

"ARMA VIRUMQUE CANO"—II

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It is not my intention, in this article, to propose Cortez as a model for Catholic youth or to offer him as a possible subject for canonization. I am merely trying to show him for what he was, a great soldier and a fervent Catholic. These two points should not be difficult to prove. Every historian who has studied his record in the Mexican campaign has admitted, sometimes grudgingly enough, that the man deserves a place among the great soldiers of all time. The Pope himself recognized his religious zeal to the extent of calling him "the sword of Holy Church."

He has been accused of being a butcher, yet he never took a life wantonly. The cruelty of Cortez and Spanish cruelty in general have been greatly exaggerated. The Spanish were no more brutal than the British. This statement must pass at its face value. It has the proportions of a doctoral dissertation, but here it is but a digression and no space can be spared for its development. Suffice it to say that the same type of historiography that has attached the name of "Bloody Mary" to the daughter of Henry VIII principally because she was a Catholic, and the name of "Good Queen Bess" and "The Virgin Queen" to her sister who was neither good nor virgin, is responsible in large measure for the perpetuation of the legend of Spanish cruelty and British godliness.

Cortez has been accused of greed, yet he spent the greater part of his huge fortune in the service of an ungrateful king. He has been charged with the enslavement of a nation, yet he was the New World's first anti-slavery agitator. Possibly, the point in his character most difficult to condone, from our modern standpoint, was his open and lifelong flouting of the sixth commandment. He was a zealous apostle of that religion which in all ages, even the most corrupt, has steadfastly preached the doctrine "Blessed are the clean of heart." He was an ardent devotee of Mary the Queen of virgins, chastity incarnate. Yet, with all his zeal and devotion, his own conduct in some respects was little better than pagan. Many historians have recognized this contradiction in his character and have tried

variously to explain it away. The simplest explanation seems to me to be the obvious one. The same hot blood that courses through the veins of the hero flows through the body of the saint. But in the latter it is carefully tempered by bodily mortification. The same great passions that inflame the heart of the warrior enkindle also the heart of the saint, but in the saint they are directed to other and better ends. Sometimes these passions, as in the case of a Dominic or a Thomas of Aquin receive, by the grace of God, proper orientation in childhood. Sometimes the proper direction is given them in later life as happened in the case of Loyola, who, struck down by a canon ball, saw the heavens in a new perspective from his prone position. The ways of God are mysterious. Cortez as a young man had had his leg broken also, not by a cannon ball, as did Ignatius, but in a fall from the window of a mistress. The fall did not shake the scales from his eyes as it shook them from the eyes of Ignatius. Possibly the difference between Ignatius, the saint, and Hernando, the sinner, who were both so greatly like in physical makeup, may be best illustrated in the Ignatian prayer, *Suscipe Domine*. To Ignatius his faith was his everything, his God was his all. To Cortez his faith was a powerful motive force but not his everything, his God though a considerable portion to him was not his all. In a word, Cortez would have been an exemplary Catholic were it not that he had the passions of a saint, directed by a will not entirely lost in God.

But on with the campaign! After leaving the kingdom of Tlascalala, Cortez entered territory inhabited not by subject nations but by peoples who were of Aztec blood. From this point on there was no respite; he had to fight every inch of the way. It seems almost miraculous that his force was not entirely destroyed. As he approached the lake-girt city of Mexico, he was once more met by envoys of Montezuma who extended to him an invitation to visit the city peacefully. When the Spaniards had crossed the great causeway leading to the almost mythically beautiful capital of the Aztecs, they were met at the gates of the city by the august Montezuma himself, who quartered them in the most sumptuous of his palaces and gave them the freedom of the city. He himself served Cortez as a guide, showing him his riches, his vast market places, and finally the foul and bloody temple of Mexxtl. From the top of the great temple Cortez surveyed the wonderful city, making a mental map of the causeways leading to it.

Here once again the apostolic spirit of Cortez almost proved his undoing. Through Marina, Cortez explained to Montezuma that the Aztec gods were not gods but devils, that their statues should be de-

stroyed and in their stead erected statues of the Blessed Virgin. The angered Emperor replied that should such a sacrilege be attempted not even he with all his power could prevent his subjects from rising and slaughtering Cortez and his men like rats in a trap. Cortez realized to the full extent just how dangerous was his position and he decided on a bold stroke, namely, to capture Montezuma and through him rule the city.

It was villiany of the deepest dye, treachery of the worst kind, but it was a plan that could have been conceived only in the brain of a genius and carried out only by a man who knew not the meaning of fear. In execution it was most simple. It consisted, this major military operation—the capture of an emperor—of Cortez with a few of his men walking into the throne room of Montezuma and putting irons on him, overawing his guard by threats to kill their ruler should any of them make a false move. The royal hostage was bundled into his magnificent litter. His shackles were hidden, and he was borne to Cortez's quarters. For about two months the invader ruled Mexico through his puppet, and by his orders all the gold that could be obtained was brought to the city. Then once more Cortez's religious zeal almost destroyed all that he had thus far accomplished, for when he sent forth an order for the breaking of the idols pandemonium burst forth and the infuriated people all but brought the city down about his ears. But by having Montezuma address his subjects at the proper moment, an armed revolt was forestalled.

At this critical juncture, Cortez was forced to leave Mexico with a detachment of his men to crush a large force of Spaniards who had been sent by the governor to capture Cortez and bring him back to Cuba in irons. In his absence Alvarado, his rash lieutenant, watered the seeds of revolt by an unprovoked massacre of the Aztecs, when unarmed they were performing a ceremony of propitiation to their gods. The city was in an uproar by the time Cortez returned, and to quell the people Cortez sent one of his hostages—Cuitlahuac, a nephew of Montezuma—as an ambassador to them. In doing so he committed the worst tactical error of his career. All that the people needed was a leader of the blood royal to turn their disorganized riot into a real revolt, and Cuitlahuac was a leader of remarkable ability. The mob metamorphosed into an army stormed the palace. Once more Cortez reached up his sleeve for his ace, Montezuma, but the people had tired of the mountebank and his monkey, and the act was jeered. They hissed and booed and stoned the sacred person of their once mighty emperor. Montezuma, al-

ready weary of life, died of the shock. There was only one thing for the Spaniards to do,—attempt to leave the city and die fighting if necessary rather than on the sacrificial altar. The valiant host charged the massed Aztecs and fought their way to the nearest causeway, only to find that all of the eight bridges had been destroyed. Their only retreat was cut off. The sinking sun found the Spaniards trying to fight off their attackers and replace the bridges at the same time.

After three days of horrible struggle, Cortez decided that such a course was useless. He thought that one portable bridge, carried by six hundred Indian allies, would serve the purpose. The bridge was finally built amid constant fighting, and midnight of Saturday, June 30 was chosen as the time of retreat. Even at this desperate pass, Cortez refused to relinquish his booty. He assigned eight horses and sixty porters to the task of carrying out the king's share of the spoils and sixty porters to carry his own share. The rest of the great horde was piled up on the ground to the amount of \$4,000,000, and the soldiers were invited to help themselves—grim irony! Then the army started its retreat once more. That night is known in Spanish history as *La Noche Triste*, the sorrowful night. The portable bridge failed to work, for it was impossible to manipulate it so fierce was the Indian attack. The invaders were hard pressed on all sides. The retreat became a rout. The next day Mextli once more enshrined on his mucky altar looked down with his horrible grin on many a writhing Spaniard. How a man escaped alive from the city is a question that defies the explanations of the best historians. It seems probable to me that Mary did not forget her erring but fervent votaries in their hour of tribulation. Of 1200 Spaniards who started the retreat (Cortez had enrolled the men sent to capture him) only 550 survived. All the cannon had been lost, and all the muskets but seven. Of crossbows, only twelve remained. The Spaniards were an army without arms with their hardest battle still before them.

Cuitlahuac, determined on exterminating them, had followed across the causeway. But he was outwitted by Cortez, who succeeded in getting his weary, starving rag-men into the mountains. Cuitlahuac, however, was not to be denied his revenge; so, gathering all the warriors he could muster, a force of 100,000 armed men, he awaited Cortez at the pass of Otumba. The battle that followed sounds like a fairy-tale, but it has never been denied by an historian of merit.

Outnumbered 2000 to one, the entire Spanish force knelt and prayed fervently to our Lady, to their warrior saint, Jago, and to St.

Peter, the special patron of Cortez; then, with a courage that only faith can give, they threw themselves on the massed enemy. The poor starving soldiers fought for hours. Twice they were entirely surrounded until, to quote Bancroft, "A feeling of suffocation and deadly despair comes over the Spaniards as the dusky host fold them in closer and yet fiercer embrace. Hot falls the blood-reeking breath upon their faces, as, flushed with success and sure of their victims, the foe lay hold of the Spaniards to drag them away to sacrifice. Rare offerings to the gods indeed, are these magnificent men! And such they will surely become if Mary, Santiago, or the ready genius of Cortés appears not quickly to the rescue. But how shall there be a rescue? What rescue is there to the sinking ship alone in midocean? Can this Cortés for the release of his comrades baffle death like Hercules for the release of Alcestis?"¹

Yet the rescue does come. Once more the genius of Cortez saves the army, with another seemingly mad plan. Espying the golden banner of the Aztec commander in the center of the copper horde, he calls his two aides, Alvarado and Sandoval, to his side and challenges them to follow him. Then, with the names of Santiago and San Pedro on his lips, he throws himself with flashing sword into the thick of the enemy, followed by the two men who, next to himself, were the greatest fighters then alive. He reaches the general's litter, kills many of the picked bodyguard and dashes the Aztec chieftan to the ground. The Herculean feat saved the day. Filled with confusion and superstitious fear of this invulnerable devil, the Aztec ranks break and a disordered flight is underway. "Military authorities agree," says Robinson, "that Cortez displayed at Otumba the highest attributes of martial skill. His disposition of weary, ragged troops, unsupported by artillery in attacking an army that outnumbered them 2000 to 1 was simple genius."²

After the great battle, Cortez fell ill with a fever which almost claimed his life. He was nursed through it by the devotion of Marina, and on his recovery started making plans for the siege of Mexico City, which he had resolved to take. The account of his masterly reduction of the city is too long to be included in this brief sketch. Suffice it to say that on August 13, 1521, after seventy-five days of blockade and siege, the city fell into his hands. Cortez then dropped his rôle of conqueror and became a builder. The day after the capture of the city he issued orders for its reconstruction and, in a few

¹ Bancroft, *op. cit.*, p. 500.

² Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

months, with all signs of battle completely erased, the temple torn down and a Catholic Cathedral in process of erection, Mexico City had been transformed into the beautiful Christian metropolis of the New World. Cortez ruled for some time as military administrator, in which office he showed himself, like Caesar, as adept as in the art of war. He was the best governor Mexico ever had; just, merciful, a champion against enslavement of the Indians, and an ardent advocate for the spread of the Faith which Franciscan and Dominican friars were soon preaching over the length and breadth of New Spain. He founded the *Hospital of Jesus*, which still stands in Mexico City and is still supported by a fund bequeathed to it by Cortez—that is, unless the fund has been confiscated by the present greedy government.

His last days were troublesome ones. Assailed by enemies on all sides, he was involved in one lawsuit after another. He lost the favor of the king and in losing that he lost his post as governor. He twice sailed for Spain; once to receive the thanks of his emperor, Charles V. At that time he was a national hero. The second time, fifteen years later, with the greater part of his fortune spent in a fruitless search for more lands to conquer for his king, he came once more to the homeland to find that he had been forgotten by both king and people. But while he lived the Indians never forgot him. When he lost his post as governor, the Indians refused to recognize his successor and moved with Cortez to Tezcuco where he remained, for them, the chief man of the kingdom. Had he been minded to stir up a revolt, as the king so foolishly feared, he might easily have done so then. He died at the age of sixty-two in a castle near Madrid, Dec. 2, 1647, while on a last trip to Spain to plead for justice to the deaf ears of Charles V. His great soul answered its summons to that tribunal whose Judge alone is capable of passing sentence on Hernando Cortez.

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