CHAPTER X.

NIGHT ASSAULT ON PUEBLA.

MAXIMILIAN'S Empire survived but eight weeks. Diaz dealt it one of its severest blows at Puebla.

Republicanism had been held in subjection for nearly five years, but had never been extinguished, and, relieved from the weight of foreign soldiery which had kept it down, it gathered together its forces in overwhelming strength. What little permanent effect had resulted from the attempt to graft monarchical institutions on Mexican life and character was evident from the readiness with which the country almost from end to end proclaimed its sympathy with the Juárists.

Mexico, under the rule of President Diaz, has now enjoyed unbroken peace for thirty years. What may have been its influence in remoulding the national character only time will show. But the Mexican in the tumultuous days of the last century, and in poor Maximilian's reign, was somewhat of a paradox. He flattered himself on his possession of Republican liberty, while all the time submitting to the most crushing tyranny from a succession of dictators. He gave to an exclusively military oligarchy that abrogated to itself the name of Republic, a loyal adherence which, with the Spanish ascendancy fresh in memory, he would have refused to any monarchy. Had fortune favoured Maximilian he would probably have given Mexico the true liberty, peace, and contentment to which up to that time the country had been altogether a stranger; but his short rule left no impress.

Oaxaca capitulated to General Diaz without an attempt

being made to strike an effective blow, and the whole of the South and East, as he marched through them, acknowledged the Republic. His army increased every league he advanced. Only six months before he had with difficulty counted his few hundred men, and now his following of zealous Republicans was to be numbered in thousands.

Juárez meanwhile pressed back upon the capital from the north, and the entire country fell into his hands. General Escobedo, the General-in-Chief of the Army of the North, with a force now fifteen thousand strong, on February 1st, met Miramón, Maximilian's general, at San Jacinto. Inflicting a decisive defeat upon him, he drove him back to Querétaro, and himself hastened to begin the siege of that city. Diaz, as General-in-Chief of the Army of the South, made his objective Mexico City, delivering his first attack on Puebla, where the Mexican General Noriega had thrown up defences and prepared to hold the town on behalf of Maximilian.

Diaz was familiar with every inch of the ground and every building, for twice he had himself defended Puebla; first, when the French, immediately after entering the country, were driven off and his own brilliant work on that day gained for him promotion to the rank of general; and again a year later, when after an heroic resistance on the part of the garrison he was himself made prisoner. His intimate knowledge of the place proved of immense advantage when perfecting his plans.

All was ready for the grand assault on April 2nd, 1867.

The attack was delivered at dead of night. Diaz threw his whole force upon the town, and by an impetuous rush carried positions which his adversaries, not without some apparent reason, had considered impregnable. There was terrible carnage, and in the heat of the hand-to-hand encounter little quarter was asked or given. The story is one of the most stirring among the records of battles in which Mexico's troubled history is so plentiful. It has never before been made public by the victorious general, whose words, which I am privileged to give, have greater weight than could attach to any description at second-hand.

"I had decided," General Diaz says, "to storm the city, and in order that the freedom of the assailing columns might be as little impeded as possible began to detach the sick, wounded, and baggage on the road to Tehuacán, with the object of placing them in safety in case the assault did not succeed; but I did this without divulging the plan to anybody. This preliminary work was interpreted by friends and foes alike as preparation for a retreat towards Tehuacán and Oaxaca.

"I was careful to allow no indication of my intention of attack to be perceived, and in fact, nothing whatever was known of the plan until the night of April 1st; for if my soldiers had suspected what was going on they might, by revealing the secret, have spoilt everything. Had the enemy been prepared, the sacrifice of life that the assault entailed would have been useless.

"When it was impossible to maintain secrecy any longer, and the moment for action was at hand, I communicated the plan to Don Ignacio Alatorre, the quartermaster, and ordered him to call together all the leaders whom I wished to command the various columns. This meeting was held in a house in the centre of the lines, so that each leader had not far to come from the place where he was in charge. The quartermaster and I went carefully over the plan of the town with every officer, explaining the operations to be carried out, arranging the force of each assaulting column, the entrenchments each must seize, and the walls or doors they must break through to make their way into the city.

"No column was to appear at a distance of more than a hundred metres from the entrenchment it was about to attack, and some were to remain concealed until within fifty metres. Such had formerly been our plans of approach.

"The area enclosed by the Imperial entrenchments was of an elliptical form, the largest diameter extending from north to south. The Convent del Carmen was one of the most distant points from the plaza in the defended zone. This gave me the idea of a false attack upon it, calling the enemy's attention away, and thus enticing the larger part of his forces and the reserves to rush to its defence.

"I decided on the formation of seventeen assaulting columns, with the intention of employing three of them in this false attack on El Carmen. With this object, as soon as night came I withdrew all the artillery along our line of approach, and posted the guns before the entrenchments of El Carmen, the fire from which faced south.

"Each column consisted, on an average, of one hundred and forty men."

General Diaz then describes the disposition of the different columns for the assault, which cannot with advantage be reproduced without the aid of a map. The artillery consisted of siege-guns, field-pieces, and mountain guns. These were at some risk brought within easy range of the defences which had to be won at El Carmen.

"The enemy," he continues, "had made the serious mistake of not protecting their trenches from the rear; a fault by which I intended to profit. So far as the nature of the ground permitted, each attack on a trench was so arranged that shots passing over the trench under attack should fall into the trenches on the opposite side of the defences, picking off from the rear the men who would be hotly engaged by our forces in front. These stray shots, coming unexpectedly in the middle of the night, evidently gave those who were wounded from behind the idea that the Republicans had broken through their rear defences.

"The three columns that were to deliver the false attack were collected near the artillery, taking advantage of cover which protected them from the Imperialists' fire.

"The remaining fourteen columns were assembled in the respective places from which each was to make its advance. I had a long line suspended from a wire, which ran from turret to turret of the church on the hill of San Juan, and reached to the ground. This line was saturated with oil, and was to be lighted when I gave the order as a signal to all the leaders of the assaulting columns to charge simultaneously.

"The peril of the assault was made all the greater by the fact that the enemy's trenches, for the most part thrown up

in front of buildings, were protected by rifle-fire from roofs and balconies, and even from holes pierced in the walls. In order to minimise as far as possible our losses from this cause I formed a Legion of Honour, composed of officers and men who had no place in the general attack, and, obtaining such ladders as were available, entrusted them with the task of climbing walls and balconies, and scattering confusion among the defenders of the houses.

"When night came, I forbade firing at any point of the lines except in the case of a sortie by the enemy.

"This silence, which was soon perceived by the Imperialists, and the fact that General Márquez, who had broken out from Querétaro, was about twelve leagues behind us, coupled with the removal of our baggage in the afternoon, must have made the enemy think we were retreating that very night, and were even then evacuating the lines.

"All having been arranged, I stationed myself close to the old 'Alameda' (garden), at a point from which I could watch the operations of some of the assaulting columns and also of the three that were to execute the false attack.

"Such was my scarcity of ammunition that at the last moment I had to collect powder from the cavalry for the storming parties, telling the former that if they were brought into action they must fight with their lances and sabres alone. The mounted force was awaiting orders on the south, facing the hills, and so could serve me in any event, even that of a retreat."

At a quarter to three in the morning the guns placed opposite El Carmen were suddenly discharged, and directly after the columns which were to make the false attack advanced. They were met with a heavy fire, and the Imperialists, just as Diaz had anticipated, hurried up their reserves from the plaza to reinforce the position. The fight here was at its hottest when the signal flare blazed from the church of San Juan, and the assailing columns simultaneously threw themselves on the city at fourteen different points.

All over Puebla the furious tumult of the onslaught resounded.

Every street, almost every window, was lighted with the flashes of rifles; the defenders seeking cover, the assailants pressing on, taking advantage of such shelter as they could find and firing in all directions; and amid the din the deeper note of the cannon continued to be heard. Beautiful tiles, loosened by the concussion, fell from the church domes, gloriously coloured glass windows were shattered, figures of the saints fell from their niches, and the whole town seemed to tremble with the force of the attack, carried out before dawn near the close of a dark night.

The assault on El Carmen, at first beaten back, was renewed with redoubled vigour, and with an irresistible rush the storming parties swarmed over the trenches and carried all before them.

Such work could not last long.

"Within a quarter of an hour," Diaz says, "only the Cathedral towers, the heights of San Agustin, and El Carmen remained defended. The Imperialists on the hills, who not only had not suffered attack themselves but had been reinforced by most of the refugees from the city, directed a sharp artillery fire on the assailants, chiefly over those streets in which they could see my soldiers were massed.

"Before reaching the trenches our men had to rush through a perfect deluge of fire issuing from low windows, perforated walls, balconies and house-roofs, with the fire from the trench they were approaching all the while before them."

Just as the Republican columns were making their triumphant entry into the plaza, General Diaz, whose plans had thus been brilliantly accomplished, arrived, and was enthusiastically greeted. For him this was indeed an hour of triumph. Immediately after the victory was complete, he issued a proclamation to his worn and tired troops, in terms calculated still further to raise their martial spirit:

"The General-in-Chief of the Eastern Army to his victorious troops in Peubla:

"Companions in arms,

"I wish to be the first in paying tribute to your heroism. The entire nation and posterity will afterwards perpetuate your glory.

"You have inscribed another memorable date in the history of the city where Zaragoza immortalised his name on the 5th of May. The 2nd of April, 1867, will henceforth be registered in the calendar of our national glories.

"I centred great hopes in you; I have seen you come forth without arms at your country's call, to arm yourselves in Miahuatlán and in La Carbonera, in Jalapa and in Oaxaca, with the weapons wrested from the enemy. You have fought naked and hungry, leaving behind you a track of glory; yet knowing all this your deeds in Puebla have surpassed my hopes.

"A city not without reason considered invincible, and which the first soldiers in the world could not take by assault, yielded to one dash of your courage. The entire garrison and the immense war material gathered by the enemy are the trophy of your victory.

"Soldiers! you deserve well of your country. The struggle which rent her cannot be further prolonged. You have given proof of your irresistible valour. Who will dare measure arms with the victors of Puebla? Independence and Republican institutions will waver no longer. A country that has sons like you will be safe from all conquest and oppression.

"Intrepid in battle and moderate in victory, you have won the admiration of this city for your bravery, and its gratitude for your discipline.

"Who is the General that will not be proud to lead you? While you are with me your friend will deem himself invincible.

"PORFIRIO DIAZ."

These were stirring words, uttered with all the enthusiasm of a man who had just gained a notable victory. To Juárez, now established at San Luis Potosí, Diaz reports the battle in this letter to the Minister of War:

"Republican Army, Eastern Line.

"GENERAL-IN-CHIEF,—

"We have just taken this place by storm, including the Convent del Carmen and other fortified posts which the enemy held in the town, taking from him a numerous train of artillery

and abundant stores of ammunition. Don Mariano Trujeque, Don Febronio Quijano, and some twenty other treacherous chiefs and officers were made prisoners and shot according to law.

"Part of the enemy's garrison has taken refuge in fortified positions in the hills of Guadalupe and Loreto, waiting for help from Don Leonardo Márquez, who, according to reports by my scouts, spent last night in San Nicolás with a division of three or four thousand men and twenty guns. I cannot yet say what operations I shall next undertake, but I think I can assure you that the enemy will surrender, and that Márquez will be beaten if he does not retreat on learning of the reverses that his accomplices have suffered.

"In either case I shall soon be in a position to aid the Army of the North, or to undertake operations against Mexico City, as you think fit.

"Kindly notify this intelligence to the President of the Republic, with my respects.

"INDEPENDENCE AND THE REPUBLIC.

"Puebla de Zaragoza, April 2nd, 1867.

(Signed) "PORFIRIO DIAZ."

The trophies of the victory consisted of sixty mounted cannon, a hundred and thirty unmounted guns and guns in store; six thousand rifles, many thousand rounds of cartridges, a magazine of powder—of which Diaz' army was sadly in want—and stores, clothing, and baggage. One of these French rifles General Diaz still keeps in his private armoury as a reminder of the famous day when he took Puebla, and handles with reverence as he relates the story of the siege.

Even the assault and capture of Puebla did not bring rest to this busy soldier. In a passage already quoted he has mentioned the approach of his old antagonist Márquez, who had been sent out by Maximilian to Mexico City to secure reinforcements for the besieged army in Querétaro in its grave need, but, treacherous as ever, was for his own ends attempting the relief of Puebla, the chief arsenal from which the Imperialists

obtained their arms and supplies. The town, however, with all its stores—so invaluable to the Republicans at that time—had been taken some days before he could come up.

The destruction of Márquez, could it have been accomplished, would have been a further blow to the Imperialists. General Diaz' duty was plain. His men were exhausted and sadly needed rest, but the situation called for a supreme effort, and leaving his wounded and a small garrison in Puebla he moved out with the cavalry, giving orders for the infantry and artillery to follow at their ordinary marching rate. On the 5th, Márquez' advanced cavalry was met and repulsed, and the same night the Republican infantry arrived. Thus began the running fight known as the battle of San Lorenzo.

General Diaz writes in his diary:

"During the night of April 6th, the enemy secretly made a circuitous march so that they might reach Guadalupe without touching Tlaxcala. My obvious course was to march direct to Tlaxcala, to cut them off in the Pass of Tortolitas.

"When I arrived at this Pass on the 7th it was already night, and the enemy had reached Guadalupe. It was not yet dawn when I continued my march, but Márquez had started at midnight, leaving behind those who were wounded in the cavalry engagement on the 5th."

Battle was refused, and the retreat of the Imperialists, orderly at the outset, soon became a rout.

Just before Diaz was getting into the saddle again for an early start, Colonel Lalanne came to him to report that on a neighbouring hill he had four hundred Republican horse and six hundred infantry, which he had raised in the State of Mexico. Diaz ordered him to do all in his power to check the march of the Imperialists, if only temporarily, until he could himself catch them up.

"Colonel Lalanne," says Diaz, "obeyed my orders but sacrificed his force. He was almost completely defeated, but owing to his valour I was able, on the 8th, to reach the enemy,

whose leader only sent his cavalry to meet us, thinking that this time, as before, I had nothing but mounted troops.

"Márquez' cavalry was sharply repulsed.

"Towards the close of the 9th, one of the adjutants under General Guadarrama came to me bringing offers of service from that General, with some four thousand horse. I had not hitherto known of the arrival of this force. I ordered the General to attempt the investment of the enemy by barring his retreat on the south and west, while we held him on the east of the hacienda; but Márquez observed this at once, and in the early morning sent out some of his forces through a space that Guadarrama had not yet covered. This caused some alarm among Guadarrama's troops, and the Imperialist leader, who was doubtless observing the result of his stratagem, took advantage of the incident to sally out on the opposite side towards San Cristóbal.

"When I learnt this, I sent word to the citizens of Calpulalpam, who were friendly to the Republic, to destroy the bridge of San Cristóbal, the only passage possible for the enemy's troops. But on account of its size my agents had not time to destroy it completely, although they tore up the floor, leaving the beams uncovered. These they were trying to burn when the Imperialists arrived.

"At the same time that orders were given for the destruction of the bridge I advanced rapidly with the cavalry towards General Márquez. On the road Colonel Lalanne and General Guadarrama joined me. I had previously given orders that the whole army should follow.

"Márquez, learning that the bridge was useless, promptly ordered his engineers to repair it, which in any circumstances would have been a difficult task. They, however, thoughtlessly led the cart carrying their utensils on to the bare beams of which I have spoken. The feet of the mules and the cart wheels, slipping into the spaces between the beams, stuck there, blocking up the way while the infantry and cavalry filed along the sides confused and in disorder. This completed the obstruction of the enemy's baggage-train.