

CHAPTER XXX

THE ESCAPE

Now Otomie put the rope off her neck, and descending from the stool, stood before Marina.

'You are Marina,' she said coldly and proudly, 'and you come to save us, you who have brought ruin on the land that bore you, and have given thousands of her children to death, and shame, and torment. Now, if I had my way, I would have none of your salvation, nay, I would rather save myself as I was about to do.'

Thus Otomie spoke, and never had she looked more royal than in this moment, when she risked her last chance of life that she might pour out her scorn upon one whom she deemed a traitress, no, one who was a traitress, for had it not been for Marina's wit and aid, Cortes would never have conquered Anahuac. I trembled as I heard her angry words, for, all I suffered notwithstanding, life still seemed sweet to me, who, ten seconds ago, had stood upon the verge of death. Surely Marina would depart and leave us to our doom. But it was not so. Indeed, she shrank and trembled before Otomie's contempt. They were a strange contrast in their different loveliness as they stood face to face in the torture den, and it was strange also to see the spirit of the lady of royal blood, threatened as she was with a shameful death, or still more

shameful life, triumph over the Indian girl whom to-day fortune had set as far above her as the stars.

'Say, royal lady,' asked Marina in her gentle voice, 'for what cause did you, if tales are true, lie by the side of yonder white man upon the stone of sacrifice?'

'Because I love him, Marina.'

'And for this same cause have I, Marina, laid my honour upon a different altar, for this same cause I have striven against the children of my people, because I love another such as he. It is for love of Cortes that I have aided Cortes, therefore despise me not, but let your love plead for mine, seeing that, to us women, love is all. I have sinned, I know, but doubtless in its season my sin shall find a fitting punishment.'

'It had need be sharp,' answered Otomie. 'My love has harmed none, see before you but one grain of the countless harvest of your own. In yonder chair Guatemoc your king was this day tortured by your master Cortes, who swore to treat him with all honour. By his side sat Teule, my husband and your friend; him Cortes gave over to his private enemy, de Garcia, whom you name Sarceda. See how he has left him. Nay, do not shudder, gentle lady; look now at his wounds! Consider to what a pass we are driven when you find us about to die thus like dogs, he, my husband, that he may not live to see me handled as he has been, and I with him, because a princess of the Otomie and of Montezuma's blood cannot submit

to such a shame while death has one door through which to creep. It is but a single grain of your harvest, outcast and traitress, the harvest of misery and death that is stored yonder in the ruins of Tenochtitlan. Had I my will, I tell you that I had sooner die a score of times than take help from a hand so stained with the blood of my people and of yours--I--'

'Oh! cease, lady, cease,' groaned Marina, covering her eyes with her hand, as though the sight of Otomie were dreadful to her. 'What is done is done; do not add to my remorse. What did you say, that you, the lady Otomie, were brought here to be tortured?'

'Even so, and before my husband's eyes. Why should Montezuma's daughter and the princess of the Otomie escape the fate of the emperor of the Aztecs? If her womanhood does not protect her, has she anything to hope of her lost rank?'

'Cortes knows nothing of this, I swear it,' said Marina. 'To the rest he has been driven by the clamour of the soldiers, who taunt him with stealing treasure that he has never found. But of this last wickedness he is innocent.'

'Then let him ask his tool Sarceda of it.'

'As for Sarceda, I promise you, princess, that if I can I will avenge this threat upon him. But time is short, I am come here with the

knowledge of Cortes, to see if I can win the secret of the treasure from Teule, your husband, and for my friendship's sake I am about to betray my trust and help him and you to fly. Do you refuse my aid?'

Otomie said nothing, but I spoke for the first time.

'Nay, Marina, I have no love for this thief's fate if I can escape it, but how is it to be done?'

'The chance is poor enough, Teule, but I bethought me that once out of this prison you might slip away disguised. Few will be stirring at dawn, and of them the most will not be keen to notice men or things. See, I have brought you the dress of a Spanish soldier; your skin is dark, and in the half light you might pass as one; and for the princess your wife, I have brought another dress, indeed I am ashamed to offer it, but it is the only one that will not be noted at this hour; also, Teule, I bring you a sword, that which was taken from you, though I think that once it had another owner.'

Now while she spoke Marina undid her bundle, and there in it were the dresses and the sword, the same that I had taken from the Spaniard Diaz in the massacre of the noche triste. First she drew out the woman's robe and handed it to Otomie, and I saw that it was such a robe as among the Indians is worn by the women who follow camps, a robe with red and yellow in it. Otomie saw it also and drew back.

'Surely, girl, you have brought a garment of your own in error,' she said quietly, but in such a fashion as showed more of the savage heart that is native to her race than she often suffered to be seen; 'at the least I cannot wear such robes.'

'It seems that I must bear too much,' answered Marina, growing wroth at last, and striving to keep back the tears that started to her eyes. 'I will away and leave you;' and she began to roll up her bundle.

'Forgive her, Marina,' I said hastily, for the desire to escape grew on me every minute; 'sorrow has set an edge upon her tongue.' Then turning to Otomie I added, 'I pray you be more gentle, wife, for my sake if not for your own. Marina is our only hope.'

'Would that she had left us to die in peace, husband. Well, so be it, for your sake I will put on these garments of a drab. But how shall we escape out of this place and the camp? Will the door be opened to us, and the guards removed, and if we pass them, can you walk, husband?'

'The doors will not be opened, lady,' said Marina, 'for those wait without, who will see that they are locked when I have passed them. But there will be nothing to fear from the guard, trust to me for it. See, the bars of this window are but of wood, that sword will soon sever them, and if you are seen you must play the part of a drunken soldier being guided to his quarters by a woman. For the rest I know nothing, save that I run great risk for your sakes, since if it is discovered

that I have aided you, then I shall find it hard to soften the rage of Cortes, who, the war being won,' and she sighed, 'does not need me now so much as once he did.'

'I can make shift to hop on my right foot,' I said, 'and for the rest we must trust to fortune. It can give us no worse gifts than those we have already.'

'So be it, Teule, and now farewell, for I dare stay no longer. I can do nothing more. May your good star shine on you and lead you hence in safety; and Teule, if we never meet again, I pray you think of me kindly, for there are many in the world who will do otherwise in the days to come.'

'Farewell, Marina,' I said, and she was gone.

We heard the doors close behind her, and the distant voices of those who bore her litter, then all was silence. Otomie listened at the window for a while, but the guards seemed to be gone, where or why I do not know to this hour, and the only sound was that of distant revelry from the camp.

'And now to the work,' I said to Otomie.

'As you wish, husband, but I fear it will be profitless. I do not trust that woman. Faithless in all, without doubt she betrays us. Still at the worst you have the sword, and can use it.'

'It matters little,' I answered. 'Our plight cannot be worse than it is now; life has no greater evils than torment and death, and they are with us already.'

Then I sat upon the stool, and my arms being left sound and strong, I hacked with the sharp sword at the wooden bars of the window, severing them one by one till there was a space big enough for us to creep through. This being done and no one having appeared to disturb us, Otomie clad me in the clothes of a Spanish soldier which Marina had brought, for I could not dress myself. What I suffered in the donning of those garments, and more especially in the pulling of the long boot on to my burnt foot, can never be told, but more than once I stopped, pondering whether it would not be better to die rather than to endure such agonies. At last it was done, and Otomie must put on the red and yellow robe, a garb of shame such as many honest Indian women would die sooner than be seen in, and I think that as she did this, her agony was greater than mine, though of another sort, for to her proud heart, that dress was a very shirt of Nessus. Presently she was clad, and minced before me with savage mockery, saying:

'Prithee, soldier, do I look my part?'

'A peace to such fooling,' I answered; 'our lives are at stake, what does it matter how we disguise ourselves?'

'It matters much, husband, but how can you understand, who are a man and a foreigner? Now I will clamber through the window, and you must follow me if you can, if not I will return to you and we will end this masquerade.'

Then she passed through the hole swiftly, for Otomie was agile and strong as an ocelot, and mounting the stool I made shift to follow her as well as my hurts would allow. In the end I was able to throw myself upon the sill of the window, and there I was stretched out like a dead cat till she drew me across it, and I fell with her to the ground on the further side, and lay groaning. She lifted me to my feet, or rather to my foot, for I could use but one of them, and we stared round us. No one was to be seen, and the sound of revelry had died away, for the crest of Popo was already red with the sunlight and the dawn grew in the valley.

'Where to?' I said.

Now Otomie had been allowed to walk in the camp with her sister, the wife of Guatemoc, and other Aztec ladies, and she had this gift in common with most Indians, that where she had once passed there she could pass again, even in the darkest night.

'To the south gate,' she whispered; 'perhaps it is unguarded now that the war is done, at the least I know the road thither.'

So we started, I leaning on her shoulder and hopping on my right foot,

and thus very painfully we traversed some three hundred yards meeting nobody. But now our good luck failed us, for passing round the corner of some buildings, we came face to face with three soldiers returning to their huts from a midnight revel, and with them some native servants.

'Whom have we here?' said the first of these. 'Your name, comrade?'

'Good-night, brother, good-night,' I answered in Spanish, speaking with the thick voice of drunkenness.

'Good morning, you mean,' he said, for the dawn was breaking. 'Your name. I don't know your face, though it seems that you have been in the wars,' and he laughed.

'You mustn't ask a comrade his name,' I said solemnly and swinging to and fro. 'The captain might send for me and he's a temperate man. Your arm, girl; it is time to go to sleep, the sun sets.'

They laughed, but one of them addressed Otomie, saying:

'Leave the sot, my pretty, and come and walk with us,' and he caught her by the arm. But she turned on him with so fierce a look that he let her go again astonished, and we staggered on till the corner of another house hid us from their view. Here I sank to the ground overcome with pain, for while the soldiers were in sight, I was obliged to use my wounded foot lest they should suspect. But Otomie pulled me up, saying:

'Alas! beloved, we must pass on or perish.'

I rose groaning, and by what efforts I reached the south gate I cannot describe, though I thought that I must die before I came there. At last it was before us, and as chance would have it, the Spanish guard were asleep in the guardhouse. Three Tlascalans only were crouched over a little fire, their zerapes or blankets about their heads, for the dawn was chilly.

'Open the gates, dogs!' I said in a proud voice.

Seeing a Spanish soldier one of them rose to obey, then paused and said:

'Why, and by whose orders?'

I could not see the man's face because of the blanket, but his voice sounded familiar to me and I grew afraid. Still I must speak.

'Why?--because I am drunk and wish to lie without till I grow sober. By whose orders? By mine, I am an officer of the day, and if you disobey I'll have you flogged till you never ask another question.'

'Shall I call the Teules within?' said the man sulkily to his companion.

'No,' he answered; 'the lord Sarceda is weary and gave orders that he

should not be awakened without good cause. Keep them in or let them through as you will, but do not wake him.'

I trembled in every limb; de Garcia was in the guardhouse! What if he awoke, what if he came out and saw me? More--now I guessed whose voice it was that I knew again; it was that of one of those Tlascalans who had aided in tormenting me. What if he should see my face? He could scarcely fail to know that on which he had left his mark so recently. I was dumb with fear and could say nothing, and had it not been for the wit of Otomie, there my story would have ended. But now she played her part and played it well, plying the man with the coarse raillery of the camp, till at length she put him in a good humour, and he opened the gate, bidding her begone and me with her. Already we had passed the gate when a sudden faintness seized me, and I stumbled and fell, rolling over on to my back as I touched the earth.

'Up, friend, up!' said Otomie, with a harsh laugh. 'If you must sleep, wait till you find some friendly bush,' and she dragged at me to lift me. The Tlascalan, still laughing, came forward to help her, and between them I gained my feet again, but as I rose, my cap, which fitted me but ill, fell off. He picked it up and gave it to me and our eyes met, my face being somewhat in the shadow. Next instant I was hobbling on, but looking back, I saw the Tlascalan staring after us with a puzzled air, like that of a man who is not sure of the witness of his senses.

'He knows me,' I said to Otomie, 'and presently when he has found his

wits, he will follow us.'

'On, on!' answered Otomie; 'round yonder corner are aloe bushes where we may hide.'

'I am spent, I can no more;' and again I began to fall.

Then Otomie caught me as I fell, and of a sudden she put out her strength, and lifting me from the ground, as a mother lifts her child, staggered forward holding me to her breast. For fifty paces or more she carried me thus, love and despair giving her strength, till at last we reached the edge of the aloe plants and there we sank together to the earth. I cast my eyes back over the path which we had travelled. Round the corner came the Tlascalan, a spiked club in his hand, seeking us to solve his doubts.

'It is finished,' I gasped; 'the man comes.'

For answer Otomie drew my sword from its scabbard and hid it in the grass. 'Now feign sleep,' she said; 'it is our last chance.'

I cast my arm over my face and pretended to be asleep. Presently I heard the sound of a man passing through the bushes, and the Tlascalan stood over me.

'What would you?' asked Otomie. 'Can you not see that he sleeps? Let him

sleep.'

'I must look on his face first, woman,' he answered, dragging aside my arm. 'By the gods, I thought so! This is that Teule whom we dealt with yesterday and who escapes.'

'You are mad,' she said laughing. 'He has escaped from nowhere, save from a brawl and a drinking bout.'

'You lie, woman, or if you do not lie, you know nothing. This man has the secret of Montezuma's treasure, and is worth a king's ransom,' and he lifted his club.

'And yet you wish to slay him! Well, I know nothing of him. Take him back whence he came. He is but a drunken sot and I shall be well rid of him.'

'Well said. It would be foolish to kill him, but by bearing him alive to the lord Sarceda, I shall win honour and reward. Come, help me.'

'Help yourself,' she answered sullenly. 'But first search his pouch; there may be some trifle there which we can divide.'

'Well said, again,' he answered, and kneeling down he bent over me and began to fumble at the fastenings of the pouch.

Otomie was behind him. I saw her face change and a terrible light came into her eyes, such a light as shines in the eyes of the priest at sacrifice. Quick as thought she drew the sword from the grass and smote with all her strength upon the man's bent neck. Down he fell, making no sound, and she also fell beside him. In a moment she was on her feet again, staring at him wildly--the naked sword in her hand.

'Up,' she said, 'before others come to seek him. Nay, you must.'

Now, again we were struggling forward through the bushes, my mind filled with a great wonder that grew slowly to a whirling nothingness. For a while it seemed to me as though I were lost in an evil dream and walking on red hot irons in my dream. Then came a vision of armed men with lifted spears, and of Otomie running towards them with outstretched arms.

I knew no more.