

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CROWNING OF GUATEMOC

Our business with the people of the Otomie being ended for a while, we returned to the city of Tenochtitlan, which we reached safely, having been absent a month and a day. It was but a little time, and yet long enough for fresh sorrows to have fallen on that most unhappy town. For now the Almighty had added to the burdens which were laid upon her. She had tasted of death by the sword of the white man, now death was with her in another shape. For the Spaniard had brought the foul sicknesses of Europe with him, and small-pox raged throughout the land. Day by day thousands perished of it, for these ignorant people treated the plague by pouring cold water upon the bodies of those smitten, driving the fever inwards to the vitals, so that within two days the most of them died.* It was pitiful to see them maddened with suffering, as they wandered to and fro about the streets, spreading the distemper far and wide. They were dying in the houses, they lay dead by companies in the market places awaiting burial, for the sickness took its toll of every family, the very priests were smitten by it at the altar as they sacrificed children to appease the anger of the gods. But the worst is still to tell; Cuitlahua, the emperor, was struck down by the illness, and when we reached the city he lay dying. Still, he desired to see us, and sent commands that we should be brought to his bedside. In vain did I pray Otomie not to obey; she, who was without fear, laughed at me,

saying, 'What, my husband, shall I shrink from that which you must face? Come, let us go and make report of our mission. If the sickness takes me and I die, it will be because my hour has come.'

* This treatment is followed among the Indians of Mexico to this day, but if the writer may believe what he heard in that country, the patient is frequently cured by it.

So we went and were ushered into a chamber where Cuitlahua lay covered by a sheet, as though he were already dead, and with incense burning round him in golden censers. When we entered he was in a stupor, but presently he awoke, and it was announced to him that we waited.

'Welcome, niece,' he said, speaking through the sheet and in a thick voice; 'you find me in an evil case, for my days are numbered, the pestilence of the Teules slays those whom their swords spared. Soon another monarch must take my throne, as I took your father's, and I do not altogether grieve, for on him will rest the glory and the burden of the last fight of the Aztecs. Your report, niece; let me hear it swiftly. What say the clans of the Otomie, your vassals?'

'My lord,' Otomie answered, speaking humbly and with bowed head, 'may this distemper leave you, and may you live to reign over us for many years! My lord, my husband Teule and I have won back the most part of the people of the Otomie to our cause and standard. An army of twenty thousand mountain men waits upon your word, and when those are spent

there are more to follow.'

'Well done, daughter of Montezuma, and you, white man,' gasped the dying king. 'The gods were wise when they refused you both upon the stone of sacrifice, and I was foolish when I would have slain you, Teule. To you and all I say be of a steadfast heart, and if you must die, then die with honour. The fray draws on, but I shall not share it, and who knows its end?'

Now he lay silent for a while, then of a sudden, as though an inspiration had seized him, he cast the sheet from his face and sat upon his couch, no pleasant sight to see, for the pestilence had done its worst with him.

'Alas!' he wailed, 'and alas! I see the streets of Tenochtitlan red with blood and fire, I see her dead piled up in heaps, and the horses of the Teules trample them. I see the Spirit of my people, and her voice is sighing and her neck is heavy with chains. The children are visited because of the evil of the fathers. Ye are doomed, people of Anahuac, whom I would have nurtured as an eagle nurtures her young. Hell yawns for you and Earth refuses you because of your sins, and the remnant that remains shall be slaves from generation to generation, till the vengeance is accomplished!'

Having cried thus with a great voice, Cuitlahua fell back upon the cushions, and before the frightened leech who tended him could lift his

head, he had passed beyond the troubles of this earth. But the words which he had spoken remained fixed in the hearts of those who heard them, though they were told to none except to Guatemoc.

Thus then in my presence and in that of Otomie died Cuitlahua, emperor of the Aztecs, when he had reigned but fifteen weeks. Once more the nation mourned its king, the chief of many a thousand of its children whom the pestilence swept with him to the 'Mansions of the Sun,' or perchance to the 'darkness behind the Stars.'

But the mourning was not for long, for in the urgency of the times it was necessary that a new emperor should be crowned to take command of the armies and rule the nation. Therefore on the morrow of the burial of Cuitlahua the council of the four electors was convened, and with them lesser nobles and princes to the number of three hundred, and I among them in the right of my rank as general, and as husband of the princess Otomie. There was no great need of deliberation, indeed, for though the names of several were mentioned, the princes knew that there was but one man who by birth, by courage, and nobility of mind, was fitted to cope with the troubles of the nation. That man was Guatemoc, my friend and blood brother, the nephew of the two last emperors and the husband of my wife's sister, Montezuma's daughter, Tecuichpo. All knew it, I say, except, strangely enough, Guatemoc himself, for as we passed into the council he named two other princes, saying that without doubt the choice lay between them.

It was a splendid and a solemn sight, that gathering of the four great lords, the electors, dressed in their magnificent robes, and of the lesser council of confirmation of three hundred lords and princes, who sat without the circle but in hearing of all that passed. Very solemn also was the prayer of the high priest, who, clad in his robes of sable, seemed like a blot of ink dropped on a glitter of gold. Thus he prayed:

'O god, thou who art everywhere and seest all, knowest that Cuitlahua our king is gathered to thee. Thou hast set him beneath thy footstool and there he rests in his rest. He has travelled that road which we must travel every one, he has reached the royal habitations of our dead, the home of everlasting shadows. There where none shall trouble him he is sunk in sleep. His brief labours are accomplished, and soiled with sin and sorrow, he has gone to thee. Thou gavest him joys to taste but not to drink; the glory of empire passed before his eyes like the madness of a dream. With tears and with prayers to thee he took up his load, with happiness he laid it down. Where his forefathers went, thither he has followed, nor can he return to us. Our fire is an ash and our lamp is darkness. Those who wore his purple before him bequeathed to him the intolerable weight of rule, and he in his turn bequeaths it to another. Truly, he should give thee praise, thou king of kings, master of the stars, that standest alone, who hast lifted from his shoulders so great a burden, and from his brow this crown of woes, paying him peace for war and rest for labour.

'O god our hope, choose now a servant to succeed him, a man after thine own heart, who shall not fear nor falter, who shall toil and not be weary, who shall lead thy people as a mother leads her children. Lord of lords, give grace to Guatemoc thy creature, who is our choice. Seal him to thy service, and as thy priest let him sit upon thy earthly throne for his life days. Let thy foes become his footstool, let him exalt thy glory, proclaim thy worship, and protect thy kingdom. Thus have I prayed to thee in the name of the nation. O god, thy will be done!'

When the high priest had made an end of his prayer, the first of the four great electors rose, saying:

'Guatemoc, in the name of god and with the voice of the people of Anahuac, we summon you to the throne of Anahuac. Long may you live and justly may you rule, and may the glory be yours of beating back into the sea those foes who would destroy us. Hail to you, Guatemoc, Emperor of the Aztecs and of their vassal tribes.' And all the three hundred of the council of confirmation repeated in a voice of thunder, 'Hail to you, Guatemoc, Emperor!'

Now the prince himself stood forward and spoke:

'You lords of election, and you, princes, generals, nobles and captains of the council of confirmation, hear me. May the gods be my witness that when I entered this place I had no thought or knowledge that I was destined to so high an honour as that which you would thrust upon me.'

And may the gods be my witness again that were my life my own, and not a trust in the hands of this people, I would say to you, "Seek on and find one worthier to fill the throne." But my life is not my own. Anahuac calls her son and I obey the call. War to the death threatens her, and shall I hang back while my arm has strength to smite and my brain has power to plan? Not so. Now and henceforth I vow myself to the service of my country and to war against the Teules. I will make no peace with them, I will take no rest till they are driven back whence they came, or till I am dead beneath their swords. None can say what the gods have in store for us, it may be victory or it may be destruction, but be it triumph or death, let us swear a great oath together, my people and my brethren. Let us swear to fight the Teules and the traitors who abet them, for our cities, our hearths and our altars; till the cities are a smoking ruin, till the hearths are cumbered with their dead, and the altars run red with the blood of their worshippers. So, if we are destined to conquer, our triumph shall be made sure, and if we are doomed to fail, at least there will be a story to be told of us. Do you swear, my people and my brethren?'

'We swear,' they answered with a shout.

'It is well,' said Guatemoc. 'And now may everlasting shame overtake him who breaks this oath.'

Thus then was Guatemoc, the last and greatest of the Aztec emperors,

elected to the throne of his forefathers. It was happy for him that he could not foresee that dreadful day when he, the noblest of men, must meet a felon's doom at the hand of these very Teules. Yet so it came about, for the destiny that lay upon the land smote all alike, indeed the greater the man the more certain was his fate.

When all was done I hurried to the palace to tell Otomie what had come to pass, and found her in our sleeping chamber lying on her bed.

'What ails you, Otomie?' I asked.

'Alas! my husband,' she answered, 'the pestilence has stricken me. Come not near, I pray you, come not near. Let me be nursed by the women. You shall not risk your life for me, beloved.'

'Peace,' I said and came to her. It was too true, I who am a physician knew the symptoms well. Indeed had it not been for my skill, Otomie would have died. For three long weeks I fought with death at her bedside, and in the end I conquered. The fever left her, and thanks to my treatment, there was no single scar upon her lovely face. During eight days her mind wandered without ceasing, and it was then I learned how deep and perfect was her love for me. For all this while she did nothing but rave of me, and the secret terror of her heart was disclosed--that I should cease to care for her, that her beauty and love might pall upon me so that I should leave her, that 'the flower maid,' for so she named Lily, who dwelt across the sea should draw me back to

her by magic; this was the burden of her madness. At length her senses returned and she spoke, saying:

'How long have I lain ill, husband?'

I told her and she said, 'And have you nursed me all this while, and through so foul a sickness?'

'Yes, Otomie, I have tended you.'

'What have I done that you should be so good to me?' she murmured. Then some dreadful thought seemed to strike her, for she moaned as though in pain, and said, 'A mirror! Swift, bring me a mirror!'

I gave her one, and rising on her arm, eagerly she scanned her face in the dim light of the shadowed room, then let the plate of burnished gold fall, and sank back with a faint and happy cry:

'I feared,' she said, 'I feared that I had become hideous as those are whom the pestilence has smitten, and that you would cease to love me, than which it had been better to die.'

'For shame,' I said. 'Do you then think that love can be frightened away by some few scars?'

'Yes,' Otomie answered, 'that is the love of a man; not such love as

mine, husband. Had I been thus--ah! I shudder to think of it--within a year you would have hated me. Perhaps it had not been so with another, the fair maid of far away, but me you would have hated. Nay, I know it, though I know this also, that I should not have lived to feel your hate. Oh! I am thankful, thankful.'

Then I left her for a while, marvelling at the great love which she had given me, and wondering also if there was any truth in her words, and if the heart of man could be so ungrateful and so vile. Supposing that Otomie was now as many were who walked the streets of Tenochtitlan that day, a mass of dreadful scars, hairless, and with blind and whitened eyeballs, should I then have shrunk from her? I do not know, and I thank heaven that no such trial was put upon my constancy. But I am sure of this; had I become a leper even, Otomie would not have shrunk from me.

So Otomie recovered from her great sickness, and shortly afterwards the pestilence passed away from Tenochtitlan. And now I had many other things to think of, for the choosing of Guatemoc--my friend and blood brother--as emperor meant much advancement to me, who was made a general of the highest class, and a principal adviser in his councils. Nor did I spare myself in his service, but laboured by day and night in the work of preparing the city for siege, and in the marshalling of the troops, and more especially of that army of Otomies, who came, as they had promised, to the number of twenty thousand. The work was hard indeed, for these Indian tribes lacked discipline and powers of unity, without which their thousands were of little avail in a war with white men.

Also there were great jealousies between their leaders which must be overcome, and I was myself an object of jealousy. Moreover, many tribes took this occasion of the trouble of the Aztecs to throw off their allegiance or vassalage, and even if they did not join the Spaniards, to remain neutral watching for the event of the war. Still we laboured on, dividing the armies into regiments after the fashion of Europe, and stationing each in its own quarter drilling them to the better use of arms, provisioning the city for a siege, and weeding out as many useless mouths as we might; and there was but one man in Tenochtitlan who toiled at these tasks more heavily than I, and that was Guatemoc the emperor, who did not rest day or night. I tried even to make powder with sulphur which was brought from the throat of the volcan Popo, but, having no knowledge of that art, I failed. Indeed, it would have availed us little had I succeeded, for having neither arquebusses nor cannons, and no skill to cast them, we could only have used it in mining roads and gateways, and, perhaps, in grenades to be thrown with the hand.

And so the months went on, till at length spies came in with the tidings that the Spaniards were advancing in numbers, and with them countless hosts of allies.

Now I would have sent Otomie to seek safety among her own people, but she laughed me to scorn, and said:

'Where you are, there I will be, husband. What, shall it be suffered that you face death, perhaps to find him, when I am not at your side to

die with you? If that is the fashion of white women, I leave it to them,
beloved, and here with you I stay.'