

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

December 18, 1942
2322 Lincoln Way
Ames, Iowa

Dear Mr. Rogers:

In the first letter I sent to you from Argentina, I made what I then thought to be a quite proper statement. In commenting about certain smoke-like spirals which I saw from a train window on the Argentine plains, I speculated about what the "gauchos were burning." It is an Argentine joke about of stock to ask a foreigner if he has seen a gaucho. If the foreigner by his answer indicates that it is his conviction that gauchos ride the plains, he is considered to have little authentic knowledge about Argentina. It was not long before I discovered that gauchos did not exist in Twentieth Century Argentina and that I, like other newcomers, had to learn Argentina's folk-lore and way of life from the beginning. Many foreigners presume that gauchos still roam the Argentine plains, I think, because the gaucho tradition survives in so much of the language, the art, the literature and even the every-day life of the country. Argentines revere the story of Martín Fierro. Their best-beloved artist is Molina Campos, who is the authentic portrayer of the gaucho. The best plays which I saw in Argentina were those about gaucho-like characters whose tragic, but courageous, doings on the stage deeply affected both Porteño and provincial audiences. The truth is that the gaucho tradition is much alive; and the truth is that Argentines insist on cultivating the gaucho ideal and the cult of courage which is a part of that ideal. So it is that the gaucho, once a nomad, is now glorified and romanticized. A mystic flair of the Argentine mind will not let him be, but insists on recreating him and perpetuating him as a spiritual "reality." And at the same time Argentines make much of the point that he does not exist at all.

I have listened to many an appraisal of the gaucho, but the most interesting I ever heard was in a Boliche near La Consulta in the province of Mendoza. A Mendocino told me there that long ago he had had a friend who was a real gaucho and that through him he had come to know the inner mind and psychology of that breed of men. The gaucho, he said, had a most curious set of loyalties and values. His chief concerns in this order were: His horse, his dog and his woman. A gaucho could go afield for days and weeks and never would the thought of his woman come to mind. That is an incredible and an exaggerated appraisal of gaucho psychology, but he was a strange kind of man and this strangeness gave him distinctive and legendary qualities. Before the confusion which I had in my mind about the gaucho being a flesh and blood contemporary figure had been dismissed, a newspaper reporter came to interview me. One of the questions he asked me was whether I had seen a gaucho. I did not recognize then the guile of the question and I answered that I had not seen a gaucho, but that I meant soon to go to the country so that I might talk with one or more and study them. I showed my interviewer a copy of Martín Fierro which I intended to study and from which, too, I expected to learn much about the gaucho. The result of that interview was fantastic and was probably the foremost verguenza, or embarrassment, of my first month in Argentina. The published account must have provoked many a laugh among Argentines who were introduced to one more foreigner whose curiosity would not be satisfied until he had seen and talked with a gaucho. The paragraph of the interview which must have most amused Argentines read as follows: "The North American smiled, perhaps because he was visualizing the wild and rebellious charm of the gaucho whom José Hernández made an immortal character." Finally, of course, I did learn the truth about there being no gauchos and came to welcome the frequently- and seriously-put question as to whether or not I had seen a gaucho. "But, of course," I always answered. And when Argentines, with continued seriousness fell into my trap and asked me where I had seen a gaucho, I made reply that I had seen many a gaucho in Argentine movies.

I shall never know how many times I was the butt of the serious and indirect type of Argentine humor which is so difficult to understand until one has lived among

Argentines for some time. But it was often enough I am sure, and I, a simple paisano, certainly did not catch on many and many a time. It was really only after I went to Córdoba and my friends there explained the cachada and other kinds of indirect humor that I began to recognize instances of it. I am not ashamed of my density of mind and the slowness with which I caught on. I am only glad that I did begin to learn, and appreciate, an Argentine trait which many foreigners never understand, which some only sense and in sensing it are confused by it, and which still others, because they do not appreciate it, take offense when they are made the object of it.

I am especially critical, as I imagine the reader must have been, of the manner in which I wrote about some things in the first few letters. At points along the way the reader must have come across some "fine writing," done in real sophomore style. At times the letters read like a travelogue which tries to be descriptive or poetic, and succeeds in being neither. When one comes to write in that fashion, I imagine it is because he is partly confused by the world in which he finds himself and with great striving tries to present something which he hopes will be, or will appear to be, authentic. One does not grow up in the middle west, live without particular adventure for 28 years, and then when suddenly placed in a strange country find that he is not at first a bit bewildered. After my own experience I shall always be a bit suspicious that world travelers who write about scenery and the outward seeming of customs and strange peoples do not understand the country about which they write.

I went to the Argentine with more conventional opinions than I fancied a broad-minded character, as I presumed myself to be, could entertain and with an egotistical confidence that it would be a formality to nail down the basic "truths" about Argentina. Then I was smugger and more positive than I shall ever be again. Because I could read Spanish before I arrived in Argentina and because I knew the meanings of hundreds of words, it did not occur to me that language would be much of a problem. A month, I thought, and I would "dominate" the language, would possess an accent of distinction and would be speaking with ceastizo correctness. But when I got off the boat at Buenos Aires, the rat-a-tat-tat of Argentine Spanish (which North Americans say sounds like a machine gun and which Argentines say sounds like a machine gun) was far too fast for me at first and I found myself more often than not a paragraph or two behind. One does not tune up his language ears overnight or learn the wealth of slang expressions of a new country in a short time. Argentines, be it said, were patient and polite to me and their continuous insistence that I spoke much better than I knew I did gave me heart and boldness to talk with Yankee accent and all, to muddle and plunge along. It is only practice, much practice, I found, which teaches one a language, which softens one's accent and which, sometimes only after years of continuous speaking, makes one cease to think the idioms of one's native tongue as he utters the words of another language. Language study is an endless striving for perfection. At first the problem is to understand well and to make oneself understood. That is a fairly easy task, and can be considered only a meager accomplishment. The second stage is to speak fairly fluently, but quite ungrammatically. And the last stage, the absolute mastery of the language, is the facility of speaking fluently, grammatically and without accent.

When one begins to accept the customs of another country and to fit into its way of life, the process is a faster one than one might suppose. At first there is, in one's inner self, an opposition to accepting change, to believing that the values of another civilization, even while one is living in that civilization, should be accepted in toto. It is the breaking down of that reluctance, a reluctance built on habit and prejudice, which is most important of all. It is a state of mind. But once the mind is prepared, one goes all-out, so to speak, for the other way of life. If the heart is willing, the mind is pliable. In Letter 5, still with a great sense of North American propriety, I asserted that it would not be soon that I would speak a compliment,

or a piropo, to a young lady whom I did not know as I passed her in the street simply because she was attractive and hence, according to Argentine logic, meriting a spoken description of her charms. Yet in Letter 12 I was writing once more about the piropo and under the guidance and instruction of Rogelio Guardia, my Venado Tuerto friend, I was not only beginning to think about piropo possibilities but was trying to learn the technique of speaking an Adiós to whatever good-looking young lady whose eyes met mine during paseo hours. One, too, may laugh, to cite another example of customs, and think it out of character and ridiculous for a North American to become Latinish and effusive in the greeting of a casual acquaintance. I soon found myself, however, when I came upon an Argentine friend on the street whom I had not seen for such a long time as a few days, shaking hands and greeting him effusively. Should I ever go back to Argentina, I shall feel myself quite in character to greet my many friends with the Latin embrace. It is almost second nature with me now. In fact I think it is a nicer greeting than the hearty back slap which is a favorite greeting in the United States during the sunburn season.

However religiously and intently one might read these letters, one would not discover much about what Argentine women are like. Since my return that has been the most-asked question. Usually I am asked how Argentine women compare with North American women, or vice versa. No doubt I could explain the subject a bit better if I did not speak in generalities. But that would hardly be, from my point of view, the most judicious way to approach the subject. So speaking in generalities, I shall observe first of all, as indeed I have observed, that a striking feature of Argentine women is their dark and soft eyes, darker and softer than the eyes of any women I have ever seen. Happily, the women of all countries have a special charm. One is impressed by the delicacy and the feminine qualities of Argentine women. These characteristics are more accentuated than they are in North American women, I suppose, because the Argentine woman's place is in the home where she fills a woman's place in a man's world. She is not concerned with a career other than that of being wife and mother. I cannot say that it would seem unpleasant to have a beautiful Latin girl looking up to one as if he were, if not her lord and master, at least someone to whose advice and counsel she would give heed and regard somewhat as if it were the voice of wisdom. I cannot say that feminine dependence upon a man does not flatter the masculine ego. That kind of dependence is marked in Argentina. In truth the Argentine girl in the environment in which she lives has a special kind of appeal. The North American girl, with her independent manner and feeling of equality with the male, would be as out of place there as the Argentine girl would be in the tumultuous North American scene. By reason of these considerations, it is not fair, nor possible, to compare the two types of womanhood. And by the same token, and not merely as a matter of wise policy, I have only this to say if I am compelled to judge which type I prefer: I prefer the Argentine girl in Argentina and the North American girl in the United States of North America.

As I read over the letters which I sent to you, I was prompted to mention a few errors and misconceptions expressed in them. In the very first letter I reported that the Argentine government railroad does not have a Buenos Aires rail connection, an obvious inconsistency because I rode up to Rosario from Retiro station on the narrow gauge state line. Although it is almost true, British capital and the Argentine state are not the only owners of railroads in Argentina, for I rode down from Resistencia to Santa Fe on an ancient but serviceable rail-line built and maintained by French capital. French interests own two other small railroads. Though I was told just before I left for Mendoza that "Spanish is sung when it is spoken" in that province and although I discovered the truth of that statement, the reader is entitled to know that Spanish is sung even more in Córdoba. When I remarked in Letter 3 that Mr. J. E. Johns, the All-America Cable man, and I were the only United States citizens in Mendoza at that time, because of a lack of information and a jump-at-the-conclusion complex, I erred. There were Mormon missionaries from Salt Lake City there and several geological engineers who were even then directing drilling operations in the very shadow of Tupungato's majesty. And when I mention oil wells, it brings to mind the YPF, the Argentine government agency, which I stated to be an oil monopoly. It is only a quasi-

monopoly, for other oil interests, including Standard Oil, still have exploitation rights in parts of Argentina. In Letter 13 I remarked about a building which looked as if it might have been the Cabildo of the Spanish. Later on I discovered in an Argentine newsreel that it was indeed the real prototype of the Cabildo and is no less than a patriotic shrine. I do not know yet how I had the wit to make so good a guess. And in making a few remarks in that same letter about the mild revolution of 1930, as it was told to me by an Argentine who witnessed it, I concluded that "less than five" were killed in all the Republic in that almost bloodless uprising. Subsequent investigation brought out the information that although the revolution was mild when compared to over-the-weekend automobile casualties in the United States that nevertheless 33 did die from gunshot wounds and an even 300 were wounded.

Some things there were about which you did not receive a full and complete account, including a certain number of little adventures and misadventures. For one thing I did not send you a blueprint of my activities during the season of Carnaval, that gay, exciting week before Lent begins. Most of those activities, I can assure you, were innocent enough. For example, one night during Carnaval I threw several pounds of confetti and colored paper at an Argentine girl on the Avenida de Mayo, a young lady whom I met in Mendoza, whom I chanced to see again in Rosario but who, alas, was always chaperoned by her mother, a younger brother and sister. Nor did I say a word about another Argentine girl whom I knew for too-brief a time, but long enough to call her Rayo del Sol, which in English means sunshine. Nor did I write about a criollo gentleman whom I came to know at the Turismo Hotel and who for a reason known only to him and me dubbed me El Tiburón, which in English means The Shark. But for all the untold experiences which I had and about which I did not trouble to take notes, and mention now, if at all, without details, two Argentines whom I have since met in the United States have marvelled at my caution and timidity. Both asked me what I had seen and knew of Buenos Aires. I told them that I had been to Palermo, had seen a performance or two of the Bataclan and had walked up and down the Calle 25 de Mayo in the late evening. Both asked me if I had been to La Boca. I had not. One who has never visited La Boca, they told me, is an old woman and has not seen Buenos Aires. That I have not seen La Boca is an inexcusable oversight, they assert. They have both invited me to go to La Boca with them. It is well, for I should not like to go there alone.

It is my sincere wish and hope that those who have read these letters will set them aside knowing the Argentine people a bit better and liking them more. They are a people of many good parts. To them I can only wish in kind what many a paisano, Mendocino, Cordobese, Santafecino, Rosarino and Portefiño have wished me: Que le vaya bien. Which, freely translated, means: Good luck to you.

Sincerely,

Francis Herron