

CHAPTER XLV

CHURUBUSCO

SCOTT, as we have seen, gave orders during the night of Thursday, the nineteenth of August—while the American troops in the village of San Gerónimo were making their preparations for next morning's attack on Valencia's camp—for Worth to leave one of his brigades in front of San Antonio, and to march with the rest of his division and Quitman's remaining brigade to reinforce the troops in the Pedregal. The orders were duly obeyed, and the two brigades started for their destination early on Friday morning; but before they had gone far they received news of the successful assault upon the Mexican camp, together with orders from General Scott directing them to turn back. Worth was then ordered to attack the lines of San Antonio in front with his whole division, as soon as Pillow's and Twiggs's divisions, moving through San Angel, should approach the rear of that position, while Quitman's one small brigade was left in charge of the hospitals and trains at San Agustín. Scott himself had ridden out toward the front early in the morning, but arrived after Valencia's defeat was accomplished, and while pursuers and pursued were streaming down the San Angel road. He at once gave directions for an advance through San Angel, in the direction of the rear of the Mexican works at San Antonio.

The road, after passing through San Angel, and about a quarter of a mile beyond it, forked, the left-hand road leading to Tacubaya and Chapultepec through well-cultivated fields of corn and maguey, while the right-hand branch, curving to the west, crossed the Magdalena Brook and about three-quarters of a mile farther on came to the famous old

village of Coyoacan, the first seat of the Spanish government in New Spain and the favorite residence of Cortés.

From Coyoacan, one road led nearly due north to the city of Mexico. Another road led northeasterly, direct to the bridge of Churubusco and past the neighboring convent, where Santa Anna two days before had been quartered. And a third road led southeasterly to the hacienda of San Antonio, joining the Acapulco highway just in the rear of the Mexican works. Scott, on reaching Coyoacan, had therefore his choice, first, of marching upon the city of Mexico or upon Tacubaya and Chapultepec, leaving San Antonio and Churubusco behind him and to the east; or, second, of proceeding northeasterly so as to cut off the retreat of the troops at San Antonio if they were defeated by Worth's attack in front; or, third, of marching with his whole force on the rear of San Antonio. Advancing cautiously toward Coyoacan, Scott's force drove out or captured the Mexican troops left there in observation, and halted to arrange for future movements. Captain Lee, of the engineers, was sent with Philip Kearny's troop of dragoons and the rifle regiment to reconnoitre the rear of San Antonio, while Lieutenant Stevens was directed to observe the field from the steeple of the village church of Coyoacan. Within ten minutes the latter officer reported that the enemy were abandoning San Antonio, and that the road for a mile was occupied by his troops and baggage in retreat.

Worth, as it turned out, had not literally followed the orders given him to wait in front of San Antonio until he heard the sound of an attack upon its rear, but had moved his troops so as to be ready to assault it both in front and rear. The ground had been most carefully reconnoitred on the three previous days, and at eleven o'clock in the morning Worth began his movement by sending Clarke's brigade to his left, across a portion of the Pedregal, so as to turn the fortified Mexican position. The other brigade (Garland's), with a battery of light artillery, was advanced as near as practicable to the intrenchments with instructions to storm them if opportunity offered.

But before these dispositions had fairly been made the Mexicans had begun to evacuate the works, which, of course, had become untenable since Scott's main force had gained their rear at Coyoacan. Clarke, therefore, moving across the rocks on the left of the road, found nothing but a few skirmishers in his front whom he easily drove away, and as he approached the high-road about a thousand yards north of San Antonio he discovered the garrison of the hacienda in full retreat. Falling at once upon the Mexican column, he cut it nearly in two, whereupon the rear portion, under the command of ex-President Bravo—a force, as Worth estimated, of about two thousand men with four guns—took a cross-road leading due east from the highway toward the Peñon and disappeared from the scene of action, while the other half of the force rapidly retreated along the road in the direction of Churubusco. By the time Clarke had thus cut the Mexican column in two Garland's brigade had taken San Antonio without resistance, and following along the road joined Clarke's brigade, and the whole reunited division moved rapidly in the direction of the city of Mexico, disregarding entirely the Mexican force which had fled to the east.

As they approached the bridge of Churubusco on the heels of the retreating Mexicans they found that a regularly constructed *tête de pont* had been thrown up in front of it, which appeared to be held by a large force. On the other side of the Churubusco River, in rear of the works, there was "a dense line of infantry as far as the eye could reach." West of the road a convent was seen, "strongly occupied with troops and protected by batteries and field defences," and it was obvious at once that the carrying of this position by a direct attack would prove a very serious task for the American army. Meanwhile, the Mexicans who had retreated from San Antonio were pouring through the *tête de pont* and across the bridge in great confusion. One gun and several ammunition wagons were abandoned on the road, blocking the advance of the American troops, but at the same time affording them some cover from the heavy fire which

was opened from the Mexican works as soon as the head of Worth's column came within range.

Scott had not yet secured any information in regard to what works existed at and near Churubusco, nor had he any detailed knowledge of the roads leading to the city and Tacubaya; but he did know that the most direct and the best road to the city from his depot at San Agustin was the highway which passed through San Antonio and Churubusco. His first thought, therefore, had simply been to remove the obstacle which was presented by the hacienda of San Antonio and its surrounding works, and the moment he learned of the abandonment of that position he sent Pillow, with one of his brigades (Cadwalader's), to operate with Worth along the line of the highway. At the same time Twiggs, with Smith's brigade and a field-battery, was sent to seize the road near the convent of San Mateo at Churubusco.¹ Pierce's brigade was soon after ordered to take a road leading north from Coyoacan—not with a view to attacking the city, but in order to come in on the Acapulco road still further north and in the rear of the convent; and shortly afterward Riley's brigade of Twiggs's division was sent to follow Smith's brigade in the direction of the convent, while Shields's brigade of Quitman's division was ordered to follow Pierce.

It will thus be seen that Scott's whole plan was based upon the idea of clearing the Acapulco road. He had proposed to carry the intrenchments at San Antonio by a concerted attack, and then to seize the road at three different points in the rear of San Antonio by Pillow, Twiggs, and Shields, respectively. He had never counted upon a strong defence at the Churubusco bridge, and his whole thought was to defeat and still further scatter the Mexican army, thus dispersing the last organized military force of his enemy. But his plans had to be rapidly changed by the unexpected obstacles which were now discovered.

The Churubusco River, formed by a succession of mountain streams—of which the Magdalena Brook is one—runs at

¹ Erroneously called, in the American reports, the convent of San Pablo.

this point almost precisely east; and although it had doubtless, in past times, meandered through the marshy ground south of the city of Mexico, it had, long before the time of the battle to which it gave its name, been made into a drainage ditch, perfectly straight, and with high banks on each side to prevent its overflowing the flat fields north and south of it. At the point where the Acapulco road crossed the river the strong *tête de pont* just spoken of had been thrown up a few days before by Santa Anna's engineers. It was an earthwork of strong profile with a wet ditch in its front, which was filled by the waters of the river, now (near the middle of the rainy season) at its height.¹ It mounted five guns manned by the companies of St. Patrick (American deserters) and by the battalion of Tlalpa.

About a quarter of a mile southwesterly from the bridge, upon the road leading to Coyoacan, stands the convent of San Mateo, a venerable building dating from the year 1678, which still remains one of the most interesting and attractive objects in the immediate neighborhood of the city of Mexico. The little convent church, now rarely used, is of solid and sombre Spanish masonry, but is finished on its western front with blue tiles or *azulejos*, which add a delightful touch to the quaintness and incomparable charm of the group of buildings. On the south side of the church is a beautiful patio with a gallery on the second story, and orange-trees blossoming in the midst of it add beauty and perfume to the secluded spot. The convent is surrounded with large gardens which must once have been cultivated by the Franciscan brothers, and about which stood, and still stands, a strong masonry wall some twelve feet in height, the whole constituting a very formidable place of defence.

Under Santa Anna's directions the walls had been scaffolded on the inside, giving protection for infantry, while upon the south and southwest strong intrenchments had been constructed outside the convent walls, which mounted

¹ In winter the bed of the river is absolutely dry. Even in August it was perfectly fordable.

six pieces of artillery and had an adequate infantry support, principally the two battalions of the national guards of the city of Mexico known as Independencia and Bravo, who had been brought here from El Peñon two days before.¹

When the American troops from Coyoacan came up the Mexican position was thus assailed almost simultaneously by Worth on the southeast and by Twiggs on the southwest; but the movements of these two commanders were made without concert and without any adequate reconnoissance. Nor were the two brigades under Shields and Pierce, which had crossed the Churubusco River west of the convent, in touch with the forces of either Worth or Twiggs, so that the battle which followed consisted in reality of three separate and distinct combats, which must be separately described.

Worth, as has already been stated, advanced along the Acapulco highway. A little before noon, just before his division reached the scattered houses forming the village of Churubusco, he was joined by Pillow with Cadwalader's brigade, who had turned off in his march toward the direction of San Antonio as soon as he discovered that the works at the latter point had fallen, that the head of Worth's division was opening fire on the *tête de pont*, and that Twiggs was beginning his attack upon the convent. Worth at once sent Garland's brigade to the east of the road, where it was formed in line facing northwesterly toward the *tête de pont*. Clarke's brigade still held the road itself, while Cadwalader's brigade, under Pillow, was sent to the west to interpose between the convent and the bridge; but the cross-fire from these two points was so severe that Cadwalader was able to effect little. Nor was a direct attack down the road upon the principal front of the *tête de pont* successful, for Clarke's troops were soon driven back by the heavy fire from the Mexican works, and they also were directed to turn off into the marshy fields already occupied by Garland's brigade. Worth's division now formed a quarter of a circle east of the

¹ The other two battalions, Victoria and Hidalgo, had been stationed at San Antonio, and, as they retreated to the city, did not fire a shot that day.

road, with its right flank reaching nearly to the Churubusco River and its left to the highway, and in that formation it advanced slowly through the tall corn—which had not been cut down except close to the works—suffering heavy loss, but keeping up a steady fire on the Mexican intrenchments as well as upon the infantry lining the north bank of the river.

Twiggs, in his advance from Coyoacan upon Churubusco, came into action just as the Mexican infantry in the convent and *tête de pont* first opened fire upon the head of Worth's division, and he ordered forward a battery of light artillery to a point from which his engineers assured him the guns could fire upon the convent. Their statement was that only a single piece of Mexican artillery was in position; but this supposed one-gun battery soon proved to be simply the western salient of the work in front of the convent, which was armed with six guns. Twiggs's whole division was now rapidly brought up, and formed in the fields a rough semi-circle to the south and west of the convent, where, in spite of the tall corn through which they advanced, they were exposed to a most severe fire from the intrenchments in their front and from the roofs of the convent buildings. For upward of two hours the contest at this point continued, the Americans very slowly gaining ground, until at length the slackening of the Mexican fire indicated the exhausting of their ammunition.

Shields and Pierce, in the meantime, had become heavily engaged with the Mexican reserves stationed along the Acapulco road north of the Churubusco River. The Mexican infantry along the road was partly sheltered by maguey hedges and stood on the defensive, while a body of their cavalry was sent across the fields to interpose between the American force and the convent. The American advance was much delayed by the muddy nature of the soil and by the numerous ditches with which the fields were cut up, but the men found some protection in the scattered farm buildings of the hacienda of Portales. They were all volunteers or raw recruits, and being attacked in front and flank,

and suffering heavy loss, were at times thrown into considerable disorder and could do little more than hold their ground.

Thus the battle raged on the east, south, and north of the Mexican position; but as Worth's troops slowly closed in upon the *tête de pont* and Twiggs's division on the convent, the Mexican fire began visibly to slacken. Presently the Mexican troops lining the northerly bank of the Churubusco River were observed to give way and retreat through the fields in their rear toward the city. A party of American troops of different regiments from Worth's right, quickly waded the river east of the *tête de pont* and formed in position in rear of that work, while at the same time the remainder of his men, who had been slowly working through the corn, came out on the small open space immediately in front of the intrenchments. By this time Pillow's men, who had been unable to penetrate between the *tête de pont* and the convent, crossed the road and joined Worth's division, and the entire force, dashing through the wet ditches waist-deep, poured over the parapets and into the intrenchments, which they cleared with the bayonet in a very few instants.

"The garrison of the *tête du pont*," says Ripley, who, as a member of Pillow's staff, was on the spot, "made but short resistance. A few shots were delivered, a few bayonets crossed, and the greater number fled over the bridge toward the city, leaving three guns, two standards, and twenty-seven officers and privates in the hands of the conquerors, whose loud and continued shouts succeeded the roar of hostile musketry and cannon which but a moment before had been delivered from the parapet."¹

The first effect of the fall of the *tête de pont* was to relieve the pressure upon the American troops north of the river. The flight of the garrison threw the Mexican reserve into disorder, and the entire body, in one intermingled mass, poured along the road toward the city, pursued by the whole of Pillow's and Worth's infantry, which had crossed the bridge and joined the party that had previously waded the river. Shields and Pierce at once advanced to the highway and,

¹ Ripley, II, 273.

with Harney's dragoons, joined Worth and Pillow in the pursuit of the defeated Mexicans.

Meanwhile, for some short period of time, the convent still held out. Twiggs had carried the intrenchments in its front at about the same time that Worth carried the *tête de pont*, and the defenders fell back into the convent itself. But one of the captured guns of the *tête de pont* was placed in position and opened fire upon the convent, Duncan's battery of Worth's division opened on it from the main road, and one of Pillow's regiments was ordered to move to a position on the north of the convent and attack it upon that side; but before this regiment could get into action a white flag was hung out on the church tower. Smith's brigade of Twiggs's division received the surrender of the garrison, who numbered after the surrender 104 officers and 1,155 men. There were also captured at this point seven pieces of artillery, much ammunition, and a large quantity of small-arms. Among the officers who surrendered were General Manuel Rincon, who commanded the post, and who had defended Vera Cruz at the time of the French attack; ex-President Anaya; and Don Manuel Eduardo Gorostiza, who had been Mexican minister to the United States twelve years before and had given so much offence to President Jackson. Gorostiza was now colonel of the Bravo battalion of the national guards of Mexico.

Scott, whose head-quarters had remained at Coyoacan during the battle, now sent orders to give up pursuit, and accordingly the infantry were halted a mile or two north of the Churubusco bridge, though the cavalry, with Worth's permission, pursued the retreating enemy up to the very gates of the city, where a small body of dragoons dashed into the crowded mass of fugitives. As the American cavalry galloped up, the artillery near the gate of San Antonio Abad opened on the party, inflicting severe loss. Captain Philip Kearny lost an arm, and Major Mills, of one of the infantry regiments, a volunteer in this charge, was killed actually within the gate; and thus ended the fighting of the eventful day which had been begun by the defeat of Valencia near

Contreras, and had witnessed the successive occupation by the American troops of San Angel, Coyoacan, San Antonio, and Churubusco.¹

The various conflicts near Contreras and Churubusco on the nineteenth and twentieth of August were, in effect, parts of one single battle, and may be reviewed as a whole. It is to be observed, in the first place, that it is extremely difficult to form a satisfactory judgment as to the numbers engaged on either side. Valencia's force on the hill of Padierna was variously stated, the American estimates being apparently a great deal too high. His entire division, including cavalry, probably never amounted to five thousand men; and allowing some diminution from sickness he could hardly have had in his camp much over four thousand men. On the other hand, the attacking force west of the San Angel road consisted of four brigades of Scott's army with one large regiment of Pierce's brigade, and must have comprised almost half of Scott's army, or nearly five thousand men. The remainder of Pierce's brigade, with some artillery and other small detachments, which occupied the edge of the Pedregal east of the road, very likely brought the total American force on the field up to six thousand men.

The force which Santa Anna brought up with the intention of relieving and withdrawing Valencia from his position at Padierna, was also undoubtedly very much overestimated by the American officers. It consisted, as we have seen, principally of the brigade of General Francisco Pérez, together with the regiment of hussars constituting Santa Anna's personal escort, and a regiment of light cavalry of Vera Cruz, together with a field-battery of five guns. As Pérez had under him about three thousand five hundred

¹ Scott's official report of the day of Churubusco, with the reports of his subordinates, are in Sen. Doc. 1, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 308-354. Santa Anna's report (dated Nov. 21, 1847) is printed in *Apelacion al buen Criterio*, App., 99-101. For accounts by other eye-witnesses see Semmes, 395-409; Ripley, II, 246-285; Stevens, 67-74. See also *Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra*, 243-258; Roa Bárcena, *Invasion Americana*, 346-379, and the same author's *Vida de Gorostiza*, 94-111; and Wilcox, 378-397.

officers and men, and as Santa Anna brought up, in addition, probably less than a thousand, his whole force was something over four thousand; so that the two Mexican forces on the evening of the nineteenth—Valencia's and Santa Anna's—may be roughly estimated at eight thousand men.

Scott asserts that at Churubusco and its neighborhood the Mexicans had twenty-seven thousand men—another statement which is evidently exaggerated. The total Mexican force under arms a few days previous probably did not much exceed twenty thousand in all. From this must be deducted the cavalry division of Alvarez, which on the day of Churubusco was in observation east of San Agustin; the whole division of Valencia, or over four thousand men; a large part of the garrison of San Antonio which had fled easterly toward Mexicalcingo and the Peñon; and the detachments which had been left at the various gates of the city, or were posted at the Peñon and Chapultepec. It may therefore be concluded that the effective Mexican force at the bridge and convent of Churubusco, and along the road leading from the bridge toward the city, did not exceed nine thousand, or at most ten thousand men.

The American force attacking Churubusco consisted of Scott's entire army, with the exception of one regiment of Pennsylvania volunteers and a detachment of marines, who were left behind at San Agustin under Quitman to care for the principal depot and the hospitals at that point. Three hundred and fifty men of Worth's division were also left behind, to take care of his trains and baggage; and the fourth regiment of artillery, with small detachments of Pillow's force, had been left on the field of Padierna. The result is that the effective American force attacking Churubusco may be estimated at about eight thousand men.

With respect to the losses sustained on both sides it is not possible to speak with accuracy. The returns from the American army failed to distinguish between the losses on the nineteenth and the losses on the twentieth of August. The total for both days amounted to 137 killed, 879

wounded, and 40 missing; or, in all, aggregate losses of 1,056—very nearly one-tenth of Scott's entire army.

The Mexican losses no one ever attempted to state in exact figures. The prisoners taken on the nineteenth and twentieth numbered 2,637 men and officers, including eight generals, two of whom—Anaya and Salas—had temporarily filled the office of President of the republic. Scott estimated the Mexican killed and wounded in those two days at four thousand of all ranks, which may very likely be an overestimate, although it is apparent that their losses must have been extremely heavy. But, in addition, a very large number of the men who fled were undoubtedly dispersed and never rejoined the ranks; so that the actual losses of the Mexican army in the two days may be stated, with some degree of probability, at not less than six thousand men.¹ In addition to the loss of men was the capture of all the Mexican artillery at Padierna and Churubusco—stated by Scott at thirty-seven pieces—and the capture or destruction of immense quantities of small-arms, ammunition, and other supplies.

Besides these material losses, the moral effect upon the Mexican troops constituted an even greater diminution of their effective fighting strength. The American army had now met and overcome the Mexicans in every battle of the war. They had fought in the open field, they had conducted a siege, and they had successfully stormed fortified positions deemed by the Mexicans impregnable. They had also in the valley of Mexico succeeded in turning, and thus capturing without fighting, the most strongly prepared outer defences of the capital. They were now at the city's gates and it was not to be expected that the rank and file of the Mexican army would thenceforward make any very obstinate defence against assailants who had shown themselves so superior in every variety of warfare.

The conduct of the American army so far as concerned the

¹ The Mexican official returns July 7, 1847, gave the total force in the capital as 17,448 men. This was exclusive of Valencia's Army of the North, and probably of the cavalry of Alvarez. On Aug. 30 the returns showed only 11,381 men, apparently rank and file only.—(*Apelacion al buen Criterio*, App., 133.)