

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE CAPTURE OF SEDAN.



HE "London Globe" of Aug. 15 contains a letter from an intelligent gentleman in Berlin, containing the following statement: "A very reliable informant states, that, within one week, Germany will have an effective army of 1,200,000 men. I should feel great caution in giving currency to these figures, were it not that I am certain that my informant is in a position to know."

The movements of the Prussians were as cautious as they were impetuous. It was their evident design that the whole country behind the German armies, as far back as the Rhine, should be cleared of every military obstruction. They therefore seized upon all the barriers of the Vosges; and their numbers were so immense, that, while a victorious army was advancing upon Paris, they had all the forces they needed to conduct the sieges of Metz, Strasburg, Bitche, and every other fortress they found upon their way. The annals of war scarcely present an example of so triumphant a march. The dismay and distress occasioned in the homes of the peasantry, and in the villages, as these apparently countless thousands of Prussians swept triumphantly

along, cannot be imagined. Vast numbers (men, women, and children) fled from their homes, abandoning every thing, and in utter destitution sought refuge in the walled towns. God alone can comprehend the amount of misery inflicted; and as, on the field of battle, the missiles of war strewed the ground with the mangled, far away, amid the vineyards of Germany and the cottages of France, the woe was reduplicated as mothers and wives and loving maidens in despair surrendered themselves to life-long woe.

A French officer who was taken prisoner gives the following pleasing accounts of an interview with his victor:—

"Prince Frederick William, heir to the crown of Prussia, is a tall, thin man, with a tranquil and placid physiognomy; to which, however, the curve of his aquiline nose and the vivacity of his eye lend a stamp of decision. He speaks the French language with great purity. 'We all,' said he, 'admired, yesterday, the tenacity and courage evinced by the very meanest of your soldiers. I do not like war: if I ever reign, I will never make it. But, in spite of my love of peace, this is the third campaign I have been obliged to make. I went yesterday over the field of battle: it is frightful to look at. If it only depended on me, this war would be terminated on the spot. It is, indeed, a terrible war. I shall never offer battle to your soldiers without being superior in number: without that, I should prefer to withdraw.'"<sup>1</sup>

All alike seem to combine in testifying to the heroism of the French soldiers. A writer in "The London Times" of Aug. 16 says, "It may be questioned

<sup>1</sup> London Daily News, Aug. 15, 1870.



whether the French have not gathered more real glory from their defeats than the Prussians from their victories. Greater devotion was probably never witnessed in any war than that of certain French regiments, which rushed, at the voice of their general, upon inevitable destruction. The Prussians have fought where they liked and when they liked, and always with treble forces."

While Bazaine was in vain endeavoring to cut his way from Metz over the ramparts of his foe, MacMahon, with about thirty thousand men, was retreating upon Chalons, pursued by the Crown Prince at the head of a hundred and twenty thousand troops flushed with victory. On the 16th of August, the remnants of MacMahon's corps, numbering but fifteen thousand men, reached Chalons, where re-enforcements were met which raised their number to eighty thousand.

"MacMahon," says "The London Times," "in this retreat, has inflicted awful loss on the German army. There will be mourning in many thousand households, from the Rhine to the Vistula, and from the shores of the Baltic to the frontiers of Southern Bavaria. But then the Duke of Magenta has been utterly routed, and his defeat must have carried terror to the gates of Paris."<sup>1</sup>

In these hours of disaster, Gen. Trochu, who had already attained celebrity as a brilliant officer, was appointed, by the emperor, Governor of Paris, and commander-in-chief of all the forces assembled for its defence. Gen. Trochu was an imperialist; believing, with the overwhelming majority of his countrymen, that the

<sup>1</sup> London Times, Aug. 11, 1870.

empire was a better government for France than the old monarchy under a Bourbon or an Orléans prince, or the republic under such men as Favre and Hugo and Rochefort.

Strasburg on the Rhine contained eighty-four thousand inhabitants. "The Alsatians," says "The London Times," "are more loyal Frenchmen, almost, than the Parisians." A large force surrounded the city, and soon opened upon it a terrible bombardment from the siege-guns which they gathered from their fortresses near at hand. MacMahon had retreated to Chalons, fifty miles west of Metz. The Crown Prince, with a hundred and fifty thousand troops, was on the triumphant march towards Paris. Bazaine was hopelessly shut up in Metz, with his ammunition and provisions rapidly disappearing. Bands of Prussian cavalry were riding in all directions, emptying the granaries and the barn-yards of the peasants, and imposing enormous contributions on the towns which were captured. Desolation and misery were everywhere. The fields were covered with the unburied dead. Vionville, Flavigny, Rézonville, and Gravelotte were mostly in ashes. Families were wandering in the fields in terror and starvation.

The emperor was at Chalons, striving to assemble there a new army to arrest the advance of the Prussians upon Paris. There was no longer any French army in the field. Such a sudden collapse of one of the strongest military powers in the world was never before witnessed. A war of a fortnight had laid France prostrate; and this was done by a nation which but about a century ago could count but five million inhabitants. It was supposed that the Prussians would march irresistibly over the fortifications of Paris, and speedily en-



camp their hosts in the Garden of the Tuileries and in the Elysian Fields. Sorrows never come singly. Disaster followed disaster. The scenes described by eye-witnesses appall the imagination. In the silence of night, all the wooded gorges of the Ardennes resounded with the moan of the mutilated and the dying, rising in one continuous wail. The houses and the barns were filled with the sufferers. In one short battle, the French alone lost fifteen thousand in killed and wounded; and the Prussians, who marched recklessly up to their batteries of artillery and mitrailleuses, lost twice as many. The few surgeons could do comparatively nothing in the midst of such an accumulated mass of misery. Thousands groaned and died in the open fields, with none to give them even a cup of cold water.

The great object of Prussia in this war, as expressed by Bismarck after having entered upon it, and by all the leading Prussian journals, was to wrest from France so much additional territory, and so to weaken her, that she could never again make an attempt to recover her lost Rhine provinces. The panic in Paris was great; and frantic efforts were made to prepare for a siege.

The emperor remained with MacMahon's army, hoping to effect a junction of his troops with those of Bazaine. The plains of Chalons are as level as a floor, and thus poorly adapted for a defensive battle. On the 21st of August the French camp at Chalons was broken up, and the army retired about thirty miles to the north-east, — to the more broken ground of Rheims. As these armies of retreat and pursuit rushed along, scenes of heart-rending woe were witnessed among the inhabitants of the region thus swept by the devastating tempests of war. The Belgian frontier was overrun with thousands

of families seeking refuge there in utter impoverishment.

The Crown Prince of Prussia was now within a hundred miles of Paris. There was no force before him to oppose his march. An advance force of cavalry had been pushed forward to within sixty-five miles of the capital. The zeal of the French people in the war, notwithstanding their disasters, is manifest from the fact, that a new war loan of a thousand million francs was taken up in forty-eight hours. Strasburg was holding out firmly against a terrible bombardment. The whole populace of Paris was roused to prepare the city for the approaching siege. Though the Prussians had encountered enormous losses, the railroad-trains from the Rhine were crowded with their re-enforcements hurrying forward to fill the places of those who had fallen.

Never was the march of an invading army more resolute. On Sunday, the 25th of August, the Prussian scouts had reached Mieux, within twenty-five miles of Paris. It was a distance of three hundred miles from Sierca, the nearest point on the Prussian frontier, to the city; and yet this long line, through French territory, Prussia guarded perfectly against a warlike nation of forty millions inhabitants. The French, unable to meet their foes in the field, did what they could to harass their march by blowing up bridges, cutting railways, and blocking roads.

A constant stream of French prisoners and of captured guns and flags was entering the streets of Berlin, causing the frequent blaze of illuminations and the most enthusiastic demonstrations of joy. The French, acting on the defensive, fought from behind their ramparts and in their fortresses. Though invariably in the end defeated, they



as invariably inflicted upon their assailants a heavier loss in killed and wounded than they encountered. The shouts of joy which resounded through the streets of Berlin were answered by deeper wails of woe emerging from thousands of German cottages, whose inmates were plunged into life-long woe. It seems to be authentically stated that Prussia had then 1,124,000 well-trained and disciplined men under arms. Seven hundred and twenty thousand of these were in France. The condition of France was apparently hopeless. The exultant Prussians were marching wherever they pleased, filling their camps with abundance, exacting enormous contributions, and compelling France to drain the cup of humiliation to its dregs.

We have space for but one illustration of these exactions. It is given by a correspondent of "The London Times;" which journal was in cordial sympathy with the Prussians. The little town of Saverne contained 5,331 inhabitants. As the Prussian troops approached, the more wealthy portion of the inhabitants fled. The contributions demanded of the town were ten thousand loaves of three pounds each; sixteen thousand pounds of rice; two hundred and fifty pounds of roasted coffee; fifteen hundred pounds of salt; one thousand pounds of tobacco; seventy-five thousand cigars of superior quality; fifteen thousand quarts of wine; two hundred pounds of sugar; fifty pounds of extract of meat; a hundred and twenty thousand pounds of oats; fifty thousand pounds of hay; fifty thousand pounds of straw. These were all to be delivered before six o'clock the next morning in warehouses appointed for the purpose. A hundred wagons were to be furnished to enable the victors to carry away this food

and forage. The penalty of non-compliance was the general plunder of the town by the soldiers.

Scarcely any thing conceivable is more awful than the march through a country of half a million of hostile troops. A garden may bloom before them: a desert will be left behind. Famine and pestilence inevitably follow in the train.

On Tuesday, the 30th of August, the army of the Crown Prince overtook MacMahon's corps a short distance north of Rheims; and after a fierce battle, of enormous slaughter on each side, the Prussians drove the shattered army of the French in utter rout towards Sedan. During all the hours of the 31st, the battle raged in an incessant series of bloody skirmishes, as the French troops, about a hundred thousand in number, pressed on every side, fell back, bleeding, exhausted, despairing, into Sedan.

From the commencement of the war, the Prince Imperial, notwithstanding his youth, had accompanied his father, sharing all the fatigues of the campaign. At the commencement of these hours of terrible disaster, Marshal MacMahon, foreseeing that he was to be surrounded by overwhelming numbers, urged the emperor, with his son, to withdraw. The emperor resolved to remain with the army, and share its fate. He sent his son, however, to Mézières, and thence into Belgium.

The dawn of the morning of the 1st of September found the French so surrounded as to be cut off from all possibility of retreat. They were crowded together in a narrow space, while five hundred pieces of artillery were opening fire upon them. At five o'clock in the morning, the terrific storm of battle opened its thunders. It was an awful day. In the first hour of the battle, Gen. MacMahon was struck by the splinter of a shell



and was carried back, severely wounded, into Sedan. The command passed to Gen. Wimpffen. Nearly three hundred thousand men were now hurling a storm of bullets, shot, and shell, into the crowded ranks of the French. It was an indescribable scene of tumult and carnage. A correspondent of one of the London papers writes, —

“All describe the conduct of the emperor as that of one who either cared not for death, or actually threw himself in its way. In the midst of the scene of confusion which ensued upon the irruption of the panic-stricken French into Sedan, the emperor, riding slowly through a wide street swept by the German artillery and choked by the disordered soldiery, paused a moment to address a question to a colonel of his staff.

“At the same instant a shell exploded a few feet in front of Napoleon, leaving him unharmed; though it was evident to all around that he had escaped by a miracle. The emperor continued on his way without manifesting the slightest emotion, greeted by the enthusiastic *vivats* of the troops. Later, while sitting at a window inditing his celebrated letter to the King of Prussia, a shell struck the wall just outside, and burst only a few feet from the emperor's chair, again leaving him unscathed and unmoved.”

For five hours the emperor had been exposed to a fire which filled the air with bullets, ploughed up the ground at his feet, and covered the field with the mutilated and the dead. At half-past three o'clock in the afternoon, Gen. Wimpffen sent an officer to propose that the emperor should place himself in the middle of a column of men who should endeavor to cut their way through the enemy. The emperor replied, that he could not con-

sent to save himself at the sacrifice of so many men that he had determined to share the fate of the army. Though a large portion of the army was still fighting valiantly upon the heights around the walls, the streets of Sedan were choked with the *débris* of all the corps, and were fiercely bombarded from all sides.

After twelve hours of so unequal a conflict, the commanders of the *corps d'armée* reported to the emperor that they could no longer offer any serious resistance. The emperor ordered the white flag to be raised upon the citadel, and sent the following letter to his Prussian Majesty, who was with the conquering army: —

“Sire, my brother, not having been able to die in the midst of my troops, it only remains for me to place my sword in the hands of your Majesty.

“I am of your Majesty the good brother,

“NAPOLEON.”

William immediately replied, “Sire, my brother, regretting the circumstances under which we meet, I accept the sword of your Majesty; and I pray you to name one of your officers provided with full powers to treat for the capitulation of the army which has so bravely fought under your command. On my side, I have named Gen. Moltke for this purpose.

“I am of your Majesty the good brother,

“WILLIAM.”

Gen. Wimpffen was sent to the Prussian headquarters. “Your army,” said Gen. Moltke, “does not number more than eighty thousand men. We have two hundred and thirty thousand, who completely surround you. Our



artillery is everywhere in position, and can destroy the place in two hours. You have provisions for only one day, and scarcely any more ammunition. The prolongation of your defence would be only a useless massacre."<sup>1</sup>

Gen. Wimpffen returned to Sedan. A council of thirty-two general officers was called. With but two dissentient voices, it was decided to be useless to sacrifice any more lives. The capitulation was signed.

Our distinguished countryman, Dr. J. Marion Sims, was present at the battle of Sedan as surgeon-in-chief of the Anglo-American ambulance-corps. He testifies as follows to the necessity of the surrender:—

"It was impossible for the French to do otherwise than surrender. The emperor was not to be blamed. It was simply an act of humanity to have surrendered. On the morning of the 1st of September, MacMahon left his hotel at six o'clock. The battle had been progressing for some time. At half-past six he received his wound in the thigh, and was carried back to his hotel. The command then devolved upon Gen. Wimpffen, who had arrived only the day before. At five o'clock in the evening, white flags were raised; and, at six o'clock, the firing ceased entirely.

"On the next day, when the emperor had an interview with the king and talked of capitulation, Gen. Wimpffen said he could not sign the articles; but Bismarck showed him how the forces were situated, the French hemmed in, and without ammunition or provision, and no way of escape. Then Gen. Wimpffen, seeing he was surrounded by three times his own

<sup>1</sup> Campagne de 1870. Des Causes qui ont amené la Capitulation de Sedan, par un Officier attaché à l'Etat Major-Général.

strength and was powerless, had to sign the articles, after being but a few hours in command.

"The newspaper reports of the cruelty of the Prussians are not in the least exaggerated. The particulars are not fit for publication. Some eighty thousand French marched from Sedan before the Prussian lines to the little peninsula formed by the river, where they were halted after the capitulation. It was the saddest day in my life when I followed the poor French prisoners; and, if I lived a hundred years, I could never forget what I saw them endure. They were several days there on that piece of land, dying of sickness and starvation.

"The Bavarians utterly destroyed Bazeilles, a town of three thousand inhabitants. They say they were fired upon from the windows of the houses. In their rage they fastened up the doors, and set fire to each house, burning a great number of women and children. The smell of charred human flesh, for several days afterwards, was sickening. The Bavarians also shot a priest there, and some nuns and school-girls, besides a great number of citizens.

"I think the emperor never looked better than on the day of his surrender. It is a great mistake to suppose he is a decrepit old man. His intellect was never more vigorous; and his physical health is perfect, with the exception of some mere infirmities. He is occasionally subject to sciatica, but to no disease that threatens life.

"It is said that the Prince Imperial is a scrofulous boy. That is another great mistake. He is strong and rosy, in perfect health, and very intelligent,—a splendid boy, take him all in all. When he was ill a few



years ago, and was reported scrofulous, he simply had an abscess, the result of pressure in taking horse-riding lessons,—nothing connected in the least with disease of the bones or joints.

“They say the emperor has millions. I sincerely hope it may be so; but I have it, on the highest authority, that he is poor. The empress has property; and the Prince Imperial has property, left him two years ago by an Italian lady who died in Paris; but the emperor is not a rich man.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Testimony of Dr. Sims in the New-York Times, Nov. 4, 1870.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE OVERTHROW OF THE EMPIRE.



ING WILLIAM, in a letter which he wrote to Queen Augusta, speaks as follows of his fallen foe:—

“You already know, through my three telegrams, the extent of the great historical event which has just happened. It is like a dream, though one has seen it unroll itself hour after hour. On the morning of the 2d I drove to the battle-field, and met Moltke, who was coming to obtain my consent to the capitulation. He told me that the emperor had left Sedan at five o'clock, and had come to Donchery. As he wished to speak to me, and there was a château in the neighborhood, I chose this for our meeting. At one o'clock I started with Fritz, escorted by the cavalry staff. I alighted before the château, where the emperor came to meet me. We were both much moved at meeting again under such circumstances. What my feelings were, considering that I had seen Napoleon only three years before at the summit of his power, is more than I can describe.”

“At this conference,” writes one of the officers of the imperial staff, “the king showed the lofty feelings which animated him by exhibiting to the emperor all