

CHAPTER VI

THE CHOICE

That night I slept but ill who was overwhelmed with all that had befallen me of good and evil. I had gained a wondrous love, but she who gave it was, it seemed, about to be lost to me, aye, and to be thrown to another whom she hated, to forward the dark policies of a great and warlike people. I had spoken to her with high words of hope, but of it in my heart there was little. She would follow what she held to be her duty to the end, and that end, if she kept her promise and did not die as she desired to do--was--the arms of Urco. From these I could see no escape for her, and the thought maddened me. Moreover, Kari was gone leaving me utterly alone among these strangers, and whether he would return again I did not know. Oh! almost I wished that I were dead.

The morning broke at last and I arose and called for Zapana. Then came others who said that my servant, Zapana, could not be found, whereat I affected surprise and anger. Still these others waited on me well enough, and I rose and ate in pomp and luxury. Scarcely had I finished my meal than there appeared heralds who summoned me to the presence of the king Huaracha.

I went, borne in a litter, although an arrow from my black bow would have flown from door to door. At the portal of the palace, which was like others I had seen, only finer, I was met by soldiers and gaily

dressed servants and led across a courtyard within, which I could see was prepared for some ceremony, to a small chamber on the further side. Here, when my eyes grew accustomed to the half-darkness, I perceived a man of some sixty years of age, and behind him two soldiers. At once I noted that everything about this man was plain and simple; the chamber, which was little more than four whitewashed walls with a floor of stone, the stool he sat on, even his apparel. Here were no gold or silver or broided cloths, or gems, or other rich and costly things such as these people love, but rather those that are suited to a soldier. A soldier he looked indeed, being burly and broad and scarred upon his homely face, in which gleamed eyes that were steady and piercing.

As I entered, the king Huaracha, for it was he, rose from his stool and bowed to me, and I bowed back to him. Then he motioned to one of the soldiers to give me another stool, upon which I sat myself, and speaking in a strong, low voice, using that tongue which Kari had taught me, said:

"Greeting, White-God-from-the-Sea, or golden-bearded man named the lord Hurachi, I know not which, of whom I have heard so much and whom I am glad to behold in my poor city. Say, can you understand my talk?"

Thus he spoke, searching me with his eyes, though all the while I perceived that they rested rather on my armour and the great sword, Wave-Flame, than on my face.

I gave him back his greeting and answered that I understood the tongue he used though not so very well, whereon he began to speak about the armour and the sword, which puzzled him who had never seen steel.

"Make me some like them," he said, "and I will give you ten times their weight in gold, which, after all, is of no use since with it one cannot kill enemies."

"In my country with it one can corrupt them," I answered, "or buy them to be friends."

"So you have a country," he interrupted shrewdly. "I thought that the gods had none."

"Even the gods live somewhere," I replied.

He laughed, and turning to the two soldiers, who also were staring at my mail and sword, bade them go. When the heavy door had shut behind them and we were quite alone, he said:

"My lord Hurachi, I have heard from my daughter how she found you in the sea, a story indeed. I have also heard, or guessed, it matters not which, that her heart has turned towards you, as is not strange, seeing the manner of man you are, if indeed you be not more than man, and that women are ever prone to love those whom they think they have saved. Is this true, my lord Hurachi?"

"Ask of the Lady Quilla, O King."

"Mayhap I have asked and at last it seems that you make no denial. Now hearken, my lord Hurachi. You are my honoured guest and save one thing, all I have is yours, but you must talk no more alone with the lady Quilla in gardens at night."

Now, making no attempt to deny or explain which I saw would be useless, since he knew it all, I asked boldly:

"Why not?"

"I thought that perchance my daughter had told you, Lord Hurachi, but if you desire to hear it from my own lips also, for this reason. The lady Quilla is promised in marriage and if she lives that promise must be fulfilled, since on it hangs the fate of nations. Therefore, it is, although to grieve to part such a pair, that you and she must meet no more in gardens or elsewhere. Know that if you do, you will bring about her death and your own, if gods can die."

Now I thought awhile and answered:

"These are heavy words, King Huaracha, seeing that I will not hide from you that I love your daughter well and that she, who is great-hearted, loves me well and desires me for her husband."

"I know it and I grieve for both of you," he said courteously.

"King Huaracha," I went on, "I see that you are a soldier and the lord of armies, and it has come into my mind that perchance you dream of war."

"The gods see far, White Lord."

"Now god or man, I also am a soldier, King, and I know arts of battle which perhaps are hidden from you and your people; also I cannot be harmed by weapons because of magic armour that I wear, and none can stand before me in fight because of this magic sword I carry, and I can direct battles with a general's mind. In a great war, King, I might be useful to you were I the husband of your daughter and therefore your son and friend, and perchance by my skill make the difference to you and your nation between victory and defeat."

"Doubtless this is so, O Son-of-the-Sea."

"In the same fashion, King, were I upon the side of your enemies, to them I might bring victory and to you defeat. Whom do you desire that I should serve, you or them?"

"I desire that you should serve me," he replied with eagerness. "Do so and all the wealth of this land shall be yours, with the rule of my

armies under me. You shall have palaces and fields and gold and silver, and the fairest of its daughters for wives, and be worshipped as a god, and for aught I know, be king after me, not only of my country but mayhap of another that is even greater."

"It is a good offer, King, but not enough. Give me your daughter, Quilla, and you may keep all the rest."

"White Lord, I cannot, since to do so I must break my word."

"Then, King, I cannot serve you, and unless you kill me first--if you are able--I will be, not your friend, but your enemy."

"Can a god be killed, and if so can a guest be killed? Lord, you know that he cannot. Yet he can remain a guest. To my country you have come, Lord, and in my country you shall stay, unless you have wings beneath that silver coat. Quilla goes hence but here you bide, my lord Hurachi."

"Perchance I shall find the wings," I answered.

"Aye, Lord, for it is said that the dead fly, and if I may not kill you, others may. Therefore my counsel to you is to stay here, taking such things as my poor country can give you, and not to try to follow the moon (by this he meant Quilla) to the golden city of Cuzco, which henceforth must be her home."

Now having no more to say, since war had been declared between us, as it were, I rose to bid this king farewell. He also rose, then, as though struck by a sudden thought, said that he desired to speak with my servant, Zapana, he whom the lady Quilla had found with me in the island of the sea. I replied that he could not since Zapana had vanished, I knew not where.

At this intelligence he appeared to be disturbed and was beginning to question me somewhat sternly as to who Zapana might be and how I had first come into his company, when the door of the room opened and through it Quilla entered even more gorgeously robed and looking lovelier than ever I had seen her. She bowed, first to the King and then to me, saying:

"Lord and Father, I come to tell you that the Inca Upanqui draws near with his princes and captains."

"Is it so, Daughter?" he answered. "Then make your farewell here and now to this White-Son-of-the-Sea, since it is my will that you depart with Upanqui who comes to escort you to Cuzco, the City of the Sun, there to be given as wife to the prince Urco, son of the Sun, who will sit on the Inca's throne."

"I make my farewell to the lord Hurachi as you command," she answered, curtsying, and in a very quiet voice, "but know, my father, that I love this White Lord as he loves me, and that therefore, although I

may be given to the Prince Urco, as a gold cup is given, never shall he drink from the cup and never will I be his wife."

"You have courage, Daughter, and I like courage," said Huaracha. "For the rest, settle the matter as you will and if you can slip from the coils of this snake of an Urco unpoisoned, do so, since my bargain is fulfilled and my honour satisfied. Only hither you shall not return to the lord Hurachi, nor shall the lord Hurachi go to you at Cuzco."

"That shall be as the gods decree, my father, and meanwhile I play my part as you decree. Lord Hurachi, fare you well till in life or death we meet again."

Then she bowed to me, and went, and presently without more words we followed after her.

In front of the palace there was a great square of open ground surrounded by houses, except towards the east, and on this square was marshalled an army of men all splendidly arrayed and carrying copper-headed spears. In front of these was pitched a great pavilion made of cloths of various colours. Here King Huaracha, simply dressed in a robe of white cotton but wearing a little crown of gold and carrying a large spear, took his seat upon a throne, while to his right, on a smaller throne, sat Quilla, and on his left stood yet another throne

ornamented with gold, that was empty. Between the throne of Huaracha and that which was empty stood a chair covered with silver on which I was bidden to take my seat, so placed that all could see me, while behind and around were lords and generals.

Scarcely were we arranged when from the dip beyond the open space appeared heralds who carried spears and were fantastically dressed. These shouted that the Inca Upanqui, the Child of the Sun, the god who ruled the earth, drew near.

"Let him approach!" said Huaracha briefly, and they departed.

Awhile later there arose a sound of barbarous music and of chanting and from the dip below emerged a glittering litter borne upon the shoulders of richly clothed men all of whom, I was told afterwards, were princes by blood, and surrounded by beautiful women who carried jewelled fans, and by councillors. It was the litter of the Inca Upanqui, and after it marched a guard of picked warriors, perhaps there were a hundred of them, not more.

The litter was set down in front of the throne; gilded curtains were drawn and out of it came a man whose attire dazzled the eyes. It seemed to consist of gold and precious stones sewn on to a mantle of crimson wool. He wore a head-dress also of as many colours as Joseph's coat, surmounted by two feathers, which he alone might bear, from which head-dress a scarlet fringe that was made of tasselled wool hung down

upon his forehead. This was the Inca's crown, even to touch which was death, and its name was Lautu. He was a very old man for his white locks and beard hung down upon his splendid garments and he supported himself upon his royal staff that was headed by a great emerald. His fine-cut face also, though still kingly, was weak with age and his eyes were bleary. At the sight of him all rose and Huaracha descended from his throne, saying in a loud voice:

"Welcome to the land of the Chancas, O Upanqui, Inca of the Quichuas."

The old monarch eyed him for a moment, then answered in a thin voice:

"Greeting to Huaracha, Curaca of the Chancas."

Huaracha bowed and said:

"I thank you, but here among my own people my title is not Curaca, but King, O Inca."

Upanqui drew himself up to his full height and replied:

"The Incas know no kings throughout the land of Tavantinsuyu save themselves, O Huaracha."

"Be it so, O Inca; yet the Chancas, who are unconquered, know a king, and I am he. I pray you be seated, O Inca."

Upanqui stood still for a moment frowning, and, as I thought, was about to make some short answer, when suddenly his glance fell upon me and changed the current of his mind.

"Is that the White-god-from-the-Sea?" he asked, with an almost childish curiosity. "I heard that he was here, and to tell the truth that is why I came, just to look at him, not to bandy words with you, O Huaracha, who they say can only be talked to with a spear point. What a red beard he has and how his coat shines. Let him come and worship me."

"He will come, but I do not think that he will worship. They say he is a god himself, O Inca."

"Do they? Well, now I remember there are strange prophecies about a white god who should rise out of the sea, as did the forefather of the Incas. They say, too, that this god shall do much mischief to the land when he comes. So perhaps he had better not draw too near to me, for I like not the look of that great big sword of his. By the Sun, my father, he is tall and big and strong" (I had risen from my chair) "and his beard is like a fire; it will set the hearts of all the women burning, though perhaps if he is a god he does not care for women. I must consult my magicians about it, and the head priest of the Temple of the Sun. Tell the White God to make ready to return with me to Cuzco."

"The lord Hurachi is my guest, O Inca, and here he bides with me," said

Huaracha.

"Nonsense, nonsense! When the Inca invites any one to his court, he must come. But enough of him for the present. I came here to talk of other matters. What were they? Let me sit down and think."

So he was conducted to his throne upon which he sat trying to collect his mind, which I saw was weak with age. The end of it was that he called to his aid a stern-faced, shifty-eyed, middle-aged minister, whom after I came to know as the High-priest Larico, the private Councillor of himself and of his son, Urco, and one of the most powerful men in the kingdom. This noble, I noted, was one who had the rank of an Earman, that is, he wore in his ear, which like that of Kari was stretched out to receive it, a golden disc of the size of an apple, whereon was embossed the image of the sun.

At a sign and a word from his dotard master this Larico began to speak for him as though he were the Inca himself, saying:

"Hearken, O Huaracha. I have undertaken this toilsome journey, the last I shall make as Inca, for be it known to you that I purpose to divest myself of the royal Fringe in favour of the prince, Urco, begotten to me in the body and of the Sun in spirit, and to retire to end my days in peace at my palace of Yucay, waiting there patiently until it pleases my father, the Sun, to take me to his bosom."

Here Larico paused to allow this great news to sink into the minds of his hearers, and I thought to myself that when I died I would choose to be gathered to any bosom rather than to that of the Sun, which put me in mind of hell. Then he went on:

"Rumours have reached me, the Inca, that you, Huaracha, Chief of the Chancas, are making ready to wage war upon my empire. It was to test these rumours, although I did not believe them, that awhile ago I sent an embassy to ask your only child, the lady Quilla, in marriage to the prince Urco, promising, since he has no sister whom he may wed and since on the mother's side she, your daughter, has the holy Inca blood in her veins, that she should become his Coya, or Queen, and the mother of him who shall succeed to the throne."

"The embassy came, and received my answer, O Inca," said Huaracha.

"Yes, and the answer was that the lady Quilla should be given in marriage to the Prince Urco, but as she was absent on a visit, this could not happen until she returned. But since then, O Huaracha, more rumours have reached me that you still prepare for war and seek to make alliances among my subjects, tempting them to rebel against me. Therefore I am here myself to lead away the lady Quilla and to deliver her to the Prince Urco."

"Why did not the Prince Urco come in person, O Inca?"

"For this reason, Huaracha, from whom I desire to hide nothing. If the Prince had come, you might have set a trap for him and killed him, who is the hope of the Empire."

"So I might for you, his father, O Inca."

"Aye, I know it, but what would that avail you while the Prince sits safe at Cuzco ready to assume the Fringe? Also I am old and care not when or how I die, whose work is done. Moreover, few would desire to anger the gods by the murder of an aged guest, and therefore I visit you sitting here in the midst of your armies with but a handful of followers, trusting to your honour and to my father the Sun to protect me. Now answer me--will you give the hand of your daughter to my son and thereby make alliance with me, or will you wage war upon my empire and be destroyed, you and your people together?"

Here Upanqui, who hitherto had been listening in silence to the words of Larico, spoken on his behalf, broke in, saying:

"Yes, yes, that is right, only make him understand that the Inca will be his over-lord, since the Inca can have no rivals in all the land."

"My answer is," said Huaracha, "that I will give my daughter in marriage as I have promised, but that the Chancas are a free people and accept no over-lord."

"Foolishness, foolishness!" said Upanqui. "As well might the tree say that it would not bend before the wind. However, you can settle that matter afterwards with Urco, and indeed with your daughter, who will be his queen and is your heiress, for I understand you have no other lawful child. Why talk of war and other troubles when thus your kingdom falls to us by marriage? Now let me see this lady Quilla who is to become my daughter."

Huaracha, who had listened to all this babble with a stern set face, turned to Quilla and made a sign. She descended from her chair and advancing, stood before the Inca, a vision of splendour and of beauty, and bowed to him. He stared at her awhile, as did all his company, then said:

"So you are the lady Quilla. A fair woman, a very fair woman, and a proud, one who ought to be able to lead Urco aright if any one can. Well named, too, after the moon, for the moonlight seems to shine in your eyes, Lady Quilla. Indeed and indeed were I but a score of years younger I should tell Urco to seek another queen and keep you for myself."

Then Quilla spoke for the first time, saying:

"Be it as you will, O Inca. I am promised in marriage to the Child of the Sun and which child is nothing to me."

"Well said, Lady Quilla, and why should I wonder? Though I grow old they

tell me that I am still handsome, a great deal better looking than Urco, in fact, who is a rough man and of a coarser type. You ask my wives when you come to Cuzco; one of them told me the other day that there was no one so handsome in the whole city, and earned a beautiful present for her pretty speech. What is it you say, Larico? Why are you always interfering with me? Well, perhaps you are right, and, Lady Quilla, if you are ready, it is time to start. No, no, I thank you, Curaca, but I will not stop for any feasting who desire to be back at my camp before dark, since who knows what may happen to one in the dark in a strange country?"

Then at last Huaracha grew angry.

"Be it as you will, O Inca," he said, "but know that you offer me a threefold insult. First you refuse the feast that has been made ready for you whereat you were to meet all the notables of my kingdom. Secondly, you give me, who am a king, the title of a petty chief who owns your rule. Thirdly, you throw doubts upon my honour, hinting that I may cause you to be murdered in the dark. Now I am minded to say to you, 'Begone from my poor country, Lord Inca, in safety, but leave my daughter behind you.'"

Now at these words, I, Hubert, saw the fires of hope burn up in the large eyes of Quilla, as they did in my own heart, for might they not mean that she would escape from Urco after all? But, alas, they were extinguished like a brand that is dipped in water.

"Tush, tush!" said the old dotard, "what a fire-eater are you, friend Huaracha. Know that I never care to eat, except at night; also that the chill of the air after my father the Sun has set makes my bones ache, and as for titles--take any one you like, except that of Inca."

"Mayhap that is the one I shall take before all is done," broke in the furious Huaracha, who would not be quieted by the councillors whispering in his ears.

It was at this moment that the minister and high-priest, Larico, who had been noting all that passed with an impassive face, said coldly:

"Be not wroth, O King Huaracha, and lay not too much weight upon the idle words of the glorious Inca, since even the gods will doze at times when they are weighed down by the cares of empire. No affront was meant to you and least of all does the Inca or any one of us, dream that you would tarnish your honour by offering violence to your guests by day or by night. Yet know this, that if, after all that has been sworn, you withhold your daughter, the lady Quilla, from the house of Urco who is her lord to be, it will breed instant war, since as soon as word of it comes to Cuzco, which will be within twenty hours, for messengers wait all along the road, the great armies of the Inca that are gathered there will begin to move. Judge, then, if you have the strength to withstand them, and choose whether you will live on in glory and honour, or bring yourself to death and your people to slavery. Now, King Huaracha,

speaking on behalf of Urco, who within some few moons will be Inca, I ask you--will you suffer the lady Quilla to journey with us to Cuzco and thereby proclaim peace between our peoples or will you keep her here against your oath and hers, and thereby declare war?"

Huaracha sat silent, lost in thought, and the old Inca Upanqui began to babble again, saying:

"Very well put, I could not have said it better myself; indeed, I did say it, for this coxcomb of a Larico, who thinks himself so clever just because I made him high-priest of the Sun under me and he is of my blood, is after all nothing but the tongue in my mouth. You don't really want to die, Huaracha, do you, after seeing most of your people killed and your country wasted? For you know that is what must happen. If you do not send your daughter as you promised, within a few hours a hundred thousand men will be marching on you and another hundred thousand gathering behind them. Anyhow, please make up your mind one way or another, as I wish to leave this place."

Huaracha thought on awhile. Then he descended from his throne and beckoned to Quilla. She came and he led her towards the back part of the pavilion behind and a little to the left of the chair on which I sat where none could hear their talk save me, of whom he seemed to take no note, perhaps because he had forgotten me, or perhaps because he desired that I should know all.

"Daughter," he said in a low voice, "what word? Before you answer remember that if I refuse to send you, now for the first time I break my oath."

"Of such oaths I think little," answered Quilla. "Yet of another thing I think much. Tell me, my father, if the Inca declares war and attacks us, can we withstand his armies?"

"No, Daughter, not until the Yuncas join us for we lack sufficient men. Moreover, we are not ready, nor shall be for another two moons, or more."

"Then it stands thus, Father. If I do not go the war will begin, and if I do go it seems that it will be staved off until you are ready, or perhaps for always, because I shall be the peace-offering and it will be thought that I, your heiress, take your kingdom as my marriage portion to be joined to that of the Incas at your death. Is it thus?"

"It is, Quilla. Only then you will work to bring it about that the Land of the Incas shall be joined to the Land of the Chancas, and not that of the Chancas to that of the Incas, so that in a day to come as Queen of the Chancas you shall reign over both of them and your children after you."

Now I, Hubert, watching Quilla out of the corners of my eyes, saw her turn pale and tremble.

"Speak not to me of children," she said, "for I think that there will be none, and talk not of future glories, since for these I care nothing. It is for our people that I care. You swear to me that if I do not go your armies will be defeated and that those who escape the spear will be enslaved?"

"Aye, I swear it by the Moon your mother, also that I will die with my soldiers."

"Yet if I go I leave behind me that which I love," here she glanced towards me, "and give myself to shame, which is worse than death. Is that your desire, my father?"

"That is not my desire. Remember, Daughter, that you were party to this plan, aye, that it sprang from your far-seeing mind. Still, now that your heart has changed, I would not hold you to your bargain, who desire most of all things to see you happy at my side. Choose, therefore, and I obey. On your head be it."

"What shall I say, O Lord, whom I saved from the sea?" asked Quilla in a piercing whisper, but without turning her head towards me.

Now an agony took hold of me for I knew that what I bade her, that she would say, and that perchance upon my answer hung the fate of all this great Chanca people. If she went they would be saved, if she remained

perchance she would be my wife if only for a while. For the Chancas I cared nothing and for the Quichuas I cared nothing, but Quilla was all that remained to me in the world and if she went, it was to another man. I would bid her bide. And yet--and yet if her case were mine and the fate of England hung upon my breath, what then?

"Be swift," she whispered again.

Then I spoke, or something spoke through me, saying:

"Do what honour bids you, O Daughter of the Moon, for what is love without honour? Perchance both shall still be yours at last."

"I thank you, Lord, whose heart speaks as my heart," she whispered for the third time, then lifting her head and looking Huaracha in the eyes, said:

"Father, I go, but that I will wed this Urco I do not promise."