THE FAIR GOD.

BOOK FIVE.

CHAPTER III.

(Continued.)

"I thank thee, Father Bartoloma. That thou art near, I feel better. A good surcoat and shield, as thou knowest, give a soldier confidence in battle; and so, as I came nigh yon abomination, full of bloody mysteries called worship, and carven stones called gods—may they be accursed from the earth—I am pleased to make use of thee and thy holiness. Doubtless the air of the palace is thick with sorceries and evil charms; if so thy crucifix hath more of safeguard than thy sword. Ride nearer, father, and hearken that thou mayst answer what more I have to say. Would not this pile look the better for a cross upon every tower?"

"Thy zeal, my son, I commend, and thy question strictly hath but one answer," Olmedo replied. "The impulse, moreover, is to do at once what thou hath suggested. Roll away a stone, and in its bed plant a rose, and the blooming will be never so sweet; and so, never looketh a cross so beautiful as when it taketh the place of an idol. And for the conversion of heathen the Holy Mother careth not if the worship be under Christian dome or in pagan chamber."

"Say'st thou so!" said Cortes, checking his horse. "By my conscience, I will order a cross!"

"Be not so fast, I pray you. What armed hand now putteth up armed hand must keep; and that is war. May not the good end be reached without such resort? In my judgment we should first consult the heathen king. How knowest thou that he is not already inclined to Christian ways? Let us ask him."

Cortes relaxed the rein and rode on convinced.

Through the gate of the *coatapantli*, amid much din and clangour, the entire column entered the yard of the temple. On a pavement, glassy smooth, and spotless as a good housewife's floor, the horsemen dismounted and the footmen stood at rest. Then Cortes with his captains and Marina approached the steps, where he was received by some pabas, who offered to carry him to the *azoteas*—a courtesy he declined with many protestations of thanks.

At the top, under a green canopy and surrounded by courtiers and attendants, Montezuma stood, in the robes of a priest, and with only his sceptre to indicate his royalty.

"You have my welcome, Malinche. The ascent is wearisome. Where are the pabas whom I sent to assist you?"

The monarch's simple dignity affected his visitors, Cortes as much as the others.

"I accept thy welcome, good king," he replied, after the interpretation. "Assure thyself that it is given to a friend. The priests proffered their service as you directed; they said your custom was to be carried up the steps, which, I grant, accords with a sovereign, but not with a warrior, who should be superior to fatigue."

To favor a view of the city, which was after a while suggested, the king conducted Cortes to the southern side of the *azoteas* where were also presented a great part of the lake, bordered with white towns, and the valley stretching away to the purple sierras. The train followed them with mats and stools, and erected the canopy to intercept the sun; and thus at ease the host explained and the guest listened. Often during the descriptions the monarch's eyes rested wistfully on his auditor's face; what he sought we can imagine; but well I ween there was more revelation in a cloudy sky than in that bloodless countenance. The demeanor of the Spaniard was courtierly; he failed not to follow every gesture of the royal hand; and if the meaning of what he heard was lost because of the strange language, the voice was not. In the low, sad intonations, unmarked by positive emphasis, he divined more than the speaker read in his face—a soul goodly in all but its irresolution. If now and then the grave attention relaxed, or the eye wandered from the point indicated, it was because the city and lake, and the valley to the mountains were, in the visitor's mind, more a military problem than a picture of power or beauty.

The interview was at length interrupted. Two great towers crowned the broad *azoteas* of the temple, one dedicated to Tezca', the other to Huitzil'. Out of the door of the latter issued a procession of pabas, preceded by boys swinging censers, the smoke of which was sickening sweet. Tlalac, the *teocuctli*, came last, walking slowly, bareheaded, barefooted, his gown trailing behind him, its sleeves and front, like his hands and face, red with the blood of recent sacrifice. While the gloomy train gathered about the astonished Christians, the heathen pontiff, as if unconscious of their presence, addressed himself to the king. His words were afterwards translated by Marina.

"To your application, O king, there is no answer. What you do will be at your own inspiration. The victims are removed; the servants of the god, save whom you see, are in their cells. If such be thy will the chamber is ready for the strangers."

Montezuma sat a moment hesitant, his color coming and going; then, feeling the gaze of his guest upon him, he arose and said kindly, but with dignity, "It is well. I thank you." Turning to Cortes he continued, "If you will go with me, Malinche, I will show you our god, and the place in which we celebrate his worship. I will explain our religion and you may explain yours. Only give me respect for respect."

Bowing low Cortes replied, "I will go with thee and thou shalt suffer no wrong from the confidence. The hand or tongue that doeth grievance to anything pertaining to thy god or his worship shall repeat it never."

The last sentence was spoken with a raised voice and a glance to the captains around; then, observing the frowns with which some of them received the notice, he added, almost without a pause, to Olmedo, "What saith the Church of Christ?"

"That thou hast spoken well for this time," answered the priest, kissing the crucifix chained to his girdle. "Go on. I will go with thee."

Then they followed the king into the sanctuary, leaving the *teotuctli* and his train on the *azoteas*.

I turn gladly from that horrible chamber. With quite as much satisfaction I turn from the conversation of the king and Cortes. Not even the sweet voice of Marina could make the Aztec theogony clear or the Catholic commentary of the Spaniard interesting.

Alvarado approached the turret door with loathing. Staggered by the stench that smote him from within, he stopped a moment. Orteguilla, the page, pulled his mantle and said, "I have news for thee. Wilt thou hear?"

"*Picaro!* To-morrow, if the Mother doth spare me so long, I will give thee a lash for every breath of this sin-laden air thou makest draw with open mouth. As thou lovest life, speak and have done."

"What if I bring thee a message of love?"

"If thou couldst bring me such a message from a comely Chaistian maiden I would kiss thee, lad."

Orteguilla held out an exquisite *ramillete*. "Seest thou this? If thou carest and will follow me, I will show thee an infidel to swear by forever."

"Give me the flowers and lead me to the infidel. If thou speakest truly thy fortune is made; if thou liest I will fling thee from the temple."

(To be continued.)

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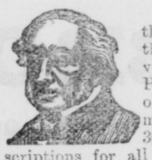

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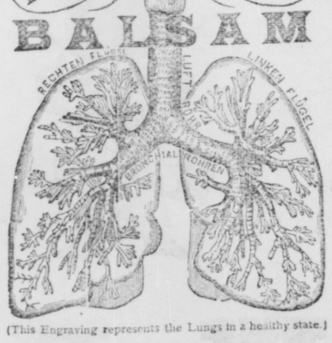

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