CHAPTER V.

PUEBLA BESIEGED BY THE FRENCH.

THE War of Reform was over. Diaz was already a General.

1862 began an important era in Mexican history. Interest in the wealth and possibilities of the country began to be aroused by the outside world. The constant changes of government, the incessant warfare between opposing factions, the long drawn-out struggle with the Church, which had caused bloodshed and turmoil throughout the length and breadth of the land, had not passed unnoticed by other nations.

The ambitious dreamer of dreams—the conqueror of the European continent—was at his zenith. Marengo, Solferino, were victories that stirred like flame his soaring ambitions. There was Mexico—Mexico with its fable and romance, and its vast hoards of wealth. Napoleon dreamed of an added empire, an object lesson to two worlds of his far-reaching power. The confidential letter of instructions with which he sent out General Forey and the Expeditionary Army discloses part, at least, if not all, of the influences which moved this ambitious schemer:

"There will not be wanting some who will ask you why we have provided men and money to establish a regular government in Mexico. In the present state of civilisation of the world the prosperity of America is not indifferent to Europe, for she it is who feeds our manufactures and keeps our commerce alive. It is to our interest that the Republic of the United

States may be powerful and prosperous, but by no means that she should take all the Gulf of Mexico, and hence command the West Indies as well as South America, and be the sole dispenser of the products of the New World. . . . . Now, therefore, our military honour pledged, the exigencies of our politics and the interest of our industry and our commerce make it our duty to march on Mexico, to plant there boldly our standard, to establish a monarchy—if it is not incompatible with the national sentiment of the country—but at all events a government which possesses some stability."* This is dated July 3rd, 1862.

Occasion for interference was not far to seek. Mexican finances had fallen into a state of hopeless bankruptcy. Payment of the Government Bonds had for two years been suspended. The War of Reform and the period of guerilla warfare which followed had been responsible for great destruction of property.

England, France and Spain had made claims on behalf of their citizens in Mexico, and of the foreign bondholders. These claims were pressed upon President Juárez, who was at that time engaged in the herculean task of restoring order and suppressing the guerilla bands.

Juárez could only give promises. Diplomatic relations were broken off, and on October 31st, 1861, a Convention of these three Powers was signed in London, providing that they should jointly seize certain fortresses in Mexico, sequestrate the customs revenues at the ports, and form a Commission to arrange payment of the debts, each Power expressly repudiating any desire to acquire territory, or to interfere directly in the Government of Mexico.

France had, in fact, the least stake of any in the country. The foreign debt amounted in round numbers to $82,000,000 (Mexican). England, the chief creditor, held almost the entire issue, her bonds amounting to no less than $70,000,000. Spain came next with an indebtedness of $9,400,000, and the French debt reached only the insignificant sum of $2,600,000.

France, therefore, though she also advanced some other visionary claims, was a long way third in importance among the

* "The Fall of Maximilian's Empire," by Lieut. Seaton Schroeder, p. 3.

Allied Powers, whose united squadrons appeared off the harbour of Vera Cruz in January, 1862, to enforce their demands. But all this time Louis Napoleon was quietly and subtly nursing his idea of a feudatory kingdom in Mexico, and had already made secret overtures to Maximilian, Archduke of Austria, to place him on the throne.

To keep the door still open to diplomatic settlement, Juárez deemed it wise to make considerable concessions, and evacuated the port and castle of San Juan de Ulúa, near Vera Cruz, at the demand of the Allies. Preliminaries were signed at La Soledad, authorising the three Powers to land their forces and occupy certain inland towns with a view to insure the maintenance of order, an undertaking being given that should negotiations be broken off they would return to the coast.

France was not long in disclosing her hand. A Mexican politician of deservedly ill-odour, Don Juan Almonte, who had been an envoy of the Reactionaries to Europe, and had obtained the ear of Napoleon, arrived off Vera Cruz with some French reinforcements which Napoleon found pretext to land in Mexico. He brought a proposal to found an Empire under French tutelage. This at once obtained support from the French Agent. England and Spain, declaring that the action of the French was a violation of the Treaties of London and La Soledad, indignantly withdrew from the alliance, re-embarked their troops, and sailed away.

Mexico was thus left face to face with well-trained French invaders. A proclamation declaring a military dictatorship, with Almonte as supreme chief of the nation, was followed by a march of the French forces, now reorganised in two divisions, and numbering six thousand five hundred men, upon the capital.

Through some of the most magnificent scenery those French troops moved inland from Vera Cruz. Surely no views in the world can be grander. They tramped on foot over country and through wondrous cañons which I traversed recently on the engine of a train. The Himalayas are higher, it is true, than those extinct volcanoes of Orizaba, Colima, or Popocatepetl—the Alps are more numerous, the Andes perhaps more rugged;

but where else does one get such marvellous pictures? Below, a tropical river with alligators and terrapin in the water; parrots and monkeys over head, wild tangled jungle on the banks, bamboo, cocoanut, rubber, or plantain, then the more rugged rocky peaks, and towering away into that wonderful sky those great, snow-clad volcanoes.

Truly beautiful scenery is to be met with in Mexico. It is the land of extremes of every kind. As we descended lower on our engine—descended, in fact, 10,000 feet in a few hours—we left the pines and magueys and reached bananas sheltering coffee, likewise cotton and sugar; adobe houses made from sunburnt bricks disappeared, and their places were taken by bamboo huts. The children ran about in nature's garb; orchids and hanging mosses clung to the trees, and all was tropical again. What a magnificent view of the snow-capped volcano of Orizaba met our admiring gaze! Even French soldiers intent on capture and on war must have been impressed by the marvellous panorama through which they passed.

Félix Diaz, the brother of the President of Mexico, was wounded by the first shot fired in the French campaign. His injury was not serious, however. With fifty mounted men he had been sent to keep observation on the detachments of French and Spanish troops, who, immediately the alliance broke up, began to retire towards the coast from Orizaba—the town which lies sheltered by the volcano of the same name. While thus engaged he was surprised and attacked by the French, and after some sharp skirmishing was made prisoner. General Diaz, who was in military command of the district, himself tells the story of his brother's escape:

"A few minutes after the encounter, the Countess of Reus, with a Spanish escort, passed by. Hearing what had happened, she besought the liberty of the prisoners, and was joined in her request by a Spanish officer who was chief of General Prim's Staff, whereupon Félix, taking advantage of a moment of carelessness among the French, rapidly mounted his own horse, which was still at his side, jumped the fence into the road, and

plunged into a wood, luckily without being struck by any of the shots that the French sent after him."

This was a bold action. Some French officers were sitting on old boxes at a little table, making out their plans of action, others were standing about discussing matters, while several unmounted French soldiers were near at hand. There were but few horses, one of which was Félix Diaz' own.

Waiting his opportunity while the French were at work, he strolled about among the empty cases and the one or two odd steeds, pretending to pat and admire them.

Then came the favourable moment.

Everybody was busy. Slipping his foot into the stirrup, he flung his leg over the saddle, and spurring his faithful beast, at one plunge they took an adjacent stone wall, and were galloping away for very life before the officers had time to draw their pistols, or the soldiers to take careful aim with their rifles.

"He arrived safely at Coscomatepec, where he had friends, and two days afterwards joined me in Acultzingo," says Diaz.

With this incident, which has something of the confusion of comedy about it, began the great national struggle which was only to end five years later with the tragic death of the Emperor Maximilian at Querétaro.

Enough has been said by French military writers on the Expedition to Mexico to show that they expected their march on the capital would be little more than a military promenade. They under-estimated the resistance of which the country was still capable, despite the ravages of the civil war from which it had just emerged. President Juárez ordered the brigades of General Diaz and General Mejía to make a front against the invaders, while he gathered forces in the interior. A terrible disaster met the Republicans at the outset. Mejía's command was practically annihilated by the explosion of a magazine. Diaz was left to bear the brunt of the fighting. He gave battle to the French on the heights of Acultzingo on April 28th, 1862. The engagement served its purpose in delaying

the advance, and affording General Zaragoza time to complete his preparations for the defence of Puebla, upon which the troops fell back at the close of the day.

A week later the French, under General Lorencez, attacked Puebla itself with all their forces. It was a glorious day for the Republicans, who still celebrate their victory of the "Cinco de Mayo" (May 5th, 1862), as one of their proudest anniversaries. The French met with a disastrous and humiliating defeat, though outnumbering by three to one the little band of two thousand men who held the town against them.

General Diaz fought as second in command under Zaragoza, and was entrusted with the defence of the road into Puebla from Amozoc, where the French encamped. During the battle the enemy repeatedly concentrated their forces upon this exposed position. Two concerted attacks, in which both sides fought with grim determination, were repulsed; the French finally broke, and Diaz found himself at the close of the engagement riding at the head of his troops in hot pursuit of their main body, which continued until nightfall. An officer who was with him on that important day described the scene to me.

"Diaz looked splendid. He always appeared much taller than he really was when in uniform, and in the saddle. His broad shoulders and fine round head gave him dignity. That day he was inwardly excited, though outwardly calm. That is a feature I have often noticed with our President; the more anxious or excited he gets the more calm he becomes. As a young man he had a strong temper, but so completely has he got that temper under control that I don't believe anyone has seen him lose it for many a year. To-day he is completely his own master."

This check warned Napoleon for the first time of the magnitude of the task he had taken in hand. Lorencez, in disgrace for his unexpected, and to his own countrymen unaccountable defeat, was superseded. A large expeditionary army was organised. When General Forey, who was sent out from France to take the command, arrived at Vera Cruz, he found himself at the head of a force which now numbered twenty-two thousand six

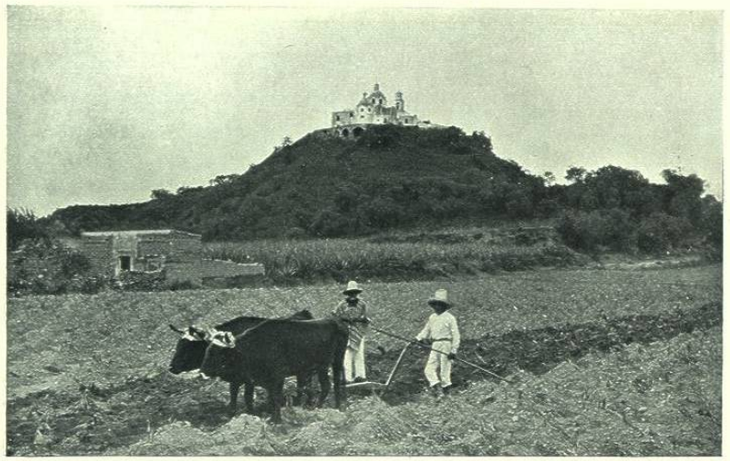
hundred men, and fifty guns. They could, in addition, depend on assistance from 7,500 auxiliaries—Mexicans who during the years of guerilla warfare had been fighting for their lives in the mountains, and were now ready to espouse any new cause under the leadership of the notorious Reactionary General Márquez, who had already shown himself a traitor.

In less than twelve months after their *débâcle* the French were again before Puebla, but under very different circumstances. The capture of the city and the recovery of his army's lost prestige was General Forey's first object. He brought up nearly thirty thousand men, and took charge in person of the operations. Against this crushing force the Republicans could place within the city only sixteen thousand men.

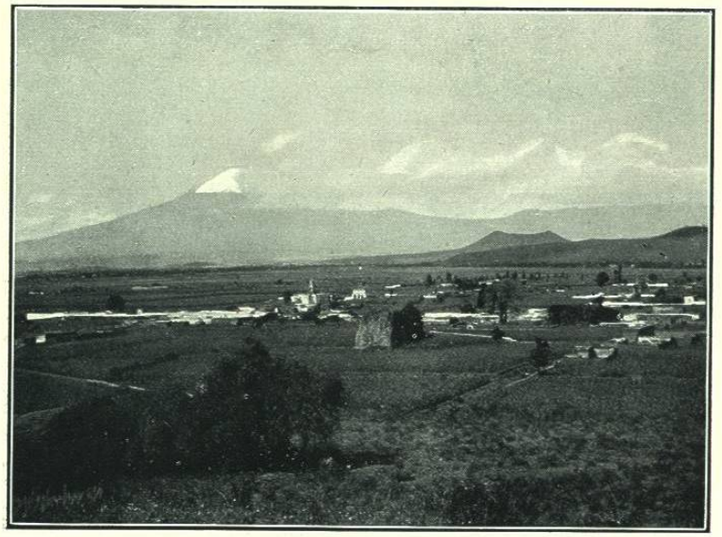
The defence was entrusted to General Ortega, under whom Porfirio Diaz held command of a brigade of infantry.

Puebla, which thus became the scene of one of the stiffest fights during the French invasion, is renowned for its situation and its beautiful buildings. It is called the "City of Angels," but the "City of Tiles" would be more appropriate. Ever since the days of the Spanish Conquest, Puebla has been famous for its tiles; but, alas! the art originally inspired by the Moors is fast dying out. The walls, floors and domes of many of the most beautiful old churches and convents are made of these tiles, and although soldiers did their best to deface them, and scraped the solid gilding off the splendid church carvings to melt it down, still much of beauty and charm remains in Puebla City.

Puebla State is one of the twenty-seven composing Mexico, and its chief town, which lies in a plain surrounded by mountains, has the same name. Eleven times have armies assembled before the gates of Puebla. Eleven times in the strange history of Mexico has Puebla played its part; but now all is quiet. In the modern town there are two or three dozen factories, saw-mills, and foundries. The public squares are full of monuments, and the streets clean and well kept. The town stands 7,000 feet above the sea level, after the usual Mexican fashion. The Mexicans had no consideration for weak hearts when they planned their cities.



Cholula.



Popocatapetl, from the battlefield of Puebla.

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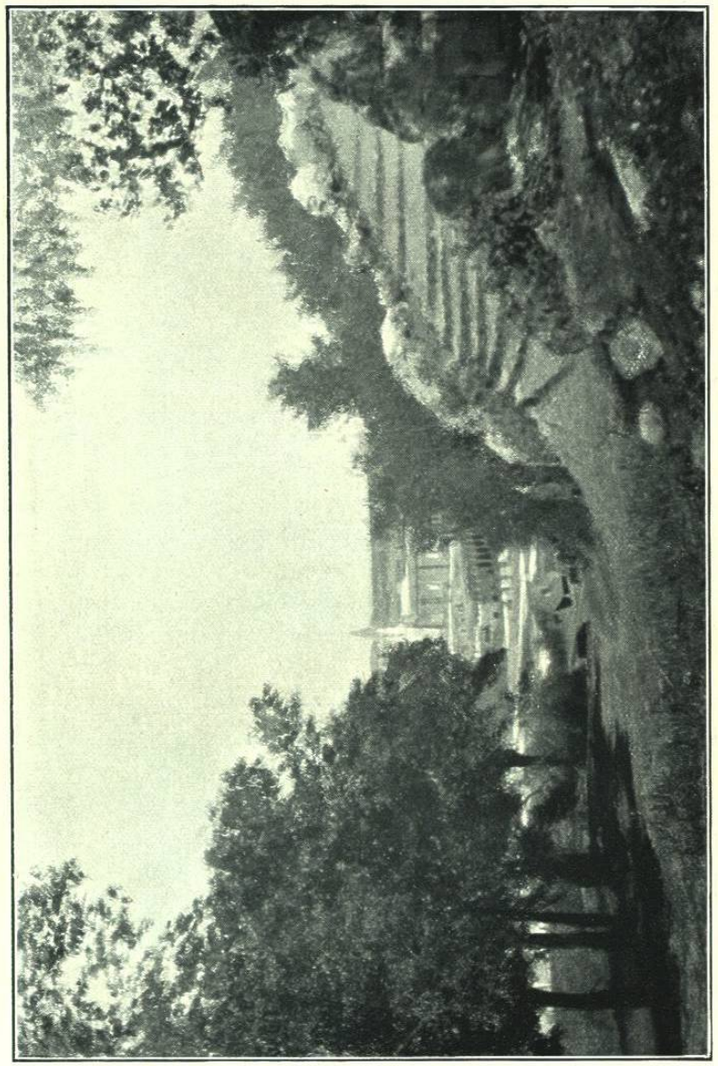

Photo by Hon. Herbert Gibbs.] Cholula Pyramid, from half-way up the Great Teocalle. [Page 89.

Not far from Puebla is the famous pyramid of Cholula, beside which the French camped. What did they think of it? Did they realise that it is larger than any pyramid in Egypt, and that here the Aztecs met the Spaniards in deadly combat? Cholula was to Mexico what Mecca is to the Mahommedans, or Jerusalem to Christians. It was the Holy City of Anahuac.

The pyramid of Cholula was raised by the Aztecs to the God of Air—Quetzalcoatl. He was a benevolent deity who walked among men, according to the Aztecs. He was said to be tall, white-skinned, with long dark hair and flowing beard. He had to flee from Mexico City because of the wrath of other gods. On his way to the sea he stopped at Cholula, where a temple was raised and dedicated to his worship. At the coast he entered a wizard skiff and sailed away, promising to return.

When the Spaniards came the Aztecs thought that among them was their own white man, and this did much to help the conquest of Mexico by a white race.

Cholula is still a place of pilgrimage. The vegetation is so thick that it scarcely looks like a pyramid; up the steep sides pilgrims toil on their knees. From the church at the top is a glorious panorama over the battlefields of Puebla. It is said that fifty-seven churches can be seen below in the surrounding valleys, and, indeed, domes and spires are everywhere. They are such beautiful tiled or gilded domes and such splendid towers, that really the churches of Mexico, even in the villages, excite astonishment.

The cathedral of Puebla, with its wonderful chapel of Santo Domingo, contains carvings which are still among the finest in Mexico, and when one says "Mexico," one means in the world, for in the matter of churches, carvings and gildings, Mexico contains exquisite workmanship. Much was destroyed in the days of warfare and revolution, especially at the time of the French invasion, but fortunately much still remains. The churches built by the Dominican monks are generally the finest in Puebla, as in Oaxaca. The Dominicans seem to have been particularly artistic as well as rich.

All accounts agree that the French suffered greatly from the

heat of the Mexican sun, for the fierceness of which they had come unprepared, and they did not realise until taught by experience that it was impossible to march in the daytime. It strikes a visitor to the country as curious that while the men—including gentlemen—all wear the enormous hat of the country, the sombrero, to protect them against sunstroke, the women go about unshielded. The better-class girls wear no head covering, and when they go out in the sun—which is seldom—they merely use a parasol. To avoid sunburn they powder tremendously—quite a white powder, which contrasts strangely with their dark skins. The elder ladies wear lace mantillas, or thin black scarves, over their hair. These, though charming—especially the former—afford no protection whatever from the sun. The poorer women, although obliged to be out in the sun's heat, never wear a hat; they just put their blue shawls (rebozo) over their heads, and walk about at the hottest time of the day with no further protection. Sunstroke, strange to say, is almost unknown among the natives, although foreigners suffer badly, and many of the Frenchmen lost their lives from it.

It was on March 18th, 1863, that the scouts of the Eastern army in Puebla observed the approach of the French in two compact columns. They separated at the road to Amozoc and marched in different directions, with the object of encircling the city. Diaz had suggested to the General in command an attack while the movement was in progress, but his advice was not acted upon, and the circle was completed on the following morning, when the heads of the converging columns met at the hill of San Juan. Next day some of the French siege batteries were brought up.

Just as the first gun-fire announced the opening of the siege there occurred an incident which showed how deeply Mexican patriotism had been stirred. Colonel Don Manuel González presented himself before General Diaz.

González, a Mexican of great ability and distinction, who afterwards rose to be President of the Republic when Diaz, after his first term, refused re-election, had devoted his life and fortunes to the Conservative party. The two men had been

opposed in the bloody strife around Oaxaca, in which González had fought against Diaz with exemplary courage. Saluting his old opponent González said:

"I have asked you at various times to help me to obtain a place in the ranks of the Mexican army as colonel. You have refused to help me in this, or the Government has refused to permit you to help me. To-day is no time for solicitations. A common enemy is here to attack the town, and I come to ask you a very different thing—a place in your ranks and a gun. Remember that I, like yourself, am a Mexican, and I claim the honour of dying for my country."

Diaz was greatly moved, and shaking his newly-found comrade by the hand, he declared that González should be at his side as a friend and companion, and promised to make his presence known to General Ortega, so that he could be formally enrolled in the National Army. An opportunity was soon at hand.

"While the French," writes Diaz, "were gradually contracting the circle of the forces besieging the city, I proposed one day to the General-in-Chief to attack an isolated position a little apart from the neighbouring posts. The suggestion was accepted, and the assault was carried out in the presence of the General and his Chief-of-Staff, who watched the operations from the Guadalupe Hill. I placed a company under the orders of González, who performed the work entrusted to him with such skill and success that on my return the General asked me who had led those men.

"I took the opportunity of presenting González to him. Then directing him to withdraw, I related to the General the way in which he had come to me. General Ortega thereupon ordered that González should receive a commission as full colonel, and in this capacity he remained at my service."

Others of the Reactionary leaders afterwards followed González' example, showing devotion to their country by joining the Liberal forces against the French invaders.

The Mexicans fought with the stubbornness and tenacity they

have always shown. In the first days of the investment, part of the San Javier fort was destroyed by cannon fire, and an attack was made in force; but though the French reached the moat they met with such a hot reception that they were compelled to withdraw. The concentrated artillery fire, however, soon reduced the fort, at no time of any great strength, to ruins, and consequently the stores which it contained were withdrawn to the heart of the city. The battalions of the States of Guanajuato and Morella, which were left to hold the San Javier Hill, were one day overwhelmed by the French, who advanced against them in four columns. In this engagement the Mexicans lost three guns and five hundred men killed and wounded.

After this disaster the bull-ring and its surroundings behind the cathedral of San Javier were defended. The bull-ring is a prominent feature in every Mexican town of importance, and is the chief amusement of the populace on Sunday.

In the first days of April street fighting began. In this form of warfare we have the testimony of the French themselves that the Mexicans were hard fighters. An officer of General Forey's staff, Captain Niox, who has written a book on the "Expédition du Mexique," says of them: "When a building was ruined they defended the ruins. Then they occupied another position behind, and defended that in the same way. Consequently, every step we took was by overturned walls brought down by gun-fire, and littered with the corpses of besiegers and besieged."

Diaz was in the thick of all this. For two days he held a weak line of defence against an attacking force greatly outnumbering his own, and after some desperate hand-to-hand fighting compelled them to retire discomfited. Some passages picked out at random from his diary are lively reading:

"On the night of April 1st I received orders to remove my brigade from the square of San José, to hand over that post to the reserves, and to guard the front of the town facing the enemy from south to north. The line of buildings commenced on the south with the Convent of San Agustin, thence lay in a northerly direction to the Hospice, and ended at La Merced.

"Collecting my troops, I spent all the night inspecting the houses and passages giving communication from one to another. I pulled down walls where necessary to gain a clear zone of fire. Fortunately the French did not attack during all the next day, and I profited by the respite to further strengthen the defences."

The weak point was the Hospice. It had already been seized by the French before Diaz arrived, the force which had held the place under Escobedo, and which Diaz relieved, having withdrawn without waiting for him to come up. His orders were not to dispute possession at that time, but to occupy all the adjacent houses which could be advantageously defended.

"At six o'clock in the morning I began to realise that the enemy were undermining us. At first the sounds seemed to me distinctly subterranean, and their direction from the Hospice towards San Agustin, in front of the house known as the barracks of San Marcos. I was, however, mistaken, and finally came to the conclusion that the Hospice walls were being bored in order to make a breach for cannon, through which the men could fire into the barrack-room of San Marcos. Acting upon this idea I occupied this building, strengthened where possible the defences facing the Hospice, and collected troops to fire from the parapets.

"The attack was not long delayed. At eight, cannon-fire destroyed the front of a shop on the right of the porch, but the roof, being very solid and stoutly built, did not fall in, as doubtless the French had expected it would.

"A petard was then exploded at the door of the porch. Fortunately, I had strengthened this within by a heavy backing of tiles and bricks obtained from the courtyard and the porch itself, and behind these a wall of earth. Owing to this the petard did not break down the door, and the French had to attack through the open breach at the adjoining shop.

"Their sallies were energetically repulsed for more than two hours.

"There was one perilous moment when the impetuous rush of the French through the breach discouraged my soldiers, who began