

CHAPTER XXV

THE BURYING OF MONTEZUMA'S TREASURE

Cuitlahua was crowned Emperor of the Aztecs in succession to his brother Montezuma, while I lay sick with the wound given me by the sword of de Garcia, and also with that which I had received on the altar of sacrifice. This hurt had found no time to heal, and in the fierce fighting on the Night of Fear it burst open and bled much. Indeed it gave me trouble for years, and to this hour I feel it in the autumn season. Otomie, who nursed me tenderly, and so strange is the heart of woman, even seemed to be consoled in her sorrow at the loss of her father and nearest kin, because I had escaped the slaughter and won fame, told me of the ceremony of the crowning, which was splendid enough. Indeed the Aztecs were almost mad with rejoicing because the Teules had gone at last. They forgot, or seemed to forget, the loss of thousands of their bravest warriors and of the flower of their rank, and as yet, at any rate, they did not look forward to the future. From house to house and street to street ran troops of young men and maidens garlanded with flowers, crying, 'The Teules are gone, rejoice with us; the Teules are fled!' and woe to them who were not merry, ay, even though their houses were desolate with death. Also the statues of the gods were set up again on the great pyramid and their temples rebuilt, the holy crucifix that the Spaniards had placed there being served as the idols Huitzel and Tezcat had been served, and tumbled down the sides

of the teocalli, and that after sacrifice of some Spanish prisoners had been offered in its presence. It was Guatemoc himself who told me of this sacrilege, but not with any exultation, for I had taught him something of our faith, and though he was too sturdy a heathen to change his creed, in secret he believed that the God of the Christians was a true and mighty God. Moreover, though he was obliged to countenance them, because of the power of the priests, like Otomie, Guatemoc never loved the horrid rites of human sacrifice.

Now when I heard this tale my anger overcame my reason, and I spoke fiercely, saying:

'I am sworn to your cause, Guatemoc, my brother, and I am married to your blood, but I tell you that from this hour it is an accursed cause; because of your bloodstained idols and your priests, it is accursed. That God whom you have desecrated, and those who serve Him shall come back in power, and He shall sit where your idols sat and none shall stir Him for ever.'

Thus I spoke, and my words were true, though I do not know what put them into my heart, since I spoke at random in my wrath. For to-day Christ's Church stands upon the site of the place of sacrifice in Mexico, a sign and a token of His triumph over devils, and there it shall stand while the world endures.

'You speak rashly, my brother,' Guatemoc answered, proudly enough,

though I saw him quail at the evil omen of my words. 'I say you speak rashly, and were you overheard there are those, notwithstanding the rank we have given you, the honour which you have won in war and council, and that you have passed the stone of sacrifice, who might force you to look again upon the faces of the beings you blaspheme. What worse thing has been done to your Christian God than has been done again and again to our gods by your white kindred? But let us talk no more of this matter, and I pray you, my brother, do not utter such ill-omened words to me again, lest it should strain our love. Do you then believe that the Teules will return?'

'Ay, Guatemoc, so surely as to-morrow's sun shall rise. When you held Cortes in your hand you let him go, and since then he has won a victory at Otompan. Is he a man, think you, to sheathe the sword that he has once drawn, and go down into darkness and dishonour? Before a year is past the Spaniards will be back at the gates of Tenochtitlan.'

'You are no comforter to-night, my brother,' said Guatemoc, 'and yet I fear that your words are true. Well, if we must fight, let us strive to win. Now, at least, there is no Montezuma to take the viper to his breast and nurse it till it stings him.' Then he rose and went in silence, and I saw that his heart was heavy.

On the morrow of this talk I could leave my bed, and within a week I was almost well. Now it was that Guatemoc came to me again, saying that he had been bidden by Cuitlahua the emperor, to command me to accompany

him, Guatemoc, on a service of trust and secrecy. And indeed the nature of the service showed how great a confidence the leaders of the Aztecs now placed in me, for it was none other than the hiding away of the treasure that had been recaptured from the Spaniards on the Night of Fear, and with it much more from the secret stores of the empire.

At the fall of darkness we started, some of the great lords, Guatemoc and I, and coming to the water's edge, we found ten large canoes, each laden with something that was hidden by cotton cloths. Into these canoes we entered secretly, thinking that none saw us, three to a canoe, for there were thirty of us in all, and led by Guatemoc, we paddled for two hours or more across the Lake Tezcucuo, till we reached the further shore at a spot where this prince had a fair estate. Here we landed, and the cloths were withdrawn from the cargoes of the canoes, which were great jars and sacks of gold and jewels, besides many other precious objects, among them a likeness of the head of Montezuma, fashioned in solid gold, which was so heavy that it was as much as Guatemoc and I could do to lift it between us. As for the jars, of which, if my memory serves me, there were seventeen, six men must carry each of them by the help of paddles lashed on either side, and then the task was not light. All this priceless stuff we bore in several journeys to the crest of a rise some six hundred paces distant from the water, setting it down by the mouth of a shaft behind the shelter of a mound of earth. When everything was brought up from the boats, Guatemoc touched me and another man, a great Aztec noble, born of a Tlascalan mother, on the shoulder, asking us if we were willing to descend with him into the hole, and there to dispose

of the treasure.

'Gladly,' I answered, for I was curious to see the place, but the noble hesitated awhile, though in the end he came with us, to his ill-fortune.

Then Guatemoc took torches in his hand, and was lowered into the shaft by a rope. Next came my turn, and down I went, hanging to the cord like a spider to its thread, and the hole was very deep. At length I found myself standing by the side of Guatemoc at the foot of the shaft, round which, as I saw by the light of the torch he carried, an edging of dried bricks was built up to the height of a man above our heads. Resting on this edging and against the wall of the shaft, was a massive block of stone sculptured with the picture writing of the Aztecs. I glanced at the writing, which I could now read well, and saw that it recorded the burying of the treasure in the first year of Cuitlahua, Emperor of Mexico, and also a most fearful curse on him who should dare to steal it. Beyond us and at right angles to the shaft ran another passage, ten paces in length and high enough for a man to walk in, which led to a chamber hollowed in the earth, as large as that wherein I write to-day at Ditchingham. By the mouth of this chamber were placed piles of adobe bricks and mortar, much as the blocks of hewn stone had been placed in that underground vault at Seville where Isabella de Siguenza was bricked up living.

'Who dug this place?' I asked.

'Those who knew not what they dug,' answered Guatemoc. 'But see, here is our companion. Now, my brother, I charge you be surprised at nothing which comes to pass, and be assured I have good reason for anything that I may do.'

Before I could speak again the Aztec noble was at our side. Then those above began to lower the jars and sacks of treasure, and as they reached us one by one, Guatemoc loosed the ropes and checked them, while the Aztec and I rolled them down the passage into the chamber, as here in England men roll a cask of ale. For two hours and more we worked, till at length all were down and the tale was complete. The last parcel to be lowered was a sack of jewels that burst open as it came, and descended upon us in a glittering rain of gems. As it chanced, a great necklace of emeralds of surpassing size and beauty fell over my head and hung upon my shoulders.

'Keep it, brother,' laughed Guatemoc, 'in memory of this night,' and nothing loth, I hid the bauble in my breast. That necklace I have yet, and it was a stone of it--the smallest save one--that I gave to our gracious Queen Elizabeth. Otomie wore it for many years, and for this reason it shall be buried with me, though its value is priceless, so say those who are skilled in gems. But priceless or no, it is doomed to lie in the mould of Ditchingham churchyard, and may that same curse which is graved upon the stone that hides the treasure of the Aztecs fall upon him who steals it from my bones.

Now, leaving the chamber, we three entered the tunnel and began the work of building the adobe wall. When it was of a height of between two and three feet, Guatemoc paused from his labour and bade me hold a torch aloft. I obeyed wondering what he wished to see. Then he drew back some three paces into the tunnel and spoke to the Aztec noble, our companion, by name.

'What is the fate of discovered traitors, friend?' he said in a voice that, quiet though it was, sounded very terrible; and, as he spoke, he loosed from his side the war club set with spikes of glass that hung there by a thong.

Now the Aztec turned grey beneath his dusky skin and trembled in his fear.

'What mean you, lord?' he gasped.

'You know well what I mean,' answered Guatemoc in the same terrible voice, and lifted the club.

Then the doomed man fell upon his knees crying for mercy, and his wailing sounded so awful in that deep and lonely place that in my horror I went near to letting the torch fall.

'To a foe I can give mercy--to a traitor, none,' answered Guatemoc, and whirling the club aloft, he rushed upon the noble and killed him with a

blow. Then, seizing the body in his strong embrace, he cast it into the chamber with the treasure, and there it lay still and dreadful among the gems and gold, the arms, as it chanced, being wound about two of the great jars as though the dead man would clasp them to his heart.

Now I looked at Guatemoc who had slain him, wondering if my hour was at hand also, for I knew well that when princes bury their wealth they hold that few should share the secret.

'Fear not, my brother,' said Guatemoc. 'Listen: this man was a thief, a dastard, and a traitor. As we know now, he strove twice to betray us to the Teules. More, it was his plan to show this nest of wealth to them, should they return again, and to share the spoil. All this we learned from a woman whom he thought his love, but who was in truth a spy set to worm herself into the secrets of his wicked heart. Now let him take his fill of gold; look how he grips it even in death, a white man could not hug the stuff more closely to his breast. Ah! Teule, would that the soil of Anahuac bore naught but corn for bread and flint and copper for the points of spears and arrows, then had her sons been free for ever. Curses on yonder dross, for it is the bait that sets these sea sharks tearing at our throats. Curses on it, I say; may it never glitter more in the sunshine, may it be lost for ever!' And he fell fiercely to the work of building up the wall.

Soon it was almost done; but before we set the last bricks, which were shaped in squares like the clay lump that we use for the building of

farmeries and hinds' houses in Norfolk, I thrust a torch through the opening and looked for the last time at the treasure chamber that was also a dead-house. There lay the glittering gems; there, stood upon a jar, gleamed the golden head of Montezuma, of which the emerald eyes seemed to glare at me, and there, his back resting against this same jar, and his arms encircling two others to the right and left, was the dead man. But he was no longer dead, or so it seemed to me; at the least his eyes that were shut had opened, and they stared at me like the emerald eyes of the golden statue above him, only more fearfully.

Very hastily I withdrew the torch, and we finished in silence. When it was done we withdrew to the end of the passage and looked up the shaft, and I for one was glad to see the stars shining in heaven above me. Then we made a double loop in the rope, and at a signal were hauled up till we hung over the ledge where the black mass of marble rested, the tombstone of Montezuma's treasure, and of him who sleeps among it.

This stone, that was nicely balanced, we pushed with our hands and feet till presently it fell forward with a heavy sound, and catching on the ridge of brick which had been prepared to receive it, shut the treasure shaft in such a fashion that those who would enter it again must take powder with them.

Then we were dragged up, and came to the surface of the earth in safety.

Now one asked of the Aztec noble who had gone down with us and returned

no more.

'He has chosen to stay and watch the treasure, like a good and loyal man, till such time as his king needs it,' answered Guatemoc grimly, and the listeners nodded, understanding all.

Then they fell to and filled up the narrow shaft with the earth that lay ready, working without cease, and the dawn broke before the task was finished. When at length the hole was full, one of our companions took seeds from a bag and scattered them on the naked earth, also he set two young trees that he had brought with him in the soil of the shaft, though why he did this I do not know, unless it was to mark the spot. All being done we gathered up the ropes and tools, and embarking in the canoes, came back to Mexico in the morning, leaving the canoes at a landing-place outside the city, and finding our way to our homes by ones and twos, as we thought unnoticed of any.

Thus it was that I helped in the burying of Montezuma's treasure, for the sake of which I was destined to suffer torture in days to come. Whether any will help to unbury it I do not know, but till I left the land of Anahuac the secret had been kept, and I think that then, except myself, all those were dead who laboured with me at this task. It chanced that I passed the spot as I came down to Mexico for the last time, and knew it again by the two trees that were growing tall and strong, and as I went by with Spaniards at my side, I swore in my heart that they should never finger the gold by my help. It is for this reason

that even now I do not write of the exact bearings of the place where it lies buried with the bones of the traitor, though I know them well enough, seeing that in days to come what I set down here might fall into the hands of one of their nation.

And now, before I go on to speak of the siege of Mexico, I must tell of one more matter, namely of how I and Otomie my wife went up among the people of the Otomie, and won a great number of them back to their allegiance to the Aztec crown. It must be known, if my tale has not made this clear already, that the Aztec power was not of one people, but built up of several, and that surrounding it were many other tribes, some of whom were in alliance with it or subject to it, and some of whom were its deadly enemies. Such for instance were the Tlascalans, a small but warlike people living between Mexico and the coast, by whose help Cortes overcame Montezuma and Guatemoc. Beyond the Tlascalans and to the west, the great Otomie race lived or lives among its mountains. They are a braver nation than the Aztecs, speaking another language, of a different blood, and made up of many clans. Sometimes they were subject to the great Aztec empire, sometimes in alliance, and sometimes at open war with it and in close friendship with the Tlascalans. It was to draw the tie closer between the Aztecs and the Otomies, who were to the inhabitants of Anahuac much what the Scottish clans are to the people of England, that Montezuma took to wife the daughter and sole legitimate issue of their great chief or king. This lady died in childbirth, and her child was Otomie my wife, hereditary princess of the Otomie. But

though her rank was so great among her mother's people, as yet Otomie had visited them but twice, and then as a child. Still, she was well skilled in their language and customs, having been brought up by nurses and tutors of the tribes, from which she drew a great revenue every year and over whom she exercised many rights of royalty that were rendered to her far more freely than they had been to Montezuma her father.

Now as has been said, some of these Otomie clans had joined the Tlascalans, and as their allies had taken part in the war on the side of the Spaniards, therefore it was decided at a solemn council that Otomie and I her husband should go on an embassy to the chief town of the nation, that was known as the City of Pines, and strive to win it back to the Aztec standard.

Accordingly, heralds having been sent before us, we started upon our journey, not knowing how we should be received at the end of it. For eight days we travelled in great pomp and with an ever-increasing escort, for when the tribes of the Otomie learned that their princess was come to visit them in person, bringing with her her husband, a man of the Teules who had espoused the Aztec cause, they flocked in vast numbers to swell her retinue, so that it came to pass that before we reached the City of Pines we were accompanied by an army of at least ten thousand mountaineers, great men and wild, who made a savage music as we marched. But with them and with their chiefs as yet we held no converse except by way of formal greeting, though every morning when we started on our journey, Otomie in a litter and I on a horse that had been

captured from the Spaniards, they set up shouts of salutation and made the mountains ring. Ever as we went the land like its people grew wilder and more beautiful, for now we were passing through forests clad with oak and pine and with many a lovely plant and fern. Sometimes we crossed great and sparkling rivers and sometimes we wended through gorges and passes of the mountains, but every hour we mounted higher, till at length the climate became like that of England, only far more bright. At last on the eighth day we passed through a gorge riven in the red rock, which was so narrow in places that three horsemen could scarcely have ridden there abreast. This gorge, that is five miles long, is the high road to the City of Pines, to which there was no other access except by secret paths across the mountains, and on either side of it are sheer and towering cliffs that rise to heights of between one and two thousand feet.

'Here is a place where a hundred men might hold an army at bay,' I said to Otomie, little knowing that it would be my task to do so in a day to come.

Presently the gorge took a turn and I reined up amazed, for before me was the City of Pines in all its beauty. The city lay in a wheelshaped plain that may measure twelve miles across, and all around this plain are mountains clad to their summits with forests of oak and cedar trees. At the back of the city and in the centre of the ring of mountains is one, however, that is not green with foliage but black with lava, and above the lava white with snow, over which again hangs a pillar of smoke

by day and a pillar of fire by night. This was the volcan Xaca, or the Queen, and though it is not so lofty as its sisters Orizaba, Popo, and Ixtac, to my mind it is the loveliest of them all, both because of its perfect shape, and of the colours, purple and blue, of the fires that it sends forth at night or when its heart is troubled. The Otomies worshipped this mountain as a god, offering human sacrifice to it, which was not wonderful, for once the lava pouring from its bowels cut a path through the City of Pines. Also they think it holy and haunted, so that none dare set foot upon its loftier snows. Nevertheless I was destined to climb them--I and one other.

Now in the lap of this ring of mountains and watched over by the mighty Xaca, clad in its robe of snow, its cap of smoke, and its crown of fire, lies, or rather lay the City of Pines, for now it is a ruin, or so I left it. As to the city itself, it was not so large as some others that I have seen in Anahuac, having only a population of some five and thirty thousand souls, since the Otomie, being a race of mountaineers, did not desire to dwell in cities. But if it was not great, it was the most beautiful of Indian towns, being laid out in straight streets that met at the square in its centre. All along these streets were houses each standing in a garden, and for the most part built of blocks of lava and roofed with a cement of white lime. In the midst of the square stood the teocalli or pyramid of worship, crowned with temples that were garnished with ropes of skulls, while beyond the pyramid and facing it, was the palace, the home of Otomie's forefathers, a long, low, and very ancient building having many courts, and sculptured everywhere with snakes and

grinning gods. Both the palace and the pyramid were cased with a fine white stone that shone like silver in the sunlight, and contrasted strangely with the dark-hued houses that were built of lava.

Such was the City of Pines when I saw it first. When I saw it last it was but a smoking ruin, and now doubtless it is the home of bats and jackals; now it is 'a court for owls,' now 'the line of confusion is stretched out upon it and the stones of emptiness fill its streets.'

Passing from the mouth of the gorge we travelled some miles across the plain, every foot of which was cultivated with corn, maguey or aloe, and other crops, till we came to one of the four gates of the city. Entering it we found the flat roofs on either side of the wide street crowded with hundreds of women and children who threw flowers on us as we passed, and cried, 'Welcome, princess! Welcome, Otomie, princess of the Otomie!' And when at length we reached the great square, it seemed as though all the men in Anahuac were gathered there, and they too took up the cry of 'Welcome, Otomie, princess of the Otomie!' till the earth shook with the sound. Me also they saluted as I passed, by touching the earth with their right hands and then holding the hand above the head, but I think that the horse I rode caused them more wonder than I did, for the most of them had never seen a horse and looked on it as a monster or a demon. So we went on through the shouting mass, followed and preceded by thousands of warriors, many of them decked in glittering feather mail and bearing broidered banners, till we had passed the

pyramid, where I saw the priests at their cruel work above us, and were come to the palace gates. And here in a strange chamber sculptured with grinning demons we found rest for a while.

On the morrow in the great hall of the palace was held a council of the chiefs and head men of the Otomie clans, to the number of a hundred or more. When all were gathered, dressed as an Aztec noble of the first rank, I came out with Otomie, who wore royal robes and looked most beautiful in them, and the council rose to greet us. Otomie bade them be seated and addressed them thus:

'Hear me, you chiefs and captains of my mother's race, who am your princess by right of blood, the last of your ancient rulers, and who am moreover the daughter of Montezuma, Emperor of Anahuac, now dead to us but living evermore in the Mansions of the Sun. First I present to you this my husband, the lord Teule, to whom I was given in marriage when he held the spirit of the god Tezcat, and whom, when he had passed the altar of the god, being chosen by heaven to aid us in our war, I wedded anew after the fashion of the earth, and by the will of my royal brethren. Know, chiefs and captains, that this lord, my husband, is not of our Indian blood, nor is he altogether of the blood of the Teules with whom we are at war, but rather of that of the true children of Quetzal, the dwellers in a far off northern sea who are foes to the Teules. And as they are foes, so this my lord is their foe, and as doubtless you have heard, of all the deeds of arms that were wrought upon the night of the slaying of the Teules, none were greater than his,

and it was he who first discovered their retreat.

'Chiefs and captains of the great and ancient people of the Otomie, I your princess have been sent to you by Cuitlahua, my king and yours, together with my lord, to plead with you on a certain matter. Our king has heard, and I also have heard with shame, that many of the warriors of our blood have joined the Tlascalans, who were ever foes to the Aztecs, in their unholy alliance with the Teules. Now for a while the white men are beaten back, but they have touched the gold they covet, and they will return again like bees to a half-drained flower. They will return, yet of themselves they can do nothing against the glory of Tenochtitlan. But how shall it go if with them come thousands and tens of thousands of the Indian peoples? I know well that now in this time of trouble, when kingdoms crumble, when the air is full of portents, and the very gods seem impotent, there are many who would seize the moment and turn it to their profit. There are many men and tribes who remember ancient wars and wrongs, and who cry, "Now is the hour of vengeance, now we will think on the widows that the Aztec spears have made, on the tribute which they have wrung from our poverty to swell their wealth, and on the captives who have decked the altars of their sacrifice!"

'Is it not so? Ay, it is so, and I cannot wonder at it. Yet I ask you to remember this, that the yoke you would help to set upon the neck of the queen of cities will fit your neck also. O foolish men, do you think that you shall be spared when by your aid Tenochtitlan is a ruin and the Aztecs are no more a people? I say to you never. The sticks that the

Teules use to beat out the life of Tenochtitlan shall by them be broken one by one and cast into the fire to burn. If the Aztecs fall, then early or late every tribe within this wide land shall fall. They shall be slain, their cities shall be stamped flat, their wealth shall be wrung from them, and their children shall eat the bread of slavery and drink the water of affliction. Choose, ye people of the Otomie. Will you stand by the men of your own customs and country, though they have been your foes at times, or will you throw in your lot with the stranger? Choose, ye people of the Otomie, and know this, that on your choice and that of the other men of Anahuac, depends the fate of Anahuac. I am your princess, and you should obey me, but to-day I issue no command. I say choose between the alliance of the Aztec and the yoke of the Teule, and may the god above the gods, the almighty, the invisible god, direct your choice.'

Otomie ceased and a murmur of applause went round the hall. Alas, I can do no justice to the fire of her words, any more than I can describe the dignity and loveliness of her person as it seemed in that hour. But they went to the hearts of the rude chieftains who listened. Many of them despised the Aztecs as a womanish people of the plains and the lakes, a people of commerce. Many had blood feuds against them dating back for generations. But still they knew that their princess spoke truth, and that the triumph of the Teule in Tenochtitlan would mean his triumph over every city throughout the land. So then and there they chose, though in after days, in the stress of defeat and trouble, many went back upon their choice as is the fashion of men.

'Otomie,' cried their spokesman, after they had taken counsel together, 'we have chosen. Princess, your words have conquered us. We throw in our lot with the Aztecs and will fight to the last for freedom from the Teule.'

'Now I see that you are indeed my people, and I am indeed your ruler,' answered Otomie. 'So the great lords who are gone, my forefathers, your chieftains, would have spoken in a like case. May you never regret this choice, my brethren, Men of the Otomie.'

And so it came to pass that when we left the City of Pines we took from it to Cuitlahua the emperor, a promise of an army of twenty thousand men vowed to serve him to the death in his war against the Spaniard.