

The army was now concentrated, the different divisions in sight of one another, and the arrangements made for final operations. On the 13th it was on the Puebla road on the east side of Lake Chalco, advancing on El Penon. On the 18th it was on the Acapulco road, near San Augustine, nine miles from the city of Mexico. The change was made in good order, and the ground to operate on was far better, and the defences in front less. The city of the Spanish-Aztecs was now within the grasp of the arms of the United States, predestined, in the convictions of the people, to be invincible wherever they should be carried. A conviction like this, existing in ages past, alike in the minds of Roman, Mohammedan, and Puritan, often makes the destiny which it affirms and courts. Asserted in the cause of liberty and justice, it would subdue a world to the civilization of Christianity. In any other cause, its predestined glory may fade before a darker fate.

## CHAPTER XII.

Mexican Line of Defence.—Position of the American and Mexican Armies.—Action of the 19th.—Position in the Hamlet of Contreras.—Position of General Scott.—Arrangements for the Battle.—Distribution of the American and Mexican Forces.—Battle of Contreras.—Rout of the Mexicans.—Surrender of Mexican Generals.—Recapture of the Buena Vista Guns.—Scott's Arrangements.—Evacuation of San Antonio.—Storm of the Tête du Pont.—Battle of Churubusco.—Defeat of the Mexicans.—Loss.—Truce.

THE Mexican plan of defence for the city of Mexico seems to have contemplated two lines of defence—an exterior and interior one. The exterior was composed of a line of forts and fortified eminences. The strongest was EL PENON, on the National Road, completely commanding it, near the edge of Lake Tezcuco. This fortress, as we have already stated, was pronounced impracticable without immense loss. It contained fifty-one guns, disposed in several different batteries, with infantry breastworks, and the whole surrounded by a deep ditch connecting the marshes and waters about it. The next fort of this class was at MEXICALCINGO, at the upper end of Lake Xochimilco, and commanding a narrow causeway to the city. This, also, was defended with batteries and infantry breastworks. The next position was the BRIDGE OF CHURUBUSCO, a *tête du pont* at the crossing of a canal, armed also with cannon, on the Acapulco road. The next, but to the west, and front of this, was the HILL OF CONTRERAS, thoroughly armed with batteries and breast-



works. In the route, and still nearer to the city, was the HILL OF CHAPULTEPEC, on which was the Military College. This was at the point where the mountains approached the city. It was a strong position and well armed.<sup>1</sup> It is plain, from an examination of the map, that these positions really commanded all the practicable passes to the city on the whole semicircle, extending round from Lake Tezcuco in the east to where the mountains come near the city on the west. These fortifications were armed with near one hundred pieces of cannon, while the ground between them was either marshy, or covered with volcanic remains, sharp and abrupt, rendering it almost impassable even for footmen. Behind this line of exterior defences General Valencia, with 6,000 of the best troops of the Mexican army, was to manoeuvre, and reinforce any point which might be exposed to attack.

The interior line seems to have been only the forts, and canals or ditches of the city itself. These, however, were by no means weak. The city was approached only by causeways. Canals and ditches surrounded it in various directions, and at the gateways were *garitas*, or small forts, constructed at the angles of the streets or entrances of the causeways, eight in number.<sup>2</sup> These defences of the city were also mounted with a large number of cannon. This interior line, however, was evidently weaker than the exterior one. These various defences were well calculated to protect the city against any thing less than a large army and protracted siege, had the energy

<sup>1</sup>This statement corresponds in substance with one made by Captain Lee of the engineers.

<sup>2</sup> See Scott's Official Report.

of the men, or the ability of their officers, corresponded with the natural strength of the positions. This, however, was not the case. Whether it be a superior strength, innate in the natural constitutions of the inhabitants of the northern temperate zone, or whether it be what is more than equivalent to strength, a higher and better education, it is certain that the arms of England and the United States have exhibited a great superiority over those of more southern nations—a superiority, whose final result on the dominion and civilization of the world is yet to be made known by the events of futurity.

On the 18th of August, the position of the armies, at night, was in the order following, viz.: Worth's division had, during the day, advanced from San Augustine in the direction of San Antonia, whose batteries were brought to bear on his troops, and the first shot killed Captain Thornton, a brave but unfortunate officer of the 2d dragoons.<sup>1</sup> The cavalry had been thrown in front to reconnoitre. The village proved to be strongly fortified, and a bold *reconnaissance* made by Captain Mason of the engineers, accompanied by Lieutenants Stevens and Tower, determined that this point could only be approached by the front, over a narrow causeway of great length, flanked with wet ditches of great depth.<sup>2</sup> Worth was ordered not to attack, but to threaten and mask the place. On the left of the road here, extending west, was an immense field of volcanic rocks and lava, called *pedregal*, and on the east it was wet and boggy.<sup>3</sup> This *pedregal* was

<sup>1</sup> Scott's Official Report.

<sup>2</sup> Official Report.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of an officer in the Washington Union.

thrown up in sharp rocks and broken pieces, in such a manner, that the Mexican officers supposed it to be impassable. It extended to the mountains, five miles to the left. That night Worth made the headquarters of his division at a *hacienda* on the road, near Antonia, and within reach of the enemy's guns.

On the same night the division of Twiggs slept in a little village, in sight of Worth's corps.<sup>1</sup> The divisions of Pillow and Quitman were near.

On the same evening (the 18th) General Valencia, whose division had previously been held liable to march to any point, and whose troops were called "the flower" of the Mexican army, occupied the fortified intrenchments at the heights of Contreras, about five miles to the northwest of San Augustine.<sup>2</sup> At the same time (evening of the 18th) General Rincon took command at Churubusco, whose fortifications were not then completed, but to finish which he immediately addressed himself.<sup>3</sup> The garrison of that post appears to have been composed, according to the official report, of the battalions of national guards, called *Independencia* and *Bravo*, which were subsequently reinforced (19th and 20th) by different batteries of artillery.

At San Antonia was posted another Mexican division, reinforced on the morning of the 19th, by the battalions of *Hidalgo* and *Victoria*. In the neighborhood of Contreras and San Angel were other divisions of the enemy under Santa Anna.

<sup>1</sup> Letter in the New York Courier and Enquirer.

<sup>2</sup> Official Report of General Salas.

<sup>3</sup> Official Report of General Rincon.

This, then, was the situation of the two armies on the night of the 18th August. General Scott's headquarters were at San Augustine. The pass of San Antonia, in front, being strong and on a narrow causeway, the plan of attack adopted seems to have been this—to *turn* Antonia by taking the fort at Contreras, and thus be able to march round San Antonia; or rather, to gain Coyhoacan on the San Angel, in the rear of San Antonia, and which was also but one mile from Churubusco. To do this, however, required that a new road should be cut for artillery from San Augustine to Contreras, and that, when there, that position, strongly defended by artillery, should be stormed and taken. This was the plan now devised by the American general, and to be immediately executed by the army.

On the morning of the 19th, all was animation in both armies. General Valencia was strongly posted at Contreras; Rincon was busy increasing the fortifications of Churubusco; Santa Anna was reinforcing both Antonia and Contreras, with bodies of troops drawn from the city; and General Scott, having made a new *reconnaissance* to the left by Captain Lee, with Lieutenants Beauregard and Tower,<sup>1</sup> now detached Pillow's division on the contemplated route to make a practicable road for heavy artillery.<sup>2</sup>

Captain Lee of the engineers, having discovered a corps of observation in the direction taken by Pillow's division, Twiggs was advanced in front to cover the party cutting the road.<sup>3</sup> This last division had now arrived at

<sup>1</sup> Scott's Official Report, (No. 31,) 19th August, 1847.  
<sup>2</sup> Official Report.  
<sup>3</sup> Idem.

the village of San Juan, and were prepared for the severe labor of the next two days. The men were ordered to put their blankets on their shoulders, their knapsacks in their wagons, and two days' bread and beef in their haversacks. At one P. M., they left San Juan, and proceeded forward, dragging with them Magruder's battery and the mountain howitzers.<sup>1</sup> At two P. M., General Smith's brigade had arrived at the crest of a hill, from which Valencia, in his intrenchments, was plainly visible, and in the distance reinforcements marching to his assistance. These intrenchments of Valencia, at the hill of Contreras, had twenty-two pieces of artillery (mostly heavy) mounted in a battery commanding the difficult, broken, rocky ground, on which the American troops had to manoeuvre. With this position the city of Mexico was connected, by an excellent road beyond the volcanic field, and by which it received, from time to time, great bodies of cavalry.<sup>2</sup>

At four P. M., General Scott took position on one of the eminences in front of Contreras, and found the brigades of P. F. Smith and Riley, (Twiggs' division,) supported by those of Pierce and Cadwallader, (Pillow's division,) picking their way over the broken ground in the enemy's front, and extending themselves towards the road which leads to the city. With great difficulty Captain Magruder's battery of twelve and six pounders, and Lieut. Callender's battery of mountain howitzers and rockets, had been advanced to within range of the intrenchments.<sup>3</sup> "The

<sup>1</sup> Letter of an officer in the New York Courier  
<sup>2</sup> Scott's Official Report.  
<sup>3</sup> Official Report

ground," says an officer, "was the worst possible for artillery; covered with rocks, large and small, prickly-pear and cactus; intersected by ditches filled with water, and lined with maguey plant, itself impervious to cavalry; and with patches of corn, which concealed the enemy's skirmishers while it impeded our passage. The artillery advanced but slowly, under a most murderous fire of grape, canister, and round shot, until it got into position."<sup>1</sup>

Our artillerymen could get but *three* pieces in battery, while the enemy had *twenty-two*, which, being mostly heavy, rendered our fire nugatory. "For two hours," says the same officer, "our troops stood the storm of iron and lead which hailed upon them, unmoved. At every discharge they laid flat down to avoid the storm, and then sprung up to serve the guns. At the end of that time, two of the guns were dismounted, and we (the rifles) badly hurt; thirteen of the horses were killed and disabled, and fifteen of the cannoniers killed and wounded. The troops were then recalled."

In the mean time the Mexican lancers had been repeatedly repulsed. In another part of the field Riley's brigade sustained the enemy's fire, and were engaged in skirmishing. This action lasted for about three hours, during which time our troops maintained themselves under a heavy and severe fire, and successfully resisted the charges of large columns of cavalry.

The day of the 19th, however, closed without any decisive results. The infantry, unsustained by either cav-

<sup>1</sup> Letter of an officer in the New York Courier

alry or artillery, could not charge in column without being mowed down by the Mexican batteries, nor in line, without being successfully assailed by the Mexican cavalry.<sup>1</sup> To cut off the junction of further reinforcements from the capital (which till now arrived at will) the general-in-chief determined to occupy the hamlet and church of Contreras, on the road leading from the capital to Valencia's camp. Cadwallader's brigade, already advanced in that direction, had taken position, and needed assistance. The 14th regiment of infantry, Colonel Morgan, was then ordered by Scott to occupy the hamlet, and a few minutes later they were followed by the New York and South Carolina volunteers, composing the brigade of General Shields. These troops made their way through a dense forest to the left of the road at Contreras, (east side,) and in the night took post in the hamlet on the road. In the mean time the brigades of Smith and Riley had advanced still further, and taken post in rear and flank of the enemy's post at Contreras.

It was determined by Scott to make a diversion in the morning, or earlier, if practicable, in front of Fort Contreras, while the brigades of Smith and Riley should attack, and Shields should cut off the advance of reinforcements, or the retreat of the defeated through the hamlet on the road. This purpose was carried out.

General Persifer F. Smith of Twiggs' division was first on the ground, and had the merit of making the immediate dispositions for the battle of the following morning. They were made with skill and judgment, drawing from

<sup>1</sup> Scott's Official Report.

the commander-in-chief the warmest praise, and from the army universal admiration. The close of the 19th was, to the troops immediately engaged, neither pleasant nor inspiring. They closed a severe action without decisive results. The rifle regiment, with the 1st artillery and 3d infantry, (engaged in front with the enemy,) marched to their new positions through chapporal and cactus, tired, hungry, and sorrowful.<sup>1</sup> In the evening they marched into the little hamlet, and there spent the night, with the brigade of Riley in the same road. Shields' brigade was in an orchard near by, and Cadwallader nearer the enemy. The night was cold, wet, and dreary. An officer of the rifles thus describes it.<sup>2</sup>

"As we were within reach of their batteries, which could enfilade the road in which we lay, we built a stone breastwork at either end to conceal ourselves from their view and grape. There we were, completely surrounded by the enemy, cut off from our communications, ignorant of the ground, without artillery, weary, dispirited, and dejected—we were a disheartened set. With Santa Anna and Salas' promise of 'no quarter,' a force of four to one against us, and one half defeated already, no succor from Puebla and no news from Scott,<sup>3</sup> all seemed dark. Suddenly the words came whispered along, '*We storm at midnight!*' Now we were ourselves again.

"But what a horrible night! There we lay—too tired to eat, too wet to sleep—in the middle of that muddy

<sup>1</sup> Letter from an officer in the New York Courier.

<sup>2</sup> From the same.

<sup>3</sup> Scott was, till after dark, in a position opposite the enemy's centre. He then retired to San Augustine and wrote the despatch of the day.

road, officers and men side by side, with a heavy rain pouring down upon us—the officers without blankets or overcoats, (they had lost them in coming across,) and the men worn out with fatigue. About midnight, the rain was so heavy that the streams in the road flooded us; and there we stood, crowded together, drenched and benumbed, waiting till daylight."

The darkness and heavy rain impeded the troops, and rendered the transmission of orders<sup>1</sup> so difficult, that the attack on the enemy which had been planned for the dawn of day did not commence till a later hour. About four o'clock the troops of Riley and Smith, which had occupied the hamlet and road during the night, defiled into their position in rear of the enemy, by a ravine covered by orchards and corn-fields. The nature of the ground facilitated this operation. The batteries and intrenched camp of Valencia were on the side of a hill, towards the east or southeast, so as to command the road, it being the great object to defend the roads which led to the city. The volcanic and rocky formation here made several little eminences, with ravines between. In this instance there were other eminences in the rear still higher. The brigade of Riley passed through an orchard into the ravine behind Valencia, so as to be out of sight of Valencia's corps, and yet occupy a position near to him, in his rear. The brigade of Smith followed. That of Cadwallader had already taken position in rear of these, as a support, while Shields' was held in reserve—taking the place of Smith's men, in

<sup>1</sup> Scott had sent seven officers out for information that evening, of which not one got through. Captain Lee, alone, with a message from Shields, was able to get through.

the village of Contreras, and undertaking to hold that against the approach of the Mexican main army from the city,<sup>1</sup> or, in case Valencia was defeated, to cut off his retreat to the city. He was accompanied also by the 13th regiment under Colonel Morgan. In the mean time, a diversion (at General Smith's request) had been intended, by the advance in front of one of Worth's brigades and one of Quitman's, leaving San Augustine (the general depot) to be garrisoned by Harney's dragoons. This movement, however, occurred too late to affect the engagement.<sup>2</sup>

These movements were made, and the action ready to begin, at about six A. M. It appears that the march of the American troops in the night, and preparatory to the engagement, was altogether unknown to the Mexicans, whose attention was chiefly directed to an attack in front. The action of the afternoon of the 19th, in which the Americans had made no impression, inspired them with an idea that they might be victorious; and as the evening had come on leaving the Americans in front, they had the belief that the attack would be in front or along the line of the road. Here we may remark, that the idea of rapid night movements, with a view to turn positions or make surprises by skill and energy, seems not to be at all familiar to the Mexican generals. Had it been, why did they not discover, and endeavor to prevent the execution and use of the new road made round the heights of Cerro Gordo? Why did they not throw their troops into, and defend the narrow pass, between mountain and water,

<sup>1</sup> See Official Report.

<sup>2</sup> See Scott's Official Report

round the south end of Lake Chalco? And why, now, with twenty thousand men in sight, did they not watch and defend the space between Valencia's batteries, and the road and hamlet occupied on the night of the 19th by the brigades of Riley and Smith? *They did not*, and lost the battle (strategically considered) on that account.

Let us now review the exact position of the two armies on the morning of the 20th—and which, all other things being equal, decided their fate—as to the position of Contreras. First, we observe, that the road leading by the heights of Contreras, goes to Mexico through San Angel. At the last place a road branches off, rather southeast, by Coyhoacan, to the San Antonia road at Churubusco. At the last place, and very near the junction of the roads, the San Antonia road crosses a little stream, or canal, called Churubusco River. At this point, covering the crossing, is a regular fortification, called *Tête du Pont*, or Bridgehead. This is connected with a church or convent, in the hamlet of Churubusco, by defences. Churubusco is approached, then, on the south and west, by two roads only; one from San Angel, through Coyhoacan; the other from San Antonia. Now the reader will mark that the Mexican positions were these: 1st. Valencia, with the division of the north, composed of about six thousand men, occupied the batteries and hill-side on the height of Contreras. This was a battery mounted with heavy pieces. The object of this defence was to command the road, which was a good one, from here to Mexico. 2d. At about two miles from this work, and parallel with the same road, lay the main body of the Mexican army, under Santa Anna, supposed to be about twelve thousand men. A reference to the map of the ground will show

that this was a position well adapted to reinforce either Contreras upon one road, or Churubusco on the other. 3d. General Rincon, with the regiments of Bravo and Independencia, occupied the church and *tête du pont*, at Churubusco.<sup>1</sup> 4th. San Antonia, which had first arrested the march of Worth's division in this direction, was likewise garrisoned and fortified. In all these positions, taken in the aggregate, the Mexican forces amounted to about twenty-five thousand men. All of them were strong positions when skilfully and energetically defended. It is very evident, however, that if Contreras were taken, San Antonia would be turned and rendered useless. Churubusco then might be attacked without touching Antonia. The enemy must then concentrate his defence at the *tete du pont* of Churubusco. This actually took place.

The American positions we have already detailed. The object of Scott was first to force the fortifications of Contreras, and thus command the road through San Angel, and then to carry Churubusco, when the main road would be open to the city of Mexico. For this purpose, the brigades under the command of General P. F. Smith were detached to surround, if possible, the height of Contreras; Shields to support and hold the road; Worth to check Antonia and divert in front; while Quitman garrisoned the depot of San Augustine. The immediate arrangements and command at Contreras devolved upon General Smith, who most ably carried out the views of the commander-in-chief. The nature of the ground and

<sup>1</sup> General Rincon's Official Report.

the negligence of the Mexicans favored our troops in taking their respective places. We have seen that the brigades of Riley, Cadwallader, and Smith, each took their position in rear of the enemy, with only the crest of a hill between. Shields' position in the hamlet was such, that he was able on one hand to cut off or check reinforcements, and on the other to intercept the retreat of Valencia. In fact, the Americans had *cut the line* of the Mexican defence, and were thus able to attack their posts and divisions in detail. This was done.

At six A. M. the arrangements for battle were all made. The place and course of Riley's brigade was given by Lieutenant Tower, of the engineers. In the same manner, that of Cadwallader was pointed out by Lieutenants Beauregard and Brooks; while Captain Lee directed the course of the column under Colonel Ransom.<sup>1</sup> All these officers had reconnoitred the enemy's camp and forces.

When the word was given, our men sprung up in rear and on both flanks of the astonished Mexicans, rushed over the crest of the hill, and dashed pell-mell into the intrenchments! Nothing could resist them: the batteries were taken; the army of Valencia driven out in utter rout; and its flying remnants pursued on the road to Mexico! So admirable were the dispositions, and so impulsively energetic, that the battle was ended almost as soon as begun. The actual conflict lasted but *seventeen minutes!* The pursuit was for hours. The results were gigantic.

Of the scene during the battle, and the fierce ardor

<sup>1</sup> Scott's Official Report, (No. 32.)



which impelled the American<sup>1</sup> troops, we take a description from the same graphic writer whom we have before quoted. "At last, just at daylight, General SMITH slowly walking up, asked if all was ready. A look answered him. 'Men, forward!' and we *did* 'forward.' Springing up at once, Riley's brigade opened, when the crack of a hundred rifles started the Mexicans from their astonishment, and they opened their fire. Useless fire—for we were so close that they overshot us, and before they could turn their pieces on us we were on them. Then such cheers arose as you never heard. The men rushed forward like demons, yelling and firing the while. The carnage was frightful, and though they fired sharply, it was of no use. The earthen parapet was cleared in an instant, and the blows of the stocks could be plainly heard, mingled with the yells and groans around. Just before the charge was made, a large body of lancers came winding up the road, looking most splendidly in their brilliant uniforms. They never got to the work, but turned and fled.<sup>2</sup> In an instant all was one mass of confusion, each

<sup>1</sup> The Mexicans uniformly, in their reports and letters, speak of the people of the United States of the north, as "Americans," although they are themselves just as much "Americans." This settles the question, whether the people of the United States have a name.

<sup>2</sup> This dastardly conduct of the Mexican cavalry is thus spoken of in the Official Report of General Salas, which corresponds in this respect with the above account:

"As soon as I observed the dispersion of our forces, I endeavored to check it. Crying 'Victory to Mexico!' and sounding the signal of attack, I succeeded in rallying our troops, and ordered General Anastasia Torreon to make a charge with his cavalry; but this chief, far from obeying my orders, fled like a coward, and the cavalry following his example,



STORMING OF CONTRERAS