

CHAPTER XIII

THE STONE OF SACRIFICE

At length the morning broke and found me in a sorry plight, for my face was swollen to the size of a pumpkin by the venom of the mosquitoes, and the rest of my body was in little better case. Moreover I could not keep myself still because of the itching, but must run and jump like a madman. And where was I to run to through this huge swamp, in which I could see no shelter or sign of man? I could not guess, so since I must keep moving I followed the bank of the river, as I walked disturbing many crocodiles and loathsome snakes. Now I knew that I could not live long in such suffering, and determined to struggle forward till I fell down insensible and death put an end to my torments.

For an hour or more I went on thus till I came to a place that was clear of bush and reeds. Across this I skipped and danced, striking with my swollen hands at the gnats which buzzed about my head. Now the end was not far off, for I was exhausted and near to falling, when suddenly I came upon a party of men, brown in colour and clothed with white garments, who had been fishing in the river. By them on the water were several canoes in which were loads of merchandise, and they were now engaged in eating. So soon as these men caught sight of me they uttered exclamations in an unknown tongue and seizing weapons that lay by them, bows and arrows and wooden clubs set on either side with spikes of

flinty glass, they made towards me as though to kill me. Now I lifted up my hands praying for mercy, and seeing that I was unarmed and helpless the men laid down their arms and addressed me. I shook my head to show that I could not understand, and pointed first to the sea and then to my swollen features. They nodded, and going to one of the canoes a man brought from it a paste of a brown colour and aromatic smell. Then by signs he directed me to remove such garments as remained on me, the fashion of which seemed to puzzle them greatly. This being done, they proceeded to anoint my body with the paste, the touch of which gave me a most blessed relief from my intolerable itching and burning, and moreover rendered my flesh distasteful to the insects, for after that they plagued me little.

When I was anointed they offered me food, fried fish and cakes of meal, together with a most delicious hot drink covered with a brown and foaming froth that I learned to know afterwards as chocolate. When I had finished eating, having talked a while together in low tones, they motioned me to enter one of the canoes, giving me mats to lie on. I obeyed, and three other men came with me, for the canoe was large. One of these, a very grave man with a gentle face and manner whom I took to be the chief of the party, sat down opposite to me, the other two placing themselves in the bow and stern of the boat which they drove along by means of paddles. Then we started, followed by three other canoes, and before we had gone a mile utter weariness overpowered me and I fell asleep.

I awoke much refreshed, having slept many hours, for now the sun was setting, and was astonished to find the grave-looking man my companion in the canoe, keeping watch over my sleep and warding the gnats from me with a leafy branch. His kindness seemed to show that I was in no danger of ill-treatment, and my fears on that point being set at rest, I began to wonder as to what strange land I had come and who its people might be. Soon, however, I gave over, having nothing to build on, and observed the scenery instead. Now we were paddling up a smaller river than the one on the banks of which I had been cast away, and were no longer in the midst of marshes. On either side of us was open land, or rather land that would have been open had it not been for the great trees, larger than the largest oak, which grew upon it, some of them of surpassing beauty. Up these trees climbed creepers that hung like ropes even from the topmost boughs, and among them were many strange and gorgeous flowering plants that seemed to cling to the bark as moss clings to a wall. In their branches also sat harsh-voiced birds of brilliant colours, and apes that barked and chattered at us as we went.

Just as the sun set over all this strange new scene the canoes came to a landing place built of timber, and we disembarked. Now it grew dark suddenly, and all I could discover was that I was being led along a good road. Presently we reached a gate, which, from the barking of dogs and the numbers of people who thronged about it, I judged to be the entrance to a town, and passing it, we advanced down a long street with houses on either side. At the doorway of the last house my companion halted, and taking me by the hand, led me into a long low room lit with lamps of

earthenware. Here some women came forward and kissed him, while others whom I took to be servants, saluted him by touching the floor with one hand. Soon, however, all eyes were turned on me and many eager questions were asked of the chief, of which I could only guess the purport.

When all had gazed their fill supper was served, a rich meal of many strange meats, and of this I was invited to partake, which I did, seated on a mat and eating of the dishes that were placed upon the ground by the women. Among these I noticed one girl who far surpassed all the others in grace, though none were unpleasing to the eye. She was dark, indeed, but her features were regular and her eyes fine. Her figure was tall and straight, and the sweetness of her face added to the charm of her beauty. I mention this girl here for two reasons, first because she saved me once from sacrifice and once from torture, and secondly because she was none other than that woman who afterwards became known as Marina, the mistress of Cortes, without whose aid he had never conquered Mexico. But at this time she did not guess that it was her destiny to bring her country of Anahuac beneath the cruel yoke of the Spaniard.

From the moment of my entry I saw that Marina, as I will call her, for her Indian name is too long to be written, took pity on my forlorn state, and did what lay in her power to protect me from vulgar curiosity and to minister to my wants. It was she who brought me water to wash in, and a clean robe of linen to replace my foul and tattered garments, and a cloak fashioned of bright feathers for my shoulders.

When supper was done a mat was given me to sleep on in a little room apart, and here I lay down, thinking that though I might be lost for ever to my own world, at least I had fallen among a people who were gentle and kindly, and moreover, as I saw from many tokens, no savages. One thing, however, disturbed me; I discovered that though I was well treated, also I was a prisoner, for a man armed with a copper spear slept across the doorway of my little room. Before I lay down I looked through the wooden bars which served as a protection to the window place, and saw that the house stood upon the border of a large open space, in the midst of which a great pyramid towered a hundred feet or more into the air. On the top of this pyramid was a building of stone that I took to be a temple, and rightly, in front of which a fire burned. Marvelling what the purpose of this great work might be, and in honour of what faith it was erected, I went to sleep.

On the morrow I was to learn.

Here it may be convenient for me to state, what I did not discover till afterwards, that I was in the city of Tobasco, the capital of one of the southern provinces of Anahuac, which is situated at a distance of some hundreds of miles from the central city of Tenochtitlan, or Mexico. The river where I had been cast away was the Rio de Tobasco, where Cortes landed in the following year, and my host, or rather my captor, was the cacique or chief of Tobasco, the same man who subsequently presented Marina to Cortes. Thus it came about that, with the exception of a certain Aguilar, who with some companions was wrecked on the coast of

Yucatan six years before, I was the first white man who ever dwelt among the Indians. This Aguilar was rescued by Cortes, though his companions were all sacrificed to Huitzel, the horrible war-god of the country. But the name of the Spaniards was already known to the Indians, who looked on them with superstitious fear, for in the year previous to my being cast away, the hidalgo Hernandez de Cordova had visited the coast of Yucatan and fought several battles with the natives, and earlier in the same year of my arrival, Juan de Grigalva had come to this very river of Tobasco. Thus it came about that I was set down as one of this strange new nation of Teules, as the Indians named the Spaniards, and therefore as an enemy for whose blood the gods were thirsting.

I awoke at dawn much refreshed with sleep, and having washed and clothed myself in the linen robes that were provided for me, I came into the large room, where food was given me. Scarcely had I finished my meal when my captor, the cacique, entered, accompanied by two men whose appearance struck terror to my heart. In countenance they were fierce and horrible; they wore black robes embroidered with mystic characters in red, and their long and tangled hair was matted together with some strange substance. These men, whom all present, including the chief or cacique, seemed to look on with the utmost reverence, glared at me with a fierce glee that made my blood run cold. One of them, indeed, tore open my white robe and placed his filthy hand upon my heart, which beat quickly enough, counting its throbs aloud while the other nodded at his words. Afterwards I learned that he was saying that I was very strong.

Glancing round to find the interpretation of this act upon the faces of those about me, my eyes caught those of the girl Marina, and there was that in them which left me in little doubt. Horror and pity were written there, and I knew that some dreadful death overshadowed me. Before I could do anything, before I could even think, I was seized by the priests, or pabas as the Indians name them, and dragged from the room, all the household following us except Marina and the cacique. Now I found myself in a great square or market place bordered by many fine houses of stone and lime, and some of mud, which was filling rapidly with a vast number of people, men women and children, who all stared at me as I went towards the pyramid on the top of which the fire burned. At the foot of this pyramid I was led into a little chamber hollowed in its thickness, and here my dress was torn from me by more priests, leaving me naked except for a cloth about my loins and a chaplet of bright flowers which was set upon my head. In this chamber were three other men, Indians, who from the horror on their faces I judged to be also doomed to death.

Presently a drum began to beat high above us, and we were taken from the chamber and placed in a procession of many priests, I being the first among the victims. Then the priests set up a chant and we began the ascent of the pyramid, following a road that wound round and round its bulk till it ended on a platform at its summit, which may have measured forty paces in the square. Hence the view of the surrounding country was very fine, but in that hour I scarcely noticed it, having no care for

prospects, however pleasing. On the further side of the platform were two wooden towers fifty feet or so in height. These were the temples of the gods, Huitzel God of War and Quetzal God of the Air, whose hideous effigies carved in stone grinned at us through the open doorways. In the chambers of these temples stood small altars, and on the altars were large dishes of gold, containing the hearts of those who had been sacrificed on the yesterday. These chambers, moreover, were encrusted with every sort of filth. In front of the temples stood the altar whereon the fire burned eternally, and before it were a hog-backed block of black marble of the size of an inn drinking table, and a great carven stone shaped like a wheel, measuring some ten feet across with a copper ring in its centre.

All these things I remembered afterwards, though at the time I scarcely seemed to see them, for hardly were we arrived on the platform when I was seized and dragged to the wheel-shaped stone. Here a hide girdle was put round my waist and secured to the ring by a rope long enough to enable me to run to the edge of the stone and no further. Then a flint-pointed spear was given to me and spears were given also to the two captives who accompanied me, and it was made clear to me by signs that I must fight with them, it being their part to leap upon the stone and mine to defend it. Now I thought that if I could kill these two poor creatures, perhaps I myself should be allowed to go free, and so to save my life I prepared to take theirs if I could. Presently the head priest gave a signal commanding the two men to attack me, but they were so lost in fear that they did not even stir. Then the priests began to flog them

with leather girdles till at length crying out with pain, they ran at me. One reached the stone and leapt upon it a little before the other, and I struck the spear through his arm. Instantly he dropped his weapon and fled, and the other man fled also, for there was no fight in them, nor would any flogging bring them to face me again.

Seeing that they could not make them brave, the priests determined to have done with them. Amidst a great noise of music and chanting, he whom I had smitten was seized and dragged to the hog-backed block of marble, which in truth was a stone of sacrifice. On this he was cast down, breast upwards, and held so by five priests, two gripping his hands, two his legs, and one his head. Then, having donned a scarlet cloak, the head priest, that same who had felt my heart, uttered some kind of prayer, and, raising a curved knife of the flint-like glass or itztli, struck open the poor wretch's breast at a single blow, and made the ancient offering to the sun.

As he did this all the multitude in the place below, in full view of whom this bloody game was played, prostrated themselves, remaining on their knees till the offering had been thrown into the golden censer before the statue of the god Huitzel. Thereon the horrible priests, casting themselves on the body, carried it with shouts to the edge of the pyramid or teocalli, and rolled it down the steep sides. At the foot of the slope it was lifted and borne away by certain men who were waiting, for what purpose I did not know at that time.

Scarcely was the first victim dead when the second was seized and treated in a like fashion, the multitude prostrating themselves as before. And then last of all came my turn. I felt myself seized and my senses swam, nor did I recover them till I found myself lying on the accursed stone, the priests dragging at my limbs and head, my breast strained upwards till the skin was stretched tight as that of a drum, while over me stood the human devil in his red mantle, the glass knife in his hand. Never shall I forget his wicked face maddened with the lust for blood, or the glare in his eyes as he tossed back his matted locks. But he did not strike at once, he gloated over me, pricking me with the point of the knife. It seemed to me that I lay there for years while the paba aimed and pointed with the knife, but at last through a mist that gathered before my eyes, I saw it flash upward. Then when I thought that my hour had come, a hand caught his arm in mid-air and held it and I heard a voice whispering.

What was said did not please the priest, for suddenly he howled aloud and made a dash towards me to kill me, but again his arm was caught before the knife fell. Then he withdrew into the temple of the god Quetzal, and for a long while I lay upon the stone suffering the agonies of a hundred deaths, for I believed that it was determined to torture me before I died, and that my slaughter had been stayed for this purpose.

There I lay upon the stone, the fierce sunlight beating on my breast, while from below came the faint murmur of the thousands of the wondering people. All my life seemed to pass before me as I was stretched upon

that awful bed, a hundred little things which I had forgotten came back to me, and with them memories of childhood, of my oath to my father, of Lily's farewell kiss and words, of de Garcia's face as I was hurled into the sea, of the death of Isabella de Siguenza, and lastly a vague wonder as to why all priests were so cruel!

At length I heard footsteps and shut my eyes, for I could bear the sight of that dreadful knife no longer. But behold! no knife fell. Suddenly my hands were loosed and I was lifted to my feet, on which I never hoped to stand again. Then I was borne to the edge of the teocalli, for I could not walk, and here my would-be murderer, the priest, having first shouted some words to the spectators below, that caused them to murmur like a forest when the wind stirs it, clasped me in his blood-stained arms and kissed me on the forehead. Now it was for the first time that I noticed my captor, the cacique, standing at my side, grave, courteous, and smiling. As he had smiled when he handed me to the pabas, so he smiled when he took me back from them. Then having been cleansed and clothed, I was led into the sanctuary of the god Quetzal and stood face to face with the hideous image there, staring at the golden censer that was to have received my heart while the priests uttered prayers. Thence I was supported down the winding road of the pyramid till I came to its foot, where my captor the cacique took me by the hand and led me through the people who, it seemed, now regarded me with some strange veneration. The first person that I saw when we reached the house was Marina, who looked at me and murmured some soft words that I could not understand. Then I was suffered to go to my chamber, and there I passed the rest of

the day prostrated by all that I had undergone. Truly I had come to a land of devils!

And now I will tell how it was that I came to be saved from the knife. Marina having taken some liking to me, pitied my sad fate, and being very quick-witted, she found a way to rescue me. For when I had been led off to sacrifice, she spoke to the cacique, her lord, bringing it to his mind that, by common report Montezuma, the Emperor of Anahuac, was disturbed as to the Teules or Spaniards, and desired much to see one. Now, she said, I was evidently a Teule, and Montezuma would be angered, indeed, if I were sacrificed in a far-off town, instead of being sent to him to sacrifice if he saw fit. To this the cacique answered that the words were wise, but that she should have spoken them before, for now the priests had got hold of me, and it was hopeless to save me from their grip.

'Nay,' answered Marina, 'there is this to be said. Quetzal, the god to whom this Teule is to be offered, was a white man,* and it may well happen that this man is one of his children. Will it please the god that his child should be offered to him? At the least, if the god is not angered, Montezuma will certainly be wroth, and wreak a vengeance on you and on the priests.'

* Quetzal, or more properly Quetzalcoatl, was the divinity who is fabled to have taught the natives of Anahuac all the useful arts, including those of government and policy, he

was white-skinned and dark-haired. Finally he sailed from the shores of Anahuac for the fabulous country of Tlapallan in a bark of serpents' skins. But before he sailed he promised that he would return again with a numerous progeny. This promise was remembered by the Aztecs, and it was largely on account of it that the Spaniards were enabled to conquer the country, for they were supposed to be his descendants. Perhaps Quetzalcoatl was a Norseman! Vide Sagas of Eric the Red and of Thorfinn Karlsefne.--AUTHOR.

Now when the cacique heard this he saw that Marina spoke truth, and hurrying up the teocalli, he caught the knife as it was in the act of falling upon me. At first the head priest was angered and called out that this was sacrilege, but when the cacique had told him his mind, he understood that he would do wisely not to run a risk of the wrath of Montezuma. So I was loosed and led into the sanctuary, and when I came out the paba announced to the people that the god had declared me to be one of his children, and it was for this reason that then and thereafter they treated me with reverence.