

CHAPTER VI.

GENERAL ASSAULT ON THE CITY.—DEFEAT OF THE SPANIARDS.—THEIR DISASTROUS CONDITION.—SACRIFICE OF THE CAPTIVES.—DEFECTION OF THE ALLIES.—CONSTANCY OF THE TROOPS.

1521.

FAMINE was now gradually working its way into the heart of the beleaguered city. It seemed certain that, with this strict blockade, the crowded population must in the end be driven to capitulate, though no arm should be raised against them. But it required time; and the Spaniards, though constant and enduring by nature, began to be impatient of hardships scarcely inferior to those experienced by the besieged. In some respects their condition was even worse, exposed as they were to the cold, drenching rains, which fell with little intermission, rendering their situation dreary and disastrous in the extreme.

In this state of things, there were many who would willingly have shortened their sufferings and taken the chance of carrying the place by a *coup de main*. Others thought it would be best to get possession of the great market of Tlatelolco, which, from its situation in the northwestern part of the city, might afford the means of communication with the camps of both Alvarado and Sandoval. This place, encompassed by spacious porticoes, would furnish accommodations for a numer-

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ous host; and, once established in the capital, the Spaniards would be in a position to follow up the blow with far more effect than at a distance.

These arguments were pressed by several of the officers, particularly by Alderete, the royal treasurer, a person of much consideration, not only from his rank, but from the capacity and zeal he had shown in the service. In deference to their wishes, Cortés summoned a council of war, and laid the matter before it. The treasurer's views were espoused by most of the high-mettled cavaliers, who looked with eagerness to any change of their present forlorn and wearisome life; and Cortés, thinking it, probably, more prudent to adopt the less expedient course than to enforce a cold and reluctant obedience to his own opinion, suffered himself to be overruled.¹

A day was fixed for the assault, which was to be made simultaneously by the two divisions under Alvarado and the commander-in-chief. Sandoval was instructed to draw off the greater part of his forces from the northern causeway and to unite himself with Alvarado, while seventy picked soldiers were to be detached to the support of Cortés.

On the appointed morning, the two armies, after the usual celebration of mass, advanced along their respective causeways against the city.² They were sup-

¹ Such is the account explicitly given by Cortés to the emperor. (Rel. Terc., ap. Lorenzana, p. 264.) Bernal Diaz, on the contrary, speaks of the assault as first conceived by the general himself. (Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 151.) Yet Diaz had not the best means of knowing; and Cortés would hardly have sent home a palpable misstatement that could have been so easily exposed.

² This punctual performance of mass by the army, in storm and in

ported, in addition to the brigantines, by a numerous fleet of Indian boats, which were to force a passage up the canals, and by a countless multitude of allies, whose very numbers served in the end to embarrass their operations. After clearing the suburbs, three avenues presented themselves, which all terminated in the square of Tlatelolco. The principal one, being of much greater width than the other two, might rather be called a causeway than a street, since it was flanked by deep canals on either side. Cortés divided his force into three bodies. One of them he placed under Alderete, with orders to occupy the principal street. A second he gave in charge to Andres de Tápia and Jorge de Alvarado; the former a cavalier of courage and capacity, the latter a younger brother of Don Pedro, and possessed of the intrepid spirit which belonged to that chivalrous family. These were to penetrate by one of the parallel streets, while the general himself, at the head of the third division, was to occupy the other. A small body of cavalry, with two or three field-pieces, was stationed as a reserve in front of the great street of Tacuba, which was designated as the rallying-point for the different divisions.³

sunshine, by day and by night, among friends and enemies, draws forth a warm eulogium from the archiepiscopal editor of Cortés: "En el Campo, en una Calzada, entre Enemigos, trabajando dia, y noche, nunca se omitia la Missa, páraque toda la obra se atribuyesse á Dios, y mas en unos Meses, en que incomodan las Aguas de el Cielo; y encima del Agua las Habitaciones, ó malas Tiendas." Lorenzana, p. 266, nota.

³ In the treasurer's division, according to the general's Letter, there were 70 Spanish foot, 7 or 8 horse, and 15,000 or 20,000 Indians; in Tápia's, 80 foot, and 10,000 allies; and in his own, 8 horse, 100 infantry, and "an infinite number of allies." (*Ibid.*, ubi supra.) The

Cortés gave the most positive instructions to his captains not to advance a step without securing the means of retreat by carefully filling up the ditches and the openings in the causeway. The neglect of this precaution by Alvarado, in an assault which he had made on the city but a few days before, had been attended with such serious consequences to his army that Cortés rode over, himself, to his officer's quarters, for the purpose of publicly reprimanding him for his disobedience of orders. On his arrival at the camp, however, he found that his offending captain had conducted the affair with so much gallantry, that the intended reprimand—though well deserved—subsided into a mild rebuke.⁴

The arrangements being completed, the three divisions marched at once up the several streets. Cortés, dismounting, took the van of his own squadron, at the head of his infantry. The Mexicans fell back as he advanced, making less resistance than usual. The Spaniards pushed on, carrying one barricade after another, and carefully filling up the gaps with rubbish, so as to secure themselves a footing. The canoes supported the attack, by moving along the canals and grappling with those of the enemy; while numbers of the nimble-footed Tascalans, scaling the terraces, passed on from one house to another, where they were connected, hurling the defenders into the streets below.

looseness of the language shows that a few thousands more or less were of no great moment in the estimate of the Indian forces.

⁴ "Otro dia de mañana acordé de ir á su Real para le reprehender lo pasado. . . . Y visto, no les imputé tanta culpa, como antes parecia tener, y platicado cerca de lo que habia de hacer, yo me bolví á nuestro Real aquel dia." *Rel. Terc. de Cortés*, ap. Lorenzana, pp. 263, 264.

The enemy, taken apparently by surprise, seemed incapable of withstanding for a moment the fury of the assault; and the victorious Christians, cheered on by the shouts of triumph which arose from their companions in the adjoining streets, were only the more eager to be first at the destined goal.

Indeed, the facility of his success led the general to suspect that he might be advancing too fast; that it might be a device of the enemy to draw them into the heart of the city and then surround or attack them in the rear. He had some misgivings, moreover, lest his too ardent officers, in the heat of the chase, should, notwithstanding his commands, have overlooked the necessary precaution of filling up the breaches. He accordingly brought his squadron to a halt, prepared to baffle any insidious movement of his adversary. Meanwhile he received more than one message from Alderete, informing him that he had nearly gained the market. This only increased the general's apprehension that, in the rapidity of his advance, he might have neglected to secure the ground. He determined to trust no eyes but his own, and, taking a small body of troops, proceeded at once to reconnoitre the route followed by the treasurer.

He had not proceeded far along the great street, or causeway, when his progress was arrested by an opening ten or twelve paces wide, and filled with water, at least two fathoms deep, by which a communication was formed between the canals on the opposite sides. A feeble attempt had been made to stop the gap with the rubbish of the causeway, but in too careless a manner to be of the least service; and a few straggling

stones and pieces of timber only showed that the work had been abandoned almost as soon as begun.⁵ To add to his consternation, the general observed that the sides of the causeway in this neighborhood had been pared off, and, as was evident, very recently. He saw in all this the artifice of the cunning enemy, and had little doubt that his hot-headed officer had rushed into a snare deliberately laid for him. Deeply alarmed, he set about repairing the mischief as fast as possible, by ordering his men to fill up the yawning chasm.

But they had scarcely begun their labors, when the hoarse echoes of conflict in the distance were succeeded by a hideous sound of mingled yells and war-whoops, that seemed to rend the very heavens. This was followed by a rushing noise, as of the tread of thronging multitudes, showing that the tide of battle was turned back from its former course, and was rolling on towards the spot where Cortés and his little band of cavaliers were planted.

His conjecture proved too true. Alderete had followed the retreating Aztecs with an eagerness which increased with every step of his advance. He had carried the barricades which had defended the breach, without much difficulty, and, as he swept on, gave orders that the opening should be stopped. But the blood of the high-spirited cavaliers was warmed by the

⁵ "Y hallé, que habian pasado una quebrada de la Calle, que era de diez, ó doce pasos de ancho; y el Agua, que por ella pasaba, era de hondura de mas de dos estados, y al tiempo que la pasaron habian echado en ella madera, y cañas de carrizo, y como pasaban pocos á pocos, y con tiento, no se habia hundido la madera y cañas." Rel. Terc. de Cortés, ap. Lorenzana, p. 268.—See also Oviedo, Hist. de las Ind., MS., lib. 33, cap. 48.

chase, and no one cared to be detained by the ignoble occupation of filling up the ditches, while he could gather laurels so easily in the fight; and they all pressed on, exhorting and cheering one another with the assurance of being the first to reach the square of Tlatelolco. In this way they suffered themselves to be decoyed into the heart of the city; when suddenly the horn of Guatemozin—the sacred symbol, heard only in seasons of extraordinary peril—sent forth a long and piercing note from the summit of a neighboring *teocalli*. In an instant, the flying Aztecs, as if maddened by the blast, wheeled about, and turned on their pursuers. At the same time, countless swarms of warriors from the adjoining streets and lanes poured in upon the flanks of the assailants, filling the air with the fierce, unearthly cries which had reached the ears of Cortés, and drowning, for a moment, the wild dissonance which reigned in the other quarters of the capital.⁶

The army, taken by surprise, and shaken by the fury of the assault, was thrown into the utmost disorder. Friends and foes, white men and Indians, were mingled together in one promiscuous mass. Spears, swords, and war-clubs were brandished together in the air. Blows fell at random. In their eagerness to

⁶ Gomara, Crónica, cap. 138.—Ixtlilxochitl, Venida de los Españoles, p. 37.—Oviedo, Hist. de las Ind., MS., lib. 33, cap. 26.—Guatemozin's horn rang in the ears of Bernal Diaz for many a day after the battle. "Guatemuz, y manda tocar su corneta, q̄ era vna señal q̄ quando aquella se tocasse, era q̄ auian de pelear sus Capitanes de manera, q̄ hiziesen presa, ó morir sobre ello; y retumbaua el sonido, q̄ se metia en los oidos, y de q̄ lo oyéro aquellos sus esquadrones, y Capitanes: saber yo aquí dezir aora, con q̄ rabia, y esfuerço se metian entre nosotros á nos echar mano, es cosa de espanto." Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 152.

escape, they trod down one another. Blinded by the missiles which now rained on them from the *azotecas*, they staggered on, scarcely knowing in what direction, or fell, struck down by hands which they could not see. On they came, like a rushing torrent sweeping along some steep declivity, and rolling in one confused tide towards the open breach, on the farther side of which stood Cortés and his companions, horror-struck at the sight of the approaching ruin. The foremost files soon plunged into the gulf, treading one another under the flood, some striving ineffectually to swim, others, with more success, to clamber over the heaps of their suffocated comrades. Many, as they attempted to scale the opposite sides of the slippery dike, fell into the water, or were hurried off by the warriors in the canoes, who added to the horrors of the rout by the fresh storm of darts and javelins which they poured on the fugitives.

Cortés, meanwhile, with his brave followers, kept his station undaunted on the other side of the breach. "I had made up my mind," he says, "to die, rather than desert my poor followers in their extremity!"⁷ With outstretched hands he endeavored to rescue as many as he could from the watery grave, and from the more appalling fate of captivity. He as vainly tried to restore something like presence of mind and order among the distracted fugitives. His person was too well known to the Aztecs, and his position now made him a conspicuous mark for their weapons. Darts,

⁷ "É como el negocio fué tan de súbito, y ví que mataban la Gente, determiné de me quedar allí, y morir peleando." Rel. Terc., ap. Lorenzana, p. 268.

stones, and arrows fell around him thick as hail, but glanced harmless from his steel helmet and armor of proof. At length a cry of "Malinche," "Malinche," arose among the enemy; and six of their number, strong and athletic warriors, rushing on him at once, made a violent effort to drag him on board their boat. In the struggle he received a severe wound in the leg, which, for the time, disabled it. There seemed to be no hope for him; when a faithful follower, Cristóval de Olea, perceiving his general's extremity, threw himself on the Aztecs, and with a blow cut off the arm of one savage, and then plunged his sword in the body of another. He was quickly supported by a comrade named Lerma, and by a Tlascalan chief, who, fighting over the prostrate body of Cortés, despatched three more of the assailants; though the heroic Olea paid dearly for his self-devotion, as he fell mortally wounded by the side of his general.⁸

⁸ Ixtlilxochitl, who would fain make his royal kinsman a sort of residuary legatee for all unappropriated, or even doubtful, acts of heroism, puts in a sturdy claim for him on this occasion. A painting, he says, on one of the gates of a monastery of Tlatelolco, long recorded the fact that it was the Tezcucan chief who saved the life of Cortés. (*Venida de los Españoles*, p. 38.) But Camargo gives the full credit of it to Olea, on the testimony of "a famous Tlascalan warrior," present in the action, who reported it to him. (*Hist. de Tlascala*, MS.) The same is stoutly maintained by Bernal Diaz, the townsman of Olea, to whose memory he pays a hearty tribute, as one of the best men and bravest soldiers in the army. (*Hist. de la Conquista*, cap. 152, 204.) Saavedra, the poetic chronicler,—something more of chronicler than poet,—who came on the stage before all that had borne arms in the Conquest had left it, gives the laurel also to Olea, whose fate he commemorates in verses that at least aspire to historic fidelity:

"Túvole con las manos abraçado,
Y Francisco de Olea el valeroso,

The report soon spread among the soldiers that their commander was taken; and Quiñones, the captain of his guard, with several others, pouring in to the rescue, succeeded in disentangling Cortés from the grasp of his enemies, who were struggling with him in the water, and, raising him in their arms, placed him again on the causeway. One of his pages, meanwhile, had advanced some way through the press, leading a horse for his master to mount. But the youth received a wound in the throat from a javelin, which prevented him from effecting his object. Another of his attendants was more successful. It was Guzman, his chamberlain; but, as he held the bridle while Cortés was assisted into the saddle, he was snatched away by the Aztecs, and, with the swiftness of thought, hurried off by their canoes. The general still lingered, unwilling to leave the spot while his presence could be of the least service. But the faithful Quiñones, taking his horse by the bridle, turned his head from the breach, exclaiming, at the same time, that "his master's life was too important to the army to be thrown away there."⁹

Vn valiente Español, y su criado,
Le tiró vn tajo brauo y riguroso:
Las dos manos á cercen le ha cortado,
Y él le libró del trance trabajoso.
Huuó muy gran rumor, porque dezian,
Que ya en prision amarga le tenian.

"Llegáron otros Indios arriscados,
Y á Olea matáron en vn punto,
Cercáron á Cortés por todos lados,
Y al miserable cuerpo ya difunto:
Y viendo sus sentidos recobrados,
Puso mano á la espada y daga junto.
Antonio de Quiñones llegó luego,
Capitan de la guarda ardiendo en fuego."

EL PEREGRINO INDIANO, Canto 20.

⁹ "É aquel Capitan que estaba con el General, que se decia Antonio

Yet it was no easy matter to force a passage through the press. The surface of the causeway, cut up by the feet of men and horses, was knee-deep in mud, and in some parts was so much broken that the water from the canals flowed over it. The crowded mass, in their efforts to extricate themselves from their perilous position, staggered to and fro like a drunken man. Those on the flanks were often forced by the lateral pressure of their comrades down the slippery sides of the dike, where they were picked up by the canoes of the enemy, whose shouts of triumph proclaimed the savage joy with which they gathered in every new victim for the sacrifice. Two cavaliers, riding by the general's side, lost their footing, and rolled down the declivity into the water. One was taken and his horse killed. The other was happy enough to escape. The valiant ensign, Corral, had a similar piece of good fortune. He slipped into the canal, and the enemy felt sure of their prize, when he again succeeded in recovering the causeway, with the tattered banner of Castile still flying above his head. The barbarians set up a cry of disappointed rage as they lost possession of a trophy to which the people of Anahuac attached, as we have seen, the highest importance, hardly inferior in their eyes to the capture of the commander-in-chief himself.¹⁰

Cortés at length succeeded in regaining the firm *de Quiñones*, *dixole*: *Vamos, Señor, de aquí, y salvemos vuestra Persona, pues que ya esto está de manera, que es morir desesperado atender; é sin vos, ninguno de nosotros puede escapar, que no es esfuerzo, sino poquedad, porfiar aquí otra cosa.*" Oviedo, *Hist. de las Ind.*, MS., lib. 33, cap. 26.

¹⁰ It may have been the same banner which is noticed by Mr.

ground, and reaching the open place before the great street of Tacuba. Here, under a sharp fire of the artillery, he rallied his broken squadrons, and, charging at the head of the little body of horse, which, not having been brought into action, were still fresh, he beat off the enemy. He then commanded the retreat of the two other divisions. The scattered forces again united; and the general, sending forward his Indian confederates, took the rear with a chosen body of cavalry to cover the retreat of the army, which was effected with but little additional loss.¹¹

Andres de Tápia was despatched to the western causeway to acquaint Alvarado and Sandoval with the failure of the enterprise. Meanwhile the two captains had penetrated far into the city. Cheered by the triumphant shouts of their countrymen in the adjacent streets, they had pushed on with extraordinary vigor, that they might not be outstripped in the race of glory. They had almost reached the market-place, which lay nearer to their quarters than to the general's, when they heard the blast from the dread horn of Guatemozin,¹² followed by the overpowering yell of the bar-

Bullock as treasured up in the Hospital of Jesus, "where," says he, "we beheld the identical embroidered standard under which the great captain wrested this immense empire from the unfortunate Montezuma." *Six Months in Mexico*, vol. i. chap. 10.

¹¹ For this disastrous affair, besides the Letter of Cortés, and the Chronicle of Diaz, so often quoted, see Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva-España*, MS., lib. 12, cap. 33.—Camargo, *Hist. de Tlascala*, MS.,—Gomara, *Crónica*, cap. 138.—Torquemada, *Monarch. Ind.*, lib. 4, cap. 94.—Oviedo, *Hist. de las Ind.*, MS., lib. 33, cap. 26, 48.

¹² "El resonido de la corneta de Guatemuz."—Astolfo's magic horn was not more terrible: