

TEN SHILLINGS IN ADVANCE.

THE GREATEST POSSIBLE GOOD TO THE GREATEST POSSIBLE NUMBER.

TWELVE AND SIX PENCE AT THE END OF THE YEAR.

VOLUME I.

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CORTES'S CONQUEST OF MEXICO.

The conquest of Mexico by Cortes is unquestionably the most brilliant achievement in the long series of remarkable events connected with the discovery and early settlement of the New World. There we find the outline, at least, of a great empire, and some civilization, the monuments of which have begun, in our own times, to engage the attention of the learned. In Mexico there was a dense population, there were large towns, and there was that prime mover of human labour and daring—gold, in abundance. This great empire was conquered and the gold won by a handful of Spaniards, led by one who owed his elevation wholly to the caprice of fortune, for Cortes had no experience of war or command, nor had he shown in his early career much passion for romantic adventures. But great prospects gave birth to great hopes, and these kindled inexhaustible passions; hence the disregard of bodily fatigue and the perseverance, in spite of frequent reverses, which certainly mark the progress of all the Conquistadores. Cortes had the advantage, too, of being the first who trod that elevated stage; those who came after him, if they were his equals in heroic qualities, fell short of him in opportunities. Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru, was but a coarse imitator of Cortes; the courage and cunning of the latter became with the former ferocity and perfidiously. The extraordinary rapidity with which the New World was explored and colonized, was due in no slight degree to the success of Cortes.

The philosopher, it is true, unblinded by the surface of things, may doubt the genius and herculean of the first conquerors of America. Looking at the great inequalities of the human mind, he may be disposed to think that the Spaniards, by any means, were not the most distinguished of the human race, and that the conquest of the Mexican empire was, under the circumstances, a most extraordinary feat. Men, nearly naked, armed with wooden swords, edged with flint, and frightened at the sight of horses, which were new to them, could not, it is evident, offer any effectual resistance to cavaliers in full armour, wielding Toledo blades, and provided with matchlocks. If Cortes had, therefore, only boundless ambition and constancy under the reverse arising from his own miscalculations, his eventual success would have been a mere matter of time. We are willing, therefore, to take Cortes for a hero, since he did what appears to the bulk of mankind to have been a great thing. But his exploits, as we have seen, are not his writings. His letters to the Emperor Charles V. give us but an imperfect, and on many grounds suspicious, account of the conquest of Mexico. For a full and impartial history of that event, as well as for the personal history of the hero himself, we must look elsewhere. Cortes was by no means an elegant of the original. Though his narrative is in general tedious and artificial, yet it offers some curious passages, and late researches give us reason to believe that his description of the opulence and civilization of the country was not so exaggerated as might be at first imagined. For a picture of national prosperity, long since extinct, take the following account of Tlaxcala, which still exists, though much decayed.

"This city is so extensive and so well worthy of admiration, that although I omit much that I could say of it, I feel assured that the little I shall say will be generally credited, since it is larger than Granada, and much stronger and contains as many fine houses and a much larger population than that city did at the time of its capture; and it is much better supplied with fowls and game, fish from the rivers, various kinds of vegetables, and other excellent articles of food. There is in this city a market, in which every day thirty thousand people are engaged in buying and selling, beside many other markets which are scattered about the city. The market contains a great variety of articles both of food and clothing, and all kinds of shoes for the feet; jewels of gold and silver, and precious stones, and ornaments of feathers, all as well arranged as they can possibly be found in any public square or markets in the world. There is much earthenware of every style and a good quality, equal to the best of Spanish manufacture. Wood, coal, edible and medicinal plants are sold in great quantities. There are houses where they wash and shave the head as barbers, and also for baths. Finally, there is found among the well regulated police; than together greatly superior to the most civilized African nation."

Add to this the description of the neighbouring state of Cholula:—"The inhabitants are better clothed than the Thebanians in some respects, as the superior classes of citizens all wear cloaks over their other dress; similar in shape, material, and bordering; to those of Africa, but unlike them in being provided with pockets. Since the late troubles they have been and continue to be obedient vassals of your Majesty, performing whatever is required of them in your royal name, and I

believe they will remain so hereafter.—This state is very fertile under cultivation, as there is much land, most of which is well watered; and the exterior of the city is more beautiful than any in Spain, as it contains many towers, and is situated on a plain. As to assure your Majesty, that I have counted from mosque or temple four hundred mosques and as many towers, all of which are of mosques in this city. This city is more suitable for the Spaniards to inhabit than any of the towns we have yet seen, as it has unoccupied lands and water for cattle, which none of the others have that we have seen; and the multitude of people who dwell in the other places is so great, that there is not a hand's breadth of land which is not cultivated."

According to Cortes, the houses and gardens of the chief people in Mexico were fully equal to those of Spanish grandees.—He describes with much detail his meeting with Montezuma, and tells how he took off his own neck a collar of glass diamonds, and put it on that of the Mexican chief—for Cortes never styles Montezuma king or emperor,—and received two golden collars instead of the glass. But here is a passage still more characteristic:—"Six days having passed, most powerful Prince, since I entered the great city of Tezcuicatan (Mexico), and having seen some things in it, though but a few compared with what there was to be seen elsewhere, it seemed to me, judging from these things, and from what I had observed of the country, that it would subserve the interests of your Majesty and our own security if Montezuma was in my power, and not wholly free from constraint; in order that he might not be diverted from the resolution and willing spirit which he showed in the service of your Majesty, especially as we Spaniards were somewhat troublesome and difficult to please; but feeling assured that any occasion, he should do us some serious injury, and even might cause all memory of us to perish, in the exercise of his great power. It also appeared to me that if he was under my control, all the other countries that were subject to him would be more easily brought to the knowledge and service of your Majesty, as afterwards actually happened. I resolved, therefore, to take him and place him in my quarters, which was of great strength, and to see that he should now this could be effected."

I recollected what the officer whom I had left in command of Vera Cruz, had written me concerning the occurrences in the city of Almeria, which I have already related, and which, as he was informed, had all taken place in pursuance of orders from Montezuma. Having used the pretence that I did not believe it was so, he never the less, in order to clear himself from the imputation, it seemed to me proper that he should send for Quailpocca and the other principal men of that city, who had been concerned in the slaughter of the Spaniards, that the truth of the matter might be known, and those men punished, by which means he would satisfy your Majesty of his loyal disposition beyond all dispute; least instead of the rewards which your Majesty would order to be given him, the reports of these outrages might provoke your Majesty's anger against him on account of his having commanded the injury to be done; since I was well satisfied that the truth was contrary to what those men had declared."

The offending cazique, Quailpocca, was brought to the capital, as our readers are probably aware, and, with his followers, was burnt alive. Cortes tells this part of the story with much naïveté. "So they were publicly burnt in a square of the city, without creating any disturbance; and on the day of their execution, as they confessed that Montezuma had directed them to kill the Spaniards, I caused him to be put in irons, which threw him into great consternation." All this was manifestly done merely from the motives above intimated, namely, "to subserve the interests of your Majesty and our own security;" yet Cortes had some apprehension lest he might offend royal sympathies, and so, in respect of his demeanour towards Montezuma, he writes to the Emperor:—"Such was the kindness of my treatment towards him, and his own contentment with his situation, that when at different times I tempted him with the offer of his liberty, begging that he would return to his palace, he as often replied that he would well pleased with his present quarters, and did not wish to leave them, as he wanted nothing that he was accustomed to enjoy in his own palace; and that in case he went away, there would be reason to fear the importunities of the local governors, his vassals, might lead him to act against his own wishes, and in opposition to your Majesty, while he desired in every possible manner to promote your Majesty's service; so that he had determined that he would do as he desired to have done, and was well content to remain where he was; and should they wish to suggest anything to him, he could answer that he was not at liberty, and thus excuse himself from attending to them."

Cortes thus describes the original city of Mexico, which he soon afterwards destroyed. "This great city of Tezcuicatan is situated in this salt lake, and from the main land to the denser parts of it, whichever route one chooses to enter the distance is two leagues. There are avenues or entrances to the city, all of which are formed by artificial canals, two spans length in width. The city is as large as Seville or Cordova; its streets I speak of the principal ones, and are wide and straight; some of these, and the inferior ones, are half land and water, and are navigated by canoes. The city has many public squares, in which are situated the markets and other places for buying and selling. There is one square twice as large as that of the city of Salamanca, surrounded by porticoes, where are daily assembled more than sixty thousand souls, engaged in buying and selling; and where are found all kinds of merchandise, such as the world affords, embracing the necessities of life, as, for instance, articles of food, as well as jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, snails, and feathers. There are also exposed for sale wrought and unwrought stones, bricks burnt and unburnt, timber hewn and unhewn, of different sorts. Every kind of merchandise is sold in a particular street or quarter assigned to it exclusively, and that the best order is preserved. They sell everything by number or measure; at least so far we have not observed them to sell anything by weight. There is a building in the great square, where ten or twelve persons, who are magistrates, sit and decide all controversies that arise in the market, and order delinquents to be punished. In the same square there are other persons who go constantly about among the people, observing what is sold, and the measures used in selling; and if they see any measure used that is not the true one, they break measures that were not true. This great city contains a large number of temples, or houses for their idols, very handsome edifices, which are erected in the different districts and the suburbs; in the principal ones religious persons of each particular sect are constantly residing, for whose use besides the houses containing the idols there are other edifices, such as schools. All these persons are black, and never cut or comb their hair from the time of their infancy; and their dresses, both noble and respectable citizens, are placed in the temples and wear the same dress from the age of seven or eight years until they are taken out to be married; which occurs more frequently with the first rank than with the others. The priests are debarred from female society, nor is any woman permitted to enter the religious houses. They also abstain from eating certain kinds of food, and are prohibited from marrying, and others. Among these temples there is one which far surpasses all the rest, whose grandeur of architectural details no human tongue is able to describe; for within its precincts are situated the principal temples, and the most magnificent edifices, which are dedicated to a particular idol, to which they pay their devotions. These idols were soon precipitated from their pedestals and images of our Lady and Saints were set in their stead. The following we do not believe:—"The figures of the idols in which these people believe surpass in stature a person of more than the ordinary size; some of them are used for food, ground and mixed together, which they sacrifice to them, and besmear their faces with the blood."

Montezuma and destruction of Mexico, not by any means flattering to the humanity of the Spaniards, and which account has been translated into Spanish by Don Carlos Maria de Bustamante, himself of Indian descent. The story of Cortes has also been much eulogized, particularly by the best of his editors, Lorenzana, Archbishop of Mexico; and, in truth, he showed much zeal in the destruction of Pagan idols; but, on the other hand, he had a leaning to the moral and economical institutions of Paganism, of which the Archbishop, had he been aware of it, would most certainly have condemned for his heretical tendency. Cortes, when at a loss for surplus revenue, bestowed him that he could manage of the tithes much better than the clergy. In fact, he proposed to the Emperor to vest the tithes in the commissioners, for various uses; but this very bold and curious proposition deserves to be set forth in the words of its author:—"The plan I recommended is, that a number of religious persons (or priests;) as I have already mentioned, zealous for the conversion of this people, should come out, for whom houses and monasteries should be erected in the provinces wherever it may seem proper; and that tithes be assigned them to defray the expenses of building their houses, and for their support, the surplus to be applied to the erection and ornamenting of the churches in the village where the Spaniards reside, as well as to maintain the clergy who officiate in the same. Officers appointed by your Majesty should collect and keep an account of the tithes, and with them supply the monasteries and churches; for which purpose they will be more than sufficient, and a balance left for the disposition of your Majesty. Let your Majesty petition his Holiness (the Pope) to grant you the tenth of these parts for this purpose, giving him to understand the service rendered to God our Lord by the conversion of this people, which can be accomplished in no other way; for if bishops and other prelates are sent, they will follow the custom practised by them for our sins at the present day, by disposing of the estates of the church, and expending them in pageants and other foolish matters; and bestowing rights of inheritance on their sons or relatives. A still greater evil would result from this state of things, the natives of a country formerly had their priests, who were engaged in the practice of the rites and ceremonies of their religion; and so strict were they in the practice of hospitality and charity, that any deviation therefrom was punished with death; now if they saw that the affairs of the church and what related to the service of God were entrusted to persons who were engaged in the practice of the rites and ceremonies of their religion; and so strict were they in the practice of hospitality and charity, that any deviation therefrom was punished with death; now if they saw that the affairs of the church and what related to the service of God were entrusted to persons who were engaged in the practice of the rites and ceremonies of their religion; and so strict were they in the practice of hospitality and charity, that any deviation therefrom was punished with death; now if they saw that the affairs of the church and what related to the service of God were entrusted to persons who were engaged in the practice of the rites and ceremonies of their religion; 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