THE FAIR GOD.

BOOK SIX.

CHAPTER VII.

(Continued.)

While he looked his doubts gave way to certainty. Light there was essential, revealing, beautiful light. He clasped his hands, and the tears of despair became tears of joy; all the hopes of his being, which, in the dreary hours just passed, had gone out as stars go behind a spreading cloud, rose up whirring, like a flock of startled birds and, filling all his heart, once more endued him with strength of mind and body. He passed his hands across his eyes; still the light remained. Surer than a fantasy, good as a miracle, there it was, growing brighter, and approaching, and that, too, by the very passage in which he was standing; whether borne by a man or spirit, friend or foe, it would speedily reach the head of the steps, and then——"

Out of the very certainty of aid at hand, a reaction of feeling came. A singular caution seized him. What if those bearing the light were enemies? Through the glow dimly lighting the part of the passage below the passage below the stairway, he looked eagerly for a place of concealment. Actually though starving, the prospect of relief filled him with all the instincts of life renewed. A door caught his eye. He ran to the cell, and hid, but in position to see whomsoever might pass. He had no purpose; he would wait and see—that was all.

The light approached slowly—in his suspense, how slowly! Gradually the glow in the passage became a fair illumination. There was no sound of feet, no forerunning echoes; the coming was noiseless as that of spirits. Out of the door, nevertheless, he thrust his head, in time to see the figure of a man on the upper step, bareheaded, barefooted, half wrapped in a cotton cloak, and carrying a broad wooden tray or waiter, covered with what seemed table-ware; the whole brought boldly into view by the glare of a lamp fastened, like a miner's to his forehead.

The man was alone; with that observation, Orteguilla drew back, and waited, his hand upon his dagger. He trembled with excitement. Here was an instrument of escape; what should he do? If he exposed himself suddenly, might not the stranger drop his burden, and run, and in the race extinguish the lamp? If he attacked, might he not have to kill? Yet the chance must not be lost. Life depended upon it, and it was, therefore, precious as life.

The man descended the steps carefully, and drew near the cell door. Orteguilla held his breath. The stepping of bare feet became distinct. A gleam of light, almost blinding, flashed through the doorway, and, narrow at first but rapidely widening, began to wheel across the floor. At length the cell filled with brightness; the stranger was passing the door not a yard away.

The young Spaniard beheld an old man, half naked, and bearing a tray. That he was a servant was clear; that there was no danger to be apprehended from him was equally clear; he was too old. These were the observation of a glance. From the unshorn, unshaven head and face, the eyes of the lad dropped to the tray; at the same instant, the smell of meat, fresh from the coals saluted him, mixed with the aroma of chocolate, still smoking, and sweeter to the starving fugitive than incense to a devotee. Another note: the servant was carrying a meal to somebody, his master or mistress. Still another note: the temple was inhabited, and the inhabitants were near by. The impulse to rush out and snatch the tray, and eat and drink, was almost irresistible. The urgency there is in a parched throat, and in a stomach three days empty, cannot be imagined. Yet he restrained himself.

The lamp, the food, the human being—tbe three things most desirable—had come, and were going, and the page still undetermined what to do. Instinct and hunger and thirst, and a dread of the darkness, and of the death so lately imminent, moved him to follow and he obeyed. He had cunning enough left to take off his boots. That done, he stepped into the passage, and, moving a few paces behind, put himself in the guidance of the servant, sustained by a hope that daylight and liberty were but a short way off.

For a hundred steps or more the man went his way, when he came to a great flat rock or flag cumbering the passage; there he stopped, and set down the tray; and taking the lamp from the fastening on his head, he knelt by the side of a trap, or doorway, in the floor. Orteguilla stopped at the same time, drawing, as a precaution, close to the left wall. Immediately he heard the tinkling of a bell, which he took to be a signal to some one in a chamber below. His eyes fixed hungrily upon the savoury viands. He saw the slave fasten a rope to the tray, and begin to lower it through the trap; he heard the noise of the contact with the floor beneath; still he was unresolved. The man arose, lamp in hand, and without more ado, as if a familiar task were finished, started in return. And now the two must come within reach of each other; now the page must discover himself or be discovered. Should he remain? Was not retreat merely going back into the terrible labyrinth? He debated; and while he debated, chance came along and took control. The servant, relieved of his load, walked swiftly, trying, while in motion, to replace the lamp over his forehead; failing in that he stopped; and as fortune ordered, stopped within two steps of the fugitive. A moment—and the old man's eyes, dull as they were, became transfixed; then the lamp fell from his hand and rolled upon the floor, and with a scream he darted forward in a flight which the object of his fear could not hope to outstrip. The lamp went out and darkness dropped from the ceiling and leaped from the walls, reclaiming everything.

Orteguilla stood overwhelmed by the misfortune. All the former horrors returned to plague him. He upbraided himself for irresolution. Why allow the man to escape? Why not seize, or at least speak to him? The chance had been sent, he could now see, by the Holy Mother; would she send another? If not, and he died there, who would be to blame but himself? He wrung his hands and gave way to bitter tears.

Eventually the unintermitting craving of hunger aroused him by a lively suggestion. The smell of the meat and chocolate haunted him. What had become of them? Then he remembered the ringing of the bell and their disappearance through the trap. There they were; and more—somebody was there enjoying them. Why not have his share? Ay, though he fought for it! Should an infidel feed while a Christian starved? The thought lent him new strength. Such could not be God's will. Then, as often happens, indignation begat a certain shrewdness to discern points and put them together. The temple was not vacant, as he at first feared. Indeed, its tenants were thereabouts. Neither was he alone; on the floor below he had neighbors.

"Ave Maria!" he cried, and crossed himself.

His neighbors, he thought—advancing to another conclusion—his neighbors, whoever they were, had communication with the world; otherwise they would perish, as he was perishing. Moreover, the old servant was the medium of the communication, and would certainly come again. Courage, courage!

A sense of comfort, derived from the bare idea of neighborship with something human, for the time at least, lulled him into forgetfulness of misery.

Upon his hands and knees he went to the great stone, and to the edge of the trap.

"*Salvado! Soy salvado!* I am saved!" And with tears of joy he rapturously repeated the sweet salutation of the angels to the Virgin. *The space below was lighted!*

The light, as he discovered upon a second look, came through curtains stretched across a passage similar to the one he was in, and was faint, but enough to disclose two objects, the sight of which touched him with a fierce delight—the tray on the floor, its contents untouched, and a rope ladder by which to descend.

He lost no time now. Placing his dagger between his teeth he swung off, though with some trouble, and landed safely. At his feet then lay a repast to satisfy the daintiest appetite—fish, white bread, chocolate in silver cups and beaten into honeyed foam, and fruits from vine and tree. He clasped his hands and looked to heaven, and as became a pious Spaniard restrained the maladies that afflicted him while he said the old Pater Noster—dear, hallowed utterance taught him in childhood by the mother who, but for this godsend, would have lost him forever. Then he stooped to help himself, and while his hand was upon the bread the curtain parted, and he saw, amidst a flood of light pouring in over her shoulders, a girl very young and very beautiful.

(To be continued.)

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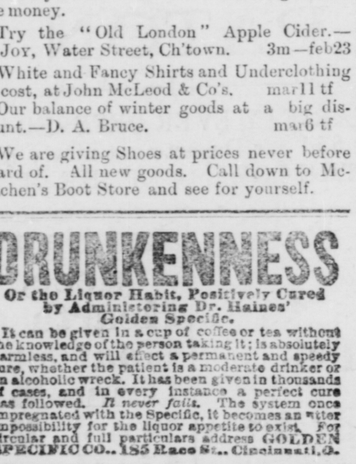

(This Engraving represents the Lungs in a healthy state.)

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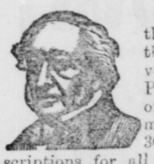

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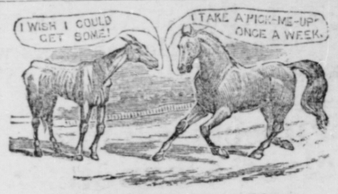

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