

CHAPTER IV

THE ORACLE OF RIMAC

In this town of Quismancu I remained for seven days, going abroad but little, for when I did so the people pressed about me and stared me out of countenance. There was a garden at the back of the house surrounded by a wall built of mud bricks. Here for the most part I sat and here the great ones of the place came to visit me, bringing me offerings of robes and golden vessels and I know not what besides. To all of them I told the same story--or, rather, Kari told it for me--namely, that I had risen out of the sea and found him a hermit, named Zapana, on the desert island. What is more, they believed it and, indeed, it was true, for had I not risen out of the sea?

From time to time Quilla came to see me also in this garden, bearing gifts of flowers, and with her I talked alone. She would sit upon a low stool, considering me with her beautiful eyes, as though she would search out my soul. One day she said to me:

"Tell me, Lord, are you a god or a man?"

"What is a god?" I asked.

"A god is that which is adored and loved."

"And is a man never adored and loved, Quilla? For instance, I understand that you are to be married, and doubtless you adore and love him who will be your husband."

She shivered a little and answered:

"It is not so. I hate him."

"Then why are you going to marry him? Are you forced to do so, Quilla?"

"No, Lord. I marry him for my people's sake. He desires me for my inheritance and my beauty, and by my beauty I may lead him down that road on which my people wish that he should go."

"An old story, Quilla, but will you be happy thus?"

"No, Lord, I shall be very unhappy. But what does it matter? I am only a woman, and such is the lot of women."

"Women, like gods and men, are also sometimes loved and adored, Quilla."

She flushed at the words and answered:

"Ah! if that were so life might be different. But even if it were so and I found the man who could love and adore even for a year, for me it is now too late. I am sworn away by an oath that may not be broken, for to

break it might bring death upon my people."

"To whom are you sworn?"

"To the Child of the Sun, no less a man; to the god who will be Inca of all this land."

"And what is this god like?"

"They say that he is huge and swarthy, with a large mouth, and I know that he has the heart of a brute. He is cruel and false also, and he counts his women by the score. Yet his father, the Inca, loves him more than any of his children, and ere long he will be king after him."

"And would you, who are sweet and lovely as the moon after which you are named, give yourself body and soul to such a one?"

Again she flushed.

"Do my own ears hear the White-God-from-the-Sea call me sweet and lovely as the moon? If so, I thank him, and pray him to remember that the perfect and lovely are always chosen to be the sacrifice of gods."

"But, Quilla, the sacrifice may be all in vain. How long will you hold the fancy of this loose-living prince?"

"Long enough to serve my purpose, Lord--or, at least," she added with flashing eyes, "long enough to kill him if he will not go my country's road. Oh! ask me no more, for your words stir something in my breast, a new spirit of which I never dreamed. Had I heard them but three moons gone, it might have been otherwise. Why did you not appear sooner from the sea, my lord Hurachi, be you god or man?"

Then, with something like a sob, she rose, made obeisance, and fled away.

That evening, when we were alone in my chamber where none could hear us,

I told Kari that Quilla was promised in marriage to a prince who would be Inca of all the land.

"Is it so?" said Kari. "Well, learn, Master, that this prince is my brother, he whom I hate, he who has done me bitter wrong, he who stole away my wife and poisoned me. Urco is his name. Does this lady Quilla love him?"

"I think not. I think that like you she hates him, yet will marry him for reasons of policy."

"Doubtless she hates him now, whatever she did a week ago," said Kari in

a dry voice. "But what fruit will this tree bear? Master, are you minded to come with me to-morrow to visit the temple of Pachacamac in the inner sanctuary of which sits the god Rimac who speaks oracles?"

"For what purpose, Kari?" I answered moodily.

"That we may hear oracles, Master. I think that if you choose to go the lady Quilla would come with us, since perhaps she would like also to hear oracles."

"I will go if it can be done in secret, say at night, for I weary of being stared at by these people."

This I said because I desired to learn of the religion of this nation and to see new things.

"Perhaps it can be so ordered, Master. I will ask of the matter."

It seemed that Kari did ask, perhaps of the high priest of Pachacamac, for between all the worshippers of this god there was a brotherhood; perhaps of the lord Quismancu, or perhaps of Quilla herself--I do not know. At least, on this same day Quismancu inquired whether it would please me to visit the temple that night, and so the matter was settled.

Accordingly, after the darkness had fallen, two litters were brought into which we entered, Quilla and a waiting woman seating themselves in

one of them and Kari and I in the other, for Quismancu and his wife did not come--why I cannot say. Then, preceded by another litter in which was a priest of the god, and surrounded by a guard of soldiers, through a rain-storm we were borne up the hill--it was but a little way--to the temple.

Here, before the golden doors on which the lightning glimmered fitfully, we descended and were led by white-robed men bearing lanterns, through various courts to the inner sanctuary of the god, on the threshold of which I crossed myself, not loving the company of heathen idols. So far as I could see by the lamplight it was a great and glorious place, and everywhere that the eye fell was gold--places of gold on the walls, offerings of gold upon the floor, stars of gold upon the roof. The strange thing about this holy place, however, was that it seemed to be quite empty except for the aforesaid gold. There was neither altar nor image--nothing but a lamp-lit void.

Here all prostrated themselves, save I alone, and prayed in silence.

When they rose again, in a whisper I asked of Kari where was the god. To which he answered: "Nowhere, yet everywhere." This I thought a true saying, and indeed so solemn was that place that I felt as though I were surrounded by that which is divine.

After a while the priests, who were gorgeously apparelled, led us across the sanctuary to a door that opened upon some stairs. Down these stairs we went into a long passage that seemed to run beneath the earth, for

the air in it was heavy. When we had walked a hundred paces or more in this narrow place, we came to other steps and another door, passing through which we found ourselves in a second temple, smaller than that which we had visited, but like to it rich with gold. In the centre of this temple sat the image of a man rudely fashioned of gold.

"Behold Rimac the Speaker!" whispered Kari.

"How can gold speak?" I asked.

Kari made no answer.

Presently the priests began to mutter prayers and incantations that I thought unholy, after which they laid offerings of what looked like raw flesh set in cups of gold before the idol, that I thought unholier still. Lastly they drew back and asked of what we would learn.

I made no answer who did not like the business. Nor did Kari say anything, but Quilla spoke out boldly, saying that we would learn of the future and what would befall us.

Now there was a long silence, and I confess that fear got hold of me, for it seemed to me as though spirits were moving in the air and through the darkness behind us--yes, as though I could hear their whisperings and the rustle of their wings. Suddenly, at the end of this silence, the golden image in front of us began to glow as though it were molten, and

the emerald eyes that were set in its head to sparkle terribly, which frightened me so much that had it not been for shame's sake I would have run away, but because of this stood still and prayed to St. Hubert to protect me from the devil and his works. Presently I prayed still harder, for the image began to speak--yes, in a horrid, whistling voice it spoke, although no one was near to it. These were the words it said:

"Who is this clad in silver whose skin is white and whose hair is yellow? Such an one I have not seen for a thousand years, and such as he it is that shall possess themselves of the Land of Tavantinsuyu, shall steal its wealth, shall slay its people, and shall cast down its gods. But not yet, not yet! Therefore this is the command of Pachacamac, uttered by the voice of Rimac the Speaker, that none do harm to or cross the will of this mighty seaborne lord, since he shall be as a strong wall to many and his sword shall be red with the blood of the wicked."

The whistling voice ceased while the priests and all there stared at me, for they seemed to think its words fateful. Then suddenly it began again:

"And who is this that came out of the sea with the Shining One, having wandered further than any of his ancient blood? I know. I know, yet I may not say, since the Spirit of spirits whose image he wears upon his heart bids me be silent. Be bold! Be bold! Prosper and grow great, Child of Pachacamac, for thy wanderings are not yet done. Still there is a mountain to be climbed, and on the crest of it hangs a fringe of

Heaven's gold."

Again the voice ceased, while this time all stared at Kari, who shook his head humbly as though bewildered by what he could not understand. Once more the image spoke:

"Who is this daughter of the Sun, in whose veins play moonbeams and who is fairer than the evening star? One, I think, whom men shall desire and because of whom shall flow the blood of the great. One whose thought is swift as the lightning and subtle as the snake, one in whom passion burns like fire in the womb of the mountain, but who is filled with spirit that dances above the fire and who longs for things that are afar. Daughter of the Sun in whose blood run the moonbeams, thou shalt slip from the hated arms and the Sun shall be thy shelter, and in the beloved arms thou shalt sleep at last. Yet from the vengeance of the god betrayed fly fast and far!"

Again the voice ceased, and I thought that all was over. But it was not so, for after a little space the golden figure of the oracle glowed more fiercely than before and the emerald eyes shone more terribly, and in a kind of scream it spoke, saying:

"The snows of Tavantinsuyu shall be red with blood, the waters of her rivers shall be full of blood. Yes, ye three shall wade through blood, and in a rain of blood shall pluck the fruit of your desires. Still for a while the gods of Tavantinsuyu shall endure and its kings shall reign

and its children shall be free. But in the end death for the gods and death for the kings and death for the people. Still, not yet--not yet! None who live shall see it, nor their children, nor their children's children. Rimac the Voice has spoken; treasure ye his words and interpret them as ye will."

The whistling voice died away like the thin cry of some starving child in a desert, and there was a great silence. Then in a moment the figure of gold ceased to glow and the eyes of emerald to burn, leaving the thing but a dead lump of metal. The priests prostrated themselves, and rising, led us from the place without a word, but in the light of the lamps I saw that their faces were full of terror--so full that I doubted whether it could be feigned.

As we had come, so we went, and at last found ourselves outside the glittering temple doors where the litters awaited us.

"What did it mean?" I whispered to Quilla, who was by my side.

"For you and the other I know not," she answered hurriedly; "but for me I think that it means death. Yet, not until--not until----" And she ceased.

At that moment the moon appeared from behind the rain-clouds and shone

upon her upturned face, and in her eyes there was a glory.

Now, as I learned afterwards, these words of its most famous oracle went all through the land and caused great talk and wonder mixed with fear, for none of such import had been spoken by it for generations. More, they shaped my own fortunes, for, as I came to know, Quismancu and his people had determined that I should not be allowed to go from among them. Not every day did a white god rise from the sea, and they desired that having come to them, there he should bide to be their defence and boast, and with him that hermit named Zapana, to whom, as they believed, he had appeared upon the desert isle. But after Rimac had spoken all this was changed, and when I said it was my will to depart and accompany Quilla upon her journey home to her father, Huaracha, King of the Chancas, as by swift messenger this King invited me to do, Quismancu answered that if I so desired I must be obeyed as the god Rimac had commanded, but that nevertheless he was sure that we should meet again.

Now, thinking these things over, I wondered much whether that oracle came out of the golden Rimac or perchance from the heart of Quilla, or of Kari, or of both of them, who desired that I should leave the Yuncas and travel to the Chancas and further. I did not know, nor was I ever to learn, since about matters to do with their gods these people are as secret as the grave. I asked Kari and I asked Quilla, but both of them stared at me with innocent eyes, and replied who were they to inspire

the golden tongue of Rimac? Nor, indeed, did I ever learn whether Rimac the Speaker was a spirit or but a lump of metal through which some priest talked. All I know is that from one end of Tavantinsuyu to the other he was believed to be a spirit who spoke the very will of God to those who could understand his words, though this as a Christian man I could not credit.

So it came about that some days later, with Quilla and Kari and certain old men who, I took it, were priests or ambassadors, or both, I departed on our journey. As we went the people wept around my litter for sorrow, real or feigned, for we travelled in litters guarded by some two hundred soldiers armed with axes of copper and bows, and cast flowers before the feet of the bearers. But I did not weep, for though I had been very kindly treated there and, indeed, worshipped, glad was I to see the last of that city and its people who wearied me.

Moreover, I felt that there I was in the midst of plots, though of what these were I knew nothing, save that Quilla, who to the outward eye was but a lovely, innocent maiden, had a hand in them. Plots there were indeed, for, as I came to understand in time, they were nothing less than the preparing of a great war which the Chancas and the Yuncas were to wage against their over-lord, the Inca, the king of the mighty nation of the Quichuas, who had his home at a city called Cuzco far inland. Indeed, there and then this alliance was arranged, and by Quilla--Quilla, who proposed to sacrifice herself and by the gift of her person to his heir, to throw dust in the eyes of the Inca, whose

dominion her father planned to take and with it the imperial crown of Tavantinsuyu.

Leaving the coastland, we were borne forward through the passes of great mountains, upon a wonderful road so finely made that never had I seen its like in England. At times we crossed rivers, but over these were thrown bridges of stone. Or mayhap we came to swamps, yet there the road still ran, built upon deep foundations in the mud. Never did it turn aside; always it went on, conquering every hindrance, for this was one of the Inca's roads that pierced Tavantinsuyu from end to end. We came to many towns, for this land was thickly populated, and for the most part slept in one of them each night. But always my fame had gone before me, and the Curacas, or chiefs of the towns, waited upon me with offerings as though I were indeed divine.

For the first five days of that journey I saw little of Quilla, but at length one night we were forced to camp at a kind of rest-house upon the top of a high mountain pass, where it was very cold, for the deep snow lay all about. At this place, as here were no Curacas to trouble me, I went out alone when Kari was elsewhere, and climbed a certain peak which was not far from the rest-house, that thence I might see the sunset and think in quiet.

Very glorious was the scene from that high point. All round me stood

the cold crests of snow-clad mountains towering to the very skies, while between them lay deep valleys where rivers ran like veins of silver. So immense was the landscape that it seemed to have no end, and so grand that it crushed the spirit, while above arched the perfect sky in whose rich blue the gorgeous lights of evening began to gather as the great sun sank behind the snowy peaks.

Far up in the heavens floated one wide-winged bird, the eagle of the mountains, which is larger than any other fowl that I have ever seen, and the red light playing on it turned it to a thing of fire. I watched that bird and wished that I too had pinions which could bear me far away to the sea and over it.

And yet did I wish to go who had no home left on all the earth and no kind heart that would welcome me? Awhile ago I should have answered, "Yes, anywhere out of this loneliness," but now I was not so sure. Here at least Kari was my friend if a jealous one, though of late, as I could see, he was thinking of other things than friendship--dark plottings and high ambitions of which as yet he said little to me.

Then there was that strange and beautiful woman, Quilla, to whom my heart went out and not only because she was beautiful, and who, as I thought, at times looked kindly on me. But if so, what did it avail; seeing that she was promised in marriage to some high-placed native man who would be a king? Surely I had known enough of women who were promised in marriage to other men, and should do well to let her be.

Thinking thus, desolation took hold of me and I sat myself down on a rock and covered my face with my hands that I might not see the tears, which I knew were gathering in my eyes, as they fell from them. Yes, there in the midst of that awful solitude, I, Hubert of Hastings, whose soul it filled, sat down like a lost child and wept.

Presently I felt a touch upon my shoulder and let fall my hands, thinking that Kari had found me out, to hear a soft voice, the voice of Quilla, say:

"So it seems that the gods can weep. Why do you weep, O God-from-the-Waves who here are named Hurachi?"

"I weep," I answered, "because I am a stranger in a strange land; I weep because I have not wings whereon I can fly away like that great bird above us."

She looked at me awhile, then said, most gently:

"And whither would you fly, O God-from-the-Sea? Back into the sea?"

"Cease to call me a god," I answered, "who, as you know well, am but a man though of another race than yours."

"I thought it but I did not know. But whither would you fly, O Lord

Hurachi?"

"To the land where I was born, Lady Quilla; the land that I shall never see again."

"Ah! doubtless there you have wives and children for whom your heart is hungry."

"Nay, now I have neither wife nor child."

"Then once you had a wife. Tell me of that wife. Was she fair?"

"Why should I tell you a sad story? She is dead."

"Dead or living, you still love her, and where there is love there is no death."

"Nay, I only love what I thought she was."

"Was she false, then?"

"Yes, false and yet true. So true that she died because she was false."

"How can a woman be both false and true?"

"Woman can be all things. Ask the question of your own heart. Can you

not perchance be both false and true?"

She thought awhile and, leaving this matter, said:

"So, having once loved, you can never love again."

"Why not? Perchance I can love too much. But what would be the use when more love would but mean more loss and pain?"

"Whom should you love, my lord Hurachi, seeing that the women of your own folk are far away?"

"I think one who is very near, if she would pay back love for love."

Quilla made no answer, and I thought that she was angry and would go away. But she did not; indeed, she sat herself down upon the stone at my side and covered her face with her hands as I had done and began to weep as I had done. Now in my turn I asked her:

"Why do you weep?"

"Because I, too, must know loneliness, and with it shame, Lord Hurachi."

At these words my heart beat and passion flamed up in me. Stretching out my hand I drew hers away and in the dying light gazed at the face beneath. Lo! on its loveliness there was a look which could not be

misread.

"Do you, then, also love?" I whispered.

"Aye, more, I think, than ever woman loved before. From the moment when first I saw you sleeping in the moonbeams on the desert isle, I knew my fate had found me, and that I loved. I fought against it because I must, but that love has grown and grown, till now I am all love, and, having given everything, have no more left to give."

When I heard this, making no answer, I swept her into my arms and kissed her, and there she lay upon my breast and kissed me back.

"Let me go, and hear me," she murmured presently, "for you are strong and I am weak."

I obeyed, and she sank back upon the stone.

"My lord," she said, "our case is very sad, or at least my case is sad, since though you being a man may love often, I can love but once, and, my lord, it may not be."

"Why not?" I asked hoarsely. "Your people think me a god; cannot a god take whom he wills to wife?"

"Not when she is vowed to another god, he who will be Inca; not when on

her, mayhap, hangs the fate of nations."

"We might fly, Quilla."

"Whither could the God-from-the-Sea fly and whither could fly the daughter of the Moon, who is vowed to the son of the Sun in marriage, save to death?"

"There are worse things than death, Quilla."

"Aye, but my life is in pawn. I must live that my people may not die. Myself I offered it to this cause and now, being royal, I cannot take it back again for my own joy. It is better to be shamed with honour than to be loved in the lap of shame."

"What then?" I asked hopelessly.

"Only this, that above us are the gods, and--heard you not the oracle of Rimac that declared to me that I should slip from the hated arms, that the Sun should be my shelter, and in the beloved arms I should sleep at last, though from the vengeance of the god betrayed I must fly fast and far? I think that this means death, but also it means life in death and--O arms beloved, you shall fold me yet. I know not how, but have faith--for you shall fold me yet. Meanwhile, tempt me not from the path of honour, since this I know, that it alone can lead me to my home. Yet who is the god betrayed from whom I must fly? Who, who?"

Thus she spoke and was silent, and I, too, was silent. Yes, there we sat, both silent in the darkness, searching the heavens for a guiding star. And as we sat, presently I heard the voice of Kari saying:

"Have I found you, Lord, and you also, Lady Quilla? Return, I pray you, for all search and are frightened."

"Why?" I answered. "The lady Quilla and I study this wondrous scene."

"Yes, Lord, though to those who are not god-born it would be difficult in this darkness. Suffer, now that I show you the path."