

CHAPTER IV.

DISTURBANCES IN MEXICO.—RETURN OF CORTÉS.—DIS-
TRUST OF THE COURT.—CORTÉS RETURNS TO SPAIN.
—DEATH OF SANDOVAL.—BRILLIANT RECEPTION OF
CORTÉS.—HONORS CONFERRED ON HIM.

1526-1530.

THE intelligence alluded to in the preceding chapter was conveyed in a letter to Cortés from the licentiate Zuazo, one of the functionaries to whom the general had committed the administration of the country during his absence. It contained full particulars of the tumultuous proceedings in the capital. No sooner had Cortés quitted it, than dissensions broke out among the different members of the provisional government. The misrule increased as his absence was prolonged. At length tidings were received that Cortés with his whole army had perished in the morasses of Chiapa. The members of the government showed no reluctance to credit this story. They now openly paraded their own authority; proclaimed the general's death; caused funeral ceremonies to be performed in his honor; took possession of his property wherever they could meet with it, piously devoting a small part of the proceeds to purchasing masses for his soul, while the remainder was appropriated to pay off what was called his debt to the state. They seized, in like

(286)

manner, the property of other individuals engaged in the expedition. From these outrages they proceeded to others against the Spanish residents in the city, until the Franciscan missionaries left the capital in disgust, while the Indian population were so sorely oppressed that great apprehensions were entertained of a general rising. Zuazo, who communicated these tidings, implored Cortés to quicken his return. He was a temperate man, and the opposition which he had made to the tyrannical measures of his comrades had been rewarded with exile.¹

The general, greatly alarmed by this account, saw that no alternative was left but to abandon all further schemes of conquest, and to return at once, if he would secure the preservation of the empire which he had won. He accordingly made the necessary arrangements for settling the administration of the colonies at Honduras, and embarked with a small number of followers for Mexico.

He had not been long at sea when he encountered such a terrible tempest as seriously damaged his vessel and compelled him to return to port and refit. A second attempt proved equally unsuccessful; and Cortés, feeling that his good star had deserted him, saw in this repeated disaster an intimation from Heaven that he was not to return.² He contented himself, therefore, with sending a trusty messenger to advise his friends of his personal safety in Honduras. He then instituted processions and public prayers to

¹ Carta Quinta de Cortés, MS.—Bernal Diaz, Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 185.—Relacion del Tesorero Strada, MS., México, 1526.

² Carta Quinta de Cortés, MS.

ascertain the will of Heaven and to deprecate its anger. His health now showed the effects of his recent sufferings, and declined under a wasting fever. His spirits sank with it, and he fell into a state of gloomy despondency. Bernal Diaz, speaking of him at this time, says that nothing could be more wan and emaciated than his person, and that so strongly was he possessed with the idea of his approaching end that he procured a Franciscan habit,—for it was common to be laid out in the habit of some one or other of the monastic orders,—in which to be carried to the grave.³

From this deplorable apathy Cortés was roused by fresh advices urging his presence in Mexico, and by the judicious efforts of his good friend Sandoval, who had lately returned, himself, from an excursion into the interior. By his persuasion, the general again consented to try his fortunes on the seas. He embarked on board of a brigantine, with a few followers, and bade adieu to the disastrous shores of Honduras, April 25, 1526. He had nearly made the coast of New Spain, when a heavy gale threw him off his course and drove him to the island of Cuba. After staying there some time to recruit his exhausted strength, he again put to sea, on the 16th of May, and in eight days landed near San Juan de Ulua, whence he proceeded about five leagues on foot to Medellin.

Cortés was so much changed by disease that his person was not easily recognized. But no sooner was it known that the general had returned than crowds of people, white men and natives, thronged from all the neigh-

³ Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 184. et seq.—Carta Quinta de Cortés, MS.

boring country to welcome him. The tidings spread far and wide on the wings of the wind, and his progress to the capital was a triumphal procession. The inhabitants came from the distance of eighty leagues to have a sight of him; and they congratulated one another on the presence of the only man who could rescue the country from its state of anarchy. It was a resurrection of the dead,—so industriously had the reports of his death been circulated, and so generally believed.⁴

At all the great towns where he halted he was sumptuously entertained. Triumphal arches were thrown across the road, and the streets were strewed with flowers as he passed. After a night's repose at Tezcucuo, he made his entrance in great state into the capital. The municipality came out to welcome him, and a brilliant cavalcade of armed citizens formed his escort; while the lake was covered with barges of the Indians, all fancifully decorated with their gala dresses, as on the day of his first arrival among them. The streets echoed to music, and dancing, and sounds of jubilee, as the procession held on its way to the great convent of St. Francis, where thanksgivings were offered up for the safe return of the general, who then proceeded to take up his quarters once more in his own princely residence.⁵ It was in June, 1526, when Cortés re-entered Mexico; nearly two years had elapsed since he had left it, on his difficult march to Honduras,—a march which led to no important results, but which

⁴ Carta Quinta de Cortés, MS.—Bernal Diaz, Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 189, 190.—Carta de Cortés al Emperador, MS., México, Sept. 11, 1526.

⁵ Carta de Ocaña, MS., Agosto 31, 1526.—Carta Quinta de Cortés, MS.

consumed nearly as much time, and was attended with sufferings quite as severe, as the Conquest of Mexico itself.⁶

Cortés did not abuse his present advantage. He, indeed, instituted proceedings against his enemies; but he followed them up so languidly as to incur the imputation of weakness. It is the only instance in which he has been accused of weakness; and, since it was shown in redressing his own injuries, it may be thought to reflect no discredit on his character.⁷

He was not permitted long to enjoy the sweets of triumph. In the month of July he received advices of the arrival of a *juex de residencia* on the coast, sent by the court of Madrid to supersede him temporarily in the government. The crown of Castile, as its colonial empire extended, became less and less capable of watching over its administration. It was therefore

⁶ "What Cortés suffered," says Dr. Robertson, "on this march,—a distance, according to Gomara, of 3000 miles" (the distance must be greatly exaggerated),—"from famine, from the hostility of the natives, from the climate, and from hardships of every species, has nothing in history parallel to it, but what occurs in the adventures of the other discoverers and conquerors of the New World. Cortés was employed in this dreadful service above two years; and, though it was not distinguished by any splendid event, he exhibited, during the course of it, greater personal courage, more fortitude of mind, more perseverance and patience, than in any other period or scene in his life." (Hist. of America, note 96.) The historian's remarks are just; as the passages which I have borrowed from the extraordinary record of the Conqueror may show. Those who are desirous of seeing something of the narrative told in his own way will find a few pages of it translated in the Appendix, Part 2, No. 14.

⁷ "Y esto yo lo oí dezir á los del Real Consejo de Indias, estando presente el señor Obispo Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, que se des-
cuidó mucho Cortés en ello, y se lo tuviéron á floxedad." Bernal Diaz, Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 190.

obliged to place vast powers in the hands of its viceroys; and, as suspicion naturally accompanies weakness, it was ever prompt to listen to accusations against these powerful vassals. In such cases the government adopted the expedient of sending out a commissioner, or *juex de residencia*, with authority to investigate the conduct of the accused, to suspend him in the mean while from his office, and, after a judicial examination, to reinstate him in it or to remove him altogether, according to the issue of the trial. The enemies of Cortés had been for a long time busy in undermining his influence at court, and in infusing suspicions of his loyalty in the bosom of the emperor. Since his elevation to the government of the country they had redoubled their mischievous activity, and they assailed his character with the foulest imputations. They charged him with appropriating to his own use the gold which belonged to the crown, and especially with secreting the treasures of Montezuma. He was said to have made false reports of the provinces he had conquered, that he might defraud the exchequer of its lawful revenues. He had distributed the principal offices among his own creatures, and had acquired an unbounded influence, not only over the Spaniards, but the natives, who were all ready to do his bidding. He had expended large sums in fortifying both the capital and his own palace; and it was evident, from the magnitude of his schemes and his preparations, that he designed to shake off his allegiance and to establish an independent sovereignty in New Spain.⁸

⁸ Memorial de Luis Cardenas, MS.—Carta de Diego de Ocaña, MS.—Herrera, Hist. general, dec. 3, lib. 8, cap. 14, 15.

The government, greatly alarmed by these formidable charges, the probability of which they could not estimate, appointed a commissioner with full powers to investigate the matter. The person selected for this delicate office was Luis Ponce de Leon, a man of high family, young for such a post, but of a mature judgment and distinguished for his moderation and equity. The nomination of such a minister gave assurance that the crown meant to do justly by Cortés.

The emperor wrote at the same time with his own hand to the general, advising him of this step, and assuring him that it was taken, not from distrust of his integrity, but to afford him the opportunity of placing that integrity in a clear light before the world.⁹

Ponce de Leon reached Mexico in July, 1526. He was received with all respect by Cortés and the municipality of the capital; and the two parties interchanged those courtesies with each other which gave augury that the future proceedings would be conducted in a spirit of harmony. Unfortunately, this fair beginning was blasted by the death of the commissioner in a few weeks after his arrival, a circumstance which did not fail to afford another item in the loathsome mass of accusation heaped upon Cortés. The commissioner fell the victim of a malignant fever, which carried off a number of those who had come over in the vessel with him.¹⁰

On his death-bed, Ponce de Leon delegated his authority to an infirm old man, who survived but a few

⁹ Carta del Emperador, MS., Toledo, Nov. 4, 1525.

¹⁰ Bernal Diaz, Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 192.—Carta de Cortés al Emperador, MS., México, Set. 11, 1526.

months,* and transmitted the reins of government to a person named Estrada, or Strada, the royal treasurer,

* [This person, the licentiate Marcos de Aguilar, showed, during his short tenure of office, much greater zeal and activity than would be inferred from the slight mention of him by historians. Prescott has omitted to state that a principal point in the instructions given to Ponce de Leon related to the question of the *repartimientos* and other methods of treating the Indians, in regard to which he was to obtain the opinions of the authorities and other principal persons and of the Dominican and Franciscan friars. Sir Arthur Helps, who notices this fact, adds that it "led to no result," the instructions on this subject to Ponce de Leon being on his death "forgotten or laid aside." But a series of documents published by Señor Icazbalceta (Col. de Doc. para la Hist. de México, tom. ii.) shows, on the contrary, that they were promptly and fully carried out by Aguilar, who considered this to be the principal business of the commission, and one, as he wrote to the emperor, requiring despatch, since the very existence of the native population depended on immediate action. He accordingly consulted all the officials, Cortés himself included, the other chief residents of the city, such as Alvarado and Sandoval, and the members of the two religious orders, obtaining written opinions, individual as well as collective, which he transmitted with his own report to the emperor. The great majority of the persons consulted, including all the monks, while differing on some matters of detail, concurred in urging the necessity of the *repartimientos* and in recommending that they should be made hereditary.]

The same result followed an inquiry instituted in 1532 and the following years. Among the opinions delivered on that occasion is one deserving of particular notice, both for the manner in which it is enforced and the character of the writer,—Fray Domingo de Batanzos, whose career has been agreeably sketched, though his views on the present matter have been misapprehended, by Sir Arthur Helps. The three objects to be kept in view, he begins by remarking, are the good treatment and preservation of the natives, the establishment and security of the Spanish settlers, and the augmentation of the royal revenues. The proper means to be adopted are also threefold: the *repartimientos* extended and perpetuated, the abandonment of the idea of reserving certain *pueblos* to be held by the crown and managed by its officers, and the appointment of good governors, since the best

one of the officers sent from Spain to take charge of the finances, and who was personally hostile to Cortés.

measures are of no avail if not ably administered. The objections to the crown's reserving any *pueblos* for itself are, that the officers will be employed solely in collecting the tribute, the Indians will receive no protection or religious instruction, and the cultivation of the soil will be always degenerating, since no one will have an interest in maintaining or improving its condition. The *repartimientos*, on the contrary, by giving the holders a direct interest in the better cultivation of the soil and the increase of the people, will insure both these results; and though under this system the royal revenues may be diminished for a time, they will in the end be greatly augmented through the general improvement of the country. The great misfortune has been that the authorities at home pursue a policy which directly contravenes their own intentions: wishing to benefit, they destroy; wishing to enrich, they impoverish; wishing to save the Indians, they exterminate them. There is needed a man with the mind and resolution of Charlemagne or Cæsar, to adopt a plan and carry it out. Instead of this, the course pursued is that of endless changes and experiments, like a perpetual litigation. It is a sure sign that God intends destruction when men are unable to find a remedy. In the present case, well-meaning and holy men have sought one in vain. In his opinion, which he knows will be unheeded, the system which has in it the least evil and the most good is that of hereditary *repartimientos*, which should be established once for all. In a later letter he says, "The person least deceived about the affairs of this country is I, who know its fate as if I saw it with my eyes and touched it with my hands." He predicts the extermination of the Indians within fifty years. He has always believed and asserted that they would perish, and the laws and measures founded on any other supposition have all been bad. The wonderful thing is, he remarks, with an apparent allusion to Las Casas, that the men of greatest sanctity and zeal for good are those who have done the most harm. (Icazbalceta, Col. de Doc. para la Hist. de México, tom. ii.) That the prediction of Batanzos has been falsified by the event may be attributed to a variety of causes: the vastness of the country and the comparative density of the native population; the social and industrial habits of the latter, so different from those of more northern tribes; the decline of the Spanish power and of that spirit of conquest which, by keeping up a con-

The Spanish residents would have persuaded Cortés to assert for himself at least an equal share of the authority, to which they considered Estrada as having no sufficient title. But the general, with singular moderation, declined a competition in this matter, and determined to abide a more decided expression of his sovereign's will. To his mortification, the nomination of Estrada was confirmed; and this dignitary soon contrived to inflict on his rival all those annoyances by which a little mind in possession of unexpected power endeavors to assert superiority over a great one. The recommendations of Cortés were disregarded, his friends mortified and insulted, his attendants outraged by injuries. One of the domestics of his friend Sandoval, for some slight offence, was sentenced to lose his hand; and when the general remonstrated against these acts of violence he was peremptorily commanded to leave the city! The Spaniards, indignant at this outrage, would have taken up arms in his defence; but Cortés would allow no

stant stream of emigration and ardor of enterprise, might have led to a conflict of races; and the sedulous protection afforded to the Indians by the government and the church. Their welfare was the object of constant investigation and a long series of enactments. Slavery was in their case entirely abolished. The *repartimientos* were made hereditary, but the rights and power of the *encomenderos* were carefully restricted, and the personal services at first exacted were ultimately commuted for a fixed tribute. Living together in communities which resembled so many small republics, governed by their own laws and chiefs, guided and protected by the priests, exempt from military service and all the burdens imposed by the state on the rest of the population, the Indians constituted, down to the period of Independence, a separate and privileged class, despised, it is true, but not oppressed, by the superior race.—ED.]

resistance, and, simply remarking "that it was well that those who at the price of their blood had won the capital should not be allowed a footing in it," withdrew to his favorite villa of Cojohuacan, a few miles distant, to await there the result of these strange proceedings.¹¹

The suspicions of the court of Madrid, meanwhile, fanned by the breath of calumny, had reached the most preposterous height. One might have supposed that it fancied the general was organizing a revolt throughout the colonies and meditated nothing less than an invasion of the mother country. Intelligence having been received that a vessel might speedily be expected from New Spain, orders were sent to the different ports of the kingdom, and even to Portugal, to sequester the cargo, under the expectation that it contained remittances to the general's family which belonged to the crown; while his letters, affording the most luminous account of all his proceedings and discoveries, were forbidden to be printed. Fortunately, however, three letters, constituting the most important part of the Conqueror's correspondence, had been given to the public, some years previous, by the indefatigable press of Seville.

The court, moreover, made aware of the incompetency of the treasurer, Estrada, to the present delicate conjuncture, now intrusted the whole affair of the inquiry to a commission dignified with the title of the Royal Audience of New Spain. This body was clothed with full powers to examine into the charges against

¹¹ Bernal Diaz, *Hist. de la Conquista*, cap. 194.—*Carta de Cortés al Emperador*, MS., Set. II, 1526.

Cortés, with instructions to send him back, as a preliminary measure, to Castile,—peacefully if they could, but forcibly if necessary. Still afraid that its belligerent vassal might defy the authority of this tribunal, the government resorted to artifice to effect his return. The president of the Indian Council was commanded to write to him, urging his presence in Spain to vindicate himself from the charges of his enemies, and offering his personal co-operation in his defence. The emperor further wrote a letter to the Audience, containing his commands for Cortés to return, as the government wished to consult him on matters relating to the Indies, and to bestow on him a recompense suited to his high deserts. This letter was intended to be shown to Cortés.¹²

But it was superfluous to put in motion all this complicated machinery to effect a measure on which Cortés was himself resolved. Proudly conscious of his own unswerving loyalty, and of the benefits he had rendered to his country, he was deeply sensible to this unworthy requital of them, especially on the very theatre of his achievements. He determined to abide no longer where he was exposed to such indignities, but to proceed at once to Spain, present himself before his sovereign, boldly assert his innocence, and claim redress for his wrongs and a just reward for his services. In the close of his letter to the emperor, detailing the painful expedition to Honduras, after enlarging on the magnificent schemes he had entertained of discovery in the South Sea, and vindicating himself from the

¹² Herrera, *Hist. general*, dec. 4, lib. 2, cap. 1; and lib. 3, cap. 8.