CHAPTER XXIX

THE PROBLEMS OF CALIFORNIA

SOME account has been given in a previous chapter of the colonization and early history of California. We are now to inquire what was the condition of that country near the time of President Polk's inauguration, and what were the views of the United States and other foreign nations in respect to that fertile and far-spreading domain.

On the whole, life in California bore much the same aspect, at least upon the surface, during the first twenty-five years after independence as during the twenty-five years before; and yet there had been changes of an important kind, which were far from being changes for the better. Three developments from early colonial conditions were chiefly significant:

1. The increase in the English-speaking part of the population.
2. The destruction of the missions.
3. The growth of a home-rule sentiment, accompanied by distrust and dislike of Mexican authority.

The total Mexican and Indian population, in 1825, amounted to perhaps 3,500 of the former, and 20,000 of the latter. In 1831 an apparently accurate statement gave 4,342 for the Mexicans and foreigners, and 18,683 for the Indians.[1] By 1845 the Mexican population was estimated at about 6,200, showing a tolerably high rate of growth in twenty years.[2] Only a very little of this was due to immigration from Mexico. No man came thence except under compulsion, or for wages. There were some civil officials, some soldiers, a few convicts, and a very few subsidized colonists. It was not because the Mexican government discouraged emigration. On the contrary, they made repeated promises of grants of land and money to promote it, but they simply failed to attract settlers. The growth in the Mexican population was, therefore, almost entirely accounted for by the natural increase of a prolific race, living in a healthy climate, where the means of existence were extraordinarily abundant.

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[1] Forbes, *California*, 202.

[2] Bancroft, *California*, IV, 649. His figures are 6,900 for the *gente de razon*, of whom 680 were foreigners. This would leave 6,220 for the Mexican population.

But if Mexican citizens were slow to seek their fortunes in California, there were men in plenty from elsewhere, who came eagerly and without asking either help or permission from any governmental authority. There were very few of these foreigners in 1825, and there were perhaps one hundred and fifty in 1830, and six hundred and eighty in 1845.[1] Some came by sea, including all the first-comers, but as early perhaps as 1825 trappers, in the employment of the great fur companies of Canada and the United States, began to arrive over the mountains. "After 1826 an army of hunters, increasing from hundreds to thousands, frequented the fur-producing streams of the interior, and even the valleys of California, flitting hither and thither, individuals and parties, large or small, according to the disposition of the natives, wandering without other motive than the hope of more abundant game, well acquainted with the country, as is the wont of trappers, but making no maps and keeping no diaries." [2]

In most cases, the visits of these men were contrary to the Mexican law. By a decree of May 1, 1828, no foreigner could lawfully enter Mexican territory without a passport, nor could he remain more than a month unless he obtained a license (*carta de seguridad*), which must be renewed from year to year,[3] and few Americans or Canadians troubled themselves about passports. Of course the law was never consistently enforced, and numbers of trappers and traders continued to make their way overland, some from Oregon, some over the Sierra Nevada, and some by way of the Gila River from New Mexico. Deserters from foreign ships also helped to swell the population.

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[1] *Ibid.*, V, 524.

[2] *Ibid.*, III, 151-152.

[3] Dublan y Lozano, II, 69.

Undesirable as most of these men were, they were not much troubled by the authorities; and indeed the people of California seem generally to have had much less objection to Englishmen and Americans than to Mexicans.[1] This regard for foreigners was due, at least in part, to the fact that many of them were respectable people who married in the country, and through a degree of energy and enterprise quite unknown to the natives became reputable and influential citizens. The resident English and Americans had in their hands the greater part of the trade of the country.[2]

But if the numbers of the Spanish and English-speaking people, the *gente de razon*, had increased, the numbers of the semi-civilized mission Indians had fallen off to a remarkable degree. This was almost entirely due to the successful efforts of the secular authorities to do away with the missions. In theory the Spanish missions were by no means permanent institutions, but were temporary schools for the training of the Indians in the arts of civilization. The aim of the regular clergy professed to be the transformation of these naked nomads into a God-fearing, laborious, settled peasantry; and in Upper California the Franciscans had had an undoubted measure of success, far greater, for instance, than was ever attained by the missionaries in Texas. But in spite of its successes the church was never willing to admit that its task was finished, or that the Indians were ready to become citizens. On the other hand, the liberal and anti-clerical parties, both in Spain and in Mexico, quite irrespective of any evidence to the contrary, asserted that the neophytes were ready for citizenship, and must be rescued as soon as possible from a condition of quasi-slavery.

As early as September 13, 1813, the Spanish Cortes decreed that all missions, within ten years after their foundation,

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[1] Bancroft, *California*, III, 397.

[2] Interesting contemporary foreign accounts of life in California about this time will be found in Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, Forbes's *California*, and Robinson's *Life in California*.

must be converted into pueblos, or villages, and become subject to secular authority, both in civil and religious affairs. It seems probable that the existence of this decree was unknown in California until years after its enactment, a fact not so surprising when it is remembered that the whole of Mexico was at that time in the very midst of the war of independence, and that neither Spaniards nor Mexicans were ever able to establish regular or certain means of communication between California and the capital.[1] At any rate, it was not until 1825 that the first steps toward secularizing the missions were taken. In that year Echeandía, the first governor under the republic, issued an edict authorizing married Indians who had some means of gaining a livelihood, and who had been Christians for fifteen years, or since childhood, to assume all the right of Mexican citizens and to leave the missions freely. This experiment was not, however, very successful, and apparently had very limited application.[2]

The question of secularization now became involved with the policy of expulsion of Spanish subjects from Mexican territory—the friars being for the most part native Spaniards—and also, to some extent, with the question of the recognition of the republic by the Roman church. These were matters in which the Mexican authorities felt much interest, but the inhabitants of California none at all. The latter were at that time by no means eager to break up the mission establishments, for it was thought that the friars were the only people who could control the Indians and make them work, and that if the friars were expelled the Mexican colonists would be exposed to Indian raids, and the chief resources of the country in cattle and crops would be cut off. Indeed, in a country so thinly settled, with an indolent population, with a small military force, and with a chronically impoverished government, secularization presented very real difficulties.

Governor Echeandía, nevertheless, who seems to have been possessed of a strong anti-clerical bias, believed that secularization could be accomplished. In 1829 he prepared and sent to the supreme government a project for secularizing the missions, which was at first favorably received by the Mexican authorities.[1] But by the end of the year Guerrero's government was out and Bustamante, with his reactionary and despotic notions, was in. One of the first acts of the new administration was to order Echeandía to make no change in the mission system, and a new governor, one Manuel Victoria, was appointed. Echeandía, however, was not the man to be stopped in his career of reform either by the facts of the case or by the orders of his superiors; and as Governor Victoria was in no hurry to take up his office, Echeandía, without any legal authority whatever, had the opportunity to issue a decree of secularization. The friars very naturally declined to obey, more especially as the new governor did at last land at San Diego soon after the decree was issued. As soon as he reached Monterey the decree was rescinded.

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[1] Bancroft, *California*, II, 399.

[2] *Ibid.*, III, 102.

Echeandía, however, was not yet at the end of his resources. Visions of plunder had begun to awaken new hopes in the minds of some of the younger Californians, and with their aid the garrison of San Diego was induced to pronounce in favor of Echeandía. Victoria thereupon raised an "army" of thirty men and met the revolutionists near Los Angeles; but one of his men being killed, and he himself wounded, he surrendered and was sent back to Mexico. By this time the Federal government had formally disapproved Echeandía's decree of secularization, although, evidently with the intention of conciliating anti-clerical sentiment, it had directed that the question be closely studied in order to ascertain what missions were in a condition to be secularized according to the Spanish law of 1813, and to prepare such a plan as might be deemed most expedient. Incidentally, another governor of California, General José Figueroa, was appointed, who entered upon the discharge of his duties in January, 1833. Profiting by the experience of his predecessor, he lost no time in banishing Echeandía from California, and the latter disappears from history.

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[1] *Ibid.*, III, 302.

Figueroa took no active steps against the missions. His reports to the government were, however, highly unfavorable to the friars. He described the mission Indians as held in a degrading servitude, and as untaught in letters or even in the simplest arts of agriculture. If set free he believed they would be beggars, and would soon relapse to barbarism and join the wild Indians in stealing horses and cattle for sale to New Mexicans and foreigners. He therefore advised against any sudden or radical change, while favoring partial and experimental reforms at some of the older missions.[1]

But before these reports could have reached the city of Mexico Bustamante, in his turn, was out and Farias and his *doctrinaire* associates were administering the federal government; and they made haste, in the midst of their other activities, to settle the mission question. By a law passed August 20, 1833, the Mexican Congress directed the government to secularize all the missions in the two Californias. In the place of each mission a parish church was to be established, which was to be in charge of a member of the secular clergy having a fixed salary. The mission buildings, other than the churches, were to be converted into priests' houses, schools, offices for the ayuntamientos and other public establishments. The lands and cattle were to be distributed among the Indians belonging to the mission.[2]

This law merely authorized the government to act, but both men and money were scarce, and until the government found the new priests, and provided the funds to carry on the new parishes, it was not easy to see what the authorities in California could do. At first they drifted, but on August 9, 1834, they passed a decree of the local legislature placing the missions under the control of the civil authorities, and granting parcels of the mission lands to the Indians in severalty.[1]

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[1] *Ibid.*, III, 325, 328.

[2] Dublan y Lozano, II, 548. See also the law of April 16, 1834, which secularized all the missions in the several states; *ibid.*, 689. This law had no application to the Californias, which were *territories*.

Almost simultaneously with this decree the central government attempted to deal with the mission lands in another way, by authorizing the formation of a company which was to colonize and develop this property. To that end, the government undertook to give money, free transportation, tools, and rations for a year to every colonist sent out by the company, besides an allotment of land and cattle from the property of the missions. Something over two hundred and fifty people were enlisted for the new colony upon the strength of the government's offers. They started from the city of Mexico in April, 1834, while Farias was still in power, and nearly two hundred and fifty reached Monterey in the autumn of that same year, in spite of some losses by death and desertion on the long and toilsome journey.[2] But their plans came to nothing. Santa Anna had taken the government out of the hands of Farias soon after the expedition started, and as a part of his general policy of undoing whatever Farias had done, Santa Anna sent orders overland to California revoking the concessions made to the new settlers. The enterprise was thus wrecked. The leaders of the party were deported soon after their arrival, and the colonists were sent as quasi-prisoners to Solano, north of the Bay of San Francisco, where they were detained for some time, a part of them ultimately returning to Mexico and the rest being scattered among the old residents of California.[3]

The next year the federal government, by an act of Congress of November 7, 1835, directed that secularization under the law of August 20, 1833, should be suspended until the new parish priests were ready to take charge;[4] but as the process of secularization in California under the local regulations of August 9, 1834, had already considerably progressed, and receivers for some of the missions had been appointed long before the new law was known, the latter was never obeyed. Indeed by the summer of 1836 only

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[1] Bancroft, *California*, III, 342.

[2] *Ibid.*, 259–269, 344.

[3] *Ibid.*, 275–281, 286–290.

[4] Dublan y Lozano, III, 96.

two missions were left in their original condition, and by the beginning of 1837 the missions of San José and Santa Clara, the two remaining, were turned over to the civil authorities.[1]

From this time forward the process of secularization seems to have been made easier by the fact that it met with no opposition. The friars appear to have lost heart, and to have become convinced that disaster could not be averted; and they were even accused of stripping the missions of their property as far as possible, which, of course, meant slaughtering the cattle and converting their hides and tallow into money.[2]

The method of carrying out the regulations of 1834 was to appoint a *comisionado*, or receiver, for each mission, whose duty it was to distribute the lands and cattle among the Indians belonging to the mission, to superintend the formation of village government, to get in the crops, and to dispose of such property as was not to be distributed to the neophytes. To do this successfully would obviously have required "the employment of able and honest administrators, a degree of intelligence on the part of the neophytes, the hearty co-operation of the missionaries, a strong and watchful territorial government, a healthful, intelligent, and liberal public spirit, and freedom from sectional strife. All these conditions being more or less wanting, success was impossible. Failure was a foregone conclusion."[3]

The first difficulty was doubtless the most serious. It was impossible to find administrators for the several missions who were both able and honest. Those who were honest were incompetent or stupid; those who were able were not honest; and some were both vicious and incompetent. Accounts were not kept, or if kept, were useless. The governor and other territorial officials were permitted to use the cattle and grain of the missions as if it were government property, or their own, and "loans" of cattle were made to friends. The Indians were permitted to relapse into barbarism. Some of them were kept together and at work much as in former years; but those to whom cattle or tools were given converted them as fast as possible into liquor, and lived by begging and stealing; and when these resources failed, some went back to work, while many drifted off to join the wild Indians of the interior.[1]

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[1] Bancroft, *California*, IV, 47.

[2] *Ibid.*, III, 320–348, *passim.*

[3] *Ibid.*, IV, 44.

The net result was that by 1840 the mission Indians had decreased from fifteen thousand or eighteen thousand to five thousand or six thousand; cattle from one hundred and forty thousand to fifty thousand; and sheep from one hundred and thirty thousand to fifty thousand.[2] Three years later, what poor remnants were left of the mission property and the mission Indians, were turned back to the church; but it was too late to restore the past, and the whole mission system may be considered to have come completely to an end. Several of the missions had been destroyed, and some were totally abandoned; and in 1845 the mission lands and buildings were ordered to be sold, or rented for a term of years.[3]

Contemporaneously with the destruction of the missions, there developed in California a strong separatist or home-rule sentiment, which expressed itself in open revolution on a petty scale, and in a general and quite freely expressed dissatisfaction with the Mexican government. There was evident and abundant cause for such dissatisfaction. The attempt to administer the affairs of the territory from the distant capital, and by a government so ill-informed, so impoverished, and so utterly inefficient as that of Mexico, was bound to be a failure. It is true that the people of California were not oppressed; but they were neglected, and they did not love the politicians who were sent from time to time to rule over them. The result was a hostile feeling which, in 1836, broke out into something that might be called a revolution.

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[1] *Ibid.*, 50–52.

[2] *Ibid.*, 62. Forbes's figures show much greater numbers of sheep and cattle in 1831.—(*California*, 265.)

[3] Bancroft, *California*, IV, 369; Richman, *California*, 282–285. The subject of missions in California, the process of secularization, and the title to mission lands, is discussed at length by the Supreme Court of California in the case of *Nobili v. Redman*, 6 Cal., 325.

Figueroa had died the year before; his successor, Chico, had been forced or persuaded to return to Mexico, and a certain Nicolás Gutierrez was acting governor. His overthrow was mainly the work of three men, Vallejo, Alvarado, and José Castro.

Of these three, Mariano Guadelupe Vallejo seems to have been much the most capable. He was the son of one of the soldiers who landed in California in 1769—a man of good family who had volunteered for the expedition. Don Mariano was the eighth of the emigrant's thirteen children, and was born at Monterey, in 1808. Before he was thirty years old he had come into possession of a large tract of land, in the neighborhood of Sonoma, and many cattle; and he was shrewd enough to keep himself out of the way of the various disturbances in other parts of California, while he lent his name, or at least his influence, to his nephew, Alvarado, and was recognized as military commander of the department.[1]

Juan Bautista Alvarado, who was born in California in 1809, was the son of a sergeant in the Spanish troops. His mother was María Josefa Vallejo, a sister of Don Mariano. Alvarado had not much education, but a good deal of practical ability, and he acquired great popularity and influence with all his countrymen. He was for a time employed as a clerk to a merchant in Monterey, and for a time was employed in the custom-house. Sir George Simpson, who visited Monterey early in 1842, thought that Alvarado possessed little of the talent and decision of his uncle, being "more remarkable for love of conviviality than for anything else."

José Castro, the third Californian leader, was the son of a corporal and the grandson of a sergeant in the Spanish army, and was born about 1810. He had had the same sort of education as Alvarado, and does not seem to have had any particular occupation except to serve for several terms as member of the *diputación*, or territorial legislature. As presiding officer of that body he was governor of California *ad interim* from September, 1835, to January, 1836.

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[1] "Pioneer Spanish Families in California," *Century Magazine*, XLI, 377–389 (Jan. 1891).

The revolt was begun by Alvarado and Castro alone, Vallejo taking no active part, although his name was freely used by the promoters. The movement professed to be in support of the Constitution of 1824, just as the Texan rising of the previous year had been in support of that instrument; and in so far as there was any real justification for a resort to arms, it was to be found in a resistance to the Centralist revolution, which Santa Anna and his successors had by this time carried through, and which was causing revolts in all the outlying parts of Mexico. "Federation or Death!" was the cry of the Californian leaders, but, as later events abundantly proved, their only object was to secure the offices for themselves.

The physical force employed on both sides was ridiculously small, when considered with reference to the size of the country or the serious consequences involved. The "Vanguard of the Division of Operations," as the conspirators chose to call themselves, numbered about a hundred, of whom twenty-five or thirty were Englishmen and Americans, mostly sailors who had deserted their ships. But among these foreigners there were some half a dozen trappers, who were excellent riflemen. The leader of the foreign legion was Isaac Graham, a native Tennesseean, who cared no more for a Mexican than for an Indian, and whose business at this particular time consisted in running a sort of "moonshine" distillery near San Juan.

On the evening of November 3, 1837, the revolutionary "army," with José Castro at its head, arrived in Monterey, and lost no time in taking possession of the Castillo, which was not defended. Governor Gutierrez, who had about fifty Mexican soldiers and twenty-five volunteers, was in the presidio, a row of two-story adobe buildings not far off. The insurrectos appear to have been aided by the foreign traders in the village, and they certainly got some powder from two or three of the merchant vessels in the port, although it was not any part of their plans to put California

under foreign control. "California for the Californians" was their real purpose. In addition to getting powder given them, they were also lucky enough to find a cannon-ball which would fit one of the guns in the castle, and early the next morning they fired off this gun at the presidio and knocked a hole in the roof. This shot settled the business. Twenty-nine of the garrison deserted, the rest insisted on a surrender, and after much letter-writing and the holding of a council of war in the presidio the governor surrendered. A few days later he sailed away with about seventy companions, some of them Mexican officials and some of them discontented colonists, and he too disappears from history.

By a proclamation issued November 13, 1836, Alvarado declared himself governor of California, Vallejo military commander, and Castro prefect of Monterey. California was declared to be a free and sovereign state, which would remain separate from Mexico until the Centralist government was overthrown and the Constitution of 1824 was again adopted by all the Mexican states. Thenceforward none but native Californians (*hijos del país*) were to have the offices.[1]

The southern part of California still remained to be reckoned with, for the people of Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and San Diego had had no share in the revolution and were chronically jealous of the people of Monterey. There was some talk of resistance to "Northern tyranny," but when Alvarado and his "army," including Graham's men and two pieces of field-artillery, appeared near Los Angeles the talk abruptly ceased.

For the next few months there were constant trivial disturbances and conspiracies in California, which were finally put an end to by Alvarado's cynically but shrewdly agreeing to accept the constitutional laws of December 29, 1836, which were the crowning triumph of Centralist principles.[2]

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[1] Bancroft, *California*, III, 470; Richman, *California*, 259.

[2] Under date of July 9, 1837, Alvarado issued a proclamation to the people of California, declaring that as their arms had given them liberty and a "wise Congress" had assured them peace, they must now preserve inviolate their union with Mexico. "*Viva la Nación! Viva la Constitución del año de* 36!" —(Bancroft, *California*, III, 529.)