

## CHAPTER III.

THE Mexican Army under General Ampudia prepares to defend Monterey—General Taylor's order regulating the movement to Camargo—Departure from Camp Belknap—The valley of the Rio Grande, its people and productions—A Sabbath in Matamoros—Reynosa—A Fandango—The Stag-dance—Death of a Volunteer—A pleasant interchange of visits with a Mexican family—Arrive at Camargo—A glimpse at Head-Quarters and General Taylor.

AFTER the two sanguinary engagements on the northern bank of the Rio Grande, General Arista solicited an armistice, which was refused by General Taylor, who stated in reply, that a month previous he had proposed one to the Mexican General, which had then been declined; that circumstances were now changed; that he was receiving large reinforcements, and could not suspend operations which he had not initiated or provoked. Perceiving that the Americans were determined to crown their victories with the conquest of Matamoros, the broken and dispirited battalions of the Mexican army evacuated the town at twilight on the 17th of May, and retreated to Linares, which place they reached on the 28th, suffering every misfortune in their mournful retreat. We are informed that "many of the soldiers perpetrated suicide; and that General Garcia, a chivalrous man and an illustrious citizen, died during the march of profound grief." \*

\* These facts are stated upon the authority of a Mexican history of the war, entitled, "The Other Side, or Notes for the History of the War between the United States and Mexico;" written by a *junta* of Mexican officers, and translated by

In the month of July the remnant of that unlucky army was united with fresh troops at Monterey,—a city situated at the base of the Sierra Madre, near the entrance of the principal pass leading up to the table lands of the interior. The Mexican government, learning the disastrous result of the conflicts at Palo Alto and Resaca, and desiring, as usual, to throw the blame upon the unsuccessful general, deprived Arista of the command of the army of the North. He was succeeded by General Mejia. Soon afterwards, however, the Central Government was itself overthrown, and Mejia was in turn superseded by Ampudia, who undertook, as "Governor General-in-chief," the defense of Monterey.

Meantime the American regulars had occupied Matamoros, while the tents of the rapidly arriving volunteers dotted the banks of the river, at various points, between that town and the Gulf. In the latter part of July, General Taylor began to push forward the regular troops to Camargo, a town situated near the head of steamboat navigation on the San Juan, a tributary of the Rio Grande. To that point, by water, it was no difficult matter to transport men and supplies. But beyond it, in consequence of the limited resources of the country, but a small force could be taken with our inadequate means of land carriage. Yet such was the anxiety of the government to hasten operations, that General Taylor determined to march from Camargo upon Monterey with but six thousand men,—half regulars and half volunteers,—unpro-

Colonel Ramsey, of the 11th United States Infantry. In that book, to which the reader's attention will occasionally be invited in the following pages, the frightful disorders and hardships of the retreats from Matamoros and Buena Vista are vividly portrayed.

vided with a siege train, and with scarcely transportation enough at the command of his Quarter-Master for a single division. But in Taylor's hands, enterprises of great pith and moment were not to be balked by ordinary obstacles. When the number of troops intended for the reduction of Monterey was made known, a strong desire was manifested by the volunteers to learn which of the regiments would be selected for that honorable service, as all were averse to an indolent garrison life on the frontier. That interesting question was not decided until after our arrival at Camargo; nor were the volunteer troops organized into divisions and brigades until we reached that place. The following communication, however, which was received at Camp Belknap early in August, indicated with tolerable clearness to some anxious spirits that they were not to be included in the glorious six thousand. Being an important order, it is quoted in *extenso*, as it will explain not only the disposition first made of the volunteers, but may also serve to inform the reader of the numbers, commanders, and States of the various regiments in the field.

Orders } *Head-Quarters, Army of Occupation,*  
No. 93. } *Matamoros, July 30, 1846.*

1. The commanding General being about to leave for Camargo, the following arrangements for regulating the movements of the troops, and the service generally, in the rear, are announced for the government of all concerned.

2. Four companies of artillery, under the command of Brevet Major Brown, now under orders for Camargo, will be

the first to ascend the river. They will be followed, as rapidly as transportation can be provided, by the following corps, in the order named:

Louisville Legion, (1st Kentucky regiment,) Col. Ormsby.

Baltimore and Washington battalion, Lieut. Col. Watson.

Ohio brigade, Brigadier General Hamer.

Second Kentucky regiment, Colonel McKee.

Mississippi regiment, Colonel Davis.

First Tennessee regiment, Colonel Campbell.

Alabama regiment, Colonel Coffee.

Georgia regiment, Colonel Jackson.

Second Tennessee regiment, Colonel Haskell.

3. The Indiana brigade, and the regiment from Missouri and Illinois, will remain below until further orders. The regiments of Texas volunteers will receive particular orders for their movement.

4. Brigadier General Hamer is assigned to the command of the Ohio brigade. He will designate one of the regiments to proceed immediately by water to Matamoros, and take such position as may be indicated by Colonel Clarke, commanding in the town, to whom the Colonel of the regiment will report for orders.

5. The first four corps destined for Camargo, viz:—the Louisville legion, Baltimore battalion, and two regiments Ohio volunteers, will send their heavy baggage forward by water, with four companies of each regiment and two of the Baltimore battalion. The remaining companies of each corps, with their light baggage, will take up their line of march for Camargo as soon as provided with wagons by the Quarter-Master's Department,—say by the 10th of August.

6. The other corps destined for Camargo, viz:—the Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia regiments, and the Second Kentucky regiment, will move forward by water as rapidly as practicable, in the order prescribed in the second paragraph.

7. Brigadier General Twiggs will remain at Matamoros in command of all the troops in the vicinity until the last volunteer regiment shall pass up by land, when he will move forward with the dragoons and horse artillery to Camargo. On his departure, Colonel Clarke will assume command of all the troops in and near Matamoros, on both banks of the river. Colonel Clarke will receive special instructions for his government in this command.

8. The artillery and train of the third brigade, with the rear companies, will march by the 5th of August, under Lieutenant Colonel Garland.

By order of Major General TAYLOR:

W. W. S. BLISS,

Assistant Adjutant General.

In accordance with the foregoing order, General Hamer designated the Third Ohio regiment, Colonel Curtis's, for the garrison of Matamoros. The First and Second Ohio regiments, Mitchell's and Morgan's, proceeded to Camargo in the manner mentioned in the fifth paragraph. It was my fortune, being yet on the sick list, to go by water with the four companies detached from our regiment. A frail and filthy little steamboat was provided for our transportation; and on the 8th of August, after exchanging adieux with our

companions who were compelled to take the weary land route, we pushed off from Camp Belknap, and commenced the ascent of the Rio Grande.

Owing to high water, the ignorance of pilots, who, being unaccustomed to the river, were unable to steer at night, and the fact that our boat was chartered by the day, we were more than a week in getting to Camargo. It had not been long since the first steamboat ascended the river, and, to the natives, it was yet an object of intense curiosity. At all the *rancherias* on the banks, a throng of people—women, children, and even old men tottering with infirmity—were assembled to stare at our boat as it struggled slowly up against the rushing and roaring stream. At that period, but few wood-yards had been established, and we were sometimes compelled to take the troops ashore to gather the pickets inclosing the fields, to be used as fuel. Occasionally, too, we were detained at places where the river, in its whole length brimfull, had overrun its banks and covered the country for miles, forming wide lagoons in which our pilots had to sound for the channel. In these bayous were to be seen large flocks of water-fowl; and not unfrequently the bloated carcasses of animals, navigated by piratical-looking vultures, floated slowly through the circling eddies.

Mexico—bare, dry, and mountainous as it is, for the most part—was naturally enough called “New Spain,” by the conquerors, from the resemblance of its principal features and productions to those of the Peninsula. It is particularly deficient in good harbors and navigable streams. Of the latter, the Rio Grande is the most important; but the people

have not availed themselves of the facilities which even that affords. The river, as it meanders through the *tierra caliente*, offers but few beauties to the eye of the traveler. Nothing is hazarded in asserting that it is the most crooked stream on the continent, since it far surpasses the Mississippi in the number and magnitude of its curves. For hundreds of miles, its yellow waves, pent in by muddy banks, roll through a lonely champaign country, undiversified by majestic cliffs or shadowy woods. Like a great serpent which has lost its brilliant and varying hue, it fails to charm. If it were but straight, its homeliness would be complete. So far as I could hear or observe, it has not a single tributary between its mouth and the Rio San Juan; a fact suggestive of arid wastes, which the mind, touched by remembrance, did not fail to contrast with the many bubbling brooks and enchanting groves that beautify and refresh the Atlantic slope of the United States. As there are no forests on its banks, there are of course no snags or sawyers to excite the fears of the voyager; and its navigation is far more tedious than hazardous. The country, however, is well clothed with *chaparral*; and groves of the more lofty *mesquite* are abundant in the valle,. The former, as the reader is perhaps aware, is a low evergreen thorn; the latter, a tree resembling the peach somewhat in appearance, and of not much larger growth.

The valley of the Rio Grande abounds in fine, nutritious grass, which, after the wet season, dries upon the stalk, and becomes excellent hay. It is but sparsely populated, yet these plains, interspersed with clumps of mesquite, gave to many places the appearance of high cultivation, when viewed

from a distance. The broad and verdant lawns skirting the river, afford good pasture throughout the year to the large herds of cattle roaming over them. The cattle far exceed in size any of the common herds of the United States; owing, perhaps, to the fact that they never experience any cold or starving winters, but grow and fatten from their calthood. The quality of their flesh, however, is much inferior to that of our northern stock. This wild beef, together with salt pork, beans, and hard biscuit, constituted our rations. But they were dainties to a campaign appetite,—hunger furnishing a better sauce than epicure ever invented. At some spots along the river, we noticed a few beautiful flowers and luxuriant plants, whose broad and glossy leaves told of an exuberant soil, stimulated by the great heat and moisture of the season. Mexico, from its remarkable terraced formation, enjoying every variety of climate, is said to possess the richest and most diversified Flora to be found in any country on the globe. The soil is not generally poor,—the nakedness of the interior plains being caused by the scorching sun and absence of water, rather than by any natural barrenness. The banks of the Rio Grande are in places chequered with patches of maize, sugar-cane, and cotton, whose large stalks attest the fertility of the soil; and of these products, two crops may be raised annually in all situations where irrigation can be effected. An industrious, well-governed people could make the valley “stand so thick with corn that it would laugh and sing.” But the Mexicans, naturally indolent, are oppressed by a government that fosters neither agriculture nor any of the productive arts which are the surest source of public and

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individual prosperity. Nay, so far from encouraging enterprise, it imposes severe restrictions upon it, and, together with a numerous and avaricious priesthood, is continually and corruptly sapping what little of energy yet remains among the people. Is it strange, then, considering this vampirism of church and state, that the principal productions of the country should be *pronunciamientos*, *priests*, and *prickly-pears*?

The cultivation of the soil, in northern Mexico, is slovenly in the extreme. Agriculture there is yet the veriest drudgery; as it always must be when not pursued with system and intelligence. The labors of the farmer, in our country, now rendered comparatively light and pleasant by the improvements which science and the inventive genius of our people have suggested, are there performed, of course, at a great disadvantage, with the most antiquated implements of husbandry. At a rancho on the Rio Grande, near which we landed for wood, we had an opportunity of examining for the first time a Mexican plow. It may be best and briefly described as a forked stick pointed, with a huge ox horn as a substitute for a share. Not a particle of metal was employed in its construction, and probably it was only serviceable for scratching the alluvial borders of the river. It was just such an implement as has been used for centuries on the banks of the Nile; and was fashioned much like that curious specimen of eastern art—the Syrian plow—which was exhibited, in the midst of many beautiful modern American tools, like a senseless mummy, among the active and useful agents of agriculture, at the Ohio State Fair, held at Columbus in 1851.

Domestic animals are numerous in Mexico, but they are

very inferior to ours. The mustangs possess scarcely more than half the size and strength of our northern horses, and are entirely unsuited for farm work or military service. Many of them exhibit marks of fine blood, but from the effect of climate or food, neglect or close breeding, they have sadly degenerated from their famous Andalusian ancestry. The Mexicans are a nation of horsemen, or mulemen,—even the beggars are mounted. I never saw one traveling *a pied*. None are so poor as not to have a riding animal; they throw the lariat too well for that. With them, the mule and ass are literally “beasts of burden,” and often made to carry immense loads. The ox is generally used for draught at the plow, and may sometimes be seen clumsily attached by the horns to a heavy, unwieldy sort of tumbrel, with low, thick wheels of solid wood, and which, though a sufficiently picturesque object, would be considered a decidedly slow coach by our go-ahead people. The fact that the Mexicans have existed so long on the boarder of “the universal Yankee nation,” without profiting by any of the useful inventions of our country and age, is evidence of a sloth and degeneracy, which, if not soon arrested, must, at no very remote period, terminate in the ruin of their republic and race.

In contemplating the entire *status* of the people,—their political, religious, social, and intellectual condition—no attentive observer, even among themselves, has failed to foresee and lament the fate of the country. It must gradually sink, from its complication of fatal diseases, into the tomb of the Acolhuans and the Aztecs. And not only Mexico, but the whole of Spanish America, will probably pass from the do-

minion of the original conquerors into the possession of the enterprising blue-eyed Saxon—the chosen people of the age; who, by the way, are even now “prospecting” in the rich basins of the Amazon and La Plata. So few are the wants of man in those soft and genial climes, that they are easily satisfied by fitful and desultory exertion. And as long as the people do not feel the pressure of that necessity which makes intelligent and industrious citizens, they will continue to be vagrant herdsmen and shepherds. The man, too, who merely wanders over a country with his flocks, rarely forms the same attachment for it, and is seldom as able to defend it, as he who mingles the sweat of his brow with its soil as it is upturned by his hands.

The inhabitants of the valley of the Rio Grande are chiefly occupied in raising stock; the wool, hides, and tallow of which constitute the exports of the port of Matamoros. But a pastoral life, generally so propitious to purity of morals and strength of constitution, does not appear to have produced its usually happy effect upon that people. Poets, from the earliest days of their art, have been most gracious and complimentary to all engaged in that primitive and innocent occupation. Those men were shepherds too, who, “as they watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground,” were made the honored recipients of the most joyful tidings ever communicated by shining angels to sinning man. But neither poets nor seraphs, I ween, would tune their harps to the praises of these vile rancheros; the majority of whom are so vicious and degraded that one can hardly believe that the light of Christianity has ever dawned upon them. Many of the coun-

try people are in quite as “parlous a state” as shepherd Corin, whom that rare fellow, Touchstone, makes the subject of some exquisite fooling. They are just such “*natural* philosophers,” and know simply “that the property of rain is to wet, and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep; and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun.” Never elsewhere have I seen such an idle, ignorant, and unenterprising a community. Their habitations are constructed of the most flimsy materials, and utterly devoid of taste or comfort. Along the river we saw some formed of hides, fastened to a light frame work, and many of reeds placed upright in the ground, and interwoven and thatched with leaves or grass. These domiciles are decorated with rude crucifixes, and perhaps a few wretched prints of the Virgin, or “Our Lady of Gaudaulpe,” the greatest of the native Mexican saints. How striking was the contrast everywhere with the United States, in which personal comforts of every kind are inconceivably multiplied and brought within the reach of all!

The population of Mexico is said to be about eight millions; more than half of whom are pure blooded Indians, and the remainder of every cross and color. Three-fourths or more of the inhabitants of the Northern States are of unmixed Indian blood. With scarcely an exception, the country people are brown, broad, and big-headed bipeds; and it is only in the towns that the traveler sees the fair complexion, regular features, and graceful forms of Castilé. In regarding the aspect, bearing, and manners of modern Mexicans, it is difficult to believe that many of them can be the descendants of that chivalrous Spanish race which once gave laws to both hemis-

pheres; or, of that fierce Aztec tribe, which, after centuries of warfare, pushed the boundaries of their empire from a little village of reeds in the marshes of Lake Tezcuco, to the shores of the Atlantic and Pacific. The sad and sinking steps by which our sister republic—the oldest, and once the strongest and wealthiest, power on this continent—has arrived at her present low estate, and her people made the bondman of even the bold barbarians on her borders, are known to every reader.

" 'Twere long to tell and sad to trace  
Each steps from splendor to disgrace."

Now, instead of subjugating neighboring tribes, extending the limits of their territory, and enriching themselves with crowds of prisoners, the Mexicans are unable to defend their own provinces from Indian invasion; and it is stated that there are not less than four thousand of their women and children at this time enslaved by the wild warriors who wander over the vast plains and hills washed by the waters of the Rio Grande. How applicable to Mexico the words of the prophet: "Wo to thee that spoilest, and thou wast not spoiled; and dealest treacherously, and they dealt not treacherously with thee! When thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled; and when thou shalt make an end to deal treacherously, they shall deal treacherously with thee!" We commend those unhappy captives to the *generous* and *disinterested* sympathies of our ardent Flibustiers, and trust that their next foray in the cause of freedom and the rights of mankind will be to the Camanché country, instead of Cuba.

The towns on the Rio Grande are few and insignificant.

Matamoros, the largest of them, is about fourteen leagues by land from the coast. We did not reach it, however, until the afternoon of the day after our departure from Camp Belknap. On passing "Fort Brown," which is rather below the city, our men greeted the star-spangled banner, that then floated in triumph o'er its battered walls, with many hearty cheers. The fort, as well as the village, Brownsville, that has since sprung up around it, takes its name from the gallant Major who was killed while defending it. Though but a common and hastily constructed field-work, it had sustained successfully for one hundred and sixty hours a severe cannonade of shot and shells. We landed near the Mexican Fort Parades, on the southern bank.

Matamoros is situated on a beautiful plain, half a mile from the river, and from the landing it presented a very picturesque appearance. But a short walk toward it, proved that distance had lent its wonted illusions to the view. The beautiful suburban gardens and cottages that we had so much admired in our first glimpse of the town, were found upon a closer inspection to be cow-pens and contemptible huts. Around the Plaza—for every Mexican village has its public square—and on some of the principal streets, there are a few respectable dwellings of two stories, built of *adobes*, or large unburnt bricks. The doors and windows are small, and most of the latter are protected by stout iron bars, which cause the houses to resemble so many prisons. Nor were the sulky and swarthy faces peering through some of them at the passers by, in the least calculated to remove the impression. The streets are narrow, unpaved, and, at that season, were very muddy. The