



President Díaz Elects a Governor

"Where the captain commands..."

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION HAPPENED because the high politicians of the country openly failed to agree on who should rule when President Porfirio Díaz died. These politicians, nicknamed the *científicos*, believed it a natural law that the nation could progress only through their control and for their benefit. From the early 1890's on they lectured Mexico about the authority their special science entitled them to, and they eventually convinced great sections of the public of their infallibility. But by 1904 they were floundering in the test of arranging succession to Díaz, who had been president then for twenty consecutive years. In 1908, two years before the next presidential election, the test became a notorious affair of state. And with their maneuvers exposed, the powerful proved naïve, treacherous, and incompetent. In a short time their fashionable order collapsed.

What made the test a crisis was its publicity, and what made it public was Díaz's pride. In February 1908 Díaz had granted an interview to a well-known American "special correspondent," James Creelman, on assignment in Mexico for the popular American monthly *Pearson's Magazine*. Díaz told Creelman he was definitely retiring when his term ended in 1910 and would not, even if his "friends" begged him, "serve again." He "welcomed

President Díaz Elects a Governor

• 11

... as a blessing" the formation of an opposition party, he said. "And if it can develop power, not to exploit, but to govern," he promised, "I will stand by it, support it, advise it and forget myself in the successful inauguration of complete democratic government in the country."¹

Then seventy-eight years old, and pathetically obsessed with fixing his place in Mexican history, Díaz intended by these words only to strike the statesmanlike pose he believed worthy of the high rank he held in world esteem. He was sincere but not serious. Resigning, retiring, and promising free elections had long been his favorite gestures, always harmlessly performed for the same audience—for journalists, who could only report, never for Congress, which might accept. And no one had ever taken his words to heart. But there was a difference this time that charged what he said with unexpected significance: Díaz was getting old and could not hide it. Before, talk about retiring was only breath wasted and forgotten. Now, in 1908, it was a morbid reminder that whether he retired or not, he would soon die, and then times would change.

No important politicking had gone on in Mexico for over thirty years without Díaz involving himself in it. By this means he had become the only politician able to maneuver through the intricate maze of alliances and armistices. To ensure his control he kept all deals precarious: in 1908 practically everything central depended on him. The very idea of his departure unsettled people and sent shivers through officeholders high and low. For his own good Díaz should have avoided alarming the public, and he could have done so by turning Creelman away or by having the Mexican press suitably distort his words for Mexican readers. But now toward the end of his life he longed for the genuine gratitude of his compatriots even more than the respect of an Edwardian world, and out of a tardy and indiscreet hope that he might win it by liberal words, he allowed the most influential pro-government newspaper in the country, *El Imparcial*, to publish a full translation of the interview in early March. Like the sudden muffled tolling of a royal funeral bell, the report signaled the ending of one age in Mexico—Don Porfirio's—and the beginning of another (God knew whose), when those left in charge would have to act on their own and without precedents.

But in fact the ceremony was a fake: Díaz was still around. Staging scenes and watching people play them fascinated him. And in the Creelman interview he indulged himself again—asking people and politicians

¹ James Creelman: "President Díaz. Hero of the Americas," *Pearson's Magazine*, XIX, 3 (March 1908), 242.