

"ARMA VIRUMQUE CANO"

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IN the American History course in the average American school, the student hears a great deal about English activities in the New World and very little about Spanish and French. It is, of course, right and proper that emphasis be laid on English activities, for that part of North America now occupied by the United States was the principal field of English colonization. But one of the many things wrong with the history courses of our public schools is the tendency to minimize, following the old anti-Catholic tradition of the parson historians, the effect and undoubted contribution of Spanish colonization. The average American public-school product thinks of the great Spanish explorers, when he thinks of them at all, as monsters of cruelty who were moved by lust for gold and a half fanatic, half hypocritical desire to spread the Catholic faith. He knows a few of the outstanding names among the great conquistadors: Cortez, De Soto, Coronado, Pizzaro et al., and with each of them he has been taught to associate two ideas—blood-lust and gold-lust. To him they are not to be mentioned in the same breath with the revered names of such men as Smith, Drake, Raleigh, Winthrop, Williams, and the other English immortals whom he has been taught to view as reincarnations of St. George and Galahad. Yet in the light of true history, the greatest English captains were picayune compared to the Conquistadores of Spain. They were gingerbread men of whom the greatest, Drake, considered from the standpoint of pure daring and hardihood, was not worthy to bear the spear of some of the great Spaniards. The Spanish conquerors who reddened the pages of history with Indian blood during the sixteenth century and who sealed those pages with the red badge of courage were, compared to the English heroes, as giants to dwarfs—yahoos in Lilliput. It is with the career of the greatest of them, Hernando Cortez, that the following pages deal.

That Cortez, a name which to the average American signifies cruelty personified, was a leader who would have been outstanding not only against savage foes in the New World, but against the cream of chivalry on any field in Europe, is a fact that is recognized by all

historians acquainted with his exploits. To Henry Morton Robinson, his most modern biographer, he was one of the greatest military commanders of all time.¹ William Hickling Prescott, whom it would be difficult to accuse of pro-Catholic or pro-Spanish bias, became so enthusiastic about the man in his history of the conquest that he drew a stern rebuke from a rabid anti-Catholic writer, one Robert Anderson Wilson, a two-bit historian whose name has long since passed into the limbo of forgotten men. Wilson wrote his *A New History of the Conquest of Mexico* to restore to the American public its quondam healthy hate of things Romish and Spanish, a hate that was in danger of being modified by the works of Prescott and the Scottish minister, Robinson. Both these authors, according to Wilson, had been led astray by "monkish chroniclers." Yet even Wilson with all his hate of things Catholic and Spanish came to the conclusion that Cortez was "truly a great man in an age of great men" and that had it not been for his Romish upbringing he would have been much greater. To these testimonies to the calibre of the Spanish hero might well be added the eulogy with which the staid Bancroft ends Vol. I of his history of Mexico: "If ever there was a hero, a genius of war worthy the adoration of war worshippers, if ever there were grand conception and achievement, all were vividly displayed in the mind and person of Hernan Cortez. . . . No Alexander or Scipio, or Caesar, or Napoleon ever achieved results so vast with means so insignificant."

Hernando Cortez was born in Medlin, a small town in Extramadura, an isolate and mountainous part of Spain—the same section, incidently, that produced his illustrious kinsman, Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru. The family was of a noble line; but by the time Hernando was born, it had been, like so many other old Spanish families, greatly reduced in circumstances. All their nobility was in their blood; they were peasants in purse. Young Hernando was heir to no castles in Spain. His only heritage was the fierce pride and indomitable courage of a race of warriors. Hernando must have been a throwback to an earlier ancestor, for from his father, Don Martin Cortez de Monroy, a captain of infantry in Isabella's Moorish wars, he seems to have inherited little of his character. Don Martin was brave enough, but he was a quiet man chiefly famous for his uncompromising and rigid morality, a quality to which his son could never justly lay claim. From his mother came, no doubt, his fervent zeal for religion; for Dona Catalina Pizarro Altamirano, like the great

¹ Robinson, Henry M., *Stout Cortez*, *passim*.

Jane of Aza and so many other mothers of Spanish heroes, was deeply religious. Like the late great Theodore Roosevelt, Hernando was a puny child who like Roosevelt owed the steely frame that was his in later life to a vigorous life of action in the open air. He was not a model boy. He grew through a most unpromising adolescence to a still more unpromising young manhood. His chief virtues as a boy were his ability to lead other lads of his age and to harangue the most cautious of his "gang" to follow him on harum-scarum ventures.

Old Martin, thinking that his son's forensic ability promised great things, sent him to Salamanca to study law. But Hernando, though he had the mental equipment, had not the temperament of a student. He spent his time at Salamanca in writing love lyrics and mapping out the campaigns of Hannibal. He soon left the University and shortly thereafter sailed for America, leaving the fathers and mothers of the town of Medellin to breathe a corporate sigh of relief with the expectation that both their sons and daughters would be the better for the departure of one who was undoubtedly an evil influence on both. At Cuba he resumed his ordinary way of living and for his first year there was known principally as a hard-riding, hard-gaming Lothario who stood behind the fastest sword on the island. He showed great talent as an Indian fighter, and was soon appointed captain of the island's fighting force.

He duped the Governor, Don Diego Velasquez, into appointing him to the command of an expedition to the mainland. Many of the older officials thought that the post belonged to them from point of service, and by putting pressure on the Governor the old guard forced him to rescind the appointment. But through fear of Cortez, Don Diego temporized until it was too late. Cortez, hearing of the machinations against him, sailed off before the appointed sailing time in order to escape the official mandate that would have demoted him.

The expedition was the greatest of the three that had sailed thus far from Cuba. Under his command Cortez had eleven boats, four hundred Spanish soldiers, two hundred Indians, sixteen horses, ten cannons and four culverins. But the position of the commander was not an enviable one. A goodly portion of the company considered Cortez an upstart who had beaten worthier men out of the post, and these malcontents were prepared to make trouble. Not the least of Cortez's qualities as a great commander was his ability to make loyal followers of these would-be rebels and so mould them to his will that they were prepared to follow him anywhere, even into the jaws of hell.

The expedition sailed along the mainland and landed at several

points. In the course of the voyage, Cortez heard of the great kingdom of the Aztecs and acquired the Indian slave-girl, Marina, who became his mistress, interpreter and indispensable adviser. In June, 1519, he established the Villa Rica de Vera Cruz as his base of operations, and the conquest of Mexico, one of the greatest feats in military history, had begun.

To understand how such a ridiculously small army could subjugate a nation, an intelligent nation so vastly outnumbering the invaders—and this despite the fact that it was commanded by a genius and equipped with a few fire arms²—it is necessary to know a little of the early history of Mexico. The Valley of Mexico was at that time ruled by the most powerful of the North American races, the Aztecs. Two hundred years before the arrival of Cortez, the Aztecs had conquered Mexico and had established themselves in and around the beautiful and strongly fortified cities of Mexico and Tescuco, from which they ruled with an iron hand the peoples then and subsequently conquered, imposing on them burdensome taxes and demanding of them as tribute human lives for sacrifice to the insatiable Aztec war-god, Mexitl. To him were offered ten slaves a day as propitiatory victims in the ordinary course of events, and many more in special times of stress or jubilation.³ Under such an oppressive yoke, the conquered races chafed and prayed for deliverance. They had a tradition among them that some day Quetzacoatl, the blond god who had at one time dwelt among them, would return and free his people.⁴ Added to this was the fact that the Aztec ruler was the most absolute of monarchs, the chief priest of his people and a kind of minor god. This terrible, all-powerful post was held at the time of the conqueror's coming by Montezuma II, a degenerate descendant of a fierce line. His moral fibre had been weakened by luxurious living, and over him Cortez exercised seemingly hypnotic power. But the Conquistador knew none of the factors that were so largely to aid him in his mad enterprise.

Disregarding the explicit instructions in his orders against marching into the interior, Cortez, after using his silver tongue to good effect in an oration to his men in which he appealed to their love of gold, of fame, and above all of their religion, sank his ships to

² The superiority of Spanish equipment has been greatly exaggerated by some American historians. Cf. Bancroft, *"The Conquest of Mexico," passim.*

³ The flesh of the victims was sold in the markets and considered by the cannibalistic Aztec as a special delicacy. Cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 41, 73, 124.

⁴ This legend is thought by some writers to have basis in fact. They think that the blond Indian Messiah was a Norse or Irish sailor who had been stranded on the coast in the dim past.

destroy the hope of return and started off at the head of his 450 fools to Mexico, to capture a king who was able to summon to his standard 500,000 armed men.

Before he was well started he was met by ambassadors from Montezuma who brought him rich gifts, a king's ransom as it truly was, and promised him much more if he would only turn back to the far land whence he had come. The sight of so much gold only served to incite the greed of Cortez, and he refused to turn back until he had met Montezuma himself. The coastal Indians offered him little resistance, some of the tribes even joining him as allies. But when he reached the mountains he found his way barred by the fierce Tlascaltecs, who were fighting to save not Montezuma but themselves; for this great race of warriors not even the Aztecs had been able to conquer. They refused to make any terms with the invader. If he wished to pass through their territory he would have to fight his way. Led by Sicutengal, the general of their army, they met Cortez 100,000 strong in disciplined formation at a pass in the mountains. "In no recorded battle of modern times," says Robinson, "was the odds so heavy against an invader."⁵ Cortez saw that strategy would be useless. He must force his way through the horde to the plain below where he could bring his cavalry and cannon into play. Three times at the head of his small force of horse Cortez charged and three times he was thrown back by sheer weight of numbers.

A horse is killed and this gives the enemy comfort for they had believed that these beasts were gods and invulnerable. With wild cries, the Indians take the offensive and charge. Ordering his infantry to be ready with their bows, Cortez forms a flying wedge with his cavalry and with the cry of "Santiago" on his lips meets the Indian charge full tilt, breaks his way through the front ranks and with whirling blade mows a path through the closely packed secondary ranks. In spite of all their attempts to snatch him from his horse and to kill him with their razor-edged swords the Indians see this demon in human form ride straight through their files, closely followed by his horsemen and they by the infantry. The little band reaches the plain and the artillery is rolled into place. The belching of the six little cannon spreads death and dismay in the Indian ranks. They beat a hasty retreat. Once more "Santiago" has won a hotly contested field.

But the fierce Tlascaltecs are not yet beaten. The following day they again meet the Spaniards, this time with a new formation. Sic-

⁵ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

untengal, the local Napoleon, has devised a new strategy. Dividing his vast army into four parts, he plans to crush the Spaniards in the middle of it as in a four-jawed vice. After a barrage of arrows and spears which wreaks havoc in the Spanish ranks, the wild hordes charge. But this time Cortez is ready and the cannon immediately begin their decimation of the Indian ranks. Then the calvary, headed as always by Cortez himself, meets the foremost Indian charge. The braves are beaten back. Again they charge and they are once more beaten back; and after four such fierce sallies they retire from the field.

The Indians sued for peace. Cortez made a treaty with them, consenting to leave them unmolested if they would tear down the statues of their monster gods, cleanse the filthy temples, and erect in the vacated niches statues of the Blessed Virgin. He sent Father Olmedo, his Dominican chaplain, and Dona Marina to supervise the operations and instruct the Indians in the faith. This time there was no reaction from the destruction of the pagan temples; but in almost every other case, these high-handed measures of Cortez in his efforts to destroy the demoniacal religions of the country caused revolt. In the next country, where lived the nation of Cholula, had it not been for Marina the forces of Cortez might have been destroyed by a night attack. In every case his path would have been much smoother had he not been so intolerant in matters of religion. But in spite of all the dangers his policy entailed, Cortez would give the heathen gods no quarter.

(To be concluded in the June issue.)