



Hernando Cortez

A Story of
The Spanish Conquest of Mexico.

BY R. M. BIRD.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

During the year after the landing of Cortez in Mexico, Amador de Leste, a young Spanish nobleman, arrives at Vera Cruz and learns that the knight Calavar, of whom he is in search, is with Cortez. He makes his way to him in company with a stripling secretary, sent with him by Admiral Cavallero. In the cavalcade are a Moorish prisoner and his boy, whom Amador defends from assault by an officer, Salvatierra. Arrived at the camp of Gen. Narvaez, Amador asks to be passed on to Cortez, nearby. Now, the triumphs of Cortez have fired with jealousy the heart of Velasquez, Governor of Cuba, who sent him to conquer Mexico, and Cortez and Narvaez, sent by Velasquez, are about to fight. Narvaez, enraged, throws Amador into prison, whence he is rescued by one of Narvaez's officers; Botello, a reputed magician attached to Cortez, escaping at the same time. They meet Cortez. Amador finds his kinsman, Calavar, afflicted with melancholy and forgetfulness. Cortez attacks and routs Narvaez, whose officers join Cortez in their movement farther into the interior. They arrive at Tlascala, a strange republican city in the midst of the Aztec empire. Don Amador, De Morla, a cavalier, and Jacinto, the page, visit the sacred temple.

CHAPTER XIII.

The temple was soon reached. The city,—a congregation of cabins and rude stone dwellings of vast size,—lying on the prolonged base of a great mountain, reared its principal sanctuaries on the spurs of this elevation, on the highest of which stood that consecrated to the god of the air. This was an earthen pyramid, huge and lofty, surmounted by towers such as Don Amador had seen at Zempoala. As the friends approached this, the deep silence that surrounded it was broken by the voices of men speaking vehemently in a strange tongue; and as they advanced, they beheld two or three figures glide behind the pyramid, as if to escape observation. This would not perhaps have attracted the notice of the neophyte had not his companion exclaimed:

"Sidi, the cannoneer, again! plotting his knaveries with the two Moorish slaves of Cortez! There is some villainy in the wind. I have twice or thrice seen Abdalla in close conference with these two varlets, and he is often seen talking with his other countrymen that we have in the army. I will represent this matter to the General; for there can no good come of such secret proceedings.—I have all along distrusted that infidel cannoneer to have some mischief in him."

"Please, my lord, my father is no infidel," said Jacinto, trembling, perhaps as much at his presumption in contradicting a noble hidalgo, as at the presumed danger of his parent,—no infidel, but a Christian Moor; as the good padre Olmedo will witness to my lord."

"Young page," said De Morla, pleasantly, "I should not have said so grievous a thing of thy father, but that I forgot thou wert in hearing. I will grant thee Abdalla to be a good Christian, if the padre say so; but, if thou art as much of a wit as a singer, tell me, how is it thy father is found so often skulking about by night, in company with the Moorish slaves, who are yet unbelievers, instead of resting with Christian soldiers?"

"Though the Moors be slaves and Mahometans," said the page, with much of the submissiveness of his father, though recovering from his trepidation, "they were born in the same land with my father, and are his countrymen. As for the Christian soldiers, they will not forget that, though a Christian, he was born of the poor Moriscos, and, my lord knows, it is hard to rest with those who hate us."

"I should give thee a ducat for thy argument," said De Morla, good-humoredly, "but that I know thou art so unsophisticated as to prefer sweet praise to gold; and I intend soon to bestow some of that upon thee. Thy oration has utterly persuaded me I have wronged Abdalla; in token of my penitence for which I will relieve thee of the burthen of the torch whilst thou art climbing up these steps, which are none of the smoothest nor shortest."

"Take thou my hand, Jacinto," said the novice, benevolently; "for, as my friend says, these steps are indeed very rugged; and I am willing to show thee that though thou art of Moorish blood, I myself do by no means either hate or despise thee."

The page humbly and hesitatingly placed his hand in the grasp of Don Amador, and ascending at his side, soon stood on the summit of the pyramid.

Besides two towers of stone that reared their lofty bulk overhead, the novice perceived in advance of them two great urns of rude workmanship, each apparently carved out of a solid block of stone, and each glowing with the remains of a fire not yet extinguished, though no priests stood by to guard and replenish them; they had forsaken their altars to join in the festivities of the evening.

"Turn, senior, from these pigmy vases to the great censers, which God has himself raised to his majesty!"

As De Morla spoke, he turned from the altars, and Don Amador, following with his eyes the direction in which he pointed, beheld a spectacle which instantly drove from his mind the thought of the idolatrous urns. Far away in the southwest, at the distance of eight or 10 leagues, among a mass of hills that upheld their brows in gloomy obscurity, a colossal cone elevated its majestic bulk to heaven, while the snows which invested its resplendent sides glittered in the fires that crowned its summit. A pillar of smoke of awful hue and volume rose to an enormous altitude above its head, and then parting and spreading on either side through the serene heaven, lay still and

solemn, like a funeral canopy, over its radiant pedestal.

From the crater, out of which issued this portentous column, arose also, time by time, great flames with a sort of lambent playfulness, in strange and obvious contrast with their measureless mass and power; while ever and anon globes of fire, rushing up through the pillar of vapor as through a transparent cylinder burst at the top, and spangled the grim canopy with stars.

No shock creeping through the earth, no heavy roar stealing along the atmosphere attested the vigor of this sublime furnace, but all in silence and solemn tranquillity the spectacle went on—now darkling, now waxing temporarily into an oppressive splendor, as if for the amusement of those shadowy phantoms who seemed to sit in watch upon the neighboring peaks.

"This is, indeed," said Don Amador, reverently, "if God should require an altar of fire, such a high place as might be meet for his worship than any shrine raised by the hands of man. God is very great and powerful! The sight of such a spectacle doth humble me in mine own thoughts; for what is man, though full of vanity and arrogance, in sight of Him who builds the fire-mountains?"

"My friend," said De Morla, "will now perceive for what reason it was that the Tlascalans were dismayed and sorrowful when I pronounced the name of Popocatepetl. The name signifies the Mountain of Smoke; for this great chimney, though ever pouring forth dark vapors, has not often been known to kindle into flames. The present eruption, beginning about the time of our descent upon the coast, has ever since continued, and was considered to have heralded our appearance. The Tlascalans, though as securely fettered under the sway of their senators as are the people of Anahuac under their kings, are, as I told thee, very intolerant of such chiefs as carry the open names of masters. Nay, so bitterly do they detest all tyrants, that they have constructed a fable, which they now believe as a truth; namely, that the souls of such persons are concocted and elaborated among the flames of yonder awful crater; whence, at the times of eruptions, they are sent forth in the shape of meteors and fire-balls to afflict and desolate the world. The globes that fall back into the cavity, they think, are despots recalled by their relenting gods; whereas, those that fall beyond the brim and roll down the sides of the mountain are tyrants let loose upon them without restraint."

"This being their belief, it may seem strange to you, they have conceived so preposterous an affection for ourselves, who are much liker to prove their tyrants than any of the lords of Anahuac; but 't is so savage is their detestation of those native kings, that, though nightly terrified with the spectacle of so many fiery tyrants flying through the air, they seem quite to have lost sight of the danger of entrusting their liberties to our care."

"I hope," said Don Amador, "we have come to rid them of the bondage of idolatry, not to reduce them to a new slavery." "We will see that by and by," said De Morla. "We broke the chains of superstition in the islands, but we followed them with more galling fetters; and what better fate awaits the good Montezuma is more than I can tell."

"Dost thou call that savage emperor the good Montezuma?" demanded the novice. "I cannot do otherwise," said De Morla mildly. "A thousand times might he have swept us from the face of the earth, for his armies are numberless. A grain of sand from the hand of each of his warriors would have covered us with a mountain. But age has come to him with a disgust of blood, and all his actions

have proved him rather a humane host than a barbarous destroyer.

"I must confess, we have repaid his gentleness and beneficence both with perfidy and cruelty; yet, notwithstanding all this, and notwithstanding that he is sorely afflicted by our harshness, such is the goodness of his heart that he will not permit his people to do us any injury, nor by any violence rescue him out of our hands."

"I have heard another story from Don Hernando," said Amador; "and truly I thought these ferocious assaults upon the garrison left with the senior Alvarado in the city were proof enough of his deceitful malice."

"I will not take upon me to contradict what is averred by Don Hernando," said De Morla. "But, senior, we have had other representations of these tumults by envoys from Montezuma himself, which, if Cortez had not refused to hear them, would have entirely changed the nature of our belief. I have myself spoken with these ambassadors," continued the young cavalier earnestly, "some of whom were sent to us at Zempoala, and others have met us at divers places since, though without being hearkened to, and having no inducements to remain in a rage, like Cortez himself, I was very easily persuaded, to my shame, that the fault lay all on the side of the garrison."

"Senior, for the sake of lucre, we have done many unjust things! We were received with all hospitality by Montezuma, the great lord of Tenochtitlan; he gave us a palace to live in, supplied us with food and raiment, and enriched us with many costly presents. We repaid all this kindness by seizing him in a moment of confidence, and conveying him to our dwelling, where we have kept him ever since a prisoner, forcing him, by the fear of death, to submit to many indignities unworthy his high rank and benevolent character, and once even forcing him to sit in chains and witness the cruel execution of some of his own officers for a certain crime in which he could have had no part. He forgave us this, as well as other insults, and, while we were absent against Zempoala, preserved his promise sacred to remain in ward of Alvarado until our return."

"Now, senior, you shall hear the truth of the assault, of which so much is said by Cortez, as fully proving the iniquitous duplicity of the captive emperor. While we were gone there occurred the anniversary of the great festival of Mexitli, the war-god, in which it is customary for all the nobles, arrayed in their richest attire, to dance on the terrace of the great pyramid before the emperor. Alvarado, dreading lest such an assemblage of chiefs, heated, as we well knew them to be, on account of the imprisonment of their king, might encourage them to rescue him from his thrall, refused to let the Mitotes (for so they call this ceremony) be danced on the temple; and, at his invitation, the Tlatoani assembled in the courtyard of the palace which Montezuma gave us for our quarters; and here the rite began."

"Now, senior," continued De Morla, speaking indignantly, "you will blush to hear that our Christian garrison were so inflamed with cupidity at the sight of the rich and precious jewels with which their guests were decorated that they resolved to possess them, though at the cost of blood-guiltiness; and falling upon these poor unsuspecting and unarmed revelers, when wearied with the dance, and calling out 'Treason!' as if to justify themselves, though there was no treason except that in their own hearts, they butchered all that could not leap the high walls, and rified the corpses, even in the sight of the emperor."

"This, as you may well believe, excited the people to fury, and drove them to vengeance. They assaulted the palace,

and would have destroyed all, but that Montezuma, whom they call the traitor and murderer, moved by the entreaties and excuses of Alvarado, commanded them to retire; and such are their love and subjection to this monarch that they instantly obeyed him, and have remained in peace ever since, waiting the return and the judgment of Don Hernando. And Don Hernando will doubtless command us to give them justice by slaying as many as shall dare to demand it."

"By heaven!" said Don Amador, "if this be the truth, there are more barbarians than those who worship pagan idols; and I vow to God, if I find thy narrative well confirmed, I will draw no sword, not even at the bidding of my knight Calavar, on the people of Tenochtitlan. Were I even sworn, like a vowed knight of Rhodes, to keep no peace with the in-

ple. But his mortification was appeased by Don Amador exclaiming with great emphasis:

"That these Mexican princesses may make very good wives, when true Christians, I can well believe; but I have my doubts whether they have any such superiority over the Moorish ladies of Granada who possess the religion of Christ. I have, once or twice, known very noble Moriscas, honored among the wives of Granada as much as those who boasted the pure blood of Castile; and for myself, without pretending to say I shall ever condescend to such a marriage, I may aver, that I have seen at least one fair maiden, and she of no very royal descent, whom—that is, if I had loved her—I should not have scorned to wed. But

it, I shall rejoice to hear thee chant it once more, while we sit under the tower and gaze on the fire-mountain that looks down on Mexico."

The boy agreed, and, sitting down at the feet of the cavaliers, on the flags that surrounded the sanctuary, with the torch stuck in the earth near him, he tuned his instrument with a willing hand, and then sang the ballad.

"I like that ballad well," said De Morla, with a pensive sigh, when the singer had finished; "and, to my thought, no handsome maiden, though such always makes the best ballad-singer, could have trotted it with a more tender and loving accent than Jacinto. 'The Moorish Maid,'" he continued, humming words of the ballad in a sentimental manner:

"The Moorish maid she kiss'd the cross,
She knelt upon her knee.

"To my mind it would read better if we could say, 'The Mexican Maid.'"
Then he informed



"HE TUNED HIS INSTRUMENT WITH A WILLING HAND AND THEN SANG THE BALLAD."

Don Amador, with much interest. "If she be worthy of thee, Francisco, I pray heaven to make thee happy with her."

"Now may I die!" cried De Morla, grasping Don Amador's hand warmly, "if I did not fear thou wouldst either censure or laugh at me,—or perhaps turn thy ridicule upon Benita,—a wrong I never could have forgiven thee. For I protest to thee, there is no such gentle and divine being in all the world beside. I make thee my confidant, hermano mio, because I shall have much need of thy friendship and counsel; for I cannot love the princess and yet be blind to the miseries of the king."

"Assuredly," said Don Amador, "I will aid thee, and, for thy sake, both the fair princess and her unconverted sire, where-

these things go by fate. A Christian Moor is perhaps as much regarded by heaven as a Christian Spaniard; and surely there are some of them very lovely to look on, and with most angelical eyes!"

The gentle cavalier smiled in his own conceits as he listened to the argument of his friend; but, without answering it, he said:

"While we have the authority of the Cid Ramon of Leon before our eyes, I am much disposed to agree with Don Amador; for the Cid adored an infidel, and why should not we love proselytes? Come, now, my pretty page of all thy ballads, I like best that which treats of the loves of Cid Ramon; and if thou hast not forgotten

Don Amador that he was in love with a Mexican maid, Minnapotzin, received to the holy faith under the name of Dona Benita—a princess among these poor barbarians.

"Dost thou indeed love one of these strange maidens, then?—and is she baptized in our holy faith?" demanded Don Amador, with much interest. "If she be worthy of thee, Francisco, I pray heaven to make thee happy with her."

"Now may I die!" cried De Morla, grasping Don Amador's hand warmly, "if I did not fear thou wouldst either censure or laugh at me,—or perhaps turn thy ridicule upon Benita,—a wrong I never could have forgiven thee. For I protest to thee, there is no such gentle and divine being in all the world beside. I make thee my confidant, hermano mio, because I shall have much need of thy friendship and counsel; for I cannot love the princess and yet be blind to the miseries of the king."

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