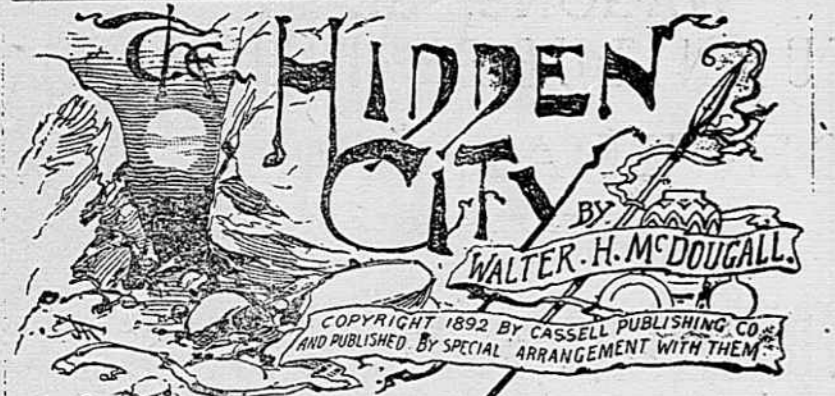


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They followed the old man, who held a candle aloft, and after a journey of perhaps a half hour came to a stop before an apparently solid wall of large stones. Eric recognized the great slab in the center as a door similar to the one Iklapel had opened when they had inspected the treasure vault.

They passed through and along the passage again until they came upon the treasure house of Aztlan, filled to overflowing with the accumulated wealth of dead, forgotten nations. Even old Listah lost his stolid reserve and burst into astonished exclamations, while Jan-ila walked around among the various ancient, almost priceless relics with open-eyed and open mouthed wonder. It was truly a remarkable spectacle. More wealth in gold and silver lay there unguarded, unheeded, than the banks of the entire world could command. His United States over him as his eyes roved over the mass; the old vases full of gold dust, strangely shaped utensils and furniture, meaningless trappings of all sorts, shapes and sizes aroused his antiquarian interest and his cupiditv at the same time, for there were fortunes in single objects lying there upon the tiled pavement; relics of the prehistoric past that nations would vie with one another to secure—not for their intrinsic value alone, but for their ethnological interest.

"It is the treasure of the gods," said Listah finally. "It belongs to them—yes, and it belongs to Quetzal!"

"It is not for us at any rate," rejoined Jan-ila. "I would not know what to do with it if I had it."

"Nor I," Listah replied. "but Quetzal knows, I would wager, and many wonderful things he could make for us. For me one good ax or knife of his wondrous new metal that he calls iron is worth all this great pile."

There was a strong fascination in the board to Eric. He felt a sort of misery greet every object as his eyes roved over the mass; the old vases full of gold dust, strangely shaped utensils and furniture, meaningless trappings of all sorts, shapes and sizes aroused his antiquarian interest and his cupiditv at the same time, for there were fortunes in single objects lying there upon the tiled pavement; relics of the prehistoric past that nations would vie with one another to secure—not for their intrinsic value alone, but for their ethnological interest.

"There are pictures of them in the sacred books," said Jan-ila when Eric had pointed out this wonder. "For I have seen them often. The pictures show men spearing them and being trampled under feet by these same monsters."

They lost no more time, but started at once for the chamber under the temple, for Eric remembered well the way now, and they reached it in a few minutes. Noiselessly they entered it, and the two priests reverently, for both had been there before on solemn occasions. This room held the ark of the Aztlan faith, Quetzalcoatl's vessel, and it was a sacred apartment, into which none but priests ever ventured. Listah extinguished the candle as soon as they were fairly in the cellarlike chamber. A few narrow shafts of light shot through the crevices, but they could see that the light was dim and that darkness was rapidly approaching. They heard footsteps upon the light flooring above, but they ceased a moment later.

"Barl, do not speak; I come from Listah to ask you whether you are still his wife and friend or Chalpa's slave?"

"Why, what mean you?" she exclaimed. "I saw my husband today; he need send me no such message. I do his bidding and no other's."

"But you guard Lela, who is Chalpa's victim, the sacrifice to the god?"

"Aye, but Listah did not forbid me, and it is my duty."

"But, think you, would Quetzal like to see you preparing his bride for death?"

"He has gone and left her—his she was, and he will protect her. I do no wrong in thinking it."

"Yes, he will protect her, and you shall help him," he said, standing up before her and revealing his face. "Do not start—I am Quetzal. I have returned, but it must not be known until tomorrow. This you must do. Tell her privately that she must ask Chalpa to permit her to have one last conversation with Kulcan before she dies. She must go to Chalpa's house, where her brother is confined, and tell him I am here and will smite the rattlesnake tomorrow. Tell him to yield not, nor be discouraged, for he will be safe."

"Kulcan is not at Chalpa's house," said Barl. "The priest has taken him to your dwelling, out beyond the city, and is with him there, for he says he will occupy that house himself hereafter."

"The deuce he has!" ejaculated Eric. "That is cool! Very well, she must go there at once. Some of your women can attend her, of course, and conduct her home on her return. But there is no time to waste; she must go immediately; hasten now, but be cautious."

Before she could reach the door it opened, and Lela came forth. Going straight to Eric, she threw her arms about his neck and said:

"My own! Something told me you were here. Blessed, true heart, to come to me when I needed you!"

He kissed her many times, hushing her voice thus, and "then said:

"You must go back at once. If you are seen here it will ruin all. Barl will tell you for what I came, and tomorrow all the trouble will be ended. Have patience and courage, my darling. Go into the house now, dear, at once."

She obeyed him silently. With one long fond look she entered the house. Old Barl followed her and closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER XIII IN THE HOUR OF NEED.

He stood there for a moment looking at the door, and then moved away, for a group of people was approaching, and he wished to evade them. The city gate leading to the orchards and to his own

house was high, and he went out into the fields. After walking awhile he came to his mill, silent and dark by the riverside, and then he thought that he would go beyond and to his own dwelling and see if he could spy out anything there. His scouting savored so much of the romantic and perilous that it was fascinating. It brought back his boyhood's dreams to him and filled him with a queer sort of dime novel heroism that was positively thrilling.

It was within two hours of midnight. The moon, which was in its last quarter, hung almost over the horizon in the far end of the canyon; the air was so still that the soft murmur of the river came clear to his ears as he stood in the shadow of the trees and looked toward his dwelling. Suddenly the silence was gently stirred—not broken—but what seemed to him as he listened, with a stilled pulse, the faintest, most distant chorus of voices.



He seized a long iron knife.

As a dream it seemed to come to him from some faroff desert spot, like the voices of the stars. Yet he surely heard it, faint, but clear, the air of "Annie Laurie," sung by male voices in unison, and it seemed the sweetest sound he had ever heard. It was for but a few moments that it was audible; then it sank away in the deepest silence, and he heard his heart's loud beating. He looked up at the silent stars and caught his breath, what madness was this? Had he truly heard the voices? Were the sounds but some fantasy born of the hour and the night?

After a little reflection he arrived at the conclusion that what he had fancied he heard was but the result of momentary mental derangement, superinduced by the recent physical strain to which he had been subjected. It could have no other explanation, and he resolved to be careful in the future. His reflections were interrupted by the approach of people and the sound of female voices. He sank deeper into the shadow of the trees, and hurried to a position where he could command a view of his own house and see all that occurred.

The group approached, and he saw that it was Lela and three of her women. She had been talking gaily to them, but when she reached the door she stopped, and her face grew pale as she listened to the voices of the women. She saw that they were talking of her, and she felt that she was being betrayed.

"I come to beg one favor of you before I die," answered Lela, throwing into her voice all the pleading, plaintive tones she could command. "Let me see my brother and speak to him for but a little moment! I cannot go without bidding him farewell. I would see him alone, for tomorrow I cannot see him. I am resigned—I will go to my doom quietly, willingly if I can see him just once more!"

"Yes, you shall see him," he said. "This but a little thing you ask. Tell me, can I not grant a greater boon?"

"I ask nothing—nothing but to speak to Kulcan."

"Enter, then," he said, standing aside; "your women shall wait here. No, they shall return. Go," he continued, turning to them; "return to the city. I will bring Lela to you when she is ready."

Lela had entered the house, and the women, after a single glance at Chalpa's face, quickly departed. He stood for a little time looking after them, and then followed his victim indoors. She had already, in a few words, delivered her message, and when Chalpa's stealthy footfall came to her ears she was caressing her brother and bidding him be comforted. It was hard for Kulcan to conceal the joy and hope that filled him and brightened his face, but fortunately Chalpa, now bent upon another scheme, noticed nothing; he was delighted at the turn affairs had taken, and now that Lela was so completely in his power his thoughts had taken a new turn.

After standing silent in the center of the large room—from which he could see the two—for some minutes, he approached them. Kulcan, his arms bound by thongs, raised his eyes, and Lela turned toward the crafty priest as he spoke:

"My brother and sister, I like not these hard, uncourtly measures which we had to adopt. Methinks no other Katun feast has been so marred; it is an ill thing when those so young as you show ancient practices. Yet it is because you are both young and headstrong. Lela, it seems, has at last become resigned to the will of Kinchanan, and will go cheerfully to Chalpa's dreaded altar; but you, Kulcan, you still are headstrong and perverse. Yet, as I love you both, I would fain hold out some hope."

"What hope is there now?" cried Kulcan defiantly, all his strength and spirit returning to him now that he knew Eric lived.

"No hope for you or your sister if you maintain that spirit of disdain," Chalpa answered; "but there is hope, he continued after a pause, "if you will do my will. I love you both right well. If I did not you would have shared the fate of—that is, you would not be here now to know my clemency and tenderness at this late hour."

"Brother," interrupted Lela as he was about to answer, her soft voice full of pleading, "listen and be not rebellious. Chalpa holds out a hope to us. Let us hear him."

"Yes, I hold out hope and safety for you both," Chalpa said somewhat eagerly. "I do not desire your blood—I can avert your doom if you will do my will. Obey me and you both are saved, for believe me, before the sun sets tomorrow the thirty priests will have not only your sister but your blood poured out upon the altar."

"Oh, horrible!" cried Lela, covering her face. "Spare him, Chalpa! Take my life, but let not his blood be shed. Remember he is the last of our family."

"I remember it only too well," answered Chalpa.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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