no doubt, on the occurrence of some casual circumstance for the payment. In a few months their hopes disappear; their want of capital becomes evident; they are called on to pay the debts that they had contracted in dependence solely on the crop; the day arrives for the payment of the instalment due to the proprietor; they have neither money nor credit, and they are obliged to deliver up the estate. But it is a circumstance of too frequent recurrence that some of them refuse to surrender the property, and enter into a tedious litigation, in which the real owner, in recompense for his good faith, is often ruined; and, if he succeeds in getting possession of the property

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EFFECTS OF THE REVOLUTION OF 1820. 7

at last, he finds it an uncultivated waste. These people, who are a disgrace to any country, disappointed in their chimerical views, vent their rage on the government and laws of the island, attributing to injustice and a want of protection what is wholly owing to their own folly and presumption.

It would be well worth the attention of those planters in the foreign islands who are employing their capital on worn-out land, which scarcely pays the expense of manure, to turn their views seriously to Puerto Rico, where they will enjoy security and protection, with extraordinary privileges. It is only requisite for them to bestow a moment's reflection on the wise and liberal regulations by which foreigners are encouraged—regulations which are religiously observed. Let them recollect that although many of those who have deceived the government and outraged the laws may have escaped with impunity, it is not either from a want of energy in the government, nor want of vigilance in the authorities, nor of exact execution of the laws, that this has occurred, but from a lenient and humane principle on the part of the government, rather to let a criminal escape than give room for it to be thought that any undue severity had been exercised towards strangers, who came to the island confiding in its justice and protection. The recompense it has received has been the vilest calumnies, which, I understand, have prevented many capitalists from establishing themselves in this colony.

The dreadful political oscillation which shook the Spanish monarchy to its foundation in the year 1820, was felt in its extremities with equal violence. The concentration of command in one individual, so essentially necessary to preserve order in distant colonies, ceased to exist. The principles of firm attachment to the mother

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country which have so eminently distinguished the inhabitants of Puerto Rico, could alone have saved them in a moment so critical. They were proof against the seductions of those who in vain attempted to induce them to follow the example of the Spanish colonies on the continent. They foresaw that the continuance of the revolutionary system would be ere long the destruction of their prosperity. In the four years during which it lasted, their agriculture and commerce had considerably diminished,—party spirit began to show its malignant influence,—the press became the vehicle of abuse and personalities,—the mechanic and the artisan, in place of working for the daily support of their families, mounted the tribune, and harangued the public on the nature of governments and laws—their families starving, while they contented themselves with the noisy applause of a multitude as ignorant as themselves. The epithet of citizen levelled all distinctions of rank and merit. The warrior who had his brows covered with the laurels of a hundred battles—who had exposed his life a thousand times in the public service—and who was covered with honourable wounds and scars in the defence of his country,—was often prevented even from giving his vote by a wretch who had only a few days before escaped from the galleys, where he had been consigned to drag a chain in expiation of his crimes!

This state of things could not long exist,—nature had been forced out of her natural course; all good men, all the industrious, the great mass of the population (with few, very few exceptions) anxiously desired a change. The year 1823 saved this island from inevitable shipwreck. Order was restored—confidence re-established—the loyal flocked round the government—the bad, who were few and impotent, held down their heads in silence.

Not one drop of blood was shed—no tears bedewed the grave of fallen anarchy. No one was persecuted for former opinions,—the veil of oblivion was thrown over them, in the hope that past experience would furnish conviction of the fallacy of the revolutionary doctrines. Such was the praiseworthy conduct of the captain-general of this island, which fully corresponded to the spirit of generous humanity which emanated from the throne.

The captain-general, Don Miguel de la Torre, was fully invested with vice-regal power, which was so indispensably necessary in order to enable him to check old and inveterate abuses. He saw the deplorable state of the public revenue, and the hidden causes from which it originated. He perceived that extraordinary and decisive measures were imperiously demanded to put a stop to the organized system of defalcation that existed, the continuance of which would have irretrievably ruined the island. The difficult and invidious enterprise of introducing a system of reform in the administration of the public revenue, he executed with the straightforward decision of a soldier, the circumspection and impartiality of a wise legislator, and the comprehensive foresight of a political economist. By these timely and vigorous proceedings, he at once put a stop to the ancient plan of malversation, which had too long existed. This circumstance alone would have been sufficient to render his government for ever memorable. It forms a striking epoch in the history of the improvement of this island. The testimony of its efficacy is indelibly recorded by the immediate increase of the public revenue, which from that day rapidly increased. I refrain from making any comments on these plain and simple facts; and I am even willing chiefly to ascribe the *errors* previously committed in the administration of the public funds, to ignorance or neglect, although

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I fear the world, less indulgent, will scarcely admit this extenuation. The inexorable tribunal of public opinion, judges only from the facts which are presented to its view.

From this period, (1825,) the improvement of the public revenue continued rapidly to advance. All the various duties of the government were diligently executed. The troops in garrison, and all persons employed in the public service, were regularly paid; and nearly half the arrears of back pay were gradually paid off. Confidence in the government, both within the island and in foreign countries, was solidly established. Foreigners, certain of being protected in person and property under an upright and impartial administration, flocked to the island, and engaged either in agricultural pursuits or mercantile operations. Individuals augmented their capitals:—it is only adventurers, without capital or conduct, as I have already explained, that become nominally bankrupts, without having ever possessed any real property to lose.

But all the wise and beneficent regulations, decreed by the Spanish government for the amelioration of this island, and the prudent and energetic measures pursued by the capt.-general, would not by themselves alone have brought the island to its present advanced state, had not internal regulations of police been enacted and other circumstances duly attended to, in order to form a solid, compact, and harmonious system. The attentive observer will here find a vast and instructive field open to his investigation; and it will be perceived with astonishment that more has been accomplished for this island in the space of *seven years*, and more money arising from its revenue expended in works of public utility in that brief period, than the whole amount furnished for the same objects during the preceding period of three hundred years! A country that a few years ago was covered with impervious woods and unhealthy