



PASS INTO THE VALLEY OF RINCONADA.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

SALTILLO, differing in no respect from the general run of Mexican towns, was a dull quarter, and after calling on General Douay and his staff, who received me with the greatest kindness and civility, I was by no means sorry to hear that before long there would be a move in the direction of Monterey, for I was already tired of inaction, and quite ready to be once again on the road.

You will recollect we received intelligence of the loss of Matamoros before leaving Matehuala. I will now try to give you some idea of the succes-

sion of events by which the surrender was hastened on, and subsequently the evacuation of the north decided upon, for General Douay's departure from Saltillo proved to be merely a movement supporting the retreat of the French troops under General Jeaningros from Monterey.

Some time previously, Escobedo, who then commanded the only important force of the Liberals in the north, was in the vicinity of Galeana. Now, if you will take the trouble to look at the plan, you will readily perceive that columns marching from Saltillo, Victoria, Monterey, and Salado would drive Escobedo from Galeana, either forcing him into the Tierra Caliente, or compelling him to fight,—provided, of course, that he was in ignorance of the plans, as in that case, gaining Linares, he would be able to escape the combination by taking the northern road in the direction of Matamoros.

Under instructions from Mexico, four columns marched from the above-mentioned points, under the orders of General Douay, and beyond a doubt the expedition would have succeeded in its object, had not Escobedo received some inkling of the intended movements—either by capturing some couriers from the capital, or through information from the many Liberal spies,—and moving rapidly to Linares, taken the route towards Matamoros simultaneously with the departure of the French from Saltillo.



Latterly the communications between Matamoros and Monterey had been so extremely unsafe, that all commerce was brought to a standstill.

Despairing of the position of affairs, and wishing to put an end to the state of uncertainty in which they were placed, the merchants offered a large subsidy to the Government for the payment of their troops, on condition that an attempt should be made to pass a large convoy of merchandise between the two cities. Always hard up, the Government caught at the chance, and sent orders from Mexico to Mejia, then commanding at Matamoros, to start off a convoy under strong escort, without any delay for any cause whatsoever.

On receiving these instructions, Mejia had no other course left open to him but to obey them to the letter; accordingly, warning the merchants in the town to collect their goods immediately, a conducta was speedily formed, and proceeded towards Monterey, escorted by three hundred and fifty Austrians, and all the Mexican troops that could be spared from the garrison,—a courier being sent to inform General Douay of what had been done.

The papelito containing this dispatch, and the news of Escobedo's move, *viâ* Linares, in the direction of Matamoros, reached General Douay almost simultaneously. Orders were issued that a column should instantly leave Monterey to meet the convoy, and support it in case of need, for the General fore-

saw that it would be exposed to a surprise by the Liberals who had left Galeana.

These apprehensions were only too well founded, for Escobedo attacked the conducta before its junction with the Monterey column was possible. The Mexican troops deserted the Austrians, who, attacked upon every side, and greatly outnumbered, were killed almost to a man, few prisoners being made. Colonel De Tucé, in command of the column from Monterey, on receiving intelligence that the convoy had been captured, and its escort almost entirely destroyed, of course had nothing left him to do but to retrace his steps, and report this unfortunate affair to General Douay.

Mejia's position at Matamoros was no longer tenable, his garrison consisting only of Mexican troops, and these comrades of the very men who, by their treachery, had contributed to the defeat of the Austrians. Pressed on every side by superior forces, his only course was to make an honourable surrender, and this he succeeded in effecting, permission being given to him and his officers to leave for Vera Cruz by sea.

From this moment may be dated the commencement of the unfavourable turn of affairs for the Empire, for the loss of Matamoros was quickly followed by that of Tampico, and very shortly afterwards by the evacuation of all the north.



About the same time news arrived from Mexico of the departure for Europe of the Empress, the march of Marshal Bazaine towards St. Luis Potosi, and the outbreak of war between Austria and Italy and Prussia; so there was plenty of food for speculation on future events, and most certainly Mexican affairs began to look very gloomy, and supporters of the Empire must have felt anything but easy in their minds.

It was on the morning of the 24th of July that we finally marched out from Saltillo, *en route* for Monterey, and this movement of General Douay's, in support of the subsequent evacuation, was occasioned, I fancy, by intelligence received from General Jeaningros, that the enemy were collecting in his neighbourhood, and that the difficulties of procuring sufficient carriage were great, for a long train of empty carts of every description followed our column. As on all similar occasions, every one held his own theory as to the ultimate objects of the expedition, and surmises were legion. During the thirteen leagues' march to Rinconada, many were the conclusions arrived at, yet I do not expect we were any wiser at the end of our journey than we had been in the early morning. All was conjecture.

The Rinconada is a bright green valley, traversed by clear running streams, shaded by willow and poplar trees,—altogether fresh and bright in

appearance, and very cheering to dust-begrimed travellers. Approaching by a winding descent, you cross the deep bed of a dry mountain-torrent, knocking your horse's legs about in a terrible fashion over the big round boulders strewn upon the path; then suddenly the valley breaks into view, and although the same scene in most countries would not produce, in all probability, any very great amount of enthusiasm, still to us, scorched up by the midday sun, and wearied by the monotonous plains of sand and brushwood we had been marching over, it was the oasis in the desert—the end of a long day's toil, and we were indeed content.

At one time there was a flourishing hacienda here, but at the present moment I do not think there are more than a couple of habitable apartments to be found in the whole pile of buildings, for everything has fallen into the most lamentable state of decay. It is tolerably safe to date all this deterioration throughout the country from the days of the termination of the Spanish rule, for since that period the depredations of the guerilleros have steadily increased, and the want of security discouraging landed proprietors from any attempts to repair damages, apathy and sheer carelessness soon convert a once well-to-do hacienda into a tumble-down ruined group of uninhabited barns, very uninviting to the traveller.



I have a strong recollection of the cold wind and the clouds of dust that swept through our little tent, and ended by putting us into the worst of evil tempers for the greater part of the evening. It certainly required courage, but still De Montholon and I eventually sallied forth, "en costume d'Adam," to take our usual "tub" outside the tent-door, to the great dismay of a fellow-officer of M.'s, who could not imagine any one in his senses braving the adverse elements for the sake of getting rid of the day's dirt. His theory on the subject was charming, for, after gravely assuring us that he felt convinced we had suffered slightly, as regarded our sanity, from the effects of the sun, he proceeded gravely to give us the benefit of his own experiences in "dry-rubbing," for he maintained stoutly that this process answered every purpose, and was, besides, far more agreeable than cold water. I firmly believe he was actually a true disciple of his own doctrine at the time, but latterly I am glad to say he has become a convert to the "religion of cleanliness," and hardly to be recognised as the same man, even by his most intimate friends. Let us hope that he may not soon stray away from the good "groove" into which he has so happily fallen.

It was a bitterly cold morning on the 25th, and the wind blew keenly in our faces as we rode up the steep pass leading from Rinconada to El Alto.

We had misgivings besides as to the possible duration of the march before us, and fears that the breakfast hour might be unduly prolonged, a fair consideration being held for our appetites. Talking of eating led us into a tantalizing conversation about the merits of Véfour's and Tortoni's, and very naturally this led to our foraging during the half-hour we halted at El Alto, to allow the rear-guard to close up with the main column, before descending into the next valley. Luckily we found a basket of eggs in a dirty little fonda, and Ranson, acting as our *chef de cuisine*, made some amends for the rash turn our discussions had taken, by producing a capital omelette. It really was an immense success, and although you did serve it up on a broken soup plate, nevertheless I still tender you my thanks, and render homage to your talents in the culinary line, *ami Ranson*, for that good act you performed in the smoky shed at El Alto. After this halt we descended into the extensive valley leading towards Monterey, only, after all, catching one glimpse of the town in the distance, for we got no further on our road than to the outskirts of Santa Catarina, a large village some two leagues from the town. On the road we had already passed the Belgians and the Mexican cavalry of Quiroga, the advance-guard of General Jeaningros. His main body we eventually found at the village itself, toiling slowly along



with its long train of heavily-laden baggage wag-gons. After talking for a short time with General Jeaningros, General Douay's column retraced its road to El Alto, and the evacuation of Monterey was completed without any interference on the part of the enemy. It was late in the evening before we were encamped and had breakfasted, and a pretty tiring day we had of it altogether; indeed, the early morning omelette was the only saving clause.

Two days later we arrived in Saltillo, only waiting to evacuate the town and retire on Matehuala. Not a very cheering prospect, for now the rains had fairly commenced, and visions of the deep, black mud of that uninteresting town were only calculated to fill one with feelings of disgust as to our possible sojourn there.

If Saltillo had been a stupid, dull place to us before our departure for Monterey, it certainly was ten times worse after our return. The inhabitants, knowing the occupation was fast drawing to a close, did not dare to show us over-much civility, for they naturally dreaded the reception they might meet with from the hands of the Liberals, who awaited patiently at a respectful distance until the departure of the French should leave the road open to them. In the evening, when the band of the 12th Chasseurs played on the plaza, there was hardly any one to be seen, with the exception of the officers and

men of the garrison; and in the *cercle* there was a gloom cast over the absinthe and even the *écarté*, for every one saw that before many days we should be again "dwellers in tents;" and packing up traps, and throwing away accumulations of extra kit, are not generally exhilarating amusements or productive of good temper.

There was but one resident of the town, the owner of a large *fabrique* and a good deal of property in the neighbourhood, who was not to be intimidated by the aspect of affairs; for, running his chance of being heavily fined by the Liberals, as an after consequence of his hospitality, he gave us a series of farewell dinners, and I sincerely trust did not suffer on our account after the departure of the French.

Each day troops were marching south, and on the morning of the 4th of August all the arrangements for the evacuation were completed. That day General Douay left, marching seven and a half leagues to Agua Nueva; General Jeaningros commanding the rear-guard, and halting for the night at Buenavista, about four leagues from the town. The next day, the Liberals were in Saltillo.

Most certainly the French troops were not sorry to be off. They were tired of the whole business, taking very little interest in the issue of affairs, and only too glad to imagine themselves at last home-



ward bound. Still, there was many a sad face, and I think many a silent adieu whispered in the hearts of weatherbeaten and toil-stained soldiers, to the memory of those whose bones the fortune of war left far from their comrades in a strange soil—De Briant, Cazes, Rawix, and others who had fallen in the front of the battle, whose resting-places ought to be pointed out for many a long day as holding the ashes of men who were a brave enemy, and nobly accomplished their *devoir*. May they rest in peace!



FOR THE LINE OF MARCH.



CALLE DEL TEATRO, ST. LUIS POTOSI.

## CHAPTER XI.

## AN EXODUS.

OUR descent from Saltillo was a small exodus in its way, for there were many Mexicans too compromised by their adherence to the Imperial party, too openly expressed in their opinions as "mochos,"\* to run the chance of Liberal clemency, and remain in

\* "Mochos,"—the slang term used by the Mexicans when alluding to the Imperialists.