

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE NIGHT OF FEAR

Long before I awoke that day the commands of the council had been carried out, and the bridges in the great causeways were broken down wherever dykes crossed the raised roads that ran through the waters of the lake. That afternoon also I went dressed as an Indian warrior with Guatemoc and the other generals, to a parley which was held with Cortes, who took his stand on the same tower of the palace that Montezuma had stood on when the arrow of Guatemoc struck him down. There is little to be said of this parley, and I remember it chiefly because it was then for the first time since I had left the Tobascans that I saw Marina close, and heard her sweet and gentle voice. For now as ever she was by the side of Cortes, translating his proposals of peace to the Aztecs. Among those proposals was one which showed me that de Garcia had not been idle. It asked that the false white man who had been rescued from the altars of the gods upon the teocalli should be given in exchange for certain Aztec prisoners, in order that he might be hung according to his merits as a spy and deserter, a traitor to the emperor of Spain. I wondered as I heard, if Marina knew when she spoke the words, that 'the false white man' was none other than the friend of her Tobascan days.

'You see that you are fortunate in having found place among us Aztecs, Teule,' said Guatemoc with a laugh, 'for your own people would greet you

with a rope.'

Then he answered Cortes, saying nothing of me, but bidding him and all the Spaniards prepare for death:

'Many of us have perished,' he said; 'you also must perish, Teules. You shall perish of hunger and thirst, you shall perish on the altars of the gods. There is no escape for you Teules; the bridges are broken.'

And all the multitude took up the words and thundered out, 'There is no escape for you Teules; the bridges are broken!'

Then the shooting of arrows began, and I sought the palace to tell Otomie my wife what I had gathered of the state of her father Montezuma, who the Spaniards said still lay dying, and of her two sisters who were hostages in their quarters. Also I told her how my surrender had been sought, and she kissed me, and said smiling, that though my life was now burdened with her, still it was better so than that I should fall into the hands of the Spaniards.

Two days later came the news that Montezuma was dead, and shortly after it his body, which the Spaniards handed over to the Aztecs for burial, attired in the gorgeous robes of royalty. They laid it in the hall of the palace, whence it was hurried secretly and at night to Chapoltepec, and there hidden away with small ceremony, for it was feared that the people might rend it limb from limb in their rage. With Otomie weeping

at my side, I looked for the last time on the face of that most unhappy king, whose reign so glorious in its beginning had ended thus. And while I looked I wondered what suffering could have equalled his, as fallen from his estate and hated by the subjects whom he had betrayed, he lay dying, a prisoner in the power of the foreign wolves who were tearing out his country's heart. It is little wonder indeed that Montezuma rent the bandages from his wounds and would not suffer them to tend his hurts. For the real hurt was in his soul; there the iron had entered deeply, and no leech could cure it except one called Death. And yet the fault was not all his, the devils whom he worshipped as gods were revenged upon him, for they had filled him with the superstitions of their wicked faith, and because of these the gods and their high priest must sink into a common ruin. Were it not for these unsubstantial terrors that haunted him, the Spaniards had never won a foothold in Tenochtitlan, and the Aztecs would have remained free for many a year to come. But Providence willed it otherwise, and this dead and disgraced monarch was but its instrument.

Such were the thoughts that passed through my mind as I gazed upon the body of the great Montezuma. But Otomie, ceasing from her tears, kissed his clay and cried aloud:

'O my father, it is well that you are dead, for none who loved you could desire to see you live on in shame and servitude. May the gods you worshipped give me strength to avenge you, or if they be no gods, then may I find it in myself. I swear this, my father, that while a man is

left to me I will not cease from seeking to avenge you.'

Then taking my hand, without another word she turned and passed thence.

As will be seen, she kept her oath.

On that day and on the morrow there was fighting with the Spaniards, who sallied out to fill up the gaps in the dykes of the causeway, a task in which they succeeded, though with some loss. But it availed them nothing, for so soon as their backs were turned we opened the dykes again. It was on these days that for the first time I had experience of war, and armed with my bow made after the English pattern, I did good service. As it chanced, the very first arrow that I drew was on my hated foe de Garcia, but here my common fortune pursued me, for being out of practice, or over-anxious, I aimed too high, though the mark was an easy one, and the shaft pierced the iron of his casque, causing him to reel in his saddle, but doing him no further hurt. Still this marksmanship, poor as it was, gained me great renown among the Aztecs, who were but feeble archers, for they had never before seen an arrow pierce through the Spanish mail. Nor would mine have done so had I not collected the iron barbs off the crossbow bolts of the Spaniards, and fitted them to my own shafts. I seldom found the mail that would withstand arrows made thus, when the range was short and the aim good.

After the first day's fight I was appointed general over a body of three thousand archers, and was given a banner to be borne before me and a

gorgeous captain's dress to wear. But what pleased me better was a chain shirt which came from the body of a Spanish cavalier. For many years I always wore this shirt beneath my cotton mail, and it saved my life more than once, for even bullets would not pierce the two of them.

I had taken over the command of my archers but forty-eight hours, a scant time in which to teach them discipline whereof they had little, though they were brave enough, when the occasion came to use them in good earnest, and with it the night of disaster that is still known among the Spaniards as the *noche triste*. On the afternoon before that night a council was held in the palace at which I spoke, saying, I was certain that the Teules thought of retreat from the city, and in the dark, for otherwise they would not have been so eager to fill up the canals in the causeway. To this Cuitlahua, who now that Montezuma was dead would be emperor, though he was not yet chosen and crowned, answered that it might well be that the Teules meditated flight, but that they could never attempt it in the darkness, since in so doing they must become entangled in the streets and dykes.

I replied that though it was not the Aztec habit to march and fight at night, such things were common enough among white men as they had seen already, and that because the Spaniards knew it was not their habit, they would be the more likely to attempt escape under cover of the darkness, when they thought their enemies asleep. Therefore I counselled that sentries should be set at all the entrances to every causeway.

To this Cuitlahua assented, and assigned the causeway of Tlacopan to

Guatemoc and myself, making us the guardians of its safety. That night Guatemoc and I, with some soldiers, went out towards midnight to visit the guard that we had placed upon the causeway. It was very dark and a fine rain fell, so that a man could see no further before his eyes than he can at evening through a Norfolk roke in autumn. We found and relieved the guard, which reported that all was quiet, and we were returning towards the great square when of a sudden I heard a dull sound as of thousands of men tramping.

'Listen,' I said.

'It is the Teules who escape,' whispered Guatemoc.

Quickly we ran to where the street from the great square opens on to the causeway, and there even through the darkness and rain we caught the gleam of armour. Then I cried aloud in a great voice, 'To arms! To arms! The Teules escape by the causeway of Tlacopan.'

Instantly my words were caught up by the sentries and passed from post to post till the city rang with them. They were cried in every street and canal, they echoed from the roofs of houses, and among the summits of a hundred temples. The city awoke with a murmur, from the lake came the sound of water beaten by ten thousand oars, as though myriads of wild-fowl had sprung suddenly from their reedy beds. Here, there, and everywhere torches flashed out like falling stars, wild notes were blown on horns and shells, and above all arose the booming of the snakeskin

drum which the priests upon the teocalli beat furiously.

Presently the murmur grew to a roar, and from this direction and from that, armed men poured towards the causeway of Tlacopan. Some came on foot, but the most of them were in canoes which covered the waters of the lake further than the ear could hear. Now the Spaniards to the number of fifteen hundred or so, accompanied by some six or eight thousand Tlascalans, were emerging on the causeway in a long thin line. Guatemoc and I rushed before them, collecting men as we went, till we came to the first canal, where canoes were already gathering by scores. The head of the Spanish column reached the canal and the fight began, which so far as the Aztecs were concerned was a fray without plan or order, for in that darkness and confusion the captains could not see their men or the men hear their captains. But they were there in countless numbers and had only one desire in their breasts, to kill the Teules. A cannon roared, sending a storm of bullets through us, and by its flash we saw that the Spaniards carried a timber bridge with them, which they were placing across the canal. Then we fell on them, every man fighting for himself. Guatemoc and I were swept over that bridge by the first rush of the enemy, as leaves are swept in a gale, and though both of us won through safely we saw each other no more that night. With us and after us came the long array of Spaniards and Tlascalans, and from every side the Aztecs poured upon them, clinging to their struggling line as ants cling to a wounded worm.

How can I tell all that came to pass that night? I cannot, for I saw

but little of it. All I know is that for two hours I was fighting like a madman. The foe crossed the first canal, but when all were over the bridge was sunk so deep in the mud that it could not be stirred, and three furlongs on ran a second canal deeper and wider than the first. Over this they could not cross till it was bridged with the dead. It seemed as though all hell had broken loose upon that narrow ridge of ground. The sound of cannons and of arquebusses, the shrieks of agony and fear, the shouts of the Spanish soldiers, the war-cries of the Aztecs, the screams of wounded horses, the wail of women, the hiss of hurtling darts and arrows, and the dull noise of falling blows went up to heaven in one hideous hurly-burly. Like a frightened mob of cattle the long Spanish array swayed this way and that, bellowing as it swayed. Many rolled down the sides of the causeway to be slaughtered in the water of the lake, or borne away to sacrifice in the canoes, many were drowned in the canals, and yet more were trampled to death in the mud. Hundreds of the Aztecs perished also, for the most part beneath the weapons of their own friends, who struck and shot not knowing on whom the blow should fall or in whose breast the arrow would find its home.

For my part I fought on with a little band of men who had gathered about me, till at last the dawn broke and showed an awful sight. The most of those who were left alive of the Spaniards and their allies had crossed the second canal upon a bridge made of the dead bodies of their fellows mixed up with a wreck of baggage, cannon, and packages of treasure. Now the fight was raging beyond it. A mob of Spaniards and Tlascalans were still crossing the second breach, and on these I fell with such men



as were with me. I plunged right into the heart of them, and suddenly before me I saw the face of de Garcia. With a shout I rushed at him. He heard my voice and knew me. With an oath he struck at my head. The heavy sword came down upon my helmet of painted wood, shearing away one side of it and felling me, but ere I fell I smote him on the breast with the club I carried, tumbling him to the earth. Now half stunned and blinded I crept towards him through the press. All that I could see was a gleam of armour in the mud. I threw myself upon it, gripping at the wearer's throat, and together we rolled down the side of the causeway into the shallow water at the edge of the lake. I was uppermost, and with a fierce joy I dashed the blood from my eyes that I might see to kill my enemy caught at last. His body was in the lake but his head lay upon the sloping bank, and my plan was to hold him beneath the water till he was drowned, for I had lost my club.

'At length, de Garcia!' I cried in Spanish as I shifted my grip.

'For the love of God let me go!' gasped a rough voice beneath me. 'Fool, I am no Indian dog.'

Now I peered into the man's face bewildered. I had seized de Garcia, but the voice was not his voice, nor was the face his face, but that of a rough Spanish soldier.

'Who are you?' I asked, slackening my hold. 'Where is de Garcia--he whom you name Sarceda?'

'Sarceda? I don't know. A minute ago he was on his back on the causeway. The fellow pulled me down and rolled behind me. Let me be I say. I am not Sarceda, and if I were, is this a time to settle private quarrels? I am your comrade, Bernal Diaz. Holy Mother! who are you? An Aztec who speaks Castilian?'

'I am no Aztec,' I answered. 'I am an Englishman and I fight with the Aztecs that I may slay him whom you name Sarceda. But with you I have no quarrel, Bernal Diaz. Begone and escape if you can. No, I will keep the sword with your leave.'

'Englishman, Spaniard, Aztec, or devil,' grunted the man as he drew himself from his bed of ooze, 'you are a good fellow, and I promise you that if I live through this, and it should ever come about that I get YOU by the throat, I will remember the turn you did me. Farewell;' and without more ado he rushed up the bank and plunged into a knot of his flying countrymen, leaving his good sword in my hand. I strove to follow him that I might find my enemy, who once more had escaped me by craft, but my strength failed me, for de Garcia's sword had bitten deep and I bled much. So I must sit where I was till a canoe came and bore me back to Otomie to be nursed, and ten days went by before I could walk again.

This was my share in the victory of the noche triste. Alas! it was a barren triumph, though more than five hundred of the Spaniards were slain and thousands of their allies. For there was no warlike skill or

discipline among the Aztecs, and instead of following the Spaniards till not one of them remained alive, they stayed to plunder the dead and drag away the living to sacrifice. Also this day of revenge was a sad one to Otomie, seeing that two of her brothers, Montezuma's sons whom the Spaniards held in hostage, perished with them in the fray.

As for de Garcia I could not learn what had become of him, nor whether he was dead or living.