

CHAPTER XIX

THE FOUR GODDESSES

Some weary time went by, and at last came the day of the entry into Mexico of Cortes and his conquerors. Now of all the doings of the Spaniards after they occupied the city, I do not propose to speak at length, for these are matters of history, and I have my own story to tell. So I shall only write of those of them with which I was concerned myself. I did not see the meeting between Montezuma and Cortes, though I saw the emperor set out to it clad like Solomon in his glory and surrounded by his nobles. But I am sure of this, that no slave being led to sacrifice carried a heavier heart in his breast than that of Montezuma on this unlucky day. For now his folly had ruined him, and I think he knew that he was going to his doom.

Afterwards, towards evening, I saw the emperor come back in his golden litter, and pass over to the palace built by Axa his father, that stood opposite to and some five hundred paces from his own, facing the western gate of the temple. Presently I heard the sound of a multitude shouting, and amidst it the tramp of horses and armed soldiers, and from a seat in my chamber I saw the Spaniards advance down the great street, and my heart beat at the sight of Christian men. In front, clad in rich armour, rode their leader Cortes, a man of middle size but noble bearing, with thoughtful eyes that noted everything, and after him, some few

on horseback but the most of them on foot, marched his little army of conquerors, staring about them with bold wondering eyes and jesting to each other in Castilian. They were but a handful, bronzed with the sun and scarred by battle, some of them ill-armed and almost in rags, and looking on them I could not but marvel at the indomitable courage that had enabled them to pierce their way through hostile thousands, sickness, and war, even to the home of Montezuma's power.

By the side of Cortes, holding his stirrup in her hand, walked a beautiful Indian woman dressed in white robes and crowned with flowers. As she passed the palace she turned her face. I knew her at once; it was my friend Marina, who now had attained to the greatness which she desired, and who, notwithstanding all the evil that she had brought upon her country, looked most happy in it and in her master's love.

As the Spaniards went by I searched their faces one by one, with the vague hope of hate. For though it might well chance that death had put us out of each other's reach, I half thought to see de Garcia among the number of the conquerors. Such a quest as theirs, with its promise of blood, and gold, and rapine, would certainly commend itself to his evil heart should it be in his power to join it, and a strange instinct told me that he was NOT dead. But neither dead nor living was he among those men who entered Mexico that day.

That night I saw Guatemoc and asked him how things went.

'Well for the kite that roosts in the dove's nest,' he answered with a bitter laugh, 'but very ill for the dove. Montezuma, my uncle, has been cooing yonder,' and he pointed to the palace of Axa, 'and the captain of the Teules has cooed in answer, but though he tried to hide it, I could hear the hawk's shriek in his pigeon's note. Ere long there will be merry doings in Tenochtitlan.'

He was right. Within a week Montezuma was treacherously seized by the Spaniards and kept a prisoner in their quarters, watched day and night by their soldiers. Then came event upon event. Certain lords in the coast lands having killed some Spaniards, were summoned to Mexico by the instigation of Cortes. They came and were burned alive in the courtyard of the palace. Nor was this all, for Montezuma, their monarch, was forced to witness the execution with fetters on his ankles. So low had the emperor of the Aztecs fallen, that he must bear chains like a common felon. After this insult he swore allegiance to the King of Spain, and even contrived to capture Cacama, the lord of Tezcucoc, by treachery and to deliver him into the hands of the Spaniards on whom he would have made war. To them also he gave up all the hoarded gold and treasure of the empire, to the value of hundreds of thousands of English pounds. All this the nation bore, for it was stupefied and still obeyed the commands of its captive king. But when he suffered the Spaniards to worship the true God in one of the sanctuaries of the great temple, a murmur of discontent and sullen fury rose among the thousands of the Aztecs. It filled the air, it could be heard wherever men were gathered, and its sound was like that of a distant angry sea. The hour of the breaking of

the tempest was at hand.

Now all this while my life went on as before, save that I was not allowed to go outside the walls of the palace, for it was feared lest I should find some means of intercourse with the Spaniards, who did not know that a man of white blood was confined there and doomed to sacrifice. Also in these days I saw little of the princess Otomie, the chief of my destined brides, who since our strange love scene had avoided me, and when we met at feasts or in the gardens spoke to me only on indifferent matters, or of the affairs of state. At length came the day of my marriage. It was, I remember, the night before the massacre of the six hundred Aztec nobles on the occasion of the festival of Huitzel.

On this my wedding day I was treated with great circumstance and worshipped like a god by the highest in the city, who came in to do me reverence and burned incense before me, till I was weary of the smell of it, for though such sorrow was on the land, the priests would abate no jot of their ceremonies or cruelties, and great hopes were held that I being of the race of Teules, my sacrifice would avert the anger of the gods. At sunset I was entertained with a splendid feast that lasted two hours or more, and at its end all the company rose and shouted as with one voice:

'Glory to thee, O Tezcat! Happy art thou here on earth, happy mayst thou be in the Houses of the Sun. When thou comest thither, remember that we dealt well by thee, giving thee of our best, and intercede for us that

our sins may be forgiven. Glory to thee, O Tezcatl'

Then two of the chief nobles came forward, and taking torches led me to a magnificent chamber that I had never seen before. Here they changed my apparel, investing me in robes which were still more splendid than any that I had worn hitherto, being made of the finest embroidered cotton and of the glittering feathers of the humming bird. On my head they set wreaths of flowers, and about my neck and wrists emeralds of vast size and value, and a sorry popinjay I looked in this attire, that seemed more suited to a woman's beauty than to me.

When I was arrayed, suddenly the torches were extinguished and for a while there was silence. Then in the distance I heard women's voices singing a bridal song that was beautiful enough after its fashion, though I forbear to write it down. The singing ceased and there came a sound of rustling robes and of low whispering. Then a man's voice spoke, saying:

'Are ye there, ye chosen of heaven?'

And a woman's voice, I thought it was that of Otomie, answered:

'We are here.'

'O maidens of Anahuac,' said the man speaking from the darkness, 'and you, O Tezcat, god among the gods, listen to my words. Maidens, a great

honour has been done to you, for by the very choice of heaven, you have been endowed with the names, the lovelinesses, and the virtues of the four great goddesses, and chosen to abide a while at the side of this god, your maker and your master, who has been pleased to visit us for a space before he seeks his home in the habitations of the Sun. See that you show yourselves worthy of this honour. Comfort him and cherish him, that he may forget his glory in your kindness, and when he returns to his own place may take with him grateful memories and a good report of your people. You have but a little while to live at his side in this life, for already, like those of a caged bird, the wings of his spirit beat against the bars of the flesh, and soon he will shake himself free from us and you. Yet if you will, it is allowed to one of you to accompany him to his home, sharing his flight to the Houses of the Sun. But to all of you, whether you go also, or whether you stay to mourn him during your life days, I say love and cherish him, be tender and gentle towards him, for otherwise ruin shall overtake you here and hereafter, and you and all of us will be ill spoken of in heaven. And you, O Tezcat, we pray of you to accept these maidens, who bear the names and wear the charms of your celestial consorts, for there are none more beautiful or better born in the realms of Anahuac, and among them is numbered the daughter of our king. They are not perfect indeed, for perfection is known to you in the heavenly kingdoms only, since these ladies are but shadows and symbols of the divine goddesses your true wives, and here there are no perfect women. Alas, we have none better to offer you, and it is our hope that when it pleases you to pass hence you will think kindly of the women of this land, and from on high bless them

with your blessing, because your memory of these who were called your wives on earth is pleasant.'

The voice paused, then spoke again:

'Women, in your own divine names of Xochi, Xilo, Atla, and Clixto, and in the name of all the gods, I wed you to Tezcat, the creator, to sojourn with him during his stay on earth. The god incarnate takes you in marriage whom he himself created, that the symbol may be perfect and the mystery fulfilled. Yet lest your joy should be too full--look now on that which shall be.'

As the voice spoke these words, many torches sprang into flame at the far end of the great chamber, revealing a dreadful sight. For there, stretched upon a stone of sacrifice, was the body of a man, but whether the man lived or was modelled in wax I do not know to this hour, though unless he was painted, I think that he must have been fashioned in wax, since his skin shone white like mine. At the least his limbs and head were held by five priests, and a sixth stood over him clasping a knife of obsidian in his two hands. It flashed on high, and as it gleamed the torches were extinguished. Then came the dull echo of a blow and a sound of groans, and all was still, till once more the brides broke out into their marriage song, a strange chant and a wild and sweet, though after what I had seen and heard it had little power to move me.

They sang on in the darkness ever more loudly, till presently a single

torch was lit at the end of the chamber, then another and another, though I could not see who lit them, and the room was a flare of light. Now the altar, the victim, and the priests were all gone, there was no one left in the place except myself and the four brides. They were tall and lovely women all of them, clad in white bridal robes starred over with gems and flowers, and wearing on their brows the emblems of the four goddesses, but Otomie was the stateliest and most beautiful of the four, and seemed in truth a goddess. One by one they drew near to me, smiling and sighing, and kneeling before me kissed my hand, saying:

'I have been chosen to be your wife for a space, Tezcat, happy maid that I am. May the good gods grant that I become pleasing to your sight, so that you may love me as I worship you.'

Then she who had spoken would draw back again out of earshot, and the next would take her place.

Last of all came Otomie. She knelt and said the words, then added in a low voice,

'Having spoken to you as the bride and goddess to the husband and the god Tezcat, now, O Teule, I speak as the woman to the man. You do not love me, Teule, therefore, if it is your will, let us be divorced of our own act who were wed by the command of others, for so I shall be spared some shame. These are friends to me and will not betray us;' and she nodded towards her companion brides.

'As you will, Otomie,' I answered briefly.

'I thank you for your kindness, Teule,' she said smiling sadly, and withdrew making obeisance, looking so stately and so sweet as she went, that again my heart was shaken as though with love. Now from that night till the dreadful hour of sacrifice, no kiss or tender word passed between me and the princess of the Otomie. And yet our friendship and affection grew daily, for we talked much together, and I sought to turn her heart to the true King of Heaven. But this was not easy, for like her father Montezuma, Otomie clung to the gods of her people, though she hated the priests, and save when the victims were the foes of her country, shrank from the rites of human sacrifice, which she said were instituted by the pabas, since in the early days there were no men offered on the altars of the gods, but flowers only. Daily it grew and ripened till, although I scarcely knew it, at length in my heart, after Lily, I loved her better than anyone on earth. As for the other women, though they were gentle and beautiful, I soon learned to hate them. Still I feasted and revelled with them, partly since I must, or bring them to a miserable death because they failed to please me, and partly that I might drown my terrors in drink and pleasure, for let it be remembered that the days left to me on earth were few, and the awful end drew near.

The day following the celebration of my marriage was that of the

shameless massacre of six hundred of the Aztec nobles by the order of the hidalgo Alvarado, whom Cortes had left in command of the Spaniards. For at this time Cortes was absent in the coast lands, whither he had gone to make war on Narvaez, who had been sent to subdue him by his enemy Velasquez, the governor of Cuba.

On this day was celebrated the feast of Huitzel, that was held with sacrifice, songs, and dances in the great court of the temple, that court which was surrounded by a wall carved over with the writhing shapes of snakes. It chanced that on this morning before he went to join in the festival, Guatemoc, the prince, came to see me on a visit of ceremony.

I asked him if he intended to take part in the feast, as the splendour of his apparel brought me to believe.

'Yes,' he answered, 'but why do you ask?'

'Because, were I you, Guatemoc, I would not go. Say now, will the dancers be armed?'

'No, it is not usual.'

'They will be unarmed, Guatemoc, and they are the flower of the land. Unarmed they will dance in yonder enclosed space, and the Teules will watch them armed. Now, how would it be if these chanced to pick a

quarrel with the nobles?'

'I do not know why you should speak thus, Teule, for surely these white men are not cowardly murderers, still I take your words as an omen, and though the feast must be held, for see already the nobles gather, I will not share in it.'

'You are wise, Guatemoc,' I said. 'I am sure that you are wise.'

Afterwards Otomie, Guatemoc, and I went into the garden of the palace and sat upon the crest of a small pyramid, a teocalli in miniature that Montezuma had built for a place of outlook on the market and the courts of the temple. From this spot we saw the dancing of the Aztec nobles, and heard the song of the musicians. It was a gay sight, for in the bright sunlight their feather dresses flashed like coats of gems, and none would have guessed how it was to end. Mingling with the dancers were groups of Spaniards clad in mail and armed with swords and matchlocks, but I noted that, as the time went on, these men separated themselves from the Indians and began to cluster like bees about the gates and at various points under the shadow of the Wall of Serpents.

'Now what may this mean?' I said to Guatemoc, and as I spoke, I saw a Spaniard wave a white cloth in the air. Then, in an instant, before the cloth had ceased to flutter, a smoke arose from every side, and with it came the sound of the firing of matchlocks. Everywhere among the dancers men fell dead or wounded, but the mass of them, unharmed as yet,

huddled themselves together like frightened sheep, and stood silent and terror-stricken. Then the Spaniards, shouting the name of their patron saint, as it is their custom to do when they have some such wickedness in hand, drew their swords, and rushing on the unarmed Aztec nobles began to kill them. Now some shrieked and fled, and some stood still till they were cut down, but whether they stayed or ran the end was the same, for the gates were guarded and the wall was too high to climb. There they were slaughtered every man of them, and may God, who sees all, reward their murderers! It was soon over; within ten minutes of the waving of the cloth, those six hundred men were stretched upon the pavement dead or dying, and with shouts of victory the Spaniards were despoiling their corpses of the rich ornaments they had worn.

Then I turned to Guatemoc and said, 'It seems that you did well not to join in yonder revel.'

But Guatemoc made no answer. He stared at the dead and those who had murdered them, and said nothing. Only Otomie spoke: 'You Christians are a gentle people,' she said with a bitter laugh; 'it is thus that you repay our hospitality. Now I trust that Montezuma, my father, is pleased with his guests. Ah! were I he, every man of them should lie on the stone of sacrifice. If our gods are devils as you say, what are those who worship yours?'

Then at length Guatemoc said, 'Only one thing remains to us, and that is vengeance. Montezuma has become a woman, and I heed him no more, nay,

if it were needful, I would kill him with my own hand. But two men are still left in the land, Cuitlahua, my uncle, and myself. Now I go to summon our armies.' And he went.

All that night the city murmured like a swarm of wasps, and next day at dawn, so far as the eye could reach, the streets and market place were filled with tens of thousands of armed warriors. They threw themselves like a wave upon the walls of the palace of Axa, and like a wave from a rock they were driven back again by the fire of the guns. Thrice they attacked, and thrice they were repulsed. Then Montezuma, the woman king, appeared upon the walls, praying them to desist because, forsooth, did they succeed, he himself might perish. Even then they obeyed him, so great was their reverence for his sacred royalty, and for a while attacked the Spaniards no more. But further than this they would not go. If Montezuma forbade them to kill the Spaniards, at least they determined to starve them out, and from that hour a strait blockade was kept up against the palace. Hundreds of the Aztec soldiers had been slain already, but the loss was not all upon their side, for some of the Spaniards and many of the Tlascalans had fallen into their hands. As for these unlucky prisoners, their end was swift, for they were taken at once to the temples of the great teocalli, and sacrificed there to the gods in the sight of their comrades.

Now it was that Cortes returned with many more men, for he had conquered Narvaez, whose followers joined the standard of Cortes, and with them others, one of whom I had good reason to know. Cortes was suffered to

rejoin his comrades in the palace of Axa without attack, I do not know why, and on the following day Cuitlahua, Montezuma's brother, king of Palapan, was released by him that he might soothe the people. But Cuitlahua was no coward. Once safe outside his prison walls, he called the council together, of whom the chief was Guatemoc.

There they resolved on war to the end, giving it out that Montezuma had forfeited his kingdom by his cowardice, and on that resolve they acted. Had it been taken but two short months before, by this date no Spaniard would have been left alive in Tenochtitlan. For after Marina, the love of Cortes, whose subtle wit brought about his triumph, it was Montezuma who was the chief cause of his own fall, and of that of the kingdom of Anahuac.