

CHAPTER VII

THE RETURN OF KARI

So Quilla, seated in a golden litter and accompanied by maidens as became her rank, soon was borne away in the train of the Inca Upanqui, leaving me desolate. Before she went, under pretence of bidding me farewell, none denying her, she gained private speech with me for a little while.

"Lord and Lover," she said, "I go to what fate I know not, leaving you to what fate I know not, and as your lips have said, it is right that I should go. Now I have something to ask of you--that you will not follow me as it is in your heart to do. But last night I prayed of you to dog my steps and wherever I might go to keep close to me, that the knowledge of your presence might be my comfort. Now my mind is different. If I must be married to this Urco, I would not have you see me in my shame. And if I escape marriage you cannot help me, since I may only do so by death or by taking refuge where you cannot come. Also I have another reason."

"What reason, Quilla?" I asked.

"This: I ask that you will stop with my father and give him your help in the war that must come. I would see this Urco crushed, but without that help I am sure that the Chancas and the Yuncas are too weak to overthrow

the Inca might. Remember that if I escape marriage thus only can you hope to win me, namely, by the defeat and death of Urco. Say, then, that you will stay here and help to lead the Chanca armies, and say it swiftly, since that dotard, Upanqui, frets to be gone. Hark! his messengers call and search; my women can hold them back no more."

"I will stay," I answered hoarsely.

"I thank you, and now farewell, till in life or death we meet again. Thoughts come to my mind which I have no time to utter."

"To mine also, Quilla, and here is one of them. You know the man who was with me on the island. Well, he is more than he seems."

"So I guessed, but where is he now?"

"In hiding, Quilla. If you should chance to find him, bear in mind that he is an enemy of Urco and one not friendless; also that he loves me after his fashion. Trust him, I pray you. Urco is not the only one of the Inca blood, Quilla."

She glanced at me quickly and nodded her head. Then without more words, for officers were pressing towards us, she drew a ring off her finger, a thick and ancient golden ring on which were cut what looked like flowers, or images of the sun, and gave it to me.

"Wear this for my sake. It is very old and has a story of true love that I have no time to tell," she said.

I took it and in exchange passed to her that ancient ring which my mother had given to me, the ring that had come down to her with the sword Wave-Flame, saying:

"This, too, is old and has a story; wear it in memory of me."

Then we parted and presently she was gone.

I stood watching her litter till it vanished in the evening haze. Then I turned to go to find myself face to face with Huaracha.

"Lord-from-the-Sea," he said, "you have played a man's--or a god's--part to-day. Had you bidden my daughter bide here, she would have done so for love of you and the Chanca people must have been destroyed, for as that old Inca or his spokesman told us, the breaking of my oath would have been taken as a declaration of instant war. Now we have breathing time, and in the end things may go otherwise."

"Yes," I answered, "but what of Quilla and what of me?"

"I know not your creed or what with you is honour, White Lord, but among us whom perhaps you think of small account, it is thought and held that there are times when a man or a woman, especially if they be highly

placed, must do sacrifice for the good of the many who cling to them for guidance and for safety. This you and my daughter have done and therefore I honour both of you."

"To what end is the sacrifice made?" I asked bitterly. "That one people may struggle for dominion over another people, no more."

"You are mistaken, Lord. Not for victory or to increase my dominions do I desire to war upon the Incas, but because unless I strike I shall presently be struck, though for a little while this marriage might hold back the blow. Alone in the midst of the vast territories over which the Incas rule, the Chancas stem their tide of conquest and remain free amongst many nations of slaves. Therefore for ages these Incas, like those who ruled before them at Cuzco, have sworn to destroy us, and Urco has sworn it above all."

"Urco might die or be deposed, Huaracha."

"If so another would put on the Fringe and be vowed to the ancient policy that does not change from generation to generation. Therefore I must fight or perish with my people. Harken, Lord-from-the-Sea! Stay here with me and become as my brother and a general of my armies, for where will they not follow when you lead, who are held to be a god? Then if we conquer, in reward, from a brother you shall become a son, and to you after me I swear shall pass the Chanca crown. Moreover, to you, if she can be saved, I will give in marriage her whom you love. Think

before you refuse. I know not whence you come, but this I know: that you can return thither no more, unless, indeed, you are a spirit. Here your lot is cast till death. Therefore make it glorious. Perchance you might fly to the Inca and there become a marvel and a show, furnished with gold and palaces and lands, but always you would be a servant, while I offer to you a crown and the rule of a people great and free."

"I care nothing for crowns," I answered, sighing. "Still, such was Quilla's prayer, perchance the last that ever she will make to me. Therefore I accept and will serve you and your cause, that seems noble, faithfully to the end, O Huaracha."

Then I stretched out my hand to him and so our compact was sealed.

On the very next day my work began. Huaracha made me known to his captains, commanding them to obey me in all things, which, looking on me as half divine, they did readily enough.

Now, of soldiering I knew little who was a seaman bred, yet as I had learned, a man of the English race in however strange a country he finds himself can make a path there to his ends.

Moreover, in London I had heard much talk of armies and their ordering and often watched troops at their exercise; also I know how to handle

bow and sword, and was accustomed to the management of men. So putting all these memories together, I set myself to the task of turning a mob of half-savage fellows with arms into an ordered host. I created regiments and officered them with the best captains that I could find, collecting in each regiment so far as possible the people of a certain town or district. These companies I drilled and exercised, teaching them to use such weapons as they had to the best purpose.

Also I caused them to shape stronger bows on the model of my own with which I had shot the three Frenchmen far away at Hastings that, as it was said, once had been the battle-bow of Thorgrimmer the Norseman my ancestor, as the sword Wave-Flame was his battle-sword. When these Chancas saw how far and with what a good aim I could shoot with this bow, they strove day and night to learn to equal me, though it is true they never did. Also I bettered their body-armour of quilting by settings sheets of leather (since in that country there is no iron) taken from the hides of wild animals and of their long-haired native sheep, between the layers of cotton. Other things I did also, too many and long to record.

The end of it was that within three months Huaracha had an army of some fifty thousand men who, if not well trained, still kept discipline, and could move in regiments; who knew also how to shoot with their bows and to use their copper-headed spears and axes of that metal, or of hard stone, to the best purpose.

Then at length came the Yuncas to join us, thirty or forty thousand of them, wild fellows and brave enough, but undisciplined. With these I could do little since time was lacking, save send some of the officers whom I had trained to teach their chiefs and captains what they were able.

Thus I was employed from dawn till dark and often after it, in talk with Huaracha and his generals, or in drawing plans with ink that I found a means to make, upon parchment of sheepskin and noting down numbers and

other things, a sight at which these people who knew nothing of writing marvelled very much. Great were my labours, yet in them I found more happiness than I had known since that fatal day when I, the rich London merchant, Hubert of Hastings, had stood before the altar of St. Margaret's church with Blanche Aleys. Indeed, every cranny of my time and mind being thus filled with things finished or attempted, I forgot my great loneliness as an alien in a strange land, and once more became as I had been when I trafficked in the Cheap.

But toil as I would, I could not forget Quilla. During the day I might mask her memory in its urgent business, but when I lay down to rest she seemed to come to me as a ghost might do and to stand by my bed, looking at me with sad and longing eyes. So real was her presence that sometimes I began to believe that she must have died to the world and was in truth a ghost, or else that she had found the power to throw her soul afar, as it is said certain of these Indian folk, if so they should be called,

can do. At least there she seemed to be while I remained awake and afterwards when I slept, and I know not whether her strange company joyed or pained me more. For alas! she could not talk to me, or tell me how it fared with her, and, to speak truth, now that she was the wife of another man, as I supposed, I desired to forget her if I could.

For of Quilla no word reached us. We heard that she had come safely to Cuzco and after that nothing more. Of her marriage there was no tidings; indeed she seemed to have vanished away. Certain of Huaracha's spies reported to him, however, that the great army which Urco had gathered to attack him had been partly disbanded, which seemed to show that the Inca no longer prepared for immediate war. Only then what had happened to Quilla, whose person was the price of peace? Perhaps she was hidden away during the preparations for her nuptials; at least I could think of nothing else, unless indeed she had chosen to kill herself or died naturally.

Soon, however, all news ceased, for Huaracha shut his frontiers, hoping that thus Urco might not learn that he was gathering armies.

At length, when our forces were almost ready to march, Kari came, Kari whom I thought lost.

One night when I was seated at my work by lamplight, writing down numbers upon a parchment, a shadow fell across it, and looking up I saw Kari standing before me, travel-worn and weary, but Kari without doubt,

unless I dreamed.

"Have you food, Lord?" he asked while I stared at him. "I need it and would eat before I speak."

I found meat and native beer and brought them to him, for it was late and my servants were asleep, waiting till he had filled himself, for by this time I had learned something of the patience of these people. At length he spoke, saying:

"Huaracha's watch is good, and to pass it I must journey far into the mountains and sleep three nights without food amid their snows."

"Whence come you?" I asked.

"From Cuzco, Lord."

"Then what of the lady Quilla? Does she still live? Is she wed to Urco?"

"She lives, or lived fourteen days ago, and she is not wed. But where she is no man may ever come. You have looked your last upon the lady Quilla, Lord."

"If she lives and is unwed, why?" I asked, trembling.

"Because she is numbered among the Virgins of the Sun our Father, and

therefore inviolate to man. Were I the Inca, though I love you and know all, should you attempt to take her, yes, even you, I would kill you if I could, and with my own sword. In our land, Lord, there is one crime which has no forgiveness, and that is to lay hands upon a Virgin of the Sun. We believe, Lord, that if this is done, great curses will fall upon our country, while as for the man who works the crime, before he passes to eternal vengeance he and all his house and the town whence he came must perish utterly, and that false virgin who has betrayed our father, the Sun, must die slowly and by fire."

"Has this ever chanced?" I asked.

"History does not tell it, Lord, since none have been so wicked, but such is the law."

I thought to myself that it was a very evil law, and cruel; also that I would break it if I found opportunity, but made no answer, knowing when to be silent and that I might as well strive to move a mountain from its base as to turn Kari from the blindness of his folly bred of false faith. After all, could I blame him, seeing that we held the same of the sacredness of nuns and, it was said, killed them if they broke their vows?

"What news, Kari?" I asked.

"Much, Lord. Hearken. Disguised as a peasant who had come into this

country to barter wool from a village near to Cuzco, I joined myself to the train of the Inca Upanqui, among whose lords I found a friend who had loved me in past years and kept my secret as he was bound to do, having passed into the brotherhood of knights with me while we were lads. Through him, in place of a man who was sick, I became one of the bearers of the lady Quilla's litter and thus was always about her and at times had speech with her in secret, for she knew me again notwithstanding my disguise and uniform. So I became one of those who waited on her when she ate and noted all that passed.

"After the first day the Inca Upanqui, he who is my father and whose lawful heir I am, although he discarded me for Urco and believes me dead, made it a habit to take his food in the same tent or rest-house chamber as the lady Quilla. Lord, being very clever, she set herself to charm him, so that soon he began to dote upon her, as old, worn-out men sometimes do upon young and beautiful women. She, too, pretended to grow fond of him and at last told him in so many words that she grieved it was not he that she was to marry whose wisdom she hung upon, in place of a prince who, she heard, was not wise. This, she said, because she knew well that the Inca would never marry any more and indeed had lived alone for years. Still, being flattered, he told her it was hard that she should be forced to wed one to whom she had no mind, whereon she prayed him, even with tears, to save her from such a fate. At last he vowed that he would do so by setting her among the Virgins of the Sun on whom no man may look. She thanked him and said that she would consider the matter, since, for reasons that you may guess, Lord, she did not desire

to become a Virgin of the Sun and to pass the rest of her days in prayer and the weaving of the Inca's garments.

"So it went on until when we were a day's march from Cuzco, Urco, my brother, came to meet his promised bride. Now, Urco is a huge man and hideous, one whom none would believe to have been born of the Inca blood. Coarse he is, and dissolute, given to drink also, though a great fighter and brave in battle, and quick-brained when he is sober. I was present when they met and I saw the lady Quilla shiver and turn pale at the sight of him, while he on his part devoured her beauty with his eyes. They spoke but few words together, yet before these were done, he told her it was his will that they should be wed at once on the day after she came to Cuzco, nor would he listen to the Inca Upanqui who said, being cunning and wishing to gain time, that due preparation must be made for so great a business.

"Thereupon Urco grew angry with his father, who both fears and loves him, and answered that, being almost Inca, this matter was one which he would settle for himself. So fierce was he that Upanqui became afraid and went away. When they were alone Urco strove to embrace Quilla, but she fled from him and hid with her maidens in a private place. After this, at the feast Urco took too much drink according to his custom and was led away to sleep by his lords. Then Quilla waited upon the Inca and said:

"O Inca, I have seen the Prince and I claim your promise to save me

from him. O Inca, abandoning all thought of marriage, I will become the bride of our Father the Sun.'

"Upanqui, who was wroth with Urco because he had crossed his will, swore by the Sun itself that he would not fail her, come what might, since Urco should learn that he was not yet Inca."

"What happened then?" I asked, staring him in the eyes.

"After this, Lord, when we were halted before making the state entry into Cuzco, for a moment the lady Quilla found opportunity for private speech with me. This is what she said:

"'Tell my father, King Huaracha, that I have fulfilled his oath, but that I cannot marry Urco. Therefore I seek refuge in the arms of the Sun, as the oracle Rimac foretold that I should do, having to choose between this fate and that of death. Tell my Lord-from-the-Sea what has befallen me and bid him farewell to me. Still say that he must keep a good heart, since I do not believe that all is ended between us.'

"Then we were parted and I saw her no more."

"And did you hear no more, Kari?"

"I heard much, Lord. I heard that when Urco learned that the lady Quilla had vanished away into the House of Virgins, whither he might not come,

and that he was robbed of the bride whom he desired, he grew mad with rage. Indeed, of this I saw something myself. Two days later, with thousands of others I was in the great square in front of the Temple of the Sun, where the Inca Upanqui sat in state upon a golden throne to receive the praise of his people upon his safe return after his long and hard journey, and as some reported, to lay down his lordship in favour of Urco; also to tell the people that the danger of war with the Chancas had passed away. Scarcely had the ceremony begun when Urco appeared at the head of a number of lords and princes of the Inca blood, who are of his clan, and I noticed that he was drunk and furious. He advanced to the foot of the throne, almost without obeisance, and shouted:

"Where is the lady Quilla, daughter of Huaracha, who is promised to me in marriage, Inca? Why have you hidden her away, Inca?"

"Because the Sun, our Father, has claimed her as his bride and has taken her to dwell in his holy house, where never again may the eyes of man behold her, Prince!" answered Upanqui.

"You mean that robbing me, you have taken her for yourself, Inca," shouted Urco again.

"Then Upanqui stood up and swore by the Sun that this was not so and that what he had done was done by the decree of the god and at the prayer of the lady Quilla, who having seen Urco, had declared that either she would be wed to the god or die by her own hand, which would

bring the vengeance of the Sun upon the people.

"Then Urco went mad. He raved at the Inca and while all present shivered with fear, he cursed the Sun our Father, yes, even when a cloud came up in the clear sky and veiled the face of the god, heedless of the omen, he continued his curses and blasphemy. Moreover, he said that soon he would be Inca and that then, if he must tear the House of Virgins stone from stone, as Inca he would drag forth the lady Quilla and make her his wife.

"Now at these words Upanqui stood up and rent his robes.

"'Must my ears be outraged with such blasphemies?' he cried. 'Know, Son Urco, that this day I was minded to take off the Royal Fringe and to set it on your head, crowning you Inca in my place while I withdrew to pass the remainder of my days at Yucay in peace and prayer. My will is changed. This I shall not do. My life is not done and strength returns to my mind and body. Here I stay as Inca. Now I see that I am punished for my sin.'

"'What sin?' shouted Urco.

"'The sin of setting you before my eldest lawful son, Kari, whose wife you stole; Kari, whom also it is said you poisoned and who at least has vanished and is doubtless dead.'

"Now, Lord, when I, Kari, heard this my heart melted in me and I was minded to declare myself to Upanqui my father. But while I weighed the matter for a moment, knowing that if I did so, such words as these might well be my last since Urco had many of his following present, who perhaps would fall upon and kill me, suddenly my father Upanqui fell forward in a swoon. His lords and physicians bore him away. Urco followed and presently the multitude departed this way and that. Afterwards we were told that the Inca had recovered but must not be disturbed for many days."

"Did you hear more of Quilla, Kari?"

"Yes, Lord," he answered gravely. "It was commonly reported that, through some priestess in his pay, Urco had poisoned her, saying that as she had chosen the Sun as husband, to the Sun she would go."

"Poisoned her!" I muttered, well-nigh falling to the ground. "Poisoned her!"

"Aye, Lord, but be comforted for this was added--that she who gave the poison was taken in the act by her who is named the Mother of the Virgins, and handed over to the women who cast her into the den of serpents, where she perished, screaming that it was Urco who had forced her to the deed."

"That does not comfort me, man. What of Quilla? Did she die?"

"Lord, it is said not. It is said that the Mother of the Virgins dashed away the cup as it touched her lips. But this is said also, that some of the poison flew into her eyes and blinded her."

I groaned, for the thought of Quilla blinded was horrible.

"Again take comfort, Lord, since perchance she may recover from this blindness. Also I was told, that although she can see nothing, her beauty is not marred; that the venom indeed has made her eyes seem larger and more lovely even than they were before."

I made no answer, who feared that Kari was deceiving me or perhaps was himself deceived and that Quilla was dead. Presently he continued his story in the same quiet, even voice, saying:

"Lord, after this I sought out certain of my friends who had loved me in my youth and my mother also while she lived, revealing myself to them. We made plans together, but before aught could be done in earnest, it was needful that I should see my father Upanqui. While I was waiting till he had recovered from the stroke that fell upon him, some spy betrayed me to Urco, who searched for me to kill me and well-nigh found me. The end of it was that I was forced to fly, though before I did so many swore themselves to my cause who would escape from the tyranny of Urco. Moreover, it was agreed that if I returned with soldiers at my back, they and their followers would come out to join me to the number

of thousands, and help me to take my own again so that I may be Inca after Upanqui my father. Therefore I have come back here to talk with you and Huaracha.

"Such is my tale."