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The Destruction of Tenochtitlan

Upon the orchidean beauty of the new world the old rushed inevitably to revenge itself after the Italian's return. Such things occur in secret. Though men may be possessed by beauty while they work that is all they know of it or of their own terrible hands; they do not fathom the forces which carry them. Spain cannot be blamed for the crassness of the discoverers. They moved out across the seas stirred by instincts, ancient beyond thought as the depths they were crossing, which they obeyed under the names of King or Christ or whatever it might be, while they watched the recreative New unfolding itself miraculously before them, before *them*, deafened and blinded. Steering beyond familiar horizons they were driven to seek perhaps self-justification for victorious wars against Arab and Moor; but these things are the surface only. At the back, as it remains, it was the evil of the whole world; it was the perennial disappointment which follows, like smoke, the bursting of ideas. It was the spirit of malice which underlies men's lives and against which nothing offers resistance. And bitter as the thought may be that Tenochtitlan, the barbaric city, its people, its genius wherever found should have been crushed out because of the awkward names men give their emptiness, yet it was no man's fault. It was the force of the pack whom the dead drive. Cortez was neither malicious, stupid nor blind, but a conqueror like other conquerors. Courageous almost beyond precedent, tactful, resourceful in misfortune, he was a man of genius superbly suited to his task. What his hand touched went down in spite of him. He was one among the rest. Velasquez, the Cuban Governor who sent him out, traitorously attacked him from the rear a week afterward. His own captains would have deserted him, so hard was he to follow. But the entire enterprise lived for many years on the verge of being allowed to languish, ruin to succeed destruction, because of the fortuitous anger which blossomed so naïvely, so mysteriously in Fonseca, Bishop of Burgos, President of the Council of the Indies. This the man, Cortez' most powerful enemy, already so notorious for the spiteful malevolence with which he thwarted the views of Columbus—a logic clearer had there been two Fonsecas instead of the one. After a rough voyage from Cuba, across the gulf, Cortez landed his small force safely before what is now Vera Cruz, near the native city of Cempoal. There, lest his men should desert him in view of the hardships which lay ahead, he had his vessels beached, under pretext of their being no longer seaworthy, and destroyed them.

Montezuma immediately sent gifts, at the same time begging the Spaniard not to risk coming up into the back country: a gold necklace of seven pieces, set with many gems like small rubies, a hundred and eighty-three emeralds and ten fine pearls, and hung with twenty-seven little bells of gold.—Two wheels, one of gold like the sun and the other of silver with the image of the moon upon it, made of plates of those metals, twenty-eight hands in circumference, with figures of animals and other things in bas relief, finished with great skill and ingenuity.—A headpiece of wood and gold, adorned with gems, from which hung twenty-five little bells of gold, and, on it, instead of plume, a green bird with eyes, beak and feet of gold.—Several shoes of the skin of deer, sewed with gold thread, the soles of which were made of blue and white stones of a brilliant appearance.—A shield of wood and leather, with little bells hanging to it and covered with plates of gold, in the middle of which was cut the image of the god of war between four heads of a lion, a tiger, an eagle and an owl represented alive with their hair and feathers.—Twenty-four curious and beautiful shields of gold, of feathers and very small pearls, and four of feathers and silver only.—Four fishes, two ducks and some other birds of molten gold.—A large mirror adorned with gold, and many small.—Miters and crowns of feathers and gold ornamented with pearls and gems.—Several large plumes of beautiful feathers, fretted with gold and small pearls.—Several fans of gold and silver mixed together; others of feathers only, of different forms and sizes.—A variety of cotton mantles, some all white, others chequered with white and black, or red, green, yellow and blue; on the outside rough like shaggy cloth and within destitute of color and nap.—A number of underwaistcoats, handkerchiefs,

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counterpanes, tapestries and carpets of cotton, the workmanship superior to the materials of which they were composed.—And books made of tablets with a smooth surface for writing, which being joined might be folded together or stretched out to a considerable length, “the characters inscribed thereon resembling nothing so much as Egyptian hieroglyphics.”—But Cortez was unwilling to turn back; rather these things whetted his appetite for the adventure. Without more ado he sent letters to his king advising him that having come to these lands to conquer them, in the royal name and that of the true church, he would forthwith proceed to take Montezuma, dead or alive, unless he should accept the faith and acknowledge himself a subject to the Spanish throne.

The advance was like any similar military enterprise: it accomplished its purpose. Surmounting every difficulty Cortez went his way into the country past the quiet Cempoalan maizefields, past the smoking summit of Popocatepetl, until, after weeks of labor, he arrived upon the great lakes and the small cities in them adjoining Tenochtitlan itself. Montezuma seeing that there was nothing else for it, sent envoys accompanied by three hundred warriors, who met the Spaniard advancing on the lake road and there welcomed him to the district with great ceremony and show of friendliness. Noticeable among them was one young man of magnificent appearance who descended from his litter and walked to meet the Conqueror while his followers ran before him, picking up stones and other small obstructions which lay in his path. Cortez now passed over his first causeway into one of the lesser lake cities, built of well-hewn stone sheer from the water. He was overcome with wonder. The houses were so excellently put together, so well decorated with cloths and carven wood, so embellished with metalwork and other marks of a beautiful civilization; the people were so gracious; there were such gardens, such trees, such conservatories of flowers that nothing like it had ever been seen or imagined. At the house where the Conqueror was entertained that day and night he especially noted a pool built of stone into the clear waters of which stone steps descended, while round it were paven paths lined with sweet-smelling shrubs and plants and trees of all sorts. Also he noted the well-stocked kitchen garden. The following day at noon he arrived at the end of his journey.

There it lay! a city as large as Cordova or Seville, entirely within the lake two miles from the mainland: Tenochtitlan. Four avenues or entrances led to it, all formed of artificial causeways. Along the most easterly of these, constructed of great beams perfectly hewn and fitted together, and measuring two spears-lengths in width, the Christian advanced. Running in at one side of the city and out at the other this avenue constituted at the same time its principal street. As Cortez drew nearer he saw, right and left, magnificent houses and temples, close to the walls of which, each side, moved parallel rows of priests in black robes, and, between them, supported by two attendants, Montezuma, on foot, down the center of the roadway. Cortez stepped forward but the attendants interceded. The Emperor then advanced alone and with great simpleness of manner placed a golden chain about the Christian’s neck. Then taking him by the hand, and the whole procession following, he conducted him to the quarters which had been chosen for the visitors, a great building close to the royal palaces in the center of the city. Everything had been prepared in advance: all the material needs together with rich gifts, as before: precious metals, gems, male and female apparel of remarkable elegance, ornamental hangings for bedchambers, tapestries for halls and temples, counterpanes composed of feathers interwoven with cotton, and many beautiful and curious artifices “of so costly and unusual workmanship that considering their novelty and wonderful beauty no price could be set on them.” Here in this large building whose great hall was to serve the Spaniards for barracks from that time until the end, Montezuma and Cortez found themselves seated at last face to face. Montezuma spoke: “They have told you that I possess houses with walls of gold and many other such things and that I am a god or make myself one. The houses you see are of stone and lime and earth.”—Then opening his robe: “You see that I am composed of flesh and bone like yourselves and that I am mortal and palpable to the touch.”—To this smiling sally, so full of gentleness and amused irony, Cortez could reply nothing save to demand that the man declare himself a subject of the Spanish King forthwith and that, furthermore, he should then and there announce publicly his

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allegiance to the new power.—Whatever the Aztec may have felt during the weeks of Cortez' slow advance upon his capital from the seashore, nothing at the present moment seemed to disturb his aristocratic reserve. He had thought and he had made up his mind. Without semblance of anger, fear or impatience; without humility or protest but with the force bred of a determination to face at any cost a situation fast going beyond his control, he spoke again. He explained that his people were not the aborigines of the land but that they had emigrated there in times past and ended by accepting the Spanish Monarch as his rightful and hereditary master. After due announcements and explanations had been made to the people Cortez became the acknowledged regent, in the name of Castile and the true church, for all that country.

Streets, public squares, markets, temples, palaces, the city spread its dark life upon the earth of a new world, rooted there, sensitive to its richest beauty, but so completely removed from those foreign contacts which harden and protect, that at the very breath of conquest it vanished. The whole world of its unique associations sank back into the ground to be reënkindled, never. Never, at least, save in spirit; a spirit mysterious, constructive, independent, puissant with natural wealth; light, if it may be, as feathers; a spirit lost in that soil. Scarcely an element in the city's incredible organization but evidenced an intellectual vigor full of resource and delicacy which had given it distinction. Half land and half water the streets were navigated by canoes and bridged at the intersections by structures of great timbers over which ten horses could go abreast. For water supply a masonry pipe, two paces broad and five feet high, ran from the mainland over one of the great causeways, carrying excellent drinking water. There were two such aqueducts, side by side, each to be used alternately while the other was cleaning. There were public squares, and one of great size surrounded by porticoes where daily sixty thousand souls engaged in buying and selling under the supervision of twelve central magistrates and numbers of inspectors. Here "everything which the world affords" was offered for purchase, from the personal services of laborers and porters to the last refinements of bijouterie; gold, silver, lead, brass, copper, tin; wrought and unwrought stone, bricks burnt and unburnt, timber hewn and unhewn, of different sorts; game of every variety, fowls, quails, partridges, wild ducks, parrots, pigeons, reed-birds, sparrows, eagles, hawks, owls, likewise the skins of some birds of prey with their feathers, head, beak and claws; rabbits, hares, deer and little dogs, which they raised for eating; wood and coals in abundance and brasiers of earthenware for burning coals; mats of various kinds; all kinds of green vegetables, especially onions, leeks, watercresses, nasturtium, sorrel, artichokes and golden thistle; fruits, fish, honey, grain—either whole, in the form of flour or baked into loaves; different kinds of cotton thread of all colors; jars, jugs, pots and an endless variety of vessels, all made of fine clay, most of them glazed and painted; eggs, cakes, pâtés of birds and fish; wine from the maguey; finally everything that could be found throughout the whole country was sold there, each kind of merchandise in a separate street or quarter of the market assigned to it exclusively, and thus the best order was preserved. There was an herb street, there were shops where they shaved and washed the head, and restaurateurs who furnished food and drink at a price.

Large numbers of temples existed throughout the great city, but for grandeur and excellence of architectural detail one far surpassed the rest. Forty towers, lofty and well built, rose from within its sacred precinct, the largest of which, constructed of hewn stone remarkably hard in texture, had fifty steps leading to its main body. A mass higher than the cathedral of Seville. Three halls of wonderful extent and height, adorned with figures sculptured in wood and stone, contained the principal idols. And from these, through very small doors, opened the chapels, to which no light was admitted, nor any person except the priests, and not all of them. Decorated with curious imagery in stone, the woodwork carved in relief and painted with figures of monsters and other things, unpaved, darkened and bloodstained, it was in these chapels that the religious practices which so shocked the Christian were performed. Here it was that the tribe's deep feeling for a reality that stems back into the permanence of remote origins had its firm hold. It was the earthward thrust of their logic; blood and

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earth; the realization of their primal and continuous identity with the ground itself, where everything is fixed in darkness. The priests in black robes, tribal men, never cutting or combing the hair; the instinctive exclusion of women from all places of worship; the debarring of priests from female society: it was a ceremonial acknowledgment of the deep sexless urge of life itself, the hungry animal, underlying all other power; the mysterious secret of existence whose cruel beauty they, the living, inherited from the dead. The same for their sculpture. It is the mystery of the past which monsters, grotesques, beasts combined with the human, truly signify—gentle animal associations distorted by the invasions of night—and not a debased instinct whose reliance is necessarily upon oppression and fear. The earth is black and it is there: only art advances. The figures of the idols themselves were of extra-human size and composed, significantly, of a paste of seeds and leguminous plants, commonly used for food, ground and mixed together and kneaded with human blood, the whole when completed being consecrated with a bath of blood from the heart of a living victim. The chief of these idols Cortez precipitated from their pedestals and cast down the temple steps; an act of extraordinary daring; at the same time purifying the chapels and setting up in them images of Our Lady and the saints. Such a stroke could not fail to have proved of the most serious consequence to all had not Montezuma again displayed his tact, self-control and remarkable grasp of the changing situation. The new state of affairs was accepted, human sacrifice was abolished and the orderly significance of the events taking place was publicly made evident. In person, together with many of the principal citizens, he, Montezuma, assisted at the final purification of the chapels. Whether or not this be evidence on the Aztec's part of weakness or the deepest forbearance, surely nothing like it for quiet flexibility of temper and retained dignity has ever been recorded. Perhaps by a sudden, daring stroke this man might have rid himself of the intestine enemy who was each day, each week, striking deeper at the nation's life. Perhaps fear had unmanned him. Perhaps what we call forbearance was no more than the timidity which is an overwhelming agony of heart inspired by the sight of a resistless force aimed at our destruction. Still, if this be so, Montezuma has left no trace of cowardice upon the records. But weakling or genius, about the suave personality of this barbaric chieftain the liveliest, most airily expansive moods of the race did flower, just as the black permanence of tribal understanding stood rooted in the priesthood. Perhaps it was a conscious knowledge of this that inspired and moved Montezuma in the present action.

Surely no other prince has lived, or will ever live, in such state as did this American cacique. The whole waking aspirations of his people, opposed to and completing their religious sense, seemed to come off in him and in him alone: the drive upward, toward the sun and the stars. He was the very person of their ornate dreams, so delicate, so prismatically colorful, so full of tinkling sounds and rhythms, so tireless of invention. Never was such a surface lifted above the isolate blackness of such profound savagery. It is delightful to know that Montezuma changed his clothes four times a day, donning four different suits, entirely new, which he never wore again; that at meals he was served in a great clean-swept chamber on mats upon the floor, his food being kept warm in chafing dishes containing live coals; that at meals he sat upon a small cushion "curiously wrought of leather." But nowhere in his state was the stark power of beauty, the refined and the barbaric, so exquisitely expressed as in his smaller palaces and places of amusement. "What can be more wonderful than that a barbarous monarch, as he is, should have every object in his domain imitated in gold, silver, precious stones and feathers; the gold and silver being wrought so naturally as not to be surpassed by any smith in the world; the stonework executed with such perfection that it is difficult to conceive what instruments could have been used, and the feather work superior to the finest production in wax and embroidery." "There is one palace inferior to the rest, attached to which is a beautiful garden with balconies extending over it supported by marble columns and having a floor formed of jasper elegantly inlaid. Belonging to it are ten pools, in which are kept the different species of water birds found in the country, all domesticated: for the sea birds there are pools of salt water and for the river birds, fresh water. Each species being supplied with the food natural to it when wild. Over the pools

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are corridors and galleries, to which Montezuma resorts, and from which he can look out and amuse himself with the sight of the birds there." "In an apartment of the same palace there are men, women and children whose faces, bodies, hair, eyebrows and eyelashes were white from birth." "The Emperor has another very beautiful palace, with a large courtyard, paved with handsome flags in the style of a chessboard. There are cages about nine feet in height and six paces square, each of which is half covered with a roof of tiles, and the other half has over it a wooden grate, skilfully made. Every cage contains a bird of prey, of all species." "In the same palace there are several large halls on the ground floor, filled with immense cages built of heavy pieces of timber, well put together, in which are kept lions, wolves, foxes and a great variety of other animals of the cat kind." "The care of these animals and birds is assigned to three hundred men." Daily the Emperor's wine cellar and larder were open to all who wished to eat and drink. His meals were served by three or four hundred youths who brought on an infinite variety of dishes; indeed, whenever he dined or supped, the table was loaded with every kind of fish, flesh, fruits and vegetables which the country afforded. Both at the beginning and end of every meal they furnished water for the hands, and the napkins used on these occasions were never employed a second time.

And then the end: Cortez had demanded gold from the first. To satisfy him, small groups of two Spaniards and two Indians, bearing the proper credentials, had been despatched about the Aztec's domain, to distances in some cases of several hundred miles, that the tribute be collected. On one of these forays the two Christians were killed. Cortez immediately seized the person of Montezuma, together with his daughters and sons, imprisoning them in the garrison-fortress. From that time on, it was merely a matter of detail and of time as to what form the final catastrophe would take. Events shifted back and forth until in May, seven months after the Spaniards' first entrance to the city, the people laid siege to the intolerable intruders, determined to have done with them. In answer to shouts from outside, Montezuma, a prisoner within, had appeared on the ramparts of the besieged fortress whence he implored his people to give over their attacks. In reply he was struck on the head by a stone which killed him. Only the horse and the ordnance saved the Christians on that memorable retreat across the great causeway. Fighting madly to escape with some remnant of his forces through the masses of the enemy, and to retain at the same time his prisoners and treasure, Cortez lost everything. The children of Montezuma, the gold, everything perished over the sides of the breached and beleaguered avenue across the lake down which the Spaniards retreated, foot by foot, with swarms of Indians flinging themselves continually upon them. They escaped. Some months later they returned and continued the destruction, this time deliberately and with calculated malintention. Tenochtitlan surrounded, the water supply cut off, the augmented Spanish forces began to burrow forward and after weeks of desperate effort they succeeded in their plans. It was the horses the Indians feared most. At one time they had Cortez in their very hands only to have them cut off at the wrists by his followers. But nothing could bemuse them now. They knew now what it all meant and they opposed themselves to the intruder inflexibly and without murmur until the end. Neither the overwhelming means used against them, their desertion by friends of the nearby tribes, the lack of water, starvation, nor attempts to inspire them with fear, made the slightest impression. To every advance made inviting them to parley they had but the one answer: no! Cortez, dejected, seeing that it would be necessary to exterminate them before he could succeed in taking the city and dreading the horror of such a course, decided with reluctance, in order to impress them, to burn the noble edifices in the great square which had served Montezuma for aviaries. "It grieved me much but it grieved the enemy more." Each day he heard mass and returned to the city to renew the attack upon the now nearly starved inhabitants who had retreated to the market quarter and there still held out. At one time during a successful sally the Indians had killed two of the Spanish horses and in great spirits had sent the severed heads by messengers in canoes to the surrounding tribes for them to come to the rescue, but none dared. Most had already joined the Christian in his irresistible purpose. But Guatemotzin, the young nephew of Montezuma, would not give in. Women and children

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reduced to the last extremity by hunger and privation were wandering dazed about the streets when the Spaniards had made their final charge. But Guatemotzin, taken captive from a boat in an effort to get to the mainland, still maintained his pride and integrity of spirit. He had done all that he could and he was beaten. Placing his hand upon the hilt of Cortez' dagger, he asked the Spaniard to draw it and plunge it into his heart. Cortez refused. Later the Conqueror tried to rebuild the city. *Viva quien vence!*

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