

them a joyfully hospitable entertainment. Partly by way of triumph in the success of their movements hitherto, and partly by way of amusing, and at the same time overawing their entertainers, the Spaniards, the day after their arrival in the city, made a grand military display in their quarters, and in the neighboring streets. They exercised their prancing steeds in all the feats of horsemanship, racing, leaping, and cantering, in all the wild majesty of the trained charger, under the three-fold discipline of bit and spur, and cheering shout.—They rushed upon each other in the mock warfare of the tournament, with clashing sword and glancing spear, and then, discharging their carbines in the air, separated amid clouds of dust and smoke, as if driven asunder by the bolts of heaven in their own hands. The astonished natives, accustomed only to the simple weapons of primitive warfare, looked on with undisguised admiration, not unmixed with fear. The strange beings before them, wielding such untried powers, seemed indeed to have descended upon earth from some higher sphere, and to partake of that mysterious and fearful character, which they had been wont to ascribe to inhabitants of the spiritual world. But when, to closing off the day's entertainment, they brought out the loud-mouthed artillery, and shook the very foundations of the city with their oft-repeated thunders, the spirit of the Aztec sunk within him, and he felt, as he retired to his dwelling, that it was for no good end, that men of such power, having such fearful engines at their command, had been permitted to fix their quarters in one of the fortresses of Tenochtitlan.

"Alas!" said an ancient Cacique from the northern frontier, "we are fallen upon evil times.—Our enemies are even now in the citadel—enemies whom we know not, whose mode of warfare we do not understand, whose weapons defy alike our powers of imitation and resistance. Let us abandon the field, and retire to the far north, whence our fathers came, and rear a new empire amid the impregnable fastness of the mountains."

"Who talks of abandoning the field to the enemy?" interrupted Guatimozin.—"Let no Aztec harbor so base a thought. Rather let us stand by our altars and die, if die we must."

"Right," cried the youthful prince Axayatl, from the southern slope of the Sierra, "why should the all-conquering Aztec tremble at this display of the mysterious stranger? Are not the millions of Anahuac a match for a few hundred of their enemies, in whatever form they come? Be they gods, or belching demons, they belong not to this soil, nor this soil to them, and, by all our altars and all our gods, they must retire or perish, though we, and our wives, and our children perish with them."

"Give us your hand, brave Axayatl," exclaimed Cuitlahua and Guatimozin, at the same instant, "be that our vow in life and in death, and woe to the base Aztec, that abandons the standard of Montezuma, or whispers of submission to the haughty stranger."

Thus were the councils of the people divided between a timid superstition, and a bold uncompromising patriotism. There wanted not the material, it well directed, to annihilate, at a blow, the hopes of the daring invaders. The arm of the nation was strong and sinewy, but "the head was sick, and the heart faint." The emperor, the hitherto proud and self-sufficient Montezuma,—

Like a struck eagle fainting in his nest, had cowered to a phantom of his own diseased imagination, and weakly consented to regard them as gods, whose passions, appetites and vices proved them to be men, and whose diminished numbers, after every battle they had fought, showed they were of mortal mould.

On the following day, a magnificent banquet was prepared for Cortez, and his officers, in the imperial palace. It was graced by the presence of all the nobility of Azteca, with all the pride and beauty of their household divinities—for, among this refined people, the wife and the daughter held her appropriate rank, and woman exercised all the influence, which, among (so called) civilized nations, Christianity alone has assigned her. Every apartment of that spacious and magnificent pile blazed with the light of odiferous torches, which sent up their clouds of incense from hundreds of gold and silver stands, elaborately carved and embossed in every form that fancy could suggest, or ingenuity invent.

Flowers of every hue and name were profusely distributed through the rooms, clustered in beautiful vases, or hung in gorgeous festoons and luxuriant chaplets from the walls. The costume of the monarch and his court was as rich and gorgeous, as the rare and variegated plumage, with a lavished use of gold and gems, could make it. The women were as splendidly apparelled as the men. Many of them were extremely beautiful. Some were distinguished for their easy refinement of manners, which charmed, no less than it astonished, the Castilian knights, who had been accustomed to suppose that nothing so beautiful, or refined, could be found without the borders of Spain!

By special command of the Emperor, all his nobles were present at this festival, so that Guatimozin, contrary to his own will and purpose, was brought into contact with Cortez, and his steel-clad cavaliers. Tecuichpo also was there, in all her maiden loveliness, outshining all the stars of that splendid galaxy. And yet she was as a star in eclipse, for her soul was oppressed with those mysterious shadows that hung over her destiny and that of her father, as connected with the coming of these white men. Karez was there in attendance upon her mistress, as she still delighted to call her; but her attention was more absorbed by the strangers than by Tecuichpo. She watched every movement, and scanned every countenance with a scrutiny that did not escape their observation, in order to read, as well as she could, the character of each. Her scrutiny satisfied herself, and she whispered in the ear of the Princess, that "if these were gods, they came from the dark, and not from the sunny side of heaven."

It was a rare spectacle, which this royal banquet presented. The contrast between the steel-clad cavaliers of Castile, whose burnished armor blazed and glittered in the brilliant torch-light, and hung under their heavy martial tramp upon the marble floor, and the comparatively fairy figures of the gaudily apparelled Aztecs, was as strong as could possibly be represented in a scene like this. The costumes and customs of each were matter of wonder and admiration to the other. The Aztec trembled at the mysterious power, the incomprehensible weapons, of the white man. The Castilian, if he did not tremble, fully appreciated the danger of a little band, separated and scattered among a festive throng of writhing men, amid the interminable labyrinth of the imperial palace, and under the eye of a monarch whose word was absolute law to all the myriads of his people.

But, whatever was passing in the inner man, the Aztec and the Castilian, alike, appeared perfectly at ease, each abandoning himself to the festivities of the occasion, as if each, unmolested by the presence of a stranger, were revelling in the security of his own castle, and celebrating some time-honored festival of his own people.

With a benign dignity and grace, the Queen, and her suite of high-born ladies, received the homage of the cavaliers, after they had been presented to the Emperor. She was struck with admiration at the graceful and dignified bearing of the Castilian, which, while it showed all the deference and respect due to her sex and her rank, had nothing in it, of that abject servility, which placed an impassible barrier between the Aztec noble and his monarch, and made them appear to belong to distinct races of being. To the chivalrous, impassioned Castilian, accustomed to worship woman, and pay an almost divine homage to beauty, in the courtly halls and sunny bowers of Spain, the scene presented a perfect constellation of grace and loveliness. The flashing eye of the Aztec maiden, as lustrous and eloquent as any in the gardens of Hesperides; the jetty tresses, glittering with gems and pearls, or chastly decorated with natural flowers; the easy grace of the loose flowing robe, revealing the full rich bust and the rounded limb, in its fairest proportions, won the instant admiration of every mailed knight, and brought again to his lips his oft-repeated vows of love and devotion.

But of little avail were honied lips and eloquent tongues to the gallant cavaliers at that magic fete. They formed no medium of communion with the bright spirits, and gay hearts around them. The doom of Babel was on them all, and there was no interpreter. Nothing daunted by obstacles seemingly insurmountable, the gay Spaniards resolved, that, where bright eyes were to be gazed on, and sweet smiles won from the ranks of youth and

beauty, they would make a way for themselves.—The first ceremonies of presentation over, each knight addressed himself to some chosen fair one and by sign and gesture, and speaking look, and smile of eloquent flattery, commenced a spirited pantomimic attack, to the infinite amusement of all the gay throng around. It was met with wonderful spirit, and ready ingenuity, by the Aztec maidens, to whom the dialect of signs, and the language of hieroglyphics was perfectly familiar; that being the only written language of all the nations of Anahuac.

The spirit and interest of the scene that followed surpassed all attempt at description. Abandoned to the gaily of the hour, the Spaniards forgot alike their schemes of ambition and aggrandisement, and the peculiar perils which surrounded them; while the Aztec revellers dismissed, for the moment, both their superstitious dread of the white man, and their patriotic disgust at his daring pretensions to universal dominion.

The noble Sandoval, attracted by the mild beaming eye, and sweet smile of the Princess Tecuichpo, with a profound obeisance, laid his plumed helmet at her feet, and choosing, from a vase at her side, a half-blown rose, which he gracefully twined with a sprig of amaranth, he first pressed it to his own heart and lips, and then placed it among the glittering gems upon her bosom. With queenly courtesy and grace, the fair princess received this gallant token, and instantly responded to it, by stooping down, and weaving among the plumes, so courteously laid at her feet, another, of such rare beauty and brilliancy of hue, that it quite eclipsed the gayest feather in the hall.

Cortez and Alvarado were, each in his turn, struck with the deep, dark, piercing eye of Karez; and each put forth his best endeavor to win from her a smile. But it was so coldly given, and accompanied with a look so deep and searching, that the general quailed before it, as he had never done before to mortal eye.

Instantly recovering himself, he put on such a smile of blended grace and dignity, as melted at once the icy reserve of the maiden, and opened the way for a long and animated parley. It was full of sparkles and power, but could not be translated into any living tongue, without losing all its force and brilliancy.

Meanwhile, an animated discussion had arisen between Guatimozin and the Prince of Tezcuco, touching the propriety of receiving gifts from the strangers, or, in any way, acknowledging their claims as friends. The showy trinket, which Cacama had received from Cortez at Ajotzineo, and which he displayed on his person at this festival, gave rise to the dispute.

"It is wrong," urged Guatimozin, "wrong to our country and wrong to ourselves. Let them gain what they can from the exuberant munificence of the Emperor, and let them stay in peace, while he permits and requires it,—but let us not weaken our hands, by touching their gifts, or accepting their tokens. When they depart, let them not boast that they have left any remembrance behind them, or laid claims upon our hands, by their gifts, which we have freely accepted."

"Surely, my dear cousin," said the Princess, "you make too much of so small a matter. They are but common courtesies, and too trifling for such grave consideration and argument."

"Not so, believe me, my fair cousin. They take us on the weak side of the heart—they blind our eyes to our relations, unnerve our arms, and blunt our weapons of defence."

"What then would you do," asked Cacama, as if more than half-persuaded that Guatimozin was right in his views of duty.

"Do," replied the Prince, with startling energy of tone and manner, "I would fling it at his feet, or trample it under my own, before his eyes, and show him that I scorn him and his gifts alike."

Tecuichpo turned suddenly round at this remark, as if fearing the strangers would understand it, and in her agitation, dropped a magnificent jewel from her dress, and with it the rose so gallantly presented by Sandoval. A dozen princes and cavaliers sprang, at the same instant, to replace the precious toy. Pedro Outeguilta, the beautiful young page of Cortez, was so fortunate as to recover it. Doffing his cap, and kneeling gracefully at her feet, he presented it to the Princess with an air of admiring deference, and by signs, solicited the honor of replacing it upon her arm.

This little incident put an end to the discussion, which was growing too warm for the occasion, and the festivities went on as gaily as before.

A group of sprightly, mischief-loving girls, who had clustered round the cool basin of a sparkling jet d'eau, and were amusing themselves by free and fearless comments upon the appearance and manners of the strangers, arrested the eye of the impulsive, humor-loving Alvarado, and drew him to solicit a share in their sport; for, in beating a retreat from the eagle glance of Karez, he had strolled into an illuminated arbor, in one of the open courts of the palace. With hand, and eye, and lip, now appealing in emphatic gesture to the stars above, and now, with ready tact and admirable sagacity distributing the flowers among the gay maids of the tountain, he soon ingratiated himself into their favor, and engaged them in a brilliant and animated pantomime, which if it wanted the eloquence of words, found ample compensation, or that defect, in the merry shout and ringing laugh, that accompanied each labored attempt to utter, or interpret, a sentiment. The gallant cavalier soon found himself loaded with a profusion of floral favors. For every flower he bestowed upon the fair nymphs, he received an appropriate return, till his hands were full, and he found it necessary to arrange them upon his person.

Instantly the whole group, as by one impulse of artistic taste, seized the idea, and resolved to array him as a flower-god. The magnificent cactus flashed among the plumes of his helmet—a pair of splendid magnolias, tastefully adjusted on either shoulder, supplied the place of the silver epaulette—a rich cluster of unfading forget-me-not, covered and eclipsed the gilded star upon his breastplate; while every joint in his armor, and every loop and button of his doublet, was set with its appropriate garden gem. Long wreaths of a blossoming vine were dexterously intertwined with flowers of every brilliant hue, and hung like a gorgeous sash over his right shoulder, its gay streamers waving in the gentle breeze, or winding themselves about the scabbard of his sword. His hands were gloved with a moss of the most delicate green velvet, dotted with golden stars, and his boots transformed into baskins of the most approved classic pattern, by alternate bands of jessamine and scarlet lobelia, crossed and plaided with strings of anemone and hyacinth.

Thus arrayed, his face skillfully masked with the flowering wax-plant despoiled of its leaves, he was conducted into the presence of the queen, under a continually increasing escort of bright girls and fair dames, where, with due reverence to her majesty, and with the gallantry becoming a true knight, he begged, by significant looks and signs, to be permitted to lay all his bright honors at the feet of the lovely Tecuichpo.

The signal being given at this moment, he offered his arm to the Princess, and led the way into the banqueting hall, where the luxuries of all the climes of earth seemed to be spread out in endless profusion, and, as if by magic, the native song of the Aztec alternating with the martial strains of the Castilian land, the night wore away with feasting and revelry.

The day had almost dawned, when the strangers, laden with presents of inestimable value, returned to their quarters, burdened with the weight of their treasures, and deeply impressed with the more than regal munificence of their host, and the unimagined loveliness and grace of the fair being, who gave life and beauty to his magnificent court.

"If these white gods can be bought, dear father," the Princess naively remarked, as they took their leave, "you have surely paid a price worthy of the ransom of the proudest monarch on the earth."

"The more you bribe them," interrupted Guatimozin, "the less you bind them. They have not the soul of an Aztec, who scorns to receive a favor that does not pledge his heart in return. The Spaniard's heart has nothing to do with his hand. He takes your gift, only to be the better able to plot and compass your ruin."

The Emperor sighed, as he listened to a remark, to which he could make no reply. It brought again before his agitated mind, the only course he could safely adopt in the present crisis of his affairs. In vain did his paternal heart second the suggestion, and his kingly pride urge its immediate adoption. He had not the moral courage to execute his own resolve. Superstition had wholly unmanned him.