

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FALL OF TENOCTITLAN

Now shortly after Christmas, having marched from the coast with a great array of Spaniards, for many had joined his banner from over sea, and tens of thousands of native allies, Cortes took up his head quarters at Tezcuco in the valley of Mexico. This town is situated near the borders of the lake, at a distance of several leagues from Tenochtitlan, and being on the edge of the territory of the Tlascalans his allies, it was most suitable to Cortes as a base of action. And then began one of the most terrible wars that the world has seen. For eight months it raged, and when it ceased at length, Tenochtitlan, and with it many other beautiful and populous towns, were blackened ruins, the most of the Aztecs were dead by sword and famine, and their nation was crushed for ever. Of all the details of this war I do not purpose to write, for were I to do so, there would be no end to this book, and I have my own tale to tell. These, therefore, I leave to the maker of histories. Let it be enough to say that the plan of Cortes was to destroy all her vassal and allied cities and peoples before he grappled with Mexico, queen of the valley, and this he set himself to do with a skill, a valour, and a straightness of purpose, such as have scarcely been shown by a general since the days of Caesar.

Iztapalapan was the first to fall, and here ten thousand men, women, and

children were put to the sword or burned alive. Then came the turn of the others; one by one Cortes reduced the cities till the whole girdle of them was in his hand, and Tenochtitlan alone remained untouched. Many indeed surrendered, for the nations of Anahuac being of various blood were but as a bundle of reeds and not as a tree. Thus when the power of Spain cut the band of empire that bound them together, they fell this way and that, having no unity. So it came about that as the power of Guatemoc weakened that of Cortes increased, for he garnered these loosened reeds into his basket. And, indeed, now that the people saw that Mexico had met her match, many an ancient hate and smouldering rivalry broke into flame, and they fell upon her and tore her, like half-tamed wolves upon their master when his scourge is broken. It was this that brought about the fall of Anahuac. Had she remained true to herself, had she forgotten her feuds and jealousies and stood against the Spaniards as one man, then Tenochtitlan would never have fallen, and Cortes with every Teule in his company had been stretched upon the stone of sacrifice.

Did I not say when I took up my pen to write this book that every wrong revenges itself at last upon the man or the people that wrought it? So it was now. Mexico was destroyed because of the abomination of the worship of her gods. These feuds between the allied peoples had their root in the horrible rites of human sacrifice. At some time in the past, from all these cities captives have been dragged to the altars of the gods of Mexico, there to be slaughtered and devoured by the cannibal worshippers. Now these outrages were remembered, now when the arm of

the queen of the valley was withered, the children of those whom she had slain rose up to slay her and to drag HER children to their altars.

By the month of May, strive as we would, and never was a more gallant fight made, all our allies were crushed or had deserted us, and the siege of the city began. It began by land and by water, for with incredible resource Cortes caused thirteen brigantines of war to be constructed in Tlascalala, and conveyed in pieces for twenty leagues across the mountains to his camp, whence they were floated into the lake through a canal, which was hollowed out by the labour of ten thousand Indians, who worked at it without cease for two months. The bearers of these brigantines were escorted by an army of twenty thousand Tlascalans, and if I could have had my way that army should have been attacked in the mountain passes. So thought Guatemoc also, but there were few troops to spare, for the most of our force had been despatched to threaten a city named Chalco, that, though its people were of the Aztec blood, had not been ashamed to desert the Aztec cause. Still I offered to lead the twenty thousand Otomies whom I commanded against the Tlascalan convoy, and the matter was debated hotly at a council of war. But the most of the council were against the risking of an engagement with the Spaniards and their allies so far from the city, and thus the opportunity went by to return no more. It was an evil fortune like the rest, for in the end these brigantines brought about the fall of Tenochtitlan by cutting off the supply of food, which was carried in canoes across the lake. Alas! the bravest can do nothing against the power of famine. Hunger is a very great man, as the Indians say.

Now the Aztecs fighting alone were face to face with their foes and the last struggle began. First the Spaniards cut the aqueduct which supplied the city with water from the springs at the royal house of Chapoltepec, whither I was taken on being brought to Mexico. Henceforth till the end of the siege, the only water that we found to drink was the brackish and muddy fluid furnished by the lake and wells sunk in the soil. Although it might be drunk after boiling to free it of the salt, it was unwholesome and filthy to the taste, breeding various painful sicknesses and fevers. It was on this day of the cutting of the aqueduct that Otomie bore me a son, our first-born. Already the hardships of the siege were so great and nourishing food so scarce, that had she been less strong, or had I possessed less skill in medicine, I think that she would have died. Still she recovered to my great thankfulness and joy, and though I am no clerk I baptized the boy into the Christian Church with my own hand, naming him Thomas after me.

Now day by day and week by week the fighting went on with varying success, sometimes in the suburbs of the city, sometimes on the lake, and sometimes in the very streets. Time on time the Spaniards were driven back with loss, time on time they advanced again from their different camps. Once we captured sixty of them and more than a thousand of their allies. All these were sacrificed on the altar of Huitzel, and given over to be devoured by the Aztecs according to the beastlike custom which in Anahuac enjoined the eating of the bodies of those who were offered to the gods, not because the Indians love such meat but for

a secret religious reason.

In vain did I pray Guatemoc to forego this horror.

'Is this a time for gentleness?' he answered fiercely. 'I cannot save them from the altar, and I would not if I could. Let the dogs die according to the custom of the land, and to you, Teule my brother, I say presume not too far.'

Alas! the heart of Guatemoc grew ever fiercer as the struggle wore on, and indeed it was little to be wondered at.

This was the dreadful plan of Cortes: to destroy the city piecemeal as he advanced towards its heart, and it was carried out without mercy. So soon as the Spaniards got footing in a quarter, thousands of the Tlascalans were set to work to fire the houses and burn all in them alive. Before the siege was done Tenochtitlan, queen of the valley, was but a heap of blackened ruins. Cortes might have cried over Mexico with Isaiah the prophet: 'Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee and the worms cover thee. How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground which didst weaken the nations!'

In all these fights I took my part, though it does not become me to boast my prowess. Still the Spaniards knew me well and they had good reason. Whenever they saw me they would greet me with revilings, calling

me 'traitor and renegade,' and 'Guatemoc's white dog,' and moreover, Cortes set a price upon my head, for he knew through his spies that some of Guatemoc's most successful attacks and stratagems had been of my devising. But I took no heed even when their insults pierced me like arrows, for though many of the Aztecs were my friends and I hated the Spaniards, it was a shameful thing that a Christian man should be warring on the side of cannibals who made human sacrifice. I took no heed, since always I was seeking for my foe de Garcia. He was there I knew, for I saw him many times, but I could never come at him. Indeed, if I watched for him he also watched for me, but with another purpose, to avoid me. For now as of old de Garcia feared me, now as of old he believed that I should bring his death upon him.

It was the custom of warriors in the opposing armies to send challenges to single combat, one to another, and many such duels were fought in the sight of all, safe conduct being given to the combatants and their seconds. Upon a day, despairing of meeting him face to face in battle, I sent a challenge to de Garcia by a herald, under his false name of Sarceda. In an hour the herald returned with this message written on paper in Spanish:

'Christian men do not fight duels with renegade heathen dogs, white worshippers of devils and eaters of human flesh. There is but one weapon which such cannot defile, a rope, and it waits for you, Thomas Wingfield.'

I tore the writing to pieces and stamped upon it in my rage, for now, to all his other crimes against me, de Garcia had added the blackest insult. But wrath availed me nothing, for I could never come near him, though once, with ten of my Otomies, I charged into the heart of the Spanish column after him.

From that rush I alone escaped alive, the ten Otomies were sacrificed to my hate.

How shall I paint the horrors that day by day were heaped upon the doomed city? Soon all the food was gone, and men, ay, and worse still, tender women and children, must eat such meat as swine would have turned from, striving to keep life in them for a little longer. Grass, the bark of trees, slugs and insects, washed down with brackish water from the lake, these were their best food, these and the flesh of captives offered in sacrifice. Now they began to die by hundreds and by thousands, they died so fast that none could bury them. Where they perished, there they lay, till at length their bodies bred a plague, a black and horrible fever that swept off thousands more, who in turn became the root of pestilence. For one who was killed by the Spaniards and their allies, two were swept off by hunger and plague. Think then what was the number of dead when not less than seventy thousand perished beneath the sword and by fire alone. Indeed, it is said that forty thousand died in this manner in a single day, the day before the last of the siege.

One night I came back to the lodging where Otomie dwelt with her royal sister Tecuichpo, the wife of Guatemoc, for now all the palaces had been burnt down. I was starving, for I had scarcely tasted food for forty hours, but all that my wife could set before me were three little meal cakes, or tortillas, mixed with bark. She kissed me and bade me eat them, but I discovered that she herself had touched no food that day, so I would not till she shared them. Then I noted that she could scarcely swallow the bitter morsels, and also that she strove to hide tears which ran down her face.

'What is it, wife?' I asked.

Then Otomie broke out into a great and bitter crying and said:

'This, my beloved: for two days the milk has been dry in my breast--hunger has dried it--and our babe is dead! Look, he lies dead!' and she drew aside a cloth and showed me the tiny body.

'Hush,' I said, 'he is spared much. Can we then desire that a child should live to see such days as we have seen, and after all, to die at last?'

'He was our son, our first-born,' she cried again. 'Oh! why must we suffer thus?'

'We must suffer, Otomie, because we are born to it. Just so much happiness is given to us as shall save us from madness and no more. Ask me not why, for I cannot answer you! There is no answer in my faith or in any other.'

And then, looking on that dead babe, I wept also. Every hour in those terrible months it was my lot to see a thousand sights more awful, and yet this sight of a dead infant moved me the most of all of them. The child was mine, my firstborn, its mother wept beside me, and its stiff and tiny fingers seemed to drag at my heart strings. Seek not the cause, for the Almighty Who gave the heart its infinite power of pain alone can answer, and to our ears He is dumb.

Then I took a mattock and dug a hole outside the house till I came to water, which in Tenochtitlan is found at a depth of two feet or so. And, having muttered a prayer over him, there in the water I laid the body of our child, burying it out of sight. At the least he was not left for the zapilotes, as the Aztecs call the vultures, like the rest of them.

After that we wept ourselves to sleep in each other's arms, Otomie murmuring from time to time, 'Oh! my husband, I would that we were asleep and forgotten, we and the babe together.'

'Rest now,' I answered, 'for death is very near to us.'

The morrow came, and with it a deadlier fray than any that had gone

before, and after it more morrows and more deaths, but still we lived on, for Guatemoc gave us of his food. Then Cortes sent his heralds demanding our surrender, and now three-fourths of the city was a ruin, and three-fourths of its defenders were dead. The dead were heaped in the houses like bees stifled in a hive, and in the streets they lay so thick that we walked upon them.

The council was summoned--fierce men, haggard with hunger and with war, and they considered the offer of Cortes.

'What is your word, Guatemoc?' said their spokesman at last.

'Am I Montezuma, that you ask me? I swore to defend this city to the last,' he answered hoarsely, 'and, for my part, I will defend it. Better that we should all die, than that we should fall living into the hands of the Teules.'

'So say we,' they replied, and the war went on.

At length there came a day when the Spaniards made a new attack and gained another portion of the city. There the people were huddled together like sheep in a pen. We strove to defend them, but our arms were weak with famine. They fired into us with their pieces, mowing us down like corn before the sickle. Then the Tlascalans were loosed upon us, like fierce hounds upon a defenceless buck, and on this day it is

said that there died forty thousand people, for none were spared. On the morrow, it was the last day of the siege, came a fresh embassy from Cortes, asking that Guatemoc should meet him. The answer was the same, for nothing could conquer that noble spirit.

'Tell him,' said Guatemoc, 'that I will die where I am, but that I will hold no parley with him. We are helpless, let Cortes work his pleasure on us.'

By now all the city was destroyed, and we who remained alive within its bounds were gathered on the causeways and behind the ruins of walls; men, women, and children together.

Here they attacked us again. The great drum on the teocalli beat for the last time, and for the last time the wild scream of the Aztec warriors went up to heaven. We fought our best; I killed four men that day with my arrows which Otomie, who was at my side, handed me as I shot. But the most of us had not the strength of a child, and what could we do? They came among us like seamen among a flock of seals, and slaughtered us by hundreds. They drove us into the canals and trod us to death there, till bridges were made of our bodies. How we escaped I do not know.

At length a party of us, among whom was Guatemoc with his wife Tecuichpo, were driven to the shores of the lake where lay canoes, and into these we entered, scarcely knowing what we did, but thinking that we might escape, for now all the city was taken. The brigantines saw us

and sailed after us with a favouring wind--the wind always favoured the foe in that war--and row as we would, one of them came up with us and began to fire into us. Then Guatemoc stood up and spoke, saying:

'I am Guatemoc. Bring me to Malinche. But spare those of my people who remain alive.'

'Now,' I said to Otomie at my side, 'my hour has come, for the Spaniards will surely hang me, and it is in my mind, wife, that I should do well to kill myself, so that I may be saved from a death of shame.'

'Nay, husband,' she answered sadly, 'as I said in bygone days, while you live there is hope, but the dead come back no more. Fortune may favour us yet; still, if you think otherwise, I am ready to die.'

'That I will not suffer, Otomie.'

'Then you must hold your hand, husband, for now as always, where you go, I follow.'

'Listen,' I whispered; 'do not let it be known that you are my wife; pass yourself as one of the ladies of Tecuichpo, the queen, your sister. If we are separated, and if by any chance I escape, I will try to make my way to the City of Pines. There, among your own people, we may find refuge.'

'So be it, beloved,' she answered, smiling sadly. 'But I do not know how the Otomie will receive me, who have led twenty thousand of their bravest men to a dreadful death.'

Now we were on the deck of the brigantine and must stop talking, and thence, after the Spaniards had quarrelled over us a while, we were taken ashore and led to the top of a house which still stood, where Cortes had made ready hurriedly to receive his royal prisoner. Surrounded by his escort, the Spanish general stood, cap in hand, and by his side was Marina, grown more lovely than before, whom I now met for the first time since we had parted in Tobasco.

Our eyes met and she started, thereby showing that she knew me again, though it must have been hard for Marina to recognise her friend Teule in the blood-stained, starving, and tattered wretch who could scarcely find strength to climb the azotea. But at that time no words passed between us, for all eyes were bent on the meeting between Cortes and Guatemoc, between the conqueror and the conquered.

Still proud and defiant, though he seemed but a living skeleton, Guatemoc walked straight to where the Spaniard stood, and spoke, Marina translating his words.

'I am Guatemoc, the emperor, Malinche,' he said. 'What a man might do to defend his people, I have done. Look on the fruits of my labour,' and he pointed to the blackened ruins of Tenochtitlan that stretched on every

side far as the eye could reach. 'Now I have come to this pass, for the gods themselves have been against me. Deal with me as you will, but it will be best that you kill me now,' and he touched the dagger of Cortes with his hand, 'and thus rid me swiftly of the misery of life.'

'Fear not, Guatemoc,' answered Cortes. 'You have fought like a brave man, and such I honour. With me you are safe, for we Spaniards love a gallant foe. See, here is food,' and he pointed to a table spread with such viands as we had not seen for many a week; 'eat, you and your companions together, for you must need it. Afterwards we will talk.'

So we ate, and heartily, I for my part thinking that it would be well to die upon a full stomach, having faced death so long upon an empty one, and while we devoured the meat the Spaniards stood on one side scanning us, not without pity. Presently, Tecuichpo was brought before Cortes, and with her Otomie and some six other ladies. He greeted her graciously, and they also were given to eat. Now, one of the Spaniards who had been watching me whispered something into the ear of Cortes, and I saw his face darken.

'Say,' he said to me in Castilian, 'are you that renegade, that traitor who has aided these Aztecs against us?'

'I am no renegade and no traitor, general,' I answered boldly, for the food and wine had put new life into me. 'I am an Englishman, and I have fought with the Aztecs because I have good cause to hate you Spaniards.'

'You shall soon have better, traitor,' he said furiously. 'Here, lead this man away and hang him on the mast of yonder ship.'

Now I saw that it was finished, and made ready to go to my death, when Marina spoke into the ear of Cortes. All she said I could not catch, but I heard the words 'hidden gold.' He listened, then hesitated, and spoke aloud: 'Do not hang this man to-day. Let him be safely guarded. Tomorrow I will inquire into his case.'