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Las Casas 'The Apostle of the Indies'

Alice J. Knight

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LAS CASAS
"THE APOSTLE OF THE INDIES"



D. FR. BARTHOLOME DE LAS CASAS

*Del Orden de Predicadores, Obispo de Chiapas,
Varon apostolico y el mas glorioso de los filantropos
de las Indias.*

*Nació en Sevilla el año de 1474, y murió en México
el de 1566.*

Bartholomé De Las Casas

Frontispiece

TO
MY FRIEND AND BISHOP,

The Right Reverend
Robert Lewis Paddock, D.D.

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FOREWORD

Early American history is full of interest and romance. Great figures move across the scene. Columbus, Ponce de Leon, Cortez, Alvarado, Pizarro,—every schoolboy is familiar with their names and deeds. But one man there is that stands out conspicuously among these heroes of discovery and conquest, one not bent on fame and glory, not possessed of that greed for gold that led to so much ruthless cruelty toward the natives of the New World,—a man consumed with one burning desire: to spend himself in the service of others, to protect and save the weak and helpless. What he himself might suffer in the performance of this work mattered not at all.

Strange that to so many even the name of this man is unknown! Yet for more than fifty years no one either in all the New World or in Spain was more prominently before the eyes of all than was Las Casas, the great "Apostle of the Indies." Not only as a missionary, but as an historian, a philanthropist, a man of business, a ruler in the Church, he towers above even the notable men of that most remarkable time. His noble, self-denying, heroic life, spent [Pg 8] in untiring service to God and man, is an inspiration and an example much needed in this materialistic, money-getting, ease-loving age.

Alice J. Knight.

Hood River, Oregon.
June, 1917.

LAS CASAS

CHAPTER I

BARTOLOMÉ THE YOUTH

Whenever we hear of a famous man,—whether he be artist, author, statesman, soldier, scientist, great traveler, or missionary,—we like to know what sort of a boy he was. We are curious about his home, his school, his parents, his friends, and all the various influences that helped to make him the man he was. Such knowledge gives us a better understanding of his after life, and a fuller sympathy with his aims and achievements.

Although I have headed this chapter "Bartolomé the Youth," we know comparatively little of Las Casas until he was about twenty-eight years old. In later life we find him impetuous, loving, tireless in energy, with a fiery temper that blazed out in quick wrath against all injustice and cruelty toward the weak and helpless, possessing a brilliant mind and great talents, never giving up striving against the wrong, and never knowing when he was beaten. [Pg 10] These qualities he must have possessed in some measure as a boy, but, unfortunately, no historian has opened up for us those early pages.

Bartolomé was born in the city of Seville, Spain, in the year 1474. We are not told the day of the month. Of his mother we know nothing, but his father was Pedro de Casaus. He was of French descent, but the family had lived in Spain for over two hundred years, and because of valuable aid given to one of the Spanish kings in the wars against the Moors, they had been ennobled, and after a time the name lost its French spelling and took the Spanish form, Las Casas.

Bartolomé certainly lived in very interesting times. When he was between eighteen and nineteen years of age Columbus came to Seville on his return from his first voyage, which resulted in the discovery of the West India Islands. He brought with him many strange and wonderful things,—birds of brilliant color, such as had never been seen before, gold and pearls, and, most wonderful of all,

six Indians. We can imagine the crowds of people who must have followed that little procession as it passed through the streets of the city, pushing and crowding one another to get a sight of the great Admiral and the men who had sailed with him over unknown waters, and especially of the painted red men, who were, I am sure, [Pg 11] quite as curious on their part, and probably badly frightened besides.

It is difficult for us to understand now how much courage it took in those times to put to sea in frail little caravels, which were all the adventurer had, and go sailing over the waste of waters, not knowing what was ahead of him, or if he would ever find land on the other side. The rude maps of that day still showed a great Sea of Darkness. Dragons and all sorts of frightful sea-monsters were pictured in the unexplored parts of the ocean, and the popular idea was that if the daring mariner should sail too far over the slope of the round globe, he might be drawn by force of gravitation into a fiery gulf and never come back to his friends again. So the men that thus ventured were heroes in the eyes of the people. Never had such a voyage been heard of as the great Admiral had made, and all, from the King and Queen to the little street boys, were eager to hear about it.

Although he does not mention it, it is probable that Las Casas often saw Columbus in his father's house. Pedro de Casas, Bartolomé's father, and his uncle, Francisco de Penalosa, both went out with the Admiral on his second voyage. Columbus had then been made Viceroy of the Indies, and Bartolomé's father was on his staff, while his uncle commanded the soldiers. One of the Indians that Columbus [Pg 12] brought home from the first expedition he gave to Pedro de Casas, but the good Queen would not allow these Indians to be kept as slaves, and insisted that they should be sent back at once. All six had been baptized at Barcelona, with the King and Queen,—Ferdinand and Isabella,—as godfather and godmother; and when, soon after this, one of them died, people said he was the first Indian to go to Heaven.

Bartolomé's uncle remained in the Indies for three years, and returning, shortly afterward died in battle with the Moors. His father did not come home until 1500.

While his father and uncle were away, Bartolomé was studying at the famous university of Salamanca, where he took his degree as doctor of laws just previous to his father's return.

Very naturally, now that his education was finished, the young man's thoughts turned to the Indies. He seems to have gone out, as did the other colonists, with the idea of making money. Wealth and power appeared very desirable things to possess. How little he dreamed of the future that was before him! He knew not that the time was coming when he should give up all that he had,—money, time, strength, and talents,—for the sake of the great, deathless principles of liberty, justice, and mercy. All unknowing, he was to enter a fight that would last his life long and [Pg 13] cost him all that he held dear while struggling to protect the gentle, helpless natives of the New World from the cruelty and oppression of the Spaniards, until he should come to be called Las Casas "The Protector of the Indians." He had marked out one path for himself; God was to point out to him quite a different one. It is good to know that he "was not disobedient to the heavenly vision."

[Pg 14]

CHAPTER II

A BIT OF HISTORY

When Columbus returned to Spain after his first voyage, he left on the island of Hispaniola, now called Haiti, a little colony of about forty men.

On his second voyage he sailed first to this same place, arriving in November, late at night. A salute was fired to let the settlers know that their friends had returned, but no answer came, and it was feared that something was wrong. Sure enough, when the voyagers went ashore in the morning they found eleven dead bodies and no living men. The fort had been destroyed and the tools and provisions were gone.

This was a sad welcome; all the sadder because it need not have happened but for the evil doings of the colonists. After the departure of Columbus they had soon quarreled among themselves and had treated the inoffensive natives so cruelly that, unable to endure it, they had risen against the Spaniards and killed them all.

Columbus at once went to work to build another little town, not far from the first, and [Pg 15] called it Isabella. A church was erected, a number of houses built, and the whole surrounded by a strong wall. This being done, he placed his brother Diego in charge, and started off with three ships to make further explorations.

On this voyage he coasted along the southern shore of Cuba, discovered Jamaica and a number of smaller islands, and sailed all around Hispaniola. But he was worn out with excitement and fatigue. Discovering new countries is hard work, and it is still harder to try to govern unruly and evil men. He became very ill, and was brought back to Isabella quite unconscious. When at length he came to himself he found his brother Bartholomew beside him. This was a great comfort, for the brothers were very fond of each other, and Columbus needed all the help he could get. He made Bartholomew governor of Hispaniola, but no governor could do very much with such a company of lawless adventurers as were these Spaniards.

Like a great many people of to-day, they wanted to get rich quickly and without working. They spent their time in fighting, roaming about the country, abusing the Indians, and killing them and one another. At length the natives, exasperated beyond endurance, rose against them as before, and many Spaniards lost their lives.

In the end, however, of course it was the Indians that suffered the most. They could [Pg 16] not stand against the white men. Their bows and arrows would not pierce the soldiers' armor, and they ran in terror from the sight of a horse, an animal that they had never seen before. Twenty great bloodhounds were let loose upon them also, which tore them in pieces; and at length, in despair, they submitted to their enslavers.

They were used as slaves by the white men, being forced to cultivate the land for their conquerors and to work in the gold mines. The poor creatures, whose lives had been so simple as to require no hard labor, died by the thousands, and many were whipped to death or killed outright, so that in a little while that beautiful island became a place of great suffering, and the Spaniards were feared and hated by those gentle natives, who at their coming had been ready to welcome them as friends.

Many of the colonists grew dissatisfied because they were not getting rich as fast as they wished, and some returned to Spain with complaints of Columbus. Finally Francisco Bobadilla was sent out to look into matters. He treated the great Admiral very unjustly and cruelly, sending him back to Spain in chains; but in this action he far exceeded his instructions. Ferdinand and Isabella, grieved for the indignity that had been put upon the man who had given them a new country, caused him to be released at once, and recalled Bobadilla.

[Pg 17]

Nicholas de Ovando was now appointed to rule Hispaniola, and it was with him that Las Casas went out, as we shall see in the next chapter.

[Pg 18]

CHAPTER III

A NEW WORLD

When Las Casas arrived in Hispaniola with Ovando, the new governor, they were greeted by the news that a huge nugget of gold had been found, weighing thirty-five pounds. It was shaped like a flat dish, and to celebrate the discovery of such a treasure, a banquet was given and a roast pig served up on this novel platter. The nugget was sent to Spain, as a present to King Ferdinand, on the same ship as the infamous Bobadilla, the deposed governor, but the ship was wrecked in a terrible storm soon after leaving port, and both the nugget and the governor went down into the depths of the ocean.

Las Casas and his companion also heard that there had been another uprising of the Indians and that many had been captured and made slaves.

Queen Isabella had instructed Ovando that the Indians must be free, only paying tribute, as all Spanish subjects did, and that they should be recompensed for the work they did in the mines. The good Queen little knew how far [Pg 19] her officers were from treating them as she had commanded.

Las Casas does not seem to have felt any particular pity for the Indians in the beginning. Like the rest of the adventurers, he had come to seek his fortune in the New World, where there seemed such wonderful chances to grow rich. He obtained from the governor an estate of his own, took Indians as slaves, and sent some of them to work in the mines, though he did not abuse nor overwork them, as others did. For eight years he not only held Indians as slaves, but he was with Ovando during a second war against the natives in one of the provinces of Hispaniola, and saw terrible deeds of cruelty, yet never appears to have made a single protest. This seems very strange when we think of what he said and did against slavery a few years later, and how his whole after life was spent in the service of these oppressed people. His eyes, however, were not yet opened, and he looked at things after the fashion of his time.