

CHAPTER XXXIII

ISABELLA DE SIGUENZA IS AVENGED

For many years after the death of Guatemoc I lived with Otomie at peace in the City of Pines. Our country was poor and rugged, and though we defied the Spaniards and paid them no tribute, now that Cortes had gone back to Spain, they had no heart to attempt our conquest. Save some few tribes that lived in difficult places like ourselves, all Anahuac was in their power, and there was little to gain except hard blows in the bringing of a remnant of the people of the Otomie beneath their yoke, so they let us be till a more convenient season. I say of a remnant of the Otomie, for as time went on many clans submitted to the Spaniards, till at length we ruled over the City of Pines alone and some leagues of territory about it. Indeed it was only love for Otomie and respect for the shadow of her ancient race and name, together with some reverence for me as one of the unconquerable white men, and for my skill as a general, that kept our following together.

And now it may be asked was I happy in those years? I had much to make me happy--no man could have been blessed with a wife more beautiful and loving, nor one who had exemplified her affection by more signal deeds of sacrifice. This woman of her own free will had lain by my side on the stone of slaughter; overriding the instincts of her sex she had not shrunk from dipping her hands in blood to secure my safety, her wit had

rescued me in many a trouble, her love had consoled me in many a sorrow: surely therefore if gratitude can conquer the heart of man, mine should have been at her feet for ever and a day, and so indeed it was, and in a sense is still. But can gratitude, can love itself, or any passion that rules our souls, make a man forget the house where he was born? Could I, an Indian chief struggling with a fallen people against an inevitable destiny, forget my youth and all its hopes and fears, could I forget the valley of the Waveney and that Flower who dwelt therein, and forsworn though I might be, could I forget the oath that I once had sworn? Chance had been against me, circumstances overpowered me, and I think that there are few who, could they read this story, would not find in it excuse for all that I had done. Certainly there are very few who, standing where I stood, surrounded as I was by doubts, difficulties, and dangers, would not have acted as I did.

And yet memory would rise up against me, and time upon time I would lie awake at night, even by the side of Otomie, and remember and repent, if a man may repent of that over which he has no control. For I was a stranger in a strange land, and though my home was there and my children were about me, the longing for my other home was yet with me, and I could not put away the memory of that Lily whom I had lost. Her ring was still upon my hand, but nothing else of her remained to me. I did not know if she were married or single, living or dead. The gulf between us widened with the widening years, but still the thought of her went with me like my shadow; it shone across the stormy love of Otomie, I remembered it even in my children's kiss. And worst of all I despised

myself for these regrets. Nay, if the worst can have a worse, there was one here, for though she never spoke of it, I feared that Otomie had read my mind.

Heart to heart, Though far apart,

so ran the writing upon Lily's betrothal ring, and so it was with me. Far apart we were indeed, so far that no bridge that I might imagine could join that distance, and yet I could not say that we had ceased from being 'heart to heart.' Her heart might throb no more, but mine beat still toward it. Across the land, across the sea, across the gulf of death--if she were dead--still in secret must I desire the love that I had forsworn.

And so the years rolled on, bringing little of change with them, till I grew sure that here in this far place I should live and die. But that was not to be my fate.

If any should read this, the story of my early life, he will remember that the tale of the death of a certain Isabella de Siguenza is pieced into its motley. He will remember how this Isabella, in the last moments of her life, called down a curse upon that holy father who added outrage and insult to her torment, praying that he might also die by the hands

of fanatics and in a worse fashion. If my memory does not play me false, I have said that this indeed came to pass, and very strangely. For after the conquest of Anahuac by Cortes, among others this same fiery priest came from Spain to turn the Indians to the love of God by torment and by sword. Indeed, of all of those who entered on this mission of peace, he was the most zealous. The Indian pabas wrought cruelties enough when, tearing out the victim's heart, they offered it like incense to Huitzel or to Quetzal, but they at least dismissed his soul to the Mansions of the Sun. With the Christian priests the thumb-screw and the stake took the place of the stone of sacrifice, but the soul which they delivered from its earthly bondage they consigned to the House of Hell.

Of these priests a certain Father Pedro was the boldest and the most cruel. To and fro he passed, marking his path with the corpses of idolaters, until he earned the name of the 'Christian Devil.' At length he ventured too far in his holy fervour, and was seized by a clan of the Otomie that had broken from our rule upon this very question of human sacrifice, but which was not yet subjugated by the Spaniards. One day, it was when we had ruled for some fourteen years in the City of Pines, it came to my knowledge that the pabas of this clan had captured a Christian priest, and designed to offer him to the god Tezcat.

Attended by a small guard only, I passed rapidly across the mountains, purposing to visit the cacique of this clan with whom, although he had cast off his allegiance to us, I still kept up a show of friendship, and if I could, to persuade him to release the priest. But swiftly as I

travelled the vengeance of the pabas had been more swift, and I arrived at the village only to find the 'Christian Devil' in the act of being led to sacrifice before the image of a hideous idol that was set upon a stake and surrounded with piles of skulls. Naked to the waist, his hands bound behind him, his grizzled locks hanging about his breast, his keen eyes fixed upon the faces of his heathen foes in menace rather than in supplication, his thin lips muttering prayers, Father Pedro passed on to the place of his doom, now and again shaking his head fiercely to free himself from the torment of the insects which buzzed about it.

I looked upon him and wondered. I looked again and knew. Suddenly there rose before my mind a vision of that gloomy vault in Seville, of a woman, young and lovely, draped in cerements, and of a thin-faced black-robed friar who smote her upon the lips with his ivory crucifix and cursed her for a blaspheming heretic. There before me was the man. Isabella de Siguenza had prayed that a fate like to her own fate should befall him, and it was upon him now. Nor indeed, remembering all that had been, was I minded to avert it, even if it had been in my power to do so. I stood by and let the victim pass, but as he passed I spoke to him in Spanish, saying:

'Remember that which it may well be you have forgotten, holy father, remember now the dying prayer of Isabella de Siguenza whom many years ago you did to death in Seville.'

The man heard me; he turned livid beneath his bronzed skin and staggered

until I thought that he would have fallen. He stared upon me, with terror in his eye, to see as he believed a common sight enough, that of an Indian chief rejoicing at the death of one of his oppressors.

'What devil are you,' he said hoarsely, 'sent from hell to torment me at the last?'

'Remember the dying prayer of Isabella de Siguenza, whom you struck and cursed,' I answered mocking. 'Seek not to know whence I am, but remember this only, now and for ever.'

For a moment he stood still, heedless of the urgings of his tormentors. Then his courage came to him again, and he cried with a great voice: 'Get thee behind me, Satan, what have I to fear from thee? I remember that dead sinner well--may her soul have peace--and her curse has fallen upon me. I rejoice that it should be so, for on the further side of yonder stone the gates of heaven open to my sight. Get thee behind me, Satan, what have I to fear from thee?'

Crying thus he staggered forward saying, 'O God, into Thy hand I commend my spirit!' May his soul have peace also, for if he was cruel, at least he was brave, and did not shrink beneath those torments which he had inflicted on many others.

Now this was a little matter, but its results were large. Had I saved

Father Pedro from the hands of the pabas of the Otomie, it is likely enough that I should not to-day be writing this history here in the valley of the Waveney. I do not know if I could have saved him, I only know that I did not try, and that because of his death great sorrows came upon me. Whether I was right or wrong, who can say? Those who judge my story may think that in this as in other matters I was wrong; had they seen Isabella de Siguenza die within her living tomb, certainly they would hold that I was right. But for good or ill, matters came about as I have written.

And it came about also, that the new viceroy sent from Spain was stirred to anger at the murder of the friar by the rebellious and heathen people of the Otomie, and set himself to take vengeance on the tribe that wrought the deed.

Soon tidings reached me that a great force of Tlascalan and other Indians were being collected to put an end to us, root and branch, and that with them marched more than a hundred Spaniards, the expedition being under the command of none other than the Captain Bernal Diaz, that same soldier whom I had spared in the slaughter of the noche triste, and whose sword to this day hung at my side.

Now we must needs prepare our defence, for our only hope lay in boldness. Once before the Spaniards had attacked us with thousands of their allies, and of their number but few had lived to look again on the camp of Cortes. What had been done could be done a second time--so said

Otomie in the pride of her unconquerable heart. But alas! in fourteen years things had changed much with us. Fourteen years ago we held sway over a great district of mountains, whose rude clans would send up their warriors in hundreds at our call. Now these clans had broken from our yoke, which was acknowledged by the people of the City of Pines alone and those of some adjacent villages. When the Spaniards came down on me the first time, I was able to muster an army of ten thousand soldiers to oppose them, now with much toil I could collect no more than between two and three thousand men, and of these some slipped away as the hour of danger drew nigh.

Still I must put a bold face on my necessities, and make what play I might with such forces as lay at my command, although in my heart I feared much for the issue. But of my fears I said nothing to Otomie, and if she felt any she, on her part, buried them in her breast. In truth I do believe her faith in me was so great, that she thought my single wit enough to over-match all the armies of the Spaniards.

Now at length the enemy drew near, and I set my battle as I had done fourteen years before, advancing down the pass by which alone they could approach us with a small portion of my force, and stationing the remainder in two equal companies upon either brow of the beetling cliffs that overhung the road, having command to overwhelm the Spaniards with rocks, hurled upon them from above, so soon as I should give the signal by flying before them down the pass. Other measures I took also, for seeing that do what I would it well might happen that we should be

driven back upon the city, I caused its walls and gates to be set in order, and garrisoned them. As a last resource too, I stored the lofty summit of the teocalli, which now that sacrifices were no longer offered there was used as an arsenal for the material of war, with water and provisions, and fortified its sides by walls studded with volcanic glass and by other devices, till it seemed well nigh impossible that any should be able to force them while a score of men still lived to offer a defence.

It was on one night in the early summer, having bid farewell to Otomie and taking my son with me, for he was now of an age when, according to the Indian customs, lads are brought face to face with the dangers of battle, that I despatched the appointed companies to their stations on the brow of the precipice, and sallied into the darksome mouth of the pass with the few hundred men who were left to me. I knew by my spies that the Spaniards who were encamped on the further side would attempt its passage an hour before the daylight, trusting to finding me asleep. And sure enough, on the following morning, so early that the first rays of the sun had not yet stained the lofty snows of the volcan Xaca that towered behind us, a distant murmuring which echoed through the silence of the night told me that the enemy had begun his march. I moved down the pass to meet him easily enough; there was no stone in it that was not known to me and my men. But with the Spaniards it was otherwise, for many of them were mounted, and moreover they dragged with them two carronades. Time upon time these heavy guns remained fast in the boulder-strewn roadway, for in the darkness the slaves who drew them

could find no places for the wheels to run on, till in the end the captains of the army, unwilling to risk a fight at so great a disadvantage, ordered them to halt until the day broke.

At length the dawn came, and the light fell dimly down the depths of the vast gulf, revealing the long ranks of the Spaniards clad in their bright armour, and the yet more brilliant thousands of their native allies, gorgeous in their painted helms and their glittering coats of feathers. They saw us also, and mocking at our poor array, their column twisted forward like some huge snake in the crack of a rock, till they came to within a hundred paces of us. Then the Spaniards raised their battle cry of Saint Peter, and lance at rest, they charged us with their horse. We met them with a rain of arrows that checked them a little, but not for long. Soon they were among us, driving us back at the point of their lances, and slaying many, for our Indian weapons could work little harm to men and horses clad in armour. Therefore we must fly, and indeed, flight was my plan, for by it I hoped to lead the foe to that part of the defile where the road was narrow and the cliffs sheer, and they might be crushed by the stones which should hail on them from above. All went well; we fled, the Spaniards followed flushed with victory, till they were fairly in the trap. Now a single boulder came rushing from on high, and falling on a horse, killed him, then rebounding, carried dismay and wounds to those behind. Another followed, and yet another, and I grew glad at heart, for it seemed to me that the danger was over, and that for the second time my strategy had succeeded.

But suddenly from above there came a sound other than that of the rushing rocks, the sound of men joining in battle, that grew and grew till the air was full of its tumult, then something whirled down from on high. I looked; it was no stone, but a man, one of my own men. Indeed he was but as the first rain-drop of a shower.

Alas! I saw the truth; I had been outwitted. The Spaniards, old in war, could not be caught twice by such a trick; they advanced down the pass with the carronades indeed because they must, but first they sent great bodies of men to climb the mountain under shelter of the night, by secret paths which had been discovered to them, and there on its summit to deal with those who would stay their passage by hurling rocks upon them. And in truth they dealt with them but too well, for my men of the Otomie, lying on the verge of the cliff among the scrub of aloes and other prickly plants that grew there, watching the advance of the foe beneath, and never for one moment dreaming that foes might be upon their flank, were utterly surprised. Scarcely had they time to seize their weapons, which were laid at their sides that they might have the greater freedom in the rolling of heavy masses of rock, when the enemy, who outnumbered them by far, were upon them with a yell. Then came a fight, short but decisive.

Too late I saw it all, and cursed the folly that had not provided against such chances, for, indeed, I never thought it possible that the forces of the Spaniards could find the secret trails upon the further side of the mountain, forgetting that treason makes most things

possible.