

Simultaneously with all this, the other portion of the enemy's immense force continued to advance diagonally down the plateau, toward the very point occupied by the commanding General. There was nothing to impede their progress but the artillery under Lieutenants O'Brien and Thomas. The former of these officers, with his two pieces, was about a hundred yards to the right and in advance of the latter; and both, though unsupported, fell back no faster than the recoil of their guns would carry them. They knew our troops were hurrying up from the rear, and that, if they could retard the enemy's course but a few minutes longer, the tide of battle, now setting so heavily against us, might once more turn in our favor. Sherman and Bragg were urging on their batteries with whip, spur, and even with drawn sabres; the dragoons were coming on with them; while to the left, Davis and Lane, with their riflemen and infantry, — the men with trailed arms, — were advancing, at a run, over the ridges and ravines; the awful fire of musketry on the plateau, and down around that dismal gorge, proclaiming with fearful eloquence the necessity of their speed. Closer and closer pressed the Mexicans. O'Brien

saw, that, if he limbered up in time to save his guns, the enemy would carry the plateau before our other light artillery could get to it; but that, if he stood his ground and fought them until they were lost, there was still a chance remaining to retrieve the fortunes of the day. It was a most critical moment, and his a most perilous situation. On his choice there rested infinite responsibility. His decision, under the circumstances, was stamped with more of heroism than any other one act of the war. HE ELECTED TO LOSE HIS GUNS.

Still onward came the Mexicans. O'Brien's men were fast falling around him; he was himself wounded; already two horses had been killed under him, and the third was bleeding; besides, those attached to his pieces and caissons were nearly all down, and struggling in their harness. He looked back, and saw that the troops in rear were now nearly up, and encouraged his little handful of men to continue their exertions. The cool and intrepid Thomas, on his left, kept busily at his work, and was likewise suffering most terrible loss. Still the Mexicans came on, and were now almost up to the guns, which were pouring into them canisters on canisters of musket balls. No

troops could have behaved better than they did. There was no faltering. The wide gaps opened through their ranks were immediately closed up, and the men still pressed on. Now nearly every cannoneer was down. O'Brien looked back once more, and, thank God! Bragg's Battery, which was leading, was just at that moment coming into action; Sherman and the dragoons were following rapidly up, while Davis and Lane were just bringing their riflemen and infantry out of the last deep ravine upon the plateau. His pieces were nearly loaded again; it was slow work, the four or five men about them being so weak from loss of blood. But he was determined to give the Mexicans one more round; and he did so; it was, as one might say, right in their teeth; and then he, and the few crippled fellows who had survived the carnage, hobbled away.*

* This was the manner in which Lieutenant O'Brien "turned over" (to use a professional term for the transferring of property from one to another) these two celebrated trophies to the Mexican army. They were afterwards recaptured by the gallant and lamented Captain Simon H. Drum, of the 4th Artillery, at Churubusco. It is somewhat remarkable, that a company of the very regiment to which they belonged should have retaken them.

While those of the Mexican army nearest the guns closed in on them, and, having cut the dead and dying horses clear, limbered up, and then, by hand, rolled the pieces away, the rest continued rapidly on, their speed being now accelerated to a run. Captain Bragg had appealed to General Taylor for support. There was none to give him. That which had been in front the enemy were now cutting to pieces in the gorge to which it had been driven, while that in rear had not yet come up. "MAINTAIN THE POSITION AT EVERY HAZARD," was the order. And nobly was it executed. That magnificent battery,* — which had encountered the enemy in every battle from Palo Alto up, and before which the Mexican ranks had wilted away as if breathed upon by the Angel of Death, — now belched forth a storm of iron and lead, which prostrated every thing in its front. Nothing could withstand its terrible

Speaking of the time when they were recovered, General Scott says; "Coming up a little later, I had the happiness to join in the protracted cheers of the gallant 4th on the joyous event; and, indeed, the whole army sympathizes in its just pride and exultation."

* Ringgold's celebrated battery until he fell; then Randolph Ridgely's at Resaca de la Palma and Monterey, till he died; then Bragg's.

fury. In a few moments Sherman placed his battery alongside, and took up the fire; the dragoons were ordered to a position within supporting distance; and, at the same instant, Washington at La Angostura began to tear open the gate of lancers from the gorge below. Davis and Lane, with the Mississippi riflemen and Indiana Volunteers, having come upon the plateau at some distance to the left of the artillery, poured volley after volley into the enemy, striking him in flank, and enfilading his repeated ranks from right to left. The cannonade on both sides was now so incessant, and the roar of musketry so loud and continuous, that it was impossible, above the general clangor and din, to distinguish the report of any single gun. The struggle was most desperate. The whole air vibrated with the rushing current of balls. The Mexicans fought as they had never fought before, and with an utter disregard of life. Our men were falling on every hand. General Taylor himself was in the midst of the hottest of the fight, calmly giving his orders, his clothes torn and riddled with bullets; and, wherever the fury of the battle was greatest, there was General Wool, riding from point to point, encouraging and

stimulating the men to still greater exertions. Each moment our fire seemed to grow more and more destructive. At length, the head of the Mexican column began to fall back; not by retreating, but by being shot away. Others pressed on to supply the places of the fallen; but they, too, went down. Finding it utterly impossible, notwithstanding all were advancing, to gain even a rod of ground against such a tempest, the whole column finally faltered a moment, then gave way, and in confusion retreated to the cover of the deep ravine. Not till then did our fire slacken. The smoke, which had enveloped the two armies like a thick veil, then lifted slowly up, and there was the field, blue with the uniforms of the dead!

With the exception of the 18 and 24-pounder battery and its strong supports, still in position at the head of the plateau, the whole Mexican army had now given ground. It had done so under the combined efforts of Washington's guns at La Angostura, and of Sherman's and Bragg's batteries, Davis's riflemen, and Lane's volunteer infantry, on the plain above.

The remains of the Second Illinois Regiment were soon got together after they had

arrived near La Angostura from the fatal gorge, and were again brought upon the plateau by the modest and fearless Bissell, and posted on the right of the batteries. Lieutenant-Colonel Weatherford also gathered up the fragments of poor Hardin's regiment, and marched them out to the head of the first gorge. They thus relinquished the parapet they had thrown up, and also the ditch to the right of Washington, to all that were left of the 2d Kentucky Volunteers, who had been brought away from the gorge after McKee and Clay had gone down, and were now commanded by the only surviving field-officer, Major Cary H. Fry, one of the most determined soldiers in the battle.

Captain Bragg at this time advanced his battery, supported by the Mississippians, two or three hundred yards up the plateau, and opened upon the Battalion of San Patricio with its heavy guns and its sustaining force, the corps of Sappers and Miners, now further strengthened by the regiment of Engineers. Captain Sherman likewise pushed his pieces more to the front, and operated in that direction as the enemy from time to time became exposed to his fire. At the same moment, General Taylor directed Lieutenant-Colonel May, with the

companies of the 1st and 2d Dragoons, and Pike's and Preston's companies, to move up the ravine toward the left, to prevent the enemy from again getting to our rear by turning that flank.

It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon when all these dispositions had been made. The great tumult of the battle had just given place to an occasional cannonade, accompanied by a desultory and scattering fire of small arms, when the attention of our army was attracted toward the rear by the heavy report of guns in that direction.

It will be recollected, that, during the 22d, General Miñon with his brigade of cavalry had come into the valley northeast of Saltillo, and had been ordered by Santa Anna to remain there until our troops gave way, then to fall upon them, and cut them up. About twelve o'clock, at noon, on the 23d, a large detachment of this brigade, apparently impatient at waiting for our precipitate retreat, passed along at the foot of the mountains, and ascended into the Pass through a deep ravine at long cannon range southeast from the redoubt. As they did so, and swept around to gain the road between the battle-field and the city, they were opened

upon by Captain Webster with his 24-pounder howitzers, and, before they could get beyond the reach of the shells, sustained a slight loss both in men and horses. During the afternoon, this force was followed on the same route by the rest of the brigade, which, when it had united with its advance, halted in one immense column, — the whole being but a little over a mile in front of the town. In this position General Miñon succeeded in intercepting the flight of several of the men who had left the field of battle, and in making them prisoners. The brigade, however, had hardly gained this new position, before Lieutenant Donaldson and Lieutenant Bowen, of Webster's Battery, galloped over to the head-quarter camp, and, in concert with Lieutenant Shover, proposed that Donaldson and Shover, — the former with one of Webster's howitzers, the latter with his 6-pounder gun, — should go out and attack it by themselves, and, if possible, force it from the Pass. It was a bold plan, and one they were the very men, not only to conceive, but to execute. Lieutenant Shover knew, that, if our army in front of Buena Vista had been routed, as the fugitives had reported, a most desperate stand would probably be made

in front of the town, and, for the moment, therefore, he did not feel authorized to leave a position which General Taylor had ordered him to defend to the last extremity. But afterwards, when he found that our lines were still maintaining their ground, and that he could then leave the head-quarter camp without so much danger of compromising its safety, he dashed forward with his gun at a gallop, having for a support a promiscuous crowd of mounted and foot volunteers, teamsters, and citizens, whom Paymaster Weston, Mr. Winder, his clerk, and several other spirited gentlemen had gathered up among those who had fled to the town. They were without organization, or even any commander, and followed on after him as best they might, but yelling and whooping most infernally as they went. Lieutenant Donaldson soon got out his 24-pounder howitzer, and in a few minutes formed a junction with Lieutenant Shover, having for his support Captain Wheeler's company of the 2d Illinois Volunteers. During this time, Miñon's brigade had been put in motion, and was now taking a direction evidently to regain the valley from which it had ascended. Lieutenant Shover, being ahead, was the first to bring it with-

in range. He immediately opened upon it, striking the column in flank, and doing much execution. Lieutenant Donaldson, with his howitzer, then came alongside, when they two, thus united, absolutely drove General Miñon's whole command for at least three miles, causing him very considerable loss. At length, as these two determined officers arrived at some mills* near the mountains toward the east, Captain Wheeler's company was advanced as skirmishers, and occupied the buildings and a stone aqueduct which is there; while the two pieces remained in battery, and continued to play on the brigade. General Miñon several times formed some of the squadrons composing the rear of his column, with a view of charging these guns; but the ground was so broken, and the fire so well directed, that he as often relinquished his purpose. Finally, he hurried on, and at length abandoned the Pass entirely, and, descending through the deep ravines, made a rapid retreat to the plain below the town. He continued, as he did so, a long while under the fire of Lieutenant Donaldson's

* Arispe's Mills. They are turned by the water of the spring at Buena Vista. It is carried to them by means of a deep ditch or canal, and by aqueducts across the ravines.

howitzer, which was of heavier metal than the gun of his gallant comrade. This was one of the most daring exploits of the day. The communication between the army and the city being now completely opened again, Lieutenant Donaldson and Lieutenant Shover, with their pieces and supports, returned to their respective posts.

Meanwhile, upon the battle-field, the enemy still held the position where he had first established the battery of the Battalion of San Patricio; and, as the sun settled down still lower in the west, he was seen to move up one or two other regiments, the more certainly to maintain it. As this force could not be driven from the point it occupied, except at a sacrifice we were not in an immediate condition to make, Captain Bragg's battery, accompanied by the Mississippians,* was withdrawn from

* Colonel Davis was severely crippled, when he first came under fire in the morning, by a shot through the bones of the arch of one of his feet. He continued, however, to lead his men until the fury of the battle had subsided, when he was forced by the exceedingly painful and dangerous nature of his wound to seek surgical aid. The remains of his gallant regiment fell into good hands. Major Bradford succeeded him in command,—a gentleman always distinguished for his soldierly bearing, and conspicuous in battle for his coolness and utter contempt of danger.

its fire to the foot of the plateau. Captain Sherman still remained at the same advanced point, and still continued to fire upon such portions of the enemy as he could now and then reach with effect. As the sun sank lower and lower, the occasional rattle of musketry gave place to dropping shot, which, in turn, became less and less frequent, and at length entirely ceased. The fire of artillery on both sides had gradually subsided; the sun went down; the heavy and reverberated report of cannon had longer and more uncertain intervals; finally it was hushed; a profound and painful silence succeeded, and again the cold, deepening shadows of evening began silently to steal over the field. The two armies were still there, and were still sternly regarding each other, face to face. They were standing almost upon the same ground where they had respectively stood the night before. But in the Mexican lines we could hear no animated harangue, no responding *vivas*, nor approving cheers; and the night wind brought not to our ears again the witchery of that sweet music. One could hardly realize, as he now looked upon the dark masses of the two armies, that they had been so mingled in bloody

strife since last he saw them similarly situated; all was now so calm. Indeed, hardly a sound could be heard, save the occasional dismal flapping of the wings of the fierce *zapalotes*,* now hovering over the Pass, or the distant and almost human yell of the hungry wolves, answered by others away in the gloomy recesses of the surrounding mountains. They were already beginning to gather in to their horrible repast. And now, scarcely an evidence of the conflict could be seen, except when one took a closer survey of the ground about him. Then, scattered on every hand, how many and many were the dark forms which met his eye of what had been stalwart men and powerful steeds! some lying as if asleep, and some in strange, unnatural postures, with the moonlight resting steadily and cold on the bright points of uniforms and trappings, all still and firm as if they were belted to stone,—not tremulous and moving, as when on breathing, animated beings. These were fearful proofs of the desperate struggle which had gone by. These ghastly figures, with

* *Za-pa-lo-te*, a species of vulture with black body and wings. The head, tail, and tips of the wings are white. They fly by night as well as by day, and are very fierce.

the immovable luminous points resting upon them, were the solemn characters, the terrible hieroglyphics, traced upon the field, which, being deciphered amidst the obscurity of night, told in mute but eloquent language how dreadful a day had passed.

So ended the battle of the 23d of February.

Early in the evening every preparation had been made to resist any attack the Mexicans might offer during the night. Along our whole front there was stretched a close chain of sentinels; while, to observe the enemy's movements, should he attempt before morning again to turn our left by infantry along the mountains, a piquet of twenty-five regular dragoons, under Lieutenant Carleton and Lieutenant Givens, was sent far up the ravine in rear of the plateau. At the same time, the mounted companies of Captain Pike and Captain Preston were directed to proceed to an advanced point across the stream,⁽²¹⁾ to watch him from that quarter. The remains of the Mississippi regiment were sent in to the head-quarter encampment near Saltillo, while the seven fresh companies stationed in and near the city were ordered to replace them upon the battle-

field. Indeed, every arrangement was soon completed for renewing the struggle the coming day. The wounded were all gathered up, and carried to the cathedral in town.* Our troops, without moving from their positions, were supplied with bread, meat, and water; and our dragoon and artillery horses, still under the saddle or in harness, were refreshed with forage where they stood. All these things being done, the night passed slowly away, and, although cloudless, was extremely inclement. The troops were nearly exhausted from their protracted labors; and now, in addition to their fatigue and want of sleep, they were suffering intensely from the cold. It was a most gloomy and horrible night, and one which our soldiers, who stood shivering there amidst the dead, and with their arms in their hands ready

* A large train of wagons, filled with our wounded, was conducted to Saltillo, during the night of the 23d, by Enoch C. March, Esq., of Illinois, a most gallant old gentleman, and one who, though connected with the army only in a civil capacity, was always found, during the battle, where he could be of service; whether it was in the thick fight, in gathering up our poor fellows who were mangled and bleeding, in rallying those who had given way, or in the melancholy duty of conducting this long train to the cathedral in the city.

for instant combat, can never forget. No one despaired of ultimate success. The advantages the enemy had at first gained had been, one after another, wrested from him. So far the battle was ours; and every man upon the field still held firm his resolution that it should continue to be ours. But already seven hundred and forty-six* of our little army had been struck down, and all felt that the anticipated conflict of the approaching morrow would be as bloody as that of the day which had gone. No wonder, then, that this was a most anxious and melancholy night.

During the evening of the 23d, General Marshall, with a battery of four heavy guns under the gallant and accomplished Captain Prentiss of the U. S. 1st Artillery, and a detachment of Kentucky Mounted Volunteers, started from the Pass of the Rinconada, and, by a forced march, succeeded in running the gantlet of Blanco's and Aguierra's rancheros at Capellania on his right, and General Miñon's whole brigade on his left, and, before morning, arrived within striking distance of Buena Vista. Too much praise could not be bestowed upon this little command for its extraordina-

* See Appendix, E.

ry efforts to get to the field in time to share in the perils and glory of the conflict. In less than one night, it marched thirty-five miles over one of the worst of roads; and, at the crossing of every ravine, the officers and men were obliged to assist with ropes, not only in letting the cannon down the first bank, but in pulling them up the opposite one. In this way those determined fellows came on, with the enemy, more than ten to one, hovering about them on every hand. The timely approach of this force, together with the troops he had drawn from Saltillo, afforded General Taylor quite as many combatants, in front of Santa Anna, as he had when the battle commenced, and even one piece of artillery more.

At length the long hours of the night had worn slowly away. Just before day, the moon went down. Soon afterward, the gray, and then the purple streaks of morning began to lighten up the eastern sky, and the stars, one by one, to melt into the blue of heaven. Gradually the surrounding objects became more and more distinct as the day approached. Then it was that a sound went along our lines ever to be remembered. It was but a single cry at first; then a murmur, which rose and swelled upon

the ear like the voice of a tempest; then a prolonged and thrilling shout:

VICTORY! VICTORY! VICTORY! THE ENEMY HAS FLED! THE FIELD IS OURS!

Reader! you should have heard the wild hurrah that then rang throughout that Pass; the long, exultant, American "HURRAH!" Even the old mountains themselves turned traitors for the moment, and yelled to their hoarse echoes to repeat it. Again and again it sounded, and right over the inanimate remains of the gallant men who had poured out their blood and yielded up their lives to win this new glory for their country. And then, with mingled feelings of sorrow for the dead, joy for the victory, and gratitude to God, many a strong heart was moved; the big drops trickled down many a rough and powder-blackened face; and stern, brave men, whose eyes, for many a long day, had not known the refreshing moisture of a tear, wept now, even while they shouted in triumph.

And it was so;—the heavy masses of the Mexican army, which, when the night shut down, extended along our front from the stream to the mountains, were nowhere to be seen when the coming day again lit up the

Pass. Silently, and almost as unaccountably, as the phantoms of a vision, they had gone away. But, in the twenty-five hundred dead and wounded men,* whom they had left behind, and who would not vanish with the darkness, we had melancholy evidence, that their having been before us, and struggled with us for two long days, was something more real than the fitting vagaries of a dream.

By seven o'clock, our scouts brought the information that Santa Anna's whole army had fallen back on Agua Nueva; but our troops were not only too much exhausted, but too few, to pursue and attack him there. Soon afterwards, General Taylor, accompanied by General Wool and nearly all the staff, and having, as a guard, the companies of the 1st and 2d Dragoons, and Pike's squadron, moved up to the plateau and along over the battlefield; and thence, following the enemy's trail, to La Encantada. No one can imagine, much less describe, how dreadful a scene it was for the whole way. All of our men who had fallen, and whom the enemy had been able to

* See Appendix, F.

reach, were stripped of every article of clothing, and gashed over with wounds evidently inflicted after death. The Mexicans, on the contrary, lay just as they had died. The plateau was covered with the dead, and the gorges and ravines in front were filled with them. The ground, furrowed by cannon-shot and torn by the bursting shells, was literally reeking with blood. Men and horses, parts of equipments, shattered muskets, drums, trumpets, lances, swords, caps, — in fine, all the paraphernalia of armies, were scattered, crimson with gore, in every direction. The Mexican wounded had nearly all been taken to the cover of the ravines, or along the road beyond cannon range; and two or three surgeons had been left behind, and were now busily engaged in trying to save them. As our dragoons passed along over this part of the field, the cries for water, which were heard in every direction, were truly heart-rending. Our men dismounted, and gave the poor fellows their canteens, and placed beside them, upon the ground, the contents of their haversacks. It was a touching sight.

Arriving at La Encantada, General Taylor directed Major Bliss, Assistant Adjutant-Gen-

eral, escorted by twenty-five dragoons under Lieutenant Buford, to proceed with a flag to Agua Nueva, and negotiate with General Santa Anna an exchange of prisoners. We had taken nearly three hundred, and it was the General's desire to give them up for those, who, under Major Gaines and Major Borland, had been captured by General Miñon, at Encarnacion, some time before the battle. The Mexican army had taken only seven of our men on the 22d and 23d of February, and those not on the battle-field, — there, they took none, — but between Buena Vista and Saltillo. General Taylor also directed Major Bliss to request the Mexican commander to send for the wounded he had left behind, and to express to him the desire still cherished by the American government for the reëstablishment of peace.

When Major Bliss arrived near Agua Nueva, he was halted by the enemy's guards; but, having made known that the purpose of his visit was to obtain an interview with General Santa Anna, he and his interpreter* were both blindfolded, and were then conducted

* Mr. Thomas H. Addicks, of San Antonio de Bexar, Texas.