

CHAPTER XXXV

THE LAST SACRIFICE OF THE WOMEN OF THE OTOMIE

Here in the courtyard of the teocalli, by the light of burning houses, for as they advanced the Spaniards fired the town, we mustered our array to find that there were left to us in all some four hundred fighting men, together with a crowd of nearly two thousand women and many children. Now although this teocalli was not quite so lofty as that of the great temple of Mexico, its sides were steeper and everywhere faced with dressed stone, and the open space upon its summit was almost as great, measuring indeed more than a hundred paces every way. This area was paved with blocks of marble, and in its centre stood the temple of the war-god, where his statue still sat, although no worship had been offered to him for many years; the stone of sacrifice, the altar of fire, and the storehouses of the priests. Moreover in front of the temple, and between it and the stone of sacrifice, was a deep cemented hole the size of a large room, which once had been used as a place for the safe keeping of grain in times of famine. This pit I had caused to be filled with water borne with great toil to the top of the pyramid, and in the temple itself I stored a great quantity of food, so that we had no cause to fear present death from thirst or famine.

But now we were face to face with a new trouble. Large as was the summit of the pyramid, it would not give shelter to a half of our numbers, and

if we desired to defend it some of the multitude herded round its base must seek refuge elsewhere. Calling the leaders of the people together, I put the matter before them in few words, leaving them to decide what must be done. They in turn consulted among themselves, and at length gave me this answer: that it was agreed that all the wounded and aged there, together with most of the children, and with them any others who wished to go, should leave the teocalli that night, to find their way out of the city if they could, or if not, to trust to the mercy of the Spaniards.

I said that it was well, for death was on every side, and it mattered little which way men turned to meet it. So they were sorted out, fifteen hundred or more of them, and at midnight the gates of the courtyard were thrown open, and they left. Oh! it was dreadful to see the farewells that took place in that hour. Here a daughter clung to the neck of her aged father, here husbands and wives bade each other a last farewell, here mothers kissed their little children, and on every side rose up the sounds of bitter agony, the agony of those who parted for ever. I buried my face in my hands, wondering as I had often wondered before, how a God whose name is Mercy can bear to look upon sights that break the hearts of sinful men to witness.

Presently I raised my eyes and spoke to Otomie, who was at my side, asking her if she would not send our son away with the others, passing him off as the child of common people.

'Nay, husband,' she answered, 'it is better for him to die with us, than to live as a slave of the Spaniards.'

At length it was over and the gates had shut behind the last of them. Soon we heard the distant challenge of the Spanish sentries as they perceived them, and the sounds of some shots followed by cries.

'Doubtless the Tlascalans are massacring them,' I said. But it was not so. When a few had been killed the leaders of the Spaniards found that they waged war upon an unarmed mob, made up for the most part of aged people, women and children, and their commander, Bernal Diaz, a merciful man if a rough one, ordered that the onslaught should cease. Indeed he did more, for when all the able-bodied men, together with such children as were sufficiently strong to bear the fatigues of travel, had been sorted out to be sold as slaves, he suffered the rest of that melancholy company to depart whither they would. And so they went, though what became of them I do not know.

That night we spent in the courtyard of the teocalli, but before it was light I caused the women and children who remained with us, perhaps some six hundred in all, for very few of the former who were unmarried, or who being married were still young and comely, had chosen to desert our refuge, to ascend the pyramid, guessing that the Spaniards would attack us at dawn. I stayed, however, with the three hundred fighting men that were left to me, a hundred or more having thrown themselves upon the mercy of the Spaniards, with the refugees, to await the Spanish onset

under shelter of the walls of the courtyard. At dawn it began, and by midday, do what we could to stay it, the wall was stormed, and leaving nearly a hundred dead and wounded behind me, I was driven to the winding way that led to the summit of the pyramid. Here they assaulted us again, but the road was steep and narrow, and their numbers gave them no great advantage on it, so that the end of it was that we beat them back with loss, and there was no more fighting that day.

The night which followed we spent upon the summit of the pyramid, and for my part I was so weary that after I had eaten I never slept more soundly. Next morning the struggle began anew; and this time with better success to the Spaniards. Inch by inch under cover of the heavy fire from their arquebusses and pieces, they forced us upward and backward. All day long the fight continued upon the narrow road that wound from stage to stage of the pyramid. At length, as the sun sank, a company of our foes, their advance guard, with shouts of victory, emerged upon the flat summit, and rushed towards the temple in its centre. All this while the women had been watching, but now one of them sprang up, crying with a loud voice:

'Seize them; they are but few.'

Then with a fearful scream of rage, the mob of women cast themselves upon the weary Spaniards and Tlascalans, bearing them down by the weight of their numbers. Many of them were slain indeed, but in the end the women conquered, ay, and made their victims captive, fastening them

with cords to the rings of copper that were let into the stones of the pavement, to which in former days those doomed to sacrifice had been secured, when their numbers were so great that the priests feared lest they should escape. I and the soldiers with me watched this sight wondering, then I cried out:

'What! men of the Otomie, shall it be said that our women outdid us in courage?' and without further ado, followed by a hundred or more of my companions, I rushed desperately down the steep and narrow path.

At the first corner we met the main array of Spaniards and their allies, coming up slowly, for now they were sure of victory, and so great was the shock of our encounter that many of them were hurled over the edge of the path, to roll down the steep sides of the pyramid. Seeing the fate of their comrades, those behind them halted, then began to retreat. Presently the weight of our rush struck them also, and they in turn pushed upon those below, till at length panic seized them, and with a great crying the long line of men that wound round and round the pyramid from its base almost to its summit, sought their safety in flight. But some of them found none, for the rush of those above pressing with ever increasing force upon their friends below, drove many to their death, since here on the pyramid there was nothing to cling to, and if once a man lost his foothold on the path, his fall was broken only when his body reached the court beneath. Thus in fifteen short minutes all that the Spaniards had won this day was lost again, for except the prisoners at its summit, none of them remained alive upon the teocalli; indeed so

great a terror took them, that bearing with them their dead and wounded, they retreated under cover of the night to their camp without the walls of the courtyard.

Now, weary but triumphant, we wended back towards the crest of the pyramid, but as I turned the corner of the second angle that was perhaps nearly one hundred feet above the level of the ground, a thought struck me and I set those with me at a task. Loosening the blocks of stone that formed the edge of the roadway, we rolled them down the sides of the pyramid, and so laboured on removing layer upon layer of stones and of the earth beneath, till where the path had been, was nothing but a yawning gap thirty feet or more in width.

'Now,' I said, surveying our handiwork by the light of the rising moon, 'that Spaniard who would win our nest must find wings to fly with.'

'Ay, Teule,' answered one at my side, 'but say what wings shall WE find?'

'The wings of Death,' I said grimly, and went on my upward way.

It was near midnight when I reached the temple, for the labour of levelling the road took many hours and food had been sent to us from above. As I drew nigh I was amazed to hear the sound of solemn chanting, and still more was I amazed when I saw that the doors of the temple of

Huitzel were open, and that the sacred fire which had not shone there for many years once more flared fiercely upon his altar. I stood still listening. Did my ears trick me, or did I hear the dreadful song of sacrifice? Nay, again its wild refrain rang out upon the silence:

To Thee we sacrifice! Save us, O Huitzel, Huitzel, lord god!

I rushed forward, and turning the angle of the temple I found myself face to face with the past, for there as in bygone years were the pabas clad in their black robes, their long hair hanging about their shoulders, the dreadful knife of glass fixed in their girdles; there to the right of the stone of sacrifice were those destined to the god, and there being led towards it was the first victim, a Tlascalan prisoner, his limbs held by men clad in the dress of priests. Near him, arrayed in the scarlet robe of sacrifice, stood one of my own captains, who I remembered had once served as a priest of Tezcat before idolatry was forbidden in the City of Pines, and around were a wide circle of women that watched, and from whose lips swelled the awful chant.

Now I understood it all. In their last despair, maddened by the loss of fathers, husbands, and children, by their cruel fate, and standing face to face with certain death, the fire of the old faith had burnt up in their savage hearts. There was the temple, there were the stone and implements of sacrifice, and there to their hands were the victims taken

in war. They would glut a last revenge, they would sacrifice to their fathers' gods as their fathers had done before them, and the victims should be taken from their own victorious foes. Ay, they must die, but at the least they would seek the Mansions of the Sun made holy by the blood of the accursed Teule.

I have said that it was the women who sang this chant and glared so fiercely upon the victims, but I have not yet told all the horror of what I saw, for in the fore-front of their circle, clad in white robes, the necklet of great emeralds, Guatemoc's gift, flashing upon her breast, the plumes of royal green set in her hair, giving the time of the death chant with a little wand, stood Montezuma's daughter, Otomie my wife. Never had I seen her look so beautiful or so dreadful. It was not Otomie whom I saw, for where was the tender smile and where the gentle eyes? Here before me was a living Vengeance wearing the shape of woman. In an instant I guessed the truth, though I did not know it all. Otomie, who although she was not of it, had ever favoured the Christian faith, Otomie, who for years had never spoken of these dreadful rites except with anger, whose every act was love and whose every word was kindness, was still in her soul an idolater and a savage. She had hidden this side of her heart from me well through all these years, perchance she herself had scarcely known its secret, for but twice had I seen anything of the buried fierceness of her blood. The first time was when Marina had brought her a certain robe in which she might escape from the camp of Cortes, and she had spoken to Marina of that robe; and the second when on this same day she had played her part to the Tlascalan,

and had struck him down with her own hand as he bent over me.

All this and much more passed through my mind in that brief moment, while Otomie marked the time of the death chant, and the pabas dragged the Tlascalan to his doom.

The next I was at her side.

'What passes here?' I asked sternly.

Otomie looked on me with a cold wonder, and empty eyes as though she did not know me.

'Go back, white man,' she answered; 'it is not lawful for strangers to mingle in our rites.'

I stood bewildered, not knowing what to do, while the flame burned and the chant went up before the effigy of Huitzel, of the demon Huitzel awakened after many years of sleep.

Again and yet again the solemn chant arose, Otomie beating time with her little rod of ebony, and again and yet again the cry of triumph rose to the silent stars.

Now I awoke from my dream, for as an evil dream it seemed to me, and drawing my sword I rushed towards the priest at the altar to cut him

down. But though the men stood still the women were too quick for me. Before I could lift the sword, before I could even speak a word, they had sprung upon me like the jaguars of their own forests, and like jaguars they hissed and growled into my ear:

'Get you gone, Teule,' they said, 'lest we stretch you on the stone with your brethren.' And still hissing they pushed me thence.

I drew back and thought for a while in the shadow of the temple. My eye fell upon the long line of victims awaiting their turn of sacrifice. There were thirty and one of them still alive, and of these five were Spaniards. I noted that the Spaniards were chained the last of all the line. It seemed that the murderers would keep them till the end of the feast, indeed I discovered that they were to be offered up at the rising of the sun. How could I save them, I wondered. My power was gone. The women could not be moved from their work of vengeance; they were mad with their sufferings. As well might a man try to snatch her prey from a puma robbed of her whelps, as to turn them from their purpose. With the men it was otherwise, however. Some of them mingled in the orgie indeed, but more stood aloof watching with a fearful joy the spectacle in which they did not share. Near me was a man, a noble of the Otomie, of something more than my own age. He had always been my friend, and after me he commanded the warriors of the tribe. I went to him and said, 'Friend, for the sake of the honour of your people, help me to end this.'

'I cannot, Teule,' he answered, 'and beware how you meddle in the play, for none will stand by you. Now the women have power, and you see they use it. They are about to die, but before they die they will do as their fathers did, for their strait is sore, and though they have been put aside, the old customs are not forgotten.'

'At the least can we not save these Teules?' I answered.

'Why should you wish to save the Teules? Will they save us some few days hence, when WE are in their power?'

'Perhaps not,' I said, 'but if we must die, let us die clean from this shame.'

'What then do you wish me to do, Teule?'

'This: I would have you find some three or four men who are not fallen into this madness, and with them aid me to loose the Teules, for we cannot save the others. If this may be done, surely we can lower them with ropes from that point where the road is broken away, down to the path beneath, and thus they may escape to their own people.'

'I will try,' he answered, shrugging his shoulders, 'not from any tenderness towards the accursed Teules, whom I could well bear to see stretched upon the stone, but because it is your wish, and for the sake of the friendship between us.'

Then he went, and presently I saw several men place themselves, as though by chance, between the spot where the last of the line of Indian prisoners, and the first of the Spaniards were made fast, in such a fashion as to hide them from the sight of the maddened women, engrossed as they were in their orgies.

Now I crept up to the Spaniards. They were squatted upon the ground, bound by their hands and feet to the copper rings in the pavement. There they sat silently awaiting the dreadful doom, their faces grey with terror, and their eyes starting from their sockets.

'Hist!' I whispered in Spanish into the ear of the first, an old man whom I knew as one who had taken part in the wars of Cortes. 'Would you be saved?'

He looked up quickly, and said in a hoarse voice:

'Who are you that talk of saving us? Who can save us from these she devils?'

'I am Teule, a man of white blood and a Christian, and alas that I must say it, the captain of this savage people. With the aid of some few men who are faithful to me, I purpose to cut your bonds, and afterwards you shall see. Know, Spaniard, that I do this at great risk, for if we are caught, it is a chance but that I myself shall have to suffer those

things from which I hope to rescue you.'

'Be assured, Teule,' answered the Spaniard, 'that if we should get safe away, we shall not forget this service. Save our lives now, and the time may come when we shall pay you back with yours. But even if we are loosed, how can we cross the open space in this moonlight and escape the eyes of those furies?'

'We must trust to chance for that,' I answered, and as I spoke, fortune helped us strangely, for by now the Spaniards in their camp below had perceived what was going forward on the crest of the teocalli. A yell of horror rose from them and instantly they opened fire upon us with their pieces and arquebusses, though, because of the shape of the pyramid and of their position beneath it, the storm of shot swept over us, doing us little or no hurt. Also a great company of them poured across the courtyard, hoping to storm the temple, for they did not know that the road had been broken away.

Now, though the rites of sacrifice never ceased, what with the roar of cannon, the shouts of rage and terror from the Spaniards, the hiss of musket balls, and the crackling of flames from houses which they had fired to give them more light, and the sound of chanting, the turmoil and confusion grew so great as to render the carrying out of my purpose easier than I had hoped. By this time my friend, the captain of the Otomie, was at my side, and with him several men whom he could trust. Stooping down, with a few swift blows of a knife I cut the ropes which

bound the Spaniards. Then we gathered ourselves into a knot, twelve of us or more, and in the centre of the knot we set the five Spaniards.

This done, I drew my sword and cried:

'The Teules storm the temple!' which was true, for already their long line was rushing up the winding path. 'The Teules storm the temple, I go to stop them,' and straightway we sped across the open space.

None saw us, or if they saw us, none hindered us, for all the company were intent upon the consummation of a fresh sacrifice; moreover, the tumult was such, as I afterwards discovered, that we were scarcely noticed. Two minutes passed, and our feet were set upon the winding way, and now I breathed again, for we were beyond the sight of the women. On we rushed swiftly as the cramped limbs of the Spaniards would carry them, till presently we reached that angle in the path where the breach began. The attacking Spaniards had already come to the further side of the gap, for though we could not see them, we could hear their cries of rage and despair as they halted helplessly and understood that their comrades were beyond their aid.

'Now we are sped,' said the Spaniard with whom I had spoken; 'the road is gone, and it must be certain death to try the side of the pyramid.'

'Not so,' I answered; 'some fifty feet below the path still runs, and one by one we will lower you to it with this rope.'

Then we set to work. Making the cord fast beneath the arms of a soldier we let him down gently, till he came to the path, and was received there by his comrades as a man returned from the dead. The last to be lowered was that Spaniard with whom I had spoken.

'Farewell,' he said, 'and may the blessing of God be on you for this act of mercy, renegade though you are. Say, now, will you not come with me? I set my life and honour in pledge for your safety. You tell me that you are still a Christian man. Is that a place for Christians?' and he pointed upwards.

'No, indeed,' I answered, 'but still I cannot come, for my wife and son are there, and I must return to die with them if need be. If you bear me any gratitude, strive in return to save their lives, since for my own I care but little.'

'That I will,' he said, and then we let him down among his friends, whom he reached in safety.

Now we returned to the temple, giving it out that the Spaniards were in retreat, having failed to cross the breach in the roadway. Here before the temple the orgie still went on. But two Indians remained alive; and the priests of sacrifice grew weary.

'Where are the Teules?' cried a voice. 'Swift! strip them for the altar.'

But the Teules were gone, nor, search where they would, could they find them.

'Their God has taken them beneath His wing,' I said, speaking from the shadow and in a feigned voice. 'Huitzel cannot prevail before the God of the Teules.'

Then I slipped aside, so that none knew that it was I who had spoken, but the cry was caught up and echoed far and wide.

'The God of the Christians has hidden them beneath His wing. Let us make merry with those whom He rejects,' said the cry, and the last of the captives were dragged away.

Now I thought that all was finished, but this was not so. I have spoken of the secret purpose which I read in the sullen eyes of the Indian women as they laboured at the barricades, and I was about to see its execution. Madness still burned in the hearts of these women; they had accomplished their sacrifice, but their festival was still to come. They drew themselves away to the further side of the pyramid, and, heedless of the shots which now and again pierced the breast of one of them--for here they were exposed to the Spanish fire--remained a while in preparation. With them went the priests of sacrifice, but now, as before, the rest of the men stood in sullen groups, watching what befell, but lifting no hand or voice to hinder its hellishness.

One woman did not go with them, and that woman was Otomie my wife.

She stood by the stone of sacrifice, a piteous sight to see, for her frenzy or rather her madness had outworn itself, and she was as she had ever been. There stood Otomie, gazing with wide and horror-stricken eyes now at the tokens of this unholy rite and now at her own hands--as though she thought to see them red, and shuddered at the thought. I drew near to her and touched her on the shoulder. She turned swiftly, gasping,

'Husband! husband!'

'It is I,' I answered, 'but call me husband no more.'

'Oh! what have I done?' she wailed, and fell senseless in my arms.

And here I will add what at the time I knew nothing of, for it was told me in after years by the Rector of this parish, a very learned man, though one of narrow mind. Had I known it indeed, I should have spoken more kindly to Otomie my wife even in that hour, and thought more gently of her wickedness. It seems, so said my friend the Rector, that from the most ancient times, those women who have bent the knee to demon gods, such as were the gods of Anahuac, are subject at any time to become possessed by them, even after they have abandoned their worship, and to

be driven in their frenzy to the working of the greatest crimes. Thus, among other instances, he told me that a Greek poet named Theocritus sets out in one of his idyls how a woman called Agave, being engaged in a secret religious orgie in honour of a demon named Dionysus, perceived her own son Pentheus watching the celebration of the mysteries, and thereon becoming possessed by the demon she fell on him and murdered him, being aided by the other women. For this the poet, who was also a worshipper of Dionysus, gave her great honour and not reproach, seeing that she did the deed at the behest of this god, 'a deed not to be blamed.'

Now I write of this for a reason, though it has nothing to do with me, for it seems that as Dionysus possessed Agave, driving her to unnatural murder, so did Huitzel possess Otomie, and indeed she said as much to me afterwards. For I am sure that if the devils whom the Greeks worshipped had such power, a still greater strength was given to those of Anahuac, who among all fiends were the first. If this be so, as I believe, it was not Otomie that I saw at the rites of sacrifice, but rather the demon Huitzel whom she had once worshipped, and who had power, therefore, to enter into her body for awhile in place of her own spirit.