THE GILDED MAN OF CUNDINAMARCA

The quest for El Dorado was an enterprise of fantasy that obsessed the adventurers of Europe for more than a century. Tales of a golden kingdom and of a golden king, somewhere in the unexplored wilderness of South America, spurred men on to notable achievements of endurance, chivalry, and—too often—crime. Nothing halted the pursuers of the golden dream, neither snow-capped mountains nor blazing plains, neither the thin air of lofty plateaus nor the green intricacy of steaming tropical jungles. They marched on, killing and plundering, suffering incredible torments, often traveling—as one chronicler put it—con el alma en los dientes, with their souls between their teeth.

They did not find El Dorado. The stuff of dreams cannot easily be transmuted into solid reality. The seekers sought, and their deeds constitute a monument to futility as well as an epic of high adventure.

Yet there was a kernel of truth within the fantasy. This is where the quest began, a third of the way through the sixteenth century: with a glittering story that journeyed down from the high tableland of Bogotá to dazzle the conquistadores.
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The tale came out of Cundinamarca, "the land of the condor," now the Andean highlands of the Republic of Colombia. No white man had then penetrated that remote inland plateau, although the Spaniards had gained a foothold in bordering lands. There were Spanish settlements along the coasts of what now are Venezuela and Colombia; Spaniards had mastered the proud Incas of Peru; they had nibbled at the shores of Guiana. But as late as 1535 Cundinamarca was terra incognita. On that great plateau, more than 7500 feet above sea level, it was possible that a high civilization of spectacular wealth, comparable to the civilizations of Peru and Mexico, might still await the lucky explorer.

This was the legend out of Cundinamarca:

At a lake called Guatavita on the Bogotá plateau, a solemn ceremony was held each year to reconsecrate the king: On the appointed day the monarch came forth, removed his garments, and anointed his body with turpentine to make it sticky. Then he rolled in gold dust until covered from head to foot with a gleaming coat.

Gilded and splendid, the king arose and proceeded to the shores of Lake Guatavitá while all the multitudes of his subjects accompanied him, celebrating with music and jubilant songs. The king and his nobles boarded a canoe and paddled to the middle of the mountain-rimmed lake. There he solemnly hurled offerings of gold and emeralds into the water; and at the climax of the ceremony the gilded man himself leaped from the canoe and plunged in to bathe. At the sight of that flash of brightness, the crowd on shore sent up a mighty cheer. Soon the king emerged and returned to shore, and a festival of dancing and drinking and singing began.

A gilded man—el hombre dorado—ruling over a nation so wealthy that it could afford to coat its monarch's skin with gold! That fabled plunge kindled the imagination of
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many a gold-seeker. Already the treasuries of the Incas and the Aztecs had yielded wealth so immense as to unbalance the economy of Europe and set in motion a formidable inflation. Not content, the gold-seekers looked now for the land of the gilded man of Cundinamarca.

The legend underwent mutations. El dorado, the gilded man, became El Dorado, the kingdom of gold. The location of that kingdom shifted in steady progression eastward across South America during the century of pursuit, migrating from Colombia to the basin of the Amazon to the jungles of Guiana as each site in turn failed to fulfill its glistening promise. The original El Dorado, where the annual rite of the gilded chieftain actually had been performed, was discovered early in the quest; but since it did not conform to the hopes of its discoverers, the seekers continued to search.

It was a time of quests. Men had searched for Prester John, the Christian king of Asia; they had looked for the lost continent of Atlantis, for King Solomon's mines at Ophir, for the Seven Cities of Cíbola, for the Fountain of Youth, for the Holy Grail, for the domain of the women warriors, the Amazons. Often gold had been the mainspring of the search, as in the instance of the Río Doro of Africa, the River of Gold that Arab merchants described. Gold in plenty was found during that age of exploration, but rarely did it coincide with the site of one of the grand romantic quests. The golden cities of Cíbola turned out to be the mud pueblos of the Zuni; Prester John, that king of rubies and diamonds, was tracked to a Mongol tent in a grim steppe; and El Dorado became a trap that unmanned even the most valiant.

But the joy of a quest is in the questing. The kingdom of the gilded man lay always over the next mountain, beyond the next turn in the river, past the next thicket of the jungle. Each successive adventurer was aware of the perils and
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pitfalls of the quest, and knew the grim fate of his predecessors; yet the pull of El Dorado was relentless. The record of earlier failure only served to intensify the hunger of the new generations of explorers. As Sir Walter Raleigh, the last and most tragic of the Doradists, wrote in 1596, "It seemeth to me that this Empire is reserved for her Majesty and the English nation, by reason of the hard success which all these and other Spaniards had in attempting the same."  

The ceremony of an Indian tribe became the magnet of doom for hundreds of bold men. A will-o’-the-wisp, a fantasy, a golden dream—a chieftain transformed into a shining statue—the bright gleam of his diving body—El Dorado, the realm of gold—it was an obsessive quest from which there was no turning back, no reprieve for those condemned to follow its fruitless trails.

Gold is a beautiful metal and a useful one. It is dense and heavy, with a satisfying feeling of mass. It has a splendid yellow gleam which is virtually imperishable, for gold is not a chemically active metal and therefore not subject to rust. Its unwillingness to combine with other elements made it easily accessible to primitive man; when smelting was unknown, such metals as iron were unattainable but nuggets of pure gold could be found in many parts of the world.

Gold is malleable. It can be hammered or drawn into attractive shapes. The Egyptians and Sumerians recognized the beauty and utility of gold and fashioned it into jewelry six thousand years ago. Before the concept of currency was known, gold was desired above all other metals and must have been a choice barter item.

Gold is scarce. That added to its value. Scarce but not too scarce, easy to fabricate, beautiful, durable, massy, divisible into small units without impairment of value, gold
quickly established itself as a high prize. Eventually the idea arose of coining it into pieces of uniform weight; the traditional birthdate of coinage is about 700 B.C. in the kingdom of Lydia in Asia Minor. Iron, copper, lead all served as the basis of currency in some lands, and their deficiencies were demonstrated. Silver won great acclaim, and much of Europe preferred the silver standard well into modern times. But gold was always the master metal. Hercules went in quest of the golden apples of the Hesperides. Phoenician miners quarried gold in Spain and fetched it to the Levantine coast to grease the wheels of commerce. King Solomon sent treasure-fleets down the Red Sea to Tarshish and Ophir. "Men now worship gold to the neglect of the gods," Propertius complained in his Elegies, two thousand years ago. "By gold good faith is banished and justice is sold."

Propertius had good reason to grumble. Few nations pursued gold as assiduously as Rome. The Romans were the inheritors of Alexander's Greek empire, and Alexander had taken possession of the Persian hoard, and the Persians were successors to Babylonia, Egypt, and Assyria. All that shining treasure cascaded down to the regime of the Caesars. The Romans worked the mines of Spain to virtual exhaustion, and their coffers bulged accordingly. The high point of their prosperity came in the reign of Augustus. At his death, in 14 A.D., the Roman gold supply may have been as great as 500,000,000 ounces.

That matchless treasury was gradually dissipated. Roman gold flowed eastward in exchange for such goods as Chinese silks, deflating the Roman economy considerably, but much more damage was done by the barbarian incursions that cut Rome off from the lands where gold was mined. The yellow metal disappeared into private hands, was carried off by Goths and Vandals to become jewelry, or simply vanished. By 800 A.D., the total recoverable gold sup-
ply of Europe—the basis of currency—was less than a tenth of what it had been in the time of Augustus Caesar. The lack of gold, and a corresponding shortage of silver, hampered trade and kept prices low in relation to the purchasing power of precious metals.

The slow awakening of Europe in medieval times coincided to some extent with the revival of the gold supply. Old mines were reopened, new ones discovered; and as seamen grew more bold, it became possible to replenish the treasuries of Europe by venturing abroad. In the thirteenth century, Marco Polo and other Venetians reached as far as China, but that was a false dawn of commerce. It was nearly two centuries later that Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal goaded his captains to journey ever farther down the western coast of Africa, until at last in 1488 Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope and showed that a sea route to India lay ahead. Dias fell short of the goal, but nine years later Vasco da Gama sailed completely around Africa and reached India, opening a glamorous new trade route that gave Portugal a short interlude of world dominance.

While the Portuguese went east for gold, the Spaniards went west. They found a new world brimming with the yellow metal and changed the path of history. The story of El Dorado is largely a Spanish story, and its starting point is the year 1492.

That year merits its place among history's exalted dates for several reasons. It was, of course, the year in which a stubborn Genoese seaman named Cristofo ro Colombo persuaded the Spanish Queen to finance a westward voyage that brought him to the Indies. More than that, it was the year that Spain as a nation took form, and without that event there would have been no voyage of Columbus, no conquest of the Americas, and probably no quest for El Dorado.

Spain lies closer to Africa than any other European
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state, and in the eighth century had fallen victim to that spectacular surge of Arab militarism that erupted across the Christian world. For centuries thereafter the Iberian Peninsula was an outpost of Islam. The enlightened Moors brought their universities to Spain, their doctors and poets and astronomers, and in a rude and ignorant Europe the Moslem kingdoms of Spain became the channel by which learning entered. The overthrown Christian rulers of Spain had taken refuge in the mountains of Asturias, and maintained a shaky independence there. Gradually the Moors yielded ground as resurgent Spanish Christians pressed them from the north in a seemingly endless war of reconquest.

There was no real unity in Spain during the reconquista. Geographically, Spain is a broken land, divided by mountain chains and lacking the navigable rivers that can bind a nation together. Thus Christian Spain became a patchwork of small kingdoms that vied for dominance—Castile, Aragon, Navarre, León, and others. Now and again one kingdom attained brief supremacy, but the general picture was one of restless little states vying for power while moving in and out of complex dynastic alliances and somehow prosecuting the common war against the Moors. The Spaniards themselves referred to their peninsula until quite recent times as las Españas, “the Spains,” and not as “Spain.”

A complex mixed society of Christians and Moors took form in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as a result of the shifting alliances of “the Spains.” By the middle of the thirteenth century the conquest of the Moorish-held territories had proceeded to the point where most of the Moslems were concentrated in the kingdom of Granada along the Mediterranean coast. Granada acknowledged the supremacy of the Christian kingdom of Castile in western Spain. To the
east, the kingdom of Aragon extended its sway over what
was left of Moorish Spain. The two kingdoms of Aragon
and Castile emerged as the leading powers of the land and
the Moors remained in their part of the peninsula mainly by
tolerance of their Christian overlords.

A significant marriage in 1469 indicated the ultimate
destiny of "the Spains." Prince Ferdinand, heir to the throne
of Aragon, wed Princess Isabella, the heiress to the throne of
Castile, and by 1479 they had come to power in their respec-
tive kingdoms. Though Aragon and Castile remained sepa-
rate states, they were joined at last by a bond of marriage,
and the dynastic link gave the pair of monarchs control over
most of the peninsula.

During the period of uncertainty while the youthful
Ferdinand and Isabella were coming to their thrones, the
Moors of Granada had chosen to withhold their customary
tribute. In 1482, the joint rulers commenced a final war
against the Spanish Moors—the last crusade of Europe.
Village by village, Granada was conquered and drawn into
full Christian power. The war lasted a decade. On January
2, 1492, the city of Granada itself fell to the Catholic kings,
and the rulers of Castile and Aragon now ruled all of Spain.
It was a propitious time for Columbus to come before Isab-
ella and offer her Cathay.

Ferdinand and Isabella maintained the separateness of
their states. Ferdinand's Aragon, the smaller kingdom, was
a limited monarchy with a strong parliament—the Cortés—
and its government was stable and orderly. Isabella's Cas-
tile, upon her accession, had been loosely run, infested with
corrupt officials and haughty nobles who indulged in private
wars; it received a thorough overhauling at Isabella's hands,
and she emerged as Castile's absolute monarch. By imposing
the total supremacy of the Castilian crown she shaped the
pattern for the conquest of the Americas.
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It was a time for shaking old traditions in "the Spains." The heritage of Arab learning and tolerance was brushed aside. The intensely religious Isabella, determined to maintain her power both against her nobles and against a possible resurgence of Moslem strength, cast aside past liberalism. The Catholic Church underwent drastic reform and was given awesome powers of investigation and punishment. The new Inquisition became an arm of Isabella's policies. The Jews were expelled from the land; the Moors of Granada were forcibly baptized. Feudal revolts were sternly repressed. A harshness settled over the sunny land of Spain.

The exercise of power, however, requires an underpinning of money and Isabella was painfully conscious of her country's poverty and isolation from the rest of the world. Arid Spain could not grow fat from agriculture. Poor transportation thwarted commerce and even made it difficult for the Spaniards to benefit from the mineral wealth of their own mines. Nearly eight centuries of warfare with the Moors and among the Spanish kingdoms had made the development of manufacturing impossible. There was no Spanish navy, for old Castile and Aragon, the unifiers of the nation, had been landlocked kingdoms.

Meanwhile the nimble Portuguese, Iberians themselves who had gained independence only a few centuries earlier, were winning an empire in the Orient. Spurred on by the extraordinary Prince Henry, Portuguese navigators had found the track to the Indies, and the spices and luxuries of Arabia and India were enriching Portugal to the envy and annoyance of Spain. To Isabella, a sudden and dramatic increase in the Castilian stock of gold was the best way of building the potent imperial state she and her husband wished "the Spains" to become.

To Isabella, then, came Columbus, hat in hand, full of dreams and false geography. He had read Marco Polo, and
hungered for a sight of Cambaluc and Xanadu, the capitals of Kublai Khan. He knew the tales of lands in the western ocean. The Florentine geographer Toscanelli reinforced his beliefs by telling him of the island of Cipangu—Japan—in the west, "rich in gold, pearls, and gems: the temples and palaces are roofed with solid gold." Toscanelli had read Marco Polo, too.

Near the end of 1483, Columbus had begged King John II of Portugal to finance an expedition to the west. Portugal, thriving on its eastward trade, declined. Columbus moved on to Spain, while his brother Bartolomé presented the proposal to King Henry VII of England. King Henry said no; Queen Isabella of Spain was more interested, but unfortunately had to devote her resources to the completion of the war against Granada. For five years a Spanish royal commission mulled Columbus' suggestion. In 1491 came the verdict: Spain was not attracted by the idea. Columbus prepared to take his venture to France. A friend found him despondent at the town of La Rábida; he was Juan Pérez, sometime confessor to Queen Isabella, who heard the story and wrote to the court. The Queen summoned Columbus to the military camp at Santa Fé, not far from the Moorish bastion of the Alhambra. The Moors were near defeat. "I saw," Columbus wrote a year later, "the royal banners of your Highnesses on the towers of the Alhambra; and I saw the Moorish King come out to the city gates and kiss your royal hands."

Again the councillors of the realm debated, and again they rejected Columbus' proposal. The Genoan departed; but a messenger overtook him that same day, and called him back. Isabella had relented. Columbus could have his three caravels. With the Moors prostrate, the Queen was looking outward toward empire and perhaps this persistent man from Italy could bring her the gold of the Orient.
Awkwardly, two huge continents turned out to lie between Spain and Asia. Columbus made his landfall in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492, and persuaded himself that he had found the outlying islands of the Indies. It was not so, and gradually the immensity of the unknown western territory made itself apparent. So, too, did the New World’s riches demonstrate themselves.

On Saturday, October 13, Columbus recorded in his journal the details of his first contact with the islanders: “Many of these people, all men, came from the shore... and I was anxious to learn whether they had gold. I saw also that some of them wore little pieces of gold in their perforated noses. I learned by signs that there was a king in the south, or south of the island, who owned many vessels filled with gold.”

The first gleam was encouraging. But Columbus was after bigger game. He did not plan to search immediately for the southern land of gold, “for I must endeavor to reach Cipangu quickly.”

He pioneered that pleasant institution, the Caribbean cruise. Asking everywhere for news of the Great Khan, he sailed from island to island. On October 28 he landed at Cuba, an island big enough to be his dreamed-of Cipangu; but the natives told him to keep going if he would find the true home of gold. He sailed on through blue water and tropical warmth, but his men grew restless. Late in November his lieutenant, Martín Pinzón, took the Pinta and went off on a private voyage to the land of gold. A few days later Columbus discovered Hispaniola, the island now shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where gold abounded. The chastened Pinzón returned, empty-handed, to learn that he had missed the great moment. In January, 1493, Colum-
bus went back to Spain to bring the glad tidings to Isabella. He could not claim that he had found Cathay or Cipangu, but certainly he had found gold.

Queen Isabella, well pleased by the news, claimed the Indies as the direct and exclusive possessions of the Castilian crown, as was her right, and thereafter all ventures to the New World were conducted under license from the throne of Castile. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI confirmed the Castilian right of discovery by obligingly dividing the world between Spain and Portugal. The Pope drew a line from pole to pole, a hundred miles west of the Azores. All that lay east of that line was granted to Portugal for exploitation; the land to the west was Spain's.

Spanish activities at first were confined to the West Indies, centering about the settlement that Columbus planted on Hispaniola. It was known, in a vague way, that the isles found by Columbus were flanked by two gigantic land masses, neither of which was Asia. The Spaniards settled down to the occupation of the West Indies and the destruction of their native inhabitants, but gradually the lust for wealth drew them to the mainland.

Columbus first glimpsed the mainland of South America on his third voyage, in 1498. He found evidence of gold on the coast of what shortly would be called Venezuela. That name was given two years later when a former companion of Columbus, Alonso de Ojeda, explored over a thousand miles of the northern coast of South America from Guiana to Colombia. He thought that the islanded coast reminded him of "a queer little Venice"—Venezuela. One of his navigators, Amerigo Vespucci, also contributed to the growing terminology of the New World; in a mysterious way his first name became attached to the western continents themselves.

Ojeda found gold on the Venezuelan coast, and pearls
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as well. The best pearls and the lion’s share of the gold went into the Spanish royal treasury, for all this land belonged to Castile, and by Castile’s laws the monarch took a bullion royalty of two thirds the value. (In practice this proved too much to extort from the explorers; between 1500 and 1504, the royal share was successively reduced by petition of the American settlers to a half, a third, and a fifth. There it remained, and the “royal fifth,” the quinto real, was demanded by Spanish officials until the eighteenth century.)

The reconnaissance proceeded rapidly. In 1500, Rodrigo de Bastidas, a notary from Seville, explored the region around the Isthmus of Panamá on foot and came away with gold in abundance. About the same time, Christoval Guerra and Pedro Alonso Niño guided a rotted caravel along the Venezuelan coast and returned to Spain with gold and a multitude of pearls. They reported that gold was scarce among the Indian tribes of the eastern part of South America’s northern coast, but was more abundant farther to the west, toward the Isthmus. Vincente Yáñez Pinzón went in the other direction, past the Equator and down the coast of Brazil as far as the mouth of the Amazon, but he was ruined by shipwreck and came home with only a few survivors.

On his last expedition in 1502, Columbus called first at Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, where he met a fleet of thirty ships about to depart for Spain laden with West Indian gold. The veteran explorer warned of storms but the Spaniards would not heed him, and hurricanes sent twenty ships to the bottom, one of them carrying a nugget of gold said to weigh 36 pounds. Columbus himself waited out the storm and then went on to Jamaica, Cuba, and Honduras. He moved southward along the eastern coast of Central America, collecting a considerable quantity of gold. The Indians told him of a wealthy and civilized nation lying nine days’ march overland to the west, on the Pacific shore, but they
also told him that the western coast was "ten days' journey from the Ganges," so Columbus evidently was hearing what he chose to hear. No European yet had crossed that narrow strip of land that divides the great oceans. Columbus sought in vain for some navigable strait that would bring him to the western coast of Central America. Finding none, he returned to Jamaica, poverty, and a year of sickness and hunger. By 1504 he was back in Spain just as his patron, Queen Isabella, was dying. Columbus, gouty and deprived of the benefits of his discovery, survived her by eighteen months. After his first great voyage, his life had been a sequence of misadventures, and other men reaped the harvest of the Indies.

It was a cruel harvest, not only of gold and pearls but of the bodies and souls of men. The ruthless behavior of the Spaniards toward the natives of the New World was an unhappy accompaniment to the expansion of Spanish power. The historian William H. Prescott, a New England puritan at heart, criticized Spanish harshness this way in his classic History of the Conquest of Peru in 1847: "Gold was the incentive and the recompense, and in the pursuit of it [the Spaniard's] inflexible nature rarely hesitated as to the means. His courage was sullied with cruelty, the cruelty that flowed equally—strange as it may seem—from his avarice and his religion. . . . The Castilian, too proud for hypocrisy, committed more cruelties in the name of religion than were ever practiced by the pagan idolater or the fanatical Moslem." Prescott could not resist drawing the contrast between the cruel "children of Southern Europe" and his own forebears, "the Anglo-Saxon races who scattered themselves along the great northern division of the western hemisphere. . . . They asked nothing from the soil, but the reasonable returns of their own labor. No golden visions threw a deceitful halo around their path and beckoned them onward through seas of blood to the subversion of an unoffending dynasty."
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The Spaniards have few apologists, though recent historians have attempted to countervail the "black legend" of Spanish atrocity by insisting that they were, at least, no more cruel than anyone else of their time. R. B. Cunninghame Graham, in his *The Conquest of New Granada* (1922), points out that "Spaniards then, as now, were the most individualistic people on the earth. Thus fortified, both by religious and by racial pride, holding their faith with fierce intensity, they felt they had a mission to fulfill, laid on them from on high. Gold was not always their chief aim, as Protestant historians aver, although they loved it, wading ankle-deep in blood in its pursuit. When all is said and done, they were much like ourselves, not knowing, and not caring much to know, where their greed ended and their faith began." 4

They were tough men from a rugged land. Those who went to the New World were warriors, all sentimentality burned from them by the Spanish sun. They swore by Christ, but not the loving Christ of the Gospels; they saw no contradiction in spreading the worship of Jesus by the sword, if necessary, nor did they hesitate to enslave men they deemed lacking in souls. Some Spaniards clearly embraced terror for its own sake; others used it as an instrument of policy; still others, and they were few, recoiled from bloodshed except in the last resort. The fact stands that the Spaniards were more ruthless in their treatment of the natives than their great rivals, the English; and we will see English voyagers turning that fact to their own advantage. The best that can be said for the average conquistador is that he was as unsparing with his own life as with the lives of others. Sir Walter Raleigh, who had little reason to love the Spaniards, managed high praise for their "patient virtue" in his *History of the World*:

"We seldom or never find any nation hath endured so many misadventures and miseries as the Spaniards have
done in their Indian discoveries. Yet persisting in their enter-
prises, with invincible constancy, they have annexed to their
kingdom so many goodly provinces, as bury the remem-
brance of all dangers past. Tempests and shipwrecks, fam-
ine, overthrows, mutinies, heat and cold, pestilence, and all
manner of diseases, both old and new, together with extreme
poverty, and want of all things needful, have been the ene-
mies, wherewith every one of their most noble discoveries, at
one time or other, hath encountered. Many years have
passed over some of their heads in the search of not so many
leagues: Yea, more than one or two have spent their labor,
their wealth, and their lives, in search of a golden kingdom,
without getting further notice of it than what they had at
their first setting forth.”

Valor and vainglory, murderous cruelty and rocklike
endurance—these were the marks of the Spaniards as they
spread out into South America. A harsh light plays over
their exploits. They were fed on romantic dreams of chivalry
and on the somber inflexibility of the Inquisition, and out of
this brew of fantasy and militant intolerance they took the
nourishment of empire. For their crimes, their bravery is
their only absolution. They stand indicted by one of their
own people, the saintly Bartolomé de las Casas, “the apostle
of the Indies,” who wrote in 1542 of the destruction worked
on the Indians of the West Indies:

“Upon these lambs so meek, so qualified and endowed
of their Maker and Creator, as hath been said, entered the
Spanish . . . as wolves, as lions, and as tigers most cruel of
long time famished: and have not done in those quarters
these forty years past, neither do at this present, ought else
save tear them in pieces, kill them, martyr them, afflict them,
torment them, and destroy them by strange sorts of cruelties
never neither seen, nor read, nor heard of the like . . . so
far forth that of above three millions of souls that were in the

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Isle of Hispaniola, there are not now two hundred natives of the country.” The Dominican friar had been on the scene; he had witnessed the holocaust, and cried out to all the world against it.

Clearly there was gold to be had at the meeting-place of Central and South America. Many men now approached the Spanish throne to ask for licenses to exploit the New World. Each expedition required a capitulación, or contractual charter, from the crown. Customarily, the adventurers could not hope for a royal contribution to their expenses, but were bound to pay over the royal fifth of any takings. The throne retained all rights of government in the territories to be occupied, granting merely the concession to seek wealth.

Two licenses were awarded in 1509. Alonso de Ojeda was permitted to settle what is now the north coast of Colombia adjoining the Isthmus. The right to colonize present-day Panamá, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua went to a certain Diego de Nicuesa, over the loud objections of Columbus’ son, Diego. Neither man met with good fortune.

Ojeda dropped anchor in the harbor of the future city of Cartagena, Colombia, and led a force of seventy men to attack the Indians. They jolted his confidence with poisoned arrows, and slew all but Ojeda and one companion, who slipped away to the ships. Some 230 men remained in Ojeda’s force, but the natives picked them off daily; Ojeda himself was pierced in the thigh by a poisoned arrow, and saved his life with a cautery of red-hot iron. Eventually only a few Spaniards remained. When a pirate ship from the Spanish settlement at Hispaniola arrived, Ojeda boarded it to seek reinforcements from that island, leaving a soldier named Francisco Pizarro in charge. Ojeda’s journey back was marked by hardships, and he died in Hispaniola without ever returning to his camp on the South American coast.

The reinforcements finally arrived under the command
of a lawyer named Enciso. Aboard one of Enciso's ships was
a stowaway named Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who had left
Hispaniola to avoid payment of some embarrassing debts.
Balboa, who was about thirty-five years old, was energetic
and intelligent, and—despite his attitude toward financial
obligations—a man of considerably finer moral fiber than
most of his companions. He was also familiar with the re-
gion around the Isthmus, for he had visited it ten years
earlier as part of Bastidas' expedition of 1500.

Balboa speedily took command of the demoralized rem-
nants of Ojeda's expedition and the reinforcements from
Enciso's party. He led them westward into Panamá by sea,
and founded a village at a place the Indians called Darien.
In the course of subjugating the Indians of Darien, Balboa
and his men came into possession of "plates of gold, such as
they hang on their breasts and other parts, and other things,
all of them amounting to ten thousand pesos of fine gold." 7

While the gold was being weighed out, a young Indian who
was present supposedly struck the scales contemptuously
with his fist, scattering the precious metal about, and de-
clared, "If this is what you prize so much that you are
willing to leave your distant homes, and risk even life itself
for it, I can tell you of a land where they eat and drink out of
golden vessels, and gold is as cheap as iron is with you." 8

The legend of El Dorado was yet unknown, but the lure of a
golden land somewhere to the south had already begun to
exert its appeal.

While consolidating his position at Darien, Balboa
learned of the fate of Nicuesa's Central American adventure.
It was a tale of shipwreck and starvation and attrition. A
rescue party sent out to find survivors came upon Nicuesa
"dried up with extreme hunger, filthy and horrible to be-
hold." 9 He and his remaining forty men—out of 700—were
brought to Darien, which lay within Nicuesa's jurisdiction
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according to the royal charter. Balboa had no intention of yielding his firm, though highly unofficial, power to the wretched Nicuesa and sent him out to sea again, where he was lost.

Shrewd, fair by the standards of his time, particularly enlightened in his treatment of the Indians, Balboa built a powerful settlement at Darien. He married the daughter of a native chief, persuaded his father-in-law to embrace Christianity, and made submissive subjects out of the Indians. They brought him gold, which he valued much more than they, and regaled him with tantalizing stories of the wealth that lay near at hand, in kingdoms to the south or to the west.

Balboa communicated these stories to his monarch, King Ferdinand. Since his consort’s death in 1504, Ferdinand had ruled Castile as regent for his deranged and widowed daughter, Joanna the Mad, while remaining King of Aragon as well. In January, 1513, Balboa told the sovereign that he had discovered “great secrets of marvelous riches,” and spoke of “many rich mines . . . gold and wealth with which a great part of the world can be conquered. I have learned it in various ways, putting some to the torture, treating some with love and giving Spanish things to some.”

He asked for arms, provisions, materials for constructing ships, and a thousand men from the settlement on Hispaniola.

He could not get all that he requested, but shortly he embarked on his expedition to the land of boundless gold, taking with him 190 Spaniards and a number of Indian guides. They went by ship from Darien to the narrowest part of the Isthmus, where merely a sixty-mile-wide strip of land divided the oceans (though Balboa could only guess at that). Then he struck out overland for the western ocean, the gateway to the realm of gold. When hostile tribes barred
his way, Balboa used diplomatic wiles to wheedle his way past them. At last he came to the summit of the lone hill that lay between him and the sea. Balboa advanced alone, and, in the scene immortalized in Keats' sonnet, "with eagle eyes . . . stared at the Pacific and all his men Look'd at each other with a wild surmise, Silent, upon a peak in Darien." Before him lay the broad Pacific. It was a memorable day—September 25, 1513. The perplexing geography of the New World now seemed unraveled: a mere strip of land lay between two mighty seas, and little could prevent the Spaniards from continuing down the western coast of South America as they had begun to do in the east. And on that western coast, so all the Indians said, lay the golden kingdom.

Through a pardonable poetic oversight, Keats credited the discovery of the Pacific not to Balboa but to "stout Cortez." Like Columbus, Balboa had shown the way; and like him, he would not taste the sweetness of his discovery.

King Ferdinand, disturbed by the irregular way Balboa had come to power, appointed the savage and sinister Pedro Arias de Avila, or simply "Pedrarias," as Governor of Darien. The King gave Balboa the resounding title of adelantado (governor) of the South Sea, but made him subordinate to Pedrarias. For five years Pedrarias allowed Balboa to conduct further explorations along the Pacific shore of Central America. Then, falsely suspecting treason, he sent Francisco Pizarro to arrest Balboa. The adelantado was tried, condemned to death, and speedily beheaded. An unchallenged tyrant now, Pedrarias descended heavily on the Indians of Panamá and ruled in terror for another dozen years until his death in 1530.

Balboa's investigations had alerted the Spaniards to the
probable existence of a rich empire on the western coast of South America, and in time that empire would be revealed to be no myth at all, but the Peru of the Incas. However, it happened that a different golden realm was the first to fall.

Spaniards commanded by Juan de Grijalva set out from Cuba in 1518 on a voyage of reconnaissance. They landed on the Caribbean coast of Mexico, which was a land unknown to them. Some Spaniards had been shipwrecked off Yucatán in 1511 and had fallen into the hands of the Mayas, but nothing had been heard from them at the time Grijalva sailed. Besides, his landing was made at an entirely different part of Mexico.

The strangers’ stay was short, but it aroused great interest among the Mexicans. Only a generation before, a tribe known as the Aztecs had succeeded in imposing its authority over most of central Mexico. The Aztecs ruled in splendor from their inland capital of Tenochtitlán, at the present-day site of Mexico City; but their king, the moody, superstitious Moctezuma II, was troubled by a prophecy that bearded white-skinned gods would come one day out of the eastern ocean to relieve him of his kingdom. Grijalva and his men were mistaken for these divine visitors. Moctezuma hastened to send loads of jewelry, precious stones, capes of feathers, and elegant articles of bright gold as gifts. Grijalva returned to Cuba laden with treasure.

Diego de Velásquez, a veteran of Columbus’ voyages, now ruled Cuba. He was irritated with Grijalva for not having ventured farther inland, and chose a different man to go back to Mexico on a mission of conquest. He selected Hernando Cortés, a lively, even flamboyant, Spaniard of unswerving courage. Cortés quickly assembled a picked party. Velásquez was unnerved by the young Spaniard’s show of ambition and tried to revoke the appointment; but in 1519 Cortés set out with a fleet of eleven ships, 500
men, thirteen musketeers, thirty-two crossbowmen, sixteen horses, and seven cannons hardly larger than toys.

The implausible story of Cortés' achievement is well known. With this tiny army he marched successfully across Mexico and brought the invincible Aztecs quickly to defeat. He had many advantages: the charismatic nature of his own leadership, the willingness of vassal Indian tribes to ally themselves with the Spaniards against the Aztecs, and the services of a slave girl named Malinal, or Dona Marina, who was his interpreter. Cortés had rescued one of the Spaniards shipwrecked off Yucatán in 1511, and he spoke the Mayan language; so did Malinal, who learned her Spanish from him. Thereafter she was the go-between through whom Cortés could communicate his precise wishes to the natives of Mexico.

As Cortés marched westward toward Tenochtitlán, the frightened Moctezuma attempted to placate him with rich gifts. Aztec ambassadors met the invaders laden with treasure. Bernal Díaz, one of Cortés' soldiers and probably the most reliable chronicler of the conquest, left this description of the gifts of Moctezuma:

"The first article presented was a wheel like a sun, as big as a cartwheel, with many sorts of pictures on it, the whole of fine gold, and a wonderful thing to behold. . . . Then another wheel was presented of greater size made of silver of great brilliancy in imitation of the moon with other figures on it, and this was of great value as it was very heavy. . . . Then we were brought twenty golden ducks, beautifully worked and very natural looking, and some ornaments like dogs, and many articles of gold worked in the shape of tigers and lions and monkeys, and ten collars beautifully worked and other necklaces; and twelve arrows and a bow with its string, and two rods like staffs of justice, five palms long, all in beautiful hollow work of gold. Then there
were presented crests of gold and plumes of rich green feathers, and others of silver, and fans of the same material, and deer copied in hollow gold...and so many other things were there that it is useless my trying to describe them for I know not how to do it.”

Cortés responded with two shirts and some blue glass beads for each ambassador, and requested an audience with Moctezuma at Tenochtitlán. This the Aztec ruler was unwilling to grant; but the Spaniards proceeded inland, picking up allies as they went, and entered Tenochtitlán unopposed. Soon Moctezuma was a captive, and Cortés was in command. Although the Spaniards suffered some severe reverses later in the conquest, they were unquestioned masters of Mexico by the summer of 1521.

Meanwhile the first shipload of Mexican gold was on the way to Spain—for Cortés, conscious of the fact that Governor Velásquez had revoked his permission to invade Mexico, was eager to have the blessing of the Spanish King. He had sent envoys and a mass of golden treasure to his monarch, by way of a first installment, and the arrival of the golden cargo provoked amazement in Europe.

Spain had a new ruler now, one of the most remarkable men of his era—the Emperor Charles V. He was just twenty years old when the envoys from Cortés reached him in March, 1520, but already he was the master of the greatest empire since the time of Charlemagne. It was the destiny of Charles V to preside over much of the quest for El Dorado.

A series of dynastic accidents had given this not very aggressive young man his startling collection of crowns. His grandparents on one side were Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile; on the other they were the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I and Mary, Duchess of Burgundy. Charles was born in 1500; six years later his father, Philip of Burgundy, died with the boy as his sole heir. From him
Charles inherited an assortment of duchies in the Netherlands and France. Since his mother, Joanna of Castile, was insane, his grandfather, Maximilian of Habsburg, acted as his regent for these properties. His grandfather Ferdinand of Aragon was already serving as the regent for Castile. When Ferdinand died in 1516, Charles inherited both Aragon and Castile, technically sharing the throne with his demented mother. Finally, in 1519, Charles secured the succession to the main Habsburg domain—the Holy Roman Empire—which included much of Germany and Austria. Thus, before he was twenty he found himself ruling over Spain, the Low Countries, a substantial segment of France, most of Germany, Austria, a fair portion of Italy, and scattered provinces elsewhere in Europe—and, of course, through the throne of Castile he also claimed possession of the entire New World. "God has set you on the path towards a world monarchy," his chief minister told him in 1519.

Charles' Spanish domains were restless under his rule. He made his first appearance in Spain in September, 1517—a solemn, ugly boy with the long Habsburg jaw, speaking no Spanish and surrounding himself with courtiers of Burgundy and Flanders. There was a curious strength in Charles, though, and in short order he made himself the acknowledged King of Castile and Aragon, subduing the protesting Spanish grandees by shrewd persuasion. Then he moved on, for the Emperor's life was going to be spent in an eternal and wearying shuttling from one to another of his many kingdoms.

He was back in Spain in the spring of 1520 when Cortés' gold arrived. By Castilian law, all treasure from the New World had to pass through Seville where a Casa de Contratación, or House of Trade, had been established through Isabella's decree in 1503. Until 1519, relatively little gold had passed through the customs house at Seville;
but now a great commotion was caused. An emissary from Velásquez in Cuba arrived to claim the gold, arguing that Cortés' mission had been unauthorized, and the Sevillian authorities promptly sequestered the whole cargo pending a royal decision. The envoys from Cortés and the gold of Moctezuma were brought to Charles at Tordesillas, where he was visiting his mother, Joanna.

The members of the court stared in amazement at the gleaming objects, and marveled at the master craftsmanship. One of those present was Albrecht Dürer, who exclaimed, "Never in all my born days have I seen anything which warmed my heart as much as these things." 12 Another awed viewer was the scholar Peter Martyr, who wrote to Pope Leo X, "I do not marvel at gold and precious stones, but am in a manner astonished to see the workmanship excel the substance. . . . And in my judgment, I never saw anything whose beauty might so allure the eye of man." 13

To Charles, the esthetics of Mexican gold mattered less than the economics of the cargo. He was heavily in debt, after a costly election campaign that gave him the crown of the Holy Roman Empire, and he welcomed any gold for its monetary value. Quickly he signified his approval of the American discoveries, and suggested that more such cargoes would be welcome. Then, in May, he took his leave of Spain without bothering to settle the dispute between Cortés and Velásquez. Such petty matters would always bore him. Cortés survived the opposition of the Cuban governor, and eventually won the favor of Charles V, who made him Governor and Captain-General of New Spain (Mexico). And the gold of the Aztecs continued to flow toward Seville.

5

None of the earlier explorers had known such success as Cortés. While they had found only islands populated by
naked Indians, he had encountered and conquered a civilization as rich and complex as any of Europe. They had found scattered outcroppings of gold; he had gained possession of a stunning treasurehouse. Were there other Mexicos waiting for the lucky and the bold?

Fired by ambition and greed, Spaniards by the hundreds set out to make their fortunes in the New World. Balboa's Darien was the radial point from which many expeditions spread, upward into Central America and downward toward South America. From Cortés' Mexico they moved north toward the pueblos of the American Southwest. Florida was explored and settled. By 1525, so many Spaniards were on the trail of gold that the Venetian Ambassador to Spain, Andrea Navagiero, expressed his surprise at the general depopulation of the country. Seville, he wrote, “was left almost to the women.”

New zones of treasure were uncovered all the time. One lay far down the eastern coast of South America, at the mouth of the Río de la Plata between present-day Uruguay and Argentina. An explorer named Juan de Solís sailed from Spain in 1515 with instructions to enter the South Sea (the Pacific) and journey northward along the western shore of South America to the Isthmus. To do that, he would have had to round Cape Horn or pass through the Strait of Magellan; but Magellan's voyage was still a few years in the future, and no one had any idea how far south one had to go before a sea route through the continent appeared.

Solís was an experienced navigator who had succeeded Amerigo Vespucci in the honored post of Pilot-Major of Spain. After touching the Brazilian coast at several points, he came to the huge mouth of the Plata in February, 1516, and named it El Mar Dulce, “the Freshwater Sea.” It seemed to offer the desired westward passage. But as Solís sailed inland along the Uruguayan bank of the river he was
set upon by Indians and killed. Some members of his expedi-
tion managed to return to Spain; others were cut off and
marooned and took up the life of castaways on the Uru-
guayan coast.

One of them was a Portuguese named Alejo García. García
and a few companions undertook a trek deep into the
mountainous heart of the continent, penetrating far enough
to hear rumors of a wealthy and civilized kingdom some-
where to the west. This was the Inca kingdom of Peru,
whose fame had reached in all directions. Balboa had heard
tales of it from the Indians of Panamá, north of Peru; here,
several years later, García picked up the same stories to the
east and south of Peru.

On the journey back to the eastern coast, García was
murdered by natives. The others returned to the mouth of
the Plata and were still living there when a Spanish expedi-
tion led by Sebastian Cabot turned up in 1526. Cabot was
Genoese in origin, English by upbringing—the son of the
celebrated navigator John Cabot, who had discovered
North America in 1497. Sebastian had left English service
in 1512 to sail for Spain; after the death of Solís, Charles V
had given him the title of Pilot-Major. The purpose of
Cabot's voyage was to find a westward route to the Spice
Islands, or East Indies, and so enable Spain to challenge the
Portuguese monopoly of the East Indian trade. By the papal
decree of 1493, the Spaniards had to remain west of the Line
of Demarcation, but in a round world they could reasonably
expect to reach the Spice Islands from the west if they could
only find a path around the American continents.

Cabot's commission instructed him “to discover the
Moluccas, Tarshish, Ophir, Cipangu, and Cathay, to barter
and load his ships with gold, silver, precious stones, pearls,
drugs, spices, silks, brocades, and other precious things.” 15
He headed down the Brazilian coast and came at length to
the body of water Solís had called El Mar Dulce. Cabot went ashore and was met by friendly Indians who gave him some objects of silver, leading him to name the great river the River of Silver, Río de la Plata.

He also encountered the survivors of Solís’ expedition. These men told him of Alejo García’s inland trek, and informed Cabot that “near the Sierra there is a white king, dressed like a Spaniard, and mines, and Indians bedecked in gold plates.” Cabot instantly dropped any plans to find the East Indies and decided to ascend the Plata until he found the place where “he could load a ship with gold and silver.”

When he had gone some hundred miles upstream, he obtained more silver from the natives. He asked after its origin, and they pointed westward and spoke of “the white king.” Indeed, it was Inca silver. Cabot proceeded until a waterfall blocked his ascent, then shifted to the Río Paraguay, which he followed upstream for about a thousand miles. Unfortunately, he did not seem to be getting any closer either to the Spice Islands or to the mysterious inland kingdom, and in 1529 he turned back with little to show for his three years of effort.

The persistent rumor of a great civilization in western South America drew a more determined response from Francisco Pizarro. Robust, courageous, stubborn, illiterate, cruel, and rapacious, Pizarro was the illegitimate, ill-favored son of a minor Spanish nobleman of the province of Estremadura, birthplace of many conquistadores. Spain offered him nothing better than a swineherd’s career, and he joined the crowd of adventurers that passed through Seville to the Americas early in the sixteenth century. Pizarro suffered with Ojeda on the Colombian shore in 1510; he became one of Balboa’s lieutenants, and was with him in the discovery of the South Sea. Pizarro was present when the young Indian chieftain told Balboa of the golden kingdom in the south.
The Gilded Man of Cundinamarca

Affixing himself next to the grim Pedrarias, Pizarro took part in the arrest and execution of Balboa. By 1521, he had some detailed news of the southern kingdom, which he now knew to be called Peru. A sailor named Pascual de Anda-goya had gone south from Panamá to the borders of the far-flung Inca empire. Pizarro, now about fifty and not yet wealthy, resolved to make Peru his own. The sensational example of Cortés stood before him as an ideal and as a model.

The first attempts were failures. The year 1527 saw Pizarro marooned on Gallo Island off the Pacific coast of Colombia, facing mutiny by his resentful men. They had come to doubt the existence of Peru, and all but thirteen of his followers deserted him. With maniacal persistence, Pizarro and his loyal thirteen sailed to Peru and landed at the town of Túmbez. It was only a provincial outpost of the great empire, but it was splendid enough, and they beheld its wonders with their own eyes. Then they returned to Panamá. Unable to gain support there, Pizarro sailed to Spain in the summer of 1528. He came before Emperor Charles at Toledo with llamas, fine woven fabrics of vicuña wool, and vessels of gold and silver. A new Mexico seemed within grasp.

For a year Pizarro haunted the court. Charles absented himself to Italy, but in July, 1529, Pizarro received a capitulación signed by the Queen Regent, assigning him high rank and authorizing him to conquer Peru. The ex-swine-herd now bore the titles of governor, captain-general, adelantado, and alguacil-mayor of Peru for life. All that remained was the conquest itself.

He recruited men of Estremadura, including four of his brothers and half-brothers. Late in 1530 the expedition set out: 180 men, 27 horses. Pizarro spent a short time at Panamá, then began his march down the coast of South
America, establishing bases as he went and collecting a healthy booty in gold, silver, and emeralds. The tropical sun was fierce on Spanish mail and quilted jackets, but the lure of gold obliterated all hardships.

Pizarro had studied the campaigns of Cortés, who was his kinsman, and he did a superb job of imitating them. Though he was an unprepossessing man who lacked the animal vitality of the magnetic Cortés, Pizarro bound his men in a web of loyalty through an example of total dedication. Like Cortés, he was invading an empire that had only recently been assembled by a conquering army, and so could easily be taken apart again. In Peru as in Mexico there were legends of bearded white gods who must be received with respect. And here, too, society had a pyramidal structure, so that the removal of the man at the top would transfer all power to the Spaniards.

Marching through Peru, Pizarro learned of one more favorable event: a civil war between the reigning Inca, Atahualpa, and his half-brother Huascar. Atahualpa, it seemed, was a usurper who had deposed Huascar in 1532. In November of that year Pizarro entered the Peruvian town of Cajamarca after a quick march through a country weakened by the civil war. Atahualpa unwisely came into Cajamarca to speak with the Spaniards. He was borne in on a litter carried by Inca nobles, so laden with jewelry that, one Spaniard wrote, “they blazed like the sun.”

Pizarro took a direct approach. He had his chaplain invite Atahualpa to become a Christian. The Inca, who regarded himself as a living god, declined, casually tossing the Bible to the ground. At a signal from Pizarro, Spanish muskets opened fire, and in the confusion Atahualpa was made a prisoner. Without the loss of a man the Spaniards had taken Peru, for the master of Atahualpa was the master of the empire.
The Gilded Man of Cundinamarca

And this was the land of gold. What Cortés had found in Mexico was eclipsed by the treasure of the Incas. Francisco López de Gómar, whose Crónica de Indias and Historia de la Conquista de Nueva-España were published at Seville in the middle of the sixteenth century, set down this account of the magnificence of Atahuallpa (the translation is Sir Walter Raleigh's):

“All the vessels of his home, table, and kitchen were of gold and silver, and the meanest of silver and copper for strength and hardness of the metal. He had in his wardrobe hollow statues of gold which seemed giants, and the figures in proportion and bigness of all the beasts, birds, trees, and herbs, that the earth bringeth forth: and of all the fishes that the sea or waters of his kingdom breedeth. He had also ropes, budgets, chests and troughs of gold and silver, heaps of billets of gold that seemed wood, marked out to burn.” 17

Another contemporary chronicler was Garcilaso de la Vega, son of a Spanish father and Peruvian mother. Garcilaso, called “the Inca,” was born in 1539, and wrote a lengthy account of the conquest of Peru about 1600. Garcilaso described the gardens of Atahuallpa’s palace:

“Here were planted the finest trees and the most beautiful flowers and sweet-smelling herbs in the kingdom, while quantities of others were reproduced in gold and silver, at every stage of their growth, from the sprout that hardly shows above the earth, to the full-blown plant, in complete maturity. There were also fields of corn with silver stalks and gold ears, on which the leaves, grains, and even the corn silk were shown. In addition to all this, there were all kinds of gold and silver animals in these gardens, such as rabbits, mice, lizards, snakes, butterflies, foxes, and wildcats (there being no domestic cats). Then there were birds set in the trees, as though they were about to sing, and others bent over the flowers, breathing in their nectar. There were roe
deer and deer, lions and tigers, all the animals in creation, in fact, each placed just where it should be.

“Each one of these mansions had its bathing suite, with large gold and silver basins into which the water flowed through pipes made of the same metals. And the warm springs in which the Incas went to bathe were also ornamented with very finely wrought gold trimmings.” 18

To the Incas, gold was precious purely for its ornamental value. Garcilaso tells us, “Nothing could be bought or sold in their kingdom, where there was neither gold nor silver coin, and these metals could not be considered otherwise than as superfluous, since they could not be eaten, nor could one buy anything to eat with them. Indeed, they were esteemed only for their beauty and brilliance, as being suitable for enhancing that of royal palaces, Sun temples and convents for virgins.” 19 Indeed throughout all the New World gold and silver had no monetary value, even in those lands where—unlike Peru—private commerce was customary. José de Acosta, whose Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias of 1590 is one of the most useful and fascinating accounts of the Americas in the era of discovery, remarked that “We find not that the Indians in former times used gold, silver, or any other metal for money, and for the price of things, but only for ornament.... They had some other things of greater esteem, which went current amongst them for price, and instead of coin: and unto this day this custom continues among the Indians, as in the Provinces of Mexico, instead of money they use cacao (which is a small fruit) and therewith buy what they will. In Peru they use coca to the same end (the which is a leaf the Indians esteem much) as in Paraguay, they have stamps of iron for coin, and cotton woven in Saint Croix, of the Sierra.” 20

Though the Indians were perplexed to find the Spaniards placing such a high value on the yellow metal, they
were quick to sense that only through gold could they keep their new masters content. Atahuallpa, Pizarro's captive, offered a mighty ransom for his freedom. He would, he said, cover the floor of his cell with gold. The cell was about 25 feet by 17 in area, and the Spaniards were dazzled into silence by the offer. Mistaking their silence for rejection, the Inca increased his bid, and volunteered to fill the room in three dimensions, not merely in two, loading it with gold as high as he could reach. A line was duly drawn nine feet from the floor, and Atahuallpa was given two months to obtain the gold. In addition, the Inca undertook to fill an adjoining room of smaller size with silver.

From every part of the huge empire came llama-loads of gold for the Inca's ransom. Gold ornaments and utensils were stripped from the palaces and temples. The distances were great, and the room filled slowly, but it filled. Some of the slabs of gold plate weighed twenty-five pounds apiece. An unbelievable treasure accumulated at Cajamarca. Pizarro's men demanded a division of the spoils even before the ransom was complete. The royal fifth was weighed out, and Pizarro despatched his brother Hernando to Spain with it. The rest was melted down, despite the objections of a few of the more cultured Spaniards, who grieved to see items of such rare and delicate workmanship reduced to mere bullion. Gold by the weight was what Pizarro's men craved, though, and teams of Indian goldsmiths worked day and night for a full month, reducing to uniform yellow ingots the goblets, ewers, and vases, the temple ornaments, the fanciful golden birds and animals, the elegant utensils and cunning artifacts.

The booty was weighed at 1,326,539 golden pesos or pesos de oro. Calculating the modern cash value of this cache is difficult; the peso de oro ("weight of gold") was a unit of measure, not of currency, in sixteenth-century Spain.

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But the *peso de oro* was equivalent in weight to the gold coin known as the *castellano*, which had been minted in Spain until 1497. The *castellano*’s weight had been fixed at one one-hundredth of a Spanish pound of fine gold, or .001014 pound avoirdupois. That was roughly a sixth of an ounce, worth slightly less than $6 at the post-1933 price of gold.

But the purchasing power of the *castellano* in 1533 was considerable, though it underwent a sharp decline as American gold unbalanced the economy of Europe later in the century. Moreover, the modern price of gold is an artificially pegged figure that bears no necessary relation to true demand. Prescott, writing in 1847, calculated the buying power of the *castellano* at about $11.67 in United States currency of his day, putting the overall worth of Atahuallpa’s ransom above $15,000,000. Allowing for a century and a quarter of further inflation, we can say that the *castellano* or *peso de oro* of Pizarro’s day bought as much as $100 or so will buy today, which would give the Inca’s gold a value of over $150,000,000.

Pizarro solemnly divided the spoils. His own share was 57,222 pesos of gold, some silver, and the solid gold throne of the Inca, valued at 25,000 golden pesos. The other leading figures of the conquest did nearly as well. The officers became millionaires; the ordinary soldiers grew wealthy as dukes. Of course, their wealth was all in the form of metal, valuable in Spain but not overly useful in Peru. One immediate result of the bonanza was a surfeit of gold that produced sudden and violent inflation among the *conquistadores*. A bottle of wine changed hands for sixty golden pesos, a sword for forty or fifty, a cloak for a hundred, a pair of shoes for forty, a good horse for several thousand. Ten *pesos de oro* could buy many acres of land in Castile; in Peru it was the price of a quire of paper. The treasure of the Incas made a mockery of the traditional scale of European values. Within
twenty years, one Spaniard was offering 10,000 golden pesos—perhaps a million dollars in modern purchasing power—for an ordinary saddle-horse, and he found no sellers.

Atahuallpa still languished a prisoner. In a rash moment, Pizarro allowed a belligerent faction among his men to bring him to trial on charges of idolatry, polygamy, treason against the Spaniards, the murder of his half-brother Huascar, and other absurd charges. Swiftly he was sentenced to death, and executed on August 29, 1533. Instantly the treasure-trains still en route to Cajamarca halted. The bearers of gold for the ransom hurled their burdens into rivers and lakes. Among the lost items, so it was said, was a chain of gold 700 feet long, weighing several tons. The casual treachery of the Spaniards had cost them heavily in gold, and it cost them the peace of Peru as well, for while Atahuallpa alive was a helpless puppet, Atahuallpa dead was the martyred symbol of revolt. It now became necessary for the Spaniards to follow their easy and bloodless conquest with a series of taxing military campaigns before Peru was finally subdued.

The Casa de Contratación at Seville enjoyed a steady stream of gold. Between 1516 and 1520 it had recorded imports totalling 993,000 pesos de oro—the last output of the dwindling West Indian mines, and the first dividends from Panamá. From 1521 to 1525, only 134,000 pesos de oro arrived. The first impact of Cortés’ conquest of Mexico was felt in the statistics for 1526–30, which showed a new high figure of 1,038,000 pesos de oro. The totals for 1531–35 reflect the yield both of Mexico and Peru: 1,650,000 pesos de oro. In another five years, the harvest had risen steeply: 3,937,000 pesos de oro between 1536 and 1540.

Spain was enriched by the Indies, although, as we will see, all this wealth brought little prosperity to the homeland.
The statistics compiled at Seville showed a rising trend, but yet the golden flow itself diminished rapidly once the treasures of temples and palaces were looted. It was easy to grab golden objects that had been accumulated over generations; prying new supplies of gold from the earth took more time. Between 1493 and 1530, more than 98% of the treasure received at Seville was gold. Then the scales tipped, and between 1531 and 1550 more than 85% of what came in was silver, far less valuable by the ounce. At the peak of Spanish imperialism—1591—95—the New World would produce treasure to the value of 35,185,000 pesos de oro, but 98.5% of this would be in silver.

Mexico and Peru were not enough, then. Their treasuries were cleaned of gold, and the natives, weakened by disease and sullen from mistreatment, had little incentive to dig more for their Spanish masters. Yet the Americas were Spanish imperialism—1591—95—the New World would repay its finders as Mexico had repaid Cortés and Peru Pizarro?

The legends of golden kingdoms persisted. Balboa and Solís and Cabot had sniffed out the wealth of Peru, and Pizarro had found it. Now came new stories, tales of the gilded man of Cundinamarca, El Dorado, he who coated his skin in precious dust. The rumors of Peru had proved to be no fantasies. The quest for El Dorado commenced in earnest, with the shining examples of Cortés and Pizarro to serve as spurs for the brave.