PORFIRIO DIAZ,

SEVEN TIMES PRESIDENT OF MEXICO.

CHAPTER I.

BEGINNING OF A GREAT CAREER.

One of the most remarkable traits in the character of Porfirio Diaz, President of Mexico, is his modesty, and yet he is the greatest figure in modern history.

Egotism is the prevailing sin of success. This is not so in his case, for he does not appear to think he has accomplished anything. His aims are so high; he feels that he has never reached his goal.

Porfirio Diaz was born September 15th, 1830, so that when I first saw him in his own capital in 1900, he was seventy, but he appeared years less, and on my return to Mexico in the winter of 1904, I found him looking even younger. He is a marvellously juvenile veteran, all the more surprising in a land where youth is short, old age is long.

His position is absolutely unique in the world's history, for although President of a Republic, he has *reigned* for a quarter of a century. His will is all powerful, as great, in fact, as that of the Tsar and Pope combined. He is a monarchical, yet a democratic, ruler. He controls millions of people with a hand of iron; still they love him. Some say he is a despot, but his is a despotism tempered with justice, and at the same time he leads the unassuming life of a private gentleman. He walks or rides unattended in the quieter parts of Mexico City, where only a few years ago no ordinary individual dared go alone, and few

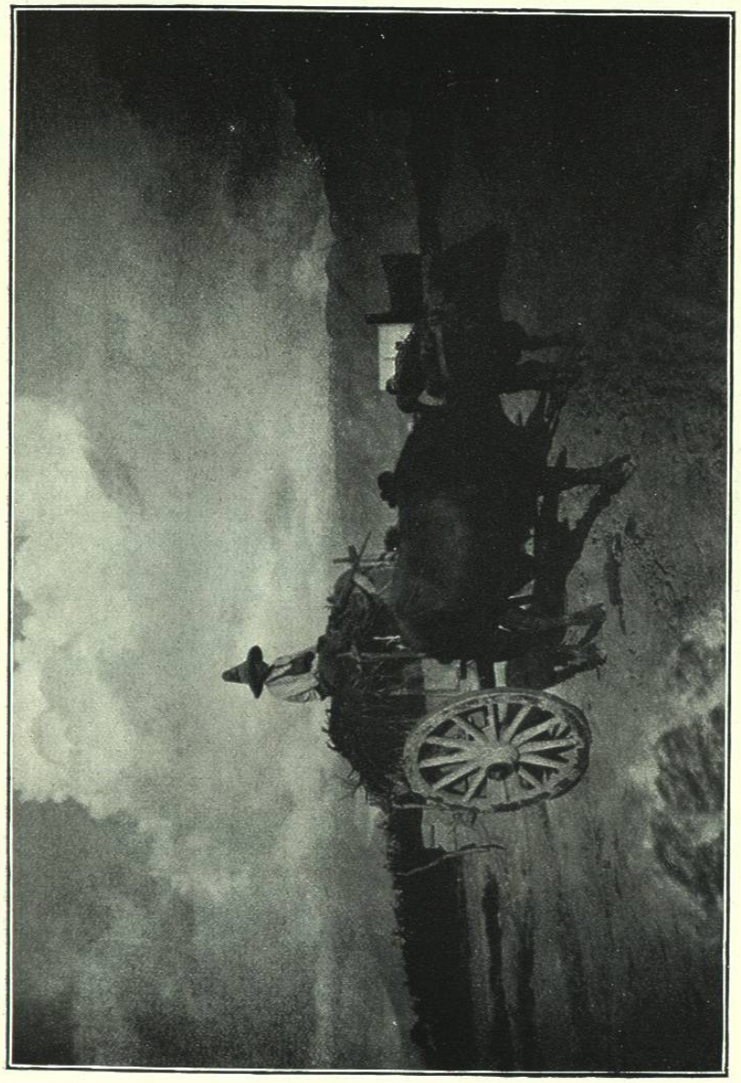
went about unarmed. He strolls alone in the neighbourhood of his summer castle at Chapultepec, cares nothing for pomp in his daily life, and plays to perfection the *rôle* of a simple, home-loving citizen. He is not a rich man; his yearly income from the State is only $50,000 (about £5,000 sterling), or half that of the Lord Mayor of London. Want of means is sometimes inconvenient in life, but it does not engender such hatred as wealth. His only extravagance is in the cause of charity.

It is because Diaz has risen from the bottom rung of the ladder to the very top, and against such odds, that he stands forth as the greatest man of the nineteenth century. Of course, there were other great men in the nineteenth century—men such as Bismarck, or, of humbler origin, Garibaldi or Abraham Lincoln. Wonderful as were their achievements, none of them retained the head of affairs of State for well nigh thirty years. They did not drag their land from oblivion, its resources from bankruptcy, teach outlaws peace—in fact, make a nation and a prosperous country out of chaos, alone and unaided, in a quarter of a century, as Diaz has done.

His life has been a long romance; an early struggle for existence, war and strife, wounds so severe that several times death seemed imminent; imprisonment, dangerous escapes, military success, and then what has become a perpetual Presidentship—all these events have followed in quick succession in the career of this extraordinary personality.

On his father's side he comes of a good family, but being a Republican he thinks little of that, and is almost more proud of his grandmother, an Indian woman of the Mixteco tribe, one of the finest aboriginal races of Mexico.

Diaz' father, José Faustino Diaz, kept a little inn at Oaxaca (pronounced O–ah–uack–ah), the capital of the State of that name in Southern Mexico, and here the President and six other children were born. His native town became in after life the scene of some of the most important of his military exploits. Three years after the birth of Porfirio his father died of cholera, and the mother was left with her young family and limited means to battle with the world. The daily struggle to provide



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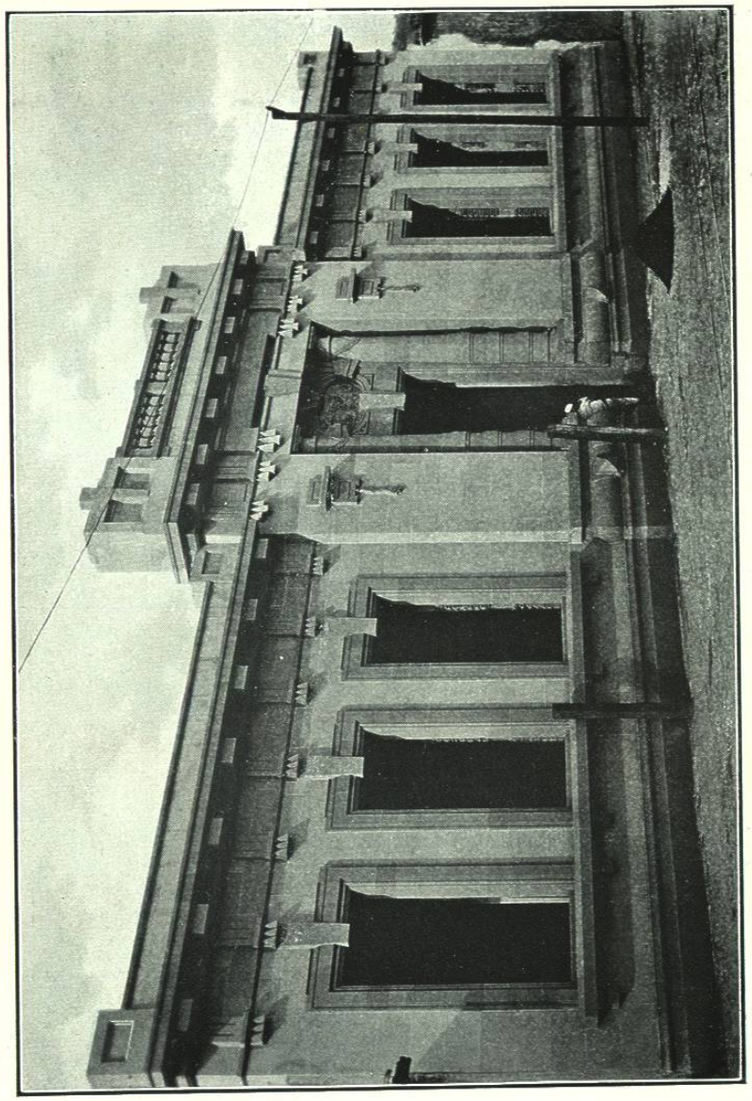
Driving home.—An ox-cart in Oaxaca.

Photo by RAVELL.]



Exterior of the house where General Diaz was born, Oaxaca. [*Page 3.*

food and clothing for her children was great, but, being a brave, clever woman, she succeeded.

The house where Diaz was born has long since been swept away. It has, however, been replaced by one after his own heart, viz., a school known as the "Escuela Porfirio Diaz." This home of learning was built with Government funds, and is maintained by the same resources as a compliment to the President, who in his advanced years so much regrets the want of better education in his youth that he is unceasing in his endeavours to teach the populace.

There are still one or two people in Oaxaca who remember Diaz as a boy, and how he loved playing at soldiers. His home was near the convent of La Soledad, so named after the patron saint of the town, on whose feast day it has long been a custom to allow people to fire pistols or other firearms by way of expressing joy.

For weeks before the fête of La Soledad the boy saved his centavos, and going on to the roof of their family homestead he fired off his pistols and watched the smoke rise into the stillness of the night. Roofs in these semi-tropical regions are generally flat, and little parties are entertained on the house-tops, where the family often sleep in the hot weather.

The fête of La Soledad is remembered even to-day by Diaz as one of his great annual treats.

Until he was seven years old, Porfirio, a mischievous boy, went to the village primary school. At fourteen he joined the free school of the Roman Catholic Seminary, with the intention of entering the Church later on, this being his mother's dearest wish. The Bishop of Oaxaca—who was his godfather and a relative of his mother—was also strongly imbued with this idea. Education was even at that time free, a custom so universal in Mexico to-day that the military student obtains his training in the schools without fees. The cadets, however, are afterwards obliged to serve four years, and if a youth does not care to work out his time, then he must pay for the education he has already received. Schooling, although free, was not compulsory in those early days of the President's youth.

"And so," said General Diaz, with that merry twinkle he often gets in his eyes, "I am afraid I often missed school and played truant in the fields instead. I had several little friends, and our greatest joy was to get on to the top of one of the ore carts returning from the mines, and have a ride. Bullocks dragged the same lumbering old carts then as now, with the same solid wheels, made from the whole transverse section of a tree, but we boys thought ourselves kings, and the carts the finest coaches in the world, while the oxen stirred up the dust as they slowly trudged to the market-place."

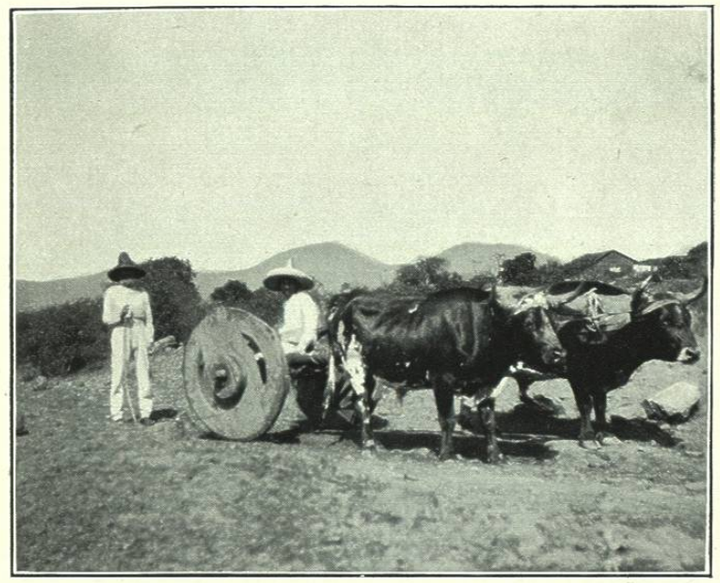
Or they loved to follow the turkey vendor, who even to-day walks through the towns with his little flock, calling out: "*Vendedor de guajolotes?*" (Who'll buy my turkeys?), as the muffin man cries his wares in London, or the fish-wife in Edinburgh.

Turkeys are indigenous to Mexico, and the national "party-dish" is *mole de guajalote*, or turkey stewed with peppers and many spices, but that was a luxury unknown to young Porfirio in these childhood days. It is a pretty sight to see the turkey herd with his flock, and the housewives coming out to choose their bird and carry it off kicking and screeching to fatten in a pen till wanted. Diaz and his companions had fine fun catching the turkeys and carrying home the housewives' purchases.

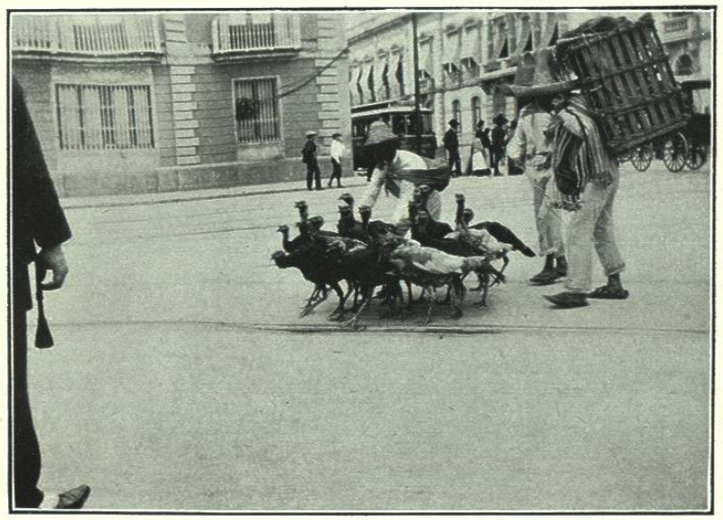
As Porfirio grew older, being of an independent spirit, he earned a small sum by teaching, with a portion of which money he was able to pay for preliminary studies in Latin grammar, logic and philosophy (subjects necessary for all professional careers), and to help his mother with the little surplus. That "the boy is father of the man" was, indeed, proved in his early career. Young Diaz from the first showed his ability of imparting and gaining knowledge at the same time, which power has stood him in good stead through life.

The President speaks charmingly of his mother.

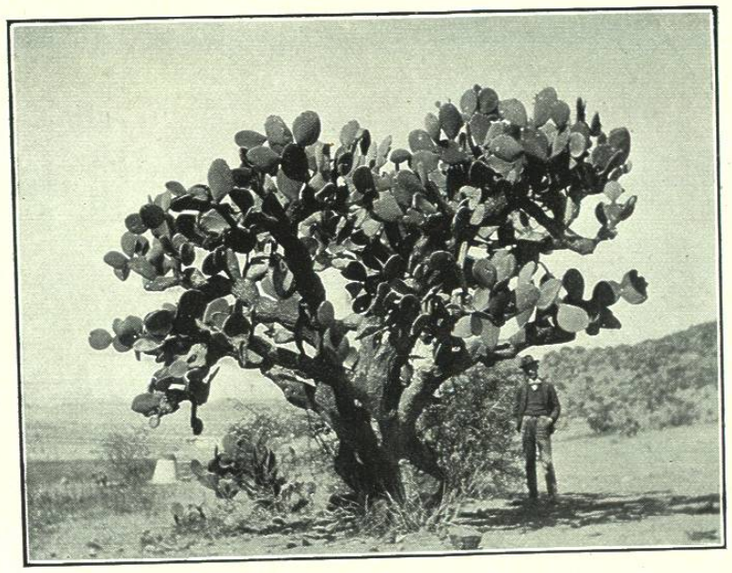
"We were very poor after my father died. She was still a young woman, and she had seven children, so her hands were full. I am afraid my brother Félix and I were naughty, mischievous boys. We used to climb trees or scramble through the prickly pear hedges and tear our clothes to ribbons—in fact,



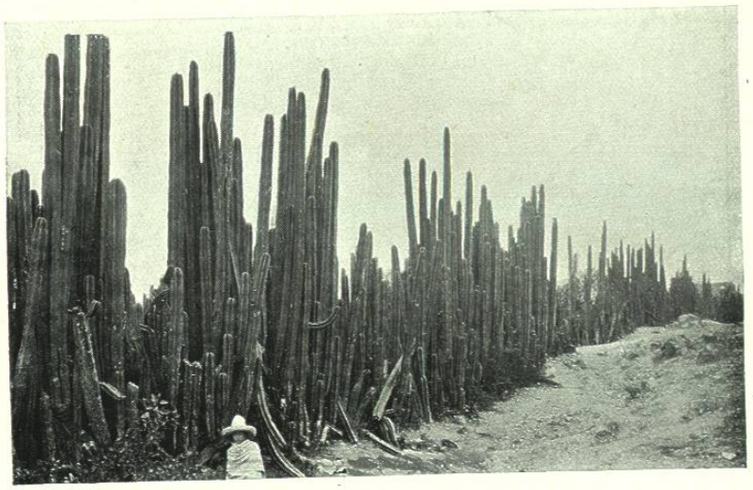
An ore cart, Oaxaca, showing solid wheels.



The turkey vendor.



Prickly pear (Tuna).



Organ cactus.

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there was no form of villainy we boys did not enjoy; but my mother was always kind, always hard-working, doing her best to keep us clean and tidy and well-behaved. Poor mother!"

In that quaint little township of Oaxaca we can imagine those seven children running wild. The climate is almost tropical. Cactus hedges and aloes, to say nothing of three-inch thorns, are merciless with children's clothes, especially in a land where life is spent almost entirely out of doors. That good mother must have been continually mending and darning to keep all her unruly offspring tidy.

They were up at the break of day, and before going off to school had breakfast of coffee and tortillas. Tortillas are the staple food of the country; they are pancakes made from maize, which is indigenous to Mexico.

"My mother," said Diaz, "was a very devout Catholic, and the Bishop of Oaxaca was not only her relative but her *compadre*, being my godfather."

Now a *compadre* is a very serious relationship in Mexico; it stands next to a parent, and before brothers, sisters, or other relatives. Therefore the Bishop felt keenly his responsibilities towards young Porfirio. A godfather is styled *padrino*, a god-mother *madrina*, and they are *compadres* to the child's parents. These *compadres* become spiritually related to the parents, wedded, so to speak, by the bonds of the Church. God-parents look upon their office as a sacred one; they take the spiritual life of the child in their hands, and if the parents die, often fill their place towards the god-child.

Up to the time of Cortéz (1519) it was quite common for parents to sacrifice their newly-born babes; but these days have long gone by, and it is the duty of *compadres* to look after the children if the parents in any way fail; so *compadres* play an important part in the life of every home, and the welfare of every child.

"As my father was dead," continued General Diaz, "the Bishop naturally felt he must take particular interest in my welfare. He and my mother, as *compadres*, put their wise heads together and decided that the most profitable thing to do

was to put me into the Church. One fine day I was told of this decision. I said nothing ; they talked ; still I said nothing ; still they argued ; until finally I screwed up courage to utter one word.

" ' Impossible ! '

" The Bishop was angry. A terrible scene ensued. The poor old man waxed warm, told me I was a fool ; that the Church was the profession of a gentleman, and a sure means of board and lodging ; assured me that if I did not follow his advice I might not have enough centavos to buy tortillas, and would end in a pauper's grave.

" My mother was sad. Tears rolled from her eyes when I stoutly maintained that it was an impossible career for me ; so upset was she, indeed, that I weakly suggested I would think it over if they gave me time. She rose and took me in her arms, and that mother's kiss made me feel a grievous deceiver. For months and months she used to argue with me on the spiritual advantages of the Church. But it was of no avail. I never had the slightest inclination that way, and to show how opposed I was, I took with renewed vigour to teaching as a means of educating myself, and to help my mother. Time wore on ; again and again the Church was referred to, and even to-day I can vividly remember what a brute I felt to go against those dear old people, and how I argued with myself that my life would be longer than theirs, so I must carve it out my own way."

Then for many months the boy followed his own bent, and forgot all about the Church in his interest in his work, and in listening to stories of revolution and war which reached Oaxaca from time to time.

The priests would not, however, let him alone. They felt that in Porfirio Diaz they had to do with no ordinary lad, and realised that his talent and forceful character might prove of service to the Church. Their influence in Mexico, which up to then had been practically unbounded, was becoming a little less secure. It was necessary for the welfare of the Catholic faith to enrol in its defence young men who gave promise of future strength and power. They offered him a scholarship

when he was nineteen years of age, on condition that he would take minor Orders. He thanked them, but refused.

All idea of entering the Church was over ; he would never again listen even to his mother's entreaties or to his *padrino's* (the Bishop's) prayers. Long hours were spent by his elders in striving to show him the many reasons why he should become a priest, but he was deaf to all entreaties. Circumstances and learning had only strengthened his determination not to take Holy Orders. All his inclinations tended towards being a soldier and fighting for his country, which at that time was torn by revolution and internal struggles.

Of course, troops were continually passing through Oaxaca, and the young student used to slip off in the evening to join them round the camp fires, where he would follow open-mouthed the tales of valour and strife that made the blood tingle in his veins, and first inspired him with a desire to follow a military career.

As he listened to those stories and heard how the colonel urged on his men, how the colonel planned and schemed and finally attained his end ; how, in fact, the colonel of the regiment was everybody and everything, he wove dreams in the night and in imagination saw himself some day as colonel. Ah, but could he, the poor simple boy, ever rise step by step in the army and some day lead his regiment, some day help in the making of Mexican history, some day be of use to the land of his birth, the land he loved with all the ardour of youth, as he now loves it with the strength of maturity ?

To be a colonel was in those days the highest ambition he ever wished to attain. Such a position seemed far beyond the realms of possibility. The profession of the law, not arms, however, was that in which he was destined to spend his youthful years. There were no newspapers at that time, but the stories retailed by the soldiers inspired him with longing for a more romantic career than ever the law could afford him.

Under those glorious Mexican skies, when the moon was straight above his head, and he made a shadow no bigger than the breadth of his own shoulders, the boy listened. His heart beat

the faster as he heard yarns of plunder and pillage, of murder and strife, and the flickering flames from the little camp fires made of kindling wood and charcoal, burning in an Indian pot, played on his features, which were illumined by the enthusiasm of youth as much as, or more than, by the tiny blaze. The cayotes (prairie wolves) howled in the hills, the grasshoppers kept up their incessant chatter; weird little beetles that beat a small drum under their chests added to nature's noises; flocks of parrots were common; blue, red and green macaws flew overhead; humming-birds, beautiful but songless, darted ceaselessly about. The stars trembled high in the heavens in that blue-black tropical sky, as the boy dreamed of Mexico's future, and longed to join in the fray for independence. Life would be deadly were it not for its illusions.

All boys love stories of adventure, but few live in the midst of the very scenes that make history or lay the foundations of romance. Those were stirring days in Mexico. No soldier knew if he would live to see the morrow, and existence was literally a hand-to-mouth affair. Hardships from heat and cold, exhaustion from long, fatiguing marches, and want of food and water were all endured in turn. It was a thrilling and exciting life, and young Porfirio loved every hour he passed round the camp fires.

His youth was spent in hard work; but in hours stolen from his desk he used to attend the cock-fights, especially on Sundays. There was no bull ring in Oaxaca, so these were the chief amusement of the people after Mass. Even to-day they are very general. Sometimes they are held in cock-pits, when the performance is watched by a paying crowd, and blade-like spurs are put upon the cocks' feet. Then the birds are really valuable, and in their way are tended as carefully as racehorses, but more commonly cock-fights among the Indians are made up at any street corner, and the stake is merely a few centavos.

Diaz, when still very young, was doomed to lead the drab life of a lawyer, and therefore had to put all dreams of a soldier's career aside. To a lad of his roving disposition the sacrifice must have been a great one; its full extent none but himself

could know; but his first duty was to earn money to assist his widowed mother and her family, and the determination which kept him for some years wedded to his original plans showed the earliest development of that strong character which has become so pronounced in after life. Adversity is the touchstone of character. It is not in wealth, but in poverty, that hidden powers bear fruit.

Although his life is a long story of romance and adventure, and serious difficulties ably overcome, before describing his career in more minute detail it may be well to give a short personal sketch of the President of Mexico as he is to-day. General Diaz is not only possessed of strong character and iron will, but has shown his power as one of the greatest rulers in history. In that capacity he assumes a giant's strength, and yet retains the love and veneration of his people. Indeed, one of the most eminent men in Mexico writes, in a letter lately received:

"I am sure that as long as General Diaz lives the people of Mexico will never have anyone else as their President. Every day we love him more and more; and, thanks be to God, he keeps in such good health that he looks younger and younger."

It has been my privilege to meet many interesting personalities within the last few years, but no one has impressed me more forcibly as a man of grit and power than General Diaz, whose guest for some time on two occasions I had the honour to be. The more I saw of him during the many months I spent in his country, the more I admired him; the more I heard of him the more I realised what a wonderful man he is.

To sum up his career in a few chapters is difficult—as difficult as it is to find a precedent for his position—for although Mexico is a Republic and General Diaz merely a President, he has governed for over a quarter of a century. His lightest word is a command.

In December, 1904, he commenced his seventh term of office.

As I said before, he is a monarchical, yet a democratic, ruler. Those millions of people over whom he "reigns" are at peace with themselves, and at peace with the world; and yet when he ascended his "throne" they were neither. There had been

fifty-two dictators, presidents, and rulers in fifty-nine years. Revolution filled the air; civil war was rife; Maximilian struggling for Imperial power, a foreigner in a strange land; Juárez, overthrowing the all-powerful Catholic Church, confiscating the wealth of the priests and demolishing their religious houses; while Santa Anna was still a name to be dealt with—in the midst of all this turmoil and excitement young Diaz was fighting for his country.

Where so many had failed he succeeded. It was in November, 1876, that General Diaz was first elected President of Mexico, an office which he will never be allowed to vacate until death takes him from the scene of his labours. He was once out of power for four years, it being only possible at that time to hold the post of President for such a term; but a *compadre* of his own took his place for the time being.

After he entered the army, where he rose steadily and surely, he many times nearly lost his life; he went through adventures such as few men have experienced, for bloodshed of the most cruel kind was then by no means uncommon in Mexico. He rose to the rank of General, and at the age of forty-six became President of his country. Diaz realised that Mexico wanted a strong man in her ruler. He knew revolution must be peremptorily stamped out if the land were ever to be peaceful and prosperous. He has succeeded so marvellously that he can hardly realise his own success.

Although General Diaz holds such a remarkable position, he remains a simple, kindly man. He rises early, like most people in hot climates, only taking a cup of coffee for his breakfast, and gets through a vast amount of work, both at home and at the Palace, before the midday meal, which is a great institution in Mexico.

Nearly every one takes a siesta in the afternoon. Not so the President. Although he does no official work, so as to give his secretaries and Ministers a rest, he employs those hours when the sun is hottest in more personal matters.

All the latest telegrams received by the English-American newspaper are translated into Spanish for the President daily—

nay, hourly. Nothing passes in this great world that he does not know about. He is a modern of the moderns; and as soon as he hears of a new invention, manufacture, or scientific discovery, he at once sends able representatives to inquire into the matter, and report fully to him. That is why Mexico is so up-to-date. More than that, his position is so unique that whatever he decides is for the good of the country can practically be done at once. He is not hampered by endless snail-like Royal Commissions, but can carry a thing to completion while another nation is merely thinking about it.

Mexico is a country with vast mineral and agricultural possibilities. There are to-day many thousands of miles of railway traversing that immense land, which is two thousand miles in length, or about as long as from Iceland to Northern Africa. Ports and harbours are being opened, and the home of the ancient Aztecs still goes on advancing. All this success and prosperity is due to General Diaz.

In appearance he is a short man, though his height of five feet eight inches is tall for a Mexican; he is solidly built, with soldierly bearing and courtly manners. He has deep-set, dark eyes, with heavy brows, white, closely-cut hair, a bushy white moustache, and bright complexion, for his skin is hardly even swarthy. He has a deep, melodious voice; and, although somewhat silent by nature and serious by habit, he possesses a keen sense of humour, and thoroughly enjoys a joke. He is simple in his ways, and yet at times assumes a stately air, and expects great deference from his people on ceremonial occasions.

Most men of seventy-five show their age. They are deaf; not he. They are a little blind; not he, for rarely he puts on glasses even to read; they stoop and get hollow between the shoulders; not he, he is upright and square; they are inclined to drag their feet and assume a shuffling gait; not he, he will walk for miles and for hours after game without showing fatigue. Diaz is like an energetic, strong, vigorous man a quarter of a century younger than his years, and still governs Mexico with the strength and enthusiasm of a young man.

One of his first Ministers said to me: "He rules by love, not

fear. He has been severe, he has even been cruel and hard, but the people realise that occasion demanded it, and they love him for his strength as well as his gentleness. Mind, our Mexico is a huge country to govern ; there is only a small army, and the people are naturally unruly. So what he has attained is even more than the outside world is able to appreciate."

On my way home from Mexico for Christmas, 1904, one of the most important men in the Cabinet at Washington, the most important perhaps, startled me by asking :

" Is Mexico ready to become part of the United States ? "

" Mexico ! " I exclaimed.

" Yes, Mexico. Is Mexico ready to amalgamate with America yet ? "

" No, certainly not," I replied aghast. " Mexico is a totally different country, with a different people, a different language, different thoughts, aims, ideals. Mexico is full of history and romance while you are new and business-like."

He smiled.

" We should make rather a good combination I think."

" I'm afraid not. Mexico and the States under one flag would amalgamate even worse than Finland and Russia."

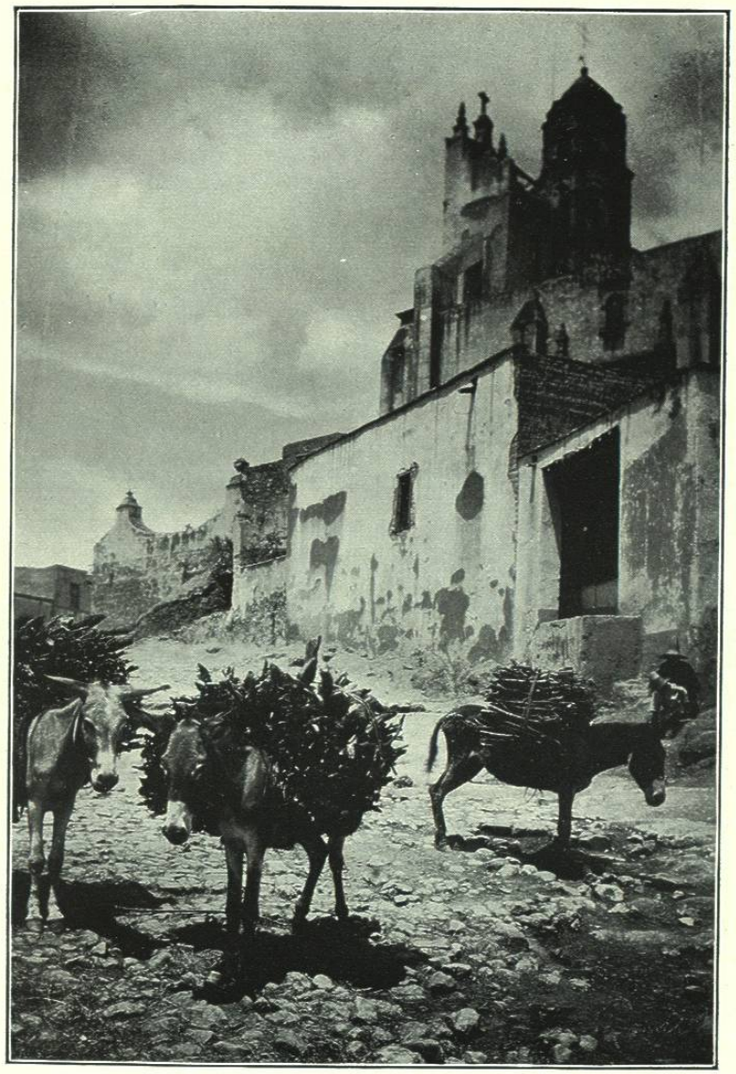

Photo by RAVELL.]

The beast of burden.

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