

## CHAPTER XIV.

## A NEW ERA FOR OLD MEXICO.

NOBODY had the hereditary right to govern. The country was uneducated. No man had really known what he wanted, and when one among them proved a little stronger than his neighbours he had proclaimed himself Dictator, President, Emperor, or what he fancied.

Mud was immediately hurled at him, and he and his "dynasty" fell over like a house of cards. There had been fifty-two rulers in fifty-nine years, and disorder and revolution prevailed from end to end of the land.

The United States, France, and Maximilian from without, Juárez and the Church from within, had all been waging war. Probably no land was ever less safe for human life, or more unsettled, than Mexico about the middle of the nineteenth century. The great power of the Church and its purse could no longer be counted upon, for both were scattered.

Maximilian and Carlota had left nothing behind them but bankruptcy, pretty names, and romantic history; they had not done one thing in the whole course of the three years to weld the Empire together. Chaos reigned as chaotic as ever. The Government was no more stable than before. The debts were heavier; the prestige of the country even less secure. In a total population of fifteen millions one hundred and fifty different languages and dialects were spoken by the various Indian tribes.

After the French troops left, and as the difficulties of resettling the country which confronted the restored Republican Government became acute, the influence of Diaz in Mexico steadily rose.

Ambition had only been born in him during the years that had passed since he first realised what his country wanted. Conscious that peace and prosperity did not yet exist, Diaz had at last determined to listen to the pleadings of his followers and take office. It is more difficult to retain front rank than to gain it, as he had soon to learn.

He had been a soldier for a quarter of a century, and probably no man ever crowded more personal fighting into that length of time. He had been in more hand-to-hand combats than it has been possible to enumerate in this volume. He had, as we know, been shot many times, and twice seriously wounded. He had on three occasions been made a prisoner, and three times escaped. He had lived a hairbreadth life of excitement and adventure. He was a soldier and nothing else, always most happy when in the saddle, with his rifle to his shoulder, or his sword by his side.

Diaz had excelled in the army, but would and could the rough soldier turn into the ruler of a nation? Those fifty-two men in fifty-nine years had not succeeded in their attempts to put down disorder. Could he drag the country out of the abyss into which it had fallen, and place it, a well-organised, peaceful and prosperous State, in the front rank of the civilised Powers of the world?

The key of success is the power of influencing others. Diaz had shown that power among his soldiers, but would he retain it among politicians and financiers? War made with parsimony would entail peace with prodigality, but where was the money to come from?

It is all very well to accomplish and achieve in one profession, but it is unusual to repeat the process in another, and for a man nearly fifty years of age to entirely alter his life, his aims, his hopes; to be thrown among fresh surroundings, other minds, literally begin a new life, and make even a greater success of it than he did of the first, is a remarkable achievement. He had many friends, but he had bitter enemies, and had caused many heartburnings. Men had been jealous of him, and, after all, no hatred equals that engendered by jealousy.



Revenge is more certain to pay its debt than gratitude.

"Was he very ambitious at that time?" I asked a man who knew him well, and served beside him.

"No, I should say not. I don't think ambition had anything to do with it, or ever entered into his calculations. It was simply his extreme love of order. He had his own ideas for the betterment of Mexico, and as no one else seemed capable of bringing that condition about, he stepped in, not so much for his own personal ends as to attain that object."

Subsequent events have proved this to be true.

Mexico's was a risky cause. Nothing but a long line of failures lay behind him. The re-making of a nation, already honeycombed with corruption, was no light matter. Knowing the man I can picture him with his lips set tight, his head thrown back, his nostrils dilated, having once made up his mind to accept office, determined to *do or die*.

Many attempts were made against his life in his early days of power, both by ball and poison; plots were formed against him as they had been against all those who had held the chief office before him; treason met him on every side. In some miraculous way Diaz always escaped. To-day he laughs over the "amusing little episodes which really were nothing."

While two Presidents have been shot in the United States, he has gone on calmly sitting in his chair. America guards her President (who himself is never without a pistol in his pocket) with detectives and police numerous enough to make an army, while Diaz goes about with just sufficient soldiers to give dignity to his office, and on unceremonious occasions alone. It is many years since he carried firearms himself, and yet he is perfectly safe from harm.

Nor does he only walk about alone. One day in May, 1905, when he and his son were strolling home one evening, he came upon a fire which had suddenly broken out in the street through which they were passing.

Diaz, in his tweed suit, stopped, directed the firemen, and then seizing the nozzle of the hose in his own hand, proceeded to play it on the flames. He was most energetic in the work, and

discovered when the fire was put out that the house actually belonged to the widow of one of his old and valued officers.

Such acts naturally add to his popularity with the people, who look upon him not only as their ruler but as one of themselves.

Once in power, every officer, every soldier who had ever served with or under Diaz wanted his aid. Even the farmers on whose land he had been quartered came forward with their grievances or requests. There were only four hundred miles of railways in those days, and a soldier, travelling north to south, east and west, had naturally spent nights and weeks in many haciendas. Even to-day the sons and daughters and widows of this kind of people turn up at the public audiences, which are described more fully in a later chapter, with their grievances or demands. Generally the President manages to do something for them, for it is one of his creeds never to forget an old friend, if one does not injure a new one by doing so. It is a strong characteristic this, and one which, if a little more universal, would make the world a good deal happier than it is.

Power is delightful, success has its charm; but both bring their obligations and their enemies. However, Diaz never lost his head. Magnanimity and generosity have ever been his strongest characteristics.

Few nations have fallen so low in the estimation of other nations as Mexico at the time that Diaz took control of its destinies. The world has never seen anything like its revival, and is hardly yet able to appreciate the enormous strides that it has made. Mexico, even to-day, when fast steamships, great railway systems and a network of telegraph lines have linked up the most distant quarters of the globe, is still somewhat remote from the great highways of commerce.

The fact is that its expansion has been overshadowed by that of its vast neighbours in the north. We hear a great deal from the United States of America, the people of which have the happy faculty of always finding some novelty to entertain us. Canada, too, affords many topics to dispute over. To the average European the North American continent consists of the United States and Canada. Southern America is a congerie of



turbulent Republics, with a habit of repudiating debts and treaty obligations. This calls for occasional visits from foreign warships sent to overawe them. Mexico—well, Mexico lies between, spreading itself over the map some hundreds of miles, too well governed to attract attention, too self-contained to require much aid, and too modest to be always advertising itself; therefore, Europe is not as familiar as it should be with Mexican affairs.

It is a country of absorbing interest to those who have travelled through its matchless scenes, have drawn with their breath in the fresh sunny mornings the spirit of its old romance, and made themselves acquainted with its rulers and people; but we cannot all go to Mexico. The tongue spoken is Spanish, which few Europeans are able to read, though English is now obligatory in all the Mexican public schools. Knowing little of the Mexico of to-day, but remembering much of its past misdeeds, Europe is apt to pay it scant justice.

Steadily, persistently, unobtrusively, Mexico has worked out its own salvation. In this it owes nothing to foreign aid, but everything to one man, however much he may deny the fact, who is to-day the pride and admiration of his people—Porfirio Diaz.

I am conscious of the fact that in writing the life of a man like Diaz it is difficult to avoid the charge of hero-worship. People like to find their own heroes for themselves. Diaz fills the part to all who know him. His is the most striking individuality in the Western hemisphere. He has not the force or power of the American President at his command, but his personal influence is immeasurably greater. He is a Mexican before all things—a son of the soil.

He knows the good points of his people, and sympathises with their weaknesses. His military leadership at a time when every man's hand was at the throat of his fellow brought him into intimate acquaintance with their bad points. The good he has developed. The bad he has sought to eradicate by giving men the opportunity, so long denied them when civil war devastated every home, of honest labour and better things. He has won the

admiration of all Mexicans by his military exploits, their respect by his firmness, and their love and esteem by his scrupulous integrity and whole-hearted patriotism.

He is, as his countrymen, now united in one solid party, delight to call him, "the man for Mexico." The good of the nation is the well-spring of all his actions. Better than any of his predecessors, he has realised its needs and knows how to meet them.

It is a remarkable thing that Diaz has never shown favouritism. His warmest friends hold no office, while men he personally dislikes are sometimes put in positions of power if he thinks their services of value to the nation. Many an able ruler has met his doom through his favourites; not so Diaz. His personal impartiality is one of his strongest holds on the people. When first he was President, the country was still divided into two bands, the Liberals and the Conservatives, and he enrolled many Conservatives on his side, including men who had served under Maximilian during the Empire.

Diaz is courteous to all his visitors, and spares no pains to inform them on any subject on which they may seek his assistance, but he will not be interviewed. The irrepressible American journalist who "wants the President to tell him everything about himself" finds no encouragement at the Palace or at Chapultepec. Many of Porfirio Diaz's greatest achievements in matters of administration have been done through the channel of others. He is chary of speech-making, or airing his opinions, and is often content to take the background while others occupy the front of the stage.

It would possibly be rash to say there will never be another revolution in Mexico, but this much is well assured, that the old corrupt system of misgovernment which flourished for so long, and reached its hey-day under the rule of Santa Anna, has gone for ever. Education, the greatly increased knowledge of public affairs, the experience of thirty years of peaceful development, and the truer and nobler patriotism which has been slowly awakened, have made the usurpation of the Mexican State by any military adventurer no longer possible. Mexico before Diaz is



as far removed from the Mexico of to-day as were the methods of the Spanish conquerors, and Montezuma's barbaric rule which they displaced.

No doubt it is a fact which invites reflection, though not unexampled in history, that the man who has wrought so vast a change, and has been the first to lead the Mexican nation along the path of constitutional progress, should have himself attained the supreme power at the head of an armed revolution.

Dictators have been made in this way; it is, in a sentence, the history of half of the Spanish-American Republics. Monarchs have climbed to Imperial thrones by such means. Diaz, when he rode at the head of his army into the capital and proclaimed himself "Provisional" President, was in fact Dictator, though he had no intention to call himself such, nor of assuming absolute power. It was a new rôle for this life-long servant of the Constitution, but this action is seen, on investigation, to be quite in keeping with his previous record.

That he had been a staunch adherent to constitutional methods, enough has been shown to prove. As a youthful lawyer he had risked his liberty and life at Oaxaca when he cast his vote against Santa Anna and in favour of the Constitution which that notorious President had grossly violated. He had fought for the Constitution when it was threatened by Reactionaries and Clericals; throughout the Wars of Reform it was the Constitution of 1857 in its integrity that he, on the Juárezists' side, strove to uphold.

A dozen chances occurred in Diaz' life when, had he cared to grasp them, he might have seized the Presidency. He steadfastly refused them all, as he had refused the overtures to accept high office from Bazaine and Maximilian. The hesitancy of Juárez to grant the full measure of constitutional liberties had been one of the chief causes of his estranged relations with that illustrious Mexican in his closing years.

A *pronunciamiento* and a revolution placed Diaz in a position of supreme authority in Mexico, but personal ambition was not his object. In his own words, which have been quoted at the head of the previous chapter, he "drifted into it," but

this explanation does not quite satisfy. He was the natural leader of such a movement as that which began with the "Plan of Tuxtepec." His high standing among the Liberals, and the influential support from the masses of the people which he could command, made him indispensable to its success. There was no other man to take the place which he alone could fill.

The movement itself was the logical outcome of the trend of events. Under Lerdo's weak government corruption in the national services and abuses in financial administration had again become rampant, and the country was hastening backwards to the condition of the old, bad Reactionary and Clerical days. So outrageously was Lerdo's so-called second "election" in the autumn of 1876 manipulated that it must have proved to every one who previously doubted that there was no security for national liberty in such hands. It was as a champion to restore the Constitution that Diaz appealed for, and obtained, the suffrages of his countrymen.

A new Mexico was born when Porfirio Diaz assumed the office of Provisional President in November, 1876.

The national credit had been dissipated. The robbery by Márquez, under General Miramón's orders, of 600,000 dollars deposited at the British Legation in Mexico for the payment of English bondholders, was but a typical incident in that soldier of fortune's dishonourable career. The suspension of payment of the debt forced upon Juárez and Congress at the close of the War of Reform brought on the European Intervention. Then came the French occupation, at enormous cost; afterwards Maximilian's Empire, with a further load of debt, sufficient to bear down even a prosperous country.

When Maximilian's Empire was overthrown the Mexicans had about 200,000 men in arms. Some of these were retained in the smaller but efficient army which Juárez, with assistance from Diaz, had at once reorganised. Others gladly returned to their homes and civil occupations. Others, again, without a career in the army to look forward to, without settled habitations, without training or any taste for peaceful industry, took to the mountains, and reinforced the bands of cut-throats and



desperadoes who for many years infested the highways. No man's life was safe from them.

Juárez during his later terms in the Presidency had introduced railways and telegraphs, mostly by the use of American capital obtained under somewhat burdensome conditions. With peace and settled government much more might have been done, but simmering revolution that existed at his re-election in 1872, and open revolt a few months later, which collapsed only with his death, were not calculated to give the foreign capitalist any enthusiasm for Mexican investments. Then came Lerdo's government, with a restoration of some of the old abuses, undoing what little had been accomplished in the way of industrial development, and again revolution and bloodshed.

This was the state of the country when Porfirio Diaz made himself its master, and took upon his shoulders the enormous burden of raising it to an honourable position among civilised states; ruin, absolute and complete, an entire contempt for the law, the public highways controlled by outlaws, all authority ignored, the treasury depleted. Mexico had tried every form of government in turn, republican, monarchical, despotic, and now, ten years after Maximilian's Empire had collapsed, the nation was again split into factions furiously fighting against one another. The foreign investor would, indeed, have been a sanguine person if he had felt confidence in the stability of such a country.

Mexico, in short, had no credit. But it possessed a man, known to the world at that time as a brilliant soldier, but who was to prove himself even greater as a statesman and administrator.

Diaz' first official act after establishing himself in the Presidency was to issue a proclamation, in which he offered the co-operation of the Government in any desirable reform, and called upon all competent men to come forward in the common cause of their country's welfare, whatever might have been the political differences which had hitherto divided them, and assist in the great task of reorganising the State.



Photo by The AUTHOR.]

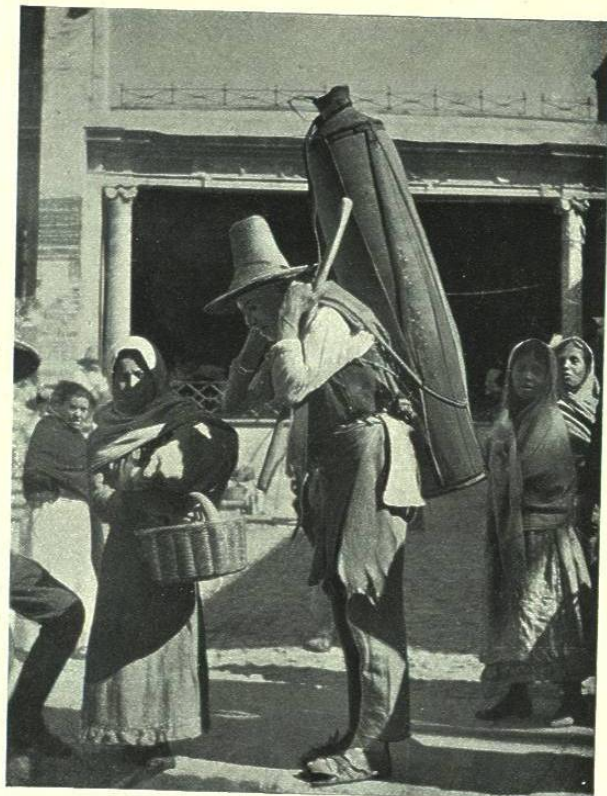
Man and gourd, with which he extracts pulque (the drink of the country) from the mague plant.



Photo by The AUTHOR.]

Water carrier.





Photos by The AUTHOR.]

Guanajuato water sellers.

[Page 273.

## A NEW ERA FOR OLD MEXICO.

273

This was the programme which he set before himself :  
To establish a lasting peace, so that the arts and industries of Mexico, then crushed and dying, might duly develop.

To enforce respect for the laws upon the people, and to awaken a love of work among them.

To equalise the exports and imports.

To establish and consolidate home and foreign credit, and thereby to open up the great sources of national wealth which the country possessed, and give to the people extended fields of labour.

To initiate and execute great public improvements in the cities, as soon as the public treasury could supply the necessary expenses of the administration.

Mexico City he held in the hollow of his hand, and, knowing the character of his adversaries, the grip was a tight one. The country was still unsettled. Lerdo's disbanded troops remained a menace, and a possible source of future trouble. Diaz left General Mendez in charge of the capital, entrusting him with the executive power, and marched at the head of an army into the interior. His first objective was Guanajuato, from which Hidalgo had struck the first note of Independence, and where Iglesias had attempted to set up his government.

Poor Guanajuato. It is the most picturesque city in Mexico, with a population to-day of nearly 100,000 persons. So recently as June, 1905, there was a terrific cloud-burst over the city. Suddenly the heavens darkened, there were roars of thunder, and a deluge of rain. Horses and vehicles were swept from their feet, and people washed from their beds ; and hardly had they recovered from the first shock when tens of thousands of tons of water tore down upon them from the mountain sides, washing, drowning, scattering everything in Guanajuato as it passed. Four hundred homes were swept away, and nearly two thousand people are computed to have lost their lives. One theatre and many public buildings entirely disappeared, and the beautiful new theatre I had admired so much during my visit to the town had thirty feet of water in its auditorium. Luckily, such cloud-bursts are almost unknown. Guanajuato