



THE VALLEY OF ST. MIGUEL.

## CHAPTER XV.

### A HOT CHASE.

THOSE provident men who had taken the very necessary precaution to put crusts of bread and brandy-flasks in their holsters before leaving Matchuala, set to work to make the morning meal, known in India as "chota-hazri," for we were fated to wait for anything more substantial until past ten o'clock at night. Before the mules arrived with the baggage it was past midday, and then the General with the cavalry followed up the pass De la Hayrie and the Liberals had taken. Certainly the guides had some

excuse for saying the road was impracticable to troops, and nothing but the sternest necessity could have forced the enemy to choose such a path. In places the boughs overhung the track,—I cannot call it by any other term,—and everybody had to crouch down on their saddles, whilst large, rolling boulders made the horses slip and "peck" almost constantly, whenever they were not up to their knees in sand, or being pricked out of their senses by the formidable cacti and bush-thorns. This made our pace very slow, but at every few yards we came on evident signs of the hurried retreat; here and there a horse, who could not keep up with the main body, was straying away through the brushwood, his rider having probably escaped danger by hiding down the ravines, until the pursuit should have passed by, and the path was strewn with carbines, stirrups, sombreros, etc. etc. It was not, after all, very long before we came upon the column of De la Hayrie, who sent back to tell the General that the enemy were a very short distance before his advanced guard of partisan cavalry, and flying as fast as their horses could go, but in very fair order.

Turning off to the left, we took across country to avoid clashing with his column, capturing in one of the valleys the mules carrying the Liberals' ammunition, and at last got clear of the pass, finding ourselves on a broad plain of immense extent, slop-



ing gradually towards a village in the centre, traversed by cross-roads, and then rising again until lost in the far distance on the horizon. Just beyond this village, St. Miguel, were the enemy in three columns, going at a wonderful pace, and closely pressed by the partisans, who kept about half a mile from their rear-guard, and formed the advance of De la Hayrie's force. The ground we were on was detestable; at places we had to break into single file to follow the narrow, winding, nullah bed along which we were compelled to march. It seemed as if we should never get on to a road again, although we could see distinctly before us a highway leading through the village, and a cross-road coming from the southward. Little by little the "going" got better, and we trotted again, enveloped by clouds of fine dust, rendering it a matter of impossibility to see where one's horse was putting his feet. At last, arriving at St. Miguel, and getting through the streets, or rather I should say street, just in time to avoid De la Hayrie,—as we turned the corner, back came a Mexican officer with the information that Campos and Quiroga were engaged with the rear-guard of the enemy, who had halted to receive them. It was quite absurd to attempt to see what was going on, the dust being so thick you might have cut it with a knife; but half an hour's sharp trot brought us close on to the partisans, and

the Chef d'État-Major, with Captain de Creny and a few men, started off at a gallop to see what was taking place, taking me with them.

Clear of the dust raised by the cavalry, and ahead of the advanced guard, we could make out the position of affairs better, and got a pretty good idea of everything. Ahead of us, and not far from Quiroga and Campos, were the main body of the Liberals; half-a-dozen smaller parties of them keeping on the slopes of the small hills, followed the different paths now beginning to branch off in various directions from the main road, and traverse the country, the aspect of which—we were now fairly across the open plain—had changed considerably, for before us stretched away a country covered with thickets of brushwood and dwarf yuccas, very difficult for cavalry. Quiroga was pursuing rapidly over a dangerous succession of small cerros on our left, having already broken and dispersed the enemy's rear-guard, capturing several prisoners, and inflicting a tolerably severe blow on the already disheartened Liberals, though they hardly required even that extra stimulus to make them fly faster than they had already been doing.

Behind us a dense cloud of dust covered the General, advancing with his cavalry; and ascending the slope, after clearing St. Miguel, followed the column of De la Hayrie, whilst the main body and the



baggage, debouching from the mountain pass, were just commencing the gradual descent of the long plain down towards the cross-roads of the village.

Interrogating the prisoners, we discovered that the force we were pursuing consisted of three divisions, all cavalry, under Treviño, Naranco, and Zapeda,—the whole, about 2500 strong, under the command of Treviño; that there were a few infantry with them, who had been directed to disperse, and rejoin at Vanegas, as soon as the French came in sight at Miembres,—their present point was either Valle Purissima, through Laca, or across the mountains by Estaca to Soledad, where they had a considerable force, and thirteen guns; but that they never dreamt of being pursued with such vigour, counting on the delays we should make for our baggage and infantry, and consequently the order had been given to halt for the night at the hacienda and village of Laca, where they made sure they would be beyond any harm.

We were soon obliged to make a considerable pause before entering the wooded country; but as soon as the columns had cleared St. Miguel, the *à cheval* was again sounded, and we threaded our way along through the bridle paths of the yucca thickets, until we once more found ourselves on open ground, and to our great delight came in view of a small rancho, and a large pond of clear

water, shaded by wide-spreading trees,—an oasis in the desert, and a green spot refreshing to us all, dust-begrimed, sun-dried, and tired out as we were, after our long midday chase. This was Pósito, and here we halted to drink, watered our horses, stretched our legs, and then took the road to Laca, for the General was determined to give the Liberals no rest for that night.

Crossing the high ground before reaching Laca, the daylight was rapidly drawing to a close, and the large pile of mountains before us began to darken and grow sombre, the dust of the flying enemy being barely distinguishable, whilst occasional low deep rolling of thunder in the distance warned us that before long we should have heavy rain down upon us. Quiroga and Campos pushed on, nevertheless, to the last, supported by a squadron of the 12th Chasseurs, and caught the rear-guard once more as the night began to close in, engaging them with success, and killing one of the principal Liberal officers, who, mistaking our partisans for some of his own men, galloped back to them, asking the leading files whether they belonged to Zapeda or Naranco, and was instantly shot by one of them with a revolver. It was eight P.M. when we got out of the saddle, and a pitch-dark night. Standing in front of the hacienda, a few dim flickering fires showed that some of the dissidents had halted at Estaca; but



our "exploradores" reported that their main body had turned to the right, and followed the direct road to Valle Purissima.

The village was almost deserted, and most of the houses strongly barred and locked up, so everybody set to work to break down doors, and find themselves a habitation for the night. It was none too soon to do so, for before we were fairly housed down came a mountain storm, rain in torrents, and it was past ten o'clock before the infantry and artillery were all in, tired out, and drenched to the skin.

That night we breakfasted between ten and eleven,—the only food we had had all day being the crusts of bread at Tankito, and a couple of bottles of wine, the thoughtful De Creny shared amongst us all. The men had had neither the time nor the opportunity to make their coffee, the baggage besides being always too far behind to make it possible to serve out the *goutte*; and now the heavy rain rendering it out of the question to light fires, and there not being enough accommodation to put many of them under shelter, the consequences were that very few got anything to eat but bread until the next morning.

They accepted the position very well, as French soldiers generally do, and by daylight, the weather having cleared up, the camp fires were soon alight; all the pigs and poultry about the neighbourhood

were hunted down, and in a few hours the men had cooked up and devoured that marvellous *soupe*, that they seemed capable of making even out of hedgestakes: their clothes were dried, their arms and accoutrements cleaned, and all of them eager to be off again in pursuit.

Exploradores\* were sent out before daylight, for it was evident that the Liberals, tired out and hunted as they were, could not move far. In fact, there were several shots fired at our outlying pickets during the night, proving that at any rate some of them must have bivouacked at no very great distance from us.

It turned out that a small party had gone across the mountains by way of Estaca, and that their main body had passed the night in a large barranca, crossing the road leading to Valle Purissima, about a league beyond Laca. An uncommonly wretched night they must have had, with the heavy rain pouring down in torrents,—no food, and no fires, after their day's ride.

The great question was which road they had eventually taken, for the country was entirely deserted, and it was impossible to get information.

\* "Exploradores"—picked men taken from the Partisan troops, chosen for their knowledge of the country, and mounted on the best horses. They were used as spies, or rather "feelers," on every occasion.



The probabilities appeared in favour of their having taken that to Valle Purissima, but still there was no reason why they should not have quitted it again further on, and joined the force at Soledad, across country.

At any rate, the mountains by Estaca were impracticable to us, so the General decided to march to Valle from there. Should they have gone to Soledad, there was a fair road by which we could follow their steps, and drive them into the valley of Potosi, from whence they would certainly not be able to interfere with the evacuation of Matehuala; for there was no secret made now of the object of the expedition, which was simply undertaken to clear the coast of the enemy before retiring again towards St. Luis Potosi.



SOLDIER.



EXPLORADORES.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## VALLE PURISSIMA.

THE sun came out bright and hot that Sunday morning at Laca, after the storm, soon drying up the mud, and giving new life to the men, who had passed a tolerably rough night.

About eight o'clock we started in two columns for Valle Purissima, the cavalry, under General Douay, by the road crossing the barranca, and the infantry, artillery, and baggage following the low ground, with orders to form a junction with us near Albarconas. A league from Laca we came upon