

CHAPTER XV

THE COURT OF MONTEZUMA

Now for a week I was so ill from my wounds that I was unable to be moved, and then I must be carried in a litter till we came to within three days' journey of the city of Tenochtitlan or Mexico. After that, as the roads were now better made and cared for than any I have seen in England, I was able to take to my feet again. Of this I was glad, for I have no love of being borne on the shoulders of other men after the womanish Indian fashion, and, moreover, as we had now come to a cold country, the road running through vast table-lands and across the tops of mountains, it was no longer necessary as it had been in the hot lands. Never did I see anything more dreary than these immense lengths of desolate plains covered with aloes and other thorny and succulent shrubs of fantastic aspect, which alone could live on the sandy and waterless soil. This is a strange land, that can boast three separate climates within its borders, and is able to show all the glories of the tropics side by side with deserts of measureless expanse.

One night we camped in a rest house, of which there were many built along the roads for the use of travellers, that was placed almost on the top of the sierra or mountain range which surrounds the valley of Tenochtitlan. Next morning we took the road again before dawn, for the cold was so sharp at this great height that we, who had travelled from

the hot land, could sleep very little, and also Guatemoc desired if it were possible to reach the city that night.

When we had gone a few hundred paces the path came to the crest of the mountain range, and I halted suddenly in wonder and admiration. Below me lay a vast bowl of land and water, of which, however, I could see nothing, for the shadows of the night still filled it. But before me, piercing the very clouds, towered the crests of two snow-clad mountains, and on these the light of the unrisen sun played, already changing their whiteness to the stain of blood. Popo, or the Hill that Smokes, is the name of the one, and Ixtac, or the Sleeping Woman, that of the other, and no grander sight was ever offered to the eyes of man than they furnished in that hour before the dawn. From the lofty summit of Popo went up great columns of smoke which, what with the fire in their heart and the crimson of the sunrise, looked like rolling pillars of flame. And for the glory of the glittering slopes below, that changed continually from the mystery of white to dull red, from red to crimson, and from crimson to every dazzling hue that the rainbow holds, who can tell it, who can even imagine it? None, indeed, except those that have seen the sun rise over the volcanos of Tenochtitlan.

When I had feasted my eyes on Popo I turned to Ixtac. She is not so lofty as her 'husband,' for so the Aztecs name the volcan Popo, and when first I looked I could see nothing but the gigantic shape of a woman fashioned in snow, and lying like a corpse upon her lofty bier, whose hair streamed down the mountain side. But now the sunbeams caught her

also, and she seemed to start out in majesty from a veil of rosy mist, a wonderful and thrilling sight. But beautiful as she was then, still I love the Sleeping Woman best at eve. Then she lies a shape of glory on the blackness beneath, and is slowly swallowed up into the solemn night as the dark draws its veil across her.

Now as I gazed the light began to creep down the sides of the volcan, revealing the forests on their flanks. But still the vast valley was filled with mist that lay in dense billows resembling those of the sea, through which hills and temple tops started up like islands. By slow degrees as we passed upon our downward road the vapours cleared away, and the lakes of Tezcuco, Chalco, and Xochicalco shone in the sunlight like giant mirrors. On their banks stood many cities, indeed the greatest of these, Mexico, seemed to float upon the waters; beyond them and about them were green fields of corn and aloe, and groves of forest trees, while far away towered the black wall of rock that hedges in the valley.

All day we journeyed swiftly through this fairy land. We passed through the cities of Amaquem and Ajotzinco, which I will not stay to describe, and many a lovely village that nestled upon the borders of Lake Chalco. Then we entered on the great causeway of stone built like a road resting on the waters, and with the afternoon we came to the town of Cuitlahuac. Thence we passed on to Iztapalapan, and here Guatemoc would have rested for the night in the royal house of his uncle Cuitlahua. But when we reached the town we found that Montezuma, who had been advised of

our approach by runners, had sent orders that we were to push on to Tenochtitlan, and that palanquins had been made ready to bear us. So we entered the palanquins, and leaving that lovely city of gardens, were borne swiftly along the southern causeway. On we went past towns built upon piles fixed in the bottom of the lake, past gardens that were laid out on reeds and floated over the waters like a boat, past teocallis and glistening temples without number, through fleets of light canoes and thousands of Indians going to and fro about their business, till at length towards sunset we reached the battlemented fort that is called Xoloc which stands upon the dyke. I say stands, but alas! it stands no more. Cortes has destroyed it, and with it all those glorious cities which my eyes beheld that day.

At Xoloc we began to enter the city of Tenochtitlan or Mexico, the mightiest city that ever I had seen. The houses on the outskirts, indeed, were built of mud or adobe, but those in the richer parts were constructed of red stone. Each house surrounded a courtyard and was in turn surrounded by a garden, while between them ran canals, having footpaths on either side. Then there were squares, and in the squares pyramids, palaces, and temples without end. I gazed on them till I was bewildered, but all seemed as nothing when at length I saw the great temple with its stone gateways opening to the north and the south, the east and the west, its wall carven everywhere with serpents, its polished pavements, its teocallis decked with human skulls, thousands upon thousands of them, and its vast surrounding tianquez, or market place. I caught but a glimpse of it then, for the darkness was falling,

and afterwards we were borne on through the darkness, I did not know whither.

A while went by and I saw that we had left the city, and were passing up a steep hill beneath the shadow of mighty cedar trees. Presently we halted in a courtyard and here I was bidden to alight. Then the prince Guatemoc led me into a wondrous house, of which all the rooms were roofed with cedar wood, and its walls hung with richly-coloured cloths, and in that house gold seemed as plentiful as bricks and oak are with us in England. Led by domestics who bore cedar wands in their hands, we went through many passages and rooms, till at length we came to a chamber where other domestics were awaiting us, who washed us with scented waters and clothed us in gorgeous apparel. Thence they conducted us to a door where we were bidden to remove our shoes, and a coarse coloured robe was given to each of us to hide our splendid dress. The robes having been put on, we were suffered to pass the door, and found ourselves in a vast chamber in which were many noble men and some women, all standing and clad in coarse robes. At the far end of this chamber was a gilded screen, and from behind it floated sounds of sweet music.

Now as we stood in the great chamber that was lighted with sweet-smelling torches, many men advanced and greeted Guatemoc the prince, and I noticed that all of them looked upon me curiously.

Presently a woman came and I saw that her beauty was great. She was tall and stately, and beneath her rough outer robe splendidly attired in worked and jewelled garments. Weary and bewildered as I was, her

loveliness seized me as it were in a vice, never before had I seen such loveliness. For her eye was proud and full like the eye of a buck, her curling hair fell upon her shoulders, and her features were very noble, yet tender almost to sadness, though at times she could seem fierce enough. This lady was yet in her first youth, perchance she may have seen some eighteen years, but her shape was that of a full-grown woman and most royal.

'Greeting, Guatemoc my cousin,' she said in a sweet voice; 'so you are come at last. My royal father has awaited you for long and will ask questions as to your delay. My sister your wife has wondered also why you tarried.'

Now as she spoke I felt rather than saw that this lady was searching me with her eyes.

'Greeting, Otomie my cousin,' answered the prince. 'I have been delayed by the accidents of travel. Tobasco is far away, also my charge and companion, Teule,' and he nodded towards me, 'met with an accident on the road.'

'What was the accident?' she asked.

'Only this, that he saved me from the jaws of a puma at the risk of his life when all the others fled from me, and was somewhat hurt in the deed. He saved me thus--' and in few words he told the story.

She listened and I saw that her eyes sparkled at the tale. When it was done she spoke again, and this time to me.

'Welcome, Teule,' she said smiling. 'You are not of our people, yet my heart goes out to such a man.' And still smiling she left us.

'Who is that great lady?' I asked of Guatemoc.

'That is my cousin Otomie, the princess of the Otomie, my uncle Montezuma's favourite daughter,' he answered. 'She likes you, Teule, and that is well for you for many reasons. Hush!'

As he spoke the screen at the far end of the chamber was drawn aside. Beyond it a man sat upon a brodered cushion, who was inhaling the fumes of the tobacco weed from a gilded pipe of wood after the Indian fashion. This man, who was no other than the monarch Montezuma, was of a tall build and melancholy countenance, having a very pale face for one of his nation, and thin black hair. He was dressed in a white robe of the purest cotton, and wore a golden belt and sandals set with pearls, and on his head a plume of feathers of the royal green. Behind him were a band of beautiful girls somewhat slightly clothed, some of whom played on lutes and other instruments of music, and on either side stood four ancient counsellors, all of them barefooted and clad in the coarsest garments.

So soon as the screen was drawn all the company in the chamber prostrated themselves upon their knees, an example that I hastened to follow, and thus they remained till the emperor made a sign with the gilded bowl of his pipe, when they rose to their feet again and stood with folded hands and eyes fixed abjectly upon the floor. Presently Montezuma made another signal, and three aged men whom I understood to be ambassadors, advanced and asked some prayer of him. He answered them with a nod of the head and they retreated from his presence, making obeisance and stepping backward till they mingled with the crowd. Then the emperor spoke a word to one of the counsellors, who bowed and came slowly down the hall looking to the right and to the left. Presently his eye fell upon Guatemoc, and, indeed, he was easy to see, for he stood a head taller than any there.

'Hail, prince,' he said. 'The royal Montezuma desires to speak with you, and with the Teule, your companion.'

'Do as I do, Teule,' said Guatemoc, and led the way up the chamber, till we reached the place where the wooden screen had been, which, as we passed it, was drawn behind us, shutting us off from the hall.

Here we stood a while, with folded hands and downcast eyes, till a signal was made to us to advance.

'Your report, nephew,' said Montezuma in a low voice of command.

'I went to the city of Tobasco, O glorious Montezuma. I found the Teule and brought him hither. Also I caused the high priest to be sacrificed according to the royal command, and now I hand back the imperial signet,' and he gave the ring to a counsellor.

'Why did you delay so long upon the road, nephew?'

'Because of the chances of the journey; while saving my life, royal Montezuma, the Teule my prisoner was bitten by a puma. Its skin is brought to you as an offering.'

Now Montezuma looked at me for the first time, then opened a picture scroll that one of the counsellors handed to him, and read in it, glancing at me from time to time.

'The description is good,' he said at length, 'in all save one thing--it does not say that this prisoner is the handsomest man in Anahuac. Say, Teule, why have your countrymen landed on my dominions and slain my people?'

'I know nothing of it, O king,' I answered as well as I might with the help of Guatemoc, 'and they are not my countrymen.'

'The report says that you confess to having the blood of these Teules in your veins, and that you came to these shores, or near them, in one of their great canoes.'

'That is so, O king, yet I am not of their people, and I came to the shore floating on a barrel.'

'I hold that you lie,' answered Montezuma frowning, 'for the sharks and crocodiles would devour one who swam thus.' Then he added anxiously, 'Say, are you of the descendants of Quetzal?'

'I do not know, O king. I am of a white race, and our forefather was named Adam.'

'Perchance that is another name for Quetzal,' he said. 'It has long been prophesied that his children would return, and now it seems that the hour of their coming is at hand,' and he sighed heavily, then added: 'Go now. To-morrow you shall tell me of these Teules, and the council of the priests shall decide your fate.'

Now when I heard the name of the priests I trembled in all my bones and cried, clasping my hands in supplication:

'Slay me if you will, O king, but I beseech you deliver me not again into the hands of the priests.'

'We are all in the hands of the priests, who are the mouth of God,' he answered coldly. 'Besides, I hold that you have lied to me.'

Then I went foreboding evil, and Guatemoc also looked downcast. Bitterly did I curse the hour when I had said that I was of the Spanish blood and yet no Spaniard. Had I known even what I knew that day, torture would not have wrung those words from me. But now it was too late.

Now Guatemoc led me to certain apartments of this palace of Chapoltepec, where his wife, the royal princess Tecuichpo, was waiting him, a very lovely lady, and with her other ladies, among them the princess Otomie, Montezuma's daughter, and some nobles. Here a rich repast was served to us, and I was seated next to the princess Otomie, who spoke to me most graciously, asking me many things concerning my land and the people of the Teules. It was from her that I learned first that the emperor was much disturbed at heart because of these Teules or Spaniards, for he was superstitious, and held them to be the children of the god Quetzal, who according to ancient prophecy would come to take the land. Indeed, so gracious was she, and so royally lovely, that for the first time I felt my heart stirred by any other woman than my betrothed whom I had left far away in England, and whom, as I thought, I should never see again. And as I learned in after days mine was not the only heart that was stirred that night.

Near to us sat another royal lady, Papantzin, the sister of Montezuma, but she was neither young nor lovely, and yet most sweet faced and sad as though with the presage of death. Indeed she died not many weeks after but could not rest quiet in her grave, as shall be told.

When the feast was done and we had drunk of the cocoa or chocolate, and smoked tobacco in pipes, a strange but most soothing custom that I learned in Tobasco and of which I have never been able to break myself, though the weed is still hard to come by here in England, I was led to my sleeping place, a small chamber panelled with cedar boards. For a while I could not sleep, for I was overcome by the memory of all the strange sights that I had seen in this wonderful new land which was so civilised and yet so barbarous. I thought of that sad-faced king, the absolute lord of millions, surrounded by all that the heart of man can desire, by vast wealth, by hundreds of lovely wives, by loving children, by countless armies, by all the glory of the arts, ruling over the fairest empire on the earth, with every pleasure to his hand, a god in all things save his mortality, and worshipped as a god, and yet a victim to fear and superstition, and more heavy hearted than the meanest slave about his palaces. Here was a lesson such as Solomon would have loved to show, for with Solomon this Montezuma might cry:

'I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments, and that of all sorts. And whatsoever my eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy. And behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.'

So he might have cried, so, indeed, he did cry in other words, for, as the painting of the skeletons and the three monarchs that is upon the

north wall of the aisle of Ditchingham Church shows forth so aptly, kings have their fates and happiness is not to them more than to any other of the sons of men. Indeed, it is not at all, as my benefactor Fonseca once said to me; true happiness is but a dream from which we awake continually to the sorrows of our short laborious day.

Then my thoughts flew to the vision of that most lovely maid, the princess Otomie, who, as I believed, had looked on me so kindly, and I found that vision sweet, for I was young, and the English Lily, my own love, was far away and lost to me for ever. Was it then wonderful that I should find this Indian poppy fair? Indeed, where is the man who would not have been overcome by her sweetness, her beauty, and that stamp of royal grace which comes with kingly blood and the daily exercise of power? Like the rich wonders of the robe she wore, her very barbarism, of which now I saw but the better side, drew and dazzled my mind's eye, giving her woman's tenderness some new quality, sombre and strange, an eastern richness which is lacking in our well schooled English women, that at one and the same stroke touched both the imagination and the senses, and through them enthralled the heart.

For Otomie seemed such woman as men dream of but very rarely win, seeing that the world has few such natures and fewer nurseries where they can be reared. At once pure and passionate, of royal blood and heart, rich natured and most womanly, yet brave as a man and beautiful as the night, with a mind athirst for knowledge and a spirit that no sorrows could avail to quell, ever changing in her outer moods, and yet most faithful

and with the honour of a man, such was Otomie, Montezuma's daughter, princess of the Otomie. Was it wonderful then that I found her fair, or, when fate gave me her love, that at last I loved her in turn? And yet there was that in her nature which should have held me back had I but known of it, for with all her charm, her beauty and her virtues, at heart she was still a savage, and strive as she would to hide it, at times her blood would master her.

But as I lay in the chamber of the palace of Chapoltepec, the tramp of the guards without my door reminded me that I had little now to do with love and other delights, I whose life hung from day to day upon a hair. To-morrow the priests would decide my fate, and when the priests were judges, the prisoner might know the sentence before it was spoken. I was a stranger and a white man, surely such a one would prove an offering more acceptable to the gods than that furnished by a thousand Indian hearts. I had been snatched from the altars of Tobasco that I might grace the higher altars of Tenochtitlan, and that was all. My fate would be to perish miserably far from my home, and in this world never to be heard of more.

Musing thus sadly at last I slept. When I woke the sun was up. Rising from my mat I went to the wood-barred window place and looked through. The palace whence I gazed was placed on the crest of a rocky hill. On one side this hill was bathed by the blue waters of Tezcuco, on the other, a mile or more away, rose the temple towers of Mexico. Along the slopes of the hill, and in some directions for a mile from its

base, grew huge cedar trees from the boughs of which hung a grey and ghostly-looking moss. These trees are so large that the smallest of them is bigger than the best oak in this parish of Ditchingham, while the greatest measures twenty-two paces round the base. Beyond and between these marvellous and ancient trees were the gardens of Montezuma, that with their strange and gorgeous flowers, their marble baths, their aviaries and wild beast dens, were, as I believe, the most wonderful in the whole world.*

'At the least,' I thought to myself, 'even if I must die, it is something to have seen this country of Anahuac, its king, its customs, and its people.'

* The gardens of Montezuma have been long destroyed, but some of the cedars still flourish at Chapoltepec, though the Spaniards cut down many. One of them, which tradition says was a favourite tree of the great emperor's, measures (according to a rough calculation the author of this book made upon the spot) about sixty feet round the bole. It is strange to think that a few ancient conifers should alone survive of all the glories of Montezuma's wealth and state.
--AUTHOR.