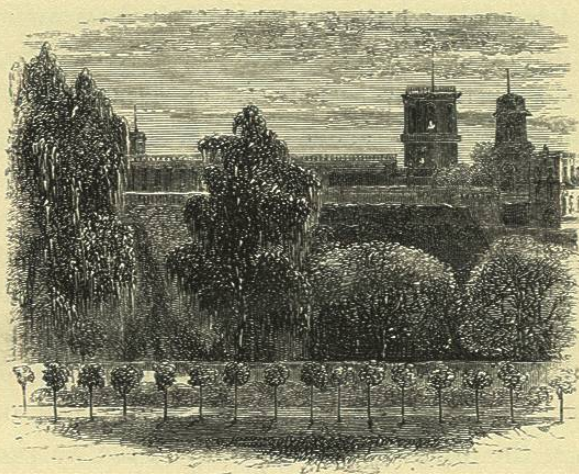
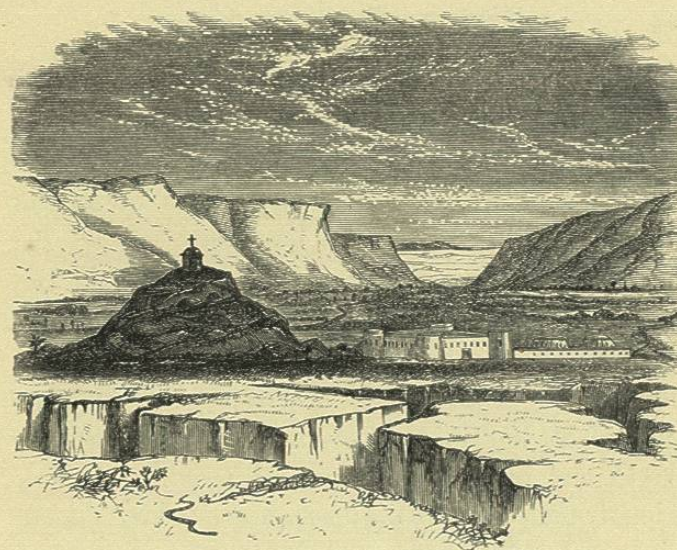


against such desperate odds, had succeeded in forcing their way through,—here, under these very branches, the stout heart of even Ferdinand Cortés failed him, and “he wept.”

Truly the fate of the Aztec kings was in the balances on that night, and not much was required to weigh them down, or to make that defeat decisive against the handful of brave Spaniards, who fought with and for the sign of the Cross.



CHAPULTEPEC.



HACIENDA AND CERRO OF SANTA ISABEL.

## CHAPTER V.

## OLLA PODRIDA.

THE rainy season in Mexico—I speak of the Valley—begins about the second week in May; and for some time previous to the commencement of it, a general fear of inundation prevails throughout the city. Nor is it astonishing, for after about a couple of heavy downfalls, the streets are nearly knee-deep in water; nay, more, the very courtyards of the houses become, for the time, miniature Chalcos; and I well remember the evening when, in order to effect a passage from our rooms to the *salle à manger*, we were



compelled to hire stalwart aguadores\* to carry us "pickaback" across the patio† of the Iturbide.

It follows evidently, that when the rain commences in real earnest, the attractions of Mexico diminish; still, to us, the time flew quickly, for hospitality is certainly the order of the day in this city. Messrs. Graham, Greaves, and Co. rivalled with Mr. Newbold in giving us the best of dinners; and at the Mondays of M. Friant—the *intendant en chef* of the French army, one found "all the world and his brother"—to say nothing of those friendly little dinners *à la maison des Quatre Lapins*, where we passed many a pleasant evening, chatting over old days in China in 1860, Yuen-min-Yuen, dragons, enamels, Tartars, and loot.

And besides, we had to make our preparations for a start, for we were in daily expectation of the departure of a convoy for the North, and it was not the custom of the French to give a very long warning.

On arriving at Mexico, I had presented the letters, etc., I had brought from Europe, to the Marshal Bazaine, and requested his permission to join the Division of General Douay, then at Saltillo and Monterey. This was immediately granted me, and I was directed to hold myself in readiness to leave with De Colbert by the first opportunity.

\* Aguadores,—the water-carriers of the city.

† Patio,—courtyard.

About noon on the 14th of May, the order arrived for a start the next morning at five o'clock, and we were all hurry and bustle, leaving extra baggage behind us, compressing our kits as much as possible, taking leave of our friends, and going through the usual turmoil and rush of a last day. A farewell dinner with D'Hendecourt at the 'Quatre Lapins,' followed by a pleasant evening at Magnan's, and we bid adieu to civilization for a time.

In the morning, long before Mexico was out of bed, we were well on the road towards the North, and halfway to our first halt, Tlalnepantla. Fortunately we had no rain until the afternoon; but about four o'clock down it came in torrents, and the next morning the roads were deep in black mud, through which the heavily-laden waggons toiled with evident difficulty; and the mules required constant volleys of anathemas levelled at them, both in Spanish and French, to keep them at all up to the mark. The march was short, but it was late before we arrived at the small town of Cautitlan, and painfully evident to us all, that if the wet weather lasted a few days longer, a breakdown was inevitable. However, we were a very pleasant little mess together—Dupeyron, the commandant of the convoy, and Carrère, both captains in the Bataillon d'Afrique, de Colbert, and myself; and as *chef de popote* Carrère was indefatigable. There



were also about a hundred men of the Belgian corps attached to our convoy, but their officers kept themselves to themselves, and we did not see very much of them. An endless line of carts, and a force of about a hundred men belonging to different regiments—convalescents and detached men rejoining their corps—completed the composition of Dupeyron's command, and an uncommonly annoying one it must have been to him, I should fancy. I do not think anybody envied him his charge.

On the 20th, with great difficulty, the rain pouring in torrents, we dragged slowly through about five leagues of black, tenacious, clayey mud, and reached the post of Arroyo Zarco, just before dark. We were more fortunate than our unlucky rear-guard; they passed the night in a wretched wayside tumble-down old fonda, and did not arrive until late the next morning. Of course a halt was unavoidable, and in the Hotel de las Diligencias we passed a long, stupid day, only rendered bearable by writing letters for the next mail, and smoking innumerable pipes of the inestimable tobacco still remaining to us out of the store we had laid in at the Havana. ~~†~~

The French soldier is really admirable under evil circumstances; however much rain, mud, or dust may have provoked his anger during the day's march, once that over, he is again gay and cheery,

smokes his short black pipe, drinks his *goutte* of aguardiente, and "mocks himself" of everything in general. All day long, between the down-pouring of the rain, the "zephyrs," stripped to the waist, washed themselves in the shallow river that runs through Arroyo Zarco, and kept up an incessant fire of jokes, intermingled with loud peals of laughter, thoroughly succeeding in astonishing the damp, dismal-looking Mexicans, shivering under cover of their zarapes, who congregated under the shelter of the hotel walls, waiting for the arrival of the diligence.

Let me, while we halt at this *joli port de mer*, try to give you an idea of the state of affairs in Mexico at the present moment. All the principal towns and great cities are held by the French troops or by the forces of Maximilian, from the capital to Matamoras the tricolour being to the fore. There are, indeed, scattered bands lurking in the almost inaccessible mountain strongholds, but none of these, with the exception of the forces of Escobedo, can be considered formidable, and only annoy by occasionally descending from their hiding-places, and levying blackmail on any unfortunate train of merchandise they may happen to pounce upon. Still, the last serious affair between the Liberals and the French was a most unfortunate one for the latter.



When passing the Havana, we had heard rumours of the death of the Commandant de Briant, and at Mexico full particulars were given us regarding the combat of Santa Isabel, in which he lost his life.

Parras, one of the neatest and most civilized towns in the north, celebrated for its vineyards and the really excellent wine made there, is situated to the westward of Saltillo, at the distance of about forty leagues, and was at the time one of the outposts of the French. Now Parras has always been most devoted to the cause of Maximilian, and Máximo Campos, the prefect and military commander of the town, had frequently defended the place and saved it from the attacks of the Liberals, unassisted by the French troops. The district, on the contrary, called the Laguna, is hostile to Imperialism, and has invariably done its best to assist the Liberal party. Hence the Commandant de Briant, who, in command of some 150 men of the foreign legion, garrisoned the town, was naturally inclined to believe all reports exaggerated in favour of the enemy. To the north-west of Parras lies a desert of great extent—the Bolson de Mapimi—closed in on every side by mountains, and impassable except during the rainy season. To give you an idea of the difficulties and impracticability of this desert, let me tell you that some twelve months previously, the French, under Generals Brincourt and Jeaningros, forced the Mexicans, some

2000 strong, under Negrete, to take their choice of two evils—either to stand and fight, or to escape across the Mapimi. They chose the latter course, and attempted to cross it. Negrete did arrive on the opposite side and escaped the French bullets, but of his 2000 men, the bones of 1800 were left to whiten upon the sands; all his horses and mules perished, and his cannon and baggage remained there until he could send for them during the rains.

One day, news was brought into Parras that the enemy, under Escobedo, Treviño, and Naranco, had succeeded in crossing this same Mapimi, taking advantage of the close of the rainy season leaving some little water for their men and horses, and entered the Laguna by the pass of Santa Isabel, with the intention of pressing northwards towards the frontier, and cutting off the communication between Matamoras, then held by the Imperialists under Mejia, and the city of Monterey. The report stated that the enemy were numerous, over 2000 in number, cavalry and infantry. This the Commandant de Briant—taking it for granted that any exaggeration would be in favour of Escobedo—would not believe, and in answer to the counsels of Máximo Campos, who assured him that the information was trustworthy, attempted to prove to him the impossibility of so large a number of men being able to pass the desert. In the end he informed



Campos that, at all events, he intended to attack, and accordingly that evening, at nine o'clock, leaving fifty men, under Captain Bastidon, to garrison Parras, the little force sallied out, full of hope, and all eager to have a brush with the enemy.

Campos had with him about 150 Mexicans, most of them cavalry, and one gun—the Commandant de Briant some 120 or 130 of the Legion. At first all went well, and on arriving at the village of San Lorenzo, about two leagues from Santa Isabel, they fell in with the enemy's outposts and soon put them to flight. Here, it appears, Campos again remonstrated with De Briant, and assured him that from his information, which he could rely upon, he was positive that Escobedo and Treviño had, at the very least, 2000 men with them; but after his easy victory over the outlying pickets, the Commandant was not to be convinced, so, pushing onwards, the little force soon found itself stopped by one of those deep intricate *barancas*\* so common throughout Mexico, and close upon the position of Santa Isabel. Now Santa Isabel consists of a large hacienda, built at the foot of a *cerro*, or solitary hill, standing alone in the vast plain, stretching far away to the mountains bordering the desert. The enemy occupied the hacienda and the *cerro*; upon the latter they

\* The '*baranca*' is a large ravine, and often extends for miles. It is the counterpart of the Indian '*nullah*.'

had thrown up rough breastworks of loose stones, their cavalry being in the plain, concealed from view behind the hill.

The Commandant de Briant divided his force into three parties. The Mexican cavalry, under Campos, after clearing the *baranca*, were to ford a small stream beyond it, and pass to the opposite side of the hacienda, in order to intercept the fugitives, fifty men assaulting the hacienda itself, whilst the remainder of the Legion, under Briant, were to follow the windings of the *nullah* and attack the *cerro*, upon the side furthest from the hacienda. Unfortunately, the windings of this ravine resembled each other so exactly, that even in broad daylight it was very possible to make a mistake. One wrong turning brought the party, not to the foot of the *cerro* away from the hacienda, but between the hill and the loop-holed walls. It was too late to turn back, so the attack was bravely made, but the odds were too great, and the cross-fire from the buildings and the breastworks mowed the French down like grass. In the meanwhile Campos, after crossing the stream, found himself attacked by the Liberal cavalry, some 800 in number, and with difficulty escaped with a handful of his men to report his defeat to the Commandant. But the brave De Briant had given his last order, and his party had been almost killed to a man. Only



the fifty men remained who had been sent to the assault of the hacienda. They took the position, killing every Mexican within its walls—but it was too late. Briant was dead. Campos, seeing all was lost, had ridden off towards Parras, with not much chance of ever getting there, and the handful of men in the hacienda were the sole survivors on the French side.

They had but one chance for safety—to gain the baranca, and if possible, by following it, to get back to San Lorenzo. But fortune deserted them again, and one false turn took them into a complete *cul-de-sac*, where from behind the rocks they fired away their last cartridge before surrendering themselves up to the tender mercies of the patriots, who “rob and murder in the name of God and liberty.”

One officer and about sixty men remained as prisoners in the hands of the victors, nearly all being wounded, and many of them very severely so. To the shame of the Liberals, if shame they have, all the Frenchmen too badly wounded to follow the rapid marches of their captors, were murdered; that is the right word to use, and I see no good in mincing matters over it. So closes the mournful scene. If there was undue temerity shown by the Commandant de Briant, he made ample atonement for it, falling fighting amongst the foremost of his men, and it is hardly meet to question the acts of those who die bravely in the forefront of the battle;

let us rather hope that should we ever be placed in like circumstances, we may do our duty as well.

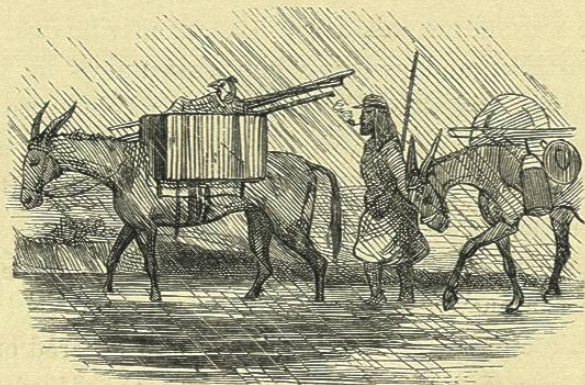
Do not imagine for a moment that this success elated the Liberals into the display of anything approaching to bravery. Very far from it. Bastidon, who, you will recollect, was left to garrison Parras, could hardly believe the reports of the Mexican spies who came in from Santa Isabel. Still, acting with caution and prudence, he retired his little troop into the church, which had been loop-holed and fortified in case of an attack. There is a hill commanding this church, and the next day it was covered with the enemy, waving the arms and accoutrements of the vanquished, and summoning the little garrison to surrender, with derisive shouts and foul abuse. The Liberals subsequently sent two flags of truce, relating the fact that all Briant's force were either killed or prisoners, offering quarter to Bastidon, and assuring him, that unless he immediately laid down his arms, the whole force of Escobedo and Treviño would attack the church, and put every French soldier to the sword. But Bastidon was not to be cajoled by their fair promises. The second bearer of the flag of truce went back with the answer that “should a third be sent in the direction of the church, he would be fired on.” And you will hardly believe that the Mexicans never had the courage to attack that handful of



brave men, but like the Levite in the parable, "passed by on the other side," and judged it prudent to leave them alone.

I do not think that this affair encouraged the Liberal party very much. You must remember they lost very heavily; all their men in the hacienda had been killed, and the success was virtually a barren one, as far as any ulterior advantage resulting to them from it.

Still, things were in this wise, no one knew exactly what the next move would be; the probable evacuation of Mexico by the French was in everybody's mouth, and reports were circulated that Austria would certainly refuse to lend more troops to Maximilian, her disputes with Prussia becoming every day more and more serious.



DURING THE RAIN.



UNDER THE PORTALS OF A HACIENDA.

## CHAPTER VI.

### NORTHWARD HO!

It was a thick, misty morning on the 21st, when we again started off with our horses' heads northwards, but the rain luckily did not come down until after we had all got under shelter at Soledad. We had equally good fortune on the next day, and were in our billets, in the charming little town of San Juan del Rio, just in time to escape the usual afternoon's storm. Really, we were marching away as rapidly as possible from the wet season, which appears to begin in the Valley of Mexico during