

Munroe Kirk

The White Conquerors: A Tale of Toltec and Aztec



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CHAPTER I. A CAPTIVE WARRIOR

Night had fallen on the island-city of Tenochtitlan, the capital of Anahuac, and the splendid metropolis of the Western world. The evening air was heavy with the scent of myriads of flowers which the Aztec people loved so well, and which their religion bade them cultivate in lavish profusion. From every quarter came the sounds of feasting, of laughter, and of music. The numerous canals of salt-water from the broad lake that washed the foundations of the city on all sides, were alive with darting canoes filled with gay parties of light-hearted revellers. In each canoe burned a torch of sweet-scented wood, that danced and flickered with the motions of the frail craft, its reflection broken by the ripples from hundreds of dipping paddles. Even far out on the placid bosom of the lake, amid the fairy-like chinampas, or tiny floating islands, the twinkling canoe-lights flitted like gorgeous fire-flies, paling the silver reflection of the stars with their more ruddy glow.

In the streets of the city the dancing feet of flower-wreathed youths and maidens tripped noiselessly over the smooth cemented pavements; while their elders watched them, with approving smiles, from their curtained doorways, or the flat flower-gardened roofs, of their houses. Above all these scenes of peaceful merriment rose the gloomy pyramids of many temples, ever-present reminders of the cruel and bloody religion with which the whole fair land was cursed.

Before the hideous idols, to which each of these was consecrated, lay offerings of human hearts, torn from the living bodies of that day's victims, and from the summit of each streamed the lurid flames of never-dying altar fires. By night and day they burned, supplied with fuel by an army of slaves who brought it on their backs over the long causeways that connected the island-city with the mainland and its distant forests. These pillars of smoke by day, and ill-omened banners of flame by night, were regarded with fear and hatred by many a dweller in the mountains surrounding the Mexican valley. They were the symbols of a power against which these had struggled in vain, of a tyranny so oppressive that it not only devoted them to lives of toil, hopeless of reward, but to deaths of ignominy and torture whenever fresh victims were demanded for its reeking altars. But while hatred thus burned, fierce and deep-seated, none dared openly to express it, for the power of the all-conquering Aztec was supreme. Far across the lofty mountains, to the great Mexican Gulf on the east, and westward to the broad Pacific; from the parched deserts of the cliff-dwelling tribes on the north, to the impenetrable Mayan forests on the south, the Aztec sway extended, and none might withstand the Aztec arms. If the imperial city demanded tribute it must be promptly given, though nakedness and hunger should result. If its priests demanded victims for their blood-stained altars, these must be yielded without a murmur, that the lives of whole tribes might not be sacrificed. Only one little mountain republic still held out, and defied the armies of the Aztec king, but of it we shall learn more hereafter.

So the mighty city of the lake drew to itself the best of all things from all quarters of the Western world, and was filled to overflowing with the wealth of conquered peoples. Hither came all the gold and silver and precious stones, the richest fabrics, and the first-fruits of the soil. To its markets were driven long caravans of slaves, captured from distant provinces, and condemned to perform such menial tasks as the haughty Aztec disdained to undertake.

During the brilliant reign of the last Montezuma, the royal city attained the summit of its greatness, and defied the world. Blinded by the glitter of its conquests, and secure in the protection of its invincible gods, it feared naught in the future, for what enemy could harm it?

The evening with which this story opens was one of unusual rejoicing in Tenochtitlan, for the morrow was to mark one of the most notable events of Montezuma's reign. The great Aztec calendar stone, the result of years of ceaseless labor, had at length reached the inner court of the principal temple. On the following day it was to be bathed in the blood of victims, and dedicated by the priests. This huge mass of shining porphyry, weighing more than fifty tons, and quarried from the distant mountains beyond the lake of Chalco, had been subjected to the unrelenting labors of the most famous astronomers and skilled artisans for so long, that the king had almost despaired of living to witness its completion. Finally, polished like a mirror and cunningly engraved with a countless but orderly array of hieroglyphics, it started on its journey to the city, drawn by the united efforts of ten thousand slaves. Inch by inch, slowly and painfully, costing a thousand lives for every mile of progress, it traversed leagues of rugged country. Even on the great causeway, when it had nearly reached its destination, where the iron-wood rollers ran smoothly and all difficulties seemed at an end, it had broken through a bridge and plunged into the lake, crushing a score of human beings beneath it. With infinite toil and human suffering it had been recovered from the waters, and, as the straining slaves cringed under the biting lashes of their drivers, its triumphal progress was resumed.

At length the huge stone had reached the end of its weary journey, and the morrow was to witness the closing scenes of this great national undertaking. The feasting had already been kept up for a week, or ever since the mighty monolith entered the city. Scores of victims had been sacrificed on the temple altars to insure the favor of the gods during those last days of its progress. But all this was as nothing compared with what would be witnessed on the morrow. For that day the bravest warriors taken in battle had been reserved, and the most beautiful captives. The former would be made to fight against each other under false promises that the lives of the victors should be spared. The latter – handsome youths, delicate maidens, and even little children – would dance a dance of death with wild beasts and deadly serpents, many cages of which had been brought from distant parts for the purpose. Oh! it was truly to be a rare and enjoyable festival, and the hearts of the dwellers in Tenochtitlan thrilled high in anticipation of its pleasures.

And yet, despite the universal joy that reigned in every quarter of the crowded city, it contained at least two hearts that were heavy with the forebodings of sorrow. One was that of its mighty ruler, the priest-warrior, Montezuma, and the other beat in the breast of one even more redoubtable as a warrior than the king himself, who, as a captive, was destined to fight for his life against overwhelming odds on the morrow.

In all that land of warriors there was none so famed as Tlahuicol. To all men he was known as the Tlascalan; but ever to himself and to Huetzin, his son, he whispered that he was Tlahuicol the Toltec. For years he had been the dreaded war-chief of the dauntless little mountain republic of Tlascala, which, alone of all those now occupying the land of Anahuac, had resisted the all-conquering Aztec arms, and retained its freedom. In spite of this he was not a Tlascalan, but had joined them in one of their times of sorest need, when it seemed as though their surrender to the swarming legions of Montezuma was inevitable. Their army had been defeated, its leaders killed or taken captive, and another day must have witnessed the overthrow of the republic. That night Tlahuicol appeared among them, a young warrior in the first flush of manhood, and addressed them with such fervid eloquence that their sinking spirits were again inflamed, and they gathered courage for one more desperate effort.

In the morning the young stranger led them to an attack against the Aztecs, whose vigilance was relaxed in anticipation of an easy triumph over their enemies. So marvellous was his strength, so admirable his skill, and so reckless his bravery, that the signal victory gained by the Tlascalans that day was afterward said to have been won by Tlahuicol alone. In their excess of gratitude and admiration his brave, but superstitious, followers hailed him as a god, declaring that never in mortal

were combined the qualities shown by him that day. From that time forth the fortunes of this stranger were linked with those of the Tlascalans, and all the honors at the disposal of the simple republic were showered upon him. The position of war-chief was accorded to him without question, and for more than a score of years he led his hardy mountaineers to victory in every battle that they fought against the cruel Aztecs. Very early in his new career he was wedded to a beautiful Tlascalan maiden, an only daughter of the noble house of Titcala, the chief of which was the acknowledged head of the republic. The fruits of this marriage were two children: Huetzin, who inherited his father's indomitable bravery, and Tiata, who, even as a child, gave promise that all of her mother's great beauty was to be hers.

As the years rolled on Tlahuicol lost none of his popularity with his troops nor with the people at large; only with the priests was he ever at enmity. He abhorred their bloody human sacrifices, and strove by every means in his power to have them abated. In return, the priests continually strove for his overthrow and to wean the affections of his soldiers from him. For many years their efforts were in vain, but finally their subtle craft gained them a few malcontent adherents. In the very heat of a fierce battle with an Aztec army, commanded by Montezuma in person, a cowardly blow, struck from behind, stretched the Tlascalan war-chief senseless on the ground. When he recovered consciousness he was a prisoner and being hurried toward the Aztec capital. Thither his devoted wife and her children followed him, resigning themselves to a willing captivity, that might even result in death, for the sake of sharing his fortunes.

For more than a year, though every avenue of escape was closely guarded, the noble prisoner was treated with the utmost consideration, and every effort was made to induce him to renounce his allegiance to Tlascala. Honors and riches were promised him if he would devote his sword to the service of the Aztec monarch; but every offer was disdainfully refused, and at length Montezuma reluctantly yielded to the cruel clamor of the priests, and condemned him to sacrifice.

CHAPTER II.

"REMEMBER THAT THOU ART A TOLTEC"

Knowing the cruelty of his Aztec captors as well as he did, Tlahuicol had hoped for no mercy from the first. He even attempted to hasten the fate that he foresaw was inevitable, by bitter denunciations of the Aztec priesthood and their horrid rites. Even Topil, the chief priest, whom Montezuma sent to the prisoner with the hope that his awful threats might terrify the bold warrior into an acceptance of his terms, was treated with such scornful contempt, that when he returned to his royal master the priest's dark face was livid with rage. Under penalty of the wrath of the gods, which should be called down upon the whole nation in case his request was not granted, Topil then and there demanded that not only the impious warrior, but his family as well, should be delivered to him for sacrifice.

To this the monarch granted a reluctant consent, only stipulating that they should be reserved for the greatest and most important feasts of the year, and that their fate should not be announced to them until the very hour of sacrifice. Although Topil agreed to these terms, he had no intention of keeping his word. The opportunity of prolonging his enemies' sufferings by anticipation was too precious to be neglected. So he caused the information to be conveyed to Tlahuicol's wife that her husband was doomed to death by torture. At the same time it was intimated, with equal secrecy, to the brave warrior himself, that unless he held himself in readiness to put to death with his own hands a number of Tlascalan captives then awaiting their doom in the dungeons of the great temple, and to lead an Aztec army against the mountain republic, his wife and children should die on the altars of Huitzil. With these cruel threats hanging over them the several members of this unfortunate family were kept apart, and no communication was allowed to pass between them.

Although the stern warrior continued in his defiant attitude, and refused to be moved by either threats or promises, he fell into a state of settled melancholy. This was soon afterward deepened by the sad news that the loving wife, who had shared his captivity as cheerfully as she had his former triumphs, was dead. Of his children he could learn nothing. It was of them that he was thinking, with a heart well-nigh breaking from its weight of sorrow, on the night of rejoicing that preceded the festival of the great calendar stone.

In pursuance of his policy of kindness, by which he hoped to win this redoubtable warrior to his own service, Montezuma had caused Tlahuicol to be lodged in one of the numerous dwellings that formed part of the royal establishment. These buildings, which were occupied by Aztec nobles in attendance upon the king, and by royal hostages from conquered nations, stood with the palace in an immense walled enclosure, hard by the great temple. They were surrounded by gardens planted with a wealth of tropical trees, shrubs, and flowers, traversed by a labyrinth of shaded paths and cool grottoes, watered by canals, lakes, and fountains, and containing immense aviaries of every bird known to the kingdom, as well as cages of serpents and wild animals. Ten large tanks, some filled with salt-water, and others with fresh, were stocked with every procurable variety of fish and marine animal; while for the care of these creatures, whose habits the king was never tired of studying, an army of attendant slaves was maintained. Besides these features of the royal museum, there was a building containing every form of warlike weapon and defensive armor known to the Aztecs, another for rare fabrics, and one for exquisitely wrought vessels of gold, silver, and the prized pottery of Cholula. There was also an establishment for dwarfs and other human monstrosities, which the monarch took pleasure in collecting from all parts of his kingdom.

In this place of beauty, and surrounded by all that royalty could command of things best calculated to interest and amuse, Tlahuicol chafed at his captivity, and dreamed of his home in the distant mountains. If he could but once more lead his trusty troops to battle against the hated Aztec,

how gladly would he pay for the privilege with his life! He was allowed the freedom of the gardens, though always under guard, and sometimes he would stroll to the training-field where the king's sons and other noble youth vied with each other in feats of arms. As he watched them his lip would curl with scorn at their puny efforts, and a fierce desire to show them what a mountain warrior could do with those same weapons would seize upon him. But no weapon was allowed within his reach, and with an air of disgust he would turn and walk back to his own quarters, always closely followed by his watchful guards.

On the evening preceding the day of the great feast, Tlahuicol sat moodily just outside the door of the house in which he was lodged, and which, beautiful as it was, still seemed to him the most hateful of prisons. Two motionless guards, armed with keen-edged maquahuitls, or Aztec swords, stood close at hand at either side, with their eyes fixed upon him. Should he escape, or should he even do himself bodily harm, their lives would be forfeit, and with this knowledge their vigilance was never relaxed.

Tlahuicol sat with downcast eyes and listened to the sounds of revelry that came faintly to him from the city. Clearly he understood their meaning, and wondered if on the morrow he was to meet the doom that he believed to be in store for him. He thought of the wife who was gone from him, and of the son and daughter concerning whose fate he had long been kept in ignorance. From these thoughts he was roused by the sound of approaching footsteps, and at once rose to his feet. In a moment the king, followed at a short distance by armed torch-bearers, stood before him.

Abruptly, and in a tone that proved him to be greatly agitated, Montezuma said:

"Tlahuicol, I am come to thee once again as a friend. As such I would serve thee, and as such I claim thy service."

"Thy friendship I reject, O king, and my service thou shalt never have," returned the other, proudly.

"Hear me to the end," replied the king, calmly; "for many days I have known what thou hast had no means of learning, but which will interest thee. An army of strange beings, white-skinned and bearded, but whether gods or men cannot be determined, have come out of the eastern sea, and landed on our coast. Since their earliest appearance my spies have noted their every movement, and brought me hourly word concerning them. I had hoped they would depart in peace, but was disappointed in the hope. Even now is word brought me that they have attacked and captured my city of Cempoalla, destroyed its gods, and are preparing to advance into the interior. If they be gods my power may not prevail against them. If they be men, as I hope, then will I fight them until they are swept from the face of the earth, and their hearts smoke upon the altars of Huitzil. In such a fight all other feuds should be forgotten, and all the nations of Anahuac united. It is in this service that I would have thy aid. With thy word that thou wilt enlist thy Tlascalans against this common foe, and lead them to battle as of old, both thou and thy children are free. Refuse it, and thy heart shall lie on Huitzil's altar ere the setting of the morrow's sun."

In spite of this startling intelligence, in spite of the tempting offer thus made, and in spite of the terrible threat by which it was accompanied, Tlahuicol's voice, as he answered the king, was as calm as though he was discussing some topic of ordinary interest.

"O king," he said, "know what I have told no man ere now, that I am no Tlascalan, but am a Toltec of the Toltecs. For many generations have my ancestors dwelt in the country of the Mayas. From there I came to this land to battle against thy accursed gods. Since the day that I left the Mayan people have I ever been in communication with them. Thus did I learn long since of strange and terrible beings, white-skinned and bearded as thou dost describe, who had landed on the Mayan coast. I was told much concerning them, and one thing I learned that thou wouldst give half thy kingdom to know for a certainty."

"Tell it me then, I command thee?" cried the king.

"I will tell it," answered Tlahuicol, "upon condition that thou first grant me a few minutes private converse with my children."

"Thy daughter is removed from here, but thy son is at hand. In return for thy secret, I will grant thee a single minute with him, but no more."

"It is all I ask," replied the prisoner.

The king gave an order to one of the guards and handed him his signet. The soldier departed. In a few minutes he returned accompanied by a tall, finely proportioned youth, of noble bearing, just entering upon manhood. It was Huetzin, who, at sight of his father, whom he had feared was dead, sprang into Tlahuicol's arms, and was enfolded in a close embrace. Quickly releasing himself, the elder man said hurriedly, but in too low a tone for the bystanders to hear:

"Huetzin, my son, by tomorrow's set of sun I may be with thy mother, therefore do thou take these as my latest words. Remember always that thou art a Toltec, that the Aztecs and the Aztec gods are mortal enemies of thy gods and thy people. If thou art spared, as I feel thou wilt be, devote thy life to their overthrow. The white conquerors, of whom I have so often spoken to thee, are even now in the land. If thou canst escape from this den of murderers, make thy way to them, join thyself to them, and lead them to this place. As for little Tiata, I trust thee – "

"Thy time is ended!" interrupted the stern voice of the king; "and now for thy secret?"

There was one more straining embrace between father and son, then the latter, exclaiming, "I will never forget!" was roughly dragged away and disappeared in the darkness.

Folding his arms, and turning grandly to the king, Tlahuicol said: "The secret that thou wouldst hear, O Montezuma, is that the strange beings who trouble thee are not gods, but men. At the same time they be men possessed of powers so terrible that they will sweep thee and thy false gods from the face of the earth, as the breath of the north wind scattereth chaff. Know, too, that sooner than lift hand to stay their coming, I will pray for their success with my latest breath."

"Thy prayers will be few and short, then," answered the king, in a tone of suppressed rage, as he turned away; "for on the morrow thy false heart shall be torn from thy body, and the wild fowls of the air shall feast upon thy carcass."

CHAPTER III.

IN THE MARKET-PLACE OF TENOCHTITLAN

On the morning of the last and greatest day of the festival by which the mighty calendar stone was dedicated, the rising sun shone from an unclouded sky upon the fair city of Tenochtitlan. All night long a thousand slaves had been busy sweeping and watering its streets, until now their smooth pavements of cement fairly shone with cleanliness. As there were no horses nor other beasts of burden in all the land, as all heavy traffic of the city was carried on in boats by means of the numerous intersecting canals, and as water was everywhere abundant, the cleansing of the ancient city of Tenochtitlan was a much easier task than is that of Mexico, its modern successor.

From earliest dawn troops of country people had thronged the three great causeways leading from the mainland, and poured over them into the city. Fleets of canoes from Tezcuco, on the opposite side of the lake, and from various smaller cities and villages on its border, were constantly arriving laden with parties of expectant sight-seers. Thus the avenues, streets, and squares, as well as the enclosures of the six hundred *teocallis* or temples of the city, were filled, soon after sunrise, by an eager and joyous multitude.

Especially animated was the scene in the *tinguez*, or great market-place, of Tlateloco. Here, displaying their wares in its shaded porticos, under booths of green leaves, or beneath awnings of gayly-striped cloth, were gathered traders from all parts of the kingdom, each in the quarter allotted to his particular class of goods. Among them were the goldsmiths of Azapozalco, the potters of Cholula, the weavers of Tezcuco, the stone-carvers of Tenojocan, the hunters of Xilotepec, the fishermen of Cuitlahuac, the mat and chair makers of Quauhtitlan, the florists of Iztapalapan, the fruit-dealers of the *tierra templada*, and the skilled artisans in feather-work of Xochimilco. Here were armorers displaying arrows, darts, and javelins, headed with an alloy of copper and tin as hard as steel, and tougher, heavy *maquahuitls*, resembling somewhat both a battle-axe and a sword, with keen blades of glistening *itztli* or obsidian. *Escaupils*, or doublets of quilted cotton which no arrow might penetrate, fierce-looking casques, fashioned like the grinning heads of wild animals, and shirts of golden mail, which only nobles might wear. In other places were quantities of meat, poultry, bread of maize, cakes, pastry, confectionery, smoking bowls of chocolate, flavored with vanilla, which, with the intoxicating *pulque*, shared the name of national beverage. Barber-shops, and booths for the sale of drugs and herbs abounded. Nor were book-stalls wanting, though the books displayed in them bore slight resemblance to those of modern times. They were formed of broad sheets of cotton cloth, parchment, or a paper made from the leaves of the agave, folded in the shape of fans, and covered with the minute colored pictures by means of which the Aztecs, ignorant of letters, reproduced their ideas on paper. Thus all Aztec writers were artists, and in the education of youth drawing was taught instead of reading and writing. To name all the commodities offered for sale in this vast market-place would be a tedious task, for in all Tenochtitlan were no stores, nor shops, nor places for trade, save this. The money used was in the shape of quills of gold-dust, small bags of cacao beans, and rudely stamped bits of tin.

Besides being a market-place, the *tinguez* was the centre where all news was exchanged, and to it came all those who wished to hear or tell some new thing. On this particular day two subjects of intense interest agitated the multitude who thronged it, to the exclusion of all other topics. One was the appearance on the coast of the white strangers, who were invariably spoken of as gods, and the other was the spectacle with which the great festival was to conclude that afternoon.

"They do say," exclaimed one portly individual, clad in a flowing *tilmatli*, or robe of purple cotton cloth, belted at his waist with a broad yellow sash, to the armorer whose store of obsidian daggers he was inspecting, "that the white gods are coming this way, and have even now set forth from Cempoalla."

"So I have heard," replied the other, "but I care not. If the king so wills, they may come. If he forbids, they may not."

"But," continued he of the purple robe, "they do say that the king has already forbidden their advance, and that the strangers pay no heed to his words."

"Then will Huitzil, the all-powerful, awake, and destroy them with a breath."

"But they do say that some of them are gods mighty and terrible in themselves, having the forms both of men and beasts greater and more frightful than ever were seen. And they do say," he almost whispered in his earnestness, "that they breathe fire and smoke like Popocatepetl himself, and that their weapons are thunderbolts."

"Aye, and they do say truly," interrupted a book-seller who had overheard these remarks, "for here it is pictured out in detail, a copy made from one of the reports sent to the king himself."

With this the new-comer unfolded a fan-like sheet of parchment, on which were drawn likenesses of white men in armor, some on horseback and others on foot, of cannon belching forth fire and smoke, and of many other things so strange and wonderful to Aztec eyes that in a few moments the trio were surrounded by a gaping crowd, eagerly pushing and struggling for a glimpse of the marvellous pictures.

Amid the excitement caused by these evidences that the rumors of the white gods, busily circulated for many months, were only too true, the armorer remained calm and self-possessed. He even expressed a contempt for the strange beings who, he declared, were but sea-monsters, after all.

"Can such creatures harm the children of the sun so long as Huitzil, the god of gods, watches over them from his seat above the clouds?" he cried. "Not that he will be called upon to so much as lift a finger; for is not Montezuma, our lord and the lord of lords, able of his own might to drive them into the sea, whence they came? Shall he who overcame Tlahuicol, the greatest warrior of the age, forbid the advance of men, monsters, fire-breathing beasts, or even of gods, in vain? Shame on you for thus belittling your own gods and your king! Alas! that I, in my poverty, am compelled to forge weapons for such as you!"

"They do say," here interposed he of the purple robe, anxious to change the subject, "that Tlahuicol the Tlascalan, who is doomed to sacrifice this day, has demanded the privilege of a warrior who has never turned back to foe, and that the king has granted it."

"Not the battle of despair?" exclaimed the armorer.

"Even so," nodded the other.

"Then will I at once put away my wares, and hasten to secure a place within the serpent wall, for if he meet with worthy foemen the sight of this battle will be worth all the other sights of earth, and I would not miss it, though with my right hand I was forced to pay for admission within the sacred wall."

It was even so. Tlahuicol was to lend a crowning glory to the great festival of his enemies by fighting, for their entertainment, the battle of despair. This was the poor privilege granted to any captive warrior who had never turned back to foe, of fighting for his life and liberty, with a single weapon, and with one foot tethered, against any six who might challenge him, and who might attack him singly or in couples, as they chose. In all Aztec history no captive had ever gained his freedom in this manner, and even so famous a warrior as Tlahuicol was not supposed to have the slightest chance of victory in so unequal a contest. It was well known that he had been out of practice, and had taken almost no exercise for a year. Thus it was held by many that he was now no more than equal to a warrior of ordinary attainments. As to his overcoming six, selected from the throng of young Aztec nobles who eagerly sought this opportunity for acquiring fame and the order of knighthood, which would be conferred upon him who should deal a fatal blow to the redoubtable Tlascalan, the idea was unworthy of consideration. Nevertheless all agreed that Tlahuicol would make a pretty fight, and even to witness the death-struggle of the warrior whose name had so long been a terror to Aztec ears, was deemed so great a privilege that, hours before the time set for the battle, every inch of available space in the amphitheatre adjoining the great temple was occupied by the eager populace.

This amphitheatre was but a small portion of the vast area reserved in the heart of the city, and enclosed by a stone wall eight feet high, called the Coatapantli, or wall of serpents, for the temple of Huitzil, the war-god. Here were the dwellings of thousands of priests, and quarters for ten thousand troops, granaries, arsenals, seminaries for the priestly education of youth of both sexes, and numerous monuments, the most notable of which was that constructed of one hundred thousand human skulls of victims sacrificed on Huitzil's altars. In the exact centre of the whole towered the great temple, a lofty pyramid of masonry rising in five terraces, which were gained by as many flights of stairs. Each of these gave access to a single terrace, and they were so arranged that from the top of one the entire circuit of the pyramid must be made ere the next flight could be reached.

The top of this mighty pyramid presented a flat surface of nearly an acre in extent. On it, rising to a height of sixty feet, was a shrine sheltering a hideous image of the god and its bloody altar, on which was laid daily offerings of human hearts torn from living bodies. Outside of the shrine stood another altar, on which burned the never-dying fire. It was commonly believed that if by any chance this should be extinguished some dire calamity would overtake the nation. Near by stood the great war-drum of serpents' skins, which was only struck in times of emergency, when the awe-inspiring sound of its hollow boomings could be heard for leagues.

The only other object on the broad level space was a large block of jasper, slightly convex on its upper side. It was the stone of sacrifice, across which victims were laid for the greater convenience of the priests in cutting open their breasts and tearing out the still palpitating hearts in which the blood-loving god delighted. The whole place bore the aspect of a shambles, and was pervaded by a sickening stench. The priests who officiated here, and of whom Topil was the chief, were blood-besmeared from head to foot, and allowed their long hair, also clotted with blood, to hang in elf-locks over their shoulders. Thus their appearance was more savage and terrible than can well be imagined.

CHAPTER IV. TLAHUICOL'S LAST BATTLE

The amphitheatre in which Tlahuicol was to make so desperate a fight for his life was enclosed on three sides by low buildings, having terraced roofs on which a vast number of spectators could be accommodated. In its centre was an immense circular stone, like a gigantic mill-stone, on the flat surface of which were fought all gladiatorial combats. Late in the afternoon of the day of feasting, when the thousands of spectators were weary of the brutal games by which until that time they had been entertained, an expectant murmur suddenly swept over the vast assemblage, and then broke into a roar of applause. Six warriors of noble birth, wearing on their heads golden casques in the likenesses of a dog, a fox, a wolf, a bear, an ocelot, and a mountain-lion, with a carriage that bespoke their martial training, had entered the amphitheatre, and were marching slowly around the outer edge of the great stone. When they reached the point nearest the pavilion in which, beneath a canopy of royal green, reclined the king, surrounded by his attendant nobles, the six warriors prostrated themselves until their foreheads touched the pavement. Then they continued their measured march until they reached the side of the amphitheatre opposite that by which they had entered.

Now, to the barbaric music of drums, attabals, and shells, there entered a single figure between a double file of soldiers, and the hurricane of applause by which he was greeted would have proclaimed his identity even had not his name been heard on all sides.

"Tlahuicol the ocelot!" "Tlahuicol the wolf!" "Tlahuicol the mountain-lion!" "Tlahuicol the terrible!" shouted the spectators, and the eyes of the great warrior lighted with a momentary gleam of triumph at these tributes from his enemies. He was conducted directly to the centre of the great stone, where one of his ankles was tethered by a short chain to a ring-bolt let into the unyielding rock. Then one of his guards stripped the tilmatli from his shoulders, disclosing the fact that he was naked, save for a cloth about his loins, and unprotected by armor of any kind. At the same moment another soldier handed the prisoner the maquahuatl with which he was to defend his life.

Tlahuicol balanced it for a moment in his hand, then suddenly snapped its tough staff in two without apparent effort, and disdainfully flung the pieces from him. Turning toward the king he cried, in a loud voice:

"It was but a toy! a child's plaything, and yet it was given me for the defence of my life! Let me, I pray thee, O king, have my own good sword. Then will I show thee a fight that may prove of interest."

The king nodded his assent. A soldier was despatched for the weapon, and shortly returned, bearing in both hands a maquahuatl so huge that a murmur of amazement arose from the spectators, who deemed it impossible that any man could wield it. But Tlahuicol received it with a smile of satisfaction, swung it lightly twice or thrice above his head, and then leaned upon it with an expectant air as though inviting his enemies to approach. No further invitation was needed, for no Aztec warrior worthy of the name was ever lacking in bravery. The young noble who wore the head of a fox sprang forward, and, with guarded movements, approached the chained but still terrible champion.

Cautiously the fox circled about his adversary seeking an unguarded point at which to strike. On account of his fettered leg Tlahuicol could only turn half-way round, but he would then whirl about so quickly that, in spite of his disadvantage, he presented no opening for attack for some minutes. At length, wearying of such fruitless play, he purposely made his movements slower, until the Fox, thinking his opportunity had come, sprang forward to deliver a deadly blow. In an instant his sword was struck from his hand. Broken and useless it was sent spinning to the further side of the arena, and the Fox reeled backward with the force of the blow. Recovering himself he sprang to a soldier who stood near, snatched a javelin from his hand, and hurled it with deadly aim at Tlahuicol's head. Without moving his body, the Toltec bent his head to one side, caught the hurtling weapon in his

left hand, and, almost with the same motion, flung it back with such terrible force that it passed completely through the body of the Aztec and fell to the ground behind him. He staggered, fell, and was borne, dying, from the scene.

Instantly two of his companions took his vacant place. Filled with rage they advanced impetuously and somewhat incautiously. As their weapons were raised to strike, the terrible maquahuítl of Tlahuicol crushed the skull of one like an egg-shell, and then, with a fierce backward blow, sent the other reeling a dozen paces away, so severely wounded that it was doubtful if he might ever recover. Marvellous as this feat was, it did not wholly save the Toltec from the descending sword of his third enemy. The keen obsidian blade cut a frightful gash in his side, and he was instantly bathed in his own blood.

But the wounded warrior had no time to consider his own condition, for, almost before he realized that he had been struck, two fresh assailants were upon him. One of these was cleft from casque to shoulders by Tlahuicol's awful weapon, which seemed to the breathless spectators like a thunderbolt in the hands of a god. Ere the Toltec could recover himself, the other rushed in and bore him to the ground, where, falling uppermost, the Aztec hoped to deal a fatal blow with his dagger. Before he could accomplish his purpose the champion's arms had enfolded him in an embrace so deadly that the breath was driven from his body with a sound that might be heard in all parts of the amphitheatre, and his ribs were crushed like pipe-stems. Leaping to his feet, amid thunders of applause from the frenzied spectators, the Toltec flung the lifeless body from him, and regained his ponderous sword just in time to meet the onset of his sixth, and most powerful, assailant, he whose casque was fashioned in the likeness of an ocelot.

Now the breath of the champion came in sobbing gasps, and he was so weakened by loss of blood that it seemed impossible for him to withstand the furious onslaught of this fresh adversary. For the space of two minutes the exchange of blows was so rapid that there was but one continuous crash of sound. Then the ocelot leaped back beyond reach of his tethered opponent. The Toltec staggered and seemed about to fall. Suddenly, rallying his failing strength, he hurled his heavy weapon so truly, and with such mighty force, that the last of his assailants was swept over the edge of the platform on which they had fought, and rolled, to all appearance lifeless, to the base of the royal pavilion.

For an instant there was a silence as of death in the vast amphitheatre. Then it was broken by a thrilling cry in the Mayan tongue of "Father! oh, Father! you have conquered! you are free!"

Tlahuicol, who had fallen to his knees with the force of his last effort, lifted his drooping head and looked to where Huetzin struggled in the grasp of two brawny priests. Then, very feebly, with his right hand, he made a sign such as but two persons in that vast concourse recognized. He touched his forehead, his breast, and both shoulders. It was the sign of the God of the Four Winds, the almost forgotten symbol of the Toltec faith. Huetzin knew it, and so did one of the priests who held him.

With the making of this sacred symbol of his race, the mighty warrior fell forward and lay prone on the bloody stone, unmindful of the wild storm of plaudits by which his unprecedented victory was hailed.

Suddenly, while all was confusion, the fierce figure of Topil, the chief priest, sprang to the platform, and, snatching the dread knife of sacrifice from his girdle, bent over the prostrate man. The next moment he rose, and with a savage cry of triumph held aloft the heart of the bravest son of Anahuac. The cheering of the multitude sank into a shuddering cry of horror at this dastardly act. Had another committed it he would have been rent in pieces, but the person of the chief priest was sacred.

Even the elements seemed aghast at the dreadful deed; for, though the sun had not yet set, the sky was darkened by a veil of inky blackness, and an ominous moaning filled the air.

Paying no heed to these portents, nor to the black looks of those about him, Topil screamed to his fellows that the son should share the fate of the father, and that the god was weary of waiting for the offering of their hearts. Then, bidding them follow him with the prisoner, he sprang up the steps of the great temple. With shrill cries the obedient priests forced a passage through the surging

multitude, and hurried Huetzin in the same direction. Even the king had no power to stop them, for in Tenochtitlan the chief priest was mightier than he.

So the compact body of white-robed priests mounted flight after flight of steps, and swept around the four sides of the teocal along terrace above terrace. Finally they gained the summit of the lofty pyramid, and disappeared from the view of the silent throngs who gazed, as though fascinated, after them.

Inevitable and awful as was the fate before him, Huetzin had but one thought as he was dragged up those weary flights, and along those interminable terraces. It was not for himself, but for his sister Tiata, the dear one who, with his last words, the dead father had entrusted to his care. Without father, mother, or brother, what would be her fate? What would become of her? As they stripped him and stretched his naked body on the dread stone of sacrifice, he cried aloud in his agony:

"Tiata! sister! To the god of the Toltecs, our father's god and our god, I commend thee!"

CHAPTER V.

HUETZIN'S MIRACULOUS ESCAPE

At this supreme moment in the life of Huetzin, the young Toltec, the scene, of which he formed the central figure, was of such a character as to inspire a nameless fear in the hearts of all beholders. To the silent multitude who, with upturned faces, were gathered about the temple of their most dreaded god, awaiting the wild chant of priests that should proclaim the sacrifice accomplished, the summit of the lofty pyramid was lost in the pall-like blackness of the heavens. Only a fitful gleam of altar-fire formed a point of light on which the eye could rest. The broad space surmounting the temple was the dramatic focus of the weird scene. About it moaned the spirits of upper air, as though with the voices of the innumerable dead who had breathed their last on that accursed spot. There was an absolute calm, and no breath of wind disturbed the straight column of altar-flame that cast a lurid light across the blood-stained platform. In front of the altar, and clustered in a dark mass about the stone of sacrifice, were the priests of Huitzil. Their white robes had been thrown aside, and all the hideous features of their blood-smeared bodies and streaming locks of matted hair were revealed. In their midst, cruelly outstretched on the mass of polished jasper, lay the naked body of the beautiful youth whose death was to close the pagan rites with which the great calendar stone was dedicated.

Suddenly the dread silence was broken by a single stroke upon the huge drum of serpent skins. Out through the blackness rolled its booming echoes, proclaiming to the utmost limits of the city, and far beyond, that the final act of the drama was about to be consummated. As the significant sound smote upon the ears of those gathered at the base of the teocal, a shuddering cry broke from the vast concourse. It was heard by Topil, the chief priest, who had just sounded the signal, and now strode, knife in hand, toward his waiting victim; but it only caused him to smile scornfully. It was but another tribute to his power, and he exulted in the natural accessories that rendered this final scene so impressive.

As Topil stood beside his victim, Huetzin gave utterance to the prayer recorded in the preceding chapter. Then the dread knife, that had drunk the blood of thousands, was uplifted. Ere it could descend there came, from out the enveloping blackness, a flash of light so vivid, and a crash of thunder so awful, that the very earth trembled with the shock and the mighty pyramid rocked on its foundations. A huge globe of fire, a veritable thunderbolt of the gods launched with unerring aim and irresistible force, had fallen on Huitzil's temple. It burst as it struck the rock-paved summit of the teocal, and for a moment the whole space was bathed in leaping flames of such dazzling intensity that no mortal eye might gaze upon them. Many of the stone blocks were shattered into fragments, the altar on which burned the eternal fire was overthrown and its sacred flame extinguished. The priests, gathered about the stone of sacrifice, were flung, stunned and breathless, in every direction. Some of them, in the madness of their terror, even leaped from the edge of the trembling platform, and were dashed to the pavement of the courtyard far below.

An instant of darkness followed this first exhibition of the storm god's power. While it lasted, cries of terror and lamentation arose from all parts of the wide-spread city. From every quarter it was seen that the sacred fire no longer burned, and into every mind flashed the foreboding of calamity thus portended. Only for a moment was the wrath of the storm god stayed, and then bolt upon bolt crashed above the devoted city, their awful din mingled with the wild shriekings of unfettered wincings, and a downpour of rain that seemed like to deluge the world.

With the first outbreak of the tempest, Huetzin, released by the terrified priests who had held him, rolled unconscious to the pavement beside the stone of sacrifice. When he recovered his senses and staggered to his feet, a furious storm of wind and rain was buffeting his naked body, while lightning glared and thunder crashed incessantly about him. But he still lived, and of those who so

recently condemned him to death, not one was to be seen. A sudden hope sprang into his breast, and he glanced about for a way of escape. There was none. If he descended the long flights of steps he would certainly be apprehended in the walled court below. He might seek a temporary refuge in the shrine at one end of the platform; but at the best, that would only prolong his existence for a few wretched hours. Last of all, he might end his misery at once by a leap from the giddy verge of the platform on which he stood. Yes, that was best. There was no other way. As he was about to carry out this intention, a human figure rose from beyond the sacrificial stone, and stepped to where he stood. It was that of a priest, and, as a flash of lightning betrayed his presence, Huetzin's impulse to seize him and force him also to take the death-leap was checked by a sight that filled him with amazement.

A second gleam of lightning revealed the startling fact that this priest of Huitzil was making the sacred symbol of the Toltec faith, the sign made by his own father as his dying act, and which he deemed unknown to any in all Tenochtitlan save himself. As he stood motionless with amazement, the strange priest cried, in a voice to be heard above the tumult of the storm:

"Follow me and I will save you, for I, too, know the holy sign of the Four Winds! I, too, am a Toltec!"

With this he seized the youth's hand, and the latter allowed himself to be led away. Instead of turning toward the outer stairway, as Huetzin fancied they would, they entered the foul and evil-smelling shrine of the Aztec war-god. The monstrous image, with its hideous features, was dimly revealed by the intermittent flashes of lightning, and Huetzin shuddered as he stood before it. To him it was the embodiment of that cruel and cowardly religion with which the fair land of his ancestors was cursed, and could he have destroyed it at the expense of his own life, he would gladly have done so.

Passing swiftly to the back of the image, the priest, who had just proclaimed himself to be of the Toltec race, caused a panel of stone to slide noiselessly back in polished grooves, and disclosed a place of utter blackness. Entering this he drew Huetzin after him. Then he closed the opening, and, bidding the other stand motionless, passed his hands carefully over the stone floor at their feet. There was a slight grating sound, and Huetzin knew, by a sudden upflow of damp air, that some concealed passage-way had been opened.

"Now," whispered his guide, "we are about to descend a secret stairway known only to the chief priest and myself. Moreover, should he even suspect that I was possessed of its knowledge, my heart would smoke on Huitzil's altar. For this reason I claim thy oath, by the immortal God of the Four Winds, never to reveal this secret, so long as Huitzil sits upon his throne."

"By the sacred name of the Four Winds I swear never to reveal it," answered the youth.

Then they began to descend, carefully closing the opening above them, and feeling their way with the utmost caution. The air was damp and chill, the narrow stone steps were slippery with moisture. They formed a stairway of zigzags, and to Huetzin it seemed as though they must penetrate below the foundations of the temple, so long was it before the bottom of the last flight was reached.

At the terminus of the stairway was a closed door, which only those initiated into its secret might open. It admitted them to a long narrow passage, from which branched other passages, as Huetzin learned by coming upon them with his groping hands. His guide took careful note of the number of these passages, and finally turned into one that led at right angles to that they had been following. After a while it sloped upward, and at its end they found themselves in a small room, which at the same time seemed large and airy as compared with the suffocating narrowness of the various passages they had just traversed.

Bidding Huetzin remain here for a moment, the priest left him standing in darkness and silence that were absolute. So long a time elapsed before his companion returned, that the young Toltec wondered if he had escaped the altar of sacrifice only to be buried alive in this mysterious place. While he dwelt with a sinking heart on the awful possibilities thus presented, a door was noiselessly opened, and a flood of light poured into the apartment. The priest, bearing a torch in one hand and a

packet in the other, entered. He was followed by a slave, carrying a basket, at sight of whom Huetzin shrank back in alarm.

"Be not afraid," whispered the priest, noting the movement; "he is blind and knows naught of thy presence."

As the slave set down his burden, he was dismissed and retired, closing the door behind him. From the packet that he bore the priest produced a robe of the coarse cotton (*nequen*) worn by the lower classes, with which Huetzin gladly covered his naked body, a pair of grass sandals, and a dagger of *itztli*. The basket yielded materials for a bountiful meal, to which the young man, who had tasted no food since the night before, sat down with the appetite of one who is famished. His companion also ate heartily, and as he did so conversed with Huetzin, principally of his own affairs. Of himself he only said:

"My name is Halco, and like thyself I am of the Toltec race. Why I am here in this accursed guise, and how I came to know the secrets of Topil, I cannot now explain. Suffice it that I am one of the bitterest enemies of Aztec priesthood and Aztec gods. Until the moment of his death I knew not that thy father, the brave Tlahuicol, was a Toltec, or I might have saved him; when he made the sign it was too late. Now I can provide thee with means of escape. Make thy way to the camp of the white conquerors, of whom thou must have heard, and lead them to this city. In them lies our only hope for the overthrow of Huitzil and his bloody priesthood; when thou comest again thou shalt hear from me."

"But Tiata, my sister! I cannot leave her unprotected," interrupted Huetzin.

"Fear not for her. For the present she is safe, and if she were not thou couldst do nothing to help her. I will keep watch, and if dangers beset her while thou art with the white conquerors, thou shalt be informed. Now that thou hast eaten and regained thy strength, thy flight must be continued. Already Topil is aware of thy escape, and he has sworn by all the gods that thy heart shall yet smoke on Huitzil's altar."

CHAPTER VI.

TWO SLAVES OF IZTAPALAPAN

Following the mysterious priest, who bore the torch that illuminated their way, Huetzin was conducted through bewildering ranges of galleries, passages, and halls, until finally Halco paused, saying:

"Farther than this I may not go. It is high time that I showed myself among the priests, that my absence may not cause suspicion. Follow this passage to its end, where thy way of escape will be made plain. Now fare thee well, son of Tlahuicol, and may the god of the Four Winds guide and protect thee."

With these words, and without waiting for a reply, the priest turned abruptly away, and in another moment both he and the light of his torch had disappeared. For a minute or so Huetzin stood motionless where he had been left, but as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he imagined that a faint light came from the direction he had been told to take. Walking cautiously toward it his ear caught the sound of lapping waters, and in a moment later he stood in the opening of a low water-gate that looked out on the broad lake of Tezcuco. The storm had passed and the stars shone brightly. The cool night air was delightfully refreshing, and Huetzin inhaled it with long breaths. As he looked out beyond the wall of the gateway, he saw a shadowy form of a canoe containing a single occupant, who appeared to be waiting. Believing this to be the means of escape indicated by the priest, he uttered a slight cough.

Instantly there came a whisper of: "Art thou he who would be set across?"

To which Huetzin replied, without hesitation: "I am he."

As the canoe moved to where he stood, he stepped in, and it instantly shot away toward the farther side of the star-flecked waters. Many boats, with twinkling lights, were seen, but all of them were skilfully avoided, until the canoe was among a cluster of little floating islands of artificial construction. Some of these were used as resorts by pleasure-loving Aztecs, and others as small gardens on which were raised vegetables and flowers for the near-by city market. As the canoe which bore Huetzin and his silent companion passed swiftly by one of these, a stern voice hailed them, demanding to know their business and whither they were bound. Receiving no reply, the voice commanded them to halt, in the king's name.

"What shall I do?" asked Huetzin's companion, irresolutely.

"Do as he commands, and when his curiosity is satisfied so that thou art allowed to depart, come for me to yonder chinampa," replied Huetzin, in a whisper. As he spoke he pointed to one of the floating islands dimly outlined not far from them, and at the same time quietly slipped into the water. He swam noiselessly, but with such powerful strokes that a dozen of them placed him beside the tiny islet he had indicated to his companion. He made as though he would land on it, and then, with a sudden change of plan, the motive of which he could not have explained even to himself, he slipped back into the water and swam toward another chinampa that he could barely discern in the distance. It was well for him that he obeyed the instinct forbidding him to land on the first island; for, as he drew himself out on the second, and lay hidden in the tall grasses that fringed its edge, he heard the quick dip of paddles, and the sound of suppressed, but excited, voices coming from the direction of the other. He was startled by hearing his own name coupled with that of his father. It was borne distinctly to him over the still waters, and gave him a certain intimation that the bloodhounds of the chief priest were already on his trail.

Without waiting a further confirmation of his fears, Huetzin hastily crossed to the other side of the island on which he had taken refuge, almost stumbling against the tiny, grass-thatched hut of its proprietor as he did so. The man heard him, and shouted to know who was there. As Huetzin quietly

entered the water and swam away, the man emerged from his hut, keeping up the angry shouting that the young Toltec would so gladly have silenced. He soon gained another island, fastened to which he discovered a canoe. Even as he clambered into it and shoved off, its owner, aroused by the distant shouts, came hurriedly to the place where it had been. In another moment his outcries were added to the others, as he discovered his loss. Fortunately the canoe had drifted so far under the impetus of Huetzin's vigorous shove, that it was hidden by the darkness from the eyes of its owner, so that he could form no notion of who had taken it, nor why it had been stolen.

Huetzin lay motionless in the bottom of the frail craft so long as it continued to move. Then he raised himself cautiously and began to feel for a paddle. To his dismay there was none. The careful owner had carried it to his hut, and now the fugitive, though possessed of a boat, had no means of propelling it. Yes, he had his hands! and, kneeling in the bottom of the canoe, he began to urge it forward by paddling with them. It was slow and tedious work. Moreover, it was accompanied by a certain unavoidable amount of splashing. This sounded so loud to the strained senses of the poor lad, that he felt convinced it must reach the ears of his pursuers.

He had made considerable progress and was well-nigh exhausted by the unaccustomed nature of his efforts, but still hopeful of escape. Suddenly he heard voices behind him, evidently approaching rapidly, and his heart failed him as he realized the utter helplessness of his position. He listened fearfully to the approaching sounds, which were coming so directly toward him that discovery was inevitable if he remained in the canoe. All at once his ear detected something which caused such a sudden revulsion of feeling that he could have shouted for joy. The voices were those of a man and a woman, who were talking in the familiar Tlascalan dialect.

"Ho, slaves!" he called in an imperious tone, as the other canoe approached close to his own.

The paddling ceased and the man's voice, couched in submissive accents, answered, "Yes, my lord."

"Have you an extra paddle? Mine is broken and I am a King's messenger on a service that admits of no delay."

"We have but two, both of which are in use. But if your lordship desires one of them, and will make good its loss to our master – "

"Hand it to me at once," interrupted Huetzin, in as stern a tone as he could command. "Or better still," he continued as the other craft drew alongside, "I will come into your canoe, and you shall carry me to the further side of the lake. In that way I shall get on more quickly, and you will run no risk of losing your precious paddle."

Thus saying, Huetzin stepped lightly into the other boat, and peremptorily ordered its occupants to hasten forward with all speed, as his mission could no longer be delayed.

With an obedience born of long servitude, they resumed their paddles and labored to fulfil his wishes, without question. For some time they proceeded in silence. Then Huetzin's curiosity got the better of his prudence, and he asked the slaves what they were doing on the lake at so late an hour of the night.

"We carried a load of flowers from our master's garden, near Iztapalapan, to the market of Tenochtitlan," answered the man, "and delayed to witness the festivities until overtaken by the storm. When it abated so that we might put forth, it was near the middle watch. Since then we have been stopped and examined three different times by boats of the lake patrol."

"What sought they?" demanded Huetzin.

"An escaped prisoner."

"Heard you his name?"

"They said – ," began the woman, timidly.

"No," interrupted her husband, sharply, "we heard it not. Where will my lord that we should land him?"

"Anywhere," answered Huetzin, carelessly. Then, correcting himself, he added: "That is, you may land me at the place to which you are going. I would not that you should incur your master's displeasure by further delay. You have a hut of your own, I suppose?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Then take me to it, for my garments are wet, and I would dry them before proceeding on my journey."

Although such a proposition from one who had recently claimed to be in the greatest haste, struck both the Tlascalans as peculiar, they were too wise to pass remarks on the actions of a king's messenger, and so received it in silence.

Guiding their course by the stars, they soon brought the canoe to land, and led the way to their humble hut of rushes, plastered with lake mud, that stood not far from the water's edge.

As the three entered it, the woman knelt to blow life into some coals that smouldered in a bed of ashes, on a rude hearth, while the man brought a bundle of twigs to throw on them. As a bright blaze sprung up, both turned to look at the stranger who had so unceremoniously thrust himself upon their hospitality. The firelight fell full on his face, and as the man caught sight of it, a startled cry burst from his lips. It was echoed by the woman.

"It is Huetzin the Tlascalan!" gasped the former.

"The son of Tlahuicol, our war chief!" cried the woman, with a great sob, and, seizing the young man's hand, she kissed it passionately.

CHAPTER VII.

LOYALTY OUTWEIGHS GOLD AND FREEDOM

The delight of these humble Tlascalan slaves at discovering, and being permitted to serve, the son of their country's hero, knew no bounds. They wept with joy, and would have kissed his feet had he allowed it. The man provided him with dry clothing from his own scanty stock, while the woman hastened to make some tortillas, the thin cakes of meal and water, baked on the surface of a flat stone set at an angle before the fire, that to this day form the staple bread of all Mexico. They marvelled at the story of his escape from beneath the very knife of sacrifice, and listened to it with ejaculations of thankfulness and amazement at every detail. They spoke with bated breath of Tlahuicol's brave fight, while the man declared proudly that the like had never been seen even in that land of battles, and that none but a Tlascalan could have performed such marvels. More than all were they proud that Huetzin had entrusted them with his life, and they wondered that he should have dared place himself at the mercy of strangers.

"No Tlascalan is a stranger to the son of Tlahuicol," answered the young man, simply.

"But how knew you that we were Tlascalans?"

"By the tongues with which you spoke. The voice of the mountaineer no more resembles that of a dweller in the valleys than the cry of the eagle is like that of a raven," replied Huetzin, with a smile.

Then they rejoiced that in all their years of slavery they had not lost their native accent, and recalled with simple pride how they had striven and helped each other to preserve this token of their birth, and sole reminder of their happy youth among the distant mountains. They told him of their captivity, and how they had been surprised, not far from their own home, by a party of Aztec slave-hunters, against whom the man's desperate resistance proved of no avail. "Though there were but few abler warriors than he in all the land," added the old woman, proudly, with a fond look at her old husband. They also told him of their only child, the little girl, Cocotin, who had been left behind and of whose fate they had gained no tidings in all these years. They told of their present life with all its toil and hardship, and, when the tale was ended they rejoiced that the gods had led them over the thorny paths of slavery to the end that they might be of service to the son of Tlahuicol, their country's hero.

With all this there was no intimation of the fact, that should they be suspected of aiding the escape of a victim doomed to sacrifice, or of having sheltered him for an hour, they would be condemned to death by torture. Huetzin, however, was well aware of this, and so, when he had eaten of their frugal fare and dried his wet garments, he would have taken his departure; but to this his entertainers would not listen.

"It is near morning, and with daylight your capture in this place would be certain," argued the man. "Tarry with us until the coming of another night, when I will guide you to a place from which you may reach the road to Tlascala."

"Would my lord snatch from us the great joy of our lives?" asked the woman, reproachfully, "and needlessly shorten the only hours of happiness we have known since last we looked on the face of Cocotin, our little one?"

"But if I am found here your lives will be forfeit," urged Huetzin.

"That is as the gods will," answered the man. "Our poor lives are as nothing, while the gods have shown that they are reserving yours for their own good purpose. Nay, my lord, depart not, but honor us with your presence yet a while longer, and all shall be well."

Thus urged Huetzin yielded, and, more weary than he was aware of, flung himself down on a mat of sweet grasses in one corner of the room, where he almost instantly fell asleep. The old people watched him, sitting hand in hand and conversing in whispers of the wonderful event by which the

hard monotony of their lives had been brightened. Every now and then the man went outside and listened. At daylight he was obliged to report for duty in the fields.

When he had gone the woman took a quantity of the maguey fibre, which it was her daily task to prepare for the cloth-weavers, and, with it, completely concealed the sleeping youth. So well was he hidden that even the prying eyes of a female neighbor, who ran in for a few moments' gossip while her breakfast was cooking, failed to detect his presence.

"Have you heard," asked the woman, "of the escape of a victim dedicated to Huitzil yesterday? In some manner – I have not yet learned the details – he succeeded in killing several of the holy priests, and escaping from under the very knife of sacrifice. The gods were so incensed that they extinguished the sacred fire with a breath. Nor will they be appeased until he is again brought before them, and his heart lies on the altar; for so say the priests."

"What is he like?" demanded the other, calmly.

"They say," replied the visitor, "that he is young, and as comely to look upon as Quetzal himself; but that at heart he is a very monster, and that his only meat is babes or very young children. I should be frightened to death were I to catch sight of him, though for the sake of the reward I should be willing to venture it."

"Is there a reward offered for his capture?"

"Yes. Have you not heard? It is proclaimed everywhere, that, to any free man who shall produce him dead or alive, or tell where he may be found, shall be given a hundred quills of gold and a royal grant of land. If any slave shall be the fortunate one, he and his shall be given their freedom, and twenty quills of gold. Oh! I would my man might set eyes on him. He is already searching, as are many of the neighbors, for it is said that the escaped one crossed the lake in this direction last night, after overturning several boats that were in pursuit of him, and leaving their occupants to perish in the water. Besides that, he killed or wounded near a score of chinampa owners, and set their canoes adrift. I know this to be so, for my man picked up one of the canoes on the lake shore, not an hour ago, and has informed the officers."

"Never did I hear of anything so terrible!" cried the Tlascalan woman, professing an eager sympathy with her neighbor's gossip. "We are all in danger of our lives."

"Yes," continued the other, "but he must be taken soon, for soldiers are scouring the country in all directions, and every house is to be searched. They will not find him in a dwelling, though, for the penalty is too terrible. The proclamation says that whoever shall give him a crust of bread, or a sup of water, or a moment's shelter, shall be burned to death, he and every member of his family. So the monster will get no aid, I warrant you. Well, I must go. I am glad you know nothing of him," she added, casting a searching glance around the interior of the hut, "for I should hate to be compelled to inform against a neighbor. What a fine lot of fibre you have prepared!"

"Yes," answered the Tlascalan woman, calmly, "and I am just about to take it out in the sun to bleach."

As the steps of the departing gossip died away, Huetzin, who had been aroused by her shrill tones, and had overheard all that she said, shook off his covering of fibre and rose to his feet, looking very pale and determined.

"I can no longer remain here," he said; "my presence would be discovered by the first who searched this dwelling, and I should only have devoted you and your husband to an awful fate. It is better that you should give me up and claim the reward."

At these words the woman gave him a look so reproachful and full of entreaty, that he hastened to recall them. "No," he exclaimed, "you could not! To a Tlascalan such baseness would be impossible! But you can at least let me depart."

"Yes," said the woman, "you must go, for you can no longer remain here in safety; but I am minded of another hiding-place in which, for a time at least, you can remain undiscovered. Come with me, and I will show it you."

So they left the hut together, Huetzin almost creeping on his hands and knees through the tall grasses which formed the only shelter from observation, and the woman bearing a great bundle of maguey fibre. This answered a fourfold purpose. The pretense of bleaching it gave her an excuse for going abroad. Its weight would account for the slowness with which she walked. She carried it so as partly to shield her companion from sight, and, had anyone approached, she would have dropped it over him while pretending to rest.

Thus the two proceeded slowly and fearfully until they reached the ruins of an ancient aqueduct, that had once brought water for the garden fountains of some long-forgotten Toltec noble. The aqueduct, which was a sodded dike enclosing a great earthen pipe, had been gullied by some short-lived but furious torrent, and its pipe was broken at the place where Huetzin and the Tlascalan woman now halted. There was an opening just large enough for a man to squeeze through; but, once inside the pipe, he could neither turn himself about nor assume any position save that of lying at full length. The bottom of the pipe was covered thickly with a slimy sediment suggestive of all manner of creeping and venomous things. It was indeed a dismal place, but it offered a chance for life which Huetzin accepted. As he disappeared within its dark recess, the woman resumed her burden of fibre and retraced her steps to her own dwelling.

Not long after her return to it, she was startled by the approach of a squad of Aztec soldiers, guided by her husband, with anguish-stricken face. Entering the hut they searched it carefully, thrusting their spears into every suspected place, including the heap of maguey fibre on the floor, which they thoroughly prodded. The Tlascalan was amazed at his wife's calmness during these proceedings, as well as at the absence of the fugitive. He had been certain that the latter would be discovered there, even while he stoutly denied any knowledge of him or his whereabouts to the soldiers, who had forced him to accompany them to the search of his own dwelling. When they left to hunt elsewhere he was compelled to go with them. Thus it was not until nightfall, when he returned from his day's labor, that he learned of the safety of their beloved guest, and of the hiding-place found for him by the quick-witted Tlascalan woman. She had not dared go near him during the day, and it was not until after their usual hour for retiring, when all men were supposed to be asleep, that the brave old couple ventured forth to release the prisoner from his painful position in the ancient water-pipe.

CHAPTER VIII. TRAPPING A KING'S COURIER

But for a promise he had given, to remain in his uncomfortable hiding-place until summoned by his friends, and but for the awful penalty they must have paid had their connection with him been discovered, Huetzin would long since have left the old water-pipe. His position in it was so painfully cramped that, as the long hours dragged slowly away, it became well-nigh insupportable. When he finally heard the welcome summons, and issued from the narrow opening, he was so stiff he could hardly stand. A brisk rubbing of his limbs soon restored their circulation; and, after partaking of a hearty meal in the cabin of his humble protectors, he was once more ready to venture forth. A wallet well filled with tortillas, provided by the woman to whom he already owed his life, was given him, and, bidding her a loving and grateful farewell, he followed the lead of the old mountaineer out into the darkness.

Making many detours to avoid dwellings, and after a narrow escape from a patrol of soldiers, suddenly encountered, who passed so close to where they crouched in a thicket by the wayside that they could have touched them, the fugitives finally reached the fresh-water lake of Chalco. Here Huetzin alone would have wasted much precious time, but his guide knew where to find a canoe. This he speedily drew forth from its hiding-place, and a half-hour of silent paddling set them across the lake. Although they approached the shore with the utmost caution, they were hailed from out its shadows, as they were about to land, by a hoarse challenge that sounded like a voice of doom. As they hesitated, irresolute, an arrow flew by their heads with a venomous hiss, and the old man cried out, in a tremulous voice:

"Hold thy hand, my lord, it is only I, a poor slave of Iztapalapan, seeking to catch a few fish for the morrow's food."

"Come hither, slave, at once, that I may examine thee, ere I drive an arrow through thy miserable carcass," cried the voice.

Making an awkward splashing with his paddle, under cover of which Huetzin slid into the water, the old man obeyed. He found but a single soldier awaiting him, though others, who came running up from either side, demanding to know the cause for shouting, showed that he formed but one of a cordon guarding the whole lake shore. These carefully examined the old man and his canoe. At length, satisfied that he was alone and bore no resemblance to the one whom they sought, they let him go, bidding him not to venture near the shore again as he valued his life. As he humbly thanked them for their forbearance, and slowly paddled away, they moved up the beach in search of other suspicious characters.

Huetzin, who had been standing in water up to his neck, where he would hear every word that passed, now attracted the Tlascalan's attention by a low hissing sound, grasped his hand in token of farewell, and made his way to the spot just vacated by the soldiers, correctly assuming that, for a short time at least, it would be safer than any other. Cautiously and noiselessly he crept up the bank, nor did he dare to move at more than a snail's pace until a good quarter of a mile had been put between him and his enemies. Then he set forth at such speed that, before morning, he had left the valley of Mexico behind, and was climbing the rugged slope of the mountains bounding it on the east.

At the coming of daylight the fugitive sought a cave, near which issued a spring of clear water; and here he passed the day, having no food save the water-soaked tortillas, already sour and mouldering in his wallet. When night came he again ventured forth, and found a field, from which he procured a few ears of half-ripened maize.

Thus for a week he hid by day and travelled by night, rarely daring to set foot on the highway by which the mountains were traversed, but scrambling through the dense forests that bordered it, and

having narrow escapes from wild beasts and wilder men. His clothing and skin were torn by thorns, his feet were cut and bleeding from rude contact with jagged rocks, his blood was chilled by the biting winds of the lofty heights to which he climbed, and his body was weakened and emaciated by starvation. Only an indomitable will, the remembrance of his father's death, and the thought of Tiata with no one in the world to care for her save him, urged the young Toltec forward.

Often during the day, from some hiding-place overlooking the public road, he watched with envy the king's couriers, hurrying east or west with the swiftness of the wind. Each of these, as he knew, ran at full speed for two leagues, at the end of which he delivered his despatches to another who was in waiting at a post-station, and was then allowed to refresh himself with food, drink, and a bath, before being again summoned to duty. Such was the swiftness of these trained runners, and the perfection of the system controlling them, that despatches were transmitted with incredible rapidity, and on the king's table in Tenochtitlan fresh fish were daily served, that were taken from the eastern ocean, two hundred miles away, less than twenty hours before.

Not only did Huetzin, barely existing on the few tunas or acrid wild figs that he occasionally found, envy the king's couriers the comforts of the post-stations, to which he dared not venture, and which seemed so desirable as compared with his own surroundings, but he longed to know the purport of the despatches that so constantly passed and repassed. That most of them contained information concerning the white conquerors, whose movements and intentions he was so anxious to discover, he felt certain. He knew that the penalty for molesting or delaying a king's courier was death; but that meant nothing to him, for the same fate would be his in any case if he should be captured. Thus, being already outlawed, he would not have hesitated to attack a courier and strive to capture his despatches, but for the fact that they were strong, well-fed men, while he was weak from starvation. Moreover, they were armed, while he was not, even his dagger having been broken off at the hilt in an attempt to cut for himself a club early in his flight. At length, however, he contrived a plan that promised success, and which he at once proceeded to put into execution.

He had saved the broken blade of his dagger, and transformed it into a rude knife by binding one end with bark. With this he cut a tough, trailing vine, nearly one hundred feet in length, and, coiling it as he would a rope, made his way, cautiously, just at dusk, to the edge of the highway. He had chosen a place from which he could see for some distance in either direction; and, after making certain that no person was in sight, he fastened one end of his rope-like vine to the roots of a small tree. Then, carrying the other across the road, he stretched it as tightly as possible, and made it fast. The rope, so arranged, was lifted some six inches above the surface of the road. Having thus set his trap, Huetzin concealed himself at one side and impatiently awaited the approach of a victim.

Ere he had waited a half-hour there came a sound of quick foot-falls, and the heart of the young Toltec beat high with excitement. Now he could see the dim form of a man speeding forward through the darkness, and hear the panting breath. Now the flying messenger is abreast of the place where he crouches. Now he trips over the unseen obstacle, and plunges headlong with a startled cry and outstretched arms. Huetzin leaped forward and flung himself bodily upon the prostrate form. He had anticipated a struggle, and nerved himself for it, but none was made. The man's forehead had struck on the rocky roadbed, and he lay as one dead. Huetzin wasted no time in attempting to revive him; but, unfastening the green girdle that held the precious packet of despatches, and at the same time distinguished its wearer as being in the royal service, and securing the bow and arrows with which the courier was armed, he plunged again into the forest and disappeared.

That night he was so fortunate as to discover a corn-field, for he had now passed the range of the great volcan, and descended to the fertile table-land on its eastern side. At daylight he had the further good fortune to shoot a wild turkey, and though, having no fire nor means of procuring one, he was forced to eat the meat raw, it greatly refreshed and strengthened him. By the time he had finished this welcome meal, and selected a hiding-place for the day, the sun had risen, and he eagerly opened the packet of despatches.

For an hour he pored over them, and when it was ended the young Toltec was wiser, concerning some matters of vital importance, than the king himself. He had not only learned, as well as pictured likenesses could teach him, what manner of beings the white conquerors were, but a secret concerning them that might have altered the fate of the kingdom had Montezuma been aware of it at that moment. It was that the terrible beings who accompanied the conquerors, and were described as combining the forms of men and fire-breathing monsters, were in reality two distinct individuals, a man and an animal, also that they were mortal and not godlike. These facts were shown by pictures of a dead horse, and two of the white strangers, also lying on the ground, dead and transfixed by arrows. Near them stood a number of men, and several horses without riders, but all pierced by arrows, showing them to be wounded. It was evidently a representation of a battle-scene between the white conquerors, and – Could it be? Yes! There was the white heron, the emblem of the Tlascalan house of Titcala, the token of his mother's family! The white conquerors were at war with Tlascala!

This was a startling revelation to the son of Tlahuicol. He knew that his warrior father had deemed a union of the forces of Tlascala with those of the powerful strangers the only means by which the Aztec nation and its terrible priesthood could be overthrown. What could he do to stop the war now so evidently in progress, and bring about the desirable alliance? He could at least bear his father's last message, with all speed, to Tlascala, and he would. It should be heard by the council of chiefs ere the set of another sun. Thus deciding, and fastening the green girdle of the courier, the badge of royal authority, about his waist, Huetzin hastened to the highway, and set out boldly upon it, with all speed, in the direction of Tlascala.

CHAPTER IX.

WHO ARE THE WHITE CONQUERORS?

Yes, the white strangers were at war with Tlascala; there could be no doubt of it. The meaning of the pictured despatches was too clear on that point to be misunderstood. Which side would win in such a struggle? The pictures seemed to indicate that the strangers had suffered a defeat. Certainly some of them had been killed, as had at least three of the mysterious beings who had, until then, been believed to be gods. With such evidences of the superiority of his countrymen to reassure him, could the son of a Tlascalan warrior doubt which banner would be crowned with victory? And yet, if these white strangers should be destroyed, or driven back whence they came, what would become of his father's cherished plan for the overthrow of Montezuma and his bloody priesthood by their aid? Why had Tlahuicol placed such confidence in their powers? Who, and what, were these white conquerors? Whence had they come? and what was their object in braving the dangers that must beset every step of their advance into the land of Anahuac?

With thoughts and queries such as these was the mind of Huetzin filled as he sped forward on his self-appointed mission. The question of food, that had absorbed so large a share of his attention on the preceding days of his flight, no longer gave him any anxiety. The sight of his green girdle and packet of despatches caused his wants of this nature to be rapidly supplied from the several post stations, at which he halted for a moment without entering. To be sure his appearance created animated discussions after he had departed, but only when it was too late to make investigation. Thus Huetzin's mind was free to dwell upon the subject of the white conquerors and their war with his own people.

These "white conquerors," as Tlahuicol had termed them, formed the little army with which Hernando Cortes set forth from Cuba, in the spring of 1519, for the exploration and possible subjugation of the great western kingdom, concerning which fabulous accounts had already reached Spain. During the twenty-seven years that had elapsed since Columbus first set foot on an island of the New World, exploration had been active, and the extent of its eastern coast had been nearly determined. Sebastian Cabot had skirted it from Labrador to the peninsula of Florida. Columbus himself had reached the mainland, without realizing that it was such, and had sailed from Honduras to the mouth of the mighty Orinoco. Amerigo Vespucci and others had coasted southward as far as the Rio de la Plata. Balboa, with dauntless courage, had forced his way through the trackless forests of Darien, and from the summit of its lofty cordilleras sighted the mighty Pacific. The West Indian Islands were all known, and only the lands bordering the Mexican Gulf still remained unexplored.

In 1517 a Spanish slave-hunter, bound from Cuba to the Bahamas, was driven so far out of his course by a succession of easterly gales that, at the end of three weeks, he found himself on an unknown coast far to the westward. It was the land of the Mayas, who, having learned by rumor of the cruelties practised by the Spaniards in the Caribbean Islands, greeted these new-comers with an invincible hostility that resulted in a series of bloody encounters. In most of these the Spaniards were worsted; some of them were taken prisoners by the Indians, and so many were killed that all notions of their godlike nature were destroyed. When the whites questioned those natives with whom they gained intercourse as to the name of their land, the answer always given was, "Tec-ta-tan" (I do not understand you), and this, corrupted into "Yucatan," is the name borne by that portion of the country to this day.

In spite of their reverses and failure to gain a foothold in this new country, the Spanish slave-hunters saw enough of its stone buildings, populous towns, cultivated fields, rich fabrics, and golden ornaments to convince them that they were on the borders of a powerful and wealthy empire. Thus, when they returned to Cuba, leaving half their number behind, either dead or as prisoners, they

brought such glowing accounts of their discoveries that another expedition to extend them, as well as to procure slaves and gold, was immediately fitted out. Under the command of Juan de Grijalva, and embarked in four small vessels, it sailed from Santiago in May, 1518, and was gone six months, during which time it explored the coast from Yucatan to a point some distance beyond where the city of Vera Cruz now stands.

On the Mayan coast Grijalva met with the same fierce hostility that had greeted his predecessor, but among the Aztecs he was received with a more friendly spirit by a chieftain who had been ordered to make a careful study of the strangers for the information of the king of that land. This monarch, who was soon to become the world-famed Montezuma, also sent costly gifts to the Spaniards, hoping that, satisfied with them, they would depart and leave his country in peace. They did so, but only to carry to Cuba such wonderful tales of the wealth of the countries they had visited that a third expedition was at once undertaken. It was placed under command of Hernando Cortes, a trained soldier, about thirty-three years of age. His fleet consisted of eleven vessels, the largest of which was but of one hundred tons burden. Three others were from seventy to eighty tons, and the rest were open caravels. In these were embarked eight hundred and fifty souls, of whom one hundred and ten were sailors. Five hundred and fifty were soldiers, but of these only thirteen were armed with muskets, and thirty-two with crossbows, the rest being provided with swords and pikes. The remainder of the force consisted of Indian servants.

If this small force of men had been his sole reliance, Cortes would have accomplished little more than his predecessors; but it was not. He was well provided with artillery, in the shape of ten heavy guns and four small brass pieces called falconets, besides a bountiful supply of ammunition. Better than all, however, he had sixteen horses, animals up to that time unknown on the American continent, and well fitted to inspire the simple-minded natives with terror. Cortes was also fortunate in his selection of officers. Among them were the fierce Alvarado, who had already been on the coast with Grijalva, and who was afterward named by the Aztecs "Tonatiah," or the Sunlit, on account of his golden hair and beard, and Gonzalo de Sandoval, barely twenty-two years of age and slow of speech, but of such a sturdy frame, good judgment, and absolute fearlessness that he became the most famous and trustworthy of all the conqueror's captains. He was also the owner of the glorious mare Motilla, the pride and pet of the army.

With this force Cortes sailed for the Mexican coast filled with hopes of conquest and of abolishing forever the cruel religion of the Aztecs, with its human sacrifices and bloody rites, concerning which the reports of his predecessors had said so much.

The policy of Cortes was to gain his ends by peaceful means, if possible, and only to fight when forced to do so. In pursuance of this plan of action he touched at several places on the Mayan coast, before proceeding to Mexico, and so won the good-will of those fierce fighters by his courtesy and a liberal bestowal of presents, that they not only desisted from hostilities, but delivered to him a Spaniard whom they had held as prisoner for several years. This man, whose name was Aguilar, could converse fluently in the Mayan tongue, and was thus invaluable as an interpreter.

At the mouth of the Tabasco River, on the borders of Aztec territory, where Grijalva had been so courteously received two years before, Cortes was greeted in a very different manner. As the Tabascans had been ordered by the Aztec monarch to treat Grijalva's expedition kindly and gain from it all possible information concerning the white strangers, they now received instructions from the same source to destroy this one. Accordingly a great army had been collected, and in spite of Cortes's efforts to maintain peaceful relations, his little force was attacked with the utmost fury as soon as it landed. The artillery created terrible havoc in the dense ranks of the natives; but so desperate was their onset that the Spaniards would doubtless have been defeated had it not been for the opportune arrival of their cavalry, which was thus used for the first time in a New-World battle. Before these death-dealing monsters, whose weight bore down all opposition, and beneath whose iron hoofs they were trampled like blades of grass, the panic-stricken Indians fled in dismay.

The loss of the Tabascans in this first battle of the conquest of Mexico was enormous, reaching well into the thousands, while of the Spaniards a number were killed and some two hundred were wounded. Among the prisoners taken were several caciques, whom Cortes set at liberty and sent back to their own people with presents, and the message that for the sake of peace he was willing to overlook the past provided they would now acknowledge the authority of his king and abolish human sacrifices from their religious observances. If they refused these terms he would put every man, woman, and child to the sword.

This threat, together with the punishment already received, was effective. On the following day a delegation of head men came in, to tender their submission to the White Conqueror. They brought many valuable gifts, among which were twenty female slaves, whom Cortes caused to be baptized and given Christian names. The most beautiful of these, and the one who quickly proved herself the most intelligent, had already passed through a long experience of slavery, though still but seventeen years of age. Sold, when a child, by a step-mother, in a distant northern province, she had been carried to the land of the Mayas, educated there in the household of a noble, and finally captured by the fierce Tabascans. She was thus able to speak both the Aztec and the Mayan tongues, and so could interpret the Aztec, through the Mayan, to Aguilar, who in turn translated her words into Spanish. Thus, through this young Indian girl, the Spaniards were, for the first time, placed in direct communication with the dominant race of the country. The Christian name given her was "Marina," a name destined to become almost as well known as that of the White Conqueror himself.

From Tabasco Cortes followed the coast to the island of San Juan de Ulloa, inside which he anchored his fleet. Here, for the first time, he received an embassy direct from Montezuma, and saw the Aztec artists busily making sketches of his men and their belongings for the king's information. Here, too, he landed, and founded the city of Vera Cruz, to be used as a base of operations while in that country.

The Spaniards spent some months on the coast, and in the *Tierra Caliente*, or hot lands, immediately adjoining it. They formed an alliance with the Totonacs, a disaffected people recently conquered by the Aztecs, regained for them their principal city of Cempoalla, where they destroyed the Aztec idols, and devoted themselves to a study of the resources of the country they proposed to conquer and the character of its people.

In the meantime they received many messages from Montezuma forbidding their proposed visit to his capital, and commanding them to depart whence they came. As these messages were always accompanied by magnificent presents of gold, jewels, and rich fabrics, the Spaniards were even more tempted to stay and search for the source of this unbounded wealth, than to leave it undiscovered. So, in spite of Montezuma's prohibition, Cortes, after first destroying his ships that they might offer no excuse for a retreat, took up his line of march for Tenochtitlan, two hundred miles in the interior.

CHAPTER X.

THE SIGN OF THE GOD OF THE FOUR WINDS

It was in August, the height of the rainy season, that the little Spanish army of four hundred men, only fifteen of whom were mounted, took up their line of march from Vera Cruz for the Aztec capital. They carried with them but three heavy guns and the four falconets. The remainder of the troops, one horse, and seven pieces of heavy artillery, were left for the defence of their infant city. To drag their guns and transport their baggage over the mountains they obtained from Cempoalla the services of a thousand *tamanes*, or porters. An army of thirteen hundred Totonac warriors also accompanied them.

Their first day's journey was through the perfumed forest filled with gorgeous blossoms and brightly plumaged tropic birds of the *Tierra Caliente*. Then they began to ascend the eastern slope of the Mexican Cordilleras, above which towers the mighty snow-robed peak of Orizaba. At the close of the second day they reached the beautifully located city of Jalapa, standing midway up the long ascent. Two days later they came to Naulinco, whose inhabitants, being allied to the Totonacs, received them in the most friendly manner. From here they passed into the rugged defile now known as the "Bishop's Pass," where, instead of the tropic heats and sunshine to which they had become accustomed, they began to experience cold winds, with driving storms of rain, sleet, and hail, which chilled them to the marrow, and caused the death of many of the Indian porters. The aspect of the surrounding country was as dreary as that of its leaden skies. On all sides were granite boulders rent into a thousand fantastic shapes, huge masses of lava, beds of volcanic cinders and scoriæ, bearing no traces of vegetation, while, above all, towered snow-clad pinnacles and volcanic peaks. After three days of suffering and the most fatiguing labor amid these desolate scenes they descended, and emerged through a second pass into a region of exceeding fertility and a genial climate. They were now on the great table-land of Puebla, and seven thousand feet above the level of the sea. Here they rested for several days in the Aztec city of Cocotlan, the governor of which dared not resist them, as he had received no orders from his royal master to do so.

From Cocotlan they travelled down a noble, forest-clad valley, watered by a bold mountain-torrent, and teeming with inhabitants, who collected in throngs to witness the passing of the mysterious strangers, but made no offer to molest them. At the fortress of Xalacingo they came to two roads, one leading to the sacred city of Cholula, famed for its great pyramid, its temples, and its pottery, and the other leading to Tlascala. By the advice of their native allies the conquerors decided to take the latter way, and visit the sturdy little mountain republic which had maintained a successful warfare against the arrogant Aztec for more than two centuries, and with which they hoped to form an alliance. So an embassy of Totonac caciques, bearing an exquisite Spanish sword as a present, was despatched to explain to the Tlascalan chiefs the peaceful intentions of the Spaniards, and ask for permission to pass through their territory.

The Christian army waited several days in vain for the return of these messengers, and at length, impatient of the delay, determined to push on at all hazards. Leaving the beautiful plain in which they had halted, they struck into a more rugged country, and at length paused before a structure so strange that they gazed at it in wonder. It was a battlemented stone wall nine feet high, twenty in thickness, six miles long, and terminating at either end in the precipitous sides of tall mountains too steep to be scaled. Only in the centre of this wellnigh impregnable fortress was there a narrow opening, running for forty paces between overlapping sections of the wall. This remarkable structure stood on the boundary of Tlascalan territory and, had the mountain warriors to whom it belonged chosen to defend it upon this occasion, the white men might have dashed themselves against it as

fruitlessly as the waves of the sea against an iron-bound coast, until their strength was spent, without effecting a passage to the country beyond.

For days the great council of Tlascala had been the scene of stormy debate as to how the strangers applying for admission to their territory should be received. Some of its members were for making an immediate alliance with them against the Aztecs. Others claimed that these unknown adventurers had not yet declared themselves as enemies of Montezuma, nor had their vaunted powers been tested in battle against true warriors. "Therefore," said these counsellors, "let us first fight them, and if they prove able to withstand us, then will it be time to accept their alliance." This advice finally prevailed, war was decided upon, and a force was despatched to guard the great fortress. But it was too late. Cortes and his little army had already passed through its unguarded opening and gained the soil of the free republic.

After proceeding a few miles the leader, riding at the head of his horsemen perceived a small body of warriors armed with maquahuitls and shields, and clad in armor of quilted cotton, advancing rapidly. These formed the van of those who should have guarded the fortress. On seeing that the Spaniards had already passed it, they halted; and, as the latter continued to approach, they turned and fled. Cortes called upon them to halt, but as they only fled the faster he and his companions clapped spurs to their steeds and speedily overtook them. Finding escape impossible the Tlascalans faced about, but instead of surrendering or showing themselves terror-stricken at the appearance of their pursuers, they began a furious attack upon them. Handful as they were, they fought so bravely that they held their ground until the appearance, a few minutes later, of the main body to which they belonged. These numbering several thousand, and advancing on the run, at once gave battle to the little body of Spanish cavaliers. First discharging a blinding flight of arrows, they rushed, with wild cries, upon the horsemen, striving to tear their lances from their grasp and to drag the riders from their saddles. They seemed fully aware that rider and horse were distinct individuals, in which respect they differed from any of the natives yet encountered. Fortunately for the cavaliers the press about them was so great that their assailants found it almost impossible to wield their weapons, while from their superior elevation they were enabled to use their swords with telling effect. Still the Tlascalans succeeded in dragging one rider to the ground and in wounding him so severely that he soon afterward died. Two horses were also killed, and this formed by far the most serious loss yet sustained by the Spaniards.

Scores of the Tlascalans received mortal wounds, but the sight of their stricken comrades only served to animate the survivors with fresh courage and an increased fury. From their childhood the Tlascalans were taught that there was no glory so great as that to be gained by death on the field of battle, and that the warrior thus dying was at once transported to the blissful mansions of the sun. Nowhere in the New World had the Spaniards encountered such warriors as these, and it was with inexpressible thankfulness that the hard-pressed cavaliers beheld the rapid advance of their own infantry, and were able to retreat for a breathing spell behind their sheltering lines. A simultaneous fire of artillery, muskets, and crossbows so bewildered the Tlascalans, who now for the first time heard the terrifying sound, and witnessed the deadly effect, of fire-arms, that they made no further attempt to continue the battle. They did not fly but withdrew in good order, carrying their dead with them.

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