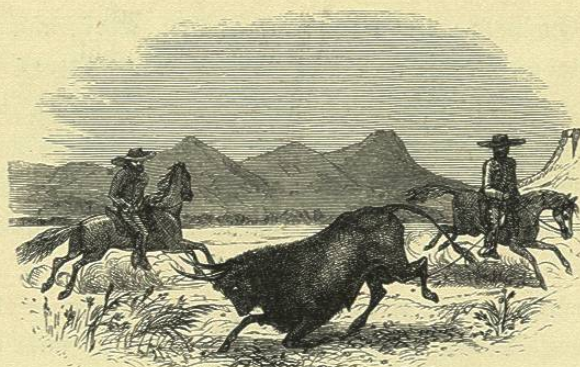
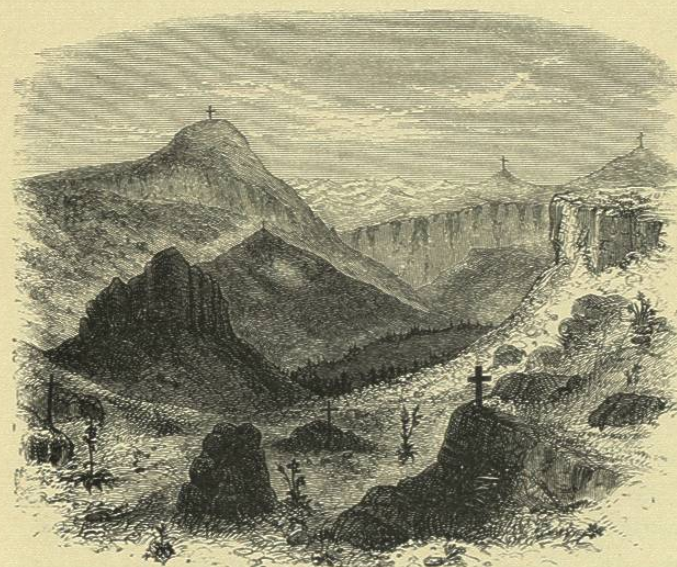


purse and fills his own pockets by every means at his disposal.

Then there is wailing and lamentation amongst the rancheros, the peones, and the mozos, for the hour is come when they, perforce, go to the wall !



VAQUEROS.



PASS OF SANTA MARIA DEL RIO.

CHAPTER VII.

TO ST. LUIS POTOSI AND VENADO.

THE march of the 30th brought us to the small town of St. Luis de la Paz, garrisoned by Zouaves ; and here we were again compelled to halt, the bad roads and overladen carts telling heavily on the mules.

Looking back to my diary, I find the entry for these two days is as follows :—"St. Luis de la Paz. Beastly hole ; bad quarters ; bad food." It is never worth while to dwell long over disagreeable recollections ; so, if you please, we will pass on to the hacienda of La Sousada, where we were well lodged on the 1st of June, and heard some news.

To the east of our road lay Rio Verde, on the borders of the State of Tamaulipas. This State was full of Liberals, and in fact communication between the capital (the port of Tampico, held by the Imperialists) and the interior had long been impossible, except by steamer to Vera Cruz and so round by Mexico. Such a state of affairs had paralysed all trade at the city of St. Luis Potosi, as formerly most of the goods from Europe for the interior of the country were shipped for Tampico, and sent up by *conductas** to the large houses of St. Luis. But an unfortunate affair had happened some months previously. A very large and valuable convoy of goods had been captured and either robbed or burnt by the Chinacos at a place called Tancasnequi, and so heavily did this loss tell on the merchants of St. Luis that since then they seemed to have given up all idea of receiving anything by the way of Tampico until the country should be in a more settled state. In short, nothing could be more ruinous to their money-making prospects than the fact of the French holding St. Luis and the Liberals infesting Tamaulipas; and I should think that at the present moment they must be infinitely better off than they were six months ago, for then all business was brought entirely to a standstill.

* *Conductas*,—the term applied to large convoys of merchandise travelling on the roads. They are usually guarded.

The news the haciendado gave out was rather startling; he asserted that Escobedo had succeeded in passing the French lines in the north, and was now actually in Tamaulipas, awaiting a band of Chinacos from Rio Verde who were on their way to meet him in the vicinity of Santa Maria del Rio. We could not credit his first piece of information, but the second, regarding the enemy being on the move between Rio Verde and Santa Maria, was possibly true; and so it turned out to be, for when we halted by the roadside to breakfast the next morning, Dupuyron received a dispatch from the commanding officer at St. Luis Potosi—Colonel D'Ornano—warning us against a probable attack, and informing us that we should be reinforced on our arrival at Santa Maria by a detachment of cavalry and some infantry.

The same day at our halt, La Villela, we met a large convoy of sick and time-expired soldiers on their road down to Mexico, and sat up late that night; for over many bottles, and innumerable cigars and pipes, all the recent affairs in the north were fought over again, and praises were many and loud in favour of De la Hayrie, whom we shall meet later on in the day. I am pretty sure that a good many heads were disturbed the following morning by that fatal "bee in the bonnet," that disagreeable follower of a night where "drink has been plenty," but fortu-

nately for the sufferers our march was short. After passing through an ugly-looking ravine, where ominous heaps of rocks, surmounted by rough crosses, suggested unpleasant ideas of the locality, a sudden turn brought us upon a well-built, clean-looking little town, nearly hidden from view by tall trees, and built in the centre of a small valley hemmed in on every side by range upon range of lofty hills, the summit of each peak being surmounted by a prominent wooden cross,—I trust for some wise and religious purpose. This was Santa Maria del Rio.

We were soon lodged in a pleasant, cheery house, looking out upon the crowded plaza filled with Indians selling fruit and flowers, for there is no doubt that the Aztec race, however much their ideas may have been degraded of late years, still retain that exquisite taste and fondness for flowers alluded to by Cortés. Strolling about on the market-place, during the time our breakfast was being prepared, our camp-beds "fixed," and our traps unpacked, we heard the clairs of the detachment that, if you remember, Colonel d'Ornano had sent to inform us would arrive here. It proved to be under the command of Captain Charrier, of the Foreign Legion, the officer who had lately superintended the laying-down of the telegraph-line between Queretaro and St. Luis,—now I should fancy gone to rack and ruin, and not likely to be recon-

structed by the Mexicans, even should they eventually have quiet times in their disturbed land.

Charrier brought us news. It proved to be untrue that Escobedo had eluded the vigilance of the French in the north, but there was no doubt that the people from Rio Verde had made a move and were in our neighbourhood. Still it was not likely that we should be molested by them, for a strong detachment had been sent to Las Pilas, halfway between Santa Maria and St. Luis, to support us in case of need, whilst this force remained to guard our rear.

Accordingly the following day we pushed on to Las Pilas and on the 5th marched into St. Luis Potosi, without having seen a sign of an enemy. But Charrier was more fortunate than we were, for on the 6th he caught this band and attacked them, killing some thirty or forty of their number and pursuing them far into the hills,—putting an end to the annoyance they had caused by keeping troops continually on the move, etc. etc., for such a severe lesson they would not be likely to forget in a hurry, even should it not have the effect of entirely breaking up the party.

St. Luis Potosi has none of the advantages of position enjoyed by Queretaro, Mexico, or Puebla. From the large village of Los Posos, you see the city in the distance, covering a large extent of ground, and fancy yourself within about a mile of

the garita; but the long, straight road, ankle-deep in dust, is very deceptive, and there are, at the least, a couple of hot weary leagues to drag through, before arriving even in the suburbs.

Neither is there anything particularly striking in the approach, for you are in the centre of a vast and highly cultivated plain, shut in by the mountain ranges, the most conspicuous peak of which is the Sierra Madre. Still, away on the right, that dark-looking hill contains the once world-famed silver mine of Potosi, now fallen in and neglected. A couple of men scratch away at the ground, in order to keep up the claim of the present owners on the property, for all mines in which no work is carried on for forty-eight hours consecutively become, by forfeiture, the property of the Government.

Perhaps some day they may strike upon a new vein, and dig out a more colossal fortune than has ever yet been produced from the earth.

It is not impossible. A friend of mine, not very long ago, bought a "bar" in an unproductive mine for £400; a few days after the purchase was effected, the mine began to yield; within a month a good vein was struck, and he now receives £200 a month as his share of the profits, and the vendor has offered him besides £10,000 to repurchase the "bar." Fortunate speculator! may your "bar" pro-

duce and prosper! I will not wish you good luck, it would be absurd, for have you not got the *veine*?

Those two lofty minarets on the left, appearing to rise from the tall trees beneath them, almost make visions of Delhi and the Jumma Musjid rise and float before your eyes. They belong to the old convent of Guadalupe, now fortified and garrisoned by the French; for the old days, when the monks of St. Luis had their fresh fish sent up from Tampico—through the entire breadth of the State of Tamaulipas—by relays of Indian runners, have long since passed away, nor is it probable they will ever return again to gladden the hearts of the Church party. It is true, at the present time, a few cowls were to be seen moodily and dreamily flitting about at the corners of streets, but when the Liberals are once more in power, they must take refuge where they best may, or submit to the exactions and insults of that unscrupulous mob.

St. Luis Potosi is clean, and that advantage it most certainly enjoys over even Mexico itself, for many of the smaller streets about the suburbs of the capital are very abominations. The plaza boasts of a palace and a cathedral, the latter recently rebuilt and in good taste. In the exterior work of many of the old religious and conventual buildings there are, besides, some really fine pieces of architecture and stone-carving worthy of notice.

Nor in the city is there any lack of good shops, or a want of society, for every evening, when the band of the Foreign Legion plays on the plaza, it is so crowded with listeners, nearly all of them belonging to a good class of society, that it is with some difficulty you succeed in strolling round to smoke a quiet cigar. Taking it altogether, for there is a very pretty Alameda besides, St. Luis is by no means a disagreeable spot to pass even a month in, which I was fated to do later on in the year, although my first visit only lasted for three days.

I do not know the precise reason why on that third morning everything went wrong with us, but there are some days upon which nothing will go right; this evidently was one of them, and by no means to be marked with a white stone.

To begin with, we overslept ourselves, and, of course, our servants profited by our example to do likewise. Then a mule—a brute at the best of times—took it into his head to break his bridle, knock over the man who was holding him, and gallop down the street, sending his load and the bât saddle flying in every direction. This was very serious; the girths, chains, and straps were all broken, and the heavy waggons had started half an hour before, to cross the river, so there was nothing to be done for it, but to hire a mule carriage to carry out the *débris*. This misfortune was soon

forgotten, for catching the column at their first halt, we transferred our luggage into one of the hindmost carts, and after five leagues of very dusty, hot marching, arrived at our resting-place for the night—Garrabatilas.

Now of all disagreeable halting-places between Vera Cruz and Monterey, recommend me to this frightful Garrabatilas. There are two or three very dirty Indian huts, a pool of bad, muddy water, a waste of sand, and a few scanty trees. To lodge in the huts was out of the question, they were inhabited by legions of fleas—an insect apparently much to the fancy of all the Aztec race.

There was only one course to follow—to encamp. Beyond a doubt the Fates were still dead against us, for, to our dismay, De Colbert's tent was nowhere to be found, and evidently it had been stolen since leaving Mexico. Making the best of a bad business we put up our beds under the thickest tree we could find, and consoling ourselves, said that at any rate we were pretty sure to be safe from rain. We spoke rashly, for soon after dinner and just about nightfall, down came a thunderstorm from the mountains, and it poured nearly the whole of the night.

In these cases, I do not think that either the actual discomfort or the drenching is the most disagreeable part of the annoyance. It is that terri-

ble battle in the morning, with damp clothes and saturated boots, that is productive of strong language and bad temper, and has the most lasting effect upon one's mind.

The next day, though, good quarters in the hacienda of Las Bocas—a finer one even than that of the Noria—soon made us forget our annoyances at Garrabatillas, and passing through the small town of Moctezuma (or Hedionda) the day after, on the 11th we arrived at Venado, meeting in the town the Contre-Guerillas, under Colonel Du Pin.

Here we halted again for a day to rest the mules and make bread for the men; and a very pleasant spot it was for a sojourn, that quiet little town, with the clear, brawling mountain torrent rushing through it, and the large shady trees overshadowing the pleasant paths following its stream.



ROAD CROSS.



THE CONTRE-GUERILLAS.

CHAPTER VIII.

IRREGULARS.

THE corps of Contre-Guerillas was originally raised at Vera Cruz, by orders of Marshal Forey, under the command of a man called Stekelin, and were originally composed of Mexicans and foreigners, who took service to serve in the Tierra Caliente. From Vera Cruz they were sent to Medellin, a town some short distance off, and their mission was to suppress and hunt down the brigands and robbers, who had become a perfect pest to everybody in those fever-stricken districts, where it was judged imprudent to garrison French troops.