

ALVARADO, MEXICAN DICTATOR, PLANS UTOPIA IN YUCATAN

By AMEEN RIHANI.

And Being Dictator, Although a Benevolent One, He Has Been Able to Put Into Actual Practice Many Social Reform Theories in This One Quiet Corner of a War Ridden Land

In one, at least of the States of Mexico to-day the social revolution is no longer a theory, a vision, but a reality. It was peacefully launched, peacefully conducted, and in some of its phases successfully accomplished. One man, coming from the war torn, bandit ridden north, has turned the social consciousness of a people inside out. His scheme of rejuvenation has a world worker's union on one side and a feminist movement on the other. And it begins at two important starting points—the hacienda and the school.

Merida, the capital of Yucatan, is the centre of this revolution. And Yucatan, which is one of the richest States of the republic as well as the most interesting country on the Gulf in that it witnesses the rise and fall of the Mayan civilization of yore and can still boast of some of its mysterious ruins, presents to the visitor these days the remarkable spectacle of a most ancient people and a government of the most modern type.

The Mayan Indians, or their descendants, the mestizo, who still speak their native tongue and cling to their ancient traditions in dress and manner—the peons of the hacienda, the slaves of the Spaniards—are beginning to leap of liberty, free masonry and anti-clericalism; they are learning the gesture of revolt under the guidance and protection of the Governor of the State, Gen. Salvador Alvarado, who in his spare moments is found poring over the textbooks of German Socialists. And here we have the root of a rare, semi-tropic social phenomenon.

Whether at work or at play these days, this Mayan Indian, whose ancestors worshipped at the Temple of the Snail, is astoundingly, oftentimes amusingly, modern. I have seen him marching on Labor Day in Merida to the wild music of a Mexican band, brandishing the most anti-capitalist and anti-clerical banners and placards that any I. W. W. parade could ever boast of, or any labor leader could conceive; I have seen him in his white linen and ornamental sash, his dancing a mass meeting held at the cathedral, and I have seen him also at the baseball game, making a home run at a stretch, and clinching it with American slang, while the Governor and a crowd of Indian fans shouted their applause, American fashion.

Thus in the most modern, most sportive and most evolutionary manner was Labor Day celebrated in Merida. And Merida, picturesque quaint, somnolent, dreamy, colorful and cheerful and remarkably clean, without slums, without saloons and without a religion to-day, is the most ancient city in America, according to the best authorities on the subject. Here is a startling, a dramatic contrast.

When Gen. Alvarado entered it in triumph a little more than a year ago the hacienda, the cantina and the church were supreme; the peon soaked himself in habaneros (a pure alcohol made from the sugar cane), subserviently served his superior and reverently kissed the hand of his lord. Now the cantina is closed, the church is closed and the hacienda and its master are virtually under the control of the Government. And the peon—it is no longer just, however, to call them by this name—the mestizo, the laboring classes rather, are none the worse for it. At least as far as the liquor problem is concerned. For here is a State that has gone dry and has not gone mad. The mestizo, who was the heaviest drinker, does not seem to miss his drink, and the owner of the cantina does not seem to miss his coin. Prohibition, instead as a blessing, was accepted as such.

The cervecerias, where a thin state beer is sold, are still open, but the mestizo, for economic and constitutional reasons, cannot get up a jug on beer. He takes it only for refreshment, as he would a glass of lemonade. In prohibition, therefore, Gen. Alvarado has accomplished one of his greatest reforms.

Of course there have been excesses connected with the enforcement of the law. All liquor on the day it was put in force became the property of the State, and not only the cantinas but even private houses were searched. The rich Yucatecan, who reluctantly surrendered their private stock, protested, murmured rather their indignation and discontent. As many as a hundred cases of wine were one day confiscated in one house; and an old professor had to give up his bottle of cognac, which he kept, he told me, for medicinal purposes.

But these inconveniences affecting mostly the rich and leisure class are offset by the benefits, in a general way, to the community. "Do you know," said Gen. Alvarado, who speaks English well, "that after prohibition had been established we were able to dispense with one-quarter of our police force?" Which fact is sufficient comment, I think, upon the efficiency of this reform.

"And what are you going to do with this liquor?" I asked. I had seen thousands of cases deposited in a warehouse which was turned into a warehouse.

"We export it," was the reply. Not to the United States, however, but to other States in Mexico, to Vera Cruz, Campeche, for instance, where prohibition is not likely to succeed.

Other reform measures which are being tried in Yucatan have utterly failed or have not been attempted at all in other States. For in this peninsula the social reformer has the advantage of a singular soil; and an almost virgin social soil, and favored by such geographical and ethnological features, a strong man like Alvarado can act as dictator without meeting with any opposition from either the people or the central Government.

The Yucatecan himself, hitherto the lord of the land, have been the victims of an abundance of wealth and slaves, which robbed them of any moral stamina they may have had and rendered them indolent, voluptuous, sybaritic. They submit to any law their ruler lays down; they take any medicine he prescribes. Indeed, it might be said that they have inherited the principal characteristics of their own slaves. They themselves have become docile, submissive; they are a people that murmur their indignation, that whisper their discontent.

And here is one of the pitfalls for a dictator. A healthy, intelligent, vital opposition would have the tendency to check some of his extravagances, would save him, in certain instances, from himself. Yes, a dictator Alvarado is, a dictator of the benevolent type, and a reformer of the most radical and most uncompromising views.

He is regarded as honest and earnest and sincere, ruthless, too, and fanatical. A man of a studious nature and an austere simplicity, a man with a vision and a sword, a book too, a German textbook on socialism, he is now having the time of his life trying to establish a Utopia in the shadow of the ancient ruins of the Mayas.

Gen. Alvarado conceives the law, embodies it in a decree, puts it with unprejudiced and unhesitating rapidity, as far as law is concerned, into force, and the people of Yucatan, most willy-nilly submit and obey. But in a country like Mexico, particularly Yucatan, where the Catholic Church for centuries has been all powerful and supreme, it is difficult to institute any religious reforms that would prove in any way enduring. Reaction is sure to follow. I say this in spite of the fact that the Feminist Congress, the first of its kind, I think, in the history of Mexico, which convened in Merida and was attended by 4,000 women of both the mestizo and the vestal class, discussed among various other subjects of social reform the secularization of the schools and voted in one of its sessions for it. But it must be observed that Gen. Alvarado was sitting on the stage with the members of the committee.

This is but one of a number of experiments in Gen. Alvarado's scheme of rejuvenation which seem doomed to failure. Indeed, he loves to experiment. He has turned the State of Yucatan into a nursery, so to speak, of social and industrial reforms. His decrees are issued almost daily in the most persistent and most astonishing manner, often contradicting and sometimes nullifying one another; but this is a natural concomitant to experimentation.

He plants a seed, as it were, to-day and with some knowledge of its nature derived from books but hardly any experience about its growth and synergies, he watches it patiently for a spell and then if it does not grow to his satisfaction he plucks it up by the roots and throws it away. This may be better than the method of the compromising and indolent reformer, who satisfies himself with a diseased, stunted growth, thus depriving the healthier plants from the greater sustenance which they would otherwise receive.

But in his labor and industrial reforms Gen. Alvarado is unflinching, uncompromising, fanatically consistent. His Comision Agraria, which has its office in the chapel of a confiscated convent, is still working on the agrarian problem; his Comision Reguladora del Mercado de Henequen is firmly established and has had for a year now the absolute control of the hemp industry of the State; while his labor reforms have been in a way a decided success. These are three of the five principal problems which he discusses in a pamphlet entitled "Las Cinco Hermandades" (The Five Sisters), the two others being a free municipal police and the agraves of the land.

He has a double, underlying motive in all these reforms—to put an end to

the privileges of the hacendados and to give the laboring man a chance. But it must be said that he does not always succeed in striking a balance; his sense of justice, no matter how passionate and pure, would seem at times to work but one way. That he has the interests of the masses at heart cannot be doubted; that he is earnest and sincere in his desire to better their condition is beyond question; but in his ambition to emancipate and regenerate an enslaved class he has subordinated, fettered another. And this by no means makes for a free community in which every citizen is sovereign in his own right.

Indeed, the present government of Yucatan might be said to be a government of Alvarado, by Alvarado and for the mestizos, the laboring classes. It may gradually develop to be a government of the Lincoln type, and it may not. Though Gen. Alvarado is not a Lincoln, however he is not an ordinary man. To be sure, he is not a respecter of persons, not is he a grafter. His friends and his enemies agree in this. And that is why perhaps he is not liked by the hacendados and the people of wealth, who not only mistake their lost privileges for rights suppressed but also resent the clamorous, defiant attitude of their former slaves.

Any people who have been long under the yoke of tyranny are likely to abuse their rights in the first stage of their freedom; they become, at least, more arrogant than the privileged classes. But though Gen. Alvarado himself has been a sufferer from such abuses—the mestizos as government laborers exhibited an obstinacy and ungrateful spirit, demanding more pay, threatening to strike, snapping at their overseers, &c., he has been most patient and consistent in his conduct toward them; he has not changed his policy or swerved from his course. His labor reforms in this sense, though for the present, affected by the monetary condition of the country, are a decided success.

But there is something in the mestizo laborer that can never be changed. He is lazy, stubborn, self-indulgent; has no idea of thrift, never dreams of husbanding his resources; will strike six days in a week if in one day he can earn enough to keep his blood in circulation for that time; while the eight hour law, high wages and a world workers' union are developing in him the latent, surly nature of one who has been for centuries a slave. Give him twenty centuries of land to cultivate and establish a rural credit system for his benefit and organize Federal insurance agencies to take care of him, when tropical or temperamental regions he is unable or unwilling to work—what will the result be? Gen. Alvarado intends to do all these things for the mestizo, and it would not be his fault if he fails.

His proletarian tendencies are genuine. He himself has sprung from the people, but he has been a small reasoner in his State in the north before he joined the army of the revolution. In manner and temperament he is a true democrat, a social democrat, if this can be said of a dictator. He dispenses with the formalities of his office. He receives the mestizo, who come to him with a petition of a grievance at his home or at the Palacio, any hour of the day quicker than he would a hacendado, and he attends their fiestas, their games, their dances in the open air, and is often photographed with them.

Such a man, one would say, is either a charlatan or a genius. I cannot say he is the first, but he has the madness at least of the second. At his home, a humble dwelling, not in the best residential section of the city, he receives people in a back veranda, which is utilized as a dining room, a refectory rather, suggesting a guest house, furnished with a long rickety table and two tumbledown benches for himself and his staff.

And one evening at the Peon Contreras, which is the principal theatre of Merida, I saw him occupying a seat in one of the boxes. He was alone. But presently two mestizos in their attractive and immaculate white uplifts with their escorts, also dressed in white linen, walked into the box and occupied the other seats. Their Governor bowed his welcome and moved his chair so as not to obstruct their view. An affectionate, this democratic spirit, a theatricality? Whatever it be it is interesting to observe its immediate effect upon the different classes of society. One thing is evident—Merida society is seldom seen at the Peon Contreras these days.

On the other hand, he is not amiable and fraternal with those who come to him with grievances, nor is he lenient with those who disobey his decrees.

He is kind without being weak. An oak tree at the entrance of the Paseo Montejo now stands as the emblem of his power. For immediately upon his entry into Merida two men, a mestizo and one of his own soldiers, were hanged by his order upon that tree for violating innocent girls. And that put an end to such outrages as were committed daily in the north by Villa and Carranza soldiers. That oak tree has become the protector of innocence, the patron saint of maidenly virtue.

A man from the Plancha, the workshop of the railroad, which is now under the control of the Government, came to him to report on certain conditions, and he started by telling him how he was treated by his workmen. "I don't want to know how you are treated," Gen. Alvarado snapped. "I want to know what's happening?" Not even the mestizos themselves, and for obvious reasons, are wholly satisfied with his regime; for his blessings are overshadowed, discounted, poisoned, by that terrible spectre that haunts Mexico to-day and under which

reformer or labor leader who is not troubled with a domestic economic problem. What does he care, indeed, about the blessings of secularized schools or a world workers' union to a future generation? He wants his daily bread for himself, his wife and children; and ten pesos in Yucatan to-day can barely buy him that.

The merchant's disaffection is greater than the laborer's, for with the exchange fluctuating every day, rising from 1,500 to 4,000 in a week—from 4,000 to 5,000 in a day—how can he fix his prices to conform to the regulations of a commission of trade or transact any business? The merchant who has to pay for his goods in United States currency in New York or New Orleans makes a sale, let us say, of five thousand pesos when the rate of exchange was 2,000, that is 2,000 pesos of Mexican gold; and he figures his profit in accordance with that rate. But when the bill is paid,

say a few weeks later, the exchange might have risen to 4,000 and thus he will be getting but one-half of the cost of his goods.

This is not an exaggerated example, but one of the many everyday instances. No wonder then the merchants protest and threaten to close their stores, some of them often refusing to sell. No wonder the laborers protest and threaten to strike. And yet there is a great abundance in the land of Carranzista bills—bills—bills! What an embarrassment, what a calamity! Soon they may not be worth the price of their printing. Two cents to-day a cent and a half to-morrow a cent apiece! Gone your fortune—gone your savings. Why then keep a pile of bills in your drawer, why choke your safe with them? Here, boys, go out among the bookers and see what bills of exchange on New York or any other city outside of Mexico for that matter, are in the market for sale at whatever rate.

And so the corresponders, brokers, are the only people that are profiting by the calamity; the financial crisis is making them rich. I have seen one of them going from one office to another in hectic haste, with nothing in his pocket but a small draft which might have come from Brazil, or Argentina, or New York, and having on its back a dozen indorsements. And yet that crumpled, oily, insubstantial slip of a check will buy a pile of Carranzista bills—one such pile as I saw a half naked mestizo carrying one day on his arm and crying facetiously, "Mi nulo no los come. Que barbaridad!" (My nule will not eat them. It's awful!)

And Gen. Alvarado with his Comision Reguladora, his Trade Commission, his police force and his eyes wide open cannot help the situation. One day, for some insupportable reason, the exchange went down from 5,000 plump to 1,800, and the Government gave out that the fixed rate therefore will be 2,000—no more or less. Gen. Alvarado might have had good reason to make this assurance, he might have been sincere in his belief that the Government could regulate that most mercurial of hidden financial forces. And so he issued a decree.

Merchants should fix their prices according to the rate of exchange. His mestizos must be clothed, even in a country like Yucatan, and must be fed. And when Alvarado issues a decree he sees that it is obeyed, as I have said. When he lays down a law he sees that it is strictly and immediately enforced, although he has no military force to speak of. His garrison does not exceed, I think, a thousand men. But he is a man of resolution, a man of courage. He has mettle, and he has what Danton called "audace."

When he issued his decree to the merchants his police and secret detectives invaded the commercial section of the city, stood by the counters in the stores to see that it was obeyed, obeyed. Those who even dared to protest were arrested there and then. And there were the corresponders, who were tampering with the exchange! The corresponders, therefore, should be suppressed. More than fifty of them, together with a score of merchants, were hustled in one day to jail.



Gen. Alvarado and a group of mestizo women.



The Feminist Congress in the Peon Contreras, Merida, Yucatan.

would not think, while these these days, that one was in Mexico. Much has been written about the "green gold" or the henequen industry of Yucatan, and that it is one of the richest States of the Republic is well known. It is also known, and admitted, that the Government through the Comision Reguladora del Mercado de Henequen controls this great industry. The Regulating Commission now sells direct to American buyers, its paid in gold and has an office in New York, on which it issues to the hacendados, one by one bills of exchange at the current rate. It is also known, and admitted, that between the bills obtained and that paid to the hacendados there is a large margin of profit, several millions of dollars, which for a year has been accumulating somewhere, probably in New York banks—probably.

Now, here is what the merchants suggested to Gen. Alvarado. Since the Regulator has an office in New York, and such at its command, presumably why not let it sell its bills of exchange to pay for our purchases in the United States at a fixed rate, whether 2,000 or 3,000 or 4,000, it matters not, so long as a stable rate that could be depended upon, and we will fix our prices to conform to the regulations of the "Commission of Trade." On the face of it a sound business proposition.

But Gen. Alvarado had reasons of his own for not accepting it. The 250,000 cash at the command of the Regulator in New York was not so thoughtfully as large as the merchandise stored. Senor Carranza has already intended to draw on Yucatan for the hacendados in fact, for the gold sold for his currency fund to guarantee a new issue of bills. Which sum must willy-nilly be paid. There is a promised dividend to the hacendados at the end of the year to which they still look with wistful eyes. But this is not the principal reason why Gen. Alvarado refused to accept the proposition of the merchants. If the Regulator issued bills of exchange at a fixed rate, what about the republic outside of Yucatan? The fluctuation and manipulation continued, its bills will be sold at a premium in the capital and in the cities of Mexico, thus adding to the confusion and ruinous effect of the situation.

No, the singular isolation of Yucatan offered no advantage in the matter. And I have no doubt that if Gen. Alvarado were free to dispose of the surplus fund of the Regulator and act independently he would have accepted the proposition of the merchants, thereby solving the monetary problem of Yucatan to the satisfaction of the rich and the laboring classes, and overcoming one of the greatest difficulties that now threaten the success of his social and industrial reforms.

GLIMPSES OF EARLY SUMMER SCENES AT LONG BEACH

By K. R. CHAMBERLAIN



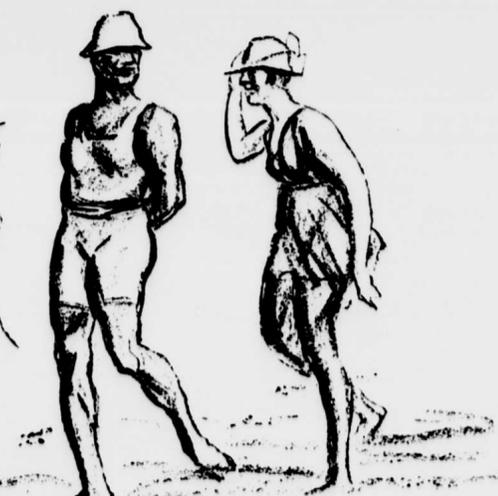
Electric wheel chair gets a dark look from a competitor.



The water may be cold, but there are many bathers.



And women in furs and heavy veils look on.



They've been going in all winter.