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OBSERVATIONS ON THE
PRESENT STATE OF THE
AFFAIRS OF THE RIVER
PLATE

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of the Affairs of the River Plate**

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Содержание

OBSERVATIONS ON THE PRESENT STATE OF THE AFFAIRS OF THE RIVER PLATE	4
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

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The destructive war which has now been waged for so many years, by the Chief of the Province of Buenos Ayres against the Republic of Uruguay, involves questions of so much importance to the commercial interests, and to the national honour of England, that nothing can account for the very slight attention which it has received from Parliament and the press, except the fact that many of the principal considerations connected with it have never yet been fully brought before the British public. In order to supply this deficiency, and to show how much it concerns the character of this country that this war should at once be brought to a close in the only manner in which it can be ended; that is, by the prompt and decided interference of the

Governments of France and England, I have thought that it might be useful to lay before the public the following observations and documents, explanatory of the principles involved in the war; of the conduct pursued by Mr. Mandeville, the British Minister to the Argentine Confederation, at the most critical period of its progress; and of the strong and rapidly-increasing interest which this country, and more especially the port of Liverpool, has in the preservation of the threatened independence of the Republic of Uruguay.

Most of the readers of these remarks are no doubt aware that the Province of the Banda Oriental, or eastern bank of the River Plate, was first constituted an independent state, under the title of the Republic of Uruguay, at the close of the war between the Argentine Confederation and the Empire of Brazil, in the year 1828. This arrangement was in a great measure brought about by the good offices of Lord Ponsonby, the Ambassador of the British Government to the Court of Rio, and the result of his negotiations was so agreeable to the English Government, that the peace thus concluded was made a subject of congratulation in the speech from the throne in the year 1829. The principal object in forming this new Republic was, to put an end to the destructive war between Buenos Ayres and Brazil, originating in the claims put forward by both these countries to the possession of the Province of the Banda Oriental. The Brazilians, who had had possession of it for several years, were naturally unwilling to have so warlike and powerful a state as the Argentine Republic

on their most vulnerable frontier, and the Argentines were not less unwilling to have the Brazilian frontier pushed more than a hundred leagues up the River Plate, and within the limits of the ancient Viceroyalty of Paraguay, which had for ages been occupied by the Spanish race. As the only effectual solution of these difficulties, the English Government proposed that the Banda Oriental should be rendered independent of both countries, and this, after some negotiation, was agreed to by all the parties concerned.

The primary object of the mediation of the English Government was the re-establishment and preservation of peace and amity between two nations, with both of which England had valuable commercial relations; and this object has been completely gained by the arrangement then effected. During the sixteen years which have elapsed since the treaty was concluded, no serious difference has occurred between Brazil and the Argentine Confederation, nor is any likely to occur so long as the barrier of an independent state is interposed between them. It is only during the last two years that serious discussions have arisen between them, and these have originated in the fears of Brazil, lest the successes of the Buenos Ayrean army, now before Monte Video, should be such as to break down the barrier established by the Ponsonby treaty, and again to bring the Buenos Ayreans on the frontiers of Rio Grande. From apprehension of this event, the Brazilian Government has allowed General Paz, with his military staff, to pass through its territory to place himself at

the head of the Correntino insurgents, who have risen against Rosas, and made common cause with Monte Video; it has also recalled Admiral Grenfell, its commander in the River Plate, as well as its diplomatic agent at Monte Video, for engaging in an ill-timed quarrel with the Monte Videan Government; and if the Buenos Ayrean army should succeed in gaining possession of the city of Monte Video, it will in all probability, whether backed or not by England and France, decide to take part in the war, rather than allow General Rosas to succeed in the designs which he now avows on the Republics of Uruguay and Paraguay, the two bulwarks of the western provinces of the Brazilian empire. Notwithstanding the recent victories of the Brazilian General, Baron Caxias, over the rebels of Rio Grande d'ó Sul, that province is still in a very unsettled state – far too much so to be safely exposed to the machinations of such dangerous neighbours as Generals Rosas and Oribe. It may, therefore, be confidently expected, that if the great naval powers do not interpose, the progress of events will again bring on a war between Brazil, strengthened by the army of Uruguay, under General Rivera, that of Corrientes under General Paz, and the forces of Paraguay on one side; and Buenos Ayres on the other, backed by those other provinces of the Argentine Confederation, which still follow the fortunes of General Rosas.

What the result of such a war would be no one can predict, but its first consequence would be another blockade of Buenos Ayres, by the Brazilian fleet, its next the reinforcement of the

garrison of Monte Video by a detachment of Brazilian troops, and its probable final result, after the whole of the countries engaged in it had been thoroughly ruined, the establishment of the ascendancy either of the government of Buenos Ayres, or of that of Brazil at Monte Video. This would be alike opposed to the wishes and the interests of the Monte Videans themselves, to the interests of a large portion of South America, and to those of the nations trading with it. A small Independent State, like the Republic of Uruguay, governed as it has ever been since the date of its independence on the most liberal commercial principles, is the best of all checks on the commercial illiberality of the neighbouring countries, and is much too valuable to be sacrificed by the Government of any commercial nation which has at heart the prosperity of its subjects.

If it should be said that neutral nations have no right to interpose between belligerents, even for the purpose of preserving the national independence of the weaker, I answer, that no longer since than last year, the Government of this country was prepared to have interposed, if it had been necessary, in order to preserve the independence of the Empire of Morocco; and that the Government of France fully admitted the right of England to do so in such a case, by giving a promise beforehand that it would not use its victory either to conquer the territory or to destroy the independence of the offending state. The reason why England was prepared to resist the conquest of Morocco was, that such a conquest would have seriously

endangered her interests and influence in the Mediterranean; and one principal reason why she should interfere to prevent the conquest of Monte Video by the army and squadron of Buenos Ayres is, that such a conquest would jeopardise her valuable commerce and her influence in the River Plate, the only outlet of regions larger than all the great Kingdoms of Western Europe united. Brazil has the same right to interpose that Austria would have to resist the conquest of Sardinia, or Prussia the conquest of Belgium, by France.

Many advantages have resulted both to the commerce of foreign nations, and to the prosperity of the people of Uruguay, from the recognition of its independence both of Buenos Ayres and Brazil, which were not anticipated at the time when it was established, the whole of which, as we shall show, will be lost if it is allowed to be absorbed by or placed in dependence on Buenos Ayres. Amongst these advantages are the following: —

The creation of an Independent State on the eastern bank of the River Plate has given the commercial nations of Europe trading with those vast countries of South America, whose only means of intercourse with the rest of the world is through that River, a greatly increased security against being again cut off from communication with them, as they were during the Brazilian blockade, in the years 1825, 6, and 7. At that time, both banks of the river were involved in the war, the city of Monte Video being in the hands of the Brazilians, and the Province which now forms the Republic of Uruguay being in arms against

them. The consequence of this state of things was, that the whole of the countries watered by the great rivers Parana, Paraguay, Uruguay, and their innumerable tributary streams, as well as the provinces of Buenos Ayres and Monte Video, were cut off from all communication with Europe for nearly three years, and that the great commerce which even then was carried on by England and other nations with those countries, was for the time destroyed. Some notion may be formed of the inconvenience which this country alone sustained from the blockade of the river, from the following facts. In the years 1822, 3, 4, and 5, the four years preceding it, the average annual value of the exports from England to the River Plate, was £909,330, whilst in 1826, 7, and 8, during the blockade, it fell to £279,463, and in 1827, to £150,000, and even that small remnant of trade was carried on by vessels which broke the blockade. At a subsequent period, namely, in the years 1838-9, and 40, there was again a blockade in the River Plate, established by France, a power much more capable of making a blockade respected than Brazil, but as the east bank of the river was no longer under the control of Buenos Ayres, which was the power against whom the blockade was directed, the evils resulting from it were comparatively small. Foreign ships were still able to proceed to Monte Video, (thanks to the independence of Uruguay), and thus, although one line of intercourse with the interior was cut off by the blockade of the port of Buenos Ayres, the other up the river Uruguay was kept open. In consequence of this, the evils of the blockade were,

in a great measure, confined to the city of Buenos Ayres and its immediate neighbourhood, for the eastern bank of the river flourished more than ever, the communication with the interior was never closed, and the commerce of the nations trading with those countries continued to increase. When it is considered (and it ought never to be lost sight of,) that the commerce of foreign nations with the whole of the central regions of South America depends entirely on the keeping open one or other of these lines of communication, it will be seen that it is a matter, not merely of national but of universal importance, though in an especial manner to England, to maintain the entire independence of Monte Video of Buenos Ayres, so as to diminish as much as possible the danger of both being closed at the same time and by the same political events. We say the entire independence of Monte Video, for though the nominal independence of the country might be preserved, even if the Buenos Ayrean army, under General Oribe, should get possession of the city of Monte Video, that officer would be compelled to lean on General Rosas for support to protect him against the majority of his fellow countrymen, who are now in arms against him quite as much as the chiefs of the Banda Oriental were in 1826, 7, and 8, compelled to lean on Buenos Ayres for protection against the arms of Brazil; and to follow the fortunes of Buenos Ayres in any war in which General Rosas might involve himself, either with Brazil or any of the nations of Europe. This would again be fatal to the trade of the River Plate.

It is not generally known, although it is very important that it should be, that this trade amounted in 1842, including both imports and exports, to upwards of Three Millions sterling, at the port of Monte Video alone. It is still, however, in its infancy, and requires nothing but a few years of peace, with the introduction of steam navigation on the Parana, the Uruguay, and their tributaries,¹ to give it an extension which will render it of vital importance to the merchants and manufacturers of England. The Parana and the Paraguay, together, are known to be navigable to Assumption, which is fifteen hundred miles above Buenos Ayres, to vessels drawing nine feet water, and there is every reason to believe that both those rivers might be navigated a thousand miles higher by iron steamers, such as those recently built at Birkenhead, by order of the East India Company, for the navigation of the Indus and the Sutlej, the former of which, when carrying guns and troops, draw only four feet water, the latter of which, when loaded in the same manner, not more than two and a half. The Uruguay is equally navigable for several hundred miles to the Salto Chico, (the little leap), and if a short canal was cut, to turn that rapid and the much more formidable one of the Salto Grande,² it would be navigable for many hundred miles above the Falls. Several

¹ The Monte Videan Government has granted a patent for introducing steamers on all its rivers to an Englishman, Mr. Bugglen. — (*See Appendix.*)

² Plans for forming such a canal were under consideration by the Commissioners appointed under the treaty of San Ildefonso, in 1778, to fix the boundaries of the Spanish and Portuguese possessions.

of the tributaries of these gigantic streams are larger than the Rhine, the Elbe, or the Tagus, and great numbers of them than the Thames or the Mersey, and the whole of this vast network of waters is connected with the still more stupendous river of the Amazons, by a short portage to the Madeira, one of the principal tributaries of that king of rivers. The natural products which these unrivalled lines of river communication might be made the means of bringing to the ports on the Rivers Plate and Amazons are varied and inexhaustible. In addition to the large supplies of hides, wool, tallow, and provisions, which these countries now furnish, Paraguay and Corrientes are capable of supplying the finest timber for ship-building purposes, sugar the growth of free labour, the best kinds of tobacco, cotton-wool, dyewoods, drugs, the tea of Paraguay, and the precious metals from Bolivia and the back provinces of Brazil. It is now only twenty or thirty years since steam navigation was introduced on the Mississippi, and the consequence of its introduction has been an extension of cultivation and population such as the world never before saw. The natural resources of the great valleys of the Parana, Paraguay, and Uruguay, merely require to be developed by the same means to make Monte Video and Buenos Ayres as flourishing as New Orleans, and to make the commerce of the River Plate rival that of the Mississippi. It is perhaps vain to hope that anything will induce the present Governor of Buenos Ayres to abandon the suicidal policy which is at once impeding the intercourse with the interior, and depriving that city of the

principal benefits of its unrivalled position, but this only renders it the more necessary to keep open the only other course, namely, that through the Uruguay, by which the resources of these vast countries can be brought into activity.

For another of the great advantages which has resulted from the independence of Monte Video, has been the opening of a new channel for the commercial intercourse between Europe and the central states of South America, in peace as well as in war; and this channel the Monte Videan Government has laboured to improve and keep open, as zealously and as successfully as the Buenos Ayrean Government has laboured to narrow and impede the old ones. The Buenos Ayrean Government has been warned repeatedly by its warmest friends of the consequences which would result from its illiberal commercial policy; but they might just as well have reasoned with the winds; for, the only effect of the contrast between the rapidly increasing prosperity of Monte Video and the declining state of Buenos Ayres, has been to excite the most deadly hatred and jealousy towards Monte Video on the part of the Buenos Ayrean Government, and a settled determination to drag down that rapidly improving city to its own level. The following sketch of the commercial policy of the two countries will show what have been the principal causes of the prosperity of Monte Video, and what of the decline of Buenos Ayres; and also how strong a claim the policy of the former gives it on the sympathy and support of this country.

A large portion of the revenue, both of Monte Video and of

Province of Buenos Ayres, is raised by taxes on the importation of foreign goods, and the rate of duties is not excessive in either case. It is not on this account that any one complains of the Buenos Ayrean Government, but because it confines foreign commerce to the single port of Buenos Ayres, and excludes both foreigners and foreign vessels from the other ports of the Confederation, as strictly as the Chinese formerly excluded them from every port except Canton. This it is able to effect by its command over the entrance to the river Parana, the direct route to Entre Rios, Corrientes, and the other provinces of the Confederation. Whilst the provincial Government of Buenos Ayres thus excludes all foreign vessels from the Parana, and as far as its control extends from the Uruguay, it claims the right to expend the whole of the customs' revenue raised at Buenos Ayres. The upper provinces very naturally consider this unjust, and insist on having either a share of the revenue collected at Buenos Ayres (somewhat on the principle adopted amongst the states of the German Zollverein), or on having a general Congress of all the provinces of the Confederation to decide how the money shall be distributed. This General Rosas and his adherents refuse, and this refusal, coupled with the equally positive refusal of the same parties to allow foreign vessels to ascend the river, is one principal cause of the frequent wars between the states of the Argentine Confederation on the banks of the river and the Government of Buenos Ayres, one of which is now raging between it and Corrientes. In this way the commerce

with the interior is continually interrupted. The policy of the Monte Videan Government is in every respect the reverse of this, for it not only throws open the ports of Monte Video, Maldonado, and Colonia, on the River Plate, but those of Soriano and Paysandú, on the Uruguay, the Yaguaron, on the Laguna Merin, and the dry port of Taquarembó on the Brazilian frontier to all the world, and thus gives every part of the republic all the advantages of foreign commerce.

There is a still greater difference, if it is possible, in the policy adopted by the two governments with regard to the transit trade. At Monte Video goods may be landed without the payment of any duty, may be there deposited in the Custom-house stores for any length of time, on the payment of a smaller warehouse rent than is usually paid in Liverpool, and may be sent to any of the independent countries in the interior, or re-shipped to foreign parts, without the payment of a dollar. The Government goes even further than this, for it allows goods in transit to be conveyed through the whole territory of the Republic, with a guia or Custom-house Permit to all parts of the frontier, and to be forwarded into the Argentine provinces of Entre Rios and Corrientes, into the Republic of Paraguay, and into the back provinces of the empire of Brazil, perfectly free from duty. Hence goods are constantly forwarded up the Uruguay, instead of going to Buenos Ayres to pay duty to General Rosas. The natural consequence of this is, that the people of all the adjoining states have a friendly feeling towards Monte Video. Corrientes has

several times risen against the connection with General Rosas, in support of Monte Video, and Brazil is prepared, if necessary, to interfere to save it from his grasp. In fact, it is quite evident that nothing but an entire change of policy on the part of Buenos Ayres can prevent a general war against its usurpations. The policy of Rosas with regard to goods in transit to the Independent States of the interior is altogether different from that of Monte Video, for, when landed at Buenos Ayres, they pay the same duties as if they were intended for consumption there, and not a sixpence, or what is less than a sixpence, a Buenos Ayrean paper dollar, is ever returned. When goods are intended for re-exportation by sea, the difference is in appearance less, but much the same in reality, for whilst they can be landed at Monte Video without paying any duty, can remain there as long as the owners like, and can then be re-exported duty free, at Buenos Ayres they cannot be landed without paying the full duties, their owners lose all claim to have any part of those duties returned, if they are not re-exported within six months, and it is only with the greatest difficulty and after waiting many months that they obtain any return at all, even if they are exported within that time.

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