

CHAPTER VII.

SUCCESES OF THE SPANIARDS. — FRUITLESS OFFERS TO GUATEMOZIN. — BUILDINGS RAZED TO THE GROUND. — TERRIBLE FAMINE. — THE TROOPS GAIN THE MARKET-PLACE. — BATTERING-ENGINE.

1521.

THUS passed away the eight days prescribed by the oracle; and the sun which rose upon the ninth beheld the fair city still beset on every side by the inexorable foe. It was a great mistake of the Aztec priests—one not uncommon with false prophets, anxious to produce a startling impression on their followers—to assign so short a term for the fulfilment of their prediction.¹

The Tezcucan and Tlascalcan chiefs now sent to acquaint their troops with the failure of the prophecy, and to recall them to the Christian camp. The Tlascalans, who had halted on the way, returned, ashamed of their credulity, and with ancient feelings of animosity heightened by the artifice of which they had been the dupes. Their example was followed by many of the other confederates, with the levity natural to a people whose convictions are the result not of reason,

¹ And yet the priests were not so much to blame, if, as Solís assures us, "the Devil went about very industriously in those days, insinuating into the ears of his flock what he could not into their hearts." *Conquista*, lib. 5, cap. 22.

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but of superstition. In a short time the Spanish general found himself at the head of an auxiliary force which, if not so numerous as before, was more than adequate to all his purposes. He received them with politic benignity; and, while he reminded them that they had been guilty of a great crime in thus abandoning their commander, he was willing to overlook it in consideration of their past services. They must be aware that these services were not necessary to the Spaniards, who had carried on the siege with the same vigor during their absence as when they were present. But he was unwilling that those who had shared the dangers of the war with him should not also partake its triumphs, and be present at the fall of their enemy, which he promised, with a confidence better founded than that of the priests in their prediction, should not be long delayed.

Yet the menaces and machinations of Guatemozin were still not without effect in the distant provinces. Before the full return of the confederates, Cortés received an embassy from Cuernavaca, ten or twelve leagues distant, and another from some friendly towns of the Otomies, still farther off, imploring his protection against their formidable neighbors, who menaced them with hostilities as allies of the Spaniards. As the latter were then situated, they were in a condition to receive succor much more than to give it.² Most of the officers were, accordingly, opposed to granting a request compliance with which must still further impair their diminished strength. But Cortés knew the impor-

² "Y teniamos necesidad antes de ser socorridos, que de dar socorro." *Rel. Terc. de Cortes*, ap. Lorenzana, p. 272.

tance, above all, of not betraying his own inability to grant it. "The greater our weakness," he said, "the greater need have we to cover it under a show of strength."³

He immediately detached Tápia with a body of about a hundred men in one direction, and Sandoval with a somewhat larger force in the other, with orders that their absence should not in any event be prolonged beyond ten days.⁴ The two captains executed their commissions promptly and effectually. They each met and defeated his adversary in a pitched battle, laid waste the hostile territories, and returned within the time prescribed. They were soon followed by ambassadors from the conquered places, soliciting the alliance of the Spaniards; and the affair terminated by an accession of new confederates, and, what was more important, a conviction in the old that the Spaniards were both willing and competent to protect them.

Fortune, who seldom dispenses her frowns or her favors single-handed, further showed her good will to the Spaniards, at this time, by sending a vessel into Vera Cruz laden with ammunition and military stores. It was part of the fleet destined for the Florida coast by the romantic old knight, Ponce de Leon. The cargo was immediately taken by the authorities of the

³ "God knows," says the general, "the peril in which we all stood; pero como nos convenia mostrar mas esfuerzo y ánimo, que nunca, y morir peleando, disimulabamos nuestro flaqueza así con los Amigos como con los Enemigos." *Rel. Terc. de Cortés, ap. Lorenzana, p. 275.*

⁴ Tápia's force consisted of 10 horse and 80 foot; the chief alguacil, as Sandoval was styled, had 18 horse and 100 infantry. *Ibid., loc. cit.*—Also Oviedo, *Hist. de las Ind., MS., lib. 33, cap. 26.*

port, and forwarded, without delay, to the camp, where it arrived most seasonably, as the want of powder, in particular, had begun to be seriously felt.⁵ With strength thus renovated, Cortés determined to resume active operations, but on a plan widely differing from that pursued before.

In the former deliberations on the subject, two courses, as we have seen, presented themselves to the general. One was to intrench himself in the heart of the capital and from this point carry on hostilities; the other was the mode of proceeding hitherto followed. Both were open to serious objections, which he hoped would be obviated by the one now adopted. This was to advance no step without securing the entire safety of the army, not only on its immediate retreat, but in its future inroads. Every breach in the causeway, every canal in the streets, was to be filled up in so solid a manner that the work should not be again disturbed. The materials for this were to be furnished by the buildings, every one of which, as the army advanced, whether public or private, hut, temple, or palace, was to be demolished! Not a building in their path was to be spared. They were all indiscriminately to be levelled, until, in the Conqueror's own language, "the water should be converted into dry land," and a

⁵ "Pólvora y Ballestas, de que tenemos muy estrema necesidad." (*Rel. Terc. de Cortés, ap. Lorenzana, p. 278.*) It was probably the expedition in which Ponce de Leon lost his life; an expedition to the very land which the chivalrous cavalier had himself first visited in quest of the Fountain of Health. The story is pleasantly told by Irving, as the reader may remember, in his "Companions of Columbus."

smooth and open ground be afforded for the manœuvres of the cavalry and artillery!⁶

Cortés came to this terrible determination with great difficulty. He sincerely desired to spare the city, "the most beautiful thing in the world,"⁷ as he enthusiastically styles it, and which would have formed the most glorious trophy of his conquest. But in a place where every house was a fortress and every street was cut up by canals so embarrassing to his movements, experience proved it was vain to think of doing so and becoming master of it. There was as little hope of a peaceful accommodation with the Aztecs, who, so far from being broken by all they had hitherto endured, and the long perspective of future woes, showed a spirit as haughty and implacable as ever.⁸

The general's intentions were learned by the Indian allies with unbounded satisfaction; and they answered his call for aid by thousands of pioneers, armed with their *coas*, or hoes of the country, all testifying the greatest alacrity in helping on the work of destruction.⁹

⁶ The calm and simple manner in which the *Conquistador*, as usual, states this in his *Commentaries*, has something appalling in it from its very simplicity: "Acordé de tomar un medio para nuestra seguridad, y para poder mas estrechar á los Enemigos; y fué, que como fuésemos ganando por las Calles de la Ciudad, que fuessen derrocando todas las Casas de ellas, del un lado, y del otro; por manera, que no fuésemos un paso adelante, sin lo dejar todo asolado, y lo que era Agua, hacerlo Tierra-firme, aunque hobiese toda la dilacion, que se pudiese seguir." Rel. Terc., ap. Lorenzana, p. 279.

⁷ "Porque era la mas hermosa cosa del Mundo." Ibid., p. 278.

⁸ "Mas antes en el pelear, y en todos sus ardides, los hallabamos con mas ánimo, que nunca." Ibid., p. 279.

⁹ Yet we shall hardly credit the Tezcucan historian's assertion that a hundred thousand Indians flocked to the camp for this purpose!

In a short time the breaches in the great causeways were filled up so effectually that they were never again molested. Cortés himself set the example by carrying stones and timber with his own hands.¹⁰ The buildings in the suburbs were then thoroughly levelled, the canals were filled up with the rubbish, and a wide space around the city was thrown open to the manœuvres of the cavalry, who swept over it free and unresisted. The Mexicans did not look with indifference on these preparations to lay waste their town and leave them bare and unprotected against the enemy. They made incessant efforts to impede the labors of the besiegers; but the latter, under cover of their guns, which kept up an unintermitting fire, still advanced in the work of desolation.¹¹

The gleam of fortune which had so lately broken out on the Mexicans again disappeared; and the dark mist, after having been raised for a moment, settled on the doomed capital more heavily than before. Famine,

"Viniesen todos los labradores con sus coas para este efecto con toda brevedad: . . . llegaron mas de cien mil de ellos." Ixtlilxochitl, Venida de los Españoles, p. 42.

¹⁰ Bernal Diaz, Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 153.

¹¹ Sahagun, who gathered the story from the actors, and from the aspect of the scene before the devastation had been wholly repaired, writes with the animation of an eye-witness: "La guerra por agua y por tierra fué tan porfiada y tan sangrienta, que era espanto de verla, y no hay posibilidad, para decir las particularidades que pasaban; eran tan espesas las saetas, y dardos, y piedras, y palos, que se arrojaban los unos á los otros, que quitaban la claridad del sol; era tan grande la vocería, y grita, de hombres y mugeres, y niños que voceaban y lloraban, que era cosa de grima; era tan grande la polvareda, y ruido, en derrocar y quemar casas, y robar lo que en ellas habia, y cautivar niños y mugeres, que parecia un juicio." Hist. de Nueva-España, MS., lih. 12, cap. 38.

with all her hideous train of woes, was making rapid strides among its accumulated population. The stores provided for the siege were exhausted. The casual supply of human victims, or that obtained by some straggling pirogue from the neighboring shores, was too inconsiderable to be widely felt.¹² Some forced a scanty sustenance from a mucilaginous substance gathered in small quantities on the surface of the lake and canals.¹³ Others appeased the cravings of appetite by devouring rats, lizards, and the like loathsome reptiles, which had not yet deserted the starving city. Its days seemed to be already numbered. But the page of history has many an example to show that there are no limits to the endurance of which humanity is capable, when animated by hatred and despair.

With the sword thus suspended over it, the Spanish commander, desirous to make one more effort to save the capital, persuaded three Aztec nobles, taken in one of the late actions, to bear a message from him to Guatemozin; though they undertook it with reluctance, for fear of the consequences to themselves. Cortés told the emperor that all had now been done that brave men could do in defence of their country.

¹² The flesh of the Christians failed to afford them even the customary nourishment, since the Mexicans said it was intolerably bitter; a miracle considered by Captain Diaz as expressly wrought for this occasion. Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 153.

¹³ Ibid., ubi supra.—When dried in the sun, this slimy deposit had a flavor not unlike that of cheese, and formed part of the food of the poorer classes at all times, according to Clavigero. Stor. del Messico, tom. ii. p. 222.*

* [This was the *ahuahulle* before described. See *ante*, vol. ii. p. 109; note.—ED.]

There remained no hope, no chance of escape, for the Mexicans. Their provisions were exhausted; their communications were cut off; their vassals had deserted them; even their gods had betrayed them. They stood alone, with the nations of Anahuac banded against them. There was no hope but in immediate surrender. He besought the young monarch to take compassion on his brave subjects, who were daily perishing before his eyes; and on the fair city, whose stately buildings were fast crumbling into ruins. "Return to the allegiance," he concludes, "which you once proffered to the sovereign of Castile. The past shall be forgotten. The persons and property, in short, all the rights, of the Aztecs shall be respected. You shall be confirmed in your authority, and Spain will once more take your city under her protection."¹⁴

The eye of the young monarch kindled, and his dark cheek flushed with sudden anger, as he listened to proposals so humiliating. But, though his bosom glowed with the fiery temper of the Indian, he had the qualities of a "gentle cavalier," says one of his enemies, who knew him well.¹⁵ He did no harm to the envoys; but, after the heat of the moment had passed off, he gave the matter a calm consideration, and called a council of his wise men and warriors to deliberate upon it. Some were for accepting the proposals, as offering the only chance of preservation. But the priests took a different view of the matter. They knew that the ruin of their own order must follow the triumph of

¹⁴ Bernal Diaz, Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 154.

¹⁵ "Mas como el Guatemuz era mancebo, y muy gentil-hombre y de buena disposicion." Ibid., ubi supra.

Christianity. "Peace was good," they said, "but not with the white men." They reminded Guatemozin of the fate of his uncle Montezuma, and the requital he had met with for all his hospitality; of the seizure and imprisonment of Cacama, the cacique of Tezcuco; of the massacre of the nobles by Alvarado; of the insatiable avarice of the invaders, which had stripped the country of its treasures; of their profanation of the temples; of the injuries and insults which they had heaped without measure on the people and their religion. "Better," they said, "to trust in the promises of their own gods, who had so long watched over the nation. Better, if need be, give up our lives at once for our country, than drag them out in slavery and suffering among the false strangers."¹⁶

The eloquence of the priests, artfully touching the various wrongs of his people, roused the hot blood of Guatemozin. "Since it is so," he abruptly exclaimed, "let us think only of supplying the wants of the people. Let no man, henceforth, who values his life, talk of surrender. We can at least die like warriors."¹⁷

The Spaniards waited two days for the answer to

¹⁶ "Mira primero lo que nuestros Dioses te han prometido, toma buen consejo sobre ello y no te fies de Malinche, ni de sus palabras, que mas vale que todos muramos en esta ciudad peleando, que no vernos en poder de quiē nos harán esclavos, y nos atormentarán." Bernal Diaz, Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 154.

¹⁷ "Y entonces el Guatemuz medio enojado les dixo: Pues assi quereis que sea, guardad mucho el maiz, y bastimentos que tenemos, y muramos todos peleando: y desde aquí adelante ninguno sea osado á me demandar pazes, si no yo le mataré: y allí todos prometieron de pelear noches, y dias, y morir en la defensa de su ciudad." Ibid., ubi supra.

their embassy. At length it came, in a general sortie of the Mexicans, who, pouring through every gate of the capital, like a river that has burst its banks, swept on, wave upon wave, to the very intrenchments of the besiegers, threatening to overwhelm them by their numbers. Fortunately, the position of the latter on the dikes secured their flanks, and the narrowness of the defile gave their small battery of guns all the advantages of a larger one. The fire of artillery and musketry blazed without intermission along the several causeways, belching forth volumes of sulphurous smoke, that, rolling heavily over the waters, settled dark around the Indian city and hid it from the surrounding country. The brigantines thundered, at the same time, on the flanks of the columns, which, after some ineffectual efforts to maintain themselves, rolled back in wild confusion, till their impotent fury died away in sullen murmurs within the capital.

Cortés now steadily pursued the plan he had laid down for the devastation of the city. Day after day the several armies entered by their respective quarters, Sandoval probably directing his operations against the northeastern district. The buildings, made of the porous *tetzontli*, though generally low, were so massy and extensive, and the canals were so numerous, that their progress was necessarily slow. They, however, gathered fresh accessions of strength every day from the numbers who flocked to the camp from the surrounding country, and who joined in the work of destruction with a hearty good will which showed their eagerness to break the detested yoke of the Aztecs. The latter raged with impotent anger as they beheld

their lordly edifices, their temples, all they had been accustomed to venerate, thus ruthlessly swept away; their canals, constructed with so much labor and what to them seemed science, filled up with rubbish; their flourishing city, in short, turned into a desert, over which the insulting foe now rode triumphant. They heaped many a taunt on the Indian allies. "Go on," they said, bitterly: "the more you destroy, the more you will have to build up again hereafter. If we conquer, you shall build for us; and if your white friends conquer, they will make you do as much for them."¹⁸ The event justified the prediction.

In their rage they rushed blindly on the corps which covered the Indian pioneers. But they were as often driven back by the impetuous charge of the cavalry, or received on the long pikes of Chinantla, which did good service to the besiegers in their operations. At the close of day, however, when the Spaniards drew off their forces, taking care to send the multitudinous host of confederates first from the ground, the Mexicans usually rallied for a more formidable attack. Then they poured out from every lane and by-way, like so many mountain streams, sweeping over the broad level cleared by the enemy, and falling impetuously on their flanks and rear. At such times they inflicted considerable loss in their turn, till an ambush, which Cortés laid for them among the buildings adjoining the great

¹⁸ "Los de la Ciudad como veian tanto estrago, por esforzarse, decian á nuestros Amigos, que no ficiessen sino quemar, y destruir, que ellos se las harian tornar á hacer de nuevo, porque si ellos eran vencedores, ya ellos sabian, que habia de ser assí, y si no que las habian de hacer para nosotros." Rel. Terc. de Cortés ap. Lorenzana, p. 286.

temple, did them so much mischief that they were compelled to act with more reserve.

At times the war displayed something of a chivalrous character, in the personal rencontres of the combatants. Challenges passed between them, and especially between the native warriors. These combats were usually conducted on the *azoteas*, whose broad and level surface afforded a good field of fight. On one occasion, a Mexican of powerful frame, brandishing a sword and buckler which he had won from the Christians, defied his enemies to meet him in single fight. A young page of Cortés', named Nuñez, obtained his master's permission to accept the vaunting challenge of the Aztec, and, springing on the *azotea*, succeeded, after a hard struggle, in discomfiting his antagonist, who fought at a disadvantage with weapons in which he was unpractised, and, running him through the body, brought off his spoils in triumph and laid them at the general's feet.¹⁹

The division of Cortés had now worked its way as far north as the great street of Tacuba, which opened a communication with Alvarado's camp, and near which stood the palace of Guatemozin. It was a spacious stone pile, that might well be called a fortress. Though deserted by its royal master, it was held by a strong body of Aztecs, who made a temporary defence, but of little avail against the battering enginery of the besiegers. It was soon set on fire, and its crumbling

¹⁹ Rel. Terc. de Cortés, ap. Lorenzana, pp. 282-284.—Herrera, Hist. general, dec. 3, lib. 1, cap. 22, lib. 2, cap. 2.—Gomara, Crónica, cap. 140.—Oviedo, Hist. de las Ind., MS., lib. 33, cap. 28.—Ixtlixochitl, Venida de los Españoles, p. 43.