

CHAPTER XXXI

OTOMIE PLEADS WITH HER PEOPLE

When I awoke it was to find myself in a cave, where the light shone very dimly. Otomie leant over me, and not far away a man was cooking a pot over a fire made of dry aloe leaves.

'Where am I and what has happened?' I asked.

'You are safe, beloved,' she answered, 'at least for awhile. When you have eaten I will tell you more.'

She brought me broth and food and I ate eagerly, and when I was satisfied she spoke.

'You remember how the Tlascalan followed us and how--I was rid of him?'

'I remember, Otomie, though how you found strength to kill him I do not understand.'

'Love and despair gave it to me, and I pray that I may never have such another need. Do not speak of it, husband, for this is more horrible to me than all that has been before. One thing comforts me, however; I did not kill him, the sword twisted in my hand and I believe that he was

but stunned. Then we fled a little way, and looking back I saw that two other Tlascalans, companions of the senseless man, were following us and him. Presently, they came up to where he lay and stared at him. Then they started on our tracks, running hard, and very soon they must have caught us, for now you could scarcely stir, your mind was gone, and I had no more strength to carry you. Still we stumbled on till presently, when the pursuers were within fifty paces of us, I saw armed men, eight of them, rushing at us from the bushes. They were of my own people, the Otomies, soldiers that had served under you, who watched the Spanish camp, and seeing a Spaniard alone they came to slay him. They very nearly did so indeed, for at first I was so breathless that I could scarcely speak, but at last in few words I made shift to declare my name and rank, and your sad plight. By now the two Tlascalans were upon us, and I called to the men of the Otomie to protect us, and falling on the Tlascalans before they knew that enemies were there, they killed one of them and took the other prisoner. Then they made a litter, and placing you on it, bore you without rest twenty leagues into the mountains, till they reached this secret hiding place, and here you have lain three days and nights. The Teules have searched for you far and wide, but they have searched in vain. Only yesterday two of them with ten Tlascalans, passed within a hundred paces of this cave and I had much ado to prevent our people from attacking them. Now they are gone whence they came, and I think that we are safe for a time. Soon you will be better and we can go hence.'

'Where can we go to, Otomie? We are birds without a nest.'

'We must seek shelter in the City of Pines, or fly across the water; there is no other choice, husband.'

'We cannot try the sea, Otomie, for all the ships that come here are Spanish, and I do not know how they will greet us in the City of Pines now that our cause is lost, and with it so many thousands of their warriors.'

'We must take the risk, husband. There are still true hearts in Anahuac, who will stand by us in our sorrow and their own. At the least we have escaped from greater dangers. Now let me dress your wounds and rest awhile.'

So for three more days I lay in the cave of the mountains and Otomie tended me, and at the end of that time my state was such that I could travel in a litter, though for some weeks I was unable to set foot to the ground. On the fourth day we started by night, and I was carried on men's shoulders till at length we passed up the gorge that leads to the City of Pines. Here we were stopped by sentries to whom Otomie told our tale, bidding some of them go forward and repeat it to the captains of the city. We followed the messengers slowly, for my bearers were weary, and came to the gates of the beautiful town just as the red rays of sunset struck upon the snowy pinnacle of Xaca that towers behind it, turning her cap of smoke to a sullen red, like that of molten iron.

The news of our coming had spread about, and here and there knots of people were gathered to watch us pass. For the most part they stood silent, but now and again some woman whose husband or son had perished in the siege, would hiss a curse at us.

Alas! how different was our state this day to what it had been when not a year before we entered the City of Pines for the first time. Then we were escorted by an army ten thousand strong, then musicians had sung before us and our path was strewn with flowers. And now! Now we came two fugitives from the vengeance of the Teules, I borne in a litter by four tired soldiers, while Otomie, the princess of this people, still clad in her wanton's robe, at which the women mocked, for she had been able to come by no other, tramped at my side, since there were none to carry her, and the inhabitants of the place cursed us as the authors of their woes. Nor did we know if they would stop at words.

At length we crossed the square beneath the shadow of the teocalli, and reached the ancient and sculptured palace as the light failed, and the smoke on Xaca, the holy hill, began to glow with the fire in its heart. Here small preparation had been made to receive us, and that night we supped by the light of a torch upon tortillas or meal cakes and water, like the humblest in the land. Then we crept to our rest, and as I lay awake because of the pain of my hurts, I heard Otomie, who thought that I slept, break into low sobbing at my side. Her proud spirit was humbled at last, and she, whom I had never known to weep except once, when our firstborn died in the siege, wept bitterly.

'Why do you sorrow thus, Otomie?' I asked at length.

'I did not know that you were awake, husband,' she sobbed in answer, 'or I would have checked my grief. Husband, I sorrow over all that has befallen us and my people--also, though these are but little things, because you are brought low and treated as a man of no estate, and of the cold comfort that we find here.'

'You have cause, wife,' I answered. 'Say, what will these Otomies do with us--kill us, or give us up to the Teules?'

'I do not know; to-morrow we shall learn, but for my part I will not be surrendered living.'

'Nor I, wife. Death is better than the tender mercies of Cortes and his minister, de Garcia. Is there any hope?'

'Yes, there is hope, beloved. Now the Otomie are cast down and they remember that we led the flower of their land to death. But they are brave and generous at heart, and if I can touch them there, all may yet be well. Weariness, pain and memory make us weak, who should be full of courage, having escaped so many ills. Sleep, my husband, and leave me to think. All shall yet go well, for even misfortune has an end.'

So I slept, and woke in the morning somewhat refreshed and with a

happier mind, for who is there that is not bolder when the light shines on him and he is renewed by rest?

When I opened my eyes the sun was already high, but Otomie had risen with the dawn and she had not been idle during those three hours. For one thing she had contrived to obtain food and fresh raiment more befitting to our rank than the rags in which we were clothed. Also she had brought together certain men of condition who were friendly and loyal to her in misfortune, and these she sent about the city, letting it be known that she would address the people at mid-day from the steps of the palace, for as Otomie knew well, the heartstrings of a crowd are touched more easily than those of cold and ancient counsellors.

'Will they come to listen?' I asked.

'Have no fear,' she answered. 'The desire to look upon us who have survived the siege, and to know the truth of what has happened, will bring them. Moreover, some will be there seeking vengeance on us.'

Otomie was right, for as the morning drew on towards mid-day, I saw the dwellers in the City of Pines gathering in thousands, till the space between the steps of the palace and the face of the pyramid was black with them. Now Otomie combed her curling hair and placed flowers in it, and set a gleaming feather cloak about her shoulders, so that it hung down over her white robes, and on her breast that splendid necklace of

emeralds which Guatemoc had given to me in the treasure chamber, and which she had preserved safely through all our evil fortune, and a golden girdle about her waist. In her hand also she took a little sceptre of ebony tipped with gold, that was in the palace, with other ornaments and emblems of rank, and thus attired, though she was worn with travel and suffering, and grief had dimmed her beauty for a while, she seemed the queenliest woman that my eyes have seen. Next she caused me to be laid upon my rude litter, and when the hour of noon was come, she commanded those soldiers who had borne me across the mountains to carry me by her side. Thus we issued from the wide doorway of the palace and took our stand upon the platform at the head of the steps. As we came a great cry rose from the thousands of the people, a fierce cry like that of wild beasts howling for their prey. Higher and higher it rose, a sound to strike terror into the bravest heart, and by degrees I caught its purport.

'Kill them!' said the cry. 'Give the liars to the Teules.'

Otomie stepped forward to the edge of the platform, and lifting the ebony sceptre she stood silent, the sunlight beating on her lovely face and form. But the multitude screamed a thousand taunts and threats at us, and still the tumult grew. Once they rushed towards her as though to tear her to pieces, but fell back at the last stair, as a wave falls from a rock, and once a spear was thrown that passed between her neck and shoulder.

Now the soldiers who had carried me, making certain that our death was at hand, and having no wish to share it, set my litter down upon the stones and slipped back into the palace, but all this while Otomie never so much as moved, no, not even when the spear hissed past her. She stood before them stately and scornful, a very queen among women, and little by little the majesty of her presence and the greatness of her courage hushed them to silence. When there was quiet at length, she spoke in a clear voice that carried far.

'Am I among my own people of the Otomie?' she asked bitterly, 'or have we lost our path and wandered perchance among some savage Tlascalan tribe? Listen, people of the Otomie. I have but one voice and none can reason with a multitude. Choose you a tongue to speak for you, and let him set out the desire of your hearts.'

Now the tumult began again, for some shouted one name and some another, but in the end a priest and noble named Maxtla stepped forward, a man of great power among the Otomie, who, above all had favoured an alliance with the Spaniards and opposed the sending of an army to aid Guatemoc in the defence of Tenochtitlan. Nor did he come alone, for with him were four chiefs, whom by their dress I knew to be Tlascalans and envoys from Cortes. Then my heart sank, for it was not difficult to guess the object of their coming.

'Speak on, Maxtla,' said Otomie, 'for we must hear what there is for us to answer, and you, people of the Otomie, I pray you keep silence, that

you may judge between us when there is an end of talking.'

Now a great silence fell upon the multitude, who pressed together like sheep in a pen, and strained their ears to catch the words of Maxtla.

'My speech with you, princess, and the Teule your outlawed husband, shall be short and sharp,' he began roughly. 'A while hence you came hither to seek an army to aid Cuitlahua, Emperor of the Aztecs, in his struggle with the Teules, the sons of Quetzal. That army was given you, against the wishes of many of us, for you won over the council by the honey of your words, and we who urged caution, or even an alliance with the white men, the children of god, were overruled. You went hence, and twenty thousand men, the flower of our people, followed you to Tenocitlan. Where are they now? I will tell you. Some two hundred of them have crept back home, the rest fly to and fro through the air in the gizzards of the zaphilotes, or crouch on the earth in the bellies of jackals. Death has them all, and you led them to their deaths. Is it then much that we should seek the lives of you two in payment for those of twenty thousand of our sons, our husbands, and our fathers? But we do not even ask this. Here beside me stand ambassadors from Malinche, the captain of the Teules, who reached our city but an hour ago. This is the demand that they bring from Malinche, and in his own words:

"Deliver back to me Otomie, the daughter of Montezuma, and the renegade her paramour, who is known as Teule, and who has fled from the justice due to his crimes, and it shall be well with you, people of the Otomie.

Hide them or refuse to deliver them, and the fate of the City of Pines shall be as the fate of Tenochtitlan, queen of the valley. Choose then between my love and my wrath, people of the Otomie. If you obey, the past shall be forgiven and my yoke will be light upon you; if you refuse, your city shall be stamped flat and your very name wiped out of the records of the world."

'Say, messengers of Malinche, are not these the words of Malinche?'

'They are his very words, Maxtla,' said the spokesman of the embassy.

Now again there was a tumult among the people, and voices cried, 'Give them up, give them to Malinche as a peace offering.' Otomie stood forward to speak and it died away, for all desired to hear her words.

Then she spoke:

'It seems, people of the Otomie, that I am on my trial before my own vassals, and my husband with me. Well, I will plead our cause as well as a woman may, and having the power, you shall judge between us and Maxtla and his allies, Malinche and the Tlascalans. What is our offence? It is that we came hither by the command of Cuitlahua to seek your aid in his war with the Teules. What did I tell you then? I told you that if the people of Anahuac would not stand together against the white men, they must be broken one by one like the sticks of an unbound faggot, and cast into the flames. Did I speak lies? Nay, I spoke truth, for through the treason of her tribes, and chiefly through the treason of the

Tlascalans, Anahuac is fallen, and Tenochtitlan is a ruin sown with dead like a field with corn.'

'It is true,' cried a voice.

'Yes, people of the Otomie, it is true, but I say that had all the warriors of the nations of Anahuac played the part that your sons played, the tale had run otherwise. They are dead, and because of their death you would deliver us to our foes and yours, but I for one do not mourn them, though among their number are many of my kin. Nay, be not wroth, but listen. It is better that they should lie dead in honour, having earned for themselves a wreath of fame, and an immortal dwelling in the Houses of the Sun, than that they should live to be slaves, which it seems is your desire, people of the Otomie. There is no false word in what I said to you. Now the sticks that Malinche has used to beat out the brains of Guatemoc shall be broken and burnt to cook the pot of the Teules. Already these false children are his slaves. Have you not heard his command, that the tribes his allies shall labour in the quarries and the streets till the glorious city which he has burned rises afresh upon the face of the waters? Will you not hasten to take your share in the work, people of the Otomie, the work that knows no rest and no reward except the lash of the overseer and the curse of the Teule? Surely you will hasten, people of the mountains! Your hands are shaped to the spade and the trowel, not to the bow and the spear, and it will be sweeter to toil to do the will and swell the wealth of Malinche in the sun of the valley or the shadow of the mine, than to bide here free upon your hills

where as yet no foe has set his foot!

Again she paused, and a murmur of doubt and unrest went through the thousands who listened. Maxtla stepped forward and would have spoken, but the people shouted him down, crying: 'Otomie, Otomie! Let us hear the words of Otomie.'

'I thank you, my people,' she said, 'for I have still much to tell you. Our crime is then, that we drew an army after us to fight against the Teules. And how did we draw this army? Did I command you to muster your array? Nay, I set out my case and I said "Now choose." You chose, and of your own free will you despatched those glorious companies that now are dead. My crime is therefore that you chose wrongly as you say, but as I still hold, most rightly, and because of this crime I and my husband are to be given as a peace offering to the Teules. Listen: let me tell you something of those wars in which we have fought before you give us to the Teules and our mouths are silent for ever. Where shall I begin? I know not. Stay, I bore a child--had he lived he would have been your prince to-day. That child I saw starve to death before my eyes, inch by inch and day by day I saw him starve. But it is nothing; who am I that I should complain because I have lost my son, when so many of your sons are dead and their blood is required at my hands? Listen again:' and she went on to tell in burning words of the horrors of the siege, of the cruelties of the Spaniards, and of the bravery of the men of the Otomie whom I had commanded. For a full hour she spoke thus, while all that vast audience hung upon her words. Also she told of the part that I

played in the struggle, and of the deeds which I had done, and now and again some soldier in the crowd who served under me, and who had escaped the famine and the massacre, cried out:

'It is true; we saw it with our eyes.'

'And so,' she said, 'at last it was finished, at last Tenochtitlan was a ruin and my cousin and my king, the glorious Guatemoc, lay a prisoner in the hands of Malinche, and with him my husband Teule, my sister, I myself, and many another. Malinche swore that he would treat Guatemoc and his following with all honour. Do you know how he treated him? Within a few days Guatemoc our king was seated in the chair of torment, while slaves burned him with hot irons to cause him to declare the hiding place of the treasure of Montezuma! Ay, you may well cry "Shame upon him," you shall cry it yet more loudly before I have done, for know that Guatemoc did not suffer alone, one lies there who suffered with him and spoke no word, and I also, your princess, was doomed to torment. We escaped when death was at our door, for I told my husband that the people of the Otomie had true hearts, and would shelter us in our sorrow, and for his sake I, Otomie, disguised myself in the robe of a wanton and fled with him hither. Could I have known what I should live to see and hear, could I have dreamed that you would receive us thus, I had died a hundred deaths before I came to stand and plead for pity at your hands.

'Oh! my people, my people, I beseech of you, make no terms with the

false Teule, but remain bold and free. Your necks are not fitted to the yoke of the slave, your sons and daughters are of too high a blood to serve the foreigner in his needs and pleasures. Defy Malinche. Some of our race are dead, but many thousands remain. Here in your mountain nest you can beat back every Teule in Anahuac, as in bygone years the false Tlascalans beat back the Aztecs. Then the Tlascalans were free, now they are a race of serfs. Say, will you share their serfdom? My people, my people, think not that I plead for myself, or even for the husband who is more dear to me than aught save honour. Do you indeed dream that we will suffer you to hand us living to these dogs of Tlascalans, whom Malinche insults you by sending as his messengers? Look,' and she walked to where the spear that had been hurled at her lay upon the pavement and lifted it, 'here is a means of death that some friend has sent us, and if you will not listen to my pleading you shall see it used before your eyes. Then, if you will, you may send our bodies to Malinche as a peace offering. But for your own sakes I plead with you. Defy Malinche, and if you must die at last, die as free men and not as the slaves of the Teule. Behold now his tender mercies, and see the lot that shall be yours if you take another counsel, the counsel of Maxtla;' and coming to the litter on which I lay, swiftly Otomie rent my robes from me leaving me almost naked to the waist, and unwound the bandages from my wounded limb, then lifted me up so that I rested upon my sound foot.

'Look!' she cried in a piercing voice, and pointing to the scars and unhealed wounds upon my face and leg; 'look on the work of the Teule and the Tlascalan, see how the foe is dealt with who surrenders to them.

Yield if you will, desert us if you will, but I say that then your own bodies shall be marked in a like fashion, till not an ounce of gold is left that can minister to the greed of the Teule, or a man or a maiden who can labour to satisfy his indolence.'

Then she ceased, and letting me sink gently to the ground, for I could not stand alone, she stood over me, the spear in her hand, as though waiting to plunge it to my heart should the people still demand our surrender to the messengers of Cortes.

For one instant there was silence, then of a sudden the clamour and the tumult broke out again ten times more furiously than at first. But it was no longer aimed at us. Otomie had conquered. Her noble words, her beauty, the tale of our sorrows and the sight of my torments, had done their work, and the heart of the people was filled with fury against the Teules who had destroyed their army, and the Tlascalans that had aided them. Never did the wit and eloquence of a woman cause a swifter change. They screamed and tore their robes and shook their weapons in the air. Maxtla strove to speak, but they pulled him down and presently he was flying for his life. Then they turned upon the Tlascalan envoys and beat them with sticks, crying:

'This is our answer to Malinche. Run, you dogs, and take it!' till they were driven from the town.

Now at length the turmoil ceased, and some of the great chiefs came forward and, kissing the hand of Otomie, said:

'Princess, we your children will guard you to the death, for you have put another heart into us. You are right; it is better to die free than to live as slaves.'

'See, my husband,' said Otomie, 'I was not mistaken when I told you that my people were loyal and true. But now we must make ready for war, for they have gone too far to turn back, and when this tidings comes to the ears of Malinche he will be like a puma robbed of her young. Now, let us rest, I am very weary.'

'Otomie,' I answered, 'there has lived no greater woman than you upon this earth.'

'I cannot tell, husband,' she said, smiling; 'if I have won your praise and safety, it is enough for me.'