

CHAPTER III.

ALPHONSO OF SPAIN.

Birthplace—Early Life—Seizure of supreme authority at sixteen—Expelling his Mother from the Palace—Personal appearance at manhood—His country invaded by the Moors—Fighting the Moors for eight hundred years—Alphonso's Army—The advice of the Holy Hermit—Battle on the Plain of Ourique (The Bunker Hill of Portugal)—Marriage—Siege and Conquest of Lisbon—Seventy years old and still a Warrior—Death Tribute to his Memory.

THE reigning sovereigns of the kingdom of Spain had not a little to do with encouraging the bold navigator of Genoa, to whom the world is indebted for the discovery of this continent.

Many years before the birth of Columbus, while yet Portugal was ruled by dukes and counts, the subject of this sketch was born, in 1110, at the Castle of Douro, near the river of that name. His father was Henri of Besançon, Count of Toulouse; his mother was Terèse, Countess of Portugal.

His father died when he was little more than two years of age, and not much is known of his early life, beyond the fact, that, in the dissolute court of his mother, he was rigorously excluded from all knowledge of and participation in public affairs. His personal appearance was wonderfully prepossessing at an early age, and as he grew older he became the idol of the

people. With advancing years and maturing intellect he could not fail to observe how weak and irresolute was the government administered by his mother, and from the age of twelve, he was revolving plans, and consulting with the nobles, for the benefit of his country.

With a wisdom quite remarkable he counseled with the most sage among the courtiers, to whom the intimacy of his mother with Don Fernando Perez could not fail to be known, and excite jealousy among those who were less favored.

At the age of sixteen, in accordance with the advice of his nobles, and at their instigation, troops were raised by him, and the disaffected flocked to the standard of the youthful count.

The armies of Terèse and Alphonso first met at or near the fortress Vimaraens, where the countess was utterly routed, and fled for refuge to the Castle Leganoso. Not content with this defeat, Terèse sought help from the youthful King of Castile, who was her nephew; another army was raised by him, but the daring Alphonso was again victorious: he expelled his mother from the palace, and compelled her to remain in close confinement during the remainder of her life, while Don Fernando fled to Galicia.

If any of my youthful readers is shocked at this proceeding, feeling that it involves a lack of filial reverence, let him remember that the welfare of many thousands demanded that Terèse should not be allowed to hold sway. Not only was she weak and vacillating, but intriguing and ambitious; caring little for the welfare of the Portuguese, but mainly for herself, and the profligate courtiers by whom she was surrounded.

of warfare, and he shrunk from exposing his people—his beloved army, to the tortures of the infidel dogs.

While thus pondering the question, to fight, or not to fight, a holy hermit, whose life was devoted to prayer and helpful counsel to those who sought his aid in the forest where he dwelt, came to meet him, and Alphonso laid before him his doubt and distress. "Fear not, my son," was his reply, "go forth to battle, when the bells ring for early matins. Keep thy face to the East." In the gloaming of the following morning, he addressed those who had begged him to retreat to the Tagus. Their hearts became infused with his own courage, and elevated by the faith so strong within himself they were ready to follow him to a victor's or a martyr's crown.

Obedying the voice of his counsellor, with dauntless valor the brave count led his cohorts toward the East, when suddenly a wondrous vision appeared to his eye. The figure of Christ stood out upon a cloud in the sky, and a voice bade him go forward, with good courage, for though hard the struggle, the victory was insured to him—he should receive as a reward a kingly crown, which would be worn by sixteen generations of his descendants.

We may not suppose that the Divine Redeemer did actually make himself visible to the devout Alphonso. But rather, that in seeking help from the God of battles, inspired with a firm belief in the words of the holy hermit, his imagination became so highly excited, that the vision in his mind took actual bodily shape before his eyes, and he believed that he saw the Saviour and heard his voice, speaking to him the words of cheer that animated him through all that bloody day.

Thus inspired, and with devout trust in Him who was his leader, what wonder that the giant form of Alphonso led that small army to victory? The contest raged fiercely all the day: now it seemed that the infidels would triumph; again the rallying cry from the lips of their leader infused a new courage into fainting hearts. The sight of his bright armor flashing in the sunlight, towering above all surroundings, was a fresh incentive to a new effort.

The day closed in the wildest panic; the Moors were utterly routed, and the plain of Ourique is to-day called "The Bunker Hill of Portugal." 160,000 Moors are said to have perished on that day, the kings were all slain, and the armor which Alphonso wore is still preserved in the half-ruined castle of a small city near his birthplace.

The battle of Ourique was fought July 25, 1139, and amid the wildest clamor over the destruction of the enemy the grateful and enthusiastic army proclaimed Count Alphonso to be their king. The action of the people was soon confirmed by the Pope, who at that period held undisputed sway of Portugal, as God's vicegerent upon earth.

For a time peace reigned in the new kingdom, and the king, being now thirty-seven years of age, married Matilda, the daughter of a neighboring Christian prince. Six children were born to him, who were reared in a manner worthy of their noble father, as Matilda was, in all respects, suited to be the wife of the king who had chosen her.

After this, Alphonso was more than ever the favorite of the people. Believing as they did that a special revelation from heaven had been granted him, what

wonder that he was looked upon as almost a representative of that divine being who had stood out upon the cloud at the plains of Ourique, and bade Alphonso go forth in face of fearful odds, to victory?

At this time Lisbon was a Moorish city, and the king longed to conquer it for his country. He could raise only a small army, but while he was casting about for means to accomplish his purpose, a fleet of crusaders came to anchor in the bay, near the mouth of the Tagus. It did not take long for the silver-tongued Alphonso to persuade them that God would be equally honored by the conquest of the infidels in Portugal, or in Palestine. They were in command of William Longsword, and were composed of English, French and Flemish warriors, each with a blood-red cross upon his helmet and his breast.

They may have been influenced by a hope of plunder, as Lisbon was known to contain fabulous amounts of gold and silver, in coin, ingots, and highly wrought utensils; be that as it may, the crusaders joined the army of Alphonso, thus greatly strengthening it numerically, and giving them new courage to attack this strongly fortified city.

For five months the besieged Moors resisted all attacks from their enemies, until Alphonso appointed a special day to storm the walls. At the close of a hard day's fight, when the besieged were well nigh exhausted, the besiegers rushed upon them with fresh troops reserved for the purpose, and triumphantly entered the city of Lisbon. The crusaders were greatly enriched by the plunder which was freely allowed them, and their vessels, laden with precious freight, turned their prows toward England.

From time to time King Alphonso received more help from the crusaders, and by their aid no less than twelve Moorish strongholds were conquered and permanently subdued.

In 1171 Alphonso assaulted the famous fortress of Santarem. The fortifications were very strong, and the defenders numerous and valiant. But nothing daunted by repulse the assault was for many days continued; at length it was resolved to scale the walls by night. In less than an hour an entrance was effected, and to the shame of a king whose record is, in other respects, so honorable, by his order every man of the garrison was put to death by the sword. The year following this transaction Portugal was declared free.

The martial character, not only of the king, but of the age in which he lived, inclined him to perpetual warfare. In 1167 he seized upon Limia, in Galicia, which he claimed to be part of his mother's dowry. In 1168 he advanced upon Badajoz, whose Moorish governor was a vassal of the King of Léon. Fernando II. hastened to the relief of his dependent, but so rapid had been the action of Alphonso that the Portuguese banner floated from the towers ere the rescue arrived.

Fernando paused before the gates and challenged the king to mortal combat. As he was issuing through the gates, mounted upon his charger, the animal shied, bringing his rider violently against the stone wall. His thigh was so seriously injured that he never again mounted a horse.

At this time he was taken prisoner, but was treated with the utmost courtesy, and released, on the promise that he would relinquish all his Galician acquisitions, which promise he faithfully performed.

A period of five years of peace succeeded at this time, during which Alphonso devoted himself with untiring energy to the good of his people. He invited to his kingdom the Knights of St. John and the Knights Templar, besides establishing other orders, which were of benefit to those connected with them.

He was also a wise legislator, ordaining a code of laws, relating to the privileges of the nobility, the order of succession, as well as to the ordinary business transactions of life.

These laws are in force at the present day, and are called "The Cortes of Lamego." Geraldo the Dauntless, a neighboring count, who had his stronghold among the mountains, had long been the terror both of Moors and Christians.

Having, in some way of which history does not inform us, incurred the displeasure of King Alphonso, he began a free-booting life among the wilds of Alemtejo. At length visited by remorse, in consequence of a vision, he determined to attempt some feat which should win his pardon from a king whom everybody loved and honored. Perceiving that the stronghold of Evora was negligently guarded, Geraldo, having succeeded, partly by strategy, and partly by prowess, in obtaining entrance and routing the Moors—presented the stronghold to Alphonso, who freely pardoned the outlaw.

Alphonso reigned for fifty-nine years, until he was seventy-five years of age, dying, full of honors, enshrined in the hearts of his countrymen as the "most adorable king."

His name will be remembered as long as the kingdom exists, not only as its first sovereign, but as one

who cheerfully endured great hardships, filled with zeal for the people whom God had committed to his charge. We may not judge of his character in the light of the civilization of the present time, but remember that he lived in an age when methods of warfare were in vogue, which would now be considered to be barbarous. His unassuming goodness caused him to be looked upon as a model for all who should succeed him.

With the superstition which characterizes the age in which he lived, his mantle was thought to possess healing power, and for many years it was used in the churches, and by the bed-sides of the sick as a curative for the afflicted.

It is said, and devoutly believed by the Portuguese, that, a century after his death, he appeared clad in white armor, in the choir of Santa Cruz at Coimbra, and informed the holy brotherhood that he and his son, Sancho I., were proceeding to Cento to assist the Portuguese army then in danger.

He died at the fortress of Coimbra in December, 1185, and was succeeded by his oldest son, Sancho I.

One of the first principles of political economy is, that the greatest good of the greatest number should ever be paramount. The few must give way to the many, when the highest good is involved.

In our own Commonwealth we have recently had an illustration of this same principle; when the Legislature ordered the seizure of a certain property, worth more than one hundred thousand dollars, because the public good required it. True, in accordance with our high civilization, the owners of this property will be paid a just price for their house and land. They refused to sell at reasonable figures, and the State, needing the building, took it. As this has been done in the year 1883, I leave my young readers to look up the particulars of the transaction which so well illustrates and defends the course which the young Count Alphonso pursued towards his mother.

History and tradition give to this young warrior the most wonderful personal appearance. Erect in stature, towering, like Saul, above his fellows, to the height of six feet ten inches, with piercing eyes and curling hair, graceful in carriage—an athlete—victorious in all manly sports, he well might be a favorite with the people, who looked upon him as their deliverer from oppression, and early gave to him the title of Alphonso the Conqueror.

During the first years of his administration the youthful count was at variance with his cousin, who had helped his mother. He would not acknowledge his supremacy, but invaded his Galician territories, and with whose enemy, the King of Navarre, he made an alliance.

Together they made several conquests in Galicia, but

were turned from their purpose to annoy the King of Castile, by attacks from the Moors. In fact, to repel these attacks, and expel them from the country, had, for eight hundred years, been the main object of the rulers of Portugal.

In 1139 Alphonso assembled an army at Coimbra, resolved to reduce all infidel strongholds west of the Guadiana. The Moorish governor summoned all his brethren of neighboring provinces to arms.

Not content with this, he procured vast reinforcements from Africa, and made every exertion to fortify by art a position made strong by nature. Five kings came to the rescue, and together they commanded a force of two hundred thousand men.

But Alphonso had an army of only thirteen thousand men, and valiant though their leaders were, they sought audience of the count, on the day preceding the battle, and begged him to fall back to the vicinity of the Tagus. The vast plain of Ourique, bordered by forests and rocky eminences, afforded an exceptionally favorable place for combat. Alphonso had gathered his army on an eminence at the western side of the Moorish encampment, overlooking the plain. Is it strange that his great heart grew faint as he thought of the handful of men that he would lead to an apparently certain death?

We may imagine the valiant commander, as the western sun was sinking on the evening of July 24th, 1139, pacing restlessly to and fro before his tent, and as he surveyed the vast encampment of swarthy warriors, doubting if it were possible, with his small force, to succeed against them.

The Moors were proverbially brutal in their methods