CHAPTER XVIII

An Attempt at Murder
(1828)

It was Bolívar’s fortune to dispel the effect of evil with his presence, but in his absence evil was certain to raise its head. While he triumphed in Caracas, he was being severely criticised in Bogotá, even by Santander. His generosity with regard to Páez irritated the people of Nueva Granada to the extreme.

When Congress convened, Bolívar tendered his resignation, as usual, but this time he insisted still more. “For fourteen years,” he wrote, “I have been Supreme Chief and President of the Republic. Danger forced me to accept this duty. Now that the danger has passed, I may retire to enjoy private life.” The rest of his communication evidenced the sincerity of his desires and his modesty. He finished with these words: “I implore of Congress and of the people the grace to be permitted to resume my simple citizenship.”

In spite of the resignation, intrigues continued in Nueva Granada, and the separatist feeling grew stronger and stronger in that country and in Venezuela. Through the separation of Nueva Granada, Bolívar’s enemies in that nation saw a way to get rid of him without displaying their enmity, since, being a citizen of Venezuela, Bolívar could not be president of Nueva Granada. Páez and his partisans, on their side, did not want to have Santander in authority, because Santander was not a native of Venezuela.
The situation was made more complicated and more serious by a rebellion in Lima, followed by another in Guayaquil. Notwithstanding that his resignation had been tendered, Bolívar, considering that the union of Colombia was threatened, immediately started for Bogotá, to take the situation in hand. He resolved to sacrifice everything to prevent anarchy from taking the place of freedom and mutiny from taking the place of law. He left Caracas, his native city, and here again he was taking a last farewell. In July he was in Cartagena, where the people received him with genuine affection. He recalled that it was from here he had begun his first quixotic expedition to his country in 1812. Fifteen years had elapsed since then, and he was again in Cartagena, his great work of redemption fulfilled but now in danger of being destroyed.

The steps taken by the Liberator to organize the attack against the revolutionists were described by Santander and his followers as steps to destroy the country and its political freedom. It was publicly proposed that Nueva Granada should declare null the fundamental convention providing for the union of the country with Venezuela. Santander was ready to begin the work of resistance. He was persuaded to be prudent, but not before he had given vent to his immoderate anger in ignoble expressions. He went so far as to state that war should be declared against Bolívar, for, if they were to be deprived of public liberty, it would have been better, he said, to remain under Spain. Morillo was to him preferable to Bolívar.

Bolívar advanced towards Bogotá. Santander endeavored to stop him, sending him word that the army was not necessary since constitutional order had been reestablished in Guayaquil. Bolívar knew better, and continued his advance. On the 10th day of September he arrived in Bogotá, was received by the Congress, took the oath of office and delivered an address in which he offered to govern according to the constitution, in order to keep Colombia free and united until the meeting of the national convention. Santander greeted Bolívar formally. They had a long conversation in which the Liberator showed unbounded generosity.
Congress had entire confidence in Bolívar. It approved all the steps he had taken and gave him powers to execute other measures seemingly necessary to the life of the Republic. It also issued a communication providing for a general convention in the city of Ocaña on the 2nd of March, 1828. This convention was the last hope for the reestablishment of the Republic. Bolívar recommended that, in the election of representatives, the people select honorable men, possessed of intense patriotism and devotion to the independence, union and freedom of Colombia. He sent a request to Guayaquil not to leave the Union, and he had the satisfaction of learning that a counter revolution had put an end to the work of secession in that section of the country. Other minor movements were soon defeated and an alarm over a reported Spanish invasion subsided.

The convention took place in Ocaña, and after the work of preparation it formally inaugurated its work on April 9th. Among its members were some of Bolívar's most bitter enemies, some of his closest friends and a group of so-called independents who were ready to swing to either side. The convention proved a field of discord and of disgraceful disputes. Bolívar experienced keen anguish at the thought of the inevitable results of the meeting of that ill-advised group of men, and feared that it would lead to anarchy. He sent a message in which he exhorted the convention to save Colombia from ruin and to give it security and tranquility. He demanded a firm, powerful and just government to indemnify her for the loss of 500,000 men killed in the field of battle.

"Give us a government under which law is obeyed, the magistrate is respected, and the people are free; a government which can prevent the transgression of the general will and of the people's commands... In the name of Colombia, I pray you to give us for the people, for the army, for the judge and for the magistrate an inexorable government."
Bolívar knew that in his appeals for a strong government his enemies would see, or pretend to see, personal ambitions, and Santander, of course, immediately exploited this feeling against him. But Bolívar, who had proved his disinterestedness when he might have had anything he desired, made no effort, at this time, when he was trying to rescue his country from grave danger, to show that he was not ambitious.

A large number of petitions were received by the general assembly, requesting that Bolívar continue in control of the government “as the only man who, because of his talents, his exceptional services and his powerful influence, can keep Colombia united and tranquil.” But the convention was agitated by opposing feelings and influences. The federal system was proposed, but it was not accepted, although the proposal was greeted with joy by the enemies of the Liberator.

Bolívar, at about this time, wrote to a friend:

“If the constitution to be adopted in Ocaña is not suitable to the situation in which I see Colombia, I shall abandon at once a government of which I am tired at heart.”

And to his sister he wrote:

“I have decided to leave for Venezuela, and I want you to know this, warning you that I absolutely do not want you, on your account or on mine, to incur the least expense, for you well know how poor I am.”

And this was the man who had been born wealthy, who had declined to accept a million dollars from Perú, who gave his salary to the needy, who could have had all life can give, but who renounced all to devote himself to his country!

When the constitution was drafted, Bolívar found that it was going to be contrary to his desires, and he made ready to return to Venezuela,
but was persuaded by the insistence of his friends to remain. At last, they, fearing the oppression of Santander and his followers, left Congress. This destroyed the quorum, as other representatives had already resigned. On June 11th, they issued a proclamation explaining the failure of the Congress, attributing it to the oppression by a party which desired a constitution unsuited to Colombia, and which overlooked the real facts of the situation; and declared that the legal status of the country was as follows:

"The constitution of the year 1811 is in full vigor; the laws are in force, and at the head of the government is the Libertador Presidente, who has the confidence of the nation."

When Bolívar was informed that the convention had adjourned, he wanted to return to the capital and withdraw from public life. This would have meant civil war with no man powerful enough to put an end to it. In the emergency an assembly of respectable persons met in Bogotá and established a Junta, asking Bolívar to resume power and to hasten to the capital to handle the situation. Bolívar had nothing to do but to obey; it was a matter of his own conscience, even more than of the demands of the people.

He had full power in governmental matters, but he decided to exercise it with due consultation and only during the crisis through which Colombia was passing. Bogotá received him with unusual enthusiasm. He declared publicly that he would always be the champion of public liberty.

"When the people want to deprive me of the power and separate me from the command, I shall gladly submit to their will and will surrender to them my sword, my blood and my life. That is the sacred oath I utter before all the principal magistrates, and what is more, before all the people."

In truth, he used his powers with great prudence, and devoted his time especially to the reorganization of the army and the extinction of
privateering, ordering that no more licenses should be issued and that those in force should be recalled.

Memorials to him were drafted in every part of Nueva Granada, and even the smallest villages showed their unanimous wish that Bolívar should take the situation in hand and save the country. Guayaquil and Venezuela did the same. It seemed that everything was settled and that peace was to last forever. Bolívar did not use the name of Dictator nor that of Supreme Chief, but the one given to him by law, Libertador Presidente. He regulated his own powers, created a council of state, ordered that all guarantees granted by the constitution of Cúcuta be respected, and offered to convocate the national representation for January 2, 1830, to establish at last the constitution of the Republic. In papers concerning the constitution, he expressed disgust for dictatorship.

"Under a dictatorship, who can speak of freedom?" he said.
"Let us feel mutual compassion for the people who obey and for the man who commands alone."

He was as generous as ever with his enemies. Santander was appointed minister of Colombia in Washington; and in the appointment of the members of his council of state, Bolívar did not hesitate to include men who had not shown the least friendship for him, if their intellectual achievements or their patriotic work warranted the distinction.

Santander repaid Bolívar's kindness by fostering a plot against his life. On the 25th of September, Bolívar's palace was attacked by a group of conspirators whose object was to murder him. They took the guard by surprise, wounding and killing several of its members, and started towards Bolívar's room. The Liberator intended to fight, but was persuaded that it would be foolhardy; so he jumped through the window to the street and hid for a while. The conspirators, crying, "Death to the tyrant and long life to General Santander and the constitution of Cúcuta," went in pursuit of him. Colonel William Ferguson, the Liberator's Irish aide-de-
camp, seeking his chief in order to defend him, was killed. Other men were also murdered. The garrison was made ready and went to the palace. Finding it abandoned by the conspirators, it assembled in the principal square of the city and prepared to defend Bogotá. There was fighting in several sections, accompanied by much sorrow, for it was believed that Bolívar had been killed. Bolívar had not been killed, but he would have preferred death to the torture which he experienced at this reward of his eighteen years of service in the interest of his country. Seeing some soldiers pass discussing the defeat of the mutineers, Bolívar joined them and soon presented himself to the garrison, who received him with tears of joy.

To make a show of energy, he published a decree declaring that he would assume the powers given to him by the people and would use them according to circumstances; but this event had depressed him more than anything in his life. "I have really been murdered," he said. "The daggers have entered here in my heart. Is this the reward for my services to Colombia and to the independence of America? How have I offended freedom and those men? Santander has caused all this; but I will be generous."

Several of the conspirators were sentenced to die, among them Santander, but Bolívar changed the penalty to banishment from the country. Santander always contended that the sentence of death had been unjust. The worst punishment that might have fallen upon the would-be-murderers was the unanimous condemnation of all the people.