THE FAIR GOD.

BOOK SEVEN.

CHAPTER IX.

(Continued.)

I doubt if the captain took other note of the fight than its menace to the palace; and if he prayed the return of Cortes a little more fervently than before, it was not from fear, or confusion of mind; for straightway he appealed to that arm which had been the last and saving resort of the Christians in many a former strait. Soon every disengaged gun was in position before the western door of the palace, loaded full of stones not larger than bird's eggs, and trained, through the crowd, upon the beach—and afterwards there were those who charged that the captain did not wait for all his Tlasclans to get out of the way. The guns opened with united voices; palace and paved earth trembled; and the smoke, returning upon the pieces, enveloped everything, insomuch that the door of the house was not to be seen, nor was friend distinguished from enemy.

If my reader has been in battle, he knows the effect of that fire too well to require description of me; he can hear the cries of the wounded, and see the ghastly wrecks on the pavement; he can see, too, the recoil of the Aztecs, and the rush of the Tlascalans, savagely eager to follow up their advantage. I leave the scene to his fancy, and choose rather to go with a warrior who, availing himself of the shrouding of the smoke, pushed through the throng behind the guns, and passed into the palace. His steps were hurried, and he looked, neither to the right nor left; those whom he brushed out of the way had but time to see him pass, or to catch an instant's view of a figure of motley appurtenances—a Christian shield and battle-axe, a close cap of steel, and the gleam of a corselet under the colorless tatters of a surcoat of feather-work—a figure impossible to identify as friend or foe. The reader, however, will recognize Hualpa coming out of the depths of the battle, but going—whither?

Once before, as may be remembered, he had been in the ancient house—the time when, in a fit of shame and remorse, he had come to lay his lordship and castle at the king's feet; then he had entered by the eastern portal and passed to the royal presence under guidance: this time his entry was from the west, and he was alone and unacquainted with the vast interior, the halls, passages, courts and chambers. In the first visit, moreover, peace had been the rule, and he could not go amiss for friends; now the palace was a leaguered citadel, and he could hardly go amiss for enemies.

Whatever his purpose, he held boldly on. It is possible he counted on the necessities of the battle requiring, as in fact they did, the presence of every serviceable man of the garrison. The few he met passed him in haste, and without question. He avoided the courts and occupied rooms. In the heart of the building he was sensible that the walls and very air vibrated to the roar without; and as the guns in the eastern front answered those in the western; he was advised momentarily of the direction in which he was proceeding, that his friends still maintained the combat.

Directly three men passed clad in *neguen*; they were talking earnestly, and scarcely noticed him; after them came another, very old and distinguished by a green *maxtlall* over his white tunic—one of the king's councillors.

"Stay, uncle," said Hualpa, "stay; I have a question to ask you."

The old man seemed startled.

"Who are you?" he inquired.

Hualpa did not appear to hear him, but asked, "Is not the princess Nenetzin with the king, her father?"

"Follow this hall to its end," replied the ancient, coldly. "She is there, but not with the king, her father. Who is he?" he continued, after a pause—"who is he that asks for the false princess?"

With a groan Hualpa passed on.

The hall ended in a small *patio*, which, at sight, declared itself a retreat for love. The walls were finished with a confusion of arabesque moulding, brilliantly and variously colored; the tracery around the open doors and windows was a marvel of the art; there were flowers on the floor, and in curious stands, urns, and swinging baskets; there were also delicate vines, and tropical trees dwarfed for the place, amongst which one full grown banana lifted its long branches of velvet green, and seemed to temper the light with dewy coolness; in the centre there was a dead fountain. Indeed, the *patio* could have been but for one purpose. Here, walled in from the cares of empire, where only the day was bold enough to come unbidden, the wise Axaya' and his less fortunate successors, Tecociatzin and Avizotl, forgot their state, and drank their cups of love, and were as other men.

All the beauty of the place, however, was lost on Hualpa. He saw only Nenetzin. She was sitting, at the time, in a low sedilium, her white garments faintly tinted by the scarlet stripes of a canopy extended high overhead, to protect her from the too ardent sun.

At the sound of his sandals she started; and as he approached her she rose in alarm. In sooth his toilet was not that most affected for the wooing of women; he brought with him the odor of battle; and as he knelt but a little way from her, she saw there was blood upon his hands, and upon the axe and shield he laid beside him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

He took off the steel cap and shapeless *panache*, and looked up in her face.

"The Lord Hualpa!" she exclaimed. Then a thought flashed upon her mind, and with terror in every feature, she cried, "Ah, you have taken the palace! And the Tonatiah?"—she clasped her hands despairingly—"dead? a captive? Where is he? I will save him. Take me to him."

At these words, the uncertain expression with which he had looked up to her upon baring his head changed to utter hopelessness. The hurried sentences tore his heart, like talons. For this he had come to her through so much peril! For this he was then braving death at her feet! His head sunk upon his breast, and he said:

"The palace is not ours. The *Tonatiah* yet lives, and is free."

With a sign of relief, she resumed her seat, asking:

"How came you here?"

He answered without raising his eyes, "The keepers of the palace are strong; they can stay the thousands, but they could not keep me out."

The face of the listener softened; she saw his love, and all his heroism, but said, coldly:—

"I have heard that wise men do such things only of necessity."

"I do not pretend to wisdom," he replied. "Had I been wise, I would not have loved you. Since our parting at Chapultepec, where I was so happy, I have thought you might be a prisoner here, and in my dreams I have heard you call me. And a little while ago, on the temple, I said to'lo', Nenetzin will despise me, if I come not soon.' Tell me, O Nenetzin, that you are a prisoner, and I will take you away. Tell me that the stories told of you on the streets are not true, and——"

"What stories?" she asked.

"Alas, that it should be mine to tell them! And to you, Nenetzin, my beautiful!"

(To be Continued.)

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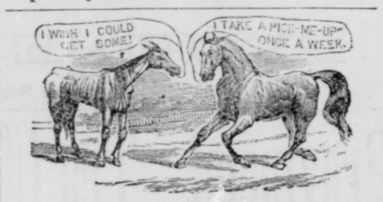

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