

CHAPTER XI.

CONDITION of General Taylor's army after the battle of Buena Vista.—Tranquility restored.—Courts established.—Glance at General Scott's campaign.—The homeward march.

WITH the battle of Buena Vista, and the guerilla affairs already described, the campaign in Northern Mexico may be said to have closed. The attention and power of the enemy were concentrated on General Scott's army, and the defense of their now seriously threatened capital. Active operations were necessarily suspended by General Taylor, in consequence of the nearly approaching expiration of the term of service for which the old volunteers had been enrolled. The new levies, destined for the northern line were late to arrive; and neither their numbers nor discipline would justify the immediate execution of any hazardous forward movements. A march to San Luis de Potosi, it was thought, too, would be attended with peculiar difficulties, chiefly from the absence of water. In that barren region which intervened, Santa Anna had lost the greater part of his army, made up of men accustomed to all the fatigues and privations of the country. Many of our new troops were already suffering much from disease, and the unusual hardships they had been compelled to endure. The Virginia regiment appeared sadly worn and reduced in health on reaching Monterey. The new Mississippi (2d) regiment, was almost immediately wasted to two-

thirds its original strength by the small-pox. The North Carolina and Massachusetts troops were in rather better plight; but still the force was entirely inadequate to the enterprise of penetrating to the heart of the republic, even if it had been in condition to encounter the melting suns and incredible toils of the desert march. No great number of the old volunteers could be induced to re-enter the service until they had once more seen those homes to which amid all the various changes and chances of the war, their hearts had been fondly turned.

In this condition of affairs, events began to stagnate north of the Sierra Madre; and the eyes of both nations, so long fixed upon the fascinating drama which concluded amid shouts and tears at Buena Vista, were turned to the more gorgeously appointed spectacle upon which the curtain was rising at Vera Cruz. Even the robbers, awed by the rapid and searching patrols of the few companies of Texan Rangers, again in the field, were perfectly quiescent; and our trains were permitted to pass unmolested with even smaller escorts than at any previous time. Such protection was given to the conquered States as they had never before enjoyed, and the people returning everywhere to their homes, embarked in their various pursuits with a prospect of greater rewards than they had derived under their own rulers. There is no lack of the material for general comfort and prosperity in Mexico. The mere assurance that property will be secure from the rapacity of officials and the numerous professed banditti, would of itself give a great impulse to the country. The protection afforded by our military occupation

of the Republic, had it continued a little longer, would have planted commerce and the useful arts upon her soil in a manner calculated to insure their growth.

Up to the period of the withdrawal of the Mexican troops from the Northern States, the *jus gladii* had been the only authority acknowledged and respected within their borders. In the clash of contending arms, the laws of the country (at all times speaking in a feeble tone and often to the perversion of justice) had remained perfectly silent. General Taylor's *dictum* settled many disputes, and the enemy never had cause to complain of the prompt decrees and stirrup verdicts he often enunciated. From Palo Alto to Buena Vista he had prohibited all wanton injuries to the Mexicans in person or property, and never failed to punish the perpetrators of them when detected. And indeed, as we have before had occasion to remark, his scrupulous sense of justice and generous leaning to the side of the vanquished, sometimes caused the scale of his own soldiers "to kick the beam," when the complaints of the natives were light and false. With the ill-fated King Henry VI., General Taylor might truly have said—

"I have not stopp'd mine ears to their demands,
Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;
My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds,
My mildness hath allay'd their swelling griefs,
My mercy dry'd their water-flowing tears:
I have not been desirous of their wealth,
Nor much oppress'd them with great subsidies,
Nor forward of revenge, though they much err'd."

Though fully authorized to levy contributions for the support of his army, the only pecuniary burden he ever imposed upon the Mexican people, was a tax to indemnify his govern-

ment for the loss of the train near Ramas on the 24th of February; and even the collection of that was suspended, and its final decision made to depend on the future good conduct of the rancheros.

With the restoration of tranquility in the conquered States came the necessity for the establishment of tribunals for its preservation and the administration of justice. Unfortunately for the Mexicans, the American government did not think proper to bless the States of Tamaulipas, New Leon and Coahuila with such permanent governments as it had bestowed upon New Mexico and California. That work, in the rapid march of events on this continent, it will be called upon to perform at no distant day, to the great benefit of Liberty and Christianity. Our armies, however, assumed temporarily supreme civil as well as military jurisdiction; and boards of officers—"courts of military commission"—were organized for the adjudication of all cases, not falling within the cognizance of courts-martial. By these all disputes between Americans and Mexicans were adjusted. Their jurisdiction extended to the whole catalogue of crime, and the punishments were awarded in accordance with the laws of the particular State which the officers composing the court happened to represent. The citadel at Monterey was converted into a quasi-penitentiary, and scarcely a day passed after the establishment of the "commission" at Monterey, in which some *chevalier d'industrie* was not sentenced to hard beans and labor at the fort. That court was organized soon after our return from Camargo, and I can safely affirm that, during the two months in which I was familiar with its

proceedings, a patient hearing was given to every party interested; and justice administered without fear or favor. As might be supposed, there were many cases on its docket between Mexicans and Texans. The latter too, were generally if not always the defendants; and their answers to the complaints (the pleadings were *oral*) almost invariably began, continued and ended with the Alamo, or Goliad or Mier; and wrongs or injuries long since suffered thus attempted to be set up in justification of present conduct.

The great *beauty* of these military tribunals was in the *promptness* with which they dispatched business. In this respect they were model courts. There were no ridiculous or barbarous forms of pleading to dodge an issue or raise a false one; no learned counsel with heads full of *sesquipedalia verba* and bags full of precedents to obstruct or turn away the stream of justice. Hence there was at least, none of that tedious, heart-breaking and mind-destroying litigation against which Dickens has recently turned his powerful pen. Certes, but our court at Monterey would have decided even the tough case of "Jarndyce and Jarndyce" at a single sitting.

About the middle of April an account of the fall of Vera Cruz reached Monterey; and about a month later news was received of the wonderful battle of Cerro Gorda. The first reports of both came from Mexican tongues and the facts were greatly misrepresented. They acknowledged however to a shameful defeat at Cerro Gorda, and stated that Generals Scott and Santa Anna were both killed. The arrival of our own couriers from the coast with authentic reports, was fol-

lowed by official announcements of the victories, by salutes and rejoicings in which every American heartily united. The exploits of General Scott's army, rivaling upon the same theater those of Cortes, even when viewed through the clear medium of the present, before Time has thrown its magnifying mist around them, seem more like the highly-colored pictures of romance than the sober truths of history. The nineteenth century, so fruitful of great and remarkable events, furnishes few more striking to the imagination than the second conquest of Mexico. What American can contemplate that campaign without feeling his heart swell and glow within him! Commenced with a force of ten thousand men, who, after pouring out their blood as freely as the clouds drop rain, upon the thirsty sands of the coast, the rough slopes of the mountains, the fertile valley of the capital; after warring against every unpropitious circumstance, finally succeeded in capturing a city of two hundred thousand people, splendidly fortified, and prostrating the last standard the enemy dared spread to the breeze, on the very spot where, more than five centuries ago, its device of "the eagle, serpent and cactus" had originated.*

*The city of Mexico was founded in the year 1325, by one of those migratory tribes of aborigines which entered the valley from the remote regions of the North. Prescott gives the following account of the humble beginnings of this splendid capital.—

"After a series of wanderings and adventures, which do not shrink from a comparison with the most extravagant legends of the heroic ages of antiquity, the Aztecs at length halted on the south-western borders of the principal lake, in the year 1325. They there beheld, perched on the stem of a prickly-pear, which shot out from the crevice of a rock that was washed by the waves, a royal eagle of extraordinary size and beauty, with a serpent in his talons, and his broad wings opened to the rising sun. They hailed the auspicious omen, announced by the oracle, as indicating the site of their future city, and laid its foundation by sinking

The brilliant campaign of General Taylor, crowned though it be with the splendors of Buena Vista, may not be considered more glorious to American arms than the series of operations conducted by General Scott in Eastern and Central Mexico; planned with consummate genius, and executed with a courage, daring and skill that have never been surpassed. He who undertakes to institute a comparison between the characters and actions of that noble pair of American Generals, will engage in a difficult and thankless task. In Mexico, both led small armies against an enemy vastly superior in numbers, and always overcame him whenever and wherever he offered battle—in the walled city, mountain defile or open plain—and accomplished with the means at command, all and more than their government could reasonably expect. And to the permanent honor of both it will be recorded, that their campaigns were graced alike by the milder virtues of a compassionate forbearance and magnanimity. Both loved peace more than war; and prizing the *Olive* more than the *Laurel* wreath, were conquerors only to become pacificators. The honor and interests of their country were dearer to them than their own. May that country ever have a Scott and Taylor in her hour of need!

As the close of their terms of enlistment drew near, the old volunteer regiments were sent in succession from the field to be mustered out of service at New Orleans. Our home-

piles in the shallows; for the low marshes were half buried under water. The legend of its foundation is still commemorated by the device of the Eagle and the Cactus, which form the arms of the modern Mexican republic."

ward march was a joyful one, though over a road then numerous dotted with the skeletons of men and animals. Roofless and ruined ranchos, and many a dark and smoldering heap of ashes, told the disasters in which the people had involved themselves by throwing off their neutrality and entering upon a career of pillage and massacre. Truly "they that plow iniquity and sow wickedness shall reap the same." The hot season had again returned, and in consequence of the low water in the Rio Grande, the land route was lengthened to Reynosa and Matamoros. In the center of the march we met several detachments of troops who had lately arrived in the country; and after exchanging the military salutations usual on such occasions, many a merry laugh would escape from our men, as they contrasted their own burnt visages, flowing beards and soiled and ragged attire with the fresh complexions and perfect appointments of the new levies. But the day after our landing in New Orleans, the barbers and tailors of that city, accomplished such magical changes in their appearance, that it was no uncommon thing for officers and men who had served side by side throughout the campaign to pass each other as strangers in the streets.

In descending the Rio Grande, then diminished to a mere creek, it was difficult to realize that it was the same stream upon whose turbid and swollen current we had floated the previous summer. Its banks relieved from that inundation, appeared quite lofty and wore a more inviting and healthful aspect. It was a bright evening in June, 1847, when our eyes were once more gladdened by the blue waves of the

Gulf. Pitching our last camp upon the breezy beach, we sat down and gazed with delight upon the rolling billows, and the stout transports chafing at their anchors as if impatient and anxious to bear us home. Desert and danger were behind; toils and vigils were o'er, and now the faces and voices of long parted friends began to fill the heart. Soon the full-orbed moon with visage bright, arose in queenly splendor from the deep, and paved a silvery track across the sea; tempting our busy thoughts upward as well as homeward, to that Almighty Spirit who at the beginning "moved upon the face of the waters;" and who had borne us unscathed through all the perils of the march, the camp, the battlefield. We looked from our tents upon the lovely scene,— "the soul, on past and future, foraging for joy"—till the spirits of air and sea assailed us with their slumb'rous spells, while to fairy music chanting—

"Soldier, rest! thy warfare o'er,
Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking;
Dream of fighting-fields no more,
Days of danger, nights of waking."

