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MERCEDES OF CASTILE;

OR,

THE VOYAGE TO CATHAY.

BY J. FENIMORE COOPER.

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I fill this cup to one made up of loveliness alone,  
A woman, of her gentle sex the seeming paragon;  
To whom the better elements and kindly stars have given  
A form so fair, that, like the air, 'tis less of earth than heaven.

*Pinkney.*

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COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

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NEW EDITION.

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NEW YORK:
STRINGER AND TOWNSEND.

1856

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MERCEDES OF CASTILE.

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J. FENIMORE COOPER,

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the Northern District of New York.

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PREFACE.

So much has been written of late years, touching the discovery of America, that it would not be at all surprising should there exist a disposition in a certain class of readers to deny the accuracy of all the statements in this work. Some may refer to history, with a view to prove that there never were such persons as our hero and heroine, and fancy that by establishing these facts, they completely destroy the authenticity of the whole book. In answer to this anticipated objection, we will state, that after carefully perusing several of the Spanish writers, from Cervantes to the translator of the journal of Columbus, the Alpha and Omega of peninsular literature, and after having read both Irving and Prescott from beginning to end, we do not find a syllable in either of them, that we understand to be conclusive evidence, or indeed to be any evidence at all, on the portions of our subject that are likely to be disputed. Until some solid affirmative proof, therefore, can be produced against us, we shall hold our case to be made out, and rest our claims to be believed on the authority of our own statements. Nor do we think

there is any thing either unreasonable or unusual in this course, as perhaps the greater portion of that which is daily and hourly offered to the credence of the American public, rests on the same species of testimony,—with the trifling difference that we state truths, with a profession of fiction, while the great moral caterers of the age state fiction with the profession of truth. If any advantage can be fairly obtained over us, in consequence of this trifling discrepancy, we must submit.

There is one point, notwithstanding, concerning which it may be well to be frank at once. The narrative of the “Voyage to Cathay,” has been written with the journal of the Admiral before us; or, rather with all of that journal, that has been given to the world through the agency of a very incompetent and meagre editor. Nothing is plainer than the general fact that this person did not always understand his author, and in one particular circumstance he has written so obscurely, as not a little to embarrass even a novelist, whose functions naturally include an entire familiarity with the thoughts, emotions, characters, and, occasionally, with the unknown fates of the subjects of his pen. The nautical day formerly commenced at meridian, and with all our native ingenuity and high professional prerogatives we have not been able to discover whether the editor of the journal has adopted that mode of counting time, or whether he has condescended to use the

more vulgar and irrational practice of landmen. It is our opinion, however, that in the spirit of impartiality which becomes an historian, he has adopted both. This little peculiarity might possibly embarrass a superficial critic; but accurate critics being so very common, we feel no concern on this head, well knowing that they will be much more apt to wink at these minor inconsistencies, than to pass over an error of the press, or a comma with a broken tail. As we wish to live on good terms with this useful class of our fellow-creatures, we have directed the printers to mis-spell some eight or ten words for their convenience, and to save them from head-aches, have honestly stated this principal difficulty ourselves.

Should the publicity which is now given to the consequences of commencing a day in the middle, have the effect to induce the government to order that it shall, in future, with all American seamen, commence at one of its ends, something will be gained in the way of simplicity, and the writing of novels will, in-so-much, be rendered easier and more agreeable.

As respects the minor characters of this work, very little need be said. Every one knows that Columbus had seamen in his vessels, and that he brought some of the natives of the islands he had discovered, back with him to Spain. The reader is now made much more intimately acquainted with certain of

these individuals, we will venture to say, that he can be possibly by the perusal of any work previously written. As for the subordinate incidents connected with the more familiar events of the age, it is hoped they will be found so completely to fill up this branch of the subject, as to render future investigations unnecessary.

MERCEDES OF CASTILE.

CHAPTER I.

“There was knocking that shook the marble floor,
And a voice at the gate, which said —
“That the Cid Ruy Diez, the Campeador,
Was there in his arms array'd.”——

MRS. HEMANS.

WHETHER we take the pictures of the inimitable Cervantes, or of that scarcely less meritorious author from whom Le Sage has borrowed his immortal tale, for our guides; whether we confide in the graver legends of history, or put our trust in the accounts of modern travellers, the time has scarcely ever existed when the inns of Spain were good, or the roads safe. These are two of the blessings of civilization which the people of the peninsula would really seem destined never to attain; for, in all ages, we hear, or have heard, of wrongs done the traveller equally by the robber and the host. If such are the facts to-day, such also were the facts in the middle of the fifteenth century the period to which we desire to carry back the reader in imagination.

At the commencement of the month of October, in the year of our Lord 1469, John of Trastamara reigned in Aragon, holding his court at a place called Zaragoza, a town lying on the Ebro, the name of which is supposed to be a corruption of Cæsar Augustus, and a city that has become celebrated in our own times, under the more Anglicised term of Saragossa, for its deeds in arms. John of

Trastamara, or, as it was more usual to style him, agreeably to the nomenclature of kings, John II., was one of the most sagacious monarchs of his age; but he had become impoverished by many conflicts with the turbulent, or, as it may be more courtly to say, the liberty-loving Catalonians; had frequently enough to do to maintain his seat on the throne; possessed a party-coloured empire that included within its sway, besides his native Aragon, with its dependencies of Valencia and Catalonia, Sicily and the Balearic Islands, with some very questionable rights in Navarre. By the will of his elder brother and predecessor, the crown of Naples had descended to an illegitimate son of the latter, else would that kingdom have been added to the list. The King of Aragon had seen a long and troubled reign, and, at this very moment, his treasury was nearly exhausted, by his efforts to subdue the truculent Catalans, though he was nearer a triumph than he could then foresee, his competitor, the Duke of Lorraine, dying suddenly, only two short months after the precise period chosen for the commencement of our tale. But it is denied to man to look into the future, and on the 9th of the month just mentioned, the ingenuity of the royal treasurer was most sorely taxed, there having arisen an unexpected demand for a considerable sum of money, at the very moment that the army was about to disband itself for the want of pay, and the public coffers contained only the very moderate sum of three hundred *Enriques*, or Henrys; a gold coin named after a previous monarch, and which had a value not far from that of the modern ducat, or our own quarter eagle. The matter, however, was too pressing to be deferred, and even the objects of the war were considered as secondary to those connected with this suddenly-conceived, and more private enterprise. Councils were held, money-dealers were cajoled or frightened, and the confidants of the court were very manifestly in a state of great and earnest excitement. At length, the time of preparation appeared to be passed and the instant of action arrived. Curiosity was relieved, and the citizens of Saragossa were permitted to know that their sovereign was about to send a solemn embassy, on matters of high moment, to his neighbour, kinsman, and ally, the monarch of Castile. In 1469, Henry, also of

Trastamara, sat upon the throne of the adjoining kingdom, under the title of Henry IV. He was the grandson, in the male line, of the brother of John II.'s father, and consequently, a first-cousin, once removed, of the monarch of Aragon. Notwithstanding this affinity, and the strong family interests that might be supposed to unite them, it required many friendly embassies to preserve the peace between the two monarchs; and the announcement of that which was about to depart, produced more satisfaction than wonder in the streets of the town.

Henry of Castile, though he reigned over broader and richer peninsular territories, than his relative of Aragon, had his cares and troubles, also. He had been twice married, having repudiated his first consort, Blanche of Aragon, to wed Joanna of Portugal, a princess of a levity of character so marked, as not only to bring great scandal on the court generally, but to throw so much distrust on the birth of her only child, a daughter, as to push discontent to disaffection, and eventually to deprive the infant itself of the rights of royalty. Henry's father, like himself, had been twice married, and the issue of the second union was a son and a daughter, Alfonso and Isabella; the latter becoming subsequently illustrious, under the double titles of the Queen of Castile, and of the Catholic. The luxurious impotency of Henry, as a monarch, had driven a portion of his subjects into open rebellion. Three years preceding that selected for our opening, his brother Alfonso had been proclaimed king in his stead, and a civil war had raged throughout his provinces. This war had been recently terminated by the death of Alfonso, when the peace of the kingdom was temporarily restored by a treaty, in which Henry consented to the setting aside of his own daughter—or rather of the daughter of Joanna of Portugal—and to the recognition of his half-sister Isabella, as the rightful heiress of the throne. The last concession was the result of dire necessity, and, as might have been expected, it led to many secret and violent measures, with a view to defeat its objects. Among the other expedients adopted by the king, or it might be better to say, by his favourites, the inaction and indolence of the self-indulgent but kind-hearted prince being proverbial, with a view to counteract

the probable consequences of the expected accession of Isabella, were various schemes to control her will, and guide her policy, by giving her hand, first to a subject, with a view to reduce her power, and subsequently to various foreign princes, who were thought to be more or less suited to the furtherance of such schemes. Just at this moment, indeed, the marriage of the princess was one of the greatest objects of Spanish prudence. The son of the King of Aragon was one of the suitors for the hand of Isabella, and most of those who heard of the intended departure of the embassy, naturally enough believed that the mission had some connection with that great stroke of Aragonese policy.

Isabella had the reputation of learning, modesty, discretion, piety and beauty, besides being the acknowledged heiress of so enviable a crown; and there were many competitors for her hand. Among them were to be ranked French, English and Portuguese princes, besides him of Aragon to whom we have already alluded. Different favourites supported different pretenders, struggling to effect their several purposes by the usual intrigues of courtiers and partisans; while the royal maiden, herself, who was the object of so much competition and rivalry, observed a discreet and womanly decorum, even while firmly bent on indulging her most womanly and dearest sentiments. Her brother, the king, was in the south, pursuing his pleasures, and, long accustomed to dwell in comparative solitude, the princess was earnestly occupied in arranging her own affairs, in a way that she believed would most conduce to her own happiness. After several attempts to entrap her person, from which she had only escaped by the prompt succour of the forces of her friends, she had taken refuge in Leon, in the capital of which province, or kingdom as it was sometimes called, Valladolid, she temporarily took up her abode. As Henry, however, still remained in the vicinity of Granada, it is in that direction we must look for the route taken by the embassy.

The cortège left Saragossa, by one of the southern gates, early in the morning of a glorious autumnal day. There was the usual escort of lances, for this the troubled state of the country demanded; bearded nobles well mailed, for few, who offered an inducement to the plunderer, ventured

on the highway without this precaution; a long train of sumpter mules, and a host of those who, by their guise, were half menials and half soldiers. The gallant display drew crowds after the horses' heels, and, together with some prayers for success, a vast deal of crude and shallow conjecture, as is still the practice with the uninstructed and gossiping, was lavished on the probable objects and results of the journey. But curiosity has its limits, and even the gossip occasionally grows weary; and by the time the sun was setting, most of the multitude had already forgotten to think and speak of the parade of the morning. As the night drew on, however, the late pageant was still the subject of discourse between two soldiers, who belonged to the guard of the western gate, or that which opened on the road to the province of Burgos. These worthies were loitering away the hours, in the listless manner common to men on watch, and the spirit of discussion and of critical censure had survived the thoughts and bustle of the day.

"If Don Alonso de Carbajal thinketh to ride far in that guise," observed the elder of the two idlers, "he would do well to look sharp to his followers, for the army of Aragon never sent forth a more scurvily-appointed guard than that he hath this day led through the southern gate, notwithstanding the glitter of housings, and the clangour of trumpets. We could have furnished lances from Valencia more befitting a king's embassy, I tell thee, Diego; ay, and worthier knights to lead them, than these of Aragon. But if the king is content, it ill becomes soldiers, like thee and me, to be dissatisfied."

"There are many who think, Roderique, that it had been better to spare the money lavished in this courtly letter-writing, to pay the brave men who so freely shed their blood in order to subdue the rebellious Barcelans."

"This is always the way, boy, between debtor and creditor. Don John owes you a few maravedis, and you grudge him every Enriques he spends on his necessities. I am an older soldier, and have learned the art of paying myself, when the treasury is too poor to save me the trouble."

"That might do in a foreign war, when one is battling against the Moor, for instance; but, after all, these Catalans are as good Christians as we are ourselves; some of

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