

"If I cannot make them friends, by my conscience! I can at least seal their mouths in the day of my calamity."

Then bowing his head, he added, —

"Thy benediction, father."

The blessing was given.

"Amen!" said Cortes.

And the priest departed; but the steps of the iron-hearted soldier were heard long after, — not quick and determined as usual, but slow and measured, and with many and long pauses between. So ambition walks when marshalling its resources; so walks a heroic soul at war with itself and fortune! He flung himself upon his couch at last, saying, —

"In my quiver there are two bolts left. The saints help me! I will speed them first."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KING BEFORE HIS PEOPLE AGAIN.

GUATAMAZIN'S call at the royal palace to see the king, Cuitlahua, had not been without result. When told that the monarch was too sick of the plague to be seen, he called for the officer who had charge of the accounts of tribute received for the royal support.

"Show me," said the 'tzin, "how much corn was delivered to Montezuma for Malinche."

A package of folded *aguave* leaves was brought and laid at the accountant's feet. In a moment he took out a leaf well covered with picture-writing, and gave it to the 'tzin, who, after study, said to a cacique in waiting, "Bring me one of the couriers," and to another, "Bring me wherewith to write."

When the latter was brought, he sat down, and dipping a brush into a vessel of liquid color, drew upon a clear, yellow-tinted leaf a picture of a mother duck leading her brood from the shore into the water; by way of signature, he appended in one corner the figure of an owl in flight. On five other sheets he repeated the writing; then the missives were given each to a separate courier with verbal directions for their delivery.

When he left the palace, the 'tzin laid his hand upon Hualpa's shoulder, and said, joyfully, —

"Better than I thought, O comrade. Malinche has corn for one day only!"

The blood quickened in Hualpa's heart, as he asked, — "Then the end is near?"

"To-morrow, or the next day," said the 'tzin.

"But Montezuma is generous, —"

"Can he give what he has not? To-night there will be delivered for his use and that of his household, whom I have had numbered for the purpose, provisions for one day, not more."

"Then it is so! Praised be the gods! and you, O my master, wiser than other men!" cried Hualpa, with upraised face, and a gladness which was of youth again, and love so blind that he saw Nenezin, — not the stars, — and so deaf that he heard not the other words of the 'tzin, —

"The couriers bear my orders to bring up all the armies. And they will be here in the morning."

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In the depth of the night, while Cortes lay restlessly dreaming, his sentinels on the palace were attracted by music apparently from every quarter; at first, so mellowed by distance as to seem like the night singing to itself; afterwards, swollen into the familiar dissonant minstrelsy of conch and atabal, mixed with chanting of many voices.

"O ho!" shouted the outliers on the neighboring houses, "O ho, accursed strangers! Think no more of conquest, — not even of escape; think only of death by sacrifice! If you are indeed *teules*, the night, though deepened by the smoke of our burning houses, cannot hinder you from seeing the children of Anahuac coming in answer to the call of Huitzil'. If you are men, open wide your ears that you may hear their paddles on the lake and their tramp on the causeway. O victims! one day more, then, — the sacrifice!"

Even the Christians, leaning on their lances, and listening, felt the heaviness of heart which is all of fear the brave can know, and crossed themselves, and repeated such pater nosters as they could recollect.

And so it was. The reserve armies which had been reposing in the vales behind Chapultepec all marched to the city; and the noise of their shouting, drumming, and trumpeting, when they arrived and began to occupy its thoroughfares and strong places, was like the roar of the sea.

To the garrison, under arms meantime, and suffering from the influence of all they heard, the dawn was a long time coming; but at last the sun came, and poured its full light over the leaguered palace and courtly precincts.

But the foemen stood idly looking at each other; for in the night, Cortes, on his side, had made preparations for peace. Two caciques went from him to the king Cuitlahua, proposing a parley; and the king replied that he would come in the morning, and hear what he had to say. So there was truce as well as sunshine.

"Tell me truly, Don Pedro, — as thou art a gentleman, tell me, — didst thou ever see a sight like this?"

Whereupon, Alvarado, who, with others, was leaning against the parapet which formed part of the battlements of the eastern gate of the palace, looked again, and critically, over that portion of the square visible from his position, and

replied, — "I will answer truly and lovingly as if thou wert my little princess yonder in the *patio*. Sight like this I never saw, and" — he added, with a quizzical smile — "never care to see again."

Orteguilla persisted, —

"Nay, didst thou ever see anything that surpassed it?"

Once more Alvarado surveyed the scene, — of men a myriad, in the streets rank upon rank; so on the houses and temple, — everywhere the glinting of arms, and the brown faces of warriors glistening above their glistening shields; everywhere *escaupiles* of flaming red, and banners; everywhere the ineffable beauty and splendor of royal war. The good captain withdrew his enamoured gaze slowly: —

"No, never!" he said.

Even he, the prince of gibes and strange oaths, forgot his tricks in presence of the pageant.

While the foemen looked at each other so idly, up the beautiful street came heralds announcing Cuitlahua. Soon his palanquin, attended by a great retinue of nobles, was brought and set down in front of the eastern gate of the palace. Upon its appearance, the people knelt, and touched the ground with their palms. Then there was a blare of Christian trumpets, and Cortes, with Olmedo and Marina, came upon the turret.

The heralds waved their silver wands: the hush became absolute; then the curtains of the palanquin were rolled away, and the king turned his head languidly, and looked up to Cortes, who raised his visor, and looked down on him; and in the style of a conqueror demanded peace and quick return to obedience.

"If thou dost not," he said, "I will make thy city a ruin."

The shrill voice of Marina, interpreting, flew wide over the space, so peopled, yet so still; at the last word, there was a mighty stir, but the heralds waved their wands, and the hush came back.

On Cuitlahua's face the pallor of sickness gave place to a flush of anger; he sat up, and signed to Guatamozin, and upon his shoulder laid his hand trustingly, saying, —

"My son, lend me your voice; answer."

The 'tzin, unmindful that the breath he drew upon his cheek was the breath of the plague, put his arm around the king, and said, so as to be heard to the temple's top, —

"The king Cuitlahua answers for himself and his people. Give ear, O Malinche! You have desolated our temples, and broken the images of our gods; the smoke of our city offends the sky; your swords are terrible, — many have fallen before them, and many more will fall; yet we are content to exchange in death a thousand of ours for one of yours. Behold how many of us are left; then count your losses, and know that you cannot escape. Two suns shall not pass, until, amidst our plenty, we shall laugh to see you sick from hunger. For further answer, O Malinche, as becomes the king of his people, Cuitlahua gives you the war-cry of his fathers."

The 'tzin withdrew his arm, and snatching the green *panache* from the palanquin, whirled it overhead, crying, "Up, up, Tlateloco! Up, Tlateloco!"

At sight of the long feathers streaming over the group, like a banner, the multitude sprang to foot, and with horrible clamor and a tempest of missiles drove the Christians from the turret.

And of the two bolts in Cortes' quiver, such was the speeding of the FIRST ONE!

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An hour passed, — an hour of battle without and dispute within the palace.

To Cortes in his chamber then came Orteguilla, reporting.

"I gave the king the message, Señor; and he bade me tell thee thy purpose is too late. He will not come."

The passion-vein * on Cortes' neck and forehead rose, and stood out like a purple cord.

"The heathen dog!" he cried. "Will not! He is a slave, and shall come. By the holy blood of Christ, he shall come, or die!"

Then Olmedo spoke, —

"If thou wilt hear, Señor, Montezuma affects me and the good Captain Oli tenderly; suffer us to go to him, and see what we can do."

"So be it, so be it! If thou canst bring him, in God's name, go. If he refuse, then — I have sworn! Hearken to the hell's roar without! Let me have report quickly. I will wait thee here. Begone!"

Olmedo started. Cortes caught his sleeve, and looked at him fixedly.

"Mira!" he said, in a whisper. "As thou lovest me do this work well. If he fail — if he fail —

"Well?" said Olmedo, in the same tone.

"Then — then get thee to prayers! Go."

The audience chamber whither Oli and the priest betook themselves, with Orteguilla to interpret, was crowded with courtiers, who made way for them to the dais upon which Montezuma sat. They kissed his hand, and declining the invitation to be seated began their mission.

"Good king," said the father, "we bring thee a message from Malinche; and as its object is to stay the bloody battle which is so grievous to us all, and the slaughter which must otherwise go on, we pray thy pardon if we make haste to speak."

The monarch's face chilled, and drawing his mantle close he said, coldly, —

"I am listening."

Olmedo proceeded, —

* Bernal Díaz, Hist. de la Conq.

"The Señor Hernan commiserates the hard lot which compels thee to listen here to the struggle which hath lasted so many days, and always with the same result, — the wasting of thy people. The contest hath become a rebellion against thee as well as against his sovereign and thine. Finally there will be no one left to govern, — nothing, indeed, but an empty valley and a naked lake. In pity for the multitude, he is disposed to help save them from their false leaders. He hath sent us, therefore, to ask thee to join him in one more effort to that end."

"Said he how I could help him?" asked the king.

"Come and speak to the people, and disperse them, as once before thou didst. And to strengthen thy words, and as his part of the trial, he saith thou mayst pledge him to leave the city as soon as the way is open. Only let there be no delay. He is in waiting to go with thee, good king."

The monarch listened intently.

"Too late, too late!" he cried. "The ears of my people are turned from me. I am king in name and form only; the power is another's. I am lost, — so is Malinche. I will not go. Tell him so."

There was a stir in the chamber, and a groan from the bystanders; but the messengers remained looking at the poor king, as at one who had rashly taken a fatal vow.

"Why do you stay?" he continued, with a glowing face. "What more have I to do with Malinche? See the state to which my serving him has already reduced me."

"Remember thy people!" said Olmedo, solemnly.

Flashed the monarch's eyes as he answered, —

"My brave people! I hear them now. They are in arms to save themselves; and they will not believe me or the promises of Malinche. I have spoken."

Then Oli moved a step toward the dais, and kissing the royal hand, said, with suffused eyes, —

"Thou knowest I love thee, O king; and I say, *if thou carest for thyself, go.*"

Something there was in the words, in the utterance, probably, that drew the monarch's attention; leaning forward, he studied the cavalier curiously; over his face the while came the look of a man suddenly called by his fate. His lips parted, his eyes fixed; and but that battle has voices which only the dead may refuse to hear his spirit would have drifted off into unseemly reverie. Recalling himself with an effort, he arose, and said, half-smiling, —

"A man, much less a king, is unfit to live when his friends think to move him from his resolve by appeals to his fears." And rising, and drawing himself to his full stature, he added, so as to be heard throughout the chamber, "Very soon, if not now, you will understand me when I say I do not care for myself. I desire to die. Go, my friends, and tell Malinche that I will do as he asks, and straightway."

Oli and Olmedo kissed his hands, and withdrew; whereupon he calmly gave his orders.

Very soon the 'tzin, who was directing the battle from a point near the gate of the *coatapantli*, saw a warrior appear on the turret so lately occupied by Cortes, and wave a royal *panache*. He raised his shield overhead at once, and held it there until on his side the combat ceased. The Christians, glad of a breathing spell, quit almost as soon. All eyes then turned to the turret; even the combatants who had been fighting hand to hand across the crest of the parapet, ventured to look that way, when, according to the usage of the infidel court, the heralds came, and to the four quarters of the earth waved their silver wands.

Too well the 'tzin divined the meaning of the ceremony. "Peace," he seemed to hear, and then, "Lover of Anahuac, servant of the gods, — choose now between king and country."

Now or never!" The ecstasy of battle fled from him; his will became infirm as a child's. In the space between him and the turret the smoke of the guns curled and writhed sensuously, each moment growing fainter and weaker, as did the great purpose to which he thought he had steeled himself. When he brought the shield down, his face was that of a man whom long sickness had laid close to the gates of death. Then came the image of Tula, and then the royal permission to do what the gods enjoined, — nay, more than permission, a charge which left the deed to his hand, that there might be no lingering amongst the strangers. "O sweetheart!" he said, to himself, "if this duty leave me stainless, whom may I thank but you!"

Then he spoke to Hualpa, though with a choking voice, —

"The king is coming. I must go and meet him. Get my bow, and stand by me with an arrow in place for instant use."

Hualpa moved away slowly, watching the 'tzin; then he returned, and asked, in a manner as full of meaning as the words themselves, —

"Is there not great need that the arrow should be very true?"

The master's eyes met his as he answered, "Yes; be careful."

Yet the hunter stayed.

"O 'tzin," he said, "his blood is not in my veins. He is only my benefactor. Your days are not numbered, like mine, and as yet you are blameless; for the sake of the peace that makes life sweet, I pray you let my hand do this service."

And the 'tzin took his hand, and replied, fervently, —

"There is nothing so precious as the sight that is quick to see the sorrows of others, unless it be the heart that hurries to help them. After this, I may never doubt your love;

but the duty is mine, — made so by the gods, — and he has asked it of me. Lo, the heralds appear!"

"He has asked it of you! that is enough," and Hualpa stayed no longer.

Upon the turret the carpet was spread and the canopy set up, and forth came a throng of cavaliers and infidel lords, the latter splendidly bedight; then appeared Montezuma and Cortes.

As the king moved forward a cry, blent of all feelings, — love, fear, admiration, hate, reverence, — burst from the great audience; after which only Guatamozin and Hualpa, in front of the gate, were left standing.

And such splendor flashed from the monarch's person, from his sandals of gold, tunic of feathers, *tilmatli* of white, and *copilli** inestimably jeweled; from his face and mien issued such majesty that, after the stormy salutation, the multitude became of the place a part, motionless as the stones, the dead not more silent.

With his hands crossed upon his breast he stood awhile, seeing and being seen, and all things waited for him to speak; even the air seemed waiting, it was so very hushed. He looked to the sky, flecked with unhallowed smoke; to the sun, whose heaven, just behind the curtain of brightness, was nearer to him than ever before; to the temple, place of many a royal ceremony, his own coronation the grandest of all; to the city, beautiful in its despoilment; to the people, for whom, though they knew it not, he had come to die; at last his gaze settled upon Guatamozin, and as their eyes met, he smiled; then shaking the *tilmatli* from his shoulder, he raised his head, and said, in a voice from which all weakness was gone, his manner never so kingly, —

"I know, O my people, that you took up arms to set me free, and that was right; but how often since then have I

* The crown.

told you that I am not a prisoner; that the strangers are my guests; that I am free to leave them when I please, and that I live with them because I love them?"

As in a calm a wind sometimes blows down, and breaks the placid surface of a lake into countless ripples, driving them hither and thither in sparkling confusion, these words fell upon the listening mass; a yell of anger rose, and from the temple descended bitter reproaches.

Yet the 'tzin was steady; and when the outcry ended, the king went on, —

"I am told your excuse now is, that you want to drive my friends from the city. My children, here stands Malinche himself. He hears me say for him that, if you will open the way, he and all with him will leave of their own will."

Again the people broke out in revilements, but the monarch waved his hand angrily, and said, —

"As I am yet your king, I bid you lay down your arms —"

Then the 'tzin took the ready bow from Hualpa; full to the ear he drew the arrow. Steady the arm, strong the hand, — an instant, and the deed was done! In the purple shadow of the canopy, amidst his pomp of royalty, Montezuma fell down, covered, when too late, by a score of Christian shields. Around him at the same time fell a shower of stones from the temple.

Then, with a shout of terror, the companies arose as at a word and fled, and, panic-blind, tossed the 'tzin here and there, and finally left him alone in the square with Hualpa.

"All is lost!" said the latter, disconsolately.

"Lost!" said the 'tzin. "On the temple yonder lies Malinche's last hope. No need now to assail the palace. When the king comes out, hunger will go in and fight for us."

"But the people, — where are they?"

The 'tzin raised his hand and pointed to the palace, —

"So the strangers have asked. See!"

Hualpa turned, and saw the gate open and the cavaliers begin to ride forth.

"Go they this way, or yon," continued the 'tzin, "they will find the same answer. Five armies hold the city; a sixth keeps the lake."

Down the beautiful street the Christians rode unchallenged until they came to the first canal. While restoring the bridge there, they heard the clamor of an army, and lo! out of the gardens, houses, and temples, far as the vision reached, the infidels poured and blocked the way.

Then the cavaliers rode back, and took the way to Tlacopan. There, too, the first canal was bridgeless; and as they stood looking across the chasm, they heard the same clamor and beheld the same martial apparition.

Once more they rode, this time up the street toward the northern dike, and with the same result.

"*Ola*, father!" said Cortes, returned to the palace, "we may not stay here after to-morrow."

"Amen!" cried Olmedo.

"Look thou to the sick and wounded; such as can march or move, get them ready."

"And the others?" asked the good man.

"Do for them what thou dost for the dying. Shrieve them!"

So saying, the Christian leader sank on his seat, and gave himself to sombre thought

He had sped his *second and* — LAST BOLT!

The rest of the day was spent in preparation for retreat.