

The new recruits soon found their way to Tezcuco; as the communications with the port were now open and unobstructed. Among them were several cavaliers of consideration, one of whom, Julian de Alderete, the royal treasurer, came over to superintend the interests of the crown.

There was also in the number a Dominican friar, who brought a quantity of pontifical bulls, offering indulgences to those engaged in war against the infidel. The soldiers were not slow to fortify themselves with the good graces of the Church; and the worthy father, after driving a prosperous traffic with his spiritual wares, had the satisfaction to return home, at the end of a few months, well freighted, in exchange, with the more substantial treasures of the Indies.²²

(Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 143.) But the old soldier wrote long after the events he commemorates, and may have confused the true order of things. It seems hardly probable that so important a reinforcement should have arrived from Castile, considering that Cortés had yet received none of the royal patronage, or even sanction, which would stimulate adventurers in the mother country to enlist under his standard.

²² Bernal Diaz, Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 143.—Oviedo, Hist. de las Ind., MS., lib. 33, cap. 21.—Herrera, Hist. general, dec. 3, lib. 1, cap. 6.

CHAPTER III.

SECOND RECONNOITRING EXPEDITION. — ENGAGEMENTS ON THE SIERRA. — CAPTURE OF CUERNAVACA — BATTLES AT XOCHIMILCO. — NARROW ESCAPE OF CORTÉS. — HE ENTERS TACUBA.

1521.

NOTWITHSTANDING the relief which had been afforded to the people of Chalco, it was so ineffectual that envoys from that city again arrived at Tezcuco, bearing a hieroglyphical chart, on which were depicted several strong places in their neighborhood, garrisoned by the Aztecs, from which they expected annoyance. Cortés determined, this time, to take the affair into his own hands, and to scour the country so effectually as to place Chalco, if possible, in a state of security. He did not confine himself to this object, but proposed, before his return, to pass quite round the great lakes, and reconnoitre the country to the south of them, in the same manner as he had before done to the west. In the course of his march he would direct his arms against some of the strong places from which the Mexicans might expect support in the siege. Two or three weeks must elapse before the completion of the brigantines; and, if no other good resulted from the expedition, it would give active occupation to his troops, whose turbulent spirits might fester into discontent in the monotonous existence of a camp.

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He selected for the expedition thirty horse and three hundred Spanish infantry, with a considerable body of Tlascalan and Tezcucan warriors. The remaining garrison he left in charge of the trusty Sandoval, who, with the friendly lord of the capital, would watch over the construction of the brigantines and protect them from the assaults of the Aztecs.

On the fifth of April he began his march, and on the following day arrived at Chalco, where he was met by a number of the confederate chiefs. With the aid of his faithful interpreters, Doña Marina and Aguilar, he explained to them the objects of his present expedition, stated his purpose soon to enforce the blockade of Mexico, and required their co-operation with the whole strength of their levies. To this they readily assented; and he soon received a sufficient proof of their friendly disposition in the forces which joined him on the march, amounting, according to one of the army, to more than had ever before followed his banner.¹

Taking a southerly direction, the troops, after leaving Chalco, struck into the recesses of the wild sierra, which, with its bristling peaks, serves as a formidable palisade to fence round the beautiful Valley; while within its rugged arms it shuts up many a green and fruitful pasture of its own. As the Spaniards passed through its deep gorges, they occasionally wound round the base of some huge cliff or rocky eminence, on

¹ "Viniéron tantos, que en todas las entradas que yo auia ido, despues que en la Nueva España entré, nunca ví tanta gente de guerra de nuestros amigos, como aora fuéron en nuestra compañía." Bernal Diaz, *Hist. de la Conquista*, cap. 144.

which the inhabitants had built their towns, in the same manner as was done by the people of Europe in the feudal ages; a position which, however favorable to the picturesque, intimates a sense of insecurity as the cause of it, which may reconcile us to the absence of this striking appendage of the landscape in our own more fortunate country.

The occupants of these airy pinnacles took advantage of their situation to shower down stones and arrows on the troops as they defiled through the narrow passes of the sierra. Though greatly annoyed by their incessant hostilities, Cortés held on his way, till, winding round the base of a castellated cliff occupied by a strong garrison of Indians, he was so severely pressed that he felt to pass on without chastising the aggressors would imply a want of strength which must disparage him in the eyes of his allies. Halting in the valley, therefore, he detached a small body of light troops to scale the heights, while he remained with the main body of the army below, to guard against surprise from the enemy.

The lower region of the rocky eminence was so steep that the soldiers found it no easy matter to ascend, scrambling, as well as they could, with hand and knee. But, as they came into the more exposed view of the garrison, the latter rolled down huge masses of rock, which, bounding along the declivity and breaking into fragments, crushed the foremost assailants and mangled their limbs in a frightful manner. Still they strove to work their way upward, now taking advantage of some gully worn by the winter torrent, now sheltering themselves behind a projecting cliff, or some straggling tree

anchored among the crevices of the mountain. It was all in vain. For no sooner did they emerge again into open view than the rocky avalanche thundered on their heads with a fury against which steel helm and cuirass were as little defence as gossamer. All the party were more or less wounded. Eight of the number were killed on the spot,—a loss the little band could ill afford,—and the gallant ensign, Corral, who led the advance, saw the banner in his hand torn into shreds.² Cortés, at length, convinced of the impracticability of the attempt, at least without a more severe loss than he was disposed to incur, commanded a retreat. It was high time; for a large body of the enemy were on full march across the valley to attack him.

He did not wait for their approach, but, gathering his broken files together, headed his cavalry and spurred boldly against them. On the level plain the Spaniards were on their own ground. The Indians, unable to sustain the furious onset, broke, and fell back before it. The flight soon became a rout, and the fiery cavaliers, dashing over them at full gallop, or running them through with their lances, took some revenge for their late discomfiture. The pursuit continued for some miles, till the nimble foe made their escape into the rugged fastnesses of the sierra, where the Spaniards did not care to follow. The weather was sultry, and, as the country was nearly destitute of water, the men and horses suffered extremely. Before evening they reached a spot overshadowed by a grove of wild mulberry-trees,

² "Todos descalabrados, y corriendo sangre, y las vanderas rotas, y ocho muertos." Bernal Diaz, *Hist. de la Conquista*, ubi supra.

in which some scanty springs afforded a miserable supply to the army.

Near the place rose another rocky summit of the sierra, garrisoned by a stronger force than the one which they had encountered in the former part of the day; and at no great distance stood a second fortress at a still greater height, though considerably smaller than its neighbor. This was also tenanted by a body of warriors, who, as well as those of the adjoining cliff, soon made active demonstration of their hostility by pouring down missiles on the troops below. Cortés, anxious to retrieve the disgrace of the morning, ordered an assault on the larger and, as it seemed, more practicable eminence. But, though two attempts were made with great resolution, they were repulsed with loss to the assailants. The rocky sides of the hill had been artificially cut and smoothed, so as greatly to increase the natural difficulties of the ascent. The shades of evening now closed around; and Cortés drew off his men to the mulberry-grove, where he took up his bivouac for the night, deeply chagrined at having been twice foiled by the enemy on the same day.

During the night, the Indian force which occupied the adjoining height passed over to their brethren, to aid them in the encounter which they foresaw would be renewed on the following morning. No sooner did the Spanish general, at the break of day, become aware of this manœuvre, than, with his usual quickness, he took advantage of it. He detached a body of musketeers and crossbowmen to occupy the deserted eminence, purposing, as soon as this was done, to lead the assault in person against the other. It was not

long before the Castilian banner was seen streaming from the rocky pinnacle, when the general instantly led up his men to the attack. And, while the garrison were meeting them resolutely on that quarter, the detachment on the neighboring heights poured into the place a well-directed fire, which so much distressed the enemy that in a very short time they signified their willingness to capitulate.³

On entering the place, the Spaniards found that a plain of some extent ran along the crest of the sierra, and that it was tenanted not only by men, but by women and their families, with their effects. No violence was offered by the victors to the property or persons of the vanquished; and the knowledge of this lenity induced the Indian garrison, who had made so stout a resistance on the morning of the preceding day, to tender their submission.⁴

After a halt of two days in this sequestered region, the army resumed its march in a southwesterly direction on Huaxtepec, the same city which had surrendered to

³ For the assault on the rocks,—the topography of which it is impossible to verify from the narratives of the Conquerors,—see Bernal Diaz, *Hist. de la Conquista*, cap. 144,—*Rel. Terc. de Cortés*, ap. Lorenzana, pp. 218–221,—Gomara, *Crónica*, cap. 127,—Ixtlilxochitl, *Venida de los Españoles*, pp. 16, 17,—Oviedo, *Hist. de las Ind.*, MS., lib. 33, cap. 21.

⁴ Cortés, according to Bernal Diaz, ordered the troops who took possession of the second fortress "not to meddle with a grain of maize belonging to the besieged." Diaz, giving this a very liberal interpretation, proceeded forthwith to load his Indian *tamanes* with everything but maize, as fair booty. He was interrupted in his labors, however, by the captain of the detachment, who gave a more narrow construction to his general's orders, much to the dissatisfaction of the latter, if we may trust the doughty chronicler. *Ibid.*, ubi supra.

Sandoval. Here they were kindly received by the cacique, and entertained in his magnificent gardens, which Cortés and his officers, who had not before seen them, compared with the best in Castile.⁵ Still threading the wild mountain mazes, the army passed through Jauhtepec and several other places, which were abandoned at their approach. As the inhabitants, however, hung in armed bodies on their flanks and rear, doing them occasionally some mischief, the Spaniards took their revenge by burning the deserted towns.

Thus holding on their fiery track, they descended the bold slope of the Cordilleras, which on the south are far more precipitous than on the Atlantic side. Indeed, a single day's journey is sufficient to place the traveller on a level several thousand feet lower than that occupied by him in the morning; thus conveying him, in a few hours, through the climates of many degrees of latitude. The route of the army led them across many an acre covered with lava and blackened scoriæ, attesting the volcanic character of the region; though this was frequently relieved by patches of verdure, and even tracts of prodigal fertility, as if Nature were desirous to compensate by these extraordinary efforts for the curse of barrenness which elsewhere had fallen on the land. On the ninth day of their march the troops arrived before the strong city of Quauhnahuac, or Cuernavaca, as since called by the

⁵ "Adonde estaua la huerta que he dicho, que es la mejor que auia visto en toda mi vida, y así lo torno á dezir, que Cortés, y el Tesorero Alderete, desde entonces la viéron, y paséaron algo de ella, se admiráron, y dixéron, que mejor cosa de huerta no auian visto en Castilla." Bernal Diaz, *Hist. de la Conquista*, cap. 144.

Spaniards.⁶ It was the ancient capital of the Tlahuicas, and the most considerable place for wealth and population in this part of the country. It was tributary to the Aztecs, and a garrison of this nation was quartered within its walls. The town was singularly situated, on a projecting piece of land, encompassed by *barrancas*, or formidable ravines, except on one side, which opened on a rich and well-cultivated country. For, though the place stood at an elevation of between five and six thousand feet above the level of the sea, it had a southern exposure so sheltered by the mountain barrier on the north that its climate was as soft and genial as that of a much lower region.

The Spaniards, on arriving before this city, the limit of their southerly progress, found themselves separated from it by one of the vast *barrancas* before noticed, which resembled one of those frightful rents not unfrequent in the Mexican Andes, the result, no doubt, of some terrible convulsion in earlier ages. The rocky sides of the ravine sank perpendicularly down, so bare as scarcely to exhibit even a vestige of the cactus, or of the other hardy plants with which Nature in these fruitful regions so gracefully covers up her deformities. The bottom of the chasm, however, showed a striking contrast to this, being literally choked up with a rich and spontaneous vegetation; for the huge walls of rock which shut in these *barrancas*,

⁶ This barbarous Indian name is tortured into all possible variations by the old chroniclers. The town soon received from the Spaniards the name which it now bears, of Cuernavaca, and by which it is indicated on modern maps. "Prevalse poi quello di *Cuernabaca*, col quale è presentemente conosciuta dagli Spagnuoli." Clavigero, *Stor. del Messico*, tom. iii. p. 185, nota.

while they screen them from the cold winds of the Cordilleras, reflect the rays of a vertical sun, so as to produce an almost suffocating heat in the enclosure, stimulating the soil to the rank fertility of the *tierra caliente*. Under the action of this forcing apparatus,—so to speak,—the inhabitants of the towns on their margin above may with ease obtain the vegetable products which are to be found on the sultry level of the lowlands.*

At the bottom of the ravine was seen a little stream, which, oozing from the stony bowels of the sierra, tumbled along its narrow channel and contributed by its perpetual moisture to the exuberant fertility of the valley. This rivulet, which at certain seasons of the year was swollen to a torrent, was traversed at some distance below the town, where the sloping sides of the *barranca* afforded a more practicable passage, by two rude bridges, both of which had been broken, in anticipation of the coming of the Spaniards. The latter had now arrived on the brink of the chasm which intervened between them and the city. It was, as has been remarked, of no great width, and the army drawn up on its borders was directly exposed to the archery of the garrison, on whom its own fire made little impression, protected as they were by their defences.

The general, annoyed by his position, sent a detachment to seek a passage lower down, by which the troops might be landed on the other side. But, although the banks of the ravine became less formidable as they

* ["The whole of this description," remarks Alaman, "agrees perfectly with the present aspect of Cuernavaca and the *barrancas* surrounding it."—ED.]

descended, they found no means of crossing the river, till a path unexpectedly presented itself, on which, probably, no one before had ever been daring enough to venture.

From the cliffs on the opposite sides of the barranca, two huge trees shot up to an enormous height, and, inclining towards each other, interlaced their boughs so as to form a sort of natural bridge. Across this avenue, in mid-air, a Tlascalan conceived it would not be difficult to pass to the opposite bank. The bold mountaineer succeeded in the attempt, and was soon followed by several others of his countrymen, trained to feats of agility and strength among their native hills. The Spaniards imitated their example. It was a perilous effort for an armed man to make his way over this aerial causeway, swayed to and fro by the wind, where the brain might become giddy, and where a single false movement of hand or foot would plunge him in the abyss below. Three of the soldiers lost their hold and fell. The rest, consisting of some twenty or thirty Spaniards and a considerable number of Tlascalans, alighted in safety on the other bank.⁷ There hastily forming, they marched with all speed on the city. The enemy, engaged in their contest with the Castilians on the opposite brink of the ravine, were taken by surprise,—which, indeed, could scarcely have been exceeded if they had seen their foe drop from the clouds on the field of battle.

⁷ The stout-hearted Diaz was one of those who performed this dangerous feat, though his head swam so, as he tells us, that he scarcely knew how he got on. "Porque de mí digo, que verdaderamente quando passava, q̃ lo ví mui peligroso, é malo de passar, y se me desvanecia la cabeça, y todavía passé yo, y otros veinte, ó treinta soldados, y muchos Tlascaltecas." Hist. de la Conquista, ubi supra.

They made a brave resistance, however, when fortunately the Spaniards succeeded in repairing one of the dilapidated bridges in such a manner as to enable both cavalry and foot to cross the river, though with much delay. The horse, under Olid and Andres de Tapia, instantly rode up to the succor of their countrymen. They were soon followed by Cortés at the head of the remaining battalions, and the enemy, driven from one point to another, were compelled to evacuate the city and to take refuge among the mountains. The buildings in one quarter of the town were speedily wrapt in flames. The place was abandoned to pillage, and, as it was one of the most opulent marts in the country, it amply compensated the victors for the toil and danger they had encountered. The trembling caciques, returning soon after to the city, appeared before Cortés, and, deprecating his resentment by charging the blame, as usual, on the Mexicans, threw themselves on his mercy. Satisfied with their submission, he allowed no further violence to the inhabitants.⁸

Having thus accomplished the great object of his expedition across the mountains, the Spanish commander turned his face northwards, to recross the formidable barrier which divided him from the Valley. The ascent, steep and laborious, was rendered still more difficult by fragments of rock and loose stones, which encumbered the passes. The mountain sides and summits were

⁸ For the preceding account of the capture of Cuernavaca, see Bernal Diaz, ubi supra,—Oviedo, Hist. de las Ind., MS., lib. 33, cap. 21,—Ixtlilxochitl, Hist. Chich., MS., cap. 93,—Herrera, Hist. general, dec. 3, lib. 1, cap. 8,—Torquemada, Monarch. Ind., lib. 4, cap. 87,—Rel. Terc. de Cortés, ap. Lorenzana, pp. 223, 224.

shaggy with thick forests of pine and stunted oak, which threw a melancholy gloom over the region, still further heightened at the present day by its being a favorite haunt of banditti.

The weather was sultry, and, as the stony soil was nearly destitute of water, the troops suffered severely from thirst. Several of them, indeed, fainted on the road, and a few of the Indian allies perished from exhaustion.⁹ The line of march must have taken the army across the eastern shoulder of the mountain, called the *Cruz del Marques*, or Cross of the Marquess, from a huge stone cross erected there to indicate the boundary of the territories granted by the Crown to Cortés, as Marquis of the Valley. Much, indeed, of the route lately traversed by the troops lay across the princely domain subsequently assigned to the Conqueror.¹⁰

The Spaniards were greeted from these heights with a different view from any which they had before had of the Mexican Valley, made more attractive in their eyes, doubtless, by contrast with the savage scenery in which they had lately been involved. It was its most pleasant and populous quarter; for nowhere did its cities and

⁹ "Una Tierra de Pinales, despoblada, y sin ninguna agua, la qual y un Puerto pasámos con grandissimo trabajo, y sin beber: tanto, que muchos de los Indios que iban con nosotros perecieron de sed." Rel. Terc. de Cortés, ap. Lorenzana, p. 224.

¹⁰ The city of Cuernavaca was comprehended in the patrimony of the dukes of Monteleone, descendants and heirs of the *Conquistador*.—The Spaniards, in their line of march towards the north, did not deviate far, probably, from the great road which now leads from Mexico to Acapulco, still exhibiting in this upper portion of it the same characteristic features as at the period of the Conquest.

villages cluster together in such numbers as round the lake of sweet water. From whatever quarter seen, however, the enchanting region presented the same aspect of natural beauty and cultivation, with its flourishing villas, and its fair lake in the centre, whose dark and polished surface glistened like a mirror, deep set in the huge frame-work of porphyry in which nature had enclosed it.

The point of attack selected by the general was Xochimilco, or "the field of flowers," as its name implies, from the floating gardens which rode at anchor, as it were, on the neighboring waters.¹¹ It was one of the most potent and wealthy cities in the Valley, and a stanch vassal of the Aztec crown. It stood, like the capital itself, partly in the water, and was approached in that quarter by causeways of no great length. The town was composed of houses like those of most other places of like magnitude in the country, mostly of cottages or huts made of clay and the light bamboo, mingled with aspiring *teocallis*, and edifices of stone, belonging to the more opulent classes.

As the Spaniards advanced, they were met by skirmishing parties of the enemy, who, after dismissing a light volley of arrows, rapidly retreated before them. As they took the direction of Xochimilco, Cortés inferred that they were prepared to resist him in considerable force. It exceeded his expectations.

On traversing the principal causeway, he found it occupied at the farther extremity by a numerous body of warriors, who, stationed on the opposite side of a bridge, which had been broken, were prepared to dis-

¹¹ Clavigero, Stor. del Messico, tom. iii. p. 187, nota.