

CHAPTER XVII

THE ARISING OF PAPANTZIN

On the morrow Papantzin died, and was buried with great pomp that same evening in the burial-ground at Chapoltepec, by the side of the emperor's royal ancestors. But, as will be seen, she was not content with their company. On that day also, I learned that to be a god is not all pleasure, since it was expected of me that I must master various arts, and chiefly the horrid art of music, to which I never had any desire. Still my own wishes were not allowed to weigh in the matter, for there came to me tutors, aged men who might have found better employment, to instruct me in the use of the lute, and on this instrument I must learn to strum. Others there were also, who taught me letters, poetry, and art, as they were understood among the Aztecs, and all this knowledge I was glad of. Still I remembered the words of the preacher which tell us that he who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow, and moreover I could see little use in acquiring learning that was to be lost shortly on the stone of sacrifice.

As to this matter of my sacrifice I was at first desperate. But reflection told me that I had already passed many dangers and come out unscathed, and therefore it was possible that I might escape this one also. At least death was still a long way off, and for the present I was a god. So I determined that whether I died or lived, while I lived I

would live like a god and take such pleasures as came to my hand, and I acted on this resolve. No man ever had greater or more strange opportunities, and no man can have used them better. Indeed, had it not been for the sorrowful thoughts of my lost love and home which would force themselves upon me, I should have been almost happy, because of the power that I wielded and the strangeness of all around me. But I must to my tale.

During the days that followed the death of Papantzin the palace and the city also were plunged in ferment. The minds of men were shaken strangely because of the rumours that filled the air. Every night the fiery portent blazed in the east, every day a new wonder or omen was reported, and with it some wild tale of the doings of the Spaniards, who by most were held to be white gods, the children of Quetzal, come back to take the land which their forefather ruled.

But of all that were troubled, none were in such bad case as the emperor himself, who, during these weeks scarcely ate or drank or slept, so heavy were his fears upon him. In this strait he sent messengers to his ancient rival, that wise and severe man Neza, the king of the allied state of Tezcuco, begging that he would visit him. This king came, an old man with a fierce and gleaming eye, and I was witness to the interview that followed, for in my quality of god I had full liberty of the palace, and even to be present at the councils of the emperor and his nobles. When the two monarchs had feasted together, Montezuma spoke to Neza of the matter of the omens and of the coming of the Teules,

asking him to lighten the darkness by his wisdom. Then Neza pulled his long grey beard and answered that heavy as the heart of Montezuma might be, it must grow still heavier before the end.

'See, Lord,' he said, 'I am so sure that the days of our empire are numbered, that I will play you at dice for my kingdoms which you and your forefathers have ever desired to win.'

'For what wager?' asked Montezuma.

'I will play you thus,' answered Neza. 'You shall stake three fighting cocks, of which, should I win, I ask the spurs only. I set against them all the wide empire of Tezcucu.'

'A small stake,' said Montezuma; 'cocks are many and kingdoms few.'

'Still, it shall serve our turn,' answered the aged king, 'for know that we play against fate. As the game goes, so shall the issue be. If you win my kingdoms all is well; if I win the cocks, then good-bye to the glory of Anahuac, for its people will cease to be a people, and strangers shall possess the land.'

'Let us play and see,' said Montezuma, and they went down to the place that is called tlachco, where the games are set. Here they began the match with dice and at first all went well for Montezuma, so that he called aloud that already he was lord of Tezcucu.

'May it be so!' answered the aged Neza, and from that moment the chance changed. For strive as he would, Montezuma could not win another point, and presently the set was finished, and Neza had won the cocks. Now the music played, and courtiers came forward to give the king homage on his success. But he rose sighing, and said:

'I had far sooner lose my kingdoms than have won these fowls, for if I had lost my kingdoms they would still have passed into the hands of one of my own race. Now alas! my possessions and his must come under the hand of strangers, who shall cast down our gods and bring our names to nothing.'

And having spoken thus, he rose, and taking farewell of the emperor, he departed for his own land, where, as it chanced, he died very shortly, without living to see the fulfilment of his fears.

On the morrow of his departure came further accounts of the doings of the Spaniards that plunged Montezuma into still greater alarm. In his terror he sent for an astronomer, noted throughout the land for the truth of his divinations. The astronomer came, and was received by the emperor privately. What he told him I do not know, but at least it was nothing pleasant, for that very night men were commanded to pull down the house of this sage, who was buried in its ruins.

Two days after the death of the astronomer, Montezuma bethought

him that, as he believed, I also was a Teule, and could give him information. So at the hour of sunset he sent for me, bidding me walk with him in the gardens. I went thither, followed by my musicians and attendants, who would never leave me in peace, but he commanded that all should stand aside, as he wished to speak with me alone. Then he began to walk beneath the mighty cedar trees, and I with him, but keeping one pace behind.

'Teule,' he said at length, 'tell me of your countrymen, and why they have come to these shores. See that you speak truth.'

'They are no countrymen of mine, O Montezuma,' I answered, 'though my mother was one of them.'

'Did I not bid you speak the truth, Teule? If your mother was one of them, must you not also be of them; for are you not of your mother's bone and blood?'

'As the king pleases,' I answered bowing. Then I began and told him of the Spaniards--of their country, their greatness, their cruelty and their greed of gold, and he listened eagerly, though I think that he believed little of what I said, for his fear had made him very suspicious. When I had done, he spoke and said:

'Why do they come here to Anahuac?'

'I fear, O king, that they come to take the land, or at the least to rob it of all its treasure, and to destroy its faiths.'

'What then is your counsel, Teule? How can I defend myself against these mighty men, who are clothed in metal, and ride upon fierce wild beasts, who have instruments that make a noise like thunder, at the sound of which their adversaries fall dead by hundreds, and who bear weapons of shining silver in their hands? Alas! there is no defence possible, for they are the children of Quetzal come back to take the land. From my childhood I have known that this evil overshadowed me, and now it is at my door.'

'If I, who am only a god, may venture to speak to the lord of the earth,' I answered, 'I say that the reply is easy. Meet force by force. The Teules are few and you can muster a thousand soldiers for every one of theirs. Fall on them at once, do not hesitate till their prowess finds them friends, but crush them.'

'Such is the counsel of one whose mother was a Teule;' the emperor answered, with sarcasm and bitter meaning. 'Tell me now, counsellor, how am I to know that in fighting against them I shall not be fighting against the gods; how even am I to learn the true wishes and purposes of men or gods who cannot speak my tongue and whose tongue I cannot speak?'

'It is easy, O Montezuma,' I answered. 'I can speak their tongue; send me to discover for you.'

Now as I spoke thus my heart bounded with hope, for if once I could come among the Spaniards, perhaps I might escape the altar of sacrifice. Also they seemed a link between me and home. They had sailed hither in ships, and ships can retrace their path. For though at present my lot was not all sorrow, it will be guessed that I should have been glad indeed to find myself once more among Christian men.

Montezuma looked at me a while and answered:

'You must think me very foolish, Teule. What! shall I send you to tell my fears and weakness to your countrymen, and to show them the joints in my harness? Do you then suppose that I do not know you for a spy sent to this land by these same Teules to gather knowledge of the land? Fool, I knew it from the first, and by Huitzel! were you not vowed to Tezcat, your heart should smoke to-morrow on the altar of Huitzel. Be warned, and give me no more false counsels lest your end prove swifter than you think. Learn that I have asked these questions of you to a purpose, and by the command of the gods, as it was written on the hearts of those sacrificed this day. This was the purpose and this was the command, that I might discover your secret mind, and that I should shun whatever advice you chanced to give. You counsel me to fight the Teules, therefore I will not fight them, but meet them with gifts and fair words, for I know well that you would have me to do that which should bring me to my doom.'

Thus he spoke very fiercely and in a low voice, his head held low and his arms crossed upon his breast, and I saw that he shook with passion. Even then, though I was very much afraid, for god as I was, a nod from this mighty king would have sent me to death by torment, I wondered at the folly of one who in everything else was so wise. Why should he doubt me thus and allow superstition to drag him down to ruin? To-day I see the answer. Montezuma did not these things of himself, but because the hand of destiny worked with his hand, and the voice of destiny spoke in his voice. The gods of the Aztecs were false gods indeed, but I for one believe that they had life and intelligence, for those hideous shapes of stone were the habitations of devils, and the priests spoke truth when they said that the sacrifice of men was pleasing to their gods.

To these devils the king went for counsel through the priests, and now this doom was on them, that they must give false counsel to their own destruction, and to the destruction of those who worshipped them, as was decreed by One more powerful than they.

Now while we were talking the sun had sunk swiftly, so that all the world was dark. But the light still lingered on the snowy crests of the volcans Popo and Ixtac, staining them an awful red. Never before to my sight had the shape of the dead woman whose everlasting bier is Ixtac's bulk, seemed so clear and wonderful as on that night, for either it was so or my fancy gave it the very shape and colour of a woman's corpse steeped in blood and laid out for burial. Nor was it my phantasy alone,

for when Montezuma had finished upbraiding me he chanced to look up, and his eyes falling on the mountain remained fixed there.

'Look now, Teule!' he said, presently, with a solemn laugh; 'yonder lies the corpse of the nations of Anahuac washed in a water of blood and made ready for burial. Is she not terrible in death?'

As he spoke the words and turned to go, a sound of doleful wailing came from the direction of the mountain, a very wild and unearthly sound that caused the blood in my veins to stand still. Now Montezuma caught my arm in his fear, and we gazed together on Ixtac, and it seemed to us that this wonder happened. For in that red and fearful light the red figure of the sleeping woman arose, or appeared to rise, from its bier of stone. It arose slowly like one who awakes from sleep, and presently it stood upright upon the mountain's brow, towering high into the air. There it stood a giant and awakened corpse, its white wrappings stained with blood, and we trembled to see it.

For a while the wraith remained thus gazing towards the city of Tenochtitlan, then suddenly it threw its vast arms upward as though in grief, and at that moment the night rushed in upon it and covered it, while the sound of wailing died slowly away.

'Say, Teule,' gasped the emperor, 'do I not well to be afraid when such portents as these meet my eyes day by day? Hearken to the lamentations in the city; we have not seen this sight alone. Listen how the people

cry aloud with fear and the priests beat their drums to avert the omen. Weep on, ye people, and ye priests pray and do sacrifice; it is very fitting, for the day of your doom is upon you. O Tenochtitlan, queen of cities, I see you ruined and desolate, your palaces blackened with fire, your temples desecrated, your pleasant gardens a wilderness. I see your highborn women the wantons of stranger lords, and your princes their servants; the canals run red with the blood of your children, your gateways are blocked with their bones. Death is about you everywhere, dishonour is your daily bread, desolation is your portion. Farewell to you, queen of the cities, cradle of my forefathers in which I was nursed!

Thus Montezuma lamented in the darkness, and as he cried aloud the great moon rose over the edge of the world and poured its level light through the boughs of the cedars clothed in their ghostly robe of moss. It struck upon Montezuma's tall shape, on his distraught countenance and thin hands as he waved them to and fro in his prophetic agony, on my glittering garments, and the terror-stricken band of courtiers, and the musicians who had ceased from their music. A little wind sprang up also, moaning sadly in the mighty trees above and against the rocks of Chapoltepec. Never did I witness a scene more strange or more pregnant with mystery and the promise of unborn horror, than that of this great monarch mourning over the downfall of his race and power. As yet no misfortune had befallen the one or the other, and still he knew that both were doomed, and these words of lamentation burst from a heart broken by a grief of which the shadow only lay upon it.

But the wonders of that night were not yet done with.

When Montezuma had made an end of crying his prophecies, I asked him humbly if I should summon to him the lords who were in attendance on him, but who stood at some distance.

'Nay,' he answered, 'I will not have them see me thus with grief and terror upon my face. Whoever fears, at least I must seem brave. Walk with me a while, Teule, and if it is in your mind to murder me I shall not grieve.'

I made no answer, but followed him as he led the way down the darkest of the winding paths that run between the cedar trees, where it would have been easy for me to kill him if I wished, but I could not see how I should be advantaged by the deed; also though I knew that Montezuma was my enemy, my heart shrank from the thought of murder. For a mile or more he walked on without speaking, now beneath the shadow of the trees, and now through open spaces of garden planted with lovely flowers, till at last we came to the gates of the place where the royal dead are laid to rest. Now in front of these gates was an open space of turf on which the moonlight shone brightly, and in the centre of this space lay something white, shaped like a woman. Here Montezuma halted and looked at the gates, then said:

'These gates opened four days since for Papantzin, my sister; how long,

I wonder, will pass before they open for me?'

As he spoke, the white shape upon the grass which I had seen and he had not seen, stirred like an awakening sleeper. As the snow shape upon the mountain had stirred, so this shape stirred; as it had arisen, so this one arose; as it threw its arms upwards, so this one threw up her arms. Now Montezuma saw and stood still trembling, and I trembled also.

Then the woman--for it was a woman--advanced slowly towards us, and as she came we saw that she was draped in graveclothes. Presently she lifted her head and the moonlight fell full upon her face. Now Montezuma groaned aloud and I groaned, for we saw that the face was the thin pale face of the princess Papantzin--Papantzin who had lain four days in the grave. On she came toward us, gliding like one who walks in her sleep, till she stopped before the bush in the shadow of which we stood. Now Papantzin, or the ghost of Papantzin, looked at us with blind eyes, that is with eyes that were open and yet did not seem to see.

'Are you there, Montezuma, my brother?' she said in the voice of Papantzin; 'surely I feel your presence though I cannot see you.'

Now Montezuma stepped from the shadow and stood face to face with the dead.

'Who are you?' he said, 'who wear the shape of one dead and are dressed in the garments of the dead?'

'I am Papantzin,' she answered, 'and I am risen out of death to bring you a message, Montezuma, my brother.'

'What message do you bring me?' he asked hoarsely.

'I bring you a message of doom, my brother. Your empire shall fall and soon you shall be accompanied to death by tens of thousands of your people. For four days I have lived among the dead, and there I have seen your false gods which are devils. There also I have seen the priests that served them, and many of those who worshipped them plunged into torment unutterable. Because of the worship of these demon gods the people of Anahuac is destined to destruction.'

'Have you no word of comfort for me, Papantzin, my sister?' he asked.

'None,' she answered. 'Perchance if you abandon the worship of the false gods you may save your soul; your life you cannot save, nor the lives of your people.'

Then she turned and passed away into the shadow of the trees; I heard her graveclothes sweep upon the grass.

Now a fury seized Montezuma and he raved aloud, saying:

'Curses on you, Papantzin, my sister! Why then do you come back from the dead to bring me such evil tidings? Had you brought hope with you, had you shown a way of escape, then I would have welcomed you. May you go back into darkness and may the earth lie heavy on your heart for ever. As for my gods, my fathers worshipped them and I will worship them till the end; ay, if they desert me, at least I will never desert them. The gods are angry because the sacrifices are few upon their altars, henceforth they shall be doubled; ay, the priests of the gods shall themselves be sacrificed because they neglect their worship.'

Thus he raved on, after the fashion of a weak man maddened with terror, while his nobles and attendants who had followed him at a distance, clustered about him, fearful and wondering. At length there came an end, for tearing with his thin hands at his royal robes and at his hair and beard, Montezuma fell and writhed in a fit upon the ground.

Then they carried him into the palace and none saw him for three days and nights. But he made no idle threat as to the sacrifices, for from that night forward they were doubled throughout the land. Already the shadow of the Cross lay deep upon the altars of Anahuac, but still the smoke of their offerings went up to heaven and the cry of the captives rang round the teocallis. The hour of the demon gods was upon them indeed, but now they reaped their last red harvest, and it was rich.

Now I, Thomas Wingfield, saw these portents with my own eyes, but

I cannot say whether they were indeed warnings sent from heaven or illusions springing from the accidents of nature. The land was terror-struck, and it may happen that the minds of men thus smitten can find a dismal meaning in omens which otherwise had passed unnoticed. That Papantzin rose from the dead is true, though perhaps she only swooned and never really died. At the least she did not go back there for a while, for though I never saw her again, it is said that she lived to become a Christian and told strange tales of what she had seen in the land of Death.*

* For the history of the resurrection of Papantzin, see note to Jourdanet's translation of Sahagun, page 870.--AUTHOR.