

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS

'Otomie,' I said presently, 'when will they kill us?'

'When the point of light lies within the ring that is painted over your heart,' she answered.

Now I turned my head from her, and looked at the sunbeam which pierced the shadow above us like a golden pencil. It rested at my side about six inches from me, and I reckoned that it would lie in the scarlet ring painted upon my breast within some fifteen minutes. Meanwhile the clamour of battle grew louder and nearer. Shifting myself so far as the cords would allow, I strained my head upwards and saw that the Spaniards had gained the crest of the pyramid, since the battle now raged upon its edge, and I have rarely seen so terrible a fight, for the Aztecs fought with the fury of despair, thinking little of their own lives if they could only bring a Spaniard to his death. But for the most part their rude weapons would not pierce the coats of mail, so that there remained only one way to compass their desire, namely, by casting the white men over the edge of the teocalli to be crushed like eggshells upon the pavement two hundred feet below. Thus the fray broke itself up into groups of foes who rent and tore at each other upon the brink of the pyramid, now and again to vanish down its side, ten or twelve of them

together. Some of the priests also joined in the fight, thinking less of their own deaths than of the desecration of their temples, for I saw one of them, a man of huge strength and stature, seize a Spanish soldier round the middle and leap with him into space. Still, though very slowly, the Spaniards and Tlascalans forced their way towards the centre of the platform, and as they came the danger of this dreadful end grew less, for the Aztecs must drag them further.

Now the fight drew near to the stone of sacrifice, and all who remained alive of the Aztecs, perhaps some two hundred and fifty of them, besides the priests, ringed themselves round us and it in a circle. Also the outer rim of the sunbeam that fell through the golden funnel, creeping on remorselessly, touched my painted side which it seemed to burn as hot iron might, for alas, I could not command the sun to stand still while the battle raged, as did Joshua in the valley of Ajalon. When it touched me, five priests seized my limbs and head, and the father of them, he who had conducted me from the palace, clasped his flint knife in both hands. Now a deathly sickness took me and I shut my eyes dreaming that all was done, but at that moment I heard a wild-eyed man, the chief of the astronomers whom I had noted standing by, call out to the minister of death:

'Not yet, O priest of Tezeat! If you smite before the sunbeam lies upon the victim's heart, your gods are doomed and doomed are the people of Anahuac.'

The priest gnashed his teeth with rage, and glared first at the creeping point of light and then over his shoulder at the advancing battle.

Slowly the ring of warriors closed in upon us, slowly the golden ray crept up my breast till its outer rim touched the red circle painted upon my heart. Again the priest heaved up his awful knife, again I shut my eyes, and again I heard the shrill scream of the astronomer, 'Not yet, not yet, or your gods are doomed!'

Then I heard another sound. It was the voice of Otomie crying for help.

'Save us, Teules; they murder us!' she shrieked in so piercing a note that it reached the ears of the Spaniards, for one shouted in answer and in the Castilian tongue, 'On, my comrades, on! The dogs do murder on their altars!'

Then there was a mighty rush and the defending Aztecs were swept in upon the altar, lifting the priest of sacrifice from his feet and throwing him across my body. Thrice that rush came like a rush of the sea, and each time the stand of the Aztecs weakened. Now their circle was broken and the swords of the Spaniards flashed up on every side, and now the red ray lay within the ring upon my heart.

'Smite, priest of Tezcat,' screamed the voice of the astronomer; 'smite home for the glory of your gods!'

With a fearful yell the priest lifted the knife; I saw the golden

sunbeam that rested full upon my heart shine on it. Then as it was descending I saw the same sunbeam shine upon a yard of steel that flashed across me and lost itself in the breast of the murderer priest. Down came the great flint knife, but its aim was lost. It struck indeed, but not upon my bosom, though I did not escape it altogether. Full upon the altar of sacrifice it fell and was shattered there, piercing between my side and that of Otomie, and gashing the flesh of both so that our blood was mingled upon the stone, making us one indeed. Down too came the priest across our bodies for the second time, but to rise no more, for he writhed dying on those whom he would have slain.

Then as in a dream I heard the wail of the astronomer singing the dirge of the gods of Anahuac.

'The priest is dead and his gods are fallen,' he cried. 'Tezcat has rejected his victim and is fallen; doomed are the gods of Anahuac! Victory is to the Cross of the Christians!'

Thus he wailed, then came the sound of sword blows and I knew that this prophet was dead also.

Now a strong arm pulled the dying priest from off us, and he staggered back till he fell over the altar where the eternal fire burned, quenching it with his blood and body after it had flared for many generations, and a knife cut the rope that bound us.

I sat up staring round me wildly, and a voice spoke above me in Castilian, not to me indeed but to some comrade.

'These two went near to it, poor devils,' said the voice. 'Had my cut been one second later, that savage would have drilled a hole in him as big as my head. By all the saints! the girl is lovely, or would be if she were washed. I shall beg her of Cortes as my prize.'

The voice spoke and I knew the voice. None other ever had that hard clear ring. I knew it even then and looked up, slipping off the death-stone as I looked. Now I saw. Before me fully clad in mail was my enemy, de Garcia. It was HIS sword that by the good providence of God had pierced the breast of the priest. He had saved me who, had he known, would as soon have turned his steel against his own heart as on that of my destroyer.

I gazed at him, wondering if I dreamed, then my lips spoke, without my will as it were:

'DE GARCIA!'

He staggered back at the sound of my voice, like a man struck by a shot, then stared at me, rubbed his eyes with his hand, and stared again. Now at length he knew me through my paint.

'Mother of God!' he gasped, 'it is that knave Thomas Wingfield, AND I

HAVE SAVED HIS LIFE!

By this time my senses had come back to me, and knowing all my folly, I turned seeking escape. But de Garcia had no mind to suffer this. Lifting his sword, he sprang at me with a beastlike scream of rage and hate. Swiftly as thought I slipped round the stone of sacrifice and after me came the uplifted sword of my enemy. It would have overtaken me soon enough, for I was weak with fear and fasting, and my limbs were cramped with bonds, but at that moment a cavalier whom by his dress and port I guessed to be none other than Cortes himself, struck up de Garcia's sword, saying:

'How now, Sarceda? Are you mad with the lust of blood that you would take to sacrificing victims like an Indian priest? Let the poor devil go.'

'He is no Indian, he is an English spy,' cried de Garcia, and once more struggled to get at me.

'Decidedly our friend is mad,' said Cortes, scanning me; 'he says that this wretched creature is an Englishman. Come, be off both of you, or somebody else may make the same mistake,' and he waved his sword in token to us to go, deeming that I could not understand his words; then added angrily, as de Garcia, speechless with rage, made a new attempt to get at me:

'No, by heaven! I will not suffer it. We are Christians and come to save victims, not to slay them. Here, comrades, hold this fool who would stain his soul with murder.'

Now the Spaniards clutched de Garcia by the arms, and he cursed and raved at them, for as I have said, his rage was that of a beast rather than of a man. But I stood bewildered, not knowing whither to fly. Fortunate it was for me indeed that one was by who though she understood no Spanish, yet had a quicker wit. For while I stood thus, Otomie clasped my hand, and whispering, 'Fly, fly swiftly!' led me away from the stone of sacrifice.

'Whither shall we go?' I said at length. 'Were it not better to trust to the mercy of the Spaniards?'

'To the mercy of that man-devil with the sword?' she answered. 'Peace, Teule, and follow me.'

Now she led me on, and the Spaniards let us by unharmed, ay, and even spoke words of pity as we passed, for they knew that we were victims snatched from sacrifice. Indeed, when a certain brute, a Tlascalan Indian, rushed at us, purposing to slay us with a club, one of the Spaniards ran him through the shoulder so that he fell wounded to the pavement.

So we went on, and at the edge of the pyramid we glanced back and saw

that de Garcia had broken from those who held him, or perhaps he found his tongue and had explained the truth to them. At the least he was bounding from the altar of sacrifice nearly fifty yards away, and coming towards us with uplifted sword. Then fear gave us strength, and we fled like the wind. Along the steep path we rushed side by side, leaping down the steps and over the hundreds of dead and dying, only pausing now and again to save ourselves from being smitten into space by the bodies of the priests whom the Spaniards were hurling from the crest of the teocalli. Once looking up, I caught sight of de Garcia pursuing far above us, but after that we saw him no more; doubtless he wearied of the chase, or feared to fall into the hands of such of the Aztec warriors as still clustered round the foot of the pyramid.

We had lived through many dangers that day, the princess Otomie and I, but one more awaited us before ever we found shelter for awhile. After we had reached the foot of the pyramid and turned to mingle with the terrified rabble that surged and flowed through the courtyard of the temple, bearing away the dead and wounded as the sea at flood reclaims its waste and wreckage, a noise like thunder caught my ear. I looked up, for the sound came from above, and saw a huge mass bounding down the steep side of the pyramid. Even then I knew it again; it was the idol of the god Tezcat that the Spaniards had torn from its shrine, and like an avenging demon it rushed straight on to me. Already it was upon us, there was no retreat from instant death, we had but escaped sacrifice to the spirit of the god to be crushed to powder beneath the bulk of his marble emblem. On he came while on high the Spaniards shouted in



triumph. His base had struck the stone side of the pyramid fifty feet above us, now he whirled round and round in the air to strike again within three paces of where we stood. I felt the solid mountain shake beneath the blow, and next instant the air was filled with huge fragments of marble, that whizzed over us and past us as though a mine of powder had been fired beneath our feet, tearing the rocks from their base. The god Tezcat had burst into a score of pieces, and these fell round us like a flight of arrows, and yet we were not touched. My head was grazed by his head, his feet dug a pit before my feet, but I stood there unhurt, the false god had no power over the victim who had escaped him!

After that I remember nothing till I found myself once more in my apartments in Montezuma's palace, which I never hoped to see again. Otomie was by me, and she brought me water to wash the paint from my body and the blood from my wound, which, leaving her own untended, she dressed skilfully, for the cut of the priest's knife was deep and I had bled much. Also she clothed herself afresh in a white robe and brought me raiment to wear, with food and drink, and I partook of them. Then I bade her eat something herself, and when she had done so I gathered my wits together and spoke to her.

'What next?' I said. 'Presently the priests will be on us, and we shall be dragged back to sacrifice. There is no hope for me here, I must fly to the Spaniards and trust to their mercy.'

'To the mercy of that man with the sword? Say, Teule, who is he?'

'He is that Spaniard of whom I have spoken to you, Otomie; he is my mortal enemy whom I have followed across the seas.'

'And now you would put yourself into his power. Truly, you are foolish, Teule.'

'It is better to fall into the hands of Christian men than into those of your priests,' I answered.

'Have no fear,' she said; 'the priests are harmless for you. You have escaped them and there's an end. Few have ever come alive from their clutches before, and he who does so is a wizard indeed. For the rest I think that your God is stronger than our gods, for surely He must have cast His mantle over us when we lay yonder on the stone. Ah! Teule, to what have you brought me that I should live to doubt my gods, ay, and to call upon the foes of my country for succour in your need. Believe me, I had not done it for my own sake, since I would have died with your kiss upon my lips and your word of love echoing in my ears, who now must live knowing that these joys have passed from me.'

'How so?' I answered. 'What I have said, I have said. Otomie, you would have died with me, and you saved my life by your wit in calling on the Spaniards. Henceforth it is yours, for there is no other woman in the world so tender and so brave, and I say it again, Otomie, my wife, I

love you. Our blood has mingled on the stone of sacrifice and there we kissed; let these be our marriage rites. Perhaps I have not long to live, but till I die I am yours, Otomie my wife.'

Thus I spoke from the fulness of my heart, for my strength and courage were shattered, horror and loneliness had taken hold of me. But two things were left to me in the world, my trust in Providence and the love of this woman, who had dared so much for me. Therefore I forgot my troth and clung to her as a child clings to its mother. Doubtless it was wrong, but I will be bold to say that few men so placed would have acted otherwise. Moreover, I could not take back the fateful words that I had spoken on the stone of sacrifice. When I said them I was expecting death indeed, but to renounce them now that its shadow was lifted from me, if only for a little while, would have been the act of a coward. For good or evil I had given myself to Montezuma's daughter, and I must abide by it or be shamed. Still such was the nobleness of this Indian lady that even then she would not take me at my word. For a little while she stood smiling sadly and drawing a lock of her long hair through the hollow of her hand. Then she spoke:

'You are not yourself, Teule, and I should be base indeed if I made so solemn a compact with one who does not know what he sells. Yonder on the altar and in a moment of death you said that you loved me, and doubtless it was true. But now you have come back to life, and say, lord, who set that golden ring upon your hand and what is written in its circle? Yet even if the words are true that you have spoken and you love me a

little, there is one across the sea whom you love better. That I could bear, for my heart is fixed on you alone among men, and at the least you would be kind to me, and I should move in the sunlight of your presence. But having known the light, I cannot live to wander in the darkness. You do not understand. I will tell you what I fear. I fear that if--if we were wed, you would weary of me as men do, and that memory would grow too strong for you. Then by and by it might be possible for you to find your way back across the waters to your own land and your own love, and so you would desert me, Teule. This is what I could not bear, Teule. I can forego you now, ay, and remain your friend. But I cannot be put aside like a dancing girl, the companion of a month, I, Montezuma's daughter, a lady of my own land. Should you wed me, it must be for my life, Teule, and that is perhaps more than you would wish to promise, though you could kiss me on yonder stone and there is blood fellowship between us,' and she glanced at the red stain in the linen robe that covered the wound upon her side.

'And now, Teule, I leave you a while, that I may find Guatemoc, if he still lives, and others who, now that the strength of the priests is shattered, have power to protect you and advance you to honour. Think then on all that I have said, and do not be hasty to decide. Or would you make an end at once and fly to the white men if I can find a means of escape?'

'I am too weary to fly anywhere,' I answered, 'even if I could. Moreover, I forget. My enemy is among the Spaniards, he whom I have

sworn to kill, therefore his friends are my foes and his foes my friends. I will not fly, Otomie.'

'There you are wise,' she said, 'for if you come among the Teules that man will murder you; by fair means or foul he will murder you within a day, I saw it in his eyes. Now rest while I seek your safety, if there is any safety in this blood-stained land.'