

CHAPTER XI

THE HOUSE OF DEATH

Now at one time during this long war against Urco victory smiled upon him, though afterwards the scale went down against him. Kari was defeated in a pitched battle and I who commanded another army was almost surrounded in a valley. When everything seemed lost, afterwards I escaped by leading my soldiers round up the slope of a mountain and surprising Urco in the rear, but as it ended well for us I need not speak of that matter.

It was while all was at its blackest for us that a certain officer was brought to me who was captured while striving to desert, or at least to pass our outposts. As it happened I knew this man again having, unseen myself, noted him on the previous day talking earnestly to the high-priest Larico, who, with other priests, accompanied my army, perhaps to keep a watch on me. I took this captain apart and questioned him alone, threatening him with death by torment if he did not reveal his errand to me.

In the end, being very much afraid, he spoke. From him I learned that he was a messenger from Larico to Urco. Believing that our defeat was almost certain, Larico had sent him to make his peace with Urco by betraying all Kari's and my own plans to him and revealing how he might most easily destroy us. He said also that he, Larico, had only joined

the party of Upanqui, and of Kari after him, under threats of death and that always in his heart he had been true to Urco, whom he acknowledged as his Lord and as the rightful Inca whom he would help to restore to the Throne with all the power of the Priesthood of the Sun. Further, he sent by this spy a secret message by means of little cords cunningly knotted, which knots served these people as writing, since they could read them as we read a book.

Now, being always desirous of knowledge, I had caused myself to be instructed in the plan of this knot-writing which by this time I could read well enough. Therefore I was able to spell out this message. It said shortly but plainly, that knowing he still desired her, he, Larico, as high-priest would hand over to Urco the lady Quilla, daughter to the King of the Chancas who unlawfully had been hidden away among the Virgins of the Sun, also that he would betray me, the White-God-from-the-Sea who sought to steal her away, into Urco's hands, that he might kill me if he could.

When I had mastered all this I was filled with rage and bethought me that I would cause Larico to be taken and suffer the fate of traitors. Soon, however, I changed this mind of mine and placing the spy in close keeping where none could come at him, I set a watch on Larico but said nothing to him or to Kari of all that I had learned.

A few days later our fortunes changed and Urco, defeated, was in full flight to the shores of Lake Titicaca. After this I knew we had nothing

more to fear from this fox-hearted high-priest who above everything desired to be on the winning side and to continue in his place and power. So knowing that I held him fast I bided my time, because through him alone I could hope to come at Quilla. That time came after the war was over and we had returned to Cuzco in triumph. As soon as the rejoicings were over and Kari was firmly seated on his throne, I sent for Larico, which, as the greatest man in the kingdom after the Inca, I was able to do.

He appeared in answer to my summons and we bowed to each other, after which he began to praise me for my generalship, saying that had it not been for me, Urco would have won the war and that the Inca had done well to name me his Brother before the people and to say that to me he owed his throne.

"Yes, that is true," I answered, "and now, since through me, you, Larico, are the third greatest man in the kingdom and remain High-Priest of the Sun and Whisperer in the Inca's ear, I would put you in mind of a certain bargain that we made when I promised you all these things, Larico."

"What bargain, Lord-of-the-Sea."

"That you would bring me and a Virgin of the Sun, who while she was of the earth was named Quilla, together, Larico, and enable her to return from those of the Sun to my arms, Larico."

Now his face grew troubled and he answered:

"Lord, I have thought much of this matter, desiring above all things to fulfil my word and I grieve to tell you that it is impossible."

"Why, Larico?"

"Because I find that the law of my faith is against it, Lord."

"Is that all, Larico?" I asked with a smile.

"No, Lord. Because I find that the Inca would not suffer it and swears to kill all who attempt to touch the lady Quilla."

"Is that all, Larico?"

"No, Lord. Because I find that a woman who has been betrothed to one of the royal blood may never pass to another man."

"Now perhaps we come nearer to it, Larico. You mean that if this happened and perchance after all Urco should come to the throne, as he might do if Kari his brother died--as any man may die--he would hold you to account."

"Yes, Lord, if that chanced, as chance it may, since Urco still lives

and I hear is gathering new armies among the mountains, certainly he would hold me to account for I have heard as much. Also our father the Sun would hold me to account and so would the Inca who wields his sceptre upon earth."

I asked him why he did not think of all these things before when he had much to gain instead of now when he had gained them through me, and he answered because he had not considered them enough. Then I pretended to grow angry and exclaimed:

"You are a rogue, Larico! You promise and take your pay and you do not perform. Henceforth I am your enemy and one to whom the Inca hearkens."

"He hearkens still more to this god the Sun and to me who am the voice of God, White Man," he answered, adding insolently, "You would strike too late; your power over me and my fortunes is gone, White Man."

"I fear it is so," I replied, pretending to be frightened, "so let us say no more of the matter. After all, there are other women in Cuzco besides this fair bride of the Sun. Now before you go, High-Priest, will you who are so learned help me who am ignorant? I have been striving to master your method of conveying thoughts by means of knots. Here I have a bundle of strings which I cannot altogether understand. Be pleased to interpret them to me, O most holy and upright High-Priest."

Then from my robe I drew out those knotted fibres that I had taken from

his messenger and held them before Larico's eyes.

He stared at them and turned pale. His hand groped for his dagger till he saw that mine was on the hilt of Wave-Flame, whereon he let it fall. Next the thought took him that in truth I could not read the knots which he began to interpret falsely.

"Have done, Traitor," I laughed, "for I know them all. So Urco may wed Quilla and I may not. Also cease to fret as to that messenger of yours for whom you seek far and near, since he is safe in my keeping. To-morrow I take him to deliver his message not to Urco, but to Kari--and then, Traitor?"

Now Larico who, notwithstanding his stern face and proud manner, was a coward at heart, fell upon his knees before me trembling and prayed me to spare his life which lay in my hand. Well he knew that if once it came to Kari's ears, even a high priest of the Sun could not hope to escape the reward of such treachery as his.

"If I pardon you, what will you give me?" I asked.

"The only thing that you will take, Lord--the lady Quilla herself. Hearken, Lord. Outside the city is the palace of Upanqui whom Urco slew. There in the great hall the divine Inca sits embalmed and into that holy presence none dare enter save the Virgins of the Sun whose office it is to wait upon the mighty dead. To-morrow one hour before the dawn, when

all men sleep, I will lead you to this hall disguised in the robes of a priest of the Sun, so that on the way thither none can know you. There you will find but one Virgin of the Sun, the lady whom you seek. Take her and begone. The rest I leave to you."

"How do I know that you will not set some trap for me, Larico?"

"Thus, Lord, that I shall be with you and share your sacrilege. Also my life will be in your hand."

"Aye, Larico," I answered grimly, "and if aught of ill befalls me, remember that this," and I touched the knotted cords, "will find its way to Kari, and with it the man who was your messenger."

He nodded and answered:

"Be sure that I have but one desire, to know you, Lord, and this woman whom, being mad, you seek so madly, far from Cuzco and never to look upon your face again."

Then we made our plans as to when and where we should meet and other matters, after which he departed, bowing himself away with many smiles.

I thought to myself that there went as big a rogue as I had ever known, in London or elsewhere, and fell to wondering what snare he would set for me, since that he planned some snare I was sure. Why, then, did I

prepare to fall into it? I asked myself. The answer was, for a double reason. First, although my whole heart was sick with longing for the sight of her, now, after months of seeking, I was no nearer to Quilla than when we had parted in the city of the Chancas, nor ever should be without Larico's aid. Secondly, some voice within me told me to go forward taking all hazards, since if I did not, our parting would be for always in this world. Yes, the voice warned me that unless I saved her soon, Quilla would be no more. As Huaracha had said, there was more poison in Cuzco, and murderers were not far to seek. Or despair might do its work with her. Or she might kill herself as once she had proposed to do. So I would go forward even though the path I walked should lead me to my doom.

That day I did many things. Now, being so great a general and man--or god--among these people, I had those about me who were sworn to my service and whom I could trust. For one of these, a prince of the Inca blood, of the House of Kari's mother, I sent and gave to him those knotted cords that were the proof of Larico's treachery, bidding him if aught of evil overtook me, or if I could not be found, to deliver them to the Inca on my behalf and with them the prisoned messenger who was in his keeping, but meanwhile to show them to no man. He bowed and swore by the Sun to do my bidding, thinking doubtless that, my work finished in this land, I purposed to return into the sea out of which I had risen, as doubtless a god could do.

Next I summoned the captains of the Chancas who had fought under me throughout the civil war, of whom about half remained alive, and bade them gather their men upon the ridge where I had stood at the beginning of the battle of the Field of Blood, and wait until I joined them there. If it chanced, however, that I did not appear within six days I commanded that they should march back to their own country and make report to King Huaracha that I had "returned into the sea" for reasons that he would guess. Also I commanded that eight famous warriors whom I named, men of my own bodyguard who had fought with me in all our battles and would have followed me through fire or water or the gates of Hell themselves, should come to the courtyard of my palace after nightfall, bringing a litter and disguised as its bearers, but having their arms hidden beneath their cloaks.

These matters settled, I waited upon the Inca Kari and craved of him leave to take a journey. I told him that I was weary with so much fighting and desired to rest amidst my friends the Chancas.

He gazed at me awhile, then stretched out his sceptre to me in token that my request was granted, and said in a sad voice:

"So you would leave me, my brother, because I cannot give you that which you desire. Bethink you. You will be no nearer to the Moon (by which he meant Quilla) at Chanca than you are at Cuzco and here, next to the Inca, you are the greatest in the Empire who by decree are named his brother and the general of his armies."

Now, though my gorge rose at it, I lied to him, saying:

"The Moon is set for me, so let her sleep whom I shall see no more. For the rest, learn, O Kari, that Huaracha has sworn to me that I shall be, not his brother but his son, and Huaracha is sick--they say to death."

"You mean that you would choose to be King over the Chancas rather than stand next to the throne among the Quichuas?" he said, scanning me sharply.

"Aye, Kari," I replied, still lying. "Since I must dwell in this strange land, I would do so as a king--no less."

"To that you have a right, Brother, who are far above us all. But when you are a king, what is your plan? Do you purpose to strive to conquer me and rule over Tavantinsuyu, as perchance you could do?"

"Nay, I shall never make war upon you, Kari, unless you break your treaty with the Chancas and strive to subdue them."

"Which I shall never do, Brother."

Then he paused awhile and spoke again with more passion than I had ever known in him, saying:

"Would that this woman who comes between us were dead. Would that she had never been born. In truth, I am minded to pray to my father, the Sun, that he will be pleased to take her to himself, for then perchance we two might be as we were in the old time yonder in your England, and when we faced perils side by side upon the ocean and in the forests. A curse on Woman the Divider, and all the curses of all the gods upon this woman whom I may not give to you. Had she been of my Household I would have bidden you to take her, yes, even if she were my wife, but she is the wife of the god and therefore I may not--alas! I may not," and he hid his face in his robe and groaned.

Now when I heard these words I grew afraid who knew well that she of whom the Inca prays the Sun that she may die, does die, and swiftly.

"Do not add to this lady's wrongs by robbing her of life as well as of sight and liberty, Kari," I said.

"Have no fear, Brother," he answered, "she is safe from me. No word shall pass my lips though it is true that in my heart I wish that she would die. Go your ways, Brother and Friend, and when you grow weary of kingship if it comes to you, as to tell truth already I grow weary, return to me. Perchance, forgetting that we had been kings, we might journey hence together over the world's edge."

Then he stood up on his throne and bowed towards me, kissing the air as though to a god, and taking the royal chain that every Inca wore from

about his neck, set it upon mine. This done, turning, he left me without another word.

With a heavy heart I returned to my palace where I dwelt. At sundown I ate according to my custom, and dismissed those who waited upon me to the servants' quarters. There were but two of them for my private life was simple. Then I slept till past midnight and rising, went into the courtyard where I found the eight Chanca captains disguised as litter-bearers and with them the litter. I led them to an empty guard-house and bade them stay there in silence. After this I returned to my chamber and waited.

About two hours before the dawn Larico came, knocking on the side-door as we had planned. I opened to him and he entered disguised in a hooded cloak of sheep's wool which covered his robes and his face, such as priests wear when the weather is cold. He gave to me the garments of a priest of the Sun which he had brought with him in a cloth. I clothed myself in them though because of the fashion of them to do this I must be rid of my armour which would have betrayed me. Larico desired that I should take off the sword Wave-Flame also, but, mistrusting him, this I would not do, but made shift to hide it and my dagger beneath the priest's cloak. The armour I wrapped in a bundle and took with me.

Presently we went out, having spoken few words since the time for speech had gone by and peril or some fear of what might befall weighed upon our tongues. In the guard-house I found the Chancas at whom Larico looked

curiously but said nothing. To them I gave the bundle of armour to be hidden in the litter and with it my long bow, having first revealed myself to them by lifting the hood of my cloak. Then I bade them follow me.

Larico and I walked in front and after us came the eight men, four of them bearing the empty litter, and the other four marching behind. This was well planned since if any saw us or if we met guards as once or twice we did, these thought that we were priests taking one who was sick or dead to be tended or to be made ready for burial. Once, however, we were challenged, but Larico spoke some word and we passed on without question.

At length in the darkness before the dawn we came to the private palace of dead Upanqui. At its garden gate Larico would have had me leave the litter with the eight Chanca warriors disguised as bearers. I refused, saying that they must come to the doors of the palace, and when he grew urgent, tapped my sword, whispering to him fiercely that he had best beware lest it should be he who stayed at the gate. Then he gave way and we advanced all of us across the garden to the door of the palace. Larico unlocked the door with a key and we entered, he and I alone, for here I bade the Chancas await my return.

We crept down a short passage that was curtained at its end. Passing the curtains I found myself in Upanqui's banqueting-hall. This hall was dimly lit with one hanging golden lamp. By its light I saw something

more wondrous and of its sort more awful than ever I had seen in that strange land.

There, on a dais, in his chair of gold, sat dead Upanqui arrayed in all his gorgeous Inca robes and so marvellously preserved that he might have been a man asleep. With arms crossed and his sceptre at his side, he sat staring down the hall with fixed and empty eyes, a dreadful figure of life in death. About him and around the dais were set all his riches, vases and furniture of gold, and jewels piled in heaps, there to remain till the roof fell in and buried them, since on this hallowed wealth the boldest dared not lay a hand. In the centre of the hall, also, was a table prepared as though for feasters, for amid jewelled cups and platters stood the meats and wines which day by day were brought afresh by the Virgins of the Sun. Doubtless there were more wonders, but these I could not see because the light did not reach them, or to the doorways of the chambers that opened from the hall. Moreover, there was something else which caught my eye.

At the foot of the dais crouched a figure which at first I took to be that of some dead one also embalmed, perhaps a wife or daughter of the dead Inca who had been set with him in this place. While I stared at it the figure stirred, having heard our footsteps, rose and turned, standing so that the light from the hanging lamp fell full upon it. It was Quilla clad in white and purple with a golden likeness of the Sun blazoned upon her breast!

So beautiful did she look searching the darkness with great blind eyes and her rich flowing hair flowing from beneath her jewelled headdress, a diadem fashioned to resemble the Sun's rays, that my breath failed me and my heart stood still.

"There stands she whom you seek," muttered Larico in a mocking whisper, for here even he did not seem to dare to talk aloud. "Go take her, you whom men call a god, but I call a drunken fool ready to risk all for a woman's lips. Go take her and ask the blessing upon your kisses of yonder dead king whose holy rest you break."

"Be silent," I whispered back and passed round the table till I came face to face with Quilla. Then a strange dumbness fell upon me like a spell or dead Upanqui's curse, so that I could not speak.

I stood there staring at those beautiful blind eyes and the blind eyes stared back at me. Presently a look of understanding gathered on the face and Quilla spoke, or rather murmured to herself.

"Strange--but I could have sworn! Strange, but I seemed to feel! Oh! I slept in my vigils upon that dead old man who in life was so foolish and in death appears to have become so wise, and sleeping I dreamed. I dreamed I heard a step I shall never hear again. I dreamed one was near me whom I shall never touch again. I will sleep once more, for in my darkness what are left to me save sleep and--death?"

Then at last I found my tongue and said hoarsely,

"Love is left, Quilla, and--life."

She heard and straightened herself. Her whole body seemed to become rigid as though with an agony of joy. Her blind eyes flashed, her lips quivered. She stretched out her hand, feeling at the darkness. Her fingers touched my forehead, and thence she ran them swiftly over my face.

"It is--dead or living--it is----" and she opened her arms.

Oh! was there ever anything more beautiful on the earth than this sight of the blind Quilla thus opening her arms to me there in the gorgeous house of death?

We clung and kissed. Then I thrust her away, saying:

"Come swiftly from this ill-omened place. All is ready. The Chancas wait."

She slipped her hand into mine and I turned to lead her away.

Then it was that I heard a low, mocking laugh, Larico's, I thought, heard also a sound of creeping footsteps around me. I looked. Out of the darkness that hid the doors of the chamber on the right appeared a giant

form which I knew for that of Urco, and behind him others. I looked to the left and there were more of them, while in front beyond the gold-laid board stood the traitor, Larico, laughing.

"You have the first fruits, but it seems that another will reap the harvest, Lord-from-the-Sea," he jeered.

"Seize her," cried Urco in his guttural voice, pointing to Quilla with his mace, "and brain that white thief."

I drew Wave-Flame and strove to get at him, but from both sides men rushed in on me. One I cut down, but the others snatched Quilla away. I was surrounded, with no room to wield my sword, and already weapons flashed over me. A thought came to me. The Chancas were at the door. I must reach them, for perhaps so Quilla might be saved. In front was the table spread for the death feast. With a bound I leapt on to it, shouting aloud and scattering its golden furnishings this way and that. Beyond stood the traitor, Larico, who had trapped me--I sprang at him and lifting Wave-Flame with both hands I smote with all my strength. He fell, as it seemed to me, cloven to the middle. Then some spear cast at me struck the lamp.

It shattered and went out!