

THE LITTLE PARIS OF SOUTH AMERICA

Pictureque Features of Life in the Capitol of Venezuela.

REMINERS OF AN ILLUSTRIOUS MAN

Guzman Blanco's Career and What He Accomplished Before His Departure—The Venezuelan Household, Especially His Young Lady, and How She Is Courted.

Caracas Letter, New York Tribune.

Richard Harding Davis has called Caracas the "Little Paris" of South America, and one comes to the gay little city prepared to see it from his point of view. In 1812 the city, or at any rate, the greater part of it, was destroyed by an earthquake. This is now an almost entirely forgotten disaster, but it left its ineradicable mark. A huge crevice, some fifty feet in depth, cuts across the valley, and over this innumerable bridges have been built. There is no bar, cracked appearance to the landscape, and it is not at all the narrow little hole of the geography pictures, but wide and deep, like the bed of a river. On each side are wine gardens, where the tables are set out under palm trees, and the earthquake hole itself is all overgrown with trailing vines and bamboo.

The iron bridge, puente de hierro, is the most imposing of all the Caracas bridges. It was erected by that "illustrious American," Guzman Blanco, and spans the earthquake chasm at the point which has become, in a way, the pleasure grounds of the people. Here everybody comes of an afternoon to drive or promenade, to flirt or drink wine, find amusement or otherwise. Here are the wine gardens, innumerable palm trees and gas lights, and here on a moonlight night the tinkle of the guitar mingles with the wail of the donkey in a neighboring field.

TRACES OF GUZMAN BLANCO.

In Caracas one runs up against traces of Guzman Blanco at every turn. It is true that he is an exile now, and in disgrace, but there is no doubt that he was an important personage in his time, and did more for the appearance of his native town than any other "illustrious American" who came after him.

Ten years ago Guzman Blanco was a sort of combination of president, dictator and Grand Mogul. He appointed senators and congressmen, and, if they so much as breathed in opposition to any of his little plans, he sent them, bag and baggage, out of the country. He built ornate bridges and laid out public squares with fountains and fountains, and erected magnificent public buildings, and wherever he did any of these things, of which he was very proud, he had a statue of himself made and set up in commemoration. He was a handsome man—the handsomest in all Venezuela—and was fond of seeing bronze and marble images of himself standing around. He lived in magnificent, had town houses and villas and coffee plantations, and his wife, who was as beautiful as he was handsome, had her own special church and priests, and so ordinary mortal was allowed to enter there. But even with all this power and glory Guzman suffered from ennui; Caracas, in his opinion, was slow, and, looking around to find a remedy for this state of affairs, his eye fell upon the Roman Church. The country, he said, was priest-ridden, the women were all too religious to be interesting, and the eternal jangling of church bells annoyed him, and he proceeded to arrange matters to suit himself.

He put a stop to all parading of church images through the streets. No women were forbidden the privilege of wearing mantillas, and they were forced to wear bonnets and hats. The cathedral bells were removed, and in their place chimera imported from England, were substituted. The chimera were most comforting to homesick foreigners. They played "Lily Dail," "There is a Happy Land" and "Home, Sweet Home" in the most cheerful manner imaginable.

Then Guzman decided that he did not like the pictures of St. Paul in the churches. St. Paul, it seems, was his patron saint, and the pictures were not sufficiently good-looking, so he had his own face painted on all the Saint Pauls, and even then he was not satisfied. He craved amusement, and excitement. He built a huge French theater, which he called "Teatro Guzman Blanco," and imported Italian opera, which the government supported in magnificent style six months in the year. He had bull-fights and cock-fights, and sent all the way to Madrid for his terodors. He had music in the public squares in the city, and forced the people to habits of gaiety which they have never relinquished. After all, he found the "Little Paris" of his creation too small and dull, so he substituted a president to act for him in his absence, and sent himself as minister to France.

THE WORM TURNS.

And when he was well out of sight the worm in Venezuela began to turn. The women went back to their early mass and beloved mantillas. The cathedral bells tinkled out joyously. One fine day the university students went forth in a body, pulled out all the statues of the "illustrious American," and dragged them ignominiously through the streets, shouting "Libertad!" The priests mounted pulpits and pointed out the face of St. Paul in all the churches. The chimera were packed up and sent back to their native soil, and Guzman received a letter from the "Gobierno Municipal" advising him to stay away from Venezuela.

And now he is a man well advanced in years. He still lives in gay Paris.

He is very rich, enormously, even suspiciously rich—and there are some prophetic old women here in Caracas who say that some day he will return, and "Little Paris" will become demoralized a second time.

There is a mystery about the appearance of Caracas which is unaccounted for in other South American towns. The city is well regulated and orderly—its streets all straight and narrow, running north and south, east and west—its houses all of a size, one red tile roof running into another. There are the great old churches, the government building and building, and at regular intervals the public squares—plazas—where tropical plants blossom in profusion. The whole is as uniform as the city of blocks a child builds.

The whole houses are painted all the colors of the rainbow. The windows, which open on the sidewalks, are protected in some instances by substantial iron bars, and in others by elaborate grillwork. There is always a courtyard, or patio, which sometimes is a perfect garden, with fountains and flowers, and sometimes is paved with brightly colored tiles, when it is used for a ballroom. Nothing could be more attractive than the interior of one of these houses, with their shaded lamps and hanging masks, their gaudy chairs and gay awnings and hand-mocks.

HOUSE INTERIORS.

Caracas has become such a cosmopolitan place, invaded as it is by hordes of diplomats of all countries, that the old Spanish style of house-furnishing is giving way to European methods. But when one does come into the home of the conservative Venezuelan, imperious to foreign influences, his house will be found arranged just as his ancestors left it. White lace curtains and red velvet lampshades, an oval mirror at each end of the room, a chandelier, and immediately beneath the mirror two high-backed red velvet sofas facing each other. Each of these sofas is flanked by parallel lines of chairs, four on a side, and in the center of the room is another row of chairs, these pushed back against the wall. There is always a hanging chandelier, with candles and glass pendants. The Venezuelan host seats himself on one sofa, the hostess on the other, guests of honor occupy the sixteen chairs in the immediate vicinity, and those of less importance sit with their backs to the wall.

THE SENORITAS.

It is in this sort of a home that one finds the senoritas with raven hair and flirtatious tendencies about whom so many romances have been written. To the outside of this girl's life, with its staid church rooms and utter lack of liberty, seems dreary and monotonous in the extreme. But the girl is as happy and contented as a sandlot. To sit behind the iron bars of her window, with a white rose tucked in her hair and a lace fan in her hand, and to read English novels and to see the young men who ride past, is to her joy unspeakable. Dolores would faint at the idea of college training. The thoughts of Latin or Greek would put her to counting out an endless number of "Hail Marys" and "Pat-nosters" for deliverance. What good is education to Dolores? She has the most divine cyphers and the softest voice imaginable. She can speak a little French and a little English, and such music as she makes with her voice and her marionette's single note will bring the young secretary of the German Embassy to her feet in adject admiration. The young German is a disciple of the philosophy of the Great Unknowable, and to the mother of Dolores it makes no great matter to know things out of books. She herself has a vague idea whether New York is in the United States, or the United States in New York. In her youth she was a slip of a girl like Dolores with a creamy complexion and great natural beauty. Her father, a Frenchman, was in the window, armed with the rose and the big fan. A gay young cavalier, who is now the father of Dolores, used to stop and talk to her through the iron bars of the window. She has now grown gray, and quite fat because of too much red wine and sweets and rocking chair. The grandmother of Dolores spent just the same sort of life, and Dolores herself has not the remotest conception of anything different.

WHEN NOT PRETTY.

This is all very well when the girl in the window has long eyelashes and dimples and all the other physical attractions that appeal to her countrymen. But when she should not happen to be pretty? Her prospects are not joyous. No claim to meet people and show them that she is clever and attractive in spite of her appearance. No happy prospect of a free bachelor customer, when chattering and trifling and babyish will elude pleasantly. No woman's club, no slumming, no bicycle, no career, nothing but the endless monotony of early mass and afternoon window sill with the men all passing by and never changing in her direction. The Spanish language, besides, is most insulting to the spinster state. The young woman who "remains over to dress the saints in the churches" is facetiously styled una hamona, a ham, salted meat, something stale and dry and altogether unpalatable. However, Dolores rarely lacks prettiness to attract not only the young German, but all the other young secretaries, and a host of her own countrymen besides, who will talk to her through the iron bars of her window, standing by the sidewalk. The mother of Dolores, not two yards distant, keeps her ears discreetly open. This is the beginning. Should the admirer come closer to the window, should he exchange a red rose for the white one Dolores wears in her hair, should he venture inside, it is all up with him. The mother of Dolores believes that attentions should always be accompanied by intentions, and the father of Dolores loves to call upon the town, and has an accidental chat with him.

THE CARACAS YOUNG MAN.

The main point of difference between the average North American young man and the average South American young man is that the one does not always take himself seriously and the other does. Imagine a young Venezuelan, educated at the University of Caracas, regarding himself in a whimsical manner? He is pathetic, enthusiastic, sometimes noble, but humorous never. His most striking peculiarity is his attitude toward women. If one should judge him by the conversation he whispers through the iron bars of Dolores's window, he would be accounted perpetually angry, or simply naturally weak-minded. But such is not the case; he is in his normal physical and mental condition, and when he asks Dolores for the white rose, saying, "It will bring sunshine into a life which is dark and dreary, and by the pulsations of thy heart, kept alive by the light of thine eyes," he means to be taken seriously.

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When he like the appearance of a young woman walking on the street he starged so that the object of his admiration becomes self-conscious and uncomfortable, and has to retire into some friendly church to escape his stinging eye. He spends a good part of his time at the Caracas club, where he plays baccarat and drinks cocktails. In the afternoon he goes out for a drive in a very shiny victoria, with pillows at his back and a cigarette in his mouth. The coachman is resplendent in a heavy of white broadcloth, with gold braid and brass buttons, but his horses are meek little animals with all the spirit whipped out of them.

PECULIAR CUSTOMS. There are some little peculiarities of custom that the foreigner stumbles up against in Caracas which are a source of no small annoyance to him. The most exasperating of these is that shopkeepers and hotel clerks, and, in fact, almost every person with whom he may happen to have business relations, labor under the delusion that he is a millionaire traveling incognito. They regard him as their legitimate prey, and swindle him unmercifully. He may be very unpretentious in his dress, he may even be shabby genteel and out at elbows; the delusion is still entertained in regard to him, and he cannot so much as buy a paper of pins unless he pays three or four prices for it. The servants here have an absurd self-bringing to their windows as many interested, but more disinterested, spectators; it is dreadful! He talks to Jose by the hour, but he only laughs and persists in his wickedness. He never goes further. He becomes acquainted with the foreign tourists at the hotels, girls of the most immodest appearance, who wear coats like men, and shirts and stiff collars and cravats, and sailor hats. They go upon the streets, these boy-girls, unheeded, carrying a little black instrument with which they take everybody's picture, and often they are accompanied by Jose. He says they belong to the best North American families, which is a statement that Jose's mother cannot bring herself to believe.

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