

THE FAIR GOD.

BOOK THREE.

CHAPTER I.

THE FAIR GOD. The 'train's companion the night of the banquet, as the reader has no doubt anticipated, was Huapla, the Tezucan. To an adventure of his, more reckless than his friend's, now turn.

It will be remembered that the 'train left him at the door of the great hall. In a strange scene, without a guide, it was natural for him to be ill at ease; light-hearted and fearless, however, he strolled leisurely about, at one place stopping to hear a minstrel, at another to observe a dance, and all the time half-confused by the maze and splendor of all he beheld. In such a way stood he of the monarch that gave the throne a wide margin, contented from a distance to view the accustomed interchanges of courtesy between the guests and their master. Finding at last that he could not break through the bashfulness acquired in his solitary life among the hills, and imitate the ease and nonchalance of those born as it were to the lordliness of the hour, he left the house, and once more sought the retirement of the gardens.

Out of doors, beneath the stars, with the fresh air in his nostrils, he felt at home again, the wilful hunter, ready for any enterprise. As to the walk he should follow he had no choice, for in every direction he heard laughter, music and conversation; everywhere were flowers and the glow of lamps. Merest chance put him in a path that led to the neighborhood of the museum.

Since the night shut in—be it said in a whisper—a memory of wonderful brightness had taken possession of his mind. Huapla's face, as he saw it laughing in the door of the clock when Yetevo called the 'train for a song, he thought on the lamp, the flowers, and everything most beautiful about his path; her eyes were as stars, rivaling the incense ones in the mead above him. He remembered them, too, as all the laughter for the tears through which they had looked down—alas! not on him, but upon his revered comrade. If Huapla was not in love, he was, at least, borrowing wings for a flight of that kind.

Including the delicious reverie, he came upon some nobles conversing, and quite blocking up the way, though going in his direction. He hesitated, but considering that, as a guest, the freedom of the garden belonged equally to him, he proceeded and became a listener.

"People call him a warrior. They know nothing of what makes a warrior; they mistake good fortune, or what the trailers in the *Canque* call luck, for skill. Take his conduct at the combat of Quetzal as an example; they say that he threw his arrows well; yet it was a cowardly war. How much braver to grasp the *maquahuil*, and rush to blows! That requires manhood, strength, skill. To stand back and kill with a chance arrow—a woman could do as much.

"The 'train was the subject of discussion, and the voice that of Itzli, the Tezucan. Huapla moved closer to the party.

"I thought his course in that combat good," said a stranger; "it gave him opportunities not otherwise to be had. That he did not join the assault cannot be urged against his courage. Had you, my Lord Itzli, fallen like the Otompan, he would have been left alone to fight the challengers. A fool would have seen the risk; a coward would not have courted it.

"The argument," replied Itzli, "is creditable with too much reverence. By the gods, he never doubted the result—not he! He knew the Huasculans would never pass his shield; he knew the victory was mine, two against me as they were. A prince of Tezucan was never conquered!"

"The spirit of the hunter was fast rising; yet he followed, listening.

"And, my friends," the Tezucan continued, "who better judged the conduct of the combatants than day than the king? See the result. To-night I take from the faint heart his bride, the woman he has loved, from boyhood. Then his banquet, to whose honor it is? What does it celebrate? There is a prize to be awarded—the prize of courage and skill; and who gets it? And further, of the nobles and chiefs of the valley, but one is absent—in whose presence exceeds his valour."

"In such strain the Tezucan proceeded. And Huapla, fully aroused, pushed through the company to the speaker, but so quietly that those who observed him asked no questions. Assured that the 'train must have friends present, he waited for some one to take up his case. His own impulse was restrained by his great dread of the king, whose gardens he knew were not fighting grounds at any time or in any quarrel. But, as the boastful prince continued, the resolve to punish it took definite form with the Tezucan—no one to such a degree had his admiration for the 'train already risen! Gradually the auditors dropped behind or disappeared; finally but one remained—a middle-aged, portly noble, whose demeanor was not of the kind to shake the resolution taken.

Huapla made his first advance close by the eastern gate of the garden, to which point he held himself in check lest the want of arms should prove an apology for refusing the fight.

"Will the Lord Itzli stop?" he said, laying his hand on the Tezucan's arm.

"I do not know you," was the answer. The stout courtier also stopped and stared broadly.

"You do not know me? I will mend my fortune in that respect," returned the hunter mildly. "I have heard what you said so ungraciously of my friend and comrade—the last word he emphasized strongly—'Gustamozin.' Then he repeated the offensive words as correctly as if he had been a practised herald, and concluded, 'Now, you know, the 'train cannot be here to-night; you also know the reason; but, for him and in his place, I say, prince though you are, you have basely slandered an absent enemy.'

"We can make the sentinels at the gates clever by a few quills of gold, and here are enough to satisfy them." Huapla produced a handful of the money. "Let us try them. Outside the gate the street is clear."

The courtier protested, but the prince was determined.

"The arms! Pledge my province and palaces—everything for a *maquahuil* now." They went to the gate and obtained the use of two of the weapons and as many shields. Then the party passed into the street, which they found deserted. To avoid the great thoroughfare to Itzapalapan, they turned to the north, and kept on as far as the corner of the garden wall.

"Stay we here," said the courtier. "Short time it all you want, Lord Itzli! The fashers on the hawk's wings are not full-bloded."

The man spoke confidently; and it must be confessed that the Tezucan's reputation and experience justified the assurance. One advantage the hunter had which his enemies overlooked—a surpassing composure. From a temple near by a red light shined broadly over the place, redeeming it from what would otherwise have been vague starlight; by its aid they might have seen his countenance without a trace of excitement or passion. One wish, and but one, he had—that Gustamozin could witness the trial.

(To be continued.)

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