

CHAPTER XII

THE FIGHT TO THE DEATH

There was tumult in the hall; shoutings, groans from him whom I had first struck down, the sound of vases and vessels overthrown, and above all those of a woman's shrieks echoing from the walls and roof, so that I could not tell whence they came.

Through the gross darkness I went on towards the curtains, or so I hoped. Presently they were torn open, and by the faint light of the breaking dawn I saw my eight Chancas rushing towards me.

"Follow!" I cried, and at the head of them groped my way back up the hall, seeking for Quilla. I stumbled over the dead body of Larico and felt a path round the table. Then suddenly a door at the back of the hall was thrown open and by the grey light which came through the doorway I perceived the last of the ravishers departing. We scrambled across the dais where the golden chair was overthrown and the embalmed Upanqui lay, a stiff and huddled heap upon his back, staring at me with jewelled eyes.

We gained the door which, happily, none had remembered to close, and passed out into the parklike grounds beyond. A hundred paces or more ahead of us, by the glowing light, I saw a litter passing between the trees surrounded by armed men, and knew that in it was Quilla being

borne to captivity and shame.

After it we sped. It passed the gate of the park wall, but when we reached that gate it was shut and barred and we must waste time breaking it down, which we did by help of a felled tree that lay at hand. We were through it, and now the rim of the sun had appeared so that through the morning mist, which clung to the hillside beyond the town, we could see the litter, the full half of a mile away. On we went up the hill, gaining as we ran, for we had no litter to bear, nor aught else save the sack of armour which one of the Chancas had thought to bring with him when he rushed into the hall, and with it my long bow and shaft.

Now, at a certain place between this hill and another there was a gorge such as are common in that country, a gorge so deep and narrow that in places the light of day scarcely struggles to the pathways at its bottom. Into this tunnel the litter vanished and when we drew near I saw that its mouth was held by armed men, six of them or more. Taking my bow from the Chanca I strung it and shot swiftly. The man at whom I aimed went down. Again I shot and another fell, whereon the rest of them took cover behind stones.

Throwing back the bow to the Chanca, for now it was useless, we charged. That business was soon over, for presently all those of Urco's men who remained there were dead, save one who, being cut off, fled down hill towards the city, taking with him the news of what had passed in the palace of dead Upanqui.

We entered the mouth of the gorge, plunging towards the gloom, though as it chanced this place faced towards the east, so that the low sun, which now was fully up, shone down it and gave us light that later would have been lacking.

I, who was very swift of foot and to whom rage and fear gave wings, outran my companions. Swinging myself round a rock which lay in the pathway, I saw the litter again not a hundred yards ahead. It halted because, as it seemed to me, one or more of the bearers stumbled and fell among the stones. I rushed at them, roaring. Perhaps it had been wiser to wait for my companions, but I was mad and feared nothing. They saw me and a cry went up of:

"The White God! The terrible White God!"

Then fear took hold of them and they fled, leaving the litter on the ground. Yes, all of them fled save one, Urco himself.

He stood there rolling his eyes and gnashing his teeth, looking huge and awful in those shadows, looking like a devil from hell. Suddenly a thought seemed to take him, and leaping at the litter he tore aside its curtains and dragged out Quilla, who fell prone upon the ground.

"If I may not have her, you shall not, White Thief. See! I give back his bride to the Sun," he shouted, and lifted his copper sword to pierce her

through.

Now I was still ten paces or so away and saw that before I could reach him that sword would be in her heart. What could I do? Oh! St. Hubert must have helped me then for I knew in an instant. In my hand was Wave-Flame and with all my strength I hurled it at his head.

The great blade hurtled hissing through the air. I saw the sunlight shine on it. He strove to leap clear, but too late, for it caught him on the hand that he had lifted to protect his head, and shore off two of his fingers so that he dropped his sword. Next instant, still roaring, as doubtless old Thorgrimmer, my forefather, used to do when he fought to the death, for blood is very strong, I leapt on the giant, who like myself was swordless. There in the gulf we wrestled. He was a mighty man, but now my strength was as that of ten. I threw him to the ground by a Sussex trick I knew and there we rolled over and over each other. Once he had me undermost and I think would have choked me, had it not been that his right hand lacked two fingers.

With a mighty heave I lifted him so that now we lay side by side. He was groping for a knife--I did not see, but knew it. Near his head a sharp-edged stone rose in the path to the height of a man's hand or more. I saw it and bethought me what to do if I could. Again I heaved and as at length he found the knife and stabbed at me, scratching my face, I got his bull's neck upon that stone. Then I loosed my hand and caught him by the hair. Back I pressed his great head, back and back

with all my might till something snapped.

Urco's neck was broken. Urco quivered and was dead!

I lay by his side, panting. A voice came from the white heap upon the ground by whom and for whom this dreadful combat had been fought, the voice of Quilla.

"One died, but who lives?" asked the voice.

I could not answer because I had no breath. All my strength was gone. Still I sat up, supporting myself with my hand and hoping that it would come back. Quilla turned her face towards me, or rather towards the sound that I had made in moving, and I thought to myself how sad it was that she should be blind. Presently she spoke again and now her voice quavered:

"I see who it is that lives," she said. "Something has broken in my eyes and, Lord and Love, I see that it is you who live. You, you, and oh! you bleed."

Then the Chancas came bounding down the gorge and found us.

They looked at the dead giant and saw how he had died, killed by strength, not by the sword; they looked and bent the knee and praised me, saying that I was indeed a god, since no man could have done this

deed, killing the huge Urco with his naked hands. Then they placed Quilla back in her litter and six of them bore her down that black gorge. The two who remained, for in that fight none of them had been hurt, supported me till my strength came back, for the cut in the face that I had received from Urco's dagger was but slight. We reached the mouth of the gorge and took counsel.

To return to Cuzco after what I had done, would be to seek death. So we bore away to the right and, making a round, came about ten o'clock of the morning unmolested by any, to that ridge on which I had stood at the beginning of the battle of the Field of Blood. There I found the Chancas encamped, some three thousand of them, as I had commanded. When they saw me, living and but little hurt, they shouted for joy, and when they learned who was in that litter they went well-nigh mad.

Then the eight warriors with me told them all the tale of the saving of Quilla and the death of the giant Urco at my hands, whereon their captains came and kissed my feet, saying that I was in truth a god, though heretofore some of them had held me to be but a man.

"God or man," I answered, "I must rest. Let the women tend to lady Quilla, and give me food and drink, after which I will sleep. At sunset we march home to Huaracha, your king and mine, to give him back his daughter. Till then there is naught to fear, since Kari has no troops at hand with which to attack us. Still, set outposts."

So I ate and drank, but little of the former and much of the latter, I fear, and after that I slept as soundly as one who is dead, for I was outworn.

When the sun was within an hour of setting, captains awakened me and said that an embassy from Cuzco, ten men only, waited outside our lines, seeking speech with me. So I rose, and my face and wound having been dressed, caused water to be poured over my body, and was rubbed with oil; after which, clothed in the robes of a Chanca noble, but wearing no armour, I went out with nine Chanca captains to receive the embassy on the plain at the foot of the hill, at that very spot where first I had fought with Urco.

When we drew near, from out of the group of nobles advanced one man. I looked and saw that he was Kari, yes, the Inca himself.

I went forward to meet him and we spoke together just out of earshot of our followers.

"My brother," said Kari, "I have learned all that has passed and I give you praise who are the most daring among men and the first among warriors; you who slew the giant Urco with your naked hands."

"And thus made your throne safe for you, Kari."

"And thus made my throne safe for me. You also who clove Larico to the

breast in the death-house of Upanqui, my father----"

"And thus delivered you from a traitor, Kari."

"And thus delivered me from a traitor, as I have learned also from your messenger who handed to me the knotted cord, and from the spy whom you had in your keeping. I repeat that you are the most daring among men and the first among warriors; almost a god as my people name you."

I bowed, and after a little silence he went on:

"Would that this were all that I have to say. But alas! it is not. You have committed the great sacrilege against the Sun, my father, of which I warned you, having robbed him of his bride, and, my brother, you have lied to me, who told me but yesterday that you had put all thought of her from your mind."

"To me that was no sacrilege, Kari, but rather a righteous deed, to free one from the bonds of a faith in which neither she nor I believe, and to lead her from a living tomb back to life and love."

"And was the lie righteous also, Brother?"

"Aye," I answered boldly, "if ever a lie can be. Bethink you. You prayed that this lady might die because she came between you and me, and those that kings pray may die, do die, if not with their knowledge or by their

express command. Therefore I said that I had put her from my mind in order that she might go on living."

"To cherish you in her arms, Brother. Now hearken. Because of this deed of yours, we who were more than friends have become more than foes. You have declared war upon my god and me; therefore I declare war upon you. Yet hearken again. I do not wish that thousands of men should perish because of our quarrel. Therefore I make an offer to you. It is that you should fight me here and now, man to man, and let the Sun, or Pachacamac beyond the Sun, decide the matter as may be decreed."

"Fight you! Fight you Kari, the Inca," I gasped.

"Aye, fight me to the death, since between us all is over and done. In England you nurtured me. Here in the land of Tavantinsuyu, which I rule to-day, I have nurtured you, and in my shadow you have grown great, though it is true that had it not been for your generalship, perchance I should no longer be here to throw the shadow. Let us therefore set the one thing against the other and, forgetting all between us that is past, stand face to face as foes. Mayhap you will conquer me, being so mighty a man of war. Mayhap, also, if that chances, my people who look upon you as half a god will raise you up to be Inca after me, should such be your desire."

"It is not," I broke in.

"I believe you," he answered, bowing his head, "but will it not be the desire of that fair-faced harlot who has betrayed our Lord the Sun?"

At this word I started and bit my lip.

"Ah! that stings you," he went on, "as the truth always stings, and it is well. Understand, White Lord who were once my brother, that either you must fight me to the death, or I declare war upon you and upon the Chanca people, which war I will wage from month to month and from year to year until you are all destroyed, as destroyed you shall be. But should you fight and should the Sun give me the victory, then justice will be accomplished and I will keep the peace that I have sworn with the Chanca people. Further, should you conquer me, in the name of my people I swear that there shall still be peace between them and the Chancas, since I shall have atoned your sacrilege with my blood. Now summon those lords of yours and I will summon mine, and set out the matter to them."

So I turned and beckoned to my captains, and Kari beckoned to his. They came, and in the hearing of all, very clearly and quietly as was his fashion, he repeated every word that he had said to me, adding to them others of like meaning. While he spoke I thought, not listening over-much.

This thing was hateful to me, yet I was in a snare, since according to the customs of all these peoples I could not refuse such a challenge and

remain unshamed. Moreover, it was to the advantage of the Chancas, aye, and of the Quichuas also, that I should not refuse it seeing that whether I lived or died, peace would then reign between them who otherwise must both be destroyed by war. I remembered how once Quilla had sacrificed herself to prevent such a war, though in the end that war had come; and what Quilla had done, should I not do also? Weary though I was I did not fear Kari, brave and swift as he might be, indeed I thought that I could kill him and perhaps take his throne, since the Quichuas worshipped me, who so often had led their armies to triumph, almost as much as did the Chancas. But--I could not kill Kari. As soon would I kill one born of my own mother. Was there then no escape?

The answer rose in my mind. There was an escape. I could suffer Kari to kill me. Only if I did this, what of Quilla! After all that had come and gone, must I lose Quilla thus, and must Quilla lose me? Surely she would break her heart and die. My plight was desperate. I knew not what to do. Then of a sudden, while I wavered, some voice seemed to whisper in my ear; I thought it must be that of St. Hubert. It seemed to say to me, "Kari trusts to his god, cannot you trust to yours, Hubert of Hastings, you who are a Christian man? Go forward, and trust to yours, Hubert of Hastings."

Kari's gentle voice died away; he had finished his speech and all men looked at me.

"What word?" I said roughly to my captains.

"Only this, Lord," answered their spokesman, "Fight you must, of that there can be no doubt, but we would fight with you, the ten of the Chancas against the ten of the Quichuas."

"Aye, that is good," replied the first of Kari's nobles. "This business is too great to set upon one man's skill and strength."

"Have done!" I said. "It lies between the Inca and myself," while Kari nodded, and repeated "Have done!" after me.

Then I sent one of the captains back to the camp for my sword and Kari commanded that his should be brought to him, since according to the custom of these people when ambassadors meet, neither of us was armed. Presently, the captain holding my sword returned, and with him servants who brought my armour. Also after them streamed all the army of the Chancas among whom the news had spread like wind-driven fire, and lined themselves upon the ridge to watch. As he came, too, I noticed that this captain sharpened Wave-Flame with a certain kind of stone that was used to give a keen edge to weapons.

He brought the ancient weapon and handed it to me on his knee. The Inca's man also brought his sword and handed it to him, as he did so, bowing his forehead to the dust. Well I knew that weapon, since once before I had faced it in desperate battle for my life. It was the ivory-handled sword of the lord Deleroy which Kari had taken from his

dead hand after I slew him in the Solar of my house in the Cheap at London. Then the servant came to me with the armour, but I sent him away, saying that as the Inca had none, I would not wear it, at which my people murmured.

Kari saw and heard.

"Noble as ever," he said aloud. "Oh! that such bright honour should have been tarnished by a woman's breath."

Our lords discussed the manner of our fighting, but to them I paid little heed.

At length all was ready and we stepped forward to face each other at a given word, clad much alike. I had thrown off my outer garment and stood bareheaded in a jerkin of soft sheepskin. Kari, too, was stripped of his splendid dress and clad in a tunic of sheepskin. Also, that we might be quite equal, he had taken off his turban-like headgear and even the royal Fringe, whereat his lords stared at each other for they thought this a bad omen.

It was just then I heard a sound behind me, and turning my head I saw Quilla stumbling towards us down the stony slope as best her half-blind eyes would let her, and crying as she came:

"Oh! my Lord, fight not. Inca, I will return to the House of the Sun!"

"Silence, accursed woman!" said Kari, frowning. "Does the Sun take back such as you? Silence until the woe that you have wrought is finished, and then wail on forever."

She shrank back at his bitter, unjust words, and guided by the women who had followed her, sank upon a stone, where she sat still as a statue or as dead Upanqui in his hall.

Now one called aloud the pledges of the fight which were as Kari had spoken them. He listened and added:

"Be it known, also, that this battle is to the death of one or both of us, since if we live I take back my oaths and I will burn yonder witch as a sacrifice to the Sun whom she has betrayed, and destroy her people and her city according to the ancient law of Vengeance on the House of those who have deceived the Sun."

I heard but made no answer, who did not wish to waste my breath in bandying words with a great man, whose brain had been turned by bigotry and woman-hatred.

A moment later the signal was given and we were at it. Kari leapt at me like the tree-lion of his own forests, but I avoided and parried. Thrice he leapt and thrice I did this; yes, even when I saw an opening and might have cut him down. Almost I struck, then could not. The Chancas

watched me, wondering what game I played who was not wont to fight in this fashion, and I also wondered, who still knew not what to do. Something I must do, or presently I should be slain, since soon my guard would fail and Deleroy's sword get home at last.

I think that Kari grew perplexed at this patient defence of mine, and never a blow struck back. At least he withdraw a little, then came for me with a rush, holding his sword high above his head with the purpose of striking me above that guard, or so I supposed. Then, of a sudden, I knew what to do. Wheeling Wave-Flame with all my strength in both hands, I smote, not at Kari but at the ivory handle of his sword. The keen and ancient steel that might well have been some of that which, as legend told, was forged by the dwarfs in Norseland, fell upon the ivory between his hand-grip and the cross-piece and shore through it as I had hoped that it would do, so that the blade of Kari's sword, severed just above the hilt, fell to the ground and the hilt itself was jarred from his hand.

His nobles saw and groaned while the Chancas shouted with joy, for now Kari was defenceless and save for the death itself, this fight to the death was ended.

Kari folded his arms upon his breast and bent his head.

"It is the decree of my god," he said, "and I did ill to trust to the sword of a villain whom you slew. Strike, Conqueror, and make an end."

I rested myself upon Wave-Flame and answered:

"If I strike not, O Inca, will you take back your words and let peace reign between your people and the Chancas?"

"Nay," he answered. "What I have said, I have said. If yonder false woman is given up to suffer the fate of those who have betrayed the Sun, then there shall be peace between the peoples, but not otherwise, since while I live I will wage war upon her and you, and upon the Chancas who shelter both of you."

Now rage took hold of me, who remembered that while this woman-hater lived blood must flow in streams, but that if he died there would be peace and Quilla would be safe. So I lifted my sword a little, and as I did so Quilla rose from her stone and stumbled forward, crying:

"O Lord, shed not the Inca's holy blood for me. Let me be given up! Let me be given up!"

Then some spirit entered into me and I spoke, saying:

"Lady, half of your prayer I grant and half I deny. I will not shed the Inca's blood; as soon would I shed yours. Nor will I suffer you to be given up who have done no wrong, since it was I who took you away by force, as Urco would have done. Kari, hearken to me. Not once only when

we were in danger together in past days have you said to me that we must put our faith in the gods we worship, and thus we did. Now again I hearken to that counsel of yours and put my faith in the God I worship. You threaten to gather all the strength of your mighty empire, and because of what I hold to be your superstitions, to destroy the Chanca people to the last babe and to level their city to the last stone. I do not believe that the God I worship will suffer this to come about, though how he will stay your vengeance I do not know. Kari, great Inca of Tavantinsuyu, Lord of all this strange new world, I, the White Wanderer-from-the-Sea, give you your life and save you as once before I saved you in a far land, and with your life I give you my blessing in all matters but this one alone. Kari, my brother, look your last on me and go in peace."

The Inca heard, and raising his head, stared at me with his fine, melancholy eyes. Then suddenly from those eyes there came a gush of tears. More, he knelt before me and kissed the ground, as the humblest of his slaves might do before his own majesty.

"Most noble of men," he said, lifting himself up again, "I worship you. Yes, I, the Inca, worship you. Would that I might take back my oath, but this I cannot do because my god hardens my heart and then would decree destruction on my people. Mayhap he whom you serve will bring things to pass as you foretell, as it would seem he has brought it to pass that I should eat the dust before you. I hope that it may be so who love not the sight of blood, but who like the shot arrow must yet follow my

course, driven by the strength that loosed me. Brother, honoured and beloved, fare you well! May happiness be yours in life and death, and there in death may we meet again and once more be brothers where no women come to part us."

Then Kari turned and went with bowed head, together with his nobles, who followed him as sadly as those who surround a corpse, but not until they had given to me that royal salute which is only rendered to the Inca in his glory.