

"He had hoped that the toils of youth would have secured him repose in his old age. For forty years he had passed his life with little sleep, bad food, and with his arms constantly by his side. He had freely exposed his person to peril, and spent his substance in exploring distant and unknown regions, that he might spread abroad the name of his sovereign and bring under his sceptre many great and powerful nations. All this he had done, not only without assistance from home, but in the face of obstacles thrown in his way by rivals and by enemies who thirsted like leeches for his blood. He was now old, infirm, and embarrassed with debt. Better had it been for him not to have known the liberal intentions of the emperor, as intimidated by his grants; since he should then have devoted himself to the care of his estates, and not have been compelled, as he now was, to contend with the officers of the crown, against whom it was more difficult to defend himself than to win the land from the enemy." He concludes with beseeching his sovereign to "order the Council of the Indies, with the other tribunals which had cognizance of his suits, to come to a decision; since he was too old to wander about like a vagrant, but ought rather, during the brief remainder of his life, to stay at home and settle his account with Heaven, occupied with the concerns of his soul, rather than with his substance."<sup>23</sup>

This appeal to his sovereign, which has something in it touching from a man of the haughty spirit of Cortés, had not the effect to quicken the determination of his

<sup>23</sup> The Letter, dated February 3, 1544, Valladolid, may be found entire, in the original, in Appendix, Part 2, No. 15.

suit. He still lingered at the court from week to week, and from month to month, beguiled by the deceitful hopes of the litigant, tasting all that bitterness of the soul which arises from hope deferred. After three years more, passed in this unprofitable and humiliating occupation, he resolved to leave his ungrateful country and return to Mexico.

He had proceeded as far as Seville, accompanied by his son, when he fell ill of an indigestion, caused, probably, by irritation and trouble of mind. This terminated in dysentery, and his strength sank so rapidly under the disease that it was apparent his mortal career was drawing towards its close. He prepared for it by making the necessary arrangements for the settlement of his affairs. He had made his will some time before; and he now executed it. It is a very long document, and in some respects a remarkable one.

The bulk of his property was entailed to his son, Don Martin, then fifteen years of age. In the testament he fixes his majority at twenty-five; but at twenty his guardians were to allow him his full income, to maintain the state becoming his rank. In a paper accompanying the will, Cortés specified the names of the agents to whom he had committed the management of his vast estates scattered over many different provinces; and he requests his executors to confirm the nomination, as these agents have been selected by him from a knowledge of their peculiar qualifications. Nothing can better show the thorough supervision which, in the midst of pressing public concerns, he had given to the details of his widely-extended property.

He makes a liberal provision for his other children,



and a generous allowance to several old domestics and retainers in his household. By another clause he gives away considerable sums in charity, and he applies the revenues of his estates in the city of Mexico to establish and permanently endow three public institutions,—a hospital in the capital, which was to be dedicated to Our Lady of the Conception, a college in Cojohuacan for the education of missionaries to preach the gospel among the natives, and a convent, in the same place, for nuns. To the chapel of this convent, situated in his favorite town, he orders that his own body shall be transported for burial, in whatever quarter of the world he may happen to die.

After declaring that he has taken all possible care to ascertain the amount of the tributes formerly paid by his Indian vassals to their native sovereigns, he enjoins on his heir that, in case those which they have hitherto paid shall be found to exceed the right valuation, he shall restore them a full equivalent. In another clause he expresses a doubt whether it is right to exact personal service from the natives, and commands that a strict inquiry shall be made into the nature and value of such services as he had received, and that in all cases a fair compensation shall be allowed for them. Lastly, he makes this remarkable declaration: "It has long been a question whether one can conscientiously hold property in Indian slaves. Since this point has not yet been determined, I enjoin it on my son Martin and his heirs that they spare no pains to come to an exact knowledge of the truth; as a matter which deeply concerns the conscience of each of them, no less than mine."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Item. Porque acerca de los esclavos naturales de la dicha

Such scruples of conscience, not to have been expected in Cortés, were still less likely to be met with in the Spaniards of a later generation. The state of opinion in respect to the great question of slavery, in the sixteenth century, at the commencement of the system, bears some resemblance to that which exists in our time, when we may hope it is approaching its conclusion. Las Casas and the Dominicans of the former age, the abolitionists of their day, thundered out their uncompromising invectives against the system on the broad ground of natural equity and the rights of man. The great mass of proprietors troubled their heads little about the question of right, but were satisfied with the expediency of the institution. Others, more considerate and conscientious, while they admitted the evil, found an argument for its toleration in the plea of necessity, regarding the constitution of the white man as unequal, in a sultry climate, to the labor of cultivating the soil.<sup>25</sup> In one important respect the condition of slavery in the sixteenth century differed materially from its condition in the nineteenth. In

Nueva España, así de guerra como de rescate, ha habido y hay muchas dudas y opiniones sobre si se han podido tener con buena conciencia ó no, y hasta ahora no está determinado: Mando que todo aquello que generalmente se averiguare, que en este caso se debe hacer para descargo de las conciencias en lo que toca á estos esclavos de la dicha Nueva España, que se haya y cumpla en todos los que yo tengo, é encargo y mando á D. Martin mi hijo subcesor, y á los que despues dél subcedieren en mi Estado, que para averiguar esto hagan todas las diligencias que combengan al descargo de mi conciencia y suyas." Testamento de Hernan Cortés, MS.

<sup>25</sup> This is the argument controverted by Las Casas in his elaborate Memorial addressed to the government, in 1542, on the best method of arresting the destruction of the aborigines.



the former, the seeds of the evil, but lately sown, might have been, with comparatively little difficulty, eradicated. But in our time they have struck their roots deep into the social system, and cannot be rudely handled without shaking the very foundations of the political fabric. It is easy to conceive that a man who admits all the wretchedness of the institution and its wrong to humanity may nevertheless hesitate to adopt a remedy until he is satisfied that the remedy itself is not worse than the disease. That such a remedy will come with time, who can doubt, that has confidence in the ultimate prevalence of the right and the progressive civilization of his species?

Cortés names as his executors, and as guardians of his children, the duke of Medina Sidonia, the marquis of Astorga, and the count of Aguilar. For his executors in Mexico, he appoints his wife, the marchioness, the archbishop of Toledo, and two other prelates. The will was executed at Seville, October 11th, 1547.<sup>26</sup>

Finding himself much incommoded, as he grew weaker, by the presence of visitors, to which he was necessarily exposed at Seville, he withdrew to the neighboring village of Castilleja de la Cuesta, attended by his son, who watched over his dying parent with filial solicitude.<sup>27</sup> Cortés seems to have contemplated

<sup>26</sup> This interesting document is in the Royal Archives of Seville; and a copy of it forms part of the valuable collection of Don Vargas Ponce.

<sup>27</sup> [My friend Mr. Picard has furnished me with the copy of an inscription which may be seen, or could a few years since, on the house in which Cortés expired. "Here died, on the second of September, 1544, victim of sorrow and misfortune, the renowned Hernan Cortés,

his approaching end with a composure not always to be found in those who have faced death with indifference on the field of battle. At length, having devoutly confessed his sins and received the sacrament, he expired on the 2d of December, 1547, in the sixty-third year of his age.<sup>28</sup>

The inhabitants of the neighboring country were desirous to show every mark of respect to the memory of Cortés. His funeral obsequies were celebrated with due solemnity by a long train of Andalusian nobles and of the citizens of Seville, and his body was transported to the chapel of the monastery of San Isidro, in that city, where it was laid in the family vault of the duke of Medina Sidonia.<sup>29</sup> In the year 1562 it was removed, by order of his son, Don Martin, to New Spain, not, as directed by his will, to Cojohuacan,\* but to the monastery of St. Francis, in Tezcucó, where it was laid by the side of a daughter, and of his

the glory of our country and the conqueror of the Mexican empire." It is strange that the author of the inscription should have made a blunder of more than three years in the date of the hero's death.]

<sup>28</sup> Zuñiga, *Annales de Sevilla*, p. 504.—Gomara, *Crónica*, cap. 237.—In his last letter to the emperor, dated in February, 1544, he speaks of himself as being "sixty years of age." But he probably did not mean to be exact to a year. Gomara's statement, that he was born in the year 1485 (*Crónica*, cap. 1), is confirmed by Diaz, who tells us that Cortés used to say that when he first came over to Mexico, in 1519, he was thirty-four years old. (*Hist. de la Conquista*, cap. 205.) This would coincide with the age mentioned in the text.

<sup>29</sup> *Noticia del Archivero de la Santa Iglesia de Sevilla*, MS.

\* [This may be accounted for by the fact that his intention to found a convent at Cuyoacan, as the place is now called, had, according to Alaman, never been carried out.—ED.]



mother, Doña Catalina Pizarro. In 1629 the remains of Cortés were again removed; and on the death of Don Pedro, fourth marquis of the Valley, it was decided by the authorities of Mexico to transfer them to the church of St. Francis, in that capital. The ceremonial was conducted with the pomp suited to the occasion. A military and religious procession was formed, with the archbishop of Mexico at its head. He was accompanied by the great dignitaries of church and state, the various associations with their respective banners, the several religious fraternities, and the members of the Audience. The coffin, containing the relics of Cortés, was covered with black velvet, and supported by the judges of the royal tribunals. On either side of it was a man in complete armor, bearing, on the right, a standard of pure white, with the arms of Castile embroidered in gold, and, on the left, a banner of black velvet, emblazoned in like manner with the armorial ensigns of the house of Cortés. Behind the corpse came the viceroy and a numerous escort of Spanish cavaliers, and the rear was closed by a battalion of infantry, armed with pikes and arquebuses, and with their banners trailing on the ground. With this funeral pomp, by the sound of mournful music, and the slow beat of the muffled drum, the procession moved forward, with measured pace, till it reached the capital, when the gates were thrown open to receive the mortal remains of the hero who, a century before, had performed there such prodigies of valor.

Yet his bones were not permitted to rest here undisturbed; and in 1794 they were removed to the Hospital of Jesus of Nazareth. It was a more fitting place,

since it was the same institution which, under the name of "Our Lady of the Conception," had been founded and endowed by Cortés, and which, with a fate not too frequent in similar charities, has been administered to this day on the noble principles of its foundation. The mouldering relics of the warrior, now deposited in a crystal coffin secured by bars and plates of silver, were laid in the chapel, and over them was raised a simple monument, displaying the arms of the family, and surmounted by a bust of the Conqueror, executed in bronze by Tolsa, a sculptor worthy of the best period of the arts.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately for Mexico, the tale does not stop here. In 1823, the patriot mob of the capital, in their zeal to commemorate the era of the national independence, and their detestation of the "old Spaniards," prepared to break open the tomb which held the ashes of Cortés, and to scatter them to the winds! The authorities declined to interfere on the occasion; but the friends of the family, as is commonly reported, entered the vault by night, and, secretly removing the relics, prevented the commission of a sacrilege which must have left a stain, not easy to be effaced, on the scutcheon of the fair city of Mexico.<sup>31</sup> Humboldt,

<sup>30</sup> The full particulars of the ceremony described in the text may be found in Appendix, Part 2, No. 16, translated into English from a copy of the original document, existing in the Archives of the Hospital of Jesus, in Mexico.

<sup>31</sup> [The bust of Cortés and the arms of gilt bronze were secretly removed from his monument, and sent to his descendant, the duke of Monteleone, at Palermo. The remains of the Conqueror were soon after sent in the same direction, according to Doctor Mora, cited by Alaman, who does not contradict it: "Aun se habrian profanado las



forty years ago, remarked that "we may traverse Spanish America from Buenos Ayres to Monterey, and in no quarter shall we meet with a national monument which the public gratitude has raised to Christopher Columbus or Hernando Cortés."<sup>32</sup> It was reserved for our own age to conceive the design of violating the repose of the dead and insulting their remains! Yet the men who meditated this outrage were not the descendants of Montezuma, avenging the wrongs of their fathers and vindicating their own rightful inheritance. They were the descendants of the old Conquerors, and their countrymen, depending on the right of conquest for their ultimate title to the soil.<sup>33</sup>

Cortés had no children by his first marriage. By his second he left four; a son, Don Martin,—the heir of his honors, and of persecutions even more severe than those of his father,<sup>34</sup>—and three daughters, who formed

cenizas del héroe, sin la precaucion de personas despreocupadas, que deseando evitar el deshonor de su patria por tan reprehensible é irreflexivo procedimiento, lograron ocultarlas de pronto y despues las remitieron á Italia á su familia." *Disertaciones históricas*, tom. ii. p. 61.]

<sup>32</sup> *Essai politique*, tom. ii. p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> [They entertained, says Alaman, the rather extravagant idea that, as descendants of the conquering nation, they were the heirs of the rights of the conquered, and bound to avenge their wrongs. *Conquista de Méjico* (trad. de Vega), tom. ii. p. 309.]

<sup>34</sup> Don Martin Cortés, second marquis of the Valley, was accused, like his father, of an attempt to establish an independent sovereignty in New Spain. His natural brothers, Don Martin and Don Luis, were involved in the same accusation with himself, and the former—as I have elsewhere remarked—was in consequence subjected to the torture. Several others of his friends, on charge of abetting his treasonable designs, suffered death. The marquis was obliged to remove

splendid alliances. He left, also, five natural children, whom he particularly mentions in his testament and honorably provides for. Two of these, Don Martin, the son of Marina, and Don Luis Cortés, attained considerable distinction, and were created *comendadores* of the Order of St. Jago.<sup>35</sup>

The male line of the marquises of the Valley became extinct in the third generation. The title and estates descended to a female, and by her marriage were united with those of the house of Terranova, descendants of the "Great Captain," Gonsalvo de Cordova.<sup>36</sup> By a subsequent marriage they were carried into the family of the duke of Monteleone, a Neapolitan noble. The present proprietor of these princely honors and of vast domains, both in the Old and the New World, dwells in Sicily, and boasts a descent—such as few princes can boast—from two

with his family to Spain, where the investigation was conducted; and his large estates in Mexico were sequestered until the termination of the process, a period of seven years, from 1567 to 1574, when he was declared innocent. But his property suffered irreparable injury, under the wretched administration of the royal officers, during the term of sequestration.

<sup>35</sup> [The illegitimate children were Don Martin Cortés, Don Luis Cortés, Doña Catalina Pizarro (daughter of Doña Leonor Pizarro), also two other daughters, Leonor and María, born of two Indian women of noble birth. Alaman, *Disertaciones históricas*, tom. ii. p. 48.]

<sup>36</sup> [Señor Alaman, in reference to this passage, says, "It is a mistake to suppose that the heirs of Cortés and Gonsalvo de Cordova were ever united by marriage. The fact appears to be that the title of duke of Terranova was held by the descendants of both; but the Terranova assigned to the Great Captain was in Calabria, while the place from which the descendants of Cortés took the title was in Sicily. *Conquista de Méjico* (trad. de Vega), tom. ii. p. 308.]



of the most illustrious commanders of the sixteenth century, the "Great Captain," and the Conqueror of Mexico.

The personal history of Cortés has been so minutely detailed in the preceding narrative that it will be only necessary to touch on the more prominent features of his character. Indeed, the history of the Conquest, as I have already had occasion to remark, is necessarily that of Cortés, who is, if I may so say, not merely the soul, but the body, of the enterprise, present everywhere in person, in the thick of the fight or in the building of the works, with his sword or with his musket, sometimes leading his soldiers, and sometimes directing his little navy. The negotiations, intrigues, correspondence, are all conducted by him; and, like Cæsar, he wrote his own Commentaries in the heat of the stirring scenes which form the subject of them. His character is marked with the most opposite traits, embracing qualities apparently the most incompatible. He was avaricious, yet liberal; bold to desperation, yet cautious and calculating in his plans; magnanimous, yet very cunning; courteous and affable in his deportment, yet inexorably stern; lax in his notions of morality, yet (not uncommon) a sad bigot. The great feature in his character was constancy of purpose; a constancy not to be daunted by danger, nor baffled by disappointment, nor wearied out by impediments and delays.

He was a knight-errant, in the literal sense of the word. Of all the band of adventurous cavaliers whom Spain, in the sixteenth century, sent forth on the

career of discovery and conquest, there was none more deeply filled with the spirit of romantic enterprise than Hernando Cortés. Dangers and difficulties, instead of deterring, seemed to have a charm in his eyes. They were necessary to rouse him to a full consciousness of his powers. He grappled with them at the outset, and, if I may so express myself, seemed to prefer to take his enterprises by the most difficult side. He conceived, at the first moment of his landing in Mexico, the design of its conquest. When he saw the strength of its civilization, he was not turned from his purpose. When he was assailed by the superior force of Narvaez, he still persisted in it; and when he was driven in ruin from the capital, he still cherished his original idea. How successfully he carried it into execution, we have seen. After the few years of repose which succeeded the Conquest, his adventurous spirit impelled him to that dreary march across the marshes of Chiapa, and, after another interval, to seek his fortunes on the stormy Californian Gulf. When he found that no other continent remained for him to conquer, he made serious proposals to the emperor to equip a fleet at his own expense, with which he would sail to the Moluccas and subdue the Spice Islands for the crown of Castile!<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> "Yo me ofresco á descubrir por aquí toda la espeçeria, y otras Islas si huviere cerca de Moluco, ó Melaca, y la China, y aun de tal órden que V. M. no aiga la espeçeria por via de rescate, como la ha el Rey de Portugal, sino que la tenga por cosa propria, y los naturales de aquellas Islas le reconoscan y sirvan como á su Rey y señor natural, porque yo me ofresco con el dicho additamento de embiar á ellas tal armada, ó ir yo con mi persona por manera que la sojusge y pueble." Carta Quinta de Cortés, MS.



This spirit of knight-errantry might lead us to undervalue his talents as a general and to regard him merely in the light of a lucky adventurer. But this would be doing him injustice; for Cortés was certainly a great general, if that man be one who performs great achievements with the resources which his own genius has created. There is probably no instance in history where so vast an enterprise has been achieved by means apparently so inadequate. He may be truly said to have effected the Conquest by his own resources. If he was indebted for his success to the co-operation of the Indian tribes, it was the force of his genius that obtained command of such materials. He arrested the arm that was lifted to smite him, and made it do battle in his behalf. He beat the Tlascalans, and made them his stanch allies. He beat the soldiers of Narvaez, and doubled his effective force by it. When his own men deserted him, he did not desert himself. He drew them back by degrees, and compelled them to act by his will, till they were all as one man. He brought together the most miscellaneous collection of mercenaries who ever fought under one standard: adventurers from Cuba and the Isles, craving for gold; hidalgos, who came from the old country to win laurels; broken-down cavaliers, who hoped to mend their fortunes in the New World; vagabonds flying from justice; the grasping followers of Narvaez, and his own reckless veterans,—men with hardly a common tie, and burning with the spirit of jealousy and faction; wild tribes of the natives from all parts of the country, who had been sworn enemies from their cradles, and who had met only to cut one another's throats and to

procure victims for sacrifice; men, in short, differing in race, in language, and in interests, with scarcely anything in common among them. Yet this motley congregation was assembled in one camp, compelled to bend to the will of one man, to consort together in harmony, to breathe, as it were, one spirit, and to move on a common principle of action! It is in this wonderful power over the discordant masses thus gathered under his banner that we recognize the genius of the great commander, no less than in the skill of his military operations.

His power over the minds of his soldiers was a natural result of their confidence in his abilities. But it is also to be attributed to his popular manners,—that happy union of authority and companionship which fitted him for the command of a band of roving adventurers. It would not have done for him to fence himself round with the stately reserve of a commander of regular forces. He was embarked with his men in a common adventure, and nearly on terms of equality, since he held his commission by no legal warrant. But, while he indulged this freedom and familiarity with his soldiers, he never allowed it to interfere with their strict obedience nor to impair the severity of discipline. When he had risen to higher consideration, although he affected more state, he still admitted his veterans to the same intimacy. "He preferred," says Diaz, "to be called 'Cortés' by us, to being called by any title; and with good reason," continues the enthusiastic old cavalier, "for the name of Cortés is as famous in our day as was that of Cæsar among the Romans, or of Hannibal among the Cartha-