

Sources

Plague at Buenos Aires

By Marion G. Mulhall (1)

It would seem the irony of fate that a city so proverbial for its healthy and agreeable climate should become the scene of one of the most terrible plagues recorded in history. Its origin is still a mystery, as the special committee appointed by Government in 1872 have not yet published their report.

The first case occurred in June 1870, when Dr. Berry's servant died, with all the symptoms of yellow fever, another death following in the same house a few days later. It was then mid-winter, but on the approach of summer, in November, Dr. Berry wrote a letter to the Municipality, suggesting precautionary measures, as the city was in an unhealthy condition, and a plague was raging at Barcelona, from which port vessels often arrived. This led to a quarantine being ordered, shortly before Christmas, on all ships from Europe or Brazil. It happened, however, that the mail-steamer from Marseilles, which arrived on January 8, 1871, had on board a niece of the Prime Minister, who was allowed to land, and to this act of weakness on the part of the port-captain many people, perhaps incorrectly, ascribe the awful calamity which cost the lives of 26,000 citizens.

For some weeks previously the banks of the River Plate were covered with dead fish, and the water had such a dreadful smell that much sickness occurred among the people living at the south end of the city. The river of Barracas also had become of a purple colour, from the blood of animals killed in the "saladeros" along its banks, but as these salting establishments had existed more than a century and the men employed in them enjoyed excellent health, no measures were taken to suspend the slaughter of cattle or purify the stream before falling into the River Plate. In fact, it had long been the custom to send invalids to Barracas to inhale the peculiar atmosphere of the saladeros.

I remember one delightful summer's evening, in January, we were walking about on the roof of our house, which commanded a wide view of the city and shipping, when the wind veered round to the south, and brought such an odour of the Barracas river that I became giddy and almost fainted. A few days later there was some alarm in town from the sudden death of an Italian woman in the parish of San Telmo, with whom lodged one of the newly-arrived passengers by the Marseilles steamer. In less than a week the people of the same parish were dying five or six daily, but, as Carnival was at hand, the Municipality turned its attention to fire-works and decorating the streets, hoping to divert the public mind from an apprehension of pestilence. Never were the preparations on a grander scale. (The police had instructions to cause all funerals to take place after sunset, and when by chance anybody spoke of the prevalent sickness, people said: "It is only the poor Italians who die, because they live on wretched food and in unhealthy dwellings.")

Sunday was the first day of Carnival, and the crowds of masqueraders went about throwing sweets, flowers, and costly presents at the ladies in the balconies. The Corso, comprising three of the principal streets, was four miles in length, hung with banners, and having a triumphal arch at each point where streets crossed. Between the hour of noon and that of the Ave Maria (half-an-hour after sunset) more than 1000 carriages and 10,000 horse-men dressed in splendid costumes passed along. There were crusaders, warriors of the epoch of Cortés and Pizarro, Indian caciques, and every fantastic style of mounted cavaliers. The same pageant took place on the second and third days, and when Carnival concluded, everybody was pleased that it had passed off so well, especially the fireworks of the Municipality.

No newspapers having appeared for three days, the public was astounded to learn on Ash

Wednesday that the deaths had risen to forty daily, and that the English Catholic (2) chaplain was among the victims. A panic ensued, whereupon such was the demand for horses and waggons to remove furniture that people paid the price of a team for a day's hire. In order to eradicate the evil, the Municipality had caused the police to turn out the inhabitants of any house in San Telmo parish where sickness had appeared, and whitewash the premises. The effect of this step was to spread infection all over the city. Five parishes were now tainted, out of thirteen, and so convinced were the citizens of an impending plague that the waiters in coffee-houses became carpenters to make coffins, while some of the lawyers bought up every cargo of timber in Buenos Ayres and Montevideo.

All the members of the Municipal Council having fled to the suburbs, the entire control of the city devolved upon Don Henrique O'Gorman, Chief of Police, who bravely held his ground to the last. Before the end of February the deaths reached one hundred in a day. The gravediggers demanded double wages, and extra gangs of men were employed to bury by torchlight. Some of the police died from over-work in carrying sufferers to hospital, the dead to the cemetery; others deserted. Even the porters or "changadores," who used to stand at the street-corners, were gone, many people of the humbler classes crowding along the great highways, north to Belgrano and west to Flores, and forming gipsy encampments wherever a clump of trees or a ruined outhouse gave any shelter. Until the beginning of March there was no sickness in our street, (3) and as our house stood higher than those around it there was not much reason to fear the approach of contagion. One morning, about sunrise, I heard the bell of the acolyte accompanying the priest to visit the dying. That evening three coffins were taken from a house in front of ours, and an hour afterwards the police proceeded to burn the furniture, the flames throwing a lurid glare on all around. Every morning the disinfectors came round to sprinkle the houses with a mixture of coal-tar, saying at the same time "May God keep you from the plague!" The

municipal dust-carts were used to remove the dead.

All the convents in the city had been turned into hospitals; every day they were filled, and emptied again before the following sunrise, for all died within twenty-four hours. The French Sisters of Charity lost half their number, including the Superioress; the Irish Sisters of Mercy were in like-manner stricken down in their heroic labours. There was no distinction of nationality among the patients admitted, nor did the Destroying Angel spare age or sex. The only difference remarked was that the negroes were exempt, and being much in request as nurses they obtained enormous wages.

Some cold days occurred in March which checked the plague, the deaths suddenly declining to two hundred daily, but no sooner did the bright warm sunshine return, than the number rose again to three hundred, and even passed the highest point reached before. I never saw more lovely autumn weather; such a contrast to the awful tragedy that was being enacted on all sides! To look at the bright blue sky, the ships lying at anchor on the unruffled waters of La Plata, and the charming aspect of the wooded suburbs of Barracas and Flores, one could not believe that a work of carnage was going on, more deadly than if a hundred cannon were bombarding the city. Food was beginning to run short, as the market people were afraid to come in with meat, butter, or milk. Prices rose as if a siege were going on, and some of the neighbouring villages drew a "cordon sanitaire" around, putting in quarantine any one who had come from the city.

One English grocer, who had not fled, sent us a supply of tinned meat, Danish butter, and Swiss preserved milk: it was very kind on his part, since we could not pay him, as all the banks were closed. Nobody was disposed to trust his neighbour, because any shopkeeper knew that if he died the lawyers would get what was due to him, and if his debtor died the heirs might dispute the debt. There was an Italian near us who had a quantity of partridge and fish preserved in oil, and this afforded some variety to our fare.

In the last days of March people hoped that April would bring a change, for the plague had already lasted two months. The town-clock in the Plaza had stopped. Grass grew in the streets. Dogs roamed about without owners. A dead silence reigned, unless when the rumble of the dust-cart was heard, with the cry of the half-drunken cartmen, "Bring out the corpses!" Most of the physicians and clergy had perished; there were even few apothecaries left, as an insane rumour that they were selling poison obliged them to shut their shops, after some of them had been fired at by relatives of persons who had died.

The boatmen from the Boca, with their families, and many of the inhabitants of the infected parish of San Telmo, had, in the beginning of the epidemic, taken possession of the finest houses in the fashionable quarters, as if the city had been taken by storm. Most of the poorer streets were deserted, and in these, as the Sisters of Charity went their rounds, they sometimes rescued one or other helpless infant from among a group of corpses, for in many houses the dead lay several days before the police could take them away for burial. In their visits to the poor, two of the Irish Sisters of Mercy, being one morning attracted by the barking of a dog, entered a house, and found on a bed the lifeless body of an Englishman, and by its side a woman apparently sleeping. The latter, on recovering consciousness, said that her husband had died the previous day; the house was a scene of destitution, for the poor woman had sold everything to obtain food and medicine. She seemed to have but a few hours to live; the Sisters, however, removed her to the convent (as well as her little dog), where she recovered.

In Holy Week a Government decree was issued, closing the post-office, telegraph offices, and other public departments, and ordering all shops to be shut for thirty days, in order to compel the remaining inhabitants to leave the city. The bishop also closed the churches, except those attached to the convents. The law-courts and notaries' offices had been shut previously. Some of the railways had to stop running, as the engine-drivers were dead. The new cemetery opened in March being now full,

the chief of police seized the Chacrita farm, at the west end of the city, and turned it to the same purpose. The gravediggers, after spreading one hundred cartloads of lime over the graves of the twenty thousand victims in the Corrales cemetery, marched off to the new ground. They were paid about thirty shillings a day, and happily not one of them died. If a panic had broken out among them, it would have been impossible to get others to take their place. They were about three hundred, and worked like sailors, in watches of four hours. The greatest number of corpses buried was on Easter Monday, namely one thousand and eighty; the weekly average hardly exceeded five thousand even then.

On April 13th we left town for Luxán, a village forty miles westward, arriving there by train at nightfall. The inn was crowded, but the landlady offered to make us as comfortable as possible in a barn, provided we got a permit from the police-doctor. In this we had no difficulty, the doctor at once certifying that we had no symptom of plague, and even volunteering to look for apartments for us among his friends. It happened, next day, that we met the American Minister in the square, and he told us that an American family, who had just recovered from the plague, were about to give up their house and go to a sheep-farm some leagues off. He accompanied us to the place, on the edge of the town, facing a large plantation, but it was closed. We found the owner, an old lady, half-Indian, who told us that the Americans had just left, and that we could have the cottage at the same rent, two hundred silver dollars, or £40, per month. My husband at once got a man to whitewash the two rooms, and next day we entered our new home. We bought some kitchen utensils, a wooden table, three chairs, a couple of iron bedsteads, and a few other things. A black woman, who lived about fifty yards off, was our nearest neighbour, and I engaged her for my servant. The intervening space between our hut and hers was covered with a dense growth of wild hemlock, so high that, as she informed us, "mala gente" or bad people sometimes concealed themselves there at dusk, for which

reason she recommended me to keep the door barred after the Ave Maria.

During two days that it rained we could not stir out, and in this dismal hut I began to think that my servants in town were right when they preferred to remain in our comfortable house, rather than face the sufferings of camp life. The frogs and toads leaped about the floor, for even when the door was shut they got in through the chinks in the mud walls. It rained in so badly that we had to keep umbrellas over our beds, after shifting in vain from one corner to another. To add to the unpleasantness of our position, my husband heard from the American Minister that it was very necessary to be on our guard against the black woman's husband, a cross-blooded "guapo" who was known to "be indebted for six deaths," which means in English that he had murdered six persons. He never came near the place except to bring water for cooking, and was always most respectful when he saw me, besides getting us fresh milk, or whatever was necessary, with the utmost willingness, whenever his wife told him that I wanted anything. It is true that I paid her high wages, in fact what she asked, but I must say that during the two months I spent in the hut I had no cause to complain of these people.

An English blacksmith very kindly came to offer us quarters at his house in the village, but I preferred to remain where we were, expecting that we should soon be able to return to town, for the weather had set in so cold that we had to get a dish of cinders in our room. One night we heard a noise in the hemlock near the house, and could see by the moonlight a figure moving stealthily towards the entrance. My husband cried out "Quien vive?" and as there was no answer, but a rustling in the bushes, he said, in Spanish, that he would fire if the intruder came any nearer. Presently two figures made a dash forward, my husband fired; there was a heavy fall in the hemlock, and all again was still. Next morning we had to pay five dollars for having shot the stray horse of a neighbour, that being the value of the ill-fated animal, after deducting the price of its hide.

When the evenings were fine we used to walk up to the station to get a copy of the Bulletin,

containing the number of interments and the names of any persons of note who had died in the twenty-four hours. The English names were often so mangled by Spanish printers that it was hard to make them out. Most of the English and other foreigners had now left the city, the number of people remaining being estimated at one-third of the ordinary population, or scarcely 70,000 souls. Among the passengers who arrived one evening was Mr. Kennedy, an English merchant, who had gone through much of the plague, visiting the sick and burying the dead. He said the proportion of deaths was every week lighter, being now only one-third of the persons attacked, whereas at the beginning it was nine-tenths. More would have recovered had they not been abandoned by their friends, but the disease was so deadly in some families that it was not surprising a panic seized all around. Mr. Kennedy was the sole survivor of six gentlemen who attended the funeral of Mr. Carfield, in whose house seven persons had died. The British hospital was unfortunately closed against patients, as its constitution forbade the treatment of any infectious or contagious disease, but the physicians, chaplains, and directors did all they could for our country-people by visiting them. The city hospitals obtained a very bad reputation, as none of the patients recovered, a circumstance mainly due to the fact that they were already beyond hope when admitted, and in part to the terror of the people at the idea of being buried without coffins. Nor could this be remedied at a time when the rudest coffin cost £10 - simply a long wooden box painted black, with a yellow cross on the lid.

In the middle of May, the deaths having fallen below 100 daily, and our "rancho" at Luxán being intolerably cold and cheerless, we resolved to return to our house in town. As the train stopped at the suburb of Almagro, we had to proceed from there on foot, and came upon a very odd scene a few yards from the railway station. Some fifty men with knives and long sticks were cutting open a number of beds and mattresses, and raking about the contents in search for money, the beds having been sent out here by the police to be burnt as infectious.

It was said that large sums were often found in this way. At the Plaza Setiembre there was a worse sight, for one of the municipal carts full of corpses had broken down, one of the wheels lying at some distance. The dead had their clothes on, just as if stricken down in the streets. Near Plaza Lorea a man was selling coffins, the best omen that the plague was abating, as the supply was evidently equal to the demand. He cried out "Boxes for sale!" in the same way as if he were selling peaches, the word box in Spanish standing for coffin. We saw a woman run out and buy one, and then he sat down to smoke, for another person was dying and he expected to sell a second. The city presented a deserted appearance, for we went some blocks without seeing anybody, but on reaching Calle San Martin we were suddenly stopped by a mounted policeman, who took us to the Policia, because my husband had a bundle of cloaks and rugs. The Commissary took down our address, and explained that it was necessary to arrest all persons with bundles, in order to check burglary.

I shall never forget an amusing occurrence that we saw at the Policia. A prisoner was brought in, charged with having attempted to stab some of the gravediggers at the Chacrita cemetery. He was a negro, and his face and head were so covered with lime that his appearance was extremely ludicrous. It appeared he had been a nurse, and having earned high wages got very drunk; he was picked up for dead in the street, and taken in the municipal dust-cart to the Chacrita, but the lime which the gravediggers threw on the corpses got into his eyes and soon brought him to his senses. So enraged was he that he drew his knife and attacked the gravediggers. When I saw him he was quite sober, and the Commissary let him go without any fine, but took the knife from him. It is needless to say that many persons were believed to have been buried alive, which was quite possible. The most remarkable escape was that of Mr. Gardoni, an Italian, who recovered

his senses in the same way as the negro, on the brink of the grave. On his way back from the cemetery to the city he felt so faint that he entered a "pulperia" and got a little brandy, but having no money to pay for it he was obliged to explain the escape he had from being buried alive as one of the plague victims, which so frightened all present that they ran away, leaving him in possession of the shop.

During the month of June the people came back in such numbers that it was feared the pestilence would break out afresh, especially as no pains were taken to disinfect the houses, but such fears were, happily, not realised. Many of the finest houses had been stripped of their furniture by the boatmen and laundresses that lived in them, nor could the owners obtain any trace of the costly mirrors, chandeliers, works of art, etc., which had probably been shipped to Brazil or Europe.

The British community lost 270 persons, which was about one-sixth, but the other classes did not suffer so heavily, the city losing altogether 26,000, or only one-eighth of the population. It was observed that twice as many men died as women, and very few children. Some of the persons that were mourned for as dead, reappeared among their friends, when it was discovered that the printers had made a mistake in the name. In some cases also those who had been only taken ill were put down for dead, and becoming convalescent had gone to the country for a time. On the other hand, several persons died whose names were not registered, and for whom the British Consul made enquiries in vain.

Before many weeks the plague was as utterly forgotten as if it had occurred in the previous century, and the foundations for a new opera-house (4) were laid on the site of a sawmill in Calle Corrientes used for making coffins during the epidemic.

Marion G. Mulhall

Notes

1. From *Between the Amazon and Andes or ten years of a lady's travels in the Pampas, Gran Chaco, Paraguay and Matto Grosso* (London: Edward Stanford, 1881), pp. 28-44. Marion MacMurrough

Mulhall, Marion G. "The Plague at Buenos Aires"

Mulhall (née Murphy) was the wife of Michael Giovanni Mulhall, joint editor and co-founder and proprietor of *The Standard*. They were married on 19 June 1868 in Ireland. Marion died in Kent, England, on 15 November 1922. Text digitalised by Graeme Wall.

2. Rev Anthony Fahey, actually an Irish priest from Galway
3. Calle Belgrano
4. Still in existence, now the Opera Theatre.