

The Adventures of Cabeza de Vaca, by Gary Cartwright

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THE FIRST white men to set foot on Galveston Island and encounter the Karankawas must have been a sorry sight. There were forty of them, nearly naked, nearly starved, and completely delirious. They washed ashore in a storm in the early morning hours of November 6, 1528. They were Cabeza de Vaca and the remnants of the ill fated expedition of Don Pánfilo de Narváez. The expedition had started out in Florida five months earlier with three hundred men and forty horses, and this pitiful collection was all that remained. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was in his mid-thirties when the Spanish fleet set sail from Cuba to conquer the Florida peninsula. His family traced its ancestry (and its ludicrous name) to a humble shepherd who carved a place in Spanish history by showing the troops of King Sancho of Navarre a shortcut through the mountains north of Seville. The shepherd's name was Martin Alhaja and he marked the mountain pass with the skull of a *cow-cabeza de vaca*—thus enabling the Spanish to rout the Moors during the Re-conquest of 1212. As a reward, the king gave Martin Alhaja the noble name of Cowhead. In the centuries that followed, the family distinguished itself as builders, civil servants, and explorers. Cabeza de Vaca's paternal grandfather led the conquest of Grand Canary Island in the late 1400s.

By 1500 the island of Cuba had become headquarters for Spanish conquistadors. Cortés had sailed from Cuba in 1521 to conquer the Aztecs of Mexico (which he called New Spain). Six years later, Charles V gave permission for an expedition to conquer and populate the region from the Rio de las Palmas in northeastern Mexico to the Isle of Florida. The Spanish greatly underestimated how much territory this included, or what an incredible effort would be required to conquer and populate it. Don Pánfilo de Narváez, who financed the expedition out of his own pocket, was appointed its governor and commander in chief. The emperor appointed Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca as royal treasurer to the expedition, a bright young man with a head for numbers, a gift for command, and an extraordinary measure of faith and courage.

On April 7, 1528, after seven weeks at sea, the fleet sighted the landlocked Bay of Espíritu Santo. The vessel commanded by Cabeza de Vaca landed at St. John's Pass, just north of St. Petersburg. In all, four ships, four hundred men, and eighty horses survived the crossing. Fifteen years earlier Ponce de León had discovered and named the mainland of Florida, but now it was the task of Don Pánfilo and his compadres to claim it in the name of the crown.

But the cove where they landed was not the sheltered bay their pilots had charted. The real bay (Tampa Bay) was just to the south. The smart move would have been to stay with the ships and explore the coastline until they found suitable anchorage, but the governor was impatient to start marching north. He had been in Mexico a few years earlier and heard tales of enormous treasure somewhere north of Vera Cruz. Don Pánfilo didn't know where he was, but his heart told him he was close to the cities of gold. At worst, he figured, it was only a few days' march to the Spanish settlement of Pánuco. This was a tragic and monumental error in his geography. The Spanish expedition was standing on the coast of Florida and the village of Pánuco (now Tampico) was on the northeast coast of Mexico, more than half a continent away.

Ignoring the advice of his senior officers, Don Pánfilo and the main body of the expedition started overland, trooping over dunes, sand flats, swamps, and marshes. They had carried only two pounds of hardtack and a half-pound of bacon per man, and after a week their rations were depleted and they lived on fruit from dwarf fan palms. At the end of the second week they discovered an Indian village on the banks of what was probably the Withlacoochee River. The Indians seemed friendly enough. They led the starving Spaniards to fields of ripe corn and gave them water. Falling to their knees, the conquistadors thanked God, though it didn't occur to them to thank the Indians. Their real mission was gold, the Spaniards managed to convey. The Indians made the Spanish understand that though they had no gold, plenty of it could be found by marching north to the empire of the Apalachee tribe. It wasn't far, the Indians indicated.

The trip to the village of Apalachee turned out to be a march of nearly six weeks, 250 miles or so, to the shores of Micosukee Lake near the present Georgia border. They were expecting golden temples and possibly casks of wine and legs of mutton. What they found were forty thatched huts and a small store of corn and deerskins. A few wretched women and children huddled near a campfire, but the men had vanished into the forest. The Spaniards were bitterly disappointed and near exhaustion. Their faces and arms were ripped by thorns and infected from insect bites, and their bodies blistered under their heavy shirts of mail. Scouting parties reported that beyond this village the country was barely passable, nothing but lakes, marshes, fallen trees, tangles of underbrush, and hostile Indians.

For the next month the expedition made its headquarters in the village, enjoying a hospitality had not been necessarily offered. The Apalachee weren't openly hostile, but they practiced a kind of guerrilla warfare that drove the Spaniards mad. A conquistador would be minding his own business, picking dewberries, and suddenly an arrow from nowhere would graze his ear and bury itself six inches deep in the trunk of a tree. A detachment of soldiers watering the horses would hear a rustling, and a volley of arrows would erupt from the underbrush. Several of Don Pánfilo's men were killed from ambush. Sensing that they had overstayed their welcome—the Apalachee food supply was exhausted anyway—the expedition turned South toward the sea, hoping against hope that their ships might be waiting there.

The march south was the worst yet. A merciless July sun turned the woods into a furnace, and the bone-tired and dispirited conquistadors stumbled like zombies through lashing branches and putrid bogs, conquering nothing, not even the terror in their own hearts. They crossed creeks in which alligators were indistinguishable from clumps of green scum, hauling their sore bodies over fallen tree trunks as wide as barrels. Flies swarmed over their bleeding, sweating faces, while ticks and redbugs crawled beneath the blistering metal of their armor and made nests. Each step brought them palpably closer to death.

As the Spaniards were attempting to ford a lake, a band of large, naked Indians attacked. Arrows pierced their armor as though it were goose down, wounding a number of the men, including Cabeza de Vaca.

After a number of days the expedition reached the mouth of the Ocklockonee River, two hundred miles down the coast from Pensacola Bay. The coastal prairie was low and marshy, barely rising above the lagoon, a purgatory that was not quite land and not quite sea. There was no Spanish ship waiting there, of course, not that anyone truly believed there would be. Cabeza de Vaca and a few officers still strong enough to think clearly decided that their salvation was to build some boats as best they could.

Though they had no food, no tools, no iron, no smithery, no oakum or pitch, and not the slightest idea how to build a ship, the Spaniards went about the business of constructing five barges. At least one-third of the men were too sick to work and the number increased daily. They found a few oysters in the lagoon and some maize in a nearby Indian village, and every third day they killed a horse and rationed out servings of meat.

In building their crude barges, the Spaniards showed marvelous ingenuity. They fashioned bellows out of deerhide and cane pipes. In an earthen forge they melted down their stirrups, spurs, and crossbows and made nails, saws, and axes. Fibers and husks from palmettos and hair from horses' manes and tails were twisted into rope; sails were created from raggedy shirts. A Greek soldier in their ranks showed them how to make pitch and oakum from pine sap. They flayed the legs of horses, tanned the hide, and made leather canteens for carrying water. By September 20, seven weeks after they started building, five 35-foot barges were ready to sail. Though nobody knew how to navigate, they slaughtered their last horse and put to sea, 247 desperately frightened, nearly naked Spaniards, crammed three and four abreast, praying that Pánuco was just down the coast.

The pitiful little fleet hung close to the shore, exploring an occasional inlet for food and fresh water but finding only a few birds' eggs and a lot of bad Indians. Anchored at one island waiting out a storm, some of the men drank salt water and five of them went mad from the drink and died in agony. With the storm still raging, they put back to sea, determined to find a miracle or die.

They fought an all-night battle with Indians at Pensacola Bay, and later tried without success to find food and water at Mobile Bay. By the time the fleet reached the mouth of the Mississippi, the Spaniards were crazed with thirst and almost too weak to man the oars. They dipped fresh water from the river, drinking themselves sick, then landed on the east side of the river, only to discover there was no firewood to roast their small supply of corn.

This was a river unlike any the expedition had encountered. It was so wide they couldn't see the opposite bank, and currents and eddies collided in boiling swirls, sucking under great bodies of debris and spitting them into erratic patterns. When they tried to cross the great river, a rising north wind pushed them toward

the open sea. For two days they struggled against a treacherous tide, losing sight of land and, for a while, of each other.

At dawn of the third day Cabeza de Vaca's vessel hooked up with two other barges, including the one that carried the governor—the other barges apparently were swept away. The governor had despaired of command and at this point issued his final order: every man for himself. Exhausted and close to starvation, straining against hope, the remaining members of the expedition rowed all day against the current, never reaching land. Sometime before sunset, Cabeza de Vaca looked back and realized that the governor's boat had vanished. Now there were only two boats, one commanded by Cabeza de Vaca and a second commanded by two captains named Panalosa and Tellez. Four days later there was another storm and the second boat vanished. Three hundred proud and ambitious Spaniards had started out from Florida nearly five months before, and now Cabeza de Vaca could count only himself and about forty others, all more dead than alive.

For two weeks the men battled heavy seas, existing on a daily allowance of half a handful of raw maize. By the night of the fifteenth day Cabeza de Vaca and his boatswain were the only two strong enough to work the barge and they took turns steering. Certain that they were at death's gate, Cabeza de Vaca closed his eyes and slumped over the bodies of his fallen men, too weary to protest.

"Near dawn," he wrote many years later, "it seemed to me I heard the tumbling of the sea; for as the coast was low, it roared loudly. Surprised at this, I called to the boatswain, who answered me that he believed we were near an island." Sounding the bottom, they found themselves in seven fathoms. Cabeza de Vaca grabbed an oar and began to row, then a wave lifted the barge out of the water, flipped it upside down, and flung it toward shore. Roused from their stupor, the men began to stumble and crawl up the beach.

Cabeza de Vaca dispatched the hardiest of his men, Lope de Oviedo, to climb a tree and survey this place. Indeed, they had landed on an island, Oviedo reported. A scouting party was sent in the direction of a grove of trees, and returned shortly with a supply of dried mullet, a small dog, and a cooking pot. They had found an Indian village but no Indians. Warming themselves by the fire, parching their corn and dividing the mullets and dog meat, the Spaniards must have experienced the wondrous sensation of people brought back from the dead. They were too busy eating to hear the movement, but when the Spaniards looked up from their meal, they were surrounded by a hundred giant archers.

The Spaniards were far too weak to fight; some of them were too weak to stand. But the Indians made no move to attack. They waited at a discreet distance like so many apparitions. They were tall, naked, well-formed men, Cabeza de Vaca wrote in his diary, and their lips were pierced with sections of quarter-inch cane that gave the illusion of perpetual grinning. The nipples of their bare chests were perforated, and foot-long pieces of cane ran under the skin. The Spaniards must have appeared equally bizarre to the Karankawas, who had never seen a white man or even a beard. The white men weren't dressed much better than the Indians, covered as they were with just a few gritty rags.

Cabeza de Vaca offered the savages beads and bells, and each Indian responded by giving the Spanish captain an arrow. The Indians had no food with them, but they made signs indicating that they would return at sunrise with provisions, which they did. Then they disappeared again. Over the next few days the savages appeared at sunrise and again at sunset, always with food and pledges of friendship. Their diet apparently consisted of fish and nutlike roots that they dug with some effort from the bayside marshes.

Their strength and their sense of mission returning, the Spaniards gathered a supply of fish and roots and decided to continue their journey to Pánuco. They stripped away their rags to keep them dry, then dug their barge from the sand and launched it in the shallow surf. The weather was cold and blustery, and their hands were so sore and numb they could barely grip the oars. Still in sight of land, a wave turned the barge broadside to the breakers and flipped its occupants into the sea. Three men drowned in the tumbling current and the others were flung out onto the beach.

"We survivors escaped naked as we were born," Cabeza de Vaca wrote, "with the loss of all we had; and although the whole was of little value, at that time it was worth much, as we were then in November, the cold was severe and our bodies were so emaciated the bones might be counted with little difficulty, so that we looked like the picture of death. . . ." In this entry in his journal, Cabeza de Vaca revealed that since May he hadn't eaten any-thing except maize and a few fish. Horsemeat was more than he could handle. Now they had nothing—no maize, no clothing, no weapons, no boat. Three more men had drowned in this latest disaster and two others died a short time later. There were still a few sparks from their campfire, and they rekindled it and sat close, the north wind howling and their despair beyond mortal comprehension.

As had become the pattern, the Karankawas appeared at sunset with food. They didn't realize that the Spaniards had tried to leave the island. When they saw the wretched survivors praying and crying, and observed the bodies of their comrades rolling in the surf, the Indians fled. Cabeza de Vaca called them back and in sign language tried to explain what had happened. The Karankawas apparently understood because they sat down and began to weep. For half an hour their wails could be heard all across the island. Cabeza de Vaca recalled: "Verily, to see beings so devoid of reason, untutored, so like unto brutes, yet so deeply moved by pity for us, it increased my feelings and those of others in my company for our own misfortune."

The Spaniards debated what to do next. In their present state, most of them would be dead by morning. The savages might agree to take them back to their village, but those who had served in New Spain feared they might end up as sacrifices to some pagan idol. Either way, Cabeza de Vaca pointed out, they were going to die. They might as well die warm and well fed.

While a small party of Indians stayed on the beach with their guests, others gathered firewood and hurried off toward their lodges. After dark the Indians carried the remnants of the expedition along a trail, literally lifting them by their arms so that their feet barely touched ground. On their way to the village they stopped four or five times to revive and warm themselves by fires built by the

advance party. An hour later the Spaniards were secure inside a hut, with many fires and plenty of fish and roots. The Karankawas danced and celebrated throughout the night, which the Spanish took as a sign they were about to be sacrificed. But when the sun rose again over the narrow island, they were still alive.

That same morning Cabeza de Vaca made an extraordinary discovery. An Indian showed him a trinket and said he got it from 11 other men like ourselves." This had to mean that at least one other barge from the expedition had washed up on the island and that there were survivors. A short time later there was a joyous reunion with captains Andrés Dorantes and Alonso del Castillo and all their crew. Their barge had stranded on a reef a league and a half (3.9 miles) northeast of the village. They had escaped with only the clothes on their backs, which was more than Cabeza de Vaca and his crew had done, but their barge was wrecked beyond repair. The three captains agreed that they had no choice except to spend the winter on the Island. In the meantime, a four-member scouting party went ahead to search for Pánuco.

Either Cabeza de Vaca's memory was faulty or the winter of 1528-29 was about as bad as it gets on Galveston Island. The bay didn't freeze over, but no sooner had one blue norther ripped down from the prairie than another was on its way. The Karankawas had divided members of the expedition into small groups and placed them in various villages along the Island. The weather was too cold and stormy to fish or even pull roots, and the eighty surviving Spaniards went days without food. So did the Indians, of course, but they suffered without complaint.

Cabeza de Vaca was gaining a strange respect for these savages on whom he and his men depended, a stirring that he couldn't quite articulate. The Spaniards prayed out of habit, and out of fear, never daring to doubt that there was a divine presence overseeing all that happened. The Indians seemed to recognize a presence too, one as unyielding and merciless as any Old Testament deity. But it wasn't the same. Maybe it wasn't even a religion—maybe it was something as simple as an accord with nature—but the Karankawas surrendered themselves to the reality of constant sorrow.

And yet their generosity and compassion was unequivocal. "Of all the people in the world," Cabeza de Vaca wrote, "they are those who most love their children and treat them best." When their young died, as they did in great numbers that winter, the Indians seemed not only willing but absolutely fanatical in their determination to risk their own lives in ritual fasting. The Catholic religion was harsh, but no Spaniard would starve himself to death if he had a choice. And yet these savages unfailingly shared what little they had with these pitiful castaways, so superior in their attitude and yet so loathsome.

Something happened that winter that dramatically altered the relationship between the Spanish and the Indians and prompted Cabeza de Vaca to reflect again on who were the true savages. Five Spaniards had taken refuge alone down the Island; then one day there were only four. Then there were three, then two, until finally one poor wretch survived, surrounded by the well-picked bones of his comrades. They had eaten each other, all but one.

When the Karankawas learned what had happened, they were horrified. This tribe that has been so maligned by historians might understand a symbolic Last Supper in which the bodies of enemies were devoured, but eating a friend was an act so intolerable that they had never considered a response. "There was such an uproar," wrote Cabeza de Vaca, "that I verily believe if they had seen this at the beginning they would have killed [us] all."

The Indians didn't kill the surviving Spaniards, but they no longer considered them guests. Since the Spaniards had no skills with the bow and arrow, they were given women's jobs of pulling submerged roots from the rushes. It was backbreaking work under bitter cold conditions, and the sharp reeds of the marsh sliced Cabeza de Vaca's fingers until they bled. He was naked except for the rags taken off the bodies of fallen comrades. Hunger and abject misery were his only companions, and his only choice was to submit himself in total obedience to the savages. Ten months earlier he had landed on the coast of Florida under the banner of the sovereign, the emperor Charles V, vowing to subject such savages to the cross and sword; now he himself was subjected to an even harsher imperialistic mandate, the law of nature. To his credit, Cabeza de Vaca accepted his fate with courage and humility.

Starvation and cannibalism weren't the only tribulations in paradise that winter. A plague—probably cholera—killed half the Indians on the island and more than half of the Spaniards. By January only fifteen of the eighty castaways had survived. The Indians blamed the Spanish for their misfortune. Surely these visitors were sorcerers, most members of the tribe agreed, and the safe course would be to sacrifice those still alive. Then one Indian stepped forward with an appeal to reason: if the Spaniards had so much power, why was it that they had suffered and died, too? This was the first bit of European-style logic that the Spaniards had heard since their arrival on what they now called Isla de Malhado—the Island of Bad Luck.

Instead of killing the Spaniards, the Karankawas made them medicine men. This made no sense to Cabeza de Vaca, but he was cagey enough to keep quiet. Though the Indians recognized no chief or priest, they put enormous trust in their shamans and gave them special privileges. Shamans didn't pull roots or beg for fish heads. They were permitted to take two or even three wives, and the wives were expected to live together in harmony and friendship. Ordinarily, a Karankawa was limited to only one wife and was required to closely observe custom and tradition. Shamans on the other hand were free to do about anything they wanted. Shamans made the rules as they went along

It didn't take Cabeza de Vaca and his men long to learn the new trade. Shamans cured the sick by breathing on their wounds or laying on hands or sometimes heated stones. First, the medicine man made a few cuts where the pain was located and sucked the skin around the incisions. Then he cauterized the wound with fire, a practical method to arrest infection. Finally, he breathed on the spot where the pain had been and the disease supposedly went away. The Spaniards added a few touches of their own, making the sign of the cross and reciting a Pater Noster and Ave Maria or two. The methods of the shamans weren't all that different from practices used by European physicians, who still treated gunshot wounds with boiling oil. To Cabeza de Vaca's surprise, most patients professed

to be cured, at which time the patient was expected to give everything he owned, and everything he could borrow from relatives, to the shaman.

At the end of February the clan of Karankawas with whom Cabeza de Vaca had lived paddled back to the mainland, taking him with them. He went with mixed feelings. He realized now that the four-man party he had sent to find Pánuco had never made it, but he still held out hope that a Spanish ship might sail close enough to the Island to notice the castaways. He had lost track of the other members of the expedition by this time.

For the next two months the Karankawas lived beside an inlet to the mainland, subsisting on oysters and brackish water. At the end of April they migrated to the shore and ate blackberries and herbs, dancing and celebrating the entire month. Everywhere there were signs of new life. Fragrant weeds and wildflowers spread over the coastal prairie, and ducks and geese nested in the marshes, so thick you could have killed them with a stick. Why the Karankawas didn't is anybody's guess. According to the journal of Cabeza de Vaca, the Indians didn't hunt or fish or do much of anything else to sustain their existence during the rites of spring.

It is possible he didn't remember much about the spring of 1529: he became deathly ill, probably with malaria. During Cabeza de Vaca's delirium, captains Andrés Dorantes and Alonso del Castillo gathered the other survivors of the expedition—about a dozen remained—and made plans to start again for Pánuco. Finding Cabeza de Vaca near death, they decided to go without him. When he awoke days later, Cabeza de Vaca learned what had happened and realized that he had been abandoned.

For the remainder of the spring and throughout the summer, the Karankawas migrated from one campsite to another, moving every three or four days. Recovered now, Cabeza de Vaca was put to work carrying lodge mats, fetching firewood, and performing any other menial chore his masters could devise; apparently, he had lost his license to practice medicine during his own illness. When the blackberries played out, the tribe lived on wild onions, fish, and the meat of an occasional deer. Sometimes they caught lizards, snakes, rats, and giant spiders. His Majesty's royal treasurer, who had once turned up his nose at horsemeat, fell shamelessly on servings of roasted rat and baked tarantulas. But he was already devising a plan to escape.

On those rare occasions when his particular clan of Karankawas encountered other Indians, this white man with the bushy beard was always the center of attention. A constant state of warfare prevented most tribes from trading or bartering with each other, but he learned in conversations that they had no objection to his acting as their broker or intermediary. This was a role he courted with great enthusiasm, but he would have to wait for the right moment to break away.

When the Karankawas returned to the Island in October, Cabeza de Vaca made a discovery that was to sidetrack his escape for nearly three years. He wasn't the only Spaniard left behind: Lope de Oviedo had stayed by choice, though Cabeza de Vaca hardly recognized him. Less than a year before, Lope had been the only crewman strong enough to climb a tree. Now he looked numb and hollow, a

walking dead man interested in nothing except the bare rudiments of survival—a dry place to sleep, some fish and roots, and an occasional romp with a squaw. He wanted no part of Cabeza de Vaca's escape plan.

Cabeza de Vaca found his chance to break away when the tribe returned to the mainland in 1530. For the next two years he lived alone in the wilderness, free to travel as he pleased. All things considered, life as a trader was infinitely better than life as a slave. He roamed 150 miles or more along the coast—always wondering what lay just to the south—and he ventured well into the forests of the interior. His stock was seashells and cockles, and beanlike fruit and herbs used in medicine and ritual dances. Indians saw him as a bearded curiosity who stayed among them at various times of the year, bringing news and trade goods and a manner that was unfailingly ingratiating. Wherever he went, Cabeza de Vaca was welcome and well treated. He was like one of them. He was as naked as they were, and he understood their customs and common phrases. He took part in their raids and moonlight rituals and learned to drink a bitter, mildly hallucinogenic tea that the Indians brewed from yaupon leaves and evergreen branches. He could have headed for Pánuco anytime he wished but Cabeza de Vaca couldn't bring himself to desert his addled and cowardly crewman, Lope de Oviedo. Each year he returned to the Island and each year Lope found a new excuse to stay put.

At last, in the summer of 1532, Lope agreed to follow Cabeza de Vaca down the coast, along his familiar trade route. Near Port O'Connor, on the southern tip of Matagorda Bay, Cabeza de Vaca discovered that three other members of the expedition long given up for dead were actually prisoners of the Quevenes. Andrés Dorantes, Alonso del Castillo, and the Moorish slave Estebanico had endured more than three years of cruel captivity but were at least alive and well. Joining them would mean that Cabeza de Vaca and Lope de Oviedo would also be prisoners, at least temporarily.

The prospect was too much for poor Lope. Preferring the familiar agony of the Island of Bad Luck to whatever lay ahead, Lope fled back in the direction he had come, never to be heard of again. Cabeza de Vaca was long past caring what happened to Lope. He described his reunion with the two Spanish captains as "the greatest pleasure we had enjoyed in life."

Using their old medicine-man cures to make their lives as comfortable as possible, the remaining four members of the expedition marked time and waited for their chance to run. They found it in the spring of 1535, during the Truce of the Tunas. While the various tribes were feasting on the sweet purple cactus fruit, Cabeza de Vaca and the Spaniards slipped away in the desert and headed south toward the Rio Grande.

Near the present Mexican border town of Reynosa they made another strategic error in navigation. Instead of turning southeast to the Gulf where they would have found Spanish settlements in another few weeks, they journeyed west into the rugged Sierra Madres. From Monclova, Mexico, they veered northeast, crossing the Rio Grande again and wandering through the hauntingly beautiful Big Bend Country. From there they went north along the volcanic plains and limestone ridges of the Chihuahuan desert, crossing the Rio Grande a third time

just downstream from El Paso del Norte. It was a circuitous route to salvation that took them two thousand miles out of their way.

During the long journey Cabeza de Vaca learned the fate of other members of the Narváez expedition. The barge carrying Don Pánfilo had washed up on the Texas coast near the San Bernard River, Dorantes and Castillo told him. Following an argument with his crew, Don Pánfilo had gone into one of his infamous sulks and insisted on spending the night aboard the barge; sometime during the night a storm carried the governor's barge out to sea for the last time. Crewmen from yet another barge had wintered near Rockport on Copano Bay, and, like their comrades on the Isla de Malhado, had eaten each other until only one remained, a man named Esquivel, who was subsequently captured by Indians. As for their long quest to reach the Spanish settlement of Pánuco, the settlement had been abandoned long ago, according to Dorantes' information.

Cabeza de Vaca's remarkable experience was nearly complete, but one final revelation was yet to take place, perhaps the bitterest one of all. In December 1535, as they made their way along the backside of the Sierra Madres, they began to hear stories of other Christians just beyond the mountains, toward the Gulf of California. Presently, they saw evidence with their own eyes. First, they noticed clusters of buzzards drifting high above the bean fields of adobe villages. As they drew closer, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions saw that the villages had been sacked, ravished, and burned. Skeletons hung from trees, Spanish rope twisted about their necks. Soon they found the survivors of these villages, chained together and whipped along by mounted and armored conquistadors. They had found their way back to Christian civilization.