A Revealing Novel of Latin America

THE TYRANT. By Ramon del Valle-Inclán. 295 *pp. New York: Henry Holt & Co.* $2.50.

IT is symptomatic of the loss of power which so frequently characterizes a translation that the subtitle of "The Tyrant" should be rendered "A Novel of the Warm Lands." In the Spanish text the phrase is the terser and more masculine "Novela de Tierra Caliente," which would connote to any reader who had but once and for the briefest time sojourned in Latin America a wealth of romantic adventure. Tierra Caliente—the hot country—evokes tropic jungles, reptiles, scorpions, tarantulas, enervating languor, passion, love and death. Pregnant and exciting words! What a pity to vitiate them by translation.

Don Ramón del Valle-Inclán, though little known to North American readers, is a novelist with more than a score of titles in the list of his Opera Omnia, and a reputation in Spain of the first rank. The book under review, when originally published in 1926, created a national sensation. That it has not before this appeared in an English version may be attributed to the great difficulty of doing justice to an elliptical style, to what one might call the aroma, and perhaps also to the fact that our interest in Spanish America is, after all, more commercial than literary.

Don Ramón's theme is revolution in the Republic of Santa Fe, an imaginary country typifying any one of half a dozen Central and South American republics that straddle the Cordilleras. The President, General Santos Banderas, is a wily, pure-blooded Indian, cruel, arrogant, a thorough realist who rules by a combination of guile and brutality. In appearance he is like a mummy, his mouth drooling green saliva, thanks to chewing coca, a habit he had acquired during campaigns against the Spaniards in Peru. Banderas has no faith in the political potentialities of his oppressed fellow-indigenes. To him, as to the avaricious merchant class composed of Spanish immigrants (shopkeepers, pawnbrokers, petty exploiters contemptuously called Gachupines by the natives), the Indian is merely a useful animal.

Surrounding himself in his military headquarters with creole officers, supported by the parasitic and subservient Gachupines, the tyrant's only opponents are the handful of intellectuals, for the most part flamboyant theorists. There is another element antagonistic to tyranny—the creole ranchmen. This squirearchy eventually throws in its lot with the revolt. Living like petty feudal chieftains and enjoying the dog-like loyalty of their peons, the rancheros are a force to be reckoned with.

The book is slyly satiric. Don Ramón's thrusts not sparing even the venerable diplomatic corps. He gives a finely ironic account of a meeting of the corps which was called in order to issue a protest to the government (i. e., President Banderas) against the slaughter of prisoners of war and suspected persons. The British Minister delivers a vigorous speech invoking the Christian sentiment and human solidarity of the world, an address which his colleagues regard as a correct gesture. The American Ambassador, on equally moral grounds, counsels moderation. The protest, finally agreed upon and signed by representatives of twenty-seven nations, resolves itself into a friendly note to the government counseling the closing of the saloons and demanding the strengthening of the guards at foreign banks and legations.

"The Tyrant" is divided into seven parts, each of these being subdivided into from three to seven "books," thereby effecting a pattern highly suggestive of moving-picture continuity.

In spite of the unevenness of the translation, the book is well worth reading for its revelation of the extreme complexity of Latin-American civilization, with the three racial elements, Indian, creole and negro, in psychological conflict.

Ramón del Valle-Inclán.