

THE FAIR GOD.

BOOK THREE.

CHAPTER II.

(Continued.)

In his situation, all places were alike perilous—houses, streets, temples and palaces. As for that reason, one direction was good as another, he started up the Itzapalapan street from the *tianguis*. Passengers met him now and then, otherwise the great thoroughfare was unusually quiet. Sauntering along in excellent imitation of careless enjoyment, he strove to feel cheerful; but, in spite of his efforts, he became lonesome, while his dread of the patrols kept him uneasy. Such freedom, he ascertained, was not all his fancy colored it; yet it was not so bad as his prison. On he went. Sometimes on a step, or in the shade of a portico, he would sit and gaze at the houses as if they were old friends basking in the moonlight; at the bridges he would also stop, and leaning over the balustrades, watch the waveless water in the canal below, and envy the watermen asleep in their open canoes. The result was a feeling of recklessness, sharpened by a yearning for something to do, some place to visit, some person to see; in short a thousand wishes, so vague, however, that they amounted to nothing.

In this mood he thought of Nezetzin, who, in the tedium of his imprisonment, had become to him a constant dream—a vision by which his fancy was amused and his impatience soothed; a vision that faded not with the morning, but at noon was sweet as at night. With the thought came another—the idea of an adventure excusable only in a lover.

"The garden," he said, stopping and thinking. "The garden. It is the king's; so is the street. It is guarded; so is the city. I will be in danger; but that is around me everywhere. By the gods! I will go to the garden, and look at the house in which she sleeps."

In the garden of the great king at midnight? The project would have terrified the Chalcas; the 'tzin would have forbade it; at any other time the adventurer himself would rather have gone unarmed into the den of a tiger. The gardens were chosen places sacred to royalty, otherwise they would have been without walls and without sentinels at the gate. In the event of detection and arrest, the intrusion at such a time would be without excuse; death was the penalty.

But the venture was agreeable to the mood he was in; he welcomed it as a relief from loneliness, as a rescue from his tormenting void of purpose. If he saw the dangers, they were viewed in the charm of his gentle passion—griffins and goblins masked by Love, the enchanter. He started at once, and now that he had an object before him, there was no more loitering under porticoes or on the bridges. As the squares were put behind him, he repeated over and over, as a magical exorcism, "I will look at the house in which she sleeps—the house in which she sleeps."

Once, in his progress, he turned aside from the great street, and went up a footway bordering a canal. At the next street, however, he crossed a bridge, and proceeded to the north again. Almost before he was aware of it, he reached the corner of the royal garden, always to be remembered by him as the place of his combat with the Tezucuan. But so intent was he upon his present project he scarcely gave it a second look.

The wall was but little higher than his head, and covered with snowy stucco; and where, over the coping, motionless in the moonshine, a palm tree lifted its graceful head, he boldly climbed, and entered the sacred enclosure. Drawing his mantle close about him, he stole toward the palace, selecting the narrow walks most protected by overhanging shrubbery.

A man's instinct is the only counsellor in danger; often it is the only counsellor. Gliding through the shadows, cautiously as if hunting, he seemed to hear a recurrent whisper:

"Have a care, O hunter! This is not one of thy familiar places. The gardens of the great king have old guardians in the stars. Death awaits thee at every gate." But as often came the reply, "Nezetzin—I will see the house in which she sleeps."

He held on towards the palace, never stopping until the top, here and there crowned with low turrets, rose above the highest trees. Then he listened intently, but heard not a sound of life from the princely pile. He sought next a retreat, where, secure from observation, he might sit in the pleasant air, and give wings to his lover's fancy. At last he found one, a little retired from the central walk, and not far from a tank, which had once been, if it were not now, the basin of a fountain. Upon a bench, well shaded by a clump of flowering bushes, he stretched himself at ease, and was soon absorbed.

The course of his thought, in keeping with his youth, was to the future. Most of the time, however, he had no distinct idea; reverie, like an evening mist, settled upon him. Sometimes he lay with closed eyes, shutting himself in, as it were, from the world; then he stared vacantly at the stars, or into those blue spaces in the mighty vault too deep for stars; but most he loved to look at the white walls of the palace. And for the time he was happy; his soul may be said to have been singing a silent song to the unconscious Nezetzin.

Once or twice he was disturbed by a noise, like the suppressed cry of a child; but he attributed it to some of the restless animals in the museum at the farther side of the garden. Half the night was gone; so the watchers on the temples proclaimed; and still he stayed—still dreamed.

About that time, however, he was startled by footsteps coming apparently from the palace. He sat up, ready for action. The appearance of a man alone and unarmed allayed his apprehension for the moment. Up the walk, directly by the hiding-place, the stranger came. As he passed slowly on, the intruder thrilled at beholding, not a guard or an officer, but Montezuma in person! As far as the tank the monarch walked; there he stopped, put his hands behind him, and looked moodily down into the pool.

movements, the very stillness of its advance at last identified it. In all his hunter's experience, he had never seen an ocelot so large. The screams he had heard were now explained—the monster had escaped from the menagerie!

I cannot say the recognition wrought a subsidence of Huapla's fears. He felt instinctively for his arms—he had nothing but a knife of brittle *itzi*. Then he thought of stories he had heard of the ferocity of the royal tigers, and of unhappy wretches flung, by way of punishment, into their dens. He shuddered, and turned to the king, who still gazed thoughtfully over the wall of the tank.

Holy Huiztil! the ocelot was creeping upon the monarch! The flash of understanding that revealed the fact to Huapla was like the lightning. Breathlessly he noticed the course the brute was taking; there could be no doubt. Another flash, and he understood the monarch's peril—alone, unarmed, before the guards at the gates or in the palace could come, the struggle would be over; child of the Sun though he was, there remained for him but one hope of rescue.

As, in common with provincials generally, he cherished a reverence for the monarch, he hardly secondary to that he felt for the gods, the Tlhuacacac was inexpressibly shocked to see him subject to such a danger. An impulse aside from native chivalry urged him to confront the ocelot; but under the circumstances—and he recounted them rapidly—he feared the king more than the brute. Brief time was there for consideration; each moment the peril increased. He thought of the 'tzin, then of Nezetzin. "Now or never!" he said. "If the gods do but help me, I will prove myself."

And he unlooped the mantle and wound it about his left arm; the knife, poor as it was, he took from his *maztlatl*; then he was ready. Ah, if he only had a *tezcuitl*! To place himself between the king and his enemy was what he next set about. Experience had taught him how much such animals are governed by curiosity, and upon that he proceeded to act. On his hands and knees he crept out into the walk. The moment he became exposed the ocelot stopped, raised its round head and watched him with a gaze as intent as his own. The advance was slow and stealthy; when the point was almost gained the king turned about.

"Speak not, still not, O king!" he cried, without stopping; "I will save you—no other can."

(To be continued.)

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