

CONQUEST

Pedro de Alvarado y Contreras (1495–1541)

to Hernán Cortés (1485–1547)

Utlatan, 11 April 1524

From Sonconusco I wrote to Your Grace all that had happened to me as far as that place and even something of what was expected to happen further on. And after having sent my messengers to this country, informing them of how I was to come to conquer and pacify the provinces that might not be willing to place themselves under the dominion of His Majesty, I asked of them as his vassals (for as such they had offered themselves to Your Grace) the favor and assistance and passage through their country; that by so doing, they would act as good and loyal vassals of His Majesty and that they would be greatly favored and supported in all justice by me and the Spaniards in my company; and if not, I threatened to make war on them as on traitors rising in rebellion against the service of our Lord the Emperor and that as such they would be treated, and that in addition to this, I would make slaves of all those who should be taken alive in the war. And having done all this and dispatched the messengers, who were men of their own people, I reviewed all my men, both foot and horse. And the next day, on the morning of Saturday, I set out in search of their land, and after marching for three days through uninhabited forest, we pitched our camp, and the scouts whom I had sent out captured three spies from a town in their country named Zapotulan. I asked them what they came for and they told me that they were collecting honey, but it was notorious that they were spies, as it later on appeared. Notwithstanding all this, as I wished to treat them reasonably before compelling them, I gave them another command and requirement as before, and sent them to the chiefs of the said town. To none of my requests did I receive any answer.

Arriving at this town, I found all the roads open and very wide, the highway as well as the crossroads, but the roads that ran to the principal streets were obstructed, and then I understood their evil intentions and that everything was arranged to fight us. There came a few of them sent to me and from a distance they told me I should enter into the town to lodge, intending that they might fight us at their convenience, as it had been ordered. That day I camped near the town until I would be able to reconnoiter the country to see the plans they had. Later that same afternoon they could not conceal their bad intentions and they killed and wounded some of the Indians of my army. When I was informed of this, I sent some of the horsemen to reconnoiter the country and they found many warriors with whom they fought, and that afternoon some horses were wounded.

Next day I went to examine the road by which we had to advance and also saw warriors, and the country was so thickly wooded, covered with trees and cocoa plantations, that it was very favorable for them and not for us, so I returned to camp. Next day I left with all my men to enter the town. In the road was a river difficult to cross, at which the Indians had taken their position, and there, after a struggle, we defeated them. On the high bank of the river, on a plain, I waited for the stragglers because the way was very dangerous and caused much trouble, although I carried the best outfit that could be had. Being as I have said, on the river bank, they came from many parts through the woods, and assaulted me again, and we resisted them for a long while until we had carried all our baggage across. And, after entering in the houses we struck down the people, and continued the pursuit as far as the market place and half a league beyond, afterwards returning to the market place to camp. Here we were two days reconnoitering the country. And at the end of that time I left for another town called Quezaltenango. That day I crossed two rivers with very steep, rocky banks, which we passed with much difficulty, and commenced to climb a mountain pass that was six leagues in length; half way up I made camp that night. The pass was so rough that the horses could scarcely climb. Next morning I continued and above a gully I found a woman and a dog sacrificed, which my interpreter informed me was a challenge. Continuing our march, we found in a very narrow pass, a stone barricade with strong palings, but nobody in it. We had just got through the pass with the archers and infantry in front of me, as the horses had not been able to keep up

with us on account of the roughness of the road, when there appeared about 3.000 or 4.000 warriors above a ravine and struck at the contingent of our friends and caused them to retreat; then we defeated them. While up there, collecting the people to rally them, I saw more than 30.000 men coming towards us. I thanked God that there we found some plains, and although the horses were tired and fatigued from the pass, we waited some time for them (the Indians) to arrive to throw arrows at us; and we attacked them. As they had never seen horses they showed much fear, and we made a very good advance and scattered them and many of them died.

Then we awaited all our people and gathered together, and went to camp a league away near some springs because there we had no water and were suffering greatly from thirst, and as we were very tired, any place was a good site to camp. As the country was flat I took the lead with 30 horsemen. Many of us had taken along a relay of horses. The rest of the men came in a body, and then I dismounted to drink the water. While dismounted and drinking, we saw many warriors approaching and we allowed them to approach as they came over very wide plains; and we defeated them. Here we made another very big advance to where we found people awaiting us, one of them to two horsemen. We continued the pursuit for a full league and they brought us to a mountain and there they faced us, and I put myself in flight with some of the horsemen to draw the Indians to the plains, and they followed us, until reaching the horses' tails. And after I rallied with the horsemen, I turned on them, and here a very severe pursuit and punishment was made. In this affair one of the four chiefs of the city of Utlatan was killed, who was the captain general of all this country. I returned to the spring and there made camp that night, greatly fatigued, and with several Spaniards and horses wounded.

Next day in the morning I left for the town of Quezaltenango, a league away, and after yesterday's punishment I found it empty—not even a single person there. I camped and re-organized and reconnoitered the country, which is as thickly populated as Tlascala and equally cultivated and excessively cold.

At the end of six days that I had been here, one Thursday at noon, a great multitude of people appeared on many sides and according to what I learned from them, 12.000 were from this city and surrounding towns and the others they said could not be counted. From the moment I saw them, I put my men in order, and went out to give them battle with 90 horsemen, in the middle of a plain three leagues long. I left men in the camp to guard it, and at a gun-shot from the camp and no more, we commenced to crush them and scattered them in all directions and followed them in pursuit for two leagues and a half until all of them were routed and nobody left in front of us. Later we returned against them, and our friends and the infantry made the greatest destruction in the world, at a river. They surrounded a bare mountain where they had taken refuge, and pursued them to the top, and took all that had gone up there. That day we killed and imprisoned many people, many of whom were captains and chiefs and people of importance.

And when the chiefs of this town found that their people were defeated, they took counsel with all the land and called many other provinces to them, and gave tribute to their enemies and induced them to join them, so that all might come together and kill us. And they agreed to send and tell us that they had wished to be friends, and that again they gave obedience to our Lord the Emperor, so that I should enter the city of Utlatan, where they afterwards brought me, thinking that they would lodge me there, and that when thus encamped, they would set fire to the town some night and burn us all in it, without the possibility of resistance. And in truth their evil plan would have come to pass but that God our Lord did not see good that these infidels should be victorious over us, for this city is very, very strong, and there are only two ways of entering it; one of over thirty steep stone steps and the other by a causeway made by hand, much of which was already cut away, so that that night they might finish cutting it, and no horse could then have escaped into the country. As the city is very closely built and the streets very narrow, we could not have stood it in any way without either suffocating or else falling headlong from the rocks when fleeing from the fire. And as we rode up and I could see how large the stronghold was, and that within it we could not avail ourselves or the horses because the streets were so narrow and walled in, I determined at once to clear out of it on to the plain, although the chiefs of the town asked me not to do so, and invited me to seat myself and eat before I departed, so as to gain time to carry out their plans. But I knew the danger in which we were, and at once sent some men ahead of me to take

possession of the causeway and bridge, so that I could get out on to the plain, and the causeway was already in such a condition that one could hardly get over it on horseback, and outside the city were many warriors, and as they saw me pass out on to the plain, they retreated, but not so much that I did not receive much harm from them. But I concealed it all so that I might capture the chiefs who were taking to flight and by the cunning with which I approached them, and through presents which I gave them, the better to carry out my plan, I took them captive and held them prisoners in my camp. but, nevertheless, their people did not cease fighting against me in the neighborhood and killed and wounded many Indians who had gone out to gather grass. And one Spaniard who was gathering grass, a gunshot from camp, was slain by a stone rolled down the hill. This land is very full of gullies; there are gullies two hundred *estados* in depth, and on account of them, one cannot carry on war and punish these people as they deserve.

And seeing that by fire and sword I might bring these people to the service of His Majesty, I determined to burn the chiefs who, at the time that I wanted to burn them, told me, as it will appear in their confessions, that they were the ones who had ordered the war against me and were the ones also who made it. They told me about the way they were to do so, to burn me in the city, and that with this thought (in their minds) they had brought me there, and that they had ordered their vassals not to come and give obedience to our Lord the Emperor, nor help us, nor do anything else that was right. And as I knew them to have such a bad disposition towards the service of His Majesty, and to insure the good and peace of this land, I burnt them, and sent to burn the town and to destroy it, for it is a very strong and dangerous place, that more resembles a robbers' stronghold than a city. And to enable me to hunt out these people I sent to the city of Guatemala, which is ten leagues distant from this place, and ordered them on the part of His Majesty to send me some warriors (and this I did so that I could find out what their disposition was, as well as to strike terror into the land), and they were well disposed toward me and agreed to do so, and sent me four thousand men, and with these men and those that were already with me, I made an expedition and chased them and threw them out of the entire country. And seeing the damages which they had suffered, they sent me messengers to tell me that now they wished to be good, and that if they had erred, it had been at the order of their chiefs, and that while their chiefs had been living they dared not do otherwise, but as now their chiefs were dead they prayed me to pardon them, and I spared their lives, and ordered them to return to their houses and live as they had done formerly; and this they did, and at the present time I have them in the same condition as they were formerly, at the service of His Majesty. And for greater security I gave liberty to two sons of the chiefs, whom I placed in their fathers' positions, and I believe that they will carry out faithfully all that tends to the service of His Majesty and the good of his lands. And as far as touches the war, I have nothing more at present to relate, but that all the prisoners of war were branded and made slaves, of whom I gave His Majesty's fifth part to the treasurer, Baltasar de Mendoza, which he sold by public auction, so that the payment to His Majesty should be secure.

I would wish Your Grace to know that the country is healthy and the climate temperate, and well populated, with many strong towns, and that this city is well built and wonderfully strong, and has much corn land and many people subject to it, the which, with all the subject towns and neighborhoods, I have placed under the yoke and in the service of the royal crown of His Majesty.

In this country there is a mountain range of alum, another of copperas and another of sulfur, the best which I have yet seen and with a piece of it which they brought me, without refining or any such process, I made half an arroba of very good gun-powder; but as I wish to send off Argueta without delay, I do not send to Your Grace 50 loads of it, but whenever there should be a messenger there will be time for it.

On Monday, 11 April, I am leaving for Guatemala, where I mean to stop but a short time, because the town which is situated on the water called Atitlan is at war, and has killed four of my messengers, and I think with the aid of our Lord soon to subdue it to the service of His Majesty.

According to my information I have much to do in the future and I am therefore in haste to winter 50 to 100 leagues beyond Guatemala, where they tell me, and I have notice from the natives of this land, of marvelous

and large buildings and wonderful cities that are there. Also they tell me that five days' journey beyond a large city that is twenty days' journey beyond a large city that is twenty days' journey from here, is the end of this country, and they confirm it. If it is so, I am certain it is the strait. May it please God to give me victory over these infidels so that I may bring them to His service or that of His Majesty. I should not wish to give this account piece-meal, but after everything is finished, because I would have much more to say. The Spaniards of my company, both horse and foot, have conducted themselves so well in the war that they are worthy of great thanks. At present I have nothing more of importance to say except that we are in the wildest country and people one has ever seen, and so that our Lord may give us victory I supplicate Your Grace to ordain that a procession be held in your city of all the priests and friars so that our Lord may help us. We are so far from help that if He does not help us, nobody can. Also be sure to inform His Majesty how we have served him with our persons and our properties at our own cost, for your own conscience' sake and so that His Majesty may grant us privileges. May our Lord protect the very magnificent person of Your Grace for as long a time as you desire.

As I am on a long voyage and think I will lack horseshoes, if, during the coming summer, Your Grace could provide me with same, it would be very well, and His Majesty will be well served by it. They are now worth here 190 pesos a dozen and so we are trading them and paying for them in gold.

I kiss the hands of Your Grace.

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