

CHAPTER XXIII

THOMAS IS MARRIED

Otomie turned and went. I watched the golden curtains close behind her; then I sank back upon the couch and instantly was lost in sleep, for I was faint and weak, and so dazed with weariness, that at the time I scarcely knew what had happened, or the purpose of our talk. Afterwards, however, it came back to me. I must have slept for many hours, for when I awoke it was far on into the night. It was night but not dark, for through the barred window places came the sound of tumult and fighting, and red rays of light cast by the flames of burning houses. One of these windows was above my couch, and standing on the bed I seized the sill with my hands. With much pain, because of the flesh wound in my side, I drew myself up till I could look through the bars. Then I saw that the Spaniards, not content with the capture of the teocalli, had made a night attack and set fire to hundreds of houses in the city. The glare of the flames was that of a lurid day, and by it I could see the white men retreating to their quarters, pursued by thousands of Aztecs, who hung upon their flanks, shooting at them with stones and arrows.

Now I dropped down from the window place and began to think as to what I should do, for again my mind was wavering. Should I desert Otomie and escape to the Spaniards if that were possible, taking my chance of death at the hands of de Garcia? Or should I stay among the Aztecs if they

would give me shelter, and wed Otomie? There was a third choice, indeed, to stay with them and leave Otomie alone, though it would be difficult to do this and keep my honour. One thing I understood, if I married Otomie it must be at her own price, for then I must become an Indian and give over all hope of returning to England and to my betrothed. Of this, indeed, there was little chance, still, while my life remained to me, it might come about if I was free. But once my hands were tied by this marriage it could never be during Otomie's lifetime, and so far as Lily Bozard was concerned I should be dead. How could I be thus faithless to her memory and my troth, and on the other hand, how could I discard the woman who had risked all for me, and who, to speak truth, had grown so dear to me, though there was one yet dearer? A hero or an angel might find a path out of this tangle, but alas! I was neither the one nor the other, only a man afflicted as other men are with human weakness, and Otomie was at hand, and very sweet and fair. Still, almost I determined that I would avail myself of her nobleness, that I would go back upon my words, and beg her to despise me and see me no more, in order that I might not be forced to break the troth that I had pledged beneath the beech at Ditchingham. For I greatly dreaded this oath of life-long fidelity which I should be forced to swear if I chose any other path.

Thus I thought on in pitiable confusion of mind, not knowing that all these matters were beyond my ordering, since a path was already made ready to my feet, which I must follow or die. And let this be a proof of the honesty of my words, since, had I been desirous of glozing the truth, I need have written nothing of these struggles of conscience, and

of my own weakness. For soon it was to come to this, though not by her will, that I must either wed Otomie or die at once, and few would blame me for doing the first and not the last. Indeed, though I did wed her, I might still have declared myself to my affianced and to all the world as a slave of events from which there was no escape. But it is not all the truth, since my mind was divided, and had it not been settled for me, I cannot say how the struggle would have ended.

Now, looking back on the distant past, and weighing my actions and character as a judge might do, I can see, however, that had I found time to consider, there was another matter which would surely have turned the scale in favour of Otomie. De Garcia was among the Spaniards, and my hatred of de Garcia was the ruling passion of my life, a stronger passion even than my love for the two dear women who have been its joy. Indeed, though he is dead these many years I still hate him, and evil though the desire be, even in my age I long that my vengeance was still to wreak. While I remained among the Aztecs de Garcia would be their enemy and mine, and I might meet him in war and kill him there. But if I succeeded in reaching the Spanish camp, then it was almost sure that he would bring about my instant death. Doubtless he had told such a tale of me already, that within an hour I should be hung as a spy, or otherwise made away with.

But I will cease from these unprofitable wonderings which have but one value, that of setting out my strange necessity of choice between an absent and a present love, and go on with the story of an event in which

there was no room to balance scruples.

While I sat musing on the couch the curtain was drawn, and a man entered bearing a torch. It was Guatemoc as he had come from the fray, which, except for its harvest of burning houses, was finished for that night. The plumes were shorn from his head, his golden armour was hacked by the Spanish swords, and he bled from a shot wound in the neck.

'Greeting, Teule,' he said. 'Certainly I never thought to see you alive to-night, or myself either for that matter. But it is a strange world, and now, if never before in Tenochtitlan, those things happen for which we look the least. But I have no time for words. I came to summon you before the council.'

'What is to be my fate?' I asked. 'To be dragged back to the stone of sacrifice?'

'Nay, have no fear of that. But for the rest I cannot say. In an hour you may be dead or great among us, if any of us can be called great in these days of shame. Otomie has worked well for you among the princes and the counsellors, so she says, and if you have a heart, you should be grateful to her, for it seems to me that few women have loved a man so much. As for me, I have been employed elsewhere,' and he glanced at his rent armour, 'but I will lift up my voice for you. Now come, friend, for the torch burns low. By this time you must be well seasoned in dangers;

one more or less will matter as little to you as to me.'

Then I rose and followed him into the great cedar-panelled hall, where that very morning I had received adoration as a god. Now I was a god no longer, but a prisoner on trial for his life. Upon the dais where I had stood in the hour of my godhead were gathered those of the princes and counsellors who were left alive. Some of them, like Guatemoc, were clad in rent and bloody mail, others in their customary dress, and one in a priest's robe. They had only two things in common among them, the sternness of their faces and the greatness of their rank, and they sat there this night not to decide my fate, which was but a little thing, but to take counsel as to how they might expel the Spaniards before the city was destroyed.

When I entered, a man in mail, who sat in the centre of the half circle, and in whom I knew Cuitlahua, who would be emperor should Montezuma die, looked up quickly and said:

'Who is this, Guatemoc, that you bring with you? Ah! I remember; the Teule that was the god Tezcat, and who escaped the sacrifice to-day. Listen, nobles. What is to be done with this man? Say, is it lawful that he be led back to sacrifice?'

Then the priest answered: 'I grieve to say that it is not lawful most noble prince. This man has lain on the altar of the god, he has even been wounded by the holy knife. But the god rejected him in a fateful

hour, and he must lie there no more. Slay him if you will, but not upon the stone of sacrifice.'

'What then shall be done with him?' said the prince again.

'He is of the blood of the Teules, and therefore an enemy. One thing is certain; he must not be suffered to join the white devils and give them tidings of our distresses. Is it not best that he be put away forthwith?'

Now several of the council nodded their heads, but others sat silent, making no sign.

'Come,' said Cuitlahua, 'we have no time to waste over this man when the lives of thousands are hourly at stake. The question is, Shall the Teule be slain?'

Then Guatemoc rose and spoke, saying: 'Your pardon, noble kinsman, but I hold that we may put this prisoner to better use than to kill him. I know him well; he is brave and loyal, as I have proved, moreover, he is not all a Teule, but half of another race that hates them as he hates them. Also he has knowledge of their customs and mode of warfare, which we lack, and I think that he may be able to give us good counsel in our strait.'

'The counsel of the wolf to the deer perhaps,' said Cuitlahua, coldly;

'counsel that shall lead us to the fangs of the Teules. Who shall answer for this foreign devil, that he will not betray us if we trust him?'

'I will answer with my life,' answered Guatemoc.

'Your life is of too great worth to be set on such a stake, nephew. Men of this white breed are liars, and his own word is of no value even if he gives it. I think that it will be best to kill him and have done with doubts.'

'This man is wed to Otomie, princess of the Otomie, Montezuma's daughter, your niece,' said Guatemoc again, 'and she loves him so well that she offered herself upon the stone of sacrifice with him. Unless I mistake she will answer for him also. Shall she be summoned before you?'

'If you wish, nephew; but a woman in love is a blind woman, and doubtless he has deceived her also. Moreover, she was his wife according to the rule of religion only. Is it your desire that the princess should be summoned before you, comrades?'

Now some said nay, but the most, those whose interest Otomie had gained, said yea, and the end of it was that one of their number was sent to summon her.

Presently she came, looking very weary, but proud in mien and royally attired, and bowed before the council.

'This is the question, princess,' said Cuitlahua. 'Whether this Teule shall be slain forthwith, or whether he shall be sworn as one of us, should he be willing to take the oath? The prince Guatemoc here vouches for him, and he says, moreover, that you will vouch for him also. A woman can do this in one way only, by taking him she vouches as her husband. You are already wed to this foreigner by the rule of religion. Are you willing to marry him according to the custom of our land, and to answer for his faith with your own life?'

'I am willing,' Otomie answered quietly, 'if he is willing.'

'In truth it is a great honour that you would do this white dog,' said Cuitlahua. 'Bethink you, you are princess of the Otomie and one of our master's daughters, it is to you that we look to bring back the mountain clans of the Otomie, of whom you are chieftainess, from their unholy alliance with the accursed Tlascalans, the slaves of the Teules. Is not your life too precious to be set on such a stake as this foreigner's faith? for learn, Otomie, if he proves false your rank shall not help you.'

'I know it all,' she replied quietly. 'Foreigner or not, I love this man and I will answer for him with my blood. Moreover, I look to him to assist me to win back the people of the Otomie to their allegiance. But let him speak for himself, my lord. It may happen that he has no desire to take me in marriage.'

Cuitlahua smiled grimly and said, 'When the choice lies between the breast of death and those fair arms of yours, niece, it is easy to guess his answer. Still, speak, Teule, and swiftly.'

'I have little to say, lord. If the princess Otomie is willing to wed me, I am willing to wed her,' I answered, and thus in the moment of my danger all my doubts and scruples vanished. As Cuitlahua had said, it was easy to guess the choice of one set between death and Otomie.

She heard and looked at me warningly, saying in a low voice: 'Remember our words, Teule. In such a marriage you renounce your past and give me your future.'

'I remember,' I answered, and while I spoke, there came before my eyes a vision of Lily's face as it had been when I bade her farewell. This then was the end of the vows that I had sworn. Cuitlahua looked at me with a glance which seemed to search my heart and said:

'I hear your words, Teule. You, a white wanderer, are graciously willing to take this princess to wife, and by her to be lifted high among the great lords of this land. But say, how can we trust you? If you fail us your wife dies indeed, but that may be naught to you.'

'I am ready to swear allegiance,' I answered. 'I hate the Spaniards, and among them is my bitterest enemy whom I followed across the sea to

kill--the man who strove to murder me this very day. I can say no more, if you doubt my words it were best to make an end of me. Already I have suffered much at the hands of your people; it matters little if I die or live.'

'Boldly spoken, Teule. Now, lords, I ask your judgment. Shall this man be given to Otomie as husband and be sworn as one of us, or shall he be killed instantly? You know the matter. If he can be trusted, as Guatemoc and Otomie believe, he will be worth an army to us, for he is acquainted with the language, the customs, the weapons, and the modes of warfare of these white devils whom the gods have let loose upon us. If on the other hand he is not to be trusted, and it is hard for us to put faith in one of his blood, he may do us much injury, for in the end he will escape to the Teules, and betray our counsels and our strength, or the lack of it. It is for you to judge, lords.'

Now the councillors consulted together, and some said one thing and some another, for they were not by any means of a mind in the matter. At length growing weary, Cuitlahua called on them to put the question to the vote, and this they did by a lifting of hands. First those who were in favour of my death held up their hands, then those who thought that it would be wise to spare me. There were twenty-six councillors present, not counting Cuitlahua, and of these thirteen voted for my execution and thirteen were for saving me alive.

'Now it seems that I must give a casting vote,' said Cuitlahua when the

tale had been rendered, and my blood turned cold at his words, for I had seen that his mind was set against me. Then it was that Otomie broke in, saying:

'Your pardon, my uncle, but before you speak I have a word to say. You need my services, do you not? for if the people of the Otomie will listen to any and suffer themselves to be led from their evil path, it is to me. My mother was by birth their chieftainess, the last of a long line, and I am her only child, moreover my father is their emperor. Therefore my life is of no small worth now in this time of trouble, for though I am nothing in myself, yet it may chance that I can bring thirty thousand warriors to your standard. The priests knew this on yonder pyramid, and when I claimed my right to lie at the side of the Teule, they gainsayed me, nor would they suffer it, though they hungered for the royal blood, till I called down the vengeance of the gods upon them. Now my uncle, and you, lords, I tell you this: Slay yonder man if you will, but know that then you must find another than me to lure the Otomie from their rebellion, for then I complete what I began to-day, and follow him to the grave.'

She ceased and a murmur of amazement went round the chamber, for none had looked to find such love and courage in this lady's heart. Only Cuitlahua grew angry.

'Disloyal girl,' he said; 'do you dare to set your lover before your country? Shame upon you, shameless daughter of our king. Why, it is

in the blood--as the father is so is the daughter. Did not Montezuma forsake his people and choose to lie among these Teules, the false children of Quetzal? And now this Otomie follows in his path. Tell us how is it, woman, that you and your lover alone escaped from the teocalli yonder when all the rest were killed. Are you then in league with these Teules? I say to you, niece, that if things were otherwise and I had my way, you should win your desire indeed, for you should be slain at this man's side and within the hour.' And he ceased for lack of breath, and looked upon her fiercely.

But Otomie never quailed; she stood before him pale and quiet, with folded hands and downcast eyes, and answered:

'Forbear to reproach me because my love is strong, or reproach me if you will, I have spoken my last word. Condemn this man to die and Prince you must seek some other envoy to win back the Otomie to the cause of Anahuac.'

Now Cuitlahua pondered, staring into the gloom above him and pulling at his beard, and the silence was great, for none knew what his judgment would be. At last he spoke:

'So be it. We have need of Otomie, my niece, and it is of no avail to fight against a woman's love. Teule, we give you life, and with the life honour and wealth, and the greatest of our women in marriage, and a place in our councils. Take these gifts and her, but I say to you both,

beware how you use them. If you betray us, nay, if you do but think on treachery, I swear to you that you shall die a death so slow and horrible that the very name of it would turn your heart to water; you and your wife, your children and your servants. Come, let him be sworn!

I heard and my head swam, and a mist gathered before my eyes. Once again I was saved from instant death.

Presently it cleared, and looking up my eyes met those of the woman who had saved me, Otomie my wife, who smiled upon me somewhat sadly. Then the priest came forward bearing a wooden bowl, carved about with strange signs, and a flint knife, and bade me bare my arm. He cut my flesh with the knife, so that blood ran from it into the bowl. Some drops of this blood he emptied on to the ground, muttering invocations the while. Then he turned and looked at Cuitlahua as though in question, and Cuitlahua answered with a bitter laugh:

'Let him be baptized with the blood of the princess Otomie my niece, for she is bail for him.'

'Nay, lord,' said Guatemoc, 'these two have mingled bloods already upon the stone of sacrifice, and they are man and wife. But I also have vouched for him, and I offer mine in earnest of my faith.'

'This Teule has good friends,' said Cuitlahua; 'you honour him overmuch. But so be it.'

Then Guatemoc came forward, and when the priest would have cut him with the knife, he laughed and said, pointing to the bullet wound upon his neck:

'No need for that, priest. Blood runs here that was shed by the Teules. None can be fitter for this purpose.'

So the priest drew away the bandage and suffered the blood of Guatemoc to drop into a second smaller bowl. Then he came to me and dipping his finger into the blood, he drew the sign of a cross upon my forehead as a Christian priest draws it upon the forehead of an infant, and said:

'In the presence and the name of god our lord, who is everywhere and sees all things, I sign you with this blood and make you of this blood. In the presence and the name of god our lord, who is everywhere and sees all things, I pour forth your blood upon the earth!' (here he poured as he spoke). 'As this blood of yours sinks into the earth, so may the memory of your past life sink and be forgotten, for you are born again of the people of Anahuac. In the presence and the name of god our lord, who is everywhere and sees all things, I mingle these bloods' (here he poured from one bowl into the other), 'and with them I touch your tongue' (here dipping his finger into the bowl he touched the tip of my tongue with it) 'and bid you swear thus:

""May every evil to which the flesh of man is subject enter into my

flesh, may I live in misery and die in torment by the dreadful death, may my soul be rejected from the Houses of the Sun, may it wander homeless for ever in the darkness that is behind the Stars, if I depart from this my oath. I, Teule, swear to be faithful to the people of Anahuac and to their lawful governors. I swear to wage war upon their foes and to compass their destruction, and more especially upon the Teules till they are driven into the sea. I swear to offer no affront to the gods of Anahuac. I swear myself in marriage to Otomie, princess of the Otomie, the daughter of Montezuma my lord, for so long as her life shall endure. I swear to attempt no escape from these shores. I swear to renounce my father and my mother, and the land where I was born, and to cling to this land of my new birth; and this my oath shall endure till the volcan Popo ceases to vomit smoke and fire, till there is no king in Tenochtitlan, till no priest serves the altars of the gods, and the people of Anahuac are no more a people."

'Do you swear these things, one and all?'

'One and all I swear them,' I answered because I must, though there was much in the oath that I liked little enough. And yet mark how strangely things came to pass. Within fifteen years from that night the volcan Popo had ceased to vomit smoke and fire, the kings had ceased to reign in Tenochtitlan, the priests had ceased to serve the altars of the gods, the people of Anahuac were no more a people, and my vow was null and void. Yet the priests who framed this form chose these things as examples of what was immortal!

When I had sworn Guatemoc came forward and embraced me, saying: 'Welcome, Teule, my brother in blood and heart. Now you are one of us, and we look to you for help and counsel. Come, be seated by me.'

I looked towards Cuitlahua doubtfully, but he smiled graciously, and said: 'Teule, your trial is over. We have accepted you, and you have sworn the solemn oath of brotherhood, to break which is to die horribly in this world, and to be tortured through eternity by demons in the next. Forget all that may have been said in the hour of your weighing, for the balance is in your favour, and be sure that if you give us no cause to doubt you, you shall find none to doubt us. Now as the husband of Otomie, you are a lord among the lords, having honour and great possessions, and as such be seated by your brother Guatemoc, and join our council.'

I did as he bade me, and Otomie withdrew from our presence. Then Cuitlahua spoke again, no longer of me and my matters, but of the urgent affairs of state. He spoke in slow words and weighty, and more than once his voice broke in his sorrow. He told of the grievous misfortunes that had overcome the country, of the death of hundreds of its bravest warriors, of the slaughter of the priests and soldiers that day on the teocalli, and the desecration of his nation's gods. What was to be done in this extremity? he asked. Montezuma lay dying, a prisoner in the camp of the Teules, and the fire that he had nursed with his breath devoured the land. No efforts of theirs could break the iron strength of these

white devils, armed as they were with strange and terrible weapons. Day by day disaster overtook the arms of the Aztecs. What wisdom had they now that the protecting gods were shattered in their very shrines, when the altars ran red with the blood of their ministering priests, when the oracles were dumb or answered only in the accents of despair?

Then one by one princes and generals arose and gave counsel according to their lights. At length all had spoken, and Cuitlahua said, looking towards me:

'We have a new counsellor among us, who is skilled in the warfare and customs of the white men, who till an hour ago was himself a white man. Has he no word of comfort for us?'

'Speak, my brother?' said Guatemoc.

Then I spoke. 'Most noble Cuitlahua, and you lords and princes. You honour me by asking my counsel, and it is this in few words and brief. You waste your strength by hurling your armies continually against stone walls and the weapons of the Teules. So you shall not prevail against them. Your devices must be changed if you would win victory. The Spaniards are like other men; they are no gods as the ignorant imagine, and the creatures on which they ride are not demons but beasts of burden, such as are used for many purposes in the land where I was born. The Spaniards are men I say, and do not men hunger and thirst? Cannot men be worn out by want of sleep, and be killed in many ways? Are not

these Teules already weary to the death? This then is my word of comfort to you. Cease to attack the Spaniards and invest their camp so closely that no food can reach them and their allies the Tlascalans. If this is done, within ten days from now, either they will surrender or they will strive to break their way back to the coast. But to do this, first they must win out of the city, and if dykes are cut through the causeways, that will be no easy matter. Then when they strive to escape cumbered with the gold they covet and came here to seek, then I say will be the hour to attack them and to destroy them utterly.'

I ceased, and a murmur of applause went round the council.

'It seems that we came to a wise judgment when we determined to spare this man's life,' said Cuitlahua, 'for all that he tells us is true, and I would that we had followed this policy from the first. Now, lords, I give my voice for acting as our brother points the way. What say you?'

'We say with you that our brother's words are good,' answered Guatemoc presently, 'and now let us follow them to the end.'

Then, after some further talk, the council broke up and I sought my chamber well nigh blind with weariness and crushed by the weight of all that I had suffered on that eventful day. The dawn was flaring in the eastern sky, and by its glimmer I found my path down the empty corridors, till at length I came to the curtains of my sleeping place.

I drew them and passed through. There, far up the room, the faint light

gleaming on her snowy dress, her raven hair and ornaments of gold, stood
Otomie my bride.

I went towards her, and as I came she glided to meet me with
outstretched arms. Presently they were about my neck and her kiss was on
my brow.

'Now all is done, my love and lord,' she whispered, 'and come good or
ill, or both, we are one till death, for such vows as ours cannot be
broken.'

'All is done indeed, Otomie, and our oaths are lifelong, though other
oaths have been broken that they might be sworn,' I answered.

Thus then I, Thomas Wingfield, was wed to Otomie, princess of the
Otomie, Montezuma's daughter.