## CHAPTER XXXIV

## THE SIEGE OF THE CITY OF PINES

The battle was already lost. From a thousand feet above us swelled the shouts of victory. The battle was lost, and yet I must fight on. As swiftly as I could I withdrew those who were left to me to a certain angle in the path, where a score of desperate men might, for a while, hold back the advance of an army. Here I called for some to stand at my side, and many answered to my call. Out of them I chose fifty men or more, bidding the rest run hard for the City of Pines, there to warn those who were left in garrison that the hour of danger was upon them, and, should I fall, to conjure Otomie my wife to make the best resistance in her power, till, if it were possible, she could wring from the Spaniards a promise of safety for herself, her child, and her people. Meanwhile I would hold the pass so that time might be given to shut the gates and man the walls. With the main body of those who were left to me I sent back my son, though he prayed hard to be allowed to stay with me. But, seeing nothing before me except death, I refused him.

Presently all were gone, and fearing a snare the Spaniards came slowly and cautiously round the angle of the rock, and seeing so few men mustered to meet them halted, for now they were certain that we had set a trap for them, since they did not think it possible that such a little band would venture to oppose their array. Here the ground lay so that

only a few of them could come against us at one time, nor could they bring their heavy pieces to bear on us, and even their arquebusses helped them but little. Also the roughness of the road forced them to dismount from their horses, so that if they would attack at all, it must be on foot. This in the end they chose to do. Many fell upon either side, though I myself received no wound, but in the end they drove us back. Inch by inch they drove us back, or rather those who were left of us, at the point of their long lances, till at length they forced us into the mouth of the pass, that is some five furlongs distant from what was once the wall of the City of Pines.

To fight further was of no avail, here we must choose between death and flight, and as may be guessed, for wives' and children's sake if not for our own, we chose to fly. Across the plain we fled like deer, and after us came the Spaniards and their allies like hounds. Happily the ground was rough with stones so that their horses could not gallop freely, and thus it happened that some of us, perhaps twenty, gained the gates in safety. Of my army not more than five hundred in all lived to enter them again, and perchance there were as many left within the city.

The heavy gates swung to, and scarcely were they barred with the massive beams of oak, when the foremost of the Spaniards rode up to them. My bow was still in my hand and there was one arrow left in my quiver. I set it on the string, and drawing the bow with my full strength, I loosed the shaft through the bars of the gate at a young and gallant looking cavalier who rode the first of all. It struck him truly between the

joint of his helm and neck piece, and stretching his arms out wide he fell backward over the crupper of his horse, to move no more. Then they withdrew, but presently one of their number came forward bearing a flag of truce. He was a knightly looking man, clad in rich armour, and watching him, it seemed to me that there was something in his bearing, and in the careless grace with which he sat his horse, that was familiar to me. Reining up in front of the gates he raised his visor and began to speak.

I knew him at once; before me was de Garcia, my ancient enemy, of whom I had neither heard nor seen anything for hard upon twelve years. Time had touched him indeed, which was scarcely to be wondered at, for now he was a man of sixty or more. His peaked chestnut-coloured beard was streaked with grey, his cheeks were hollow, and at that distance his lips seemed like two thin red lines, but the eyes were as they had always been, bright and piercing, and the same cold smile played about his mouth. Without a doubt it was de Garcia, who now, as at every crisis of my life, appeared to shape my fortunes to some evil end, and I felt as I looked upon him that the last and greatest struggle between us was at hand, and that before many days were sped, the ancient and accumulated hate of one or of both of us would be buried for ever in the silence of death. How ill had fate dealt with me, now as always. But a few minutes before, when I set that arrow on the string, I had wavered for a moment, doubting whether to loose it at the young cavalier who lay dead, or at the knight who rode next to him; and see! I had slain one with whom I had no quarrel and left my enemy unharmed.

'Ho there!' cried de Garcia in Spanish. 'I desire to speak with the leader of the rebel Otomie on behalf of the Captain Bernal Diaz, who commands this army.'

Now I mounted on the wall by means of a ladder which was at hand, and answered, 'Speak on, I am the man you seek.'

'You know Spanish well, friend,' said de Garcia, starting and looking at me keenly beneath his bent brows. 'Say now, where did you learn it? And what is your name and lineage?'

'I learned it, Juan de Garcia, from a certain Donna Luisa, whom you knew in your days of youth. And my name is Thomas Wingfield.'

Now de Garcia reeled in his saddle and swore a great oath.

'Mother of God!' he said, 'years ago I was told that you had taken up your abode among some savage tribe, but since then I have been far, to Spain and back indeed, and I deemed that you were dead, Thomas Wingfield. My luck is good in truth, for it has been one of the great sorrows of my life that you have so often escaped me, renegade. Be sure that this time there shall be no escape.'

'I know well that there will be no escape for one or other of us, Juan de Garcia,' I answered. 'Now we play the last round of the game, but do

not boast, for God alone knows to whom the victory shall be given. You have prospered long, but a day may be at hand when your prosperity shall cease with your breath. To your errand, Juan de Garcia.'

For a moment he sat silent, pulling at his pointed beard, and watching him I thought that I could see the shadow of a half-forgotten fear creep into his eyes. If so, it was soon gone, for lifting his head, he spoke boldly and clearly.

'This is my message to you, Thomas Wingfield, and to such of the Otomie dogs with whom you herd as we have left alive to-day. The Captain Bernal Diaz offers you terms on behalf of his Excellency the viceroy.'

'What are his terms?' I asked.

'Merciful enough to such pestilent rebels and heathens,' he answered sneering. 'Surrender your city without condition, and the viceroy, in his clemency, will accept the surrender. Nevertheless, lest you should say afterwards that faith has been broken with you, be it known to you, that you shall not go unpunished for your many crimes. This is the punishment that shall be inflicted on you. All those who had part or parcel in the devilish murder of that holy saint Father Pedro, shall be burned at the stake, and the eyes of all those who beheld it shall be put out. Such of the leaders of the Otomie as the judges may select shall be hanged publicly, among them yourself, Cousin Wingfield, and more particularly the woman Otomie, daughter of Montezuma the late king.

For the rest, the dwellers in the City of Pines must surrender their wealth into the treasury of the viceroy, and they themselves, men, women and children, shall be led from the city and be distributed according to the viceroy's pleasure upon the estates of such of the Spanish settlers as he may select, there to learn the useful arts of husbandry and mining. These are the conditions of surrender, and I am commanded to say that an hour is given you in which to decide whether you accept or reject them.'

'And if we reject them?'

'Then the Captain Bernal Diaz has orders to sack and destroy this city, and having given it over for twelve hours to the mercy of the Tlascalans and other faithful Indian allies, to collect those who may be left living within it, and bring them to the city of Mexico, there to be sold as slaves.'

'Good,' I said; 'you shall have your answer in an hour.' Now, leaving the gate guarded, I hurried to the palace, sending messengers as I went to summon such of the council of the city as remained alive. At the door of the palace I met Otomie, who greeted me fondly, for after hearing of our disaster she had hardly looked to see me again.

'Come with me to the Hall of Assembly,' I said; 'there I will speak to you.'

We went to the hall, where the members of the council were already gathering. So soon as the most of them were assembled, there were but eight in all, I repeated to them the words of de Garcia without comment. Then Otomie spoke, as being the first in rank she had a right to do. Twice before I had heard her address the people of the Otomie upon these questions of defence against the Spaniards. The first time, it may be remembered, was when we came as envoys from Cuitlahua, Montezuma her father's successor, to pray the aid of the children of the mountain against Cortes and the Teules. The second time was when, some fourteen years ago, we had returned to the City of Pines as fugitives after the fall of Tenoctitlan, and the populace, moved to fury by the destruction of nearly twenty thousand of their soldiers, would have delivered us as a peace offering into the hands of the Spaniards.

On each of these occasions Otomie had triumphed by her eloquence, by the greatness of her name and the majesty of her presence. Now things were far otherwise, and even had she not scorned to use them, such arts would have availed us nothing in this extremity. Now her great name was but a shadow, one of many waning shadows cast by an empire whose glory had gone for ever; now she used no passionate appeal to the pride and traditions of a doomed race, now she was no longer young and the first splendour of her womanhood had departed from her. And yet, as with her son and mine at her side, she rose to address those seven councillors, who, haggard with fear and hopeless in the grasp of fate, crouched in silence before her, their faces buried in their hands, I thought that Otomie had never seemed more beautiful, and that her words, simple as

they were, had never been more eloquent.

'Friends,' she said, 'you know the disaster that has overtaken us. My husband has given you the message of the Teules. Our case is desperate. We have but a thousand men at most to defend this city, the home of our forefathers, and we alone of all the peoples of Anahuac still dare to stand in arms against the white men. Years ago I said to you, Choose between death with honour and life with shame! To-day again I say to you, Choose! For me and mine there is no choice left, since whatever you decide, death must be our portion. But with you it is otherwise. Will you die fighting, or will you and your children serve your remaining years as slaves?'

For a while the seven consulted together, then their spokesman answered.

'Otomie, and you, Teule, we have followed your counsels for many years and they have brought us but little luck. We do not blame you, for the gods of Anahuac have deserted us as we have deserted them, and the gods alone stand between men and their evil destiny. Whatever misfortunes we may have borne, you have shared in them, and so it is now at the end. Nor will we go back upon our words in this the last hour of the people of the Otomie. We have chosen; we have lived free with you, and still free, we will die with you. For like you we hold that it is better for us and ours to perish as free men than to drag out our days beneath the yoke of the Teule.'

'It is well,' said Otomie; 'now nothing remains for us except to seek a death so glorious that it shall be sung of in after days. Husband, you have heard the answer of the council. Let the Spaniards hear it also.'

So I went back to the wall, a white flag in my hand, and presently an envoy advanced from the Spanish camp to speak with me--not de Garcia, but another. I told him in few words that those who remained alive of the people of the Otomie would die beneath the ruins of their city like the children of Tenoctitlan before them, but that while they had a spear to throw and an arm to throw it, they would never yield to the tender mercies of the Spaniard.

The envoy returned to the camp, and within an hour the attack began. Bringing up their pieces of ordnance, the Spaniards set them within little more than an hundred paces of the gates, and began to batter us with iron shot at their leisure, for our spears and arrows could scarcely harm them at such a distance. Still we were not idle, for seeing that the wooden gates must soon be down, we demolished houses on either side of them and filled up the roadway with stones and rubbish. At the rear of the heap thus formed I caused a great trench to be dug, which could not be passed by horsemen and ordnance till it was filled in again. All along the main street leading to the great square of the teocalli I threw up other barricades, protected in the front and rear by dykes cut through the roadway, and in case the Spaniards should try to turn our flank and force a passage through the narrow and tortuous lanes

to the right and left, I also barricaded the four entrances to the great square or market place.

Till nightfall the Spaniards bombarded the shattered remains of the gates and the earthworks behind them, doing no great damage beyond the killing of about a score of people by cannon shot and arquebuss balls. But they attempted no assault that day. At length the darkness fell and their fire ceased, but not so our labours. Most of the men must guard the gates and the weak spots in the walls, and therefore the building of the barricades was left chiefly to the women, working under my command and that of my captains. Otomie herself took a share in the toil, an example that was followed by every lady and indeed by every woman in the city, and there were many of them, for the women outnumbered the men among the Otomie, and moreover not a few of them had been made widows on that same day.

It was a strange sight to see them in the glare of hundreds of torches split from the resin pine that gave its name to the city, as all night long they moved to and fro in lines, each of them staggering beneath the weight of a basket of earth or a heavy stone, or dug with wooden spades at the hard soil, or laboured at the pulling down of houses. They never complained, but worked on sullenly and despairingly; no groan or tear broke from them, no, not even from those whose husbands and sons had been hurled that morning from the precipices of the pass. They knew that resistance would be useless and that their doom was at hand, but no cry arose among them of surrender to the Spaniards. Those of them who spoke

of the matter at all said with Otomie, that it was better to die free than to live as slaves, but the most did not speak; the old and the young, mother, wife, widow, and maid, they laboured in silence and the children laboured at their sides.

Looking at them it came into my mind that these silent patient women were inspired by some common and desperate purpose, that all knew of, but which none of them chose to tell.

'Will you work so hard for your masters the Teules?' cried a man in bitter mockery, as a file of them toiled past beneath their loads of stone.

'Fool!' answered their leader, a young and lovely lady of rank; 'do the dead labour?'

'Nay,' said this ill jester, 'but such as you are too fair for the Teules to kill, and your years of slavery will be many. Say, how shall you escape them?'

'Fool!' answered the lady again, 'does fire die from lack of fuel only, and must every man live till age takes him? We shall escape them thus,' and casting down the torch she carried, she trod it into the earth with her sandal, and went on with her load. Then I was sure that they had some purpose, though I did not guess how desperate it was, and Otomie would tell me nothing of this woman's secret.

'Otomie,' I said to her that night, when we met by chance, 'I have ill news for you.'

'It must be bad indeed, husband, to be so named in such an hour,' she answered.

'De Garcia is among our foes.'

'I knew it, husband.'

'How did you know it?'

'By the hate written in your eyes,' she answered.

'It seems that his hour of triumph is at hand,' I said.

'Nay, beloved, not HIS but YOURS. You shall triumph over de Garcia, but victory will cost you dear. I know it in my heart; ask me not how or why. See, the Queen puts on her crown,' and she pointed to the volcan Xaca, whose snows grew rosy with the dawn, 'and you must go to the gate, for the Spaniards will soon be stirring.'

As Otomie spoke I heard a trumpet blare without the walls. Hurrying to the gates by the first light of day, I could see that the Spaniards were mustering their forces for attack. They did not come at once, however,

but delayed till the sun was well up. Then they began to pour a furious fire upon our defences, that reduced the shattered beams of the gates to powder, and even shook down the crest of the earthwork beyond them. Suddenly the firing ceased and again a trumpet called. Now they charged us in column, a thousand or more Tlascalans leading the van, followed by the Spanish force. In two minutes I, who awaited them beyond it together with some three hundred warriors of the Otomie, saw their heads appear over the crest of the earthwork, and the fight began. Thrice we drove them back with our spears and arrows, but at the fourth charge the wave of men swept over our defence, and poured into the dry ditch beyond.

Now we were forced to fly to the next earthwork, for we could not hope to fight so many in the open street, whither, so soon as a passage had been made for their horse and ordnance, the enemy followed us. Here the fight was renewed, and this barricade being very strong, we held it for hard upon two hours with much loss to ourselves and to the Spanish force. Again we retreated and again we were assailed, and so the struggle went on throughout the live-long day. Every hour our numbers grew fewer and our arms fainter, but still we fought on desperately. At the two last barricades, hundreds of the women of the Otomie fought by the sides of their husbands and their brothers.

The last earthwork was captured by the Spaniards just as the sun sank, and under the shadow of approaching darkness those of us that remained alive fled to the refuge which we had prepared upon the teocalli, nor was there any further fighting during that night.