THE FAIR GOD.

BOOK FIVE.

CHAPTER XI.

(Continued.)

The party was impatient. To their relief, Cortes at last came out, with his five chosen cavaliers, Sandoval, Alvarado, Leon, Avila and Lugo. As he proceeded to the gate, all eyes turned to him, and all hearts became confident—so much of power over the weak is there in the look of one master spirit.

At the gate he waited for the Dona Marina.

"Are ye ready, gentlemen?"

"All ready," they replied.

"With thee, De Oli, I leave the command. At sight or sound of attack or combat, come quickly. Charge straight to the palace, lances in the lead. Bring our horses. Farewell. Christ and the Mother for us!" And with that, Cortes stepped into the street.

For a time the party proceeded silently.

"Is not this what the pagans call the beautiful street?" Sandoval asked.

"Why the question?"

"I have gone through graveyards not more deserted."

"Thou'rt right," said Lugo. "By Our Lady! when last we went this way, I remember the pavements, doors, porticos and roofs were crowded. Now, not a woman or a child."

"In faith, Senor, we are a show suddenly become stale."

"Be it so," replied Leon sneeringly. "We will give the public a new trick."

"*Mirad Senores!*" said Cortes. "Last night, all through this district, particularly along this street, there went patrols, removing the inhabitants, and making ready for what the drum is advertised to let loose upon us. Don Pedro, thy princess hath told the truth." And looking back to the towers of the *teocallis*, he added, after a fit of laughter, "The fools, the swine! They have undone themselves; or, rather"—his face became grave on on the instant—"the Holy Mother hath undone them for us. Give thanks, gentlemen, our emprise is already won! Yonder the infidel general hath his army in waiting ing for the word of the king. Keep we that unspoken or undelivered—only that—and the way of our return, prisoner in hand, will be as clear of armed men as the going is."

The customary guard of nobles kept the portal of the palace; the ante-chamber, however, was crowded to its full capacity with unarmed courtiers, through whom the Christians passed with grave assurance. To acquaintances Cortes bowed courteously. Close by the door of the audience chamber, he found Orteguilla conversing with Maxtla, who, at sight of him, knelt, and, touching the floor with his palm, offered to conduct the party to the royal presence; such were his orders. Cortes stopped an instant.

"Hath the king company?" he asked Orteguilla.

"None of account—a boy and three or four old men."

"He is ours. Let us on, gentlemen."

And forthwith they passed under the curtains held aside for them by Maxtla.

On a dias covered with a carpet of *plumaje*, the monarch sat. Three venerable men stood behind him. At his feet, a little to the right, was the prince Io', in uniform. A flood of light poured through a window on the northern side of the chamber, and fell full on the group, bringing out with intense clearness the rich habliments of the monarch, and every feature of his face. The Christians numbered the attendance, and, trained to measure dangers and discover advantages by a glance, smiled at the confidence of the treacherous heathen. Upon the stillness, broken only by their ringing tread, sped the voice of Cortes.

"Alvarado, Lugo, all of ye, watch well whom we have here. On you lives, see that the boy escape not."

Montezuma kept his seat.

"The gods keep you this pleasant morning," he said. "I am glad to see you."

They bowed to him, and Cortes replied:

"We thank thee, good king. May the Holy Virgin, of our Christian faith, have thee in care. Thus pray we, than whom thou hast no truer servants."

"If you prefer to sit, I will have seats brought."

"We thank thee again. In the presence of our master, it is the custom to stand, and he would hold us discourteous if we did otherwise before a sovereign friend as dear to him as thou art, great king."

The monarch waved his hand.

"Your master is no doubt a rare and excellent sovereign," he said, then changed the subject.

"The lords, whom I sent to you this morning, reported that all goes well with you in the palace. I hope so. If anything is wanted you have only to speak. My provinces are at your service."

"The lords reported truly."

"I am very glad. Thinking of you, Malinche, and studying to make your contentment perfect, I have wondered if you have any amusements or games with which to pass the time."

As there were not in all the new world, however it might be in the old, more desperate gamblers than the cavaliers, they locked at each other when the translation was concluded, and smiled at the simplicity of the speaker. Nevertheless, Cortes replied with becoming gravity:

"We have our pastimes, good king, as all must have; for without them, nature hath ordered that the body shall grow old and the mind incapable. Our pastimes, however, relate almost entirely to war."

"That is labor, Malinche."

"So is hunting," said Cortes, smiling.

"My practice is not," answered the monarch, taking the remark as an illusion to his own love of the sport, and laughing. "The lords drive the game to me, and my pleasure is in exercising the skill required to take it. Some day you must go with me to my preserves over the lake, and I will show you my modes; but I did not mean that kind of amusement. I will explain my meaning. Io'," he said to the prince, who had arisen, "bid Maxtla bring hither the silver balls. I will teach Malinche to play *totoloqua*."

"Have a care, gentlemen," said Cortes, divining the speech from the action of the speaker. "The lad must stay. And thou, Marina, tell him so."

The comely, gentle-hearted Indian woman hastened tremulously to say, "Most mighty king, Malinche bids me tell thee that he has heard of the beautiful game, and will be glad to learn it, but not now. He wishes the prince to remain."

One step, Io' had in the meantime taken—but one; in front of him Leon stepped, hand on sword, and menace on his brow. The blood fled the monarch's face.

"Go not," he at length said to the boy; and to Cortes, "I do not understand you, Malinche."

The time of demand was come. Cortes moved nearer the dais, and replied, his eyes fixed coldly and steadily on those of the victim:

"I have business with thee, king; and until it is concluded, thou, the prince, and thy councillors must stay. Outcry, or attempt at escape, will be at peril of life."

The monarch sat upright, pale and rigid; the ancients dropped upon their knees. Io' alone was brave; he stepped upon the platform, as if to defend the royal person. Then in the same cold, inflexible manner, Cortes proceeded:

"I have been thy guest, false king, long enough to learn thee well. The power which, on all occasions, thou hast been so careful to impress upon me, hath but made thy hypocrisy the more astonishing. Listen, while I expose thee to thyself. We started hither at thy invitation. In Cholula, nevertheless, we were set upon by the army. No thanks to thee that we are alive to-day. And, in the same connection, when thou wert upbraided for inviting us, the lords and princes were told that such was the instruction of one of thy bloody gods, who had promised here in the capital to deliver us prisoners for sacrifice."

Montezuma offered to speak.

"Deny it not, deny it not," said Cortes, with the slightest show of passion. "In god or man such perfidy cannot be excused. But that is not all. Say nothing about the command sent the troops near Tuzpan to attack my people; nor about the demand upon townships under protection of my royal master for women and children to feed to thy hungry idols; now——"

Here the king broke in upon the interpreter:

"I do not understand what Malinche says about my troops attacking his people at Tuzpan."

"Thy governor killed one of my captains."

"Not by my order."

"Then make good the denial, by sending for the officer who did the murder, that he may be punished according to the wickedness of his crime."

(To be continued.)

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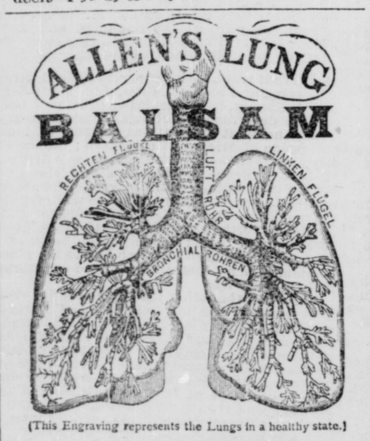

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