CHAPTER XIX

COLOMBIA AND THE CONVENTION OF OCAÑA, 1827-28

BOLIVAR was fully occupied for some time at Caracas in restoring order in the neglected administration, and in the finances, which Paez had thoroughly ruined.

The 2nd January 1827 had been fixed by the constitution for the assembly of the Colombian Congress, and Bolivar believed it would meet then, or a few days later.

On the 6th February, he despatched once more his resignation of the Presidency of Colombia. He had, he said, been for fourteen years at the head of the republic, a position which he had been compelled by the needs of the State to hold. There no longer existed any such dangers. "I myself do not feel myself innocent of ambition; therefore, I desire to save myself from the claws of that madness, in order to deliver my fellow-citizens from anxiety, and to assure after my death a reputation worthy of liberty."[1] Therefore, he insisted on acceptance of his resignation, in order to save him from the necessity of desertion. Santander and the Congress must have got pretty well accustomed to this sort of talk, and to putting but a small valuation on it. It was perhaps getting a little dangerous for Bolivar to tender resignations, unless they were really meant to be accepted, especially looking to the ill-concealed hostility of Santander, and the spread of a desire in New Granada for

[1] Larrazabal, ii. 395.

separation alike from Ecuador and from Venezuela. If that were to occur, Bolivar, as a Venezuelan, would be excluded from the government of New Granada. The desire for separation from New Granada was equally strong with many of the Venezuelans. The two peoples differed in many ways from one another, and from the people of Ecuador. Bolivar's dream of a perpetual union of the three territories was really impossible of realisation, as was very soon to appear by the dissolution of Colombia into its three elements of Venezuela, Colombia (corresponding to New Granada), and Ecuador. Since Bolivar's death they have remained separate states, and there seems not the slightest probability of their ever permanently coalescing again.

Whilst the Liberator was busy restoring order in Venezuela, he received bad news, not only from Bogotá, but also from Peru. A mutiny of the 3rd Colombian division, led by a Granadian named Bustamente, had broken out in Lima at the end of January. The mutineers had seized their officers, thrown them into the dungeons of Callao, and then sent them off by sea to Buenaventura. Bustamente and his followers, professing great admiration for the Colombian constitution, had based their rising on the supposed hostility to it of Lara and other officers, whom they accused of working for a dictatorship. Bustamente was joined by the Peruvian revolutionaries, and together they overthrew the government as left by Bolivar on his departure. The news of this outbreak was received with rejoicing by Santander and Bolivar's other enemies at Bogotá. As for Bolivar, when the news of the revolt reached him at Caracas, he remarked—"Colombia has lost a division of troops; but the Peruvian Republic will relapse into the anarchy from which it was rescued by me and the Colombian army." Later, on hearing of the reception of the news at Bogotá, he added—"Overwhelmed with shame, I know not which

to consider the more grievous, the crime of the revolt, or the deliberate approbation accorded to it by the government of Bogotá. How terrible! How could Santander allow himself to be drawn into such excess of passion! To ratify the violation of military discipline!"

Campbell, in his memorandum already quoted, openly accuses Santander of having fomented this revolt, and of having corresponded with Bustamente.

In Lima the enemies of Bolivar, headed by Vidaurre and Pando, poured abuse on him and on Colombia. Bustamente and his troops were sent to Guayaquil to gain over that long-disputed department to Peru. With them was sent Lopez Mendez,[1] to take over the governorship of the three southern departments as soon as they should revolt against Colombia, which it was assumed they would easily be persuaded to do. When the expedition had been ten days at sea, news of its approach was brought to Guayaquil, where T. C Mosquera, the Intendant, Generals Perez, Valdés, and others prepared to resist it.

Early in April the invaders disembarked, part at Manta under Colonel Elizalde, the rest at Paita under Bustamente, the intention being to march by Loja into the province of Cuenca. They marched to the cry that Bolivar the tyrant had destroyed the law. They equally refused to obey Santander, and said they would desist only when Bolivar should appear as a simple citizen to defend, before the Congress, his atrocious conduct in Peru. They were presently joined by Colonel Delgado, Santander's commandant in Manabí, and the whole then started to march against Guayaquil. At that place Antonio Elizalde[2] and others, in the meanwhile, gained

[1] This was the man who had formerly been Venezuelan agent in London, and who is so strongly denounced as a fraudulent person by Hippisley and others.

[2] Brother of the Elizalde who landed at Manta.

over the garrison to the cause of revolution. At 2 a.m. on the 16th April 1827 the revolution was effected in Guayaquil, and La Mar, the former commander of the Peruvian troops at Ayacucho, was elected civil and military chief of the place, and a little later President of the Peruvian Republic. He embarked for Callao on the 24th July to take up his new office.

Though Bolivar had sent in his resignation of the Presidency, he now changed his mind, and decided to march to Bogotá and the south, in order to remedy this new disaster. In his proclamation of the 19th June, addressed from Caracas to the Colombians, he explains the necessity for his intervention, "as citizen, as Liberator, and as President." Later on he adds a significant admission in the words, "The national will is oppressed by these new prætorians, who have taken on themselves to dictate the law to the sovereign whom they ought to obey. They have assumed the sacred right of the nation, they have violated all principles; in fine, the troops which were the Colombian auxiliaries of Peru have returned to their country to establish a new and foreign government on the ruins of the Republic, which they outrage with greater insults than our oppressors."[1] The reign of prætorianism had begun before this with the revolt of Paez, perhaps even before that. Henceforth it was to be the rule, rather than the exception, in territories in which a long course of ultimately successful war had taught the soldiery to look upon themselves as arbiters of the destiny of governments.

On the 5th July Bolivar sailed from La Guaira for Cartagena, on H.B.M.S. "Druid," in company with Sir A. Cockburn, the British envoy to Caracas. On the 9th Cartagena was reached, and thence Bolivar set out, with such troops as he had collected, for Bogotá, marching by Ocaña.

[1] Larrazabal, ii. 400.

The news of Bolivar's march to Bogotá was extremely unpalatable to Santander and his partisans, who perhaps felt far from secure, seeing how Bolivar's name had hitherto carried everything before it, and feeling, as they must have, that the Liberator had a long account to settle with them. The line taken by Santander was that Bolivar's advance was a distinct threat to liberty. Santander himself was now posing, says Campbell, as the champion of the law, "el hombre de la constitucion" (the man of the constitution). His vehement messages to the Senate gave rise to a discussion in which Doctor Soto and other leaders of the Santander party denounced Bolivar in violent terms, though no definite resolution was passed.

Then there appeared an article in the *Conductor*, Santander's organ, urging separation of New Granada from Venezuela, which, of course, implied relegation of the Liberator to his own country. Bogotá was almost in a state of revolution. But for the advice of Soublette, then Minister of War, Santander would have resigned the Vice-Presidency and himself headed the revolution. His chief councillors were Soto and Azuero, the editor of the *Conductor*. Every device was employed to prevent the advance of Bolivar and the other troops which were moving from Cúcuta and Magdalena. Santander wrote that the expedition to the south was no longer necessary, because Obando had reduced Guayaquil to order; but Bolivar had later and more accurate news. Then the Vice-President urged the difficulty of supporting the troops near the capital. Then he said that Bolivar had no authority, because he had not taken the oath as President. Whatever there may have been in such a plea, Bolivar was not to be put off by it. Santander, on his part, protested to the Senate that he would not surrender power until Bolivar had taken the oath, and, in his desperation, he even proposed to address a circular

to the representatives of foreign powers, protesting against Bolivar's action!

Then he said that, as the south was for separation from the centre and north, he would go there. His secretaries told him plainly that, if he was afraid of the vengeance of the Liberator, he had much better resign the Vice-Presidency and clear out of the country till the storm had blown over. Probably Santander saw plainly that such a flight would be the end of his reputation and power, so he resolved to brazen it out.

Soublette, Mosquera, Herran, and others of the party of Bolivar now went northward to meet him, and to try to avert the reprisals which they felt he might justly wish to execute on his enemies at Bogotá. From Socorro Herran was sent back to Bogotá, whilst the others accompanied Bolivar to Cipaquirá, the site of the great salt mines, in the plain some 30 miles north of the capital. Thence Mosquera was despatched with letters from Bolivar announcing his intention of assuming the chief authority immediately on his arrival at Bogotá.

The Congress assembled in the church of San Domingo, ready to receive the President, and to administer the oath of fidelity to the constitution. On the afternoon of the 10th September, Bolivar arrived, and at once took the necessary oath. Santander, in considerable trepidation, awaited his arrival at the Presidential Palace. He found his apprehensions, natural though they were, to be unfounded; for Bolivar greeted him in friendly terms. The two were then left alone, to confer, and to dine together!

As Bolivar entered the capital, Soto, Azuero, and some others of his chief opponents left it. Hearing of this, Bolivar merely laughed, and said they could live in peace and security, since he had no ideas of vengeance against any one.

He then arranged for a special session of Congress

to receive his account of his exercise of the supreme power. The situation towards the close of 1827 was far from being satisfactory. Guayaquil had set a bad example by breaking away and setting up as a separate republic; there was a general tendency towards disorder in Colombia; the Spanish Governor of Puerto Rico was fomenting rebellion in the province of Caracas; several leaders were trying to collect forces to proclaim the King; the Indians in the Orinoco valley were giving trouble; there were symptoms of insurrection in Coró, Guayana, and Cumaná; finally, there was the greatest hostility to Colombia on the part of La Mar and the Peruvian Congress, who were raising forces for the subjugation of the southern provinces as far as the Juanambú. Santander and his friends still secretly continued their intrigues against the President, who, however, was supported by the Congress and the more conservative section of the people. A decree was now issued convoking the General Convention of Provincial Deputies to assemble at Ocaña on the 2nd March 1828, and rules were issued for the conduct of the elections to it. This Convention, for the reform of the Constitution, had been promised by Bolivar when he marched against Paez. He laid special stress on the necessity for the persons elected being men of enlightenment and devotion to the cause of liberty.

His thoughts, meanwhile, were devoted to the problem of Guayaquil. On arriving at Bogotá he learned that J. J. Flores had already succeeded in working a counter-revolution in Guayaquil against Lopez Mendez and Bustamente. They and others had fled to Peru. Flores had also put down an attempt to proclaim the subordination of Guayaquil to Peru.

Whilst Bolivar confined himself to asking for enlightened members of the coming Convention, without otherwise interfering with the elections, Santander and the "Liberals" were actively canvassing. "Santander,"

wrote Bolivar, "has gone to the length of going out on to the highways to seek partisans, and offering board and lodging to the Deputies who come to Ocaña."[1]

The press continued its campaign against Bolivar, who, however, refused to muzzle it, as was suggested by his friends. To have done so would have been to play into the hands of his opponents. Just at this moment there was a serious scare in Venezuela, owing to the appearance of a Spanish squadron off the coast. Nothing came of it, as the rebels under the guerrilla chief, Arizábalo, whom it was proposed to help, could not be found. But the appearance of possible invasion gave Bolivar an excuse for once more assuming the extraordinary powers allowed to the President in time of war. He took up these powers on the 13th March 1828, excepting only in the Canton of Ocaña, the place of meeting of the Convention.

Having prescribed orders for the trial of traitors and conspirators, and called in to his aid Urdaneta, Bolivar marched by Tunja for Cúcuta to meet the expected invasion. On the road he heard from Paez that the danger had passed; though about the same time he also heard that General Padilla had revolted at Cartagena, where he assumed control for a few days. Campbell accuses Santander of being at the bottom of this revolt also. Bolivar, who was marching for Venezuela, halted at Bucaramanga. But Padilla, on the 7th March, finding himself deserted by the garrison and the inhabitants of the fortress, had fled, and had sent from Ocaña a letter of excuses to Bolivar. The latter ordered the arrest and trial of the rebel under his recent orders for the trial of conspirators.

Early in March 67 Deputies had assembled at Ocaña,

[1] Larrazabal, ii. 417. This is confirmed by Campbell, who says Santander managed the elections, sent to voters lists of the persons they were to vote for, and arranged to pack the actual voters.

and, as they were more than half the total number of 108, the Convention began its sittings on the 9th April.

Among its members were Santander, Azuero, Soto, Gomez, and other enemies of the President. His friends were headed by J. M. del Castillo,[1] President of the Assembly, Briceño Mendez, and others.

There was a third party of "independents," whom both the parties sought to gain over, in order to turn the scale. The Convention was thus a very much divided body. As soon as it was installed, the Presidential message of the 29th February[2] was read. In it Bolivar once more tendered his resignation of the Presidency, and of his command-in-chief. Then he proceeeded to draw a gloomy picture of the state of Colombia, and to explain what had led to the necessity of reforming the constitution, which, in 1821, and again in writing from Pasto in 1822, he had held to be unalterable for ten years. According to Campbell, Santander had by the profession of Liberal principles gained much influence amongst persons who were taught to believe that no reforms in the constitution could be made before October 1831. In Bolivar's picture of the woes of Colombia it is impossible not to see a suggestion that in himself alone lay a hope of safety. Though he himself denied this interpretation of his plea for a strong Government, the Convention saw in it clear indications of his ambition. They were bombarded with petitions from municipalities and others. Those from the centre and south of the Republic urged

[1] Jose Maria del Castillo y Rada, like his namesake Bolivar's enemy, was a native of Cartagena, where he was born in 1776. He was at Bogotá when the revolution broke out there in 1810. He succeeded in escaping Morillo in 1816. To his intercession chiefly is attributed the commutation of the death sentence on Santander in 1828. He died in poverty at Bogotá in 1835. He was a man of peace, a "Doctor," not a soldier like the other Castillo.

[2] Larrazabal, ii. 421

the maintenance of Bolivar in power, and it is at least open to suspicion that his instigation had something to do with them.

The first act of the Convention was to pass a unanimous vote that the Constitution must be reformed. Then a deputy proposed the adoption of the federal system. He was supported by Santander's party, though hitherto Santander had been an advocate of a centralised republic. The Convention, however, by a majority, negatived this radical measure. The proposal was clearly aimed at discrediting Bolivar,[1] and rendering impossible his position at the head of the state, for he had throughout been a consistent advocate of a centralised republic. Though it is true that, in his letter of the 23rd December 1826, to Paez, he had said, "I will not oppose federation," yet his views were still hostile to it, as they had ever been. A committee was now appointed for the revision of the Constitution. This was to be done on lines calculated to exalt personal liberty at the expense of rendering the Government almost impotent. Hearing of this, Bolivar, abandoning all hope in the Convention, proposed to betake himself to Venezuela. His friend Castillo, the President of the Convention, proposed that the Liberator should be sent for to Ocaña to assist in the deliberations. This proposal was negatived on the 14th May by 40 votes to 28. Naturally, Santander and his friends felt that Bolivar's presence at Ocaña would make an end of their schemes for his overthrow. His personal influence was still immense. To this fact, according to Larrazabal, Santander paid the highest tribute. "Such is his (Bolivar's) influence," said the Vice-President, "and such the secret power of his will, that I myself, on many occasions, have approached him in fury, and, merely on seeing and

[1] Larrazabal (ii. 426*n*.) tells a story of a Deputy who, unable to support the case of federation by argument, clinched the matter with the words, "Anyhow it will serve to overthrow Bolivar, and the rest does not matter."

hearing him, have been disarmed and have left his presence filled with admiration." [1]

Two rival schemes of reform were now put forward for discussion—the one drawn up by Santander's friend Azuero, the other by Castillo, the ally of Bolivar. The latter was backed by only twenty-two deputies, and it soon became clear that they had no chance of carrying their scheme. Therefore, on the 2nd June, they decided to abandon the Convention and return home. This decision was temporarily reversed, as the result of negotiations with the Santander party, but, as soon as the latter had thus got a chance of taking the initiative, they in turn proposed to secede, saying they could not abandon their liberal principles. Castillo and his friends, naturally furious at being thus jockeyed out of the position taken up on the 2nd June, took themselves off on the 10th. That left only fifty-four deputies sitting, and as the presence of at least fifty-five was necessary for amendment of the Constitution of 1821, the remainder had no course left but dissolution.

After they had left, the seceding deputies issued, from Santa Cruz, a justification of their conduct, into the details of which it is not necessary to enter. The Convention of Ocaña had ended in a ridiculous fiasco, though Santander and his party represented the result as a victory for themselves, which, indeed, it was. The means by which it was gained are quite another matter, though there seems equally little to be said in favour of the tactics of either side. Neither could have carried a reformed constitution so long as the other was prepared to render dissolution necessary by secession, rather than suffer defeat.[2]

[1] Larrazabal, ii. 427.

[2] Campbell avers that, looking to its constitution, the Convention was a mere instrument in the hands of Santander. However, looking to the end of it, it seems clear he had not sufficient control over the weapon to be able to use it effectively.