

CHAPTER IX.

THE BEAUTIFUL EMPRESS CARLOTA.

In the meantime what had Carlota been doing ?

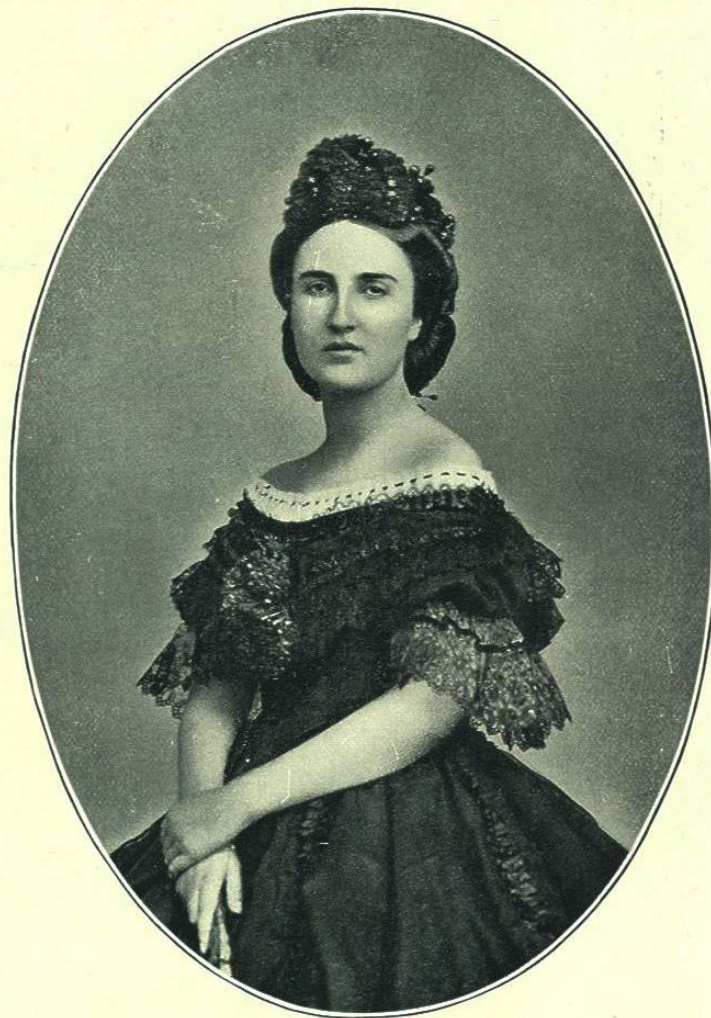
A pretty and pathetic figure, she had been playing at Court with the solemnity of a wilful child, amid courtiers fashioned by her own hand. They watched her achievements with unconcealed amazement. She was striving to revive once more in Mexico City the pomp and splendour she had enjoyed during those two short years at Milan. Petulant, masterful, yet feminine in everything, she may fittingly be introduced here as a ray of sunshine amid the gloom which overshadows the luckless Maximilian.

Carlota—Empress of but a few fleeting months—found herself on good soil to give play to her ambitions.

There are many beautiful houses in Mexico to which the term "palace" might be applied, and many of their owners are rich. Sick to death of all the wars and strife of half a century, the younger people were only too glad to help the Empress enjoy herself, which she did right merrily. Dinners, balls and routs became the fashion.

Social civilisation was introduced into Mexico by Carlota. Men learned to wear dress-coats, and women low gowns.

The last Emperor, Montezuma, over three hundred years before, held splendid court 'tis true, but it was the pomp and display of his time and of a rude people. Feathers and skins had been the covering of the Aztecs, but the climate of Mexico had already begun to grow colder, and dress required to be warmer. The

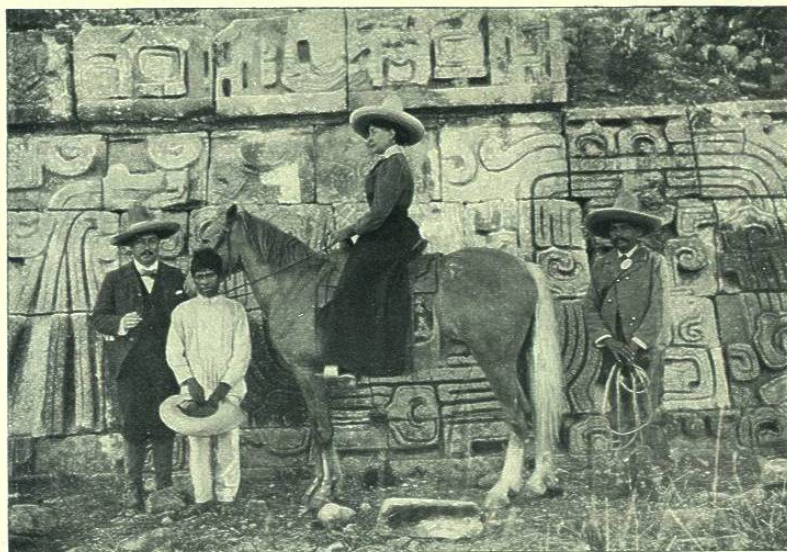


Carlota, Empress of Mexico.



Photo by The AUTHOR.]

A Mexican diligence.



The Author riding astride in Mexico.

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Mexicans had achieved a higher civilisation under the Spanish sway, only to lapse back again during that half century of tumult.

Carlota arrived upon the scene fresh from the Courts of Europe, her trunks loaded with gowns, her cases full of jewels. All her paraphernalia—even her wardrobe and her piano—had to go over the mountain passes on mule-back to the capital. Her modern ideas, her ultra-Court etiquette, her love of pomp and display, amazed Mexican Society.

She must have been a revelation. People travelled little in those days, because of the difficulty of transport; and to suddenly find in their midst a lovely princess in rich apparel, of commanding airs and royal descent, must have stirred all hearts.

She shot like a meteor from the sky, and dazzled high-born Spanish and low-born Indian alike.

She drove about in a gorgeous carriage like a Lord Mayor's coach; * she opened the Palace and Castle for all kinds of routs, she entertained generously, she spent lavishly. She tried, in fact, to be the reigning Queen of the New World as the wife of her patron, the Empress Eugénie, was of the old.

She amazed the quiet-going Spanish *grandes dames*—whose ideas did not soar above chocolate parties and gossip, adoring babies and husbands, and getting fat and middle-aged in the process before they were five-and-twenty—by her brilliant conversation and daring feats of horsemanship; she had a good seat, a light hand, and loved the saddle withal.

In those days Vera Cruz Harbour, where the Empress Carlota and Maximilian landed, was noted for its insecurity. It was the chief, in fact, the only port of any consequence on the whole Gulf of Mexico, and except in fine weather no vessel could take shelter. Not only were the seas boisterous, but those dreadful things known as "norther" raked the coast. Carlota's first encounter with a "norther"—another bad omen, for their reception at Vera Cruz had not been very enthusiastic—struck terror to her soul, and no wonder. Well I remember my own experiences at this very place on just such an occasion.

Nothing in the world is more horrible. It is "awful" in the

* This is now in the Mexican Museum.

true sense of that often misused word. A London or Chicago fog brings despair to the housewife when it arrives just before a dinner-party, and turns her brightly shining silver yellow; but a smoky fog is a mere bagatelle when compared with a real Mexican "norther," which penetrates every corner of the house, and fills drawers, sponges, and even tooth-brushes with sandy grit.

It had been very hot for a couple of days previous to my arrival, and the air was heavily laden with moisture, like a Turkish bath. Everyone, therefore, predicted a "norther," and everyone, alas! was right.

First the wind got up—from the north, of course. The intense heat turned to sudden cold, and the temperature grew more and more chilly, until the country was swept with an arctic blast. The wind increased in force as the atmosphere became colder. All this was endurable—one could bear a terribly cold windy storm—but the wind had a companion, and that was dust. Once the norther sets in, all the dust gets loose, and whirls and hurtles about in a gale which defies description. Eyes, nose, mouth, ears, are choked with dust—hard, sharp, cutting, sandy dust. People are said to have turned white in one night; I accomplished the feat in a few hours, and, if report be true, poor Carlota's raven tresses changed colour even quicker than that, to her chagrin. Such white locks reminded her of the powder days of her ancestors in France.

Verily such winds are a terror; but it is no longer necessary for ships to flee from the coast at Vera Cruz in case of storm. Since the wonderful harbour works, constructed by English engineers, were completed in 1901, ships can get in at any time, and lie perfectly safe and calm at anchor while a terrific storm rages outside.

Vera Cruz was not an interesting landing place for this princely couple; it is flat, low, sandy and hot, and at that time was cursed with yellow fever, which, however, through General Diaz' wise plans, has now been almost exterminated. There was not a vehicle in the town of any sort or kind—indeed, there is nothing there to-day but tramcars, neither a carriage nor a cab. It boasts one attraction, a tropical alameda (garden), full of palms,

bamboos, castor-oil plants, and other splendid foliage, and poinsettia trees standing twenty or thirty feet high, covered with scarlet blossom.

Luckily both Maximilian and Carlota were accustomed to the saddle, for it must have been a trying journey to pass over the mountainous district between Vera Cruz and Mexico City. They were a large party, for they had an entire suite with them—French and Austrian officers, secretaries, and ladies and gentlemen-in-waiting. Some of these did not care to ride; in fact, had not the slightest idea how to do so, and consequently had to have resource to the primitive *diligence* of the country.

The iron horse is rapidly chasing the old coach from the road, but it still survives in the wilder parts of Mexico, and in Carlota's day was universal. These quaint vehicles, to be seen at any wayside station, were once painted bright red, but are now much faded by sun and weather. They hang on enormously thick leather straps instead of springs, and as they move swing from side to side. There is room for two people beside the driver; behind him and on top three can sit beneath a cotton head-covering, whilst inside nine persons can be stowed away, although it must be a fearfully close pack. Behind goes the luggage and bundles. In such coaches some of the suite travelled.

Whatever the discomforts of that journey may have been, the Emperor and his Consort must have been amazed at the beauty of the country through which they passed. I was there in 1900, and I remember with pleasure that long ride on the Mexican Railway, which had been finished twenty-seven years before, and is still one of the greatest engineering feats of the world.

It is a splendid journey. The line is often over a four per cent. grade, and swings round endless curves as it descends some eight thousand feet to Vera Cruz. The beautiful part begins at Esperanza, and from thence to Orizaba—famous for its domes—it is perfectly lovely. There are endless tunnels and high bridges, and so sharply does the route curve that the coaches have to lie right over to get round at all. The succeeding curve is often in the opposite direction, in which event over sways the car again on the other side, see-saw fashion, until one gets giddy

looking over the sides of sheer precipices down seven hundred to a thousand feet.

This line was the first built in Mexico, and the honour of its construction belongs to Englishmen.

Carlota, with her artistic taste, revelled in the wonderful effects of light and shade so characteristic of Mexico; the miasmas and mirages. She loved the wealth of vegetation, the gorgeous plumage of the birds, the dazzling beauty of the butterflies, and sketched whenever time allowed. She travelled about with a retinue of people; did everything, in fact, to keep up the splendour of a Court, and expected and obtained homage on all sides.

She loved the life and was happy, or appeared so outwardly, although a feeling of uncertainty was probably gnawing at her heart-strings all the time. And—if we are to believe the French writer, Paul Gaulot—she and the Archduke were on a less happy footing than formerly. He had begun to resent a little her persuasion to take the crown, and was more inclined to strike out his own line of action; still, outwardly, she appeared happy and contented with her rôle of Empress.

Best of all, she loved those days at dear old Cuernavaca, their summer home near Mexico City, with its glorious gardens and ponds, its quaint little Imperial house—and well she might, for of all the delightful spots I saw in Mexico, Cuernavaca still remains fresh in memory.

Back to the capital they would go for more balls and parties, more gaiety and display; but behind it all the knell of death was beginning to toll.

One of the people I had the pleasure of meeting in Mexico, who has lived in the history of the country, was Madame Degollado, at one time lady-in-waiting to the Empress Carlota. A Virginian girl, she was brought up to the saddle, and while still in her teens married a Spanish-Mexican, who shortly afterwards was appointed chamberlain to the Emperor Maximilian.

Madame Degollado is now a handsome woman with white hair and fine carriage. It is easy to imagine she was a beautiful girl, and quickly found favour with the Empress. As she was the only horsewoman among the Court—for the ladies in Mexico

rode even less than nowadays—while the Empress was devoted to riding, the two naturally spent much of their time together. Carlota, who was still in the early twenties, never drove when she could ride, and as there were no railways, all her expeditions were accomplished on horseback.

"The Empress was such a handsome woman!" said Madame Degollado to me one day; "very tall, exceptionally tall and thin, with great grace of movement. Haughty and proud in manner, some people feared her; but she had the kindest of hearts, never neglected a duty, was faithful in her friendships, and always thoughtful for others."

"What did she do all day?" I enquired.

"We rode generally every morning, quite long rides, escorted by only a few soldiers and generally joined by some men friends. After luncheon she spent hours and hours over State papers. She seemed to love mastering difficult problems, unearthing abstruse facts, and never a day passed that she did not go over those State documents."

When the necessities of his position called Maximilian away from the capital, Carlota took up the reins of government, and her control in both political and military affairs was by no means inadequate. Witness this letter to General Bazaine, which shows how active was her interference:

"Mexico, September 16, 1864.

"GENERAL,—

"My opinion is asked on the subject of the enclosed letter, but as it has to do with generals I want in the first place to know *your* opinion. For my part, I believe it is nothing but an intrigue which proves the very contrary of that which is sought to be shown.

"Be kind enough to give me the requisite information, and send me the paper after you have read it, for M. Velasquez wishes me to give him an answer to-morrow.

"It will fall upon you to deal with various questions with which we are occupied in the Council. The most important is the pacification of the Sierra. The prefect of Tulcingo has some

ideas about it which are not bad. It seems to me that by sending some detachments to a fixed post, and some others to make expeditions, good results will be produced. Only in this case I would ask you to give me notice, so that the civil authorities may arrange measures to co-operate with yours in helping on the undertaking.

"If it were possible to arrange beforehand certain movements, keeping them in the meantime as secret as possible, I think it would produce great results, and the passage of the troops might be followed by some kind of organisation.

"As for the Indians who are desirous to defend themselves against the Plateados, you must tell me if you think that it is necessary to provide them with arms. This sort of thing begins to get too frequent, and as for money, the Government have resolved not to give any to anyone.

"Believe, General, etc.,

"CHARLOTTE.

"I hope that you know all about the army for the 16th, and also that it will be reviewed as soon as I return to the Palace, and before the reception of the authorities. You did not give me any memorandum as to it on Sunday."

Of Carlota's unbounded energy Madame Degollado went on to say :

"I never saw such an industrious woman in my life. She read a great deal in several languages, besides personally conducting all the correspondence with the crowned heads of Europe. For her amusement, she sketched and painted. Both she and the Emperor were excellent Spanish scholars, and she spoke wonderful English. In fact, they were both extraordinarily fluent linguists, and I remember once hearing the Emperor say he thought he knew eleven German dialects."

"The Empress ought to have been the man and I the woman," he once laughingly remarked. "She prefers the drum, I prefer the bâton."

"And was that true?"

"Yes, I think so; she had much the stronger nature. She

had a masterful mind, but it was a little unbalanced by ambition. He was a dreamer, a cultured gentleman, a man of artistic temperament, but not strong enough to rule.

"Had he lived, however, Mexico would have benefited by his taste and talent in many ways. For instance, he was a born architect, and loved drawing out plans; there is no doubt about it, he would have done much to beautify the city. The zocalo was his work, while the Empress founded a hospital, and was active in charitable deeds. They certainly both had the betterment and improvement of their capital at heart."

"Was she happy?" I asked.

"No, I think not; in the first place, the grief of her life was not having a child, and then she always felt the insecurity of the Emperor's position."

Poor Carlota! Her life seems to have been clouded from the first. Even her childhood was a lonely one, as old King Leopold would not allow her any playfellows but her brothers.

"A Princess must not mix with her father's subjects," he said, and accordingly her two brothers were her only companions. She had a charming French governess in Belgium, who often deplored her want of childish friends, and encouraged her to find amusement elsewhere by collecting butterflies, and keeping them in large glass cases filled with flowers and fruit. This woman did much to awaken Carlota's love of nature and beauty. Even as a child the Princess was obstinate and ambitious, and never did these traits show more strongly than when she opposed her father's attempt to prevent Maximilian's acceptance of the Mexican crown.

Speaking of Cuernavaca, where, by the way, Cortéz first made sugar in the form of a sugar loaf (his moulds are still in use to-day), and of the lovely garden where the Imperial pair spent so much of their time, Madame Degollado said :

"The Empress loved that beautiful spot. We used constantly to ride there. By the mountain passes it was only a distance of some thirty miles from the capital. We would get up very early, and start about four o'clock. She and I rode, accompanied by her gentlemen-in-waiting, and the Guardo de Palatin, the