

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SURRENDER

Taking Otomie in my arms, I bore her to one of the storehouses attached to the temple. Here many children had been placed for safety, among them my own son.

'What ails our mother, father?' said the boy. 'And why did she shut me in here with these children when it seems that there is fighting without?'

'Your mother has fainted,' I answered, 'and doubtless she placed you here to keep you safe. Now do you tend her till I return.'

'I will do so,' answered the boy, 'but surely it would be better that I, who am almost a man, should be without, fighting the Spaniards at your side rather than within, nursing sick women.'

'Do as I bid you, son,' I said, 'and I charge you not to leave this place until I come for you again.'

Now I passed out of the storehouse, shutting the door behind me. A minute later I wished that I had stayed where I was, since on the platform my eyes were greeted by a sight more dreadful than any that

had gone before. For there, advancing towards us, were the women divided into four great companies, some of them bearing infants in their arms. They came singing and leaping, many of them naked to the middle. Nor was this all, for in front of them ran the pabas and such of the women themselves as were persons in authority. These leaders, male and female, ran and leaped and sang, calling upon the names of their demon-gods, and celebrating the wickednesses of their forefathers, while after them poured the howling troops of women.

To and fro they rushed, now making obeisance to the statue of Huitzel, now prostrating themselves before his hideous sister, the goddess of Death, who sat beside him adorned with her carven necklace of men's skulls and hands, now bowing around the stone of sacrifice, and now thrusting their bare arms into the flames of the holy fire. For an hour or more they celebrated this ghastly carnival, of which even I, versed as I was in the Indian customs, could not fully understand the meaning, and then, as though some single impulse had possessed them, they withdrew to the centre of the open space, and, forming themselves into a double circle, within which stood the pabas, of a sudden they burst into a chant so wild and shrill that as I listened my blood curdled in my veins.

Even now the burden of that chant with the vision of those who sang it sometimes haunts my sleep at night, but I will not write it here. Let him who reads imagine all that is most cruel in the heart of man, and every terror of the evillest dream, adding to these some horror-ridden

tale of murder, ghosts, and inhuman vengeance; then, if he can, let him shape the whole in words and, as in a glass darkly, perchance he may mirror the spirit of that last ancient song of the women of the Otomie, with its sobs, its cries of triumph, and its death wailings.

Ever as they sang, step by step they drew backwards, and with them went the leaders of each company, their eyes fixed upon the statues of their gods. Now they were but a segment of a circle, for they did not advance towards the temple; backward and outward they went with a slow and solemn tramp. There was but one line of them now, for those in the second ring filled the gaps in the first as it widened; still they drew on till at length they stood on the sheer edge of the platform. Then the priests and the women leaders took their place among them and for a moment there was silence, until at a signal one and all they bent them backwards. Standing thus, their long hair waving on the wind, the light of burning houses flaring upon their breasts and in their maddened eyes, they burst into the cry of:

'SAVE US, HUITZEL! RECEIVE US, LORD GOD, OUR HOME!'

Thrice they cried it, each time more shrilly than before, then suddenly they were GONE, the women of the Otomie were no more!

With their own self-slaughter they had consummated the last celebration of the rites of sacrifice that ever shall be held in the City of Pines.

The devil gods were dead and their worshippers with them.

A low murmur ran round the lips of the men who watched, then one cried, and his voice rang strangely in the sudden silence: 'May our wives, the women of the Otomie, rest softly in the Houses of the Sun, for of a surety they teach us how to die.'

'Ay,' I answered, 'but not thus. Let women do self-murder, our foes have swords for the hearts of men.'

I turned to go, and before me stood Otomie.

'What has befallen?' she said. 'Where are my sisters? Oh! surely I have dreamed an evil dream. I dreamed that the gods of my forefathers were strong once more, and that once more they drank the blood of men.'

'Your ill dream has a worse awakening, Otomie,' I answered. 'The gods of hell are still strong indeed in this accursed land, and they have taken your sisters into their keeping.'

'Is it so?' she said softly, 'yet in my dream it seemed to me that this was their last strength ere they sink into death unending. Look yonder!' and she pointed toward the snowy crest of the volcan Xaca.

I looked, but whether I saw the sight of which I am about to tell or whether it was but an imagining born of the horrors of that most hideous

night, in truth I cannot say. At the least I seemed to see this, and afterwards there were some among the Spaniards who swore that they had witnessed it also.

On Xaca's lofty summit, now as always stood a pillar of fiery smoke, and while I gazed, to my vision the smoke and the fire separated themselves. Out of the fire was fashioned a cross of flame, that shone like lightning and stretched for many a rod across the heavens, its base resting on the mountain top. At its foot rolled the clouds of smoke, and now these too took forms vast and terrifying, such forms indeed as those that sat in stone within the temple behind me, but magnified a hundredfold.

'See,' said Otomie again, 'the cross of your God shines above the shapes of mine, the lost gods whom to-night I worshipped though not of my own will.' Then she turned and went.

For some few moments I stood very much afraid, gazing upon the vision on Xaca's snow, then suddenly the rays of the rising sun smote it and it was gone.

Now for three days more we held out against the Spaniards, for they could not come at us and their shot swept over our heads harmlessly. During these days I had no talk with Otomie, for we shrank from one another. Hour by hour she would sit in the storehouse of the temple a

very picture of desolation. Twice I tried to speak with her, my heart being moved to pity by the dumb torment in her eyes, but she turned her head from me and made no answer.

Soon it came to the knowledge of the Spaniards that we had enough food and water upon the teocalli to enable us to live there for a month or more, and seeing that there was no hope of capturing the place by force of arms, they called a parley with us.

I went down to the breach in the roadway and spoke with their envoy, who stood upon the path below. At first the terms offered were that we should surrender at discretion. To this I answered that sooner than do so we would die where we were. Their reply was that if we would give over all who had any part in the human sacrifice, the rest of us might go free. To this I said that the sacrifice had been carried out by women and some few men, and that all of these were dead by their own hands. They asked if Otomie was also dead. I told them no, but that I would never surrender unless they swore that neither she nor her son should be harmed, but rather that together with myself they should be given a safe-conduct to go whither we willed. This was refused, but in the end I won the day, and a parchment was thrown up to me on the point of a lance. This parchment, which was signed by the Captain Bernal Diaz, set out that in consideration of the part that I and some men of the Otomie had played in rescuing the Spanish captives from death by sacrifice, a pardon was granted to me, my wife and child, and all upon the teocalli, with liberty to go whither-soever we would unharmed, our lands and

wealth being however declared forfeit to the viceroy.

With these terms I was well content, indeed I had never hoped to win any that would leave us our lives and liberty.

And yet for my part death had been almost as welcome, for now Otomie had built a wall between us that I could never climb, and I was bound to her, to a woman who, willingly or no, had stained her hands with sacrifice. Well, my son was left to me and with him I must be satisfied; at the least he knew nothing of his mother's shame. Oh! I thought to myself as I climbed the teocalli, oh! that I could but escape far from this accursed land and bear him with me to the English shores, ay, and Otomie also, for there she might forget that once she had been a savage. Alas! it could scarcely be!

Coming to the temple, I and those with me told the good tidings to our companions, who received it silently. Men of a white race would have rejoiced thus to escape, for when death is near all other loss seems as nothing. But with these Indian people it is not so, since when fortune frowns upon them they do not cling to life. These men of the Otomie had lost their country, their wives, their wealth, their brethren, and their homes; therefore life, with freedom to wander whither they would, seemed no great thing to them. So they met the boon that I had won from the mercy of our foes, as had matters gone otherwise they would have met the bane, in sullen silence.

I came to Otomie, and to her also I told the news.

'I had hoped to die here where I am,' she answered. 'But so be it; death is always to be found.'

Only my son rejoiced, because he knew that God had saved us all from death by sword or hunger.

'Father,' he said, 'the Spaniards have given us life, but they take our country and drive us out of it. Where then shall we go?'

'I do not know, my son,' I answered.

'Father,' the lad said again, 'let us leave this land of Anahuac where there is nothing but Spaniards and sorrow. Let us find a ship and sail across the seas to England, our own country.'

The boy spoke my very thought and my heart leapt at his words, though I had no plan to bring the matter about. I pondered a moment, looking at Otomie.

'The thought is good, Teule,' she said, answering my unspoken question; 'for you and for our son there is no better, but for myself I will answer in the proverb of my people, "The earth that bears us lies lightest on our bones."'

Then she turned, making ready to quit the storehouse of the temple where we had been lodged during the siege, and no more was said about the matter.

Before the sun set a weary throng of men, with some few women and children, were marching across the courtyard that surrounded the pyramid, for a bridge of timbers taken from the temple had been made over the breach in the roadway that wound about its side.

At the gates the Spaniards were waiting to receive us. Some of them cursed us, some mocked, but those of the nobler sort said nothing, for they pitied our plight and respected us for the courage we had shown in the last struggle. Their Indian allies were there also, and these grinned like unfed pumas, snarling and whimpering for our lives, till their masters kicked them to silence. The last act of the fall of Anahuac was as the first had been, dog still ate dog, leaving the goodly spoil to the lion who watched.

At the gates we were sorted out; the men of small condition, together with the children, were taken from the ruined city by an escort and turned loose upon the mountains, while those of note were brought to the Spanish camp, to be questioned there before they were set free. I, with my wife and son, was led to the palace, our old home, there to learn the will of the Captain Diaz.

It is but a little way to go, and yet there was something to be seen

in the path. For as we walked I looked up, and before me, standing with folded arms and apart from all men, was de Garcia. I had scarcely thought of him for some days, so full had my mind been of other matters, but at the sight of his evil face I remembered that while this man lived, sorrow and danger must be my bedfellows.

He watched us pass, taking note of all, then he called to me who walked last:

'Farewell, Cousin Wingfield. You have lived through this bout also and won a free pardon, you, your woman and your brat together. If the old war-horse who is set over us as a captain had listened to me you should have been burned at the stake, every one of you, but so it is. Farewell for a while, friend. I am away to Mexico to report these matters to the viceroy, who may have a word to say.'

I made no answer, but asked of our conductor, that same Spaniard whom I had saved from the sacrifice, what the senor meant by his words.

'This, Teule; that there has been a quarrel between our comrade Sarceda and our captain. The former would have granted you no terms, or failing this would have decoyed you from your stronghold with false promises, and then have put you to the sword as infidels with whom no oath is binding. But the captain would not have it so, for he said that faith must be kept even with the heathen, and we whom you had saved cried shame on him. And so words ran high, and in the end the Senor Sarceda,

who is third in command among us, declared that he would be no party to this peacemaking, but would be gone to Mexico with his servants, there to report to the viceroy. Then the Captain Diaz bade him begone to hell if he wished and report to the devil, saying that he had always believed that he had escaped thence by mistake, and they parted in wrath who, since the day of *noche triste*, never loved each other much; the end of it being that Sarceda rides for Mexico within an hour, to make what mischief he can at the viceroy's court, and I think that you are well rid of him.'

'Father,' said my son to me, 'who is that Spaniard who looks so cruelly upon us?'

'That is he of whom I have told you, son, de Garcia, who has been the curse of our race for two generations, who betrayed your grandfather to the Holy Office, and murdered your grandmother, who put me to torture, and whose ill deeds are not done with yet. Beware of him, son, now and ever, I beseech you.'

Now we were come to the palace, almost the only house that was left standing in the City of Pines. Here an apartment was given to us at the end of the long building, and presently a command was brought to us that I and my wife should wait upon the Spanish captain Diaz.

So we went, though Otomie desired to stay behind, leaving our son alone

in the chamber where food had been brought to him. I remember that I kissed him before I left, though I do not know what moved me to do so, unless it was because I thought that he might be asleep when I returned. The Captain Diaz had his quarters at the other end of the palace, some two hundred paces away. Presently we stood before him. He was a rough-looking, thick-set man well on in years, with bright eyes and an ugly honest face, like the face of a peasant who has toiled a lifetime in all weathers, only the fields that Diaz tilled were fields of war, and his harvest had been the lives of men. Just then he was joking with some common soldiers in a strain scarcely suited to nice ears, but so soon as he saw us he ceased and came forward. I saluted him after the Indian fashion by touching the earth with my hand, for what was I but an Indian captive?

'Your sword,' he said briefly, as he scanned me with his quick eyes.

I unbuckled it from my side and handed it to him, saying in Spanish:

'Take it, Captain, for you have conquered, also it does but come back to its owner.' For this was the same sword that I had captured from one Bernal Diaz in the fray of the noche triste.

He looked at it, then swore a great oath and said:

'I thought that it could be no other man. And so we meet again thus after so many years. Well, you gave me my life once, and I am glad that

I have lived to pay the debt. Had I not been sure that it was you, you had not won such easy terms, friend. How are you named? Nay, I know what the Indians call you.'

'I am named Wingfield.'

'Friend Wingfield then. For I tell you that I would have sat beneath yonder devil's house,' and he nodded towards the teocalli, 'till you starved upon its top. Nay, friend Wingfield, take back the sword. I suited myself with another many years ago, and you have used this one gallantly; never have I seen Indians make a better fight. And so that is Otomie, Montezuma's daughter and your wife, still handsome and royal, I see. Lord! Lord! it is many years ago, and yet it seems but yesterday that I saw her father die, a Christian-hearted man, though no Christian, and one whom we dealt ill with. May God forgive us all! Well, Madam, none can say that YOU have a Christian heart. If a certain tale that I have heard of what passed yonder, some three nights since, is true. But we will speak no more of it, for the savage blood will show, and you are pardoned for your husband's sake who saved my comrades from the sacrifice.'

To all this Otomie listened, standing still like a statue, but she never answered a word. Indeed she had spoken very rarely since that dreadful night of her unspeakable shame.

'And now, friend Wingfield,' went on the Captain Diaz, 'what is your

purpose? You are free to go where you will, whither then will you go?'

'I do not know,' I answered. 'Years ago, when the Aztec emperor gave me my life and this princess my wife in marriage, I swore to be faithful to him and his cause, and to fight for them till Popo ceased to vomit smoke, till there was no king in Tenochtitlan, and the people of Anahuac were no more a people.'

'Then you are quit of your oath, friend, for all these things have come about, and there has been no smoke on Popo for these two years. Now, if you will be advised by me, you will turn Christian again and enter the service of Spain. But come, let us to supper, we can talk of these matters afterwards.'

So we sat down to eat by the light of torches in the banqueting hall with Bernal Diaz and some other of the Spaniards. Otomie would have left us, and though the captain bade her stay she ate nothing, and presently slipped away from the chamber.