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Pedro Simon

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*Translated from Fray Pedro Simon's Sixth
Historical Notice of the Conquest of Tierra
Firme by William Bollaert*

PEDRO SIMÓN



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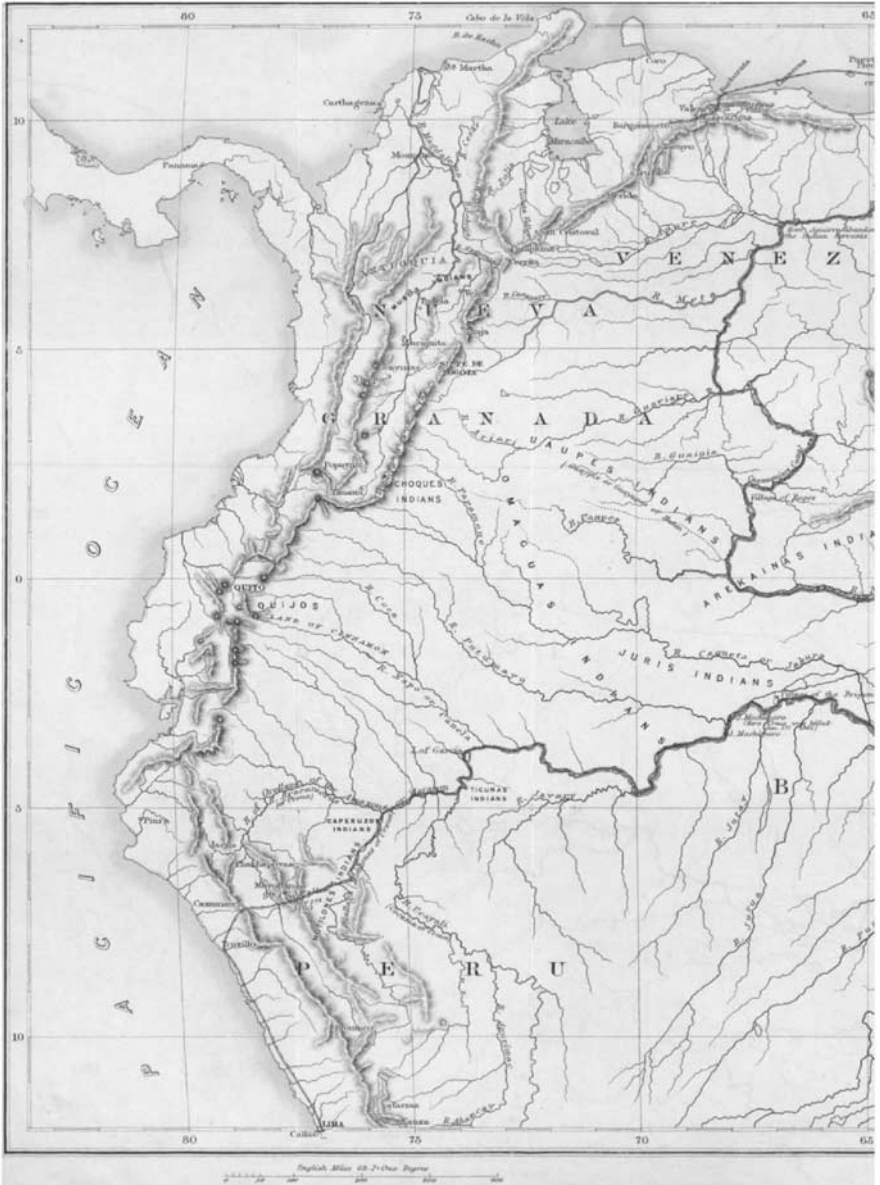
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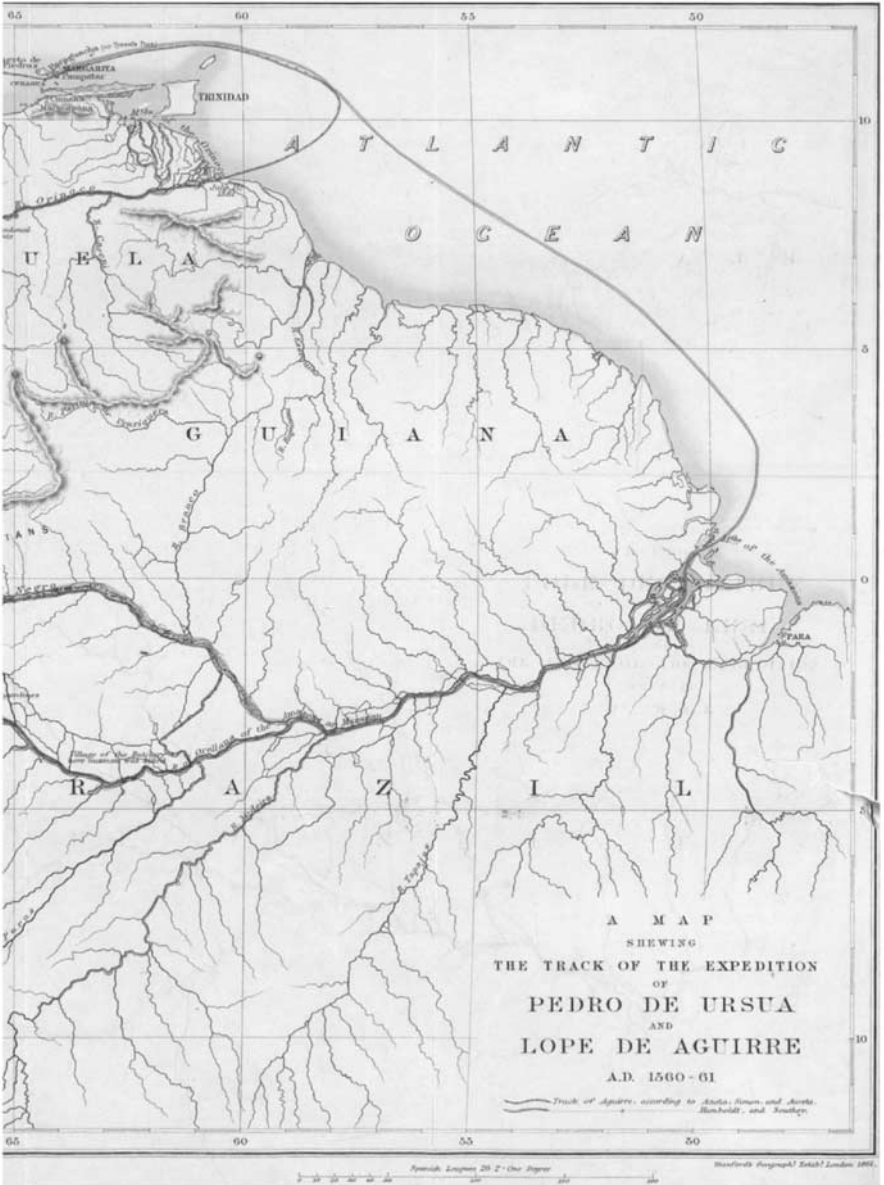
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IN 1560-1.

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CONQUEST OF TIERRA FIRME."

BY

WILLIAM BOLLAERT, Esq., F.R.G.S.,

CORR. MEM. OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHILE; MEMBER OF THE
ETHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW YORK.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

CLEMENTS R. MARKHAM, ESQ.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE blood-stained cruise of the “tyrant Aguirre,” the translated narrative of which, from the text of the old chronicler Simon, is now printed for the first time, is by far the most extraordinary adventure in search of El Dorado on record. The dauntless hardihood of those old Spaniards and Germans, who, undismayed by the reverses and sufferings of numerous predecessors, continued to force their way for hundreds of miles into the forest covered wilds, is sufficiently astonishing; but in this cruise of Aguirre all that is wildest, most romantic, most desperate, most appalling in the annals of Spanish enterprise seems to culminate in one wild orgie of madness and blood.

The history of previous searches after the fabled El Dorado, which led to the expedition of Ursua and Aguirre, truthful and authentic as it is, yet seems fitter for the pages of King Arthur’s romance than for a sober narrative of facts. It is necessary, however, that these romantic expeditions should be fresh in the reader’s mind, in order to understand the objects and views of the men who followed Aguirre

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to destruction, and the exact position which his expedition occupies in the history of South American geographical discovery.

When the Spaniards had conquered and pillaged the civilized empires on the table lands of Mexico, Bogota, and Peru, they began to look round for new scenes of conquest, new sources of wealth; the wildest rumours were received as facts, and the forests and savannas, extending for thousands of square miles to the eastward of the cordilleras of the Andes, were covered, in imagination, with populous kingdoms, and cities filled with gold. The story of El Dorado, of a priest or king smeared with oil and then coated with gold dust, probably originated in a custom which prevailed amongst the civilized Indians of the plateau of Bogota;¹ but El Dorado was placed,

¹ "When the chief of Guatavita was independent, he made a solemn sacrifice every year, which, for its singularity, contributed to give celebrity to the lake of Guatavita, in the most distant countries, and which was the origin of the belief in El Dorado, in search of which so many years and so much wealth was employed. On the day appointed the chief smeared his body with turpentine, and then rolled in gold dust. Thus gilded and resplendent, he entered the canoe, surrounded by his nobles, whilst an immense multitude of people, with music and songs, crowded round the shores of the lake. Having reached the centre, the chief deposited his offerings of gold, emeralds, and other precious things, and then jumped in himself, to bathe. At this moment the surrounding hills echoed with the applause of the people; and, when the religious ceremony concluded, the dancing, singing, and drinking began."—*Descubrimiento de la Nueva Granada, por el Coronel J. Acosta*, p. 199.

Here we have the origin of El Dorado, and of Raleigh's lake

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by the credulous adventurers, in a golden city amidst the impenetrable forests of the centre of South America, and, as search after search failed, his position was moved further and further to the eastward, in the direction of Guiana. El Dorado, the phantom god of gold and silver, appeared in many forms. The Spaniards of Bogota and Venezuela explored the head waters of the Orinoco and the Rio Negro in search of the "gilded man," or the golden "house of the sun," and no fabulous tale was too wild for their credulity. The settlers at Quito and in Northern Peru talked of the golden empire of the Omaguas, while those in Cuzco and Charcas dreamt of the wealthy cities of Paytiti and Enim, on the banks of a lake far away to the eastward of the Andes. These romantic fables, so firmly believed in those old days, led to the exploration of vast tracts of country, by the fearless adventurers of the sixteenth

of Parima, and golden city of Manoa. It is implied that the ceremony did not take place subsequent to the conquest of Guatavita by Nemequene, the Zipa of Bogota, about forty years before the appearance of the Spaniards; so that, on their arrival, traditions only existed of the gilded chief of the lake, which, in a confused and exaggerated form, seem to have originated the belief in El Dorado, and in a great city in the central plains of South America.

The people of Guatavita believed that their deity resided in the lake, and yearly sacrifices of gold and emeralds were made to him. Cochrane gives an amusing account of an attempt to drain this lake, which is only a short distance from Bogota; and several gold ornaments have been fished up, from time to time, but it is believed that millions still remain buried in the slime, at the bottom. — *Cochrane's Travels*, ii, p. 201.

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century, portions of which have never been traversed since, even to this day.

The most famous searches after El Dorado were undertaken from the coast of Venezuela, and the most daring leaders of these wild adventures were German Knights.¹

Shortly after Ojeda had discovered the coast of Venezuela, and Rodrigo de Bastidas had established a settlement at Santa Martha, the emperor Charles V made an agreement with a company of Germans to colonize these rich provinces. The Velsers of Augsburg were great merchants who traded in all parts of the world, and they agreed, through their Agents, Enrique de Alfinger and Geronimo Sailer, to found two cities and three forts within two years, to arm four ships, and take out three hundred Spaniards and fifty German miners; on condition that the emperor granted them the country extending from Cabo de la Vela to Maracapana (except the portion previously granted to one Juan de Ampuez) and without limit to the south, gave the title of Adelantado to the governor appointed by them, and allowed them to make slaves of the Indians.² At about the same time Bastidas, the governor of Santa Martha, had died, and it was arranged that Garcia de Lerma,

¹ The early expeditions to the river Orinoco, of Diego de Ordaz, and Geronimo de Ortal, the lying tale of Martinez concerning the city of Manoa, the advance of Sedeño towards the Meta, and the remarkable expedition of Berreo, have already been described in Sir Robert Schomburgk's copious notes to Raleigh's *Guiana*.

² Yet two friars were sent out, with the title of "Protectors of the Indians."

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a knight of Burgos, the new governor, should go out in the German ships to Santa Martha, and that the Germans should then proceed to their destination. Ambrosio de Alfinger was named governor, and Bartolomè Sailer Lieutenant Governor, by the Vellers, both Germans, and the expedition sailed from Spain in 1528.

Having landed Lerma at Santa Martha, Ambrosio de Alfinger, with four hundred men and fifty horses, went to Coro, on the coast of Venezuela, which had been founded in 1527 by Juan de Ampuez, who afterwards retired to Curaçoa. The coast offered few temptations to the German adventurer, and Alfinger, leaving his lieutenant Sailer in command at Coro, determined to make an expedition into the interior, in 1530, in search of some fabulous golden city in the forests far to the south. He left Coro with about two hundred Spaniards, and several hundred unfortunate Indians, laden with provisions and stores; and the cruelties, committed by this savage on the poor defenceless people, were reported in Europe, and were amongst the tales which made the blood of Raleigh and Sir Richard Hawkins boil with generous indignation at the very name of a Spaniard. To prevent the laden Indians from deserting, Alfinger's soldiers fastened them to a chain, by a ring round their necks; thus, to let one out, it was necessary to loosen the whole row; but, to save time, when an Indian became too tired to go on, they cut off his head, and let the body drop out, saying that, as it was necessary to leave him behind,

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it was the same to them whether he was alive or dead, and the trouble of loosening the chain was saved.

When Alfinger reached the lagoon which the river Cesar forms, at its confluence with the Magdalena, the fame of his cruelties had preceded him, and all the natives had taken refuge on the islands in the lake; but the greedy Spaniards, seeing the glitter of their golden ornaments from a distance, spurred their horses into the lake, and swam to one of the islands, where the Indians, terrified at so strange a sight, were all killed or taken prisoners. The Indian chief of the district of Tamalameque gave himself up, and supplied the Spaniards with provisions and gold ornaments. So great was the spoil, that Alfinger sent twenty-five of his men back to Coro, with booty valued at 60,000 dollars, to buy horses and arms; and waited a whole year for their return, at the confluence of the rivers Cesar and Margarita. He waited in vain, and at length the ruthless adventurers began to follow the stream of the Magdalena, living on wild fruits and insects, and suffering from fever, and the torments of mosquitos. Their wretchedness soon became unbearable, and Alfinger led them up the mountains to the eastward, into a cold country, where they lived on land shells, and where three hundred of the naked Indians and many Spaniards were frozen to death during the nights. The wanderers then descended into the valley of Chinacota, where they were exposed to constant attacks from the wild Indians, and finally Alfinger was wounded

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in the neck, and died in three days. He was buried at the foot of a tree, and his epitaph was cut in the bark, by his surviving comrades.¹

His worn out followers reached the valley of Cucuta, but, rendered fiercer and more cruel by their sufferings, they slaughtered men, women, and children in the villages on their line of march; and, in 1532, worn out and decimated by disease, they found their way back to Coro; and thus ended the first expedition of the Germans in Venezuela, and the first search for El Dorado.²

On the death of Alfinger, a German knight named Nicholas Fedreman went to Castille, to apply for the government of Venezuela; but it was given to another knight of the same nation, named George of Spires, and Fedreman was appointed his lieutenant-general. They raised four hundred men in Andalusia and Murcia, and reached Coro in 1534. Since the time of Alfinger, the rumours concerning great wealth to be found in the wilds, to the eastward of the Andes, had increased in number; and George of Spires resolved to make an attempt to solve the mystery which enveloped those unknown regions.³ He left Coro with three hundred infantry and one hundred cavalry, crossed the mountains near the sources of the Tocuyo, descended to the plains, and, after

¹ *Castellanos*, pt. ii, el. i, canto 4.

² Strictly speaking, Alfinger did not search for El Dorado, as that fable was not yet in existence, but for some golden country of his own imagination.

³ *Herrera*, Dec. v, Lib. 9, cap. v.

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waiting for some months until the periodical inundations of those regions had subsided, began his march to the south. The expedition of George of Spires, which commenced in 1536, was composed of determined men; and they penetrated into regions which have scarcely ever been visited since, braving hardships and dangers which would have been insurmountable to men, who were not actuated by the extraordinary enthusiasm of these early conquerors. They avoided the mountains, on account of the great difficulty of making roads passable for horses; but, in doing this, they encountered great risks in crossing the rivers, and suffered from want of provisions, the swarms of mosquitos, the unhealthiness of the climate, and the attacks of wild Indians. During the dry season they found plenty of deer on the plains, which supplied them with wholesome food, but, when the rains came on, and the country was inundated, their sole food consisted of *palmitos* and wild roots: and the attempts they made to construct canoes, and go afloat in them, in search of provisions, only ended in disappointment. It is also recorded, that the jaguars were so numerous and ferocious, that they carried off the horses in broad daylight, and even killed a Spaniard, and several Indians.

George continued to advance to the south, through a country inhabited by different Indian tribes, and found great inconvenience from the diversity of languages, which rendered interpreters useless. They crossed the Ariari, and afterwards the Guaviare river,

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where they encountered a tribe of Indians called Guayupes,¹ who painted their bodies black, and came to battle half drunk, so that it was not difficult to repulse their attacks. The extreme point reached by the knight of Spires was the margin of the river Papamene,² whence he returned to Coro, and a glance at the map will show the immense extent of country which he traversed, in this daring and romantic expedition. During the retreat to Coro, many officers died, and among them Murcia de Rondon, who had acted as secretary to Francis I, during his captivity in Madrid. George of Spires reached Coro in May 1538, after an absence of three years, during which time he marched upwards of one thousand five hundred miles into the interior of South America. He was a mild good man, and died peacefully as governor of Venezuela, in 1540.³

In the meanwhile his lieutenant, Nicholas Fedreman, followed his chief, with reinforcements and supplies, until he found himself in the vicinity of his countryman's camp, when ambition prompted him to avoid a meeting, and to continue his discoveries on

¹ The Uaupes Indians, on the head waters of the Rio Negro, of whom a very interesting account is given by Wallace, p. 482.

² The same as the river Caqueta, or its tributary the Rio de la Fragua, according to Humboldt; but Colonel Acosta, in his map, makes the river Papamene one of the tributaries of the Guaviare.

³ Benzoni, however, says that he was murdered in his bed, by the Spaniards, who mangled him, by dragging his body ignominiously about, and finally throwing it into a wood. He adds that the murderers were severely punished, by order of the emperor. (*Benzoni, in Hakluyt Coll.*, p. 76.)

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his own account, with about two hundred men. Fedreman is described as an active and energetic German, of middle size, with a flowing red beard; he was beloved by his soldiers, and no cruelty to the Indians is recorded of him. After leaving the track of his chief, Fedreman came to the banks of a river, where there were ruins of villages, and the Indians told him that, many years ago, a serpent with numerous heads had come out of the river, and devoured all the inhabitants. He passed the rainy season at the foot of the mountains, near the banks of the river Casanare, then crossed the Meta, and, after wandering about for three years, he finally crossed the most difficult part of the cordilleras of Sumapaz, and met the famous conquerors, Quesada and Belalcazar, on the plains of Bogota, in April 1539.

This was, in many respects, a very remarkable meeting. The great conqueror of New Granada, Don Gonzalo Ximenes de Quesada, and his colleague, the Adelantado Pedro Fernandez de Lugo, in exploring the course of the river Magdalena, had discovered the country of the civilized Chibchas, and reached the plateau of Bogota in 1537. The history of the conquest of New Granada, which is equal in interest to those of Mexico or Peru, has not yet found a Prescott; although the Chibchas were more civilized than the Aztecs, prodigious wealth was derived from the sack of their cities,¹ and the ad-

¹ At Tunja alone the Spaniards found 191,294 dollars worth of fine gold; 37,288 dollars of rough gold; 18,390 dollars of silver; and 1815 emeralds.