

III

THE SIEGE OF PUEBLA—GENERAL FOREY—GENERAL ORTEGA

THE news of the check sustained by the French at Puebla—a check to which the precarious condition of the army lent all the proportions of a serious defeat—was made public in France by means of a despatch sent from New York on June 14. The army was at once raised to twenty-five thousand men. The command-in-chief of this increased force was given to General Forey. He entered upon his official duties on October 25, 1862.¹

The new commander-in-chief, like those whom he was superseding, was under precise orders from the home government to be guided by M. de Saligny. Notwithstanding the disastrous consequences of his misrepresentations, the French minister, strangely enough, still retained his hold upon the Emperor and his advisers.

General Forey's instructions, given in a note from Napoleon dated July 3, 1862, were to bring

¹ General Forey commanded Sebastopol he commanded both the Fourth Division at the battle the Third and the Fourth, to which of Alma, in the Crimean war; at was intrusted the siege work.

The Siege of Puebla

about, through General Almonte, the convocation of an assembly of notables to decide upon the "form of government and the destinies of Mexico." Should the Mexicans prefer a monarchy, "it was in the interest of France to support them, and to indicate the Archduke Maximilian as the candidate of France."¹

On February 18, 1863, after wasting four precious months, at an enormous cost of money and prestige, General Forey appeared before Puebla.² The procrastination of the French commander had given the Mexican government time to elaborate the defense. General Zaragoza had died, in the full blaze of his glory, in the month of September. His successor, General Jesus Gonzalez Ortega, had now under his command a fairly organized army of twenty-two thousand men. The main trouble was the scarcity of arms. The guns were mostly old rejected muskets, and I was told that during the siege unarmed bodies of men waited to use the arms of the slain or wounded. But the place had been strongly fortified; this time it was to be war in earnest.

The town was built in blocks. Each block, fortified and defended by the besieged, must be fought for and carried by assault, at terrible cost of

¹ "La Vérité sur l'Expédition du Mexique, d'après les Documents Inédits d'Ernest Louët," etc. Edited by Paul Gaulot. Part I, "Rêve d'Empire," p. 91, 4th ed. (Paris).
extraordinary procrastination by complaining that the minister of war had failed to supply him with a sufficient amount of ammunition. See Colonel Loizillon, "Lettres sur l'Expédition du Mexique," p. 101.

² General Forey explained his

life on the part of the French, whose close ranks were fired upon with murderous effect from the roofs and windows on both sides of the streets.

The episodes of the contest recall those of the siege of Saragossa, when the Spaniards so fiercely resisted the French forces; only at Puebla the cruel struggle lasted two whole months.¹ To quote a French officer, it was "a noble defense, admirably organized."

The pulse of the capital now quickened under the influence of Puebla's sacrifice to the national honor. Every now and then a thrill of vindictive patriotism ran through the city and clamored for revenge. Already, before the celebration of the anniversary of the national independence (September 16, 1862), wild rumors of a contemplated wholesale slaughter of foreigners had run through the town, arousing among us fears of an impending catastrophe. The news had one day been brought us that the 16th was the date fixed for these new Sicilian Vespers, and all were warned to be watchful. The day, however, passed without any further demonstration of ill will than a few shots, and cries of "Mueran los Franceses!"

Much of this excitement had, of course, been fostered by the stirring proclamations of the government, issued with a proper desire to arouse into something like patriotic enthusiasm the apathy of a people accustomed to submit to the inevitable. There was no telling, however, to what extremes

¹ From March 18 to May 10, "Lettres sur l'Expédition du 1863. See Colonel Loizillon, Mexique," Paris, 1890.

might resort a populace composed of Indians and half-breeds, should it once become fully alive to the situation. To such a people geographical discrimination seemed a nicety; the issue was between them and the foreigners, and the words "French" and "foreigner" were at that time generally used as synonymous.

This was not all. When the fort of San Xavier was taken, and when began the frightful hand-to-hand fight in Puebla, the result of which was a foregone conclusion, the government announced its intention to defend the capital. The level of the lakes of Chalco and Tezcuco is above that of the city, and the flooding of the valley was regarded as an effective means of defense. This, of course, meant pestilence. The president resolutely declared that, should arms fail, the people must prolong the defense of the capital with their "teeth and nails"; and although there was no practical response among the people, a general and very genuine uneasiness pervaded the whole community.

It was a Mexican custom on Good Friday to burn Judas in effigy on the Plaza Mayor. Judas was a manikin made in the shape of the person who happened to be most unpopular at the time. It was quite admissible to burn Judas under different shapes, and sometimes these summary *autos da fe* were multiplied to suit the occasion and the temper of the people. At the same time, rattles were sold on the streets, and universally bought alike by children and adults, by rich and poor, to grind the bones of Judas; and the objectionable

Maximilian in Mexico

noise—second in hideousness only to that of our own sending off of fire-crackers on the Fourth of July—was religiously kept up all day. In the year of our Lord 1863 Judas was burned in Mexico on the Plaza Mayor under the shapes of General Forey, Napoleon III, and last, but not least, M. Dubois de Saligny, who especially was roasted with a will amid the wild execrations of the populace.

President Juarez had bent his whole energy upon the raising of an army of relief. He succeeded in getting together some ten thousand men, the command of whom he gave to General Comonfort. This had been no easy task. A general *leva* had been ordered, and all were mustered into the army who could be provided with arms. Of uniforms there was, of course, no mention. It was a supreme and desperate effort.

A convoy of supplies for the relief of General Ortega was also prepared, which it was hoped General Comonfort might succeed in throwing into the besieged city. He utterly failed, however; and his raw recruits having been routed at San Lorenzo¹ by General Bazaine (May 8), further resistance became hopeless. Puebla was lost. General Ortega faced the situation with a dignity worthy of his courageous defense of the town. He spiked his guns, blew up his magazines, disbanded the garrison, and, with his officers, surrendered on May 19.

The news fell like a knell upon the capital. As

¹ San Lorenzo is a village and road to Puebla passes about hacienda through which the main sixty-six miles from Mexico.

The Siege of Puebla

far as we were concerned, there seemed to be just then only a choice of evils. Either the government would await in Mexico the impending issue, and we must be exposed to all the unspeakable horrors of which Puebla had just been the scene, or the President and his administration would abandon the city, and an interval must follow during which we must be left exposed to mob law, or, should Marquez first take possession of the city, perhaps to pillage and bloodshed.

Meanwhile Congress had indefinitely adjourned, after conferring full and extraordinary powers upon Juarez. The president issued a proclamation announcing his firm resolve to continue the war. After this he prepared to leave the city and to retire to San Luis.

That night, while sitting in our drawing-room, we heard the dull, steady tramp of men marching, otherwise noiselessly, down the Calle de San Francisco toward the plaza; and looking out of the window, we saw the debris of the defeated Liberal army making its way through the city. A strange, weird sight they presented in the moonlight—these men whose sole equipment consisted of a musket and a cartridge-box slung over their white shirts. Most of them wore only loose *calzoneras*, and many, according to the Mexican custom, were accompanied by their women. Apparently undrilled, or, at least, tramping on with scarcely an attempt at order, and seen in the half-shadow cast by the houses upon the moonlit street, their loose ranks reminded one more of the immigration of

Maximilian in Mexico

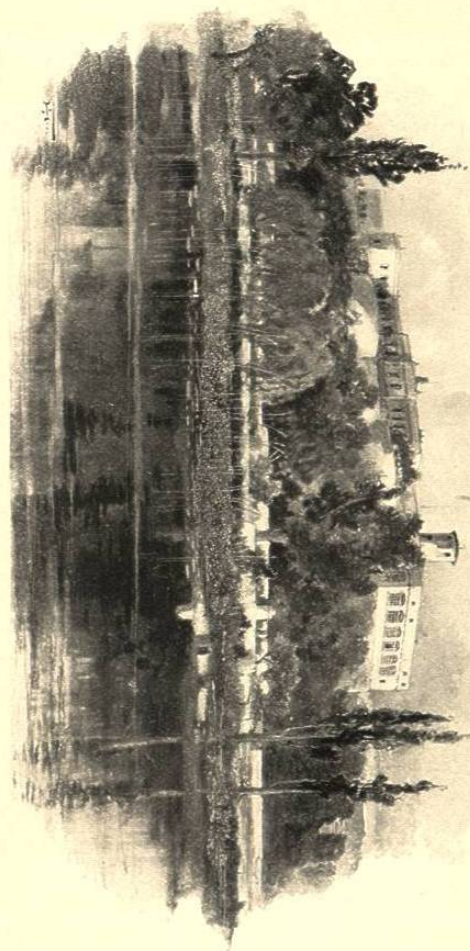
some ancient barbaric horde than of the march of a modern army.

I shall never forget the impressions of that night. The picturesqueness of the scene was not lessened by the element of personal interest that attached to it. What did this portend—this ragged remnant of a defeated army hurrying through the capital in the dead of night? Were the French approaching, driving it before them? Was it intended to garrison the city, and here to make the last stand in defense of the republic and of Mexican liberty? Or, on the contrary, was it beating a retreat into the interior of the country, making way for the advent of the foreigner and monarchy and priest rule?

The next day (May 31, 1863) an unusual stir was noticeable in the city. The air was all aglow with excitement. Horsemen were galloping in the streets leading pack-mules, and the sleepy town seemed full of bustle and animation. As we stood at our balcony, we saw many acquaintances, apparently equipped for a journey, speeding past, with a wave of the hand as a last farewell; and soon the attaché of the American legation dropped in with a message from Mr. Corwin to the effect that President Juarez and his government were leaving the city.

The exodus of the previous night was thus explained. The remnants of General Comonfort's and General Ortega's armies had fallen back to serve as an escort for the government in its flight. The city was now without an administration, without

CHAPULTEPEC, MAXIMILIAN'S PALACE.



The Siege of Puebla

a police, without an army. It was left unprotected, at the mercy of the mob or of the invader, and the serious question before us was how best to protect ourselves pending the arrival of the French forces.

The foreign representatives, fearing that the vanguard might be formed of the Mexican contingent under Marquez, and knowing the pitiless ferocity of the "Leopard," as the chieftain was called,¹ petitioned General Forey to send one of his divisions to take immediate possession of the capital. Meanwhile the foreign residents organized and formed themselves into mounted patrols, and although only seven hundred strong, they managed to maintain fair order.

Here and there ominous incidents occurred to show the necessity of such vigilance. A Frenchman was lassoed, and dragged through the streets by a small mob; another was shot in the head in front of our house, and, bleeding, took refuge in our patio. Upon inquiry, I was told that he had cried, "Vive la France!"

No one thought of retiring on that memorable night. From time to time a stray shot, a few shouting drunkards, or some other unwonted noise in the street, would excite our apprehension; then again, occasionally, some friend, passing with a patrol before our door, would step in and report that so far all was quiet.

Late that night, when at the window, listening in the stillness then reigning over the city, a distant but strangely familiar sound fell faintly upon my

¹ His name was Leonardo, from which came the sobriquet Leopard.

Maximilian in Mexico

to bear upon the fort at sufficiently close range to reach it. One fifth of the corps of attack was thus uselessly sacrificed.

Some months after these events (September, 1862) I witnessed in the city of Mexico the public obsequies of General Zaragoza,¹ whom this exploit had naturally placed high in the esteem of his countrymen. Upon the elevated catafalque, drawn by a long line of horses draped in black trappings, lay the stately coffin. Tossed at its feet was the French flag; banners, hung everywhere, inscribed with devices recalling his signal service to his country, proclaimed him "the conqueror of conquerors" (*el conquistador de los conquistadores*). The French, it was asserted, had measured themselves with and conquered all the nations of the world, and Zaragoza had conquered the French!

This day is proudly recorded in the Mexican annals as the Cinco de Mayo. The historic importance of a battle is not always to be measured by the numbers of the contending forces, and although its far-reaching significance was at the time scarcely understood, this check must ever be remembered by future historians as the first serious blow struck by fortune at Napoleon III and his fated empire. The honor of France was now involved and must be vindicated. There was no receding upon the dangerous path. No French sovereign could dare to withdraw without avenging the first check met

¹ Much of the credit for the weight of the assault upon the achievement was due to General Cerro de Guadalupe and pre-Negrete, whose command bore the vented its capture.



PORFIRIO DIAZ.

A Mexican general and statesman, born in 1830. He served in the war against the United States in 1847, against Santa Anna in 1854. During the French invasion he was one of the leaders of the defense. He became president in 1877, and except from 1880 to 1884 he has been president ever since, the constitution having been amended so that he could succeed himself.

Maximilian in Mexico

ear—very faintly; but never did the finest harmony born of Wagner's genius so fill a human soul with ecstasy. There was no mistaking it: it was a French bugle. The French were entering Mexico. We were safe, and now might go to bed.

IV

THE FRENCH IN THE CITY OF
MEXICO—THE REGENCY

THE next morning the town was swarming with red trousers, the wearers whereof were seeking quarters. From our balcony we saw, standing at the corner of the Calles de la Profesa and Espirito Santo, a little group of officers talking together in that half-earnest, half-distract manner so characteristic of men newly landed in a town, whose interest in every trifle gets the better of the topic under immediate consideration.

By their uniforms and demeanor we could judge that one was a general and the others were officers of various rank. As we appeared at the balcony there was a perceptible flutter among them, and some of them began to ogle us as only Frenchmen could whose eyes had not rested upon a white woman for several months. This incident, trifling as it seems, was to become the key-note of our future Mexican existence. The group of officers in quest of suitable quarters turned out to be General Bazaine and his staff, some of whom afterward became our warm friends.