

#### IV

### GENERAL CASTELNAU

THE dénouement was drawing near. On October 10 General Castelnau landed in Vera Cruz, on a special mission from Napoleon III. He was accompanied by the Comte de St. Sauveur, his *officier d'ordonnance*, and by the Marquis de Gallifet.

His arrival created considerable excitement and some anxiety, not only at the palace, where Maximilian was expecting news from France much as a man awaits his sentence, but also at the quartier-général.

Information had come that the course taken by the marshal had not proved satisfactory to Napoleon. It was whispered that he had not shown sufficient zeal in the task required of him under the new policy; that his sovereign was seriously annoyed at what he conceived to be wilful procrastination in the withdrawal of the army; and that he was now sending his own aide-de-camp to cut the Gordian knot in the tangled skein of Mexican politics.

The marshal's popularity in his command was no longer what it had been. The intrigues carried on

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both in France and in Mexico, with the purpose of setting up General Douay in his place, had resulted in ill feeling that had been turned to account by the Mexican Imperialists.

There were those in the army who did not fear to impute unworthy motives to the commander-in-chief's actions. His Mexican marriage had not added to his prestige among the French. It was hinted that his lenient dealings with the empire and with Maximilian were due to the fact that the handsome property at San Cosme must be left behind in the event of his return to France; and even worse calumnies, too ill founded to mention, were circulated with regard to the selfishness of his policy.

The fact that General Castelnau, who found himself intrusted with superior powers, extending, if necessary, even to the actual superseding of the commander-in-chief, was, from the military standpoint, the marshal's subordinate, seemed likely to add considerably to the chance of new difficulties.

Meanwhile the general seemed in no hurry to enter upon his thankless mission. Unmindful of the natural suspense of those who were awaiting him, he and his little party traveled leisurely. A martyr to the gout, he lingered on his way, no doubt making good use of his time as he went for the study of the situation which he was called upon to clear up. A fortnight thus elapsed before he approached the capital.

Serious events had taken place during his journey from the coast which at first seemed somewhat

to simplify the difficulties of his mission; and upon his arrival in the capital affairs had reached an acute crisis which men cleverer than himself and his colleagues, working in harmony, might perhaps have turned to favorable account for France.

On October 18, three days before General Castelnau reached the capital, a telegram, sent from Miramar via New York by the Comte de Bombelles, brought to Chapultepec the news of the illness of Empress Charlotte. This last blow fell with crushing weight upon the suffering Emperor. This was about the time when the return of the Empress was expected, and he had made his plans to travel toward the coast to meet her on her homeward journey. Some days earlier Colonel Kodolitch and his Austrian hussars had been summoned to the capital to form his body-guard. Maximilian now at once resolved to leave Chapultepec, and to retire to Orizaba.

As soon as this was known, an uneasy feeling spread over Mexico caused by a rumor that the empire was at an end, and that Maximilian was leaving the city, never to return. The result was a panic. The new cabinet and other clerical leaders flocked to the castle to get some assurance as to the Emperor's intentions; but he was ill, and denied himself to all visitors, even to the Princess Iturbide, who, it is said,<sup>1</sup> resented the slight in violent language.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Basch, "Maximilien au Mexique," p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> In 1866, the imperial couple being childless, Maximilian be-

The ministers, terror-stricken at the thought of being left alone to face a revolution, tendered their resignation in a body; and Señor Lares declared that if the Emperor left the city there would no longer be a government.

Looking back upon the event, it would now seem that by threatening the ministers with summary measures if they did not reconsider their decision, Marshal Bazaine had lost his one opportunity to clear the tables for a new "deal," and thus become master of the situation. But it is only fair to state that the conditions were bewildering. The concentration of the army had not been perfected, and scattered detachments were still at considerable distances. Rumors of Sicilian Vespers once more floated in the air. The exasperation of the clerical party against the French was now far more violent than that of the Liberals. Indeed, it seemed difficult to calculate the extent of the conflagration which a single spark might kindle. Moreover, no one then doubted Maximilian's resolve to abdicate. To-day, however, it would seem that by stemming the torrent at this time Marshal Bazaine defeated

child, a mere infant, became the basis of a remarkable agreement which excited much comment.

By the terms of this contract, and for certain important pecuniary considerations, the uncles, aunt, and father of the boy agreed that the Iturbide family, including the parents, should leave the country, and that Maximilian should become the guardian of

the child, the aunt, Doña Josefa Iturbide, the masterful mind of the family, remaining as his governess. The consent of the mother was wrenched from her, and the contract was duly signed. Its execution was not carried out without considerable resistance on the part of Princess Iturbide who, however, was finally sent out of the country.

his own end. This may fairly be inferred from the part played by the priest Fischer in the transaction.

Father Fischer was an obscure adventurer of low degree, and of more than shady reputation, whose shrewdness and talent for intrigue had impressed themselves upon the weakened mind of the Emperor in the latter days of his reign. Utterly unscrupulous, with everything to gain for himself and his party, and with absolutely nothing to lose but a life which he took good care to save by avoiding danger, he insinuated himself into the confidence of Maximilian, and became the Mephistopheles of the last act in the Mexican drama. Having but recently risen to the confidential position he now occupied near the person of the Emperor, the latter's abdication was obviously against his interests. When the ministers threatened to resign, he is stated to have represented to them that their action was likely to precipitate the catastrophe which they sought to avoid; that by such a demonstration of their own helplessness they must only confirm the Emperor's determination; and he persuaded them that if the Emperor were not allowed temporarily to retire to Orizaba he might without further delay return to Europe.

It is claimed by Dr. Basch<sup>1</sup> that the priest's arguments had as much to do with bringing the ministers to resume their portfolios as the marshal's firmness. However this may be, the crisis was avoided. On October 2, Maximilian, Señor Arroyo, Father Fischer, Dr. Basch, and Councilor

<sup>1</sup> See Basch, *loc. cit.*, p. 64.

Hertzel, under the escort of Colonel Kodolitch and his Austro-Hungarian regiment, started from Chapultepec at three o'clock in the morning. There was no doubt in any one's mind that his departure for Orizaba was the first relay in the Emperor's journey to the coast.

There is something profoundly pathetic in this chapter of his life. It forms a fitting introduction to that tragedy the threatening outline of which even then faintly appeared upon the horizon as a dreadful possibility.

The friends whose society had enlivened the earlier days of his reign in his adopted land were now scattered like straws at the first approach of the cyclone. The Empress had gone upon her hopeless mission, never to return; and the faithful Comte de Bombelles was with her to advise and protect. Court and political intrigues had loosened the bond that had united the Emperor to the great clerical leaders who had made the empire.

Whatever his dreams may have been, the reality was pitiful. The gilding thinly spread over the Mexican crown had worn off; the glitter had disappeared. The treasury was empty, courtiers were now few, and the successor of the Montezumas, the descendant of the Hapsburgs, the popular archduke, the Austrian admiral, was now reduced to the intimacy of a corrupt adventurer in priestly garb, who had stolen into his confidence upon the shortest acquaintance, and of his German physician, Dr. Basch, whom he had known only one month. These two, with his still faithful followers, the coun-

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cilor Hertzell and the naturalist Bilimek, were his only confidential advisers during the terrible crisis upon the issue of which depended life and fame.

It so happened that, a day or two after the Emperor's departure, as we were passing Chapultepec on horseback, a friend invited us to enter the palace to look at the costly improvements made in the last two years by the Emperor. While there we were shown the private apartments. No one had as yet straightened out the place. A certain disorder still reigned, as though the imperial inmate had just left. His clothes hung in open closets, and the condition of the rooms betokened a hasty departure, and formed a dramatic *mise en scène* for the opening of the last act of his life.

A coincidence brought General Castelnau and his party to Ayotla, on their way to the capital, as the Emperor and his escort stopped there for breakfast. Maximilian, however, refused to see the envoy. It is said that he even declined to see Captain Pierron, his own secretary, then traveling with the general.

At this time the unfortunate prince seemed utterly crushed under the repeated blows dealt him by fate. According to his physician, then his daily companion, his imagination showed him his own conduct as a noble effort to regenerate the country by the establishment of an empire resting upon the will of the nation. This effort had been frustrated "by the resistance of the Mexicans [!] and the vexations of the French."

The journey was a dreary one. The Emperor



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most of the time remained silent. On the way he generally accepted the hospitality of priests.

A certain apprehension was felt as to his safety, and the road was well guarded, as it was feared that he might be kidnapped. That such fears were not wholly unfounded was proved by an incident which took place at Aculzingo. After a short halt, when the imperial party was about to proceed on its journey, it was discovered with dismay that the eight white mules forming the Emperor's team had been stolen.

At Orizaba he received his last ovation; but these public demonstrations had lost their charm. He withdrew to the house of Señor Bringas, a violent reactionary, most inimical to the French. There he denied himself to every one. Of his military household he retained only two Mexican officers—Colonel Ormachea and Colonel Lamadrid. Later he retired to the hacienda of Jalapilla. While here even letters were not sure to reach him. His correspondence passed through interested hands, and was sifted under prying eyes, before being placed before him. No one was allowed to see him without the knowledge of the priest, who was rapidly obtaining over him an influence that was to lead him to his death. Those who approached him at this time reported him as completely under the influence, almost in the custody, of Father Fischer.

So complete was his mental collapse that it was said, and by some believed, that during their residence at Cuernavaca, prior to the departure of the

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Empress, a subtle poison known to the Indians of that region, and the action of which was through the brain, had been administered to the imperial couple.<sup>1</sup>

The condition of the Empress, the prolonged fits of depression to which Maximilian was subject when he resolved to remove his residence to Orizaba, away from the presence of his hated allies, his extreme listlessness, which betrayed itself in the carelessness of his attire and in his lapses of etiquette and of memory, gave color to the report. But there was quite enough in the unfortunate prince's situation to account for the abnormal condition of his mind without having recourse to romantic fancies.

All this time the Austrian frigate *Elizabeth* was at anchor off Vera Cruz, awaiting his pleasure, ready to take him back to Trieste, and part of his baggage was already on board.

His own countrymen looked upon the game as lost. The empire, which for some time had been caving in at the center, was now everywhere crumbling at the edges. Only the most unblushing personal interest could advise, and the most inconsistent folly consider, the retaining of a crown which, under circumstances even less inauspicious, he had only a short time before wisely resolved to surrender.

Unsuccessful in his attempt to govern with

<sup>1</sup> An attempt is said to have been made upon his life in July, 1866. The affair was hushed up, but is said to have made a deep impression on his mind. See D'Héricault, "Maximilien et le Mexique: Histoire des Derniers Mois de l'Empire du Mexique," pp. 29, 54.

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French financial and military support, how could he contemplate reigning alone, without allies, money, or credit? The mere thought seemed madness. After insisting upon a plebiscite to sanction his reign, how could he honorably remain now that the country in arms was everywhere falling away from his standard?

On November 6 the rumor of his abdication was circulated in New York; and the London "Post" and "Star" published it as a fact. But intrigue and folly prevailed.

It has been claimed that a communication from his former secretary, the Belgian Eloin, now his agent abroad, had a decisive effect upon his final resolution. In this letter, since published by M. de Kératry, M. Eloin warned Maximilian against affording the French an easy way out of their difficulties by yielding to General Castelnau's wiles. He urged upon the Emperor the maintaining of the empire after the departure of the foreigners, a free appeal to the Mexican nation for the material means of sustaining himself, and, in case of failure, the return of the crown to the people who gave it. Thus, and thus alone, in the opinion of the secretary, could the Emperor return with credit to Europe, with an untarnished fame, and "play the part which belonged to him in every respect in the important events that could not fail to occur" in Austria.

The hints at the general dissatisfaction with the present order of things at home, at the discouragement of Emperor Francis Joseph, at the popularity

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of Maximilian both in his native country and in Venetia, show that, in the mind of his secretary at least, the possibilities of Maximilian's political career were by no means confined to the sovereignty of Mexico. In reading this remarkable letter, one's mind involuntarily turns to the family scene enacted at Miramar, when Maximilian, compelled by his brother to renounce his rights to the Austrian throne, clung to them with a tenacity that seriously loosened the close bond that hitherto had united the two men.

This letter also explains the insistence of Francis Joseph, through his ambassador Baron de Lago, when the possibility of his brother's return was discussed, that Maximilian, once upon Austrian soil, should drop the imperial title.<sup>1</sup> However this may be, from this time Maximilian's mind seemed made up. He determined to risk his all upon the promises of the clerical leaders.

General Castelnau and his party arrived in the capital on October 21, 1866. A few days after their arrival, Mme. Magnan invited a number of us to take supper at her house, after the opera, to meet the newcomers.

The general was a tall, middle-aged man of prepossessing mien and soldierly bearing. A charming talker, his manners were those of one accustomed to the best society. He readily fell into our easy life.

<sup>1</sup> Compare "L'Empire de Maximilien," M. de Kératry, p. 220. It has been stated by M. Domech ("Histoire du Mexique," Europe yet.

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He constantly invited us to his box at the opera, and at first arranged pleasant parties; but later, when the gravity of the situation weighed upon him, and his health suffered under it, while he often placed the box at our disposal, he came to it only when equal to the exertion.

Notwithstanding many admirable qualities, the general was scarcely strong enough for the part which he was called upon to play. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how any representative of the Emperor of the French, at this stage, could have assumed control of events. Looking back upon it now, it would seem as though, under existing conditions, arbitration alone could have stemmed the current of human passion then hurrying all involved toward the final catastrophe.

The knowledge that Napoleon III, who had set up his throne, was now in accord with the United States government and with the Liberal leaders to tear it from under him, stung Maximilian to the quick. He not unnaturally felt a strong desire to remain a stumbling-block in the way of negotiations which to him seemed treacherous and infamous. When General Castelnau arrived he was hesitating. The presence of Napoleon's aide-de-camp was not calculated to soothe his feelings. The return of General Miramon and General Marquez at this crisis again turned the tide of events.

These men, formerly set aside through French influence, felt a resentment which added strength to their party feeling. The confidence of the Emperor in their ability once more to rally the people