

## CHAPTER IV.

General Taylor leaves Fort Brown.—Mexicans prepare to Dispute his Passage.—Mexican estimate of their Valor.—Charge of Cowardice against General Taylor.—Bombardment of Fort Brown.—Further account of their Glorious Deeds.—Erect a Battery in the rear of the Fort.—Death of Major Brown.—The Fort Summoned to Surrender.—Refusal.—Bombardment Resumed.—Taylor starts on his return from Point Isabel.—Meets the Enemy.—Battle of Palo Alto.—The Details.

On the 1st of May, 1846, immediately after receiving the message of Major Munroe, General Taylor left his intrenchments opposite Matamoras, and took up his line of march for Point Isabel, determined to open the communication between the two positions, at all hazards, and to fight the enemy, however strong he might be. He left Major Jacob Brown, a brave and accomplished officer, in command of Fort Brown, with the Seventh regiment of infantry, and two companies of artillery, the latter commanded by Captain Lowd, and Lieutenant Bragg, respectively, making a force of about five hundred effective men. Arista mistook the movement of General Taylor towards Point Isabel for a precipitate retreat of the American forces, and forthwith dispatched a bulletin to Mexico, announcing the fact; or, if he did not himself believe our army intended to retreat, he meant to create such an impression amongst the Mexican soldiers, and in the mind of his own government. All the movements of General Taylor seem

to have been well known at Matamoras, however imperfectly his motives and intentions were understood, and preparations were accordingly made for cutting him off. The designs of the Mexican generals are revealed in the following semi-official communication, taken from the *El Monitor Republicano* of May 4th, three days after General Taylor left Fort Brown. It is in the usual exaggerated and grandiloquent style of Mexican documents, but it reveals the feelings which they entertained towards the Americans before the breaking out of hostilities, and the large expectations of success by which they were governed:—

"On the first of this month (May) at eleven o'clock in the morning, the general-in-chief left this place (Matamoras) to join the army, who several hours before had left with the intention of crossing the river at a short distance from the camp of the enemy. In consequence of the orders given, so that this dangerous operation might be performed with due security, and according to the rules of military art, when our troops arrived at the spot designated for the crossing of the river, the left bank was already occupied by Gen. D. Anastasio Torrejon, with all the force under his command. The enthusiasm of our soldiers to conquer the obstacles which separated them from the enemy was so great, that they showed themselves impatient of the delay occasioned by the bad condition of some of the flat boats, which had been very much injured in the transportation by land, and could not be used, as they would fill up with water as soon as they were launched. In spite of that obstacle, the work went on with such activity, and so great was the ardor of the most excellent general-in-chief, whose orders were obeyed with the greatest promptness and precision, that a few hours



were sufficient to transport, to the opposite bank of the Bravo, a strong division, with all its artillery and train.

"This rapid and well combined movement ought to have proved to the invaders not only that the Mexicans possess instruction and aptness for war, but that those qualities are now brought forth by the purest patriotism. The Northern Division, fearless of fatigue, and levelling all difficulties, ran to seek an enemy who, well sheltered under parapets, and defended with guns of a large calibre, could wait for the attack with indisputable advantage. With deep trenches, with a multitude of fortifications, the defence was easy against those who presented themselves with their naked breasts.

"But General Taylor dared not resist the valor and enthusiasm of the sons of Mexico. Well did he foresee the intrepidity with which our soldiers would rush against the usurpers of the national territory. Well did he know the many injuries which were to be avenged by those who had taken up arms, not to aggrandize themselves with the spoils of the property of others, but to maintain the independence of their country. Well did he know, we repeat it, that the Mexicans would be stopped neither by trenches, or fortresses, or large artillery. Thus it was that the chief of the American forces, frightened as soon as he perceived from the situation and proximity of his camp, that our army were preparing to cross the river, left with precipitation for Point Isabel, with almost all his troops, eight pieces of artillery, and a few wagons. Their march was observed from our position, and the most excellent General D. Francisco Mejia immediately sent an express extraordinary to communicate the news to the most excellent general-in-chief. Here let me pay to our brave men the tribute which they deserve. The

express verbally informed some of the troops which had not yet arrived at the ford, of the escape of the Americans; in one instant, all the soldiers spontaneously crossed the river, almost racing one with another. Such was the ardor with which they crossed the river to attack the enemy.

"The terror and haste with which the latter fled to the fort, to shut themselves up in it and avoid a conflict, frustrated the active measures of the most excellent Senor General Arista, which were to order the cavalry to advance in the plain and to cut off the flight of the fugitives. But it was not possible to do so, notwithstanding their forced march during the night. General Taylor left his camp at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, and, as fear has wings, he succeeded in shutting himself up in the fort. When our cavalry reached the point where they were to detain him, he had already passed, and was several leagues ahead. Great was the sorrow of our brave men not to have been able to meet the enemy face to face; their defeat was certain, and the main body of that invading army, who thought that they inspired the Mexicans with so much respect, would have disappeared in the first important battle. But there was some fighting to be done; and the Americans do not know how to use other arms but those of duplicity and treachery. Why did they not remain with firmness under their colors? Why did they abandon the ground which they pretend to usurp with such iniquity? Thus has an honorable general kept his word. Had not General Taylor said, in all his communications, that he was prepared to repel all hostilities? Why, then, does he fly in so cowardly a manner to shut himself up at the Point? The commander-in-chief of the American army has covered



himself with opprobrium and ignominy in sacrificing a part of his forces, whom he left in the fortifications, to save himself; for it is certain that he will not return to their assistance—not that he is ignorant of their peril, but he calculates that this would be greater if he had the temerity of attempting to resist the Mexican lances and bayonets in the open plain.”

The Mexican general conceived that, as General Taylor had “retreated” from Fort Brown, the small detachment left to defend it must fall a very easy prey to Mexican valor and prowess. On the 3rd of May, they opened upon it a fire from a seven-gun battery, which was returned by Major Brown with great spirit and effect, silencing their guns in a very few moments. They immediately commenced another attack, however, with shot and shell, killing Sergeant Weigard while at his post, but doing little other damage. The firing upon the fort was heard by General Taylor, at Point Isabel, and he immediately dispatched Captains May and Walker to ascertain the position of affairs there. They returned with intelligence that the fort was in a condition to resist any force that could be brought against it.

The result of their first day’s bombardment of Fort Brown filled the Mexicans with even greater delight, if possible, than the remarkable achievement of surprising and capturing Captain Thornton’s handful of men with their overwhelming force. Great rejoicings were had in Matamoras over the brilliant achievement, and an official dispatch, in the following terms, was forwarded to the Mexican government:

“But let us relate the glorious events of yesterday. As Aurora dawned, we began to fire from our ramparts on the fortifications of the enemy, and the thun-

der of Mexican cannon was saluted by the reveille from every point of our line, by the bell of the parochial church, and by the *vivas* of the inhabitants of Matamoras. In a moment the streets were filled, and all were rejoiced to see at last the hour arrived, when we were to give a terrible lesson to the American camp, whose odious presence could no longer be tolerated. The enemy answered, but they were soon convinced that their artillery, although of a superior calibre, could not compete with ours. After a fire of five hours, our ramparts remained immovable, on account of the solidity of their construction, and the intelligence with which the rules of art had been observed. The same did not happen to the American fortifications, whose bastions were so completely demolished, that towards eleven o’clock in the morning their artillery ceased to play, and their fire was hushed. We continued to fire with activity during the day, without the enemy’s daring to respond to us, because the parapets under which they would shelter themselves being destroyed, they had not courage to load their guns, which remained uncovered. This result shows us of what in reality consists the exalted skill of the American artillerists. They have eighteen pounders, and we have nothing larger than eight pounders; and yet the intelligence and practice of the Mexicans sufficed to conquer those who had superior arms. Unequalled glory and eternal honor to our brave artillerymen.

“The enemy, in their impotent rage, and before they concealed their shame behind the most distant parapets, had the barbarous pleasure of aiming their guns towards the city, to destroy its edifices, as it was not in their power to destroy the fortifications from which they received so much injury. This wicked re-



venge, which only springs from cowardly and miserable souls, did not meet with the success expected by those who so unworthily adorn themselves with the title of *savans* and philanthropists. Their stupidity was equal to their wickedness. Almost all the balls passed too high; and those which touched the houses, although they were eighteen pounders, did not cause any other mischief but that of piercing one or two walls. If those who conceived the infamous design of destroying Matamoras, had seen the contemptuous laughter with which the owners of those houses showed their indifference for the losses which they might sustain, they would have admired the patriotism and disinterestedness of the Mexicans, always ready to undergo the greatest sacrifices, when it is necessary to maintain their nationality and independence. The glorious 3rd of May is another brilliant testimony of this truth; through the thickest of the firing, one could remark the most ardent enthusiasm on all faces, and hardly had a ball fallen, when even the children would look for it, without fearing that another aimed in the same manner should fall in the same place. That, we saw ourselves in the public square, where a multitude of citizens were assembled.

"The triumph of our arms has been complete, and we have only to lament the loss of a sergeant and two artillerymen, who fell gloriously in fighting for their country. The families of those victims ought to be taken care of by the supreme government, to whose paternal gratitude they have been recommended by the most excellent senior general-in-chief. We must also be consoled by the thought that the blood of these brave men has been revenged by their bereaved companions. As many of our balls passed through the

enemy's embrasures, the loss to the Americans must have been very great; and although we do not know exactly the number of their dead, the most accurate information makes it amount to fifty-six. It is probable that such is the case. Since eleven o'clock in the morning, the abandonment of their guns, merely because two of them were dismounted, and the others were uncovered; the panic-terror with which, in all haste, they took refuge in their furthest entrenchments, taking away from the camp all that could suffer from the attack of our artillery; the destruction which must have been occasioned by the bombs, so well aimed, that some would burst at a yard's distance from the ground in their descent to the point where they were to fall; everything contributes to persuade that indeed the enemy have suffered a terrible loss. If it were not the case—if they preserved some remnant of valor, why did they not dare to repair their fortifications in the night. It is true that, from time to time, a few guns were fired on them in the night, but their aim could not be certain, and cowardice alone could force them not to put themselves in an attitude to return the fire which was poured on them again at daylight. No American put out his head; silence reigned in their camp; and for this reason we have suspended our fire to-day—that there is no enemy to meet our batteries.

"To conclude, we will give a brilliant paragraph relating to the contest, by the most excellent senior general-in-chief, as to the part which he took in the events of yesterday. He says thus: 'Mexico must glorify herself, and especially the valiant men of the Division of the North, that a force inferior in its elements, and perhaps in number also, and which required nearly two months to swell itself with the auxiliaries



coming from the capital, should meet in an immense plain, defying the army of the United States, and the whole power of that republic, without their opponents who could receive succor in the space of fifty hours, daring to leave the fort to give us battle.'

"From the news which we publish to-day, it will be seen that the Northern Division, so deservedly intrusted with the first operations against the North American army, has most nobly filled its highly important mission. Not that we mean to be understood as considering its task is yet fully completed, but we anticipate, before the end of the present week, to witness the total discomfiture of the enemy, who has had the temerity to answer the fire of our batteries; of those batteries that gave them yesterday such abundant proof of that valor, so characteristic of the Mexicans: a valor rendered famous in a hundred bloody contests! It were endless to recount all the acts of patriotism performed by the troops of the garrison, and the valiant citizens who shared in the defence of the city—they courted danger with that intrepidity always inspired by a just cause.

"So rapid is the fire of our guns, that *the batteries of the enemy have been silenced*. But what is most worthy of notice, as showing the great enthusiasm of this place, is the fact that many of the inhabitants, of both sexes, in the hottest of the cannonade, remained firm in front of the enemy, filled with enthusiasm; indeed, fear is always unknown to those whose mission is to avenge an outrage upon the sacred rights of their beloved country.

"From our account of the war, the world will judge of the great superiority of our troops, in courage as well as skill, over the Americans. It is indeed wonder-

ful to witness the dismay of the enemy: rare is the occurrence when an American ventures outside of the breastwork. There can be no doubt of this, that the Mexicans will be considered by foreign nations as the very emblems of patriotism. How evident that they inherit the blood of the noble sons of Pelayo! Happy they who have met with so glorious a death in defending the territory bequeathed to them by their fathers!

"The nation with which we are at war is most savage in its proceedings; no regard being paid to the flags of friendly nations: even those usages and customs respected by civilized nations, to divest war of some of its horrors, have been shamefully disregarded. The enemy have fired red shot against this innocent city, and we publish it to the world in proof that, with all their boasted wisdom and liberty, they are unworthy of being counted among enlightened nations.

"His excellency, the general-in-chief of the Northern Division, and his intrepid soldiers, are ready to fight the enemy in any numbers, and we are certain that our arms will be successful; but the nation against whom we have to contend is excessively proud; and it is also possessed of resources which may perhaps surpass those within our reach. Let us then make an immense effort to repel their aggressions. Let us contribute everything most dear to us, our persons, our means, to save our country from its present danger. Let us oppose to the unbridled ambition of the Anglo-American, that patriotic enthusiasm, so peculiar to us. Indeed, we need only follow the glorious example of Matamoras, that noble city, which will be known in future by the name of Heroic. Its inhabitants have emulated the examples of Menamia, and Sagantum; they have determined to die at the foot of the eagle of



Anahuac, defend their fort whilst they retain the breath of life—this plan is settled. The supreme government is making strenuous exertions in order to protect the territory placed under its care by the nation, and nothing is now wanting but for the people to rush in a mass to the frontier, and the independence of Mexico is safe."

During the night of the 4th of May, a large body of Mexican troops crossed the river and erected a strong battery in the rear of Fort Brown, and on the morning of the 5th a heavy fire was opened from this battery, and the fort was assailed with great vigor. At the same time a hot fire was opened from the batteries at Matamoras, and a galling discharge of shot and shell was kept up for about an hour. The fire of the enemy from both these positions was returned with spirit and effect, by Major Brown, until they were silenced for the day. Early on the morning of the 6th, the fire from the enemy's batteries was renewed with increased vigor, their shot and shell falling in every direction tearing tents to pieces and wounding many of the horses. But for the great size of the field-works and the very few men to defend it, the loss of life must have been very severe. As it was, the only one who fell during the bombardment, which continued throughout the day, was Major Brown, the noble, high-minded and accomplished commander of the fort. After the firing had continued for several hours, this gallant officer took his usual round to satisfy himself that every man was at his post and in the performance of his duties. While making his observations he was struck by a shell, which took off one of his legs, and dreadfully mangled him. He was immediately taken to the hospital and his leg amputated above the knee.

*During this time Major Brown was wounded and on the 9th of May died.*

But he could not be saved, and after lingering until the 9th of May, he died, universally lamented, not only by the army, who best knew his worth, but by the whole country. Few men, indeed, had obtained a stronger hold upon the affection of the soldiers, or was more sincerely esteemed by his brother officers, of whatever rank, than Major Brown.

Upon leaving Fort Brown for Point Isabel, General Taylor gave orders to Major Brown to maintain his post, whatever contingency might arise, and under no circumstances to hazard his position by making a sally against the enemy. In the event of the fort being surrounded and an assault made upon him, he was ordered to warn him of the fact, by firing, at stated intervals, his eighteen pounders. On the evening of that day accordingly, the signal guns were fired, and their warning voice informed him, though many miles distant that the contemplated danger was threatening the gallant defenders of Fort Brown. These signal guns seemed to stimulate the enemy to still more active exertions to capture the fort, before they could call General Taylor back to its aid. So satisfied were they that they were making dreadful havoc amongst the Americans, and that Captain Hawkins, who had succeeded Major Brown in command, could not hold out against their destructive fire, that Arista summoned him to surrender, out of pure humanity. Captain Hawkins, however, was wholly insensible to this magnanimous conduct, and informed him that, as his interpreter was not skilled in Spanish, he might not have understood his communication, but if he did, he should respectfully decline to surrender the fort. This indifference to the humane proposition, brought upon the fort a more heavy fire from the Mexican batteries than they had



yet suffered. Shells and shot were literally showered into the fort. This storm of iron Captain Hawkins was unable to return for want of powder, which rendered the condition of his troops extremely irksome and mortifying.

With the morning light of the 7th the enemy's batteries recommenced, but after pouring into the fort a large number of shot and shell, they suddenly ceased. About half-past seven o'clock a large number of Mexicans were discovered in and around the *Fanques del Raminero*, and the houses formerly occupied by the guards of the Second Brigade. Several rounds of canister and grape were fired into them, which caused them to make a precipitate retreat, after throwing a few shell in return. The Mexicans had theretofore used shell made of bronze; they now used iron, which they fired at intervals until noon. It was at this time discovered that the mortar battery in the rear of the fort, had been removed to the city of Matamoras. About noon some shells were thrown, which killed four of Lieutenant Bragg's horses, and broke the wheel of one of his caissons. Soon after, all their batteries opened, and kept up a steady firing of round shot and shell, which continued for nearly two hours. By one of these discharges the sentinel lost his arm, but the bomb proofs were so far advanced that the men were comparatively protected. Random shots were now fired from under the bank of the river, and the rear of the fort; it was evidently the determination of the besiegers to give the fort no rest, and induce them to expend all their ammunition, having been informed by deserters that there was little in the fort. Orders had been given to return no fire more than eighty yards distant, and as the Mexicans never approached to within twice that

distance, they elicited no reply. At half-past two a regular bombardment commenced from all the batteries, howitzers, and mortars, which continued without intermission until sunset.

At dark, the indefatigable Captain Mansfield, with a small party, left the fort, and levelled the traverse thrown up by our troops when they first arrived on the banks of the river, and also cut down a large quantity of chapparel that served at times to cover the "sharp shooters" of the enemy. Everything after this remained quiet until midnight. Each man was at his post, and anxiously awaiting the assault, when the stillness was broken by volleys of musketry, and bugles "sounding the charge." The firing then ceased, but in a short time recommenced, and continued until daylight.

At noon the bombardment was resumed, and kept up about two hours. Many of the soldiers began to show symptoms of being worn down with hard labor and watching; nature was becoming exhausted, they grew indifferent about the exploding shells, and listlessly let them burst in dangerous proximity to their persons. The heavy bombardment had hardly ceased, when a *severe cannonading was heard towards Point Isabel*; so sudden did it commence, and so rapidly was it carried on, that it seemed like one continued volley of field-pieces. The soldiers in the fort sprang as one man to their feet, and listened. The sounds of artillery continued to roll on the plain; a simultaneous shout rose from the men in the fort, that must have sounded in Matamoras more terribly than our severest cannonade, for it must have told the people there that those in the fort believed that General Taylor was on the advance from Point Isabel. The enemy felt that shout,