

THE FAIR GOD.

BOOK SIX.

CHAPTER II.

(Continued.)

The words, audible throughout the chamber, proceeded from the nearest devotee—a tall man, well muffled in gown and hood. The monarch controlled himself, and listened, while the speaker continued in a slow, monotonous manner, designed to leave the cavaliers, whom he knew to be observing him, in doubt whether he was praying, or intoning some part of the service of the occasion.

"It is in the streets and in the palaces, and has gone forth into provinces, that Montezuma is the willing guest of the strangers, and that from great love of them and their society, he will not come away, although his empire is dissolving and the religion of his fathers menaced by a new one; but know, O king, that the chiefs and caciques refuse to credit the evil spoken of you, and, believing you a prisoner, are resolved to restore you to freedom. Know further, O king, that this is the time chosen for the rescue. The way back to the throne is clear; you have only to go hence. What says the king? The nation awaits his answer."

"The throne is inseparable from me—is where I am, under my feet always," answered the monarch coldly.

"And there may it remain forever!" said the devotee, with fervor. "I only meant to pray you to come from amongst the strangers, and set it once more where it belongs—amongst the loving hearts that gave it to you. Misunderstand me not, O king. Short time have we for words. The enemy is present. I offer you rescue and liberty."

"To offer me liberty is to deny that I am free. Who is he that proposes to give me what is mine alone to give? I am with Huitzil. Who comes thus between me and the god?"

"From the pabas in the chamber there was a loud murmur; but as the king and devotee retained their composure, and, like praying men, looked steadily at the face of Huitzil, the cavaliers remained unsuspecting observers of what was to them merely a sinful ceremony."

"I am the humblest, though not the least loving, of all your subjects," the devotee answered.

"The name?" said the king. "You ask me to go hence; whither and with whom?"

"Know me without speaking my name, O king. I am your brother's son."

Montezuma was visibly affected. After awhile he said:

"Speak further. Consider what you have said true—that I am a prisoner, that the strangers present are my guards—what are the means of rescue? Speak, that I may judge of them. Conspiracy is abroad, and I do not choose to be blindly led from what is called my prison to a tomb."

"To the reasonable demand the 'tzin calmly replied, 'That you were coming to worship to-day, and the conditions upon which you had permission to come, I learned from the *teotachi*. I saw the opportunity, and proposed to attempt your rescue. In thank the gods have a faithful servant, and you, O king, a true lover. When you were received upon the *acoates*, you did not fail to notice the pabas. Never before, in any one temple have there been so many assembled. They are the instruments of the rescue."

"The instruments!" exclaimed the king, unable to repress his scorn. "The 'tzin interposed hastily. 'Beware! Though what we say is not understood by the strangers, their faculties are sharp, and very little may awaken their suspicion and alarm; and if our offer be rejected, better for you, O king, that they may go hence ignorant of their danger and our design. Yes, if your conjecture were true, if we did propose to face the *teotles* with barehanded pabas, your scorn would be justified; but know that the concourse on the *acoates* is, in fact, of chiefs and caciques, whose gowns do but conceal their preparation for battle."

A pang contracted the monarch's face, and his hands closed harder upon his breast; possibly he shuddered at the necessity so thrust upon him of deciding between Mallicuac who he feared, and the people whom he so loved.

"Yes," continued the 'tzin, "here are the chosen of the realm—the noblest and the best—each with his life in his hand, an offering to you. What need of further words? You have not forgotten the habits of war; you divine the object of the concourse of priests; you understand they are formed in ranks, that, upon a signal, they may throw themselves as one man upon the strangers. Here in the sanctuary are fifty more with *maguahuils*; behind them a door has been constructed to pass you quickly to the *acoates*; they will help me to keep the door, and stay put, until, while you descend to the street. And now, O king, said I not rightly? What have you to do more than go hence? Dread not for us. In the presence of Huitzil, and in full defence of his altar, we will fight."

"I have a man upon the strangers. Here in the sanctuary are fifty more with *maguahuils*; behind them a door has been constructed to pass you quickly to the *acoates*; they will help me to keep the door, and stay put, until, while you descend to the street. And now, O king, said I not rightly? What have you to do more than go hence? Dread not for us. In the presence of Huitzil, and in full defence of his altar, we will fight."

"My son," the king answered, after a pause, "if I were a prisoner I would say you and the lords have done well; but, being free and pursuing my own policy, I reject the rescue. Go your ways in peace; leave me to my prayers. In a few days the strangers will depart; then, if not sooner, I will come back as you wish, and bring the old time with me, and make all the land happy."

The monarch ceased. He imagined the question answered and passed; but a murmur, almost a groan, recalled him from the *ort* to abstract himself. And then the *teotachi*, exercising his privilege, went to him, and laying a hand upon his arm, and pointing up to the god, said:

"Hearken, O king! The strangers have already asked you to allow them to set up an altar here in the house of Huitzil, that they may worship their god after their manner. The request was sacrilege, listening to it a sin; to grant it would make you accursed forever. Save yourself and the god, by going hence as the lords have besought. Be wise in time."

"I have decided," said the poor king, in a trembling voice. "I have decided."

Thus looked to the 'tzin despairingly. The appeal to the monarch's veneration for the god of his fathers had failed; what else remained? And the 'tzin for the first time looked to the king, saying sorrowfully: "Anahuac is the common mother, as Huitzil is the father. The foot of the stranger is heavy on her breast, and she cries aloud. 'Where is Montezuma? Where is the Lord of the Earth? Where is the Child of the Sun?'"

And silence hung heavy in the sanctuary, and the waiting was painful. Again the 'tzin's voice:

"The bride sits in the house waiting. Love puts its songs in her mouth, and kindles her smiles with the dazzle of stars. But the bridegroom lingers, and the evening and the morning bring him not. Ah, what is she, though ever so beautiful and sweet-singing when he comes not, and may never come? O king, you are the lingering lord, and Anahuac the waiting bride; as you love her, come."

The fated king covered his face with his hands, as if, by shutting out the light, to find relief from the pangs too acute for endurance.

Minutes passed—minutes of torture to him, and of breathless expectancy to all present, except the cavaliers, who, unconscious of peril watched the scene with indifference, or rather, the scornful curiosity natural to men professing a purer and diviner faith. At last his hand dropped, and he said with dignity:

"Let this end now—so I command. My explanation must be accepted. I cannot understand why, if you love me as you say, you should receive my word with so little credit; and if you can devote yourselves so entirely to me, why can you not believe me capable of equal devotion to myself? Hear me once more. I do not love the strangers. I hope yet to see them sacrificed to Huitzil. They promise in a few days to leave the country, and I stay with them to hasten their departure, and, in the meantime, shield you, the nation, the temples, and the gods, from their power, which is past finding out. Therefore, let no blow be struck at them, here or elsewhere, without my order. I am yet the king. Let me have peace. Peace be with you! I have spoken."

(To be continued.)

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