

CHAPTER XXII.

1817.

THE LIBERATOR LANDS AT BARCELONA — ENCOUNTER AT CLARINES — HE RESISTS AT "CASA FUERTE" — HE IS REINFORCED BY MARIÑO — INTERVIEW WITH BERMUDEZ — PROJECT OF BOLIVAR TO FORM A JUNCTION WITH PIAR AT GUAYANA — INTEREST OF DEFENDING BARCELONA — THE LIBERATOR LEAVES FREITES AT BARCELONA AND ORDERS THE MARCH OF THE REMAINING FORCES TO ANCOSTURA — ALDANA ATTACKS THE "CASA FUERTE" — SACRIFICE OF FREITES — ATROCITIES OF ALDANA — CONDUCT OF MARIÑO — EXPEDITION OF CANTERAC — PRODIGIOUS CONSTANCY OF BOLIVAR.

THE first of January of the year 1817 shall be a memorable day in our history; because on it, Bolivar landed on the American continent, never more to abandon it.

The Liberator had found Margarita freed by the efforts of Arismendi; but he did not find this chief on the celebrated scene of his brilliant achievements; because Arismendi, as soon as he had obtained the absolute independence of the island, had crossed over to Barcelona with 400 men to assist the operations of the war: an extraction of troops which was only due to the influence of that leader over the Margaritan islanders, usually reluctant to leave their country. This circumstance decided the Liberator to proceed to Barcelona in preference.

Both chiefs met there and embraced each other.

Venezuela felt the presence of her Liberator. The independence already seemed to be secure. Vallant chieftains sallied out from forests and deserts, anxious to fight under the orders of the hero; and in such a manner was the authority of the chief in the operations of the war acknowledged, that even the principal promoter of the mutiny of Guiria saw himself forced to receive and obey him. "The best harmony reigns between myself and Mariño," Bolivar wrote confidentially to his friend Leandro Palacios.

Happy we, if by that harmony, sincere on the part of Bolivar, the door had been forever closed on the paltry and insolent rivalries which produced so many evils, even in later epochs!

And now, what will the Liberator do at Barcelona? What shall be his plans to attain the independence of Venezuela? Bolivar will renew in the East the same prodigies which announced his name in 1813 in the West. He will struggle unceasingly; he will persevere; advantageously at times, unfortunate at others, disregarding the threats of the enemy; he will reserve to his conduct the weight of the affairs and all the risks of the undertaking; he shall encourage his friends, and that long campaign about to be opened on the shores of the Neveri, on the coast of the Caribbean Sea, shall end with the liberty of the New World, far away at the Desaguadero and in the lands of the Potosi, by the immortal battle of Ayacucho! . . .

I shall recall at this place that the Liberator did not limit his purpose to giving independence to Venezuela and New Granada; but that he determined to purge the whole of America of Spaniards, and with this resolution he wrote from Barcelona, having scarcely landed: "The troops of Urdaneta have already joined those of Zaraza; when this army shall have the arms it needs, and joins our forces, there will be formed a mass of 10,000 men, with whom we will be able to march without impediment to Santa Fé and Peru, and liberate those provinces from the yoke of the tyrants who oppress them."^a

This appears an extravagance, nonconformable and unproportionate with the circumstances of affairs; and it is no less than the influence of destiny, affording to the hero eminent and magnificent objects, so that his greatness may find new roads, and his fame be more widely spread.

On his landing at Barcelona, the Liberator saw himself with scarcely any troops to command, as he had carried over very few, and the army of the interior had spread in all directions. Monagas, Zaraza, and Parejo operated on different points; Piar and Cedeno threatened Guayana; Marino was at Cumana. With all the efforts of the active and influential General Pedro Maria Freites, only 800 men could be added to the 400 brought by Arismendi from Margarita. Bolivar intended to occupy the valleys of the province of Caracas, and to take the capital, where the installment of a Congress would be an event of great importance and interest. He marched, then (8th of January), at the head of those troops, the greater portion recruits, and attacked the royalists in the intrenchments of Unare, opposite Clarinea. There existed there a body of 850 men, commanded by the Spanish captain Don Francisco Jimenez, whom Torrente styles as "most valiant," and who was no more than a subaltern of Morales. Jimenez resisted the attack and defeated Bolivar, who was forced to return to Barcelona with very few soldiers, and leaving in the power of the enemy munitions, muskets, and other elements of war. "Misfortune," justly observes Restrepo, "then pursued the Liberator in all his enterprises, which he certainly undertook without the necessary resources and means. He confided too much in the love of independence, which he supposed animated all the Venezuelans. Fallacious hope at that epoch, which was on the point of costing the life of the supreme chief; if Providence had not preserved his precious days, that he might fulfill the important acts which he should execute in the benefit of the greater part of South America!

The cares of Bolivar were now limited to reorganizing his forces, and to await with this base the attack of the Spanish chiefs; an attack which was soon to take place, as Moxo was pushing forward at Orituco, the formation of a column of 4,000 men, which was confided to the command of Brigadier Don Pascual Real, and with him came Morales and Aldama; the first as chief of a division of infantry, the second at the head of another of cavalry.

Many and active were the measures adopted by the supreme chief to recruit soldiers; but in spite of all, he could scarcely count upon 800 undisciplined men, with whom he could not offer combat, but he resolved to resist in the convent of the Franciscans of Barcelona, fortified and provisioned as a point of defence. This place, destined to the retirement of monks, was not truly a "Casa Fuerte," for all that the Liberator may have styled it so; only the most daring and rash spirit could have inclosed itself there to await the prompt attack of

^a Letter to Colonel Leandro Palacios, 2d of January, 1817.

the royalists, who could cause the total sacrifice and extermination of the patriots.

The royalist army realized its march with great rapidity and appeared before Barcelona on the 8th of February, taking possession of the bridge and principal square with the greater part of their forces, increased, besides, with 1,200 men from Clarines.

On conceiving the thought of resisting in the Casa Fuerte, Bolivar necessarily relied on the succors which could be given him by Mariño and the other independent chiefs, and he had immediately sent the sub-chief of the army of the East, General Carlos Soublette, to Cumana to solicit help from Mariño. Mariño was at his headquarters in the plains of Cantaro, and scarcely had he received the message, when he prepared to march to Barcelona to protect him. He assembled the principal officers of his army and pointed out to them the situation of the Liberator. "We should not allow," he said to them, "that he should be the victim of the ferocity of the enemies, who are also ours; let us prepare to march to his succor."

Guevara, Valdes, Armario, manifested no repugnance, but Bermudez, who still harbored some hatred, and he did not parlon the occasion to authorize it as a motive to disregard the solicitude of Bolivar.

Then Mariño, interrupting him, "I can scarcely believe what you say," he said; "then we will abandon Bolivar in peril, and we shall allow the Vandals to triumph over him? And shall Freitas and Ahimendi, and remaining friends and patriots, who are with him, perish? This cannot be."

"My general," replied Bermudez, resolutely and with an expression of indefinable sincerity, "I am ready to march."

This scene depicts truly the heart of Mariño: noble, generous, incapable of meanness . . . The Liberator was in danger; he set out on the spot to rescue him . . . I know that he loved him as a brother, and his remembrance filled his soul with gratitude and ineffable joy. If Bolivar had seen himself in a thousand dangers, from a thousand dangers would Mariño have saved him, exposing resolutely his life. He did not recall old disputes, and forgot all, all, in the bosom of reconciliation. It is indeed deplorable that that soul, so simple, so magnanimous and liberal; such noble sentiments; such a valiant heart, so intrepid that he never knew what was the shade of fear; should suffer the injury of self-love and vanity, of the desire of exclusive preference which perverted and corrupted all.

The disposable force of Mariño, which did not amount to more than 1,200 men, marched to Barcelona on the 20th of January, a part by land, a part by sea, Pozuelo being pointed out as the rendezvous. Colonel Antonio José Sucre remained, charged with the command of the province of Cumana; the same one who from this on we shall behold cover himself with immortal glory.

Magnæ spes altera Roma.

On the same day that Real arrived at Barcelona, Bermudez also arrived at Pozuelo. This last was informed that the enemy had opened their fire on the patriots of the Casa Fuerte, and with that haughtiness proper to his character and strength of mind, he sent a message to Real ordering him to retreat, as Bermudez had arrived. Real retreated to Juncal, and immediately to Clarines, where he stationed himself, to suffer scarcities and the greatest desertion.

The forces of Mariño entered Barcelona, and Bermudez had the pleasure of

being the first to see Bolivar. This one sallied out to the other side of the bridge, and opening his arms to the proud Cumanian, he said, "I come to embrace the liberator of the Liberator." In effect, they cordially embraced each other, and without speaking to each other for many minutes, the tears shed by both represented well how sincere and useful was that reconciliation. Finally, Bermudes broke the silence, and exclaimed, as if to relieve himself: "HURRAH FOR AMERICA LIBERATED!"*

Amongst the causes alleged by Real to justify his retrograde movement, that on which he laid most stress was the scarcity of provisions and want of siege-artillery. But, if well considered, the besieged should have had greater scarcity, and the royalists, even without siege-artillery, could have given an assault at the point of the bayonet, and have decided by one blow the campaign. So that we have to conclude, to say the truth, that the name of Bermudes contributed its part, whose message was as laconic as it was eloquent.

Bolivar awaited, and desired that the enemy might return to attack him at Barcelona. He foresaw the victory; but Real could never put himself in accord with the chief of the fleet to obtain the siege-artillery which he required (so corrupted and mismanaged was the service amongst some of the royalist bodies), and remained in inaction.

All was the will of Providence to save Bolivar from the great perils he ran.

The Liberator passed in Barcelona, in vain expectation, not only the rest of the month of February, but also part of March. Meanwhila, provisions were becoming scanty, the abounding fields having been destroyed by the war, and, above all, the best opportunity of operating in the interior was being lost, where various patriot chiefs maintained themselves, if not with advantage, at least with hope and movement. Impatient at this delay, which led to nothing good, Bolivar resolved to leave Barcelona, to remove to Margarita the elements of war which he would not require for the first campaign, and to lead the troops to Guayana, where Piar, more than ever active and fortunate, harassed the Spaniards disputing the possession of the country.

This plan was proper, and was received with approbation by the principal chiefs of the army. The different columns operating in Barcelona, Cumana and Guayana, joined in one body: the independent forces would make themselves respectable, and they could fear nothing from the Spanish army always encamped on the line of the Unare. It could even happen that a fortunate success would open Bolivar the way to the capital, abundant in resources, before Morillo and his hordes could occupy it, and fix there a base of operations; which, until then, did not exist. If this should not happen, it was evident that Guayana could be occupied and the communication established by the Orinoco,

* The Liberator from that moment thought a great deal of Bermudes. His warlike qualities were eminent, and his heart was that of a child. How not love that man, so patriotic, so brave and disinterested; that man who was never known to vacillate in matter of valor, love of country, and liberty! Always led astray by an impatience which is not easily excused, and which I shall always condemn, without power to contain himself in reasonable terms, he failed to the respect due to the Liberator, and indignantly offended him, passing from personality to insult, and from insult to rude and criminal threats; but afterwards he washed out this stain by abundant and sincere, heartfelt tears, and the friendship of Bermudes was true.

with the independents of Apure. The provinces of the east would form the right of the line of operations, the Apure the left, and the divisions of Zaraga and Monagas would be considered as advanced bodies against Caracas and Barcelona. Thus, the affairs of the war were taking an imposing feature.

Unfortunately, the municipal authorities of the city opposed this project, and encouraged by the Governor Francisco Esteban Ribas, they offered to defend the city of Barcelona, which remained abandoned, if they would only have left the battalion "Barcelona," and some arms and ammunition.

There was much patriotism in this pretension, but it was indiscreet and un-military. The Liberator immediately opposed it, representing to Ribas (the most persistent in the idea of always occupying Barcelona), that they should necessarily regularize the operations of the various bodies which operated in distant localities, and to give unity and concert to those same operations; that, above all, the first thing was to seek a base, and Barcelona was not it, nor could be it. Guayana was called upon by its geographical position to become the base of ulterior combinations; also, the dismemberment of the army was absurd, that once distant, the division which was to march to Guayana, the royalists would attack the Casa Fuerte, with all probability of good exit.

These solid reasons did not produce the desired effect of the persuasion; but, on the contrary, the number of those who begged Bolivar with tears in their eyes to leave some force in the city, was increased.

The Liberator then convoked a council of war, and, submitted to debate the subject of the evacuation or preservation of Barcelona. After a long conference, they agreed affirmatively to the second extreme.

The Liberator condescended reluctantly; and this weakness, born from the circumstances, cost the lives of hundreds of confiding and inexperienced men, who were hallucinated by the love of country.

Bolivar was, I have already said many times, unflinching, but he gave way on this occasion because he did not consider his authority yet well secured.

With the view of obviating as much as possible the evils he foresaw, he left the General Pedro Maria Freites with 400 soldiers as garrison, ordering him to enclose himself in the Convent, or Casa Fuerte, to protect some 300 persons more who had taken refuge there. The rest of the force (3,000 men) were to march under the command of Marino, to Guayana.

A very satisfactory communication from Piar, which was at that moment delivered to Bolivar by the Colonel José Manuel Olivares, Secretary of Cedeño, came to excite more and more the purpose of taking Guayana. Piar said that he had obtained some advantages, and it was not to be doubted that, the attack being strengthened and the operations better disposed, the exit would be successful.

The Liberator took up his line of march at the break of day of the 25th March, accompanied by only fifteen officers and a few orderlies.

Three hours afterwards, the troops of Marino marched out by column.

The risks that General Bolivar ran in that long travel are to be supposed; the country infested by guerrillas, and Aldama having been notified by anticipated advices from Barcelona itself, informing him of the voyage meditated by the Liberator. Notwithstanding, as this one had to fulfill an important mission which was as yet uncompleted, no ball wounded him, no peril frightened him, no ambush found him unprepared. No one could surprise him. Destiny, or, speaking in Christian sense, Providence protected him. At Quia-

mare, a spot full of brambles and pits, the Colonel Parejo, who was in advance discovered a hostile ambush; he gave notice and dismounted. Bolivar, who was following, did the same and in a loud voice, he began to give orders, commanding attacks on the right and left; the fire of the escort corresponding to the voice of order; and the enemies, who believed the forces to be greater, retreated, leaving the road undisturbed. The guerrillas of Quimare were led by a negro named Jesus Aleman, who entered the town of San Mateo a little after the passing through it, of the Liberator. When he was informed of the small escort which accompanied him, he refused to believe it, and to this circumstance was owing, perhaps, that he did pursue him.

The Liberator arrived at the Orinoco, and crossed it at the head of the island of Bernabela in a canoe, given him by the commandant Don Pantaleon Guzman. He met Piar in the vicinity of Angostura, which place this general was besieging. He was confirmed in the idea of fixing the base of operations at Guayana, and he returned to Chaparro (17th April), resolved to bring into this province the park of Barcelona, and to increase the forces of Piar with those he had left under the command of Mariño and Freites.

The plan was the assault of Angostura.

Bolivar met at Palmita, near Chaparro, the columns of Bermudez and Valdea. He was there informed of the unfortunate news of the loss of Barcelona, the very important one of the defection of Mariño, who had openly disobeyed his commands, marching to Cariaco.

By consequence of the retreat of the Brigadier Real upon the Unare, and his following inaction, the Captain-General Moxo dismissed him from the command, qualifying him as *unable*, and conferred it on the Colonel D. Juan Aldama. This new chieftain, wishing to accredit himself, moved immediately his troops against Barcelona, and pressed the siege of the Casa Fuerte, in which, unfortunately, Freites had shut himself up. A multitude of all sexes and ages took refuge in it, fleeing from the outrages and cruelties of the Spaniards. Behind parapets the soldiers of Aldama erected their batteries, at about a thousand yards distant from the façade of the Convent, fronting on the east, and began to open a breach. The republicans resisted with desperate bravery. Freites and Ribas, calm, active, full of fire, resolved to sacrifice themselves to save their brethren, performed miracles of valor, but the odds and the artillery finally triumphed. The ferocious soldiers of the wicked Aldama gave no quarters. They massacred nearly 700 soldiers, and more than 800 old men, women and children. Many persons took refuge in the Church, but even there, in that sacred asylum, they were assassinated without pity. Blood was shed even in the sanctuary. Only four women were preserved by Aldama to satiate his baseness. He ordered fifty invalids to be massacred in the hospital; and he sent Ribas and Freites in a dying state to Caracas, where they were hung by Moxo. What desolation! What a dreadful sacrifice!

The good citizens of Barcelona had no remembrance of any such a great disaster. Blood flowed through the streets, and the fragments of the human body unconsumed by the fire, served as a grateful repast to the dogs and other animals. It would not be believed if I should write as it really was. The most ingenious malice cannot invent the atrocities and crimes which were committed by Aldama and his soldiers. The church became a house of lasciviousness, and dead bodies served as the jeers, the insensible forms being the scene of base infamies.

The name of the Colonel Don JUAN ALDAMA should pass to posterity, so that with that of Boves, Morillo, Roseta, Morales, Antafianza, Luna and others, it may be covered with the most hateful execration.*

My readers, will allow me before going any further in my relation of historical events, to turn again our attention to the army of Marino, and to ask with reason why he did not fly to the rescue of the besieged? What was he doing that he could not go to save so many patriots, an entire population threatened with death by the most cruel of those who came with the expedition? Bolivar, it is true, had given the order of march; but it was not to be inferred from this that he should neglect Barcelona to the point of abandoning her to her own resources, and this when the army was only a few days' march distant, and it was easy for him to help. What happened then that the General-in-chief should behave in this strange and truly inexcusable manner?

The troops of Marino could well have (as they were only a short distance from Barcelona) come to the help of Freites and the unhappy beings who were inclosed in the Casa Fuerte. Marino received dispatch upon dispatch from Freites, who advised of his situation, and solicited with urgent prayers to succor; but in those moments the seeds of disunion, fed by the army, were being developed, and therefore all concerted and generous movement was made impossible. Marino, whose achievements were of extraordinary merit, even in that time when prowesses were common, valiant and a soldier by character and constitution, refused to serve in the East under the orders of the Liberator, and he dreamt of returning to Cumana at the head of the troops which he had brought from there to operate independently. Several chiefs and officers warmed his purposes; but Soublette, Arismendi, Bermudez and Valdes opposed them. That beginning of insubordination and anarchy naturally caused grave disorders, because the followers of Marino spread the sinister rumor that the Liberator had been murdered by a guerrilla on the road of Guayana, news that was belied by advices of Monages, saying that he had passed by Sta Ana safe and sound. And as Marino wished to give a new organization to the forces he commanded, Bermudez and Valdes opposed themselves to the nomination of the chief of grenadiers and the guard of honor of the general-in-chief, the scandal of the dispute going to such an extreme of these taking arms to sustain their opposition. It is unnecessary to say that, in the warmth of these purposes there was nothing else than the very same purposes, and when Marino was disposed to counter-march to the rescue of Freites, it was too late. The officer Raimundo Freites, brother of the unfortunate Pedro, with a few other fugitives, appeared to say, that Barcelona no longer existed, and the banner of Castile floated over her ruins.

Ambition, then, that galling egotistical passion, was the cause of the abandonment of those noble patriots, martyrs of liberty, who paid with their blood the immoderate desires of the chief of the republican forces.

* In the catastrophe of the "Casa Fuerte" of Barcelona, that young Englishman, Chamberlain, who so decisively followed our cause, was also buried. To evade falling a prisoner to the royalists, and being oppressed by Aldama, he shot himself with a pistol. His wife, Eulalia Buroz, was taken prisoner by a Spanish officer who wished to caress her, and afterwards force her to forget the memory of her husband; but she drew a pistol and shot the Spaniard, leaving him dead at her feet! . . . She was on the spot cut to pieces by the royal soldiery, who left her a mangled mass. . .

It is strange, that amongst the generals who accompanied Mariño in his fatal disobedience, should be numbered Urdaneta; and let other historians say what they will, it is the truth, that not only did that chief not refuse the command of the division which Mariño offered him, but that when the separation was carried out, he went along with him to Cariaco. Mariño openly opposed the orders of the Liberator: he divided the army and gave the fatal example of disobedience. Urdaneta continued to obey him!

Arisemendi, Armario, Bermudez, and Valdes separated from Mariño, and returned to Chaparro to await the orders of Bolivar.

At Palmita, as has already been said, near Chaparro, the Liberator met the division who remained faithful to him. The sorrow caused him by the news of the loss of Barcelona, and the surprise produced to him by the defection of Mariño, cannot be described. "Until when," he exclaimed, "shall General Mariño continue to torment us with his pretension of command? Does he not consider the evil he inflicts on the country by that thirst which nothing quenches?"

The forces that were at Palmita ascended to little more than 500 men; with them the Liberator took up his march to the Orinoco, leaving Monagas and a few other subalterns at different points on the plains to harass the enemy.

The rainy season, that had already set in, caused the fording of the Orinoco to be difficult, which was at last executed in small canoes, during the 25th and 26th of April, two leagues above the mouth of the river Pao.

Barcelona destroyed, Mariño separated in defection, the glory of the republic withered, the towns sacked and almost devoid of subsistence, Bolivar should still find in his great effort, resources capable to resist the coming of the evils which were being prepared against Venezuela. Morillo had returned from the kingdom of Santa Fé, to exterminate the elements of the independence by the strength of his operations and the considerable force of his armies. He fortified the town of San Fernando, he levied new troops to replace the vacancies, he ordered General Latorre to embark in the Apure for Angostura with the battalion Cachiri and detachments of other bodies, and he himself set out to Chaparro to join the army commanded there by Aldama. In the execution of this great disposition, he received news that an expedition from Spain had arrived at the fort of Cumana (31st of May), under the orders of the General Don José Canterac with the battalion Burgos, two of Navarro, a squadron of lancers, another of riflemen, and a company of artillery, with the force of 2,800 men. Canterac should assist Morillo in Costa Firme, and proceed immediately to Peru by Panamá. "The probabilities of victory were thus increased," writes a Spanish author, "from the moment that Morillo saw himself reinforced by this brilliant division, and from the moment that he counted upon the active co-operation of such a brave chief, whose distinguished opinion, attained in the war against the first soldiers of the world, was the most solid guarantee that he should confirm in this new theatre, that the shield of his birth was to be less brilliant than personal virtues."

Notwithstanding, nothing of all this could disturb the Liberator; nor the rapid progress of such ardent enemies. "We will conquer them," he always said, "and we shall give liberty to America."

And it happened thus.

He conquered Morillo in Colombia; Canterac in Peru.

Torrente qualifies Bolivar as "daring and indomitable, magnificent, with all the

shades of absurdity, religious without the least sign of Christian virtue, a warrior more by impetus than by reflection." Let this royalist writer say what he pleases, contemporaries named Bolivar LIBERATOR; a title superior to all those conferred on human pride; posterity, in hymns of gratitude, will call him the semi-god of America.

An absurd and thoughtless warrior cannot conquer: he cannot destroy expeditions on expeditions; he cannot break the brazen chain which united two worlds, nor raise altars to liberty, where there are only deserts left by the despotism of three centuries!

To elevate to the rank of nations, on this side of the Atlantic, the innumerable people who tributed to the crown of Spain the homage of obedience and humble vassalage, it was necessary that Bolivar should be the remarkable minister of the eternal decrees. Notwithstanding, this hero, who threw on his shoulders the weight of an entire world; the one elected from eternity to preside the great movement of the American revolution; he, whose hands God armed with the lightning of power, and on whose brow he wrote the titles of his destiny, is the same one whom the royalist writers mock and scoff at! Insensates! The words of Diaz and Torrente are stupidities: the works of Bolivar are the glory of America! the liberty of many millions of men! the definitive triumph of principles over the old school of ignorance and despotism!