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978-1-108-01705-3 - The True History of the Conquest of New Spain, Volume 1

Bernal Diaz del Castillo

Excerpt

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BOOK I.—THE DISCOVERY.

THE EXPEDITION UNDER FRANCISCO HERNÁNDEZ DE CÓRDOVA

CHAPTER I.

The beginning of the story.



BERNAL DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO, citizen and Regidor of the most loyal city of Santiago de Guatemala, one of the first discoverers and conquerors of New Spain and its provinces, and the Cape of Honduras and all that lies within that land, a Native of the very noble and distinguished town of Medina del Campo, and the son of its former *Regidor*, Francisco Díaz del Castillo, who was also called "The graceful," (may his soul rest in glory), speak about that which concerns myself and all the true conquerors my companions who served His Majesty by discovering, conquering, pacifying and settling most of the provinces of New Spain, and that it is one of the best countries yet discovered in the New World, we found out by our own efforts without His Majesty knowing anything about it.

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I also speak here in reply to all that has been said and written by persons who themselves knowing nothing, have received no true account from others of what really took place, but who nevertheless now put forward any statements that happen to suit their fancy. As there is no account of our many and remarkable services such as their merits deserve * * * * * these indifferent story-tellers are now unwilling that we should receive the recompense and * * * * * which His Majesty has ordered his Governors and Viceroy to afford us.

Apart from these reasons such deeds as those I am going on to describe, cannot be forgotten, and the truth about them will be proved afresh, but, as in the books which have been written on the subject the truth has so often been perverted, [I write this history] so that when tales are told of daring deeds our fame shall not suffer, and that on account of such brilliant adventures our names may be placed among the most famous, for we have run the risk of death and wounds, and have suffered a thousand other miseries, venturing our lives in discovering lands about which nothing whatever was known, battling by day and by night with a host of doughty warriors, at so great a distance from Castille that no aid or assistance could reach us, save the only true help, namely the loving kindness of our Lord God whom it has pleased that we should conquer New Spain and the far-famed city of Tenochtitlan,¹ Mexico, for so it is called, and many other cities and provinces which are too numerous for me to name. As soon as we had the country pacified and settled by Spaniards, we thought it to be our duty as good and loyal subjects of His Majesty, with much respect for our King and natural Lord, to hand the country over to him. With that

¹ Tenuztitlan in the original.

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intent we sent our Ambassadors to Castille and thence to Flanders where his Majesty at that time held his Court. I shall also tell about all the good results that came of it, and about the large number of souls which have been saved, and are daily being saved, by conversion to the faith, all of which souls were formerly lost in Hell. In addition to this holy work, attention will be called to the great treasure which we sent as a present to his Majesty, and that which has been sent and is being sent daily and is in the form of the Royal Fifths,¹ as well as in the large amounts carried off by many persons of all classes. I shall tell in this story who was the first discoverer of the province of Yucatan, and how we went to the discovery of New Spain and who were the Captains and soldiers who conquered and settled it and many other things which happened during the conquest, which are worth knowing and should not be forgotten; all this I shall relate as briefly as possible, and above all with the assured truth of an eye witness.

²If I were to remember and recount one by one the heroic [deeds] which we, one and all of us valiant captains and brave [soldiers] accomplished, from the beginning to the end of the conquest, reciting each deed as it deserved, it would, indeed, be a great [undertaking,] and would need a very famous historian [to carry it out] with greater eloquence and style than my poor words [can compass.] As later on * * * * when I was present and saw and understood, and I will call to mind * * * * that repeats * * * * imposed as a duty—and delicate style and I * * * * I will write it with God's

¹ The tax on all bullion and other treasure paid to the Crown.

² In the following passages many of the words of the Manuscript are rubbed and worn out. When the meaning is obvious the missing words are supplied in brackets in the translation. When the meaning is not clear the spaces are marked with asterisks.

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help with honest truth * * * * of the wise elders who say that a good style * * * * is to tell the truth and * * * * [not] to exaggerate and flatter * * * * others, especially in a narrative like this * * * * would die of it, and because I am no latin scholar and do not understand the art * * * * I will not treat of it, for I say I understand [only] the battles and pacifications where I was myself present, for I was one of the first [to set out] from Cuba in the company of a Captain named Francisco [Hernández de Córdova] and we were accompanied on that voyage by one hundred and ten soldiers, we explored * * * * they stopped (?) at the first place at which one landed which is called Cape [Catoche and at] a town further on called Chanpoton more than half of us [were killed and] the Captain received ten arrow wounds and all the rest of us soldiers got two [arrow wounds and the Indians] a[ttack]ing us with such skill we were obliged, with the greatest difficulty to return to the Island [of Cuba whence] we had set out with the fleet, and the captain died almost as soon as we landed, and of the one hundred and ten soldiers who set out with us, fifty-seven were left behind, dead.

After this first warlike expedition, I set out a second time from this same Island of Cuba under another captain, named Juan de Grijalva, and we again had great warlike encounters with these same Indians of the *Pueblo* of Chanpoton, and in this second battle many of our soldiers were killed. From that Pueblo we went on along the coast, exploring, until we arrived at New Spain and then kept on our way until we reached the province of Panuco. Then a second time we had to turn back to the Island of Cuba, baffled and exhausted both from hunger and thirst, and from other reasons which I will set forth in the chapter which treats of this expedition.

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To go back to my story ; I set out for the third time with the daring and valiant captain Don Hernando Cortés, who later on was made Marqués del Valle and received other titles of honour. I repeat that no other captain or soldier went to New Spain three times in succession on one expedition after another as I did, so that I am the earliest discoverer and conqueror who has ever lived or is now living in New Spain. Although many soldiers went twice on voyages of discovery, the first time with Juan de Grijalva whom I have already mentioned, and the second time with the gallant captain Cortés, yet they never went three times in succession. If they went the first time with Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, they did not go the second time with Grijalva, nor the third time with the valiant Cortés. God has been pleased to preserve me through many risks of death, both during this laborious discovery, and in the very bloody Mexican wars (and I give God many thanks for it), in order that I may tell and declare the events that happened in those wars, so that studious readers may give them attention and thought.

I was twenty-four years old when Diego Velásquez, the Governor of the Island of Cuba, who was my kinsman, promised to give me some Indians as soon as there were any available, but I did not care to be kept waiting until this should happen. I always had a zeal for soldiering, as it is becoming that a man should have, both in order to serve God and the king and to endeavour to gain renown, and as being such a life that honourable men should seek, and I gradually put from my mind the death of my companions who were killed in those times and the wounds that I myself received, and the fatigue and hardship I endured and which all must endure who set out to discover new lands, and, being as we were, but a small company, dare to enter into great towns swarming with hostile warriors. I myself was always at the front and never

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descended to the many vices prevalent in the island of Cuba, as will be clearly seen in the course of this story.

In the year fifteen hundred and fourteen, I came from Castille and began my career as a soldier on Tierra-firme,¹ then went on to the discovery of Yucatan and New Spain, and as my forefathers, my father and my brother had always been servants of the crown and of the Catholic kings of glorious memory Don Fernando and Doña Ysabel, I wished to be something like them.

In the year 1514, as I have already said, there came out as Governor of Tierra-firme, a gentleman named Pedrías Dávila.² I agreed to go with him to his Government and the country conquered by him. So as to shorten the story, I will not relate what happened on the voyage, more than to say sometimes with good weather and other times with bad weather, we arrived at Nombre de Dios, for so it was named.

Some three or four months after the settlement was formed, there came a pestilence from which many soldiers died, and in addition to this, all the rest of us fell ill and suffered from bad ulcers on the legs. Then disputes arose between the Governor and a nobleman named Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, the captain, who had conquered that province, to whom Pedrías Dávila had given his daughter (Doña somebody Arias de Peñalosa) in marriage. But it seems that after marriage, he grew suspicious of his son-in-law, believing that he would rise in rebellion and lead a body of soldiers towards the South Sea, so he gave orders that Balboa should have his throat cut and certain of the soldiers should be punished.

As we were witnesses of what I have related, and of other revolts among the captains, and as the news reached

¹ Tierra-firme = the Spanish Main.

² Pedro Arias de Ávila.

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LEAVES TIERRA-FIRME FOR CUBA.

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us that the Island of Cuba had lately been conquered and settled, and that a gentleman named Diego Velásquez, a native of Cuellar, who has already been mentioned by me, had been made Governor of the Island, some of us gentlemen and persons of quality, who had come out with Pedrarias Dávila, made up our minds to ask him to give us permission to go to Cuba, and he willingly did so, as he had no need of all the soldiers he had brought with him from Castille, as there was no one left to conquer. Indeed the country under his rule is small and thinly peopled, and his son-in-law Vasco Nuñez de Balboa had already conquered it and ensured peace.

As soon as leave was granted we embarked in a good ship and with fair weather reached the Island of Cuba. On landing we went at once to pay our respects to the Governor, who was pleased at our coming, and promised to give us Indians as soon as there were any to spare.

When three years had gone by, counting both the time we were in Tierra-firme and that which we had passed in the Island of Cuba, and it became evident that we were merely wasting our time, one hundred and ten of us got together, most of us comrades who had come from Tierra-firme, and the other Spaniards of Cuba who had had no Indians assigned to them, and we made an agreement with a gentleman named Francisco Hernández de Córdova,¹ whose name I have already mentioned, a rich man who owned an Indian Pueblo in the Island, that he should be our leader, for he was well fitted for the post, and that we should try our fortune in seeking and exploring new lands where we might find employment.

With this object in view, we purchased three ships, two

¹ The three partners in this expedition were Francisco Hernández de Córdova, Lope Ochoa de Caicedo and Cristóval Morante. (See letter from the Municipality of Vera Cruz, dated 10th July, 1519. Usually known as Cortés' first letter.)

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of them of good capacity, and the third, a bark, bought on credit from the Governor, Diego Velásquez, on the condition that all of us soldiers should go in the three vessels to some islands lying between Cuba and Honduras, which are now called the Islands of the Guanajes,¹ and make war on the natives and load the vessels with Indians, as slaves, with which to pay him for his bark. However, as we soldiers knew that what Diego Velásquez asked of us was not just, we answered that it was neither in accordance with the law of God nor of the king, that we should make free men slaves. When he saw that we had made up our minds, he said that our plan to go and discover new countries was better than his, and he helped us in providing food for our voyage. Certain inquisitive gentlemen have asked me why I have written down these words which Diego Velásquez uttered about selling us the ship, and they say they have an ugly look and should not have been inserted in this history. I reply that I write them here because it is desirable on account of the law suits which Diego Velásquez and the Bishop of Burgos and Archbishop of Rosano, whose name is Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, brought against us.

To return to my story, we now found ourselves with three ships stored with Cassava² bread, which is made from a root, and we bought some pigs which cost three dollars apiece, for in those days there were neither sheep nor cattle in the Island of Cuba, for it was only beginning to be settled, and we added a supply of oil, and bought beads and other things of small value to be used for barter. We then sought out three pilots, of whom the chief, who took charge of the fleet, was called Anton de Alaminos a native of Palos, the second came from Triana

¹ Roatan, Bonacca, etc. Islands near the coast of Honduras.

² Cassava bread. Made from the root of *Manihoc utilissima*.

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and was named Camacho, and the third was Juan Alvarez "el Manquillo"¹ from Huelva. We also engaged the necessary number of sailors and procured the best supply that we could afford of ropes, cordage, cables, and anchors, and casks for water and other things needed for the voyage, and this all to our own cost and regret.

When all the soldiers were mustered, we set out for a port which in the Indian language is called Axaruco,² on the North coast, eight leagues from a town named San Cristóbal, which was then inhabited and which two years later was moved to the present site of Havana. In order that our voyage should proceed on right principles we wished to take with us a priest named Alonso González who was then living in the said town of San Cristóbal, and he agreed to come with us. We also chose for the office of *Veedor*,³ (in his Majesty's name), a soldier named Bernaldino Yñiguez, a native of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, so that if God willed that we should come on rich lands, or people who possessed gold or silver or pearls or any other kind of treasure, there should be a responsible person to guard the Royal Fifth.

After all was arranged and we had heard Mass, we commended ourselves to God our Lord, and to Our Lady, the sainted Virgin Mary, His blessed Mother, and set out on our voyage in the way I will now relate.

¹ El Manquillo = the little maimed or one-handed man.

² Jaruco is shown on modern maps about twelve miles to the east of the present city of Havana.

The name of Havana at this time appears to have applied to the district.

San Cristóbal was on the south coast of the Island, which is here about eight leagues across from sea to sea.

³ *Veedor* (obsolete) = overseer, caterer, official in charge of the stores.

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CHAPTER II.

How we discovered the Province of Yucatan.

ON the eighth day of the month of February in the year fifteen hundred and seventeen, we left the Havana from the port of Axaruco, which is on the North coast, and in twelve days we doubled Cape San Antonio, which is also called in the Island of Cuba the land of the Guanahataveyes, who are Indians like savages. When we had passed this Cape we were in the open sea and trusting to luck we steered towards the setting sun, knowing nothing of the depth of water, nor of the currents, nor of the winds which usually prevail in that latitude, so we ran great risk of our lives, then a storm struck us which lasted two days and two nights, and raged with such strength that we were nearly lost. When the weather moderated, we kept on our course, and twenty-one days after leaving port, we sighted land, at which we rejoiced greatly and gave thanks to God. This land had never been discovered before and no report of it had reached us. From the ships we could see a large town standing back about two leagues from the coast, and as we had never seen such a large town in the Island of Cuba nor in Hispaniola, we named it the Great Cairo.

We arranged that the two vessels which drew the least water should go in as near as possible to the Coast, to examine the land and see if there was an anchorage near the shore. On the morning of the 4th March, we saw ten large canoes, called *piraguas*, full of Indians from the town, approaching us with oars and sails. The canoes were large ones made like hollow troughs cleverly cut out from huge single logs, and many of them would hold forty Indians.

To go back to my story ; the Indians in the ten canoes