

THE REWARD

“Should the inhabitants of Mexico and all of the poor duped men who until this time served Cortez join with me, we can bring the continent back to the Most Holy Religion! In the name of Christ, you will be rewarded – on earth as well as in heaven.”

It was signed, “Panfilo the First.”

Panfilo Narvaez came to the Mexican continent equipped with fifty horsemen plus two hundred infantrymen with sufficient gunpowder to wage a few days’ battle, armed men in armor with harquebusses, crossbows. Narvaez said that he desired to take back to Spain what was Spain’s out of loyalty, so war was to be waged in the name of His Most Holy Emperor Charles the Fifth. That was what enraged Cortez the most.

“Take him dead or alive, I do not care how! Hernando Cortez is a dastardly usurper of the True Most Catholic Emperor, I swear to it!” Narvaez wrote in his own hand on the page: “He has betrayed the ideals that he was supposed to have served – God, country, and King!”

Narvaez hurried to distribute flyers wherein it was stated that Cortez was a thief and an atheist. Cortez and his men found them everywhere; they were hung up on trees, they were lying in the roads that led through the villages that Cortez marched through. If he could have found Narvaez, he would have strangled him with his bare hands.

When Cortez heard about the plans of Narvaez, he left Mexico City, hastily. Montezuma was his prisoner; Montezuma’s palace was manned by

five hundred Spanish soldiers; Cortez now marched with ninety Spaniards toward the coast, for Narvaez had gathered his troops near the water, and each proceeded to wage war against the opposite godless usurper.

On the trail, Cortez had an attack of asthma. Cortez wrestled for air.

“Why’s God plaguing me?” He struggled to catch his breath. Two monks sat alongside the captain on a log, under the sun, in such heat that a man could asphyxiate without asthma; they were thinking about giving him a taste of wine and a wafer, so that the brave man with the aid of God would recover.

“The captain does indeed have a grave illness,” speculated one padre.

“The devil has gotten into him!” whispered the other priest.

They crossed themselves. The Indians, who acted as guides, observed the captain as he sat wheezing, bent forward on the log, trying to get air, strange attack of the European – only Temixtlan, whose father had been a tribal doctor who had a knowledge of mighty potions, stirred from the spot. The interpreter Temixtlan knew a trick. He went away into the area where there was yellow grass. When he came back, he had some weeds that were sour-smelling and he ground them up in a bowl with a wooden spoon, spitting into it several times, until the concoction turned brown.

“Drink it, sir,” he said in Spanish.

“It’s muck, Indian muck!” replied Cortez with a wheeze. He shoved the bowl away.

Temixtlan shook his head, holding the bowl to the captain’s face. Two soldiers with raised pikes neared them, frowns on their faces.

“It’s not poison,” Temixtlan coaxed. “It helps.”

Cortez hesitated, then Brod his tongue into the brown mush, which smelled bitter-flowery, closing his eyes he licked it clean. It did not hurt his throat but was as cool as peppermint on his palate. Now he smiled. His lungs did not feel tight.

“Why didn’t you listen?” said Temixtlan. “I would never betray you, sir.”

“Do I have to listen to an Indian?” Cortez asked, knowing full well that the Indian had perhaps saved his life. What would it have been had he gotten worse on this Godforsaken trail? Who would have followed him? “Sinful man,” he ruminated. “The Devil wants me.” Mexican swamps, or was it the land’s black, fetid water that had infected his lungs? Indian dragonflies, beetles, roaches scampered in row after iridescent row down his dry throat; he could see them when he closed his eyes at night. They crawled around in his windpipe to strangulate him; once the Devil began his work, one could only hope that mercy would be near. That night, as he looked up in the sky filled with clouds, he saw them with leafy arms: that was what it was, that which expanded inside him, that which branched out to fill his bronchial tubes. He was hallucinating badly the entire night from the drugs that Temixtlan had given him.

The next day, they found the flyers of Narvaez nailed on tree trunks along the trail leading toward the coast.

“I am the liberator!” Narvaez proclaimed in. “I’ll march on Mexico City and, once I have freed your loyal Indian prince, retaken his palace, and have won back the five hundred soldiers that that traitor Cortez left there, I’ll take the traitor and atheist Cortez into captivity. I will leave the country

forthwith. I covet no gold or jewels, I'll bring the coward back to Spain so that he will receive his just reward as a traitor.”

This enraged Cortez so much that he sputtered, “Off we go! Fly if you can! I want Narvaez tonight, if not sooner!” They mounted their horses, spurs went into the flanks of the beasts; ninety Spanish infantrymen with pikes, arquebusses, crossbows, lances, and armor made a frightful racket. The Indians who saw them along the way were frightened. They had had plenty of experience during the last months of hiding, they knew that no one must get in the Spaniards’ path.

It also was known to the captain that Narvaez tried to persuade some of the men that Cortez had left behind in order to guard the coastal city to join up with him and his rebellious forces: they even paraded in full formation by the Indians and Spaniards to intimidate them. One Indian dignitary, a nobleman in Montezuma’s royal entourage, was seen among Narvaez’s men; spies said that allegedly he had been sent to negotiate with the renegades for the purpose of getting rid of the obnoxious Captain Cortez. It made the captain distrust any Indian’s pledge of allegiance, for each tribe had attacked him along the route that he had taken the first time around, as he went toward Mexico City to Montezuma’s palace; each then apologized afterwards once they were pacified. The Indians claimed that they were forced to wage war against the Spanish due to some neighboring tribe, but chiefly due to Montezuma himself, who was a two-faced prince. As Cortez entered a village near the coast, he got a message from Montezuma: “The Indians who attack you in my city while you’re gone have gone mad. I’m still a loyal servant, Captain Cortez! Believe me.” The messenger who gave it to

him bowed down full-face on the ground. Cortez had him arrested and tortured. He admitted that Montezuma had also sent messages to Narvaez.

And as for Narvaez, he in turn sent a messenger to Montezuma, whom Cortez was sure had gotten through to the palace during the current chaos in Mexico City. He promised that the prince would be liberated, that the gold and jewelry that Cortez had taken would be returned, and that he, Narvaez, represented the Emperor Charles the Fifth; no one knew who represented anyone. The Indians could not make head or tails of it, only that the white gods from beyond the sea were truly gods and nothing else.

Just outside of Veracruz, the coastal city, two Spanish monks were coming toward the troops of Cortez. A hot day. Dust rose on the road.

They were taken to Captain Cortez, under guard. They could be assassins in disguise.

“What are you doing?” Cortez queried. “I’ll show mercy to the renegades afterwards,” speculated Cortez. “Now I’ll make them lay down their arms. Can’t they see that they’re breaking God’s law?” Cortez pointed at his breast. “God will show you mercy, believe in my word.” He had on a lace shirt and unclasped its buttons in order to breathe. His throat and lungs must be free to inhale. He coughed.

“Narvaez wants you to give up, probably,” Temixtlan said. The interpreter spoke without permission; often he was called upon by Cortez to give him counsel, for the Indian interpreter was even more mistrustful than a Spaniard was; to be an Indian in these parts was to learn mistrust.

“Throw yourself down! And beg for mercy from Narvaez! There’s still time to be forgiven,” one monk exclaimed, making the sign of the cross. All of the

Europeans bowed, kneeled in front of the two men of God, including Cortez himself.

“Give up your ill-gotten possessions, transfer all of Mexico to Señor Narvaez!” said the second one, swinging incense back and forth as though he were performing a mass.

Montezuma had been a very melancholy man. It was not easy giving his kingdom away. He said to Cortez, “You’ve taken everything from me, have promised nothing in return but allegiance to your far-away Emperor.” He pinched his arm and bare chest. “I’m only a man. I pledged my faith in God.”

Temixtlan wanted to plead with the exposed prince on the ledge to stop his own self-sacrifice and come back inside.

“Tell them I that I want -- peace!” roared Captain Cortez.

The interpreter tried that on his tongue, but it sounded absurd. Cortez had gone through villages on his way across the hot continent toward the coast, burning them for no reason. Temixtlan reckoned that Montezuma had fallen victim to false beliefs by declaring that the Spanish captain was a returning white god from beyond the sea. What was one to say? Enough had already been said. He had agreed to interpret, not to play politics on that point.

“You want peace? Then I’ll say it,” said Montezuma. “I’ll do what you ask.”

“Am I God or not?” asked the captain. He gestured with a harquebus at the two Indians as he was standing inside the high-ceilinged room, out of danger.

Temixtlan seconded the captain, out of courtesy and servility. “You’re god-ordained to lead us to peace, sir.”

“Tell the savages that they -- never mind, say that I honor and serve the Emperor!” The captain took care not to expose himself; going toward the palace balcony, he observed Indians everywhere, on rooftops, holed up in lofty towers holding rocks, aiming their arrows at them. “I’ll show mercy to the Indians afterwards,” speculated Cortez. “Now make them lay down their arms. Can’t they see that they’re breaking God’s law?” Cortez pointed at his breast. “God will show no mercy, believe my word.”

“He wants you to move mountains now,” Temixtlan said. “Prince Montezuma, you’ve got to try to make them peaceful out there.”

Montezuma closed his eyes. In the palace, inside, behind his back, beyond the balcony, was a long hall. Its walls were covered with bright feathers; at the end of the corridor was a gold statue, a warrior figure with a hawk’s head holding a bow in its right hand, a scepter in its left. The prince saw that his old Aztec god grimaced, moving its forearms in a clockwise motion in order to signal to the prince that he must now kneel. His body and legs aching from lack of sleep and exercise due to this siege, Montezuma kneeled down on the balcony; the warriors on the rooftops and in the towers hissed, but a golden twinkle sparkled into the prince’s eyes: yes, the god told him to wait; he rested on his knees. A wail went up, but the prince heard nothing. Montezuma, frowning, waited at the edge of the balcony; the matter was strange, for the Indians. Those out there had once been the prince’s subjects; they were quiet. There were hundreds wearing feathers in their hair who had their eyes on the deposed prince. Montezuma waved in both directions, left and right.

“They want to kill us. What did he tell them?” wheezed the captain as he walked nearer to the balcony where Temixtlan and the prince stood, but his steps were timid, for he saw on the rooftop opposite one strong fellow with feathers in his hair drawing back his bowstring.

“Montezuma tells them that you’re a friend,” retorted the interpreter, but Indian howls were the only answer to the captain’s offer of mercy and friendship. Whistling through the bad air, an arrow went past the Spaniard’s head. It Brod with a resounding punch in a leather chair that once was Montezuma’s throne. The Spaniard drew back from the balcony door. He had on a lace shirt and unclasped its buttons in order to breathe. His throat and lungs must be free to inhale. He coughed.

“He wants peace?” asked Montezuma. “But these people don’t understand his peace. I’ll try to make them see reason, but they’re a stiff-necked tribe.” He was talking about his own folk. He tried not to show it, but some pride was in his tone.

The captain was bending down, making the lungs inhale, there was nothing left but a vacuum, a fetid atmosphere; lizard excrement, sweat, sacrificial blood, the captain was sick to death of it! Oh, and the captain’s lungs were occupied by gaseous devils, so that the harder Cortez tried to inhale, the worse his cramped chest wheeze became. Temixtlan asked what Montezuma was to say next; but the captain whispered, “Let me be.” Then, in a tight and weak voice, “He should do something to stop – them!” As though he had no further demands than that, he closed his eyes; his chest was puffed out inordinately. The Spaniard tried to steady himself by leaning against his interpreter, who had stepped back into the room. His large nose

and beard wetted with saliva pressed against Temixtlan's brow and moistened his cheeks. He kept murmuring, "Oh, I did wrong! Why did I wrong him!"

"Wrong whom?"

"God! God! Can't you see!"

So what if the Indians revolted? He could leave the land! Become a monk! What else was he to do who had wronged God! He had wronged his king. It was the devil who whispered, "Who's king now, no one can circumscribe Cortez," was he God?

Cortez could lose the city, moreover. Things had gotten out of hand. Mexico had been his, then only two weeks ago that traitor, his countryman Narvaez, had up fouled everything by landing on the coast of New Spain; and but for the misuse of the name of Christ and his Emperor, Narvaez was a man just like himself. Cortez had quickly quelled that source of calamity, only to have this other problem immediately arise. Montezuma believed that Cortez was a god, but the Indian prince was not lord over all opinions on the subject, so that while Cortez was busy crushing the traitor, the Indians had revolted in the capital. When Cortez had left Prince Montezuma behind, the Indian prince had at first grown quiet, then progressively more sad, surrounded as he was by Spanish soldiers with armored breastplates, iron helmets with visors, men from beyond the sea who no wore feathers. Indians had feathers in their hair, behind their ears and across their breasts, and the Spaniards mocked the Indians decoration.

Captain Cortez, this morning, had repeatedly been pushing the captive prince outside to the balcony ledge.

“Speak to them, prince! I am a man of honor. If they stop, I’ll reward them.” There were hundreds and thousands who surrounded the palace. “The animals! Savages!” Cortez had exclaimed. Temixtlan pretended that he had not heard him, did not translate harsh phrases. Besides, he knew what his duty to the captain was: it was he alone who was to bear the Spanish words to the prince – and render them into the Aztec language, it was he and not another poor Indian; Cortez needed this young man of twenty-four who hailed from an enemy tribe. Montezuma did not want war, besides, how could the Indians win a war against Cortez, who held under his thrall the whole continent. “Tell them about my might! Tell them of my God! Tell them about my – my troops! About my Emperor!” Cortez said that these people must be made to understand it; he knew his God meant well with them, that was clear -- if He had any revolt to crush here, let it occur, for He knew well how to crush, He would do it, spare no one.

“Don’t harm Cortez, who’s my friend,” Montezuma said on the balcony of the palace. “He and his men are friends! The gods have proclaimed their presence once more in our land! All of my homes, my palace and all that I own, all of my possessions, all of my territories are his. That is the reward, the promise that I made so that he would return from beyond the sea!” The archer drew.

Temixtlan thought that Montezuma was mad, no ruler gave up all that he had for nothing – what was wrong? Cortez was not God, nor were the captain’s soldiers saviors, he thought: a devil.