

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-

ginians."³⁸ He showed the same kind regard towards his ancient comrades in the very last act of his life. For he appropriated a sum by his will for the celebration of two thousand masses for the souls of those who had fought with him in the campaigns of Mexico.³⁹

His character has been unconsciously traced by the hand of a master:

"And oft the chieftain deigned to aid
And mingle in the mirth they made;
For, though with men of high degree
The proudest of the proud was he,
Yet, trained in camps, he knew the art
To win the soldiers' hardy heart.
They love a captain to obey,
Boisterous as March, yet fresh as May:
With open hand, and brow as free,
Lover of wine and minstrelsy;

³⁸ The comparison to Hannibal is better founded than the old soldier probably imagined. Livy's description of the Carthaginian warrior has a marvellous application to Cortés,—better, perhaps, than that of the imaginary personage quoted a few lines below in the text. "Plurimum audaciæ ad pericula capessenda, plurimum consilii inter ipsa pericula erat: nullo labore aut corpus fatigari, aut animus vinci poterat. Caloris ac frigoris patientia par: cibi potionisque desiderio naturali, non voluptate, modus finitus: vigiliarum somnique nec die, nec nocte discriminata tempora. Id, quod gerendis rebus superesset, quieti datum; ea neque molli strato, neque silentio accessita. Multi sæpe militari sagulo opertum, humi jacentem, inter custodias stationesque militum, conspexerunt. Vestitus nihil inter æquales excellens; arma atque equi conspiciabantur. Equitum peditumque idem longe primus erat; princeps in proelium ibat; ultimus conserto proelio excedebat." (Hist., lib. xxi. sec. 5.) The reader who reflects on the fate of Guatemozin may possibly think that the extract should have embraced the "perfidia plus quàm Punica," in the succeeding sentence.

³⁹ Testamento de Hernan Cortés, MS.

Ever the first to scale a tower,
As venturous in a lady's bower;—
Such buxom chief shall lead his host
From India's fires to Zembla's frost."

Cortés, without much violence, might have sat for this portrait of Marmion.

Cortés was not a vulgar conqueror. He did not conquer from the mere ambition of conquest. If he destroyed the ancient capital of the Aztecs, it was to build up a more magnificent capital on its ruins. If he desolated the land and broke up its existing institutions, he employed the short period of his administration in digesting schemes for introducing there a more improved culture and a higher civilization. In all his expeditions he was careful to study the resources of the country, its social organization, and its physical capacities. He enjoined it on his captains to attend particularly to these objects. If he was greedy of gold, like most of the Spanish cavaliers in the New World, it was not to hoard it, nor merely to lavish it in the support of a princely establishment, but to secure funds for prosecuting his glorious discoveries. Witness his costly expeditions to the Gulf of California. His enterprises were not undertaken solely for mercenary objects; as is shown by the various expeditions he set on foot for the discovery of a communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific. In his schemes of ambition he showed a respect for the interests of science, to be referred partly to the natural superiority of his mind, but partly, no doubt, to the influence of early education. It is, indeed, hardly possible that a person of his wayward and mercurial temper should have

improved his advantages at the University; but he brought away from it a tincture of scholarship seldom found among the cavaliers of the period, and which had its influence in enlarging his own conceptions. His celebrated Letters are written with a simple elegance that, as I have already had occasion to remark, have caused them to be compared to the military narrative of Cæsar. It will not be easy to find in the chronicles of the period a more concise yet comprehensive statement, not only of the events of his campaigns, but of the circumstances most worthy of notice in the character of the conquered countries.

Cortés was not cruel; at least, not cruel as compared with most of those who followed his iron trade. The path of the conqueror is necessarily marked with blood. He was not too scrupulous, indeed, in the execution of his plans. He swept away the obstacles which lay in his track; and his fame is darkened by the commission of more than one act which his boldest apologists will find it hard to vindicate. But he was not wantonly cruel. He allowed no outrage on his unresisting foes. This may seem small praise; but it is an exception to the usual conduct of his countrymen in their conquests, and it is something to be in advance of one's time. He was severe, it may be added, in enforcing obedience to his orders for protecting their persons and their property. With his licentious crew, it was, sometimes, not without a hazard that he was so. After the Conquest, he sanctioned the system of *repartimientos*; but so did Columbus. He endeavored to regulate it by the most humane laws, and continued to suggest many important changes for ameliorating

the condition of the natives. The best commentary on his conduct in this respect is the deference that was shown him by the Indians, and the confidence with which they appealed to him for protection in all their subsequent distresses.

In private life he seems to have had the power of attaching to himself warmly those who were near his person. The influence of this attachment is shown in every page of Bernal Diaz, though his work was written to vindicate the claims of the soldiers in opposition to those of the general. He seems to have led a happy life with his first wife, in their humble retirement in Cuba, and regarded the second, to judge from the expressions in his testament, with confidence and love. Yet he cannot be acquitted from the charge of those licentious gallantries which entered too generally into the character of the military adventurer of that day. He would seem also, by the frequent suits in which he was involved, to have been of an irritable and contentious spirit. But much allowance must be made for the irritability of a man who had been too long accustomed to independent sway, patiently to endure the checks and control of the petty spirits who were incapable of comprehending the noble character of his enterprises. "He thought," says an eminent writer, "to silence his enemies by the brilliancy of the new career on which he had entered. He did not reflect that these enemies had been raised by the very grandeur and rapidity of his success."⁴⁰ He was rewarded for his efforts by the misinterpretation of his motives; by the calumnious charges of squandering the public

⁴⁰ Humboldt, *Essai politique*, tom. ii. p. 267.

revenues and of aspiring to independent sovereignty. But, although we may admit the foundation of many of the grievances alleged by Cortés, yet, when we consider the querulous tone of his correspondence and the frequency of his litigation, we may feel a natural suspicion that his proud spirit was too sensitive to petty slights and too jealous of imaginary wrongs.

One trait more remains to be noticed in the character of this remarkable man; that is, his bigotry, the failing of the age,—for surely it should be termed only a failing.⁴² When we see the hand, red with the blood of the wretched native, raised to invoke the blessing of Heaven on the cause which it maintains, we experience something like a sensation of disgust at the act, and a doubt of its sincerity. But this is unjust. We should throw ourselves back (it cannot be too often repeated) into the age,—the age of the Crusades. For every Spanish cavalier, however sordid and selfish might be his private motives, felt himself to be the soldier of the Cross. Many of them would have died in defence of it. Whoever has read the correspondence of Cortés, or, still more, has attended to the circumstances of his career, will hardly doubt that he would have been among the first to lay down his life for the

⁴² An extraordinary anecdote is related by Cavo of this bigotry (shall we call it policy?) of Cortés. "In Mexico," says the historian, "it is commonly reported that after the Conquest he commanded that on Sundays and holidays all should attend, under pain of a certain number of stripes, to the expounding of the Scriptures. The general was himself guilty of an omission on one occasion, and, after having listened to the admonition of the priest, submitted, with edifying humility, to be chastised by him, to the unspeakable amazement of the Indians." *Hist. de los tres Siglos*, tom. i. p. 151.

Faith. He more than once perilled life, and fortune, and the success of his whole enterprise, by the premature and most impolitic manner in which he would have forced conversion on the natives.⁴³ To the more rational spirit of the present day, enlightened by a purer Christianity, it may seem difficult to reconcile gross deviations from morals with such devotion to the cause of religion. But the religion taught in that day was one of form and elaborate ceremony. In the punctilious attention to discipline, the spirit of Christianity was permitted to evaporate. The mind, occupied with forms, thinks little of substance. In a worship that is addressed too exclusively to the senses, it is often the case that morality becomes divorced from religion, and the measure of righteousness is determined by the creed rather than by the conduct.

In the earlier part of the History I have given a description of the person of Cortés.⁴³ It may be well to close this review of his character by the account of his manners and personal habits left us by Bernal Diaz, the old chronicler, who has accompanied us through the whole course of our narrative, and who may now fitly furnish the conclusion of it. No man knew his commander better; and, if the avowed object of his work might naturally lead to a disparagement of Cortés, this is more than counterbalanced by the warmth of his personal attachment, and by that *esprit de corps*

⁴³ "Al Rey infinitas tierras,
Y á Dios infinitas almas,"

says Lope de Vega, commemorating in this couplet the double glory of Cortés. It is the light in which the Conquest was viewed by every devout Spaniard of the sixteenth century.

⁴³ *Ante*, vol. i. p. 257.

which leads him to take a pride in the renown of his general.

"In his whole appearance and presence," says Diaz, "in his discourse, his table, his dress, in everything, in short, he had the air of a great lord. His clothes were in the fashion of the time; he set little value on silk, damask, or velvet, but dressed plainly and exceedingly neat;⁴⁴ nor did he wear massy chains of gold, but simply a fine one, of exquisite workmanship, from which was suspended a jewel having the figure of our Lady the Virgin and her precious Son, with a Latin motto cut upon it. On his finger he wore a splendid diamond ring; and from his cap, which, according to the fashion of that day, was of velvet, hung a medal, the device of which I do not remember. He was magnificently attended, as became a man of his rank, with chamberlains and major-domos and many pages; and the service of his table was splendid, with a quantity of both gold and silver plate. At noon he dined heartily, drinking about a pint of wine mixed with water. He supped well, though he was not dainty in regard to his food, caring little for the delicacies of the table, unless, indeed, on such occasions as made attention to these matters of some consequence.⁴⁵

"He was acquainted with Latin, and, as I have understood, was made Bachelor of Laws; and when he conversed with learned men who addressed him in Latin, he answered them in the same language. He

⁴⁴ So Gomara: "He dressed neatly rather than richly, and was always scrupulously clean." *Crónica*, cap. 238.

⁴⁵ "Fué mui gran comedor, i templado en el beber, teniendo abundancia. Sufria mucho la hambre con necesidad." *Ibid.*, ubi supra.

was also something of a poet; his conversation was agreeable, and he had a pleasant elocution. In his attendance on the services of the Church he was most punctual, devout in his manner, and charitable to the poor.⁴⁶

"When he swore, he used to say, 'On my conscience;' and when he was vexed with any one, 'Evil betide you.' With his men he was very patient; and they were sometimes impertinent and even insolent. When very angry, the veins in his throat and forehead would swell, but he uttered no reproaches against either officer or soldier.

"He was fond of cards and dice, and, when he played, was always in good humor, indulging freely in jests and repartees. He was affable with his followers, especially with those who came over with him from Cuba. In his campaigns he paid strict attention to discipline, frequently going the rounds himself during the night, and seeing that the sentinels did their duty. He entered the quarters of his soldiers without ceremony, and chided those whom he found without their arms and accoutrements, saying, 'It was a bad sheep that could not carry its own wool.' On the expedition to Honduras he acquired the habit of sleeping after his meals, feeling unwell if he omitted it; and, however sultry or stormy the weather, he caused a carpet or his cloak to be thrown under a tree, and slept soundly for some time. He was frank and exceedingly liberal in his disposition, until the last few years of his life, when

⁴⁶ He dispensed a thousand ducats every year in his ordinary charities, according to Gomara. "Grandísimo limosnero; daba cada un año mil ducados de limosna ordinaria." *Crónica*, cap. 238.

he was accused of parsimony. But we should consider that his funds were employed on great and costly enterprises, and that none of these, after the Conquest, neither his expedition to Honduras nor his voyages to California, were crowned with success. It was perhaps intended that he should receive his recompense in a better world; and I fully believe it; for he was a good cavalier, most true in his devotions to the Virgin, to the Apostle St. Peter, and to all the other Saints."⁴⁷

Such is the portrait, which has been left to us by the faithful hand most competent to trace it, of Hernando Cortés, the Conqueror of Mexico.

⁴⁷ Hist. de la Conquista, cap. 203.

APPENDIX.

PART I.

ORIGIN OF THE MEXICAN CIVILIZATION.