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The Legend of Inez Walker

(Late August through early September, 1865)



TLACOTALPAN

Children's Parade – Ready for Battle

Midnight Rescue at the Hacienda

General Jo Shelby and his brigade had been riding through green, fertile valleys with flowing streams and abundant crops for several days, passing through frequent small villages. As two of the men sat by the still-glowing coals of their campfire one night, a stranger appeared out of the underbrush. It turned out that he was a goatherd. After determining that he was of no harm, they allowed him to sit with them. He wanted to tell them a story.

They were on guard duty, but the man persisted. He wanted to let them know about the nearby Hacienda de la Encarnación and the man who owned it, Luis Enrico Rodriguez. The stranger told the soldiers that Rodriguez was a very wealthy Spaniard who had bought the property a few years ago and had built a large mansion, surrounding it with high walls. The man said that everyone knew the *hacendado* (wealthy landowner) was making a fortune by using shady and suspicious means, and that they were all curious about the fate of an American woman whom Rodriguez had been hiding behind those walls.

The woman's name was Inez Walker; she apparently was the daughter of an American who had found gold and married someone from the tribe that helped him find it. The couple had moved to Guaymas and lived among the wealthy set there, and later they had sent their daughter to California to get an education. When the daughter returned to Guaymas, Rodriguez fell in love with her at first sight and began courting her. When she refused him, he was furious and became totally obsessed with her. He showed up with a gang that night and kidnapped her, carrying her to his home at the Hacienda de la Encarnación. Inez's father had followed the gang and caught up with them, but he was killed in the attempt to rescue her.

Despite all the servants, the finest clothing and food, and all the luxuries that the *Doña* (Dame) of a magnificent estate could want, she still refused Don Luis. She saw him only as the murderer of her

father and wanted nothing to do with him. She had been a prisoner ever since, her body turning frail and her hair turning gray. She was probably still there, awaiting rescue.

The two soldiers dared not tell Shelby the next day. Stealthily, they organized a posse of twenty men who would accompany them at midnight. Shelby had tightened security ever since Parras, and he would not want any of his troops taking unnecessary risks.

Just after midnight, they crashed through the main gate of the Hacienda de la Encarnación using a tree trunk as a battering ram. Dogs barked, horses neighed and at least a dozen ranch hands shouted as the men ran toward the house. There was gunfire coming from the corral. They heard a bugle in the distance and knew that Shelby had been alerted and was on the way. If they didn't have the woman in about twenty minutes, they'd have a lot of explaining to do.

Breaking down the door of the house, they fought from room to room in total darkness, recognizing each other only by their Rebel yells from earlier Confederate battles. As the noise subsided and the invisible enemy had either died or fled, they managed to find some lanterns and light them. There – on the floor – lay the corpse of Don Luis Enrico Rodriguez.

At that very moment, Shelby appeared. He was seething with anger and demanded an explanation. It took great skill to tell the tale, but the men could see Shelby's expression soften as they related the tale of Inez Walker.

“And where is the woman?” asked Shelby.

A servant brought Inez from her room. Shelby's aide, Major John M. Edwards, told of her appearance in his 1872 book, *Shelby's Expedition to Mexico: An Unwritten Leaf of the War*:

“Grief stricken, prematurely old, yet beautiful amid the loneliness of her situation, Inez Walker came into the presence of Shelby, a queen. Some strands of gray were in her glossy golden hair. The liquid of her large, dark eyes had long ago been quenched in tears. The form that had once been so full and perfect was now bent and fragile; but there was such a look of mournful tenderness in her eager, questioning face that the men drew back from her presence instinctively and left her alone with their general.”

Shelby offered Inez Walker a safe journey to Mexico City, and promised to take care of all her needs and wishes. The next morning, the rescued woman was riding in a closed carriage, flanked by an honor guard, as the brigade continued its trek toward San Luis Potosí. ^[1]

Napoleon III’s Face-Saving Inspiration

In Paris, reality was beginning to set in for Napoleon III. He had counted on the South winning the American Civil War. That had not happened. He had assumed that Maximilian would somehow be able to keep his finances in order. They were out of hand. He had thought the Mexicans would be intimidated by floggings, hangings and firing squads, but it turned out that his heavy-handed approach only strengthened their resistance. He had not counted on the overwhelming success with which Matías Romero had influenced public opinion and had lined up not only prominent but effective backers in the United States.

The last thing Napoleon wanted was a war with the United States, but the French emperor now realized that Seward and Johnson were just waiting him out. He also knew that the reasons for a withdrawal were piling up day by day, and that about the only rationale for keeping troops in Mexico was to avoid the humiliation of admitting he had made a costly mistake in sending them there.

But how was Napoleon III to withdraw troops from Mexico without losing face? The answer to the emperor's dilemma came almost by accident when an old friend dropped by for a visit. James Watson Webb had been recalled to Washington after serving as United States ambassador to Brazil. On his way home he visited Paris to see Napoleon, whom he had met in New York almost thirty years earlier. Over breakfast with the emperor, Webb said there was no way the United States could recognize Maximilian given the prevailing public opinion. In fact, he suggested, thousands of Americans might go to Mexico to fight for Juárez if Maximilian remained there much longer.

Webb had an idea. Had Napoleon thought of withdrawing his troops in stages over the next year or two? It would give the clear impression that he was doing it at his own pace for his own reasons, and not just reacting to pressure. Napoleon hadn't thought of that. He called Webb's idea "an inspiration." [2]

500 Frenchmen vs. 2,000 Juaristas – Shelby to the Rescue

Jo Shelby, now calling himself colonel instead of general, and his brigade had to pass through Matehuala to reach Mexico City, but as they approached the town they heard gunfire and the sounds of artillery. After waiting for darkness, Shelby sent four scouting detachments to find out who was fighting whom. The scouts returned with a number of prisoners who told them that a force of five hundred Frenchmen was surrounded by about two thousand Mexicans, and that the Mexicans under General Escobedo were planning an assault on the town first thing in the morning. Shelby really didn't have to ask his men; they were ready to rescue the French outpost which was commanded by a Major Henri Pierron. Shelby sent two volunteers to tell Pierron that help was on the way.

The two soldiers dropped to the ground as the French forces fired a volley in their direction, but they managed to yell out who they

were and the firing stopped. After they had briefed Major Pierron, they insisted that they had to report back to Shelby. After a quick huddle with his officers, Pierron assigned four cavalymen to escort them back through the lines.

As dawn broke, the Mexicans began their attack on the town only to see Shelby and his brigade come riding out of the woods. The Mexicans didn't recognize the Confederate uniforms and assumed that Shelby's people were probably friends.

Wrong.

Too late, the Mexican forces realized that they were being attacked from two sides. The French cavalry came galloping out of town and rode along their flanks, surrounding the Escobedo forces and killing most of them. Major Pierron rode up to Shelby as the smoke cleared, inviting him and his brigade into town for a victory celebration.

Shelby's aide, John Edwards, wrote that:

"Pierron made Matehuala a Paradise. There were days of feasting and mirth and minstrelsy, and in the balm of fragrant nights the men dallied with the women. So when the southward march resumed, many a bronzed face was set in a look of sadness, and many a regretful heart pined long and tenderly for the dusky hair that would never be plaited again, for the tropical lips that for them would never sing again the songs of roses and the summer time." [3]

The next town of any major size would be San Luis Potosí, about a hundred thirty miles to the south.

Sick, Weakened French Forces Losing Ground by Default

Bazaine's invasion of northern Mexico and his last-ditch attempt to capture Benito Juárez had left some weak spots in French coverage elsewhere. The Marquis de Montholon, who was passing through on his way as he traveled to his new

assignment in Washington, had discovered a serious troop shortage in Veracruz. The Sudanese troops, he reported, were being used as prison guards. They had neither the training nor the ability to handle such a task. There had been incidents of prisoners being shot and of escapes among those who had been taken to the hospital. Montholon urged the imperial commander in Veracruz to take advantage of a ship, which was standing by, to transport the prisoners to Yucatan.

To help speed the French withdrawal, the Juarista forces stepped up their raids on French supply lines between Mexico City and the coast. They staged renewed attacks on Medellín, La Tejería, Boca Raton and other communities surrounding Veracruz, including the alternate seaport of Tlacotalpan (“t’lah-koh-TAHL’-pan”).

That caught Bazaine’s attention. The only way he was going to get all of his troops, equipment and supplies safely out of the country was through Veracruz. Sudanese troops were placed at four of the tower-like *baluartes* (bastions) surrounding the city, as well as at the main water supply – La Noria – located along the west wall. They were also assigned to patrol the railroad right-of-way, escort the trains, and carry messages among French commanders by horseback.

The French Lose a Seaport

That alternate seaport, which was under French control, was about to be lost to the Juaristas by default as a result of widespread illness among the troops. The Imperialista commander at Tlacotalpan, Colonel Marino Camacho, told Marshal Bazaine that his sick list was up to one hundred eighty men and that he could not hold on much longer.



TLACOTALPAN

The cozy little town was located a few miles inland from the waters of the Gulf, just up the Papaloapan River (“papa-lo-AH’-pan”) was a strong competitor with Veracruz for shipping revenue. It was also surrounded by marshes infested with the enemy.

The Juarista forces had been bombarding the town more often lately. With all of the sickness and the summer rains adding to the difficulties, Colonel Camacho decided to ask Bazaine for gunboats to evacuate Tlacotalpan. As the Juaristas were preparing for another assault on the town – one that their commander was certain would result in reconquest – Camacho asked for a conference with the enemy under neutral conditions. He told the Juaristas that he wanted to avoid bloodshed during the withdrawal, but that if so much as one of his men were to be wounded in an attack, the gunboats would level the town.

To General Alejandro Garcia, second in command to Porfirio Díaz, it was a really great offer. On one hand, Camacho could just have been bluffing and trying to negotiate an easy escape for his men, but it was also remotely possible that the gunboats could carry out the threat. In any case, General Garcia got to retake Tlacotalpan without firing a shot. Marshal Bazaine’s options had thus narrowed to little more than using the Port of Veracruz. ^[4]