

OUR LITTLE
AZTEC
COUSIN OF LONG AGO



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This edition published 2026
by Living Book Press
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ISBN: 978-1-76183-132-4 (hardcover)
978-1-76183-131-7 (softcover)

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Our Little Aztec Cousin of Long Ago

by

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“HIS THOUGHTS WERE ELSEWHERE”

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CHAPTER I

A Boy at School

Coyotl sat on a straw mat in front of his teacher and practiced writing. But even as he mixed the paints before him in little shallow bowls of earthenware, and dipped his brush in the color, his thoughts were elsewhere.

He and the other students, all boys of about his own age, were writing on leaves of paper made of the pressed pulp of the maguey bush. They were practicing the simplified drawings which the Aztecs used for writing. Rabbits, leaves of corn, bundles of reeds, a man seated—all these pictures meant words, as written in different combinations—to the Aztecs. Writing by means of pictures which everyone understands, as we all understand letters, is called hieroglyphic, or picture, writing.

There was no use hurrying, or wishing to be through with the lessons, and gone, because in the Aztec schools the boys lived with the priests, in a

special building inside the great pyramid—temple or church, and they were not allowed to return to their parents again for many years—until all their schooling had been completed.

The priests of the temples were wise men, and they had much to teach their pupils.

The priests of the Aztecs, besides administering services and sacrifices to their Gods, and devotion by means of eternal fires, and prayers, were students of the stars that revolved overhead in the black night. They knew arithmetic, and the sciences that tell about the earth, and animals, and plants. They knew the history of the Aztec nation, and they knew its system of government, and the rules of manners by which a good citizen should conduct himself.

All these things they taught the boys entrusted to their care in the temple schools. They also taught them the feast days, and the days made sacred to certain divinities, for the Aztecs had many Gods. And they instructed their pupils in how to make offerings of flowers and fruits at the altars, and how to feed the sacred fires at other altars, so that at no time would the Gods be neglected or made angry by lack of devotion.

Coyotl had been in the school five years. He had entered the school when he was six, a small, slender, brown-skinned boy, with dark intelligent eyes under his smooth black eyebrows, and a thick lock of purply-black hair that fell down over his forehead.

It was in his seventh year that his father and mother and little sister had died in a plague. He had no one now. Probably he would some day become a priest himself. He did not know. And yet, though he was devoted to his Gods, especially to Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, who was the God of flowers and agriculture, and of water and the air, he did not want to be a priest. Adventure called to him. He longed to be free to roam the country over, to explore the great city of Mexico which lay outside the temple walls, and which he could see only from the great altar of the main temple where the sacred fire burned night and day.

The schoolroom where Coyotl sat was made of heavy stones, of a gray color, with an occasional stone of a pinkish-cream mixed in with the others. The stone floor was covered with a reed mat, on which were painted designs with a brilliant red paint that Coyotl knew was made by crushing the bodies of

little insects. The ceiling of the room was made of wood and stone, and all the wooden beams were richly carved. Light streamed in through a window behind where the teacher sat on a cushion stuffed with bird's feathers.

The teacher, who was droning instructions to the boys, rocking comfortably to and fro as he sat, was wearing a dress of cotton cloth on which a design had been painted in purple dyes, and in his black hair he had twined a purple cord.

The boys wore white cotton garments, and simple sandals made of leather on their bare feet.

Coyotl heard the droning voice giving instructions. The teacher was calling out a list of words,—a kind of dictation—which the pupils were expected to write on their leaves of paper.

But Coyotl was dreaming of other things.

He was remembering the history lesson, and wishing that he had lived back in those adventurous days before the Aztecs had settled down into cities and established schools. He would have liked to be a soldier with the great army of the Emperor of the Aztecs, on that day when Mexico City was founded

in the midst of the swampy land between the high mountains.

“It was after conquests and much traveling,” the history teacher had told them, “that the armies of the Emperor came to a wide land of lakes and rivers. The mountains rose into the sky all around them like the edges of a bowl, and at their tips the fog clung in white steamy clouds.

“At the borders of a lake, suddenly the Emperor stopped and held up his hand. All were silent, for everyone saw what he saw. Sitting on the limb of a prickly pear tree was a great royal eagle, bearing in his talons a writhing serpent. The eagle sat with spread wings, ready for flight, and his outstretched wings were against the glow of the rising sun.

“The omen was so auspicious that the Emperor then and there gave offerings and prayers, and decided to found a city, to end his people’s wanderings, and there to live.”

Thinking of this, Coyotl started sketching—not what the teacher directed him to do,—but the form of a great black eagle, with out-stretched wings, and in his claws, a snake.

He was so absorbed in what he was thinking, and

in the drawing he was making, that he did not notice the ominous calm which had fallen over the class. The teacher had raised his eyes, and had noticed that Coyotl was not paying attention.

While the boy continued his drawing, oblivious, the teacher got up off his cushion, and came to where Coyotl sat with his paints and leaves of paper. He was putting a glow of gold behind the black wings of the eagle—a glow to represent the rising sun.

“You have been wasting my time and yours,” said the teacher quietly and Coyotl was so startled that his nervous hand spilled a little dish of ink. The purple liquid crept slowly along the reeds of the mat. And Coyotl felt his heart beating fast inside him, because the discipline at the school was strict indeed, and he knew that he would not be easily pardoned.

The teacher turned to the other pupils, who looked at Coyotl with sympathetic eyes, but could not say a word to help or encourage him, for that would have been against rules.

“You will go to your rooms,” said the teacher, and the boys began hastily gathering up their inks and paper. They tiptoed from the room, and Coyotl

looked up at the teacher with miserable apologetic eyes.

“Go to your room now,” said the teacher, “and in a little while I will come to you, and I will tell you what discipline I have decided to give you.”

Coyotl picked up his things with trembling fingers. It had seemed a harmless enough thing to do, but he knew the rules. And the punishment was strict. If a boy in the priests’ school broke discipline, he might even be sentenced to death, or sold into slavery. Montezuma, the great Emperor, wanted his subjects to be obedient, and the teaching began young.

Coyotl’s room was a tiny cell, painted white inside, with a small window opening into one of the courts. He had there a bed of reeds, and a low bench made of wood, and on hooks in the wall hung his other cotton clothes.

He went to his room and sat down disconsolately. There was no one he could talk to; no one to whom he could whisper that “he hadn’t meant any harm—he was only imagining...”

A little before the sun went down, the teacher came to see him in his room. Coyotl immediately

rose to his feet and offered the teacher his seat. Then, with hanging head, he awaited his sentence.

It didn't come at once, and the boy glanced at the teacher's face inquiringly. The teacher was looking at him kindly.

"I am not going to punish you, Coyotl," said the teacher. "You are a bright boy, and your drawing of the eagle was good. But I cannot let you fall into these habits of dreaming. You must stay up with me and tend the sacred fires, and pray until the morning. It is not your turn to watch the fires again so soon. You will be sleepy. This is your punishment.

"I will await you at the great fire on top of the main temple as soon as the first stars appear. Do not be late. You must be washed and clean, and wearing your sacrificial robes."

"I will be ready and I will not be late. And thank you," breathed Coyotl.

The teacher did not say another word, but as he left the little room, he dropped his hand forgivingly on the boy's dark head, and let it linger there a moment.

CHAPTER II

Rules are not Made to be Broken

Coyotl put on his robes of pure white, with a border of red—the same red dye in which the whole robe of the teacher-priest had been dipped. Through his little window, Coyotl could see the first stars shining in the still light-blue sky, where the pink clouds of sunset were drifting. It was time to go. The fires at the altars were heaped high at night, and burned brightly, so that the people, unsafe and insecure without their God the sun looking down at him, would at least have the protection of light from fire. The god of fire, Quetzalcoatl, would protect them.

Coyotl went out through a central hall onto a balcony that ran around the entire square building like a porch, and led toward a set of stairs which ascended the building to another similar balcony. This in turn led to another stairway, which ascended

to the flat top of the great square pyramid. On this flat summit a fire burned night and day.

From that summit of the pyramid Coyotl could see over the whole city, which was lighted almost as brightly as at mid-day by the fires of this temple and of others, and by the sacred fires which burned on the top of all the walls which surrounded the city. Out beyond those walls, lay the roads leading into remote sections of Anahuac. And out there—beyond the city, into the night, into adventure, the boy's thoughts wandered.

Coyotl knelt in front of the fire, and made his prayers and offerings of flowers and perfumed woods which sent out sweet fragrance as they burned.

The night was coming down quickly, black, but spangled with stars. Through his cotton robes Coyotl felt the chill winds that rose with the darkness, and the sacred fires reached out and leaned toward the south, as the wind grew stronger.

Piled round about the small altar in which the fire was made, were the woods, cut in sections, which tradition said were to be laid on the flames in a special sequence, in order to please the gods. Beside them stood golden jars in which oils, blessed and spiced,

were kept, for the oils facilitated the burning in bad weather. Bad weather or good, the fires must be kept up.

There was a sound of drums and singing from one of the lower balconies, and Coyotl knew that a procession of youths from the school, with their priest-teachers, was forming for the nightly parade of obeisance to the sacred fires. One of the youths was chosen every night to help tend the fires and watch them and pray until the morning, in company with a priest. This night, Coyotl was to watch the fires again, even though but two nights ago this had been his duty. Already the lack of sleep burned against his hot eyelids.

Closer and closer came the sound of the boys' voices, and the deep throbbing notes of the drum. Now they were ascending the last stairway, and now they were walking toward Coyotl.

The priest was robed in a dress of cotton, dyed brilliant red, and there were feathers and flowers in the golden headdress that sat upon his forehead like a crown. His arms were full of flowers, and his expression was one of grave and tender devotion. The boys followed behind, singing.

The rites were simple, slow, and performed with meticulous care. Then began Coyotl's long watch through the night, which he was expected to punctuate with prayers and devotions. Twice he would be visited by a priest during the night, once at midnight, and once when the first morning stars began to shine.

Coyotl knelt and said his prayers when he was alone again.

Then the watch began. The stars crawled across the sky as the hours went by. Night sounds from the street came up to his ears—a parrot screaming, calls, and the night barking of dogs.

Coyotl's eyes drooped with weariness; he longed for his little room, and his bed of rushes spread with a cloth. But there was still most of the night before him. The stars had not yet wheeled into that place in the sky which would tell him that it was near midnight.

He was not supposed to, but the hours were so long that he went to the edge of the top of the pyramid and looked down into the street. There was a man passing by; across his back he had a big bundle, and at his heels followed a dog.

“How wonderful,” thought Coyotl, “to be free

to go, to leave the city, to take a bundle on your back and walk out, into the night, bound for some far place!”

It was then that he heard a tiny sound—a heart-breakingly pitiful sound. He looked about for it. It was a sort of chirp, like that of a little hurt bird. He could not find anything, and yet those little cries continued.

By listening carefully, he thought he could detect where the little cheeps were coming from. From the balcony below.

Coyotl was torn between desire to go straight down and find out what was making those sounds, and the knowledge that he must stay and watch the fires. To neglect them was a crime; to let them die down meant to involve the city and the whole nation in disaster and destruction, and to induce the wrath of the gods.

Yet that pitiful cry of some little bird in distress caught at his heart. He decided suddenly.

He walked all around the edge of the pyramid at the top, and looked down. All silent and quiet. No one about.

He banked the fire, and put on two pieces of wood.

It wasn't proper to do it so, but Coyotl heard again those plaintive cries for help.

Then, gathering up his robe, he hurried down the stairs and went to look for the poor little bird.

Ah! There it was. A little thing. An eaglet. How could it have come there? It was frightened as he approached, and yet courageous, too, for it tried to hop away, and yet one claw and one wing had been hurt, and they dragged pathetically.

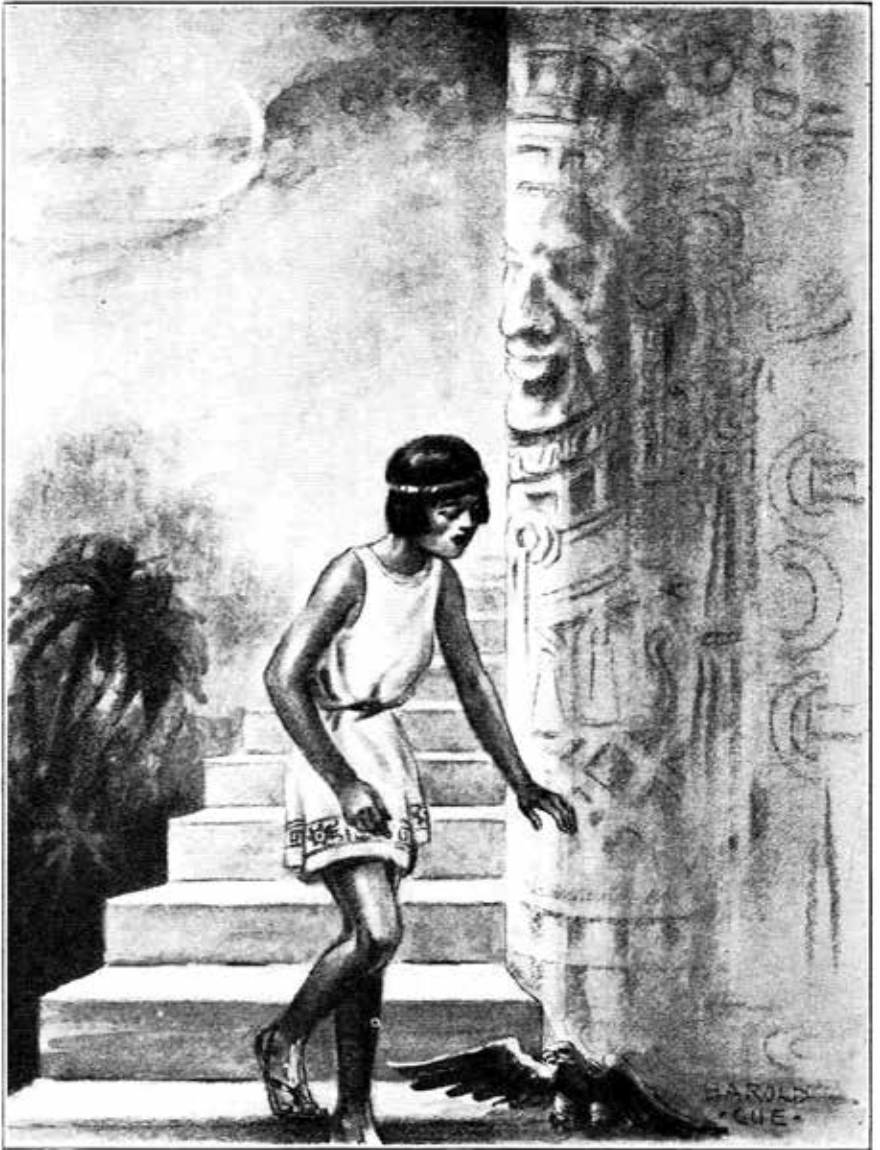
Coyotl put his hands around the bird's trembling body, picked it up and gently examined it. A broken wing, a crushed leg and claw. Oh pitiful! Some one had hurt it. Some child may have hurled a rock at it. Yet, they could be mended, thought Coyotl. Someone could heal the eaglet. He would heal it. How to keep it? How to hide it until the morning, when he would be free to take it to his cell and bind up its wing and wash and bind its claw?

As he pondered, he forgot that time was passing.

Silently, on his leathern sandals, the priest-teacher had ascended the stairs, and now stood near, watching him with disappointment and disdain.

"Coyotl, you have left the fires!"

Coyotl could say nothing, but he held his bird



'Ah! THERE IT WAS!'

closer. His heart beat as fast and as loud as the little frightened eagle's.

“Come with me.”

The priest led him up again, and made him cast the bird aside, and lie down on his face before the fires, to pray the gods for forgiveness.

There Coyotl staid, flat on his face, until the morning, and his heart failed within him, for he knew that the penalty for disobedience such as his was death. Death or slavery, and he did not know which could be worse.

The sun rose, slowly and then suddenly, flooding the valley of Mexico and the lakes nearby with warmth and color. The clouds glowed pink and golden, and the sky flushed, then turned pale green, and finally blue,—a soft satiny blue like a petunia petal.

The sun warm on his back through his cotton robe only told Coyotl that the time of his punishment was at hand.

Silently, the priest led him back to his room. The morning offerings had been given, the morning prayers said. Another priest and student tended the sacred fires. Coyotl sat in his cell thinking sadly that

he would never see it again, never again hear the voices of his comrades singing and talking together, never hear the drums that he loved, or look out over the city of Mexico, and long to be part of it, on its streets, within its houses, part of the city's busy life.

He was comforted that the priest had taken the wounded bird in his arm, and had carried it away to be cured. One of the priests was adept at cures, at binding hurts, and making sick people well. He would know how to make the eaglet fit for the blue skies again, free and happy—not earth-bound.

The teacher stood in Coyotl's doorway, a dark figure, shutting out the light. He said no word. His face was stern, his lips set in a severe line, but his eyes were very sad. He said nothing, but Coyotl knew that he was to follow him. He was to go before a conclave of all the teachers. His crime would be told. His punishment would be meted out. He bowed his head, and followed the teacher.

The priests, in their ceremonial robes of red, were meeting in one of the council chambers of the pyramid-temple-school. In the center of the room sat the head priest of the temple, with his feet on a rug made of woven feathers. The feather rug was the

only furniture of the room, except the heavy stone benches on which all sat, ranged in a semi-circle.

Coyotl threw himself on his face on the floor to await judgment.

The teacher-priest spoke.

“This lad broke discipline in the classroom. I was dictating. He set down, instead of the words I gave, a drawing of an eagle, clutching in its claws a writhing serpent. His punishment, he knew, should have been more severe than that which I gave. But since his drawing was of the eagle, a good omen, I made the punishment that he watch the fires again last night, though he had watched them before only two nights ago. At midnight I ascended to pray with him, but I found him on the balcony below. Yet, again, in his hand was the eagle of good omen—a wounded small bird which I have taken to the doctor priest for care. But he had left the fire untended.”

The head priest considered.

“The punishment is death,” he said quietly, and an involuntary shiver passed through the body of the boy as he lay on the stone floor.

“But because the omen may have meaning—because the eagle was with him each time—I will

give him into slavery. But he must be sold to a good master. Because of the omen, he should not be killed, either as punishment, or by a cruel owner.

“To the first good man who comes to this temple to make offering after noon today, shall the boy be given in slavery, to do with as he will, but not to be killed.”

The audience was ended.

The priests rose and left the room, silently.

Coyotl remained on his face, on the floor.

But after all the others had left, the teacher-priest raised him to his feet, and supported him on his arm back to his cell. He said nothing, but his eyes were kind and pitying.

Somehow, as he lay down to sleep, Coyotl felt comforted. The eagles may have been a good omen, really! Perhaps the god Quetzalcoatl had heard his prayers to wander in the world, to see and learn and do. Perhaps this was his means of releasing him, an orphan, who might otherwise remain in the temples forever. And thinking so, smiling, he fell asleep.