

FLIGHT ON THE *NOCHE TRISTE*

BY

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Now we saw our forces diminishing every day and those of the Mexicans increasing, and many of our men were dead and all the rest wounded, and although we fought like brave men we could not drive back nor even get free from the many squadrons which attacked us both by day and night, and the powder was giving out, and the same was happening with the food and water, and the great Montezuma being dead, they were unwilling to grant the peace and truce which we had sent to demand of them. In fact we were staring death in the face, and the bridges had been raised. It was therefore decided by Cortés and all of us captains and soldiers that we should set out during the night. That very afternoon we sent to tell them, through one of their priests whom we held prisoner and who was a man of great importance among them, that they should let us go in peace within eight days and we would give up to them all the gold ; and this was done to put them off their guard so that we might get out that night.

The order was given to make a bridge of very strong beams and planks, so that we could carry it with us and place it where the bridges were broken. Four hundred Tlaxcalan Indians and one hundred and fifty

PREPARATIONS FOR RETREAT

soldiers were told off to carry this bridge and place it in position and guard the passage until the army and all the baggage had crossed. Two hundred Tlaxcalan Indians and fifty soldiers were told off to carry the cannon, and Gonzalo de Sandoval, Diego de Ordás, Francisco de Sauzedo, Francisco de Lugo and a company of one hundred young and active soldiers were selected to go in the van to do the fighting. It was agreed that Cortés himself, Alonzo de Ávila, Cristóbal de Olid, and other Captains should go in the middle and support the party that most needed help in fighting. Pedro de Alvarado and Juan Velásquez de Leon were with the rearguard, and placed in the middle between them and the preceding section were two captains and the soldiers of Narvaez, and three hundred Tlaxcalans and thirty soldiers were told off to take charge of the prisoners and of Doña Marina and Doña Luisa ; by the time this arrangement was made, it was already night.

In order to bring out the gold and divide it up and carry it, Cortés ordered his steward named Cristóbal de Guzman and other soldiers who were his servants to bring out all the gold and jewels and silver, and he gave them many Tlaxcalan Indians for the purpose, and they placed it in the Hall. Then Cortés told the King's officers named Alonzo Dávila and Gonzalo Mejía to take charge of the gold belonging to His Majesty, and he gave them seven wounded and lame horses and one mare, and many friendly Tlaxcalans, more than eighty in number, and they loaded them with parcels of it, as much as they could carry, for it was put up into very broad ingots, and much gold still remained in the Hall piled up in heaps. Then Cortés called his secretary and the others who were King's Notaries, and said : " Bear witness for me that I can do no more with this gold. We have here in this apartment and Hall over seven hundred thousand pesos

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in gold, and, as you have seen, it cannot be weighed nor placed in safety. I now give it up to any of the soldiers who care to take it, otherwise it will be lost among these dogs of Mexicans."

When they heard this many of the soldiers of Narvaez and some of our people loaded themselves with it. I declare that I had no other desire but the desire to save my life, but I did not fail to carry off from some small boxes that were there, four chalchihuites, which are stones very highly prized among the Indians, and I quickly placed them in my bosom under my armour, and, later on, the price of them served me well in healing my wounds and getting me food.

After we had learnt the plans that Cortés had made about the way in which we were to escape that night and get to the bridges, as it was somewhat dark and cloudy and rainy, we began before midnight to bring along the bridge and the baggage, and the horses and mare began their march, and the Tlaxcalans who were laden with the gold. Then the bridge was quickly put in place, and Cortés and the others whom he took with him in the first detachment and many of the horsemen, crossed over it. While this was happening, the voices, trumpets, cries and whistles of the Mexicans began to sound and they called out in their language to the people of Tlaltelolco, "Come out at once with your canoes for the Teules are leaving; cut them off so that not one of them may be left alive." When I least expected it, we saw so many squadrons of warriors bearing down on us, and the lake so crowded with canoes that we could not defend ourselves. Many of our soldiers had already crossed the bridge, and while we were in this position, a great multitude of Mexicans charged down on us with the intention of removing the bridge and wounding and killing our men who were unable to assist each other; and as fortune is perverse

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at such times, one mischance followed another, and as it was raining, two of the horses slipped and fell into the lake. When I and others of Cortés Company saw that, we got safely to the other side of the bridge, and so many warriors charged on us, that despite all our good fighting, no further use could be made of the bridge, so that the passage or water opening was soon filled up with dead horses, Indian men and women, servants, baggage and boxes.

Fearing that they would not fail to kill us, we thrust ourselves ahead along the causeway, and we met many squadrons armed with long lances waiting for us, and they used abusive words to us, and among them they cried : " Oh ! villains, are you still alive ? "—and with the cuts and thrusts we gave them, we got through, although they then wounded six of those who were going along with me. Then if there was some sort of plan such as we had agreed upon it was an accursed one ; for Cortés and the captains and soldiers who passed first on horseback, so as to save themselves and reach dry land and make sure of their lives, spurred on along the causeway, and they did not fail to attain their object, and the horses with the gold and the Tlaxcalans also got out in safety. I assert that if we had waited (the horsemen and the soldiers one for the other) at the bridges, we should all have been put an end to, and not one of us would have been left alive ; the reason was this, that as we went along the causeway, charging the Mexican squadrons, on one side of us was water and on the other azoteas, and the lake was full of canoes so that we could do nothing. Moreover the muskets and crossbows were all left behind at the bridge, and as it was night time, what could we do beyond what we accomplished ? which was to charge and give some sword-thrusts to those who tried to lay hands on us, and to march and get on ahead so as to get off the causeway.

SURVIVORS REACH TACUBA

Had it been in the day-time, it would have been far worse, and we who escaped did so only by the Grace of God. To one who saw the hosts of warriors who fell on us that night and the canoes full of them coming along to carry off our soldiers, it was terrifying. So we went ahead along the causeway in order to get to the town of Tacuba where Cortés was already stationed with all the Captains. Gonzalo de Sandoval, Cristóbal de Olid and others of those horsemen who had gone on ahead were crying out : “ Señor Capitan, let us halt, for they say that we are fleeing and leaving them to die at the bridges ; let us go back and help them, if any of them survive ” ; but not one of them came out or escaped. Cortés’ reply was that it was a miracle that any of us escaped. However, he promptly went back with the horsemen and the soldiers who were unwounded, but they did not march far, for Pedro de Alvarado soon met them, badly wounded, holding a spear in his hand, and on foot, for the enemy had already killed his sorrel mare, and he brought with him four soldiers as badly wounded as he was himself, and eight Tlaxcalans, all of them with blood flowing from many wounds.

While Cortés was on the causeway with the rest of the captains, we repaired to the courtyard in Tacuba. Many squadrons had already arrived from Mexico, shouting out orders to Tacuba and to the other town named Azcapotzalco, and they began to hurl darts, stones and arrows and attack with their long lances. We made some charges and both attacked them and defended ourselves.

Let us go back to Pedro de Alvarado. When Cortés and the other Captains met him in that way, and saw that no more soldiers were coming along the causeway, tears sprang to his eyes. Pedro de Alvarado said that Juan Velásquez de Leon lay dead with many other gentlemen both of our own company and that of

ALVARADO'S LEAP

Narvaez, and that more than eighty of them were at the bridge ; that he and the four soldiers whom he brought with him, after their horses had been killed, crossed the bridge in great peril, over the dead bodies, horses and boxes with which that passage at the bridge was choked. Moreover, he said that all the bridges and causeways were crowded with warriors. At the bridge of sorrow, which they afterwards called "Alvarado's leap", I assert that at the time not a single soldier stopped to see if he leaped much or little, for we could hardly save our own lives, as we were in great danger of death on account of the multitude of Mexicans charging down on us. I never heard of this leap of Alvarado until after Mexico was captured, and it was in some satirical verses made by a certain Gonzalo de Ocampo, which, as they were somewhat nasty, I will not fully quote here, except that he says : "Thou shouldst remember the leap that thou tookest from the bridge" ; but I will not dwell on this subject.

I assert that within a matter of five days over eight hundred and sixty soldiers were killed and sacrificed, as well as seventy-two who were killed in a town named Tustepec, together with five Spanish women (those who were killed at Tustepec belonged to the company of Narvaez) and over a thousand Tlaxcalans were slain. At that time they also killed Juan de Alcántara the elder, with three other settlers from Villa Rica. If many more of the followers of Narvaez than those of Cortés died at the bridges, it was because they went forth laden with gold, and owing to its weight they could neither escape nor swim.