

CHAPTER VI.

*Action of San Juan de los Llanos—Capture of the Jaral—
Interview at Sombrero, between General Mina and some
of the Revolutionary Chiefs—Overture by Mina for
an exchange of prisoners—Events at Sombrero.*

THE officers and soldiers of Mina's little army, on entering fort Sombrero, looked forward to enjoying a few days of repose; but the enterprising general could not remain inactive, while any occasion offered to annoy his enemy. On the 28th, information was received that a movement was made in the direction of the fort, by a body of seven hundred of the enemy, under the command of *Colonel Don Felipe Castañon*, and that he was in the town of San Felipe, distant from Sombrero, east-north-east, about thirteen leagues.

Castañon, from his activity in surprising parties of the patriots, and the enormities he committed, had rendered himself conspicuous. His fidelity had been rewarded by his govern-

ment with the command of this division, and they granted him, as a peculiar mark of confidence, liberty to act as his discretion dictated. He was allowed to move in any direction, and to enter into any province he chose, with his force, which was styled a flying division: it consisted of three hundred excellent cavalry, and four hundred infantry. His movements were rapid and secret; and being generally made under cover of the night, he kept the whole country in the Baxio in perpetual alarm. He had been invariably victorious, and his name excited such terror, that the patriots, at length, could not be brought to face him; each individual, whether peasant or soldier, when his name was mentioned, and he was supposed to be near, thought only of making an escape.

It had latterly been the practice with the royalist commanders, in virtue of orders from the viceroy Apodaca, not to put to death, or molest the persons of country people within the jurisdiction of the patriots, unless they were actually taken in arms. This order was in general attended to, except in some occasional instances of plunder; but Castañon most wantonly disobeyed it, with regard to every individual, that came within his merciless grasp. The Gazette of Mexico teemed with his des-

patches, in which, after enumerating his savage acts, he invariably wound up by informing the viceroy, that the prisoners should be shot. The aged and infirm, women and children, were alike the victims of his sanguinary and vindictive spirit, so that as he advanced, every one fled to the mountains, or retired to secret retreats in the ravines, to avoid his fury. Meeting with no opposition, in the most merciless manner he murdered and robbed the unhappy peasantry, wherever they were found, and desolated every place through which he passed.

Mina, on the intelligence of his approach, rejoiced in the opportunity of checking the strides of this ferocious royalist, and, accordingly, on the evening of the 28th, marched to meet him with the effective force of the division, about two hundred strong, accompanied by Don Pedro Moreno, with a detachment of fifty infantry and eighty lancers, under *Don Encarnacion Ortiz*. The division continued its march till midnight, when, on reaching the ruins of an hacienda, they were joined by some patriot infantry, which increased the party to nearly four hundred men. At three in the morning, the division halted, about six leagues from San Felipe. Morning presented to view

the comrades who had joined during the march. They were a motley group, that merely swelled the numerical force, without bringing an addition of strength. Over their shoulders was thrown a tattered blanket, which, with a pair of drawers, constituted their only clothing. Their musquets were generally rusty, without bayonets, the locks out of repair, and many without flints. The men were unaccustomed to even the semblance of discipline, for they had lived at their own houses, scattered over several leagues of country, and had been suddenly called together for the present expedition. Such was the allied infantry; but it must not be inferred, that the lancers under Ortiz were of a similar description.

The patriots invariably pay great attention to, and take great pride in their cavalry. The lancers of Ortiz were mounted on fine horses, each man carrying either a lance or carabine, with pistols or a sword; and although they had no uniform, and were clothed in the same grotesque manner we have described on a former occasion, yet they were a hardy, fine-looking set of men, full of animation and courage. Woe be to the broken ranks of an enemy, when pierced by such men as composed the cavalry of Ortiz.

At seven o'clock next morning the troops were in motion. After advancing about a league, the enemy were discovered approaching by the same road, which lay through a beautiful undulating plain, on the lands of the hacienda of *San Juan de los Llanos*, distant from the town of San Felipe five leagues. The scene of action was near the ruins of that hacienda.

Mina ordered the division to retire behind a rising ground, and there made his dispositions with his usual promptitude and skill. The Guard of Honour, the regiment of the Union, and the infantry of Sombrero, forming a column of ninety men, of whom forty-five were citizens of the United States, were placed under the command of Colonel Young. The first regiment of the line and the patriot infantry formed another column of one hundred and ten men, under Colonel Marques, commander of the former regiment. The cavalry of the division, ninety strong, were commanded by Major Maylefer; the lancers were headed by Don Encarnacion Ortiz; and to these may be added the armed servants.

The enemy having taken up his position, Mina advanced alone to within musquet-shot of their line to reconnoitre. His dress, and the fine appearance of his horse, soon attracted the

notice of the enemy's infantry, who made a general discharge at him, but fortunately without effect. Mina's division were highly delighted with this display of his intrepidity, although many of his officers regretted to see him thus expose his person.

Having, however, accomplished his object, he returned to his troops, and gave orders for them to advance briskly to the attack. Colonel Young, at the head of his column, moved up rapidly under a heavy fire of grape and musquetry, poured into their infantry one volley, and then gallantly made a charge with the bayonet. Major Maylefer, at the head of his cavalry, at the same moment, falling, sword in hand, on that of the enemy, the whole gave way. The lancers, the instant they perceived the royalists in disorder, dashed furiously among them; the rout became general, and the victory was complete.

Three hundred and thirty-nine were found slain on the field, and *two hundred and twenty* were taken prisoners. About *one hundred and fifty* of the best mounted cavalry made their escape.

Among the slain was a Colonel Ordoñez, and several other distinguished officers. The implacable enemy of the patriots, Castañon,

received a mortal wound, of which he expired, after riding about five leagues from the scene of action. The cavalry pursued the enemy about two leagues, increasing their loss.

The gallantry displayed by Colonel Young in this action, and the ardour of his troops, set an example which was followed by all the rest of the division; and in fact, not more than eight minutes elapsed from the time Mina gave the order to advance, till the enemy were in full retreat. Mina's loss was *eight killed*, and *nine wounded*; but among the former was the brave and able officer Major Maylefer. The loss of this man almost counterbalanced the victory. The major was a Swiss, and had been an officer of dragoons in the French army; he had served in Spain, and, exclusive of his military talents, was respected by the troops for his indefatigable attention to his duties.

There fell into Mina's hands, the result of this action, *one brass field-piece* and *a mountain gun*, *five hundred musquets* (the greater part of which were of *British fabric*), a large quantity of *accoutrements*, and *all the ammunition and baggage*.

It is worthy of remark, that the enemy, during this action, fired *dollars* from their artillery. We presume this arose from their want

of grape-shot, for most certainly the state of the government revenue could not well afford such an extravagant mode of warfare. Be this as it may, many of Mina's soldiers were highly pleased with collecting this new species of grape-shot.

Mina returned to his encampment of the preceding night, amidst the congratulations of his soldiers; he marched the next morning, and arrived at Sombrero the same evening. A discharge of artillery announced to the royalists of the Villa de Leon, that a heavy disaster had befallen their cause.

From the republican press of Jauxilla, the news was spread over the plains of the Baxio, and the country held by the patriots. The death of Castañon excited universal joy amongst all classes of people: every demonstration was given of the warm feelings of the inhabitants in favour of the patriotic cause. The royalists had the mortification to see illuminations, and hear the discharge of cannon in every direction around them, up to their very walls. The churches resounded with *Te Deum*. From town to town, the praises of Mina were echoed. The blessings of heaven were implored upon his head, by the widows and orphans of the victims of Castañon. Old and young, from

Sombrero to the environs of the city of Mexico, and from San Luis Potosi to Zacatula, were chaunting hymns in honour of their deliverer.

The royalists now began to have stronger grounds of uneasiness; they beheld Mina's popularity daily augmenting, and they saw their finest troops cut up in detail, by inferior numbers. They knew that the inhabitants of the country were ready to welcome him with open arms, in case he should advance towards Mexico with any respectable force, capable of giving efficient personal protection. They were aware that Mina's victories would increase the spirit of disaffection, which had already begun to manifest itself in the royal ranks, and that every battle he gained, tended to weaken the tie which had hitherto existed between the royalists and the government.

This was the critical moment, when it may be truly said, the destinies of the Mexican nation were in the hands of Mina. Had *Padre Torres* and the other revolutionary chiefs, actuated by a genuine love of country, and devoted to its interests and independence, magnanimously come forward, and placed under Mina's direction the men and resources which they then had at their disposal, the standard of the revolution would now have waved over the walls

of Mexico, and its freedom would have been established. But so far were Torres and his satellites from adopting this important and necessary step, that they began to thwart all his measures, and eventually rendered all his exertions abortive.

After a few days' rest at Sombrero, the general, accompanied by Don Pedro Moreno, marched with the division and a body of lancers, in all three hundred strong, for the purpose of reducing the highly important *hacienda del Jaral*, twenty leagues north from Guanajuato. As this is one of the most extensive and valuable haciendas in the kingdom of Mexico, it may not be uninteresting to give some account of it.

The owner of this famous habitation is a Creole, named *Don Juan de Moncada*. From the hacienda he takes the title of Marques. Previous to the revolution, he was considered among the richest of the landed proprietaries of Mexico, and in the year 1810 actually had at one time in his own mansion six millions of dollars. The rent he derived from his estates, the revenues he drew from cattle, and horses, which latter are the finest in the kingdom, and from his own culture of wheat, Indian corn, and the article of *chile* (capsicum), were immense. He received

from the cultivation of chile alone, more than twenty-five thousand dollars annually. The great quantities of this pungent vegetable, which is grown in almost every part of Mexico, strike a stranger with astonishment. In the districts where the soil is best adapted to its culture, we behold enormous collections of it in all the magazines. For all culinary purposes, this vegetable is as essential to the Mexican, as salt is to the European, and indeed more so, because a Mexican would rather go without bread, than lack chile with his meat. At the table of the rich and poor, it constitutes an article of luxury as well as necessity: both in its green and dried state, the quantity consumed is incredible. When mashed, and mixed with a little water, it is the universal sauce or seasoning on the tables of the great; whilst with the poor, it forms a component part of their diet. More than *one-third* of the Mexican population live throughout the year chiefly on *tortillas* and chile; which last is spread on their *tortillas*, as butter is with us, though much thicker. On days of festivity, these poor people have occasionally a change of diet, by the addition of a few eggs, or a little broth (*caldo*), but they never relinquish the use of their favourite chile. A stranger, in passing through the country, has

great difficulty, for the first few months, to bear with the food prepared with chile; but, after, his palate becomes accustomed to its stimulus, it ceases to excoriate, and he generally gets as fond of it as the Indians and Creoles.

On the vast estates of the marques of Jaral, extending over *upwards of two hundred miles in length*, the miserable labourers exist, as is customary throughout Mexico, almost entirely on *tortillas* and chile. No part of the earth exhibits such striking, and such monstrous contrasts of wealth and misery, as well in the country as in the cities, as Mexico. We behold the proprietor of a hacienda, decked in a style of the most costly, but awkward grandeur. He has on a pair of country-made boots, which cost from fifty to a hundred dollars; large spurs inlaid with gold and silver; a superb horse, with a bridle and saddle which cost from a hundred and fifty to three hundred dollars; a cloak or mangas richly embroidered, and full of gold or silver buttons, laces, and fringe. He lives in a spacious house, within whose walls every luxury is to be found that the country affords; but when he sallies forth, he is lost amidst a group of half-naked, badly fed wretches, whose only dress is sheep-skins if in the country, or if in a town their shoulders are covered by an old

blanket or a sheet, serving them for a partial covering by day, and a bed at night. No species of attention is ever paid by the lord of the soil to the comfort or wants of his tenants or vassals, and a more wretched race of cultivators does not exist under the canopy of heaven, than the Indian labourers on these estates, and in the mining districts. Twenty-five cents, or two reals, are the daily wages of a labourer; out of which pittance he has to clothe and feed himself and family, and to pay the government and parochial extortions. No wonder, therefore, that he rarely tastes of animal food. In fact, the situation of a Georgia field negro is superior, notwithstanding all the royal writers say to the contrary.

In the cities, the poorer classes are still more wretched and numerous than in the country. In some places, they are called *Guachinangos*; in others, *Zaragates*, *Leperos*, and *Pelados*. In the city of Mexico, that class of miserable beings is computed at *thirty thousand*, or about *one-fourth* of the population. Some of them display great ingenuity, and evince what might be made of them, if placed under other circumstances. They work beautifully in wax, gold and silver ornaments, in painting and sculpture, and in making boxes of beads: but they know not the

value of their labours. We have seen them, when impelled by hunger, or anxious to obtain a little money to spend on days of festivity, part with articles of exquisite workmanship, on which they had expended weeks of labour, for a few reals.

The majority of these wretches live in idleness, and support themselves by gaming, which, of course, brings in its train all the other vices. Nothing can more forcibly depict, not merely a defective police, but the dreadful features of the Spanish government, than the existence of so much misery in a country blest with the finest soil and climate on earth, and where the actual population is not *one-thousandth part* of what might be subsisted from the physical resources of this beautiful section of the American continent.

The magnificent edifices of the city of Mexico, the personal splendour which surrounds the viceroy and all the officers of government, the costly temples for divine worship, the gorgeous exhibitions in religious processions, contrasted with the gloomy visages and wretched appearance of the Mexican poor, mark the reign of extortion, self-aggrandizement, superstition, and ignorance.—But let us return to the marques of Jaral. He had acted a conspicuous part in the