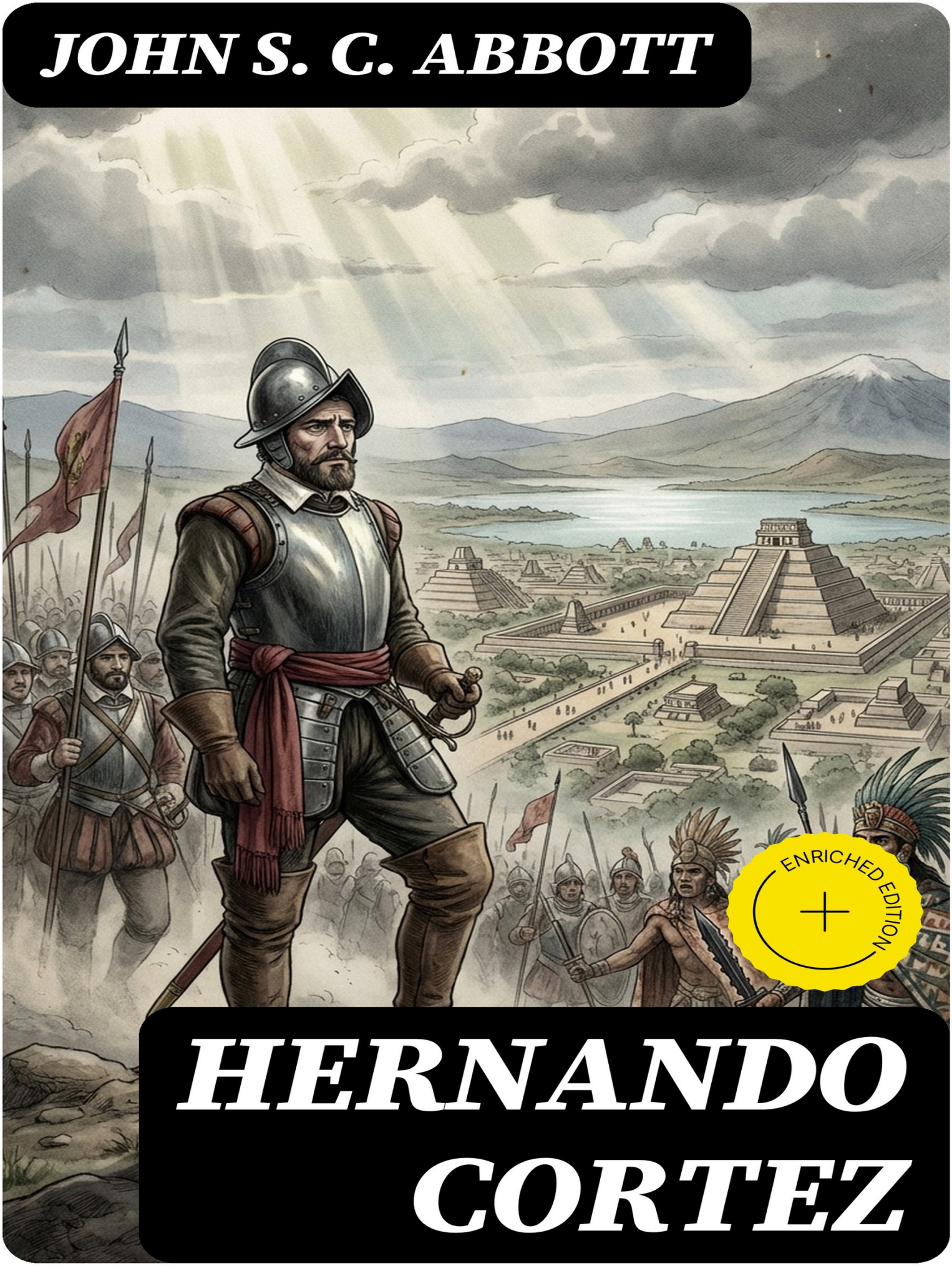
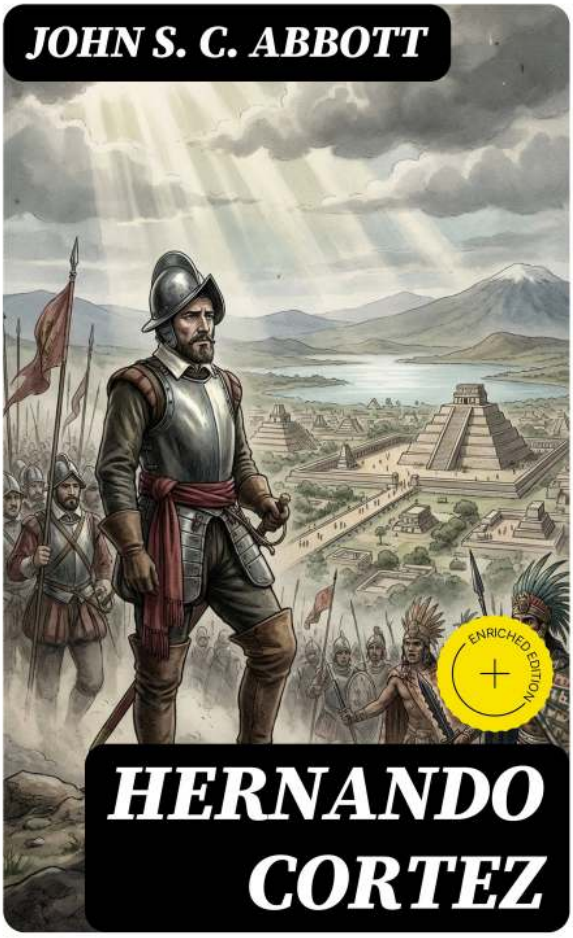
JOHN S. C. ABBOTT



HERNANDO CORTEZ


JOHN S. C. ABBOTT
ENRICHED EDITION
HERNANDO CORTEZ

John S. C. Abbott

Hernando Cortez

Enriched edition. Makers of History

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Tyler Ashford

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Introduction

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In Hernando Cortez, John S. C. Abbott frames the collision between unyielding ambition and devout certainty as the engine of a perilous expedition, following a handful of determined Europeans as they push from the margins of empire into the heart of a complex civilization, where courage, calculation, and conscience are tested in equal measure and where the promises of glory, wealth, and divine mission continually jostle against the costs of conquest, the strains of command, and the stark ethical questions that arise whenever power meets vulnerability across vast distances of geography, culture, and belief, and history itself becomes the arena in which character, circumstance, and chance contend.

Composed in the mid-nineteenth century by the American historian and popular biographer John S. C. Abbott, this work belongs to the tradition of accessible narrative history, recounting early sixteenth-century events in Spain, the Caribbean, and the region that would later be called Mexico. Its pages offer a portrait of travel, governance, and war as lived by a prominent conquistador, presented for general readers in clear, energetic prose. While written long after the events it describes, the book reflects the moral concerns and historical methods of its time, inviting comparison between nineteenth-century storytelling and modern approaches to the past. It situates actions against policies and local realities without academic formality.

Abbott begins with the formative circumstances that shape his subject and swiftly moves to the assembling of ships, men, and intentions that will carry the narrative from coastal footholds to inland alliances and risks. The storytelling is vivid and brisk, attentive to incident and character, and animated by succinct moral reflections that underscore decisions at sea and on land. Readers encounter bustling ports, contested councils, and arduous marches rendered in a tone that balances admiration for resolve with attention to peril. The voice is confident and explanatory, designed to guide rather than debate, and it privileges clarity over digression. Descriptions emphasize sequence and consequence, keeping the pace while foregrounding motive.

Across the chapters, themes of leadership under extreme uncertainty, the uses and abuses of authority, the power of persuasion, and the fracture lines within and between societies recur. Abbott is especially interested in how personal ambition intersects with claims of providence and law, and how strategy can be both ingenious and ruinous. The book examines the formation of coalitions, the fragile calculus of loyalty, and the role of technology and information in shaping outcomes. It also registers the human toll of expansion, acknowledging suffering while filtering it through a nineteenth-century moral frame that sought edification alongside explanation, often weighing character as a historical force.

The narrative proceeds chronologically, organizing episodes into compact scenes that build momentum and allow for sharply drawn portraits of commanders, envoys, and local leaders. Abbott’s method favors clear causality and illustrative anecdote, encouraging readers to see how decisions cascade through landscapes and communities. He pauses to sketch geography and custom when they clarify

the stakes, yet he rarely lingers, preferring the forward thrust of action to extended analysis. The result is a biography that reads like an expedition: purposeful, concentrated, and intent on the next ridge ahead, with reflection interleaved to frame choices without exhausting the intrigue of what follows. Moments of respite serve to recalibrate the tactical compass.

For contemporary readers, the book matters both as a dramatic account of a consequential encounter and as a document of how nineteenth-century Americans wrote about empire, faith, and power. It provides material for examining narratives that elevate individual agency, for assessing the language applied to Indigenous polities, and for recognizing how cultural assumptions shape historical judgment. Engaging it critically deepens conversations about conquest, globalization’s roots, and the responsibilities of storytelling when recounting violence and transformation. The text’s accessibility makes it a useful starting point for dialogue about bias and evidence while its energy reminds us why tales of risk and resolve endure.

Approached with curiosity and care, Hernando Cortez offers an immersive itinerary from first preparations to the threshold of momentous meetings, presenting the tensions that will drive negotiations, rivalries, and hard bargains without foreclosing their outcomes. Readers who appreciate strong narrative lines, crisp character sketches, and historically inflected moral commentary will find the experience compelling. Its enduring significance lies in the questions it raises about ends and means, leadership and legitimacy, and the stories later generations tell about foundational shocks. As a window onto both a sixteenth-century upheaval and a nineteenth-century imagination, it rewards attentive reading and invites measured, ongoing reflection.

Synopsis

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John S. C. Abbott’s Hernando Cortez is a nineteenth-century narrative biography that follows the Spanish conquistador through the age of Atlantic expansion. Opening with the social and religious climate of late medieval Spain, Abbott sketches Cortés’s early life in Extremadura, his restless temperament, and his move to the Caribbean in pursuit of opportunity. In Hispaniola and Cuba he acquires experience, allies, and enemies, positioning himself within colonial rivalries. Abbott introduces the central tensions that will drive the book: the collision of empires, the personal ambition of leaders, the moral claims of faith and law, and the unpredictable contingencies that shape vast historical change.

From Cuba, under the authority of Governor Diego Velázquez, Cortés assembles an expedition aimed at the wealthy mainland reported by earlier voyagers. Abbott describes the hurried mustering of ships, men, horses, and clergy, and the tensions between official sanction and personal initiative that threaten the venture before it sails. Landfalls at Cozumel and along the Tabasco coast yield crucial interpreters and local intelligence, enabling communication with mainland peoples. Military skirmishes test Spanish arms and discipline, while gifts and embassies hint at a powerful inland polity. Throughout, Abbott underscores how character, religious zeal, and improvisation intersect with fortune to keep the enterprise alive.

On the Gulf coast, the expedition founds a town and council to acknowledge royal authority and secure a mandate independent of Cuban rivals. Abbott narrates the controversial step of cutting off retreat to bind the army to its inland march, a decision he frames as both strategic audacity and moral wager. Advances through coastal plains and highlands bring conflict, negotiation, and new alliances, most notably with enemies of the central empire. A tense passage at Cholula exposes the fragility of trust and the brutality of preemptive measures. The account balances logistics, diplomacy, and belief as Cortés navigates a fractured political landscape.

The march culminates in a carefully staged entry into the lakeside capital, whose scale and order Abbott describes to emphasize the encounter between two sophisticated worlds. Cortés navigates lavish receptions and hidden perils, placing himself near the emperor and gradually converting ceremony into leverage. The narrative follows the decision to secure the ruler’s person to forestall attack, and the uneasy coexistence that follows within the city’s ceremonial heart. News then arrives that a punitive force has landed to arrest Cortés. Leaving a garrison, he undertakes a swift campaign on the coast, overturning a stronger foe and absorbing men and materiel.

Abbott returns to the capital in crisis, depicting escalating street violence, contested rituals, and strained authority. A disastrous night withdrawal through hostile causeways forces a reckoning with losses and tactics. Refuge among allies allows the Spaniards and their indigenous confederates to recover, reorganize, and broaden their coalition. The narrative marks a devastating epidemic that sweeps the region, altering the balance of strength even as both sides prepare for renewed conflict. Cortés oversees the construction of small warships to command the lake, trains

mixed forces, and coordinates multiple columns, framing the next phase not as a single battle but as a grueling campaign.

Abbott’s siege narrative emphasizes attrition, engineering, and the fragmentation of loyalties within and around the island city. Amphibious assaults, corridor fighting, and negotiations push the story toward a decisive resolution whose outcome he presents as redefining the political order of the valley. The latter chapters follow the rebuilding of the capital under Spanish oversight, the consolidation of alliances, and punitive expeditions meant to quell dissent. Cortés undertakes a difficult overland march to the southeast that tests his command, encounters rival officials, and ultimately seeks vindication at court. Honors and constraints follow, as do ventures along the Pacific coast, before a reflective coda on his later years.

As a popular nineteenth-century life of Cortés, Abbott’s work blends biography, travelogue, and moral reflection, offering a brisk synthesis of early Spanish chronicles and later histories accessible to general readers. He foregrounds leadership, providence, and discipline, while acknowledging the ferocity, suffering, and cultural chasms that accompanied conquest. The book’s enduring resonance lies less in archival novelty than in its shaping lens: it reveals how a previous era organized the conquest into lessons about ambition, law, and faith. Read today, it prompts questions about narrative authority and historical memory, even as its story of perilous crossing and contested empire remains compelling.

Historical Context

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John S. C. Abbott’s Hernando Cortez appeared in the mid-1850s as part of his Makers of History series, popular biographies aimed at general and youthful readers. Abbott, a New England minister-turned-historian, wrote in a clear, moralizing style common in nineteenth-century Anglo-American historical writing. He drew on widely circulated Spanish chronicles and early modern letters, presenting exploration and conquest through exemplary lives. The book emerged amid expanding print culture in the United States, when inexpensive editions, school libraries, and subscription publishing broadened access to history. Within this market, concise narratives of great men offered both entertainment and moral instruction, aligning biography with civic pedagogy.

Abbott’s subject, Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), acted within institutions forged by early modern Spain. The union of Castile and Aragon and the completion of the Reconquista in 1492 centralized royal authority devoted to expansion and evangelization. After Columbus’s voyages, the Crown regulated American ventures through the Casa de Contratación at Seville (1503) and later the Council of the Indies (1524). Royal patents allocated rights of conquest while clergy promoted conversion under papal grants such as Inter caetera (1493). Military traditions, legal norms, and religious motives thus framed expeditions, fundraising, and governance, shaping the ambitions and constraints of conquistadors operating on distant shores.

In Mexico, Cortés encountered the Mexica-led Triple Alliance —Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan—which dominated central Mesoamerica by tribute and warfare. Tenochtitlan, built on Lake Texcoco, was a densely populated metropolis with markets, causeways, and chinampa agriculture. Moctezuma II, who began his reign in 1502, presided over a ritual and political order that integrated distant towns while alienating some subject and rival peoples, notably Tlaxcala. Religious practices included human sacrifice, vividly recorded in both indigenous and Spanish sources. These structures and tensions, together with complex trade networks and diplomatic rivalries, formed the setting in which external invaders could seek allies and leverage local fractures.

Cortés’s 1519 expedition departed Cuba amid disputes over authority with Governor Diego Velázquez. Establishing the town of Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz on the Gulf coast, the captains created a municipal council to recognize Charles V and to legitimize direct reporting to the Crown. Crucial to early negotiations were interpreters: Jerónimo de Aguilar, a shipwrecked Spaniard, and Malintzin (Doña Marina), a Nahua woman who mediated between Maya and Nahuatl speakers. Spanish forces brought horses, steel weapons, and artillery, but success depended on diplomacy, logistics, and allies. The narrative underscores these institutional and communicative foundations alongside battlefield episodes.

The conquest unfolded within a wider Atlantic contest. Spain and Portugal divided new claims under the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), while Spanish settlers in Hispaniola and Cuba had already imposed encomiendas extracting labor and tribute. Reports of abuses provoked debate, from Antonio de Montesinos’s 1511 sermon to the Laws of Burgos (1512–1513), early regulations on indigenous labor and conversion. Missionaries and reformers, including Bartolomé

de las Casas, challenged violent methods and legal rationales. This ferment supplied the conceptual vocabulary—just war, sovereignty, Christian duty—by which contemporaries judged conquest, and it informed later historiography that Abbott consulted when shaping his portrait of Cortés.

Between 1519 and 1521, shifting alliances and epidemics determined outcomes as much as weaponry. Tlaxcalan and other indigenous forces fought alongside Spaniards; smallpox, likely introduced in 1520, devastated central Mexico. Urban siegecraft, control of causeways and waterways, and access to regional supplies proved decisive in the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521. The city was rebuilt as Mexico City, seat of Spanish administration. Encomiendas proliferated, mendicant orders began mass evangelization in the 1520s, and a royal audiencia later oversaw governance. Abbott situates personal daring within these structural processes, acknowledging how institutions, disease, and alliance politics constrained individual agency.

Abbott’s narrative follows primary accounts that shaped later memory: Cortés’s Cartas de relación to Charles V justify actions and highlight providence; Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s True History offers a veteran’s perspective; Francisco López de Gómara provides a polished, pro-Cortés chronicle; and Bernardino de Sahagún’s work preserves Nahua testimonies. Countervoices like Las Casas cataloged atrocities and argued for indigenous rights, influencing the mid-sixteenth-century Valladolid debate. By triangulating such sources—each partial and purposive—nineteenth-century writers constructed heroic, tragic, or moralizing arcs. Abbott’s selection and synthesis reflect the era’s confidence in exemplary biography while engaging controversies about conquest and conscience.

Published soon after the U.S.–Mexican War (1846–1848), the book met American readers newly curious about Mexico’s past and geography. Mid-century audiences, steeped in Manifest Destiny and Protestant moral discourse, often read the conquest as a drama of character, faith, and civilization. Abbott’s tone balances admiration for fortitude with criticism of cruelty, presenting providential causation and practical statecraft side by side. The work’s accessible pacing, emphasis on individual resolve, and didactic lessons exemplify popular history of the 1850s. In narrating Cortés, Abbott also reflects his own society’s debates about empire, religion, and national purpose, inviting comparison more than suspense.

Hernando Cortez

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PREFACE.

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The career of Hernando Cortez is one of the most wild and adventurous recorded in the annals of fact or fiction, and yet all the prominent events in his wondrous history are well authenticated. All *truth* carries with itself an important moral. The writer, in this narrative, has simply attempted to give a vivid idea of the adventures of Cortez and his companions in the Conquest of Mexico. There are many inferences of vast moment to which the recital leads. These are so obvious that they need not be pointed out by the writer.

A small portion of this volume has appeared in Harper's Magazine, in an article furnished by the writer upon the Conquest of Mexico.

ENGRAVINGS.

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Chapter I.

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The Discovery of Mexico.

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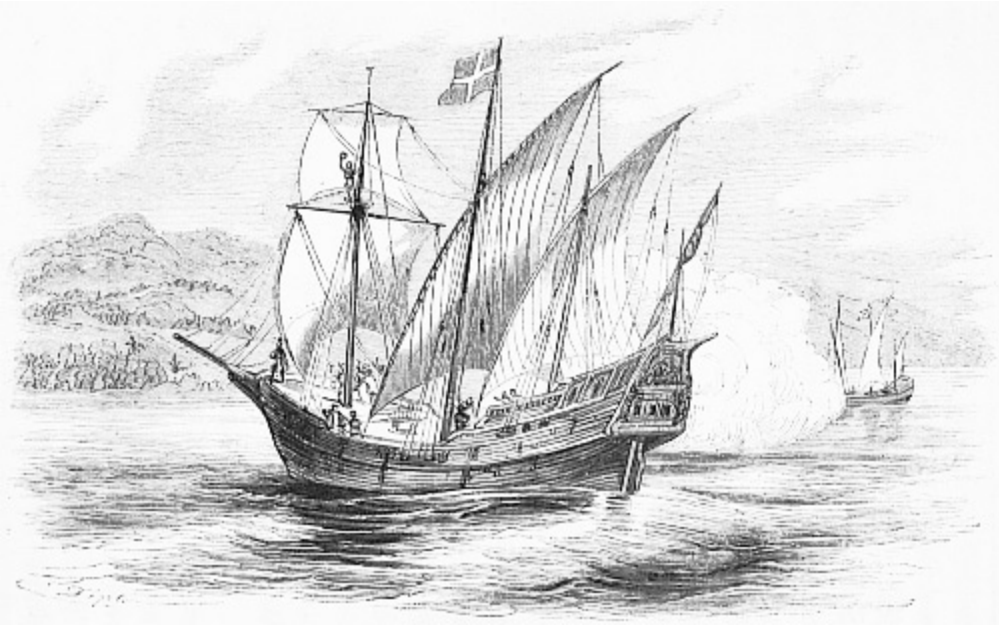
The shore of America in 1492[1q].

Three hundred and fifty years ago the ocean which washes the shores of America was one vast and silent solitude. No ship plowed its waves; no sail whitened its surface. On the 11th of October, 1492, three small vessels might have been seen invading, for the first time, these hitherto unknown waters. They were as specks on the bosom of infinity. The sky above, the ocean beneath, gave no promise of any land. Three hundred adventurers were in these ships. Ten weeks had already passed since they saw the hills of the Old World sink beneath the horizon.

For weary days and weeks they had strained their eyes looking toward the west, hoping to see the mountains of the New World rising in the distance. The illustrious adventurer, Christopher Columbus, who guided these frail barks, inspired by science and by faith, doubted not that a world would ere long emerge before him from the apparently boundless waters. But the blue sky still overarched them, and the heaving ocean still extended in all directions its unbroken and interminable expanse.

Doubt and alarm.

Discouragement and alarm now pervaded nearly all hearts, and there was a general clamor for return to the shores of Europe. Christopher Columbus, sublime in the confidence with which his exalted nature inspired him, was still firm and undaunted in his purpose.



AMERICA DISCOVERED.

A light appears[2q].
He watches the light.
The shore is seen.

The night of the 11th of October darkened over these lonely adventurers. The stars came out in all the brilliance of tropical splendor. A fresh breeze drove the ships with increasing speed over the billows, and cooled, as with balmy zephyrs, brows heated through the day by the blaze of a meridian sun. Columbus could not sleep. He stood upon the deck of his ship, silent and sad, yet indomitable in energy, gazing with intense and unintermitted watch into the dusky distance. It was near midnight. Suddenly he saw a light, as of a torch, far off in the horizon. His heart throbbed with an

irrepressible tumult of excitement. Was it a meteor, or was it a light from the long-wished-for land? It disappeared, and all again was dark. But suddenly again it gleamed forth, feeble and dim in the distance, yet distinct. Soon again the exciting ray was quenched, and nothing disturbed the dark and sombre outline of the sea. The long hours of the night to Columbus seemed interminable as he waited impatiently for the dawn. But even before any light was seen in the east, the dim outline of land appeared in indisputable distinctness before the eyes of the entranced, the now immortalized navigator. A cannon—the signal of the discovery—rolled its peal over the ocean, announcing to the two vessels in the rear the joyful tidings. A shout, excited by the heart's intensest emotions, rose over the waves, and with tears, with prayers, and embraces, these enthusiastic men accepted the discovery of the New World.

> The Spaniards land and are hospitably received.

The bright autumnal morning dawned in richest glory, presenting to them a scene as of a celestial paradise. The luxuriance of tropical vegetation bloomed in all its novelty around them. The inhabitants, many of them in the simple and innocent costume of Eden before the fall, crowded the shore, gazing with attitude and gesture of astonishment upon the strange phenomena of the ships. The adventurers landed, and were received upon the island of San Salvador[1] as angels from heaven by the peaceful and friendly natives. Bitterly has the hospitality been requited. After cruising around for some time among the beautiful islands of the New World, Columbus returned to Spain to astonish Europe with the tidings of his discovery. He had been absent but seven months.

A quarter of a century passed away, during which all the adventurers of Europe were busy exploring these newly-

discovered islands and continents. Various colonies were established in the fertile valleys of these sunny climes, and upon the hill-sides which emerged, in the utmost magnificence of vegetation, from the bosom of the Caribbean Sea. The eastern coast of North America had been during this time surveyed from Labrador to Florida. The bark of the navigator had discovered nearly all the islands of the West Indies, and had crept along the winding shores of the Isthmus of Darien, and of the South American continent as far as the River La Plata. Bold explorers, guided by intelligence received from the Indians, had even penetrated the interior of the isthmus, and from the summit of the central mountain barrier had gazed with delight upon the placid waves of the Pacific. But the vast indentation of the Mexican Gulf, sweeping far away in an apparently interminable circuit to the west, had not yet been penetrated. The field for romantic adventure which these unexplored realms presented could not, however, long escape the eye of that chivalrous age.

Mexico is discovered.
Arts and sciences of the Mexicans.
The mines of precious metals.

Some exploring expeditions were soon fitted out from Cuba, and the shores of Mexico were discovered. Here every thing exhibited the traces of a far higher civilization than had hitherto been witnessed in the New World. There were villages, and even large cities, thickly planted throughout the country. Temples and other buildings, imposing in massive architecture, were reared of stone and lime. Armies, laws, and a symbolical form of writing indicated a very considerable advance in the arts and the energies of civilization. Many of the arts were cultivated. Cloth was made of cotton, and of skins nicely prepared. Astronomy was sufficiently understood for the accurate measurement

of time in the divisions of the solar year. It is indeed a wonder, as yet unexplained, where these children of the New World acquired so philosophical an acquaintance with the movements of the heavenly bodies. Agriculture was practiced with much scientific skill, and a system of irrigation introduced, from which many a New England farmer might learn many a profitable lesson. Mines of gold, silver, lead, and copper were worked. Many articles of utility and of exquisite beauty were fabricated from these metals. Iron, the ore of which must pass through so many processes before it is prepared for use, was unknown to them. The Spanish goldsmiths, admiring the exquisite workmanship of the gold and silver ornaments of the Mexicans, bowed to their superiority.

Fairs were held in the great market-places of the principal cities every fifth day, where buyers and sellers in vast numbers thronged. They had public schools, courts of justice, a class of nobles, and a powerful monarch. The territory embraced by this wonderful kingdom was twice as large as the whole of New England.

> Code of laws.
> Punishments.

The code of laws adopted by this strange people was very severe. They seemed to cherish but little regard for human life, and the almost universal punishment for crime was death. This bloody code secured a very effective police. Adultery, thieving, removing landmarks, altering measures, defrauding a ward of property, intemperance, and even idleness, with spendthrift habits, were punished pitilessly with death. The public mind was so accustomed to this, that death lost a portion of its solemnity. The rites of marriage were very formally enacted, and very rigidly adhered to.

> Slavery.

Prisoners taken in war were invariably slain upon their religious altars in sacrifice to their gods. Slavery existed among them, but not hereditary. No one could be born a slave. The poor sometimes sold their children. The system existed in its mildest possible form, as there was no distinction of race between the master and the slave.

Military glory.

Military glory was held in high repute. Fanaticism lent all its allurements to inspire the soldier. Large armies were trained to very considerable military discipline. Death upon the battle-field was a sure passport to the most sunny and brilliant realms of the heavenly world. The soldiers wore coats of mail of wadded cotton, which neither arrow nor javelin could easily penetrate. The chiefs wore over these burnished plates of silver and of gold. Silver helmets, also, often glittered upon the head. Hospitals were established for the sick and the wounded.

Mexican mythology.

Their religious system was an incongruous compound of beauty and of deformity—of gentleness and of ferocity. They believed in one supreme God, the Great Spirit, with several hundred inferior deities. The god of war was a very demon. The god of the air was a refined deity, whose altars were embellished with fruits and flowers, and upon whose ear the warbling of birds and the most plaintive strains of vocal melody vibrated sweetly.

The three states of existence.

There were, in their imaginations, three states of existence in the future world. The good, and especially those, of whatever character, who fell upon the field of battle, soared to the sun, and floated in aerial grace and beauty among

6 An island and anchorage off the coast near present-day Veracruz, Mexico, visited by early Spanish expeditions; it later became the site of a fortified harbor (the fortress San Juan de Ulúa) that guarded Veracruz.

7 Refers to Gerónimo de Aguilar, a Spanish sailor who had lived among indigenous groups (notably Tabascans) after a shipwreck and acted as a Spanish-language interpreter for Cortés.

8 Juan de Grijalva was an earlier Spanish explorer whose 1518 expedition visited the same Gulf coast and gave the anchorage the name San Juan de Ulúa, preceding Cortés's arrival.

9 The name Cortés gave his new settlement—literally 'The Rich City of the True Cross'—a coastal colonial base located a few miles north of the modern city of Veracruz.

10 Charles V was ruler of the Habsburg domains who, as Charles I, was King of Spain and later Holy Roman Emperor (reigned as emperor 1519–1556); he was the monarch to whom Cortés appealed for official recognition.

11 Small, generally two-masted sailing vessels used in the 16th century for coastal navigation, transport, and light combat; Cortés used brigantines in his campaign along the Mexican coast.

12 A phrase used here for indigenous porters or laborers trained to carry heavy loads and drag artillery—practical logistical auxiliaries on the march rather than combat troops.

13 A Spanish term borrowed from indigenous languages for a local Indian chief or ruler in the Americas; used broadly by

the Spanish to denote native leaders during the colonial period.

14 Tlascalans were the people of Tlaxcala, a Nahua confederation that resisted the Aztec Empire and allied with Hernán Cortés in the early 16th century; contemporary chronicles record them as important indigenous military allies of the Spaniards.

15 Tenochtitlan was the Aztec (Mexica) capital founded on an island in Lake Texcoco and served as the political and religious center of the empire until its capture by the Spanish (completed in 1521); modern estimates of its population and precise layout vary among historians.

16 Brigantines were relatively small, maneuverable sailing vessels of the 16th century; Cortés had two such vessels built on Lake Texcoco to give the Spaniards naval mobility and a strategic advantage in the city’s waterways.

17 Cacamatzin (also written Cacama or Cacamatzin) was the ruler (a high noble) of the city-state of Texcoco and a nephew of Motecuhzoma II; he led resistance against the Spaniards and was seized and imprisoned during Cortés’s campaign.

18 Tezcuco (also spelled Texcoco) was one of the principal city-states of the Aztec triple alliance on the eastern shore of Lake Texcoco, an important political and cultural center adjacent to Tenochtitlan.

19 Pánfilo de Narváez was a Spanish commander sent by Governor Velázquez with an expedition to seize Cortés and assert Velázquez’s control; Narváez was defeated and captured by Cortés’s smaller force.

20 ‘Noche triste’ (Spanish for ‘sad night’) refers to the bloody retreat of the Spaniards from Tenochtitlan on the night of June 30–July 1, 1520, when many Spaniards and allied natives were killed or drowned as they fled over the causeways.

21 ‘The beautiful Marina’ refers to Doña Marina (commonly called La Malinche), an indigenous noblewoman who acted as interpreter, intermediary, and advisor to Cortés; she played a central role in communication between Spaniards and various native groups.

22 The name used here for the young Mexica (Aztec) ruler placed on the throne after Cuitlahua, who led the defense of the capital and was captured in 1521; the same historical figure appears in some sources under variant spellings (e.g., Guatimozin or Cuauhtémoc).

23 Charles V (also Charles I of Spain; 1500–1558) was Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain during the period of the conquest, ruling a vast Habsburg realm that included Spain’s American possessions.

24 An early Spanish rendering of Coyoacán, a mainland town just south of the island capital Tenochtitlan that served as a Spanish encampment and administrative base during and after the siege; today it is part of Mexico City.

25 A general term for a system or chain of mountain ranges; in this passage it refers to the highland ranges of central Mexico from whose heights the Pacific coast could be sighted.

26 The Gulf-coast port (La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz) established by Cortés in 1519 that served as the principal Atlantic landing, supply point, and communication hub for the Spanish forces.