

THE FAIR GOD.

BOOK FIVE.

CHAPTER IX.

TRULY WONDERFUL—A FORTUNATE MAN HATH A MEMORY.

Two canoes, tied to the strand, attested that the royal party, and Lo and Hualpa, were yet at Chapultepec, which was no doubt as pleasant at night, seen as the stars, as in the day, kissed by the softest of tropical suns.

That the Lord Hualpa should linger there was most natural. Raised, almost as one is transported in dreams, from hunting to warriorship; from that again to riches and nobility; so lately contented, though at peril of life, to look from afar at the house in which the princess Nenetzin slept; now her betrothed, and so pronounced by the great king himself—what wonder that he loitered at the palace?

Yes it was not late—in fact on the horizon still shone the tint, the last and faintest of the day—when Lo and Lo came out, the arm and arm, took their way down the hill to the landing. What betides the lover? Is the mistress coy? Or runs he away at call of some grim duty?

Out of the high gate, down the terraced descent, past the avenue of ghostly cypresses, until their sandals struck the white shells of the landing, they silently went.

"Is it not well with you, my brother?" asked the prince, stopping where the boats, in keeping of their crews, were lying.

"Thank you for that word," Hualpa replied. "It is better even than comrade. Well with me? I look my fortune in the face and am dumb. If I should be expected, if I should fall from such a height! O Mother of the World, save me from that! I would rather die!"

"But you will not fail," said Lo sympathetically.

"The gods keep the future; they only know. The thought came to me, I sat at the feet of Tala and Nenetzin—came to me like a taste of bitter in a cup of sweets. Close after followed another even stronger—how could I be so happy, and our comrade over the lake so miserable? We know how he has hoped and worked and lived for what the morrow is to bring; shall he not be notified even of its nearness? You have heard the sound of the war-drum; what is it like?"

"Like the roll of thunder."

"Well, when the thunder crosses the lake and strikes his ear, saying, 'Up, the war is here!' he will come to the door and down to the water's edge; there he must stop; and as he looks wistfully to the city, and strains his ear to catch the notes of the combat, will he not ask for us, and accuse us of forgetfulness? Rather than that, O my brother, let my fortune all go back to its giver."

"I understand you now," said the prince softly.

"Yes," Hualpa continued, "I am to be at the temple at the break of day; but the night is mine, and I will go to the 'Zin, my first friend, of Anahuac the soul, as Nenetzin is the flower."

"And I will go with you."

"No, you cannot. You have no permission. So farewell."

"Until to-morrow," said Lo.

"In the temple," answered Hualpa.

CHAPTER X.

HOW THE IRON CROSS CAME BACK.

Lo stayed at the landing awhile, nursing the thought left him by his comrade. And he was still there, the splash of the rowers of the receding canoe in his ear, when the great gate of the palace gave exit to another person, this time a girl. The guards on duty paid her no attention. She was clad simply and poorly, and carried a basket. Around the hill were scores of gardeners' daughters like her.

From the avenue she turned into a path which, through one of the fields below, led her to an inlet of the lake, where the market-people were accustomed to moor their canoes. The stars gave light but too feebly to reclaim anything from the darkness. Groping amongst the vessels, she at length entered one, and seating herself, pushed clear of the land and out in the lake toward the glow in the sky beneath which reposed the city.

Like the night, the lake was calm; therefore no fear for the adventures. The boat, under her hand, had not the speed of the king's when driven by his twelve practiced rowers; yet she was its mistress, and it obeyed her, kindly. But why the journey? Why alone on the water at such a time?

Half an hour of steady work. The city was, of course, much nearer. At the same time the labor began to tell; and the reach of her paddle was not so great as at the beginning, nor was the dip so deep; her breathing was less free, and sometimes she stopped to draw her dripping hand across her forehead. Sorely this is not a gardener's daughter.

Younger now became frequent. Most of them passed by with the saturation of the lake—"The blessings of the gods upon you!" Once she was in danger. A canoe full of singers, and the singers full of pulse, came down at speed upon her vessel. Happily, the blow was made obliquely; the crash suspended the song; the wassailers sprang to their feet; seeing only a girl, and no harm done, they drew off laughing. "Out with your lamp next time!" shouted one of them. A law of the lake required some such signal at night.

In the hurry of the collision a tamara, leaning over the bow of the strange canoe, swung a light almost in the girl's face. With a cry, she shrank away; as she did so, from her bosom fell a shining cross. To the dull slave the symbol told no tale; but, good reader, we know there is but one maiden in all Anahuac who wears such a jewel, and we know for whom she wears that one. By the light of that cross we also know the weary passenger is, not a gardener's daughter, but Nenetzin the princess.

And the wonder grows. What does the 'Zin Nene—so they called her in the days they swung her to sleep in the swinging cradle—out so far alone on the lake? And where goes in such guise, this night of all others, and now when the kiss of her betrothed is scarcely cold on her lips? Where are the slaves? Where the signs of royalty? As prayed by the gentle voyagers, the blessings of the gods may be upon her, but much I doubt if she has her mother's, almost as holy.

Slowly now she wins her way. The paddle grows heavier in her unaccustomed hands. On her brow shines a dew which is neither of the night nor of the lake. She is not within the radius of the temple lights, yet stops to rest, and bathe her palms in the cooling waves. Later, when the wall of the city, close by, stretches away on either side, far reaching, a margin of darkness under the illuminated sky, the canoe seems at last to conquer; it floats at will idly as a log; and in that time the princess sits motionless as the boat, lapped in reverie. Her purpose, if she has one, may have chilled in the solitude or weakened under the labor. Alas, if the purpose be good! If evil, help her, O sweet Mary, Mother!

The sound of paddles behind her broke the spell. With a hurried glance over her shoulder she bent again to the task, and there was no more hesitation. She gained the wall and passed in, taking the way by the canal. By houses, and through the press of canoes, and under the bridges, to the heart of the city she

went. On the steps bordering a basin close to the street which had been Cortes' line of march the day of the entry, she landed, and, ascending to the thoroughfare, set out briskly, basket in hand, her face to the south. With never a look to the right or left, never a response to the idlers on the pavement, she hurried down the street. The watchers on the towers sang the hour; she scarcely heard them. At last she glanced at the great temple. A glance at the *catapanth*, one at the shadowy spectators, to be sure of the locality; then her eyes fell upon the palace of Aaxaya, and she stopped. The street to this point had been thronged with people; here there were none; the strangers were by themselves. (The main gate of the ancient house stood half open, and she saw the wheels of gun carriages, and now and then a Christian soldier pacing his round, slowly and grimly; of the little host he alone gave signs of life. On the wall she heard the stamp of horses' feet, and once a neigh, shrill and loud. The awe of the Indian in presence of the white man seized her, and she looked and listened, half frightened, half worshipful, with but one clear sense, and that was of the nearness of the *Tonatiuh*.

(To be continued.)

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