

CHAPTER XXI

THE KISS OF LOVE

Presently there was a sound of music, and, accompanied by certain artists, my pages entered, bearing with them apparel more gorgeous than any that I had worn hitherto. First, these pages having stripped me of my robes, the artists painted all my body in hideous designs of red, and white, and blue, till I resembled a flag, not even sparing my face and lips, which they coloured with carmine hues. Over my heart also they drew a scarlet ring with much care and measurement. Then they did up my hair that now hung upon my shoulders, after the fashion in which it was worn by generals among the Indians, tying it on the top of my head with an embroidered ribbon red in colour, and placed a plume of cock's feathers above it. Next, having arrayed my body in gorgeous vestments not unlike those used by popish priests at the celebration of the mass, they set golden earrings in my ears, golden bracelets on my wrists and ankles, and round my neck a collar of priceless emeralds. On my breast also they hung a great gem that gleamed like moonlit water, and beneath my chin a false beard made from pink sea shells. Then having twined me round with wreaths of flowers till I thought of the maypole on Bungay Common, they rested from their labours, filled with admiration at their handiwork.

Now the music sounded again and they gave me two lutes, one of which

I must hold in either hand, and conducted me to the great hall of the palace. Here a number of people of rank were gathered, all dressed in festal attire, and here also on a dais to which I was led, stood my four wives clad in the rich dresses of the four goddesses Xochi, Xilo, Atla, and Clixto, after whom they were named for the days of their wifhood, Atla being the princess Otomie. When I had taken my place upon the dais, my wives came forward one by one, and kissing me on the brow, offered me sweetmeats and meal cakes in golden platters, and cocoa and mescal in golden cups. Of the mescal I drank, for it is a spirit and I needed inward comfort, but the other dainties I could not touch. These ceremonies being finished, there was silence for a while, till presently a band of filthy priests entered at the far end of the chamber, clad in their scarlet sacrificial robes. Blood was on them everywhere, their long locks were matted with it, their hands were red with it, even their fierce eyes seemed full of it. They advanced up the chamber till they stood before the dais, then suddenly the head priest lifted up his hands, crying aloud:

'Adore the immortal god, ye people,' and all those gathered there prostrated themselves shouting:

'We adore the god.'

Thrice the priest cried aloud, and thrice they answered him thus, prostrating themselves at every answer. Then they rose again, and the priest addressed me, saying:

'Forgive us, O Tezcat, that we cannot honour you as it is meet, for our sovereign should have been here to worship you with us. But you know, O Tezcat, how sore is the strait of your servants, who must wage war in their own city against those who blaspheme you and your brother gods. You know that our beloved emperor lies wounded, a prisoner in their unholy hands. When we have gratified your longing to pass beyond the skies, O Tezcat, and when in your earthly person you have taught us the lesson that human prosperity is but a shadow which flees away; in memory of our love for you intercede for us, we beseech you, that we may smite these wicked ones and honour you and them by the rite of their own sacrifice. O Tezcat, you have dwelt with us but a little while, and now you will not suffer that we hold you longer from your glory, for your eyes have longed to see this happy day, and it is come at last. We have loved you, Tezcat, and ministered to you, grant in return that we may see you in your splendour, we who are your little children, and till we come, watch well over our earthly welfare, and that of the people among whom you have deigned to sojourn.'

Having spoken some such words as these, that at times could scarcely be heard because of the sobbing of the people, and of my wives who wept loudly, except Otomie alone, this villainous priest made a sign and once more the music sounded. Then he and his band placed themselves about me, my wives the goddesses going before and after, and led me down the hall and on to the gateways of the palace, which were thrown wide for us to pass. Looking round me with a stony wonder, for in this my last hour

nothing seemed to escape my notice, I saw that a strange play was being played about us. Some hundreds of paces away the attack on the palace of Axa, where the Spaniards were entrenched, raged with fury. Bands of warriors were attempting to scale the walls and being driven back by the deadly fire of the Spaniards and the pikes and clubs of their Tlascalan allies, while from the roofs of such of the neighbouring houses as remained unburned, and more especially from the platform of the great teocalli, on which I must presently give up the ghost, arrows, javelins, and stones were poured by thousands into the courtyards and outer works of the Spanish quarters.

Five hundred yards away or so, raged this struggle to the death, but about me, around the gates of Montezuma's palace on the hither side of the square, was a different scene. Here were gathered a vast crowd, among them many women and children, waiting to see me die. They came with flowers in their hands, with the sound of music and joyous cries, and when they saw me they set up such a shout of welcome that it almost drowned the thunder of the guns and the angry roar of battle. Now and again an ill-aimed cannon ball would plough through them, killing some and wounding others, but the rest took no heed, only crying the more, 'Welcome, Tezcat, and farewell. Blessings on you, our deliverer, welcome and farewell!'

We went slowly through the press, treading on a path of flowers, till we came across the courtyard to the base of the pyramid. Here at the outer gate there was a halt because of the multitude of the people, and while

we waited a warrior thrust his way through the crowd and bowed before me. Glancing up I saw that it was Guatemoc.

'Teule,' he whispered to me, 'I leave my charge yonder,' and he nodded towards the force who strove to break a way into the palace of Axa, 'to bid you farewell. Doubtless we shall meet again ere long. Believe me, Teule, I would have helped you if I could, but it cannot be. I wish that I might change places with you. My friend, farewell. Twice you have saved my life, but yours I cannot save.'

'Farewell, Guatemoc,' I answered 'heaven prosper you, for you are a true man.'

Then we passed on.

At the foot of the pyramid the procession was formed, and here one of my wives bade me adieu after weeping on my neck, though I did not weep on hers. Now the road to the summit of the teocalli winds round and round the pyramid, ever mounting higher as it winds, and along this road we went in solemn state. At each turn we halted and another wife bade me a last good-bye, or one of my instruments of music, which I did not grieve to see the last of, or some article of my strange attire, was taken from me. At length after an hour's march, for our progress was slow, we reached the flat top of the pyramid that is approached by a great stair, a space larger than the area of the churchyard here at Ditchingham, and unfenced at its lofty edge. Here on this dizzy place stood the temples

of Huitzel and of Tezcat, soaring structures of stone and wood, within which were placed the horrid effigies of the gods, and dreadful chambers stained with sacrifice. Here, too, were the holy fires that burned eternally, the sacrificial stones, the implements of torment, and the huge drum of snakes' skin, but for the rest the spot was bare. It was bare but not empty, for on that side of it which looked towards the Spanish quarters were stationed some hundreds of men who hurled missiles into their camp without ceasing. On the other side also were gathered a concourse of priests awaiting the ceremony of my death. Below the great square, fringed round with burnt-out houses, was crowded with thousands of people, some of them engaged in combat with the Spaniards, but the larger part collected there to witness my murder.

Now we reached the top of the pyramid, two hours before midday, for there were still many rites to be carried out ere the moment of sacrifice. First I was led into the sanctuary of Tezcat, the god whose name I bore. Here was his statue or idol, fashioned in black marble and covered with golden ornaments. In the hand of this idol was a shield of burnished gold on which its jewelled eyes were fixed, reading there, as his priests fabled, all that passed upon the earth he had created. Before him also was a plate of gold, which with muttered invocations the head priest cleansed as I watched, rubbing it with his long and matted locks. This done he held it to my lips that I might breathe on it, and I turned faint and sick, for I knew that it was being made ready to receive the heart which I felt beating in my breast.

Now what further ceremonies were to be carried out in this unholy place I do not know, for at that moment a great tumult arose in the square beneath, and I was hurried from the sanctuary by the priests. Then I perceived this: galled to madness by the storm of missiles rained upon them from its crest, the Spaniards were attacking the teocalli. Already they were pouring across the courtyard in large companies, led by Cortes himself, and with them came many hundreds of their allies the Tlascalans. On the other hand some thousands of the Aztecs were rushing to the foot of the first stairway to give the white men battle there. Five minutes passed and the fight grew fierce. Again and again, covered by the fire of the arquebusiers, the Spaniards charged the Aztecs, but their horses slipping upon the stone pavement, at length they dismounted and continued the fray on foot. Slowly and with great slaughter the Indians were pushed back and the Spaniards gained a footing on the first stairway. But hundreds of warriors still crowded the lofty winding road, and hundreds more held the top, and it was plain that if the Spaniards won through at all, the task would be a hard one. Still a fierce hope smote me like a blow when I saw what was toward. If the Spaniards took the temple there would be no sacrifice. No sacrifice could be offered till midday, so Otomie had told me, and that was not for hard upon two hours. It came to this then, if the Spaniards were victorious within two hours, there was a chance of life for me, if not I must die.

Now when I was led out of the sanctuary of Tezcat, I wondered because the princess Otomie, or rather the goddess Atla as she was then called, was standing among the chief priests and disputing with them, for I had

seen her bow her head at the door of the holy place, and thought that it was in token of farewell, seeing that she was the last of the four women to leave me. Of what she disputed I could not hear because of the din of battle, but the argument was keen and it seemed to me that the priests were somewhat dismayed at her words, and yet had a fierce joy in them. It appeared also that she won her cause, for presently they bowed in obeisance to her, and turning slowly she swept to my side with a peculiar majesty of gait that even then I noted. Glancing up at her face also, I saw that it was alight as though with a great and holy purpose, and moreover that she looked like some happy bride passing to her husband's arms.

'Why are you not gone, Otomie?' I said. 'Now it is too late. The Spaniards surround the teocalli and you will be killed or taken prisoner.'

'I await the end whatever it may be,' she answered briefly, and we spoke no more for a while, but watched the progress of the fray, which was fierce indeed. Grimly the Aztec warriors fought before the symbols of their gods, and in the sight of the vast concourse of the people who crowded the square beneath and stared at the struggle in silence. They hurled themselves upon the Spanish swords, they gripped the Spaniards with their hands and screaming with rage dragged them to the steep sides of the roadway, purposing to cast them over. Sometimes they succeeded, and a ball of men clinging together would roll down the slope and be dashed to pieces on the stone flooring of the courtyard, a Spaniard

being in the centre of the ball. But do what they would, like some vast and writhing snake, still the long array of Teules clad in their glittering mail ploughed its way upward through the storm of spears and arrows. Minute by minute and step by step they crept on, fighting as men fight who know the fate that awaits the desecrators of the gods of Anahuac, fighting for life, and honour, and safety from the stone of sacrifice. Thus an hour went by, and the Spaniards were half way up the pyramid. Louder and louder grew the fearful sounds of battle, the Spaniards cheered and called on their patron saints to aid them, the Aztecs yelled like wild beasts, the priests screamed invocations to their gods and cries of encouragement to the warriors, while above all rose the rattle of the arquebusses, the roar of the cannon, and the fearful note of the great drum of snake's skin on which a half-naked priest beat madly. Only the multitudes below never moved, nor shouted. They stood silent gazing upward, and I could see the sunlight flash on the thousands of their staring eyes.

Now all this while I was standing near the stone of sacrifice with Otomie at my side. Round me were a ring of priests, and over the stone was fixed a square of black cloth supported upon four poles, which were set in sockets in the pavement. In the centre of this black cloth was sewn a golden funnel measuring six inches or so across at its mouth, and the sunbeams passing through this funnel fell in a bright patch, the size of an apple, upon the space of pavement that was shaded by the cloth. As the sun moved in the heavens, so did this ring of light creep across the shadow till at length it climbed the stone of sacrifice and

lay upon its edge.

Then at a sign from the head priest, his ministers laid hold of me and plucked what were left of my fine clothes from me as cruel boys pluck a living bird, till I stood naked except for the paint upon my body and a cloth about my loins. Now I knew that my hour had come, and strange to tell, for the first time this day courage entered into me, and I rejoiced to think that soon I should have done with my tormentors. Turning to Otomie I began to bid her farewell in a clear voice, when to my amaze I saw that as I had been served so she was being served, for her splendid robes were torn off her and she stood before me arrayed in nothing except her beauty, her flowing hair, and a broidered cotton smock.

'Do not wonder, Teule,' she said in a low voice, answering the question my tongue refused to frame, 'I am your wife and yonder is our marriage bed, the first and last. Though you do not love me, to-day I die your death and at your side, as I have the right to do. I could not save you, Teule, but at least I can die with you.'

At the moment I made no answer, for I was stricken silent by my wonder, and before I could find my tongue the priests had cast me down, and for the second time I lay upon the stone of doom. As they held me a yell fiercer and longer than any which had gone before, told that the Spaniards had got foot upon the last stair of the ascent. Scarcely had my body been set upon the centre of the great stone, when that of Otomie

was laid beside it, so close that our sides touched, for I must lie in the middle of the stone and there was no great place for her. Then the moment of sacrifice not being come, the priests made us fast with cords which they knotted to copper rings in the pavement, and turned to watch the progress of the fray.

For some minutes we lay thus side by side, and as we lay a great wonder and gratitude grew in my heart, wonder that a woman could be so brave, gratitude for the love she gave me, sealing it with her life-blood.

Because Otomie loved me she had chosen this fearful death, because she loved me so well that she desired to die thus at my side rather than to live on in greatness and honour without me. Of a sudden, in a moment while I thought of this marvel, a new light shone upon my heart and it was changed towards her. I felt that no woman could ever be so dear to me as this glorious woman, no, not even my betrothed. I felt--nay, who can say what I did feel? But I know this, that the tears rushed to my eyes and ran down my painted face, and I turned my head to look at her. She was lying as much upon her left side as her hands would allow, her long hair fell from the stone to the paving where it lay in masses, and her face was towards me. So close was it indeed that there was not an inch between our lips.

'Otomie,' I whispered, 'listen to me. I love you, Otomie.' Now I saw her breast heave beneath the bands and the colour come upon her brow.

'Then I am repaid,' she answered, and our lips clung together in a kiss,

the first, and as we thought the last. Yes, there we kissed, on the stone of sacrifice, beneath the knife of the priest and the shadow of death, and if there has been a stranger love scene in the world, I have never heard its story.

'Oh! I am repaid,' she said again; 'I would gladly die a score of deaths to win this moment, indeed I pray that I may die before you take back your words. For, Teule, I know well that there is one who is dearer to you than I am, but now your heart is softened by the faithfulness of an Indian girl, and you think that you love her. Let me die then believing that the dream is true.'

'Talk not so,' I answered heavily, for even at that moment the memory of Lily came into my mind. 'You give your life for me and I love you for it.'

'My life is nothing and your love is much,' she answered smiling. 'Ah! Teule, what magic have you that you can bring me, Montezuma's daughter, to the altar of the gods and of my own free will? Well, I desire no softer bed, and for the why and wherefore it will soon be known by both of us, and with it many other things.'