



PASS BETWEEN TANQUE DE LA VACCA AND AGUA NUEVA.

## CHAPTER IX.

### COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE.

WE had brought up with our convoy a *clairon*, belonging to the Bataillon d'Afrique, who had been detached with the Contre-Guerillas, and was on his way to join his corps at Saltillo. He was one of those wild, half-Arab-looking soldiers you only meet in Algerian regiments, and excessively amusing. For hours along the road he entertained us one morning by relating his adventures and marches under Colonel Du Pin, and though not exactly a clean or by any means a smart-looking soldier, he

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had gradually become rather a favourite with some of us. You may imagine how astonished we were one afternoon—on the 21st I think it was—to learn that St. Pierre had deserted the day previously, but had been caught and brought in by some Mexicans, whilst endeavouring to make his way to join the Liberals at Tula. There had been a great deal of desertion latterly among the Germans and foreigners of the Legion, and very few of them had been caught. Besides, it was reported that Escobedo had collected all the deserters he could get hold of, and formed them into a corps, thinking, and justly so, that as each man fought with a rope round his neck, the probabilities were that as a body they would serve his purpose well, being bound to stand to the last.

On the same day, curiously enough, the clue to the desertions was unravelled, and two Mexicans were arrested—keepers of a small fonda, much frequented by the soldiers—who, it was plainly proved, had been long playing the extremely dangerous game of inducing men to desert, giving them a large bounty and guides to conduct them over to the enemy; they receiving so much per head for each man gained to the Liberals by their diplomacy.

It was then evidently necessary to punish all offenders, and deter others from following their example; and accordingly, at four o'clock the same



afternoon—for the French do not lose any time over these matters—a parade was held near the cemetery, St. Pierre was shot, and the two *embaucheurs* hanged.

The *clairon* met his death without the slightest bravado, and still with wonderful firmness. One could not help feeling sorry for his fate, although he certainly deserved it, and acknowledged the justice of his sentence himself. The only excuse he gave was very French. He said that he was thoroughly tired of his life, and wanted more excitement; besides, every one knew that he was an unlucky man!

As to the two Mexicans, they exhibited the same disregard for death as, during the mutiny in India, the Sepoys invariably evinced,—one of them smoking his *papelito* until the last moment, and paying very little attention to the prayers of the priest who accompanied them,—he, poor man, appearing by far the most terrified of the party.

On the 26th and 27th, there were rumours of Liberal bands being on their way to levy a contribution on the rich silver mines of Catorce, and a small expedition was sent out at midnight on the 28th to surprise them if possible.

After marching all night, the French arrived at Catorce about midday, and were in time to capture all the enemy's mules laden with plunder, and pre-

vent the exaction of the fine imposed upon the town. Still they were too late to do them any very material damage, for they only surprised one of their outlying pickets, killing a few men and taking a Liberal officer prisoner. The force returned on the 30th, and then the enemy were reported at Cedral, only five leagues from the town, and on the direct road to Saltillo.

In short, little by little, the plot commenced to thicken, and Chinacos and guerillas cropped up in every direction, why or wherefore one could hardly surmise; but still, every day brought the news of the reappearance and resuscitation of some band or other, that everybody thought had been wiped out long ago.

On the 1st of July the Contre-Guerillas marched in, and on the 3rd left during the night on an expedition in the direction of San Cristoval. On that same day, the mounted "troop of Matehuala," composed of Mexicans and a few Frenchmen, under the command of Van der Duyn, an officer of the Foreign Legion, had a successful affair with a small band in the very valley of Matehuala itself; and on the 6th we heard that reinforcements for the north had started from Mexico.

On the 9th we heard the first decisive news from the north, and learnt that the Austrian troops had been defeated by Escobedo, between Monterey and



Matamoros, and that subsequently Mejia—the best supporter, and one of the most honest generals of the Imperial cause—had been forced to surrender the latter important seaport town to the Liberals. A few days later, intelligence arrived that Tampico had been captured, and about the same time 500 men of the Legion, under Colonel Guillem, reinforced Matehuala—a force of cavalry and infantry descending at the same time from Saltillo to Vanegas to escort our convoy.

On the 12th we got under weigh, marching ten leagues to Vanegas, and here we met a squadron of De Colbert's regiment, the 12th Chasseurs, and joined their mess,—a capital good one it was too, for we “pulled well together,” and always continued the best of friends.

We had frightful weather all along the road from Matehuala to Saltillo, for during our halt the wet season had been gradually creeping northwards, and now we got in for the very thick of it. The latter part of our first march of nine leagues to Las Animas was positively knee-deep in mud and water—not the least sign of a road to be seen; for all we knew, we might have been crossing a broad, shallow lake for the last two or three miles before arriving in camp. Here we were obliged to halt for half a day, sending back a troop to fetch some men who had been left at Vanegas by mistake. On

their arrival, we started about midday, and with the rain pouring in torrents all the way, reached the large hacienda of Salado, belonging to one Bustamente, a known scoundrel, and “Gefe de Bande,” who had long ago left his farming, and now was in the mountains somewhere near the Valle de Potosi, with a good number of Chinacos at his back, and only waiting patiently for an opportunity to descend and plunder upon the high-road.

Salado was held by the French with a force of four companies, and admirably fortified to resist an attack. I do not think the Liberals, however strong, would ever have succeeded in taking it from them,—not that there was much chance of their trying to do so. Their policy was never to engage in a doubtful affair if it could possibly be avoided, and to keep up a constant system of intercepting couriers, occasionally annoying the weaker posts of the Imperialists, whenever they happened to be somewhat isolated from immediate support.

The rain was so heavy, and the roads so deep in mud, that the Commandant Koch, who was in command of our column and convoy, was compelled to order a halt for the next day, sending on couriers to inform General Douay of his intention. These couriers were very well paid by the French, the dispatches being generally rolled up in the form of cigarettes, and placed in the centre of the bundle of



"papelitos" every Mexican invariably carries; but, even with these precautions, they were frequently caught by the Liberals, and when captured either hanged or branded with the letters T. A. M., "Traidores á Méjico," so that their identity might be established beyond a doubt, should they be taken prisoners a second time.

Late in the evening a spy came in from Encarnacion, another post fifteen leagues further up the Saltillo road, and reported that the garrison had been attacked that day by a force of some 600 of the enemy. A few minutes later, two of the men of the hacienda were discovered inducing soldiers of the garrison to desert, and brought in as prisoners. They had actually gone so far as to conduct a couple of privates belonging to the Legion some distance from the hacienda away into the brushwood, where there were horses waiting to convey the party over to the Liberal lines. The soldiers, however, turned round on their guides, and marched them with their horses back to Salado. Of course, under the circumstances, they had short shrift, and knee-deep in water, stumbling and groping along by the light of a lantern, the two Mexicans were led across the open space in front of the hacienda, and hanged upon the trees near the large well. I do not think I shall forget for a long time to come the loud shrieks and lamentations of

their wretched wives, who watched by the Noria far away into the night, mingling prayers for their husbands' souls with a grief refusing to be comforted. Yet so it has been, and always will be, as long as war lasts. The greatest blows must unavoidably fall upon those who are not even actors in the scene, the wives and mothers of those that fall.

The march of the next day to San Salvador, five leagues, we actually accomplished without any rain, and on entering the village met two mule carriages, containing a Mexican family, on their journey down from Saltillo. It turned out that they had been taken prisoners by Pedro Martinez, on his return from the unsuccessful attack he made on Encarnacion, and held to ransom. After being taken miles out of their road, in the direction of Valle Potosi, they had been eventually released, giving a bond for 4000 piastres, about £800, in order to propitiate the band. These bonds are always scrupulously redeemed, because, in case of recapture at a later period, a very probable occurrence, no mercy would ever be shown towards the man who had failed in his agreement with a "Gefe de Bande." On the whole, the family did not appear very much annoyed by this incident in their journey. They seemed to take the affair pretty much as a matter of course, and two of the daughters, one of whom



the youngest, was very good-looking, were I fancy rather pleased than annoyed at their adventure, and thought it excessively romantic.

Our next march, on the 17th, was a long one of ten leagues to Encarnacion, where traces were still to be seen of the enemy's attack. There are only two stone buildings of any size—the hacienda, held by the French, and the Hotel de las Diligencias, in which the enemy established themselves, being from this position able to annoy the garrison considerably. The Liberals seem, according to most accounts, to have attacked rather upon the hope that the men of the Legion would prove false to their colours, than upon any reasonable prospects of success. They had, it appears, already tampered with some of the men, and their plan consisted in pushing forward a few deserters who were with them to endeavour to induce their former comrades to join their side; but they were entirely out of their reckoning, and, after losing several of their best men, were obliged to retire the following morning, having inflicted little or no damage upon the garrison.

On the 18th, passing Tanqué de la Vacca, a long march of twelve leagues brought us late in the afternoon to Agua Nueva, a tumble-down village, where the only place to lodge the squadron was in the church, and there it was almost impossible to sleep for that universal plague of Mexican villages—fleas.

Happily our journey with the lumbering, slow-going old convoy was almost over, for the next day only seven leagues and a half remained to Saltillo. Breaking the road by halting to breakfast at Buenavista, about two in the afternoon our voyaging for a short time was brought to a close.



RANCHERO.