

CHAPTER XX

OTOMIE'S COUNSEL

On the day after the return of Cortes to Mexico, before the hour of dawn I was awakened from my uneasy slumbers by the whistling cries of thousands of warriors and the sound of atabals and drums.

Hurrying to my post of outlook on the little pyramid, where Otomie joined me, I saw that the whole people were gathered for war. So far as the eye could reach, in square, market place, and street, they were massed in thousands and tens of thousands. Some were armed with slings, some with bows and arrows, others with javelins tipped with copper, and the club set with spikes of obsidian that is called maquá, and yet others, citizens of the poorer sort, with stakes hardened in the fire. The bodies of some were covered with golden coats of mail and mantles of featherwork, and their skulls protected by painted wooden helmets, crested with hair, and fashioned like the heads of pumas, snakes, or wolves--others wore escaupils, or coats of quilted cotton, but the most of them were naked except for a cloth about the loins. On the flat azoteas, or roofs of houses also, and even on the top of the teocalli of sacrifice, were bands of men whose part it was to rain missiles into the Spanish quarters. It was a strange sight to see in that red sunrise, and one never to be forgotten, as the light flashed from temples and palace walls, on to the glittering feather garments and gay banners, the points

of countless spears and the armour of the Spaniards, who hurried to and fro behind their battlements making ready their defence.

So soon as the sun was up, a priest blew a shrill note upon a shell, which was answered by a trumpet call from the Spanish quarters. Then with a shriek of rage the thousands of the Aztecs rushed to the attack, and the air grew dark with missiles. Instantly a wavering line of fire and smoke, followed by a sound as of thunder, broke from the walls of the palace of Axa, and the charging warriors fell like autumn leaves beneath the cannon and arquebuss balls of the Christians.

For a moment they wavered and a great groan went up to heaven, but I saw Guatemoc spring forward, a banner in his hand, and forming up again they rushed after him. Now they were beneath the wall of the palace, and the assault began. The Aztecs fought furiously. Time upon time they strove to climb the wall, piling up the bodies of the dead to serve them as ladders, and time upon time they were repulsed with cruel loss. Failing in this, they set themselves to battering it down with heavy beams, but when the breach was made and they clustered in it like herded sheep, the cannon opened fire on them, tearing long lanes through their mass and leaving them dead by scores. Then they took to the shooting of flaming arrows, and by this means fired the outworks, but the palace was of stone and would not burn. Thus for twelve long hours the struggle raged unceasingly, till the sudden fall of darkness put an end to it, and the only sight to be seen was the flare of countless torches carried by those who sought out the dead, and the only sounds to be heard were the

voice of women lamenting, and the groans of the dying.

On the morrow the fight broke out again at dawn, when Cortes sallied forth with the greater part of his soldiers, and some thousands of his Tlascalan allies. At first I thought that he aimed his attack at Montezuma's palace, and a breath of hope went through me, since then it might become possible for me to escape in the confusion. But this was not so, his object being to set fire to the houses, from the flat roofs of which numberless missiles were hailed hourly upon his followers. The charge was desperate and it succeeded, for the Indians could not withstand the shock of horsemen any more than their naked skins could turn the Spaniards' steel. Presently scores of houses were in flames, and thick columns of smoke rolled up like those that float from the mouth of Popo. But many of those who rode and ran from the gates of Axa did not come back thither, for the Aztecs clung to the legs of the horses and dragged their riders away living. That very day these captives were sacrificed on the altar of Huitzel, and in the sight of their comrades, and with them a horse was offered up, which had been taken alive, and was borne and dragged with infinite labour up the steep sides of the pyramid. Indeed never had the sacrifices been so many as during these days of combat. All day long the altars ran red, and all day long the cries of the victims rang in my ears, as the maddened priests went about their work. For thus they thought to please the gods who should give them victory over the Teules.

Even at night the sacrifices continued by the light of the sacred fires,

that from below gave those who wrought them the appearance of devils flitting through the flames of hell, and inflicting its torments on the damned, much as they are depicted in the 'Doom' painting of the resurrection of the dead that is over the chancel arch in this church of Ditchingham. And hour by hour through the darkness, a voice called out threats and warnings to the Spaniards, saying, 'Huitzel is hungry for your blood, ye Teules, ye shall surely follow where ye have seen your fellows go: the cages are ready, the knives are sharp, and the irons are hot for the torture. Prepare, ye Teules, for though ye slay many, ye cannot escape.'

Thus the struggle went on day after day, till thousands of the Aztecs were dead, and the Spaniards were well nigh worn out with hunger, war, and wounds, for they could not rest a single hour. At length one morning, when the assault was at its hottest, Montezuma himself appeared upon the central tower of the palace, clad in splendid robes and wearing the diadem. Before him stood heralds bearing golden wands, and about him were the nobles who attended him in his captivity, and a guard of Spaniards. He stretched out his hand, and suddenly the fighting was stayed and a silence fell upon the place, even the wounded ceased from their groaning. Then he addressed the multitude. What he said I was too far off to hear, though I learned its purport afterwards. He prayed his people to cease from war, for the Spaniards were his friends and guests and would presently leave the city of Tenochtitlan. When these cowardly words had passed his lips, a fury took his subjects, who for long years had worshipped him as a god, and a shriek rent the air that seemed to

say two words only:

'Woman! Traitor!'

Then I saw an arrow rush upwards and strike the emperor, and after the arrow a shower of stones, so that he fell down there upon the tower roof.

Now a voice cried, 'We have slain our king. Montezuma is dead,' and instantly with a dreadful wailing the multitude fled this way and that, so that presently no living man could be seen where there had been thousands.

I turned to comfort Otomie, who was watching at my side, and had seen her royal father fall, and led her weeping into the palace. Here we met Guatemoc, the prince, and his mien was fierce and wild. He was fully armed and carried a bow in his hand.

'Is Montezuma dead?' I asked.

'I neither know nor care,' he answered with a savage laugh, then added:

'Now curse me, Otomie my cousin, for it was my arrow that smote him down, this king who has become a woman and a traitor, false to his manhood and his country.'

Then Otomie ceased weeping and answered:

'I cannot curse you, Guatemoc, for the gods have smitten my father with a madness as you smote him with your arrow, and it is best that he should die, both for his own sake and for that of his people. Still, Guatemoc, I am sure of this, that your crime will not go unpunished, and that in payment for this sacrilege, you shall yourself come to a shameful death.'

'It may be so,' said Guatemoc, 'but at least I shall not die betraying my trust;' and he went.

Now I must tell that, as I believed, this was my last day on earth, for on the morrow my year of godhead expired, and I, Thomas Wingfield, should be led out to sacrifice. Notwithstanding all the tumult in the city, the mourning for the dead and the fear that hung over it like a cloud, the ceremonies of religion and its feasts were still celebrated strictly, more strictly indeed than ever before. Thus on this night a festival was held in my honour, and I must sit at the feast crowned with flowers and surrounded by my wives, while those nobles who remained alive in the city did me homage, and with them Cuitlahua, who, if Montezuma were dead, would now be emperor. It was a dreary meal enough, for I could scarcely be gay though I strove to drown my woes in drink, and as for the guests, they had little jollity left in them. Hundreds of their relatives were dead and with them thousands of the people; the

Spaniards still held their own in the fortress, and that day they had seen their emperor, who to them was a god, smitten down by one of their own number, and above all they felt that doom was upon themselves. What wonder that they were not merry? Indeed no funeral feast could have been more sad, for flowers and wine and fair women do not make pleasure, and after all it was a funeral feast--for me.

At length it came to an end and I fled to my own apartments, whither my three wives followed me, for Otomie did not come, calling me most happy and blessed who to-morrow should be with myself, that is with my own godhead, in heaven. But I did not call them blessed, for, rising in wrath, I drove them away, saying that I had but one comfort left, and it was that wherever I might go I should leave them behind.

Then I cast myself upon the cushions of my bed and mourned in my fear and bitterness of heart. This was the end of the vengeance which I had sworn to wreak on de Garcia, that I myself must have my heart torn from my breast and offered to a devil. Truly Fonseca, my benefactor, had spoken words of wisdom when he counselled me to take my fortune and forget my oath. Had I done so, to-day I might have been my betrothed's husband and happy in her love at home in peaceful England, instead of what I was, a lost soul in the power of fiends and about to be offered to a fiend. In the bitterness of the thought and the extremity of my anguish I wept aloud and prayed to my Maker that I might be delivered from this cruel death, or at the least that my sins should be forgiven me, so that to-morrow night I might rest at peace in heaven.

Thus weeping and praying I sank into a half sleep, and dreamed that I walked on the hillside near the church path that runs through the garden of the Lodge at Ditchingham. The whispers of the wind were in the trees which clothe the bank of the Vineyard Hills, the scent of the sweet English flowers was in my nostrils and the balmy air of June blew on my brow. It was night in this dream of mine, and I thought that the moon shone sweetly on the meadows and the river, while from every side came the music of the nightingale. But I was not thinking of these delightful sights and sounds, though they were present in my mind, for my eyes watched the church path which goes up the hill at the back of the house, and my heart listened for a footstep that I longed to hear. Then there came a sound of singing from beyond the hill, and the words of the song were sad, for they told of one who had sailed away and returned no more, and presently between the apple trees I saw a white figure on its crest. Slowly it came towards me and I knew that it was she for whom I waited, Lily my beloved. Now she ceased to sing, but drew on gently and her face seemed very sad. Moreover it was the face of a woman in middle life, but still most beautiful, more beautiful indeed than it had been in the bloom of youth. She had reached the foot of the hill and was turning towards the little garden gate, when I came forward from the shadow of the trees, and stood before her. Back she started with a cry of fear, then grew silent and gazed into my face.

'So changed,' she murmured; 'can it be the same? Thomas, is it you come back to me from the dead, or is this but a vision?' and slowly and

doubtingly the dream wraith stretched out her arms as though to clasp me.

Then I awoke. I awoke and lo! before me stood a fair woman clothed in white, on whom the moonlight shone as in my dream, and her arms were stretched towards me lovingly.

'It is I, beloved, and no vision,' I cried, springing from my bed and clasping her to my breast to kiss her. But before my lips touched hers I saw my error, for she whom I embraced was not Lily Bozard, my betrothed, but Otomie, princess of the Otomie, who was called my wife. Then I knew that this was the saddest and the most bitter of dreams that had been sent to mock me, for all the truth rushed into my mind. Losing my hold of Otomie, I fell back upon the bed and groaned aloud, and as I fell I saw the flush of shame upon her brow and breast. For this woman loved me, and thus my act and words were an insult to her, who could guess well what prompted them. Still she spoke gently.

'Pardon me, Teule, I came but to watch and not to waken you. I came also that I may see you alone before the daybreak, hoping that I might be of service, or at the least, of comfort to you, for the end draws near. Say then, in your sleep did you mistake me for some other woman dearer and fairer than I am, that you would have embraced me?'

'I dreamed that you were my betrothed whom I love, and who is far away across the sea,' I answered heavily. 'But enough of love and such

matters. What have I to do with them who go down into darkness?'

'In truth I cannot tell, Teule, still I have heard wise men say that if love is to be found anywhere, it is in this same darkness of death, that is light indeed. Grieve not, for if there is truth in the faith of which you have told me or in our own, either on this earth or beyond it, with the eyes of the spirit you will see your dear before another sun is set, and I pray that you may find her faithful to you. Tell me now, how much does she love you? Would SHE have lain by your side on the bed of sacrifice as, had things gone otherwise between us, Teule, it was my hope to do?'

'No,' I answered, 'it is not the custom of our women to kill themselves because their husbands chance to die.'

'Perhaps they think it better to live and wed again,' answered Otomie very quietly, but I saw her eyes flash and her breast heave in the moonlight as she spoke.

'Enough of this foolish talk,' I said. 'Listen, Otomie; if you had cared for me truly, surely you would have saved me from this dreadful doom, or prevailed on Guatemoc to save me. You are Montezuma's daughter, could you not have brought it about during all these months that he issued his royal mandate, commanding that I should be spared?'

'Do you, then, take me for so poor a friend, Teule?' she answered hotly.

'Know that for all these months, by day and by night, I have worked and striven to find a means to rescue you. Before he became a prisoner I importuned my father the emperor, till he ordered me from his presence. I have sought to bribe the priests, I have plotted ways of escape, ay, and Guatemoc has helped, for he loves you. Had it not been for the coming of these accursed Teules, and the war that they have levied in the city, I had surely saved you, for a woman's thought leaps far, and can find a path where none seems possible. But this war has changed everything, and moreover the star-readers and diviners of auguries have given a prophecy which seals your fate. For they have prophesied that if your blood flows, and your heart is offered at the hour of noon to-morrow on the altar of Tezcat, our people shall be victorious over the Teules, and utterly destroy them. But if the sacrifice is celebrated one moment before or after that propitious hour, then the doom of Tenochtitlan is sealed. Also they have declared that you must die, not, according to custom, at the Temple of Arms across the lake, but on the great pyramid before the chief statue of the god. All this is known throughout the land; thousands of priests are now offering up prayers that the sacrifice may be fortunate, and a golden ring has been hung over the stone of slaughter in such a fashion that the light of the sun must strike upon the centre of your breast at the very moment of mid-day. For weeks you have been watched as a jaguar watches its prey, for it was feared that you would escape to the Teules, and we, your wives, have been watched also. At this moment there is a triple ring of guards about the palace, and priests are set without your doors and beneath the window places. Judge, then, what chance there is of escape,

Teule.'

'Little indeed,' I said, 'and yet I know a road. If I kill myself, they cannot kill me.'

'Nay,' she answered hastily, 'what shall that avail you? While you live you may hope, but once dead, you are dead for ever. Also if you must die, it is best that you should die by the hand of the priest. Believe me, though the end is horrible,' and she shuddered, 'it is almost painless, so they say, and very swift. They will not torture you, that we have saved you, Guatemoc and I, though at first they wished thus to honour the god more particularly on this great day.'

'O Teule,' Otomie went on, seating herself by me on the bed, and taking my hand, 'think no more of these brief terrors, but look beyond them. Is it so hard a thing to die, and swiftly? We all must die, to-day, or to-night, or the next day, it matters little when--and your faith, like ours, teaches that beyond the grave is endless blessedness. Think then, my friend, to-morrow you will have passed far from this strife and turmoil; the struggle and the sorrows and the daily fears for the future that make the soul sick will be over for you, you will be taken to your peace, where no one shall disturb you for ever. There you will find that mother whom you have told me of, and who loved you, and there perhaps one will join you who loves you better than your mother, mayhap even I may meet you there, friend,' and she looked up at me strangely. 'The road that you are doomed to walk is dark indeed, but surely it must

be well-trodden, and there is light shining beyond it. So be a man, my friend, and do not grieve; rejoice rather that at so early an age you have done with woes and doubts, and come to the gates of joy, that you have passed the thorny, unwatered wilderness and see the smiling lakes and gardens, and among them the temples of your eternal city.

'And now farewell. We meet no more till the hour of sacrifice, for we women who masquerade as wives must accompany you to the first platforms of the temple. Farewell, dear friend, and think upon my words; whether they are acceptable to you or no, I am sure of this, that both for the sake of your own honour and because I ask it of you, you will die bravely as though the eyes of your own people were watching all.' And bending suddenly, Otomie kissed me on the forehead gently as a sister might, and was gone.

The curtains swung behind her, but the echoes of her noble words still dwelt in my heart. Nothing can make man look on death lovingly, and that awaiting me was one from which the bravest would shrink, yet I felt that Otomie had spoken truth, and that, terrible as it seemed, it might prove less terrible than life had shewn itself to be. An unnatural calm fell upon my soul like some dense mist upon the face of the ocean. Beneath that mist the waters might foam, above it the sun might shine, yet around was one grey peace. In this hour I seemed to stand outside of my earthly self, and to look on all things with a new sense. The tide of life was ebbing away from me, the shore of death loomed very near, and I understood then, as in extreme old age I understand to-day, how much

more part we mortals have in death than in this short accident of life. I could consider all my past, I could wonder on the future of my spirit, and even marvel at the gentleness and wisdom of the Indian woman, who was able to think such thoughts and utter them.

Well, whatever befell, in one thing I would not disappoint her, I would die bravely as an Englishman should do, leaving the rest to God. These barbarians should never say of me that the foreigner was a coward. Who was I that I should complain? Did not hundreds of men as good as I was perish daily in yonder square, and without a murmur? Had not my mother died also at the hand of a murderer? Was not that unhappy lady, Isabella de Siguenza, walled up alive because she had been mad enough to love a villain who betrayed her? The world is full of terrors and sorrows such as mine, who was I that I should complain?

So I mused on till at length the day dawned, and with the rising sun rose the clamour of men making ready for battle. For now the fight raged from day to day, and this was to be one of the most terrible. But I thought little then of the war between the Aztecs and the Spaniards, who must prepare myself for the struggle of my own death that was now at hand.