EDISON MARSHALL

CORTEZ

AND

MARINA

A Novel about the Conquest of Mexico

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a https://www.fadedpage.com administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at https://www.fadedpage.com.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Cortez and Marina
Date of first publication: 1963
Author: Edison Marshall (1894-1967)
Date first posted: September 4, 2026
Date last updated: September 4, 2026
Faded Page eBook #20260910

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Pat McCoy & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive.

Cortez and Marina

EDISON MARSHALL

1963
Doubleday & Company, Inc.
Garden City, New York

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 63-16633
Copyright © 1963 by Edison Marshall
All Rights Reserved. Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

DEDICATION

The author has the honor of dedicating this book to Dr. Carlos P. Lamar, *of Coral Gables, Florida, true physician and savant, expert on Mexican history, and my trusty friend*.

Cast of Characters

The following characters in this novel really lived:

Hernan Cortez
Marina, his Aztec sweetheart, counselor, and interpreter
Montezuma, Emperor of Mexico
**Marie de Estrada*, an adventuress
Catalina Xuarez, Cortez' first wife
Hidalgo Martin Cortez, Hernan Cortez' father
**Doña Catalina Pizarro Altamirino*, Cortez' mother
Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca, bishop of Burgos
Juan Velazquez de Leon, governor of Cuba
Olmedo, a friar
Aguila, long a Spanish slave of the Aztecs
Narvaez, favorite of Velazquez
Alonzo Hernandez Puertocarrero, a nobleman
Sandoval, able officer under Cortez
**Juan Xaramillo*, a captain
**Farfan*, a captain
Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a trusty soldier, later a chronicler
Pedro de Alvarado, a dashing captain
Juan de Escalante, captain and governor of Vera Cruz
Xicotencatl the Elder, king or chieftain of Tlaxcala
Xicotencatl the Younger, his son
Ordas, *Davila*, *Olid*, other captains, and pilots
Guatemuza, Montezuma's successor
Martin Cortez, Cortez and Marina's son
Aztec chieftains
Aztec priests

* Actual personalities unknown and therefore tantamount to fictitious characters by poetic license. Marie de Estrada's presence at the Battle of the Bridges and her marriage to Farfan are attested by Bernal Diaz. Marina's affairs in Oaxaca are fictitious but perfectly possible. Indeed some great experience involving the Aztec religion would plausibly explain the honor and veneration, above that due her exalted birth, in which she was held

throughout the Aztec Confederacy. There is no evidence whatever that Bishop Fonseca was ever guilty of breaking *votum castitatis*, but his persecution of Columbus and of Cortez were far greater crimes against humanity; even so his conduct was exemplary compared to that of Cardinal (later Pope) Alexander Borgia in Italy. This is a novel of many inventions, none of which conflict with established fact.

The following characters in this novel are fictitious:

Juvena and her husband, *P'rall*, gypsy servants of Cortez' family
The Corps Perdu, including Astores
Gonzales, Cortez' servant
Tatcatl, a Tabasco chieftain
Doctor Batiste, a professor at Salamanca University

Acknowledgments

Throughout the writing of this book, I had the cordial encouragement and generous help of Dr. José Balseiro, Professor of Languages at the Graduate School of the University of Miami. I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Archie L. McNeal, Director of Libraries at the University of Miami, for entrusting to my care precious volumes on Mexican history, the lore of which proved invaluable.

Of all the material dealing with Cortez, I put my greatest trust in *The Bernal Diaz Chronicles* and in *Hernan Cortes* by Salvadore de Madariaga. Also I had access to Prescott's great work, the writings of George C. Vaillant, Don Fernando de Alva Ixtililxochitl, Francisco Lopez de Gormara, Fr. Bernandino de Sahagun, Fray Diego Duran, Fray Toribio Motolinia, Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, and Francisco Monterde. The letters and reports of Cortez himself to the Emperor Charles V are valuable but may be colored by political considerations.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the penetrative portrait of Montezuma presented in *Montezuma as Seen by Early Spanish Conquerors*, the thesis for an M.A. degree at the University of Miami, by Edison Marshall, Jr.

E.M.

Contents

BOOK I

CHAPTER 1 *The Bent Twig* 3
CHAPTER 2 *Sundry Lessons* 21
CHAPTER 3 *Signs of Progress* 63
CHAPTER 4 *Self-Finding* 73
CHAPTER 5 *Toward the Spanish Main* 93
CHAPTER 6 *Victory and Mystery* 108
CHAPTER 7 *Strong Medicine for Faint Hearts* 129
CHAPTER 8 *A Great Winning* 170
CHAPTER 9 *Two Worlds Meet* 201
CHAPTER 10 *Montezuma* 223

BOOK II

CHAPTER 11 *Signs and Omens* 241
CHAPTER 12 *Prelude to Armageddon* 269
CHAPTER 13 *Armageddon* 306
CHAPTER 14 *And Not to Yield* 321
CHAPTER 15 *Grim Victory* 353
CHAPTER 16 *The Adventuress* 373
CHAPTER 17 *Death Strikes at Night* 399
CHAPTER 18 *Temple of Quetzalcoatl* 417
CHAPTER 19 *Hail and Farewell* 443
EPILOGUE 458

BOOK I

CHAPTER 1

The Bent Twig

1

I am Hernan Cortez. So I was christened, such is my name, as such I have styled myself without addition rightfully earned. Of Hernan Cortez I write this chronicle, not of a hidalgo, a captain, a don, a conquistador, and least of all a hero. Well I know this man, this human soul clothed in human flesh, Hernan Cortez, with a knowledge deeper and more true than that possessed by any other human being, unless it be my gypsy nurse, Juvena, long departed hence to whatever heaven might receive one of an outcast race, and another woman of pale-brown skin with whom my fate was most strangely interbound.

This self-knowledge was not always mine. Indeed, what I once thought was self-knowledge was a web of dreams, self-told lies, and lies told to me by others. To obtain it, I had to obtain much more. I had to reach a kind of pinnacle from which I could gaze far and wide, and descend into a pit of solitude profound, and of silence save for the impartings of my own soul. Yet one who has won many prizes may truly say, God as my witness, that this prize, self-knowledge, was most dearly won, and that of which I am most proud. By this winning, I have rid myself of the greatest and most degrading of all illusions, which is fear of God or king or man or fate.

I can write of my findings in clear and lucid Spanish, not because for two years I was a student at the ancient University of Salamanca and where I studied law. This science of naked man in his relations with other naked men and a naked God is imperfect, fragmentary, more susceptible to misconceptions than any other science, treacherous because the least deflection of true vision and thought leads to error vast and calamitous. It is a long and grievous search, to find oneself. Truly it is more difficult to seek than the most hidden and distant realm beyond the Ocean Sea. But when at last the discovery is made, the serpent of one's tongue may lie into other ears, and often does so for various mundane gain, but not into one's own ears. This strict discipline of the tongue, this refusal to be self-deceived by

its cunning designs, permits a man to speak or to write truth if he so desires. Such is my desire. I will not wholly succeed in gratifying it, but I will do the best I can.

So I begin this chronicle with what I once thought was an episode, but which I should now regard as an incident, yet I cannot, and it still seems an event of utmost weight. I must preface it by relating some commonplace facts and one magnificent illusion.

I was born in the ancient Spanish province of Extremadura on January second, 1485. My father was Martin Cortez de Monroy, properly a hidalgo in the humbler orders of that degree. This is to say, in effect, he was a poor knight, holding land in fief to the king, boasting a coat of arms and the right to wear a sword, and with a shield affixed to the wall. Indeed, when young, he had commanded a company of fifty soldiers in the war waged by Alonzo de Monroy—Warden of the Military Order of Alcantara—against Queen Isabella of Castile and Aragon, when she had sought to wrest power from her grandees. On first hearing of this brief and soon-forgotten conflict, I had hoped that the great warden was some kin to me, because of the name Monroy, but my father, an honest man, and not liking to see my eyes shine over a falsehood, informed me that we were of no kin.

"What does it matter," he asked, "when your own name, Cortez, was once far greater than Monroy? True, it has the misfortune to be more ancient, and rank is reckoned not by a man's forebears of one hundred and fifty years ago, but of a mere fifty years ago. You know of whom you are the namesake; we have the proof of his degree, and of his close kinship to a very duke, and a duke numbered among the most great of his day. It is inscribed on vellum; and only because of the depredations of the infidel Moors, and their interminable wars with us of the True Faith, that the estates are lost to us. The Queen knows not my name; I am unknown except in Medillan and our hungry countryside; I am an impoverished hidalgo, with one lean horse and one gaunt hound and two retainers of an outcast tribe; yet hold your head high!"

Medillan was the name of our nearby town. But what my father had called our hungry countryside was much more than that, to me. It is true that much of its soil was poor. Trees grew mainly along its watercourses or in a few favored spots. Mainly it was arid plain, with scanty grass supporting cattle and sheep that must graze early and late for a living. Yet it was the abode of many hares which I could hunt, for my lean mount had more spirit than a gypsy horse trader could guess, and hoofs more swift than any in the neighborhood. If our greyhound was gaunt, he was an avid hunter, with eyes

sharp as a falcon's. Many a swift race we three ran together in the invigorating dawns, the air sweet and cool; and the wind off the mountains, along with the wind which Del Mar—the odd name I myself had given, with good reason, to the horse—caused to blow by his own darting.

Our plain was girded by mountains. Some were high, and all had a majestic sweep, and travelers spoke of their aspect being like that of the Ocean Sea in tempest. Later I would wonder if this had anything to do with so many men born in Extremadura going down to the Ocean Sea to seek adventure and perhaps riches or even splendid death. To my urchin sorrow, Christobal Colon[1] was native to Genoa. I was eight years old when he had stood to sea on his mighty enterprise. By now, I thought, he had found the short route he sought to Indies and Cathay, where gold was common as iron in Spain, and children played with rubies and diamonds as though these were clay marbles.

I was not quite nine, big for my age, when wild talk we had heard all summer was proven sober fact. By traveling west only thirty-six days from the Canary Islands, Colon had crossed the Ocean Sea and discovered the western isles of India. He had brought back not only some gold, but weapons strangely wrought, talking birds, a fiber for making cloth called cotton, plants and animals never seen before, and what moved my father most, brown-skinned men and women with straight, black hair and strong bony faces, which the learned doctors at Salamanca declared of a different race from the Indians seen by Egyptians on the Red Sea aboard ships with lateen sails.

Truly my father was most profoundly moved, for he was a man of lively intelligence and imagination, and his voice trembled when he spoke, and his eyes glimmered; and young as I was, I caught fire from him. Somehow I sensed that in my own boyhood, not in centuries long gone or far in the future, instead when I was myself alive, sensibly and intensely alive as are most urchins of nine, an event had occurred of consequence immeasurable, to be told and retold forever, perhaps the greatest single happening in all known history.

"In seven years—maybe before then—I will follow Colon's wake in a tall ship," I told my father, "and I will sail further than he did, and speak with my own mouth to the King of Cathay."

"You, the son of a poor hidalgo?" my father asked with quiet sadness. "True, Colon himself was not a prince, not even a nobleman, but now the grandees will take for their own what Colon found. They will finish what he

began; it is they who will receive the royal patents and grants; they will command the fleets; they will be the governors; in their already heavy purses will be poured the gold. That is the way of life."

I made strange answer.

"My father, I am Hernan Cortez, descended from Hernan Cortez, nephew of the Duke of Cordoba and Captain of the Ducal Guard. The proof I will show to the Queen."

"Now that is God's truth. And what you lack in gold and fame, you may make up, somehow—I know not how—still I see in you—or somehow sense—something—I know not what . . ." Then his words died away in his mouth.

I went to my sleeping place and lighted a candle before a little image of Santa Maria and the Blessed Infant; but I did not pray for her intervention in my behalf with God the Father. I tried to do but my tongue stuck. How many had so prayed, and doubtless many such prayers were answered. But once, when a song sparrow I had caught sickened in its cage and I had prayed for its recovery, it died trembling in my hands. Then with those hands I had devised a trap, whereby I had caught a beautiful canary, a rare bird in our region, which had perhaps flown hence all the way from the Canary Islands.

My thinking or perhaps my instinct was, to delay my prayer to Almighty God, the most urgent and aching I thought I would ever speak, until I was a good deal older and more deserving of the boon I asked, and more fit to do my part in its great outcome, pleasing Him, Santa Maria, and Their Son. My father had promised me that at age fourteen I could attend the University of Salamanca, not far from home. Indeed he was already saving silver and copper coins to help with the cost of books and fees, and I could board cheaply with my aunt, Inez, who dwelt thereabouts. Salamanca admitted all who could pass entrance examinations, and I could already read and write swiftly and well. Many sons of grandees, marquises and even dukes, and of high officials of the Court, took schooling there. Remembering what my sire had told me, I would try to meet and make friends with these highborn fellow students, and thus win their backing when I was ready to launch my great emprise. True, my certified rank would be only that of a hidalgo's son, although my mother, Catalina, somewhat better born than my sire, held the title of Doña. But in my veins coursed the blood of a great ducal house, and it could readily come to pass that my exalted schoolmates would perceive in me the signs of exalted origins, the manner and the mien, and would invite

me to visit them at their palaces. There I would attract notice and win their priceless favor.

At this point in my reflections I was driven to go and gaze again, for the hundredth time, at the writing upon vellum that had passed down through my father's family for generation after generation, and which was truly a sort of patent of nobility.

It was plainly a page cut out of a heavy book, no doubt magnificently bound and decorated, with lock and key. The vellum was unusually heavy and fine, the handwriting that of a learned man. I had told myself a story to account for its survival. A ducal castle was under attack by the infidel Moors; the moat had been bridged, the walls were being scaled, perhaps a single ass was readied for the flight of the last defender, with a small but precious weight of treasure. And who would be more likely to linger and fire a last gun from a rampart than the Captain of the Ducal Guard?

He would have no time to search through the book for his genealogy or formal patent of nobility. He would cut out the first page in verification of his station on which his eyes fell. We kept the page between handsome wooden boards, hinged with leather, on a wooden shelf in a small recess of the thick stone wall that also made room for a fireplace. I drew it forth, brought it to the light of the casement, opened it with reverent hands, and once more read the thrilling, soul-exalting single entry on the sheet.

> To-day, Christ Mass, in the year of our Blessed Lord, 1328, I, José de Trujilla, treasurer to His Grace the Duke of Cordoba (may Santa Maria bless him!) gave to his nephew, Hernan Cortez, Captain of the Ducal Guard, two thousand ducats as his reward for valiant service against the infidel Moor at the grievous battle of Passo del Mar in Sierra de Gata.

After restoring the treasure, I went in search of Juvena, who had suckled me and saved my infant life after the death of her own babe. This had occurred in the very week that my mother's breasts had become caked, and their sweet, life-giving flow arrested, by her hard fall across a wooden bench. No cow or goat in our small droves had been fresh at the time; no neighbor peasant woman had milk to spare; and truly Juvena's pale-brown, bountiful dugs had been a godsend. My greedy lips had given her a measure of comfort for her grief at the loss of her own suckling, snatched from life by a sudden and mysterious ailment.

It was my common way and custom, so natural that I scarcely took thought of it, to go to Juvena when my heart was as full as now, whether with grief or joy.

---

[1] Christopher Columbus.

2

Juvena was fifteen years older than I, but instead of twenty-four, she looked scarcely eighteen. She had the gift of beauty and grace in no meager measure. The first was hard to describe, beauty being an abstraction. At age nine I felt it keenly but did not know its components, except the brilliance and odd but handsome setting of her long, black, brilliant eyes, the purity of her dusky skin, her heavy black eyebrows, her well-formed, high-arched nose of the type that we called Roman, and which if white instead of pale-brown and fixed on the face of a great señora would be deemed aristocratic. She had a quick and extraordinarily brilliant smile, revealing the pearly whiteness and evenness of her teeth. The merest clod would not remain unobservant of her grace of form and movement; although he would not employ these words, and instead call her *vivo*. Perhaps this was the better term. She was brimful of life. When she walked, she appeared to dance; she could not make an awkward movement if she tried. Her arms and legs were well tapered and long. Her breasts were lovely—and who should know better than I?—plenteous but not large.

I used to sit in her lap, which gave me a cozy feeling when I was smaller, but of late I had foregone that pleasure, because it had changed to another feeling that was half pleasure and half guilt. Plainly she was aware of it, because her eyes glowed darkly, and her mouth had a sad smile, that caused her full lips to excite me; as did the warmth and contact with her long, strong arms and legs. In truth she no longer invited me to sit there, or kissed me on the mouth. I thought it might be because of her true love for her husband, whom she called P'rall, and she feared he would walk into the kitchen and find us in that position. Also I was well aware that if my mother, Doña Catalina, would discover us so, she would rebuke Juvena sternly, and later reprove me for the familiarity. I did not think that she would suspect the yearnings that overswept me at this time, being unaware that an urchin of nine could experience them or at least recognize them.

If so, she was badly mistaken. I knew perfectly well the root and cause of those yearnings. Nor was I precocious in this respect; I knew their

naturalness in boys of my age and even younger; what I did not know was the lack of any real cause for the dim guilt I felt. God knew, if I did not, that Adam's sin had branded every normal male descendant; that every one was its inheritor and most of these were its practicer, when they had the chance. I was not yet old enough to wonder why He had not put a stop to it, and multiplied the species through some other *modus operandi*, not so carnal or enjoyable to people, as was easily within His power. Surely we should not be made sinners for one man's sin of nearly four thousand years ago.

Juvena and her husband had come into our service about three years before my birth. It chanced that a band of her people, about fifty traveling in wagons, had been rightly charged with the theft, butchering, and eating of two cattle, the property of a powerful hidalgo near the city of Badajoz on the Guadiana. These folk were gypsies—although they called themselves Romany—and hence infidels in the same vile degree as the Moors who had ruled the city until two centuries before. As a matter of course they were also thieves, so the alcalde consulted the bishop in his fortresslike cathedral, and the whole band, man, woman, and child, were sentenced to die on the gallows. The bishop declared the execution, employing a Portuguese expression adopted by our clergy, an act of faith.[2]

Juvena, a maiden of twelve, and her cousin P'rall, about eighteen, had executed escape before the irons were affixed. Traveling by night and hiding in the scrub by day, they had found their way to our farm; and had begged my kind-hearted parents, both of them tolerant in matters of religion, to give them a few days' refuge. This they were not refused, although the chase was hot. Then it so happened that the presiding Cardinal of Spain rebuked the Bishop of Badajoz for his consent to the massacre and made him do penance, and King Ferdinand discharged the alcalde from office. So the two gypsies had dwelt with us ever since, and if they had sometimes yearned for the open road and the cooking fires in the dusk, in gratitude and perhaps in terror of us Christian Spaniards, they had remained our faithful servants. At my mother's insistence they had been baptized in the True Faith, and two years after their arrival they had been properly married by a holy father, and the babe that had died and whose place I had taken at Juvena's breast was their first-born.

Juvena had already heard of Colon's return from the Indies—news rides swiftly from farm to farm on our countryside—and somewhat to my surprise, she was almost as wrought up as myself, although doubtless for different reasons.

"Do you know, young master, that the dark-skinned Indians that Colon brought to be baptized are very likely folk of my own tribe?" she asked.

"It seems to me unlikely."

"Among the most learned Romany—and we have a few, mainly in Egypt—the belief is held that our native land is neither Egypt nor Rumania, but India. They say we were a low-caste tribe, perhaps an outcast or criminal tribe, and that we were driven forth, or else our love of wandering caused many of us to journey westward, trading horses, telling fortunes, and no doubt thieving, until now we are found in every land where roads could lead us except in the far north—we love the sun—and in Armenia, Palestine, and Greece, where we can no longer make a living."

"Have the gypsies always been wanderers?"

"Not if another tale is true, a sad and beautiful story. By that account Egypt was our native land, and there we practiced necromancy, and the common name for us, gypsies, lends credence to it. When the Blessed Virgin with the Child fled into Egypt, that He might escape the death proscribed by King Herod, She sought shelter for Herself and Her Babe at the tent of a chief of my tribe. Fearing Herod, the chief turned away Mother and Child, and God in His Heaven pronounced that from that hour, my tribe must wander over the earth forever. Hernan, this latter part is true. The day will come when P'rall and Juvena will hear a call, or feel an urge in our hearts too aching to resist, wakened perhaps by the sight of a gypsy wagon or the smell of a gypsy cooking fire in the dusk, and then we too must go—although God forbid its happening until the Hidalgo and the Doña have gone to Heaven—and you—you—have gone—where?"

"Do you not know, Juvena?"

"Aye, too well. To the setting sun."

"Read my palm again, and tell me all that you find there, for good or ill."

"That is a harsh command. When I was twelve or even ten I read the palms of any one who crossed my hand with silver, or even with a copper centavo. I could tell them what they wished to hear, what their own words prompted, or what was plain to see in their faces, myself caring naught whether it was truth or lies. With you, I cannot do so. I love you, Hernan. So far above me, yet in my heart you take the place of the babe that died. If I lie in one word, its woeful opposite will come true, for that is the dictum of our tribal god—was he the Snake God Naga, as some say, or the God Ptah in

Egypt? Such is his dictum if we lie to one of our own tribe, and the disaster dealt is doubled if the lie is told to a beloved one."

"It is my command that you tell me truth, and only truth."

"Give me your left hand. Behold how my hand turns chill, even as sweat beads my face. Aye, I will tell truth, as full as I can read it, and thus I will speak of what I have not spoken to you heretofore. Note the swelling of the palm at the base of the thumb. Christians call it the Mount of Venus; among the Romany it is called the Mount of Parvati. On your hand it is overlarge, and it means liberality in giving, but also a great love of woman—and, for woe or weal—a great lust for women. Throughout your young manhood you will be ever climbing balustrades, stealing into doorways and windows, fleeing for your life from outraged husbands, fighting duels with rivals, begetting bastards—some, I seem to see, with skins as dark as mine. There is one hope of respite from this wasteful and wicked lechery."

"Not that I die young?"

"No, for the curved line under the mount is long, extending from the line of the heart well-nigh to the wrist. But the height and fullness of the mount mean you are capable of deep and lifelong love, once it comes to you; and then it may be you will forego strange beds and wanton wenches. For this I will pray to Blessed Santa Maria."

"Do not trouble the Mother of God with such a trivial matter."

"Is it trivial, Hernan? Time will tell."

"Make only one prayer, burning all the candles you can afford, for if I furnished you the coin to buy them, Santa Maria would pay less heed, for She would doubt the heartfelt earnestness of your petition. Pray that I be made the captain of a stout ship, or, better yet, the admiral of a small fleet, laden with armed men, guns, and all supplies for a star-far journey, and for battle if it is met."

A troubled line was drawn between Juvena's black brows, and she made haste to resume the palm reading.

"The heart line is of good length, rising between Mount Ammon and Mount Kronos. But it has little breaks and branches, and fine, converse lines. Matters of the heart may not always go well with you, Hernan; you many love in vain, and be loved in vain—whether from some unworthiness—or because of your desire for more mundane things and for prizes you think greater than the true love of a true woman. Mount Jupiter, under the index finger, is far larger than is common, and the mount under the middle finger is

monstrously large. The Romany soothsayers call it Mount Kronos, the name of time in some tongue that I know not. Its unnatural enlargement may mean that your life among men, alive or dead, is wondrously long—years beyond count, centuries beyond belief. I do not believe it; you are no prince or grandee; you do well in your studies, especially in reading and writing; you speak exceeding well and some of your thoughts are strange and deep for a mere urchin; but you have shown no outstanding gift of oratory, poetry, drawing pictures, or in music—fields in which men of common or medium-good birth may obtain great fame. Let us take them together. The first denotes steadfastness in religion, indeed fervor, but athwart it is a dim mark I have never noticed in your palm, like an inverted cross, as though in the secret realms of your soul you will worship not God but mammon. It may be you will not seek the Crown of Thorns but a crown of bejeweled gold, which common sense denies you can ever gain."

"Speak on, Juvena," I bade her when she stopped and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"The enlargement of Mount Jupiter means overweaning ambition, a love of honor or of honors, depending on the purity of your religion. Yet you will give freely of what you have, because of a kind heart. But plainest of all I see pride, illimitable pride. The Spanish are a proud people, beyond any deservings that I know. Yours is a pride like Lucifer's. Hernan, have you not heard enough?"

"I wish to hear all."

"My mouth feels dry and my temples ache. The vast enlargement of Mount Kronos, often called Mount Saturn, denotes many quarrels or it may mean bloody and dire wars. All of the mounts are unduly large except the fifth. The fourth is the Mount of the Sun, and its enlargement means you will have the great gifts of prudence and wisdom, but many breaches in the line of the head contradicts this in some degree; at least you will make many grievous mistakes. Also it means you have the capacity for winning great fame, but this winning is not a surety; it will depend on the strength of your will. The fifth mount, that of Mercury, is of ordinary size; you may love knowledge but have little success in trade or business. Between the lines of head and heart is the Mount of Mars, and it appears almost absent in your palm, as does the Mount of the Moon directly above the line of the heart, but there must be valleys between such ranges of high mountains; perhaps they have no meaning. Now I will look at the slanting line that runs from the heart line and roughly parallel to the line of life, and this I dread."

"I am not afraid."

"No, neither fear nor irresolution is told in your palm; but rashness is plain to read, and monstrous boldness and energy. And that is why I am afraid for you. I see an impulse to tell the truth, but this is easily suppressed when a lie will serve your ends. I see pity in your heart which you can squeeze out like the juice from an orange when the winning of your goals demands cruelty. But all these signs are yet dim. You are only nine. They are only an intimation of what may be, not what must be. What we call conscience, which is the promptings of the soul given by God, self-control, moderation of ambition, or its bending to glorify God instead of glorify Hernan Cortez, may yet bring you to a peaceful old age, reconciliation to gentle death, and everlasting joy in Heaven. But whether you will do this, what I implore of you, will be shown in the line of which I speak, the line of fate. Show me both of your palms. I will look with honest eyes, regardless of their fright."

She looked long, her eyes narrowed. These slowly widened.

"Shut your hands, Hernan," she said at last, and I did so.

"Hernan, I cannot read the omens. I have never seen such lines of fate; long reaches deep and straight, dimming out and recommencing, breaks, stars, crosses, a strange parting and rejoining leaving an island, and other signs that stir me to the depths, without my knowing their import. Hernan! I am sad, and I know not why, perhaps greatness itself is a sad thing, somehow. I speak now of real greatness above the grandeur of kings; and how should I know the truth of that, I, a serving wench of an outcast tribe? I have just heard P'rall come in from the woodpile. I have just heard my lord and lady go out, no doubt to vesper service at the church. I will ask P'rall to get his guitar. He will play the Danza Astorga, and watch us dance unto each other, not with each other, as in many dances, and thus the difference in our stature makes no difference. Grant my plea, young master, if it is not against your heart."

"Yes, let us dance."

In a moment P'rall appeared, a handsome gypsy of about thirty years of age. He went readily enough to get his instrument; he had always relished playing for Juvena and me to dance, and with no half heart, and in faith he was an excellent musician.

"What shall I play?" he asked, seating himself on a bench.

"The Danza Astorga," I told him.

He shot a quick glance into Juvena's eyes. "That is a spell dance," he murmured. "It is wild and rhapsodic, and I fear I am too tired from woodchopping to play it well. Also it is a dance of heartbreak."

This last I did not understand. Truly it was a ceremonial dance, despite of what I could only call its violence, and the dancers durst not smile, but its good performance demanded immense energy. The excitement it wakened in me had never seemed sad in any way. It was originally a Moorish dance, Juvena had told me, the same performed by troupes of dancing girls of Cadiz for the Roman Emperors. It had been taken up by the gypsies, no doubt with the adoption of subtle but potent changes; but because it was exceedingly difficult to dance well, or perhaps because it had met the displeasure of the Church, it was forgotten throughout most of Spain but had been kept alive in the province of Asturius. It was also difficult to play by a lone musician. His fingers must strum, while the thumb maintained a strong, slow, rhythmic beat.

The gentleman—the Astorga had never been adopted by our peasantry—and the lady danced confronting each other except for whirlings; and when they moved in opposing directions, drawing from or nigh each other, the eyes of each remained locked on the other's face. When their bodies were shoulder to shoulder, the heads turned to maintain the magnetic gaze. Sometimes the lady and gentleman danced with their arms akimbo; during certain passages they snapped their fingers with such rapidity and sharpness that the sound resembled that of castanets. At times the sad refrain died away altogether, and only the heavy beat remained, during which the dancers took stately strides. Perhaps its most exciting feature was the opposition, rather than the matching, of the gentleman's movements and his partner's, yet this opposition gave an effect of harmony. Throughout the dance the two were never in step except in the marches, and these were in opposing directions, or at different angles that let the two pass close but never touch each other.

The excitement that overcame not only the dancers but the musicians I could not, and I did not try, to understand. Truly this was a spell dance but the spell it was weaving I believed beyond man's wit to fathom. Juvena and I danced with increasing energy. Our turns and twistings were abrupt and increasingly violent, except in the marches that remained grave and stately. P'rall had called the dance a rhapsody. If the word meant a series of disconnected movements or musical passages, more or less extempore and inspired by excitement, he was wrong. The unity of the music and the dance with one another, was esoteric but keenly felt.

I was a thoughtful boy and today made especially thoughtful by the news of Colon's return and by Juvena's fortunetelling. A part of my mind remained immune from the spell being woven, and I wondered at my increasing excitement. Most boys of nine had had primary sexual experience or at least yearnings if only in confused dreams; and I dimly knew that sexual desire was the wellspring. When I was grown I would know that there is profound, sometimes savage sexual conflict as well as need for each other between men and women. Nature's purpose in instilling that attraction and need is progeneration, hence passion is only nature's bait for catching babies. Yet man knows that he would not willingly live on earth again except under conditions of his own choosing. He knows that life itself is a cruel ordeal which he can mitigate only by his own inventions, love, law, contests which he sometimes wins, and especially so by art. Hence, looking back from my mature years upon this scene, I came to know why P'rall had called the Danza Astorga a dance of heartbreak. Demonstrating the irresistible attraction between men and women, at the same time their everlasting war, and at the same time reminding the dancers and the musicians of nature's ruthless purpose, all these felt caught in a trap from which there was no escape save debility and death.

After the wild finale, like fanfare, in which Juvena and I whirled, stamped, and made ritualized gestures that I now think were lascivious, we both stopped dead still in dying-away music. Juvena bowed and held her right arm stiffly toward me. I bowed and kissed her hand. P'rall laid his guitar on his knee and applauded in abandon. I saw that Juvena was pale except for a bright spot of color in each cheek, that a line of sweat crossed her brow, her eyes were indrawn and strange, the pupils very large and dark.

"You danced better than ever before, young master," she told me with troubled breath. "P'rall, does he not deserve reward?"

"Truly you both do."

"What may I give him, out of my poor possessions, that he would relish most?"

"Why, a kiss on the mouth, and a good, long, warm one, if I can read the expression on his face. You will be no poorer and he will be richer."

So she gave me a gypsy kiss, as I called it; and watching us intently, P'rall laughed aloud.

---

[2] Auto-da-fé.

3

Three years had passed without incident worthy of record. I attended our parish school; a fast reader now, I read more books than my fellow students, especially those of travel and adventure; I managed to write a short poem in bad Latin to Santa Maria which I ventured to show our priest. My ambition to follow Colon's wake and sail beyond it never faltered and took more solid form. I played hard games with my schoolmates, but the best game was chasing hares in the dewy dawns—astride Del Mar, with Prince streaking away before us behind a scuttling dot that would afford our household a delicious dinner if we won the race.

Juvena had continued to dance with me, P'rall strumming happily, in my parents' absence. I had learned several dances, but my favorite and the most exciting was the Danza Astorga. By now I was as tall as my teacher, faring well on our plain but healthy diet of lentils, brown bread with butter and sometimes honey, mutton, beef stew about thrice a week, dried and sometimes fresh fish, eggs in the Easter moon, a little pork from our few lean hogs, as well as bacon from the mast-fed hogs of Badajoz and Caceres, olives and fruit in season, and fowls on Sunday. But it was not alone my growing tall that caused Juvena to be circumspect, despite P'rall's urging that she reward me after the dance.

"I should not even dance the Astorga with you any more," she told me. "It is a dance for gentry, and I am a gypsy serving woman, and you are ripening before your time."

In this period Colon had made his second voyage, discovering many new islands, among them Guadeloupe, and a large island he had named San Juan Bautista.[3] The capital city of Santo Domingo on the great island Hispaniola had been founded as well as the town of Isabella; and settlers were flocking there. Many had written letters of complaint of Colon's government, and the Queen had sent a Court favorite as judge. Indeed, the name of the great discoverer was no longer in such high esteem among the Spanish people and it appeared that his star might set long aforetime. What troubled most my high-minded sire was the beginning of slave traffic, five shiploads of captive Indians being unloaded like livestock in Seville.

However, Colon was preparing a third voyage, hampered and hindered by enemies, among the most dangerous being Bishop Fonseca of Burgos, swiftly rising to power in the chanceries. I prayed to Santa Maria to defend the Admiral of the Ocean Sea and that his next adventure would recoup all

his losses and win him new glory. But thinking of my own future, I did not want him to find everything worth finding in the West.

The son of a marquis, four years older than I, who had briefly visited our town, and whose haughty bearing with his greeters there had stung me and made me smart, had been appointed a place of honor in the entourage of Colon on his coming voyage. I brooded over it one gloomy afternoon of overcast sky, and at last must needs get from its niche what we called the Book, being the document of our noble ancestry kept between wooden covers. I could have read its wondrous message in the dim light slanting through the casements, but I did not want to be seen doing so by my mother, at work at her loom, who might guess my envy and vague discouragement as mothers can. So I took the precious relic to a stone seat under an ancient beech tree in the precincts.

I had hardly opened the book when P'rall, who had returned to the woodpile, called and beckoned in excitement. I hastened there and he told me that a weasel, which had been killing baby chicks and stealing eggs, had taken refuge in the pile. He had a bat in his hand and I found one, and together we began hunting the little villain, moving sticks and split logs to get a whack at him. We caught several glimpses of him, and were getting him cornered when a light rain began to fall.

I did not notice it, so hot and engrossing was the hunt, and then as the rain became a downpour, some seconds passed before I took sudden and frighted thought of the document on the bench under the beech tree. There I sped like an arrow; still the seconds were long drawn before I could close the wooden covers and shelter the book under my jerkin. Yet, as I raced to the house, my good sense told me that the parchment had taken little harm, perhaps not any, because the heavy leafage of the tree had intercepted a good part of the rainfall, and the stone bench was barely wetted.

Making my stealthy way to the storeroom where I slept, with shaking hands I brought forth the parchment. It, too, was wetted but not drenched, and the ink of the writing was not in the least blurred, and while I very gently wiped the vellum with a kerchief, I whispered fervid thanks to Santa Maria. Truly I deserved punishment, I thought, for even a momentary neglect of the family's greatest treasure; still Her sweet heart was forgiving of a boy's derelictions, as the good father had often told us, provided we did penance and made atonement by good works.

I was wondering what good deed I could do to show my gratitude for the page of parchment taking no harm. I thought of foregoing a hare hunt I had

planned for early morning astride Del Mar with our swift hound, and instead would spend the time laying stones for a border for the graveled walkway from the road to the church door. And in the midst of these thoughts I noticed a small but puzzling thing. At its upper-right-hand corner, the parchment appeared to be split edgewise, for a distance of half an inch.

Wildly I read the writing, to make sure that it too had not been marred in some mysterious way as punishment for its neglect when in my charge, and also for having my fortune told against which the priest had enjoined us, and perhaps too for dancing the Devil's Dance, perhaps banned by the Church. But every word was as I knew it by heart:

> To-day, Christ Mass, in the year of our Blessed Lord, 1328, I, José de Trujilla, treasurer to His Grace the Duke of Cordoba (may Santa Maria bless him!) gave to his nephew, Hernan Cortez, Captain of the Ducal Guard, two thousand ducats as his reward for valiant service against the infidel Moor at the grievous battle of Passo del Mar in Sierra de Gata.

With my neck prickling fiercely, I looked again at the split corner of the parchment. God knew I did not wish to do so; I did not like the look of it, and was frightened . . . I had never heard of a parchment being doubled . . . The thickness of this parchment had attracted my attention but I had given it little thought. As I plucked lightly at the split corner, the rift became larger, comprising a triangle of the depth of two thumbs.

I could no longer doubt that what had seemed one sheet of heavy parchment was actually two thin sheets glued together.

Now I could not arrest my prying fingers. The parchments were mine more than my sire's; I was the namesake of the Hernan Cortez of the message. The ancient glue had softened in the light wetting. Easily the glued sheets parted, as I peeled one off the other, and in a matter of seconds two sheets lay before me, the inner one blank. But on the inside of the sheet, the outside of which bore the glorious writing, there was an inscription of about the same length and what at first glance seemed written by the same hand.

It was only too easy to read, for my eyes held steady. And this is what I read:

> To-day, San Pedro's Day, in the year of our Blessed Lord, 1328, I, José de Trujilla, bailiff to His Grace the Duke of Cordoba (may Santa Maria bless him!) gave to the scullion Hernan Cortez,

emptier of slop, fifty lashes as his punishment for wanton theft of three centavos from the charwoman Isabel Mateo when she had dropped her purse in the servants' gate.

My brain dizzied and I felt icy cold and sick, yet I forced myself to face the hateful truth. This, not the other, was the original inscription. Some descendant of the slop emptier, Hernan Cortez, who was getting up in the world, had slit out the damning sheet from an old book of records and to burn it was not enough to satisfy his bounding ambitions. Instead of merely suppressing a humiliating fact, he would substitute for it a fine lie. Why had he glued the forged document over the original, instead of using it of itself as proof of high birth? Apt was my brain in inventing the probable circumstances. The record book had lately come into the possession of his then master, perhaps distant kin of the long-dead duke, and the latter had glanced through it without reading it with care, but if in passing, he had caught the name Hernan Cortez, he would remember seeing it, and in time take careful note of it. No doubt the schemer had intended to replace the sheet with its glued forgery, but no opportunity had risen before the book itself had passed out of his hands.

It happened that there was some glue in the house, obtained for the repair of a broken lattice. There was no time at present to restore the forged sheet and conceal the bitter truth: supper was ready; also the page was still too damp for glue to stick. At very little risk I hid the book in my bed. So far I had given no thought to what the discovery meant to me. My only impulse was its swift concealment from my parents.

At supper my mother remarked on my pale face and poor appetite: she wondered if I were coming down with chills and fever, which I had suffered once before. She felt my hand and wondered that it should feel clammy cold instead of humid.

Yet the meal passed; I promised I would not go hunting in the morning unless I were in good fettle. When my parents, after long dawdling, retired to their bedchamber, I went to my cot with a candle, blew it out, and lay half-dressed, listening for the faintest sound. Our tall Flemish clock, plainly made of wood with wooden hands, yet reasonably honest in telling time, and part of the dowry my mother brought to my sire, tolling once for every revolution of the minute hand, rang out at what must be nine, again at ten, and, after what seemed an eon of time, once more at eleven. Well I knew my parents were deep in slumber.

I had already put the glue in my easy reach. Shutting the door softly, I relighted my candle with flint and steel. My hands held wondrously steady as with unflagging care I applied glue to the side of the sheet bearing the true but hateful writing, affixed to it the blank sheet. As far as I could tell, the double sheet looked the same as before.

Barefoot, with stealing steps, guided only by moonlight through the casements, I made for our little hall and restored what was once our treasure, now a well-hidden cheat, to its niche. Still I could not feel victorious over the successful concealment, for the trouble with Truth was that, however well-hidden, it still lived on.

---

[3] Puerto Rico.

CHAPTER 2

Sundry Lessons

1

When I fell into troubled sleep that memorable night, I had abandoned all thought of rising at the first break of day, saddling Del Mar, hushing the whining, barking hound lest he wake my parents, and going forth onto the plain to hunt hares. Yet I came wide awake, lay half a minute collecting my thoughts, then got up and unbolted and opened the kitchen door. This door looked eastward, the front door facing westward to admit all the sea cool we could catch blowing up the river valley. Low in the eastern sky the merest glint of dawn outlined the rugged hill crests, but the morning star, a hand higher than the hills, burned bright, clear, and true, the planet Venus most likely, and I gazed at her a moment and had the errant fancy that she gazed back at me. After all, she had not many admirers in our parts this early in the morning.

I had been told that my sign was Capricorn—by Juvena, I thought, since she set great store on astrology. For the moment I could not remember what this forecast, and now I did not try, and suddenly I did not care. This indifference was somehow linked with yesterday's discovery, although I did not know in what way. But the hard fact was not now the focus of my thoughts. During the night it had become a realized condition of my existence, no longer a startling or painful surprise, more like a loss which for many years, if ever, I could not retrieve.

So I walked quickly to the stable and saddled and bridled Del Mar. Well she knew what was afoot, a fine run in the uplands, the cool dewdrops on the grass showering her fleet legs, and she was restive and impatient. The hound, whom I had named Prince doubtless because of some bent of mind, was already jumping and whining around my legs. In only a minute or two, all without a bite of breakfast, we three set off.

The hunt was different from most in only one respect—I rode harder than usual, causing Prince to run faster. When we flushed a very large, lean

male hare, remarkably swift, I laid whip to Del Mar, rather against my father's wishes—for he was ever fearful of breaking the beast's wind. Then the hound must needs extend himself, with the consequence that he caught the quarry and killed after a run of three furlongs. The idle thought crossed my mind that the presence or the absence of a noble ancestor, on which proud Spaniards of all stations above the peasantry set such great store, had been no factor in this minor victory. But this I must reconsider: I had hunted harder than was my wont, and made more ruthless use of whip and spur.

When the sun was well up, we returned to the homestead with a heavy bag. We three hunters ate heartily, and my mother observed that a good night's sleep had prevented an attack of chills and fever. Our good father kept a few books in his parish house, all sanctioned by the Church, to lend to literate parishioners, so in the afternoon I went there to see what I could borrow.

"What manner of book do you wish to read?" the priest inquired. "*The Life of St. Francis, For Young Folk*, is highly esteemed."

"Father, I had hoped to get your new book on the science of geography, with maps."

"You must mean the book of charts by Juan de la Casa, Colon's shipmate. It is only a tentative forerunner for an enlarged and revised volume to be published after Colon's third voyage, yet it is very widely read. I obtained a copy from the abbot of the Jesuit Monastery at Caceres, my trusty friend."

"I would give it the best of care."

The good father hesitated, scratched the base of his skull, brought forth the book, and looked at it.

"There will be many calls for this new book now that my having it is known in the parish," he remarked. "There is not another copy that I know of closer than Caceres. I doubt not that the great hidalgo, Salvador de Zorita, will ask for it, and such a request is not unlikely from the grandee, Count Plasenera. What would I say to His Highness . . ."

He paused, as well he might. Our good father was a poor parish priest. Zorita was a rich hidalgo, the nephew of a countess, yet until yesterday I had thought myself better born than his son Diego, my fellow at the parish school. And although I bared my head to the count, until lately he was a rich wine merchant of Madrid with estates in Extremadura, who had won the

favor of King Ferdinand. I did not speak when the priest paused; instead braced myself for a refusal.

"What would I say to the Hidalgo Zorita if he should ask for this book? That I had lent it to the stripling son of Martin Cortez? He himself once put moneys in an expedition to the Azores. And if the count, who is now at his hunting lodge, should send for the book—I would have to dispatch my fat clerk on a fast horse to Martin's farm! Santa Maria, have I lost my wits! I only know that you crave the book more than anyone who will ever seek it, and will study it with more sore care. Take it from my hands, and for God's love let no drop of candle grease fall on a precious page."

2

It was a trifling incident, save that it was the beginning of a course of study that I pursued in my spare time. About a month later there occurred an event that snatched at my brain, so to speak, and forced me to a decision on a matter I had put aside. My uncle, Juan, who owned a farm near Plasencia, died of a lingering illness and willed my father a mare, a more handsome animal but not as swift or spirited as Del Mar.

"I will sell this mare, which I do not need, and put the ducats she will bring into store for Salamanca!" And my father smote his palm with his fist in emphasis.

While I had not quite dismissed the prospect of attending the great university, long my father's plan, the belief that I would ever go there had dimmed. Although it admitted sons of poor hidalgos and well-prepared youths of even lower station, how could I hold up my head among the sons of noblemen who also gathered there? In fact I had told myself it would be time wasted, to be better spent as a midshipman on the bravest ship that would accept me, as practice for command.

I said little, at the moment, but later I thought hard. A captaincy of a vessel in a westward voyage was well in the reach of a poor hidalgo's son of scanty education, but higher position would most likely be out of his reach. I needed a knowledge of law for almost any public office, the holding of which was a lever to preferment; and the favored of the Queen and the chancelleries and the prelates almost always could read and write Latin. It was told that Colon himself had studied cosmography and astronomy at the University of Pavia. Without the easy presence that education gives, he could not have won the favor of the Duke of Medina Celi, Alonzo de Quintanilla, Marquesa de Moya, and finally our Queen.

In the middle of the night I decided to attend Salamanca, and by fitting an imaginary iron brace on the back of my neck, hold my head high before all.

In the following two years, the whole length of my days and a good part of my nights were full. I became well grounded in Latin. I read Marco Polo's seeming-incredible book, and unlike the vulgar half-blind cynics of the day, believed every word of it. My father borrowed a book on astronomy from a don of Merida, published *sub rosa* by Domenico Maria Novara; and although a large part of it was over my head, it broadened my mind.

I continued to ride in the early morning in pursuit of hares, and was now an expert horseman with a horseman's walk and a tendency toward bowlegs. Juvena continued to dance with me in my parents' absence, and her decorum provoked P'rall to guffaws of laughter. In some ways he understood her better than I did.

Yet immediately following my fourteenth birthday, due to leave in a few days for Salamanca, when my parents and P'rall also were away for the night, Juvena taught me a lesson in raw, elemental life itself.

I am not exactly sure how it happened. An inn stood about a hundred paces down the road; and on Saturday nights an orchestra from the town played lively music for yokels gathered in the taproom, and these sometimes did country dances. On this cool, windless evening their music carried well through our open casement, the beat of the drum resounded, and when the players began a dance called "La Cosehade de Uvas"[4] which Juvena and I knew, we fell to dancing.

At once the inkling came to me that a wonderful thing might happen. The absence of P'rall caused our dancing together to have different meaning and aspect in my mind and I was acutely aware of our solitude safe from interruption. Juvena was not yet thirty and of passionate nature, and she knew that I, at fourteen, was a full man.

Apparently contrary to these favorable factors was Juvena's propriety toward me lately, no longer teasing me for pure gypsy deviltry, much less embracing me. Only when she had danced the Astorga had she so given sway to her youthful vigor and grace and native fire.

La Cosehade de Uvas was a hugging dance, eschewed by the gentry. It was almost always innocently performed by young peasants, with the youth's arm lightly about his partner's waist, one of the maiden's hands on his shoulder and her hand clasped by his. The steps were simple, the music

sweet and pensive, there was very little kissing, and all in all, the dance did not live up to its suggestive name. So Juvena intended to dance it, holding me at a distance, but I had quite opposite intentions.

Only four inches short of six feet and muscular, I pressed my advantage. She was powerless to resist without breaking off the dance, which somehow I did not anticipate. So in a little while I had her in close embrace, our breasts warmly pressed, her limbs moving in juncture with mine, and her hand firmly gripped by mine. When I introduced a little squirming of my thighs she could not help but follow suit, and when she protested I told her the big lie that this was the way Greek youth and maiden had performed the dance, in honor of Dionysus, God of the Vine, when grapes had been harvested. Herself illiterate, and holding my own wide reading in almost superstitious reverence, perhaps she believed me. When the friction of our loins became exquisitely pleasurable, she wanted to believe me.

In all honesty I was trying to seduce Juvena from her long-sustained fidelity to P'rall. Yet that intent would not have been fixed if finally and suddenly I had not perceived that her maidenly decorum lately was an attempt to conceal feelings of which she was frightened or ashamed.

As for me, I was wildly aroused and did not attempt to hide it. Only bashfulness had kept me continent until now, for peasant girls at work in the fields were often willing teachers to awkward, lusty, well-grown boys, but Juvena and I had been intimate too long, an intimacy hard to analyze, certainly her fault in the beginning, for me to be the least abashed over any relationship with her. And no doubt the devil was in me tonight, for along with lust I felt a delicious capacity for cruelty, if in winning my goal I must be cruel.

"Come with me, Juvena," I commanded when the music ceased.

"Where?" she answered, wide-eyed.

"I will show you."

"I will not come with you unless you tell me."

"To the bedroom of the cottage."

"I will not go there, young master. I love P'rall, and I will not do wickedness in our own bed."

"Then to my sleeping place. No one will come." I caught her by the hand.

"It was the devil who made it so safe tonight, Señor—to go with you there is unseemly and worse. It is true you are fourteen, old enough to go with a woman, and some physicians prescribe it, to strengthen the kidneys and tone up the nervous system, but I am twenty-nine and once your nurse. No, I will not say it would be wicked, for I love you too, in a different way than I love P'rall, but it would be wanton, and afterward you would be sorry —and I the like."

"I think we would both be glad. And many youths have their first passage with an older partner."

"That I know. And to yield to you would please Parvati, the goddess of us gypsies, but I would break a vow I made to Blessed Santa Maria."

"Blessed Maria will forgive you, if you do penance. All sins of the flesh are forgivable in Heaven, if the sinners make due atonement—the good father tells us so. Come quickly. I will not wait."

I was tugging her toward the door, to which we drew ever nearer despite her hanging back. She was not exerting her full strength. The pulse in her hand was bounding along with mine, and her face had flushed.

She kept protesting and even wept a little, until we both stood by my bedside. There her resistance ceased with one long gasp of breath and she was more than compliant.

"This once," she told me, in trembling tones. "Never again. And since this is your initiation into carnal love, let it be done rightly, for the greater pleasure of us both, as in the sinning of Father Adam and Mother Eve. There is no need for haste except desire."

Thus my first going with a woman was not skimped in a stolen moment, in fear or in shame. Truly it was something more than it seemed—a lecherous frolic between a lusty swain and a gypsy woman twice his age—and this fact I somehow sensed without the least understanding. In later years, when I contemplated it, recalling every detail with a vividness indeed uncommon in the ease of my careless escapades, I surmised that the bond between Juvena and me was more strong and deep than either of us knew. Whether this made more sinful our first and only passage, or perhaps more easily forgiven, I did not know. The fact remained that I retained a satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment, even gratitude toward the gypsy, along with unceasing love, that caused me to be more tender with all women.

But such thoughts did not visit my mind in my vital striplinghood. I would never again make overtures to Juvena, but I had been widely wakened by her, which would cause me to seek other sinful but blissful experience, although it could never be truly akin to that had with the gypsy. She had told me, reading my palm or giving voice to an intimation, that I was naturally licentious. I knew that only hard study, enforced by driving ambition, could keep this tendency under fair control.

---

[4] The Harvest of the Grapes

3

A few days thereafter I set off for Salamanca, mounted on Del Mar, with P'rall escorting me on a rented horse which he would ride home, leading mine. My clothes were good enough for a poor hidalgo's son on a rough journey, and in leather satchels strapped behind the two saddles was dress fit for study rooms, and a broadcloth cloak of medium quality, velvet breeches, handsome hose, and slippers for church and great occasions. These contained also a few books, comb, brush, and soap, a razor I would not need for a while yet, kerchiefs, a looking glass carefully packed, and suchlike necessary things for maintaining good appearance.

Entitled by our escutcheon to bear arms, and carrying a purse of ducats, I wore at my belt an old sword bequeathed to my mother. I was not unhandy with it, either, for Diego, son of the well-off Hidalgo Zorita, had agreed to swordplay at every chance, for he meant to seek fame in war. Except by scratching Diego's skin, my blade had never been bloodied, but I reckoned that it would be, before many years.

In my heart was renewed inspiration, by no means necessary, but welcome and gladdening. Vasco da Gama had only just now returned from his epical voyage, perhaps the longest in all history, around Africa to India. I wished he were a Spaniard instead of a Portuguese, yet as such he was a neighbor and close kin, and now a newcomer to the brotherhood of great discoverers whom the whole world honored. He had been grandly welcomed home by the King of Portugal, who prefixed "Dom" to his name, which gave him the rank of nobility without hereditary title.

Our first view of the ancient city was from an eminence, and my young heart thrilled. Its founding was lost in the mists of the ages, but it was worth the great Hannibal's time and effort to capture two centuries before the birth

of our Lord. The Ostrogoths had ruled it, and later the Moors, and it had been in Christian possession for four and a half centuries. Its great features were the Roman bridge of fifteen arches, crossing the Tormos River, the domed cruciform cathedral nearly five centuries old, and the greatest of all, in my sight, was the university about two and a half centuries old, and renowned throughout Europe. Students from the universities of Paris and Bologna came hence to attend its School of Canon and Civil Law. Its walls, green with ivy or gray with age, and its turrets and towers gave me at once a feeling of humility and pride.

Humbly, but straightforwardly, I answered the questions asked me by the registrar. Then I took the entrance examinations into the law school, which tested my knowledge of Latin, history—sacred and profane—astronomy, and geography. In the first of these I did poorly but yet passed, I was middling good in the second, in astronomy I surpassed, and in geography fairly shone. Almost before I knew it, I was an enrolled student in the oldest university in both Spain and Portugal, and one of the greatest in the Western World.

I boarded with my aunt, Inez, as my mother had arranged. In the classrooms and at assembly, and on the green and old paved walks, I did not try to attract the attention of the sons of grandees, whose names and fame I soon learned. I was modest in demeanor, as common sense bade me, forced no acquaintances and worked hard. That I had chosen law instead of some other science or art gave me increasing satisfaction. The Fuero de Salamanca, perhaps the greatest code of civil law in all Europe, was a fascinating study, complex and appealing to my best ideals. Besides, some knowledge of it would be invaluable not only to a royal governor of a far-off province, but to an alcalde of a new-born town, a clerk, and even to a captain of a brave, far-journeying ship.

I took also the course in cosmography, the doctor being most learned, bold in speech and thought, and exciting to have as mentor. He put forward one idea that thrilled my eager heart.

Fluent in both Latin and Greek, he had read the writings of a cosmographer named Eratosthenes who had lived and thought in Alexandria about two centuries before the Christian era. By the discovery of a well at Syene which on the day of the summer solstice was sunlit to its total depth, at the same hour he calculated the zenith distance of the sun at Alexandria. Thus he found the distance between the two cities to be about 500 miles, one fiftieth of a great circle. I could not follow the mental process by which he arrived at his calculations, but the doctor, Batiste, told us the result, which

was that the world was a sphere about twenty-five thousand miles in circumference.

"Colon's estimate of the circumference of the earth is much less, and he believes the Kingdom of Cathay extends much further eastward than Arabian geographers estimate. But if Eratosthenes and the Arabs are right, and Colon is wrong, there is a vast distance to account for between Cape Finisterre on the west coast of Spain and the eastern shores of Cathay. Colon's thirty-day westward sail from the Canaries does not begin to fill that gap."

We students had leave to speak in class, if we signaled the wish to do so by raising a hand. Alone of the whole assembly, I raised my hand; and when the doctor called my name, Cortez, and nodded, I spoke humbly but in good voice in the presence of the heir of a great dukedom and all the others.

"Your honor, may I ask a question?"

"Aye, you may."

"If the Alexandrian was right"—I did not dare try to pronounce his name —"what does it mean in terms of Colon's discovery?"

"It *could* mean that what he called the West Indies are merely a group of inhabited islands, comparable to the Azores, jutting up midway in an Ocean Sea of prodigious, almost unthinkable vastness. To any other hypothesis my mind dares not venture."

The great doctor spoke with a strange solemnity. I sensed it, perhaps one of a few in the assembly who did so, but none of us could surmise its true cause. The word "inhabited" he stressed a little, as though it were significant, and I obtained at least a brief glimpse of that significance. Unless those islands contained the true Garden of Eden, the people had to come from somewhere. And if the Garden of Eden was found there, rank and overgrown, how had black people made their way to Africa and white people to Europe?

4

Colon had set forth on his third voyage at the end of May 1498. About a week before Christmas, in the year 1500, indeed the first year of a century of ineffable hope and expectancy throughout the civilized world, he presented himself at court and was received with honor. All had not gone well with him meanwhile, either in the West Indies or in Spain.

He had sailed for many days along the coast of a land he called Juana,[5] so long a sail that he became persuaded it was part of the mainland of Cathay. He had discovered an island that he had named Trinidad, in honor of the Trinity, because of its three eminences. His most breath-taking discovery, south of Trinidad, was the estuary of a gigantic river, as large as any in Europe, but he had seen no rich cities or gorgeous palaces indicative of the Empire of the Great Khan, and instead a tropical wilderness. That a short passage to Cathay could soon be found he did not doubt.

At Court his star had fallen low in his long absence, because of letters of complaint from settlers in Hispaniola. He had been charged with cruelty to the Indians, lechery with the maidens, embezzlement, and even treason. Even more disastrous, the machinations of his enemies in Spain, such as Bishop Fonseca and favorites of Ferdinand, had caused Isabella to appoint a new governor of Spanish India, Francisco Bobadilla. When Colon returned from his perilous and mighty explorations to Santo Domingo, this rascal proposed to hang him and actually did put him in irons and dispatched him to Spain. The ship's captain, by name Vallejo that I would always honor, offered to remove the fetters from the illustrious prisoner even if he himself were hanged for disobeying the new governor's orders. But heartbroken Colon swore he would wear them until the Queen herself commanded otherwise, then he would keep them always "as relics and as memorials of the reward of his service."

But his letter to the Queen had moved her to tears. She determined to recall Bobadilla and to send a worthy grandee in his place. Once more the mercurial crowd gave adulation to the Great Admiral, and presently he was planning a fourth voyage, his goal the finding of a strait to that part of India, rich in gold, jewels, and spices reached by Vasco da Gama in his vastly long voyage around Africa, and now claimed by Portugal. Neither his failure to find the passage on his third voyage, nor the sickness, hardship, cruelty, and ingratitude he had suffered in that period, discouraged him one whit. That was the mettle of the great explorers and of most men great in deeds rather than in hereditary station.

How I would love to sail with him! I was now sixteen, exactly six feet tall, nimble and muscular from much riding, and well practiced at swordplay. Also I had obtained all the academic education I could ever have, partly because the money had run out, and partly on account of growing restlessness. So I said farewell to my few friends at Salamanca, paid respects and bade adieu to my professors, thanked God for my two years here, and returned home.

There I applied to the Office of Indian Affairs at Seville, sending good letters of reference from the good father, the Dean of Law at Salamanca, and prominent hidalgos hereabouts. These efforts proved fruitless. Colon was being furnished with only four caravels and one hundred and fifty men, and too many other youths of better birth or with some experience at sea sought the few available berths.

Meanwhile a new opportunity arose, which could I seize would advance me further than a voyage of adventure with Colon. The lately appointed governor was none other than Nicolas de Ovando, and instead of embarking on a single ship of state or with a small convoy, he would put out with thirty ships. It chanced that I had been presented to the great man when he was studying at the Jesuit College at nearby Caceres, and had told him of my friendship with his son José at Salamanca. My father had known him years before, he was of distant kin to my mother, and could almost be called a family friend. After obtaining recommendations, I wrote to him at Seville, applying for a post in his entourage. His secretary replied most courteously that if I would come to San Lucar in mid-January 1502, he was well-nigh certain that my application would be honored.

But as evil fortune had it, a fortnight before Christmas, I was injured in a fall while climbing roofs in the town, the very nightly occupation Juvena had read in my palm, and with the same aim. As I lay almost helpless, a passer-by had bared his sword to kill me, thinking me a thief—as indeed I was bent on being when I fell, although for another prize than coin and rich stuffs—when the watchman recognized and saved me. My punishment for venery was not yet finished. While weak from my injury I was beset by chills and fever, sent or at least sanctioned by Santa Maria, or so the good father told me. It was a savage attack, January flew by with me still abed, woefully weak, and on February thirteenth, Ovando and his thirty ships sailed without me.

During convalescence I passed the time with some gain in knowledge by reading of the remarkable journeys of John Cabot, born in Genoa, later a merchant of Venice, then a subject to King Henry VII of England. He had set sail from Bristol in 1497. Two thousand miles west of Iceland he had found land that he never doubted was part of the kingdom of the Great Khan of Cathay.

On the following year under patent of the English king he prepared another expedition, part of his crew being mariners from Lisbon and Seville who had sailed the African coast. He had gained Iceland, with which England had a lively trade, and touched Greenland, now forsaken by its Irish

and Norse settlers of hundreds of years before. Sailing southwest, he reached a long coast which he followed southward in search of Cipango.[6] He did not find it, he found only a people resembling in appearance the natives of Hispaniola, but far less civilized, knowing naught of gold or jewels. Plainly this was not Cathay, but beyond doubt a vast area of land. He set sail for England and died soon thereafter.

I took it that his astrolabe was at fault, and he had not sailed far enough south. But truly the land mass from which issued the league-wide river Colon had seen on his third voyage was far greater than only the boldest imaginations could conceive. My own imagination was deeply stirred.

Colon did not begin his fourth voyage until May 1502, and it was virtually a failure. He did not find the strait he sought; he found only a few unimportant islands; and his attempt to colonize a gold-rich region ended in disaster. Fate had decreed that he would return in 1504 and live only two years more. Yet the news of his death would stop every Spanish heart for at least one beat. I would be across the seas by then, but in due course would hear of the widespread mourning at his demise. All European nations fronting the Ocean Sea perceived the departure of a giant among men. By his lifetime deeds he died a rich man in gold and in lands, the equal of many a dukedom. Queen Isabella wept.

Where I was at the time, there was talk that his son Diego would be given the title of marquis that Colon himself had refused. Best of all he had lived greatly, beholding many an unknown island rise up out of the mists of distance, undreamed of until then by the great cosmographers at the University of Bologna. Adventure had been his bride, and danger his daily bread. Yet who could doubt that his greatest moment was at ten o'clock on the night of October 11, 1492, when in his close watch in the darkness he descried a light, no will-o'-the-wisp, no *ignis fatuus*, but a burning torch, a lantern, or a cooking fire lighted by a fellow man?

---

[5] Cuba.

[6] Japan.

5

I, too, dreamed of such a moment, and was sick of dreaming in vain. This way and that, I assembled a light pouch of silver ducats as well as a

respectable wardrobe, so at harvest time, in 1502, I took leave of my loved ones, and set out for Seville. In that great and historic city, a sailing for Santo Domingo was almost a commonplace. The ships were mainly merchantmen, laden with Spanish wines, cloths, farming implements, mining equipment, and livestock; and fetching home tobacco, a wondrous dark-red wood, small chests of gold, and numerous Indian slaves. The latter traffic Queen Isabella had opposed, but it flourished in spite of her. No few ships returned from the islands with no cargo but slaves. And here foregathered the great voyagers, such as Hojeka, Nicuesa, Pedrarius, Ponce de Leon, and Balboa. Here, too, were the Royal Chancelleries that issued patents of discovery, first approved by Bishop Fonseca, Colon's enemy, Minister of Indian Affairs.

I admired its wondrous edifices, such as the vast cathedral, once a Moorish mosque, and rebuilt as the greatest House of God in all Spain. Its chief treasure was a life-size image of Santa Maria, presented to Ferdinand by a French king, carved in wood with movable arms. She was shown seated in a silver chair, and her hair was spun gold. There I watched at the Festival of Corpus Christi a solemn dance performed by choirboys with castanets. At one corner stood the Giralda, a Moorish bell tower about three hundred feet tall. I gawked at its splendid palaces and marveled over the ruins of a Roman aqueduct with four hundred and ten arches. But I felt dreamy and strange when I gazed at the Alcazar, the great Moorish palace comparable only to the Alhambra at Granada.

But my best hours were spent on the wharves. Here the air crackled with excitement. I listened to the talk of ship captains, pilots, soldiers of fortune, and seekers of fame, and every hour it seemed there was a swift-flying rumor of a new discovery, or of an island or a city about to be discovered just beyond the horizon. I watched the unlading of the ships from out of the west, and sometimes a foot-square chest was so heavy that four men could hardly lift it, while four musketeers stood on guard. The many slaves to be offered for sale were a varied lot. Some of the men were tall, aloof, and proud, seeming to ignore their chains. Once in a while I saw a chieftain, without irons of any kind, wearing feathered headdress, robes of animal skins, or bright-colored coats and loincloths, but the run and ruck were generally naked. There were no few female slaves with handsome faces. Some, indeed, were truly beautiful, with brilliantly black eyes and well-carved features; and these would not be used as kitchen wenches, or I missed my guess.

An oddity of event took place when I was watching the unloading of a ship from Guadeloupe. One of a slave gang but walking alone, appeared an

Indian of a slightly different stamp than I had ever before observed. His skin was somewhat paler than most, and I would have thought him the bastard son of a Spaniard except that his age, fully twenty, would have prevented the conception, since Colon's first voyage had been only eleven years before; and closer observation revealed a wholly Indian cast of countenance. Still, it was far more handsome than most; I could well say nobler. If there were dynasties of Indian kings—and these, explorers had not observed in islands they had touched—I would say this man belonged to one of the oldest and most proud. He wore leg irons, and thus his stride was shortened; still it was dignified in the extreme, and I could fancy it long and graceful before he had been chained. He glanced neither to the right nor left, revealing his face in profile to bystanders; as is meet for European kings and queens when coins of their realm are stamped, or in official portraits. Actually the profile is more revealing of high breeding, and perhaps of character, than the full face.

As he approached I had noticed his eyes, black, large, proud, and yet suggestive to the mind of deep sorrow. He wore his long pitch-black hair different from the other slaves—in three braids joining in a knot on the back of his head. His only garment was a loincloth. His swinging arms were of high muscular development, with powerful wrists and hands, suggesting that he belonged to a sea-going tribe, whose main travel was in canoes.

His haughty look and bearing had enraged another watcher, a Spanish sailor of the low sort, now flushed and bellicose from drink. Without the least provocation he stepped forward and dealt the Indian a hard blow in the face with a wooden peg of some sort. The Indian reeled from the blow, but with a strong effort kept his feet. At the same time I sent the sailor sprawling by my hard-driven fist in his face. In fact it knocked the meanness out of him for a space, along with most of what senses he possessed.

The gang of slaves moved briskly past the still dizzy chieftain, patently to stay out of trouble that ever hung over slaves. The ship's officers and some of the crew were busy disembarking other gangs, their numbers revealing that the hold had been packed with human freight, and very little else. So it came about that the Indian nobleman and I had a moment's time together unobserved or overheard by anyone. And his first words filled me with amazement.

"*Gracias, señor.*"

"You speak Spanish," I marveled, in that language.

"It is no wonder. I have dwelt with Spanish settlers in Guadeloupe for five years."

"Yet your appearance is not that of a Guadeloupe Indian!"

"No, your honor. I am a Carib, native to an island some thirty leagues southward, where Fire Mountain, what we call Pelee, towers to heaven."

"How then—?"

"My canoe was caught in a great northward gale, and my companions were drowned. I alone escaped to be thrown up on the beach of Guadeloupe. But, my lord, I must speak briefly. The kindness that you did me was the first I have received in two moons—I had forgotten it lived on the earth—and the last I will ever receive, for the Fire God has marked me for soon death, truly a mercy, for I am afflicted with a mortal malady common in Guadeloupe. Thus I wish to make you a trifling gift in token of my gratitude. Pray put your hand, with your palm open, close to my face, as though to touch the bruised flesh."

I did so, and he appeared to rub his head, from the brow to the topknot, as though it pained him, and his fingers plied swiftly at the knot of his three braids of raven black. Into my palm there dropped a spherical stone of some sort, about an inch in diameter. Stealing a glance at the gift, I saw that it was lustrous black, with strange and shimmering lights.

"What is it? I have never seen its like."

"I know not. It was found by my playfellow in a shell like that of a clam, when he and I were spearing the red, long-clawed crawler—I have forgotten the Spanish word—in twenty feet of water off a rocky beach under Pelee. But he was bitten by the spotted sea snake, and before he died he gave the stone to me in remembrance."

"It might bring enough, as a curiosity, to buy your freedom."

"A ducat or two—that is all. A Spanish trader in Guadeloupe saw its like, only much smaller, and offered one ducat, an inducement to its owner to sell the mottled skin of a gigantic serpent which he coveted. Anyway, I do not seek freedom from slavery—only freedom of my soul to go to the Great Open, which will soon be mine. Now, my lord, I must follow the other slaves, for the last gang is being disembarked. Farewell, and may Pelee bless you."

The tall Indian prince, even whose name I had not heard, strode on with a high head. I pouched the stone and gave it no more thought, save as a memento of a touching experience.

6

My days in Seville continued full and rich with excitement that had so far come to naught. I made a scant but tolerable living as an apprentice-instructor in one of the city's numerous schools, teaching the rudiments of the Fuero de Salamanca to youths preparing for the university, and tutoring a few sons of mariners in astronomy. I attended festivals, and often in the evenings I visited taprooms to watch gypsy or Moorish dancing. Some such rooms had brothels overhead, but these I eschewed strictly, for I had no taste for harlots in the first place, and in the second place I feared a deadly venereal disease which some sailors had fetched home from the Indian islands.

Adventure of a strange and pleasing sort came my way at a festival to St. Vincent, himself a Sevillian of the seventh century, held at the Church of the Annunciation. This was a rich and fashionable church, in a neighborhood of fine houses, and since this festival was one of the most joyous of the year, there would be dancing by young ladies and gentlemen on the paved square. The former would be accompanied by their duennas and the dances would be those acceptable to the clergy. All parishioners were, of course, welcome, but by tacit understanding only those of gentle birth would take part in the dances, the same applying to visitors from other parishes.

The fathers here must be of a lenient sort, not uncommonly seen in the richer churches in Spain, for these had permitted a dancing contest, the prize being a beautifully decorated *Book of the Hours*. I had no intention of taking part, but I wanted to watch, and especially listen to the admirable orchestra of laymen—expert guitarists, flutists, shawmests[7], cellists, violists, and an inspired drummer who looked like a Christian Moor. At the end of each dance, the competing couple were applauded separately, the winner decided by the length and heartiness of the applause. Almost always the lady won, if only because the Spanish are a chivalric people, which almost always goes with overweaning pride. At the end of the contests, the winners would come forth and bow and the one receiving the greatest acclaim would receive the prize.

Among the onlookers I noticed a young lady of distinction, seated with her duenna, who so far had not danced. Her beautiful mantilla and embroidered skirt attracted me first, both of great richness, and then the lady's lineaments began to fascinate me greatly. I had never seen a more aristocratic countenance; at the same time I thought it beautiful and unique. The strict propriety of her demeanor did not conceal what I believed was a

unique personality with a great deal of force. There was something in her face that recalled the one close look I had had at Isabella, riding donkeyback in a state parade in honor of San José. The inward drive of the Queen was for extension of her realm and her own and her subjects' piety. The Pope had no more faithful servant on any throne in Europe.

Watching her in revery, I did not think that the young lady was a fanatical Christian, but instead resolute and perhaps fiercely ambitious. I saw little indications of carnality in her face; but her long legs and the symmetry of her body and especially the grace of her occasional movements made me guess she was a good dancer.

I would never know for certain, I was convinced. The contest was drawing near its close. Then a prelate of some sort sent a messenger to the leader of the orchestra. To my amazement it began to play the overture of the Danza Astorga.

The young lady became intensely alert, and her glances darted along the rows of seats reserved for the gentry. I knew instantly that if a gentleman stood forth, she intended to dance with him. Evidently the Danza Astorga was not well known in Seville, although this city or nearby Cadiz might be its place of birth. Also, it was a wonder to me that a prelate had requested it, unless it was danced in much more subdued style than that taught me by Juvena, or else its requester was innocent as a lamb.

I waited briefly; no young grandee or even a don stood forth. So I rose and walked to the center of the stone floor. There I waited until my eyes met those of the damosel. Then with great dignity she removed her mantilla—Danza Astorga is danced bareheaded—revealing her rich red-gold hair, somewhat rare in southern Spain where both red hair and yellow hair were prevailing colors.

She walked lightly forward and took castanets from a basket provided. These were an innovation in the Danza Astorga as Juvena and I had danced it—we had danced with our arms akimbo except when we snapped our fingers, but I was nothing loath to take castanets also, for I was no tyro in their use. At once the orchestra launched into the sharply punctuated music of the ancient Moorish dance.

It was at once apparent that tonight I had a highly gifted partner or, I had better say, opponent. Except for the click of castanets, the dance was exactly as Juvena taught me, with stately striding, haughty movements of shoulders and heads, and except for occasional simultaneous whirls, our gazes fixed upon each other. The musicians, now that they perceived they had fit

accompaniment to the strange and somehow sorrowful music, were inspired to excel themselves. The drummer seemed ecstatic, so steadfast and strong his beat, and it seemed to me that a lame man must throw away his crutch when his fellow musicians muted their instruments and he sounded that solid *boom*.

Innate antagonism between man and woman, within the magnetic field of erotic attraction, was the essence of this dance. It exemplified two deadly enemies caught in the same trap. But early in the dance, the lady did not appear to grasp its meaning, or else did not feel sexual excitement, and what should have been ferocity she deliberately changed to aristocratic disdain. My dress was good but not fine; well she knew I was far below her in caste. Indeed, she attempted to be the leader, rather than the follower or the equal partner. While its form was very old and ritualized, a leader could choose the direction of the marches and had other choices in various periods.

These choices she attempted to make but she did not succeed. Very soon I was in command, and her hauteur changed to visible antagonism; underneath there smoldered real fury. She danced better on this account. The spectators sensed it, without knowing what caused it; they were not interbound with her in the dance as I was; they watched with growing tension; the musicians were inspired by it to deeper harmony with us and soon to as fine a performance as I had ever heard. The pace of the measures slowly quickened. The clicking of our castanets, and the violence of the movements of our limbs and shoulders, was weaving a heathen spell; and the prelate who had proposed the dance must by now have rued his blunder, for this was no fit performance in the paved yard of Holy Church. The intervals of marching did not break the spell but made it more powerful and quickened passion.

The sadness underlying the primal conflict, almost its heartbreak, was now felt by all. During the marches the lady's beautiful lips drooped at the corners, and her blue eyes looked dark and strange. We came to the wild frenzy of the finale. Abruptly the music ceased. She held straight forward her right arm; I bowed and kissed her hand.

Applause broke forth, tumultuous and spasmodic, which was quieted by an imperious roll of the drum. After a brief pause, I stood back as the lady stepped forward and bowed to the spectators. Again there was great applause, which died slowly away; and very plainly she believed herself the winner. But when after a short wait I took my place beside her, applause was deafening. It continued so long—I was so plainly the victor—that the Master of the Dance stopped it short by raising his hand. My partner returned to her

seat with dignity and grace, perfectly concealing what I knew was a furious heart.

Only one other composition had been ordered, hardly a dance, although it was in joyful rhythm. It was named Visit of the Angels to St. Vincent, and celebrated the heavenly visitors' thronging his cell, flooding it with light, and balming his pain after torture. No one came forward to dance, all listened in reverence, and when I stole a glance at the young and noble lady over whom I had triumphed, she was penciling a note in a small, leather-bound book that no doubt her duenna carried in her bag.

I had no good reason to believe it was addressed to me, and it largely passed out of my mind when twelve winners of different dances, nine ladies, and three gentlemen lined up for the awarding of the prize. The Master of Ceremonies was a layman, and a medallion worn on a cord about his neck indicated he was a high official of the city, possibly the alcalde or more likely the mayor.

In any case he took thought of popular opinion, and since I had received the most applause, I was not greatly astonished to receive the prize—the handsome *Book of the Hours* that was surely an inappropriate prize for the performance of an infidel dance at the festival of a saint. The watchers applauded the decision, although not loudly and rather guiltily, I thought, for well they knew that propriety had been at least lightly breached.

At once I walked to the defeated lady's chair, bowed, and asked leave to present the prize to her. She accepted it with a grave nod.

"My thanks, Señor Hidalgo," she said in an aristocratic voice and accent. As she did so she glanced once into my eyes, and I could not read the expression in hers, but it was certainly meaningful. So, as the crowd broke up, I posted myself by one of the paved walks leading to the street.

The lady chose this walk, although there were several others, her duenna following with an impassive face. I noticed that the woman's left hand, the nearest to where I stood, was closed. Her mistress inclined her head slightly as she passed; the duenna appeared not to notice me, but deftly slipped a folded page of note paper into my ready palm. So crowded was the narrow avenue that I did not doubt the act remained unseen.

At my first chance I opened the note and read it:

> You dance well, señor. Are you as well acquainted with the other arts? In any case you should visit the Royal Gallery which will be open to public view at four o'clock, Saturday afternoon.

My neck prickled slightly, for I had felt an inkling of something more than casual flirtation such as well-guarded Spanish maidens manage to have with young gentlemen. Even this would be a wonder, considering the obvious difference in our rank; and the sending of the note by her was indeed a marvel. Proper duennas did not so contrive with their charges. They are of good station, high character, pious, usually a kinswoman, and vigilant in the performance of their duty. The note bearer, although she looked well-born, was a duenna in name only.

I could well-nigh believe that my dance with a highborn lady of puzzling beauty was not a happenstance, but a stroke of fate.

---

[7] Oboe players.

7

When on Saturday afternoon, clad in my best raiment, I visited the Royal Gallery, at first I had no eyes for pictures. Their first rounding was caused by the dignity of the company. I recognized several grandees with their wives and children; among them the Archbishop of Seville and other prelates. High officials of the Court were identified by their insignia; there were admirals and great captains, dons and runners. Also there were plainly but richly dressed citizens in business, for Seville was the scene of the richest commerce in all Spain.

It did not take me long to locate the lady of the assignation, again with her dignified duenna. At one of her occasional glances about the assembly, her gaze met mine, whereupon I bowed and smiled as though we were proper acquaintances. She returned the salute, and as her chaperone moved off a short distance, I boldly approached her.

She had been gazing at a painting evidently of little fame, for no one was in hearing of low-toned talk.

“It is pleasant to find you here,” I said, but I could not address her by her proper title, knowing not that or her name either. And if I had thought she would be somewhat embarrassed by the fact that she, not I, had proposed the assignation, she gave no sign of it. No young lady could be more at ease, as though this were really a chance meeting of old acquaintances of different rank.

"It is a fine showing," she said. "Her Majesty is most gracious in giving it. As you see, this picture is unsigned—I would hazard it is of the Venetian School—but it is charming—and I am greatly taken with the dancing nymphs." Then after a brief pause, and a dim smile, she added, "But they are not doing the Danza Astorga."

"I see they are not," I answered without wit.

"The merest approach to propriety is that we know each other's names. I am Doña Marie de Estrada."

"My name is Hernan Cortez, and I am the son of Martin Cortez de Monroy, a hidalgo of Extremadura."

"Monroy is a great name in Spain," she remarked, and I did not miss the hint of a question in her voice.

Temptation touched my mind, but I resisted it strictly. She had known by first impressions that I did not belong to the nobility; yet she had invited my acquaintance in a stealthy way.

"To my regret, I am not close kin to the great captain, if any at all."

Meanwhile I was trying to remember if I had ever heard the name Estrada. Certainly it was not the family name of any great Spanish house. Yet her lineaments, her dress, and her jewels, and her accent all proclaimed high rank. I had encountered mystery as well as adventure.

I was more and more taken with the uniqueness of her beauty. Yet to save me I did not know its elements; not one of her features was marked except by shapeliness and delicacy, although her blue eyes were larger than was common and of an unusual bright color and brilliance. Yet the sense of uniqueness remained. Perhaps her life had been strangely molded and this had given a strangeness to her countenance.

"Let us look at some of the paintings," she suggested in a calm voice, "Is not that the reason we are here?"

Again she smiled faintly. Along with the determination and strength of character I had sensed from the first, she was bold in the extreme. I had heard that this was not unusual in ladies of exalted rank, which permitted them a frankness and directness which girls of lesser station dared not essay. But Marie de Estrada's title was merely that of doña, which my own mother bore. Then what in the devil—and this might be the right invocation—did she want of me? Pure wantonness could explain it; lasciviousness was not confined to the lower orders. But I doubted that this was the case.

We began to walk about, the duenna, whose name I soon learned was Margarita, followed us with great sedateness, but out of hearing of our low-voiced conversation.

"This is a Pisanello," she told me, pausing before a picture of a saint in chains. "He has been dead about fifty years. As a draftsman he is unsurpassed. The next one—why, it is a Botticelli—Little Barrel—I can never remember his real name—who still lives in Florence. 'The Birth of Venus' is his most famous picture—I have heard that King Ferdinand tried to buy it, but a great lord of Castello would not part with it . . . This work is by a young painter of Venice; the Queen bought it and I think she got a bargain—the artist calls himself Titian."

Marie continued to overwhelm me with her knowledge of art and artists; and I thought that few princesses had been so straitly taught. Perhaps the strangeness of her countenance was artistic genius and she was herself a painter employing an assumed name. I considered this and dismissed it.

After about an hour's looking at paintings, for some of which she expressed a fervent wish to own, she ventured a personal question.

"Would you like to tell me your occupation?"

"At present I am a schoolteacher."

"A dancing school? Heaven forbid! Trying to teach young heifers, newly rich, to be light of foot!"

When I explained that I taught a little law and astronomy, she made a shrewd guess.

"The two are hardly connected. Yes, they might be, if you have come to Seville with the ambition that brings here so many young men—to make great voyages and discoveries and become governors of new islands, and get as rich as Croesus with Indian gold and jewels."

"In all truth, I hope to make a voyage soon."

"Then you should cultivate Bishop Fonseca."

"I see little chance of that."

At that moment the duenna coughed, and when Marie glanced at her I thought she passed a signal.

"I must go now," Marie told me.

"Is it possible that we may meet soon again?"

"Hernan, I was wondering if you would ask me that. The sons of country squires are usually so proper—and do not know what to do with their big, red hands."

"You have not answered my question."

"I live immediately behind the Convent of La Merced, not a large house, with a lion rampant carved on the gatepost. If you would come on Wednesday—rather late—say on the stroke of ten—I will have finished supper with Doña—a schoolfriend. If you come then, I think you could gain admittance."

"I hope so, for I will be there then."

She gave me her odd smile, and at once walked away with a lilting step and disappeared in the assembly.

At the first chance I consulted the Register of Nobility, a copy of which was in the university library. I did not find the name Estrada; although La Estrada was a town in northwestern Spain. The region was somewhat famous for its wheat, barley, cotton, and pigs, none of which was associable in my mind with Marie. As far as I could learn, there was no great dignitary in the town, or had any come from thence. The fact remained that her accent had a faint suggestion of northern Spain or at least of Santander, a busy port in the extreme north.

Siesta was observed at the school at which I taught, although the hard-pressed students usually spent the time with their books, and the younger masters in preparing lectures. On Wednesday I filled the hour by walking to the Convent of La Merced and in locating a house behind it with a lion rampant carved on the gatepost. It was not a large house and indeed small compared to some nearby mansions, but it had a pleasant garden and was plainly of great antiquity. The convent itself fronted on one of the great avenues; this residence was in the same square facing a cross street, remarkably quiet and sequestered from the busy traffic of the city.

There I found an apothecary's shop where I made a small purchase and fell into conversation with its proprietor, a bright-eyed quaint-looking Andalusian inclined to garrulousness. While he was mixing my powder I learned not only his birthplace, but his age, the size of his family, the cost of his license, how long he had kept shop here, and the high quality of his custom.

"Trade—and I should not call it that; the practice of *apotheca* is an art and a science also—is slack this afternoon," he told me. "You wonder that I

do not close my doors during siesta. I do not, as a matter of service to my clientele. After a midday banquet, many a stomach needs a digestive aid, many a head swims from o'er indulgence in wine, many a minister of the Queen, perplexed by weighty problems, requires a sleeping draught. Always they know where to seek remedy, swift and effective, nearby shops of less conscience being closed. My little bell tinkles, the servant of some grandee seeks admittance, makes the purchase, and often leaves the change upon the counter."

"I am newly come to Seville. Is the convent opposite of great antiquity?"

"A mere one hundred years. Prior to that, a noble church occupied the square."

"The structure immediately behind it, facing your shop, looks far older."

"You are a close observer. It was the rectory of the church I mentioned, erected soon after the conquest by Alphonso VII. Now it is the private residence of a noble lady."

"It is hardly large enough for a retinue—"

"She lives quietly and simply, a pity since she is both young and beautiful. Besides her duenna, there is one serving maid and a kitchen wench, and these two leave shortly after her evening repast. I take it she has lately suffered some great grief, the loss of a parent, or of her betrothed killed in the wars. True, she attends the fiestas, a fine carriage of the newest style being sent to fetch her back and forth. She has few visitors, one being a gentleman of middle age who comes in his carriage after nightfall, remains for the third part of an hour, and departs. The carriage bears no coat of arms, the visitor's rich cloak has an old-fashioned cowl, and I and no one of my acquaintance have ever seen his face. But the equipage—footmen, grooms, and the like—point to a grandee."

"What is the lady's name? Is it a great name?"

"Gentleman, I do not know it!" the apothecary broke in, with a look of embarrassment. "When her duenna comes here for a potion, she speaks of her mistress as the Doña Marie—nothing more. Nor do I know how she occupies herself, although every day or two her duenna fetches back and forth a book, obtained at some papal or public library. My best guess is, she is of a mind to become a nun, preparing for it one might say, studying holy books, and testing her own capacity for discipline and seclusion."

Just then the doorbell tinkled. I departed with the firm conclusion that the best guess of the apothecary was the wrong guess. The right one, I could

not imagine.

8

The duenna, Margarita, admitted me at the stroke of ten of the great cathedral clock. My immediate impression was that the interior of the house was more luxurious than its exterior would indicate. Also, it was considerably larger than I had thought. I was escorted through the reception hall into a smaller, less-formal room, containing a wide ottoman, a reading lamp, table and seat, a beautiful secretary of old-fashioned style but made of the dark-red wood native to Hispaniola called by its Indian name *mahogoni*, and handsome and comfortable, rather than elegant, chairs. Between panels of the walls were paintings, with religious or classical subjects, and on the beautifully carved mantel of the fireplace stood a sacred image.

I was seated, the duenna departed, and Marie entered almost at once. She gave me her hand, which I found of silky feel but strong, and then showed me to a chair closer to the fire, well fed, cheerful, and welcome in this cold winter weather. She took a chair close by, and I thought the two had been placed there for our express use. She wore no mantilla, her red-gold hair caught and enmeshed the firelight with beautiful effect. Her gown of unembroidered dark-blue velvet was form fitting, except for a fullness at the upper arms and a flare at the bottom of the skirt, and the form it fitted was most pleasing to my sight and to eyes of my imagination. The neck in the front was too high for my liking, because it concealed the collarbones, one of the most delicate and lovely features of a well-formed woman and especially of a young and slender girl. In the back it had a short V-shaped dip, under which were two or three barely visible clasps, permitting its putting on and taking off over her head.

Her breasts were not large and their separation was concealed by the straight cut of the close-fitting bodice. This, too, I deplored, as would any natural man. In all truth I believed myself more obsessed by the female breast than are most natural men. Perhaps there had been a considerable interval between the caking of my dam's breasts and the drying up of her nipples and the substitution of Juvena's breast after the death of her own babe, during which my father had sought frantically for a fresh cow or goat, while I half-starved on milk shared with Juvena's dying infant. I could be sure she did her desperate best to keep both babes alive. She and my mother had been pregnant in exactly the same period; it had drawn the two women, mistress and servant, very close. Both babes, one white and one pale-brown, had belonged to both mothers, for that would be the way of good women.

According to the notions of beauty held by Spanish gentlemen, a large breast—or booby, as our peasants say—was not a fault but by no means a necessity. I could picture the early conquerors of our peninsula, first the Goths and then the Vandals, demanding goat-sized udders on their big, fair-haired brides, but probably their selectiveness in this matter was as individual as among civilized men, for Barbarian and Greek were still vastly more alike than different. The *houris* of the paradise of the sensual Moors are portrayed of varied figure; the Moorish obsession was with virginity. Our taste in this regard had been acquired from the Romans, and theirs had been borrowed from the Greeks. The Greek Hera and Pallas Athene—Juno and Minerva in Rome—are portrayed as buxom and formidable; but the Greek ideal of beauty was the lithesome nymph.

I could think these thoughts as my senses were absorbing Marie and they tended to steady me in some degree. Heat was inevitable as I sat close to her, in this intimate room beside the cozy fire, with her duenna conspicuously absent. The idea had now crossed my mind that Marie's invitation could quite possibly lead to amorous adventure. It was not reasonable, considering our different stations; but it was a wildly exciting thought, especially since I had been celibate ever since I left my native town, a long abstinence for a Spanish youth of eighteen.

But the bright firelight disclosed, more clearly than before, two aspects of her countenance that argued against my desire. One was strength of will, a drive to win her goal, whatever it might be. The other, apparent when her face was in repose, I could only describe as sadness; she had either suffered a deep sorrow in her most impressionable years or her circumstances were different from what they seemed, which meant most strange. It was apparent in her sensuous mouth and her eyes, naturally brilliant, often darkening in accompaniment with her thoughts.

Suddenly she burst out with a most startling question.

"Why are you here, Hernan?"

"You invited me here," I answered quietly.

"But why? Why did I dance the Danza Astorga with you, when you stood forth in invitation? Why did I propose an assignation at the Queen's gallery?"

"I am completely at a loss to know."

"I had observed you before then. I have very sharp eyes and your face interested me. It is not the face of a great aristocrat but of a bold ambitious

man of keen intellect. But I felt something more than that when you took the lead in the dance away from me, which I had resolved to keep. I am not easily defeated—Fate has done its best to do so, but has not yet succeeded and I believe it never will. I was amazed to find myself following instead of leading. I was again taken aback—and that is a mild way to put it—when the spectators gave you, not me, the palm. I pride myself on my dancing and especially so on dancing the Astorga. I have always loved it and practiced it long and hard with my—but with whom does not matter. Your rank is far below mine, yet in that company of great folk at the gallery you were perfectly at ease, you showed no awe of anyone, you pretended no knowledge of painting that you did not possess. All of this challenged me. And now I have invited you to my home—actually it belongs to another—I have no money of my own—and am alone with you with no semblance of propriety. In all truth I am courting your attentions."

"I cannot comment on what you say, but I would like to ask a question."

"I will answer it if it is not too personal."

"How old are you, Marie?"

"Yes, you would call me Marie to my face, not Doña Marie. I am seventeen."

"You look that young, but I thought you were older."

"I have been of marriageable age for three years. Yet I am not married, nor have I a lover. No young man has ever proposed marriage and no alliance between my kinsmen and the kinsmen of a young nobleman has ever been discussed. You wonder why?"

"I confess that I do."

"Because the grandee who provides for me—one whom I greatly admire, but there is little love lost between us—has never permitted such a matter to develop."

"That is strange," I said after a long pause.

"I will explain. Among the nobility, marriage between its sons and daughters does not occur without careful examination of the pedigrees of both parties. Because of this custom the Spanish nobility is the most pure—that is hardly the word—I mean the least mixed with less-than-noble blood of any in Europe. The examination is made by professional genealogists who miss nothing—engaged by the parents of the prospective husband to

investigate the prospective wife, and vice versa. I cannot pass that examination. There is a blot on my escutcheon."

"I have no right to ask what it is, and I will not."

"I told you I have no lover. Could it be that my mother, a great lady wedded to a grandee, might have had one?"

"I suppose it could be that. It could be that her infidelity is not known, but would become known under careful scrutiny of her life. I would venture further that your parents still occupy the same house, but remain wedded in name only. Perhaps she went to some distant place to have her baby and your existence is unknown. And a husband in high office or of high rank does not want it known, his humiliation would be all the greater if your real father was of lowly station. Yet he is tolerant enough—generous I should say—to provide well for his wife's bastard bearing an assumed name."

"That is shrewd guessing. But I told you the grandee who provides for me has little love for me, which would be explainable on his part but not on mine, if his support of me was from generosity and tolerance. Instead, might he not fear that otherwise I would tell the secret?"

"Yes, that is possible if you were made to live in poverty."

"On the contrary, I was educated in a good school of a great convent. My entrance there was managed partly through forgery and partly because there was a respectable family named Estrada in northwest Spain—its head was a poor hidalgo—that was wiped out by a tornado striking in the dead of night. Since I cannot marry well—the usual meaning of the phrase—the sensible course would seem to be for me to become a nun, but I am not fitted for it. I am not devout in that degree."

"You could marry a man of lower station. He would be proud to have such a beautiful and accomplished wife, and care not a fig who sired you."

"No, I am too ambitious. I have a half sister who is my inferior in everything but birth. She is now a contessa in great favor with the Queen. Happily, she comes to Seville only in the summer season, while I stay in a little port near by. Now why have I spoken so frankly to you? I was under no obligation to do so."

"I do not know."

"I acted on impulse. I wanted your good opinion, and not have you think I am a favorite of some rich, elderly man, a likely reason for living as I do. I know you will tell no one—you are a gentleman—and before long you will

be on your way to the West Indies. We will not meet again, at least so intimately. It would displease my provider and no good could come of our association."

"Do you wish me to go now?"

"In another hour. Meanwhile tell more fully your ambitions, and how they were aroused. Have you influential friends?"

"José, the son of Count Aquillar, is my friend."

"The count will soon be made a duke, or so I hear. He is very influential with the Minister of Indian Affairs. What wakened your desire to go to the Indies?"

I told her how it had been my ambition since the news broke of Colon's discovery. Touched and perhaps flattered by her trusting me with part of her secret—she had carefully omitted giving any names—but no less prey to lascivious yearnings—I revealed the greatness of my goal which I had not yet confided to anyone but Juvena. I aimed to achieve command of a well-equipped expedition to sail beyond Las Higueras,[8] the westernmost land yet gained by Colon. The discoveries of John Cabot indicated a great land mass. I meant to be the conqueror of a region as great as Spain and quite likely far more rich. When the sword could not win of itself, wile would avail, because the Indians would certainly be ignorant of guns and ships, as had been the natives of Hispaniola at Colon's coming, and hence easily conquered by little bloodshed and their own superstitious fears. I would spread the True Faith, which would please the Pope and the Queen, and which was my duty. I would be ennobled and become viceroy of a vast domain.

Aye, I spoke largely, and this young lady had every right to smile. She did not, but listened with utmost attention, her eyes fixed on mine, and her face somewhat flushed, whether by firelight or excitement I could not tell. At the end of my boastful recital, she sat for a moment in revery, which ended with a little sigh.

"All that you might achieve," she murmured at last. "It does not stand to my reason—the odds against it are incalculable—yet if I were a man, and you gained command even of one ship, I believe I would go with you."

Instead of a man, she was a maiden of beauty and charm and unawakened passion, and we must part in a few minutes more. Yet since the result could not be worse than a rebuke, I decided to make bold.

"The institution of the duenna is to prevent youth and maiden from making love even lightly unless they are betrothed."

"That is quite true."

"Youth and maiden are expected to behave thus, by natural inclination and mutual attraction, if they are not watched."

"You *are* cunning, Hernan. But make your point."

"You and I are not being watched tonight. If we yielded a little way to that inclination, if it were mutual, it would be no sin, even in the sight of the priest, because society admits it is wholly natural and almost inevitable if guards are not posted."

"You would make a good lawyer too, I think."

"Such yielding on your part would be most pleasurable to me, as well as a great honor. If you feel the same, it would be quite safe—"

"I'm not sure it would be safe," she broke in with a faint smile. "Hernan, do you wish to kiss me?"

"Yes, a great wish."

She considered a long moment. Her lips drooped a little, and her hands hung limp, and I saw no pleasurable excitement in her face, so I expected gentle refusal.

"Hernan, long-voyager-to-be," she said at last, "I would like to have you kiss me."

I had only to lean toward her to find her lips. They were warm and silky smooth, and returned the pressure of mine in a sweet, unstinted kiss. Then she leaned back.

"The institution of the duenna is wise," she remarked, her eyes twinkling, and the forlorn look had gone away. "We will talk properly a few minutes more, then I will bid you good night."

"I am grateful for your favor. I will not forget it soon. And since you did not laugh at me, when I recited my great ambitions, I want to show you an Indian curio."

"No one will ever laugh at you, Hernan Cortez; they may laugh at themselves out of the wrong side of their mouths. Where is the curio?"

"In my pouch. Before I show it to you, I will tell you how I obtained it." So I related the incident of the haughty Indian chieftain and the half-drunken

ruffian that had occurred on the dock. She listened rather impatiently, I thought. So I made the story short and brought forth the glistening black stone, its manifold lights strange and beautiful in the firelight.

She gazed at it with a completely impassive face. When I put it in her hand, she examined it carefully.

"What can it be?" she asked. "I have never seen its like."

"I do not know. It was found off the beach of a Carib island."

"Did the Indian chief tell you of its worth?"

"I think he mentioned two ducats, in a curiosity shop I suppose, but the Indian prized it, perhaps because in its finding, the finder who was his friend was bitten by a sea snake and died."

She returned the stone and I pouched it. "I suppose he regarded it as a good-luck charm," she said with what seemed waning interest. "Hernan, a kinsman of my mother has an office on the wharves, and learns a good deal about oversea ventures being planned. Why, I should have thought of him before! I will ask him if he knows of an opening, fit for a gentleman-adventurer, and if he does I will tell you."

"I would be most grateful."

She again appeared startled. "But that would necessitate another meeting! Well, that would be pleasant enough. I will see him Saturday morning. Since haste is wise, I can report to you Saturday night—here at the same time. I hope I will have good news for you."

We talked a moment more, and I rose. To my great pleasure she escorted me to the door.

"Maybe your good-luck charm will now start working. You know, Hernan, I have a heathen belief in charms. Do not lose yours. And truly you should not show it to anyone, for the heathens believe that that reduces its power. Still, you did no harm showing it to me, because I respect heathen cults. I may as well confess that I too carry a good-luck charm."

"I will keep it secret, believe me."

"We have another secret, do we not? I do not regret it—in all truth I enjoyed it more than is quite proper. Good night, Hernan."

---

[8] Honduras.

9

At ten o'clock on Saturday night, Marie herself admitted me through the ancient carved door. Of Margarita I saw no sign. Of Marie's high spirits I saw abundant sign, and I noted that her attire was much less formal. An extremely high grade of wool, shorn from Merino sheep, is obtainable in Spain, and our weavers are unsurpassed in Europe. Marie's gown was of soft, light, flesh-colored wool, of straight cut and fastened at the waist with a many-braided, gold-colored cord, the knot with its dangling ends at her right thigh. All things pertaining to classic Greece and Rome were in fashion just now—hardly a month passed without some new wonder, long lost, being brought to light, such as a piece of magnificent sculpture or a manuscript of a sublime play or a scientific work—and tonight she wore her hair in glistening braids wound around her head.

The most pleasing and hopeful detail of her dress was that the gold, bejeweled clasp at the neck of her gown had been left unfastened, disclosing collar bones as delicate and shapely as I had imagined under the glossy well-nigh transparent skin.

"I cannot wait to tell you the news," she burst out, as soon as we were seated by the merrily crackling fire. "Yet it might be that my good-luck charm instead of yours worked the hardest. The trading vessel *St. Vincent*—we met on his day—is sailing in about a fortnight under the famous Captain Mino—along with four other ships. She will put in at San Juan Bautista,[9] San Domingo of course, Jamaica, and perhaps Trinidad. A suitable clerk for the *St. Vincent* has not yet been found. A literate man of respectable family and good character are qualifications for the post. Most adventure seekers wish to sail as soldiers or even as sailors, because these share profits and the loot; but the ship's clerk receives only his salary, which is not large. Still, I hope you will go to the chancellery Monday morning, and apply to the Office of the Ministry of Indian Affairs."

The ship's clerk was disrespectfully dubbed the Supercargo by the rough-and-ready sailors. Still, he was appointed a comfortable berth, no arduous labor, stood no watches, and had good rations. I did not take long to make up my mind.

This matter settled, I could devote my attentions, energies and abilities to another, assurge in the back of my mind since my first sight of Marie's enchanting, even seductive attire and my first perception of her cordiality. It became my bent; if it were at all possible I intended to achieve my goal. I had not forgotten Marie's delicious kiss. Since then, I had lain awake at

night, greatly wrought up by my long continence, aching no little, and vividly imagining Marie's beautiful body in my lecherous embrace. I had perceived two solid obstacles to this happening: one that she was virginal and a broken hymen is no trifling matter to a wooer of such station as she would accept in marriage. What I thought was an inkling, but which might well be wish thinking, half-persuaded me that she had had amorous adventure, possibly with her "cousin" who might also be her dancing teacher, despite her strong character that would make her hard to seduce. If she were not a maiden, still there was another risk not to be taken lightly.

But if I were balked of natural, full gratification of my desire, still Marie might permit love play—indeed participate in pleasurable and plenteous degree—wherein the worst of my tension might be relieved. This custom was so widespread among young folk in all Christian lands who, for one reason or another, could or dared not perform love's climactic act, that it could well-nigh be called moral, the word derived from the Latin mores, meaning not what people should do but what they do do. The clergy thundered against it, well knowing they had well save their breath to cool their porridge. Wise doctors of medicine solemnly condemned it, their argument being the nervous system suffered from being overwrought without obtaining the full satisfaction Nature had provided. Yet, by and large, only the daughters of nobility and gentry forewent the sin, often because of well-taught modesty, discipline, pride or fastidiousness, or piety overcoming the urgings of cynical Nature, but mainly, I believed, because it was forestalled by the duenna. Parents among the peasantry and poor folk, the vast majority, feigned not to know it and even provided for it, mainly because it led to early marriage of their daughters, an economic necessity.

Few of these obstacles seemed to pertain to Marie. A child of sin—or so she had led me to believe—she was biased in sin's favor, because it had permitted her own existence. However, this condition might have an exactly opposite effect. She was well disciplined, I could not doubt, but I thought she had imposed it on herself, for the sake of her own goals. I doubted if she were intensely pious, although her somewhat low collar revealed a chain around her neck from which no doubt hung a crucifix. Fastidious she might be, proud she certainly was, extreme modesty was not apparent, boldness was manifest, perhaps of a degree greater than I guessed. My best hope of a delectable happening lay in her manner toward me tonight, cordial, eager and excited, and subtly seductive, and if I read the signs aright.

In our first hour I made much hay, as our countrymen say. At my first leaning toward her, her lips met mine, as sweetly as before and perhaps with

a hint of ardor. I courted her as instinct tempered by prudence instructed me, with pauses between our kisses in which I told her bits of news, or amusing happenings to make her laugh. Now and then, I ventured a mildly salacious joke without obscene words, the butt of which were often friars or even nuns, for these jokes were popular in Spain and Italy as well, I suppose because the perverse nature of man caused him to delight in finding common frailty in those who declared themselves the most devout. The tales of Boccaccio, who had lived in Italy a hundred years before, were still widely circulated and hugely enjoyed in both countries, despite their official banning by the high clergy.

She relished the jokes, but became grave and a little palpitant, when we made other use of our mouths. Soon we were kissing with parted lips, and the tips of our tongues touching lightly now and then, caused a small lightning bolt to strike me. But she was never the aggressor in this wooing; and I perceived that she was not as aroused as I, and the passion she felt was mainly, but not all, a reflection of mine. Whether I would accomplish my design, or how near I might approach it, remained in the unknown future. And despite the urgency of my need I was strictly resolved not to deflower her even if that were possible, as a matter of honor.

She made no objection when I thrust my greedy fingers into her collar which fitted too close to admit my whole hand. This "paddling in her neck," as the argot had it, was not very satisfying, for I could reach only the upper swell of her bosom and the top of its cleft, humid and silky smooth. Her skirt was loose and her shift unconfining, and when her breath began to be a little short, and her cheekbones flushed, and a line of fine sweat appeared on her brow, I made bold to seek adventure beneath the garments.

"Do you let your hand creep above my knees," she told me. "Even this is wanton sufferance on my part, which I must admit to my confessor."

"I can hardly help myself," I answered.

"That I can understand. I do not blame you, when I have invited you here without the presence of a grave dame. I understand the heat that young men feel, and their lustful desires, for that is the nature of the Sons of Adam; and as the Daughter of Eve I confess some touch of its poison, and some itching of my private parts. And I fear that if your hand moves higher, it will rumple my dress, which would not be overlooked by Margarita when she hangs it, and she could well guess the cause."

"Then why not take it off, for your modesty will still be protected by your shift, and yet my longing to behold your beauty would be better

served." At the same time my hand made a bold movement upward to the inward swell of her thigh.

She protested neither my suggestion nor my lecherous act, and to my astonishment and leaping hope she seemed to be considering my proposal.

"I am being sorely tempted, no doubt by the devil," she murmured at last. "True, there is no danger of discovery but the conduct is more fitted for a dairy wench than the daughter of a contessa. Will you take off your coat, and your shirt, too, if you like, but not your breeches. And the lamp must be turned low."

These things I did featly, as well as loosen the sash under my coat for its waist buttons did not give me the security of my sword belt, which tonight I had not worn on this amorous adventure. My hopes and my heart were bounding.

From one corner of my eye I watched Marie remove her gown. By reaching around to the top of her back she unfastened about three pearl buttons which permitted her to pull the garment over her head. Despite my exultation at this first proof of success—I had feared mightily that she would change her mind—I took note of how she shook out its rumples and hung it with care over the back of a formal, canonical-looking chair. Now she stood naked except for her shift and her slippers and hose. She did indeed wear a crucifix on the neck chain—a custom almost universal with Spanish girls and women. The shift was loose fitting, a straight-cut garment without sleeves, covering her body from just above the bosom to just below her knees, and was upheld by cloth bands over her shoulders. Around her left shoulder and arm was a red riband, held in place by its tight fit and the slight rise of the joint, and fastened in her armpit. For the present, I could not detect its use, unless to support a tiny packet or sachet bag of perfume. To my delight she swiftly unbraided and unfastened her hair, and gave it a shake whereby it fell in a red-gold shimmering curtain over the back of her neck and shoulders.

At once she took her chair, and I took mine. And now events moved apace, my courtship being of the boldest sort, my hand wandering at will under her shift. There was no difficulty now in reaching her bosom, since the beautiful soft linen made room for one breast at a time to emerge and receive its due of caresses. My eyes were fed too, for despite the low, soft light she was bewitching in this half attire—at once concealment and revelation—and I could wonder why more sculptors had not taken advantage of its appeal in the draping of their models. But at the present my

thoughts were far from cold marble, and indeed were made dizzy and dim by the beauty, palpable and visible, of warm and silken flesh.

Allowing me such freedom of courtship, still she did not return my caresses in kind. She knew well there was no bar or barrier to the wanton wandering of her own hands. I did not try to lead them, although she was passion-swept, a fact apparent from her troubled breathing, immense pupils crowding the irises, and other signs that lovers know.

"At this rate," she murmured, with a most slight but unmistakable touch of humor, "you will soon discover I am not a virgin."

This was news indeed, for although I had not found her hymen, the entrance to her body was small and resistant. I was not as overjoyed as conscience should demand, for mine had been silenced by overweening desire.

"Then—"

"I told you I had no lover, and it is true," she went on, rather sorrowfully now, "but my shame—I should call it a humiliation within my soul—is greater than if I had had one."

"I do not understand."

"At age thirteen, walking in the woods near the little port where I stay in summer, I was chased and raped by a half-drunken sailor."

"I hope he was caught and burned at the stake. Do not think of it now."

"I did think of it, always with horror, although it removes one obstacle which you as a gentleman would respect, to the full concourse of our bodies which you so greatly desire, and which I—I can no longer oppose. It must be I do not wish to oppose it. In all truth, I desire it also, now you have gone this far."

"There is another obstacle—a danger—which I cannot ignore." For what she had told me with such honesty had rewakened my muted conscience.

"I do not believe there is much danger of what you mean. An old wife from Sicily, a land where Roman lore spread and is well remembered, told me that the danger period is in the middle of a woman's month. It was a belief held, reflected in their rules and conduct, of Roman courtesans. A Moorish maid servant confided the same—and the Moors have the best physicians in the world."

I was restive during this interlude, but it was of no real risk to a triumphant ending to my blissful adventure. My own fires were not slaked in the least degree; and by gentle and most intimate caressings I made sure that Marie was not diverted from the path whither we were bound. Indeed, that path was made straighter than before, because of Marie's confidings.

"Then we can—"

"Wait. Do not withdraw your hand, but listen. The consummation will be sweeter for this delay. Hernan, I am seventeen and unwedded. By Spanish custom I should have been so two years ago, even three, and because of circumstances I cannot marry in my own caste. If I never marry—if no commoner of high gifts wins my love—still I will never be a wanton; although I fear that my hot Castilian blood, and needs natural in woman, hard to suppress, may drive me to an occasional sinning that I hope my confessor will forgive after due penance is done. And I will never be treated as a wanton. There must be some sign, some ceremony, that no common thing has happened if I yield; that the lover holds me in high respect and will not forget what has been between us, and think tenderly of me, and be proud."

"Marie, this makes me all the more desirous of a happy ending," I answered from a full heart. "What ceremony can we perform, what sign give each other, what oath may be taken, in token of the honor in which I hold you, and of your trust in me that you have shown? It is the greatest compliment I have ever received."

"Hernan, I do not know. I have never before been confronted by the situation—the moment has never pressed so close. You spoke the word token. That gives me an idea—yes, I believe it is the answer. Let us exchange tokens which each of us will keep always."

"That is a wonderful thing."

"In my armpit, I wear one eminently suitable to a soon voyager to the far Indies." She reached under her left arm with her right hand, its fingers plied, and she brought forth the image of a ship, hardly two inches long, beautifully wrought in gold. "It was made by an Indian on Hispaniola. It represents Colon's flagship, the *Santa Maria*. I wear it upside down, to save hurt from the tiny masts, but you could wear it on a chain. In truth, it is the good-luck piece of which I spoke. In its stead, you can give me your good-luck piece—the black stone with such beautiful luster and strange lights. I will keep it as a souvenir of the first giving of my body to a lover—for so you are tonight and I return your love. Although it will dim like the memory

of a sweet dream, some little glowing will always remain." And her eyes were wondrously lighted as she spoke.

"I will be getting the best of the bargain. The little golden ship is worth —"

"What does that matter?" she asked quietly. I flushed, for my remark had been that of a dolt, blind to the beauty of the occasion.

So I took the black stone from my pouch sewn inside my coat, and put it in her palm. She handed me the little image of the immortal—in men's memory—*Santa Maria*. No token could be more suitable to one of my ambitions, and surely it would bring me to good fortune, for Our Lady had blessed the ship and her forever-famous voyage.

Then Marie uttered a little sigh and gave me a long and blissful kiss. Then she slipped her hand in mine and led me to her dimly lighted chamber.

---

[9] Puerto Rico.

10

What followed was sweet and satisfying rather than rapturous. I had been lifted into an exalted mood by the little ceremony, and was tender with my bride of tonight, and controlled myself well so as not to give her pain. Still, I felt it was a beautiful experience, to be surpassed in this respect only on my wedding night with a bride I deeply loved. Marie was more sentient to its purely carnal delights than I, more so than I had expected, if I could judge by her blissful whisperings in my ear.

After the consummation she fell into light slumber. I rose from beside her, brought her gown from the adjoining room, hung it carefully in her closet, and then dressed. She was waking when I had finished, and gave me a drowsy, childlike smile.

"I should go now?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

"When may we meet again?"

"Perhaps never. Perhaps that would be best for both of us, for you will be sailing in a fortnight, if all goes well, and tomorrow I go to Granada by coach sometimes put to my use. There I will visit a kinswoman, who knows my history, and of whom I am fond. Perhaps that is good fortune for both of

us, for although I will write to you, when you have established residence in the Indies, our fates forbid—"

Suddenly she fell silent and her eyes slowly rounded. I knew what had alarmed her—a slight sound at the rear of the house. There was no doubt that she had good cause for alarm, for she fairly leaped from the bed, her face white as the sheet, and from the closet snatched the first gown she could lay hands on. Meanwhile, she addressed me in a low, shaking voice, speaking with frantic rapidity.

"You must go at once. It would be best to go by the front door, for if that is who I think it is, he would expect you to leave by the postern or the rear door. Go quickly, for the love of God! May Santa Maria protect you—"

Featly I went, for this unknown danger was plainly only too real. Softly I opened the front door, and closed it softly behind me. A low-hanging moon was shining out of sight behind me, dimly lighting most of the square, and the street was near by, although likely deserted at this midnight hour. As soon as I escaped from the deep shadow of the house—

I ran for it, but was not quite in time. An assailant lurking in a rose garden I had noticed close to the walk, on my first visit here, sprang at me, and struck me such a hard blow on the head with his cudgel that I was knocked down and half insensible. I could not utter a sound except one gasp of sickening pain. Such thoughts that could yet move in my dulled brain told me this attack was not by footpads to get my purse and jewelry, and instead I was to be brutally murdered. What followed immediately seemed to bear out the dire inkling—two other attackers, whose shapes I dimly perceived in the hazy gloom, rushed upon me. But no knives shone wanly, I saw no other weapon, and instead all three rascals knelt at my fore and began to pummel me in the face.

Then it came to me that they did not seek my life or my valuables either, and instead I was to be given a cruel beating for some cause unknown. The blows of their fists were many and hard, mainly on the mouth and cheeks, and one, especially painful, on my eye. I was made more helpless to move or make a sound, although what sense was left to me after the stunning blow on my head did not wane further.

My face would have been pounded to a bloody pulp if the pummeling had lasted long. Instead, they drew back and disappeared, perhaps frighted by a distant view of a watchman with his lantern or by his brave voice calling the hour. But my punishment was not yet done. A fourth form appeared, taller than the others, and I had a dim sense of his being of

different attire from the bullies, and possibly wearing a doublet with glinting decoration and a plumed hat. Of a surety I caught glimpse of white in the region of his neck, suggestive of the lace collar worn by men of high rank.

In his hand was an object short handled with a dangling tail. I made no sense of it at first dim perception, but knew soon enough what it was—the kind of whip used by jailors to lash prisoners, or foremen to punish lazy or thieving slaves, or boatswains to flog unruly or undutiful sailors. He began to strike me across the body with the stinging strap, wielded by no weak arm. Every blow inflicted severe, stinging pain and, far worse, humiliation to my soul at being beaten like a common felon. I remembered I was gentle-born and had studied at a great university, and a murderous fury engulfed my brain, but I was too weak to give it voice, much less manly force.

When he began I knew he would deal twenty blows, for that was the usual number given low fellows for the first offense. Almost unknowing I counted them, and there were exactly twenty. Then the tall man kicked me in the side and faded into the gloom.

As my head cleared and my sense began to return, I lay listening awhile, then crawled a short distance toward the street. Then I must stop, my hard-aching head aswim, but after a few minutes' rest I managed to gain my feet. Reeling like a drunken man, I gained the gate of the walled square, and I leaned against it, hoping a watchman would come nigh, but instead a street sweeper came in sight with his broom. He veered out from the sidewalk at first close sight of me, and then perceiving that I was decently dressed beneath my dust and bloodstains, he approached me.

"Young man, you've been badly beaten," he remarked in peasant accents and kindly tone.

"Yes, I was set upon by footpads."

"Those rascals grow bolder every day. Thank Santa Maria that they did not dirk you. Can you walk if you take my arm?"

"Yes, and I would be most grateful if you would help me to my lodgings. But the distance is half a league."

"Are you privileged to ride a donkey?" It was strangely true that this right was not given men of ordinary or gentle birth, who could ride horses or mules, but only to the high nobility, I supposed because our Lord rode a donkey into Jerusalem.

"No, although I am a gentleman."

“That I perceive. Yet I know where to find a cart, drawn by an ox. But did the rascals leave you five centavos? For that would be his charge for taking you half a league, and I haven’t got it.”

And now I perceived that his help had been offered without much hope of reward.

“The robbers made off when a shop bell tinkled, before they found my pouch. Tell the carter I will pay ten centavos, and a like sum to you.”

“That is my full day’s wage. Wait here, rest, and I will go and quickly return.”

“I will lean on your arm for a short way, until we come to a stairway where I may sit.”

This was a distance of two blocks, and by now I felt such a return of strength that I could have footed it to my quarters. Yet I waited here until in the flare of a flambeau the rumbling cart appeared, with the driver and my good Samaritan. The latter helped me clamber aboard, and I took the jolting ride to the house of a fishmonger, where I had hired rooms. There I gave the cart driver not ten centavos, but twenty, and my friend-in-need a silver ducat, half the money in my pouch, at which he bowed almost to the ground.

The wife of my landlord, a good woman, heard my unsteady entrance, and rose in her nightdress and nightcap, put on a wrap, and came to inquire of the matter. Perhaps she thought I was besotted by wine, although she had never seen me so, nor had anyone, nor would anyone if I stuck to my resolve. She cried out at sight of my bloodied and battered face, bade me lie down on my bed, and sped away to get poultices and hot water. Then she administered to me in the most motherly fashion, crying “Alack,” and “Poor gentleman,” and often invoking Santa Maria.

When, her ministration finished, she asked what had happened, again I told the lie of being beaten by footpads. In truth, although I had no real insight into the mystery and peril hanging over the small, elegant house back of the nunnery, I believed that persons of great power and high station were involved, and the less I spoke of it, the wiser I would show. I did not examine my still-stinging sides until the goodwife was out of the room. Although the skin was not broken and hence no show of blood, there were exactly twenty red welts. These I would not reveal to anyone, nor tell the happening, and instead stored it away in some black and Christless cellar of my memory.

CHAPTER 3

Signs of Progress

1

On Monday the injuries to my face were largely healed and my lips no longer swollen, although there remained a conspicuous dark bruise about one eye, reddish blotches on my cheeks, and a closed cut that I thought had been made by a ring on my assailant's finger. Dressed in my best, I made for the Office of Indian Affairs in the Royal Chancellery. I was admitted to Bishop Fonseca's secretary, an engaging and courteous young man named Antonio Ibenez, whose title was don. He told me that the post of ship's clerk on the soon-sailing *St. Vincent* was indeed open. After we had spoken briefly, he received permission to let me enter the ministerial chamber.

Busied with papers, the minister did not at first look up. No doubt more politician than priest, still there was little wonder that he had won the favor of Ferdinand and the admiration, although not always the support, of the Queen. He was obviously of noble birth, with an extraordinarily handsome and distinguished countenance. I expected him to be older than this—no more than fifty if I guessed aright—for he had obtained the Bishopric of Burgos in the year of Colon's return from his first great voyage, about ten years ago. His able administration of his diocese had soon attracted royal attention and his power had swiftly waxed. His enmity of Colon had become apparent soon after his appointment to his present lofty office; and it still endured, although the great discoverer was now old and broken. No one knew its real cause. He had obtained for the infamous Francisco Bobadilla the appointment as Governor and Judge of Hispaniola, he who had put Colon in irons and broken his heart.

Strength and intelligence was patent in Fonseca's face, but not cruelty. When finally he looked up at me and spoke, his voice was soft and pleasant.

"You are Hernan Cortez?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord."

"You were born at Medillan, I see, in Extremadura, the province that has furnished the Queen so many able navigators. Your father was—Martin Cortez, with the rank of hidalgo, with whom I have not the honor of acquaintance. What are your qualifications for the position you seek?"

"My lord, I studied law at Salamanca."

"We are not in need of a lawyer on the *St Vincent*. Have you had experience in business?"

"No, my lord."

"You have never kept books?"

"No, my lord."

"What voyages have you made?" His voice was still soft, but it was no longer pleasant in my ears.

"I have made none."

"So you are quite without qualifications for the post. You are merely seeking adventure. Your appearance indicates you had one not long ago—a fist fight I should judge. We do not want brawlers aboard our merchant ships. You application is refused, you will please go, and I shall reprimand Don Antonio for wasting my time."

He picked up a document and was studying it as I left the room.

Don Antonio knew by the brevity of the interview that I had failed, and perhaps by an expression on my face I had tried to suppress.

"I am sorry, my young friend," he told me in the most kindly way. "But do not be discouraged, for often these setbacks turn out for the best. There will be other ships, more and more, whole fleets, ships beyond counting. You could ship as a common sailor, if no better opening comes along. The fare's plain, and the duty hard and dangerous, but a man of your kidney can put up with it, till he's promoted to the poop. The seas are vast, and no limit of land in sight. Keep trying."

I thanked him, almost with tears in my eyes, and went down into the street. Then I made for the wharves, thinking of the wonderful ship of gold I carried in my pouch. As yet it had brought me no luck, except the happy occasion of its giving, and my fortune since had been a severe beating and a humiliating defeat. But I would never lose faith in it, that I swore. Alone on the dock I took it from my pouch and looked at it again, perceived how beautifully it was wrought, kissed it, and restored it. Then I vowed that I

would sail within a year, even if I must ship as an apprentice seaman. I would do so within the month except that sailors must sign on for the whole voyage, out and back, and if they attempted to desert they were often caught, flogged, ironed, and sometimes hanged.

On the wharves I made my usual rounds, to learn that numerous ships had gained the harbor, two of these being traders in the Indies, but no vessels of special interest. I saw but few of the people with whom I had a speaking, or I had best say talking, acquaintance, and these were on the go this Monday morning and could only wave their hands in passing and call "*Buenos dias!*" I began to feel lonely, and then melancholy. I had spent nearly a year in Seville. I had pleasant acquaintance with my landlord and lady, and an exciting adventure with a highborn lady, but I could not say I knew her except in brief carnal knowledge. In truth she remained an enigma, seeming the more puzzling the more I thought upon her, until I could hardly believe it had all happened and was not a tale told me or a long daydream. At this hour she would be well on her way to Granada, and never—in all likelihood, so she had said—meet me again. But this forecast, making sense enough, I caught myself doubting. Intuition told me that Marie and I were not done with each other yet awhile, and many more dealings, for good or ill, lay in the lap of Fate.

Suddenly, I decided on a visit home. I ached for the rough plain about Medillan and the noble sweep of its surrounding mountains, and the ache was harder for our homestead, and hardest of all for the beloved faces of my sire, my dam, Juvena, and P'rall. There were still hares in brush clumps and high grass; Del Mar would still love the dewy dawns and want to run; the old greyhound would forget her laming bones when she flushed the quarry. By early afternoon I was on my way with a hired horse, along with some merchants and a mule train; and my heart was alift again.

2

On that journey I came to an important decision. I would not sign on a trading vessel as an apprentice-sailor, because desertion at some West Indian town would be at great risk. Even if I succeeded, this would be too sorry an arrival for a man ambitious for influence and promotion in the New Lands. It could handicap me for months or years, possibly throughout my life. I must make my entrance as a gentleman.

Once in Santo Domingo, I would not lack prospects of rapid advance. My highest hope lay in the new governor, Don Frey Nicolas de Ovando,

whose western sail I might have shared except for an ignoble adventure. But I would know slightly, or thereto bear letters, other gentlemen of note and influence.

Arriving home, I found everything as I had pictured it in anticipation. Juvena, now a woman of thirty-three, pretty and shapely, was at first shy and a little shamefaced, because of a happening of four years ago. I supposed she had done enough penance to expunge the sin of stealing ten ducats from her mistress, when she had not stolen anything, only taken active part in my losing a dubious innocence. But Juvena regained her old gay forwardness when I kissed her heartily on the mouth in presence of my mother, whose look of slight shock was purely for appearances, as is the clacking of the tongue by a parish priest when a peasant girl confesses a little snuggery behind the barn with a bashful swain. As for P'rall, he looked proud.

In due course I confided to my parents my plan to pay for my passage to Santo Domingo as soon as enough money was in my pouch. The fare was not high, thirty silver ducats for a "cabin" passenger, this sum reduced to twenty if he fetched his own provision and cooked it himself in the galley between watches. If besides this he would stand watch at the masthead in fair weather he could sail for fifteen ducats. I would need another fifteen to refurbish my wardrobe; and if I could amass enough to buy a small store of goods to trade to Indians for gold—an act forbidden by the Minister of Indian Affairs, but winked at by many captains—I could recoup all the cost of the journey.

But to get hand on thirty or forty ducats was no small chore. My father could not lend it to me without giving bond on his chattels, at exorbitant interest despite Isabella's law. Although I could talk largely of sending the sum on almost the first sailing of a home-bound ship, the talk of sailors on the wharves had convinced me that while gold was a common sight in Santo Domingo, it did not pass to every avid hand and did not grow on palm trees. My sire had only now repaid the loan he had made toward my expenses at Salamanca, and this by skimping.

I had not forgotten the great and famous Jesuit monastery at Caceres, in our own Extremadura. It maintained a school for neophytes, the masters of which were Jesuits of great learning, but in the town various aspirers for the society hired coaches to help them gain the knowledge required for acceptance. If I could get a few clients, I felt sure I could save the necessary sum short of a year.

This I managed to do. During Lent, which most of my pupils spent at home, I made a fortnight's pilgrimage to Salamanca, to pay my respects to my former masters, and perhaps embark on a brief amorous adventure which the good God knew I could not do safely in Caceres, and for which I had suffered many an ache. As it turned out I never got my hand in reach of a silky thigh. Ambition prevented it.

The second call I made at the university was on the learned Doctor Batiste, my teacher in cosmography. I introduced myself formally, and had begun to explain my presence in his classes two years ago, when he interrupted me.

"I remember you perfectly, Señor Cortez. You were the student who asked the pointed question, when I spoke of Eratosthenes' hypotheses as to the circumference of our sphere, in contrast with the estimations of Colon. All the others listened with glazed eyes."

"I am deeply honored, Señor Doctor, and well I remember your answer to the question."

"I did not answer it. No living man could answer it then, or even now. I only made two conjectures, both somewhat wild, and if either of which were proven true it would play havoc with the theories of our foremost cosmographers. The latitude of Madrid and Trinidad are known by means of the astrolabe; but their longitude is the crudest estimation by dead reckoning. According to the notions of Colon as to the circumference of the world, the main kingdom of Cathay cannot be much further west than Trinidad. But disciples of Eratosthenes must postulate an ocean vast beyond credence, with islands large and small and land masses large enough to account for the great estuary seen by Colon. Where are the headwaters of that mighty river? In the land mass seen by one of Vasco da Gama's captains when he was gale blown far westward from the admiral's fleet? Could that be the same land mass John Cabot visited, a thousand leagues northward and, Cabot believes, vastly westward? I would that death spare me until I know the answer."

The great doctor's face had flushed. Rightly I marveled at him speaking so earnestly, even intimately, to a mere ex-student. He would not have spoken so to the son of the duke unless he had cause to believe that something of use to man might come of it.

"If these two land masses are really one . . ." But my voice shook and I could not go on.

"Finish what you were about to say. No, I will say it for you, for even from one of my years, who knows that the wonders of the earth are beyond man's dreams, it will sound like madness. If those two are really one, a vast continent lies beyond our Ocean Sea, which reason denies can be the Indies, and which may be—must be, I believe—what we can fairly call a New World."

In one part of my mind I wished to believe it. The idea, of such scope, and so strange and new, stirred my brain and soul to such depths that these caused physical reactions in my skin, scalp, and throat. But in another part of my mind I would gainsay it, because the dream of the riches of the Indies and Cathay, gold uncountable, silver, jewels, cloths and spices, could not be gained by sailing westward, but only by the monstrously long voyage around Africa. The Queen took more than a passing interest in cosmography and geography, but her main devotion was the enrichment of Spain, the enhancement of the crown of Aragon and Castile, and the spread of the True Faith. He who best served that devotion would win a dukedom and become the greatest grandee of them all.

"If the circumference of the earth were known," the great doctor went on, "I believe it theoretically possible to devise an instrument that would determine not only latitude but also longitude—being able to place any new-found island in its relation to every other land known to man. In the meantime, thank God for the astrolabe, a crude form of which may have been known to the Greeks, and which reached its present perfection by the genius of Martin Behaim only a quarter of a century ago."

"I wish I knew how to operate an astrolabe."

"Why not learn? One of your quick mind could seize the essentials of its practice on one clear night, even though ship's masters make a great show of erudition, you would think them very Magi, priests of the occult, when they bring it forth. By Heaven, I will show you tonight if you so desire. The time would be better spent than my meditating on the Death of our Redeemer, and His soon ascension, for meditation on such divine mysteries taxes my brain in vain."

"If you would do me the honor and the great kindness—" And then my words failed.

"You know enough astronomy to find the North Star, the one unfailing guide, and to identify the constellations. I have a fine, new astrolabe in my chambers. Come to the tower as soon as the stars come out in their full splendor; let us say at the stroke of ten."

"Señor Doctor, I will be there without fail."

The tiny golden image of the *Santa Maria*, which I had obtained in a sweet exchange for a curio of little value, whereupon I committed blissful sin with a noble lady, must indeed be a good-luck charm, if not a talisman blessed by Our Lady because it symbolized a ship bearing Her Holy Name. The sin committed after the exchange of tokens She must have forgiven, having discovered the weakness of the flesh of common mortals, during Her blessed stay on earth. A cloud bank I had eyed with dread did not rise and instead disappeared, and when the afterglow of the sun had utterly faded, the great stars blazed in glory, and shy and tiny stars rarely seen in such noble company lit their dim lamps. The Milky Way seemed a dimly luminous roadway for blessed angels across the vault of Heaven.

The learned doctor brought the astrolabe, two rolled tables, a lamp, and tinderbox. Its main function was to measure in degrees the distance above the horizon of the Boreal Star, the whole dome of the sky being counted one hundred and eighty degrees, half of the mathematician's ancient dictum that a complete and perfect circle constituted three hundred and sixty degrees. How they had arrived at this number I did not ask, the matter being over my head, nor did the doctor inform me. Then by consulting a cosmographic table, I was shown that Salamanca was forty degrees and some "minutes" north of the equator.

After several trials, the result being always the same, he had me measure the position of Sirius, the Dog Star, in relation to the horizon. On this date and at this hour, the consulting of the table fetched the same result. My wonder began to grow that human wit had devised the instrument and made these tabulations and what long watching and complex calculation the latter represented. And with what awe I contemplated the wondrous order of the Work of God, that at any given place and day and hour the star fixed upon was at the same spot in the sky, year after year, century upon century!

"This table pertains only to Polaris and Sirius," the doctor explained. "The book of tables based on the Alphonsine Tables, and corrected and enlarged by disciples of Bernard Walther and Domenico Maria Novara, both of whom yet live, pertain to all the great constellations in the northern skies. So when Polaris is enshrouded, but some large patches of sky remain open, with this instrument and the tables, it is possible to establish latitudinal position at any hour of night."

This was the meat of the great doctor's instructions. Only a finished astronomer could use the planets or the moon as a fix for the astrolabe,

because of the constant variation of their orbits as pertaining to the world, and the very name planet meant a wandering star.

"I am greatly desirous to own an astrolabe," I told the master. "I suppose they are very costly."

His answer did not come at once, because he was in revery. After a moment he said in an odd tone, "Most of them are costly because of their decoration, often with inlay in precious metals. But the instrument itself is exceedingly simple as you see. Now I have an old one, fully as good in its essentials as this one presented to me by a great nobleman."

He expected no response, and indeed his remark did not call for one, so I made none.

"Señor Cortez, are you planning to go to the so-called Indies?" he asked presently.

"Yes, your honor. Early next year."

"Is your ambition to get rich in trade, or to be an explorer and discoverer?"

"Sir, the latter. I wish to emulate Colon."

"I rarely use the old astrolabe and could part with it."

"If I could afford its cost—"

"I would give it to you, not sell it. I had intended to give it to some man of ambitions like yours, and of good gifts. I think—I feel—without quite knowing why—I have found my man."

I babbled thanks. The splendid outcome was that he did give me the old astrolabe and told me of a shop hard by the university where I could buy a used copy of the book of tables. When we parted, he pressed my hand warmly.

"May Heaven and the God Eo—a Greek abstraction who might be called the God of Cosmographers—cause this night's teaching to be the most important in my life." Then he abruptly turned on his heel and left me to my vaulting thoughts, as swift as the beat of my bounding heart.

In this exalted mood, and with my eyes on heaven, I vowed to eschew the mundane and sinful adventure I had planned. I kept that vow. After making several other calls, and a night of winebibbing with three of my former schoolmates who had become instructors, I returned to Caceres. There fortune continued to smile, and more candidates for entrance to the

monastery sought coaching in the Fuero de Salamanca, elementary astronomy, and even grammar. Living an austere life for one yet so young, I saved slowly but steadily, and just before Christmas I made homeward. In my pouch and hidden in my baggage were fifty silver ducats, a sum great enough to get me murdered at least five times by footpads.

In the dawn of Twelfth Night I hunted for hares with Del Mar and the old hound Prince. It was my last hunt with these good companions, for they would be dead and deadly still when I passed this way again. On the morrow I said my farewells to the three I loved most dearly, and one more whom I had once wronged, but closer to me than any friend. My father gave me sage advice, my mother and Juvena wept when they embraced me in turn, and when P'rall bestowed upon me his prized possession, a sheath knife—perhaps to save my life in some moment of dire danger—I, too, could not withhold my tears.

I rode away, and my watching loved ones dwindled in the distance, and at a turn in the road I waved my hand once more, hardly able to bear the thought I might never see any of them again, and then the homestead itself moved out of my sight.

Soon after sunrise of the day of the journey's end the ancient bell tower of Seville loomed dimly against the sky. But this was not my journey's end, only its barest beginning. In the bustling city, my first act was to go to the house of my former landlord and lady, who received me in honor and with cordiality. They told me I could store my baggage here until I sailed, and could have meals here, but must sleep in a nearby inn, for my old room had been rented. My next errand, the one of greatest moment, was to the wharves. There I learned that all vessels departing hence for the Indies in the next fortnight had no room for a passenger, but at San Lucar de Barrameda, near Cadiz, a little fleet of five ships bound for Santo Domingo was being laded, and since they were traders, I could doubtless engage a berth on one of them.

I had no intention of visiting Marie, were she still in Seville. My garrulous apothecary told me, when I made an excuse to call at his shop and asked questions of changes hereabouts, that the house she had occupied had been rented to a minor nobleman, and the lady was in Heaven for all he knew. This last I gravely doubted, not because she would be shut out but because of her vitality. At once I brought my baggage to a coastwise sloop, and set out for San Lucar.

There I made a deal with Alonzo Quinterro, a native of Palos, and master of one of the stoutest ships in the flotilla. He would bear me to Santo Domingo for fifteen silver ducats, if I would bring my own provision, and check my findings of his astrolabe with mine. To this I most happily agreed. More, he told me that his excellent pilot and crew were also men of Palos, from which small port Colon had stood to sea on his first great voyage of discovery. This seemed to me an auspicious circumstance, and I deemed that my talisman was still strong in my behalf.

Our first port of call would be La Gomera, in the Canary Islands. This was the usual route to the West Indies, liked best by the pilots, because thus there they could revictual, fill water casks, and sail west by south to Santo Domingo. I thought that some auspicious sign would be given, as the mooring lines were loosed and the sails swelled—but for this I watched in vain. Indeed I could not imagine a more tame and commonplace beginning of a mighty voyage. Only in my own heart and mind was there great stir.

The lifted sails filled lazily and the ship was underway.

CHAPTER 4

Self-Finding

1

Captain Quinterro might excel in seamanship but not in honor. This fact was disclosed in our stay at La Gomera. I had only wondered idly at his great haste in refilling empty water casks and obtaining additional provisions, mainly dried dates that stored well, dried fish in ratproof boxes, salt beef, and olive oil, all of these at less cost than in Castile. The flotilla would not sail for some days yet, the masters, pilots, and seasoned sailors enjoying a lazy stay here, where there was tacit truce between alien infidels and bellicose Christians. They could visit little khans where slender, Moorish maids danced sinuously to fifes, kettledrums, and rattling calabashes, and Spanish taverns where Canary wine was cheap and good. Occasionally they met with small, shapely, pale-colored girls who reverted to the Guanches, the aborigines of the islands, conquered by the Spanish a century before.

Several of these taverns and small khans had been refurbished and enlarged in recent years, because the town had prospered and grown from sea traffic. Others had risen overnight by rubbing the Wonderful Lamp of Indian Gold. A Spanish ship anchoring here on her westward sail was indeed a boon, but one stopping on her homeward sail, after some thirty days at sea, was plainly the blessing of Allah.

When our ship was revictualed, and the crew could anticipate a few days' loaf, Captain Quinterro announced at sundown that all her company must remain on board tonight, because the alcalde would come aboard to examine our patent and determine if any sailor or passenger was a fugitive from Spanish justice. I paid the matter little thought, for new regulations for India-bound ships were constantly being made, and wondered idly why the sober-faced captain winked at our pilot, Francisco Nino, of a Palos family of navigators.

"The alcalde seems to be late," I remarked to a fellow passenger, well after dark.

“Do you know why?” he asked.

“No.”

“Note the fine, fresh breeze out of the east.”

He walked away, pleased with himself, and if this were a joke, concerned with the usual subject, I had missed its point. But I became alert when the order was quietly passed to extinguish the deck lanterns. And I took off my dunce cap when the sailors, without shouted command, began to weigh the anchors and make sail. It was not a matter of escaping an inspection by the alcalde. Captain Quinterro was stealing a march on his fellow captains of our flotilla, to arrive at Santo Domingo in good time to skim the cream of the trade.

None but myself seemed shocked by the stratagem. When we had passed the harbor mouth, there was a deal of merriment among crew and passengers alike. I remembered an old Spanish saying of which my father was fond: a lie has short legs.[10] And so it proved in the case of Quinterro’s treachery, and with a vengeance. Indeed the rebuke was so violent that I could well-nigh believe it had been given by Heaven.

Our journey was not yet two days old, when the wind heightened. In his avid haste, Quinterro did not order the taking in of sail, a need seen by any apprentice seaman, but I was too late a landlubber to perceive it. Instead I began to share the high spirits and jollity of my shipmates. In a burst of generosity, which Juvena had declared inborn in me when she had read my palm, I brought forth a case of preserved fruit I had bought cheaply in La Gomera, and all hands hastened aft to share the delicacy. Thus, utterly unaware of the high office, I became a saver of human life.

Instead of the sails being blown away, the mainmast broke in the middle, and the crossyard, sail, and rigging crashed on the deck. No one was struck by the ruin, but the ship was disabled, and Captain Quinterro had no choice but drift with a sea anchor until the wind changed, and then make a laborious and humiliating return to La Gomera.

There he begged forgiveness of his fellow captains, and to my astonishment they gave it with a deal of cursing. I did not know why unless the desertion from a flotilla was a common trick which they themselves had played now and then, when avarice had overcome their scruples. Because of the give-and-take among mariners, no doubt enforced by the arduousness and danger constantly encountered, they even consented to delay their own sailing until the broken mast could be repaired.

Again we put to sea, a brave and hardy company that thrilled my young heart. All would go well from henceforth, I supposed, for Heaven would surely be as forgiving as a fraternity of rough seamen. All did so, for several days. The winds were favorable, the deep sea summoned none of its power with which it was instinct, and although the flock of sea gulls in our wake turned back to coastal waters, a pair of albatrosses kept us company, and delighted my eyes by their lovely, ceremonial flight. These the sailors believed held some kind of mastery over the winds, and their presence boded well, and no firing of a blunderbuss frightened them off.

Perhaps their intentions were good, but they were thwarted by the singular behavior of Captain Quinterro. He had not learned his lesson; he could not resist temptation, and on a night when the breeze quickened, he ordered more sail with no other purpose than again to desert the flotilla and beat his fellow captains to the goal.

I made no protest; I had not the right; nor did the pilot and other officers. But at the break of day, I suffered a sick feeling, perhaps a premonition of disaster, when I looked fore and aft, and to port and starboard, without beholding the comforting sight of any other sail. The sea was vastly lonely. Our little ship was hardly larger than a full-grown whale native to the depths, equipped by nature to flourish there, and live to great age. All went well for a full fortnight, my shipmates were merry enough, then there was given a bad sign. Pilot Nino asked me to bring to the deck my astrolabe, to compare its reading with his.

I did so, and consulted my own charts. But Nino made almost an angry answer when I reported my finding, that my old instrument was faulty, and we were not nearly as far north as it maintained.

Some days passed. We should spy the north or eastern shore of San Juan any moment now, Nino assured us with a show of heartiness, but a wild look was in his eyes. The next day Captain Quinterro announced to a sobered company that Nino had lost his way.

Recriminations followed between the two officers. Various sailors, when asked their opinions, either cursed or contradicted one another. The steward confided in me—and why I was the recipient of the confidence I did not know—that our situation was far worse than most of our shipmates knew. Some of the water casks had leaked in the heat, and the supply was very low. Food, too, was running dangerously short, and unless we spied land before the new moon revealed her beauteous shape above the setted sun, we would . . . But he did not finish the dire prediction, and I needs must speak.

“We will be in serious danger?”

“Danger? We will be in Heaven, although I hope Captain Quinterro finds himself in hell.” Yet the steward had been one of the most jubilant over the stratagem that had failed.

What he had told me was soon an open secret, and soon after the subject of wild talk. Water was strictly rationed, two scanty meals were eaten instead of three; the sun beat mercilessly down and true suffering commenced. There were many quarrels, once knives were drawn; most of the company knelt repeatedly in prayer, although some hardened sinners, hell bound by self-conviction, jeered or cursed at us. By now the casks were dry, and our only water was a little that we caught on outspread sails when it fell from Heaven. Pilot Nino swore that the southward course that he had taken, partly because of the reading of my astrolabe, had carried us through some passage southwest of Juana[11] and we were now in the empty wastes of the South Sea; and if we spied an island, it would be peopled by warlike and cannibal Caribs. But remembering the Carib prince who had given me his good-luck piece, I did not believe that my last resting place would be an Indian belly.

In these desperate days there was given to my soul one mercy not directly out of Heaven. It was the sight of brave men being reconciled to death. Quarreling ceased. Shouting voices quieted. Lacking a priest, the sailors confessed their sins to one another and shared their scanty rations of water with those in greater suffering. Then there came to me an inkling of a truth that all physicians, priests, and veteran soldiers had discovered for themselves, that human beings did not fear death when they were in its certain shadow, and this applied to miscreants as well as the devout.

Then a most strange phenomenon came to pass just at nightfall. First one man, and then others, swore that they saw a white dove flying, or standing still in the air, or perching on the masthead. I alone strained my eyes in vain. Now a white pigeon was the symbol of the Holy Ghost in Christian ceremony and in art, and when the dove took off in flight, still invisible to my yearning eyes, the men implored the helmsmen to steer in the same direction. Many fell to their knees in prayers of thankfulness for this guidance from Heaven; others wept.

Still if the dove had been real and not a contagious hallucination, following its flight might not be folly, for she might be seeking a roost on some nearby island.

On the following morning fell a brief, heavy rain, by which our burning thirst was relieved. Four days more we kept to the course set, and some of the men swore they could still see the white dove in our van, although the most could not do so because, they said, of the sun's glare on the sea. On the fourth day a sailor, whose given name was appropriately Cristobal, raised the cry of land. Nor was he deceived, for soon it was plainly visible. But what land it was, Quinterro and Nino could not agree, although the latter's voice had the more confident ring.

"Damn me," he cried out shortly, "it's the Promontory of Samana on the Coast of Fig Trees of Hispaniola, or you can behead me, and eat the rest of me boiled."

If we wished we could have launched a boat, and obtained water and perhaps food on the well-wooded, fertile coast, not without some danger of attack by Indians in case Nino's confident identification was incorrect. As it happened, or was decreed by Heaven, repeated rains supplied our need for water, and some stores kept hidden for ultimate emergency were brought forth and satisfied our ravenous hunger. There was enough for one week's sail on half rations ere we must land perforce.

On the fourth day we came in plain sight of the harbor of Santo Domingo, and all our company but one gazed in silent awe. Not so Captain Quinterro, the main cause of our disasters.

"Devils in hell!" he burst out. "There are the four ships of our flotilla, God damn their keels, and they've beat us to the port, and our trade goods will go begging in a glutted market."

Truly he was a miscreant, I thought, an impious word because it implied a mistake by Almighty God in creating such a fellow.

---

[10] *La mentira tin lac piernas cortas.*

[11] Cuba.

2

Santo Domingo was the largest Spanish town west of Santa Cruz in the Canary Islands. In its eleven years of life it had gained not only respectable size but dignified and handsome appearance. By climbing to the masthead, I had a good view of its timbered church in the square as well as the belfry

tower, the bell being very old and blessed, contributed by Bishop Fonseca, at least one good work in atonement for his cruel persecution of Cristobal Colon. The residence of the governor was larger and more impressive than many a mayor's house in Spanish towns, the governmental offices were extensive and well kept. Its jail looked solid and grim, no doubt awe inspiring to wayward Indians, white smugglers, illicit slave catchers, freebooters, adulterers, and even committers of malfeasance in office. As always it was the second or third edifice to rise in a new-found town and I wondered if the Great Admiral had worn irons in one of its dungeons, when he had come to insult and overthrow during his third voyage. If so, I would like to set fire to it with my own hand and see it burn to ashes. Happily these criminal impulses were in fast restraint by more commendable ambition.

There were other houses occupied by officials and tradesmen, all erected on ample grounds, some with pleasant gardens. Some hundreds of huts no doubt housed Indians, slave or free.

The first visitors to our shipside were Indians in canoes, offering for sale fresh venison and fish, vegetables—some of which I did not know—and delicious and exotic fruits. We haggled with them—most of them knew a few Spanish words—despite the urgency of our belly craving; and we were amazed at the pile of edibles bought for two silver pesos. The next comer was a ship's longboat, bearing two of Quinterro's companion captains, with whom he had kept unfaithful company to say the least.

Yet the first shouted greetings held no real rancor, showing there was conviviality if not honor among thieves.

"Well, you old salt-water reptile, you've had your due!"

When these visitors had come on board they listened unimpressed to Quinterro's explanation of how our vessel had become separated from the others. "When the wind freshened that night, as a matter of course I bade my crew make sail, as I supposed you would the like, being experienced mariners. Imagine my surprise at first light to find ourselves alone on all that water, with no sign of our dear comrades."

"Tell Marco Polo," one of the visiting captains remarked with irony, Marco being believed to be the biggest liar since Ananias.

Of more immediate concern to me than this exchange was the visitors' response to an account of our sufferings and narrow escape from death. No word of it they doubted, not even the miraculous guidance by a white dove which I had found hard to swallow, nor did their weathered faces show the

least amazement. Fixes such as we had been in, were evidently a commonplace in the far-west seas.

With the captain's message to the Royal Governor, Nicolas de Ovando, sent to shore in the dinghy boat as soon as we dropped our hook, I had ventured to include a salutation, praying that His Excellency might recall meeting Hernan Cortez, son of the hidalgo, Martin Cortez. It so chanced that he was out of town, but my friend and schoolmate at Salamanca, a pleasant fellow named Medina, now one of the viceroy's secretaries, made haste to our shipside in an official canoe, paddled by Indians. His swift arrival increased my prestige with the whole ship's company.

After the arrival of the flotilla and a fortnight's wait, our ship had been given up for lost. We greeted each other warmly; he had been so thoughtful as to bring a bottle of wine, surmising all our stores were exhausted; and for a third of an hour we recalled our happy days at the university and inquired of each other as to mutual friends. Then we settled down to discuss the future; for in Santo Domingo the past lay in shadow against the brilliance and high promise of the yet-to-be.

Medina advised me to apply for citizenship, whereby I would be granted land for farming and shortly some Indian serfs. After five years of residence, not leaving the island without official permission, I would be free to sell my farm and chattels and go where I liked. I answered, with more honesty than discretion, that I did not expect to stay that long at any West Indian island, and my goal was the mainland, its existence no longer in doubt. He remarked that the slow road to fortune was the best, that no few ships venturing beyond Trinidad were never seen again, and those that returned, the few were rich, the many poorer, and none had found the short passage to India and Cathay that was the main hope of Spain outflanking and surpassing her rival Portugal. However, I was a gentleman, a bachelor of law, and a stubborn fellow as well, and I could have it my own way.

The fact remained that Hojeka, one of the chosen of Bishop Fonseca, had gone searching for pearls, gained very few, but had found and mapped a prodigiously long coast southeast of Trinidad, naming the land Little Venice[12] because of its numerous waters. But a better name might be Big Venice, according to his log. The mapping was done by a skillful cosmographer, Amerigo Vespucci, and already the vast region was beginning to be called Amerigo's Land, for he was no modest violet.

Another Captain Nino of Palos had gained a fortune in gold in this vicinity. The greatest of all pilots, Pinzon, had ventured further west and

south, and discovered what he believed was the estuary of a river of incredible width and volume,[13] if it were not the outlet of a titanic fresh-water lake. Rodrigo de Bastidas, whom I had once seen in Seville, had sailed west of Trinidad about four hundred leagues, with no end of the land in sight. Truly Colon had not discovered the Indies, and our islands called so was a misnomer, but a domain as great or perhaps greater. Still no one dared doubt there existed a short passage to the fabled land, for its discovery had been the design of God when Colon was inspired to his first great voyage. I, too, could not abandon the prospect and perhaps I, Hernan Cortez, arriving in Santo Domingo sans fortune or great name, might in due course prove it fact or a figment of a dream.

The above description of myself, which I thought beneath my real deservings, was rubbed into my skin when I was granted a brief audience with the great Ovando, had bent my knee before the viceregal chair, and kissed his hand. He was courteous enough, and accepted two letters of introduction from Extremadurans of some prominence, but his thoughts seemed elsewhere, and after a vague promise to keep me in mind for an appointment, he raised his hand in signal of dismissal.

For a while my spirits were low, and my purse woefully thin. I lodged with Medina, whose pay was mainly prestige, and another young gentleman down at heels. By now I had taken thought that the nearest gold was in the ground, and so took employment with a mine owner, my salary being a puny share of the diggings of his Indian slaves, my main concern to prevent thievery.

I made the barest sort of living, and the only memorable event of the summer occurred near its end, when Colon touched at Santo Domingo on his homeward way after his ineffectual fourth voyage. I saw him with my own eyes, a great edifice in ruin, and well I knew that this fourth voyage would be his last.

Ovando's courtesies to the aged admiral were patently perfunctory. Yet he was a good governor, considerate in his treatment of the Indians, firm but not harsh in enforcing regulations, and dedicated to the progress of the Islands. Colon was father of the feast Ovando now enjoyed, and I could not explain his conduct except by fear of Bishop Fonseca and his ilk.

Colon began his forlorn sail homeward. I recalled the preacher's comments on worldly glory; still I must seek it with all my might and main.

In two years of getting nowhere, I was half-tempted to return to Seville, where a merchant whom I had met pleasantly and briefly would appoint me

to a position in his countinghouse with prospects of swift advancement. Still I did not sail with him, and only a fortnight later, I received a message to present myself at Government House. By now I had broken some of the laws of Hispaniola, one of them the statute against carnal relations with an unbaptized Indian girl. Also I had done a little discreet smuggling and on several occasions had failed to attend Mass. So I did not know what the summons meant, and whether they boded good or ill.

I was received by the first secretary, and with affability that took me by surprise.

"Señor Cortez, I have good news for you," he began.

"Señor, I am in need of some."

"His Excellency offers you the post of notary public at the nearby town of Azua, at which you can make use of your studies of law at Salamanca. It is not an exalted office, as you well know, but if you fill it, it may lead to something better. Land will be put to your use, as well as some Indians, and your revenue can be enhanced by farming."

With a great lift of my heart I accepted only too readily and gratefully. Yet I could not help but wonder at this sudden boon from the hand of the viceroy, who had ignored me until now, and who was especially strict in the enforcement of laws against adultery. These were applied to making sport with baptized wenches belonging to other citizens. I wondered if some man of power in Spain, perhaps Count Aquillar, father of my friend José, had spoken for me at the Royal Chancellery.

Mine was a busy office, because of the constant changing of ownership of lands, the awarding of these to new citizens, and numerous contracts pertaining to mining, slave trading, and forestry. Also my farm was better than I had hoped, and my Indians healthy and well behaved. I need not do manual labor of any kind, which was anathema to a Spanish gentleman, and could entertain neighboring farmers and minor officials of the government. With these I was making friends and gaining their confidence. But because I was a free spender, my purse swelled with exasperating drag.

The nights were long, and Indian girls in abundance. The licentiousness of my nature, which Juvena had read in my palm, continued to assert itself, although now I strictly avoided young women who had not been baptized in the True Faith. Once, when there was strenuous competition for a young, free daughter of a chief, daggers were drawn, and not sheathed until my rival disavowed the quarrel, and I had taken a cut on the lower lip, which my well-sprouted beard covered well. All this was inexcusable folly; but my

cultivation of a fine beard was wise. Almost one of the badges of eminence in Spain was a big beard; men of low or lower middling station taking care to wear only small beards. And in Spain we had the pointed adage, "Little beard, little shame."[14]

My beard was fine, not fiery red, instead of a dark sorrel hue. And before it was full grown, there was delivered to me a letter from Castile that made me tug it fiercely.

The envelope was impressively addressed in a handwriting unique enough that I knew I had seen it before, although without recalling the occasion. But after reading the first line, I remembered well.

Dear Hernan:

I hear good news of you from a correspondent in Santo Domingo. But first I must tell you that I am wearing a different good-luck charm than the one you gave me. It is a copper coin, bearing the profile of Fernando III, which you once carried in your pouch. I found it in a chair you had occupied when you had opened your pouch to bring forth a curio to present to me.

To my incredible surprise the curio proved to be a black pearl, one of the very finest ever reclaimed from the sea. The Queen heard of it, and desired it, and her agent offered me a thousand silver ducats. Of course I could not refuse such a munificent sum; you would not have wanted me to do so in my then straits; yet it turned out the Queen had made a great bargain, and has since refused ten thousand ducats from her kinswoman, a great duchess.

This fluke of chance has given me freedom I had not had before. It is firmly in my mind to visit the West Indies before I am much older. I remain unmarried, for reasons that I gave you, and I am tired of my humdrum life, and wish to obtain such adventure as is in my reach.

I rejoice at your rise in the Islands, and be not distressed if it is not as rapid as you desire. Your ambitions are of such lofty height that you must be patient.

Adieu, *Amigo de Corazon* and farewell.

Marie.

I paced the floor awhile, furious at my own failing not to have had the beautiful stone appraised by a jeweler before I traded it for a golden ornament. To do so would have bettered my whole fortune until now. That night I slept little, but I still refused to believe that Marie had known my "curio" had great pecuniary value, considering how naturally the exchange of talismans had come about. What was done could not be undone, still some weeks passed before I gained a philosophical attitude toward the loss. What helped me do so was resorting to a downright statement of the truth, in vulgar phraseology.

I had paid a high price for a fine bit.

---

[12] Venezuela. Actually Hojeka reached the great River Courantyne, now the boundary between British and Dutch Guiana.

[13] The mouth of the Amazon River.

[14] *Poco barba, poca verguenza.*

3

Rather early in my stay at Azua, simultaneous expeditions to Veraga under Hojeka and Nicuesa respectively were bravely begun. I could easily have joined either of these, and had made up my mind to do so, Veraga being rich in gold, when I was put abed with a lame leg. Perhaps a good angel had intervened in my behalf, for the voyage ended in complete disaster. The horrors were hard to believe, including the slaughter by Indians of a good part of their forces, a long and awful march along the coasts and through the bogs of Juana, and the sudden death of thirty starving men who had eaten the body of an Indian that they had found. In all, a thousand good men died and twenty thousand pesos had been spent in vain. Hojeka, once a great conquistador, cast his soul in a hospital in Santo Domingo, leaving not a penny for the burial of his body.

Meanwhile Ovando had been called home, and a new viceroy, Diego Colon, the son of the Great Admiral, took his place. It was his hereditary right by Isabella's pact with Cristobal Colon.

In his reign, a new power rose in Santo Domingo, which meant in all so-called Spanish India. He was Diego Velazquez, an old settler here, the richest and best born, although until now he had lived a private life of great luxury, eschewing the cares and glories of high office. What had changed his

mind? I could not doubt it was the urgings of Bishop Fonseca, his friend and master, and Fonseca's motive was his lodged hate of the Colon dynasty.

When Velazquez offered his services in a proposed conquest of the great island formerly called Juana, Colon had no choice but swallow the bitter pill. The former was not only Fonseca's man; he was highly admired and popular on the island. Personable in face and body, with a tendency toward fat, he was a merry and good fellow, when he was not crossed in some favorite design. It went without saying that he was placed in command of the impending expedition.

My bread was not buttered on either side, and it needed buttering on both sides. I made the quick decision not to waver in my heartfelt loyalty to the Colon dynasty, but to volunteer for the Juana adventure "in any post where my abilities would be considered useful." Velazquez, whom I knew pleasantly, at once appointed me to his staff, which meant I would serve with, or at least under, two worthies: the dedicated priest Las Casas, a fanatical spreader of the Faith and defender of Indians and the enemy of conquistadors, and Gomara who would serve as treasurer, especially to make sure that the King received his full, due fifth of all gold and valuables captured by the armed forces. So if I were not to engage in battle, and my tools would still be pen and inkhorn, I would be in the company of powerful men, and at least lose the name of a stay-at-home.

Our company was about three hundred when we put out from Sabana. Father Las Casas would join us later, and we could expect reinforcements from Jamaica under Narvaez, a leader in that colony. He led only thirty, all excellent bowmen, and Velazquez appointed him second in command of our entire force. The resistance of the Juana Indians was more stubborn than that of any met on the islands, but not to be compared with that of the fierce mainland Indians, with good bows and poisoned arrows, who foiled the expeditions of Hojeka and Nicuesa. One incident of the brief campaign had peculiar meaning for me. At an outpost, with twenty men, Narvaez was wakened by a thrown stone striking his belly to find his encampment surrounded by several thousand Indians. A captive explained later that they had intended to wipe out the little pale-face force, not from antipathy, but to get clothing, for their chiefs no longer wished to go naked! The detail that most forcibly quickened my imagination followed when Narvaez, in his nightshirt, mounted the only available horse. The animal's bells so frightened the savages that they dispersed in flight!

An island estimated at forty thousand square miles in area, as large as all Portugal, could now be settled, with Velazquez as governor under Colon. I

took thought of this, and of the expansion of King Ferdinand's realm, but my main concern just now was my appointment, by Velazquez, as his secretary and the King's treasurer of Juana. True, I had courted his favor throughout the expedition in every way possible for a gentleman born; but I vowed that my troth to Diego Colon would not be broken or laggard, and the very throne of Spain would benefit by my rise in the long run.

To serve and please both of these powerful men proved a difficult game. The natural attraction that a fine-looking young woman had for me well-nigh threw a dead cat in the soup kettle, a peasant saying in Extremadura. The damosel was Catalina Xuarez, lady-in-waiting to the vicereine. Since none had dowers for eligible mates in Granada, she was one of three sisters looking for husbands in Spanish India. It so happened that Velazquez became interested in her sibling.

Catalina had openly boasted that she was fated to become a great lady, having been so informed by an astrologer. This idea fascinated me somewhat, but truly I had no burning ambition to make her my wife, despite her comely face and form. Yet my courting was more ardent than I had intended and its results more consequential. I will not deny that I spoke of marriage—what lover knows what rash words fall from his lips when the godling Cupid holds him in thrall, and Venus lends her amorous persuasions?—and there was no sedate duenna to check the bounding of hot Spanish blood.

Velazquez told me to my face that I had compromised the lady, and I must wed her at once or go to jail. Quarrels followed. All powerful in his own conceit, he took an imperious attitude toward me; and I was no greasy courtier to bow and scrape. Yet I was not in a position to take an open stand against him.

Then I did a rash thing. It was to be present at a meeting of settlers all of whom had felt the heavy hand of Velazquez; and with that vindictiveness native to Spaniards, they ached to strike back. Before I knew it, or without meaning to do so, I became the recognized leader of a party of conspirants, and I myself drafted a list of complaints which we intended to submit to judges of appeal who had arrived at Hispaniola to sit in judgment on the reign of Diego Colon. And I was sitting at the chairman's table, having just drafted the document of complaints with the ink still wet, when a loud knock sounded on the door which was at once burst in.

The first to enter was Velazquez' new favorite, Captain Narvaez, with his sword bared. Behind him were about ten guardsmen, three of whom had

matchlock muskets. All present were ordered to raise our hands in surrender, which we featly did, for plainly the men's order was to reply to any resistance with the dealing of sudden death. The captain glanced over the paper and put me under arrest.

None of the others present suffered the humiliation, Narvaez taking the position that since none had signed the paper, conceivably they would have debated it pro and con; and although I also had not signed it, I had revealed my treasonable sentiments in my own handwriting. I was ironed and jailed, Velazquez having decided to deal me a public hanging. I had intended to rise high, and now indeed I would ascend, it seemed—to the top of the gallows tree. It was a bleak fate to face, but I did face it, not as a remote possibility but as a just-at-hand probability. Almost the only loophole through which hope shone was the waywardness of Velazquez' nature which I had heretofore observed. His rage was often hot, but it quickly cooled. At heart he was a rather easygoing man, and although he could nurse enmity, it did not spoil his appetite or keep him awake nights.

Also he might have explaining to do, if I were given any sort of trial, whereby the document I had written reached the eyes of the judges of appeal.

When I had survived five days of incarceration, I began to believe I would survive five more; then I took it I would be pardoned, or become a fugitive. In all truth I had more friends, and these had more influence or courage than I had hoped, and a great many settlers whom I barely knew perceived me as the delegate of their discontent. The jailor, a harsh and brutal man, perhaps made so by his office, and whose sweetheart was the avaricious wife of a poor farmer, fell most conveniently sick, and I thought that his malady was caused by a heavy purse putting pressure against his liver. He was replaced by Cristobal de Lagos, himself a native of Extremadura from whom my sire had rented the horse that P'rall rode on my first journey to Salamanca. This caused me to reflect that the most minor incident, hardly noticed at its occurrence and long forgotten, may in the juggling of purpose and chance in a man's life resound in his fate. As the Spanish say, your least hair casts its shadow.[15]

The wonder astonishing all, or at least all appeared astonished, was that I somehow broke the lock of the irons on my feet, took my jailor by surprise, snatched away his sword and shield leaving him helpless, and escaped from my dungeon through an overhead window. The typically Spanish joke was told through the colony that I had decided to go fishing, and I had made a good catch, which everyone could smell. But someone raised a quick alarm

and I had to take refuge in a small church, not only with a stout door but with the blessed name of sanctuary, which all Houses of God bear in Spain. True, I could not remain here long, but meanwhile Velazquez' position became more difficult every hour. My flight and my place of refuge were the talk of the island.

The great man sent an underling to speak to me through the keyhole. If I would come out and submit to arrest while the charges against me were being investigated, I would be tried not for treason but for insubordination. At this offer I appeared to laugh heartily, but in the still shadowy church the noise had a hollow ring. The next visitor was of higher place, and his word was, that when I was starved out I would be straightway hanged as a fugitive from the law. To this I made such defiant reply in such a loud voice that the watching crowd heard me clearly, at which there rose a cheer fit to compliment a toreador when he has delivered the *coup de grâce* to a brave Andalusian bull.

My next visitor came in the darkness and silences of the night, and lightly tapped on my door by which I slept. I gazed through the window and in the wan light of the moon recognized Catalina. She held low her voice, naturally soft, and I could not hear her through the heavy wood, and dared not shout for her to bend to the keyhole. So I slid the bolt, came forth, and stood on the threshold.

"Hernan, I have a message for you—" she began.

I saw the earnestness in her face and interrupted her.

"Draw back into that patch of shadow—"

She did so, and I followed her there. And, instantly, from another, deeper shadow burst forth armed men. I had been caught in a trap that Catalina had innocently sprung, for I never for a moment believed that she was party to its setting. She was quite lacking in guile, and treachery was unthinkable in one of her simple nature. She had merely told the wrong person of her intention to visit me, or else the wrong person had advised her to do so.

My attackers had not drawn swords, and I fought hard as I was able to escape their clutch. In that brief turmoil I recognized Juan Escudero, a shipmate on the first crossing to Santo Domingo, whom I had thought a friend. I bloodied some faces and broke one man's wrist before the unequal battle came to its inevitable end. I was overpowered, knocked down, and held helpless while irons were affixed to my ankles. Once more I was Velazquez' prisoner.

“Have I your leave to speak to Sigñor Cortez?” Catalina asked my panting captors.

“Aye,” Escudero grunted without grace.

“Then please draw back a little way, for what I have to say to him is private.”

The men did so, for the Spanish are a courteous people, and the good God knew I could neither fight nor run in my leg irons. Besides, most of the liers-in-wait were not pleased with their office and its performance, for it would certainly be resented by our people.

“Don’t give up hope,” she told in privy. “Velazquez intends to send you to Santo Domingo as a troublemaker; but my sister, whom he courts, will try to persuade him to grant you pardon. Pray that she succeeds.”

She at once withdrew. I was grateful for her ministration, but the word “pardon” stuck in my crop. I did not wish to be pardoned; I wanted vindication and victory.

I was taken not to the leaky jail, but to the brig of a ship soon sailing for the capital. I would gladly go there on my own account to testify against Velazquez, but my cause was lost if I was hauled there, as his prisoner.

In the lock room, where undutiful or drunken sailors were confined, my irons were changed to a ball and chain. The room had a window by which a free man could gain the deck, and no watch was set over me, but my iron held me helpless. My wan hope lay in the locked ring about my ankle being somewhat large.

My faithful servant, Gonzales, came at dawn to visit me, and cheer me with a bottle of wine and some fruit. I bade him return the following evening, bringing a bundle which he was to tell the guard contained fresh laundry and clean sheets, but on no account let it be bulky or contain any metal object that an officer would discover when he punched the bag, which was certain to occur. Instead of laundry, it was to hold a rough jerkin such as dock workers wore, cheap breeches, a rough cap, and old hose.

The trusty fellow left; when in the morning a mate stopped by the window, I told him I welcomed the soon crossing to Santo Domingo, where I had powerful friends and could win freedom and vindication. I made so bold as to request him to hasten the sailing, if possible, but he replied that anchors would be weighed three days hence, by the master’s decree.

In midafternoon a second meal was handed to me through the window, so generous that I postulated a sympathetic cook. But the bearer told me to consume every scrap, for this would be my last meal until tomorrow's breakfast. This suited me well enough, for I direly needed solitude, if I were to attempt escape. However, it so chanced that the meal was too heavy for my fainting stomach, and I left some small raw fish, a kind of sardine, to be eaten with salt and garlic, and highly esteemed in Santo Domingo.

When I had prayed and eaten, my first study was of my ball and chain. The latter was firmly welded to the former and to the iron ring about my ankle: some conscientious loon had taken great pains with the labor. It was an expert job of which he was no doubt proud, giving little thought to the Bawd Fortune who, in playful mood, might some day contrive for him to have it fast on his own leg. Besides, I could not make my escape with an iron ring on my ankle, let alone a dangling chain. So what hope I could rally lay in the ring itself.

I had a folding penknife and a silver clasp pin at the collar of my shirt. But a few minutes' effort told me that the lock was another masterpiece of ironmongery, which could by no means be picked. My reason instructed me, as might a stern-visaged master of a school, that the ring, though large for my ankle, was yet too small to pass my foot; yet in sober truth no other hope remained.

I tugged at it until the pain became unbearable. When one side of the ring dug into my anklebone, still the other side would not go over my heel. Examining my unshod heel, I found it most certainly bone, not meat I could whittle off with my penknife, and anyway such surgery would cause heavy blood flow I could not hide. What recourse did I have but prayer?

Before prayer is any good, it must be backed by faith; almost no sermon I had ever heard failed to remark on this fact. But no small deal of faith, only its utter passion, would avail to bring about a miracle, which was my need.

I searched myself to find such faith. It was often given to ordinary men, worse men than I, whereby they performed such wonders that later they had become saints; but I kept remembering the hardness of bone and the adamantness of iron. I was able to hope powerfully for a miracle, but not quite credit it would be worked in my behalf. Perhaps I was a foul-weather Christian—akin to a fair-weather friend—undutiful in prayers when the sky was blue.

Then, as I leaned by the window in despair, I saw something that suggested a supernatural visitation. Some stormy petrels, of a small species,

had been flying about the ship, searching, I supposed, for slop. Now a sedate row of them had perched on the rail opposite my window, tired out, I thought, from flying through great gales. Now this alone was a strange sight. On our long days at sea in our voyage westward, not one out of the great flocks we had seen had set foot on our ship. But the true marvel was, that in the row of sooty-black birds with white marks at the base of their tails, one was snow white.

Well I remembered the white dove that my shipmates had seen, or seemed to see, aperch our mast in that darkest hour of our journey. How dared I half-believe it was a contagious hallucination, merely because to me, a man of little faith, it had remained invisible? The pilot had followed in the direction of its flight, whereby we had found land, whereby we had lived instead of died. God moved on the sea as well as on the land. Santa Maria had often moved Him to pity and to mercy on sailors gale-driven or becalmed, or on disabled vessels, or about to die of thirst or starvation. There were many well-known instances of Divine intervention since Colon's discovery, proving beyond question that Heaven blessed the settling of the West, the enhancement of the realm of the Catholic Queen and now the Catholic King, and the bringing of the True Faith to heathen Indians. Indeed, no ships dared sail without prayers to Our Lady of the Passage. I had not always been a faithful servant, yet truly I was taking part in a great crusade, and now I had been given a Sign, indicative of the forgiveness of my sins, whereby I was to be delivered from captivity and given another chance.

A snow-white stormy petrel! I had never heard of its like, but since a white pigeon was the symbol of the Holy Ghost on land, what could be a more fitting symbol of the same Spirit on the sea? P'rall had once told me of a white raven which he had seen circling with his black brethren over our fields parched with drought, and soon after a copious rain had fallen, saving the crop.

In this dungeon cell there was a cubby for bread and water, when derelict sailors were under severe sentence. It was not far from the window and had a level cover. There I laid the medallion that I wore on a cord about my neck, on one side the arms of Leon and Castile, and on the other a Maltese cross, this having been given to me by my dam, one of whose ancestors had been a Knight of Malta. Beside the medallion, I put one of the raw sardines which happily I had not seasoned and eaten. If the white petrel would come to this rude shrine and eat the tiny fish, I could no longer doubt that the strange bird had been sent to me as the sign of a coming miracle.

Carrying the ball and chain in my right hand so it would not rattle and bump, in my left hand I took other fishes to the open window and tossed one of them on the deck about three feet from the rail. About half the petrels, including the visitor from afar, saw its glimmer in the air, and immediately hopped down from their perches to seize the morsel. The little fowls scrabbled, scolding, on the deck, and a black petrel won the prize.

Meanwhile, I had tossed a second sardine close to the white petrel, although again her black fellow wrenched it away. Then I waited until she was at the outer edge of the avid flock, and this time she snatched it up and swallowed it, her throat visibly working in her haste.

The flock waited expectantly, eying the window. It seemed that the snow-white bird knew the offering was being made to her, or perhaps some instinct caused her to move awkwardly a good two feet apart from the others. My throw was so true that she caught the morsel before it struck the deck. At my fourth toss she was again successful, at which most of her companions resumed their perch on the rail, and only two remained, watching her with jealous intentness. The fifth little fish I dangled in my fingers, and her beady eyes fixed on it. Instead of tossing it down, I laid it on a kind of sill under the window opening. She leaped up and my heart leaped with her, seized the morsel in her bill, swallowed it greedily safe from spoilage by the others, and again lighted on the deck.

I repeated the procedure with even greater success. She remained perched on the sill, and her two disconsolate companions rejoined their fellows on the rail. Now, with my spine tingling fiercely, and my neck prickling, I stood back from the window, showed her the offering, and then laid it on the seat of a small, roughly made chair which some merciful priest or nun or kind-hearted sailor had put in this bleak prison for a prisoner's comfort. It stood about three feet from the windowsill. I stood further away, against the sea-side wall. She paid no attention to me but eyed the lure, turning her head this way and that. At last she sprang lightly with a swift, brief wing beat, lighted on the chair seat, and began to devour the fish that by my careful choosing was somewhat larger than the rest.

Meanwhile, I stepped lightly forward and all but closed the wooden shutter of the window, provided against rough weather and high seas, but did not latch it shut, and instead left it about three inches ajar, to admit light.

And it came to pass that the low sun shone straight into this opening, and its light fell softly and beautifully on top of the cubby, causing the silver medallion to gleam and the humble offering of the little fish to glisten.

The petrel had showed no alarm at the sudden lessening of the light in the room, perhaps because of her preoccupation with swallowing the present offering. And I was certain now that her next brief flight would be to the rough shrine, and this would be Sign from Heaven of my soon deliverance.

Instead the fowl took sudden alarm, flew toward the crack in the window shutter, and then, unable to pass through it because of her long wings, she began to fly wildly about the room. I knew that if I reopened the shutter she would dart out, the Sign I craved ungiven; and spreading out my arms I tried to direct her flight toward the cubby.

But the movement frightened her still more, and she began a dart over my head toward the bright rift. And at that instant, her frantic movement caused her to drop filth that struck me fairly in my upraised face.

What an insulting and foul response to my full-hearted search and reverent rite! In a low voice, for I dared not shout, I called her a demon from hell; and in the same flaming fury I threw open the shutter and freed her to go back to the pit where she belonged. Then, with even greater fury, I sat down on the floor and gave a mighty tug to the iron ring about my ankle affixed to the ball and chain.

The anklebone in front must have well-nigh broke from the fierce pull, and the very bone of my heel must have bent a little, as its skin and some underlying tissue were scraped off, and only by the utmost stress of will did I suppress a yell of pain; yet my foot came through the ring and was freed from its horrid toggle.

Then, as I sat panting, truth came to me that after all some manner of miracle had come to pass, arising not from my entreaty and hollow rite, but rather in proof of an ancient adage, the finding of the human race in its long struggle against disaster and defeat.

Most truly God helps those who help themselves.[16]

---

[15] *Un cabello haze sombra.*

[16] *Ayudate que dios te ayudara.*

CHAPTER 5

Toward the Spanish Main[17]

1

Well I knew that escape was yet distant and most precarious. With part of an old rag that I found in the cubby I wiped my nasty face and a conspicuous smear of blood on the floor, as well as some bloody footprints. Along with a piece of metal that I thought was once the handguard of a dirk, I rolled it up and, after careful watching, tossed it over the rail into the sea. The petrels had taken off, no doubt alarmed by the frightened flight from the window of their white companion. But no longer I cursed her in my heart. She had taught me in her rude way a priceless lesson.

With the other part of the rag I bandaged my heel. The proud flesh was devilish tender, and gave me much pain when I put on my slipper and took a few free steps about the room. Now I closed the shutter and latched it, moved the iron ball close to the foot of the dirty mattress supposed to serve me as a bed, and put the end under a piece of an old sail that was my coverlet. Then I removed my jerkin and lay down, my head on a small cloth sack of straw meant for a pillow, and my legs covered by the sailcloth.

There I lay while the sun slowly dropped behind the sea rim. In Extremadura there was deep night, my parents and Juvena and her husband long abed, the hound sprawled if he yet lived, twitching his ears sometimes, sometimes his legs thrashing as he dreamed of racing hares. But I doubted not that he had long gone to the place provided for good and faithful dogs. In the lands I meant to conquer, it was still late afternoon.

That conquest appeared to come into utmost jeopardy when someone tapped lightly on the shutter. I did not call or make any audible response; I had heard no sound or bustle of an official boat's arrival; the man outside my window might be the captain or a guard, despite the light tapping; more likely it was one of the crew. "The poor devil's asleep," he must have thought. "May Santa Maria let him sleep as long as he can, and in dreams forget what's ahead of him." So the man walked on, and I entreated that Our

Lady bless a man so humble that he did not insist on passing inclinations, and would let a brother sleep.

In the first dusk came Gonzales; I heard him talking to a guard.

"Deliver the clothes when I unbolt the door, and you can go in, and if he's waiting with a cudgel, you'll catch it and not me," spoke the guard. "But if he rushes the door, I'll give him a musket ball in his belly for his supper."

Gonzales came in, and I grinned and winked in the heavy gloom, sign enough that he was to keep the assignation we had previously made. At once he withdrew, the guard took a glimpse at my prone figure, the ball and part of the chain, and again slid the bolt. Very presently the sailors would begin to congregate around a fire bucket on the deck, over which they toasted mackerels, mullets, and sausages, or one of them told a joke not gone stale on their last voyage, and held quiet concourse. With my penknife I hacked off the main of my beard, putting the hairs under my mattress, and there also I put the clothes I had worn and now took off. Then I donned those Gonzales had brought me, a dock-worker's jerkin, cheap breeches, old hose, and a close-fitting low-brimmed cap. I dirtied my slippers—I could scrape up plenty of dust from the floor with my hands—and dabbed some on my face. My papers, such as my pass and warrant of office, I fastened inside my belt.

With a tug of my will I waited another hour. No one was in sight as I squeezed through the window and sauntered up the deck toward the blazing bucket of tar, around which had gathered about a dozen men, squatting on their heels or sitting on their hams. The picture was somber, except when crackling flames glistened on strong peasant features, now in complete repose, of one of the assembly.

I joined the group, because it was the safest place for me until I could perceive what boats were overside or stowed. The longboat was neither aboard nor alongside, not to my surprise, because I thought I had heard it being launched, no doubt to take some officers and men in to shore for a little revelry at resorts to their liking in the town. In fact, only two boats were moored to the gunnels, one of them the ship's dinghy and the other a shore boat that had brought visitors.

None of the men gave me a second glance as I, too, squatted down. My small beard told them I was of their own class in society; my clothes indicated I was a dock worker. I did not speak; it was safer to remain silent, and in about half an hour I strolled away, affixed my oilskin packet under my cap, and in the darkness let myself down from the low deck into the dark

water, making no more splash than a big bucketful of slop thrown overboard. I swam toward the larger boat with my penknife open in my pocket, and it was no trick to cut its mooring line for its blade was razor sharp. At once the craft drifted off with the tide.

Quietly I boarded the dinghy, thanking Heaven that its two pairs of oars were in their locks, for I had failed to think what in the devil I would do if they were absent. Its rope, too, I cut, and made off toward the only other ship in hailing distance. Its longboat was alongside, and the heavier line took a longer time to sever, but it, too, drifted ghostily away. I thought I saw the dinghy on the poop, but it could bear to shore only four men at most. Yet I did not for a moment believe or hardly hope I could delay long the raising of an alarm. Someone would find the empty cage or the longboat would return with its raucously singing crew. I had longed and struggled to be an important man, and in my modest gains I had somehow become a controversial figure on the island, an exciting quarry in the ancient urchin's game of "Run, Sheep, Run."

Not even the shore was gained yet and it proved harder to gain than I had dared believe. I rowed but slowly against the tide and the slowly sweeping river and soon could not gain an oar's length without hard work. So I stripped naked except for my loincloth and my cap and went overside. I had no fear of drowning, for I was a powerful swimmer with good wind; but sharks were often seen in the harbor, huge brutes and savage; and in the last month a drunken sailor who had fallen overboard had been attacked, his leg excised as neatly as by a surgeon's scalpel, whereof he died.

Santa Maria, let me be spared such a death, my goal ungained, all but naked, and alone!

I gained the little cape where Gonzales waited. Nothing less than the confinement of iron bars would prevent him keeping our appointment. Better yet, he had shrewdly calculated that I would have to swim to our meeting place and he had brought me his best jerkin, breeches, hose, and shoes, of better quality than one might guess, because I had paid him a more generous wage than Velazquez paid his valet. He appeared not greatly astonished to find me at his side, untrammeled and unhurt; this much he had expected, yet in the pallid moonlight I saw his face fall somewhat, as he gazed into my face.

"Señor, was it necessary to cut short your magnificent beard?"

"As Heaven is my judge, it truly was!" And I did not speak lightly.

"Well, you will grow another," he informed me as I was putting on the clothes that he had brought. "Perhaps it will be even bigger and finer after one cutting, or so I have heard. And you will soon again have garments worthy of your dignity."

The faithful fellow had explored this part of the shore, and had found a little path, made by hogs, running in the direction I wished to go. And where I wished to go was the last place on the island that my pursuers would guess. Truly it was a desperate gamble; but a few minutes hard thinking had persuaded it was my best if not only chance.

The distance was about a league. Before we had gone halfway, we heard the heavy, reverberating boom of the signal gun, indubitably from the ship I had just fled. Within twenty minutes we saw the distant flare of torches, proof that Velazquez had sounded a general alarm; and at least twenty men, and perhaps more, were searching the coastal strip where we would most likely land. I had a mental picture of Velazquez gesticulating, shouting orders and profanities, sweating heavily and out of breath, for he ate not like a bird at table.

We came boldly to the house of Juan Xuarez, brother of Catalina.

We rapped at the door; a sleepy Indian serving wench came with a candle.

"Tell your master that Hernan Cortez would wait on him."

"Señor Cortez! Aye, you are he! I would not have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes. Oh, our Blessed Lady!"

She darted away and I heard her knocking on a door; then muffled talk and a wrathful exclamation. Dark in the face was her master when he burst into the hall where I waited, a gown thrown over his nightshirt, his feet bare, and a bared blade in his hand.

"What in the devil do you mean by coming here—?"

"Señor Xuarez, I have had time to repent my waywardness, and in the shadow of death the Blessed Virgin has opened my eyes to truth hidden from me until of late, and I wish to make amends for all the wrongs that I have done you and your most honorable and worthy sister, Señorita Catalina."

The moment, or rather the next few seconds, were critical. If he responded as I hoped and believed, I would escape rearrest and deportment to Santo Domingo. I looked as contrite and crestfallen as possible.

"Sir, you are—have been—a rascal. But if you are truly repentant—well, I will hear what you have to say. Follow me to my little parlor. Your servant may wait here."

Although I had already recited the brief of my case, Xuarez wished to hear it in plain words, with no loopholes left for me to wriggle out of any agreement to which we might come. Yet I could no longer doubt that my bold stroke had told. Xuarez must show reluctance and conceal from me his eagerness to see Catalina safely married to an eligible gentleman, the stars having foretold she would become a great lady causing her to want attire and entourage her brother could ill afford. Also there was the matter of her honor, and hence his own, to be looked to.

"This means, to speak plainly, that you seek the hand of my sister Catalina in Holy Marriage?" he asked after decent delay.

"Yes, señor, I do."

"How soon?"

"As soon as she will, and yourself, and my lord Velazquez gives consent."

"Yes, Velazquez must be appeased. He is hot against you now, and who can blame him, still—he is not unamenable to persuasion, and you know his magnanimous nature. As for Catalina—you know, too, the forgiving heart of woman if a wrongdoer is truly penitent. His Excellency leaves in a few days on an expedition against rebellious Indians. What will you do in the meantime, while I employ my best offices to bring peace between you? I assure you, señor, it will not be easy."

"Do you know a place of seclusion?"

"Yes, I do. You will remember the little Church of St. Mary Magdalene, not half a league from here, abandoned because of rotting timbers. You can secret yourself there. My servants will provide food and water. If the governor will make peace with you, on these conditions, I will lend you enough pesos to restore your wardrobe—so you can make decent appearance in Holy Church for the sacred ceremony. But perhaps the clothes in your closets at home have not been seized, or you can retrieve those in which you were taken into custody."

"Of that we will speak later, by your leave. Now I wish to go at once to the long-deserted church. Velazquez keeps many dogs—they are hunting now—we have seen their torches—and I do not wish them to follow my scent."

"Aye, you must go at once. I will do what I can, and I feel that the Blessed Saints will lend me Their sweet support, for the end sought is to Their liking, being within the law, and righteous."

In a few seconds, Gonzales and I were on our way, guided by a little path faintly revealed by the wan moon. The night was warm and hushed; we feared not poisonous serpents because none had been found on the island, perhaps because of some saintly visitation as had occurred in Ireland; however, a very large constrictor, known as boa, was found in heavy woods. An owl hooted mournfully; a rabbit scuttled from our path. We gained the church building, secluded in a grove of royal palms, caught what sleep we could on the rotting floor, and did not venture out except to gather a few wild plantains in the gray of dawn. An Indian woman attired as a cocoa gatherer brought us hearty food in midmorning.

The negotiations between Velazquez and Xuarez proceeded against many obstacles, but on the whole as well as I had expected and perhaps better. The governor was losing face every day I was at large; and the settlers could scarcely conceal their jubilation. When Xuarez came to report to me on the third day after my flight he brought no promise of my chief's forgiveness; much would depend on how I approached him. I had given thought to that.

"Has he left on the expedition against the Indians?"

"This morning, and tonight he will be encamped on St. Thomas River, hard by the plantation of Antonio Jovellar."

"He has no taste for hard marches and a soldier's diet. At nine he will have dined well and be warmed by wine. Can you find me a military doublet, spare boots, a spear, and bow with arrows, and furnish your own? We will also need to borrow Indians and a big canoe from my friend, Jovellar."

"All those can be provided; but I must warn you, Hernan, that the situation is most delicate, and too great boldness can easily lead to ruin."

It could also lead to victory, if hand in hand with forethought and careful choice of the right moment to employ it. Indeed, I knew of no other answer in a difficult and dangerous pass. The great Alexander had cut the Gordian knot.

A little after nine, Xuarez and I reached the outskirts of Velazquez' camp. No watch had been posted, most of his men were asleep or loafing by supper fires; the governor himself, true to his nature, had made his quarters

in the house of the foreman of Jovellar's plantation. Scouting carefully, we saw him through an open window reading a book by lamplight, an easy target for a rebellious Indian's arrow. I would never wage even a little war in this fashion, so I vowed.

Xuarez and I walked boldly to the window.

"Who is there?" the governor called, not in the least alarmed.

"Here is Cortez, with his friend and soon his brother Xuarez, who greets his brave captain."

Velazquez could not conceal his look of satisfaction.

---

[17] The term does not refer to the ocean or to any sea, but to the Spanish mainland in the New World.

2

The long and short of it was, that Velazquez and I made peace, mainly because it was less burden on his mind than would be conflict. Well I knew that only by the utmost caution and care could that peace be maintained, as it must be as long as he was the favorite of Bishop Fonseca and held a place of power. His suspicions of me would lie dormant while I remained compliant or he was not prodded by his master. Then they would flare into extreme antagonism.

So I wedded Catalina, as I had firmly promised, and had been told. I could blame no one but myself for giving way to overweening lust. The marriage itself, for a man of limited ambition, was not bad. But it was a far cry from an arranged marriage with the daughter of a noble house whose members would further my career. Catalina's father was a hidalgo as poor as my own; while she had no open faults except a tendency toward extravagance, she had no outstanding gifts. She was good to look upon, of calm disposition, jealous of her sister who had charmed Velazquez; and in one true sense she had got the worst of the bargain, for while I was fond of her, she was at the moment in love with me, or at least infatuated because of my late notoriety, far different from fame. The main reason she had married me was simply that I was the only eligible man available.

She was not now with child and I intended for her not to become so, by taking a page from Marie de Estrada's book. I grinned a wry grin that hurt my face, when I remembered my dream of having a son and heir by a noble

lady, whereby he would be born a grandee, by right of ancient lineage on her side, and of great deeds for Church and King on my side. Perhaps it would yet come true. And in the meantime a daughter of a Cuban chief was with my child, its deliverance not far off. She had been baptized before I lay with her, as was the law, and I had given her the Christian name Doña Hulano Pocarro, in honor of my maternal ancestors.

Hulano was a beautiful girl in her dusky way and I kept her in my establishment. When the babe arrived safely to life on this earth, no less than Velazquez stood godfather to her. In all truth, I was vastly taken with the infant, pale skinned with pale-colored bright eyes; and as she began to develop, I took it she had a bright mind. Catalina was not so mean as to develop an aversion to the baby, and once I found it cuddled against her stepmother's breast, listening to the low singing of an old Spanish lullaby.

In due course the little girl could receive absolution from a deputy of the Pope.

I continued to gain in favor with Velazquez, partly because he appreciated my honest service in office, the care with which I performed my duties, saving trouble for his own lazy self, and partly because he relished my company, with its assiduous attentions and the lively play of my mind.

I did not wait long for promotion. He appointed me alcalde of the town of Baracoa, in an area pre-eminently fit for stock growing. As such, I ruled the town under the governor, and my power, and I think my popularity, was enhanced. My purse heavied also, for I was given a large farm and many Indians. I was the first to breed cattle in our island now called Cuba, importing a good bull and some heifers from Hispaniola; also I bred Merino sheep and horses. Some of my Indians were set to mining gold, taking from the stubborn rock the worth of nigh three thousand pesos. These were at least thrice the total value, reckoned in ducats, of my sire's holdings in Spain.

Some of my Indians died from dust setting up inflammation of the lungs. The most remained in good health, they had good rations, and I treated them with more consideration than was the lot of most slaves. I could not question that this bread on the waters was well given, and observed in Heaven, for on a day that I had visited the mines and, returning by canoe, was caught in a sudden gale and could not reach land, the craft capsized whereby I must cling to its bow meanwhile being blown to sea. But while I contemplated death and the riddance of my soul of sin, Indian shepherds put forth in their

stout craft, their great aquatic skill served my bitter need, and I was soon safe on land.

The colony of Cuba increased apace. It was a wondrously fertile island, with many rich savannas where there was not impenetrable forest; and Velazquez began to consider himself its viceroy, barely second to the overlord of all Spanish India. He established what amounted to a court, permitting not even hidalgos to sit in his presence. Narvaez, rising higher in his esteem than I, became his captain-general and a droll fellow was his court jester, with motley and cockscomb, his jokes as outrageously bold as those of the famous Triboulet, court fool to Louis XII.

Well I knew that the day would come that I must reckon with Velazquez to the extreme. Already he was circumventing Diego Colon in his dealings with Seville, forgetting who had obtained him his appointment. Still, I could not condemn such maneuvers too severely, since I had once shown the same ingratitude to Velazquez in a like maneuver. He obtained a direct appointment of governor, no doubt through the influence of Bishop Fonseca, and Colon could not now discharge him if he dared to try. Truly the fire irons should not call the chimney black.

The Year of Grace was now 1514, and I was only a day's sail westward from the western capes of Hispaniola, the island that was my first landing in what I brazenly called the New World. I had not tried to join the Hojeka and Nicuesa expeditions, for then my position was too low for me to leap to the top, and I had had no great confidence in either leader. Now another expedition to the mainland was being organized in Cuba, its captain a man of riches and renown, by name Hernandez de Cordoba. And its first sounding in my ear summoned up a ghost. It was that of the Duke de Cordoba, whose nephew and captain of his guard was Hernan Cortez—on a lying page of parchment. I smelled the dampness of the rain on the day of discovery; I could not feel its sting for the sensation of pain cannot be realized in the imagination; one can only remember its endurance.

Designing with him was a plain-looking, straight-talking man in his middle twenties, who called himself Bernal Diaz. If I were in command of an expedition, I wanted men like Bernal—I would want Bernal himself if I could get hold of him when the time came, as the time would come if I lived on. But I did not join Cordoba's expedition, although I could have obtained an influential office under him. In the first place the goal was not the mainland but the so-called Gianaxes Islands between Cuba and Honduras, and in the second place I had no real confidence in Cordoba.

In the Year of Our Lord 1512, Florida was discovered and named. I cannot explain the lesion in the Spanish mind, whereby it doubted the magnitude of the discovery, a peninsula about three hundred miles long by fifty wide, and doubted too that it was a projection of the mainland, not an island; and at the same time swallowing with catfish avidity the fairy story that it contained a Fountain of Youth, wherein tremulous grandsires and pot-bellied burghers of sixty could regain their youthful appearance, health, and virility. No less than Ponce de Leon, reckoned a sound navigator and explorer, set forth to find the fountain. He searched in vain a string of small islands, and suffered extreme hardship without finding what was even equal to a mess of oysters in restoring vigor.

Velazquez had commanded Cordoba to bring back a cargo of slaves, as rent for the use of one vessel. This command Cordoba, backed by the stout fellow Bernal Diaz, was man enough to disobey replying it was not so ordered by God or King. With his usual capacity to yield when common sense dictated, Velazquez withdrew the order, and officially supported the expedition.

It was momentous without being truly successful; and in losses, it was disastrous. Without doubt it gained the mainland, southwest by west of the capes of Cuba, and an Indian city was named Great Cairo. Why should it be called after a city in Egypt? It was a matter of association: Cairo was a city of the infidel, the natives too were nonbelievers: only the learned perceived that the slaves, crammed into Spanish holds, were not Moors of somewhat lighter shade. At the same time they were deemed a sort of poor, barbarous subjects of the rajas of India.

The land they touched was called Yucatan. Its manhood was in no wise like that of Hispaniola, docile and submissive. Cordoba received ten wounds, Bernal Diaz did not bother to count his own; fifty Spaniards were killed, and two made captive for sacrifice to the heathen gods. They brought back several horrid-looking idols and a little gold. After landing in Puerto de Carenas,[18] Cordoba was shriven and met death in *Sancti Spiritus*. Again my instincts, for truly I had not deserved an inkling from On High, had advised me well.

Perhaps the greatest treasure obtained on the expedition were two Indian captives from Yucatan, both of them cross-eyed oddly enough, and christened Julian and Melchior. Because of the impairment of their vision, both had quick ears, whereby they quickly learned the Spanish language. Soon they were not only able to tell much of Indian ways, weapons, and wonts, but to relate what they had heard or knew of a city called Cholula,

hidden behind high mountains, with massive teocallis, a word meaning temples, and much gold.

When Velazquez planned still another voyage of exploration and discovery without my seeking a place, it would appear that I was satisfied for life with my lucrative office as alcalde of what was now Santiago de Cuba, capital of the great island Velazquez governed. Also I had my fertile farm, its herds of livestock, a house ever being enlarged and beautified, my good wife Catalina, an Indian princess whom Biblical patriarchs might have dubbed either concubine or handmaiden by name Hulana Picarro, and her winsome, bright-skinned daughter. It was true Hulana had a little house of her own. A grove of beautiful royal palms cut off plain view of the big house. Catalina never walked the path between the two edifices but my bewitching bastard did so often, to be received by the mistress with cordiality and pleasure. My keeping of only one woman in concubinage indicated moderation, a compromise on the right side with custom, because despite the scolding of Frey Las Casas most men of wealth in Cuba kept what could be called small harems. Perhaps such is almost always true in lately settled barbaric lands, where there was a superfluity of pretty native girls.

It could be argued that these had something to do with the rapid settlement of our island, because the idea appealed to many young blades in Spain. Moreover, these girls were always baptized as a preliminary propriety. And although no doubt Heaven rejoiced at these souls saved from heathendom, a blessing more than atoning for the sin, the argument in my regard was somewhat cynical if not irreverent.

---

[18] Havana.

3

This new-planned expedition would be an ambitious one. Its captain-general would be Juan de Grijalva, Velazquez' cousin; the captains of three other ships of the flotilla of four were Alvarado, Davila, and Montejo, all three of name and prominence on the island. Velazquez gave two sets of instructions, one set of noble sound, when he had marched his fat self down to the wharf, and which was made to the entire company. Its theme was the glorification of God and the young Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, for whom every man must do his duty with no thought of self. The other set was spoken

privately to the leader, which was to seize as much gold and silver as possible, and to make settlements only if practical to do so.

For the trading with the Indians, Cordoba had brought silly beads, bells, and suchlike trinkets. Not so, Grijalva. He laded a great store of wine of Guadacanal, for which Indians would trade their dearest possessions, including wives and daughters, until they fell down.

The sails filled; the ships became dots on the sea rim, and then disappeared. The first dot to reappear was the vessel commanded by Alvarado, bringing much gold of poor quality, scant information, and a cargo of bad news. It was not yet established that Yucatan was an island or the mainland. The real name of the fabled city Cholula was Tenochtitlan,[19] the capital of the Aztec Confederacy. It was away in the mountains, but of its power and riches Alvarado held no doubt.

The coastal Indians had not accepted Charles as their lord and king, because they had their own, and did battle with white-skinned and red-bearded invaders, although not with all their might. Alvarado remarked that in a far greater degree than had Hispaniola natives at Colon's first coming, "they seemed to regard the Spanish with superstitious awe."

Before his return, Velazquez had sent a caravel in search of his kinsman and favorite, Grijalva, but he had quickly returned to Cuba with his mission unaccomplished. Since there was still no sign of the captain-general, Velazquez began to organize and finance a large expedition, not only to find Grijalva and succor him if he were in dire straits, but to claim all of Yucatan in his own name, and, if it were at all possible, to conquer Mexic. Again to steal a march on Diego Colon, Velazquez sent his chaplain, a clever man named Martin, to the Emperor Charles' Court; and more by a show of bejeweled gold that Alvarado had seized in Yucatan than by his entreaties, Velazquez was indeed made Adelantado of "Rich Island" and Martin himself its abbot.

Suddenly all of the settlements in Spanish India kindled with excitement. Garay, Governor of Jamaica, also outfitted an expedition ostensibly to search for the still-lost Grijalva, really to further his power and to garner gold. He, too, sent an envoy to Charles; and the youthful Emperor, busy with granting great cities and titles to his favorites, made him also Adelantado of Yucatan. This was Charles' third giving-away of "Rich Island". The first had been a casual gift, along with the great see of Toledo, to the young nephew of the Chancellor of Flanders.

Very plainly, the captain-general of Velazquez' expedition must be a strong man. Christobal Olid, whom my chief had appointed for the post, was high spirited, amiable, and brave, fit to be a good captain but not a great leader.

I knew that a great hour had struck, and began to tie loose ends together to make a strong cord, to conspire, to maneuver with great caution but with bold intent, and to play a greater game than chess.

My two mainstays were powerful men in Velazquez' chancellery, the secretary a quiet wise man, and the accountant a self-made diplomat of exceeding cunning. My helm, or rather the chart by which I bore it port or starboard, easing it when the seas were rough, putting hard over when there was need, was the governor's propensity to change his mind. Olid was readily dropped overside. Highborn Pocalla was the next choice, but Velazquez was easily persuaded that such a bold and ambitious admiral would take over the fleet for his own gain, and revolt.

Who was left, steadily pressing, quiet but with the name of capable, but Hernan Cortez?

Velazquez had virtually promised me the post when Grijalva sailed into port. God knew it posed a crisis, threatening the sorry collapse of my building these many years. Its worst aspect was the rumor that the lost explorer had brought back many heavy chests of gold, in the shape of hatchets with golden hafts. Fortune, if not evil-faced, frequently gives a sinister if not enigmatic smile, and sometimes she laughs aloud. In this case her belly shook with laughter.

Gentlemen, loafing sailors, and dock workers laughed with her, when they were not mouthing the ancient adage that all is not gold that glitters.[20] The hatchets brought forth from the chests looked spotty from verdigris; their hafts proved to be brass!

I was given papers bearing Velazquez' signature and seal. My instructions were to find six Spaniards, captured from Nicuesa, and said to be "somewhere in 'Rich Island' or near by." I was to inquire with diligence and pertinacity into the religions of all the Indian tribes met with, with the view of converting them to the True Faith. There was no definite order to establish settlements, only to learn all that was possible of the customs of the people, the geography of the territories, their flora and fauna, and particularly their mineral wealth and its availability. I must find out if there were indeed dog-faced Indians and others with gigantic ears, as rumor told.

In solemn ceremony, before witnesses and a notary, I must take possession of the lands in the Emperor's name. Always I was to act with caution, making no landings of great danger, and I and my men must behave with circumspection, permit no open sin or concubinage, and, of course, no carnal communion with women outside the Faith. At this I grinned inside my mouth, for Velazquez knew my derelictions, and I knew his.

My most welcome instruction was to use my best judgment, after conference with the priest and captains, in instituting action in the best service of God and the Emperor.

But I was not yet at sea. There were abundant volunteers to man the ships, because in drafting my instructions, short, unimpressive-looking, but vastly cunning Duero had given me the right of conquest, and hence of taking loot; nor was there any injunction against barter. But he who rises to high place becomes a target for his enemies, who then combine to try to haul him down. My instinct told me to emphasize, not minimize, the high place I had gained by rich attire and by giving bold commands, for thus my enemies' acts of spite would be tempered by caution. I wore richer dress, a golden chain, velvet hat, and a velvet coat covered with golden knots. I devised two banners, in gold embroidery with the Cross and the Royal Arms, and the elegant and devout motto, that by following the Sign of the Cross, victory would be ours.

It was obvious that Velazquez became somewhat uneasy over my free spending of my own fortune for barter goods and supplies, the joining of my company by prominent and powerful men, and especially by my tireless accumulation of weapons and horses. A thorn in my side was a so-called astrologer, named Millan, who prophesied dire failure of the expedition. Even Velazquez' fool did me harm with a pointed jest, to make which he doubtless had been bribed. When Velazquez with his train were watching with me at the shipyards, he remarked that his master was like the willing cuckold, politely leaving by the front door when Cortez came in the back.

Hence, along with all the other tasks I must perform, I must keep Velazquez reassured, by punctilious attendance, flattery, and large promises of countless gold. Still he remembered my once revolt and my near hanging, and the moment came when I must act with boldness unwonted even in me.

First, I bribed with my gold chain the man in charge of the meat depot of the city to sell me his whole supply. This news would soon leak, and that night I ordered my company to board the ships. At dawn Velazquez rushed to the quay, flushed and out of breath. In the longboat of my flagship, with

trusted men aboard, armed with bows and muskets, I rowed forth to speak to him.

He addressed me as "Cofather," in reference to his godfathership of my bastard daughter. And then speaking in courtly phrase, but in a voice atremble with anger, "Is this your manner of departure, without bidding me farewell?"

I made him honest answer.

"My lord, forgive me, but these things must be done, not merely thought upon."

I had not spoken in soft tones; my voice rang over the water. I sensed a great stillness on the ships. I was watching Velazquez' face, and it was eloquent of indecision. Finally he said:

"Remember my instructions, and win glory for God and King."

Anchors were weighed. Again sails filled, and the ships began moving with a kind of start, echoed in my heart. And at this sailing these were under my command.

The time was sunrise, November eighteenth of the year 1518.

---

[19] This capital is today Mexico City. Some of the early Spanish settlers spoke of the Aztec lands as Mexica. For the convenience of readers I have hereafter referred to Tenochtitlan as Mexic, and the whole confederacy as Mexico. The taking of this liberty seems justified because of numerous other difficult Indian names in the text.

[20] *Nor es odo lo que reluce.*

CHAPTER 6

Victory and Mystery

1

Looking not for signs in the sky, but in the pantries, cubbies, arsenals, and cabins, I perceived we were shorter than I had feared in provision, spare gear, weapons, and manpower, if I were to essay the great expedition of my aspiration. Our hasty departure—sailing at once or not at all—had caught me unready. So we made for Trinidad, not the large island near Venezuela but a town on a promontory of Cuba's southern coast, the home of Grijalva. There I raised my banners, and my criers sought new recruits, the bait being gold and fame.

For me it was a most fortunate port of call. Not only the Brothers Alvarado—four of them, brave and stalwart, and fit for captaincy—joined our company, but the *voyageur*, Olid, and an impoverished nobleman, Puertocarrero. For the latter I bought a mare out of my pocket. From Juan Sedono I purchased his whole cargo of food intended for the gold mines, and in love of high adventure and esteem of me he sold me the ship herself on credit and himself enlisted under my command.

Verdugo, the Alcalde of Trinidad, was Velazquez' brother-in-law. Soon a pinnace put into port from San Diego, and I did not doubt she carried orders for my recall. It so proved that Verdugo had been ordered to put me under arrest and send me home in irons. But in trying to make sureness doubly sure, Velazquez had overreached himself, writing to his own spy, Ordas, to lend help as needed to Verdugo. The outcome was, that Ordas became my advocate; Verdugo made no move to detain me, and to add insult to injury to the haughty steeple cock, Velazquez, one of the letter bearers joined my expedition, and the other returned to his master with my cordial letter, which remarked on my surprise at my chief's orders, and assuring him of my dutiful service to God and Emperor Charles.

After a busy ten days' stay, we sailed for Habana, and on that journey a severe squall caused my flagship to be stranded on a sand-spit, out of sight

of the other ships. Thus the fleet was without command for a matter of five days, and my sudden reappearance caused joy—this I could truly believe—in the hearts of most of my men, but disappointment in some. Thinking me dead, several captains had aspired to my flag, and the most ambitious was Ordas, on whom I had better keep a wary eye. As a gentle reminder of who was the admiral and intended to remain so, I sent Ordas on a pig- and cassava-bread-buying jaunt to Guanguanico, a mission somewhat beneath his dignity.

In Habana I was able to buy a few more horses, sixteen in all, redistributing them and my guns among the most suitable ships. Here, to, I assumed the regalia due an admiral of no small fleet, and discovered that Bernal Diaz, among his many gifts, was an expert judge of horseflesh. In fact, I was ever amazed by his store of useful knowledge and delighted by his forthright, down-to-earth approach to all problems.

There, report reached us that Velazquez was lava hot with fury at the outcome of his attempt to recall me, and especially at my letter. Also, the Friar Olmedo, in our fleet, soon heard and confided to me that my late master had written still further letters, a long night's work, to his kinsman Leon and various friends, and his own deputy in Habana, Pedro Barba. These, too, were of no avail, and Barba excused himself from arresting me on the ground that I had too many loyal soldiers. I, too, wrote my old chief, that I remained his servant and would sail for the unknown the following day.

I had scored on him no doubt, but now he was a bitter and relentless enemy, regretting that he had not hanged me when he had had the chance. Also I knew that under his fat he was a dangerous and able man, and I had best take utmost care that he did not score on me.

My forces were as strong, and my ships as well victualed and armed as Providence would now permit. In manpower I had five hundred and eight soldiers, including the captains and a hundred mariners of all grades. My armory included ten very strong bronze guns, four falconets, and thirteen light guns firing shot rather than balls.

Did I look the part of an admiral? My beard had grown out darker since its cutting and never again reached the same size and luxury. I had cultivated a grave glance rather than a merry one. Tall, despite a tendency to bowlegs, and muscular, I wore my rich but plain clothes well enough, and had acquired the aspect and the mien of a nobleman, partly a matter of unconscious imitation and partly because of a growing self-confidence and

sense of power. Except for one diamond of splendid fire worn in a ring, which I had bought in San Diego from a private trader whose cargo of hams had spoiled, and a blessed medal on a chain and another in my cap when not attired in my plumed hat, I boasted no jewelry, for the little golden ship I had got in a transaction in Seville fifteen years before I kept in my pouch.

The captains of two of my eleven ships, Pedro de Alvarado and Ordas, were ordered to proceed westward along the north coast of Cuba, and to meet with the rest of my fleet at San Anton, its westernmost cape. Then we were to proceed in full fleet to Cozumel, an island offshore of "Rich Island," as it was called, although its Indian name was Yucatan, and it was no more an island than is Florida thrusting southward a hundred leagues into the Ocean Sea. In truth Yucatan was also a peninsula, thrusting northward a hundred leagues. Nicuesa, half-believing it an island, had thought it was as large as Florida and perhaps larger.

At Cape Anton I met with an act of disobedience with which I must deal firmly. Ordas kept the rendezvous, but Alvarado did not so, and instead had sailed to Cozumel. Truly, I had cause to think of Captain Quinterro on my first crossing, who had deserted the fleet for private gain. When we arrived at Cozumel, I found that the main treachery was committed by Camancho, the pilot, who pretended to have missed his landfall at Anton, and thus had hastened ahead lest he arrive too late at our mustering place, Cozumel.

Alvarado had "trusted" his pilot, so he said, and I pretended to believe him, for to punish one of my best captains would have lowered the high morale of my whole force. I did not doubt that he had been as easily persuaded as an itching peasant girl encountering a lusty swain near a handy haystack. Alvarado's itch was for action. His weakness was excess impetuosity.

At his arrival, the island Indians had fled from the great ship with her tall sail, deserting their town. Thus he was unable to restrain himself, had pillaged, and captured three Indians, one of them a woman. His booty was ornaments from an altar in the *cu*, golden pennants, and fifty hens. This last seizure by a force of a great expedition made the men whoop with laughter.

It was no laughing matter to me. I summoned Alvarado, gave him a severe reprimand, and warned him at his next disobedience he would be relieved of his command, if not receive punishment more severe. Camancho was straightway ironed.

This was not even dealing. My only excuse was, if there had been a mistake, the pilot had made it from carelessness, and it was the law of the

sea that a captain must believe his pilot; but this did not ease my conscience. To still its complaints, and as good policy, I sent for the three Indian captives and had our interpreter, Melchior, tell them to go free, find their frightened fellows, and bid them return on my promise of kind treatment and restitution. The next day this promise was carried out, except in the matter of hens, which had been eaten. In their stead, I gave green beads.

On our third day at Cozumel I ordered a review, and although I did not express my satisfaction, I felt it keenly. No one had fallen sick or suffered injury. Of our thirty-two crossbowmen, two were experts in their making and repair, and these I ordered to provide extra cords, forecords, and nuts, and all to have target practice, for the crossbow was indeed a formidable weapon, unknown to the Indians, and the little force was a strong segment of my army. The like were my thirteen musketeers, and these I bade take better care of their weapons than of their Indian maidens, at least one of which almost every man jack in my army expected soon to acquire, this being a tacit inducement to their enlistment. Friar Olmedo was not, strictly speaking, one of my force, but its spiritual guide. What he intended in regard to Indian women, I could not venture to guess, since he was a hardy fellow. Boccaccio had taught us that some friars were not as continent as their vows prescribed once they were out from under their abbot's eye. In any case, we were a far cry from Rome and fanatical Las Casas, and for any sins he committed in a yet-heathen land he would make due penance, and of a surety he would not lie with an unbaptized maiden.

I ordered the most meticulous care of our guns, brass cannon, and falconets, for I could not doubt these would be a great factor in our success. We had abundant powder and ball, and our pantries were well victualed.

Now I recalled that both Martin Romas and reliable Bernal Diaz had heard, on the Cordoba expedition, Indians cry out "*Castilan, Castilan*." I sent for both men, and through Melchior, questioned the island chiefs. These told us there were at least two red beards held as slaves by mainland chiefs two days' journey from Cape Catoche, and some Indian merchants had lately seen and spoken to them. So I sent two messengers, these being Indian merchants, to find my lost countrymen and pay their ransoms with beads. It seemed a shot in the dark, yet it hit home. One of the captives, Aguila, easily obtained freedom from his kind master, and himself journeyed fifteen miles to help deliver his fellow captive, Guerro. We were not to know the consequences of this errand until the two messengers returned to Cozumel and boarded the flagship with what seemed to be a number of shabbily dressed Indians.

"Where are the Spaniards?" I asked, my fellows looking downcast.

A messenger pointed to a wretched-looking fellow, with a brown or sunburned skin, of Indian costume and hairdress, wearing one gold sandal and another fast to his belt.

"In God's love, are you a Spaniard?" I asked in utmost wonder.

"Aye, I am."

And then he squatted down in Indian fashion.

Briefly he told his story in hesitant, half-forgotten Spanish. He was indeed Aguila, and once some sort of friar settled at Darien. Eight years before he, fifteen other men, and two women had set forth for Santo Domingo in a small ship. This stranded on a reef, and the company took to the longboat, in which they were gale blown or current driven to a nearby coast. Some had died, some had been sacrificed to the teules, meaning gods; and only he and Guerro had escaped the sacrificial knives.

"Where is Guerro?" I asked.

"In the town where he is a chief, and thus he spoke to me. 'My brother Aguila, look at my tattooed face and my pierced ears. Look at my handsome sons. In war, I am a leader—a captain. Give me some green beads, which I will say is a gift from my brothers, and here I will live and die, and forget Spain.' Then his Indian wife scolded me, called me a slave, and bade me begone."

Two men. Eight years. One had become a slave, but had never forgotten his Spanish birthright; the other became a chief, almost an Indian, and no doubt worshiped at the teocallis. Was this difference the ordering of God, or a consequence of their own propensities? I was awe-struck.

I ordered respectable clothes for Aguila and questioned him about the country.

"Great cacique, I mean great captain, what do I know about the country?" he replied. "Ask me about drawing water and hewing wood, and working in the fields from dawn to nightfall, and I can answer you well."

Aguila would soon recover his full use of Spanish and serve well as an interpreter. But I wished I could get hand on Guerro. His remembrances of Spain would make him a most dangerous enemy to my design, especially to my plans of overawing the foe by various devices, and save bloodshed.

In our stay at Cozumel, I was obliged to take disciplinary action against some sailors who had stolen hams from a soldier. It was not so much the theft that enforced my severity—the loot could have been quietly restored at my stern reprimand—rather it was the thieves committing perjury under Holy Oath. For this, every culprit was given twenty lashes—a number I well remembered because of my careful count, one night in Seville fifteen years gone. I had stolen nothing then, had committed no deadly sin, what Marie and I had done was by our joined wish, and in my innocence and hers I had exchanged a priceless black pearl now among the royal jewels for a figurine in gold, this in the way of a romantic ceremony.

At Cozumel I struck my first bold stroke in the direct service of God. With all of my captains and many followers I attended a priestly service at the teocalli. The priest wore cotton wraps with his hair long and matted with the blood of human sacrifice, horrid to see and smell. Aguila gave me a rough whispered translation of his sermon; after which I bade the Indians remove their blood-thirsty idols and replace them with an image of Virgin and Child, which I would supply. They dared not do so, they answered, out of fear of the angered teules, and in a way of speaking, threw down the gauge to us. If we ourselves disturbed the idols, we would ourselves be destroyed by the wrath of the gods of the winds and of the seas when again we set sail.

I had no choice but to accept the challenge. While the natives watched in quaking terror, we did destroy the idols, hurling them down the steps, and when we had scraped away the dried blood thick upon the walls, and covered them with whitewash, we erected the Holy Image and adorned it with flowers and greenery. And then as my hardy and intrepid soldiers filed by, kneeled and kissed the Cross, I think that the Indians' hearts were strangely moved, and their faces were most solemn, and the eyes of many were round and wonder-filled, and a very few, of deeper humanity than the most, became wet.

2

We set sail on March 4, 1519, meaning to keep in touch with one another with lantern signals. God granted us fair skies and a calm sea until nightfall, when a heavy wind arose, threatening to wreck us on shore. At midnight it died down, and all but one of our scattered ships found one another, but there was no sign of Leon's ship. We waited for her all the next day, and then, thinking of her breaking on a reef, and all her company lost, we again set sail. But this abandonment of our comrades, perhaps beached and

needful, I could not long endure, so I ordered another wait. In daylight we made renewed search and soon, to our great joy, caught sight of her anchored in a bay. Here we went ashore, the sight of us putting the people to flight, but we saw their well-tilled maize fields, and visited three *cues* and looked upon their idols in the form of tall women. The soldiers called the town Punta de las Mujures.[21]

An incident of no great import, but pleasing my followers, occurred near this place. I had sent Captain Escobar to explore the region, in view of settlement, and he returned followed by a greyhound left on shore by Grijalva. Because of more wit or loyalty, or perhaps because he did not like their smell, he had not turned into an Indian dog; and his joy, expressed in barking and dashing about the ships, stopping only to sniff at Spaniards delightful to his nose, was heart warming to watch.

On the twelfth of March, we arrived at a river Grijalva had named for himself, this and the country hereabouts called Tabasco by the Indians. It was a considerable kingdom, and before us waited the most important landing we had yet made.

It might be also one of the most dangerous we would ever make. We knew from Grijalva's experience that the ships could not enter the river, so we anchored them, and most of my men-at-arms set forth in the ship's boats and aboard one ship of shallow draft. The river mouth swarmed with canoes, laden with Indian warriors, and its banks and mangrove swamps were crowded. I could not doubt that in all they outnumbered us twenty to one. Many a Spaniard, his hand on his heart or on his crucifix, commended his soul to God.

Yet we must conquer somehow, for if we failed, the word of our defeat would fly with wings up and down the coasts, and our brave emprise would be stillborn. When our vanguard was in easy sound of our voices, and the enemy stood adamant, I bade Aguila speak to them. He told the Tabascan chiefs that we meant them no harm; we would give them presents; trade with them if they liked; and treat them as brothers of the True God. But the friendly talk seemed to make the Indians even more truculent, and I feared they would take it as a sign of our weakness.

So I summoned our notary, and in his presence I demanded in the King's name that we be permitted to land in peace, obtain water, and speak to them of the True God and the Rightful King; and if they resisted, the death and wounds we would bring to them would be their own fault. The Indians'

answer was a shower of arrows that fell short and did us no harm, and the cry that if we tried to land they would kill us all.

Nevertheless we did land, fighting our way across swampy ground to a grove of pine trees. Our bows were of longer range than theirs, and one volley from our crossbowmen carried so far and did such harm, that the Indians drew back, fiercely shouting, and facing us still. They halted at their log stockades; and we bivouacked under close guard in the palm grove. Meanwhile some of our boats returned to the ships for the remainder of my soldiers, and to prepare for the landing of guns and horses the next morning. Scouts searched for a better landing place and Bernal Diaz and some other veterans of Grijalva's expedition sought a narrow road from the thicket to the town. At high tide my ships drew as close as possible to shore, and the guns and horses were landed by boat or by deep wading at the Cape of the Palms.

We did not resume the battle the next day, for the horses were lame and dispirited, and spent the day in deploy for the morrow's certain battle. At dawn the horses capered, the men were grim and determined, and a day memorable in Spanish history began with Davila and his force of ninety infantry and ten crossbowmen taking the road from the palm grove toward the town. Meanwhile the rest of our force went by boat upriver, the plan being to attack the town from opposite sides.

The advance of the main force was met by a great fleet of enemy canoes. Some of these we sank, or their crews were killed by arrow or spears, and God suffered them to retreat, still fighting, and the swarm of warriors on the bank to draw back from our furious advance. We gained entrance, fighting all the way, the Indians' main handicap being the excess of their numbers over ours, whereby they were so crowded they could hardly wield their weapons. Davila's belated but most welcome arrival—he had been delayed by swamps and creeks—enabled our combined forces to drive the defenders from their strongholds, forcing them down the streets, and their battlecry of *Al Calacheoni* resounded with less frenzy, and soon we had possession of the town.

Aguila told me that they had cried out the name, or title, of a mighty and mysterious figure whom he believed was Montezuma, ruler of Mexic.

At a court with three teocallis, we halted, and I formally annexed the town and country to the Empire of Charles V, by the Will of God, in the presence of the notary, and the sign I made was the cutting of three gashes with my sword in the trunk of a huge ceiba tree.

Eighteen of our men had been wounded, no few in proportion to our meager numbers, and although we found eighteen dead Indians, this being a trifling loss compared to their vast numbers, the conquest of Tabasco was still in name only. The great and decisive battles were yet to be fought. I had taken a slight wound in the thigh.

My whole force slept in the temple square, patrolled by sentinels. At dawn I ordered Pedro de Alvarado to scout inland with a hundred men, but when I summoned Melchior to serve as his guide and interpreter, my messengers could not find him. Shortly they found the Spanish clothes we had provided him hung in a tree, and all doubt of his desertion was now gone. Whether it was through love or terror I did not know, for how little I knew of humankind in the last searching! Only a few men know themselves, I not among them yet, and hardly none his brother. The strange thought struck me that the souls of men are as alone and apart as the fixed stars in what Dr. Batiste had once called the infinity of space. But I did know that Melchior's knowledge of us, our cannons, our muskets, and our horses, could make more difficult the Godly task before us.

Fanatical Las Casas would not use the term Godly for the victories of conquistadors, except as far as the spread of the True Faith, which in all truth was usually a secondary matter, if not thirdly, or fourthly, or hundredthly, to the garnering of power and gold, with pretty Indian girls as a kind of bonus. He would call it devilish. But I considered that even if their own intent was mundane gain, at last it would resound to the glory of our Lord. True, I did not wholly understand such matters, so I had best say to the glory of Charles V, who was deputy of our Lord.

So as I was waiting for the troops to form their ranks, these perhaps to be cleft by great gaps with many a brave soul taking wing for Home, I must need get out the document, known as the summons, issued by the Office of Indian Affairs to all admirals seeking conquest in the West. It began with the premise, nay the revealed truth, that God made one man and one woman, of which all men and women, wherever on earth they dwelt, were the offspring; and God had appointed St. Peter as his viceroy, and one of St. Peter's successors had given this western land and sea to the Kings and Queens of Spain. Thus must the people thereof, whatever the devil's path into which they had wandered, accept the Christian religion and their subjection to the Spanish Emperor, for which he would grant them honors and privileges; but if by the devil's promptings they refused, they must suffer slavery or death.

Strangely, the noble document had angered Las Casas, who maintained that the baptism of the infidel was one thing, and the imposition of Spanish rule another, and the seizing of loot and carnal delights with Indian girls was a third and most wicked thing. And bold Oviedo had laughed, when I had proposed to have it translated and read to the warlike Tabascans.

"I misdoubt these savages will understand the premise and the ergos, and I say conquer them first, and then shut them up in jail where they will have leisure to digest the fine points of the argument," the blasphemous captain said.

As for me, I believed every word of it, and that I had been vicariously appointed, a long chain of vicariousness but yet strong and unjointed, to conquer this land, and many more, for the Glory as stated. If thereby I, Hernan Cortez, too, won riches, eminence, and power, belike a lofty title under and close to the Emperor, it would be by the Will of God.

---

[21] Cape of the Women.

3

I had taken personal command of our cavalry. To Ordas I had entrusted command of the infantry, a strange entrustment it might be thought, since he was ringleader of the Velazquez faction in our force. In all truth, it was a well-considered one for this very reason. If he lost a battle, the shadow would fall on Velazquez; and if he won, the glory would shine on me. When we conferred, I found him determined to win. With my approval, he sent a hundred soldiers, under Lugo, to scout in another direction. And soon we heard distant shouting, and an Indian runner of great swiftness sent by Lugo rushed into camp, saying his force was under dire attack by countless archers. It was retreating in good formation with some loss when the force was joined by the picked men under Alvarado, who had heard the noise of battle. The joined forces drove back the enemy before the help I had sent Lugo had arrived. Two of his men had been killed and eight wounded; of Alvarado's company three had fallen wounded. They had killed fifteen Indians and captured three, one of whom Aguila proclaimed a cacique, or chief.

Still I dared hope that this taste of defeat would give the Tabascans a sour stomach, and they would not ask for the whole dish. So I sent one of the captive Indians with a gift of beads for the chiefs, and again bade them

make peace. And on Aguila's questioning the other two captives, I learned that the Indian deserter Melchior had indeed made the mischief that I feared, informing the Indians we were few in number, not gods but men, and could easily be destroyed, or captured and sacrificed to the teules. The Indian sent with the gifts we did not see again.

Plainly hot work awaited us on the morrow. I planned our attack as well as my busy brain was capable, myself to command thirteen horsemen, Mesa our artillery, with our crossbowmen and musketeers to have places of strategic importance in the line. At dawn, after a good rest, the men made grim assembly, determined to conquer. With Mesa's artillery rolling their guns on rude wheels across the plain, or dismounting and lugging them over boggy ground, the infantry began their march. With my horsemen, I took off in another direction because I had planned a great stroke.

The horde of Indian warriors were marching toward our camp when they fell foul of our small but redoubtable army of cannoneers, musketeers, crossbowmen, and infantry. They were in full battle dress, painted and beplumed, and their drums and shell trumpets had aroused them to frenzy. Javelins launched by throwing-sticks and arrows in countless numbers sped in their deadly arch, causing a great shrill sound, and eighty of our men fell wounded in this first assault. But the rest closed their ranks, fighting with utmost fury, and their swords did deadly work. Their main superiority over the two-hand swords, edged with flint, was that these could thrust while the Indian swords could only hack.

Yet it was the great arrows of our crossbowmen and the leaden balls of the musketeers, and especially the blasts of our cannon, the balls cutting swaths in the enemy array like a reaper's scythe in a hayfield, that enabled our little army to hold its ground, and even advance a little. And despite the rows of Indian dead at the cannon mouths, the mighty roar and re-echoing rumble of the firing was of more avail than the screaming balls themselves.

In its encircling movement to gain the field, my force of thirteen cavalry had been delayed by swamps; and almost too late we burst forth on the rear of the howling horde. And so grand and thrilling was our charge, at full gallop with lances thrusting, that the word sped through our force that it was led by St. James on a Heavenly Steed, with Cortez at his heels. It was a wonder how many of my men attested to this miracle, as my shipmates had attested to the white dove lighting on our mast and then guiding our vessel to land out of the lost fastnesses of Ocean Sea. Not so, hard-headed Bernal Diaz. He said that he was unworthy of beholding the Holy Visitation, and all

he saw was "Morla on a chestnut horse riding beside Cortez, with the rest of the cavalry behind."

It may be that the Indians did not recognize us as mortal men on horses, but thought we were centaurs, half-man, half-beast. In any case, they fled shrieking from the field.

I did not order pursuit, for my men were wearied and hungry. Ere they fed, we gave honorable burial to three dead Spaniards, praying for Grace and Mercy upon their Souls. Then we did a gruesome thing, which we could not forego doing, which was to cut open a dead Indian and take what fat we could find in his body, with which to treat the more severe injuries of our nigh one hundred wounded. It was well known that human fat made the best poultices.

Now that the Tabascans had tasted our power, and perhaps perceived our divine mission, I dispatched some Indian captives coached by Aguila to their caciques, to restate our good will and intentions toward them, and bid them make peace. Still underestimating our power, they replied by sending a delegation of slaves, with hens, baked fish, and maize. These I would not receive, and ordered their return to their chiefs, who must make a more worthy presentation. In their absence, I devised a stratagem meant to impress the lords of Tabasco, whose arrival I expected shortly. I had Sedono bring his mare, who had recently foaled, and tie her in thickets near my place. At a signal, the stallion of Ortiz the Musician was to be brought nigh, he being a big, lustful beast. Also a loud-mouthed lombard was carried up and loaded.

About midday the caciques arrived, and although I received them, it was with a stern countenance and angry voice. Speaking through Aguila, I told them they might have peace if this they honestly desired, otherwise I would command my irons to destroy them all. While they hesitated, unwilling to surrender, yet timorous, I passed the signal for Ortiz to loose the stallion. He could smell the mare, and he came bounding and snorting and stamping, neighing to high Heaven, and the chiefs stared with mouths agape. Then I touched my cap to signal the cannoneer, and suddenly it let go its great boom, and the stone ball shrieked overhead, smote a grove of trees knocking down three before its force was spent, and fell amid rock with a great crash and rumble.

To close the comedy, I walked to the prancing stallion, stroked him, and told him what was quickly translated into the Tabascan language, that he

need rage no more, for the Indians were now peaceful. Then Ortiz took him by the bridle and led him off the scene.

The chiefs hurried away, swiftly returning with rich offerings. I accepted these with dignity, but told them the women and children, who had been sent inland, must return to their homes, and also they must forego human sacrifice and worship before a Christian altar. To this they agreed, so a Cross was erected, and Frey Olmedo said Mass in the awed presence of two great caciques. Also, he told them of the giving birth of our Lord by Santa Maria, and how thus He was one of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. It was no wonder that their deep-brown, handsome faces had a puzzled expression. Heaven knew I could not blame them, for in a sense I, as well as most who had not been given Holy Vision, was in the same boat.

While our wounded were mending, I talked much to the chiefs, whereupon they declared themselves vassals not of the distant Montezuma whom they worshiped and yet hated, but of our King and Emperor Charles. On Palm Sunday I had the caciques and a throng of Indians bring their wives and children to behold our ceremonies, including again the slow file of me and my followers kneeling before Mother and Child to kiss the Cross.

They could not help but compare this beautiful ceremony of humility to their own horrid religious rites, in which living slaves or captives were cut open, their still-beating hearts torn out and burned at the feet of their monstrous gods, and then the bodies horridly eaten by the worshipers. I am not certain that this worship did not make a deeper impression on the minds of the watchers than had our armed power, our fearful steeds, and our cannons which they deemed were themselves alive.

4

The chiefs made me presents of gold. There were four diadems, faces of Indians, and small dogs and ducks and sandal soles and lizards wrought in gold. Giving far more joy to my soldiers was the gift of twenty young women, the first offering of this kind we had received on the mainland. Although the men knew that the officers would be the recipients, they believed not without cause that they would soon have women of their own.

Nineteen of these Frey Olmedo immediately baptized. One of the twenty, the most beautiful, shook her head, then spoke a few words in faltering Spanish that no one understood. Then to Aguila she explained that she had been held for a while by a Castilian, evidently some member of Grijalva's expedition, and had been baptized by a priest, and given the title

and name of Doña Marina. She did not tell us she was the daughter of a very great cacique and possibly a prince or even a king; the fact being apparent in her countenance and her manner. Of a surety she was a noblewoman, which her baptizer had likewise perceived.

My interest in her was instantly great, and I studied her face with care, and listened with wonder to her soft voice. I reckoned her at about eighteen, and saw that she differed otherwise than in station from the other ladies. Her eyes were not black but hazel, the word deriving from the light-brown of the hazelnut and her skin was not quite so dark as the most. Her hair was raven black but finer than the coarse straight hair of most Indian women, indeed as fine as that of a Spanish doña. The beauty of her slim body was easy to perceive, but of her face it was factual but yet strange. In it I could read intelligence and energy, but not between these lines.

If she had been held by one of Grijalva's captains, I could assume she was not a virgin, yet I had the odd feeling that she might be. It is not generally true, what many folk believe, that a broken hymen leaves its imprint in the girl's countenance, so to save me I could not account for my impression.

But it was in my mind when I presented the young women to my captains, officers, and other leaders, including the notary, while Frey Olmedo gazed wistfully. I could not keep Marina for myself until the men in the ranks had girls—this was well-considered policy—but I did the next best thing. This was to present her to my close friend Puertocarrero. The presentation appeared to my followers as eminently fitting, a noblewoman unto a nobleman; and only he and I knew it was more than that, and indeed high honor paid to him without loss to me. Puertocarrero had confided to me that for reasons unknown, he was wholly impotent.

With every prospect pleasing, we set sail from Tabasco toward San Juan de Ulua, a town named by Grijalva. Soldiers or seamen who had been with him, now under my command, pointed out with delight various landmarks of remembrance on the fertile coast. There was the river up which Alvarado had met trouble, this was the Island of Sacrifices, here was the River of Flags, the scene of a great bartering in which Grijalva and his men garnered sixteen thousand golden pesos. I expressed no pleasure in the view, for I wished I had gotten here first, yet my jealousy was modified by the thought of great kingdoms yet unvisited by any Spaniard, and that Mexic itself, the capital city of Montezuma, lay beyond these mountains.

Cultured Puertocarrero quoted poetry apt to the occasion.

"O Montesinos, behold ye France,
And Paris, first in elegance.
Spy the River flowing free
In love and haste to meet the sea."

Then after a second's thought he added two lines of his own invention, in the same rhyme:

"Behold these lands of vast expanse,
And know ye what is best for thee."

Then, not to be outdone completely, I added two lines.

"God bless our sword and darting lance,
And Knight Rodan our model be."

Three of my immediate shipmates had brought their girl companions aboard ship, these being our captain Volivia, the accountant, and Puertocarrero. I had not known how to berth them properly, for our shipbuilders had not provided for this pleasant contingency, and it was none other than Marina who solved the difficulty. With Aguila she had inspected the ship, the two had kept up a lively conversation in Tabascan as they looked at this and that; they laughed often and sometimes had dispute, the tongue of Marina's hot and quick, Aguila's mien ever respectful to the lady's exalted place, but his attitude firm. I did not watch them, but occasionally glimpsed and heard them, and it seemed to me that their conference was of more significance than it appeared, perhaps one of the first meetings of the Old World and the New with no barriers between them. She belonged to the Aztec race, Aguila was now a Spaniard, wearing Spanish clothes, yet he spoke her language and his own.

Marina settled on a small storeroom about midships where was kept some casks of salt fish and suchlike staples, spare parts for guns, coils of rope, and sundry other articles not frequently used. These she had distributed to other storerooms, the floors and walls were well washed, and three mattresses and some stools and an empty chest provided for the three inmates. A jakes used by officers was close at hand. Here she and the ladies of Captain Volivia and the notary promptly brought their cloth bags, Marina's far the largest, and took possession. Puertocarrero and the notary arranged to lodge together in a tiny apartment aft and thus they could provide for one another's absence when either desired privacy. Captain Volivia made his own arrangements.

Puertocarrero sustained the fiction of receiving Marina's favors; but in privy he told me that her brief visits were spent in teaching her Spanish. She pointed at articles for which he supplied the Spanish words, as he did for Tabascan words that she pronounced. Having an agile tongue and a quick true ear, she added fully five hundred words, mainly nouns and verbs, to her store previously acquired. She was already completely fluent not only in the Tabascan language but in Mexic, the language of the vague but vastly looming Montezuma.

Marina went often into the village at our new landing, and there bargained for fruits, vegetables, maize, hens, and sometimes venison. And it was there that she learned that spies had been posted at points where we might land all along the coast, intending us no harm, only to observe us closely and report to their master. She said that Grijalva's ships and men had been likewise watched, and those of Cordoba.

"Who is the master of these spies?" I asked through Aguila.

"The folk say he has many names," she answered in his tongue. "His rightful name, I believe, is Uei Tlatoani, meaning 'He Who May Speak'. He is not a king—kings approach his presence barefoot—nor is he a god. He is one appointed by the great gods to reign over the Seven Kingdoms."

"Then he is the Emperor Montezuma?"

"Yes, my lord."

"What is his concern with us? We are far from his kingdom."

"Only four days' march. His concern is, that he has been expecting one to come, and wishes to know if you are that one."

"Who is the one he expects? I bid you speak his name." For Marina's face, her brown skin so thin that often her cheeks flushed, had turned pale and she spoke in low tones.

"His name, my lord, is Quetzalcoatl. You have asked me so many questions, which I have answered with truth, but I, a princess, make bold to ask you one."

"You have my leave."

"Are you Quetzalcoatl or his forerunner?" And her eyes did not meet mine, but lowered.

"I am Admiral Cortez, a subject of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V."

"Yet you come in the Year Ce Acatl."

"I do not know what you mean."

I dismissed her with the feeling that I had made a mistake of some great sort, or at least had failed to seize a great chance. I must learn more of Quetzalcoatl. Could he be an invention of Grijalva or some earlier explorer, who at departure had laid the ground for his return in a given year, and Quetzalcoatl was an Indian corruption of his name? But her mien when she had pronounced the name, caused me to believe the mystery was far more profound.

We had hardly anchored, in waters sheltered from the north, and had raised the standards and pennants of my flagships, when two large canoes laden with Indians came to our shipside. They were unarmed and seemed perfectly peaceful so I had their chief men come aboard. One of them asked which of us Spaniards was Tatuan, and Marina pointed me out. Could it be that I had already been given an Indian name?

Food and wine was served our visitors. When rather timidly they asked our business, I explained we meant to make them our brothers, to trade with us if they so pleased, and fellow subjects of the King of the World, and to teach them the True Faith. At this statement, their dark faces, usually so impassive, betrayed disbelief.

On the following day we landed the horses and guns, the latter set on sand dunes. The horses were strictly guarded against molestation, and the men gathered firewood and made huts.

On the afternoon before Easter, a greater number of Indians appeared of a slightly different stamp and raiment than those from the immediate region. I was informed that they had been sent by a great cacique, head of a state, named Cuitlalpitoc, vassal to Montezuma. They were taller, more handsome, and more proud. Their manner was most friendly, and not only did they bring us fowls, fruit, and tortillas, but willingly improved my lodge by plastering it with adobe and putting up awnings. In exchange for their gifts of handsome gold jewelry, I gave them beads.

That night I fell to wondering if Montezuma's empire was not, after all, a part of the Indies. That even kings were made to approach him barefoot reminded me that the same had been told of mighty sultans and maharajas in Portuguese India. Also, I wondered how he had learned so quickly of our whereabouts, and could make the journey with such dispatch if his state was within Montezuma's realm? Could it be that they had horses? God in Heaven, I hoped not!

Early on Easter morning the delegation came to my quarters, but I bade them delay their presentations, for this was a most holy day, and service must be paid to our God, who was at once Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. One was indeed named Cuitlalpitoc, wearing rich and handsome dress, but a stately Indian named Teuhtile appeared to have precedence, and made me three deep bows. Then the Indians looked on while Frey Olmedo sang the Mass before our newly erected altar.

Thereafter, their porters set before me a large, very heavy chest of some sort, covered with animal hides. When it was opened I could well daydream that I had stumbled on the India of legend, with its fabled richness. It contained numerous golden ornaments and jewels, wonderfully worked or cut, which Marina, standing at my side with Aguila, told me were the insignia of the Great Teul Tetzcatlipoca, chief of all Mexican gods. A golden mask adorned with feathers was emblematic of another Great Teul, and another gift, a miter made of gold-colored fur with black spots, from which hung a long cape made of beautiful many-colored feathers, I took to be the richest of all, judging by the manner of its presentation.

"What is this?" I asked Marina through Aguila.

Through him she replied by a most strange question.

"Tatuan, do you not know?"

"Why should I know? This is my first journey to this land, and my stay yet short."

"Your first journey, lord, out of the East? Why should you deceive us? This miter and cape are emblematic of Quetzalcoatl."

I could barely conceal my bewilderment by giving due thanks to the two nobles, and expressing my wish to make friends with Montezuma, trade with him, and asking when Montezuma would receive me.

Teuhtile's reply was even more blunt, and again I knew I had erred.

"You are newly come here, Tatuan, and already you ask for speech with Montezuma!"

All I could do was pretend not to notice the insolence, and select gifts for the mighty monarch, such as an armed chair, beautifully carved, and a gold medal bearing the head of St. George. Meanwhile an artist painted with a fine brush on cloth. Frey Olmedo, in a stolen glance over the artist's shoulder, said that he was recording the happenings here, showing me receiving and giving gifts, and drawing symbols which apparently had

nothing to do with the occasion. Evidently it was a picture writing of some sort.

Teuhtile's manner became more lofty, and to take him down somewhat I ordered a cavalry parade for him to watch, and a lombard to be fired, its voice of thunder to blast his ears. The horses pranced and danced as their expert riders had taught them, and the big boom of the gun echoed and re-echoed. Obviously the great cacique had never before seen horses, much to my relief, and the gun's boom had plainly frightened him out of his conceit.

A little later, I saw him stare in utter amazement at a gilt helmet worn by one of the soldiers. Then he asked if he might examine it, which he did with every sign of awe. Then he spoke to a fellow in curious costume decorated with golden stars, whom Marina had identified as an astrologer, in a low tone, the burden of which Marina's keen ears caught, and which later she translated into Tabascan to Aguila, who repeated it in Spanish to me. The gilt helmet had resembled one that the Mexic priests had held holy for ages gone, and which now adorned the head of one of their Great Teules.

Little more was said, and as the visitors were taking leave, a subdued and even awed Teuhtile asked if the Tatuan wished anything more. If he did so, his great master would supply it.

When this was translated I replied that if Montezuma so desired, he could return the helmet filled with gold dust, which I would treasure as a token of his regard and a promise of our meeting as soon as possible.

"But is there nothing that you now need, or some appetite you wish to gratify?"

"I can think of none," I answered.

"A divine drink, perhaps, or the flesh of sacrifice?"

I could not imagine exactly what he meant, unless a drink of cocoa which contained a stimulating drug, and the meat of a duck, because the many golden images of this fowl indicated that ducks were used in Mexican religious ceremony. Certainly they had brought no cattle, asses, or even dogs which the Island Indians sometimes sacrificed.

"Of these I will partake with your master Montezuma, in due course," was my bold reply.

Meanwhile, it had occurred to me that our visitors had not fully or correctly grasped the part Marina played in our interview. They had perceived by her appearance and dress that she was a princess under my

sway, and, not understanding or recognizing Tabascan into which she had translated Mexic for Aguila's understanding, they had taken her interjection between their speech and Aguila's as some kind of ceremony or etiquette befitting my dignity, or a giving of Aguila leave to speak. In their converse they had not taken care against her listening, as if they had not perceived she understood the Mexican language.

So when the ambassadors had gone, and were preparing to depart on foot with their following, I sent Marina after them with a pitcher of Guadacanal wine and a tray bearing three cups, one for each of the chiefs and one for the astrologer. Her real errand was to overhear as much as she could of their talk that might concern or be of value to me. Anyway they would be pleased at the courtesy paid them, both in my offering the warming drink and its serving by a princess, presumably my handmaiden.

She heard enough to make my hair almost stand on end. The meat of it was this.

"Tatuan, Teuhtile is indeed a great lord, but Cuitlalpitoc is one of Montezuma's slaves arrayed as a great lord, and if you had accepted their offer of food and drink, the slave would have been sacrificed, the fate that he expected and not in the least deplored, and you would have been given his heart to eat, and his blood to drink."

When I could get my breath, and had whispered in awe and reverence the Sacred Name of Our Lady, I asked Marina what in Heaven did such things mean?

"My lord," she answered reproachfully, "why do you play at riddles with your faithful servant?"

CHAPTER 7

Strong Medicine for Faint Hearts

1

In this little space that we had traveled together, I had found one comrade on whose common and moral sense, honesty, and fidelity, I could wholly rely. Moreover, he was a thoughtful man; he observed much that passers-by overlooked. He had sought to perceive its meaning and to establish some sensible association between this and other happenings and facts. He was the bluff, downright, veteran adventurer, Bernal Diaz.

So I sent for Bernal, met him in privy, and told him what Marina had said. Then I asked him if it were possible to give me what he regarded as the most likely explanation. No one else that I knew could tell me except Marina herself, and although the barrier of language was lowering swiftly, it still prevented the full meeting of our minds.

One might wonder that I did not summon Aguila, who had lived eight years in slavery to the Tabascans. While he told us freely of Indian civil customs and warfare, he was as yet reticent in all matters pertaining to their religion. I could guess at no good reason unless it were fear. Aguila had somehow become terrified by the might and magnitude, and, especially, the malevolence of the Great Teules.

Indeed I doubted if any Spanish mind could ever, in my days, meet fully an Aztec mind, although the minds of Aguila and Marina came nigh to that rapport. Their concepts of life itself were different and thus all their emotional responses. I could not doubt that the Mexic and some other Indian peoples had an ancient high civilization, the beautiful feather cloth and wonderful goldsmithery and jewelry being indubitable evidence in the case of the Mexicans. And I postulated that the mightiest chasm between Christian and Indian thought was primarily a matter of religion. Our religion, although we faltered in its practice and had only the merest perception of its ideals, let alone their realization, was mountain high above the run and ruck of the European mind; still, down in our hearts we divined

it was a religion of love. The Indian religion we had met was essentially a religion of fear.

God the Father we greatly feared and were taught to do so. We saw Him as a God of Vengeance and mighty wrath unto evildoers. When we, His faltering children, have sinned, we perceive Santa Maria as well as lesser Saints as willing to intercede in our behalf if we are truly penitent, whereby our punishment is mitigated, and might even be forgiven. As for the Son, we knew He had come forth from Maria's womb to dwell among us for a while, to teach us a way of life too sublime for sinful, greedy man to follow yet, and had died on the Cross for our ultimate Salvation.

On the contrary, the Indian way of life was not rooted in hope and faith, and their fates in life and their souls' destination thereafter were proscribed by the stars under which they were born, perhaps to be bettered by bloody sacrifice and heathen superstitious rites. Men among us who had shared in the Grijalva and Cordoba and earlier expeditions had seen with their own eyes the sacrifice of men, women, and children, their living breasts split by a knife resembling our adz, held not by a handle but by a projection above the blade, and the quivering hearts of the victims torn out as an offering to their Great Teules, their heads stuck on poles, and their limbs devoured in grisly feasts. Some of my own command in our yet brief stay had seen the mangled bodies of three boys, newly sacrificed, in the teocalli of a town from which the folk had fled. Still, unlike the saint-on-earth, Las Casas, I most firmly believed that before these awful practices could be stopped, we must conquer and make part of Christendom their rich and populous kingdoms; and we could not do so by peaceful means. Unless Christians became the rulers of those kingdoms, our priests supplanting theirs, their enforced baptism they would soon ignore, and out of our sight persist in their horrid, heathen rites.

"Cortez, I will relate to you what I have heard pertaining to this matter, whether true or untrue I know not," Bernal told me when I had repeated the cryptic words of Marina. And in his addressing me not by title but by name, I knew he was speaking to me man to man, and by his tone and the expression of his strong, plain face I knew also he would say nothing to curry my favor, or to make capital for himself. "When I was on these coasts with Cordoba, I took an Indian woman. When I shipped with Grijalva, by a mighty piece of luck I found her, and we lived together again. She had been born in Mexico, where she lived till she was thirteen, when she married a chief's son of Tlaxcala, her husband dying soon of what might be some manner of pox. She had a lively tongue and keen ears."

Bernal sighed, and went on. Evidently the lady was lost to him now, but he remembered her dearly.

"The good God knew I could not learn her language, but she picked up mine, well enough that she could tell me an ancient tale, handed down by the priests, and some of it recorded in picture writing. I will tell you the tale as it was told to me."

"Do so, Bernal, my friend."

"Some centuries ago—when the oldest oaks were acorns'—a ship came to these coasts, in shape like a dragon, with upraised neck and head and tail. The people mistook her sail for the dragon's wing. Aboard was a tall man, with long yellow hair and beard, and on his buckler were painted several small crosses, alike to our Holy Cross. Because of the dragon ship with its wing, Indians gave to this man the name of Quetzalcoatl, which means Feathered Snake. He was worshiped as a god, and the men with him became lesser gods, and these took Indian women, and had children by them, and abided here some years. Some say that the Dragon Ship was mended and again took wing, sailing toward the Rising Sun from whence Quetzalcoatl had sailed. Some say that he died here. But before he departed, or before his death, he told the people that he would return out of the East and once more be a Great Teul of Mexico."

"They have expected him ever since? But why—"

"Not ever since, my captain. He told the priests and the people he would come in a certain Sheath of a Certain House, by which terms their astrologers reckon time. When Cordoba came, and then Grijalva, the year appointed was soon, but not yet reached. Meanwhile, there were signs and wonders, plain to see, and the priests thought these captains and their followers were forerunners of Quetzalcoatl. And then we came in the Year Ce Acatl, the very year named, and in its very season. And that, Cortez, is the legend as told me by my woman, her eyes aglisten, and that, I believe, explains Marina's words to you, but all that myself knows is that we are here."

"Aye, we are here. Bernal, you heard Aguila talk to the Tabascans, and you and he are confidants. Does the great Montezuma believe the prophecy has come true?"

"He believes, and he disbelieves. He rejoices and sorrows. And many are being sacrificed at the Dish of the Eagle, which is a stone at the top of the stairways of the great teocallis of Mexic."

"I will continue to let him believe and disbelieve," I said, making one of those firm decisions by one great leap of thought.

"But you have already sent him word that you are subject of the Emperor Charles, and the Indians are our brothers, and we came to bring them to the True Faith, and to trade with them if they so desired. That is no way for a heathen god to speak."

"I spoke the truth. Let them interpret it as they wish. And if they ask for a miracle which God knows I cannot perform, I will again say I am subject to Charles, and not be ashamed, and if our deeds are mighty, beyond their understanding, they may think as they may."

"Now that is wisdom. Yet of a surety the time of your arrival was most fortunate. Now have I your leave to go? I am seeing to my arms and armor, believing they will soon be in use."

I thanked him and he departed to his own place. There could be no doubt that the legend if only half-believed by the Mexican emperor and his people would tie their hands somewhat, so I could truly believe Fortune had smiled on me. But my mind balked at thinking that it was all by Heaven's design. It was against my reason that Heaven would ordain that an admiral seeking to conquer Mexico and bring its people into the Christian fold should parade himself as a heathen god. Even if so I could not swallow that I, Hernan Cortez, should be the beneficiary of such a stupendous scheme. If I did benefit by a native legend and a coincidence, I had better call it luck. I remembered the snow-white petrel that had befouled my face when I had asked for a sign from Heaven. I considered, too, that if I had not myself wrenched off my fetter at sore pain, another blue-eyed man of sorrel or yellow beard would have captained the expedition.

In a few days Montezuma would look upon the picture writing that our visiting artist had drawn, and study it with sore care. He would see pale-faced men, some with red or yellow beards and some black men, with kinky hair and unbearded faces, because a few of my richer captains had Negro slaves. Also, he would soon hear of our horses, with which I conversed, and of their stamping and neighing, and of the firing of a cannon which seemed to have terrifying life of its own. I could hardly doubt we would presently receive another delegation from the great emperor.

It proved to be much larger and more impressive than the first. It was headed by a man who so closely resembled me that my soldiers called him Cortez, and I could not doubt that, after studying my likeness drawn by the picture writer, he had been chosen for that very reason. When Aguila

questioned Marina, at my suggestion, she told him that the priests of the great Mexican teocallis were picked either because of their resemblance to the gods they were to serve, or else by dress, ornament, and masquerade obtained that resemblance. Also she noticed something that our eyes missed, for which she surmised the reason.

Our incensing by the visitors, which we thought was to honor us, was more elaborate than before. It was ceremonial in the extreme. My living likeness—his Indian name sounded like Quintalbor—first kissed the earth, and used braziers made of earth, meanwhile mumbling we knew not what. Marina thought they were performing a magic rite intended to cause us to return to the earth as dead men, or else depart from this present earth. In truth, I paid little attention to the ceremony but perhaps as much as the Indians had paid to the Easter Mass performed by Olmedo.

Thereafter, Quintalbor had thick cloths spread on the ground, and on these were placed gifts from Montezuma, such as we had never seen. The most outstanding was a disk of solid gold, at least three feet in diameter, so heavy that two men could barely lift it, on which was engraved the round face of a god, with rays extending in all directions, plainly a representation of the sun. It was a beautiful thing which only a very rich king could afford to own, its worth in metal upward of ten thousand pesos. There was also a silver disk, representing the full moon, and a golden dish full of precious stones, among them emeralds, pearls, diamonds, and jade pieces. The golden objects included a score of ducks, wonderfully wrought, monkeys, dogs, and miniatures of great felines which we called lions and tigers, but truly these were of different species than were found in Africa and Asia. These were much smaller, the "tigers" having spots instead of stripes, and the lions dun-colored and without manes. Other works in gold were two batons, ten necklaces, and a bow with a dozen arrows. Also, the emperor had returned the brass helmet, filled with pebbles and dust of gold.

If we turned back now, and repaired to Spain, I and all my captains would be rich and the men all well to do. No doubt, some of my followers dwelt on this fact, especially those loyal to Velazquez, but I gave it only a passing thought. My resolve to conquer Mexico at whatever risk was forever fixed.

2

We gave the messengers such poor gifts as we could afford, but no horse, no musket, and no crossbow, and they took their leave. During their stay I had

maintained the dignity of a born prince, even of a god in mortal form, but no doubt it stuck in their minds that myself and my men worshiped a wooden cross, and an image of a mother and a little child.

Thereafter, we noticed a change in the attitude of Cuitlalpitoc, of the first delegation, assigned by Montezuma to furnish us supplies. These became scarce, and neighboring Indians no longer brought meat and maize to trade for trinkets such as beads and bells. It turned out that this neglect served us well, because the men were driven to net fish at which the Indians were not adept, which we could sell for gold. They caught fish in their weirs and traps of rude construction, but had never learned to haul with a big net, each end towed by a boat. True, our instructions forbade barter for gold except by the admiral, but I winked at it, knowing that unless my men were prosperous and happy, my great design would fail.

Seeking any cause for complaint, who should complain but the Velazquez party, his kinsmen and former favorites led by Leon? Instead of defying them, I readily agreed that the traffic should be stopped, and invited them to choose one of their number for the office of treasurer, through whose hands all gold must pass. There is no keeping of secrets in a force as small as ours, and the men began to blame the Velazquez faction, most with heavy purses, for imposing hardship on their poor companions.

I had long perceived the need of a new and better base of operations. This was the right time to propose its founding, for the common soldiers would back me while the Velazquez men would clamor to return to Cuba. To search for a new site I sent Captain Montejo, a Velazquez man, knowing that his efforts would be half-hearted; and when he made his doleful report, the soldiers would know these had been exactly that. It happened as I had thought; the men saw through him in the way of men who know men's meanness through its own practice; and Captain Montejo's prestige and popularity took a great fall, even in the eyes of his own command. Then he changed his tune, and told me that a region of the coast near the town of Cempoala, capital of the Totonacs, subjects of Montezuma, possessed promise.

Further advantages of this region, that I gouged out of Montejo, was that Cempoala had a good harbor, sheltered from the wild north wind, and a fertile countryside with abundant forest, navigable rivers, and building stone. And my main satisfaction in the discovery, was that we could no longer remain at our present site. The men were in distress, which daily grew worse. The countless mosquitoes on the sand dunes almost prohibited sound sleep. Our bread had molded and swarmed with weevils.

In ordering our removal to the new site I stirred up a hornet's nest of opposition from Velazquez' party. They demanded that we sail not for Quiauitzlan, which was the name of the small inland fortress, but for Cuba. They gave sound enough reasons, that we lacked food to permit further explorations, that thirty-five Spaniards had died of wounds, the country I madly proposed to conquer was immense and densely inhabited by a warlike people, hence we must be satisfied with our present great gains, instead of losing all and our lives as well seeking more.

Their reasoning was sound enough, better than that of my reply. But mine was closer to the fundamental fact of human life, for it was man's nature to proceed, not fall back; that loss of men was inherent in war; that it was our duty to explore the land; and while Mexicans had food, my men would not go hungry. However, I promised to put the matter to the vote of our whole company.

Perhaps I would not have dared do so, and instead enforced the move by naked power, if I were not sure of the support of Puertocarrero, whose noble birth and bravery made him an idol of the troops, the four Alvarados, Davila and Escalante, all in high esteem; however I harbored doubts of the loyalty of Olid. Now my task was not to persuade Velazquez' men but to assure a favorable vote from every loyal follower of my own. Those who longed for the fertile farms at home, the company of their wives and children, and a quiet, safe prosperity, I could not blame; and one of my handicaps was that many of the rank and file would not lie with Indian girls to relieve their achings, saying these were ugly or ill smelling. Neither charge was true. Instead, the girls were pretty, sometimes beautiful, in their own way, different from that of Spanish girls, but not inferior. I confessed they had a different smell, but it was pleasing to my nostrils. Oddly enough, almost all the officers, more catholic in their tastes, less bound by prejudice, were delighted with their sweethearts, for no more fiery women could be found.

In the deep of night I talked to the veterans of previous expeditions, for these were held in high prestige by the newcomers; and my spokesmen did the like. These asked if the veterans wished that this brave voyage also would be in vain, and the wounds and hardship, and deadly danger endured for naught, for Velazquez would surely confiscate their treasure. However, his adherents were more numerous than I had realized, the notion of returning appealed to the homesick men, and I had best use my brain rather than my voice in gaining my goal.

So I said that I would yield to the majority's wishes, although, since this forbade further conquest and gain, and I had spent my own moneys on the

expedition, I would take a fifth of our accumulated treasure, after the Emperor's fifth had been put aside. This announcement reduced the majority to a minority. For a while I stood firm on my demand, then graciously yielded to the troop's petition that we remove at once to a new townsite Montejo had recommended.

The enthusiasm of our common soldiers gladdened my heart. Vigorous and virile, shouting unseemly and sometimes impious jests, roaring with laughter at every mishap, the men loaded their ships; many decided that Indians girls were not so lacking, after all, decidedly better than none, so they brought aboard their favorites to share their hammocks or narrow berths, now to be cozy indeed.

I made no inquiry whether the girls had been properly baptized. Most had been so, Olmedo told me, for these were reverent men, wanting to honor our beloved Santa Maria. If some of the girls had not received grace, Olmedo could only shrug and say he had done his best.

In the presence of a notary I announced my intention of founding a town to be named Villa Rica de Vera Cruz.[22] The men assumed it was to be no more than other "towns" which previous explorers had established, the latter in fact merely the attaching of a name to some cape or island or landmark, where they could barter with the Indians dwelling thereabouts, make convenient landings, or assemble stores. Not being lawyers, the main of my followers took no notice of the formality of my proceedings, and how the founding would change the expedition ordered by Velazquez into a Spanish community, with its own elected government and officers, virtually a republic answerable only to our Emperor and King and owner of Spain, who held Divine Right to reign over all. A chapter was duly chosen by acclaim, I making the nominations, and the assembly approved my choice of my trusty friend Puertocarrero and Velazquez' man Montejo to be alcaldes. Olid would be quartermaster, venturesome Alvarado would be in charge of exploration, and Escalante the chief constable, in command of watchmen.

In all truth, I had no intention of the new town being built at our present landing, and instead I meant it to rise near Cempoala, or perhaps further inland toward the Mexican fort. Still, I did some imaginary laying out of a square for a chapel and a pillory for malefactors, that juxtaposition in real towns—a hint that the citizens attend one in order to avoid confinement in the other. When I was asked where I would erect a gallows, I replied at the town's outskirts, where their victims could hang a day or two in this hot climate without giving offense, and yet be a warning to all beholders.

The fact remained that although we were still sans evidence of a town, in fact, myself and my followers became citizens of Villa Rica de Vera Cruz, no longer captain of an expedition answerable to Velazquez.

The next day the chapter met, summoning me. I was directed to show my authority and instruction given me by Velazquez, which I promptly did. The chapter found these no longer valid, and hence I was now neither captain nor chief justice. Still, the office must be filled or the town could not be properly governed, and since I was an able commander of troops and a bachelor of law besides, they duly elected me to fill both posts.

The Velazquez party was enraged, and threatened revolt. They had just begun to perceive that they had been tricked and I was not bound to compromise with my enemies. Immediately, I struck a heavy blow. Leon, Ordas, Escudero, and Escobar were arrested by our constable, and put in irons aboard the ship. But those who had sided with them were free citizens; if they wished to return to Cuba they might do so. None wished to play such fools as to return defeated while their comrades won riches and renown.

Instead of having them sit and grumble, I appointed the homesick men to help Alvarado explore the countryside, meaning to forage food. Anticipating adventure and perhaps loot, they gladly agreed. But they reported other findings than hens, maize, and vegetables from the deserted pueblos and farms.

In the temples of western villages, under sway of Montezuma, they told of finding human bodies, the hearts torn out and the limbs cut off, and the walls smeared thick with dried blood. Human sacrifice was one thing, cannibalism another, and if my men were sickened, they were also horrified and furious, better fit to pursue the great conquest I had proposed and firmly intended to make.

---

[22] The Rich City of the True Cross.

3

With gifts of gold which we Spanish call “beak syrup” and promises of place and power, I appeased the Velazquez party, and actually made a warm and faithful friend of Leon.

Meanwhile, I sent spies chosen by Marina, mainly Tabascans who revered her and hated Montezuma. Indeed, she took into her own hands the

vital business of obtaining information as to his operations and intentions. Not one man whom she had trusted failed that trust, and some strange reports were made to me, reminding me more strictly than before that I was dealing with an emperor and a people of utterly different mind from European.

He had called in sorcerers, astrologers, and wise men. When asked what sort of men we were, they replied that each of us had only one foot, this with a large palm with which we shaded ourselves, and our heads were not on necks but affixed to our chests. This made no sense to the intelligent ruler, for he had seen the picture drawings. The next group of magicians that he summoned were even more famed than the first, able to change men into wild beasts that destroyed one another. Others could induce a heavy sleep in the victims of their magic, and then would eat their hearts, or bear them away on their shoulders to be thrown into chasms and destroyed.

In these powers Montezuma believed, and bade the magicians go to work. Yet none of us were turned into wild beasts, none lost his heart, none was spirited away to die at the foot of cliffs. I did not doubt their failure was reported to Montezuma with as fantastic excuses as the mission had been fantastic. I wondered what thoughts stole unwanted into the mind of Montezuma. My heart was touched with pity and steeled by resolve.

In this period Bernal Diaz and another sentry saw five Indians approaching them across a sandy stretch. They wore blue stones in their ears and lower lips, and their dress was different from any Indians Bernal had seen. They made friendly overtures and signaled that they wished to visit our camp. Their language was unknown to both Marina and Aguila, but on her asking them if they spoke the Cholulan tongue, they answered yes. Then they explained that they had been sent by the great cacique of Cempoala, and their tale was one of woe, although most pleasing to my ears. It was a description of Montezuma's tyrannical rule, including the levy of heavy taxes, and concluded with the cacique's invitation to visit his city.

It could mean only that Montezuma's mighty kingdom of Seven Nations was not a happy family but one divided against itself. What captain, ambitious for conquest, could ask for more? I had read the biography of Alexander the Great, written by the Greek Clitarchus, and translated into Spanish. Although many cities and satrapies had yielded without a fight, I could not remember one that had broken pact made with the conqueror before battle.

Cempoala lay north of us at a river mouth. I had my troops follow the sandy shore, sending our supplies in ships. As we marched, the blue sea and its snow-white surf was on our right hand, a towering mountain range—one of the peaks of which was snow-capped, on our left hand. My men could scarcely believe that the white drapery was snow, so intensely hot the summer weather, and burning hot the sands. We passed through deserted towns and villages, and one certain and unavoidable sight was fresh blood and uncorrupted bodies in the teocallis and little temples, proof that in almost every hamlet human sacrifice had been made at the first news of our approach.

The land became more fertile with verdant meadows where deer fed, the boughs of fruit trees hung low with their weight of toothsome, fragrant, many-colored fruits; maize and cotton fields and patches of tobacco lined the road, all of this God given, but in man-made temples unto heathen gods lay the grisly remains of sacrifice. At the last town we lodged before entering Cempoala, I warned the cacique not to plot, let alone execute, stratagems against us. Aguila told him that if he did so, he and his sons and all "that pisseth against the wall," in this quoting the graphic Scriptural phrase Olmedo sometimes used, would be straightway hanged. Not to be outdone, Marina added that all that "squatteth and pisseth on the ground," would suffer the excising of one breast. This threat appeared to frighten the chieftain more than the other, for truly it conjured up in the mind a gruesome picture.

Before entering the town I sent scouts ahead, and arrayed my forces for instantaneous attack. Then, at a league distant, a delegation of twenty leaders, including priests but not the cacique, met us with bouquets of roses and beaming smiles that a secret enemy could hardly force; and the town itself was so pretty, with good streets and pleasant gardens and white houses, that the soldiers dubbed it Seville, which rivaled Granada as the most beautiful city in Spain. The Spanish are a playful people, when they escape from their deep, dark feelings, and the men jested, calling one house the palace of the Duke of Carcos, and another that of the Duke of Medina. But one party of our forerunners caused my whole force to grow beady-eyed on hearing that houses further on had solid silver walls. When these proved merely whitewashed with lime of silvery luster, the soldiers looked crestfallen, then squared the matter within themselves by hooting the befooled scouts. Their leader was dubbed Roland, the famous paladin bewitched by Morgan le Fay, who had seen like fantasies.

My suspicions had been aroused by the cacique's absence from the delegation, but when I found him lying pale-faced in a hammock, I knew that his complaint of sickness was quite real. In his place, I, too, would have sickened, for he would waken the wrath of Montezuma by this cordial reception of the alien, and we had heard that Uei Tlatoani, his most commonly used title, was a very lion in his furies, although usually kind and mild.

After we were well quartered and well fed, the cacique roused himself to pay me a formal call in full regalia and entourage. I embraced him, told him of Charles and the True Faith, and promised to redress his wrongs inflicted by Montezuma. He put at our disposal four hundred *tlamemes*, burden carriers. It was a strange fact that the Indians had no wheeled vehicles or even pack beasts, although we saw children playing with wooden hoops. Why they had failed to observe the easy progress of a rolling stone, or take note that a log was easier rolled than dragged—the train of thought leading straight to the notion of carts—neither I nor my thoughtful companions could imagine. Indeed, their pack animals were slaves captured in war.

With unburdened backs, my soldiers easily climbed to lofty Quiauitzlan, the fortress deserted except by fifteen frightened Indians. The fat cacique followed us in a litter, and there he expounded the tyrannies of Montezuma, including the sending of taxgatherers who freely raped the Cempoalan wives and daughters in the presence of their husbands or sires.

Yet as he spoke, he kept looking over his shoulder, as if expecting Montezuma's men to arrive at any moment. And this was precisely what happened, in a moment of a day of great bearing on our woe or weal.

4

Five taxgatherers, important agents of the emperor, had come into the town on their greedy errand, as was reported by a panting, pale-faced messenger. At once our hosts rushed from the room, the cacique running ahead of his litter bearers. We were wholly deserted, and my faith in my new friends was sadly shaken. As we tramped down the steep, I was wondering what course to take, what under Heaven I could do, to brace these Cempoalan reeds into stout allies. Only one dictum was confided by my soul: I must be bold.

We found the five lords strutting about, richly clad, their shiny hair worn in topknots, each with a bouquet of roses in one hand, and a curved stick, doubtless the badge of office, in the other, while servants cooled them with

feather fans, and frightened, unctuous, minor chiefs walked in their dust. The taxgatherers did not deign us visitors a glance.

They ate the dinner the servile citizens had hastily prepared, then sent for the quaking cacique. We were not long in learning that he had been straitly reprimanded for not resisting our entrance to the town, and that ten men and ten women must be sacrificed to Uitzilopochtli, whom Bernal Diaz had irreverently pronounced *Hychilobos*, strangely like the Spanish word for witch wolves.[23]

This sacrifice I was determined to prevent at all cost and risk.

My first act, as soon as the taxgatherers had left the cacique quaking and bemoaning his fate, was to summon him into my presence, where I told him on no account to yield to the demands of the taxgatherers, for now he was under the protection of the Emperor Charles, whereby he had every right and might to put them in jail. This I must say twice, in a calm voice, before the terrified chieftain could believe his ears. I supposed that no such high-handed defiance of Uei Tlatoani had been imagined, in all his reign and realm, or in the reign of his predecessors.

Yet greatly to my delight, and truly my surprise, the cacique seemed to catch fire, or rather the smoldering embers of his hatred blazed up, for he came forth, fat but formidable, and ordered his followers to fall upon the intruders and bind them fast. Like whining dogs at the sudden voice of their master, the Cempoalans obeyed with shouts of fury, and now it was the agents' turn not to believe their eyes, for before they knew it they were in the Cempoalan fashion of stocks, with their necks, arms, and legs strapped to poles.

Exalted beyond measure by their own swift and nigh-incredible victory, the Cempoalans plainly intended to sacrifice their prisoners at once. In the direct Indian mind—Marina's mind happened to be devious—it was not only the right course, but the sensible one, since thus they could not report the outrage to the dread Montezuma. Also, the gods would be pleased at such a munificent offering, and the taxgatherers themselves would be benefited, for thus their souls could pass directly to the Sun. This I forebade, and had the prisoners put into the custody of my own soldiers. Their terror was somewhat relieved when Marina told them at my instruction they would come to no harm at my hands, and at nightfall I had them brought secretly into my presence.

I pretended ignorance of the affair, questioned them courteously, and then released two of them. Since they dared not travel in this territory, I had

no choice but to send them southward in a ship's boat, to be landed safely in Mexican domain. There they were to tell Montezuma of my friendship and my promise to guard safely the remaining prisoners.

Now I must indeed play from a double deck, refusing to permit the sacrifice of the rest, and in the same breath rebuking the captors for their poor job of guarding the two fugitives. Ironing the other three, I had them removed to my ship in the estuary of Rio Chachalacas. There I immediately ordered the removal of the irons, spoke to them courteously, and promised their return to Mexican soil as soon as possible.

A self who somehow lived outside of myself congratulated each other on what amounted to a *coup de main*. The Cempoalan people—a better name was Totonacs—had broken with Montezuma and became, perforce, my allies; and I had not shown my hand as a would-be conqueror's. And now it had dawned on me that the fortress of Quiauitzlan and the neighboring plain would serve well as a base. Immediately, I ordered the strengthening and erection of fortifications, and carried the first rock on my back. My followers cheerfully gave their labor, and the Indians lent theirs with joy, as defense against the long arm of Montezuma.

Thus Villa Rica de Vera Cruz,[24] a town in name only before now, but now some turned earth and a pile of stones, began to take solid form. From this humble beginning, there rose edifices, a church in a square, a chapter house, an arsenal, the inevitable prison, a storehouse and slaughterhouse, and buildings suitable for good government and appearance. It stood on the plain, half a league from the stronghold of Quiauitzlan, well within the domain of Montezuma. In a sense, our conquest of Mexico had begun, only to be concluded by the capture of the capital, the grandeur of which to us was yet a legend.

Our idle hands were busied, and the Totonac Indians toiled as hard and as willingly as my own fellow citizens, for they perceived that this was a barrier against the fury of Montezuma at their rebellion. It was more than this; their caciques had been baptized and had sworn fealty to our Emperor. But Montezuma evidenced no open fury, although Marina's spies reported that he was furbishing a large force to inflict dire and unforgettable punishment upon the defectors. To us he sent an embassy, headed by his two nephews, who gave us gold and rich wraps to the value of two thousand pesos.

His message to us was a curious mingling of thanks and threats. He was grateful for the release and return to the capital of two of his agents; but

where were the other three? So far he had refrained from sending a punitive force against the Totonacs only out of respect for me.

I assured the ambassadors that I was their master's friend, and the three agents were being freed and sent home; but that the desertion of Pitalpitoque, whom Montezuma had appointed to furnish me with supplies, had caused me to question the emperor's friendship and to obtain succor from the Totonacs. True, these were now subjects of the great Charles and hence under my protection, but the matter of their severance from his empire, because of abuses, could be settled by peaceful negotiation when His Imperial Highness and I met face to face.

I had made the ambassadors wait until they received my order to appear before me. During the audience I had occupied a chair of state, my bareheaded captains and a flag bearer in attendance, and I spoke calmly and with care, with the dignity of a great king if not a god in human form. The Totonacs were impressed as deeply as the messengers. Instead of sacrificial knives cutting out their hearts, gold was poured into Cortez' hand.

Greatly emboldened, the Totonacs' cacique asked me to lead an attack against their old enemies of Cingapacinga—one Indian name that delighted my ear—who stole their food and their women. But when I announced the punitive expedition, again rose up the party of Velazquez, refusing to take part in the campaign, and instead demanding a ship to return them to Cuba, which I at once promised to supply. I explained I had made this promise before our forces had become a Spanish municipality, now ruled by a chapter. Yet on my part I would furnish and victual the ship, although they would be unwise to desert their elected captain's flag. As we were talking, I had passed the word to Puertocarrero of the Velazquez party's design. At once I received orders from him and his fellow alcalde that by no means could I grant permission for desertion, a crime against the community punishable by death. The would-be deserters quickly changed their minds, and thus the ideals and purposes of democracy were served.

To reach Cingapacinga we passed again through Cempoala where two thousand Indians joined our forces. After a hard ascent among rock fortifications, we gained the town at sundown, where the caciques told me that the Cempoalans had come with me not to avenge wrongs, but because of an ancient hatred, and bade me order their return. I was inclined to believe the story, and forbade the Totonac warriors to enter the town. They obeyed me, then occupied themselves by raiding the farms near by, gathering booty. Angered by their double-dealing—as though I never dealt doubly myself—I rebuked the looters sternly and made them release the

slaves they had seized, as well as ubiquitous hens. Then I acted as peacemaker between the two factions, for I could not permit my Indian allies to fight among themselves.

An incident which my scribe recorded occurred on our journey homeward to our new-raised town. One of my soldiers stole two hens—I was never done with hens—from a farmyard. I saw it and ordered the thief immediately hanged. But also I bade Alvarado stand by the gallows, and act as he saw fit. As the noose was tightening, Alvarado acted as he knew I had seen fit, which was to cut the rope with his sword. Thus justice was done, no life was lost, and I was saved censure and probable condemnation by my followers.

With the allegiance of the Cingapacingas avowed and notarized, I found I had not estranged the Cempoalan people, but had won their increased respect for me and the pale-faced red-bearded soldiers of Spain. Home again, their fat cacique provided food and a gift of eight maidens, one of them his daughter which he asked me to accept personally. These girls wore richly decorated gowns, earrings and necklaces of gold, and each had a serving wench. But I refused the acceptance of the gift until the givers agreed to abolish their idols, and stop human sacrifice and cannibalism. These were harsh terms. Only with a strong surge of my will did I impose them, and it was a rash deed. Although fearing refusal and the loss of their allegiance, yet I felt enforced to commit it, perhaps because our expedition, despite its great sinning, had come hence in the name of God.

Yet my men were with me in this, defiant of consequences, because of their disgust and horror at the atrocities we had seen. Warning them that we might all be killed, for we were vastly outnumbered by well-armed men, yet they followed me as I proceeded to the teocalli; there we ran up the flight of steps to their holy of holies, hauled forth the hideous idols, and dragged them down, pieces breaking off from them all the way. The Cempoalans did not draw their two-handed swords and instead covered their faces.

I still do not know why they did not fall upon us and behead us. They believed in those monstrous gods and now feared their vengeance. A great factor in our escape were the quiet words of Marina, whom they knew as a princess; and I had a feeling that they knew more than that, knowledge never confided to us by her or any Indian; certainly their respect and even awe of her could not wholly be explained by her being the daughter of a great cacique or prince. She had reminded them quietly that if they antagonized our force, let alone attacked us, they must deal undefended with Montezuma.

Also I liked to think that they themselves perceived a great taint of evil in their religion, although still believing in its truth. They were savages, they did not know the meaning of humanitarianism, human life was cheap in their eyes, the people sacrificed went straight to blissful existence in the Sun. Still, they had the potential of discovering human brotherhood as taught by our Lord.

The temple was cleaned of its horrid accumulation of putrifying blood, the stench of which no burning incense could conceal. The priests were forced to cut off their blood-matted hair, and an image of Virgin and Child along with a Cross was raised in the room lately a den of horrors, and now decorated with flowers and greenery. Olmedo said Mass. Through Marina, he told them how to make candles—so easy of manufacture of deer fat, yet wholly unknown to these partially civilized people—and ordered that candles be burned day and night before the Sacred Image, and the True God in Heaven would take note of this, and Santa Maria would be pleased, and awful punishment, otherwise their fate, would be remitted.

Hard upon these great and solemn doings, of significance I could sense but not clearly perceive, there followed the earthly presentation of the eight maidens. To Puertocarrero I gave the most lovely, Doña Francisco, knowing he could not make earthly love to her any more than to Marina, but which gift earned him the men's envy. Since I intended to send him soon as my ambassador to the Court of Charles V, the maiden would not long itch in vain, for my friend would certainly present her to a young and virile lover. Six of the girls remaining I bestowed on my followers renowned for bravery, for is not always beauty its fit reward? I accepted as my own the cacique's daughter, but knew not what to do with her, because she was too ugly for my performance of the obvious deed expected of me. Perhaps I could find a soldier ugly enough to be bereft of a bedmate, who would receive her gratefully and treat her kindly.

---

[23] *Hechiceralobos*.

[24] In the shiftings of the centuries and by the quirks of fate, the modern city of Vera Cruz stands not far from the sands where Cortez first announced his intention to found a town of this name.

In the harbor lay a caravel which I had bought in Santiago and left there for repair. Salcedo the Polished was her captain—his name no jest but a tribute to his elegant dress and manners—but of greater use to me were ten soldiers and a captain, famed for his bravery and skill, named Luis Martin. Most welcome were a stallion and a mare, but there is almost always bitter with the sweet, and to reduce my pleasure were ill tidings. Velazquez, previously governor, had been appointed Adelantado of Cuba by the Emperor himself, doubtless by the urgings of Bishop Fonseca, and had been given charter to carry on trade and to settle Yucatan.

As a matter of course, the Velazquez partisans in our company raised their somewhat battered heads and again grew bellicose. I must move quickly to checkmate them, so I had my faithful followers put forth three drastic proposals, one of which must be actuated. The first was to go to Mexico and by any means available make it a Spanish province. The second was to dispatch to Spain not part but all treasure that our force had accumulated by both gift and trade. The third, and most frightening to the enemy, was that I burn our ships, whereby we must either conquer, or, by slow melting away, disappear from the earth.

A great dispute rose, as I had foreseen. Bernal Diaz, held in well-deserved respect, spoke for the rank and file, in saying it would be a good and fit thing, now that we had come so far and heard so much of him, to behold mighty Montezuma and his El Dorado, and instead of sending our treasure, dispatch to the Emperor testaments of our allegiance and that we kiss his feet. My gentleman argued solemnly that since we were Charles' subjects we should indeed present him all of our private and public hoard of gold, a fit token of our fealty, for certainly we could garner more. Only a few all-or-nothing fellows, hard bitten, and utterly reckless, urged that our ships be burned.

These choices were put to vote as in accordance with municipal practice. The canvasser and teller were both, by my provision, Velazquez' men. For governors, the chapter appointed Puertocarrero and Montejo, one of them my closest friend and the other the late beneficiary of two thousand pesos in gold. Since the votes would be recorded, which record to reach the Emperor, the Velazquez men must indeed vote for the first proposal, the captains did also, and the men yearning to go on to Mexico followed suit. All our gold, including the golden sun and the silver moon, was gathered together and put aboard a ship. With it would go a letter from the chapter, relating the history

of the expedition until now, including the baptism of many heathen and the destruction of many idols, although tens of thousands needed the same blessing or the same casting down. It related my election as captain and chief justice, to remain so as long as the King wished, along with high praise. It happened to mention, thereby stressing the point, that Velazquez had contributed only a third of the cost of the expedition, and this estimation was dubious, since his contribution was in clothes and wine of far less value than he counted. It told of the soldiers' promise to give me a fifth of future gains, after the royal fifth had been set aside, and it cast aspersions on Grijalva and Cordoba. I felt that these last two items were impolitic and should be omitted, but Velazquez' men insisted that if we told some, we must tell all.

So we prepared to send away our treasure, as well as four young men and two women in the same wooden cages in which they had been fattened for sacrifice and cannibalism, which would certainly jar their royalties, and Bishop Fonseca, too.

6

The ship bearing my ambassadors, Puertocarrero, and Montejo had not yet stood to sea when there stole into my mind, demanding more and more attention, the temptation to commit the boldest act of my yet life.

Its boldness did not greatly matter, really. I had been committed to boldness ever since I had sailed from Seville, perhaps even before then, when as an urchin I had read a truthful writing concealed on a page of lies. But was it necessary and hence wise?

In any case, I must not act on impulse. Unless there was further provocation, I would not act at all. Just now, the affairs of the expedition were progressing excellently, with the Tabascans my good allies, the Cempoalans and their nation stout in my support, and the Cingapacingas won to my banner. At least this was their open protestation regardless of what they might do behind my back, and the paying at least lip service to the Cross and a Blessed Image in a whitewashed, not blood-plastered, church. And lately I had the imminent departure of my ambassadors to Spain to look to, the care of our treasure to be sent with them, and the writing of official documents.

And as soon as the sails had filled, I had private business holding promise of gain to my emprise and pleasure to my body and mind.

For their journey I had selected my flagship, being the largest and most seaworthy, with the best chances of swift flight before pirates, and a higher deck easier defended with pikes and cutlasses in case these sea wolves overtook and grappled her. From the treasure to be presented to the Emperor, three thousand gold castilians had been set aside for the expenses of the journey, and an equal sum from our treasury to be entrusted to one man in Spain whom I could wholly trust, that poor hidalgo, Martin Cortez. With these he could present himself in suitable dress and entourage to the Emperor, to whom his knighthood would give him admittance, and there he would plead and further our cause.

The ship put to sea on July 26, 1519, under orders to sail direct to Spain and on no account to touch at Cuba. As she took wing, Puertocarrero stood on the poop waving to a minute figure on the beach. This gesture of farewell was returned in kind by a beautiful young woman standing close to me, then she bowed her head a little and drew her hand with an impatient movement across her wet eyes. This was the first time I had ever seen Marina in tears.

Her name was no longer Marina among the Indians. It was Malintzin, obviously their best rendition of a name difficult to their tongues. Her title instead of Doña was Tzin, one of utmost honor, equivalent I should judge to a duchess in Spain. Because of mental processes not quite clear to me they had begun to call me Malintzin also; partly because she had stood beside me in all my dealings with them; but it had much more meaning than that. It betokened a mystery which both Bernal and I had sensed, and its implication was that she alone, of all my force and my subcaciques, was my peer. Some day I would explore it. High birth, even royal blood, could not account for it. Almost certainly it pertained to their religion.

Oddly enough my own followers out of Spain adopted the practice in my absence, and sometimes by a slip of the tongue in my presence, and called me Malintzin, soon corrupted to Malinche. They did not know why. Patently they considered it a suitable appellation.

I bowed to her and spoke.

"Marina, will you pay me the honor of dining with me tomorrow night at my quarters in Cempoala?" For my ambassadors had sailed from San Juan de Ulua, a short journey south of Cempoala.

"Yes, my lord," she answered modestly enough, but her hazel eyes filled with speculations.

The prospect lingered in my mind, sometimes at its fore and else-time at its back as I gave thought or attention to other matters. It was as one might

regard a pleasant guest in the house, not intrusive, or interfering with one's affairs, but whose company can be enjoyed when opportunity presents itself. I was a vivid dreamer, never wakening save in the midst or at the end of a dream, and beginning to dream before I fell fully asleep. Marina had already appeared and quietly moved in many dreams since I had first met her; and tonight she was never far distant in my dream world, and occasionally she was my companion there. Yet I perceived some sort of barrier between us, of which I wished to dispose, but could find no means to do so.

To pay me honor, she came in her best raiment, accompanied by a young Negro girl whom I had bought from one of my richer captains and whom I had put in Marina's service. Marina dismissed her at the door of my quarters so she could spend the evening with some Indian girls in our train, toasting small fish, drinking cocoa, and smoking tobacco leaves rolled in a cylinder that settlers in Cuba called cigarros. All of them knew some Spanish words and graphic signs, and I did not doubt they were able to communicate in sufficient degree to enjoy one another's company with much shared laughter.

Marina was swathed in beautiful Mexic cloth of bright color. She wore sandals decorated with bits of jade, and a jade necklace from which hung an ornament I had not seen before, a small winged serpent worked in gold. My servant Gonzales opened a bottle of Malaga wine, the sweetness of which I thought she would enjoy.

When he started to fill her goblet, she shook her head with a smile.

Then she told me, in halting Spanish, "My lord, I cannot. To my people it is poison."

This last was perfectly true. The Indian race had not developed what might be called resistance to spirits; it affected a hardy warrior as it might a Spanish toddler. The vine had been planted, and Bacchus become a genial god in Europe, long before the Trojan War.

"Speak Tabascan if you wish," I bade her, employing this tongue. For Tabascan might be termed the Latin of all the Indian states we had visited. It was spoken by wandering storytellers whose art was their passport into every Indian state and also by merchants. It had simple grammar and was rich with nouns and verbs of several Indian languages including Mexic. In the period between our landing at Cozumel, about five months ago, I had obtained a weak but working knowledge of this tongue.

"Thank you, I will."

"Pennant—necklace—pretty."

"It was given me by the head priest of a Mayan teocalli."

I had never before heard the word Mayan. I did not know whether it referred to a nation or a religion, but some subtle change in her tone caused me to believe the latter. If this were so, it might be a first clue to the mystery I could sense but not define, enfolding Marina and apparent in the Indians' attitude toward her. But when I had questioned Aguila about this, he had pretended to know nothing, did not quite conceal his surprise that I did not know something, and quickly changed the subject.

"Where?" I asked my beautiful companion.

"Oaxaca."

I had heard this name, which appeared to be that of a kingdom sixty or seventy leagues west from San Juan de Ulua, presumably a subject state to Montezuma. Were there religions hereabouts, or at least not vastly distant, different from the religion of the Mexic and its allied or subject states? And now I recalled that one of Balboa's captains had seen and described a temple inland from Darien in some ways different from the pyramidic temples of the Aztecs, the generic term for all Indians in our region. It had much larger stones, wonderfully cut and joined.

"Same gods?" I asked.

"Some same with different names."

"Tetzcatlipoca?" I asked.

"Itzamna," she answered, obviously the Mayan name for the Mexic Zeus.

"Quetzalcoatl?"

I could observe no change in her expression as she answered.

"Kukulcan, the head god of the Mayan."

"Same sacrifice of blood?" And I did not know, or ever knew, what prompted this somewhat irrelevant question. Perhaps it rose from the odd fact, observed by several of my followers, that human sacrifice was considerably less to Quetzalcoatl than to any other Great Teul. Friar Olmedo had recently told me something bearing on this matter which he had heard before leaving Cuba, recited to him by a fellow friar who had had it from an Indian captive of Cordoba, who had since learned Spanish. It was that the victims of sacrifice to Quetzalcoatl were all of noble blood, whether enemies, slaves, or volunteers. They were usually sprinkled with salt water

brought from the Ocean Sea before they were slain, and the slaying was more merciful, their throats being cut by what appeared to be a worked bone, but which Bernal suspected was the sharpened finbone of the sailfish. The blood was caught to be drunk ceremonially, and certain parts of the body were devoured by people carefully chosen by the astrologers. Indeed the cannibalism was more ritualistic than bestial, although horrible enough, God knew.

"Certain ones are given to Kukulcan—Feathered Snake—Quetzalcoatl—and thus die." And Marina plainly intimated she wished to say no more on this particular subject.

As she ate venison with a fork and sheath knife—as Puertocarrero had taught her—maize cakes, big brown beans, and peppers, I had a chance to make a long close study of her face and form. Presently, I told myself, I had never seen a more beautiful girl, but if I must try to prove it in an argument, I would not know how to begin. Her receding and very clear forehead was on the same plane with the ridge of her nose, and as her lips were rather full and her chin strong, her profile had the aspect of an outward slanted line. Her jaws were clean cut and the set of her head on her neck gave her what I would call a royal look, akin to that of some queens and duchesses whose portraits I had seen at the Royal Gallery with Marie de Estrada; yet a kind of wildness showed through. Her hazel eyes were long and deeply set and had an almost preternatural brilliance in the glimmer of the candelabra on the linen-draped table. Her cheekbones were high and prominent, and her cheeks severely planed, giving her whole countenance a unity of superb proportions.

Her form was slender, and her movements were sinuous, and in this she recalled my long-lost Juvena. A portrait painter, who works in color, could name the tint of her skin, but I could only say it was medium-brown, not hazel as were her eyes, and so thin and smooth that it appeared polished. Her raiment was a series of broad sashes rather tightly bound from knee to throat fastened with invisible hooks or clasps. These outlined her body to my grateful eyes—the well-molded breasts, the slight curve of her belly so delightful to educated sight. Her fine and narrow thighs made me think of presentations of nymphs in marble, some of these from Greece and some from Rome, which Count Aquillar had collected, which I had seen when I visited his son José, my schoolmate at Salamanca.

I had noticed at first sight the extraordinary fineness of her hair, so different from the rather coarse hair of most Indian girls. Tonight she wore it in glossy braids. And then I noticed a detail which startled me greatly,

unobserved before, and for which I could not find an immediate explanation. One small strand of hair rooted near her forehead, and combed back over the crown was not black or even brown but definitely golden, and glinted in the light.

I did not call attention to it, deciding finally that she had applied to it some sort of gilt fixed in oil, and it was intended to call attention to the rich ebony of her tresses. That set me to wondering if she possessed a mirror. Looking glasses from Flanders were not unknown on these coasts, for they had been articles of barter on the Cordoba and Grijalva expeditions. In a big house in a deserted village one of my men had found a mirror of brass or copper, so finely polished it returned a fairly clear reflection.

When she had finished eating, I reached across the table and took her hand in mine. The skin was as silky as Marie's, the hand strong like hers, and even more shapely. Then, partly in the way of an experiment, and mainly in sudden yearning, I rose, walked around the table, bent, and kissed her dark-red mouth.

I was more surprised by the sensation than she seemed to be. I could only call it exquisite, so wonderfully smooth and yielding were the lips that I somehow expected to be firm. Soldiers had remarked if not complained that their Indian sweethearts did not like being kissed on the mouth if kissed at all, but if kissing had been left out of Spanish wooing, doubtless I would have been a more continent man. To me, it was a lovely exchange, a finesse of European civilization one might say, despite the fact my first teacher had not been a European but a young gypsy woman. I could not doubt that highborn Puertocarrero had been Marina's instructor, himself delighting in the caress despite his impotence. Marina's lips returned the pressure of mine, and I could not really doubt that she had enjoyed this sweet communion of our mouths, and perhaps it stirred her more than she wished me to know, for a dark-red glow, particularly beautiful, appeared in her cheeks. Her eyes changed expression and became warmly glowing instead of brilliant.

"Marina, I want you to be my woman," I told her in Spanish; and I did not doubt that she understood me perfectly well.

"My lord, it is not well," she answered with a little shake of her head. *Ma sigñor, no bono* was her dialectal expression.

"Why?"

Marina spoke rapidly in Tabascan. When I shook my head, smiling into her eyes, she gazed at me in profound earnestness, and said very quietly and

simply three words that shook me to my inmost depths.

"I—have—husband."

I poured myself a glass of wine, and in making sure that my hand was steady, I somehow steadied myself. Until this instant I had not wholly realized my feelings for Marina. In truth, I had not examined them, and had lodged them somewhere in the back of my brain, while I attended to the business of conquest. Now I perceived they had been strong since my first glance at her. They had deepened greatly in our months of association, when she was ever showing her gifts of intellect, such as foresight, able planning, apt speech and deed, the constant lending to me her knowledge of Indian ways and thinking, and the startling success of her own project, espionage in Mexico. All this she had done in loyalty given me without cause that I knew or could imagine. Indeed, I had taken it for granted and thought of it as good luck, not a kind of miracle; and I had felt no passion of gratitude. It had seemed a matter of course that when impotent Puertocarrero sailed for Spain, Marina would become my concubine. I wonder if she had told Puertocarrero what she had just told me. If so, he might have concealed from her his condition.

Whom had she married, and when? I recalled she had been the companion of one of Grijalva's captains, a man of noble family, and of course I had assumed an amorous relationship. Perhaps she had even then been wedded to some Indian prince, for most Indian girls marry soon after their first flowering. Highborn Mexican girls often indicate virginity by wearing a white flower in their hair; brides often wear a red poinsettia. Marina had worn neither. My brain was working with great rapidity, and I wondered for what reason a proud Indian prince would lend his princess-wife to anyone. As a spy?

All these wild conjectures found no answer in my instincts or common sense. And then there returned to me, with great power, an impression I had had at my first sight of her, unenforced by the slightest evidence, that Marina was a virgin.

"What is his name?" I asked, in the simplest Spanish I could employ.

She rose from her chair and with a dreamy look walked to a window and gazed up at the stars. A moth flew wildly around the candle flame. I could hear a Spanish soldier strumming an old, sad, Spanish song. A heavy sorrow was on Marina, a thing somewhat different from sadness, as was proven by the existence of the two words. I tried to think out the difference, and all I could perceive was that one was of longer duration than the other, the first

more passive, the second active. I knew then that beneath all of Marina's gaieties, her frequent spriteliness, her many smiles and wholehearted laughter, there dwelt a deathless sorrow.

Finally, steeling her will, she came to me and standing before me, she slipped her hand in mine.

"I am wedded," she told me, having wracked her brain to find the exact and correct wording, "to a god."

Instantly I asked a question, although I need not, for I knew its answer.

"Quetzalcoatl?"

"Yes, Quetzalcoatl. His name there was Kukulcan."

She continued to gaze into my eyes, and her hand pressed mine. She was waiting for me to speak.

"Am I not he?"

"My lord, I am not certain." And then she withdrew her hand and clapped it on her mouth, the certain sign that tonight she would say no more about this marriage.

7

The whitewashed house I occupied at Cempoala was no hovel; in fact it had two bedrooms of fair size, as well as a small chamber for my servant Gonzales. Marina was well aware of this convenience. With three other Indian girls—sweethearts of captains, all members of the first gift of this kind I had received when we had conquered and made peace with the Tabascans—she had inspected my establishment soon after its building. They had been a gay bevy, sometimes goggling and sometimes laughing at the alien ways.

After a little thought she asked me to summon Aguila. Plainly she had decided to ask or tell me something too complex to communicate through my rudimentary Tabascan and her "*poco Espanole*."

She and Aguila were the best of friends. He a Spaniard, eight years a slave in the New World, and she a native to this world yet in service to the Spanish, understood each other well, and were no doubt confidants. I had long realized that he knew much more about Marina than did I.

When Aguila appeared, she took him somewhat aback, I thought, by her first request. After he had translated it, I supposed that this matter had

already been settled in his mind.

With some embarrassment he complied.

"Doña Marina wishes to know if Your Excellency expects her to spend the night here."

"I wish for her to do so, if she will, and to remain with me a long while."

While he was translating this into Tabascan, I watched Marina's face. She did not try to hide her pleasure, and at once made another request, less brief than the other.

"Doña Marina has asked me to send her servant Sheba after her clothes bag, and also that you ask your servant to lay a pallet on the floor of the adjoining room for Sheba to occupy tonight," Aguila repeated in a satisfied, indeed a happy, tone, and his expression was ludicrously smug.

Nor did he evince surprise at the latter of the two requests from Doña Marina. Of course she knew that the captain-general and judge would not want a black serving girl sleeping in a bed reserved for honored guests. Having no inkling of the actual situation, he assumed that this bed would remain unoccupied.

At once he departed, and in his absence Marina spoke no word to me. But she looked forlorn, and when I came to comfort her, she raised her lovely face to me, and again we kissed, and this communion was beautifully tender, and some of the sadness departed from her countenance.

Aguila and my servant entered together by the rear door, and for two or three minutes busied themselves in the next room. Then Gonzales went out; Aguila came into our presence. After a low bow to me, again he addressed Marina. I thought that he said, "Is there anything more you want me to tell Malinche?"

Marina answered to some length. Aguila's face became a study; evidently he was reluctant to comply with her request. He asked several questions which she answered with the Tabascan word for assent. Then he wiped the sweat from his face and spoke to me.

"Your Excellency, the Doña Marina wishes me to recount you a story of her childhood. It is well known to all the Indians hereabouts, and in some other provinces of the Empire. In all truth I advised her not to let you know, for it is a sad thing, and I feared you might think less of her, although the Great Teules—I mean Almighty God—know she was in no way to blame. By your leave, I will tell you in my own words as much as I know. There is

more that I do not know, although I have heard dubious rumor, and she has not asked me to speak of this, only of what happened in Mexico, where she was born.

"Marina was the daughter of a great cacique, a councilor to the father of Montezuma," Aguila went on. "At her father's death, she became cacica, that is the mistress as cacique is master, of many towns and villages, fields and houses and slaves. But her mother remarried a minor chief younger than herself, and because of her lust for her young husband, she conspired with him against her own daughter, so that he might become cacique of all her domain. Truly it was a wicked thing, and unnatural, and that is why I wished to keep it from your ears, when it concerned so great a lady as Marina, and so worthy, and in such esteem of all the people. A young girl, who was a slave, had died; perhaps she had been poisoned; in any case her evil mother and stepfather gave out that Marina had died, of a pox that disfigures the face, and is catching as well, and this was their excuse for not opening the coffin in which the slave girl lay. But the truth was they had given money to slave traders to take Marina to some distant land, and make certain she would never return to Mexico. These traders brought her to Tabasco and sold her to some other slavers, who knew what to do with her with great gain to themselves, and whereby she would never return to Mexico or to Tabasco either. They took her far away, where I know not, and thus the story ends."[25]

"But she did return to Tabasco?"

"Aye, she did, by what means I know not, and here she lived as a slave of a great cacique, but he treated her with kindness—this much I know—and did not breach her maiden gate. Perhaps he intended to give her to Montezuma. But when Your Excellency came here, he gave her to you."

"With Marina's consent?"

"I believe, Your Excellency, at her request."

I need not have asked. A single moment's calm reflection would have informed me that a maiden of Marina's stature, believing herself the wife of a mighty god, and with courage and resolution, would have desired immediate union with him if he had returned to the carnal form in which he had once before come out of the Sunrise, and again come from thence in the very year he had foretold. And if the comer now was not Quetzalcoatl, only another forerunner, trading trinkets for gold to disguise his mission, she meant to discover the fact by the most direct means. If such were the case,

she had had no fear she could not preserve her virginity for her divine betrothed.

It was a strange story and situation, but no more so than the rest of the Quetzalcoatl legend, firmly believed by the intelligent as well as the common run of the Aztec people. Aguila had previously informed me that the picture writings, preserved in the teocallis, could of course be the design of some ambitious head priest only two or three centuries before, for the fostering of the cult of Quetzalcoatl and for his own gain. But some Mexic astrologers had made the science their life's study, as was plainly shown by the Aztec calendar; and the truth of the legend was more credible than any theory of its invention. My well-educated captains, as well as Frey Olmedo, never doubted that a ship had been gale-driven into the Gulf of Mexico, patently a dragon ship of those great Scandinavian mariners in what we called the Viking era. Such ships had harried the whole coast of Europe from the mouth of the Vashka River of the Russias deep into the Mediterranean Sea and had ventured west as far as Greenland. It seemed hardly possible that the boldest liar could have conceived such a good description of a Viking ship, with its dragon head and tail, without having laid eyes on one.

As for intelligent, shrewd Marina never to doubt that she had been married to this god coming out of the Sun, now an image in countless temples, was perfectly in keeping with the mysteries of primitive religions. The astonishing coincidence of my arrival in the year foretold, as well as what seemed signs and wonders, would sway the most skeptical that the prophecy had come true.

I intended in due course to investigate these so-called signs and wonders. But I could not yet investigate Marina's soul. As she gazed steadfastly into my eyes, and I the like into her eyes, an opaque mist intervened, obscuring our perception. And that mist was the vast difference and misunderstanding between the European and the Aztec mind.

"Does anyone know what happened between the time that Marina was carried off from Mexico by slave traders and her return to Tabasco?" I asked Aguila, speaking rapidly in Spanish.

"A very few may know—such as her kind master who presented her to you, and a few other intimates. But I believe, in due course, she will tell you."

I gave Aguila leave to go but bade him stay in easy call a few minutes more, in case Marina made up her mind to tell me something. She moved listlessly about the room, looking at my various treasures, among these a

miniature painting on porcelain of my mother, done by a young artist of Trujillo who had owed my father three silver ducats that he could not pay. At the time, she had been young and highly personable, and of course Marina instantly recognized her as of the Spanish race, and might have wondered what she had to do with me, in case I were indeed Quetzalcoatl, resuming mortal form and flesh. Indians of high blood are an intensely proud people; and Indian peasants would not submit to rank insult, and would rather die than be whipped. As a corollary of that, I think, they took the utmost care to hide their feelings, and an impassive countenance had been bred into them, so to speak. Still, Marina was not quite able to hide that her heart was heavy.

Finally, her roaming brought her to the door of the adjoining room, in which we could hear Sheba moving about, no doubt giving care and putting away in handsome drawers, her mistress' garments and belongings.

"*La, bueno noche, señor*," she said, her eyes not meeting mine. "La" seemed to be an Aztec word of no precise meaning but suggesting "So be it," or the French "*Voilà*."

"*Adios*, Doña Marina."

But I walked slowly toward her. She turned her eyes on mine and waited in intense suspense. I put my arms around her, pressed her breast to mine, and kissed long and tenderly her lovely lips. Then, with a little smile, not mirthful and perhaps sad although I knew not why, I bade her good night.

Her whole mood had instantly changed and her beautiful eyes were dimly luminous through a mist of tears.

"*Gracias, Grand Teul. Gracias, hombre Espaniol*." And then, in Spanish corrupt but perfectly understandable, "I feared you would now think my mouth was poison."

I knew a compelling need for an explanation of this strange remark, for the light it would throw on Marina's mind and heart for my own good. So I quickly opened the door and called Aguila. He was waiting by the embers of the fire that Sheba and her Tabascan friends had built, and he came to me in a light, swift trot. When he questioned Marina at my request, she spoke rapidly with profound earnestness, and his translation was one I would never forget.

"Captain Cortez! What she said was, the misfortune and humiliation are like a catching disease, or a lameness of body, or a great disfigurement, in that these repel other people. She was deeply ashamed to tell you of her treatment by her stepfather and her own mother, her heart had suffered a

grievous wound that could never wholly mend, and she told you as a matter of duty before you made overtures to her, yet you gave her a tender kiss."

"God have mercy on my soul!" I exclaimed.

Marina spoke again. Then she did not wait for Aguila's translation, but quietly opened the spare-bedroom door, slipped through, and closed it.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"All she said, my captain, was may your dreams be sweet."

---

[25] This part of Marina's story is told as factual by the several reliable historians of the Conquest.

8

When again I was in full control of my emotions, my brain remained alert, my curiosity wildly aroused, and instead of dismissing Aguila, I gave him a cigarro of the large size which I had an Indian make for me. If these were smoked slowly they lasted more than a half-hour, and I had learned to relish them and from them took comfort and calm. Then I bade Aguila tell me of the so-called signs and wonders beheld by the Mexics in the years preceding and in the present year of our coming to these shores.

"Not only the Mexics beheld these signs," he began, squatting on the floor. It was a position which in his eight years among the Indians had become comfortable, and a habit he could not break in addressing a great chief. But if the cacique had come for parley with me, Aguila stood proudly at my side. "They were beheld in Cozumel, in Tabasco, and in Tlaxcala, and by the truth told by wandering storytellers, in Venezuela and Darien. I bid you remember, my captain, that I served with Encisco and Valdivia, and we were shipwrecked on these shores eight years ago. There were certain signs before then, or so I have been told, that great events impended. One was a wedge-shaped light in the eastern sky, rising after midnight, so brilliant that the gloom of night changed into heavy twilight; and this rose higher, and loomed larger until it dimmed in the dawn and then was eclipsed by the strong sun."

"But you, yourself, did not see this, Aguila."

"No, my captain. But if you ask Marina, she will tell you that she saw it as a young girl not yet in flower. The visitation lasted a whole year."

"Did the priests consider it a harbinger of woe, and the people also?"

"The folk did so. The priests and astrologers knew not what to think, but they knew what the folk had mainly forgotten, the first coming of Quetzalcoatl ages gone, and that the time of his return was not far off. The second sign, not long after I had gone into slavery, was the destruction by fire of the great temple of Uitzilopochtli, god of war, in the city of Mexic. The pouring on of water from the lagoon appeared to feed and intensify the flames. This sign the priests and magicians found most difficult to read. Some thought that it foretold peace, instead of endless war between the nations of the Aztec federation, but some said it forecast the greatest of all wars, hence an even greater temple must be raised to Uitzilopochtli, for he was dissatisfied with his present house. So rose the vast new temple, with its mightier image. And now I will tell you, my master, what I have not told before, for it is a hard thing to tell, when I have lain with and loved an Aztec woman, and had children by her. Your followers have wondered at the stonelike cement of which the images of this god are made. No water is used in the mixing of the plaster, only the blood of children slain in sacrifice, and this is mixed with edible seeds and a thick syrup of sweet cane, along with some kind of binder." Aguila paused, his eyes darkening, for himself having suffered as a slave, he was not coarsened and brutalized, and he loved the sight of children playing and of people making merry when they durst, and had pity on the lame, the blind, and all afflicted folk, and the compassionate spirit of Our Lady Santa Maria was in his heart.

"Speak on, Aguila, my friend," I told him when he was once more himself.

"Soon after this died Ahuitzotl, Uei Tlatoani. His ministry met to elect his successor from sixteen candidates, all descendants of the six rulers who had preceded him, and the choice fell on Montezuma, son of the newly dead. The high priest who is called the Serpent Woman prepared him for his inauguration as the One Who Speaks. Marina told me of this, hearing of it from whom I know not, for I think she was even then in slavery. Shall I relate this, my captain? It is only the ritual and custom of coronation, and has naught to do with the signs."

"Yes, I would like to hear it."

"His black hair was plaited and six prisoners of war were prepared for sacrifice. Montezuma was clothed in rich wraps of feather cloth, loincloths, and greaves of gold. From his waistband hung a gourd, containing tobacco ground fine for the nose and maize grit for a journey. At dawn of the day

appointed he drew blood from his own legs and ears and painted his face black, and then was crowned by a half miter on the forepart of his head and a cowl made of green feathers over the rear part and down his neck. Thereafter, no king of a confederate state nor prince of the Mexic could come into his presence otherwise than barefoot, in rough clothes covering rich bejeweled raiment, and with eyes downcast. Even the Serpent Woman must prostrate himself three times before the golden chair of One Who Speaks."

"Were the prisoners sacrificed, and did the people rejoice?"

"The prisoners themselves rejoiced ere they were slain, for now they would go to forever bliss within the Sun. The folk of the Royal City rejoiced also, because they believed that the signs of evil would now cease. But the chiefs of the subject states lamented in their teocallis, because Montezuma was known as an imperious, merciless prince, so fervent in religion that he would not be satisfied with the number of prisoners sacrificed to the Great Teules. Yet he had gentle manners with his lords and visitors, and was affable and learned in conversation."

"Did the signs of evil cease?" I asked.

"No, they became more numerous. A bolt of lightning out of a cloudless sky, hurled without thunder, struck the great *cu* of Xieutecutl, whereby it burned to the ground. On a windless day the waters of the Lake of the Mexics began to seethe and roll, and mighty waves uprose and swept away numerous houses on its shores, whereof many died. Later, hunters caught in their nets a bird like an eagle in size and color, but with a small mirror in the center of its head. It was brought to Montezuma, and when he gazed into it he saw the Constellation of the Bull, his natal star having blazed brightly in that constellation. His magicians and astrologers could not read the meaning of the omen, but none doubted that it presaged evil, and Montezuma fell into deep gloom."

Then I recalled the white dove that my shipmates thought they saw, and perhaps did see, in our hour of despair and this thought led to my vivid remembrance of a white stormy petrel in my prison cell; but that fowl was real, of flesh and bone and guts, as was soon proven. Still, I did not believe in the eagle with a mirror set in its head.

"The big bird vanished in thin air," Aguila went on. "And soon after this, two messengers came swiftly from the coast of Yucatan, pale and panting because they had taken turns carrying each other on their backs, so that one could sleep while the other marched. They were soon admitted to the

Presence, and they told of what we know now were three ships of Cordoba anchored offshore. They told of the firing of a cannon, whose burst of flame and great roar further terrified the people. On the deck they saw red-bearded men, his soldiers, and some horses, the like of which they had never seen. Montezuma asked if they had come out of the East, and he dreaded hearing the answer given, for by now he and the magicians and astrologers never doubted that the signs and wonders were of the second coming of Quetzalcoatl. But Montezuma did not believe he had come yet, for the Year of Ce Acatl was still two years distant, and these visitors must be his forerunners. Also, he took comfort that the 'big canoes' had three masts, while the dragon ship of the first coming had had but one mast. Yet he posted spies all along those coasts, with word that they bring swiftly all that they saw or heard of the visitors. Also, he ordered great sacrifices made to the god of war, and that all the images of Quetzalcoatl, god of wind and waters, be decked with flowers and greenery, and certain chosen ones sacrificed to him also."

"I thought that during the stay here of Quetzalcoatl, he had forbidden human sacrifice."

"That was long ago, and the Serpent Woman declared that this part was not truth, but a lie told by the people who hated and feared human sacrifice. However, only a handful were slain by the cutting of their throats, not their chests cut open, and these were young maidens whose hair or eyes or skin happened to be of lighter hue than common, for these are sometimes found throughout the Aztec nations, and a very few have blue eyes and yellow hair. No, they are not what we called albinos, with pink eyes and white hair. The priests believe they are remote descendants of Quetzalcoatl or his followers in carnal form, for these had taken Indian women, and their blood and coloring is not quite lost."

"Did Montezuma know of Grijalva's and his men's arrival on these shores?"

"All the Aztec nation knew of it, and believed these, too, were forerunners of Quetzalcoatl."

"Were there still signs and wonders?"

"I know of none after the eagle, until the great comet we ourselves saw."

"What happened in Mexic, Aguila, after our coming to Cozumel?"

"The usual things, I suppose. You knew of the summoning of the magicians and the astrologers, and their visit to you." He hesitated briefly,

then went on. “Also there was great, very great, human sacrifice to the god of war.”

“How great? Tell me, please.”

“The number that I heard was twenty thousand in one great rite.”

“Did you say twenty thousand people?”

“Men, women, and a great many children. Captives in war, slaves, harlots who wished to die and be absolved of their sin and to live in bliss in the Sun, and other volunteers.”

“Was there human sacrifice to Quetzalcoatl?”

“Neither Marina nor I have heard of any.”

“I am under deep obligation to you, Aguila, for reciting these events. You have my leave to go.”

The great Spaniard departed. No sound reached me from the adjoining room and I had a longing to open the door softly, and listen to the soft, slow breathing of Marina and Sheba as they lay asleep. I wanted to turn to someone, but I could not, and I knew why. There was no such person.

Not my priest, Frey Olmedo, not one of my captains, and not Marina yet, for she still half-believed that I was Quetzalcoatl. I was not he, nor any god. I was not a prelate or even a poor friar in close communion with the True God. I was not a king, not a great nobleman, I held no patent of discovery from the Crown, and such authority as I had had from Velazquez was no longer valid. I was Hernan Cortez, a soldier and the elected captain of soldiers.

And the perception of this hard fact, and the realization of all that had happened and that I had heard tonight, forced me or somehow brought me to the most mighty decision I had ever made. It was to burn our boats.

9

My preparations for the great stroke followed the line I had found so effective before. Some of my trusty captains began to spread the rumor that the bottoms of our ships were being eaten by sea worms, and their seaworthiness for a long voyage was in grave doubt. Juan Escalante, swiftly rising to great influence in the force, and in whose loyalty I placed great faith, moved quietly among the men, enlarging on this report, and venturing that if these vessels floundered now, our forces would be better off in the

long run, since it would put an end to the hankering to go home. Also, it would prevent the Velazquez party, large and strong, from forcing the issue by vote or with naked power, causing the whole expedition of such high hope to turn back and then meet death in the first heavy gale met with at sea. He found ready listeners and hearty partisans in the men I called, in private, our hell-bents, birds of a feather who flocked together, men who walked with a fine swing, bright of eye, profane, who could not endure idleness or monotony, men in love with danger, utterly self-confident, true adventurers.

"Burn the damned old hookers," they proclaimed far and wide. "Cross the bloody Rubicon," was their watch cry, "and we'll all be Caesars in the Seven Kingdoms of Mexico." For a surprising number of these rantum-scantums were well-born and educated. Puertocarrero, who spoke French, had called them a *corps perdu*.

The Velazquez party immediately closed ranks. They urged that I was suffering delusions of grandeur, and proposed that I be ousted from command and their leader, Escudero, be made captain-general. Indeed, Escudero ventured to say as much to my face.

"Captain Cortez, you are behind all this talk of burning ships. You are mad as a March hare, and if a board of physicians sat upon your condition, they would decide you had been bitten by a tarantula, and confine you in a Bethlehem. As a free citizen of this municipality that you invented I have the right to say so."

"You have the right to say so, sir, if your address is courteous, but you have not the right to act, unless the chapter puts you in command."

"Listen to reason, if you have not stuffed your ears against it. Our armed force has been reduced to under four hundred men, not counting treacherous Indian allies. We have thirteen horses, count 'em, seven light and heavy guns, and in the force there are a handful of musketeers and two handfuls of crossbowmen. Your spies report that Montezuma can put at least one hundred thousand, some say five hundred thousand, well-armed warriors into the field. None of us are gods come out of the Sunrise—not one—and do you fancy the enemy not discovering that fact, if he has not done so already? Those of us who do not die in battle will be sacrificed and devoured. I entreat you, sir, for the survival of the force and in respect to His Excellency, Velazquez, who invested his own moneys in this expedition, and who trusted you with its immediate but not absolute command, to mend the ships the best we can and set sail for Cuba."

"Señor Escudero, I will do what needs doing."

Perhaps I spoke too firmly and was overheard by too many of his partisans, not to increase the danger of immediate mutiny. Truly, the mention of Velazquez' name was the waving of a red *muleta* by an *espada* confronting a truculent Andalusian bull. I could not refrain, I had obeyed an impulse, but perhaps this had been the clear prompting of instinct that had sometimes but not often guided me amiss.

Only the following night in the gloom and silence of midnight, I was aroused by a timid knock on my door. When I called "Friend or foe?" the visitor gave his name, Bernardino de Coria, a gentleman whose loyalty wavered between Velazquez and me. Lately I had thought his leanings were toward my enemy; hence I was all the more startled by his coming here to bring me such momentous tidings.

These he poured forth in one long breath, his voice shaking and his face pallid and his eyes haunted.

"Captain, I come in utmost secrecy. Escudero and Cermeno plotted with others to seize at dawn the caravel *Santa Lucia* and set sail for Cuba. They have already victualed the ship. I was a conspirant, but I prayed to Santa Maria and was given light to repent my treason. Act quickly, or all is lost."

"You have done well. Give me the names of all the other conspirators, and I will write them down."

Truly, I was appalled by their number and their prominence. Besides the two leaders, he named the pilot Umbria, the priest Juan Diaz, and the Penate brothers, hen-stealing sailors whom I had had flogged at Cozumel. Still others were Escudero's lackeys.

Coria had urged haste. To make it was one of my abilities and instincts. At once I summoned my chief constable, Escalante, who in turn aroused his watchmen. All the conspirators, their kits packed, their arms readied, their helmets donned, and the time of the rendezvous at hand, were arrested and ironed. The encampment became as "the land shadowing with wings" in that passionate cryptic writing of Isaiah; but here the wings were those of words from mouth to mouth, every sleeper shaken awake by some bringer of the news, and my whole force was up, dressed, and aroused within an hour of its first breaking. And then the awesome task which I must perform alone awaited me.

Second to my own promised hanging by Velazquez, no prospect of my life had I so deeply dreaded.

There must be no more conspiracies against our purpose and design, or both would fail. Many of my force attacking Mexico would be killed, bravely fighting, two now must die because they had deserted before the battle was met. These were Escudero, and Cermeno. These I ordered hanged. For the pilot Umbria, in whom no few of my most faithful followers had entrusted their safety on the high seas, I ordered punishment hardly less severe, in some respects more terrible because the dealing would not be a few seconds of agony but lifelong loss, which was the amputation of both feet. For the brothers Penate, thieves aforetime, of nature villainous, I ordered a hundred lashes each, from which at last they might rise and walk, but forever maimed in body and soul. Why did I spare the priest Diaz? Not once or twice in the long upbuilding of Holy Church had ordained priests died the death. He spoke the Mass, his frock was sanctified, and I could only strike him in his treacherous mouth and leave him to the wrath and retribution of God. The other conspirators had been so under the sway of Escudero and Cermeno that their consciences had been silenced and they did not know what a heinous crime desertion was.

Yet I decided not to burn the ships to the waterline but to remove their sails, compasses, rudders, and anchors, and let the winds of Heaven drive them onto the beach, whereby most of their stores could be salvaged. Those that great gales did not shatter into driftwood could not be refloated and mended short of a year if ever. Thus to all intents and purposes, my objective would be achieved, without such deep resentment or sorrow by those who innocently still pined for home, and who believed that our marching on would be a march to death. Their numbers were remarkably few. Here the plot of the deserters had served me well. The vast majority of my Spanish force now perceived that the Conquest of Mexico or destruction in its attempt was inexorably fated, and the beaching of the ships would prevent further conspiracies to desert, thus dividing the force and weakening our now implacable intent.

Watching from the quay, we beheld the last remaining seaman aboard ships hoist the anchors and clamber into boats to row to shore. A hard east wind was blowing, the long beach was white with surf, snow white on this sunny day, and the naked ships were strangely vivid to the sight. They started as if to swing on cables, and if a spirit dwelt in every ship, as many seamen believed, perhaps it hardly noticed the absence of a jerking stop as her cable became taut. Then the rollers, one hard upon another, began to smite the vessels, at first in the bows and then in the sides as they heaved about, and they rose upon the hills and fell into the hollows of the sea, and in this disordered fashion at an increasing pace drifted toward land.

The *Corps Perdu* began to wager with one another which would strike first, and cheered when one vessel or another, because of vagaries of wind and wave, or of a bottom less heavy with barnacles, took the lead of the doomed van. On the whole the ships with the highest super-structure, such a handicap in making headway in an adverse wind, were the forerunners—and this is an inept term, for none were running as indeed they used to run, it seemed by their own will, before a fresh, fair wind. They were only thrust and shoved, helpless things that were once so stately, in one awkward posture and then another.

Two of them collided, and above the roar and crashing of the surf we heard the wind-blown sound, dull over the water, and because one had drifted at a list, her leaning masts struck the upright masts of her dying sister, and two of these broke off, as did the mainmast of the innocent assailant. And now a cleanly built caravel of shallow draft, a trig, ware vessel, was well in the lead, a certain winner in the pitiful race to death. But those who had wagered on her winning did not cheer. The men stood hushed, some with stolid faces, some with narrowed and some with rounded eyes. The shore here had an abrupt fall, the anchorage chosen for that very reason, so the ships could be more readily laded or their cargoes discharged at low tide and at high, and when the caravel struck she ran well up the beach, although with a broken keel and a damaged hull.

By now the other vessels were so near that they loomed large, although they had appeared so small at their anchorage, and the eyes of every man was on the ship on which he had sailed hence. Her every hole and cubby, and well-nigh every belaying pin he knew as well as his own face in a glass. And one man turned away his eyes just before his sea home smote the beach, and two men wept.

One ship after another, and once two at the same instant, came to this dismal end of their once-proud lives. Those that struck when atop a wave were heaved forward, through the surf, and onto the strand. Those in the hollows stopped with an awesome shudder, between land and sea. Three that had hit sideways keeled over before the onrushing and implacable waves, and these began to pile up and break over the so-slight obstacle, and soon they would break up. And thus, save for my flagship far and away on her long voyage, died the fleet that had borne us from the Old World to the New.

Aye, it died, for the fact was instantly apparent that none except the caravel could ever again depart from the Strand of the Dead Ships, and she could be made seaworthy only by long labor. Their adventurous lives in fair weather and foul, dead calms and storms, wind propelled and water borne

and guided by helms that served as minds and souls serve men, were now done. No more would their brave sails fill with a joyous crackle as they put forth toward some distant port, or an envisioned island beyond the sea mists.

But with their deaths, something was born. It was not apparent in the men's faces, or in their carriages as one by one or in little groups they trudged away. Even so, it was in their hearts, not yet articulate, and, indeed, some of these hearts were too sick to speak. They were full of memories of people and things beloved beyond the desert of water, perhaps lost to sight and sense forever. If ever regained, there must first pass months or years of perilous strife, and the finders and the found would be greatly changed.

But the men would face those perils now, because there could be no retreat. And because of the belligerent nature of man, his fighting instincts, they would attack, not merely erect defenses. They would not stand at bay, but advance. Almost overnight, it seemed, our segmented force became a united army, small in numbers but great in power, and it would not turn back from our expedition into the ominous unknown with our purpose unachieved.

Truly we were dedicated to the task in the name of God and King.

CHAPTER 8

A Great Winning

1

Yet some of us did turn back a short distance on a military mission and from military necessity, because of a threat to our rear.

I had liked to think that with our ships in rack and ruin, there was no rear; that our fortunes and our fates and the path of lives was all ahead of us, and my soul was always urging, "Forward, forward." But this was an illusion that some hard core of my brain would not accept. Across the gray waters, not as far as the wild geese fly northward and southward on the spring and fall migration, five days' easy sail in a favorable light wind, little more than two hundred leagues from the port of Vera Cruz, there pointed toward us the capes of Cuba. From these capes to Cape Catoche, at the easternmost apex of Yucatan, the intervening distance was not more than sixty leagues. This was one night's flight of a swan, or of an albatross making an urgent journey, and hardly more than a whole day's journey of a vessel, her sails bellied before a brisk east wind.

But this was looking eastward, while the sailings I must fear were westward; still the distance would neither lengthen nor decrease. From Santiago, Cuba's capital, to Cozumel was not much more than two hundred leagues, and from Cozumel to Vera Cruz about an equal distance. In Santiago, Velazquez prospered and plotted and fumed, and fired off angry letters to his master Bishop Fonseca, and even to Charles V.

How did I know at what hour he would dispatch a great fleet of ships, with soldiers and horses and guns, to crush my rebellious army, cut off its captains' hands, and haul its general to a public gallows in the capital? I would not know the day of their sailing and prepare for them the best I could. I would be lucky to know within two or three days the unhappy hour of their arrival.

Garay, that able captain, Governor of Jamaica, another Adelantado of Yucatan by Charles' decree, might see his chance to strike. A new governor

at Santo Domingo, yearning to extend his realm, might take thought of the rich shores found by Cordoba and Grijalva. Thousands of miles of coasts from Cozumel to river mouths undreamed northward of Cempoala provided good landings and harbors, and only the Heavenly Powers and the fixed stars could watch them all.

It so happened that Villa Rica de Vera Cruz was now, in a sense, a divided city. The town I had laid out near Xocotla, our inland base, was called, for convenience, Villa Rica, since the mainland harbor hard by San Juan de Ulua had proven a good site for a coastal base, it was now called Vera Cruz. There I had left Escalante as alcalde, with some score of Spaniards, mainly wounded soldiers and old mariners unfit for the Mexic adventure.

Still at Cempoala, I received a letter sent posthaste from Escalante. He had seen a ship loitering off the coast, and had hoisted white flags by day and built fires by night; these signals the unknown visitor had ignored. In a small boat he had drawn into hailing distance, to be told that the vessel was one of a flotilla dispatched by Garay from Jamaica, on a voyage of discovery. Escalante had seen troops and horses, some Indian women, and what was a new thing nigh these shores, what seemed to be a white woman with two companions or maids with skins somewhat too dark to be pure Spanish.

Leaving Alvarado in command at Cempoala, I had no choice but to make for Vera Cruz with three other horsemen, to be followed by fifty picked men, swift marchers and brave soldiers. Among them was the redoubtable Bernal Diaz.

At Vera Cruz we learned from our Indian spies of three ships—from which no one had yet landed—about an hour's easy gallop down the coast. Hungry, we did not pause to eat; tired out, we did not rest; and I amused Escalante by quoting a proverb of the Extremadura peasants, that "a lame goat takes no siesta."

On the way to the ships, we met three of Garay's party, one of them a notary, one a shipwright, and the other called Peter of the Harp, presumably a musician, seemingly an odd trio to encounter on the coast of a New World. Not so, when they told me their business. It was to take formal possession of the land northward of the boundary that I would draw, this in the name of Captain Pineda of the flotilla, who represented Garay. The official confided that Pineda had three ships, two hundred and seventy soldiers, and a dozen horses. My great army of four hundred soldiers and sixteen horses need not

fear Pineda's puny army except for its power to delay our great emprise and perhaps harry our rear!

When I offered to confer with Pineda at Vera Cruz, I was told that he would not receive me, and all business must be conducted by his notary and mine. Then I conceived a stratagem to seize one of his ships, although what I wanted of it was not clear in my head, since but lately I had left ten ships shattered on the beach. The trick I tried to play was one of the most witless I had ever attempted, and my reward was precisely nil, and only the wick of a matchlock failing to fire saved Escalante from a bullet in the body.

In command of myself again after this escapade, I considered that since Captain Pineda meant to operate in and about the Panuco River, well out of my way, I need not deal with him until we had conquered Mexico. Patently his goal was gold, not territory, so I was content to send presents to the caciques in the Panuco region. These would thus remind them of the generous conqueror Malintzin, and cause them to hamper Pineda's garnerings. Then our small force sped back to Cempoala.

At last the united army was ready to march in earnest. The date was August 16, 1519. Indian bearers provided by the cacique of Cempoala would lug our baggage; some of Montezuma's agents, minor officials indeed, in a show of his friendship for Cortez volunteered to guide us through the passes. Having again donned and discarded my dunce cap, I resolved to take all their advice not with a grain of salt[26] but the whole cellar.

Keeping to Cempoalan regions friendly to us, and others disloyal to Montezuma, we marched first toward Xalapa, then east toward Tlaxcala. We were steadily climbing, the burning plains and the steaming marshes where the horses suffered more than the tramping men, left far behind, and for a while the slopes were sunlit, the air cool off the mountains, and there we saw deer, small, wild swine, and, at a distance, what seemed to be wild sheep with big, curled horns. Once we caught a glimpse of what we called a lion, dun-colored, and about the size of a half-grown calf. The Indians called him a cuguar-cuara.[27] We saw no towns or villages.

We emerged onto a lofty plateau, swept by icy winds off the high mountains, where there was no fuel for watch fires, and where we were savagely attacked by cold rain and driven hail. Marina remarked that this was no fit welcome from Quetzalcoatl, god of the winds and with some power over waters, but perhaps he did not recognize himself in carnal form. This was the first time she had spoken in the least lightly of my

identification with the god that Montezuma believed and disbelieved. On the whole it was a good sign of a greater closeness between Marina and me, and she would not confide such doubts as she might harbor of my godhead to anyone else. She knew that my highest hope of our conquering lay in the legend, even if the reports of the Spanish renegade Guerro and the fly-by-night, cross-eyed Indian Melchior that we were not teules great or small, but human beings vulnerable to arrow and spear and broadsword, reached the imperial ears.

No one else had much to say thereafter during the coldest night she or I had ever endured. Our clothes were light, our only shelter were pavilion cloths laid on the frozen ground, these a thin fabric treated with oil and holding little heat, and these same for covering against rain and hail and to break in some degree the bitter wind. Since there were no trees, we could not cut poles to make pavilions, even if we could spare the cloths' weak protection from the murderous cold. Our burden bearers raised their own pavilions on borrowed spears stuck in the ground, and huddled under them sleepless and miserable.

There was no hot food or drink to comfort us, and truly our whole company abandoned all thought of comfort, and sought only to stay alive. Officers, soldiers, and women lay close together, to conserve as far as possible our bodies' heat, and my heart at least stayed warm at the brave way they confronted this dire, deadly attack of the elements. No one gave voice to his misery or cursed me and our expedition, and the prayers to Heaven were murmured in silence. Our Cuban Indians suffered most, for they had never known cold weather and had little natural resistance to its onslaught. When the ice-cold morning broke, three Cuban men could not be aroused from sleep. Truly it was not sleep, but deep insensibility, from which they drifted without pain into dark death.

The few Cuban women in our company, whom I thought would be first to die, survived the cruel ordeal. Indeed all the girls and women in our company had suffered less than the men, even soldiers from the cold highlands of Spain, a difference between the sexes marked before when ships had encountered and weathered wintry gales off the Spanish coast. I took it that Mother Nature, for purposes of her own, had given even the leanest women a thin layer of fat under their skins. In fact, Aguila had told me as much in relating a gruesome account of the flaying of the bodies of some victims of sacrifice, one of the most horrid of Aztec rites, where the skins were to be worn as trophies or in ritual. As far as I knew, no Goth or

Vandal or Hun of deepmost savagery had ever sunk to this, although there were tales of fiendish kings of Christendom flaying men alive.

In the morning we left the plain and toiled up another pass, and what we saw beneath us warmed our chilled, cramped spirits if not yet our numbed hands and shivering bodies. It was a green plain, with fields of maize and other plantings plainly visible as well as a few huts. The air warmed as we descended, the chill departed from our bones, and although an hour ago my men could not speak without a chattering of their teeth, now they broke into song.

On gaining the plain we saw no good houses, let alone towns. The slaves at work in the fields had been so dehumanized by poverty and by labor piled on endless labor that they scarcely glanced at us as we passed by, remembering only the day's task which they must complete or lie under the lashes of their foremen. Man's inhumanity to man! Sometimes very God must regret what He had fashioned of clay in the Sixth Day of Creation.

Then we saw the roofs of a town that looked as large and fine as Cempoala. The wonder grew as we drew nearer, perceiving houses large and small, all built of stone, and washed snow white. Its name, we learned, was Caltanmi, and a Portuguese soldier said it resembled Castilblanco, his native town.

Olintetl, cacique of the town, received me courteously enough when I had sent two Cempoalan chiefs to announce my arrival. He appeared an affable fat man—a lean cacique would be a minor marvel in the Seven Kingdoms, where the main staple of diet was maize cakes, fried in palm oil or sweetened with honey, and eaten with boiled or baked hens, wild fowl, or venison. Indeed, in every yard there were so many hens that I wondered how the few roosters could accommodate them. The fowls were heavy with fat, being likewise maize-fed, and while Olintetl palavered with my envoys, I fell to wondering about this yellow grain, large kernels growing thick on a cob, easily ground and cooked for human food. If it would fatten fowls, it would surely do as much for the lean cattle and horses on the lean plains of Spain. When I was Viceroy of Mexico I would send shiploads to be sold or bartered there. I would establish great plantations in the New World and I saw no reason it could not be grown in the Old, especially in regions of abundant rainfall, and in countries north and east of Spain, since it thrived well in the Mexican highlands of cool climate. Ten hundredweight to the acre was a common yield, certainly to be increased by better cultivation and well-manured ground.

Suddenly it struck me that this common plant, unknown in the Old World, might serve more folk, and be more important to mankind, than all the gold we would ever dig from New World mines.

Yet, presently, I found myself doubting Olintetl's affability. He had been instructed by Montezuma, so he told us, to greet us courteously and extend us his hospitality; but I observed that the supply of food he furnished us was scanty in amount, and distributed to our cooks with ill grace. Also he announced the sacrifice of fifty prisoners of war just before our arrival—plainly the news of our coming had run ahead of us—in our honor and so the Great Teules would smile on us. If any of my men would climb the steps of the teocallis to the Dish of the Eagle they could see the fresh blood. What had become of the carcasses he did not say, but I made a gruesome guess.

"Are you a vassal of Montezuma?" I asked, when he had boasted of the riches and the emperor's godlike power.

"Who on earth is not his vassal?" was the haughty reply.

Marina glanced at me, and I perceived that she wished to speak. I nodded, for I had learned that her spontaneous utterances were always meet and meatfull.

"Tzin Malintzin—so we call your great visitor—is not the vassal of Montezuma, nor are any of his followers," she told the cacique. "You may live to tell your grandsons that you furnished maize for his journey home."

This shook the cacique somewhat, we could see his fat tremble and vibrate, and then and there he earned the title of "The Shaker" among my listening captains, and since the name amused the men, they never spoke of him otherwise.

"Tzin Malintzin speaks of things to come," I told the chieftain in casual tones. "At the moment I speak in the name of the great Emperor, Charles, Lord of all the Earth beneath the powers of Heaven."

The Shaker became excited and raised his voice. Making no mention of the Powers of Heaven, he said that Mexico was unconquerable by any earthly power, because it was built on great lagoons, inaccessible except for three bridges easily defended. And now I must signal silence to my captains, and especially to Bernal Diaz whom I liked to have with me at every parley with the enemy, because of his common sense and his good reading of every situation. Their eyes had lighted up at The Shaker's boasts, and their bosoms well-nigh burst with choked-back breath.

"And this is to be remembered," I told The Shaker. "The true Emperor, with many vassal kings greater than Montezuma, disparages the sacrifice of human beings unto idols, and he sickens at the thought of human flesh being eaten by man or beast. It would be well for you to stop this practice before he becomes incensed. The priests were taught so long ago by One who came out of the Sunrise."

Still The Shaker's rage waxed, for evidently he had convinced himself, on the report of spies, that I was not Quetzalcoatl again walking the earth in human form. I turned to my captains and proposed that we erect a Cross before the main temple of the town. But Frey Olmedo opposed the suggestion, on the grounds that the Indians might burn it or defile it in some way, for which they might not receive immediate punishment. God was not always swift in His revenge, Olmedo said, but waited His good time. It were better to delay the raising of the Holy Symbol and the destruction of the heathen idols until the savages had been converted to the True Faith.

Often I rejoiced that Olmedo was in our party to restrain my own impetuosity; and, indeed, the watchword of all the wise fathers bringing to infidels the great Message had ever been patience. So I ordered a display of our horses and ordered a cannon fired, which cooled off no little the defiant cacique. So he made us presents of inferior gold, and three ugly women fit for grinding maize. Nevertheless, he contrived to let us see the town's store of skulls and crossbones, neatly and impressively stacked. Bernal's estimate of their numbers would account for a hundred thousand human sacrifices in the bloody history of this town alone.

My forces moved on to a town of well-nigh unpronounceable name, Ixtacamaxtitan, which Bernal, who had no patience with such names and who refused to twist his tongue, reduced to Xalacingo. Here the cacique was far more friendly, including being generous with food, so we tarried here while I sent messengers to the great city of Tlaxcala to fetch a message from its king. We had been told that the Tlaxcatecs, like the Cempoalans, abhorred the tyrannical rule of Montezuma and would become our allies and furnish thousands of fierce warriors to follow my banner. With the Cempoalan messengers I sent a beribboned hat, with which the recipients would not know what to do, and an impressive-looking letter they could not read.

My four messengers had received good instructions. They were to travel as ambassadors, in a cotton wrap worn slantwise about the loins and another of heavy cotton in a roll over chest and shoulders, carrying a dart with upright feathers in the right hand, and in the left a small buckler and a bag of

netting for snuff and a few edibles. Truly, this was simple regalia compared to that of European ambassadors, yet it was their passport throughout the whole Aztec Confederacy, the dimensions of which I did not yet know, although I had surmised its vastness.

According to the usual course of events, our ambassadors would be met and escorted with honor to the Community House, take food and rest, and then be guided to the Government House where they would meet the Tlaxcalan Council, four speakers representing four divisions of the kingdom. In solemnity and humility they were to approach, their bodies well covered and with roses in their hands, and to kneel before the Tlatoaniano, the word meaning speakers, as Uei Tlatoani, the title of Montezuma, meant speaker for the gods.

But the concourse seemed to take unduly long, or else my ambassadors had been detained. In my thoughts, as well as in the hearing of my captains, I took care to use the word "detained," for floating about in all our minds there were other verbs, which only our *Corps Perdu*, and perhaps Bernal Diaz, would have bluntly employed. These words were "sacrificed" or "eaten."

I would lose prestige, which was as important as our swords or cannons or horses, if I waited too long to solve the riddle. On the thirty-first of August, barely over a fortnight after leaving Cempoala, we again marched, myself with six companions riding about a mile and a half in advance of my main force. The city occupied a narrow valley, its sides precipitous. Its only entrance was toward the east, toward which flowed the river: thus we were marching upriver. Only the night before, my more learned captains and some fellows well versed in classical history had been discussing the campaigns of Alexander the Great. Mention had been made of the Cilician Gates, which if the mighty Darius had seized in time, he could have put in a bottle Alexander's army and destroyed it by attrition. Darius' army outnumbered the great Macedonian's ten to one. It had given me an odd, hollow feeling to consider that Montezuma could put into the field an army which I was now convinced outnumbered mine one hundred to one.

Just below the city we horsemen came upon the Cilician Gates of the Tlaxcala. It was a wall from mountainside to mountainside across the valley, nine feet high and about twenty wide, of well-fitted stone. Its only gap was filled by the full-flowing river and winding road about ten paces wide. As we were examining it, my army drew nigh, so small that every man could hear my shouted commands, every face so familiar to me that I knew the name of its wearer.

We could penetrate the pass, the walls being undefended, but could we ever withdraw? It is a horrid thing to enter a cul-de-sac—again and again I did so in my dreams, to find myself alone among jolly fellows, who slapped my back, and lovingly took my arms as we advanced, but I saw their ill-concealed weapons and their glinting eyes, and one by one every hope of escape sickened and died. In truth, our entrance would be another burning of our boats. On the coasts we had had open country, peopled by at least fair-weather friends. Beyond these gates lay the capital of a warlike nation of four affiliated states, closely bound with that mighty city we knew as Mexic.

To my army I shouted not a warcry, not a boast of our previous victories, but the solemn words that leaped from my heart into my throat, with no meddling or censorship by my mind.

"Gentlemen, let us follow our flag, which is the sign of the Holy Cross, for with it we shall conquer."

"Aye, for God is our True Strength," reckless and often impious Alvarado shouted in reply. At this the whole force cheered as one man.

---

[26] *Tomado con precaucion.*

[27] Throughout the western states and especially in and about regions settled by Spanish, the puma, or mountain lion, is called cougar to this day.

2

No enemy was yet in sight, yet I bade the soldiers advance with their arms readied, for we must not be taken by surprise. Once in battle, they would need no command to fight as Christian Soldiers and Gentlemen of Spain. Both of these titles were, on the whole, true. Almost all of my troops were of gentle birth or had obtained the status by embracing arms. Throughout our centuries of war with the infidel Moors, arms had been the career of well-born or ambitious and talented young men who were not heirs to great estates; by this they had won fortune or a heroic and hallowed death. Our great lords held high office under the king or were in high command of our fleets and armies.

The only voice against entering the gates was that of the cacique of the lower valley, who had advised me to proceed southward through the lands of the Cholulans. This was just the opposite of the advice of the Cempoalans,

who had said that the former people were in close league with Mexico, and would pose as our welcomers only to destroy us. Besides, having once beheld the gates and their patent threat, my turning away from them would be ascribed to cowardice by the Tlaxcatecs and to wavering by my followers.

We filed through the gates and began the short march to a great and glimmering city. No countrymen or any European had precoursed me here; neither Balboa nor Pizarro nor Cabot had laid eyes on any city of the New World the equal to this. The road ran through a forest of pines. Presently, we saw what looked like papers fluttering in the breeze off the mountains: we found them attached to threads crossing the road from tree to tree. I would not pay them enough visible attention to slash them down with my sword. I simply rode through them with my horsemen, and the men hardly deigned them a glance as they lay scattered on the ground. No doubt they were magic spells of some sort, but we were not impressed by enemies made of paper.

I could not help but grin at the thought of magicians and warlocks watching from their coverts, expecting us either to turn back, or to fall dead, or turn into a flock of cooing doves. I liked to think of one of them on a dead run to the king's palace to inform him we were indeed teules.

We had sent ahead two scouts on horseback, and presently they came galloping back to tell us of fifteen Indian warriors, well-armed, their heads and shoulders decorated with bright feathers, advancing to meet us. Intrepid, rash Lares, on our swiftest horse, charged them as might a knight at a tournament, killed two, and put the rest to flight. I bade Aguila call them to come back, that we came in peace, and this they did at last, returning not in the fashion I had hoped. And then I was taught another lesson in Aztec courage and prowess at war. Suddenly they turned on our van of six horsemen, leading some thousands of their fellows until now concealed in the pine forest. The two mounted scouts galloped to our rescue, as did the remainder of our cavalry advancing between us and our main force.

Suddenly we found ourselves in dire battle, vastly outnumbered. The enemy swords, wielded with two hands, made of hard wood, their edges being inlaid with sharpened obsidian were far from harmless toys, as was shown when one all but beheaded and instantly killed one of our precious horses with one mighty swipe in the neck. Only when some crossbow arrows from the unseen distance began their deadly fall in the thick of the foe, and then my infantry were sighted advancing on the double-quick, the Tlaxcatecs bethought themselves and retired in good order.

Two of our men had been gravely wounded; two horses were dead and three hurt. We found seventeen Indian dead, their many wounded having been carried from the field. Our losses would have been greatly more except for a single fact, one at once terrible in its implications but wondrously fortunate as pertained to battle. The Tlaxcalan warriors' main intent had been not to kill us, but to capture us for future treatment.

Again we must open the body of a dead Indian to obtain his fat, with which to treat our wounded men. We had nothing to eat but a few hens we had found at forsaken houses and small Mexican dogs that had followed the Tlaxcatecs and had run barking about the battlefield. These had been so rash as to linger, facing us and still barking, as their masters fled; and they did not know at what range and with what accuracy our archers could speed arrows. We gathered about fifty of these small dogs and had a filling, nourishing, if not delicate and dainty, meal. If my men expected me to eat hens, they did not know my strong stomach. I ate dog.

We were still resting when there arrived messengers from the cacique, along with two of the four ambassadors I had dispatched to him. The messengers said that the King of Tlaxcala regretted the attack upon us, that it was made by outlaw tribes, that he wished to be our friend, and he would pay for our slain horses. By great effort I returned courtesy for courtesy, and declined payment for the horses for soon I would have many more. The messengers departed with troubled faces; I had been able to look serene. We camped for the night and in the morning appeared the second pair of my four ambassadors. They had been abused, and against all Aztec intertribal agreement had been caged to be fattened, sacrificed, and eaten. It caused me to wonder whether Indians ate men as the Numidian Negroes ate lions, to borrow magically their might, or because they had acquired a taste for human flesh. The answer might matter to a learned doctor of Salamanca, but made small difference to me.

My two ambassadors were describing their escape when their tale was cut short by the emergence on the road of a formidable Tlaxcalan army in array. I guessed their number at six thousand; some wearing burnished armor of gold and copper and the rest multicolored cloths. Their brilliant feathers and gaudy banners composed a vivid scene; and the growing noise forced us to steady ourselves, for although barbaric it appalled the ears. It was made by blowing horn trumpets and beating in fierce rhythm various sorts of drums. I had four hundred Spanish whom, at least in battle, I could inexorably trust; also fifteen hundred Cempoalans on which for no good and

proven reason I felt I could rely, and three hundred followers, as likely to turn on us as to fight for us, men from the town we had newly left.

They paused, so that we could behold their might, and I sent forth three Tlaxcalan prisoners we had captured the day before. Also I asked safe conduct for an ambassador and our notary, who would explain our purpose here and record all our agreements. In answer to these amenities, they discharged a volley of arrows, most of which fell short.

They retreated at our first onslaught but through a defile where we could not put to good use our horses or cannon. Their rear guard fought every step of the way, and we were ready to drop, dog-tired, when at last they showed us clean heels. We gained the head of the ravine, which gave us a clear view of a broad plain beyond. And what we saw there was enough to curdle our blood and wilt our backbones.

It was the full military force of Tlaxcala assembled in array. I guessed its number at one hundred thousand warriors, the highest that I feared that it might reach, not the lowest, forty thousand, a hundred to our Spanish one, the number to which I prayed it might be confined. But Bernal Diaz had no need of such mental juggling to satisfy his mind and soul. He left his place and came close to me, as was his wont, and which the men understood and of which the captains took no notice, because Bernal's position in the host was unique from any other.

"Captain Cortez, may I speak?"

"Aye, you may."

"I guess the enemy at fifty thousand. No military force ever opposed such odds in any battle of which I know, unless it was when Roland and the paladins were ambushed by the infidels at Roncevaux.[28] But I bid you remember that Spanish men are unlike any that I know on earth when the call to battle sounds. For a thousand years we have lived by battle in the cause of God. The men know not how to retreat once the battle is joined. They will not turn their backs. The main of our ancestors died in battle. We will soon engage a brave and warlike foe, but how can they die for Montezuma and their monstrous, wicked gods with the same proud and exalted spirit as we can die for the Blessed Mother and her little Child?"

I had never heard Bernal speak with such power and simple eloquence, out of his heart and straight to the heart of the matter. And what he had said would hold if we engaged the enemy now, but this I did not mean to do, and instead to avoid joined battle with such a mighty army if it were possible. If

it were not possible, I would call upon all the wisdom that God had given and life had taught me to intimidate the enemy other than with swords beforehand, and make every possible readiness that might strengthen us and weaken him.

This I told Bernal, and some of the solemnity flitted from his countenance and from his voice. With a little grin I knew and loved, he said what was hardly proper from one of his rank to the commanding officer, yet at which I rejoiced.

"Aye, Malinche, your head is well screwed on your neck, and I know what's in it, the cunning of a serpent ere he strikes, and you will save us every drop of blood within the power of mortal man, and tonight I will confess my sins, truly a long count, and then sleep well."

---

[28] Actually Roland was ambushed by Basque mountaineers, but this fact was not known in Cortez' time.

3

So we spent the night by the village of the Tezoacinco, whose cu we named Victory Tower. The following day we rested, along with seeing to our weapons and treating our wounded horses and men. The next day I sent couriers to the cacique of the Tlaxcatecs, repeating that I sought their friendship and was not leagued against them with Montezuma. This last I told him because by now I knew more about this nation than before—that the emperor regarded it as a kind of stud farm, not to breed colts of which they knew naught, but men, women, beautiful young virgins, and pretty children for sacrifices to his insatiable gods. Also he imposed heavy taxes, and would not let them have cotton or cocoa, the latter a stimulating drug which, taken in a drink, was the favorite Aztec luxury.

On this day, I took our horsemen, one hundred infantry, and three hundred Indians from the last province we had visited and raided up the valley. From my force I had excluded all Cempoalans, because of their ancient friendship and bond with the Tlaxcatecs. We captured about four hundred men and women, and by one means or another, they were caused to teach me much more about the force that opposed me, such as their formation in battle, their usual maneuvers, and whether their arrow tips were poisoned. These were not, but double-barbed and hardened in fire.

On the other hand my embassy of peace was a total failure. As reported by blunt Aguila, who had it from the couriers, their message was they would indeed make peace by offering our hearts and blood to the god of war, and then having a great feast on what remained of our bodies. On the following dawn we would meet the supreme test of battle.

For this I mustered my whole force, cavalry, artillery, and infantry, including our walking wounded, and all who could rise from the ground joining our ranks. We saddled the wounded horses and summoned all Indians that I dared trust, to a total strength of two thousand. Opposite me were fifty thousand Tlaxcatecs, under Xicotencatl the Younger, a dashing and redoubtable general, son of the old King Xicotencatl the Elder. The enemy crammed the plain, about six miles wide and of equal depth, and bright was their regalia, burnished armor, feathers, and many banners topped by the general's flag, the heron and the rock of his ancient royal house.

My orders were that our force was by no means to split. The best marksmen among my crossbowmen would aim the arrows, while others loaded them. My riders were told to hold level their lances to strike at eyes and faces. The horses were well placed, and cannons put where they could deal the most death, with swift loaders and expert firers. The muskets would be loaded by men picked not for their bravery but for their quick hands. The swordsmen and spearmen were ordered to thrust and cut low in the bodies of their opponents, before these came close enough to hack down with their broadswords. After the enemy had loosed a cloud of darts, that did us no harm, we advanced staunchly into the middle of the horde and dire battle had been met.

By the Grace of God the Tlaxcatecs were not good archers, many of their casts too short or flying wild; and so many arrows dived into the ground that it looked like a field of corn stalks without ears or leaves. Also their soldiers were so massed that our cannon balls cut bloody paths, and although these were quickly filled from their multitudinous numbers, they must walk on dead and dismembered comrades, a thing to darken their spirits. Their captains were not well trained and did not make full use of their commands. Into the thickest fighting, when some of our soldiers were about to be overwhelmed, ran the horses, their riders thrusting right and left, and the light of many Indian lives went out as the cruel points pierced eyes or transfixed skulls, and the lancers must heave mightily to shake off the dangling dead.

But our ranks were split by one savage onslaught of the foe, and could not at first rejoin, and for those moments victory or defeat hung in deadly

balance. At my shouted commands, somehow piercing the uproar of battle, my captains maneuvered to close the gap, and at last succeeded. Then, seeing that our little army was still compact and deadly, that few of us had been felled by stones or cut down by swords or slain by arrows, and their vast numbers with the help of their heathen gods had not yet killed us out as had been confidently expected long before now—their horde against our handful—there rose dissension and hence confusion in their army. Although we did not know it then, the quarrel was between Xicotencatl and a princely captain, and to this each devoted more attention and addressed more wrath than to us, the followers of each refusing to help each other. Whether it was the fault of ancient enmity or of lack of discipline in the savage mind, or the intervention of the Powers of Heaven in our behalf, we were never to know. But if I must choose a single factor of the battle most important to our victory, this altercation in the enemy ranks would be my choice.

In deadly fear of our horses and our guns, and no longer apt for death under our sword blades or on our lance points, the Indians began to lose heart, as was shown by their slow retreat in disordered ranks. Still we pressed on, killing many, although we saw few corpses, so quickly these were carried from the field perhaps in fear that our horses would devour them, or ourselves play tit for tat. Also, as we learned later, we had killed a great cacique, kinsman of Montezuma.

The end of this was, and the illimitable wonder, that the battle ended only because we were too weary to press on, with our little force victorious. Only one of my Spanish soldiers was killed, over three score wounded, and every horse was wounded but none lost. Our dead comrade we kept concealed and buried him in secret in an underground house, almost a cave, where had dwelt slaves or poor folk. This we covered well with dirt so that on our departure the Tlaxcatecs would not, like hounds, scent out the corpse and thus know that we red beards were indeed mortals, each to know death when his hour struck, and not gods out of the Sunrise.

The exaltation of our victory was at first hot and high, but it cooled and dwindled in the cold wind off the mountains. Still we made some sort of meal, of stolen corn and hens and little dogs, and the dog-tired men caught a few hours' sleep in such cover as they could provide. Besides winning a crucial victory, instead of suffering a defeat that would have ended our enterprise then and there, or brought about its dismal finish at the Eagle Dish of the teocallis, I had been taught vitally important lessons.

One was the belief that we were gods, not men, and I, very Quetzalcoatl, returned in the human form I had worn five or more centuries ago, a belief

discredited by some, half-believed by many, and swallowed whole by most of the Aztec nations, remained our greatest stroke of fortune. I would continue to maintain I was the vassal of the Great Emperor beyond the waters, but this would not reduce their credence in my godhead and might even heighten it. In Spain we have a proverb that, on the face of it, seems absurd, yet reflects a subtle understanding of the human mind. "To offer much is a kind of denial."[29] Its reverse is also true: too strong denial of a thing is a kind of assertion of its truth. Meanwhile, we would face danger and win victories as though we were indeed gods.

Hinged, I supposed, with this credence, was our enemies' fever to capture us alive, to sacrifice to the Great Teules. If these accepted the sacrifice it would be a strong indication that we were not ourselves teules, and at least it would propitiate those that were angry and be relished greatly by all, whereby victory over us would be certain. God knew how many Tlaxcalan warriors had died, and how many of us had been spared, because of this passionate craving.

Last but not least, the huge armies that could be put in the field against us were amenable to internal discord and even to making war with one another. The greatest conquerors in history had taken advantage of similar situations at every chance.

That night I met with Aguila and Marina, we three apart, to discuss how we could best exploit our amazing victory. I had tried to keep Aguila out of the thick of the fight, he being so precious to us, irreplaceable in fact; but he had found his way into it, fought like the Spaniard he was born, and had suffered no wound. Nor had Marina skulked in terror or idled. She had been a captain of nurses, her crew being the men's Indian sweethearts and even the ugly corn-grinding women given to us, who liked servitude under us better than under Indians. They had followed the army, staunching the wounds of the fallen, and administering the stimulant of strong hot cocoa they kept hot over a fire and a most powerful drug to restore sensibility which was an unknown plant ground fine and boiled down. She was as weary as Aguila and I, and her mind as active.

All felt I should continue my peaceful overtures, and fight only when these were fruitless. My companions agreed that I should continue to disclaim godhead, and Marina gave good reasons I had not considered.

"As you say, by this denial you can, if asked to perform a miracle, have an excuse to refuse to try, which will keep Montezuma in doubt," she said quietly. "His doubt is better than his being completely convinced either way.

If he were wholly convinced he could be persuaded by the magicians that this is a war of the gods, the older gods against Quetzalcoatl coming to supplant them, the ritual of his worship always different than to them, and now demanding the end of human sacrifice as in the legend. Montezuma, despite his seeming gentle ways, is an avid sacrificer; it seems a passion in him; no other Uei Tlatoani in known history has sacrificed twenty thousand in one offering. If persuaded this is a war of gods, would he not rally all his forces and persuade his under-kings to wage religious war against you?"

"It is possible," I answered.

"Myself an Indian, knowing the Indian mind, I think it likely. But I would still be your helper, Malinche. I told you why."

"Because you are wife of Quetzalcoatl by some rite and because of circumstances you have not told me."

"I will tell you, when we both are ready. Another thing, not minor, and indeed important. As long as you maintain you are a man and not a Great Teul, you need not drink human blood and eat human flesh, beloved by other Great Teules. That would go hard with you."

"I would rather die."

"That I doubt, if your conquest of Mexico was at stake. Let me tell you one more thing. Whether or not Uei Tlatoani is convinced you are a god, yet he firmly believes that this is an end of an era, and that Mexico is fated to be ruled by someone who comes out of the Sun. Never doubt that he will order his armies to find out if you are that one. Today's great battle is only the first of many. Still, the confusion of his mind will be to your great advantage, and react on the mind of all his under-kings and chiefs and the warriors also."

She was speaking in the Tabascan language which Aguila rapidly translated at every pause. Yet she knew enough Spanish by now that she could have made her points. I saw her face in the dim glimmer of a lantern, and its beauty moved me deeply, and such is the complex nature of man, that even in this solemn hour, as we talked of gods and conquest and the danger of defeat, my passion for her was intense. And there was more than passion in my heart, indeed an intimation of deep love. I knew part of what intervened between me and my desire to have her for my mate. So I asked, in Spanish:

"Marina, do you still believe I am Quetzalcoatl taking human form?"

She answered in Tabascan, as was wholly proper, to remind me she was native-born, and the thoughts she now expressed were Indian thoughts.

"Malinche, I have seen you blow your nose on a fine kerchief. A Great Teul should not have that need. Every morning you go to the jakes, and you turn your back on me at common nature's call. More human even than that, I have seen you weep. No teul of whom I have heard has ever wept, and the Father-God of your faith does not weep—it is unthinkable—although the Son wept once—so Frey Olmedo told me—and His Mother weeps often over the woes and the sins of people. No, I do not believe that you are Quetzalcoatl; I think you a man born, and will suffer death as do your fellow men. But that does not change my being wedded to Quetzalcoatl."

I felt baffled. This barrier between us, nebulous though it might seem, was truly as great as that which prevents marriage between a common Spaniard and a noble lady. My comfort must be that if, indeed, I married Marina, or even made her my mate, it would be a barrier between the marriage not of a common Spaniard, but who had been hardly more, to a great lady of Spain, even though then I was viceroy of a nation as great and rich as Spain. This dream that was hatched when I read the truth concealed in a lying document on a day of revelation was lodged in my heart if not in my very soul.

---

[29] *Ofrecer mucho, especie es de negar.*

4

In the saddle at dawn, with my other equestrians followed by a hundred foot soldiers, I led a raid through about a dozen small towns and villages. This was to impress the people with our might—all had been told we had suffered mightily in yesterday's battle—and to collect maize and catch and fasten the legs of numberless hens, to be fetched to camp by a hundred burden bearers in our wake. Also I returned to their cacique the most important of our captured Tlaxcatecs, along with messengers patiently telling him that we did not wish war, only free safe passage through the province. No doubt he listened in patience also, for he had learned what we could do when free passage was denied.

He sent back five fattened Indians, feathers, copal incense to sweeten my rank-smelling camp, maize cakes, and cherries freshly picked, as fine as Spanish cherries and a treat for the troops. With these he sent a cryptic and confused message that we could eat what we liked of the provision, whether human flesh, the gift of the ground, or the fruit of the tree, depending on whether we were teules or mortal men. Pertaining to the first dish offered,

the five slaves were permitted to join my porters, where the fat would soon wear off them, and they would no longer be coveted for any cooking pot; and for this boon they were grateful.

Meanwhile, the cacique had summoned his mightiest magicians and learned astrologers, to sit upon the grave question whether we were indeed gods or men. Marina learned of this, by what means she did not confide and I could not guess, and told me the sorcerers' verdict—that we were not teules, or we would have devoured the five fat Indians; that we were men because we did eat the maize, also the cherries, spitting out the seeds of the latter in deference to guts quite like their own. But since we had come out of the East, we were some sort of children of the Sun. Hence it followed our godlike power in daylight was extinguished after dark, and then they could attack us and wipe us out.

Never doubting for one moment that her report was true, I ordered utmost vigilance tonight, the troops making chilly bedfellows of their swords, spears, and bucklers; the watch quadrupled, the horses saddled, the guns well placed. Late in the afternoon, parties of Indians strolled about the camp offering hens and vegetables. Since we had expected as much, the men had been cautioned to evince no suspicion of their innocent-seeming visits. Some of the visits were innocent. Marina could not separate these from the guilty with any surety, but Teuch, a cacique of Cempoala, watched them with care, and if they whispered with the Xalacingo, whose treachery had now been proven, and whom I kept alive only to deal them death when the stroke would tell most, I pointed them out to various soldiers. These made ready for a sudden attack. I steeled my heart to commit a cruel but necessary deed. The caciques must learn not to send spies, and those chosen for the office must know the cost if they were uncovered. My provosts made a sudden sally, caught and pinioned about twenty, and slashed off at the wrist the left hand of each; and then, to save their scoundrel lives, thrust the gushing stubs into the hot coals of our supper fires, searing the wound. There rose a deal of screaming hateful to the ears, and there would be no little gnashing of teeth when we sent the whole pack back to their master, Xicotencatl the Younger.

I did not think he would now cancel his orders for a night attack of our camp. We had taken care not to charge any of the spies with the conspiracy and indeed had given no hint that we knew of it, letting them think we had identified them as enemies by an imaginary dark spot on their foreheads which only Malinche could perceive. Two hours after nightfall a soldier named Carlos, whose eyes could hardly endure bright sunlight, but who at

night could see as well as a barn owl, made out the wraiths of three long lines of Tlaxcatecs stalking our encampment. Desirous that they drew not too near, because fighting in the flickering light of watch fires would be as hazardous for my own men as for the attackers, I ordered a sally of my cavalry, their mounts saddled, bridled, and waiting the spur. These and some picked infantry made short work of scattering into flight the invaders, except for twenty that lay very still in the wan moonlight, their element darkness forever.

One Cempoalan was killed, and two of my infantry and one horse were wounded. How many of the invaders ran off wounded we did not know. In any case, Xicotencatl the Younger had cause to pause and reflect.

Even so, this was the dreariest night of our so-far march. The noise of the brief battle had hardly died away, when I was attacked by a hard chill, well-nigh rattling my bones, and high fever followed fast. The men, hungry and tired already, dreading the cold night ahead, and now fearful that I might die, a disaster akin to the irreparable breach of the helm of a ship in a heavy gale, suffered a fall of spirits as swiftly as my body temperature rose. In all truth, I was more than the helm of our brave vessel: I was the hand that held the helm. Far away on a golden throne sat a mighty Emperor. If he remembered we had put forth on one of many expeditions, his only care for us yet was such gold and jewels as we might send to him. Later, if we lived and did not die, if our emprise succeeded and did not fail, all of us would come to honor and fortune, and I would be made a grandee.

Tonight that prospect was so dim in the distance that even Carlos' owl's eyes could not discern its outline. If the Tlaxcatecs could wage such war, what of the Mexics themselves, a vast populace of wealth and power? If Xicotencatl could lead such a host against us, he of whose friendship we had been told, what a myriad of warriors under the sway of Montezuma must we meet at the three bridges of the two lagoons?

And now my fever climbed so high, and my chills became so numerous and severe, that I, too, lost faith in our ultimate victory. And suddenly on an impulse, by a need I could not measure let alone try to explain, I sent for Marina.

She came, and in a vision of delirium I saw her as Juvena, when as an urchin I lay stricken with this same malady. She looked at me, laid her hand on my brow, felt the leaping artery under my jaw, kissed my burning lips, hers warm and sweet, bade me be patient a moment, and brought back a drug, this a white powder which she put in a cup with a little water.

"It is bitter as chicken gall," she told me. "It is made from the bark of the quina tree, which grows in a mountainous land four hundred leagues southward of Darien, and it is good for swamp fever. Drink it, my lord, and here is the fruit of the passion flower to sweeten your mouth."

I did as she bade me; then she sat on the side of my pallet, holding my hand in hers. The drug fighting the fever caused my head to swim, and I fainted away, but when I wakened, my whole body was wetted by sweat, and I lay in a little pool of cold sweat. But the worst of my fever had broken, and my great dread now was not that my army would be wiped out in some dire battle waiting us at some distant bridgehead, but only that Marina might leave me now, and go to her own place.

"Malinche?" she whispered, her lips close to my ear.

"Aye."

"You will need more of the medicine as the night begins to pale. That is the time that the fever, now beaten back, will advance again. Meanwhile, you will sleep fitfully, with dreadful dreams, and there is some danger that if you do not keep warm, and your soul feels too great loneliness, it will take wing. If it is your wish, I will sleep with you tonight."

"It is my mighty wish."

"It is my wish also. If Quetzalcoatl looks down, out of the Sun, he may think what he will."

"Then come quickly, and lie to my back."

She gave me a dipperful of water, to replace what I had lost in sweat, and then she removed my sweat-wet clothes. While Sheba, who was in call, ran for a coverlet from Marina's own bed, she removed her own garments, and then crept under my flimsy spread, and lay with her body conjoined with mine all its length, with her sweet and virginal breasts against my back, and her legs bent in accord with mine. And at once her lovely warmth poured out to me and ingressed my chilled flesh and bone. And sweeter than this was the comfort of her nearness, and the consolation of her love, which I had hitherto suspected, and marveled over, but never before realized, let alone valued at its true worth.

And my dreams, too, were sweetened, and were no longer horrid shapes, manlike but not human, who made mouths, and no longer I slew and slew painted warriors, as Jason slew the giants in the old myth, only to behold a dozen more spring full grown out of the ground on which one had fallen.

And my soul that had fluttered as a dove alarmed by a swooping hawk, fixed itself again firmly within my body and mind.

Just before dawn she mixed the draught again, and it took hold so well, and so braced my thews, that lascivious Nature moved in me once more. Reaching my arm behind me, I thrust my hand sideways between her firm warm thighs. Its edge found its perfect fit, wondrously soft and moist, and she gave my hand one tight squeeze, on impulse that she could not help, then drew it quickly forth.

"Often," I told her, "a man stricken with chills and fever in the night, rises with the sun and fights a battle."

"That, I know," she answered. "But I know, too, you are not that man, as far as my being his companion or his sweetheart. The medicine I gave you is a palliative, not a cure. It weakens the disease but does not kill it out. Unless you take it twice daily you will suffer another attack the night after tomorrow night, or perhaps the following night, or the night thereafter, and if the attacks are four days apart, not three or two, it is a bad sign, and you may not live until the leaves of the highland trees, now colored by the frost, are once more shimmering green. But even if your malady is the most deadly of its three forms, and you avoid all attacks by use of the drug, in some months it may pass clean away."

"Where did you learn all this?"

"My father's brother, who is now dead, had a crow's share at a feast of eagles when my grandsire's great domain was divided among his heirs. Yet he became richest of them all by his boldness and thrift as a merchant. His agents traded with the caciques of Oaxaca and they traded with the merchants of Darien, and these with the agents of the Inca."

"Tell me, who is the Inca?"

"I know not, but I think he is as to the people of that land, as is Montezuma to the people of this land. Thus gold found in the rivers of Oaxaca found its way to the chests of the Inca, and in return my father's brother had chests of various riches, pale-colored fur, very soft, and a kind of cloth called alpaca, and especially chests of quina bark worth their weight in silver. And in my father's service there was a physician of great wisdom, who learned how to boil the bark, strain off the waste, put in other drugs, and boil the mixture down to the white powder that I gave you. It is worth five times its weight in gold, for the sickness you suffer is a common one through the Aztec kingdoms."

"I will pay you ten times its weight in gold for all you furnish me."

"You need not, Malinche. I have plenty of gold for all my needs."

"How did you come by it? Will you tell me? How does a slave obtain gold?"

"It is sent me by my husband in a leathern bag. It comes in dust and pebbles to the weight of a hundred gold castilians every year." Her voice had dropped very low.

"Your husband Quetzalcoatl?" I asked, holding my voice firm.

"I have no other."

"How can a god of stone or plaster send you gold?"

"He bade the head priest do so, out of his great store."

"With one Castilian you could have bought your freedom from slavery."

"What would I have done with it, Malinche? I was sold into slavery as you know, and sold again, and then given to this same head priest, the giver receiving much gold also as a gift, but truly it was trading under a prettier name. But it came about that the priest put me in charge of the giver's uncle until a certain time, and he had been kind to me on a long journey, and I was glad to remain in his care. I had no other kinfolk, my mother and her husband having buried me, in spirit, when they put a dead slave girl in the coffin marked with my name and lineage, and put it in the ground, and covered it with dirt. And with this kind old man and his wife and concubines and slave girls, I dwelt in Tabasco until you came thence, when I asked him to give me to you, which he did."

We had been talking with utter ease in a mixture of Spanish and Tabascan. Any Tabascan word I did not know, she knew its Spanish equivalent, and vice versa. We had been together so much, on the march or in council and at many meals, that we had together picked up this bastard language without knowing it; and all of a sudden it was on our tongues. No longer need we summon Aguila to communicate our thoughts. But he rejoiced at this, for he thought it might lead to our being bedmates as well as the closest of companions. And thus, except for this one lack, it was a fitting thing that the Indians spoke of me as Malinche, as did the troops in their private speech, and called Marina Tzin Malintzin.

That day we lingered about camp, occasionally beating off small, sporadic attacks of the Tlaxcatecs, who no longer wished to engage us in pitched battle, but who were not yet tamed enough to pledge me their

allegiance. That day, too, I received some grumblers who had first talked among themselves, and the good God knew they spoke the truth in their complaints. One out of ten of our force sailing from Cuba had been killed in battle or by disease. All had been weakened by scarcity of food, the bitter chill of the nights that caused them to hug the watch fires, to bake on one side and freeze on the other, and by battle after savage battle. It was likewise true that venturing further would expose us all to danger so great that we could hardly hope to escape destruction. Did not reasonable caution, and military judgment, and plain common sense demand that we turn back, build ships at Vera Cruz, and return to Cuba for reinforcements?

It must be that I possessed no common sense, only a fire in the heart. It had been kindled almost in my infancy, when I had heard of the return of the great Colon from his mighty voyage, and the glory he had won for the whole Spanish race was yet a golden haze in the western sky; also my heart fire had been fed that day of sullen skies when a rain had wet a page of parchment. This last pertained to me and no one else; I could not explain it to my followers even if I should make the pitiful attempt. I answered them at some length, that we must not play the coward and instead the man, and keep our mighty resolve made in the name of God and King. But I could have summed it all up in one ancient Spanish proverb: "the heart bears up the body."[30]

Then I remembered another proverb—that change of pasture makes fat calves.[31] So I invited all these malcontents to be members of a force of a hundred Spaniards, including all our horsemen, and some musketeers, to essay a nighttime raid on a city about five leagues distant. Its cluster of lights indicated a metropolis where pretty girls and possibly much gold might be garnered. Their dull eyes brightened somewhat at this mention, and one hard-bitten fellow remarked that "they might as well freeze and starve on foot as lying in camp."

We started forth with some Indians whose main use was as guides. Almost at once we met evil Fortune, and if our first hour's ride was prophetic of our next month's advance into Mexico, the grumblers' argument would be proven valid. The path skirting Tlaxcala was on slippery rock at the foot of the mountainside; the horses kept falling and going lame. These I sent back one by one, and soon my captains were urging that we all turn back, for the excursion was ill-boded. The hard wind down the valley from the icy crests whisked the warmed air from under our cloaks, and we shivered like cold dogs, and only the inability to speak through chattering teeth prevented the complaints from becoming general and almost mutinous.

When all our horses were limping campward led by foot soldiers, two of our Indians saw signs in the heavens that most of us were marching down to death. So they told Aguila, and I bade him speak out and tell the men, because I did not believe in hiding bad news from my followers; and a danger seen with open eyes is less appalling than one half-guessed. They listened glumly, and one man with steady teeth related how a similar forecast by an Indian made to a crossbowman as we marched to the Battle of the Plain had proved only too true. Then I must speak, chattering teeth or no.

"Gentlemen, I will not give up tonight's enterprise for all the evil stars that shine, because I believe it will be gainful. It is the devil, God's enemy, that puts obstructions in our path."

So we tramped on and lost ourselves and were set on the right path by two Indians we had chanced to meet carrying, of all things, handfuls of hens with feet tied together. As dawn was breaking, we came on two villages, whose pugnacious occupants slung stones and shot arrows, which so enraged my evil-tempered followers that they fell upon them, committing a minor massacre of all whom they could catch. I could have stopped them, I supposed, but no doubt the villagers had attacked us at the command of some minor chief, who in turn had been instructed by the priest, and he had spoken in the name of a heathen god. Chiefs and priests must alike learn that the true God blessed our arms in our crusade against the infidel.

Then Fortune smiled on us, and we came in sight of Zimpanzingo, a city as pleasing to our sight as its easy, euphonic name was to our ears. It had about twenty thousand houses, peopled by at least a hundred thousand, and since we attacked it by surprise, caciques and priests and populace fled in yelling mobs. Since they had not cast at us one stone, and their terror seemed to me a wondrously good sign, we killed only a few, then had breakfast of stolen hens and foraged maize beside a fountain glimmering in the new-risen sun.

Then from a hilltop we gazed down on great Tlaxcala, already ours in fact if not in name, and just now we were master of the second greatest city in this confederation, which meant that our conquest here was all but completed. After the capital surrendered we must win only Huexotzingo and Cholulan ere we would pass below the great Volcano Popocatepetl, into a complex of cities the heart of which was Mexic itself.

In sacking the houses and the teocallis, we garnered gold ornaments and utensils worth five thousand silver pesos, and no doubt overlooked much greater treasure that had been hidden. As for beautiful maidens, my men

were so weary that they hardly gave them a second glance. And the lewd thought struck me, that throughout history the weariness of men's limbs had prevented the borning of more bastards than any amount of strong consciences. God had so fashioned Eve that young women were nearly always in condition for copulation, this not being true of young men.

---

[30] *El corazan manda las carnes.*

[31] *Remuda de pasturage haze bizerros gordos.*

5

Gaining our encampment shortly after midday, we rested with our comrades; and the weather having warmed somewhat, our whole force was in good spirits. My own was exceptionally lifted, because my fever had not returned, the bitter medicine having served me well, and Marina and I were to sup alone tonight in a clean and cozy house that I had requisitioned, in easy call of our sentries. We would be served by Sheba and Gonzales, both of whom knew when to come and when to go.

Marina had put on her best attire, which seemed a favorable sign, and our meal was excellent. We ate some manner of wild fowl that our fellows had netted, tasty birds and truly a welcome change from hens, not to mention from dogs. Also we had maize cakes with honey, red beans with peppers, and a jug of aged plum juice as a delicious substitute for wine. She and I talked of this and that until I gave Gonzales leave to go. Taking the hint, Marina informed Sheba she could go to her cell adjoining the main chamber. As they parted Gonzales made bold to give Sheba a knowing smile, at which the Negro girl raised her eyebrows.

They were far more confident of what would ensue than I. Well I knew Marina's mind, a deal about her heart, and something of her lovely body that two nights ago had been cuddled against mine. What I did not know was her soul, the soul of a highborn Aztec girl whose dedication to what she believed was staunch as my own. In that soul was the light of human love, of a noble nature, and of Christian compassion, but there was also the dark of superstition. Although this last was not the precise word, I knew no other. Our Lord Jesus dying on the Cross was no more real to me than Quetzalcoatl dwelling in a heathen heaven was real to her; and with him she believed herself in bond. Of the nature of that bondage, I had no glimpse.

The room was furnished with a wooden bench, and when I beckoned to the space beside me, she came and sat there, and slipped her hand into mine.

"I love you, Marina," I told her.

"Malinche, I love you," she answered.

But even the word love might have different meaning to her than to me. Actually there was no Tabascan word in the sense it was used in Europe; although there was a word for passion and one for its act. Yet I reckoned that she did know what she had meant, and what I had meant: and if it was a new thing to her, she had realized it by intuition. At last I spoke.

"You told me you no longer believed I am Quetzalcoatl."

"No, you are a human being, and for this I thank Quetzalcoatl, and the new God."

"The God of which you speak is a very old God, indeed older than the universe, because He made it."

"That I do not doubt. He is a much greater god than Quetzalcoatl, or Uitzilopochtli, the god of war, and even Tetzcatlipoca, the king of gods. Yet I am wedded to Quetzalcoatl, whether he be great or small, strong or weak; and you are not he."

I did not deny Quetzalcoatl's existence. I had an impulse to do so, but saw the uselessness of obeying it. In all my dealings with Marina I had to consider him as a reality, because she did so without one grain of doubt.

"Did you promise him that you would be true to him?" I asked.

"You mean, of course, to remain a virgin until he claimed me for his own?"

"Yes, I did mean that."

"Such a pledge would not be asked of a mortal maiden marrying a god. It went without saying. To the head priest at his temple in Oaxaca, who was his ears and tongue, I promised something, a promise I must keep, for I had been granted a great boon. Of that I will say no more, tonight or perhaps ever. But I did not, in so many words, promise chastity."

"Do you think you owe it to him?" And by now I had trouble forgetting that Quetzalcoatl did not exist in fact and was only the creation of human imagination, and his substance in the temple was lifeless stone. Marina's complete acceptance of his reality had muddled in my mind what was real

and what was not, and this was a distinction that often the wisest man could hardly make.

She considered my question a good while. I realized the instant that she found the answer. She leaned forward a little and looked me in the eyes.

"No, Malinche, I do not. I have a mortal body; he has none. He is a great god, born of the Sun, and I am born of woman. He has not claimed me yet. The priest did not speak of that matter; indeed he gave me no instruction as to what I owed and did not owe in the interval; he told me that the second coming of Quetzalcoatl in human form was not far off, in the Year of Ce Acatl, when plainly he expected me to become his wife indeed, which I myself intended."

"Marina, will you sleep with me tonight, and make love with me?"

"I slept with you two nights ago. I loved doing so, because thus I could minister to your sickness, and I loved your body closeness, and I knew passion when you slipped your hand between my thighs, although I controlled it. This I was able to do because I had not yet perceived what would be right and true to my soul, and what would be wrong and faithless to my soul. But now I know."

Her face was serene. Her beautiful strong hands lay at ease in her lap. She knew what she was about to say: before Heaven, I had not the least inkling whether her answer would be yes or no. Of one thing I could be certain: her decision was of utmost moment, of gravity impossible to exaggerate, in my life henceforward. I could not know myself or realize my potential and my prospects of the achievement of my great design would be woefully reduced, without Marina.

"Quetzalcoatl evinced no wrath when I lay at your back, both of us naked, to lend you my heat and my strength," Marina went on. "The house did not shake, no great wind rose, when I dozed off into slumber my dreams were sweet. Even in the morning when you wakened passion in me by one touch of your hand upon my fountain, and I squeezed your hand between my thighs that I might feel that touch more strongly, still neither of us were struck dead, nor were given signs and wonders of our soon destruction. I do not believe he cares if I come to him violate or a virgin. He has chosen me for one reason, only one, which I cannot tell you now: it pertains to his last visit upon the earth in the shape of a man, no doubt a lustful man. He was tall, with yellow hair and beard, a *voyageur* upon the stormy sea; and well he remembered those days and their delight. Malinche, there must be very little common pleasure in being a Great Teul. There is only satisfaction of

eternal homage, of incense burned, of the chanting and ceremonies of the priests, of human beings endlessly prostrating themselves before his insensate image, and of their awe and terror. A mortal king can relish such debasement by his fellow mortals, for he, too, is doomed to death. It is flattering to him because he cannot forget that he is himself a man, and it is proof that he stands so high above so many."

Marina paused to collect her thoughts, and then spoke in soft, deep tones.

"But what need of it, or what satisfaction in it, has an immortal god? Unlike the god of war, or the chief of gods, Quetzalcoatl has never shown delight in human sacrifice. Having drunk of clear and lovely streams of water, and of what you call wine, and of which I have drunk, so delicious to the nose and tongue, why should he crave a bath of blood? Why should he want human hearts, newly torn from human breasts, burned before him in a brazier, their fumes rising to his nostrils which are holes in stone? While he was on earth he beheld the strength and the glory of human hearts. He had felt his own heart bound, gladden, or sadden; he had known the swelling of his own breast against his ribs in the exultation of victory. He had drunk and roistered and romped and fought with fellow men and known their brave companionship during gales at sea. For when he was a man he was a man indeed, no storms were stilled because he had been a god, and would again become one. One picture writing that my sire had seen showed the dragon ship in which he came here, her boats smashed, much of her rail carried away, the top of her mast broken off and gone, and what I know now was her sail, not the dragon's wing, was little more than a torn rag. This picture writing only the high priests, and the mightiest magicians, and a few great lords such as my sire, were permitted to see. Malinche, it comes to me that Quetzalcoatl has much in common, or at least more than any other Aztec god, with the true God you call the Son, for he too dwelt on earth in human form."

"I cannot let you speak so of our Lord Jesus, or of His least likeness to a heathen god, for this is sacrilege," I broke in.

"The house did not shake. I am not struck dead. I did say it, and I stand by it, come what may. And now, my lord, Hernan, I will tell you to what all this thinking, and head scratching, and meditation, and groping for the truth, has brought me. I will live as long as I can as a woman, not in the way of the wife of a Great Teul. Because I am his wife, and you have a wife across the sea, I cannot become your wife, even if you so wished. But I can become your concubine—such is sanctioned in your own country as in mine—and I

will remain so, until a certain day, or until you tire of me, or for some reason I become an obstacle to your great designs before that certain day. If thereby I wrong my husband, and his wrath rises against me, and I am struck dead, still I will be deprived of life only a little sooner . . ."

She stopped suddenly. The strange glowing of her hazel eyes swiftly faded.

"Finish what you were saying. Speak on."

"Lord, I cannot. It is something I must bear alone. I have been repaid, paid in advance for what I must give; I will keep my oath. Give thought to it no more, nor will I. Take me by the hand, if it be your wish and pleasure, for I am yours to do with what you will. And if it is what I so greatly desire, for which I deeply yearn, and have so yearned almost since our eyes first met, pray you dwell no more on what I have said, but think of me as your sweetheart, and your mate in body and soul in such time as we have together, and be not troubled, and follow in the way of man and maid, in all of its delights, and in the glow of love."

Her eyes had filled with tears, as did mine, and hers were tears of happiness, and mine were also. But my eyelids smarted from tears of strong salt which do not flow readily because they betoken a deep shadow athwart that happiness, and awareness of its brevity. No, I would not give thought to what Marina had left unsaid, I would dismiss its implication until I could know all, and study it well, and perhaps see my way to change it. As wise Solomon had put it in his song of love to his dark-skinned sweetheart, I would be as a young roe on a mountain of spices.

I had been continent since my sailing from Cuba, but now the fast was over, and the feast could begin. And it would be a love feast in its truest sense, for neither of us would know guilt or shame, such mighty ocean rolled between here and Spain, and such vast distance stretched between our lowly earth and the sun, where by her belief the Great Teules had their dwelling. She and I were children of the earth; some of our ecstasies were ethereal, some were of earth earthly. It was to these we would look tonight, perhaps with dim glimpses beyond earth, for such gifts are sometimes given to true lovers.

I thought of summoning Frey Olmedo, asking that our temporal union might be blessed, but it would be against his conscience and his instruction, even if by his broad humanity he would not refuse; so I forsook the notion. Instead, I gave Marina one of my medals, on one side the Castle and the Lion of Castile and Leon, and on the other side the Maltese Cross, and she

gave me a little golden image not of a duck, so prized by the Aztecs for reasons no European knew, but what on close inspection I perceived was a wild goose or gander, not walking or swimming but on widespread wings. Then we exchanged a long and loving kiss.

And when we had walked hand in hand into my chamber, I remembered the instructions of Juvena, so instead of each disrobing in avid haste, in exquisite leisure we disrobed each other. Then in a warm room heated by a brazier, whose blue flame over the ruby-red coals gave light enough for our eyes' delight, her glimmering dusky body and mine on the white coverlet as an island amid shadows, we sought each other wholly, a gentle, slow, sweet search, until it seemed we were one flesh truly, with our souls no longer apart and alone.

And when the bridal rite was over, and her strange and lovely fires were slaked, she went to sleep in my arms. And I kept vigil over her for about two hours, my thoughts ranging far and wide, almost to the border of the Unseen, and then I also slept.

CHAPTER 9

Two Worlds Meet

1

After being a schemer, and then a bold striker, and then a captain in great battles, and lately a lover, now I must be a very Machiavelli in diplomacy. It began with hesitant and half-hearted overtures by the Tlaxcatecs toward making peace with me. I had builded better than I knew when, because of Marina's inkling that Xicotencatl the Younger had conceived the attack by night, I had sent to him in a handsome package the twenty hands we had cut from his captured spies. This act of defiance, even insult, was well grasped by that warrior prince, at once cunning and daring, and his wholly mistaken conclusion was that myself and my small force feared him and his myriad numbers not in the least.

Messengers and minor caciques brought gifts, apologizing for their paltry worth, and explaining it was because Montezuma kept them poor as a matter of policy, depriving them of cotton which their cold uplands could not grow and of warming, stimulating cocoa without which life was hardly worth the living. Also they invited us to visit their capital, and blamed their previous belligerency on their own blunder in supposing we were in league with their despotic masters, the Mexicans. Meanwhile at my command my soldiers had hurled no taunts. Neither had they stood about and gawked, and instead appeared busy in caring for their weapons, as if no thought of peace had entered their heads.

After my courteous greetings and thanks for their gifts, I had instructed them to return and send an embassy of higher rank, bearing more and greater gifts. They departed, and our next visitors we did not at first recognize in their grand and stately procession. Plainly they were not Tlaxcatecs of any station, and the eight leaders were obviously great caciques or noblemen with about two hundred attendants. Their manner and mien and costly accouterments soon persuaded me that they most certainly had come from Montezuma's court, which meant that he had taken open notice of me at last and saw the need of dealing with me as a god or at least a king.

When with due pomp, I received them, their message though brief, was portentous in the extreme. Their master, Uei Tlatoani, had welcomed my letters and prized my offer of friendship. And this last he would give me freely, along with gifts beyond price in gold, silver, jewels, cloths, incense, and slaves, the same to be delivered annually in any amount I named—on one condition. This was that I halt here, or better yet, return to the coasts, and on no account to enter his capital.

While these ambassadors were at my camp, Fortune had her little fling in having rash Xicotencatl, made bold or desperate by their coming, launch a surprise attack. Whereupon I must call for horse, and my followers snatch up the weapons they were so assiduously cleaning. In great haste to see the fighting and its outcome, Montezuma's envoys rushed up the steps of the teocalli. The skirmish was brief and decisive. Xicotencatl bethought himself and retired from the field; and the lofty visitors descended the stairs in a dejected manner.

Still they remained in their luxurious pavilions, for I had given no direct answer to Montezuma's proposal. On the next day Xicotencatl saw fit to visit me in peace, with servants bearing gifts worth the bringing. And thus the embassy of the great central power, Mexico, and the very prince of its most populated allied state, Tlaxcala, beheld each other currying my favor.

By blowing hot and cold with both, I caused them to fall to quarreling, and Marina spurred them on at my suggestion and by her own inventions. Each accused the other of long abuses, and of intended treachery to me. And the fruit of all this was, as regards Montezuma, we were enriched by his gift of three thousand pesos in gold jewelry, some of workmanship excelling that of the jewelers of Antwerp, and two hundred pieces of cloth of exceeding beauty, decorated with embroidery and brilliant feathers. Indeed these compared well with the silks and satins fetched from India by the Portuguese. Still, the gifts were of small importance compared to the reports brought to him by his ambassadors, at which we could only guess. But Marina thought that our courteous treatment, and our seeming fearlessness, and especially the brisk battle they had watched would impress him deeply; and most telling of all, perhaps, was my making them wait for audience, while I conferred with the Tlaxcalan chiefs. This fact would give Uei Tlatoani the most pause for thought and lay upon his indecisive mind the greatest burden.

Finally I was convinced that the Tlaxcatecs truly desired peace and would be our faithful allies: indeed they offered to leave Xicotencatl as hostage to their troth. Only then did I consent to visit their capital, and their

gratitude and satisfaction could hardly be feigned. So we set forth, two of the Mexican ambassadors in my array. They were carried in hammocks, numerous attendants brushed flies and attended to their wants, but the fact remained they were making for an enemy capital under my protection. And truly this must rankle in their hearts, and perplex and sadden Montezuma, who until the ill omens and then the fact of our arrival might have assumed the whole world had been made for him.

The Tlaxcalan chiefs had sped ahead of us to prepare for our arrival. We marched in full and fine military order, rank by rank, every soldier carrying his weapons, the cannons on rude wheels, the horses groomed and prancing. At the outskirts of the city, we were met by the four chiefs of the Confederacy, one of them Xicotencatl the Elder, who was virtually king. Thrice they bowed before me, kissing their hands and touching these to the earth. Behind them marched the priests in long white robes, burning copal incense, but in my mind their humility before our Christian banners did not offset their hair matted with the blood of sacrifice.

The streets were so thronged that we must push the people back in order to advance, and still their faces remained bright and smiling. I could not doubt that they considered us their rescuers from harsh oppression. Bouquets of roses were offered to our captains and all riders of horses, whom they assumed were great chiefs under Cortez. Handsome quarters had been prepared for us at the Great Cu, the foremost temple of the city.

It was a great city. Capital of a state of a million or more folk, it had almost every convenience and facility of a European capital. The markets displayed an abundance of all kinds of edibles, such as venison, wild and tame fowls, fresh fish, maize in many forms, vegetables, and some dainties we did not know. There were barbershops, bakeries, gold- and silversmiths, tailors, and clothmakers. The streets were well laid out and clean, lined with houses some of which could fairly be called mansions; and surrounding all were neat, well-tilled fields and pleasant farmhouses. At every corner stood a watchman, and I found out the efficiency of the police force when a small quantity of gold was stolen from the quarters of one of my soldiers. The thief was soon arrested, tried, paraded with a crier who declared his guilt, and publicly hanged.

I had bade my men show the utmost courtesy to rich and poor alike, partake in no quarrels, salute the great folk and bow respectfully to the aged, and make friends with the children. By no means were they to loot, and their honesty became a legend in the city where Montezuma's agents and tax collectors seized all that took their fancy, including beautiful young girls.

Any worthless article a soldier might have was considered a voucher at the community house for anything he might desire.

Xicotencatl the Elder was indeed old, and blind as well, but after feeling my face he said he would know me anywhere, if he could use his hands for eyes. Among other gifts he presented me with five young girls, all virgins, one of them his daughter and the rest highborn, each with a serving maid. But since they were so young, one no more than twelve, I ordered that they remain at their homes, until the Tlaxcatecs destroyed their idols and ended their heathen practices.

These last were in horrid contrast with the beauty of the city and its otherwise civilized folk. My men found trellis houses, packed with men, women, and children who were being fattened for sacrifice and for wolfish feasting. These pens they destroyed, but the inmates dared not rejoin their own people, and must follow us for protection. When I reproved the chiefs, they promised to put an end to the barbaric custom, but this was lip service, and I knew they would resume it as soon as we turned our backs.

Very plainly piecemeal subjection of the empire would not make its people Christians. Mexic itself and all the subject states must be ruled by Christians, before the evil teocallis could be changed into Christian temples. The destruction of their idols would be, too, a passing thing, unless their hearts were changed. The dream of saintly Las Casas that we should teach the Aztecs the Christian religion and not hold them in bondage for many years was indeed a dream. Not until a whole century had passed and the present generation had died out, and others born in the Faith had taken its place, could the Will of God prevail. Thus our Conquest of Mexic was truly a crusade.

Until that conquest there was little we could do of our Lord's work. We managed to have the idols removed from one *cu*, the foul place cleaned and whitewashed, and a Cross and a Holy Image raised there. And there the six young noblewomen were baptized, then given to my most brave and able captains. Old Xicotencatl's daughter, now christened Doña Luisa, the bachelor Alvarado took to wife, which won his undying loyalty that might prove priceless before our course was won.

We lingered at Tlaxcala twenty days, my own troops resting, Tlaxcalan chiefs assembling their warriors, I scheming and planning, and my sweetheart's spies bringing us every day reports of Montezuma's purposes and whims. One day he wished to fight us with all his power; another day he would placate us; on a third he would leave it to his gods and magicians to

destroy us; on yet another he would yield to us; for it was written in the stars that we should come and rule his empire. But he had captains and advisers of stronger stuff, and I had little doubt that sooner or later we must conquer his capital by force. Doubtless he could put one hundred and fifty thousand men into the field, nearly fifteen times our number including over ten thousand Indian allies not all worthy of our faith. His warriors had excellent bows, arrows with well-ground obsidian points, heavy obsidian spears, and slings that could cast stones well-nigh as straight as that with which David had felled Goliath.

I inquired as to its water supply, which I had thought I might cut off. Its source was Chapultepec, two miles from the city, and flowed through aqueducts as fine as Rome's. And I heard till my head ached how the city was built on causeways in two vast lakes, with innumerable gaps with bridges easy to defend.

To learn still more, I dispatched an embassy to Montezuma, composed of Alvarado and Tapia, a Cempoalan chief, with one servant. But these turned back without entering the city, the risk being too great for bold Alvarado to care to run; the fact discovered when from an eminence he beheld the might and grandeur of the city. Yet we would march on that city, on this I had resolved, and the hour was about to strike. It was my plan to go by way of Cholula, despite its people's reputation for intense loyalty to Montezuma. If we conquered there, the effect on Montezuma would be great; and this way led to the best causeway into the capital.

The notion sent old Xicotencatl into shudders. He said that the Cholulans were the most treacherous of all the Aztecs; but I had heard the same account of almost every people we had met in all the Aztec country. Still my inclination was to take this route, which might be instinct, which is often unconsciously meditated wisdom, or stubbornness, or even bravado.

In my life so far I had made my full allowance of mistakes, for as our Extremadura peasants were fond of saying, there are so many ways to be a fool no man can escape them all. If Marina had not long before discovered I was not Quetzalcoatl come back to earth she need only recall my witless plot to capture one of Garay's ships when I had just wrecked ten, to perceive the mundane truth. A god may wage a hopeless war against another god, as did the Titans against Zeus. A lame and ugly god, the Greek Hephaestus, later the Roman Vulcan, might be so besotted as to marry Aphrodite, Venus of the Romans. But he would not trade a priceless pearl for a golden trinket, or make the angels laugh.

Men of great deeds sometimes curse their enemies, but their bitterest curses are saved for their own fool selves.

2

Was I making another colossal blunder now, in deciding to advance on Mexic through the country of the Cholulans? In what seemed utmost earnestness and severe fright, the Tlaxcalan cacique pleaded that I not do so. He said that Montezuma was sending a force of fifty thousand to support the Cholulan army; that the regular road had been blocked off and another opened which was to be our death trap. The city had been barricaded, its armories laden with weapons, and, a fact which already troubled my mind, the Cholulans had sent no messengers of friendship and no gifts of peace.

Presently they did send envoys but more as an insult than a tribute, since it was composed of low fellows. These I ordered out of camp with word that the caciques of Cholula must present themselves in three days, or I would destroy their city, and this threat was duly written down in their picture writing, and signed by myself with notarial witness. On the following day some caciques arrived, visibly shaken, explaining that their remissness until now was in fear of the Tlaxcatecs, their ancient enemies. They pledged their friendship to us and "to the King of Spain," which to them must have been a puzzling phrase.

I did not entirely believe these protestations, but now that my terms had been accepted, I must either enter their country or cringe from doing so, which would be our ruin.

On October 13, 1519, we began our march in full military array, followed by five hundred Cempoalans, and ten or more thousand Tlaxcalan warriors. Persuaded that these had their own ax to grind, at two leagues distance from Cholula I sent back all but five thousand. At this place the Cholulans provided us with ample food, and in the morning caciques and a large number of white-robed priests came forth to meet us, singing what seemed to be temple music rather than a song of welcome.

These asked that the remaining Tlaxcalan warriors remain at the city's outskirts. This pleased me not too well, nor did the sight of a blocked-off road. Their refusal to destroy their idols, the request being one I dutifully made, did not trouble me, since Cholula was a holy city to all Aztecs of the cult of Quetzalcoatl and of Anahuac. We were told there were three hundred and sixty teocallis here, which we could readily believe, the temple of Quetzalcoatl being the greatest of all. In case of an invasion a great flood of

water would rush down from this vast *cu* and drown the enemy. Hence its walls were ever kept in repair by only one kind of cement, which would melt to permit the miraculous outpouring. It was a sort of which we had heard before with sickened ears. Its binder was the blood of children especially sacrificed.

I soon forgot this horrid fact while talking to two priests with special insignia, whom Marina identified as tantamount to bishops governing all the temples in the city. These appeared gentlemen, urbane, men of the world one would think, imperturbable, with flawless manners. They pointed out that, after all, the Cholulans and the Tlaxcatecs were hereditary enemies, the tribes went in for that sort of thing, one must expect it, and if I did not need the Tlaxcalan contingent, really they must advise me to grant the chiefs' request to leave it outside the city. Impressed with these prelates of the Aztec religion, perhaps a little flattered by their frank and cultivated speech, I agreed to the proposal except in the case of the Tlaxcalan Guard, an elite company which had previously served Xicotencatl the Elder, and who had come over to our side, lock, stock, and barrel as our musketeers liked to say, when their chief and I made pact. Our other Tlaxcatecs were burden bearers.

"You are a generous and considerate conqueror, Your Grace," was Marina's translation of the compliment one of them paid me. But there was a diamond-hard glitter in her eyes that caused me to think she was not as impressed by their one-gentleman-to-another manner as I was.

Even so, I invited them to visit me at my headquarters, regarding them as the best mediators between me and the Cholulan caciques. This invitation they accepted in the most courtly way, and promised that my quarters would be quite to my satisfaction in one of the buildings in the main square of the city. There my captains, too, would be comfortable, they said, although to their regret my rank and file would be somewhat crowded.

We proceeded into the city. Already heartened by the courtly attitude of the two prelates, I was overjoyed to observe no enmity on the part of the people thronging the streets. A good many children ran out and timidly gave the men flowers, their mothers smiled, young maids waved their hands, and all were eaten up with curiosity about our arms, armor, cannon, and our horses. Yet, I did not fail to observe barricades at the entrances of certain streets, a discordant note in the fine song of our welcome, and a rotten spot in my apple. Also I noticed a good number of Mexic ambassadors in their usual dress, but none of these approached me.

My scouts had meanwhile fanned out, and presently their captain rode up beside me to report some pits they had found, dug deep in one of the thoroughfares, studded with sharpened stakes hidden under dirt. We had hardly arrived in our quarters in the main square of the city, all that the two gentlemanly bishops had promised me, when another scout reported more barricades and pits, and one of Marina's spies informed her that seven people, including five young boys, had been sacrificed the preceding night to the god of war. Of equal dismay to my hopes of a peaceful passing was the flight from their homes of the city's women and children.

When our rations of food arrived, it proved much reduced in quantity and quality to that given us yesterday. Although I sent for the great caciques to complain of the shortage, none made their appearance. But I was appeased somewhat, and my hopes a little quickened, when the two prelates I had met on the road arrived in beautiful attire and splendid state. I could deal with these two powerful men, I thought. Doubtless of exalted birth, they had become civilized by their own nature and no doubt by studious pursuits, and I would be proud to present them to grandees of Spain if I had the chance. It was commonly said there that one gentleman can always recognize another, despite differences in color, dress, religion, or language.

They greeted me with due ceremony, and I ordered the serving of frothy, steaming cocoa.

Then I made the polite request that two thousand Cholulan warriors accompany my army into Mexic, in return for my leaving my main force of Tlaxcatecs outside the city.

They explained that their great cacique, virtually a subject-king of the emperor, could not easily be persuaded to this arrangement, but they would use their good offices to that end. He was something of a—let us say an old-fashioned chieftain—but I would understand. In fact, they believed I could rely on the granting of the escort. Meanwhile Marina's translations had sounded a little tart—in fact she was watching these two suave prelates with what seemed unnecessary care—and I was slightly embarrassed by her failure to show them full, due respect.

I presented each with a handsome if not very valuable jewel, which they said they would prize as keepsakes in remembrance of our pleasant interview. I escorted them personally to the door.

When I returned, Marina sat with folded arms, her eyes searching mine.

"Have no concern that your request for a Cholulan escort will not be granted," she told me with an enigmatic, perhaps a wicked, smile.

"What ails you, Marina?" I demanded. "You were hardly courteous to those two great lords of the Aztec priesthood, fit to be marquises in Spain."

"Was I so? I kept wondering if their beautifully dressed hair had lately been matted with the blood of little children. As for the Cholulan contingent —let us suppose that the report is true that Montezuma has sent a great force of picked men to wait for you in the defiles of the mountains. Doubtless the Cholulans will fight bravely at your side! What else could you expect when two such noble gentlemen will make the arrangements?"

Suddenly a pretty bubble that I had blown burst with a little pop inside my brain. What if the trap had been set and it would now be implemented by two thousand Cholulans marching with us as friends? Taking us on our flank or rear, they could complete the investment of our whole force, capturing and killing us off to the last man.

"Marina, I have been a fool—a vain, fond fool!" I burst out. "Thank the good God you are with me!"

"There are so many ways of being a fool—so you once told me—the saying of the peasants in harsh Extremadura—that no one can miss them all." And her eyes were misty and incomparably beautiful with tears. As usual, at such times, she wanted to be kissed, and I obliged her, let alone myself, by doing so with my whole heart and soul.

That very night Marina was again the heroine of a minor but significant event. A noblewoman, accompanied by her son, paid her a visit in the dark of midnight, and warned her that in a few days all our force would be wiped out or captured and taken to Mexic for the sacrificial knives of the god of war. Marina, however, might yet escape, and her son would take her to wife if the gods permitted, and if not, to honorable concubinage. Marina feigned to fall in with the plan, and asked the lady's permission to gather up her most treasured belongings. Consent was given, and my sweetheart immediately informed me of the whole matter.

I ordered that the lady's son be seized and with my own hand I put the point of a dagger to his heart. It did not take him long to decide to tell all. Montezuma or his ministers had hatched the plot and had dispatched twenty thousand of his best troops, half to lie in wait for us in the barrancas, these being the defiles and dark ravines between our camp and Mexic, the other half moving now into Cholula to help the warriors here if we forced battle.

Giving rich clothes to the old lady and her still-trembling son, I promised them my protection and arranged for them to leave our quarters unseen. The event's special interest to me, second only to the disclosure of

enemy plans of massacre, was Montezuma's obvious concern for Marina's safety. To rescue her from the coming slaughter, he had run the risk of sending two inept agents, the middle-aged lady and her son, to my camp. He would not have done so for any sort of princess, perhaps not for one of his numerous bastard daughters. The only possible answer was his knowledge of some connection between her and the Great Teul Quetzalcoatl, whose favor he direly needed in this time of crisis. I could deduce a little more from the patent fact that the two high priests of Cholula obviously did not know of this connection and believed her, at most, no more than Montezuma's personal spy. Since her marriage to Quetzalcoatl had seemed rather widely known in Tabasco—otherwise I could not explain the reverence, more than was due royalty, paid her there—I suspected all talk of it had been kept from the Mexicans, except, perhaps from the Serpent Woman, and a few priests and high officials. Patently, then, the fact—I would call it a fact, as had Marina herself—was potentially of vast political importance in the capital.

One more inference was inescapable. If Montezuma had believed I was indeed Quetzalcoatl, and was living with my wife now that I had returned in mortal flesh, he would not have plotted and desired that she desert her husband, enraging him beyond all bounds. Hence he must have been convinced, at least on the day that the plot was hatched, that I was not a Great Teul but a fellow mortal who presently threatened immense harm to him and his empire, even its overthrow. Then, on the day after, he had taken thought and tried to play as safely as possible by rescuing Marina.

I gave little time to these reflections. I might conquer the Mexics, even initiate the ultimate downfall of their religion, but I would never know its almost infinite ramifications. Behind it lay all the strangeness of the Aztec mind.

Well, I was not an anthropologist or a mythologist or a theologist. I was a soldier and an adventurer and a conquistador. And now with my horse sense regained, no longer to be taken in by two assassins of suave and gentlemanly manner, or turned aside by puerile and romantic fantasies, and also with my blood up, I considered what to do.

At once I ordered that my best captains be wakened and join me for counsel. They came, cool and capable, knowing an emergency had risen, and with confidence in me and in themselves to cope with it. First, I outlined the situation as well as I could grasp it, that according to tidings just received, Montezuma was bent on war. The Cholulans would be his allies and deal the first blow with the help of ten thousand picked troops

assembling here; or it would fall in the defiles and ravines of the rugged mountains through which we would be led. And if it succeeded, it could be the fatal and last blow of the war.

The whole camp was to be put on immediate alert. Tomorrow afternoon our stewards were to collect stores for a long march, and the men could be seen packing and tying up their belongings for departure early the next morning. Their chiefs and "some of their most trusted followers" were to be assembled in the courtyard at sunrise of that day, for I wished to address them before we set forth. In truth, tomorrow would be spent in preparation for a cruel and deadly stroke.

Yet I craved further verification of the plot against us, for my soul's sake, my mind already settled.

Since Marina had served so well in regard to her midnight visitors, and again with the courtly prelates, in the morning I entrusted to her the delicate mission of again inviting the precious pair to my headquarters, without in the least arousing their suspicions. This she did, hinting that although she followed me, and served my lusts, and acted as my interpreter, her loyalty and faith belonged to Mexico and she was virtually Montezuma's spy. They did not know, as the Tabascans knew, that she had been sold and carried away in slavery from Mexico, or of any rumor connecting her with Quetzalcoatl. In reply, they hinted that her good service would be rewarded in a few days, after certain events had occurred here or in a dark, mountainous ravine from which no invested enemy could escape.

The Cholulan bishops arrived at the hour named, confident of their cunning to spread the toils still better. But on entering my quarters they were startled to find me with four soldiers with drawn swords, one of them Alvarado. I had chosen him for this office partly because his appearance had so greatly impressed Montezuma's ambassadors as well as lesser chieftains that a portrait had been made of him to send to the emperor, and he had been given the name Tonatio, meaning the son of the Sun. In truth he was by far the finest-looking man in our force, magnificently built, graceful, his handsome face almost always mirthful. I knew he was too rash to be a trustworthy leader, yet I was so taken with him that I trusted him more than I ought.

The two priests quickly lost their foxy looks, as in courteous tones I told them what I wanted of them. First of all I wanted the truth, which, as priests, was their duty to tell; but what brought it featly forth was not their holy office, but the glimmer of four well-polished swords. I promised them that if

they concealed naught from me, I would not harm them or repeat what they had said; but if they lied they would surely die.

I learned that after long consideration, with many changes of his mind, Montezuma had taken the advice of the priests of the god of war. Hence what the pale and trembling young man had told me, in peril of my dagger, was substantially correct.

That night I ordered battle watch, half of the men resting with their weapons at hand, the other half awake and poised for action. The sun was barely up when the chiefs began to arrive, all accompanied by warriors, and gathered in the court between the buildings. The two priests were with them, but I sent Aguila to speak to them in privy, warning them to leave the scene. Also I posted a heavy guard at every portal of the square, and well they knew what to do when my own trap right here in Cholula, not Montezuma's trap in mountain fastnesses, would be sprung.

Their best chiefs we decoyed into a stronghold and locked them there. Then, on my horse, I had Marina interpret my address to the now uneasy but still truculent Cholulans.

Reminding them that I had come in peace, I charged them with their conspiracy, made with Montezuma, to murder all of us except those taken alive for sacrifice. Yes, I knew of our twenty that they had promised to their god of war, whereupon he had promised them victory; now they would discover if that promise would be kept. At that, their chiefs and priests began to jabber, saying that they had not set the trap by their own will, but at the command of Montezuma. My answer was, that as parties to the treachery, they would have their due part in my revenge.

Then at my arrangement a musket was fired, the signal that those Spanish hounds on leash were waiting for. Instantly, we began systematic massacre, killing right and left, in our front and in our rear, and the battle-maddened Tlaxcatecs hacked with their great two-handed swords while we slashed and stabbed with our swords and spears. Even our burden carriers snatched up axes, kitchen knives, and shoulder poles to join the butchery. Truly the Cholulans did not shame themselves in battle, fighting like cornered tigers, but in a mob not in military rank, for they had few leaders, and had been taken by surprise, the shoe on another foot than they had deemed.

In the first two hours I reckoned that we slew two thousand. Then the Tlaxcatecs who had rushed from their camp into the city fell upon the remnant of the foe. And soon there was no longer a swiftly dwindling yet

stubborn and compact force, bravely fighting, but only bands of fugitives that had broken out the gates of the square, leaving a wake of their slaughtered fellows, and pursued by the merciless Tlaxcalan avengers and some Spaniards also, who had followed blood-mad captains out of reach of my voice. Some, but not all, Cholulans chose death rather than capture, and when all resistance had ended, my Aztecs turned to looting the houses and the shops of the city, and I must shout to call in my wolves, half-deafened by the din, to pursue our own allies and force them to turn loose their prisoners. Their loot I permitted them to keep, for they had been brave in battle, and entitled to reward. So if they came hence poor men, no few departed rich.

Thus ended the massacre at Cholula, and with my thanks unto God for my victory I sent up a plea for pardon for the terrible letting of blood of fellow men, for by my human limitations I had known no other way to break the barrier to our advance, indeed to preserve our lives, whereby heathen Mexico could be conquered, ruled by a Christian emperor, and at last brought into the Christian fold.

And since Jehovah was a God of Wrath, at Whose command His chosen people had butchered Philistines and other worshipers of false gods, and all who broke His terrible ordinance, I reckoned I would be forgiven and be given suitable reward in Heaven and on earth. But the Son who had wept once during His stay here might weep again upon His Throne, at sight of this bloodied ground with its host of dead, and the tears of Our Lady of the Compassionate Heart would copiously flow. And I durst hope that the brave Cholulans who had died in the darkness of ignorance of the True Faith would not be dispatched to everlasting flame, and by penance or I knew not what, or by Divine mercy, be yet redeemed.

3

With Cholula pacified by the sword, I must turn again to diplomacy to smooth my avowed conquest of Mexic. So I summoned the priests and chiefs that had escaped carnage, and made them declare before the Mexican ambassadors that the plot against us had been conceived by Montezuma, as numerous Mexics among the Cholulan dead gave *de facto* evidence. But I did not have the declarations notarized, because I must not go on record as Montezuma's implacable enemy, and thus close all doors to peaceful entrance into the city. Yet I made known my wrath at his double-dealing, and threatened to come not with gifts and palms of peace but with the naked sword.

His ambassadors hurried away. The distance to Mexic was less than thirty leagues, and in five days the embassy returned with a weak answer. They began by relating two lies: first, that Mexic was unconquerable because of its geography, and, second, that it was a poor country not worth looting. What court fool had advised such silly messages to, in the first instance, an armed body of Spaniards, and in the second, to recipients of gold, silver, and jewels to load the treasure chests of a raja of India? Then the ambassadors themselves outdid the court liars by telling us with straight faces that Montezuma had only to release against us his caged tigers, lions, crocodiles, and other man-eating beasts to assure our destruction within one hour! But my hard-bitten followers did not keep straight faces and howled and hooted. Alexander the Great was reported to have said that jokes were as indispensable to soldiers' spirits as food for their bellies; and this was the best joke of the week.

It was no joke to me that in the battle of Cholula the great temple of Quetzalcoatl had been well-nigh destroyed. Would this not be proof in Montezuma's opinion that I was not that god returned to earth, or I would have defended my own house, and truly I was only a specimen of a dangerous pale-faced race dwelling across the sea? Marina assured me otherwise.

"Instead he will think that Quetzalcoatl himself destroyed what was once his house, because it had been defiled by human sacrifice against his wish and your command," the quick-seeing, quick-thinking girl told me in our chamber. Then I must rise and kiss her lovely dark-red trusty mouth and both of her hands of strength and symmetry symbolic of the whole young woman.

The same explanation must have been conceived throughout all the regions hereabouts. The caciques of Tepeaca sent me thirty slaves and a considerable present in gold, the latter always causing an avid gleaming in the eyes of my followers, especially those who relished not adventure for great adventure's sake, nor noble emprise either, when the safer coastal lands had dropped so far behind us. Moreover, Marina's spies reported that while human sacrifice had increased at the temples of the other Great Teules, at the teocallis of Quetzalcoatl it had virtually ceased.

Montezuma sent more presents, excuses for the Cholulans' treachery that a toddling child would choke on, and the usual petition that I not come to Mexic. I replied that I could not disobey divine and royal instructions to investigate and make report of his doings good and bad, and since he could definitely expect me, for his own sake he had best put no more obstacles in

our path. We were soon informed that this message cast him into deep gloom. Indeed he retired to a royal teocalli, where he fasted and prayed and wounded his own body, perhaps in the belief that their darling's pain would cause the gods to guide him out of these coils. Among many contradictory orders he sent forth, one kind was straightforward and unswerving—to sacrifice more men, women, and children to placate the obviously angered gods. Because of this, I felt no pang of pity for his suffering.

Then he decided upon a daring venture. To a vassal lord not far from Vera Cruz he sent orders to attack one of Escalante's outposts and to take alive, at any cost, one Spaniard. His purpose was, of course, to find out by torture our real identities and purposes, and then make a sacrifice to resound through the Aztec heaven and propitiate the angriest of gods. His vassal managed to obtain one Spanish corpse and one badly wounded Spaniard, and loaded them on human backs to be brought to Montezuma. The wounded man died on the journey; the captor's only recourse was to decapitate both corpses and send on their heads. One was rather ordinary, it seemed, but the other was large with a big, black, curly beard, and even the lifeless countenance revealed what had been youthful strength. The sight of them did not greatly cheer Montezuma. True, the invaders of his kingdom could not all be teules, because they could suffer death, yet the least of these had come out of the Rising Sun, from whence had been foretold the coming of the fated rulers of his kingdom.

He was now persuaded to invite me to visit Mexic, where he would receive me kindly. But this reception was promised to occur after my arrival there, which he still plotted to prevent. Three of the six messengers would return at once, so Montezuma could prepare for my coming; the other three would be faithful guides. Faithful to whom? Marina was instantly suspicious when they laid too much emphasis on the safety of a certain road, and for once my own thinking followed hard upon hers. We would take another road, which we were told was more rough and steep, but not as likely to conceal one great pitfall, carefully planned, constructed, and concealed, whereby all of the emperor's troubles would swiftly end.

From the blind old Xicotencatl, I received a message warning me of the greatness and power of Mexic, and if I persisted in my purpose, my whole force could reasonably expect death. However, he would send with us ten thousand of his best men either to fight beside us or to carry food and luggage. The message moved me nigh to tears, it was such an expression of gratitude and loyalty from a people barbarous in some respects yet able to keep faith better than many Christians. I thought of that aged man, the light

of his eyes gone, and fifty years a prince and chieftain, and how he took little thought of his own living on, was long reconciled to death, yet would risk the lives of his own young followers and subjects for honor's sake. I sent word that I would accept only a thousand, enough to keep open the road and carry our baggage.

The Cempoalans, so brave and true in their service until now, asked that I send them home. At Montezuma's victory, almost a certainty, they would be the peculiar victims of his fury, because they had been the first nation under his sway to take sides with me which had led to the rebellion of other tribes. I replied that very God would not wish me to force on these friends who had served us so well in our need. Whereupon I gave them many loads of cloth, and bade them carry two loads to The Shaker, their fat cacique.

My last official act before the march began was to write Escalante, reciting briefly what had occurred, how we were setting off for Mexic to be gone God knew how long, and instructing him to mind his duties and finish building the fort at Villa Rica.

We set forth in full array and were kindly received at Guaxocingo, hard by the great Volcano Popocatepetl and its sister peak, and here we were given gifts and further warnings. If we kept to our intent, we would come to two roads leading to the pass, one by way of the city of Chalco and the other by Tamanico. The better road was well cleared in our honor and for our convenience, but the worse had been worsened even more by the felling of many trees. This last road was my choice. Truly we must labor to gain headway through the trunks and tree tops piled and crisscrossed there. Still we thrust onward, and now vast Popocatepetl[32] and his wife loomed above us, truly the highest mountains any of us had ever seen. We guessed they reached nearer Heaven than any snowy crest in Europe or even the sky-thrusting peaks of the Atlas Mountains, visible from Marrakech in Morocco. The former was now an active volcano with a fine column of smoke. Ordas, Velazquez' man, and his most adventurous, ached and pined to climb it, arguing it was the scientific duty of someone in our band, although the real truth was he wanted to show the Indians that we would dare what they dared not. But I perceived the soundness of his argument, at once with its insincerity, and I gave him leave to make the attempt during our day of resting on its shoulder.

On his return, he brought icicles and other proof that he had reached its snowy mantle if not its crest. In fact he told so many tales that I knew not what to believe or to disbelieve, and the troops nicknamed him Skylark.

The cold was now brutal if not deadly, and we thanked God for some rest houses erected by merchants into which we crowded, packed like sardines in a jar of oil. On our arrival at Tamanico, people from all the surrounding towns came to visit or at least to gape at us, and we were given gold, two loads of cloth, and eight Indian women. Out of hearing of our two false guides, ambassadors of Montezuma, these folk told us the truth about his reign, of how they were no better than slaves, forced to labor from dawn until dark, their backs bent with stone, logs, or a hundredweight of corn. His tax collectors took what little stores they could put by and raped their pretty wives or daughters in their own sight. I pitied them, and at the same time was glad to hear of their abuses, for if they were impressed to fight us they would not make good soldiers, and God would surely favor their deliverance by our swords. But I invited twenty young men of this province, sons of caciques, famed hunters of spotted tigers and mountain lions, or great paddlers of canoes or of other distinction, to join my entourage.

Not one of them declined, at which Montezuma's two ambassadors looked gray in the face, for this small instance of insolidarity in his empire, at his very door, was a more ominous sign than any amount of temples burning down by spontaneous combustion, or lightning bolts out of cloudless skies, or comets. This tiny crack might well indicate a mighty rift.

And here we were advised in utmost earnestness by the caciques that we could safely take the road to Chalco, for the ambush laid there had been removed. Montezuma had feared we would discover it by witchcraft, or be somehow warned of it, and my fury would become beyond control. Had I not escaped the well-laid trap at Cholula?

While we were marching from Amecameca toward the Chalco Lake, Montezuma had no doubt held council with his brother in whom he put great trust, under-kings, and high priests. For when we had gained the town of Ayotizino, almost in sight of Mexic, the view cut off by a mountain spur separating the lakes of Chalco and Mexico, a very large embassy, in rich array, was seen approaching. They proved to be no more than announcers for Cacama, Montezuma's nephew and king of Tetzcuco, who was following in a litter. Such a litter no king in Europe had ever seen; and I doubted if Emperor Nero, a name for luxury and extravagance and consummate lavishness, had beheld its like.

It was made of gold and silver, studded and blazing with jewels, and carried by eight Mexican noblemen. Its canopy and curtains were feather cloth of splendid color, so arranged that they pictured forests and other scenes, such as mountains and valleys and streams and lakes, and wild

animals and birds. Indeed this canopy was more impressive than the man despite his fine physique, handsome, youthful face, and dazzling raiment. The man himself was more impressive than his message from Montezuma, that seemed to sing a familiar tune. If we insisted on coming on, he would give me loving welcome, and still his advice was that we turn back, laden with vast riches from his treasury, more of which would be sent me yearly. Hardship and danger awaited us on the road where his countless warriors and those of neighbor cities were assembling against us, in fury that we come so nigh the Presence without his urging. Also we would lack the food and comforts we were used to, for these were not obtainable in this mountain realm!

It was the message of a man tormented by conflicting advice and impulse, trying to confront an unprecedented situation. I could only answer courteously, and present paltry gifts to the young prince, their total not worth one leg of his palanquin.

Ere he left, he lost his diplomatic manner and spoke a dire threat.

At his departure, our army of four hundred Spaniards with about a dozen horses and as many cannon, our Tlaxcalan allies and a thousand burden carriers, and small delegations from kingdoms we had conquered, moved on to the city of Iztapalapa, built about the palace of the emperor's brother. We were now following the shores of Chalco Lake, and passed a beautiful town named Mizquic,[33] raised on a causeway with many canals. From thence the road ran straight across the lake toward an isthmus. This brought us in sight of many towns and cities, built on the water, with palaces and great temples and sky-climbing towers, like cities of enchantment that Roland saw when in the spell of Morgan le Fey, or by the Knight Rodan. Crowds were assembled here, so dense as to obstruct our march, and the water on each side of the road swarmed with canoes great and small.

We came to the town of Cuitlahuac, beautiful as a dream, its gleaming houses reflected in the azure waters, and here the caciques begged that we spend the night; but we marched on to our night's destination. Iztapalapa had a populace of fully a hundred thousand, counting slaves, and was built both on the water and on the land. Some of its palaces rivaled those of Seville, with spacious patios and verdant gardens with fruit trees, multicolored flowers, and such pools as we had not dreamed, their stone or stuccoed walls adorned with beautiful scenes, and wild fowl of brilliant feather swimming or wading there. Here we spent the night under strict watch and in the morning set forth on the last stage of our journey, toward

the city that we called Mexic, but the proper name of which was Tenochtitlan, Montezuma's capital.

It lay far out on the immense lake and gleamed like silver. The causeway was a well-built road of stone, about six paces wide, on which eight horsemen could ride abreast. But that equestrian display we did not attempt, because the remainder of our cavalry, about four horsemen and their mounts, would make such a sorry show. The road was lined with people, and multitudes ran ahead, to find new places of observance, and equal swarms marched in our wake. Now we could behold the waters only at a distance, because of the innumerable, closely packed canoes.

My men were now greatly wrought upon, torn between fear of the throngs through which our body shrank to a minuscule, and with wonder that they had come here, mortal men, some of them distinguished but most of them ordinary except for their bond of resolution and intent. That bond was linked with and somehow forged by me, Hernan Cortez of Extremadura, no king, not even a lord. They perceived the mighty wonder that they, whose bridge of ships to Spain lay wrecked on a lonely strand, should behold all this.

The year was 1519, the day was the eighth of November which Marina told me was the second month by the calendar of Aztec astronomers and the eighth month by the calendar of Aztec astrologers, a different count than in Oaxaca. The Aztecs called it the Month of the Flamingo. As such, it was sacred to lovers, and its sacrosanctity was observed in strange ways—by whores and wantons offering themselves for sacrifice or rushing out to be killed in battle and many beautiful maidens sacrificed to various gods, a horrid thing to happen in the name of love. According to the astrologers' signs and symbolism, this very day was ruled by Quetzalcoatl, god of winds and in some degree of waters, and a day when events of great and often evil import could be expected. Also this was a day in which sorcerers had great power, the birthday of many, according to Aztec beliefs, or, better said, that men born on this day were fated to become sorcerers and warlocks.

Tonight, dread spirits of goblin aspect would sally forth, bearing their astrological sign and an emblem or picture of Quetzalcoatl, and their leader carrying the left arm of a woman who had lately died in child-birth. With this he would touch the threshold of a house, upon which all its dwellers would fall into a heavy trance. If a beautiful maiden took a spectral invader's eye, she was straightway raped, and all treasure was carried off.

And on this day according to the fears or beliefs of many, Quetzalcoatl himself had returned in what seemed mortal flesh.

A short way out of the capital our causeway was joined with another, to form a broad road into the city. Here rose two tall towers, commanding a gate, and here waited fully a thousand of the city's great folk, wearing wraps and loincloths of great richness and brilliant colors, feathered headdress, and with necks and wrists, or even ears, noses, and lips, adorned with gold bracelets, necklaces, medallions, and pendants. Here we must halt while everyone gave us the same obeisance, which was to touch the road with his hand and then kiss that hand.

Then the gate was opened and we passed through. Then we crossed a removable bridge about ten yards long, a factor no doubt in defense of the city, although I had no time to study the *modus operandi*. A great and historic moment now approached its borning. Beyond the bridge ran a wide, straight avenue, lined with mansions and large buildings raised on embankments; and out from the city came our welcomers.

They approached us in two lines in solemn tread, wearing gorgeous dress, but with eyes downcast and bare feet. In the distance I could see the litter of Montezuma, under a canopy of feather cloth. As he drew nigh, the road was swept, and rich cloths laid down. He descended, and three heralds preceded him bearing their batons, and the kings of Tetzcuco and of Iztapalapa walked at his right and left.

I opened my arms to embrace the emperor, but the two kings gently took my hands so that they might not touch the Presence or even his hallowed garments. But both kings and then the emperor himself touched the road and kissed their hands, thus symbolically kissing the earth. The significance of this I could not dream; but well I understood the meeting of our eyes. So met the Old and the New World, and these were no longer separate physically, each to go its own way, but hemispheres of one world, forever and irretrievably bound. The vast consequence and outcome no man could dream. Most certainly the interplay of one upon another would shape the history of this and many centuries to come.

Spanish adventurers had not found the Indies, with its wealth in gold, jewels, and spices, by westward passage, but perhaps had found something much greater, or such was my waking dream. Most truly this was another long stride forward in the course that great Colon had set, he the precursor of us all, and if a star had burst from its sphere, and blazed a path across the sky from east to west, I would have perceived the fitness of the sign, but

been no more awed and wonderstruck than by what I read in Montezuma's eyes, and he in mine.

What we read was an almost infinite misunderstanding. The physical gulf between the Old World and the New had been bridged by little ships on the vast desert of waters, and this bridge would continue to widen, shorten in a sense as better and swifter ships were built, and become more safe. On this bridge could be transported ever greater ladings of goods and men, and hence of knowledge and ideas. But above us towered the great *cues* of heathen worship, symbols of concepts and ways of life and processes of thought so foreign to our own. And those of us who peopled this New World would in time to come have concepts and ways of life and processes of thought that were neither European nor yet Indian, and if heathen gods looked down in wonderment and trembled upon their thrones, so must we aliens here gaze upward to Sitters on the Thrones of Heaven, in even greater wonder at what They had caused to come to pass, and at what They would henceforth cause.

---

[32] The name Popocatepetl means "The Mountain that Smokes" in the argot. Its companion peak was called "The White Woman."

[33] Reader may wonder if the name of this town near the capital had any connection with the name Mexica, later applied to the Aztec Confederacy. The premise appears highly improbable.

CHAPTER 10

Montezuma

1

Montezuma addressed me then, pausing between every sentence to await Marina's swift translation. The welcome had been prepared beforehand, and by any study of its words it seemed complete capitulation. I was addressed as "Lord." I had arrived in my own land, he said, my own realm, to come to my own house; he had been expecting me long, and he had ruled the best he could, pending my arrival. I had come out of mist and clouds on the seas of the Rising Sun, just as had been foretold, to rule these lands, and speaking not in a dream, he made me and my followers welcome.

Alvarado and some of my other captains who had heard Aguila's account perceived what they believed hypocrisy or even double meaning in the emperor's welcome. I had not done so, nor had Marina. Certainly my first meeting with Montezuma was auspicious of good relationships, amenable to improvement and not deterioration—provided some of my captains or I myself did not commit some monstrous folly. Against this I must keep the strictest guard. Never must I weaken, but ever keep to my dedication of instituting a chain of events which might ultimately lead to Mexico becoming a New Spain, ruled by a Spanish king, and worshiping the true God.

When I had made courteous reply to Montezuma, I hung around his neck a strand of glass beads of many colors on a gold thread, perfumed with musk. When we had walked a distance, Montezuma in front with his nephew Cacama, I, behind, walking hand in hand with his brother Cuitlahuac, a minion put a packet into the emperor's hand. He took from it two necklaces of red shells from each of which hung eight life-size shrimps fashioned in gold, this crustacean doubtless a religious symbol. Since Mexic is in lofty highlands, I wondered at its significance, arriving at the plausible hypothesis that it was the emblem of Quetzalcoatl, god of winds and in some respects waters and hence of the Ocean Sea.

We were taken to an immense and luxurious palace, the abode of the former Emperor Axayacatl, Montezuma's father. Lately a convent for priestesses, it comfortably housed my total force as well as all the women in our train. In some of its huge halls, one hundred and fifty people could sleep and live. Servants were uncountable. The floors were polished and carpeted, many of the walls were hung with draperies of feather cloth or highly colored cotton. The beds were merely mats, but braziers gave forth a pleasant heat, as well as the sweet smell of copal incense, which bold Alvarado proposed was to offset the rank aroma of leather, grease, and plain dirt given off by our great band of travelers. I had noticed hitherto a faint smell which I thought natural and peculiar to Indians; and only our country louts, without educated and urbane noses, objected to it. It stood to reason that we Europeans also had a native smell, unconnected with what we ate or how often we bathed, and this an isolated people such as the Mexics might find disagreeable.

After our ample and delicious meal, Montezuma's arrival was announced. Chairs of solid gold were placed in the great audience chamber for both the emperor and me; my captains and caciques were given less sumptuous chairs; Marina stood beside me. Montezuma's brother and nephew were seated behind him and to one side. After the exchange of a few courtesies, bearers came laden with gifts, jewels of incredible size and brilliance for me, gold for my captains and chiefs, and cotton cloths for every European. A golden headband, with complex engraving and *repoussé* work, was placed in my hand, with which I did not know what to do until the emperor spoke and Marina knelt at my feet. With this I crowned her, and truly the ornament, in bright contrast with her jet-black hair, was most becoming. I could only suppose that the ceremony derived from Montezuma knowing she had made some sort of symbolic marriage to Quetzalcoatl.

Montezuma asked what might be a significant question. It was, whether all my Spaniards were subjects of the great Emperor Charles of which I spoke; I answered that we were all, in a manner of speaking, brothers. Perhaps he was wondering at the solidarity of my force. He knew what we had accomplished on the battlefields; how despite so many hindrances and mighty obstacles, and his own prayers and countless human sacrifice, we had arrived here in triumph. Still he must find it hard to believe, considering our paltry number.

He departed, and on the following day, November 9, 1519, I repaid his visit, accompanied by Alvarado, Leon, Ordas, and young Sandoval, a captain of great promise who had risen mightily in my esteem throughout

our journey. Also I brought five men from the ranks, which action the emperor might not understand, but which all my soldiers understood full well. It meant that I held us all as one body, and the conquest was ours, not solely mine. The emperor met us halfway in an immense hall.

The fact was soon apparent that this palace was newer than the one we occupied, and far more luxurious. That day I was to see only a barest fraction of its appointments, but Aguila and some caciques in my train were shown much more by a kind of seneschal. Many private apartments and pleasure rooms of Montezuma and some rooms of religious ceremony or significance and treasure vaults were excluded from their sight, but one fact was plain. No palace of which any of us had ever seen or heard, with the possible exception of that of the Sultan of Constantinople or the legendary Czar of all the Russias could compare with it in splendor. It had twenty entrances on four streets; it had three courtyards; besides great halls, it had a hundred chambers each with a bath, the water circulated through ducts, the source of which might be a huge and wondrously worked fountain at which I had goggled.

As for richness, the walls and floors and ceilings recalled the observers to a description of the mansions of Heaven as described by Christian priests and was no doubt found in Holy Writ. There was some common stone, but also an incredible amount of alabaster, marble, jasper, and black quartz with red veins. The ceilings were of ornamental woods of many tints, carved in animal, bird, and other figures.

As was my duty, even if its performance this soon was impolitic, I spoke about the True religion, as opposed to the false religion of the Aztecs, and compared their gods to devils who dared not come nigh our Holy Cross. Montezuma answered that he had already heard of our Three Gods, meaning the Father, the Blessed Mother, and our Lord Jesus, and doubtless they were good Gods, but the Mexic were satisfied with their own gods, and I need not speak of the matter again. He spoke quietly and courteously, but doubtlessly with firmness.

For the first four days, we were instructed to keep within the precincts of the palace assigned to us. I concurred cheerfully in this, to prevent altercations between my troops and the citizens. But there were spacious and most beautiful gardens in which the men could loaf, smoke, gamble, and complain about their hard mats while surrounded by the luxuries of Allah Din's palace raised in a trice by a genie. Also they needed and enjoyed the rest.

Then I sent to Montezuma the request that my Spaniards and I be allowed to visit the Great Teocalli, one of two chief temples in the city and his favorite except for his private chapel. The emperor consented with the stipulation that we go there in military formation, perhaps for our protection and perhaps to appease the people, who would see in it a military ceremony.

On our march there, through the splendid streets, we came suddenly on the Great Market, called Tianguiz. Our eyes were used to being rounded, and now they popped as well, for the fair surpassed any we had ever seen. Here we paused for a few minutes, knowing we would not keep Montezuma waiting, for he was taking another route in his slow-moving litter.

Separate streets were occupied by folk of the same trade, such as gold-, silver-, and coppersmiths, barbers, woodworkers, cloth makers, jewelers, perfumers, indeed every trade I could think of except iron-mongers, blacksmiths and wainwrights. This caused me to remember that the Mexics had no iron, let alone steel, no horses, and which I still found hard to believe, no wheeled vehicles. There was an immense traffic in slaves, of somewhat darker or lighter skins and different sizes and attire, but all of them what we called Indians. The food shops had a vast variety of edibles, most of which I did not know, being roots, fish and fowl, fruits, and meat of animals not in my lexicon. In the fur shops there were hides of so-called lions and tigers, bears, small wolves, soft skins resembling those of ferrets, some larger and some smaller, but of richer fur. Also there were black pelts with a broad white stripe that smelled to high heaven.

I was able to recognize the skins of otters, mountain sheep or goats, and deer; and to my delight I saw ermine skins, which kings and queens wore in their majestic robes, and which was only the common weasel brought from the cold north, and in this case from the icy mountains. When I became Viceroy of New Spain I could wear a collar of ermine fur, sewn with black tails, on the Emperor's birthday.

2

Truly it was the food markets that most fascinated my men—so often we had marched on empty bellies. I perceived now that the diet of the lesser cities of the Aztecs, and especially the region of the beaches, had been poor indeed compared to that of the Mexics. Besides venison and hens, there were many varieties of fowl such as wild and tame ducks and geese, cranes, herons, quails, grouse of many sorts and sizes, wild and tame pigeons, and a large fowl weighing up to twenty pounds, which we had previously seen in

large flocks. From the upper beak of the cock hung a red pendant, and he made a gobbling sound as he took wing. His color was bronze and his flesh delicious, Sandoval having shot one with an arrow had given it to Marina and I for our supper. We had noticed a few, obviously tamed, about farmhouses and, of course, my mind leaped to the possibility of their being raised on European farms. Maize seemed to be the only grain, but it was prepared in numerous ways, with nuts or honey or cane syrup. There was no dearth of vegetables, a red bean being the most popular, and a wonderful variety of fish, some of them of wondrous color, and other creatures of ugly aspect from salt and fresh water. The market was well conducted, perfectly peaceful under the eyes of watchmen, and three judges settled disputes.

We had this pleasant scene to remember as we entered the great square of the temple. This, too, was a welcome sight, being very large and well kept, much of it paved with white stones and scrupulously clean. The structure was more than a hundred paces square and a hundred steps high. Its various floors receded in length and breadth, the top floor being fifty paces square, and above this were two buildings in which dwelt the gods. Montezuma and some priests were performing a religious service when we arrived.

Eight robed men hurried down the long flight to meet us and offered to give me their arms to help me ascend. This offer I declined, and we filed up to the Dish of the Eagles at the top, which was scarlet from freshly spilled human blood. We had seen such dishes before; this was only the largest, and most appalling because of its contrast with the beauty and peace of an otherwise civilized city.

Trying to forget the gruesome sight, we almost did so as we gazed down at the city. Not one great city but many surrounded or were built on the huge lakes, and their countless yellow or white houses in contrast with the dark-brown canals and the deep-blue water was a thing to remember always, and delight the eyes of the mind. Yet the view was a little frightening to me, and I thought the same to all my men except our *Corps Perdu*. There were so many people, hurrying back and forth, such countless canoes, fortified bridges and towers, temples thronging with priests hateful to us, armories, and large buildings I took for barracks. But I asked Montezuma if I and a few of my followers might see the gods, their visible forms so powerless to harm us. But because innumerable people worshiped them as representing divine beings, and held them in deadly fear and obeyed their dictates as given by the priests, I saw them as the most formidable enemy we must overthrow. Yet it was God's Will, and we were His instruments, and I touched the crucifix I wore over my heart, and knew we must not fail.

After consulting the priests, the emperor gave his consent. I had seen images of these gods in other temples; these were merely larger, far more richly bejeweled, and hence more horrible to the sight. On one side was the god of war, appearing bloated with sacrifice, his visage more ugly than terrible, as a goblin's drawn by a child's hand. Covered with jewels from head to foot, the god sparkled and glimmered in the flickering light of the braziers, so that he seemed shrouded in multicolored flame. Immense snakes, fashioned of gold or silver, entwined his body; in one hand he held a bow of gold and, in the other, golden arrows. Beside him was a much smaller image of his page or servant, holding his bow and shield of richly bejeweled gold. His necklace was as horrid as that seen by one of Da Gama's men in a Hindu temple, being the faces of Indians, and images of hearts of gold studded with sapphires or turquoises.

Before him, in a brazier, three human hearts, freshly torn from human breasts, were burning to give him—God save the mark!—a pleasant smell. Incense was likely burning but it could hardly dim the stench of the layer after layer of dried blood befouling the walls.

On the other side was the Aztec Zeus, but this was an unfit name for the monster, for in Grecian temples Zeus had been at least an impressive and gigantic manlike form, stern and awesome. In his wrath he cast lightning bolts, and felled cities and men and split mountains asunder; but as far as I knew he had never demanded human sacrifice. This huge image had a face like a bear's, and mirrors cunningly set in his eyesockets caused them to glow and gleam and glitter. A better name for him would be Hades or Pluto, for all the folk except those who died by sacrifice or were born under lucky stars must go to him at last. At his feet were small images of devils with snakelike tails.

We were shown a third god in the highest chamber of the *cu*, half man and half lizard, begilded or of gold, and covered with what seemed to be seeds, for he was the god of the earth's fruits, and hence his being smeared with human blood appeared to make no sense. And in this chapel was a mighty wooden drum, its skin made of the mottled hides of great serpents. We had heard it resound at sundown only the night before, a deep and dismal sound, one that wakened fear despite all effort of our minds to let it sleep.

At last, I spoke more boldly than was wise, but I could not help myself.

"Montezuma, you are a wise man. How can you believe these horrid images are gods? They are only idols, and they stand for devils, not deities.

Give me permission to erect a Cross in one of the chapels, and put there the image of Our Lady Santa Maria and the Infant Jesus, and these monsters that you worship will no longer have power to harm."

"Malintzin, if I had known you would so insult our holy images, I would not have let you see them," Montezuma answered with great dignity; and then his eyes met sternly the angry eyes of the priests.

Rather lamely, I remarked it was time for our departure, but Montezuma would not accompany us.

"I must remain and make atonement for allowing your visit here, and for the evil words my gods have heard you speak."

"If that be so, forgive me, Lord Montezuma."

And to my heart leaped this prayer:

"Heavenly Powers, help me to guard my speech and actions, that all may go well." But all would not go well. I felt it in my bones.

On the following day I was permitted to visit the pleasure rooms of Montezuma. One of the sights was his private zoo, in which he kept large spotted felines, considerably larger than leopards, which he called *yogararas*,[34] and a leopardlike animal,[35] smaller and very beautiful, and what appeared two species of cougar, one much darker than the other. Another wonder was his snake pits, containing many species, including a boa, big enough to squeeze a deer into a long mass of meat and crushed bone and swallow it whole. These were continually hissing, and in great earthen jars were kept snakes about eight feet long whose tails, when shaken, gave forth a rattling sound, sometimes so loud and rapidly sounded that it was like a horrid war cry.[36] Their sting caused agonized death in a few minutes. Two captains and Bernal Diaz had been allowed to accompany me here, and the latter whispered when he saw the swarming reptiles and heard their fiendish noises that he "believed he was in hell."

On the contrary, Montezuma's aviary was a delight to the eyes and ears. I could hardly believe that so many beautiful birds were to be found in the whole New World, let alone in regions accessible to Mexico. Probably a great many species had been brought from distant regions by merchants.

The aviary, as well as the zoo, was an annex to the main structure. It was so large and so well screened that the birds could fly about, and perch on small, live trees. Many were of gay or even gaudy feather and some, of plain appearance, could sing or whistle as beautifully as nightingales or skylarks.

Often the brightest-feathered had raucous voices, but their screams or hoarse outcries were such a welcome change from the roaring and growling of the big cats, and especially the hissing and tail rattling and rustle of scales of the snakes, that even these were music to my ears. Some of the larger birds, with strong bills and brilliantly contrasting colors, appeared to imitate human speech, as do parrots brought from Asia Minor, and I judged them some species of parrot.

One of the features of the aviary was a pool, opening on a terrace. In this grew water lilies, and on its azure surface sported many varieties of ducks and geese. Some of the hens were followed by their broods of ducklings and goslings; and there was a great quacking and much muttered conversation. In the reeds surrounding the pool, the fowls had made nests, and the whole scene was heart warming. Indeed, my heart could stand a little heat just now, because it chilled whenever I contemplated the riches and power of this great emperor in whose power all of us lay, if he but knew it, and except for the protection of God.

Montezuma and I met every morning. Either by my own eye's witness, or by the reports of Marina, already making friends with Montezuma's two wives and some of his concubines, I was learning how he lived, ate, and slept, and truly it was as a prince in some fairy kingdom of romance.

I came to know him quite well, considering the many barriers between our minds, and the extraordinary situation of neither of us knowing who was the other's captive. His complexion was somewhat darker than Marina's, in fact the usual Indian color; his eyes were black and almost as bright as jet. Indians are not a hirsute people; many of the maidens had long, black tresses but the men's beards were sparse. In this respect, Montezuma resembled the majority.

His countenance was pleasant, his mien gentle; his person scrupulously clean. Observing this, still I must consider the report I had had from a reliable spy that, before our coming, he sometimes ate human flesh. Such conduct was hard to imagine much less realize, even if this cannibalism was somehow ritualistic, which the reporter did not believe. I tried to think of some excuse for him. Hindus would not eat cows; and to the Western mind this was silly and unnatural. A learned doctor at Salamanca, who had examined very ancient human remains in the caverns of the lower Pyrenees found men's, women's, and children's bones that had been broken and baked in order that dwellers there could suck out the marrow. I tried to imagine one of those men refusing to do so. His tribesmen would have considered his refusal silly and unnatural. The weapons and tools found by the learned man

were of well-chipped stone. In a sense, the Aztecs were only slightly advanced from the Stone Age; they had not discovered iron or even bronze; a few tools had tin or copper hafts; by mixing the two molten metals they occasionally obtained brass. But their main cutting tools, as well as the edges of their swords, were still obsidian or flint.

Yet the Aztecs could build mighty temples, beautiful palaces, towers, ingenious removable bridges, causeways; they could lay out parks and plant beauteous gardens, cut jewels, and make exquisite ornaments and utensils of gold and silver. They could communicate by sophisticated picture writing. They were an artistic people.

In those mighty temples—what? Too well I knew. At the orders of this soft-voiced man, seemingly a civilized man, the Eagle Dish had been filled to overflowing to please or appease monstrous images called gods. Aztec mothers were as sweet and loving to their children as were Spanish mothers. Fathers loved their sons; in every phase of their lives except religion, and in habits growing out of religion they behaved as civilized human beings.

The only answer was the utter downfall of that religion. What a task confronting one man and his few followers ignited by one man's fire! And even that fire was not wholly, perhaps not half, nobly lit.

Alone in my room, I wept.

---

[34] Jaguars.

[35] Ocelots.

[36] Bushmasters.

3

My wonder aroused by Montezuma's establishment would never cease. I could imagine no king in all Europe having its like, even Charles V, Emperor of all Europe, except England, France, Scandinavia, Greece, the Russias, the Balkan states, and the regions of Byzantium held by the infidel Turk.

Of the number of his servants I could never approach making an estimate. Two hundred guards had quarters near his own, and when he summoned any of them, or their captains wished to present some matter to him, they must cover their fine raiment with old, clean garments, approach

him barefoot with their eyes cast down, and back away from him on leaving. The same was true of his greatest lords except his brother and nephews. He took his meals behind curtains, making his choice of food from about three hundred different dishes, all of them prepared by master cooks. Four beautiful girls served him, and these were a mere fraction of the number at his disposal, although I never saw one as lovely as Marina. The men took pleasure in discussing the size of his harem and their wager was, that if any one girl took pleasure with him once a year, she could count herself a favorite! Others believed that he used only virgins, whom he then presented to lords and caciques throughout his empire. Yet he was so modest and discreet, that his choice for any one night never became palace gossip, and was known to only a few faithful and close-mouthed servants. He had had three children by his two wives, and the number of his bastards might put to shame a lecherous Turkish sultan.

Never a grain of dust was seen in the entire palace or on its garden walks. The number of his gardeners and the keepers of his zoo, aviary, and snake pits no doubt equaled my whole force of Spaniards. I never saw him wear the same robe twice, or never the same jewels except for two or three pieces that I took for talismans, or had religious significance. He had many entertainers, singers, pipers, jesters, acrobats, dancers, jugglers, and legerdemainists, as well as a taste for the company of dwarfs, which I found distasteful in him. Yet in one sense he was a recluse. He was never surrounded by a cluster or crowd of courtiers as are European monarchs; no one could approach him except by his express command; and even his brother and nephews must wait for his summons if they implored audience.

How such a fastidious man—in most respects—could bear to enter the teocalli, let alone that horrid stinking chamber of the fertility god, with his half-baked rotting human hearts in vessels around the blood-encrusted walls, I could not understand. He had finally consented, although with deep reluctance, to our building a Christian chapel in the same square not far from the second greatest teocalli and what Bernal called the Tower of Horrors, too ghastly to describe. Although the emperor had yielded in this one respect, he remained resentful at what he believed was an insult to his gods, and resented the giving of his own consent. It was only my first step in a crusade the final triumph of which I would not live to see; but he was astute enough to realize it was a long step, the first rift in a mighty wall guarding his throne, his dynasty, all that he was, his deepmost faith, all by which he lived, the very element of Aztec existence. Apparently he had been but lightly concerned with the shrines we had raised in the coastal regions and semisubject states, or even outlying distant dominions of his empire. This

breach had occurred within his own capital, in a stone's throw of the tower where he alone worshiped.

He remained affable with me, conversing intelligently on all subjects other than the Aztec religion. Of this matter he would not speak and deftly turned aside all my attempts to bring it up. Without again speaking as bluntly as at our visit to the temple, he made quite plain his determination. Any determination to which he came in opposition to my own was a rift in another wall, the fragile, vulnerable, all but preposterous wall in which I had confined him, our sole protection against extermination.

My men reported an ominous change in the attitude of his stewards appointed to victual and supply them. The food was less in amount, poorer in quality, and their behavior, at first submissive, had become insolent. Meanwhile, I was withholding bad news from my troops. Montezuma's governor of a province near Vera Cruz, Quauhopopoca, who had submitted to me, yet who had sent Montezuma two Spanish heads, waxed ever bolder in his subversion and was becoming a real menace to the settlement.

After many reports from my loyal Tlaxcatecs of discontent and rising anger among the citizens of Mexic, I began to ponder a mighty stroke, no less indeed than a *coup de main*. If it would succeed, our power and prestige would be vastly enhanced; if we attempted it and failed, I could expect nothing less than our destruction. It was no less than the confinement of Montezuma's person, putting him at our mercy, and holding him as the supreme hostage against any uprising of the people.

To take this course, I made up my mind. But I did not yet tell my captains of my resolve; I only remarked to them, in the way of question, that it might be a rewarding action. To my most trusted officers and men did I say this much; well I knew they would dwell upon it as though it were their own idea, and discuss it with other trustworthy officers. These eggs hatched; Alvarado, Sandoval, Leon, and Ordas came in a body to advise this very thing.

"Do not believe, gentlemen, that I am asleep," I replied. "But where is our strength for such a daring stroke?"

Of this, too, they had taken thought, marching with my own.

"On some excuse, bring him to the palace assigned to us, tell him he is our prisoner, and if he resists, he will suffer for it," Sandoval replied.

I appeared to be contemplating this suggestion, exactly what I wished to have made, but actually I was considering the speaker. Truly he was a great

addition to my force. A hidalgo in his own right, Sandoval was a man of one book, as we say,[37] but he had a keen mind that directed the activities of his fine, broad-chested, strong-limbed body. Not at all reckless as was Alvarado, he was exceeding brave; perhaps I had never known a man of greater courage in the last ditch. Not very tall but well knit, as a horseman he surpassed; his long practice was attested by his bowlegs. His face was strong, his chestnut hair and beard copious and curly; although he lisped a little, his voice was an impressive rumble. Not in the least greedy for gold, he aspired to the honors due a brave and faithful soldier; and what counted much with me, he took good care of his men. His dress was rather plain, his manners direct. Young as he was, about twenty-six, he held the rank of colonel and I meant to appoint him to a higher office in due course.

"Gentlemen, I agree with you, and it shall be done," I answered the waiting officers, their eyes fixed on my face.

Yet I changed a little the *modus operandi* proposed. It would be too great a shock to him, and cause him to lose trust in me, if we employed stratagem to put Montezuma in our hands. The hour struck: bad news from Vera Cruz, that Quauhopopoca had attacked Vera Cruz, killing among others my trusty and good governor Escalante, gave me the prod I needed, and indeed created the necessity of the emperor's imprisonment. Desiring his seizure to be as quiet as possible, causing the least commotion in the city, still I took military precautions so it would go smoothly and well.

First, I alerted the army for any emergency. Armed men were posted in the streets about the palace square; I appointed five captains to enter the chambers with me, and thirty soldiers to remain in call. Marina would accompany me as always. Other soldiers would guard the courtyard.

I had already sent word to Montezuma to expect me this early morning, not mentioning an armed force. Still he must have divined some drastic action, for when I entered with my captains, his face was pale.

Still he affected his usual cordiality and gaiety. Indeed, he had for me a present of jewels, another indication of his suspicions, and at once he offered me one of his bastard daughters as a concubine; and in a merry tone told the captains they, too, should have beautiful girls. Probably never before in his life had he needed to employ bribery so directly at least in defense of his own person; although, of course, all the presents he had sent me on the march had been bribes.

Not mentioning our new defeat at Vera Cruz, I told Montezuma that reports had reached me that his governor's previous attack, by which two

Spaniards had lost their heads, had been by his command. I went on to say that I did not believe it, yet the killers must be brought to the capital at once, so all the truth could be ascertained. He agreed promptly and then and there summoned two messengers. To these he gave a seal he had worn on his arm, which would be their passport and authority to fetch Quauhopopoca and his caciques to Mexic. The emperor looked somewhat relieved until I said further that since I must explain the murders to my king, and since Montezuma had been accused, he must move to my abode, in my custody, until he had been acquitted.

The great lord of Mexic stood very still and pale. Finally he replied in a firm, grave voice.

"Malintzin, my person is not such as may be imprisoned. Even if I would consent, my people would rebel."

Then I explained that he would not be a prisoner, but my honored guest. He could bring his kinsmen if he wished, his women, chamberlains, and entertainers. He could choose his own apartments in his own father's palace. Not only the servants but my soldiers would obey him.

For some hours he continued his objections to which I replied with utmost courtesy, but without retraction of the fact. He saw that my men were losing patience and kept touching their weapons. Not knowing Spanish, still he could perceive a deadly threat in Leon's voice and face when he spoke in angry protest.

"Why does your lordship employ so many words?" Leon demanded. "Make him come, or we will give him the sword."

Montezuma asked Marina what the Spaniard had said, and she answered with her usual good wit.

"Uei Tlatoani, I advise you to come without further talk, for thus Malintzin will pay you honor and give you your due, but if you refuse, his captains will take your life."

"Ask Malintzin to take my son and my two daughters, born of my wives, as hostages, but spare me this insult to my person and my place."

When this was duly translated, I spoke firmly.

"My lord, you must come at once, or suffer dire consequences."

He drew a deep breath, then with bowed head covered his face with his hands. But in hardly a second he stood straight, looking me in the eyes.

“I will not weep,” he said. “It is not meet that I, Montezuma, He Who May Speak for gods and men, should dim his eyes with tears. I will go with you.”

Then he spoke in low tones to an old nobleman, his chamberlain. The man hurried out; the great room was utterly silent except, faintly heard through the walls, the angry shrieks of some kind of jungle bird in the aviary. He did not look at us or we at him; we were ashamed without knowing why; he gazed quietly across the terrace on which the chamber opened. Although the month was November, the air was soft and balmy, and a hesitant breeze from the garden blew in the perfume of flowers. The chamberlain, with a gray face, returned. He spoke quietly to the emperor, who nodded and led the way out of the room.

In the vast hall was his litter, carried not by its usual crew of stalwart young nobles. All these bearers were men of advanced age, heavily lined of face, their heads hoary although erect. Montezuma mounted the litter. Without command from me, my soldiers stood rigidly at attention as the exit began. A hundred or more servants who had waited in the hall for some dread decision that they surmised, or of which somehow they had been informed, lined the wall, weeping in silence.

With Marina at my side, my officers and men fell in behind me. We passed through the great front doorway on to a walk paved with stones that led to the Palace of Axayacatl, where we were quartered. And we had hardly started when we heard a deep, resounding, dismal sound which all of us instantly knew was the beat of the great drum in the tower of the teocalli. The bearers walked in step with this strange slow toll. And throughout the mighty city and beyond its precincts, to the distance of a league, every human being, slave or free, stopped whatever he was doing, and stood still. Well they knew that the throbbing dirge heralded the death of someone very great, godlike in his stature, into whose face they durst not gaze and whose name they had breathed in whispers.

The bearers did not weep. I wished that they would weep, for their hearts’ ease; as it was, their faces were drawn and twisted in tragic beauty. This was more than the death of an emperor. With Montezuma’s fall, their sky had likewise fallen, for he was its great pillar.

It was the end of an era. The world they had known and seen through glasses darkly was fated for destruction. This was the twilight of their gods.

[37] *Hombre de un libro*.

BOOK II

CHAPTER 11

Signs and Omens

1

Montezuma told me that a jaguar captured nearly full grown in a dug pit had at first been restive in his cage, ferocious, and making numerous attempts to escape. But seeing the futility of this, and perceiving that the keepers meant him no harm, and being well fed and well caged, he had become reconciled to captivity, slept long and peacefully, and had fattened. I could not help but compare the late emperor to the beast of the thick-grown forest and the pampas. Montezuma's forest had been the semidivinity that hedged him, within which he could strike right or left and kill or spare at his whim.

Montezuma was no doubt party to several conspiracies hatched by his kinsmen for his escape. Tunnels were dug under the walls of the palace, bribery was attempted, but all these attempts but one were easily foiled by my alert and watchful soldiery. One plot came nigh to success. At a certain hour of night numbers of his nobles gathered under a terrace with a net; Montezuma proposed to leap down fifty feet and be caught in it and quickly spirited away. The scheme failed because of a fortuitous arrival of watchmen.

Not as bribes to treason, but, in my sight, a touching need in him to maintain the splendor and munificence of his former state, he gave lavish gifts of gold and cloth to all my soldiers who came near him. Perhaps because he perceived that Bernal Diaz was more powerful in the army than his rank would indicate, and closer to me, he made him the recipient of not only such presents but of a beautiful highborn girl as well. Camp bear that he was, Bernal was overjoyed.

"That man has a very noble nature," Montezuma remarked—a description with which I must agree despite his plain ways and speech, and his enjoyment of natural pleasures. But I must grin when I thought of what the fanatical Las Casas would have said. Had he sat on a throne of Heaven

he would have straightway dispatched both the emperor and the veteran to fiery torment.

It was my order that my men treat with the highest respect not only the person of Montezuma, but his entourage and his wants. A Spaniard addressed him insolently, on the matter of two of his Mexican women having disappeared. I ordered the fellow hanged, and was so angry at his disobedience and especially his *lèse-majesté* that the sentence would have been carried out except that Montezuma asked me to grant him mercy. I did indeed spare him the noose but had him soundly flogged. The request itself seemed a strange and dramatic antipode from the same mouth that had ordered twenty thousand human sacrifices unto plaster gods that they might stay my march into Mexic.

I was not so lenient with Quauhopopoca, the insurrectionist, and the slayer of Escalante, my governor at Vera Cruz. He and his son with fifteen nobles arrived at Montezuma's summons, and by the same mysterious ways of thinking and feeling in the Aztec mind, the same bewildering inconstancy of behavior, they readily confessed to some of my captains and myself that they had attacked the settlement on Montezuma's orders. With this I reproached the emperor and listened to weak excuses; but when I told him he must wear irons until the treason was avenged, he came nigh to fainting in his dismay, grief, and shame. Still, though, he did not weep.

Quauhopopoca had come in gorgeous address and state, carried in a litter. He and his nobles met privately with Montezuma; and this was one parley I would have greatly liked to overhear. No doubt he had praised them for their good service and thanked them for the two dismembered Spanish heads; but Malintzin was in a great rage which must be placated, and the king, his son, and his noblemen would be given that honor and responsibility, and die at the stake for their Uei Tlatoani. All I know is, that they came forth from his chamber with flushed faces and shining eyes, as though some great plume and privilege had been bestowed upon them.

I had chosen this manner of their deaths because it would so impress the Mexics; while their mere beheading would be hardly noticed, the like being a daily occurrence at the teocallis. The Mexics must be continually impressed. Despite Montezuma being in our custody, we were still sitting on a muttering volcano. Great stores of armaments had been found in the city; even greater stores had been hidden; public feeling was rising against us; and several of Montezuma's kinsmen, especially hot-blooded young men, plotted revolt along with our murder. Montezuma was our prisoner but, in fact, we were prisoners in the city itself, our only avenue of escape across

the lagoons being three causeways with fortified gates and removable bridges over water gaps. I had ordered the building of two brigantines under direction of our best shipwrights, but their keels had been barely laid.

Heretics had been burned at the stake in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. I did not question that it was their due, or that such a cruel death pleased not God; still, their offense of questioning the righteousness of the dictates of Holy Church seemed to me less than insurrection against a Christian Army marching with the Cross. By that march the Holy Church and His Catholic Majesty would obtain sway over millions of people, and millions of human souls would thereby be saved.

Since I was resolved upon the burning, I meant to make it as dramatic and meaningful as possible to the spectators. For fuel we used not common wood, but all the wooden weapons we could find in the armories, palaces, and teocallis, such as swords, shanks of spears, slings, shields, and bows and arrows. Hundreds of thousands of these were needed, to burn to a crisp seventeen men.

The fuel was piled in the square of Montezuma's palace. The stakes were of slow-burning oak wood, closely placed and deeply driven in the ground. Here were led the seventeen rebels, but I had not stripped them to their loincloths or humiliated them in any other way, and they wore not chains but their rich robes. They came forth with calm mien and face, their expressions noble. And if any of them screamed when the flame licked their only-too-mortal flesh, I did not hear them because of its fierce crackle. The cruel execution of my stern sentence was watched by an immense, silent throng.

Thereafter, I myself knelt on the floor to remove Montezuma's fetters, and then we embraced each other.

In our first days in the Palace of Axayacatl, some of my men had found a door walled up and whitewashed. Suspecting it was a concealed treasure vault, I had ordered it opened, and before sealing it up again, I gave every Spaniard in my force a glance at its contents. Knowing well the vast expense of Montezuma's establishments, including his host of busy armorers, the food and clothes of thousands of servants, guards, harems, entertainers, gold-, silver-, and jewel-smiths, the maintenance of two vast palaces, gardens, zoos, and aviaries, the lavish gifts he was always making to favorites, and jewels, gold, and silver in sumptuous use throughout, we had thought we had some vague notion of his wealth, but a glimpse into this treasure vault, of immense size, sent us back to school.

I was certain that no king in Western Europe, nor hardly the Sultan of Byzantium or the mightiest maharaja in fabled India, had even seen its like. Nothing less than gold, silver, chests of jewels, and the richest of cloths had been deposited here, the precious mineral not only in bars but in every kind of utensil and ornament. There were chests of pearls and jade, and other chests in which all kinds of precious stones had been poured like corn, and the rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, jade pieces, garnets, opals, amethysts, and gems I did not recognize, gave forth a glow and radiance even in this dim light. Truly we could hardly believe we were awake, and not dreaming of some treasure trove of the genies in tales told in Morocco, or in caverns of the ocean deeps guarded by monsters. We could tell by dust and dry rot that some of the chests had been stored here a century or more, but some had been put here lately. Nor could we see where any had been taken out.

As a wild guess, I estimated the total worth at five million gold castilians, or fifty million silver pesos.

Yet in all truth I gave little thought at present to the vast hoard; my mind was busy with administration and diplomacy.

For instance, I told Montezuma that he could return to his own palace if he wished, having previously instructed Aguila to advise him that if I made such an offer, he would be wise to refuse it, otherwise my less-gentle captains would make trouble. Perhaps Montezuma had suspected this double-dealing, for he was far from a fool; yet his eyes filled with tears when I made the proffer, proof that his heart was really touched. It must be that he perceived my personal fondness for him and that as his victor I best understood the ignominy of his defeat. Also, I stood between him and my more ruthless followers.

In place of brave and competent Escalante, now gone to Heaven, I appointed Grado as Governor of Vera Cruz. After I had done so and must give him his chance, I knew of no good reason. In the first place he was a Velazquez-party man; indeed, one of its leaders, and his actions had never demonstrated courage, industry, force, and subtlety needed to govern a far-off region where rebellion had been recently suppressed. When I thought of his abilities, I could enumerate only lively, witty talk, an impressive presence, a gift for music, and some literary skill.

Again I had trusted smiling Fortune too far. Grado did not make Escalante's mistake of raiding Indian villages; but he had the effrontery to request appointment as both mayor and chief constable in addition to the

governorship. He began to live like a grandee. Stuffing his stomach and gambling were his main occupations; he was constantly sending for young women from nearby Indian towns. He told widely and largely that if Velazquez' captains came he would surrender the province.

I did not burn him at the stake as I had burned a brave Aztec king who had hated the rule of the alien. I only recalled him and sent young Sandoval in his place.

I would permit no arrogance toward my royal prisoner; or any vulgarity in speech or action. My followers were gentlemen—if not born so, they must needs behave themselves as such—and when Montezuma complained of an obscenity committed by a seaman named Truxillo, a large, handsome, powerful man, he was severely punished.

Ever I was making better friends with the emperor. Visiting him every morning, I talked with him on divers subjects—of almost every matter of our knowledge under the sun—except the Aztec religion, even the mention of which seemed to pain him. But the barring of that subject permitted us to know each other only by personal qualities and prevented the meeting of our minds. For that matter, Marina's and my mind had not yet fully met. She continued to believe that she was the sworn wife of the god Quetzalcoatl, and thus our stay together was temporal, and she had never told me what had happened at the temple in Oaxaca that she called Mayan.

In fact, I knew very little of her past life and of her intentions and wishes for the future. Of my own she knew much, for there was never a better listener than she, or one more eager. Thus the situation was rather the reverse of that between Montezuma and me. He told me a good deal about his childhood, his quiet pursuit of election as Uei Tlatoani in competition with his uncles, brothers, and various nephews of his father, the former Emperor Axayacatl. He had won the confidence of the ministers whose choice of him was ratified by the court astrologers. On the other hand, I felt it impolitic to speak of my own youth, so lacking in distinction as was my birth. All I might say would reduce the mystery which in his mind enshrouded me, whether he considered me a reincarnation of Quetzalcoatl or a mortal man out of the Sunrise.

From Marina I kept few secrets. She heard of my bastard daughter in Cuba and of my marriage with Catalina, but evinced no strong feelings about either, only a girlish interest. At first she had a like attitude toward my brief affair with Marie de Estrada; but her eyes sharpened when I related the

exchange of our good-luck pieces and Marie's luck thereby, the obtainment of an almost priceless pearl.

"Do you think Marie knew she was making a most profitable trade?" Marina asked.

"I do not think so. It came about so naturally."

"A clever woman could have managed that. It did not even cost her her flower, because she had already lost it. Still, her writing you about it was a sign she had played fair. She could have kept you in ignorance of your loss and her gain—at least until she returned to Spain. But perhaps if she was intending to follow you here . . ."

"I do not think the idea had crossed her mind. When she wrote me about her good fortune she did say that she might some day meet me here, but at that time it would not be because of any deep interest in me. I was no more than a guard of a crew of gold miners."

"You are more than that now."

"She has probably married by now."

"Perhaps. You told me she was beautiful. Most of your company have light hair, eyes, and skin, but there are a few almost as dark as I. Was she a blonde or a brunette?"

"A very bright blonde."

"If you had had a child by her, she would have let you know by now." Marina spoke as if her thoughts were elsewhere. Then she remarked, "Malinche, do not trade me for one of Montezuma's beautiful daughters for whom you may have a passing passion. You may request that she be given you, he will do so gladly I feel sure; and I would not be jealous unless you love her more than you do me. But in all event, keep me as your interpreter and guide."

In all truth I could never love anyone as deeply as I loved Marina.

As it happened, Montezuma and I did play a gambling game, for the sport and to pass the time. In its essence it was no different than ringing stakes with horseshoes, although we tossed gold circles at upright pins. Once, when I kept tally, Montezuma called me a liar and a cheat, much to my captains' joy. When I won, I gave my winnings to his servants; and he the same in his turn.

Meanwhile, two brigantines were being completed, and when their tall sails were ready to fill, Marina christened one of them *Hernan*, and I, the other, *Marina*. Our first sail, on the *Marina*, was to the Rock of Tepepelco, where Montezuma had a hunting lodge. There he was host to us both, along with a suite and his favorite concubine and a small watch which for appearance, more than need, I put aboard. On the other brigantine sailed some of my captains and enough soldiers to compose a force of two hundred. In the gray of early morning, my men loosed arrows at swimming ducks and geese; then little dogs that the keepers had trained dived in and retrieved the trophies. Meanwhile, I was perched in a leafy shelter over a large tethered fowl, common in hen yards or wild in the woods, whose gobbling was intended to draw ocelots or cougars, or even jaguars. In this, I had little faith, thinking that the beast, if he approached, would smell me and make off.

About sunrise, when I was growing cramped, and my mind was far away in the Court of Spain, and the Emperor Charles was making a fine speech ere he named me Duke of Mexico, Viceroy of New Spain, I saw a faint movement of the thickets some thirty yards distant. I came alert, with my spear ready, expecting no more than a fox, when suddenly the big bird rushed in an opposite direction, gobbling frantically, and tried to make off with her clipped wings. Then out rushed a big and beautiful beast, his black spots on his yellow hide incredibly vivid in the sunlight, and his whole being the embodiment of ferocity and lethal grace. Then I had at him with my spear, a cast of fifteen feet, and the steel point caught him in the back at the base of his neck, and the life went out of him in one yowl that ended in a sob. He was a big, male jaguar, indeed a fine specimen, although of lighter hue than most. I was more made over by Montezuma and his highborn companions than if I had won a major battle against rapacious Indians from the northern deserts, loot-hungry as Arabs. I confess I took great pleasure in myself.

Marina did not join the congratulatory group, and stood aside, looking at the beautiful feline hanged on a tree limb for skinning. On her face was a dreamy expression. It was apparently at that moment she came to a decision of great importance, but what its connection was with a fine hunting trophy, she did not explain.

"Walk with me a little way into the woods," she invited me.

I did so, although I brought my spear, in case the jaguar's mate was skulking about seeking revenge. As usual, we walked hand in hand.

"Malinche, I have something to tell you. I should have waited a few months more, for I was afraid you would want to give me tender care, as husbands give their brides in Spain when the like happens, and would forbid my getting about like a mountain ewe."

"You are—" I began, in a wonder-filled tone.

"Yes. With child. Still if you look close at my belly, you will observe it is beginning to swell, despite the tight scarves I wear to hold it in. The babe was conceived in late September by your counting, so should be born about midyear. Not long ago, I thought that I felt life."

She spoke quietly and happily, yet without jubilation. As for me, I was wonder struck and deeply moved. I was already father of at least one child born outside of wedlock, and often my thoughts had strayed to a pretty, little brown-skinned girl in Cuba. By now she attended Mass; her hair was being pulled and she would be receiving other indignities from boys paying her urchin court; and in truth she visited my mind more often than did Catalina, my wedded wife. But this seemed a more serious and solemn matter than the other.

I felt superstitiously about it, also. I had heard the news the morning after the first sailing of the new-built ship and on the very morning I had slain my first jaguar, an event momentous in the life of a stripling in hunting tribes northward, the chief supplier of beautiful furs to the Mexic market. There was nothing to this, so my common sense maintained. Still I remembered Marina's dreamy expression as she gazed at my beautiful trophy, and wondered what it meant.

2

I had been told that when a native of Portuguese India hears of good fortune, he does not celebrate but sits quietly in a corner, so as not to attract the attention of some evil deity who would deal him bad fortune. Perhaps I should have done the same, for I had no sooner returned to the palace than I heard news of a full-fledged plot against me hatched by Cacama, King of Tetzcuco, and Montezuma's nephew. Conspiring with him were the lords of two other provinces, and caciques of two more.

I must act quickly, for this fire was well lit, and could sweep the Seven Kingdoms in a matter of days. When I sent an embassy to Cacama, he returned the most insolent answer I had heard since we had first approached the Tlaxcatecs. He had never heard of the Emperor Charles the Fifth; he

wished he had never heard of me; and not much more would be heard from me ever, except a growling in the stomachs of him and his chieftains when they had devoured me. In the hearing of my ambassadors he made a fiery address to his chieftains, in which he stated that neither the pale-faces nor their horses were supernatural beings; they had seen dead Spaniards and dead horses; that Montezuma was a hen and not a man, or else he had been bewitched by the holy image of the woman that we worshiped. He boasted that if the caciques would follow him, he would wipe out our whole force in four days.

So I met plot with plot. There were traitors in his midst, or rather I should say true subjects to Montezuma, and they decoyed Cacama into one of his houses built over the water. Under it, in canoes, waited my party, who quickly seized the rebel and his chief conspirators. I had Mexic blacksmiths forge a long and heavy chain of some iron we had salvaged from the ships, and to this I bolted fast Cacama and two other once-powerful kings. Some of my soldiers wondered why I did not burn them at the stake, or at least hang them. The explanation was that while my burning of Quauhopopoca and his chiefs had made a powerful impression on the Mexics, it had not been deep and lasting, or this new trouble would not have risen. On the other hand my Chain of Kings, with three already in its coils, one of them Montezuma's brother and another his nephew, would remain on public display. Other mighty rulers would observe the chain's length, giving abundant room for any king with traitorous designs.

On searching my heart, I decided that these captives could not fairly be called traitors, because in name Montezuma, not the Spanish Emperor, was their acknowledged monarch. This condition I meant to remedy at once, by the simple acknowledgment by Montezuma that he himself and all his dominion were subject to Charles V. I need not expect a great deal of resistance to this renunciation by my friend and prisoner. He was utterly convinced that an olden prophecy was being fulfilled, and that Mexico was to be ruled from henceforth by pale-faced men from the Sunrise, and this was by the wishes of his gods.

To Montezuma, I explained that just as I could not take to bed an unchristened girl, I could not properly send his gifts to the Great Emperor, Charles the Fifth, unless he were his vassal. I perceived a certain cynicism in the argument, but Montezuma did not do so. The surrender of his sovereignty was only one more step in the march of Fate, in keeping with all else that had happened, and he agreed with little protest.

All his kings and magnates were summoned to witness the ceremony. Not all came, those that did not I would deal with later, but an impressive number did appear on the day appointed. It was held on Christ Mass in the great hall of Axayacatl's palace in the year 1519, with Hernandez acting as notary.

Montezuma made his declaration of abdication under what was at first full self-control. He cited all the reasons I had offered, and others that he had himself conceived, that the Aztec nations had once before been ruled by aliens, who had gone but now had returned. But as he made his final appeal that his former subjects accept the will of the gods and the march of implacable Destiny with the same resignation, even joy, that he himself had done, tears began to fill his eyes and his voice faltered. Still he went on with his address although in broken phrases, and now and then a sob he could not suppress.

"So I implore you—that as you once held me as your lord—obeyed my dictates—served me in true faith—you now hold the Spanish King as such—and hold Malintzin—he who stands beside me—as viceroy of that king. And hereby I, Montezuma—once Uei Tlatoani—declare my sovereignty at an end."

Montezuma closed his eyes to stop their flow, drew a deep breath, and then went on in a pitiful tone that not only his own great chiefs, but my own hardened soldiers, could hardly bear to hear.

"Serve him faithfully," Montezuma told his great chieftains, he and all the rest openly weeping. "Pay him honor—love him if you can—in all case obey him and be true to him as you once were true to me. I will give that same service—and that troth. Hold me in your hearts, but as one who has gone. Farewell."

Then I, too, must weep, but not alone. His kings and chieftains were shaken with sobs, an awful thing to see in those strong and valiant men, and I saw what I had never expected in this world to see, which was not only my officers and more sentient soldiers weeping unashamed, but also every man of our *Corps Perdu*, profane, impious, defiant of fate, scornful of death, men without hope of Grace, accepting life as a grim joke which they must answer with grim jokes, fearing not God nor devil nor man—their lean, bronzed faces also were wet with tears.

Indeed, I observed only one man in the whole assembly who remained dry-eyed, and in his eyes what might be a look of scorn for all others' tears.

He was handsome Alvarado, and I wondered if he had a human heart or one of stone.

3

My conquest of Mexic and its subject Aztec nations now seemed to be complete. Not long from now, I thought, I would with my own hands present to the Emperor Charles a half-miter with a feathered shawl to put with the gold crowns of all the kingdoms of his Empire. When he beheld the tribute paid, one fifth of the vast hoard of treasure which we had seized, I reckoned he would place the barbaric headdress before all the rest. Surely he could no less than appoint me viceroy of all New Spain, including the islands, with the rank of duke; and make all my captains counts, and the least in my ranks a don. I would be privileged to ride a donkey in state parades, not far behind the royal carriage. I would make a marriage of state with the daughter of a duke of ancient name, with the blood of royal Aragon and Leon coursing in her veins, but Marina would remain my mistress, herself ennobled, and my dearest love.

Yet that very night, after Marina and I had made what truly seemed conjugal love, and she slept cuddled in my arms, when the full surge of my triumph began to ebb a little and I, too, went happily to sleep, I was visited by unhappy dreams.

In the next few weeks the body of the great kingdom newly added to Charles' Empire—although he did not know it yet—began to break out with symptoms of sickness, only a rash as yet, but threatening great sores. One cause was Alvarado's behavior with my chained prisoner, Cacama. Although I had ordered no such inquiry, the captain charged him with lying as to the amount of gold he could pay into our coffers, and for the second time—he had inflicted the same torture soon after Cacama's arrest—burned his naked body with hot tar. Because the former king then confessed a secret hoard and told its whereabouts, I could not punish Alvarado as he deserved, having to admit that his cruel measures had had results beneficial to my entire army. In fact the men applauded this already popular captain.

I had always been too lenient with Alvarado, without quite knowing why. I suppose his handsome person, dash, courage, and ever-ready merry laugh had somehow tied my hands. Perhaps it wakened a certain envy, too, because increasing power and ever its companion, responsibility, had made me somewhat dour, not the good fellow the men had followed from Vera Cruz, and I was not as popular as before. By the same token, and despite his

popularity, my failure to deal firmly with Alvarado had lost me a little of their respect.

They, too, could be like Alvarado, so they thought. And the more gold they got their hands on, the more they craved. An ugly incident occurred between Leon and Mexia, my treasurer. Playing cards had been made from the skin of a drum, much gambling ensued; and in the quarrel, blades had been bared and both men took slight wounds. I put them both in irons, soon releasing Mexia; Leon, plainly the aggressor, I banished to Cholula in an administrative office for a limited period.

Three hundred of our natives broke into the cocoa stores of Montezuma and stole all they could carry away. Cocoa was the prime luxury of the nation—often used as money. Alvarado discovered the raid, and instead of preventing it and reporting to me, he came with fifty more Indians to seize a large quantity for himself. I had trouble explaining to myself why I dealt him no punishment other than severe rebuke and stinging reprimand, when I had once come nigh hanging a soldier for stealing two hens. Why did I lull my sense of justice and turn soft when I dealt with this fascinating fellow, so merry that the Indians called him the Son of the Sun? He was extraordinarily successful as the leader of military ventures, his popularity was boundless with both factions, and three of his brothers were alike good captains. The truth was, I supposed, since Montezuma's complete capitulation, I had lost some power of will that a great challenge or crisis wakened in me.

My worst lapse followed the giving "to Malintzin and to all Spaniards under him" the vast treasure in the walled-up room we called the Jewel Shop. I should have spoken strongly at once—that no division of the hoard would be made until the whole Aztec country was secured and we were ready to sail for Spain. So I retracted or restricted my statement, saying of course I would set aside the Emperor's fifth, and half the remainder, before I divided the spoil in the near future. Alvarado boldly announced he wanted his share at once, and all Spaniards in hearing gave a great cheer. No one knew better than I the dazzlement of the eyes and the corruption of the soul caused by the sight of a Croesusian hoard of gold. Greed turns into burning fever; it can estrange old friends; it can turn love into hate in affectionate families. In our case it demolished our *esprit de corps*; it turned gentlemen into rascals, demolished discipline, and its acquisition became the prime motive of my hitherto staunch men, rather than the glory of God, the Emperor, and the Spanish race. Brilliant, rare, and precious jewels have the same effect on many women. For these they will yield their chastity or even commit murder. They have the same fiendish attraction for certain types of

men, especially the sophisticated and the artistic. Levantines above the peasant class are well schooled in their value, and will haggle and often cheat, but will never pay so high a price that they cannot make high profit. A Jew long in business drives a hard bargain but will rarely lie or swindle.

There were few epicures among my soldiers. They were dazzled by the jewels but valued them only for what they would bring in gold, an unknown quantity. On the day of distribution, I carefully weighed all the gold including utensils and decorative pieces, the sacks of pebbles and dust, gold bars, and cubes and disks used as coin. From this I subtracted the Emperor's fifth share, choosing the most beautiful pieces of gold, and set aside for future distributions half the remaining gold and all the chests of jewels and precious cloth. The Emperor's fifth amounted to a little less than half of the total gold handiwork. When I subtracted my own fifth, it was mainly of worked gold, much of it exquisite.

My captains and soldiers found no fault with this. They had no eye for finely wrought pieces; the leftovers along with their portions of bars, gold pieces used as coin, and raw gold they would only smelt into ingots. After I had set aside the Emperor's share and half of the remainder, then from the latter took my own fifth, there remained thirty-two per cent of the whole find for immediate distribution to my followers. This I divided as fairly as I could—one third of one per cent to every captain and horse owner, ship's officer, official, chaplain, cannoneer, musketeer, and crossbowman. The remainder, about one sixth of the total gold we had found, I divided into three hundred and fifty equal parts, each part worth fifteen hundred silver ducats. One fellow who had received a golden drinking cup, beautifully embossed, as part of his share, crushed it with his heel before he put it in his leathern poke.

As for the remaining gold, the Emperor's fifth and two fifths of the whole trove, the jewel chests, and the precious cloths, I had them shut in the sealed vault under guard. The jewels would be sold and distributed when jewel buyers came from Antwerp with the Emperor's agents and soldiers to administer and police the whole Aztec country, and our survivors could once more assemble at Vera Cruz.

In the meantime, there was no good in letting kings and caciques retain their hoards for seizure by the Emperor's minions. We were the conquerors of the land and its stubborn cities; to us belonged the spoils. So I took to sending parties of armed men to these cities and towns, to garner all treasure that they could get hands on except vessels in the temples, the taking of which would infuriate the priests and greatly increase our perils. We could

be sure the rulers and chieftains would conceal a good part of their treasure; but my men were not to employ torture to have it brought forth.

Most of this gold was deposited in our treasury, for later fair division. These additions to their previous gleanings made rich the humblest man in our ranks. As for myself, I had a private hoard, my share from the Jewel Shop and my gifts from Montezuma, worth sixty thousand castilians, the fortune of many a rich Spanish count. When the stored jewels were sold, and the gold and bejeweled objects in the Jewel Shop and in Montezuma's hoards had been distributed, I would have twice or three times as much. This was still a far cry from the fortune of seven hundred thousand golden pesos which the soldiers reckoned had been stowed in my personal treasury. Still, it might yet come true in this El Dorado over which I reigned. Marina's spies had discovered the region of the fabulously rich mines supplying the greater part of the royal revenue. It was in the country of the Zolulu, in the far south, by the western ocean Balboa had found, its people subject to the king of a vague, vast region of which Marina had cryptically spoken, Oaxaca.

Despite temptation, I did not send soldiers there. They were already too obsessed by gold, what they had and what they would obtain in the distribution, and the vast amount more that they desired. When in afterthought I searched what I had done, I found that a most liberal reward to every Spanish follower was only just, and some was due to my Indian followers, although the main boon for which they had fought was freedom from Mexic rule.

Yet I had gone too far. Too liberal giving is a form of self-flattery to which I was subject in many directions. My army had deteriorated in many ways in these last days. The road toward our undoing, on which we had advanced further than I had dared believe, had been shown us by that ancient temptress, gold. Our oneness had been dissolved, our resolve had weakened. Somewhere along the line I had failed my duty, and that failure had spread to officers and men. It could well be true that despite the many perils we had hitherto surmounted, we were now in the worst of all.

That night I tossed in dismal dreams, fought invisible foes, the point of my sword was broken, my shield was revealed as vulnerable tin, not iron; Montezuma's kinsmen knew a secret and laughed behind my back; sacrificial knives were being sharpened for I could hear the whetting; and the horrid faces of the Aztec gods wore sinister smiles.

"You did not sleep well, Malinche," Marina told me, when she had wakened me with a loving kiss in the dreary dawn.

"Perhaps I dined too well last night on the haunch of venison," I answered.

"That was not the fault. Nor did little devils with snaky tails, such as you saw in the highest chamber of the teocalli, tease and taunt you for some failure of duty to the gods. Those dreams were conjured up by your waking thoughts. And, my lord and dearest love, they might come true."

"What under Heaven do you mean?"

"All is not well with you, Malinche, or I should say with us, for I am become part of you, as you of me. It is not what I see and hear, or of which the spies have proof. It is something I smell in the air, a taint of decay, and it blows to me from the east. The great caciques are waiting for something . . . listening . . . they no longer believe that you are a Great Teul . . . there are many voluntary sacrifices, far more than before you took the awesome risk, dealt that mighty body blow, of imprisoning Montezuma. . . . The worship is mainly to Uitzilopochtli, our god of war. Only yesterday, a cousin of Montezuma gave in sacrifice his own beloved little daughter, wearing the white flower of virginity. . . . Also, once more, sacrifice is being made to Quetzalcoatl, god of the Sunrise."

"The two do not seem to go together."

"He is also god of the winds and in some measure of the sea. Perhaps the chiefs are asking pardon for a mistake they made."

"But the sacrifices and worship was much less after I had seized Montezuma until very lately. Is that what you said?"

"Yes."

"The bold stroke told, but its effect is wearing off."

"That is true, Malinche. The chieftains believe he will not be your prisoner for much longer, and instead you will be his. That is what I think is in their minds. Even under your hand, Montezuma has not renounced his gods; he had not even stopped human sacrifice, and himself orders it, sending to the Dish of Eagles some of his own slaves."

"Marina, are you sure?"

"I had proof of it last night, but I did not tell you, you were so wearied and sad."

"To Quetzalcoatl, too?"

"Yes, even to him."

"It comes down to this. They are persuaded that their gods are more powerful than the Crosses and the images of Maria and the Child Jesus we have raised. That their gods are greater than my God."

"It may come down to that. But there may be more than that. Do not ask me what because I do not know. Two of my most faithful spies have disappeared."

I considered a while, and then spoke.

"Then the time has come for another great stroke, as bold as the seizure of Montezuma, perhaps more bold, and more dangerous."

"Though I can hardly find breath to say so, I believe you speak the truth."

4

Then I rose, put on full military dress, and ordered a hasty breakfast. Before I had downed it, I had decided on the small company I would have at my side in the desperate sally, the stakes of which were life or death.

Among the first on which my mind had lighted were Alvarado, Bernal Diaz, and Sandoval. These three were vastly different in character and personality but there was one great thing they had in common—dauntless courage in any perilous pass. After brief consideration, I passed over every captain or soldier still loyal to Velazquez, but I picked Leon, once Velazquez' man, but now wholly mine. I selected three other stalwarts from my ranks, and eleven more of the *Corps Perdu*, daredevils in the truest sense, who strangely enough were less prey to gold fever than my more sober, cautious, usually hard-headed, placid followers. Among them was Dominico, a former bullfighter who had gone after bigger game; Astores, the attainted son of a grandee; Benevente, his face made hideous by falling in a fire; Azanta, a veteran of Cordoba's expedition; Zamora, who had been brought before the Inquisitors, sentenced to a fiery death, and mysteriously pardoned. Thus my total force including Aguila, as well a soldier as an interpreter, was only twenty. Since I could not have my whole army, so many men had gone treasure seeking far and wide, I decided on this small number because, if our mission succeeded, it would vastly increase its fame through the Aztec nations.

When I had assembled them, and told them of my resolve, I asked each man in turn if he wished to be excused; if so, my opinion of him would not be reduced and he would be in no way penalized, in public or in secret. As I might have known, not one accepted the offer, and highborn Astores laughed in my face. Once more I felt a kind of lightning flashing from heart to heart. Myself had changed from what I had been lately; I seemed to stand taller; my voice had a different ring.

Then in one surge of thought, or by a last-minute inspiration, I decided to invite Montezuma to accompany us.

I went into his apartments, much earlier in the morning than was my wont. He had just finished breakfast and was smoking one of his tobacco pipes. He searched my face before he spoke; then he employed a merry tone.

"You must have played truant from your early morning service to the Great Woman and her Child."

"I will pay it elsewhere, Uei Tlatoani. I have taken the notion to visit with a small number of my men your private temple." This was not the great teocalli in the royal square, but a tower close by, Montezuma's chapel, which Bernal had visited and called the Tower of Horrors. Indeed, until the thought of inviting Montezuma had struck my mind with such force, and my heart with such heat, I had intended our little band to visit neither tower but the great teocalli itself. Actually the choice forced upon me by my decision to invite Montezuma should have been my first choice. This tower was really the holy of holies of the whole Aztec Confederacy.

"Malinche, it would offend our gods, that armed aliens, worshiping false gods, should enter there. I most strongly advise—"

"Doubtless your gods will be offended, and the priests angered. Still my purpose holds."

"Will you tell me that purpose? Although I have surrendered my sovereignty to the great Spanish Emperor, I am not without power."

"We will not speak of that. I am in haste to be gone."

"This morning you do not speak as my good friend."

"I remain so, and will prove my friendship in the best way I know. Montezuma, I command you to accompany me. You are not without power and I am not without my sword."

"Then I will come. But I pray you, for your own sake, to do nothing you will regret. This is a most solemn warning. A measure I was about to take for

the safety of you and all your men must be abandoned, if you do anything to inflame my people."

"We will look to our own safety, Montezuma, my friend."

Pale in the face, he came, and together we joined my small but resolute party waiting in the great hall. He perceived their weapons and armor; and I did not think he failed to notice the expressions on their faces, which despite their varied lineaments caused resemblance to one another. Their eyes looked small and very bright. They stood in nonchalant postures, but with the grace of jaguars.

We conversed of divers matters, even the weather, in the short walk to the tower. But we fell silent at the doorway, which was made to represent the gaping mouth of a devil with monstrous fangs. The priest on guard there gave us one startled glance, then began running up the steep circular stairway, our band close behind him. A curtain of some heavy fabric, covered with bells, hung at the head of the stairs, and the priest slipped silently through it, but our entrance caused a great jangling, harrowing to the ears, as we pushed through. The service we had interrupted we would never forget.

On the sacrificial stone lay one of the few Cempoalans who had followed me to Mexic, a minor cacique by name Coatzalango, which was also the name of a river, although what was the connection I had never inquired. He was one of the spies Marina had sent into Tetzcuco who had failed to return from his mission. Above him stood a priest with his adz-shaped sacrificial knife, other priests held vessels to catch his blood. Pale and staring, he was prepared for the fatal stroke, and could hardly believe that rescue had come in the very breach of time. The priests drew back, snarling. Sandoval heaved him off the stone; and still dulled by terror, not knowing what he was doing, Coatzalango began to put on the garments lately removed. This little crisis passed, we began to peer about us in the dim light.

The chamber was larger than it had looked from the ground, being square, projecting on all sides from the top of the round stone tower. There were three images. One was of Tetzcatlipoca, the head god of the Aztecs, and twelve feet tall. The other two represented the god of war and Quetzalcoatl. All were richly bejeweled, and except for golden masks and less stature and bulk, they closely resembled the giant images in the teocallis. What had sickened Bernal was the number of half-burned human hearts rotting in vessels on a long shelf, so many of these small, having been

torn from the breasts of children, and no few were very small, proof of the sacrifice of babes given by their devout parents, or snatched from their arms. Of course the walls were encrusted with blood; and the stench almost beyond bearing.

One of the vessels had two infant hearts, which I presumed belonged to twins, and had beat in unison in their mother's womb, and who no doubt had died side by side almost the same instant.

I do not know why this sight frenzied me so greatly. All thought of danger sped from my mind; I hoped that the priests would attack us so we could slay them all; if Montezuma had raised his hand to restrain me I would have slashed it off. Thrusting my sword hilt into my readied left hand, I seized an iron bar stolen from a Spanish ship, now leaning against the wall. The priests' use for it I never knew, doubtless a horrid use, but I had good use for it now. With a mighty upward bound, far higher than within my natural prowess, I smote the golden mask of the giant statue with all my strength. It broke in half and fell with two great clangings on the stone floor.

"Have at them," I told the men, and they needed no other command to assail in utmost fury all three of the images. They drove their spear points into the plaster of the bejeweled trunks, and it was weaker than we had deemed. Caring naught for the blunting of their swords, they hacked through the legs on the monstrosities, causing them to crash to the floor. Then they attacked their necks and arms, Aguila now wielding the iron bar in maniacal fury. The heads were hacked off, the mirrored eyes put out, the hideous ears broken or slashed away. The bodies were already cracked by their fall, and by one means or another we broke them into pieces. These, when we had slashed away the belled curtain, we sent bumping and bounding down the stone steps. To the chamber itself, which was of wood, old and dry, we set fire, careless of the jewels that it would destroy, thinking only of its destruction and what remained of the children's and babes' hearts being consumed by the clean flame.

The priests fled howling with us hard after them, our swords bared, and only I must turn back to grasp the hand of Montezuma, who had apparently decided to perish in the fire. He offered no resistance to my implacable grasp, and he seemed more child than man as I hauled him down the steps behind my ravening pack of avengers.

One priest stopped and aimed a blow with the sacrificial adz against Dominico. The toreador ran him through the body as cleanly as his espada had transfixed the spines at the necks of Andalusian bulls when given the

coup de grâce. When we gained the entrance, Montezuma began to run wildly toward the palace, but Alvarado and hideous Benevente kept close on his heels, with their swords drawn, ready to use them if he should attempt to break out of the guarded square. The rest of us waited and watched until the abominable chamber was in full blaze, the whole tower suggesting a mighty upraised torch, visible throughout the city.

And as the flames began to die down, unable to consume the stone walls below, we heard the distant, doleful beat of the great drum in the tower of the teocalli. But now it did not toll a death march; the blows on its skin head fell so fast that their resoundings made a continuous and ominous rumble, rising and falling a little, but with never an interval of silence.

It might be, I thought, the summons to arms of countless Aztec soldiers. But no militant and inflamed throng gathered at the gate; every person on the street stopped and watched in dread silence the dying flames of what was once the supreme house of the three greatest of the gods.

Still, I never for a moment believed that the event would not have enormous consequence, whether to our good or evil I could not foretell. Long ago, in Extremadura, Juvena could predict the soon breaking of a storm by a sudden laming of her left knee. My own left knee went lame.

5

For some days, Montezuma shut himself in his private apartments and would receive no visitors. Our assessment of the good or ill of our iconoclasm was perforce incomplete and subject to grave error; yet one vastly important fact was beyond dispute. If a sudden, widespread revolt had been planned, those plans had gone awry. The priests had a hard time explaining why twenty men, assuredly not great teules, could utterly demolish the most sacred images of three of the most mighty gods, then march away unharmed. The idols had been not only demolished but insulted, clattering in pieces down the stairs, and their holy house destroyed by flame.

Marina's ear remained close to the ground. She was a highly gifted interpreter not only of several languages but of little signs, remarks overheard, intonations of voices, and facial expressions. Open grumbling at our dominion had died away. Insolent behavior or speech had ceased. Activity in and about the Mexic arsenals had markedly slowed down. On the streets our soldiers were not greeted with smiles or with gifts of flowers by children; rather the Mexic people went out of their way to avoid contact

with them. But sacrifice at the teocallis was not diminished, and perhaps increased.

"The great lords and priests are by no means reconciled to your rule," Marina told me. "They have been foiled and profoundly shocked by that audacious action, more so perhaps than by your imprisonment of Montezuma; yet I think that they still believe their hour of deliverance is not far off. They are waiting for something—perhaps a sign from the skies, or some other great miracle, or merely the day of your doom as foreseen by their astrologers."

And about the fifth day Ortegulla, the page with the agile tongue, who had learned the Mexic language, and whom I had put in the service of the emperor, came to me in dismay. Montezuma had spent most of the night and the preceding day in council with his kinsmen, powerful priests, and his ablest captains. Now he wished me to visit him to receive tidings of great moment.

I went at once. Montezuma received me with formality; his expression grave, his manner distant. Yet I thought I saw a gleam of triumph in his fine, dark eyes.

"Malinche, I am deeply wounded by what you did at my private chapel," he began.

"My lord, it was by the command of my God."

"My people have done no insult to your God, as represented by the Cross and the images you have raised. Is your God so jealous, so unsure of His dominion, that He cannot endure the presence, not even the existence, of other gods?"

"His commandment reads 'Ye shall have no other gods before me.' The groves of false gods must be cut down, their altars cast down and destroyed, and the passing of human beings through the fire to Moloch—another way of saying the burning of human hearts unto idols—is an abomination to be destroyed root and branch."

Montezuma considered briefly, then spoke in a more familiar, warmer tone.

"Malinche, the priests have been in consultation with our gods. They have already endured great abuse from you and your men, evil speech and deed. Because you come hence from a distant land, and did not know their due, or believe in their great power, they withheld punishment, but now their patience is exhausted. The priests asked these gods if you and your men

should be permitted to remain among us. The answer was no, otherwise we were to destroy you, every man, woman, and child, and all your Aztec followers. So you must depart for the coast at once, and as soon as possible take ship for the distant lands from whence you came."

"And if we refuse?"

"Then it will be our gods' appointed duty to kill you all. But Malinche, I do not believe you will refuse. First, may I ask if you have had late news from your settlement you call Vera Cruz?"

"Not in the past few days."

"I have had news from my spies there and from a long distance up and down the coasts. And now there has come a picture writing that you, for the sake of a friendship we have both enjoyed, are permitted to see."

He drew it from a drawer and unrolled the cloth. It revealed eighteen ships at anchor in the harbor, as well as some of my own ships wrecked on the beach. Also it showed many armed men on the decks and, on the shores, horses and guns.

"Three of these ships visited our coasts about the time you left Cempoala to make your wicked march to my capital. They lingered awhile, and then sailed away. Now they have returned with fifteen others. They are under the command of a great lord, very tall and heavily built, who speaks in a somewhat high and hollow voice, and his dwelling is on the great island that you call Cuba. Doubtless he will give passage to you and your men to your homes near the Rising Sun, but whether as free men, or in chains, I do not know."

Narvaez! It was a perfect description of Velazquez' favorite and lieutenant-governor, now his avenger. With great effort, I controlled my countenance, but Montezuma read something in my eyes for his own filled with mirth. And now I divined the plot against us hatched by him and Montezuma's advisers and chieftains, the go-between probably being Melchior, the Spanish renegade. While Narvaez seized Vera Cruz and our other settlements and hanged its garrisons, the Mexics were to rise in revolt, overwhelm us, or destroy us by attrition as we sought to escape.

This last disaster we had averted by the destruction of the holiest of idols in Montezuma's chapel. Thus the Mexics had lost heart to attack a force of such defiance of their gods, and would leave our destruction to our fellow Spaniards, of far greater numbers than our own, if the count of ships were

true. This last I could not doubt for the picture had been sent for Montezuma's eyes, not mine.

The plain fact, as the emperor plainly perceived, we were caught between two fires.

He saw himself, with flawless logic, the certain winner. Trying to imitate his thoughts; I reckoned thus: Malinche was a great and famous soldier, the victor of one battle after another bloody battle. I must be reckoned with and never discounted until he himself laid eyes on my dead body. In this one thing I might even be a sort of god, or else a magician of powers of unpredictable actions. It stood to reason that the tall and portly captain also was a great and famous soldier, to dare to follow down and make war upon me. The latter had a much larger force, more ships and guns and horses; still Montezuma was not certain which of us would win. That really did not matter to Montezuma. The one certainty was that the power of each of us would be hurled against the other, not against him. He had never heard of a Pyrrhic victory but he foresaw one, in fact, although not in name: Narvaez and I engaged in sanguine conflict, at which cavalry would charge cavalry, thunder guns reply to thunder guns, as armies of howling red-bearded men hacked and thrust at an army of like mettle. At battle's end, how many would survive? Only a weary handful which Montezuma need never fear again. One at a time, or in desperate clusters, they could be captured alive, sacrificed to the god of war, and the Aztec nations would again return to their old ways, with him, Montezuma, He Who May Speak, as All Highest among men.

I put an end to this reflection and returned to the present pass. Plainly, Montezuma was waiting for me to speak, and what I said he would long meditate and remember. He could hardly wait.

"Uei Tlatoani, I must soon busy my hands with this traitor and his following, a soldier of fortune who has dared invade the realm of the great King Charles. He must meet the punishment that he deserves. But many days have passed since we had a little game of pitch-for-the-pin. You beat me the last time; and I crave revenge for that defeat. Surely we have time for a brief trial at twenty points."

Montezuma could not keep his face from falling, nor had he breath for any adequate answering remark. He called for the pins and the golden rings, and when they were ready I knew that this game to him would be much more than a game. To lose would be a sign of utmost evil, a heavy rain upon his fire-new fortunes, a dread omen of defeat. So moved the mind of a

superstitious man. As I had fully expected, he tried too hard, a thing almost impossible to do in dire and bloody battle, but a handicap in any contest where the easy habits of the body, clear seeing, and good muscular control, will assure good playing. My nerves were relaxed, Montezuma's tied in a knot.

He missed his first toss and began to sweat. I won mine; and he stood there aiming a long minute before he made his second toss, and this, too, missed. As my score mounted against his, he became more desperate; he called for a strong cup of cocoa; he whispered prayers to his gods and cursed himself. When I had made twenty hits, he had but four.

"I have had a sleepless night," he told me in sick excuse.

"A glass of milk—I forgot, my good friend Montezuma, that Mexico has no cattle. I will import some, when I return. And do not forget that you owe me sixteen silver pesos."

He fumbled in his pouch and paid their worth in one small cube of gold. This I gave to his round-eyed seneschal.

Then I bade him not worry about anything, that all would turn out well, and took friendly leave. But I had not left the main portal of his palace before my brain was busied with my plans. My little force must be divided: this was a cruel but certain fact. The men whom I left here would be in far greater danger of extermination than those I marched to meet Narvaez; and my main consolation was that Axayacatl's palace was a natural fortress, strongly built, with no trees near by to use in scaling its walls. Three large terraces were good placements for cannon, their low walls offering shelter for the cannoneers. At the rear of the palace roof was what could be turned into a battlement, a roofed tower with open sides that Montezuma used as an observatory for signs in the heavens, conflagrations in the city, and in such innocent pastimes as watching birds, squirrels, and monkeys in his cherry grove. As a gesture of hospitality, the immense pantries had been kept well victualed from week to week, and it so chanced that I had lately imported from Tlaxcala a large quantity of maize, for the crops about Mexic had been poor. By good fortune only—or by the Grace of God, for I had taken no step to assure it—my garrison would not want for water. If the main duct could be cut, there was still a very deep well, fed I thought by a natural spring far underground, opening in the kitchen and used by the army of servants and retainers. Most of these I meant to discharge and disperse.

Just outside the portal I gave one command to the guard.

"Double the watch over Montezuma. He is not permitted to approach any of the portals. It is to be maintained day and night. Admit no armed visitors into the palace until further orders."

My next move was to send well-trusted couriers to summon all my followers at present gleaning or searching for gold. But one detachment I had sent forth I did not recall, and instead sped a runner to order its mission fulfilled as quickly as possible. The Chinantec tribe was famed for its long, strong spears with brass rather than obsidian heads. My men were to procure three hundred of these spears by any method necessary, and bring them in all haste to me. I resolved I would not descend to the sea until the weapons could be delivered to me at Tovilla.

Meanwhile, the days could be spent in diplomatic exchange between Narvaez and me, for I took it he could not advance on Mexic until his men had rested one or more weeks from their long, and, it had so happened, rough and weary journey. Marina was busy at espionage and such was her position, and so great the esteem in which she was held, that Spaniards as well as Indians were proud to partake in the missions she designed. Two who happened to have dark complexions, and who had learned a little of the Cempoalan language from their sweethearts, went forth disguised as Indians to hang about one of Narvaez' outlying camps. They did not glean much information but they did manage to steal two greatly needed horses. Other spies disclosed the approximate size of his force, which would have appalled me if I were not well used to facing armies vastly larger than my own. He had eighteen ships—one had been lost with all hands in the rough crossing—between twelve hundred and fourteen hundred men, including eighty horsemen, seventy musketeers, ninety crossbowmen, and the crews for twenty cannons.

Since I was resolved to leave eighty of my Spaniards under Alvarado as a garrison, along with five hundred loyal Aztecs of various nations, I must set off for Cholula with exactly seventy. But making haste from Coatzacoala to join me was Leon, with a hundred and fifty veterans, and from Chubanla came Rangel with a hundred and ten. Thus my force was three hundred and forty, perhaps a fourth of the enemy's, and some hundreds of Indian allies.

In Vera Cruz was stout Sandoval, whom I could wholly trust. When three blustering ambassadors arrived from Cempoala, demanding he surrender the settlement, Sandoval had watched his chance, had had Indians steal upon them from the rear and throw over them net hammocks, which we had learned were better man catchers than any other coil, and much quicker to apply than irons. These, one of them a puffing notary, were dispatched to

Mexic under guard of decrepit seamen, no longer able to man ships or engage in bloody battle, but competent to cut off heads of refractory prisoners.

Sandoval had also sent to safety other worn-out sailors, and manned his fortifications with fifty stout and faithful men.

As the three prisoners neared the city, I went forth to meet them, removed their bonds, and showed them every courtesy. They were already wide-eyed with astonishment at the magnificent cities of my empire, and I arranged for my soldiers to wander about in their sight, singly or in groups, wearing golden collars, belts, and buckles, and evincing every sign of lordly wealth. On the morrow I intended that Narvaez' envoys should take him my answer to his message, and I need not doubt they would also carry tales. True, I ran some risk of these so exciting his cupidity that he would make haste to march upon Mexic, but the more likely consequence would be his soldiers' taking thought, wondering if they had wagered on the wrong horse, and wishing they were in my force instead of his. Also I greased the messengers' hands with gold and jewels.

A good deal of diplomatic exchange went on, while Alvarado was erecting fortifications about the palace now his fort, and the rest of us prepared to march and fight. Yet when we had set forth, in fine fettle and spirit, I was met with a disappointment at Cholula. I had sent messengers to Tlaxcala asking for five thousand warriors. Their king replied that while he would gladly lend me hand in fighting other Aztecs, in this case the enemies were also gods or men out of the Sun, with whom he had once fought and had been taught a bitter lesson.

Still, not all my cakes were dough. Frey Olmedo had preceded the messengers to Narvaez, secure in his frock, and was casting bread on the waters in the way of golden gifts and bribes from our treasury. Also he was a most useful spy. When Narvaez proposed that he and I meet, each with ten followers, to discuss terms of peace, particularly a division of the empire between him and me, Olmedo sent me secret word not to consent, for a trap had been laid to kill me. When this trick failed, Narvaez sent me a letter saying he would provide ships, sailors, and supplies to take our whole force to Cuba, but if we did not consent we could expect no mercy at his hands. When I read this to my troops they whooped with laughter.

At Tovilla the long spears arrived, and I instantly perceived how useful they would be in meeting attack by cavalry. In this so vital division of an army, we were outnumbered about fifteen to one. My men were jubilant,

practiced handling the new weapons, and in two days could thrust them quickly and straight as the old. Meanwhile, I was sending embassy after embassy to Narvaez, saying this and that of no possible use or moment, but with servants laden down with little leather sacks of gold which would break stones. And now I heard the invigorating news that Narvaez would pay two thousand pesos to any killer of Sandoval or me.

Sandoval had met me, with fifty seamen turned soldiers, at Tampecan. Meanwhile, I had an active partisan in Narvaez' own camp, indeed in daily conference with him, and having deep influence upon him. This was Duero, treasurer to Velazquez, who had helped me obtain command of the expedition. This little fellow, quiet and keen, rising from poverty and obscurity by his own resolve, was in secret pact with me, and his goal was gold. Such a goal is not evil in itself; it makes the mare go as the proverb tells; the paying out of gold for someone's double-dealing may be a little less evil than its acceptance, but it is far from honorable. I could only quote another proverb, not native to Spain, I think a translation from some other language. "All is fair in love and war."

Narvaez made full use of his voice, but spared his legs. He was forever proclaiming himself the real lord of the land, boasting of his invincibility, telling the Indians that they would soon see me hanged; but was not in the least haste to leave the great teocalli of Cempoala to carry out his threats. Truly, it seemed, he believed that great lie of one of my ablest liars, Frey Olmedo, that my force would presently march to the city but their real purpose was not to fight him, and instead to surrender me into his hands, so greatly they hated me. Then they would swear allegiance to him as governor of all the lands they had won with sweat and blood.

By such allegiance, they would become subject to Velazquez, and thus in an unbroken chain to Bishop Fonseca, far distant in Seville. There he pulled the strings of command whereby moved and danced or fought or finagled his marionettes on countless leagues of oceans, islands uncountable, and areas of the New World in which all Spain could be stuffed away and hidden—this New World that to my own irritation was more and more frequently spoken of as Amerigo's Land. One, and perhaps two, continents could thus be named for a map maker who, as far as I knew, had never fired a musket in their obtainment. I longed for it to be named Colonia, after its great discoverer.

Quite true, Narvaez arrayed his forces and began his grand march to envelop and crush me. But they marched only one day, which was happily rainy. The night he and his captains found disagreeable, having no taste for

hard beds and leaky tarpaulins, and not many women's breasts to comfort their backs; so in the morning they returned to Cempoala. It was far better, he was advised, to remain there, and wait for my army to deliver me into his hands after a wearisome march in sultry weather. But one old cacique, whom Narvaez had promised to make a king when my neck had been stretched, spoke his mind with force.

"Why do you linger here, Pale-face Lord?" he had demanded. "Do you think Malintzin and his teules sit two hours at table and spend ten hours in bed? He has said that he and his band are Castilians, and you are Biscayans, and I know not what that means; but surely they be two different breeds, as between wolves and jackals; and if you do not stir about, you will soon be wearing his chains."

This protest aroused great merriment among Narvaez' captains.

So while he and his forces dallied, we marched. Ere many nights we pitched camp on the River Chachalacas, four miles from Narvaez' quarters in the teocalli; and standing amid the supper fires I addressed my men. I informed them that Narvaez would gladly make peace and provide for their journey to Cuba, and reward me handsomely out of the treasure our whole band had won; but Narvaez would take the rest to divide with his master Velazquez. Their own purses would be as empty as when we had sailed from Cuba, and sharing that emptiness would be the wives and children of those good comrades who had died, or had been slain, in our great venture. Now we were being called traitors, and we had our honor to look to, as well as our riches. Any who wished to eschew the battle could do so, but all who wished to follow me to the attack were to raise their voices in assent.

Then they gave voice as one man, and began to carry me about on their shoulders, until I must beg them to set me down.

CHAPTER 12

Prelude to Armageddon

1

We were hungry men, tired from tramping, and rain-soaked. We could not eat the venison our horseman had shot, because we could not light fires, thus disclosing our position and putting the enemy on guard; and we were not quite hungry enough to down the meat raw. So two hours before dawn I bade them form their ranks, since it was the soldiers' maxim to attack at the end of night, and anyhow we could not sleep. So we would march, fight, and then take our rest with stomachs full of food and our souls fed with victory. I had already given orders for the attack. Pizarro with sixty men was to seize the artillery, Sandoval was to take Narvaez dead or alive; another captain must wipe out the watch; the main of the army was to fight any of the enemy they came upon under their captain's leadership or my own.

When about a mile from the teocalli we encountered two of Narvaez' scouts, seizing one. The other escaped, running with all his might to give the alarm, but we advanced on the double-quick, and Narvaez was barely awake in his splendid chamber and shouting his commands, when we launched our furious onslaught.

Narvaez' cannons blazed and thundered, killing three of our men, but Pizarro and his remainder fought the cannoneers hand to hand, sword to sword, and killed, wounded, or captured every one. Sandoval dashed up the steps, with his avid seventy followers, and there was fighting with some priests and guardsmen, so he did not himself strike the first blow at Narvaez, which was his burning ambition. Still, it was comfort to his soul to hear the general yelling for help.

And Narvaez called not to his men, for they were either dead, wounded, captured, or in desperate battle. Instead, he wailed upon Santa Maria, saying first that he was slain, and next that his eye had been gouged out; and if he had then added that his little toe had been cut off, it would have been in harmony with his descending scale of complaint. Actually, none of these

things had happened. He was very much alive with one eye badly wounded, and he lay securely tied in his own sheets.

In an act of sheer enthusiasm, Lopez stretched the great length of his body and legs, and set fire to the straw roof of the teocalli. Because none of our own men needed immediate treatment, my surgeon asked permission to draw a steel splinter from Narvaez' eye, and to this I gave consent, for the defeated general would need both eyes to sign a document of capitulation. Other *cues* had to be subdued, with some irregular fighting; and we all had a narrow escape when a desperate fellow ran to Narvaez' powder depot, opened one barrel, and was spreading its contents to explode all the rest and end the battle in a kind of *Götterdämmerung*. This word I had heard used by a Danish sailor fetching seal skins and walrus ivory from Denmark to Seville, when a Spanish frigate had fired a salvo of twelve guns in honor of the King's birthday. Apparently it meant the killing off of everybody in the precincts, friend or foe.

One of my men, pretending to be a follower of Narvaez, told him for God's sake not to drop his torch, that it was against the captain's orders, and gently took it from the fellow's shaking hand. This our man carried to safe ground and put out the fire with the only water he had handy, not from his canteen which was empty, but from his own bladder happily full.

I went to see how Narvaez' eye was doing, whether working or forever out of work, and found it bandaged. Not so, Narvaez' mouth, which immediately opened to make me a speech.

"Sir, Captain Cortez, you should hold it a great thing what you have done, winning the victory and capturing my person."

"For that I thank God," I replied, windily as my prisoner, "but I count it among the least things I and my men have accomplished in New Spain." And then, drunk on battle, I perfumed the rose with the following utterance worthy of Solomon, perhaps when he had too freely imbibed of Sheba's nectar.

"And do you think it right to have dared to take prisoner a judge of His Majesty's bench?"

Which reminded me of an anecdote my father was fond of telling. A good husband had lain in wait and caught, *flagrante delicto*, his wife's lover in his bed. He had offered the trespasser no violence, but had inquired in an outraged voice, "Aren't you a fine gentleman to be the assistant clerk in the grain-weighing office of the Municipality of Arenas de St. Pedro?"

For comedy and tragedy forever march hand in hand in this, our topsy-turvy and forever disorderly world.

There was other comedy as well as business. The latter rose from my order for immediate seizure of all of Narvaez' horses, but the men caught only about forty, while the rest galloped wildly about. The Master of Timbals, Narvaez' man, saw no reason why his drums, obviously made for beating, should remain silent because Winged Victory had happened to light on the wrong head, so the whole lot were being madly pounded in the courtyard. Also, a Negro with a great bellowing voice was running around, shouting over and over, "The Romans themselves never saw such deeds!"

Indeed, the day was one to remember, being May 29, 1520. When I had silenced the uproar, and my captains had disposed of handfuls of still-belligerent partisans of Velazquez, I seated myself in an armchair, wearing over my armor a magnificent orange robe, my captains and some of the heroes of the fight ranged behind me, while Narvaez and his captains filed by to kneel and kiss my hand. Of hanging Narvaez I gave no thought. If I committed this just but by no means diplomatic act, it would feed the fires of Velazquez' fury, for he loved the man, while by sparing him he would become my unconscious advocate in discouraging other of his chief's designs against me. Also, I forbade looting of enemy soldiers' personal belongings, although I requisitioned a good part of their supplies.

In the afternoon I seized all the longboats in which Narvaez' army had landed, manned them with my troops fully armed, and sent them to confiscate the sails, essential rudder gear, and compasses from the eighteen ships of Narvaez' former fleet, which was now mine. Because we had trained on them our own guns and those we had seized at the teocalli, not one of the captains touched fire to powder hole, hence no drop of blood was shed. In the evening I discussed with Marina what my Latin professor would have called a *vexata quæstio* or, in more vulgar parlance, a *pons asinorum*. [38]

The fat cacique of Cempoala was beside himself with pleasure over my victory. He had applauded wildly our parade of two hundred ragged veterans, with rust-spotted swords, the mere sight of which sickened with shame Narvaez' thousand. The cacique himself had marched fifteen hundred Chinantec warriors through the streets, in ranks of three, two spearmen and one bowman, all well clad, stalwart, and in step with the drum. Then, to do me the deepmost honor, he told me he had swept and garnished the finest apartment in his house so I could spend the night there with his exceedingly ugly daughter whom he had presented to me year-long months ago. She had

since declared herself to all wooers as Malinche's handmaiden, and saved her flower for me!

When I explained the situation to Marina, she kept a straight face, indeed a properly solemn mien, but her eyes twinkled. Beholding this, I explained with all truth that the cacique, a most valuable ally, indeed the defender of my gate to Mexic, would be not only aggrieved but inordinately insulted if I declined the hospitality. This time I had no excuse. In the battle he had seen that I was able-bodied; he himself had been wounded in that battle; beholding her with the eyes of love, he no doubt regarded her as beautiful as Tzin Malintzin herself or any Aztec Venus. If I told the lie of temporary impotence, it would be readily believed, for truth-telling always was one of the virtues ascribed to me far and wide through the Aztec country; but the Indians would think less of me, if not lose faith in me, as a great captain. A goatlike virility was one of the yardsticks by which they measured heroes, they themselves being a most virile people, perhaps because of their diet of rich maize, red beans, and hot peppers, as well as of hens, almost too fat to waddle, and of tame ducks, and especially drakes. These fowls were famed for their polygamy and their quick and competent performance.

"Marina, my sweetheart, please do not laugh," I told her. "I am in a most serious predicament."

Marina became instantly grave.

"I am not thinking about you," she told me, "or the fat cacique. I am thinking about the girl."

"She is a minor factor—"

"You could not be more mistaken. She is the main factor. After all, she is a sort of princess. I know a princess' pride, and how bitter is its fall. That pride would be satisfied if you spent one night with her, all the household knowing of it. All her claims would be proven true; she could hold up her head. It is a sad thing when a maiden must hang her head; and never will I consent to my own lover being party to it. The ugliness you speak of is only in her countenance. She is shapely enough; her voice is soft and pleasant; she gave me her hand and her skin is silken. Show no more distaste for her. Accept with alacrity and recognize the honor her sire has paid you. Also be loving and impetuous."

"How can I?" I wailed.

"You can tell her one lie beforehand—that it is the custom in Spain for all lamps to be extinguished during the act of love. And did not once I hear

you speak what may be an old Spanish saying, that in the dark all cats are gray?"

"You *want* me to do it."

"I insist upon it, my beloved Malinche."

"A Spanish woman would want to scratch her eyes out."

"We Aztec women are not so insanely jealous. We know that a woman can bear, at most, one babe a year. In that same year a healthy young king, if he has a large harem every member of which keeps close track of her month, can beget more than a hundred babes. It is nature's arrangement, not woman's or man's either. I hope this is the right time for Quetzala to kindle and bear you a child."

Quetzal, the most gorgeous-feathered of all Mexican birds, was the name of the cacique's daughter. How often are folk misnamed!

Different men, different minds. Different peoples, different peculiarities! I had rather expected Marina to consent to my going, although reproachfully, or in blazing anger, or by saying that if I truly loved her, I would be physically unable to do the expected. Certainly I never thought she would urge me on with palpable sincerity, and this had somewhat taken me aback. Still I would go. It was my bounden duty.

The French rather turned their fine, short noses up at us long-nosed Spanish, their royal house being the Valois, with its purple blood showing through the skin at the wrists of their exquisitely beautiful princesses. Their King Francis had not bowed down to Charles V as had our Ferdinand and they were pleased with themselves in general. But truly their language was more explicit than ours; their idioms short but sharp, their speech more neat. All well-educated men knew many of their sayings and I chose one that I thought fit the present case as perfectly as a French glove. It was *noblesse oblige*.

And then I had trouble explaining to myself that now, having Marina's consent, I looked forward to my patriotic act not with self-pity or glorification but with a sneaking pleasure.

---

[38] Bridge of Asses.

In truth, Quetzala's face was not as ugly as I had thought, when I looked at it in dim light. When we were well ensconced in a soft bed with the lamps out, and she quivered like an aspen leaf at my least touch, and her body proved indeed silky, and she timidly returned my every lover's caress, all fears of physical difficulty vanished as by magic—that common magic that Mother Nature can brew so well. I found myself imagining that she was Marina, with whom I was deeply in love. I behaved as might Quetzala's lover.

When her maiden pain had passed, she was "fire and brimstone previous to hell" as Spanish blades were wont to boast of unnamed favorites. As to our causing a babe to be conceived, I would not consider it at all unlikely; and if it were a girl, she would grow up beautiful, and if a boy, he would be manly. Loving Marina not a whit less, worried only that she might love me a little less, still I must conclude that of all the services I had performed for His Imperial Majesty Charles V, this night's deed had been one of the least unpleasant. Still I would not have it listed with my other services, when finally he made me a duke, even if I were able to state it in a most delicate way. My thinking of such a wording, embracing terms such as my "brave body and dauntless sword," afforded me a secret grin.

To my great satisfaction and relief Marina never made the slightest reference, either in jest or in reproach, to the incident.

On the next day I visited Narvaez' flagship, to appraise her captain and decide whether to leave him in command. I was piped aboard and shown every courtesy and we shared a bottle of heady wine called amontillado, its strength being increased by the addition of the pure spirit of the vine.[39] This was obtained by a process growing out of one of Aristotle's experiments with salt water, and perfected by the Arabs in their studies in alchemy. It seemed odd to me that a people who eschewed wine should make such a contribution to the joys of its consumption. The next we knew, the thrifty Dutch would be filling bottles with pure spirit, a gobletful being equal in strength to a tumbler of good Madeira, saving much cargo space on trading ships to Africa and India; but wreaking God only knew what damage to the whole race of man.

The captain's cabin had a port of a new sort, covered with a two-inch plate of glass as well as a metal shutter for use in heavy seas. Out of the corner of my eye I saw what I thought were three women pass by, strolling the deck. And suddenly I remembered that spies had reported what they had

thought were three women aboard one of Garay's ships, which were cruising the coast when he had left Vera Cruz on our great Mexic adventure.

"My eyes must have deceived me," I remarked to the captain.

"If you were referring to the ladies, they did not. In all, I have six aboard, three of them wives who wished to join their husbands serving with you, and a great lady with two maids-in-waiting."

I was about to ask the names of the first three mentioned, at the same time picturing the probable joy, but possibly, consternation, of the three husbands at the reunion, especially if one or more pretty Indian girls shared their quarters. But just then, an orderly appeared, and the captain was called forth to attend to some matter of a fouled cable.

I went out onto the deck. The ladies I had seen were not likely the three wives, for one of them walked ahead of the other two, with an air of precedence, and the latter had every aspect of maids-in-waiting. Their mistress was very beautifully dressed. She wore no bonnet, and the breeze played pleasant havoc with her long, red-gold hair. Although I saw her down the whole length of the deck, there was something in her appearance familiar to me. Then my brain gave a little jump and I knew of whom she reminded me. Still I refused to believe it. The years had been too long and the distance too far. . . .

And then suddenly I quit being a blind fool and knew perfectly well that Marie de Estrada had followed a bent mentioned in a letter delivered me in Santo Domingo, and had gone adventuring in the New World.

I had last laid eyes on her in Seville, about sixteen years ago. Seventeen then, she was now a woman in her early thirties. But as she approached me, not having noticed me as yet as far as I could tell, I would have taken her for no more than twenty-two or -three, the age that Spanish women of high birth attain their peak of beauty. Well I remembered the quiet strength and resolution apparent then in her somewhat odd but beautiful countenance; these were still apparent, perhaps more so than before; and suddenly our meetings in Seville seemed just yesterday.

Her casual glance at me became sharp, and then she began to walk toward me at a faster pace. I quickened my own step and in a moment we were gazing into each other's eyes.

"Well, Hernan," she remarked with complete aplomb and even with a touch of humor, "we meet again."

"Wonder upon wonders!" I answered.

"I would not say so. Even then you were resolved to go to the New World, and as unattached as I am, and of an adventurous disposition, I could be expected to entertain the same yearning. I yielded to it as soon as conditions permitted and I had the means."

I had not forgotten how she had obtained the means, and found myself not at least astonished at her mentioning the matter.

"But life here is still rough and dangerous. You are a delicate lady—"

"As delicate as a woodland hind. But I should not interrupt you in this fashion. All Spain rings with the name of Hernan Cortez. I have not yet heard of your ennobling, but that would be trifle now, you the lord by right of arms of an empire as large as all Spain. Should I not bend my knee and kiss your hand?"

"Perhaps, but I will excuse the ceremony."

"Then we may talk at ease." Marie turned to her two maids. "Ask a sailor to bring a bench, and place it near the rail, for Lord Cortez and I wish to sit in this pleasant sunlight and converse; then I will dismiss your attendance while you pack my satchels for debarkation."

The girls, both pretty and exotic looking, too dark of complexion to be pure Spanish, made off.

"I have something to tell you, Hernan—" she began as soon as the maids were out of hearing.

"That you are wedded?"

"As far from it as when I saw you last. The same obstruction is still in force. I heard of your marriage to Señorita Catalina Xuarez in Cuba, and I met her in a levee in Santo Domingo and found her charming. But I have not heard of her joining you here."

"No, she has not done so."

"Here is our bench. Now I will tell you what I have long wanted you to know, yet which I did not feel free to entrust to a letter. Hernan, I would not have blamed you if the suspicion had crossed your mind that when we traded good-luck pieces—on a certain night—that I had recognized the stone as a precious jewel, indeed the finest black pearl known to the lapidaries, and all that happened—of this I will not speak—was brought about by my greed to possess it."

"No, such a suspicion did not cross my mind."

"You are truly a gentleman, Hernan. Only from the greatest gentleman could I expect such chivalric trust. But as far as you knew, I did nothing to recompense you for your loss."

"I did not expect you to do anything. We made the trade in good faith, and for a good purpose."

"Did you ever wonder, after long neglect of you by the Governor of the Islands, Don Ovando, that he should suddenly appoint you public notary of the town of Azua?"

"Santa Maria! That was the beginning of my rise to fortune!"

"I had thought it might be. It was not a high office, but the best I could obtain for you at the time. And I knew you would rise quickly."

"How could you obtain it for me? I do not doubt you! I might have known—"

"I told you I had some influence at the chancellery. A certain official, who knew my mother's story, prevailed upon Bishop Fonseca to give you the appointment."

"I thought it might be Count Aquillar. Did your friend even know my name? No doubt he was a great lord, friend or even kin to Bishop Fonseca."

"As a matter of fact, they were close kin, but I cannot tell you his name. He never gave me permission to do so."

"Then I will seek no further. You sold the jewel for a thousand silver ducats. Because you acted in my behalf, I found the road to success, and instead of a thousand ducats I have acquired—"

Then I paused, I knew not why, unless it was the injunction against boasting of one's wealth in the lofty circles of Spanish society. To those circles, on the distaff side, Marie was born.

"Let us say a competence," Marie broke in after a brief pause, and she smiled faintly at the understatement.

"What are your plans in the New World?" I asked, when my head had stopped rocking.

"I have made none. It is of great pleasure to me to have none. Chance brought me a great jewel. What else, good or evil, has Chance in store for me? Very foolishly, I suppose, I trust her. I will go where her winds blow me. I will see much that is new and strange; I will have adventures; I will pass into danger and perhaps emerge; when I die, I will have lived. Once I

failed to trust her enough and missed my great chance. I had an inkling—something most wonderful—but I denied it; anyway—there were certain barriers to my acceptance of the challenge. Of that I will speak no more."

I knew perfectly well what she meant—indeed, she had told me, just before our parting, of her premonition that I would go far. What if she had offered to accompany me on my road? I might have accepted; thereby I might have gained my goal much sooner or not at all. Only the gods can look down the road one does not take. One thing was sure. If I had bound myself to Marie de Estrada I could not have had Marina.

Still, I could not deny being greatly attracted to her.

The cordial sun was now setting and vespers approached apace. Since I had heard Marie speak of disembarking, I asked courteously if proper lodging had been arranged for her.

"It is thoughtful of you to inquire. I am a little sick of my narrow mattress, flanked by my two ladies in a cubby of the ship. I was happy to receive an invitation from Señor and Señora Jorge Alvarado, the señora having been my shipmate, to lodge with them with my two maids until I could find a suitable abode."

At that moment my servant Gonzales appeared on the deck, and approached me diffidently.

"My lord, I have a verbal message from Tzin Malintzin. Would you excuse yourself briefly from the señorita? It concerns the cacique Taltecle."

"Military information," I told Marie with a shrug. "Pardon me a moment."

Well I knew Gonzales had not brought military information. One of the elderly chiefs present at the occasion when Marina was presented to me, along with nineteen other girls, and to whom great deference was paid, was called Taltecle, whether a title or a given name I did not know. But Marina had spoken of him since on several occasions. He was the aged Tabascan who had befriended her after her return from the Mayan temple.

We walked around the deckhouse and this was Gonzales' message:

"Taltecle, Doña Marina's defender, is at Zocatlan, with two of his granddaughters and his young concubine." Zocatlan was a village near Campoala.

"Doña Marina loves them dearly, and has set out for a short stay with them," Gonzales went on. "She regretted there was no time to bid you good-

by, as she wished to travel with a party of merchants. But if you need her on some matter of importance, you may send a messenger tomorrow morning, after Mass, and she will arrive at your quarters early tomorrow afternoon."

"How did the Doña Marina know where to send me this message?"

"Lord, you spoke in her presence of visiting Garay's flagship."

"Did she know there were ladies aboard?"

"I did not hear her say so, my lord."

No, she would not say so, but of course she knew it. She no doubt knew that one was Marie de Estrada. She had removed herself for the night for my convenience if I wished to entertain a lady from my own country with whom I had had previous and eventful acquaintance.

"Did she take Sheba with her?" I asked.

"Yes, my lord."

"Return to my house, Gonzales, and see that a delicious dinner is prepared, enough for two, or it may be I will dine alone."

He withdrew and I returned to my seat beside Marie.

"I was thinking what interesting names these Indians have," Marie remarked. "The juxtaposition of consonants seems more common than in Spanish. Your Spanish servant's name has *n* and *z* together; I have recently read books by Guzman—*z* and *m*—and the *Caplas* by Manrique. Yet most of the Spanish proper names that I recall offhand have the consonants separated by vowels."

"I think what you say is true, but how did you come to observe it so soon?"

"Your servant mentioned three names, Tzin, Malintzin, and Taltecle. The letters *n*, *t*, and *z* appear together in one, *t* and *z* in a second, *l* and *t* in a third."

It did not astonish me in the least that Marie's keen ear had caught all three of these names and that she recalled them perfectly. This was a wondrous young woman in many respects.

"The name of the King of Tetzcuco has three consonants in a row, *tzc*," I remarked, "but my tongue can not cope with it."

"Between Tzin and Malintzin your servant paused, indicating that Tzin is a title."

"Malintzin is the Tabasco rendering of Marina. Tzin is an exalted title, equal to duchess in Spain."

"Then he was speaking of a Spanish lady. I did not know that any had preceded me."

"No, Marina is the name by which an Indian princess is christened."

"What do the natives call you, Hernan?"

"Malinche."

"That is rather like Malintzin."

"I was named after her."

"She must be close to you, one would almost think had precedence over you, and she sends messages to you to which you give instant heed." There was polite curiosity in Marie's tone, nothing more within my notice.

"As a matter of fact, she is my companion."

"A young and beautiful girl, I suppose."

"Highly intelligent, also."

"That is evident by her making such a good catch. But she cannot be your wife, for you have one in Cuba. Perhaps a morganatic wife, since you are virtually the King of the New World."

"I have no such title, but I am the *de facto* ruler of several kingdoms in the New World."

"Does this mean we are not likely to see each other soon again?"

"It is possible we might see each other very soon. The Doña Marina—"

"Doña?"

"She has been given that title by the Spanish soldiers, because of her high birth and rank. Tzin is equivalent of duchess, but the soldiers find 'Doña' easier to say."

"It is unusual, is it not? I have never heard of any Cuban native girl being given a Spanish title."

"Not frequently. The Cuban Indians do not impress the men as do some of the mainland Indians."

"What did you start to say about the Doña Marina? We were speaking of future meetings."

"I started to say that Marina sent me a message that she would not be home tonight, as she has gone to visit friends in a nearby village. Supper will be lonely without her, and I thought to invite you to keep me company."

"Hernan, I accept with pleasure. Since this chance to enjoy your company has happened so soon, I must believe that the good-luck charm I am wearing—the one I found in your chair—is working well."

There was a faint note of interrogation in her tone. I saw no reason to beat about the bush.

"I suspect that Marina left because she knew I had met a former friend whom I might wish to entertain privately."

"Then you must have told her about me. I am flattered that you remembered me. Oh, of course, there was the loss of the pearl, a painful memory."

"Not as painful as you might think. Perhaps, in the long run, it was a good thing for me to come to Santo Domingo almost penniless. You obtained a post for me—and all turned out well."

"Still her departure—if she loves you, that I do not doubt—is rather startling to me. Of course the Indians hold Castilians in awe. But since she is a princess, your concubine if not a morganatic wife, this seems to be carrying humility rather far."

"Marie, I must not let you suffer under a misapprehension. Humility had nothing to do with it. Marina is not humble in the least and, instead, intensely proud. This was a gesture of pride."

"You mean—she is so sure of herself—"

"She is Tzin, Malintzin. If Malinche—General Cortez—wished to entertain a lady in private, she declined to stand in the way."

"Does that mean that she has no fear of any comparisons you might make between her and me?"

"Remember, she has never seen a beautiful Spanish girl. She has seen a miniature of one—my mother, painted when she was young."

"If she had seen me—I must put this delicately—would her attitude have been different?"

"You ask me, Marie, and I will answer. I hope you will not consider it unflattering; you must consider that her ideals of beauty are Indian ideals, not Spanish ideals. Her attitude would not have been in the least different."

"You are also a Spaniard with Spanish ideals."

"The more one travels—with eyes open—the more catholic becomes one's taste."

"I never thought that I must compete with—what was the word John Cabot used—a squaw?"

"I have never heard it. It must be a word of the far-north Indians. I have invited you to supper and I am honored that you accepted. May I expect you at eight? Please ask the captain in my name to send you to shore with two orderlies, who will escort you to my quarters."

"May I bring a bottle of excellent Malaga? Even a conqueror must have some trouble maintaining an excellent cellar."

"Thank you—it would be most welcome on the march—here on the coast I have a few bottles of sound amontillado."

Marie was somewhat taken aback. I would not have said it, if she had not spoken in a patronizing way of Doña Marina. Also, whatever my intentions toward Marie, their chance of success was greater if I played the grandee. Adulation of rank with its entourage was Marie's weakness—this I had finally divined—if it were not, which could as readily be true—her strength.

---

[39] The reference to amontillado may not be an anachronism. Excellent brandy was served at a royal wedding in 1529; fortification of good wine could have been concurrent.

3

Truly I did not know my intentions toward Marie. I knew my own condition, which was lecherous. Doña Marina and I had not made love as frequently of late, because the belief was widely held throughout Christendom, and solemnly proclaimed by various physicians of repute, that the conjugal act should be eschewed in the last three months of pregnancy for fear of harm to the unborn babe and even to its mother. I was inclined to swallow the fish whole, when put to me by a learned doctor; although when the priests declared the practice was a sin as well, I was inclined to brush it off. The clergy could quote no Scripture in support of this view; their only argument being that mares and cows and ewes were continent when gravid, no doubt by the prompting of Heaven-sent instinct. In fact, some prelates went so far

as to prohibit love-making throughout the nine months, on the grounds that the excitement was injurious to the wife, and the fast good for the husband. We were sternly reminded that there was no marriage, and of course no dalliance, in Heaven.

But the priests' comparing mares, cows, and ewes with women in the same condition did not cover the behavior of stallions, bulls, and rams. Heaven-sent instinct did not seem to apply to the males of the species, nor had it applied to the patriarchs from Jacob to Solomon, the former having had only two wives along with concubines, Esau had three, and Solomon any number.

The upshot of this teaching was that many a husband went astray. I had no such excuse because Marina told me that while the good fathers were no doubt truthful in intent, in the matter of injury to wife or unborn babe they talked nonsense—provided the pregnancy was normal and progressing well. At least this was true until the eighth month. Moreover, she did not wish to be deprived of the deep, sweet union with me "as long as it is possible." I could assume she meant until it was interrupted by her lying-in, but an expression in her eyes troubled me deeply, and haunted me afterward, as if her thoughts had leaped further than that, to a time that it would cease altogether.

Yet the doctors' injunctions had restrained me to some degree, and our lovely communion had become less frequent. Thus, when I had invited Marie to sup with me, well I knew I was walking open-eyed into temptation.

It was not in the least reduced when she made her entrance to my luxurious quarters. She had looked tired on the ship, as was natural enough; now she was fresh looking and animated. I did not doubt that she knew the French facial lotion of olive oil mixed with lemon juice, both obtainable on shipboard, the latter being used to refresh stale drinking water. In fact some captains swore, although it seemed to make no sense, that water thus treated tended to prevent scurvy. Blond women take a lovely pale tan if they will avoid sunburn; and I suspected that she had employed this lotion, her complexion being now so clear and beautiful.

Throughout the journey she had perforce washed her hair in salt water, fresh water being hoarded to drink. Tonight she had had access to fresh water in abundance, and after two good washings I reckoned she had had a third, the water mixed with lemon juice. This caused her red-gold hair to have a special fluff and brilliance, or so I had been told by a beautiful blond wanton I had known in Medillan. Her gown was again formal and most rich and beautiful, being blue satin with little figures in gold brocade. Her

slippers had been gilded, and her hose, I truly believed, was glossy silk from the Indies.

Over her heart she wore a burnished copper coin, with a gold rim and clasp, and this was a sharp reminder of our exchange of good-luck pieces and what had ensued thereafter.

We had an excellent dinner of stuffed wild duck, and exotic vegetables and fruits. It seemed to me she drank very little of the amontillado, but she confessed to a very pleasant warmth within and a slight lightness of head. Evidently this dimmed her memory somewhat, because she maintained that Colon had discovered Cuba on his third voyage, not his first which was the fact.

"Would you like to bet?" I asked.

"Certainly. I am so sure that I would wager my black pearl if I still had it," she answered.

"I will wager an Aztec earring, very beautifully wrought."

"Against what?"

"A long, sweet kiss."

"You may as well pass over the earring."

Instead I made haste to get my book, which I carried everywhere, and read aloud how late in the year 1492 he discovered Cuba, naming it Juana in honor of the young prince.

"Well, I lost, but it was your fault for giving me such heady wine. You should not make me pay."

"If you are not a spoil sport, you should pay doubly, for being so sure when you were in error."

So I rose and walked around the table and bent down. Indeed, she did pay doubly, and then almost before we knew how it happened, I was seated in an armchair, with Marie in my lap.

"I fear that this is a bad climate for me," she confided after an especially ardent kiss. "It is sultry."

"It is also very thickly populated. Do you suppose there is any connection?"

"Too much connection—in dangerous areas. Tell me, Hernan. Are the native women ardent?"

"Fireballs," I answered in one true word.

"They probably put it on. Well, I must get up from your lap. This is my best gown—I wore it in your honor—it cost a hundred silver ducats—and I am rumpling it—"

"That can be easily prevented."

"I am afraid I understand too well what you mean. I am fearful that wine—and a sweet memory of long ago—and a kind of power you have over me, whereby you took the leadership away from me when we danced the Astorga—I dare say you have forgotten—is causing me to weaken in a great resolve. Rather it was a promise that I made to Santa Maria. It was not a vow—only a promise to strive to keep a promise. What about callers, or messengers rushing in, and your man Gonzales?"

"Gonzales is on watch near the gate, and will turn away all callers and messengers unless the message is extremely urgent, in which case he will ring the bell, then knock on the door in five minutes."

"I wish you had told him half an hour . . . I shouldn't have said that. But I have an important thing to say. I have already heard, Hernan, that your Marina is expecting to be delivered of a baby about the middle of the year. Under those conditions she would probably not want to return to Mexic with you, over rough mountains, far from her own kinsmen, and certainly it is your intention to go there soon, now you have defeated Narvaez."

"The last is certainly my intention. Marina might stay with her friends, her foster father one might say, although I rather doubt it. Why do you ask?"

"Because I wish to go to Mexic."

"I do not think that is possible."

"Please hear me out, General Cortez. I have been to Spain since I saw you last. I went there at the request—I could well say the command—of a personage. Have no worry about my standing the hardship. I spent most of a year in the high Pyrenees and climbed several formidable peaks. The personage of whom I speak has asked me to visit Mexic and let him know whether your reports, sent to the Emperor, are substantially true."

"Then you must have a letter or warrant of some sort."

I expected her to say that she had only verbal instructions, hence I was shaken by her reply.

"I do have such a letter. Do you wish to see it?"

“I dare say it is my duty.”

“I wear it in my left armpit, where I once wore a little ship wrought in gold. It is a scroll in a cylinder of waterproof skin, and the cord is tied around and under my left shoulder. Yes, you may see it; it is certainly your right and duty. To reach it you will have to loosen the clasps of my gown and untie the cord.”

“Why not first take off your gown? The idea was in both our minds only a moment ago.”

“Perhaps I will, when you have read the letter.”

So I did as I was bade, and in the moist softness under her arm I found the knot, a bow easy to untie. She took the tube and by pulling on the cord drew out a kind of cork, no doubt waterproof. From the cylinder she withdrew a scroll and put it into my hands.

I marked that it was the finest vellum, and bore the arms of Castile and Aragon. The letter followed:

The twenty-first day of May
of the Year of our Lord 1519

To Spanish administrators, captains, and all else whom it may concern:

Please assist the bearer, Señorita Marie de Estrada, in visiting any part of New Spain to which access is possible and show her all that she wishes to see.

Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca
Bishop of Burgos,
Minister of Indian Affairs,
Unto the Emperor Charles V

“It amazes me that His Grace should send a lady, rather than a seasoned adventurer, on such a dangerous mission,” I remarked, my skin prickling.

Marie laughed happily and replaced the vellum in its tube.

“Can we not suppose that a lady would be less suspect than a man, and appear more easy to deceive? And can we not assume that if His Grace was an old friend or even kin to the lady’s mother that he might wish to gratify her taste for adventure, especially if at the same time she might be of service to the Crown?”

"I think both assumptions are tenable."

"Now will you replace the parchment and rebutton my dress, or . . ."

"The parchment is quite safe, here on this table, easily rescuable in case of conflagration. A small fire, most delectable, might be lit, but it will hardly spread."

"It is understood I may travel with you to Mexic on your return?"

"It is my custom to obey orders from high officials of the Crown."

"Regardless of circumstances, weather, danger, and so forth, if you and your men march, I and my two maids march with them?"

"You may follow them, and three native bearers will be furnished you and your entourage to carry your baggage."

"You need not speak so formally, Hernan."

"I am in the presence of a representative of a gentleman of exalted office."

"Do you think you can unbend? I observe a wide ottoman, and the lamp can be turned low, and the room is warm . . ."

Strangely, I hesitated briefly. In truth I had been a little chilled by seeing the name Fonseca by his own hand, he who persecuted my hero to his death, and in that connection I thought of twenty lashes laid upon my back. For the first time I found myself more than half-convinced that the tall gentleman, whose white collar I had noticed in the dark and dismal light, had been indeed Fonseca in the flesh. Also I took thought of Doña Marina, great with child out of my loins. I owed an incalculable debt to her, and I owed nothing to Marie but an office I could have bought for a thousand silver pesos, the amount she had received for a royal jewel. I loved Marina. I was not sure that I did not dislike Marie de Estrada.

"Hernan, you seem slow to comment on what I have just said."

"I was thinking of my obligations. I was severely punished—of course you know it—you heard the sounds—the last time that the lamps burned low and the room was warm—"

"Those bravos mistook you for another—"

"You turned pale when we heard them. Presumably they are far away, and I need not expect to be punished again if—"

"Instead, you might be rewarded. Of that I will say no more. If for Doña Marina's sake—but that I doubt, considering she is an Indian, not a Castilian princess—or if you find me not a little, but of great attraction to you—if I am not beautiful and desirable in your sight—"

"All of that, you are. The mere touch of your silken shoulder stirred me deeply."

"It stirred me also, Hernan."

By now I had observed a change in Marie's appearance and manner. She had turned pale; the touch of rouge on her cheeks was more conspicuous than before; her air of supreme self-confidence was absent; her eyes had strangely darkened. Evidently her giving her favors to me tonight was of greater count to her than I could well understand. It seemed more than her body's need, despite natural passion and what might have been long continence; I would almost think it the desire not only of her body but her soul. This touched me or else it flattered me so greatly that by some indirect process of mind I was stirred to tenderness. For a few seconds I stood in baffled indecision. I was a profligate man; knowing this, Doña Marina should not have left me at this time, my desire was raging but my conscience, such as it was, or at least some antipathy or reluctance, was not yet overwhelmed. Marie was watching me with intense alertness. I saw relief, the first faint sign of reassurance, in her countenance. False or true, she was feeling what seemed an intimation of success in this most strange and mysterious endeavor.

False or true? I was never to know. In this very breach—as in those long-drawn seconds when victory or defeat in grievous battle hang in absolute balance—I heard the sharp clang of the gate bell, rung by Gonzales. Tidings which some one believed of great importance had been brought to me.

Marie's face turned ashen.

Little fear did I have in the importance of the tidings. True, I could not forget that only eighty Spaniards with some native allies were in fact garrisoning a mighty city with its subject cities of perhaps eight million people, whose vassal kings and chiefs and priests craved their destruction. But tomorrow they would have the news of Narvaez' defeat, and they might have it already, by runners in relay. I went so far as to fancy some bold Cempoalans catching some of the runaway horses, mustering courage to mount the beasts, imitating Spanish riders in handling the reins, and riding them to death in hope of rich reward.

As I was replacing Marie's scroll under her arm, I made bold to caress her nipple in such easy and tempting reach whereupon she kissed me so fiercely on the mouth, and nipped so hard at my lower lip as to draw a few drops of blood. Still, I was glad that the decision I had weighed with such difficulty had been settled for me by the warning bell.

Fully persuading myself that the news was not too ill, I reclasped the collar and upper part of her gown, and then called the two orderlies to escort her to the home of Jorge Alvarado, not far distant. But when I joined Gonzales at the gate, I saw in the dismal light of his lantern that his usual placidity had been replaced by extreme tension and his pleasant face was white and haggard.

"My lord, I bring most evil news," he told me, in a low, firm voice. "Two Tlaxcalan couriers have just arrived from Captain Alvarado in Mexic. The Mexics have risen and are besieging the palace. He said to tell you that he fears he cannot hold out until your arrival, but to join him in his prayers that he may do so, and God give you good speed in rushing to his help."

4

There was no time now to reflect on things I wished I had not done, or on things I had failed to do. Most of my soldiers were quartered in the lower rooms of the teocalli, and the main had gone to bed. These I did not waken; I could not possibly march until dawn after tomorrow's dawn, because it would take that long to call back Ordas and Leon, each of whom I had sent with two ships to explore coastal territory we did not know. Still another detachment under Olid was chasing and trying to catch Narvaez' forty or more runaway horses.

All the rest of my captains had already assembled at the building I used for general headquarters. Sandoval had aroused my swiftest and best couriers, and four of them were on their way, on horseback with Cempoalan runners, within twenty minutes after my arrival. The messages were sent to the three absent captains and to Doña Marina. Aguila had been wakened immediately on the arrival of the messengers from Alvarado, and these were weary men, but I gave them strong cocoa and bade them tell the story from beginning to end.

And to this I could scarcely bear to listen. Although my heart had been cracked before now, once in childhood and now again since, by the brave deaths of comrades and especially of my close friend Escalante, now it bade fair to break, because of the blunt words of Aguila as he translated the tragic

tale. And he had scarcely begun when, if I had asked who was to blame for the disaster, he could have rightly pointed his finger at me, as had the prophet Nathan pointed his finger at King David, and said in a ringing voice:

"*Thou art the man*."

My great sin was to appoint Alvarado in command of the garrison left at Mexic. It was no mere error of judgment; it was truly a sin because God had shown me, not once or twice but at least ten times, that Alvarado was too hot-headed, impetuous, and reckless to be entrusted to any office demanding sagacity. Why did my pith soften and my will falter whenever I had dealt with him? True, he was dauntless in battle. For leadership of a swift and decisive sally he had no superior and few peers. But it was the charm of the man I could not resist, his merry handsome face that caused the Indians to dub him Son of the Sun, his magnificent appearance and presence, and his personality. On parades he was the idol of all eyes. It seemed he had but to crook his finger at any maiden fancy free to draw her to his bed. I doubted if a daughter of the House of Alva could have said him nay.

The men vied with one another to serve under him. They could always count on action and excitement, the love of which is the true mark of the *hombre*. On parades children gave him more flowers than they gave me; even dogs adored him. Yet if I were killed, and the whole force voted on who should have supreme command, Alvarado would have won hardly a vote, and the choice would have fallen on Sandoval. And despite his mirth, he was at heart cruel.

The prelude to the sorry, shameful, and shaming tale began before I had left Mexic to meet the threat of Narvaez. At that time the people were already preparing for their greatest religious festival of the year, the Feast of Toxcatl, in honor of their chief god Tetzcatlipoca. Fully a year in advance a godly-looking youth had been chosen, a young man without flaw, for their chief sacrifice, an honor greater than any office other than those of Uei Tlatoani and the Serpent Woman; and greatly coveted by the most handsome and accomplished of Mexic's young manhood. Throughout the year of preparation he was worshiped as a god. Every delight was afforded him, including four beautiful girls especially trained to give him carnal pleasure. He wore his hair at full length and when he appeared on the street he was festooned with flowers and followed by eight nobly born young men serving him as pages. In this year he was taught ritualistic dances and to play the flute.

His male companion, second in the choice of the nation, came to almost equal honors, being sacrificed about the same time to the god of war.

Montezuma had asked my permission for the feast; I had granted it with the usual injunction against human sacrifice. This he had promised, but I had not looked deeply enough into a heathen feast to realize that the sacrifice of these two youths was its climactic moment, its very aim, and thus perceive that any pledge Montezuma made was not valid.

Aguila was able to explain why Alvarado feared and in truth expected a mass attack on the palace. The Mexics were then expecting news of Narvaez' victory over me, or at least such carnage in both armies that the power of both would be broken. They had made a mockery of furnishing food, and the servants in the palace had become insolent. When he had seen poles being erected, after our departure, he had failed to inquire into the coming festival, and had concluded that these had been raised for his own and some other captains' heads when a successful assault had been made. Before the sacrifice, his scouts had reported a large number of Montezuma's soldiers, in battle dress, in the teocalli square; and he did not know that they had assembled for a ceremonial dance in honor of the god of war.

Loving battle and perhaps the infliction of cruel punishment on beaten enemies, Alvarado may have become self-persuaded that attack was imminent. His reaction had been quite typical: first the seizure from Montezuma's palace of a young prince and his confinement in the barricaded palace as a hostage. Not content with this, he and part of his garrison had rushed to the thronged square of the teocalli and laid rough, impious hands on the two youths, already deemed divine, who in sacrificial dress, their long hair cut short, were awaiting their supreme glory and full deification under the priestly knives. The throng, caught up in religious exaltation, could not rally in time to resist the capture of the immolates, and these had been hustled away into the fortified palace and put to torture.

They had confessed that they were about to be sacrificed and rejoiced in the fact. Under torture they had revealed or had been forced to say that the Mexics would attack in full force in twenty days, after all ceremonies of the Feast of Taxcatl had come to an end. It was all the excuse Alvarado needed to launch his own savage attack upon celebrants in the temple. It was his boast that he slew two thousand—"for between knave and knave the first to strike, wins"—but his messengers believed the number was well under a thousand. In either case, war was now all but inevitable.

When a vast throng of avengers surrounded the fort, Montezuma appeared on the balcony and tried to dissuade his people from attacking. Their leaders agreed to do so if Montezuma were instantly freed; then whatever hope for peace through negotiation was now blasted by Alvarado putting the point of his dagger to Montezuma's breast and commanding that he disperse the infuriated throng. He tried to speak but shouting drowned out his words.

The siege began. It was deliberate and relentless. A large number of Mexics were killed by cannon fire and by archers and musketeers behind the barricades, but the force of attackers ever increased instead of diminished. When darkness fell, two messengers managed to steal forth from the besieged palace and start their journey to me. What was so awful for me to contemplate was that if I had studied the Mexic religion with a calmly inquiring mind, giving thought to its power instead of its ferocity and abomination, and chosen a level-headed leader of the garrison instead of hot-headed Alvarado, peace could have been maintained and a great blood bath, if not defeat and utter ruin, could have been avoided. The act of monstrous folly which I had prayed would never occur was not now a possibility but a foregone fact. The wheel of time would not turn backward the least jot.

Still I dared not evince the least dismay in the presence of my followers. When my captains had assembled all of Narvaez' troops who might want to join my forces in suppressing the Mexic rebellion, save my garrison, and themselves prosper greatly, I chose my words with care. I did not promise an easy victory or a quick one. If the task were not difficult I would not be calling for enlistments, since it was human nature for my veterans to desire to complete without assistance the task that we had begun. Indeed, it was all but completed when Narvaez' attack had forced me to leave the scene of our conquest, leaving a small garrison. I told them that our loss, which we could, if we must, retrieve ourselves, could be their gain.

Their gain would lie first in being part of the army in its final conquest of heathen land, and adding it to the dominion of the great Charles. Knowing I was addressing men who had just suffered an ignoble defeat, the taste of the bitter cup still in their mouths, I stressed the winning of glory more than riches. Ours was no mission of revenge, as was theirs that had just failed; our cause was noble; what was blazoned on our banner was Holy Truth. But the gaining of honor and riches was the right of those who fought bravely in the cause of God and Emperor. I spoke of the harsh, perilous, but high adventure that would be theirs if they marched with us.

Only at the last did I mention money matters, and then in what seemed an offhand way. Our conquest had gone well enough despite the difficulties until the arrival of Narvaez; although we had been too busy fighting to accumulate more than moderate booty. On the average, my rank and file had received five thousand silver pesos each—this would be my rough estimate. Pretending not to see my hearers gape, I went on to say that our treasurer would have in his charge and various vaults ten million gold pesos for distribution when the Emperor's fifth had been set aside and our campaign was over. Of this sum every new recruit who had served faithfully would receive half as much as every veteran of the same rank, and this would apply to a great many chests of jewels. All winnings from henceforth, new recruits and veterans would share alike.

The sum I had named was not far from the mark if we took the contents of the Jewel Shop, stripped the golden vessels from all the temples, the hoards of chiefs and caciques, the utensils from the two palaces, and the wonder works in gold in Montezuma's museum. Actually the worth in gold might be far beyond this, the incredibly rich mines in the west having been worked by slaves for two or more centuries if not far longer. Such ruthless rapine I did not intend; I had planned that all the altar vessels of the Christian churches yet to rise would be of solid gold. I proposed to leave enough that universities and monasteries could be built, as well as lazar houses and other charitable institutions. But all these could be largely financed by the sale of the jewels. I could not even guess at their worth, but a hundred million castilians, a thousand million silver ducats, was a moderate estimate.

In my speech I said that a great deal of hard fighting lay ahead of us. Thus I would not ask for immediate enlistments: I wished those from Narvaez' army who considered following our flag to search their hearts and discuss the matter among themselves before coming to the decision. Once it was made and they signed or made their mark on our rolls, it was irrevocable, and the punishment for desertion would be death.

If I had called for enlistment immediately, almost all would have come forward, many of whom would suffer doubt and regret of their hasty action. As it was, they would fraternize with my veterans, and obtain a fairly clear and accurate notion of what awaited them—hardship, strict discipline, night marches, both empty and overloaded stomachs depending on our luck, and, most particularly, very real and omnipresent danger. Thus the men I did not want would be weeded out by their own habits and inclinations. Those who did join would know exactly what they were doing and would be committed

body and soul and accept what happened as the fortunes of war. Even so, about nine hundred of Narvaez' army of twelve hundred decided to enlist or to accept commissions, for they were adventurous fellows, to start with, ever to have left Spain and then to join an expedition whose main purposes had been to crush Cortez and garner gold.

I had fifty horses with a few more being sent to me by the catchers,[40] although very few of these had ever smelled battle and had little training for it. Our guns numbered twenty-five, wretchedly dirty and rusty but cleanable and usable, an abundance of supplies of all sorts, and eighteen ships which, at the last and at the worst, might be our bridge to Cuba. Plenty of Cempoalan bearers would carry our baggage in the swift march that I intended.

It went well during its first part, and the news I heard from Mexic was good. My swift victory over Narvaez had cooled the Mexic heads, and the caciques and magicians bethought themselves, and the siege of the beleaguered palace was not so resolutely pushed. Hardship assaulted us at the great, lofty desert beyond which lay Tlaxcala, and there I perceived that Marie's boast of hardihood and courage was not mere wind.

She also had good foresight. She had had prepared underclothing, from throat to ankle, of the chamois, an antelopelike ruminant found in the Tyrolean Alps. Its skin was soft as silk and its fur, after the outer hair had been sheared off or plucked out, and worn next to the body, was soft and warm as sable. She declined to ride one of our new horses, which were sadly in need of training for maneuver in mountainous lands, and she did not wish to interrupt the superb control that my equestrians had over their battle steeds.

Marquez and Ojeda, my quartermasters, did Trojan work in providing food depots in advance of our march, and in utilizing what little cooking fuel was procurable in this bleak and barren region. Good use was made of saddle blankets, tarpaulins, and tent cloth, and although all endured one miserable night, no one froze to death, and we gained the warmer slopes before sundown of the next night.

Meanwhile, it appeared that Doña Marina and Marie were developing a warm friendship. Generally they marched and slept in sound of each other, and by now Marina was so adept at Spanish that they could communicate freely. Some of their talk was gay, but mainly it concerned Mexic and its environs. Marie was usually the questioner, Doña Marina the informant. It seemed to me that the latter was more loquacious than necessary,

particularly in picturing the religious life of the people, dwelling on the riches of the country, and in naming and describing various officers and the few veterans who for various reasons had quit soldiering and were developing cocoa gardens and estates in the region of Vera Cruz.

Marie's other most frequent companions were her two maids and, rather to my wonder, a good soldier named Pero Farfan, who had obtained legal title, signed by the notary and myself, to some land, including a long-deserted townsite, on the Coatzacoalco River. There he had planned to retire after the defeat of Narvaez, but like Cincinnatus of old, he had again donned his armor at news of the Mexic revolt.

What Marie saw in him puzzled me somewhat. He was a hidalgo in his own right and had attended the University of Seville, but he was a quiet, distinguished rather than handsome or dashing man, competent in battle but with no ambition for promotion. Their conversation, a soldier told me, was mainly about books and the arts.

The talk between Doña Marina and me was mainly conjecture of what lay ahead. Certainly the siege of the palace was no longer as energetic and ferocious as at first. This, she thought, was Montezuma's doing, not so much in fear of my restrengthened army as a desire to prevent a destructive war.

"I put no trust whatever in the treacherous dog," I told her, in an outburst of spleen.

"Malinche, you should not feel bitterly toward Uei Tlatoani. Obviously he conspired with Narvaez against you; I would have done the same were I the prisoner of an invader. No doubt he wished your whole force exterminated if you did not quit Mexic and return to Cuba. But 'treachery' is a word he would not understand. He has no grasp of what you call 'ethics.' He has always done what he thought was the will of the gods, or what his astrologers and magicians told him he was fated to do. He bears you no ill will. In fact, he is fond of you. It was fated, he believed at first, that you would come out of the Sunset to rule Mexic; then he believed the signs that you were not the one sent to prevail over him, and instead he would prevail over you. Thus he seized such openings as the gods offered to further that fate, with no question as to their right or wrong.

"You must try to understand that the Aztecs have little sense of right or wrong," Marina went on in deep earnestness. "There are gods to be worshiped in ways they themselves had chosen, including human sacrifice. There are laws that they must obey, all stemming from the divine will; they are required to fight bravely or be sacrificed and devoured according to their

horoscopes. They have no free will; nothing will change their ultimate fate, whether it is to live in bliss forever in the Sun or to descend to the dim realm of the god of the dead or to haunt the living as do the witch-brigands. When one night you were imitating one of Montezuma's jugglers, throwing up and catching a ball with your left hand while you poured wine from one glass to another without spilling a drop with your right hand, he told me you were—what was the word?—an 'ambidextrous' man."[41]

"So I did," I remarked, marveling at Marina's memory, "I am so, in some degree."

"Can eyes be ambidextrous—looking to the right and left at the same time? In a sense mine have become so, through association with you. My mind is the Indian mind, yet I am beginning to understand the Spanish mind."

"You consider yourself wedded to Quetzalcoatl?"

"I *am* wedded to Quetzalcoatl; although the marriage has not yet been consummated. And you are also my dearest love, my fellow human being, and my mate."

"What if you had to choose between Quetzalcoatl—God save the mark!—and me?"

"Such a choice could never rise unless he himself annuls our marriage. My wishes in the matter would not matter. It was written in the stars that I marry Quetzalcoatl. The dreadful things that happened to me as I was coming into flower were in preparation for that. My mother could not help her passion for her young husband. They could not help but conspire against me, thinking that it was to obtain for him my great estates. But this, too, was written in the stars, so that I might wed Quetzalcoatl."

"You told me you expected little Hernan—or little Marina—about midsummer. Will Quetzalcoatl be pleased, on the day of the wedding, to find a babe at your breast?"

I had spoken in a twinge of irritation, and perhaps my tone held a note of sarcasm. Doña Marina did not appear to notice this, and answered in the same straightforward and sober way as she had spoken before.

"The babe will be weaned by then, I think, and you and your wife will adopt him."

"My wife?"

"I speak of Catalina. Marie has opened the path to other women wanting to come here, and Catalina will be among the first."

"She is a timid woman. She will never leave Cuba."

"Timid or not, she is still a woman, and she is at present the lawful wife of the Lord of Mexic—unless you have been deposed since the last report of our spies. It is written in the stars that she will come."

"How could you know that?"

"You have not forgotten the great emerald that you sent her by Puertocarrero. He was to dispatch it from Spain, and you remarked to me that you hoped it would reach her before her birthday, the date of which you gave me. I repeated the date to one of Montezuma's astrologers, and he cast her horoscope. She will arrive two years from now, he thought, but not stay long."

"Because of you?" I asked.

"Because of Doña Marina? Not I. Perhaps because of Marie de Estrada."

"Do you think any woman can get me away from you?"

"We are not speaking of any woman. We are speaking of Marie de Estrada. If she does not, it will not be for lack of trying."

Marie had already tried, in a way of speaking, so I could not reply.

"Why do you suppose she is so attracted to Pero Farfan?"

"Who can answer that? Quite possibly not Marie herself. Why am I so attracted to Captain Juan Xaramillo? Not great Sandoval, not beautiful Alvarado, not Puertocarrero—otherwise my choice if he could beget children. You know of his condition. He said he told you. Yet Xaramillo is not at all like you, nor is Puertocarrero. Both are great lords by birth while I am a great lady. They were born with the thing for which you fight—self-reverence. Their souls are at ease; not always trying to burst out of a cage. They are satisfied with what God gave them. They do not fight for fame or fortune, or even for the three Gods that are One God. They have never known anyone like you; probably there is no one alive now in the wide world. They marvel at you as little boys at a magician or clown—what will you say or do next? There are many men like that. They do not come to great eminence but they make wonderful husbands. Still, this is not what attracts Marie to Señor Farfan. That would not fit in with our Marie. I wonder what it is!"

I spoke again but Marina only mumbled in reply. Her thoughts were far away.

Our march brought us to Tetzcuco, whose king, Montezuma's nephew, lay in my Chain of Kings. The city was almost deserted, which might be a good sign, since its position was favorable for a skirmish or a raid or other harrying action. Again it might be an evil sign—that all its youth had joined the armies of Mexic, and the women and children sent to safety.

As we were entering the next town, Tepeyac, we were given a bad sign to those who believed in signs. The horse of Casquete, one of my old cavalry force, caught his foot between two planks of bridge, causing the rider to fall off in the water. Watching this was Botello, a Spanish, not Indian astrologer, who had studied the science in Rome. When he noticed that the animal had been slightly lamed, he proclaimed that we were entering Mexic "on a bad foot."

Truly, we entered in what seemed to me an ominous silence. The fields and farms were deserted; we were unable to find bearers to relieve those that we had engaged at Coatepec. Ojeda and Marquez, in their search, did find one but he was no longer able to carry loads. He was hanging from a rope in the house of a cacique, perhaps as a warning to others of his trade. A short distance onward, in a temple square, we found a large stack of baked maize cakes and some hundreds of hens, lying in bunches with their feet tied. These Mexic were a bewildering people.

The folk at Tepeyac had not fled the town and sat quietly in the doors of their houses. I did not like their faint, knowing smiles. A few bridges had been lifted on the causeway, but not enough to delay our advance. When we neared the palace grounds, all was quiet, and a good part of the garrison was perched on the walls, to count heads perhaps, and take note of any officers or friends missing from their places. They waved their hands but they did not cheer, despite the deep satisfaction they must feel at our arrival. They had certainly had a severe fright and I got the impression that they still believed themselves in great danger.

I lost no time in summoning Alvarado. What he told me was substantially what I had heard from his messengers. After the release of the two young men prepared for sacrifice, the rite had occurred with what I deemed an innovation. Each of them carried up the steps an armful of flutes, and at intervals each stopped, piped a few notes, then flung the flute down the steps. At the Eagle Dish they had played the last notes and flung down their last flute. I could not imagine what the ceremony symbolized unless it

was the end of music in their mortal lives and the soon beginning of divine music in the Sun.

Alvarado's sudden attack on the celebrants was less excusable than I had at first supposed. They had made no warlike move and in fact were performing a religious dance at the very moment. All he could answer was that they were planning to attack the garrison when the festival was over—the two half-gods had told him so under torture—and he wished to catch them offguard and kill enough of them that they would forsake the plan.

"You were a fool, and I was a greater one to leave you in command," I told him; and that summed up the situation, and was about all I could say or do until the consequences of Alvarado's atrocious act became apparent. There would be consequences. He and his followers had not only committed a massacre but had torn away and kept the gold and jewelry worn by the wounded and the dead. Also, he had put me in a bad light before my army. I had rashly boasted, when I had heard news of the remission of the siege, that the Mexics had repented their assault and would come to meet me on the causeway, with flowers and gifts and shoutings. Instead, I had entered the city in a sinister silence.

This was what I should have expected, since my men had slaughtered about a thousand Mexic noblemen. Instead, I had believed a conciliatory letter I had received at Tetzcuco from Montezuma. Its tone implied guilt, and instead of remembering and acting on Marina's good advice, my resentment rose against him; and I blamed him for the cold reception which had proved me a vain boaster and hurt my pride. Long ago, when Juvena had read my palm, she had told me that my pride amounted to an obsession, although not in these words. Marina had implied the same when she had compared me with Puertocarrero and her friend Captain Xaramillo, and in effect reminded me of my relatively humble birth.

In any case, I made the mistake of not going at once to Montezuma and having some sort of love feast with him. By keeping him waiting, I shamed him before all his retinue. I thought that all he intended was to offer me a great gift of gold and again request that I take my army out of Mexico; and quite likely this was his intention. But I could have replied far better to such a proposal by sitting with him in his chamber, talking in friendly tones, and again singing my old song that we could not depart with our God's and our Emperor's orders still unobeyed.

In an evil temper I sent Montezuma the bald threat that he must open the market that had been closed, so that we could buy food, or else I would

attack. He replied that if I set free himself or his brother Cuitlahuac, whom my men held as hostage, he would comply with my demands. Without waiting to consult Marina I did release Cuitlahuac, and thus I fell into the most cunning trap ever devised for me in our Mexic adventure. In fact it reminded me of the trick I had played the Velazquez faction when I had legally changed an army under my command into a Spanish municipality, wherein my creatures could strike down the malcontents without blame on me.

With Cuitlahuac freed, Montezuma at once surrendered to him the lofty office that he still retained despite his own loss of temporal power—this being the archpriest of the Aztec religion. Strictly speaking, Cuitlahuac did not become Uei Tlatoani, which office encompassed rulership; but he was now what amounted to a heathen pope, standing higher than any king.

Cuitlahuac's word was war.

---

[40] Since Narvaez had ninety horses, this count leaves about thirty unaccounted for. It is unlikely the Aztecs could kill many of them or would dare try, and they had no natural enemies here except possibly the jaguar, but this beast would be loath to try to kill the colts of a drove of horses guarded by stallions rapidly reverting to the habits of wild horses. In any case, within two centuries the plains north of Mexico swarmed with wild horses, which were not aboriginal in the New World, and the Sioux, Apaches, and many other Indian tribes had become great equestrians. Could these runaways from the Battle of Cempoala have been the first founders of the enormous herds that played so great a part in North American history?

[41] *Hombre ambidextro*.

5

Ordas and four hundred soldiers, whom I had sent out to discover the mood of the populace, were told of Cuitlahuac's word by plain and certain voice. A vast throng of Mexic soldiers fell upon them, killing a few including a popular captain, lately under Narvaez, who had been foremost in urging his fellow men to join my banner. Ordas had been wounded. To regain the fort, the force had to cut its way through a yelling mob, hurling stones from their slings and discharging a hail of arrows. They regained temporary safety, but the Mexicans succeeded in setting fire to the palace. To control the flames,

we had to knock down part of an outer wall, a perilous breach indeed that we must hold with musket and cannon fire.

All through the day the battle raged. The cannoneers and musketeers fired point-blank into the enemy swarm, but the bloody gaps were immediately refilled by howling foemen. Eighty of my men were wounded, in all ten more slain, and that black, murky, and grievous night we spent in care of these, and in repairing and strengthening our fortifications. I had taken not a severe but a most painful and disabling wound by a stone striking my left hand.

After the next day's fighting, utterly furious, and our list of dead longer than yesterday's, and the number of our wounded almost as long, I began to see handwriting on the wall. The first words were plain, that we could not long resist the myriad of warriors dedicated to our destruction, that we could not replace our losses, while their numbers ever multiplied as more and more tribesmen from outlying kingdoms and provinces came to swell the Mexic horde. If any of us were to survive we must fly the city.

But how could we take wing? The fort was under siege every moment of the day or night. To try to enter the square except with stout convoy was certain and swift death. Here the writing on the wall became an undecipherable blur.

I was back in the brig of a ship in the harbor of San Diego with a ball and chain fastened to my ankle. In strength and desperation I had set free my foot, because God helps those who help themselves. Now I was the trusted head of an army, its members looking to me for the preservation of their lives. They knew that many of their number were marked for death, but could I save any? No wrenching at my heel could save us now or help a jot; I had but one weapon in which lay my only hope—not my sword—but my inventive mind.

My thoughts flew to battle chariots that had saved many a life in great and awesome battles of the past. Alexander's great enemy Darius III had fled a lost battle in a chariot, only to be overtaken and slain. We had no chariots, and anyway the old-fashioned chariot was open to attack from the rear and could not serve us now. So our vehicles must be walled with loopholes and slits for firing guns, arrows, and for thrusting spears, and the walls must extend almost to the ground to protect those troops that carried the equipage on their shoulders, their heads protected by the upper part. Each wagon would carry twenty warriors, and be carried by about sixty Spaniards and allies.

I ordered that three be built. These then would protect only a fourth of our Spaniards, but they might possibly break paths through the enemy throngs into which the rest, along with our native troops and followers and our baggage bearers, might fight their way. This last hope was strengthened by the thought that the Mexics would not be quick to rush the rear guard, because of wonder and fright at the strange wooden monsters that could move along their streets and causeways and deal death.

These were being built in the walled courtyards, while the Mexics besieged these walls. They could not yet break through but they observed that our retaliation was not as savage as before, and did not know the reason which was other employment by about half my force. They immediately deemed that our losses had been most severe, and we were preparing to surrender. But in all fairness they shouted that they would not accept surrender and we had best die fighting; for every man captured alive would be sacrificed to their god of war, and his limbs be devoured, and his head set to rot on a pole.

Montezuma did not appear to perceive what we were building; perhaps he thought the equipages were some sort of gods. Perhaps he was dazed by this terrible violence breaking forth in what was once a peaceful scene, and breaking into his quiet, meditative life. Living that life, he had given little thought to thousands dying at the Eagle Dish, for to this horror he had been born and it seemed to him a condition of nature, as Spanish peasants regard the death of children in hot, sultry summers. But Montezuma had given ear to the sweet whistlings of his song birds in his aviaries and had admired their lovely color and their graceful flight. He had watched his entertainers, enjoyed his beautiful women summoned by one breathing of their names. He had known of a dread prophecy, but for years and years its fulfillment had remained yet distant, and even when the appointed day had drawn nigh and finally dawned, there had been no great storm. Now he was hardly able to believe that he, Montezuma, Uei Tlatoani, could ever be exposed to such a cataclysm.

He wanted it stopped. He must act to stop it, for he could not believe that his abdication as emperor and then the giving away of his office as high priest had lost him the love and reverence of his people. Between these and all-powerful and vengeful gods he had been the mediator.

So he came to me and asked my leave to go forth on the balcony and entreat the people to desist in their murderous attack, and he would himself promise them, in the name of the Great Teules, that all would be well.

I gave my leave. He appeared on the balcony and an unplumbable silence fell, like that of the desert on a windless night, a desert where no green thing had ever grown, and no rain had ever beat or no rivulet had murmured, and where no jackal had ever howled, or vulture had ever croaked, or serpent had ever hissed. It was all the deeper because of the thunderous uproar of only a second ago; this had been cut short as when, by God's command, a meteor rushing through the skies with a prodigious roar had stopped dead still.

Montezuma began to speak. His voice faltered at first, and it never grew strong, still those near by listened and most of those further off stood in immeasurable awe. Not so, the youthful Cauuhtemoc, a prince of ancient, royal blood, descended on his mother's side from the first Mexic emperor, Acamapitl, and the son of Ahuitzotl, in whose palace we were besieged. His rough, angry, far-carrying voice shot through the silence that overhung and underlaid the soft voice of Montezuma.

"What is that Spaniard's wife saying to us? He deserves no answer from our mouths, only this."

Swiftly he drew his bow and launched an arrow. The shaft missed its mark, but not so all of the volley of stones hurled at the lonely figure of the last emperor. One struck him in the leg, one in the arm, and one in the head, and I knew by the way he tumbled, as any common man mortally wounded, that this was his death stroke. He had not lived by the sword and died by the sword. He had lived worshiping gods of plaster and stone, and by a thrown stone he would die.

Blood slowly seeped into his scalp, visible as a dull-red flush at the temples. Four of my men rushed out, on what impulse I knew not, perhaps no more than natural mercy on one who had stood so high and so far had fallen, or because they could not bear the sight of the awful impropriety of him being crushed into shapelessness by further volleys of stones. They seized him by the arms and legs and brought him into shelter.

The battle was not immediately resumed. The attackers were too moved by Montezuma's fall to launch their arrows and hurl their stones, and all stood motionless, and silent except for a low murmur of talk. So it came to pass that some of my captains went where he lay, on a rough pallet, to bid him farewell while he was still conscious; and it might be that Frey Olmedo would give him extreme unction in a last hope of his salvation, or at least send up a prayer to God to have mercy on his soul.

The slight hemorrhage within Montezuma's skull did not arrest his thoughts or completely deny their expression, although he spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"I know not whether you will live or die," he told us. "But if you do die in battle or are taken alive and sacrificed, others like you will come out of the Sunrise, more and more, and they will raise their Cross throughout our world, and the images of the Woman and her Babe, and our gods will die . . . Your worship of them is a better worship than ours to our blood-hungry idols . . . Your ways are better than our ways. The blood of your people will mix with the blood of my people, more and more, and with all Aztec blood and perhaps with kinsman tribes far and near, north and south and east and west; but our blood it will vanquish, and more and more prevail, until the Aztec blood is a mere, lingering vestige, then only a little trace in the veins of the people holding the lands, and in time that trace will die.

"I think that what you call Indians are doomed, but I may speak only for the Aztec," he went on, noble sadness in his face but his sad voice stronger. "Of all Indian races of which the far-wandering storytellers tell, we are the richest and the most advanced, approached only by the people of the Inca far to our southeast. Aye, we are too rich, too well we know how to take the gold and silver from the veins, the gleaming jewels from the rocks or sands, and such knowledge is not good for a dark-skinned people; it becomes their death sentence.

"Hear me, he who once spoke for the gods, now speaks against the gods, but I make but one slight charge. And if there are no gods, and only one God as your priests tell us, this charge I make against Him. Perhaps we Indians were the first race that He made, and when He made other races, He favored them over us, and we will never compensate for that favor, we can only die out. There are other dark peoples in the world, we have seen some darker than us as slaves on your ships, but they were not rich like us, only their bodies were worth taking, and the more they know, the greater their value to the white man who owns them, and thus the white man will teach them out of his own lore, and so they will survive. And in the fullness of time they will become your equals in prowess, in wisdom, in cunning, in invention, and in cruelty.

"I cannot look that far," said Montezuma, "I know only that now there are two things wrong with us, we are too rich, and we are too dark. If we were white and rich, you would take part of our riches, but leave part, and enter into marriage with us, and we could become one of your family of nations. If we were white but poor, you would reign over us awhile, but we

would learn your ways of becoming rich, and again you would accept us into your family of nations. If we were dark-colored and poor, you would make us your slaves, or else herd us into the lands you do not want; but time would be on our side, as time is on the side of the black people, and in its fullness we might prevail, or at least survive, how I know not. But we are dark-colored and also we are rich, so there is no hope for us."

Montezuma sat silent for a moment, looking at his beautifully shaped hands, and then spread them apart in a little gesture of despair.

"Aye, we are too dark. It was not fair of your God to make us or any other race of man with dark skins. Every dark-skinned man or woman or little child who looks upon you white people know what I say is truth, no matter the bitterness or the strength of his denial. We envy your complexions. Will one of you, just once, envy ours? There lies the proof.

"Some day the dark-skinned people may atone for this great slight. Not we rich Aztecs; our land and our gods and even our language will be lost to us; and I speak now of dark people elsewhere, Indians less advanced, and islanders far off, and what you call niggers. Do not pity any of them. With their dark skins God did not give them weak hearts or wills, or feeble brains; in all else he was fair with them. Because of this slight fault they will fight harder, they will suffer more, they will endure. In other continents and perhaps even on this continent, poor and backward peoples may survive.

"And now I, Montezuma, forgive you for your uninvited coming, and your cruel conquest, and your taking of our lands. You could not help yourselves, wolfish creatures of the cold north! You would save our souls, you told yourself, but take our gold. Such was written in the stars to which I go.

"I am sorely wounded, and my heart is broken. So I pray you go from me, and do naught to prolong my life, and no longer call upon me to speak my dark thoughts, because it excites my brain, which I want to lie supine until its deliverance of its own awareness by dark death."

He turned on his side and we stole out of the room.

CHAPTER 13

Armageddon

The shortest causeway to the shores of the lagoon was the Tlapopan. We could not expect Indian reinforcements on that shore; we could more likely expect battle; still the people were not likely to be as hot against us as the Mexics, and at least we would not have to contend with swarms of enemy canoes. So I had sent forth my three "Turtles," as the men called them, my mobile forts, to try to win and secure the bridges of which there were eight. Against the most furious fighting the Turtle Men and their rear guard did capture four of the bridges, only to lose them and be beaten back to the fortress. The Turtles themselves had been damaged and the foray had revealed certain weaknesses in their construction, which we must immediately remedy.

This first failure heightened the fighting zeal of the enemy, whereupon they sent a strong force to recapture the teocalli where we had raised the Cross and the Mother and Child. This they did, but I resolved they must not be permitted to hold it, desecrate our altars, and reinstall their gods Uitzilopochtli and Tetzcatlipoca. In the realization of our utterly desperate position, this resolve did not make sense to my head, but it was as the light of wisdom shining on my heart and soul. I submitted no arguments to these and instead dispatched Escobar with a hundred soldiers. I chose this number because the teocalli was not yet strongly manned.

Yet the defenders fought like demons in the defense of demon gods, and three times my force was beaten back. Then I had my buckler bound on my left arm, its hand being useless, and with my sword in my right hand I took personal command of the rescue expedition. Our demoralized and beaten troops immediately ceased being one and one alone, and became a body with one mind. I did not know why, unless somehow my will to victory passed mysteriously into their minds and souls. I think, too, that in their hearts they felt the sharp conflict between good and evil. They themselves were often evil, they knew well its face, they embraced at times its siren body. They held no brief for themselves; they were men of earth earthly, they deserved worse punishment than they received. Yet in this case the

Cross on which Jesus had died, and the Holy Mother that was their mother, and the Child that was once themselves in innocence and helplessness, were in direct conflict with the horrid monsters demanding human sacrifice; and all they needed was a trusty leader to implement their impulses and to make concrete and recognizable the ground on which they stood as men. Such a leader as I was today—not always so, to my eternal sorrow—was able to do these things, and to give my own life as they might have to give theirs for what we knew was holy.

We fought our way up the steps. We advanced in an irresistible rush. Our swords and spears were more than articles of iron; they changed into symbols of the Divine, or at least of Good in hand-to-hand and savage, elementary conflict with Evil. And the shields with which they fended the enemy thrusts became lovely in their sight, somehow transfigured.

Backward drew the defenders of the devil because they, too, were men, but lacking what we possessed, which was inspiration. I know no other word. All I know was, that foot by upward foot we climbed, until we reached the Chamber of the Abominable, and there we slew every soldier and every priest who had served Moloch, and then hurled their bodies down the steps. And there we destroyed their handiwork, which was the plaster they were mixing, containing no doubt the blood of children, and what parts of the images they had already fashioned; then we set fire to the towers. And when we came forth, the crowd below was shouting that we and all our great companions would be slain or sacrificed, for if need be they would range against us twenty-five thousand to our one. But this number was so vast, a total of twenty-five million, that my high heart rose higher still, because the boast was so extravagant that it denoted lesion in their minds between common sense and frenzy; and they were not now at heart so confident of victory and of our destruction. And as we made our way back to the palace the stones thrown and the arrows launched, themselves seemed half-hearted, and most of them fell short.

After this victory I was given cause not to exult too greatly, for I was reminded again of our desperate pass by the discovery that the well that I had thought was fed by an underwater spring and on which we could rely for drinking water was like almost every other well. When visited too often it dried up, just as the vessels that went too often to the well would at last break up. The simple meaning was, that our bridge-seizing and other preparations for our departure must be rashly hastened, because the days of our resistance here were cruelly numbered.

That night a company of us set forth and burned close to a thousand houses along the causeway. Abandoning our Turtles as too slow and awkward, the crews worked all night to build a movable bridge. On the following day the four bridges we had won and lost and again won caused the satanic comedy that ever walks with war to evince itself. About a dozen horsemen gained the mainland and came riding back with nosegays in their hands, in such spirits that one would think they had been to a boozing ken. I did not wonder at Alvarado in their number, for he was immature, but shocked to see staid, hard-headed Sandoval as his companion.

Then we were taken in by a trick, which was the Indians offering peace if we surrendered two high priests that we held prisoner. In truth they needed the priests for hocus-pocus and as soon as we had relinquished the pair, they resumed savage battle.

Four of the eight bridges were again lost. We fought to regain them, so easy to say, so difficult to imagine, so strange to remember, because there was no consciousness of purpose other than to live to be able to kill, stab, and slash; men falling dead at my feet, others toppling into the water, shoutings, death cries, rattlings in the throat barely heard; Death nudging his way through the throng, up and down and across, invisible, or in some shape we did not notice until he touched someone with his hand, and for him the light went out and the fighting ceased. It could not cease for us who still lived. It became one of the verities of nature; we could not remember when we were not at it; we could not dream when it would be done.

It came to me that every man and every horse was wounded; and then I saw one man who was not, and almost wakened from the nightmare, but it enshrouded me again; and suddenly we had rewon the four lost bridges, and held the remaining four. But the men we left to guard them could not hold them against the innumerable foe, hacking with their great two-handed swords, then falling through the gaps to make a bridge of bodies, but innumerably more took their place.

Night fell, misty and dark, and we won our way back to the fort. But we could not rest, and eat, and nurse our wounds, and give thought to our dead; for at midnight we must sally again, and this time we must break through, or every life under my command along with my own would be lost, and every soul take flight whither it was bound, and none would be taken prisoner, for we pledged one another that if any man fell so he could not fight on, and yet lived, and thus would be captured, we would ourselves dispatch his life and answer for the deed the best we could before the Bar of God.

And then, not in my right mind, but remembering dully something I had promised and must yet be done, I had all our treasure brought forth, in our own coffers and that from the Jewel Shop, and solemnly I took forth the Emperor's fifth share, and this fifth I put in the charge of Alonzo Davila and Gonzalo Mexia, the Emperor's treasurers in whose rightful charge it was. Also I reserved several chests that our horses or bearers could carry to use in bribing caciques to let us pass in peace or to buy food on our long journey to the coast. And from the rest I bade my men, whether my veterans or recruits from Narvaez' army, help themselves to their full satisfaction. At the same time, I bade them not weigh down themselves, for thus in dire battle or other extremity they would surely die.

And in the torchlight and lamplight most of the men began to scrabble like gulls for slop. They stuffed gold and glimmering jewels in packets and pockets, often throwing away necessities of life such as water canteens and bandages for gushing wounds, in order to make room for the once-precious stuff, which was now accursed. Truly it had become the devil's bait to ensnare brave men, no better or worse than the common run and ruck, down into hell. Still I could not at first remonstrate with them, because I had led them here by the promise of such riches, and had taken unnecessary risks in order to heap up treasure.

I stood in a spell, helpless to move or speak, my fancy caught not by the ugly scene itself, prelude to death, but by its pretty adornments. These were the flashings of great jewels as now one and then another gleamed in its full brilliance in the beam of a lantern or a torch, as some soldier moved it from one pouch to another, or threw it down to pick up one that seemed more valuable to his dazzled eyes. They had no need to fight one another or to quarrel, as they soon perceived, so vast was the hoard. Nor had they little need to speak, so the only sound was the ring of metal, or the rattle and roll of jewels on the floor, and the men's heavy breathing and little grunts, and the trickling of blood from their wounds.

Then I perceived that some of the men chose only one or two handfuls of jewels, or a small weight of gold which on the journey would be more negotiable than jewels. And when I looked upon these men I saw that almost all of them were members of our *Corps Perdu*, our daredevils. Almost all had lived lives of danger since their striplinghood. They had learned to smell it before they came upon it, and how dire it could become, and well they remembered occasions when the least handicap had caused a comrade's death, and the smallest advantage had saved his life. Yet their refusal to join the scrabblers kneeling on the floor with greedy busy hands had deeper

meanings than self-preservation on the awful march to begin at midnight. They watched the treasure-mad men not with the least contempt, only with faint smiles of human brotherhood, or even eyes of pity.

They knew the truth; the others did not yet know; there was no use to tell them; they must find out for themselves. The familiar terms on which they lived with Death, the greatest of all kings except God, had made them great aristocrats of mind and soul, which in the last meaning means only to know what is worthwhile, and what is not, what is precious and what is worthless. True, they began life with a certain bent. Perhaps Benevente had begun life commonly enough, but his fall into the fire, which had made his face a horror to gaze upon him, had set him late upon the same road. Astores was the elder son of a great marquis, yet his younger brother yearned for the title and the pomp, and he had purposely committed *lèse-majesté* against King Ferdinand, knowing he would only be attainted, and that his brother would be declared heir of the marquisate, and he could take his mother's name and live the life that his soul desired. They stood about at ease. They could not be ungraceful, because they were horsemen aforetime, hunters of wild boars, they kept their bodies fit; most of them were magnificent swimmers and were clever with their hands.

Bernal Diaz did not belong to their company, although he was well born. He was more devout and of more serious disposition. So I watched what choice he made of the glowing piles of loot. He took no gold at all but looked carefully through a chest of jewels until he had picked out four pieces of that green stone that the Aztecs so particularly prized, which might be jade of a certain color, but certainly of no great pecuniary value beyond these shores.

Also I watched Doña Marina and Marie. The latter's face was at first drawn and pale, and I thought she was gripped by passion of some deep sort, but she, too, had marked the behavior of the *Perdu* men, and at once she calmed, a great strength of purpose came into her face, and she took only a handful of extra-large diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. Doña Marina chose only one great uncut diamond, as large as a pigeon's egg, which no other chooser had noticed since it had no glitter. As she pouched it, she gave me a smile, and then patted her great belly, but I did not understand what she was trying to tell me, unless this was to be the central jewel of my viceregal crown, provided it was my fate to wear it, and that my first-born son might wear it after me.

And now the time had come for us to march into the dismal night, with spates of rain, and of generally deep-clouded skies, but from the terrace I

had observed that sometimes the clouds thinned, and the moon shone wanly through. I began to give commands as to our formation.

Under the command of Sandoval and Ordas I put the advance guard, and with them would march forty burden bearers to carry our portable bridge, and about a thousand of my best Tlaxcalan warriors. Over Olid, Davila, and a hundred picked Spaniards, their faces not so gaunt with hunger or so drawn with weariness as the most, I would command the center; and in our charge would be horses carrying chests of gold and jewels. Two of Narvaez' captains and two of my own, along with thirty of my veterans, the main of our new recruits, and the rest of the Tlaxcatecs and Indian soldiers would constitute the rear guard. Since I thought this was the safest position in our narrow line, Doña Marina and the other women, including two daughters of Montezuma, and his son I likewise placed here, along with laden horses and bearers carrying material vital to our survival.

Into the night we walked in utter silence, to find the street deserted, and we saw no Mexic except piles of their dead slain by the defenders of the palace, and now and then a Mexic corpse lying alone and lonely. And this fortune held while we turned from the street into the causeway, where soon we came upon the first water gap over a canal, its bridge so often won or lost and at last destroyed by the Mexic. With as little sound as possible we slid out our removable bridge, and the force began to cross.

Our line was long, and before the whole advance guard could cross we heard the shrill of a shell trumpet of a Mexic sentinel. At once the sound was multiplied as other guards posted further off gave the alarm, and then began the minatory dismal boom of the drum in the tower of the great teocalli far across the city. And none could doubt that this was signal of attack, and the dread battle of the water gaps would almost instantly begin, and God alone knew when it would end, and what it would cost.

A mighty splashing rose as canoes full of warriors put forth from the shore and from their hiding places along the lagoon. By now the advance guard was across the gap and was hastening on to capture two other water gaps before their guards were strongly reinforced, this by my order. But our temporary bridge was still packed with my troops, these of the center of my files, and the rear guard had not yet gained its approach. And now the nearer canoes were close enough to launch arrows and cast stones from their slings, and as the vast fleet followed fast, the scattering shafts and stones, which at first was comparable to a light rain, swiftly became as a tropic downpour, and the men began to fall as they were struck by stone or arrow, and Death began to march with us on the narrow causeway, and here and there he

touched a fellow marcher, and now it seemed he had a hundred hands, so many fell wounded or dead. And now we could not remember the deep silence of only a few minutes before, so great the splashings, so loud the trumpets, so fierce the shoutings, and so pitiful, as a sad understrain of music below a chorus, the groanings and the wailings and the prayers of the dead or dying.

Never did the thunder of battle swell more swiftly, and its ferocity climb more steeply to the ultimate possible to the forces engaged. The innumerable canoes nosed into the dikes, and their crews of warriors climbed up its sides. In the most wan moonlight that barely sifted through the clouds it was hard to tell friend from foe, impossible at a distance, and at closer range these were distinguished mainly by the outline of their garments and their weapons. But further on, the storm of battle was even more violent than here, as I could tell by its uproar, and the advance guard and part of our center was under most dire attack, and if it could not cross that water gap and the one beyond, our whole force was doomed. And not only at the gap itself was there frenzied battle, but all along the causeway between, where the Mexics had landed from their canoes.

And my followers thrust through the throng, advancing when they could, fighting when they must, every man it seemed in some contorted shape, as he sought to strike a blow or to avoid one. Men were dropping everywhere, on the causeway and in the water, some of these thrust over the brink by their moiling fellows; and those Spaniards yet alive were quickly captured by the paddlers, and quickly made helpless, whether by blows or by ropes I did not know, either to escape or to drown themselves. And often I felt my horse's hoof step on something soft, and well I knew what it was, but whether once an enemy or a follower I did not know.

And now the rear guard had crossed the first gap, except for about a hundred Spaniards, most of them from Narvaez' forces who had dared not attack a force of Mexics many times their number that had clambered from canoes onto the causeway. Their captain had lacked the force of will to drive or lead them on to what looked like suicide; yet the truth was, that some of them could have fought their way through in berserk fury, and now not one of them would live except for a few hours, or perhaps a few days or weeks, while being fattened, ere the sacrificial knives slit open their chests on the Dish of the Eagles, and their still-quivering hearts were burned on the altars of the Great Teules of stone and plaster.

And now I heard shouts for help in Indian language, and instantly I identified the shouters as the carriers of the movable bridge on which the

lives of all the rest of us appeared to hang. Another horseman caught up with me to tell me that the bridge had pressed down into the muck because of its heavy loads and now could not be lifted out. Still I rushed on toward the climactic fighting at the second water gap, thinking that some of our number could in some way cross, by wading or swimming, although with many drowning and many more killed or captured by Aztec warriors in canoes. And so furious was our attack, that the foe was pressed back and our beleaguered force could move again. Nor was it possible that many could cross the gap on the vast amount of substance accumulating there, bearers with the advance guard having dropped their burdens to try to swim or wade, and many of these could do neither, and had only sunk to the bottom to give more mass to the gruesome bridge. And those soldiers who had someway crossed were rushing on, still by my orders, to try to seize and hold the third and last gap.

The force that remained here, desperately fighting, were all swordsmen and lancers, or some of them had picked up muskets, wet and useless and dropped by the musketeers, and were using these as clubs. And suddenly the moon peered through a rent in the clouds, and in her countless sailings through the skies she had never looked down upon a scene of utter and savage violence surpassing this. And then it happened there was a great collision of enemy canoes in the gap, crushing one another, and many of them sank, and many warriors went down with them to be caught in the debris, and these, too, increased the size and substance of the awful dam; and while some of us fought like wolves at bay, others waded or picked their way across, and some were killed in trying, and thus the bridge became stronger, until more than half of my men had crossed.

The remainder, walking backward, fighting every step, crossed the gap and I was about to attempt it on horseback, when another horseman called to me from the dimness of the lagoon, and told me he had found a shoal where his horse could wade. He guided me with his voice, and only two canoes contested my joining him, and one of these the beast overturned, and I slew with my lance all four in the other canoe. And soon I was back on the causeway, and there I paused for a few seconds, my lance ready for any Mexic who came nigh enough to strike me with his sword, while I tried to decide where I was needed most.

It was not a hard decision. The forces behind me had crossed the first bridge, most could cross the second gap, but unless the third was captured, all would be lost. Behind us was the main of the Mexic army, as I could tell by the tumult of their shell trumpets and their drums; and that way lay

certain death for all. So I rode into the mass of Mexic swordsmen ahead of me, my men riding hard behind me, and so savage was our rush that we cleaved through, and although a few were cut down, or their horses slain, a great number of the Mexics were lanced and trampled underfoot, and many more were pushed off the brink.

At the third and the last water gap, what remained of my advance guard was in desperate battle with its defenders, and about to be wiped out, but the horsemen I personally led, and a hundred or more Spanish infantry following as fast as they could, turned the tide of conflict here, and the Mexics fled. Then we horsemen dashed on to the mainland, and there we stopped and looked back; and although the moon had hid her face again, the first gray of dawn gave us a dim glimpse of the causeway. We could tell by the creeping gait of my center and my rear guard, and their often stopping except for a swarming movement within themselves, and their being forced back a distance now and then, that we could not linger here. Such were the fortunes of war that the thick of the fight, where victory or defeat would be decided, was between the second gap and the third, and a short distance behind the gap with its own bridge mainly of human bodies.

So we rode back in the stingy and treacherous light of dawn. Yet in one sense it was not dawn, meaning the end of night and the beginning of a new day, for the Spirit of the Dreadful Night still walked abroad, busy with its works, so that more and more dead would be heaped or strewn about for the rising sun to behold. Indeed, the battle was at its utmost pitch. And into that battle we flung ourselves, and sometimes it seemed to lull a little, only to rage again; and the same was true of its sound, subsiding slightly then roaring forth with always the same theme of sudden death. And over and under the various strains and unaffected by their punctuation by catastrophic sounds, was not merely the resounder of that theme, but its first source and cause and continuity, which was the dread and dismal rumble of the great drum in the teocalli. Not one instant did it rest, the reverberations of one beat rolling on into the next. My thought or vision was then of a pitch-black sea breaking against great cliffs of granite in a gale of deepmost night, in which now and then huge waves burst with cataclysmic force and titanic sound, but never quite drowning out the heavy, ominous roar of a succession of lesser waves that never ceased to roll and never paused.

Time pursued its ominous creep, and it must be that the light increased a little, because I became more and more aware of the form the battle had taken, these aspects making a kind of sense, while others were no more than a dark welter, frantic as a scene in nightmare or in the high delirium of fever,

beheld in utmost horror by the brain because itself was mad, unable to realize shape or meaning. The soldiers on foot had formed not a square but a long rectangle, crossed by the Bridge of Corpses at about a third of its length from its far end, showing that a little progress had been made toward escape. The soldiers at both ends and along the sides stood almost shoulder to shoulder forming human walls, suggestive of the phalanx of long ago, but their spears and swords were not in bristling rest as in a phalanx, but constantly jabbing or slashing against the Mexics that had disembarked from their canoes and climbed the steep bank of the causeway and were trying to break through the blood-smeared barricade.

And then the question crossed my mind why these lines had not been established closer to the brinks, so that the lancers and swords could thrust or hack down at the invaders as they struggled upward. Instead, more than a yard's space had been left between the lines and brinks. Then almost instantly the question was answered, as I saw shapes swiftly moving up and down these avenues, and identified them as horsemen, wildly riding and ever thrusting downward with their lances. They could not be everywhere at once, because their number was no more than thirty, yet it seemed so, and many a Mexic thought he had safely gained the brink when one of those shapes was on him, and the lance point darted toward him, and down he toppled. And above the awful sounds of battle, shrieks of the dying, and yells, as a blow struck home, and the clatter of steel against the obsidian edges of the Mexic swords, I heard what seemed an almost continuous sound in utter discord with the horrid sounds and monstrously out of place at such a scene.

That sound was of men cheering.

Aye, as the horsemen rode they cheered one another, and joyously shouted, and uttered jubilant profanities as their thrusts drove home. And now I began to perceive that every horse that had borne wounded men, or chests of gold, or other loads of no use now, or from whose backs captain or mounted soldiers had toppled dead or wounded, had been seized by a little corps of close communion with one another, and had had great experience in working and fighting together, who knew one another well, and could serve together well, without command by officers. And that close-bound body was our *Corps Perdu*.

It had once numbered over fifty, in name commanded by Ordas, but its real captain was a small, wiry man called Guru, which was not a Spanish name, and which I thought meant "wise man" in some heathen tongue. About ten of this Corps of the Damned ran back and forth on foot along the

avenues or back and across at either end of the avenue, and I saw why they did not join the lines because each was waiting for one or another of their fellows to fall off his horse, whereby he could seize it and swing aboard and continue his deadly work. And now and again such a rider did fall, either because of a fresh wound, or from weakness by loss of blood from some previous wound. And there was hardly a rider that was not bloodied head to foot either by his own wounds, or his mount's, or from the scarlet gushing fountains of Mexics lanced in the neck or elsewhere in an artery.

Aye, they cheered each other, and shouted coarse jests, and yelled forth wagers they could never live to pay, for the Corps of the Damned was fighting its last battle, and one by one its members went down to death.

And it so chanced that Benevente fell with an arrow in his breast just as his horse flashed by mine; and almost at my feet he toppled. And before his soul passed, one of his brethren seized his horse's bridle, swung himself up, and with a great *Salude* unto the fallen dashed away on the same grim business his companion had just ceased. And I looked into the hideous face of Benevente, and he recognized me with his dying eyes, and his mouth, drawn out of shape by awesome scars of fire, managed a kind of grin.

"I had to shake that last redskin off my lance point," he told me affably, "or I would have been by and out of the track of some bastard's arrow." And then, as he gasped his last breaths, I thought he might ask God's forgiveness for his sins, but he was too proud to do so, even as he was being swept toward the very seat of God to receive judgment; and so damned he had lived and damned he had died rather than beg mercy. When with tear-filled eyes I took a last glance at him, his open eyes were glazed.

And as I looked along the avenue I saw one feathered head after another rise quickly above the brink, many of these quickly disappearing at sight of a nearing devil-rider, and after that disappearance there almost always followed a great splash of water, so hasty was the man's descent, whether falling or wildly scrambling to safety. Still in the widening gaps between the riders hundreds of Mexics gained the causeway, and hence every soldier, Spanish or Aztec, in the rectangular human wall, was fighting with extreme ferocity, sometimes against two or three howling antagonists. And stretched or huddled before him lay his previous kills, while in front of some great swordsmen there were small heaps of blood-drenched dead. And constantly the sides of the wall were being shortened as one of its pillars sank or toppled down, and the pillar on each side drew nearer to each other to close the gap, and this movement was felt all along the line. It was as though some

law of God, spoken and imposed this night, decreed that the wall must be maintained until by His act or by His word it was permitted to dissolve.

Myself riding down the avenue, I came to the midway gap, but it was no longer that, so choked it was with debris, inanimate and what was lately animate. And on the top of the heap of corpses the dawn-light gleamed on something bright, and instantly I recognized it as the tube of such pure gold that it could be bent, which Leon had worn around his shoulder and upper arm and which the men called Leon's Swagger. And it was still on him as he lay there, his face ghastly white and his eyes wide open and staring; and my heart bled in pity for him, not, it seemed, because of his brave death but because of a gold ornament that he had treasured to the last.

Leaping over or trampling the countless bodies between the wall and the brink, and stabbing every Mexic in range of my point, I saw highborn Don Mercia with his busy sword in his left hand, while his right arm dangled helpless because of a severe wound. Yet he was handicapped, and it must be that Marie de Estrada had observed the fact, and had picked up a fallen sword and stood a little behind him and on his right, and was guarding him the best she could. Although she knew little of swordsmanship, there was a half-circle of dead in front of Don Mercia and to their left, all stabbed in the breast, and I could not guess the reason until I saw that her position had put her on the left and a little behind Don Garcia Perez, out and far the best swordsman not only of his corps but in our whole force, and the best I had ever seen, including famous fencers at festivals. His movements were like the leap of a coiled spring, too swift for the eye to follow; and he could see an opening in an opponent's guard and drive his blade from any angle straight to its core, and instantly thrust elsewhere. Before his first foe knew he had been hard hit and perhaps was wondering at a brief sharp pain and a faint dizziness and perhaps dimness of sight, ere all knowingness came to a sudden end, he had a follower at his heels down into darkness.

Yet I reckoned that at least once, Marie had saved the life of one or the other of the two great soldiers, by a sudden, surprise thrust.

And when I reached the end of the wall, I rode back on the other side, and there I saw two other embattled women, Marie's maids from Zumara, the daughters of a noble Spaniard by a Moroccan woman, and one of them was a savage fighter with a spear she had picked up, thrusting and jabbing, and the other with a bleeding shoulder held a bloodied Moorish dagger in her hand. And I caught a glimpse of Montezuma's children inside the wall, sitting dejectedly on the stone and paying heed to naught, and several bodies of soldiers that had fallen backward with outstretched arms, and others lying

wounded, and one form lay on its side, with a heaving chest that was revealed by the rise and fall of a fabric of some kind, that was its cover from head to foot.

Then my attention was strictly drawn by what seemed a lull in the battle. No Mexics were crawling over the brink of the causeway, and two or three of the riders had checked to look over and see the reason. At once they started shouting to one another, and I heard one great shout from the bugle throat of Guru, the band's real leader.

"*Get ready for the rush!*"

It came a few seconds later, over the edge on both sides of the causeway, and it was frenzied and desperate. There seemed about twenty parties of ten men each, and plainly each party had been told to engage one horseman, whose horsemanship, deadliness, and dash must have made him appear a devil out of Christian hell. Plainly its members had been told not to separate until the wild rider had been killed. I saw five parties who had set their trap well, perhaps by means of spies watching over the edge and signaling the horses' various positions, for with great bravery some of them flung themselves in the animals' paths and were lanced or stamped to death, while others hacked at the riders. Bleeding horses with empty saddles proved the telling stroke and its bitter loss to us, and I feared it foretold defeat.

One wounded horse had collided with another, both falling and throwing both horsemen, who were straightway hacked to pieces, although the horses rose and ran away with but slight wounds. Several horses already at the brink of exhaustion or near death after an hour or more of frantic running under demon horsemen were headed off and sank down, their riders easy victims to the two-handed broadswords, striking from all directions, although not one of these died without taking toll of the foe. But the attackers did not linger to kill or even maim the horses, nor did they attack the still-inflexible wall. Instead they fled and leaped over the brink to fall or to slide down. And in a moment all the yet-living Mexic soldiers had disappeared, persuading me that that attack on the horsemen had been the last in this part of the battlefield, either because their force had become too small except for this one last, final, well-nigh suicidal sally, or because most of the canoes were being paddled to a more vulnerable place along the causeway.

The wall still stood intact, no doubt because the captains feared another attack now that their great protectors had been all but wiped out. But the wait grew long, as though they were making sure. Then I wondered why

they did not order a re-forming of the lines into rank and their advance toward the third and last gap between them and the mainland.

Instead the men stood panting, with lowered weapons, waiting for their watch to be relieved. And then I wondered why the wall had been formed in this particular place on the causeway, and what was its need and reason. The first question rising in my mind was quickly answered, when I perceived that along here the banks were not as steep as further ahead and behind, and this made a good place for the canoes to draw in and discharge their Mexic soldiers. But this fact did not answer my second question since the natural instinct of an army in retreat is to hurry past an area of great danger, or not to perceive it at all until the attack begins.

There had been some special or great cause at work: something of utmost preciousness that must be guarded at any cost. Certainly it was not the chests of gold that the daredevils had taken from the backs of horses in order to become the outer defense of the human barricade, nor could it be the son and daughters of Montezuma. And then the shape I had noticed under the cloth, lying on its side, suddenly sat up; and I saw it was Doña Marina. And as suddenly the mystery was solved, a mystery at once simple and very great, and I knew the whole story. She had just passed the extremity of labor, and in her hands was the infant newly born, stained with its mother's blood, and with the cord leading from the expelled placenta still fast to its navel. And as I gazed in speechless wonder and awe, the mouth of the tiny face came wide open and sucked in air, and then gave forth a bawl.

"Cut the cord with your sword, Malinche, two-fingers' length from the button, and tie it to stop its bleeding," Marina told me.

I sprang to obey, and did the job despite the wild tumult in my heart and the soaring of my soul and the tears that filled my eyes. For I knew now why the men had stood so staunch and fought so savagely with such sublime heroism, and why the *Corps Perdu* had left all other battle to strengthen and defend the wall, their last battle to the death.

For unto these damned defiers of fate and death, and unto all the soldiers who had formed the wall, it was not an Aztec princess and Cortez' beloved giving birth to his babe who were in their charge. By some ineffable transfiguration these two had changed in this hour of miracle to the Blessed Mother and Child in eternal flight from the swords of Herod.

CHAPTER 14

And Not to Yield

1

Now it was time for us to march, because one more water gap lay between us and the mainland, the troubles awaiting us there still too distant for us to borrow. All of the advance guard that had survived the attacks from canoes, surely the great majority, had already crossed the gap, either by clinging to timbers of the wrecked bridge, or by swimming or deep wading. What had been our center, now mixed with detachments from our rear guard, were trying to cross, and portions of our center and our rear guard, now greatly reduced, were with me. For the moment, the enemy remained inactive, disorganized, and dispirited by his frightful losses, and balked of his design. But soon an able admiral of the yet great fleet of canoes would grasp the yet great peril of our situation, rally his followers, and order attack in the region of the third water gap, to destroy the remainder of our army still on this side, and the portion on the other side that had not yet gained the mainland.

The *Corps Perdu* had been decimated, only five that I could see able to march, but several horses I thought dead or dying stumbled to their feet at our prodding; and in all we had about twenty able to run or to bear loads. To Marina, Astores immediately offered his mount as well as his wounded arm to carry the baby, and she answered him gratefully and in full voice.

"The jolting ride would make me bleed the more, so I will walk, and carry my baby too, for I am an Aztec woman."

So on two horses we swiftly roped four chests of the Emperor's treasure, for this, too, was our sacred charge, for we remained his subjects to the last ditch, and we had fought for God and him and Spain, and yet must fight. On three yet sound horses and two that might or might not last a while, we put six comrades, three of these crossbowmen of whom we had great need, and the other three too gravely wounded to march, but not so critically we need despair of their lives. All this we managed in what seemed one moment, so swift my commands, and with such unflurried haste were these obeyed.

Soon we came on the water gap, but a great fleet of canoes was making toward it with paddles splashing and the wet blades flashing in the sun. Deep water filled the gap, and all who could swim had crossed, and Alvarado had found a shoal where the rest could wade hip-deep. It was not very wide, so our progress was necessarily slow. Alvarado remained on the causeway, directing the waders where to turn a little left or right, and when to make again for the embankment. Although a few had wandered into deep water and had floundered, they had been jerked back to safety by their companions. And the rear rank of our number were climbing up the bank when the fleet of canoes drew into arrow range.

Alvarado was still beyond the gap, a vivid figure in the sunlight, eying the wrecked bridge for a quick crossing. And now he was seen by some of the canoeists, and about a dozen of the craft began to make toward him at a furious pace, the warriors launching arrows and throwing stones. And then this ceased, for plainly the word was passed that he was trapped, and they would capture him alive for a sacrifice second in worth only to Malinche in the eyes of the Great Teules. Was he not Son of the Sun? Was it not he who had led the massacre at the Feast of Toxcatl?

To escape the arrows and the stones he had begun to climb over the ruined bridge, and now there was no time to wade out and around the deep water, and not nearly enough to pick his way across the jammed, submerged timbers. He saw the attackers now and perceived their horrible intentions, so why did he not dive into an open place and swim to the causeway? He did not, and suddenly I remembered that despite his prowess in almost every other physical feat, Alvarado could not swim.

The canoes were now close at hand, their pace incredibly swift because of the paddlers' frenzy for his capture, and some of the warriors were already standing up in the canoes in order to seize him by the feet, jerk him down, and have him in their grasp. Whether guided by a Forgiving God, or because of his terror of an awful doom, his eyes were caused to fall upon a long pole, once part of the railing of the bridge, that lay athwart the fallen timbers. He seized it and held it aloft, and then he leaped with all his might, with what was more than his natural might it truly seemed.

The forward end of the pole hit hard bottom, and his momentum was so great, and his hold upon it so strong, that he was carried up and forward as in the athletic feat that we called vaulting, and when the pole could carry him no further he appeared to fling himself forward. He struck at the ground at the very foot of the causeway, what was once its bridgehead, and immediately scrambled up. Running with all his might he overtook us, and

since we were running also, meanwhile looking back over our shoulders, we were now almost out of arrow range of the baffled Indians, and their few casts flew wide.

They were more than baffled; they were awed. Perhaps no single feat in the whole course of the war had impressed them as deeply; and although I did not foresee this outcome, or give a second thought just now to the almost miracle of his saving, his great leap could become a legend among the Aztec people, to be told and retold for generations to come. I did not know any Indian language except fragmentary Tabascan that Marina had taught me, but when these languages were dead, and Spanish was spoken throughout all the lands of Aztec, it might still be famed.[42]

And now all our remnants were united and presently off the causeway on solid ground. A force of Mexics disembarked from their canoes and pursued us, casting arrows and stones that did us no harm. Having no inclination to join battle, and eager for the gold we had dropped on the causeway, the band soon withdrew.

It might be the immensely vast treasure of gold and jewels with which we had strewn the road had bought our lives. Surely if the Aztecs pursued our straggling, wounded, broken army with the same zeal with which they had contested our escape, they could have overwhelmed us. In the suburb city of Popotla only a few stones were cast at us, and beyond its outskirts I dismounted my weary, bleeding horse and sat on the steps of a *cu* while the remainder of my once-proud army filed slowly by.

Great God, what losses we had suffered! Fully a third, perhaps nearly half of my Spaniards either were dead or prisoners of the Mexic. Of my native troops four thousand were dead or missing. Of the once-proud *Corps Perdu* I counted five, their able leader of unknown name and history not among them. If the wounded horses mended I would have twenty horsemen. My infantry stumbled along in profound fatigue, their armor shattered, their clothes drenched and torn. Our guns and baggage were all lost; and not a single banner fluttered over us in a last show of pride. Of the captains in whom I had put the most trust there remained Sandoval, for whose survival I thanked God, Alvarado, Ordas, Olid, Davila, and Xaramillo. By a lucky chance my master shipbuilder, Martin Lopez, had been spared. Without him I could never build brigantines for the lagoons and thus—but what was I thinking of, what idiotic fancy had flashed through my mind!

I rose wearily and led my troops into Tacuba, hardly daring to hope that there we would not be assailed. Yet either because of resentment against

Montezuma's taxgatherers, or because the most zealous of the population had heard the rumor of our lost treasure and were rushing to the causeways, listlessly the people watched us pass. Surely, though, some cacique or prince would soon rally them and mount an attack, so we withdrew at once into the country. In the afternoon we came in sight of an eminence, called the Hill of Montezuma, on the crest of which we might find some safety for the coming, perilous night.

A small force of Mexic soldiers held the summit, and I must cruelly spur my jaded soldiers to drive them off. It seemed they could scarcely climb the hill, much less fight; yet somehow they drank of a miraculous fountain, not yet dry, within their hearts and souls, for we gained the top. As chance had it, or as God so decreed, the soldiers loosed only a meager shower of arrows and flung a few stones. And here stood a cu, with some aspects of a fort, and in its courts we could eat the maize and hens we had bought in Tacuba, and then sleep.

I made my bed with Marina, her babe cuddled close to her breast, and despite her dreadful weariness and late ordeal, she spoke words of cheer, and most lovingly and tenderly kissed me ere we slept. And sleep I did, dismissing from my mind the perils that lay ahead, and especially the question whether the Tlaxcalan warriors would still be loyal to me or make war upon me. If I gave honest thought to it, my common sense would make me believe the worst. Literally thousands of their tribe had died beneath my banner.

I woke physically refreshed with a wearied, troubled mind. It was hard for me to believe that the somewhat battered but still enormous Mexic army would be satisfied with our retreat and not pursue terrible revenge. What saved us this was their own losses, far greater than ours, war weariness, and particularly the measures we and our Tlaxcalan guides took to increase our safety. We lighted hundreds of fires that at a distance indicated our night's camp, but after feeding them all, and snatching a little food, we would march on in the dark and make our camp some miles distant from the decoy, and there light not a single fire. Our guides led us a path as cunning as that of a fox fleeing from hounds. Some of the villages we touched were so remote and severed from the capital that they did not recognize us as the once masters of Mexic; and from these we bought a little food and cloth. Yet now and then as we passed under a mountain, stones were rolled down; and sometimes we were molested at close range by arrows and darts.

Our wounded horses mended sooner than the men; and indeed the strong men, either in flesh or spirit, were cruelly differentiated from the weak.

Some of the latter fell in the road and could not be made to rise. Others deserted, thinking they could fare better and be safer in the jungles or ravines than in the ranks of a doomed army.

Possibly a few survived, although the most were captured, sacrificed, and devoured. The wonder was, that what I called my army did not disintegrate entirely, for most villagers hid their food supplies at news of our approach, and we were in luck when we found a maize field in which a few ears still clung to the stalks.

On these, but mainly on dry stalks boiled for such nutriment as they contained, and on wild cherries, and on roots and such mushrooms as we durst eat, we made our weary, famished way. Thank God we Spanish were good starvers, as our legends told, and the Tlaxcatecs, too, had great endurance; and the fortitudes that we shared with them did not alienate them but bound them closer to us in a brotherhood of manliness. Doggedly together we fought dire adversity and resisted that borer-from-within, that undermining enemy, the evil spirit that was despair.

When a horse whose wounds I thought had well-nigh healed suddenly died, we made the eating of his flesh not merely a meal, but a kind of banquet in which the men sang old songs greatly beloved, and a few jokes were cracked. Dearer than this to my heart was the giving by several soldiers some morsels of meat to Marina, so that the milk in her breasts would not fail and the babe would thrive. These she accepted in great pride and joy, and it did the givers as much good thus to feed their hearts and souls, as would a little more food for their wasting bodies.

Amid all this privation I was given an inspiring sight. It occurred on the seventh morning of our march, including two days we had been forced to rest, and we had reached a rugged plateau overlooking the plains of Otumba. From there I could look down on two teocallis greater than any in the city, in size alone comparing well with the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt. Their particular inspiration lay in the fact that these had been raised before the Aztec conquest of the land, and the gods worshiped were not hideous idols but great disks representing the sun and the moon, the first so placed that its polished metal glimmered and glowed when to watchers from the ground the sun had not yet emerged above the horizon. How old is the race of man, and how wondrous his hands, and how deep his need and craving for something better than bitter human life on which to latch his hopes, and relate unto his spirit!

Perhaps the *Corps Perdu* had known this need and craving, but their souls had been too haughty to acknowledge it, and they had made a grim jest of their own lives, yet had died for an Indian woman in labor and her babe.

I wished they were with me now, instead of gone to a final Judgment I could not dream, for out of our sight lay the great city of Otumba, and on its nearby plain was gathering an enemy army to stop our march forever. So Marina's spies had confided to her, and open-eyed she told me of it, and that army we must somehow vanquish before we could gain Tlaxcala, our last and flickering hope of finding restoration of our strength.

---

[42] *Salto de Alvarado* is known to every studious visitor to Mexico City.

2

Although a week old now, Marina's and my baby had not yet been christened. My brain had urged the necessity of the ceremony without delay, because of the danger of sudden death. But this was my first-born out of the woman I loved, and I wanted both of us to be satisfied with its name, and particularly for the bearer to be satisfied as an urchin, as an adolescent, and as a young man, and as an old man if God should grant he should live that long. In the first three of those ages, urchinhood, adolescence, and youth, the individual was most conscious of his given name and most likely to yearn for some other; and although this was especially true of females, almost without exception one might say, it was true of a great many males, although they were less given to open complaint.

Frey Olmedo made a great to-do about hurrying the matter, reciting the awful risks we were taking with the baby's soul by our delay, and I appeared to agree with him heartily. The real truth was I did not give a fig for the doctrine of Infant Damnation, which was the Church's maintenance of the barbarous idea that an innocent babe was doomed to hell fire unless holy drops were sprinkled on his head, and a Christian name bestowed upon him, before some evil stroke of fortune carried him off. In all truth, Olmedo looked a little shamefaced, and, indeed, not straight into my eyes, when he talked this balderdash. Finally, Marina shut us both up by her womanliness and her common sense, in complete refutation of our superstitious hypocrisy.

"I certainly will not consent to him being given some name unworthy of his history until now, his begetting by Malinche, his acceptancy by the womb of Tzin Malintzin, his long rough journey in his carriage, up mountain and down dale, his reaching a good weight unmarked, and his emergence amid the thunder of battle." Then her eyes filled with tears, and she was thinking of how many heroes had died who might have lived except for the mystery and the dedication of their guard of her and him; but of this she did not speak, nothing she could say could begin to reach adequacy, and instead she checked her tears by her own anger with the silly notion Olmedo and I had discussed.

"As for him being damned forever, tortured forever, because death took him before a ceremony of words out of men's mouths, and the sprinkling of water blessed by men of the priesthood, I would not shame God by repeating such a calumny and lie against Him. If He were capable of such an act I would quit Him this instant, and never again raise to Him my voice in prayer; and if He had once pronounced such a wicked thing, and by an old man's stubbornness stuck by it, do you think His Son, and the sweet Woman who bore that Son, would let him practice it? By Heaven, they would not! They would quit Him, and build a new Heaven, and hurl Him down into the Hell He had Himself made, or so is told of Him, although I do not believe that, either, of any God so great that He could make the life-giving sun and the beauteous moon and the Pleiades overhead that Hernan showed me, or the North Star by which people can find their way in the wilderness of land or sea, or an old shepherd tending sheep of which also Hernan told me, and most beautiful and wonderful of all, a mother with her babe nursing at her breast."

And then Marina gazed down at the snuffing and snorting little pig with an expression in her face so beautiful that the high powers of Raphael, one of whose paintings I had seen, and who was still alive when Narvaez left Cuba, would be taxed to capture on canvas.

"Marina," I told her as sternly as possible at the time—a somewhat feeble effort, I must confess—"you speak blasphemy!"

"The sky did not fall. The earth did not shake. No lightning bolt struck me dead. Olmedo, did I speak blasphemy?"

"Marina, your question is as difficult as that with which my predecessors in my Holy Order used to tax their brains some centuries ago, the question being how many angels could sit on the point of a pin? As a friar, I must say you spoke monstrous blasphemy. As a shepherd, and believing infant

baptism a good thing, I might venture the guess that if this infant died before being christened, he would most certainly not go down to hell but perhaps his rank among the angels might be somewhat reduced, and he would have to do a deal more of singing, praising, and harp playing before he was given a crown of the same fineness of gold and adornments of jewels as worn by other angels. Perhaps even his wings might be somewhat inferior to the run and ruck, and he could not fly either as far or as fast. But as for the sinful, naked man under my cloth and cowl, I would say that whether this mere infant had been christened before Death snatched him, would not make a shadow's difference in his destiny; but pray you, do not tell anyone I said so, and particularly not such clergy as worship the form with no thought of the substance, for I would be booted forth from my Order as a heretic."

"Marina," I broke in, "let's name him Martin."

"For your father. Oh, I would love to honor both of them in that way."

"And at the same time I would express my reverence for St. Martin of Tours, and perhaps he would not take it amiss, because in a sense I have followed in his footsteps. Soon after baptism, he became an exorcist of devils, which in my own rough way I have been in Mexico, and later he was a mighty enemy of idolatry. But he was at his greatest at age seventy, when he pled for the lives of some heretics condemned to death. His plea was not granted, but ever afterward he refused churchly fellowship with those bishops who had acquiesced in the execution. He must have been a man of lone and mighty will."

"Malinche, it is a great name for one I feel certain will be a great man," Frey Olmedo told me in a glowing voice.

"And by your leave, father my brother, and by yours, Marina, he shall be addressed as Don Martin. True, he is not a don by royal proclamation, but the son of a princess and, at the time of his conception, of the conqueror of the warlike, heathen Tabascans."

"I shall never address him otherwise, until he is given a higher title," Olmedo promised.[43]

So when he rang the bell for vespers, the infant was baptized in water from a pure mountain spring, which the priest had previously asked God to bless. He squalled in angry protest against the cold drops sprinkled on his fuzzy head, but the troops were pleased with the whole ceremony, which indeed went well. And it provided a little break in their fearsome thoughts of tomorrow, and perhaps raised their hopes a little that we might win what

threatened to be the most unequal battle we had ever fought, and fully as crucial as the Battle of the Water Gaps. Perhaps they thought that God would not permit our wiping-out, which would include a babe so new under the sun; for we were bound in an unspoken, implacable resolve that not one of us would be taken prisoner, man, woman, or child.

The next morning we gathered together every scrap of food in camp, for it was no use to hoard a single maize cake. If we won, we would find plenty in the enemy larders, and if we lost, not one of our tongues would ever again taste food. It had happened that at dawn two of my best crossbowmen had stolen into a mountain meadow where deer fed, and had shot a roe and hind, and had retrieved both precious arrows as well. So with the dreary rest we could rake and scrape, every soldier and burden bearer and companion had a not-filling but adequate breakfast. For we had bivouacked just below a crest, overlooking the Valley of Otumba, and there encamped the army blocking our way to Tlaxcala, and the greatest single army we had ever faced. In the light of the waning moon I had climbed to the lookout and seen their cooking fires that had seemed to fill the whole vale, and which appeared as innumerable as the stars of heaven.

Immediately after breakfast we left every article of gear not vitally needed in battle, for if we won, it could be reclaimed, and if we were defeated, we were done with it. And then I marched our entire company to the crest to let every man and woman behold what confronted us.

Cuitlahuac, the new Uei Tlatoani, had sent forth messengers to his caciques throughout the Seven Kingdoms, and each was told to send the largest possible levies of warriors to assemble in battle gear on the Otumban plain. The men in the ranks wore thickly quilted cotton in lieu of armor, and their numbers were so vast that the whole valley seemed mantled in snow. Each king or cacique had raised his banner, and the largest force we identified as Tetzcucans; and I dared not let myself believe that it was less than fifty thousand strong. Chiefs wore brilliant feather cloth over their mail; and although the archers and slingers vastly outnumbered our total force, still these were a minor contingent of the enemy army. Mainly it was composed of spearmen and swordsmen, proof of the tactics the enemy generals had chosen, which were not to attack us from a distance but crush us within their mass.

Some of my men were sick, and all were half-starved, and the majority had festered wounds. We had not a single cannon or gun, and only a few crossbowmen. My little, lonely consolation, apart from that of the tried prowess and proud spirit of my army, was that our twenty horses were in

good fettle, having rested and fed plentifully on the rich, mountain grass, and each of these was mounted by an expert rider and deadly lancer. And now I addressed my troops, as always before battle, reminding them of how again and again we had been cruelly outnumbered yet under God and our Lord Jesus, aided by Santa Maria and warlike St. James and the prayers of Christians throughout the earth, our little army had prevailed. Also I reminded them that we could not choose but fight, that this valley was not only the shortest road to Tlaxcala but the only road; that any circuitous route would mean we would not win or die together, but in little hopeless bands or all alone, as we were ambushed in every copse and ravine, and from around every corner of our path, and from behind every rock. Today we had no choice; our minds were not amenable to change; our fate was glorious victory or heroic death.

Then I gave my orders for a broad front, our cavalry on its flanks. My lancers must strike at the faces of their foes, so the weapons would never be lowered or their next thrusts delayed by the points stuck deep in bodies. And the swordsmen must only stab, not slash, for slashing demanded a backward movement of the arm, and hence brief exposure to the two-handed hacking swords of the enemy: And above all we must not become separated from one another but fight in a solid body.

Then with calm faces and brave step we began our descent to the plain. The enemy rushed to meet us with ear-blasting sound, war cries, and frenzied yells, and the blowing of shell trumpets, and the beat of a thousand drums. Ahead of them sung their arrows in darting flight, and the air seemed black with flung stones, but this was the prelude of the battle which was almost instantly joined. And at first it seemed to go well, too well in fact, for the foemen reeled aside from the rush of our horses, and were jammed together by the onward pressing of their own vast numbers in the rear. And my infantry poured into the swaths cut by the cavalry, and the whole horde of the enemy gave a little ground.

But this we could not hold because of the sheer multitude of the foe, enabling him to envelop our force—puny in comparison. We could not stop them from surrounding us, and the image that flashed to many a soldier's mind was of an island not amid a great gale, but assaulted by it from all directions at once, and the seas breaking on all sides in roaring fury.

Even so we made stout defense, spear points and sword blades thrusting, our stout shields fending; and ever when it seemed we were to be washed down, another cavalry charge, cleaving the enemy front, would give us brief respite. And every man had the strength of ten and Sandoval rode like the

Avenger of the Lord, superhuman it seemed; his quick eyes instantly discerning where he was most needed, as when a portion of our lines began to crumble, then he darted swift as a falcon on a flock of waterfowl.

But time was against us, for we could expect no help except from God, and God would move only through our spirits, to give us supreme and utter bravery and supernatural hardihood and prowess. On the other hand, every man who fell was an appreciable loss to our force. We could not spare one from our little lines, still one and one continued to fall, while the hundreds of the foe that we slew were not even missed, their places being so immediately filled. Only a madman would have led an army no larger than mine against a host of this magnitude, it would mean that both time and tide was against him, but I had had no choice but go mad. Still I was sane enough to know that the desperate and last resort was failing, and except for an opening or turn of fate amounting to miracle, we were descending to defeat and death.

---

[43] Don Martin married into a great ducal family in Spain.

3

At last I caught sight of a shining thing deep in the ranks of the enemy. I could not have seen it save it was on slightly higher ground than that occupied by the nearer enemy swarm, and I kept glancing back between thrusts of my spear, to make sure of its identity.

It was too far out of our reach . . . we could not break through to gain it . . . such a deed was humanly impossible . . . the cavalry charge would leave the square undefended . . . it was a prize dangled before our eyes, the devil knowing we could not seize it. . . . So sped my thoughts until suddenly they were dammed up by a rock of knowledge, of inspired awareness, which was that we must reach it, or at least make the manly attempt. A noble attempt I might think but I did not, because for it to be manly, in the true, deep sense of manliness, was all the nobility that God need grant.

What I saw was the commander in chief of the whole heathen army. At least this was indicated by his equipage, a litter in which he rode carried shoulder high by young nobles in gorgeous dress. He wore a robe of bright-green feather cloth, and his high headdress was of multicolored plumes set in a coronet of gold blazing with precious jewels. From the middle of his back, set in some sort of chest band, rose a short staff to which was attached

a net of gold, this being the insignia of lofty office in all Seven Kingdoms, its richness in accordance with the wearer's rank. Even ambassadors from one subject king to another carried nets of gold and silver wire containing maize and snuff symbolizing supplies for a journey.

"There is our mark!" I called to the mounted captains in reach of my voice above the uproar. "Follow and support me!"

Then, shouting my war cry of "St. James!" I spurred my brave but wearied beast into the thick of the foe.

Behind me instantly rushed four of my cavaliers, the elite of my army for charges such as this, one of them Sandoval, for whose presence I thanked God; and with him Alvarado, Olid, and Davila, deadly lancers every one, impetuous and fearless chargers. At my side rode young Juan Salamanca, whose hands and heels and voice could force more speed out of a horse than those of any other cavalier. So swift was their rush that they seemed to be swept up by a great gale of wind and the thunder of their hoofs on the sunbaked plain was wondrous martial music in my ears.

The enemy rank at which I dived was taken by surprise and cleft, and I lanced their captain, and through the gap drove my followers, and nothing less than the arresting hand of God could stop us now. I rode not Del Mar the Second, my usual mount in battle, for he had been badly wounded in a close press where I had taken two severe head wounds, and I had taken the horse of another cavalry man, reeling in his saddle from a spear thrust in the body. This beast was not quite as swift as Del Mar, but strong with good wind, and as we neared the end of the lane we must cut through, Salamanca's horse flashed past me and beat me to the target. But I think he would have beaten any charger I might ride, so great was his horsemanship.

Half out of his saddle, Salamanca aimed a mighty slash, and did not miss, and it could not miss in this supreme moment of the battle and the greatest moment in his life. The great chieftain's skull was cloven half in two, and off fell his headdress, and out of his stirrup fell Salamanca to snatch it up and chivalrously hand it to me. And then a great wail rose from the enemy near by, and confused cries, and this sound spread like a cloud of doom over the enemy host, and the noise of battle began to die away. Not even the Royal Guard had resisted our assault and had no heart to seek revenge and instead drew back in utter confusion and dismay.

And then Sandoval cried out what would have made no sense to a recruit from Narvaez' army who might be in hearing.

"*This is the Serpent Woman!*" he shouted, when he had observed the insignia of the dead lord. But good sense it made to us veterans, and it was wondrous news in our ears, for in that office he had stood next to Montezuma in priestly power, and next to his successor; and as such was in supreme command of armies, and his person was held most sacred, a living Aegeus of the host, and his fall an irredeemable calamity. And from our band of god killers the soldiers about him fled, and throughout the field the foemen were fleeing from every Spaniard in their sight, and thus the retreat turned into a ruinous rout.

In their frantic haste they knocked down and trampled one another, not even glancing back to see if they were pursued. Truly, we chased all the crowd from the broken ranks that our paltry number could, as a pack of wolves in northern Spain in winter chase a great flock of sheep. And we killed as wolves kill sheep, with one slash of our steel fangs; and there were forty times more quarry than there were hunters; and every man could kill his fill despite the ferocity of his appetite. And now we were not fighting a battle but taking vengeance for all comrades we had lost since the mutiny began; and every spear or sword thrust added to the silent host upon the bloodied ground.

On and on we chased and slew, twenty of their deaths for every one of ours being the minimum we would count tolerable; and a Spanish soldier need have only a fleet and passing memory of some friend or rank fellow among our slain to have restored his fatal fury. His own exhaustion mattered not, or somehow passed away, as he recommenced his count of dead, and renewed his work with utter zeal. It was no mere ten thousand foemen thickly strewn throughout the valley when the flying enemy began to mount the crags that we had no strength to climb, but fully twenty thousand. A full hour we had given to the massacre ere the men remembered one of the goals of their journey to these distant shores, which goal was loot.

So we returned to the field, and from the dead chieftains and captains we took the most precious treasures, some of them so prized by their late owners that their poor ghosts must have wept even as they sped to their destinations—not silver or small jewels, but only gold and great jewels, necklaces, earrings, medallions, pendants, charms, and talismans. But finally I sped orders that all rejoin their banners and proceed to the enemy commissaries. And there they marched with flushed faces, speaking in loud and half-hysterical voices. Vast stores of food were heaped on crude sledges, formed by nailing crosspieces to two slender saplings stripped of their boughs, their trunks being the handles and the limber tops the runners. And

there every man ate his fill of prepared food, and took a cluster of hens bound together by the feet, or ducks, or haunches of venison provided for captains and chiefs, and baskets of curious design and decoration filled with ground maize for tonight's supper, as well as stores of tobacco for our comfort.

After supper we held vesper service, then rested a short space until the moon topped the mountains, then we could begin the sad and solemn task of burying our dead. We had already treated wounds in that gruesome fashion we had practiced before.

And although this great defeat had by no means broken the Mexic power, we had dealt it a dire wound, and once more we had won the name of teules invincible. Many a boastful chief in the Seven Kingdoms would be summoned from his pleasures, or wakened from his sleep, to listen, pale of face, and trying without success to disbelieve the evil news that runner after runner panted forth. And the lights would burn late in council chambers of the very great, and quarrels and recriminations would break forth amid their mutterings, and the priests in the *cues* and teocallis would look askance at one another, and perhaps cast eyes of doubt upon the gods they served, or behold in them signs of wrath or even fright; and when and where would these now receive their promised due of burning human hearts cut from Spanish bosoms?

And suddenly I had higher hopes of a warm welcome by the Tlaxcatecs, regardless of their awful losses under my banner. And with these, what had been the merest wisp of a dream in my own heart that I had felt a fool to harbor began to take solid shape.

4

Of the events of the next few weeks, within this chronicle I must make short shrift. My left hand, having lost two fingers, was useless although slowly healing; my two head wounds I had taken at the great battle of Otumba became worse and finally laid me helpless in bed. Our reception in Tlaxcala was not as warm as I could wish, yet better than I had just right to hope. We were well supplied with food; we were cheered whenever we marched in the streets; our sick and wounded were kindly nursed. But there were thousands of women and children and old folk whose husbands or fathers or sons had marched away with me and had not marched home.

The blind old King Xicotencatl remained my utterly faithful ally. But Xicotencatl the Younger could not forget that with my little army I had

defeated the great army under him, and his failure rankled yet, and when lo, he had heard news that I had been crushed in Mexic and the remnants of my force were in flight and about to be caught and sacrificed, and he had been torn between malicious pleasure and a certain shame that the Mexics had succeeded where he had failed, lo he had news of that remnants' escape and then of its incredible victory over the mighty host of the Serpent Woman. Certainly the Tlaxcatecs were not now ready to follow me on a great campaign of reconquest.

In this they were joined by almost all of my soldiers who had sailed with Narvaez. They had acquired great riches at our palace-fort, these they had lost in the Battle of the Water Gaps and had lost there also a good half their number, and now that a fluke of fortune had permitted our victory at Otumba and they had refilled but not bulged their purses there, they did not want to trust fortune again, or engage in any more battles of such magnitude, and instead they wanted to go home.

Daily they implored me to march at least to Vera Cruz, where the army could be strengthened for such campaigns as must be waged, and, indeed, they drew up a petition to that effect, signed by almost all of their contingent and a few of my old veterans who also yearned for their farms and families across the sea. But well I knew that if once they gained the coast and saw the ships I had seized from Narvaez, their homesickness would lead to mutiny, and I could not stop them from going home, and my great dream would remain unrealized, and Mexic remain unconquered.

At this point He Who Speaks in Mexic sent ambassadors to Tlaxcala, and the heads of the four tribes, including the old king, joined by his surly son Xicotencatl the Younger, met with these envoys in solemn council. But among them sat a minor cacique who was Doña Marina's spy, and we knew the outcome of the argument in less than an hour after its conclusion.

The Mexic ambassadors offered a treaty to be signed by the Tlaxcalan chieftains, wherein was promised no more oppression from Mexic, no more haughty taxgatherers, no more treating their kingdoms as stud farms for breeding human sacrifices, and the right to grow cocoa, buy salt, and import cotton. All that was asked in return for these favors was to accept as comrades in arms a great army of Mexics, and with their combined armies kill every Spaniard who could not be captured and sacrificed to the Great Teules. Moreover, the advocates of the treaty made strong speeches in its behalf, that the Aztecs should never fight Aztecs, and instead fight the alien who would rule them, take their treasure, alienate their gods, desecrate their

temples, and raise their two crossed boards in the teocallis along with images of a woman and a baby.

The old king's son favored the new treaty, and wished it signed there and then. But the old king himself spoke against it, and although his blind eyes could flash no more, his voice was yet manly and strong and his words were of fire. He asked why the Mexics would now wish peace with them, after so many decades or centuries of oppressing them? Could the answer be the coming of the Spaniards? And who had dealt fairly with them from first to last, the Mexics or the alien pale-faces? And when Xicotencatl sought to interrupt the aged king's address, and laid hands on him, that fierce old man seized him in his lean old hands, and hurled him down some steps, and would have slain him save for the intervention of other chiefs. And then and there young Xicotencatl saw the light, and made no remonstration when the Mexic ambassadors were told to return to their master, and tell him that Tlaxcala would not sign the treaty, would never sign, and never break troth with Malinche and his Spaniards.

A greater difficulty was persuading my recruits from Narvaez' army to undertake with zeal further campaigns. To accomplish this, I took advantage of the cleavage, sometimes jealousy and resentment, between them and my veteran troops. The latter had returned from the Mexic war with no more loot than the former, a fact they could not forget, and little love was lost between them. However, I did not want any of the Narvaez party who still pined to serve under him instead of under me; and in their place I meant to enlist great forces of Indians, whose bravery and prowess in battle I knew so well.

The sentiment of the Indians, as far as Marina could learn from her spies, was that those states close to the capital were sworn allies with Mexic, while outlying states that had for centuries lain under the Mexic heel, heavily taxed, reservoirs of slaves and victims of sacrifice, paid their tribute and did lip service to Montezuma's successor but in their hearts were hoping that the Spanish power might rise again. The fact that a Spanish force as large as that with which I had first landed on New World soil had been able to escape from the trap into which we had walked, despite our frightful losses in veterans, recruits, and Indian allies, seemed almost a miracle, which in a sense it truly was. Since then our remnants had fought our way to Otumba and there won a critical, spectacular, all but incredible victory against a levied army outnumbering us one clean hundred to one. The kings and caciques throughout the Aztec country could not yet dismiss us from their reckoning.

On the other hand we could not dismiss the plain and hard fact that Cuitlahuac, the new Mexic emperor, was a strong ruler and a great soldier in whose heart was lodged hate of all things Spanish. That numerous Spanish had been sacrificed at his coronation we could not doubt. As we were resting, licking our wounds and making our first overtures to vacillating chieftains, he was strengthening the defenses of the capital, trying to remedy its every military weakness, and plotting our destruction.

But I did not cease to plot his destruction and the taking of a terrible vengeance for every Spaniard murdered. Months must pass, bringing the best possible fortunes, before I could deal him a direct blow, but in the interim I could exercise my troops in a campaign in which they could take loot and shore up their own sagging spirits and teach Cuitlahuac, and the Mexics and all kings and caciques who groveled to him, what Spanish vengeance meant.

At once I thought of the Tepeacans dwelling north of Chalco and so near the Tlaxcatecs that the two tribes were constantly at war. They had once sworn allegiance to me, but the treacherous dogs had deserted me when my tide was at low ebb and slaughtered and sacrificed my embassy of twelve Spaniards. So I sent word to them that I would not punish them for evil deeds done in the hate of war if they would make immediate submission; but if they did not, woe would be unto them.

Ruling a strong and populous state, with a well-trained army, the king sent a scornful answer, inviting my Spaniards and me to meet him in battle, for his supply of prisoners was low just now, and he needed more for sacrifice to their gods. The arrogant reply I had repeated to my troops, and one at a time I called the names of the twelve Spaniards, and every one was remembered by at least some few of my force, who yelled in rage, and some were remembered by a great number, and a mighty shout of fury rose. No homesick latecomer, whoring in his mind after Narvaez, dared protest, and after my quiet remark that all deserters would be pursued, caught, and hanged, the men moved briskly to their ranks and, with backs straight and heads up, began the march.

Reinforcing my company of about four hundred Spanish, marched two thousand Tlaxcalan warriors in full battle dress of white armor, plumed bucklers, under the banner of the White Heron, and led, of all people, by Xicotencatl the Younger, quite oblivious, as he thought I was, of the fact of him favoring, only a few weeks ago, a pact with Cuitlahuac, whereby all Spaniards were to be murdered and their hearts burned to the Great Teules. Being shoved down the steps by his own blind sire had been good for him;

and over and above that, I reckoned that his astrologers had decided there was no stopping Malinche, and they had made a slight mistake in reading the horoscope of the prince, and he was fated to be my valiant follower and captain. I did not think he would change his coat on the field of battle although Doña Marina was by no means convinced. Certainly he was a formidable warrior who inspired other warriors.

We met the Tepeacans in an immense field of maize now in full height and greenery, and we could not see as far and as well as we would like; still we drove them with great slaughter from the field. In a few days we cornered them in a narrow valley, and there we drove them into a ravine, where they had the choice of death or surrender. They chose the second, knowing well that their main chastisement for mutiny and the murder of my envoys was still in store. This I administered when we had marched into the capital of Tepeaca. Every man and woman of the large town was branded by a red-hot iron, and they and their children put into slavery. One fifth of their number I reserved for the Emperor, and divided the rest between the Tlaxcalan warriors and my own.

Though many slaves had been seized or captured on the Spanish islands and sold into slavery, this was the first instance on the mainland. I had two good reasons for the act, one as reprisal for their mutiny and murders, and the other was to impress the kings and caciques under Cuitlahuac what would be the price of their raising their banners against us. My third reason was not so meritorious—that we had lost so much more treasure than we had gained at Otumba that our coffers were low, and we needed the gold ducats that these chattels would bring in Spain. But I determined that my men should not sell them to other Indian tribes to use for sacrifice.

While I was at Tepeaca I had good tidings from Vera Cruz. These were sent by the commander of the garrison I had left there, and reassured me of the town's well-being, and of the cordial relations of the dwellers there with surrounding tribes. I also received embassies from the large town we called Huacachula,[44] its real name such a jumble of consonants that it was all but unpronounceable by the Spanish tongue. And this matter of consonants caused me to remember Marie de Estrada's remarks on the subject, and to contemplate her fortunes.

Just before we marched she had been carrying on a flirtation with Pero Farfan, the latter-day Cincinnatus who had left his estates near Vera Cruz to join our force. I presumed she was still at it, since he had not joined the present expedition, having remained at Tlaxcala to recuperate from fever. At the same time she had flirted with one of the five survivors of the *Corps*

Perdu, and the son of a great marquis who had renounced his heritage. Since she was herself nobly born, on the wrong side of the blanket, I thought this second flirtation was understandable in an ambitious young woman, for Astores' *lèse-majesté* against Ferdinand might readily be forgiven by the succeeding Emperor, and himself come to favor and riches. But not even Doña Marina could surmise, or at least she so pretended, what Marie wanted of Farfan, whose estates were not large and of more interest to an antiquary than to an adventuress, for they included the ruined foundation of an ancient teocalli. At present Astores was marching with us, doing his duty, but still mourning his lost companions of the Devil's Corps. So presumably Farfan had an open field.

The word brought by the messenger from the cacique of Huacachula gladdened my heart. It was no less than an appeal for help against the Mexic garrison of some thousand warriors that the new emperor had quartered there. The city was in a strategic position, at the end of a valley below high mountains and flanked by two rivers, and its only approach was guarded by a thick wall twenty feet in height.

I, having taken command of the expedition, a comfort to the Cholulans under the Mexic heel, caused a strong force of these excellent warriors to join my banner. The cacique arranged with me to have the population rise against the Mexic garrison on the day that my forces would arrive. Their barricades were stormed, their positions overwhelmed, and again to punish break of troth and to avenge our heroic dead and to cause unpleasant forebodings throughout Mexic, every member of the Mexic garrison was put to the sword.

I had learned by now the fighting prowess of the Aztec, and also knew he would keep troth clean through the doors of death once the battle was joined, although he must be kept up to the mark in peace-time, or his allegiance was likely to stray. In battle his tactics were simple but effective and he knew what many captains fail to learn, how to obey orders without an instant's hesitation. A number of other cities sent envoys, inviting me to meet with their chiefs, which I did, and I obtained their allegiance. Thereafter they would often summon me as the arbiter in intertribal disputes, or as the giver of final judgment as to succession when a king or great chieftain died.

My plans encompassed a large army requiring abundant supplies. Thus I needed ships to transport these and especially to destroy the innumerable canoes on the lagoons. The altitude of these lagoons was some thousands of feet above sea level. There were no rivers up which they might be hauled.

When there is obviously only one answer to a problem, the solver can get at it with undivided attention, and the answer here was building collapsible boats, the various portions of which could be carried by gangs of slaves up and over the mountains to the shores of the lagoons. I thanked God again that Martin Lopez, the master shipbuilder, had been saved from the Battle of the Bridges; and he neither hemmed nor hawed when I told him what must be done. Sails, ironwork, and rigging that I had taken from my ships and stored at Vera Cruz were now brought to our headquarters and the work began.

---

[44] Cuauhquechollau.

5

At this time raged the plague of smallpox, wreaking havoc horrible and indescribable. Most of my Spaniards had suffered it in childhood and thus obtained immunity, and we taught a great many Indians how to treat it, but the methods distant Indians employed were more likely to kill than cure; and the entreaties to the Great Teules and the spells and charms of the magicians were strangely ineffective in arresting the plague. None less than Cuitlahuac became its victim, which fatality I was not enough of a hypocrite to mourn; but I did mourn the death of old King Maxixca, ever our true friend. Believing in me, he had come to believe in my religion; so it came to pass that he was given extreme unction and kissed the Cross with his pale and dying lips.

Meanwhile there was more good news from Vera Cruz. Who had put in there with three ships but Pedro Barba, Narvaez' agent in Habana? My governor there met him in his cabin, and when Barba asked how I fared, he was told that I had fled into the interior with twenty followers! Barba then dared come to shore, where he and his captains were instantly seized and ironed; and I reckoned that he repented the return of his allegiance to Velazquez, after his insubordination in helping me to sail from Havana against his master's orders. It turned out that he carried orders from Bishop Fonseca to arrest me and bring me to Spain for trial, but somehow the fetters had been put on the wrong feet. This small trouble to which my alcalde went was well repaid by a horse, a mare, a small brass cannon, a small supply of gunpowder, and thirteen soldiers who, along with their captains, gladly joined my force.

In Velazquez' zeal to hear good news of Narvaez' victory, especially that I had resisted arrest and had been hanged, he rashly sent another vessel, which met the same fate as the first. It brought me eight soldiers, a mare, six crossbows, and a large quantity of dearly needed ropes. Then came three ships sent by Garay, looking for the once-haughty Captain Pinedo. But the search was quite useless, Pinedo having been lost at sea, and his soldiers and supplies were of use to me. One ship had sixty soldiers, green and pot-bellied from some sort of scurvy. Another had fifty soldiers, thirty-seven horses, guns, and numerous crossbows. The third had forty men, all clad in thick padded cotton, light armor indeed but wonderfully effective in stopping Indian arrows before they reached the skin. My soldiers immediately named the three contingents "green potbellies," "hefty backs," and "donkey saddles," this last referring to the cotton padding. It caused me to wonder how soon I would ride a donkey behind the Emperor through the streets of Seville.

And now I made bold to write a letter to His Imperial Majesty suggesting that the Aztec country be named New Spain of the Ocean Sea.[45] My argument was that it was large as all Spain, much of it was cold as the mountainous regions of Spain, and of equal if not greater population. How the Emperor took to my suggestion I would not know until I returned from Mexic, or never know if I failed to return, and in one case I thought the name would be adopted, and in the other it would be lost in his many files.

One of my captured ships I sent to Jamaica for a load of horses. The necessary gold was some hidden by fugitives from the Battle of the Bridges, two thirds of which the hoarders had been forced to disinter, being permitted to keep one third provided they had told the truth as to the size of their hoards, but if they lied they must surrender all. This action gave them a capital interest in the coming emprise and increased zeal for its success. Actually our official treasury had been already enriched by spoil obtained in the late successful battle.

During these grim preparations we held one pleasant ceremony, although its preparations were somewhat grisly. The occasion was the conferring on old Maxixca's younger son—his elder had been killed in battle—a Spanish knighthood in Indian style. It began with the sacrifice of a Mexic prisoner at the place of the ceremony, but a skilled priest did it tidily, and no doubt he lived happily ever after in the Sun. This younger son, about twelve, on whom I conferred the succession, stood in a ring of Tlaxcalan chiefs and the victim's heart had been thrown at him. He did not turn a hair when it struck him, nor when he was soundly slapped in the face by the priest's bloody

hand. When properly baptized, I gave him Spanish armor and the title Don Lorenzo. In a sense it was another meeting of East with West.

At the death of Cuitlahuac, Montezuma's younger son, whom we called Guatemuza, was elected Uei Tlatoani, whereupon he married his predecessor's widow, her previous marriage never having been consummated because of her tender years; and on the same day he killed his imbecile younger brother. Beginning his reign with such vigorous action was a bad sign, not mitigated by reports that he was fully as aggressive as his predecessor and making every preparation for the defense of his capital.

The summation of my own preparations was a force of forty Spanish horsemen, five hundred and fifty infantry including eighty crossbowmen and musketeers, and a powerful army of Tlaxcatecs well drilled for war by two of my captains. Half of these would follow in my train, the rest guard the disassembled brigantines to be lugged overland to the lagoons. On December twenty-sixth we held parade; on the twenty-eighth we set out for Tetzcuco, the well-chosen base for my ships. The first night we camped eastward of the great ridge, and the next day climbed the ridge. After a bitter night in the wintry wind off the snows, we had the choice of three roads for our descent, and as usual I took the worst. And it came to pass I all but rued my choice, for it was terribly steep over slippery rock and amid felled trees. But my enemy Guatemuza, as the soldiers called the new emperor, had not really expected us to take this frightening route, because he had made little military preparations to defend it. This underestimation of our determination might well lose him the war; because if he had attacked us in full force on this steep mountainside I could scarcely imagine other than our complete destruction.

The men made merry at sight of the great lagoon instead of weeping in remembrance. This persuaded me they were wonderfully high of heart, which did me more good than would the addition of an extra thousand Indian troops.

That night we camped twelve miles from Tetzcuco, our intended base, and on the morning's march we were met with an embassy from the king, unarmed and carrying a golden banner. They wanted peace, they told us, and we had half-swallowed this when we gained the city, to find all its women and children sent into hiding. Then we concluded his offer had been a time-winning device, whereby he could send his treasure and a store of weapons to the Mexics.

Then we marched on Iztapalapa, meeting with stern resistance, and in that hot fight it was only by chance that I saw some men digging frantically at the dike between the two lagoons. Barely was I in time to retreat; even so some of our troops were drowned in the wild rush of water. So enraged were my men by the setting of this deadly trap that they began to slaughter every man, woman, and child they could get hand on, to the number of six thousand; and somehow I could not make heard my shouted orders to grant mercy.

Thus began the Second War of Mexic, for I counted the bloody battle of Otumba an attempt to arrest our flight from the first war, and thus prevent a second. Remembering that slaughter, the Otumban chiefs came to pledge allegiance, which pledge I believed they would keep. The next important move was to conquer Chalco, on the best road into the capital. For this I sent Sandoval with a strong force, and he was met by a strong force the crushing and dispersal of which taxed all the military prowess of this brilliant man as well as the pugnacity and endurance of his followers. The consequences of this victory were far reaching, for many a hesitant tribe decided to take our side.

At Tetzcuco I visited the teocalli, and the first sight to meet my eyes were five horses magnificently stuffed by skilled Mexic taxidermists. Only their feet and iron shoes were visibly missing, and of course their hearts had been burned in braziers before the Great Teules. These had been strong hearts, for I was able to recognize three of the beasts on which the Devil Riders had guarded Marina and her babe on her night of travail. The domestication of wild horses was surely one of the major triumphs in human history. The sight of a horseback rider is always an impressive sight, that of a man master of a beast from seven to ten times his weight. It was no wonder that in leading European nations the word for the noble and the well-born was tantamount to a horseman, whether *caballero*, chevalier, or cavalier.

At Zultepec, Sandoval saw a sight even more memorable and far more horrid. It was the tanned faces, wearing beards, of two Spaniards on display in the *cu*. He thanked God that he did not recognize either one.

With what joy Sandoval met the great force bringing piecemeal from Tlaxcala the thirteen brigantines to be reassembled at Tetzcuco. All the parts had been numbered and classified under the direction of the great shipwright Martin Lopez, and were being borne by eight thousand porters! Ten thousand soldiers, mainly Tlaxcatecs, formed the advance guard, and the same number the rear.

When they reached Tetzcuco, the mighty burden had been transported fifty miles through rough and mountainous country. No feat of my lifetime had given me such quiet, solemn exultation. I took thought of Hannibal's crossing the Alps and of the building and conveyance by the Greeks of the Trojan Horse. If I had beached my fleet without taking compasses, sails, helms, and other gear, the operation would have been impossible, and my dream of recapturing Mexic would have died aborning.

The mere gathering of food for my vast army and attending noncombatants forced upon us a series of raids, skirmishes, and minor battles. Now I planned an ambitious stroke, which was to reconnoiter the capital, and punish every town and city that had sent insulting answers to my overtures to peace. The command of the garrison at Tetzcuco I entrusted to Sandoval, truly the greatest officer ever under my command. As for Alvarado and Olid, they were good enough soldiers, surpassing indeed in certain phases of war, and I put them directly under me, commanding the great host of three hundred and fifty Spaniards and most of our Indian allies.

Our advance did not fail to meet dispute. Making for the inland town of Xaltocan, we were assailed by warriors in countless canoes, for our brigantines were not fully assembled to combat. Advancing along a narrow causeway from the mainland we came to a broken dike which we could not wade or swim without casting away our weapons. For a few minutes we were thrown into disorder by the countless arrows and stones of the canoeists and by warriors casting from beyond the breach. Not much too soon a Mexic deserter, doomed to a horrid death if he were caught, decided to put his trust in the Redbeards and told us of a circuitous ford by which we could reach the island.

All the way we were under attack, and many if not all the Spaniards would have fallen and drowned, had it not been for our expert Tlaxcalan archers, strong-armed and keen-eyed, and our few crossbowmen. So we made the island shore, and fought a Mexic garrison who tried to oppose our landing. After a brief but violent battle they sought to surrender, but this we would not accept, and instead gave the steel to every soldier in reach. A good number tried to flee from our revenge, but our swift-running allies pursued them, in and out of houses and shops, alleys and streets, giving them no chance to hide, and as far as I could reckon, captured, killed, and looted every one.

Much more booty was found in this rich town, and gathered together for our treasury.

Our next assault was the ancient city of Tacuba, again disputed outside the walls, and fiercely so within. If these Indians had known how to use their long spears, some of these captured Spanish sword blades affixed to poles, in neck, chest, and gut attacks on our horses, we would have found ourselves in a perilous plight. As it was, we soon destroyed the force and took possession in the city.

These were only details of the preliminary phase of the campaign. In a parley with neighbor chiefs I found them insolent and defiant. They informed me that I would not now find another Montezuma ruling Mexic, but a new, young Uei Tlatoani who knew how to take my measure. This last I doubted but his courage and bellicosity I need not doubt. Having completed a survey of the city, observing that instead of being weakened by its previous great losses, it was stronger than before. I heard two appeals from Chalco, that they were under constant attack by the Mexic and were in bitter need of our help. These I answered by sending Sandoval with three hundred infantry and twenty horsemen, as well as some native troops. In his stay there, Sandoval made his headquarters at the palace of the Great Cacique, and I would love to hear him describe it to some officials in Spain, some of them close to Charles, who still could not believe, despite all the treasure I had sent, that Mexico was any different from other provinces or islands captured elsewhere, with a rude populace, living still in the Stone Age, inept warriors, and docile prisoners. His garden was two leagues in circumference, with pavilions, summerhouses, fish pools, and wonderful trees and flowers selected for their appeal to the eyes and to the nose, planted and arranged as beautifully as any royal garden in Europe.

Sandoval now stormed a fortress about four leagues eastward. It proved deadly dangerous and expensive to reduce, because it capped a great rock which the Mexics believed unclimbable by an enemy force in the face of great boulders rolled down and small avalanches of smaller stones. And in this conflict, our native allies won no honors, being so frightened by the rolling stones and huge pieces of rock crashing down the mountainside that they dared not follow their intrepid captain. But the Spanish proved again their magnificent aptitude, I could fairly say love for war, fixed in their veins by twenty-five generations of whom War with the Infidel was the main occupation, their pride, their joy, and their daily bread. Many of the Mexic garrison tumbled or were thrown down the cliffs and the rest put to the sword. The taking of this fort greatly modified the Chalcans' terror.

But while Sandoval was reporting to me, a panting Chalcan messenger brought news of a great Mexic force attacking the city. Fool that I was, I

remarked to my great captain that "apparently he had not completed the task assigned" to which he made almost no audible reply. Instead he rallied his force and straightway marched. He found that the Chalcans had defended themselves well, and after Sandoval had tied up loose ends he returned to Tetzcuco but did not come into my presence. By now I had learned the truth, and summoned him, and asked his forgiveness of my utterly unjustified charge against him. His generous nature pleaded for me too, and again we were trusty brothers in arms.

In three weeks more the brigantines would be ready to sail. In the meantime, a ship with two hundred well-armed Spaniards and nearly eighty horses put in at Vera Cruz, and this one to our help, not harm. In truth, they had been sent by the viceroy at Santo Domingo in answer to my appeal, and doubtless he had stood about all he could stand of Velazquez' interference, presumings, schemings, and pretensions. To me this could mean only one of two things: that Velazquez was losing favor with Bishop Fonseca, or that mighty minister was losing favor with the Emperor.

These reinforcements joined me as soon as possible, zealous for loot if not for the conversion of the heathen, and I gave them hearty welcome.

And thus ended the first phase of my war of Return and Recapture of Mexic.

---

[45] *Nueva España del Allene Mar.*

6

Many strong points about the lagoons were still held by Mexic garrisons. So I planned a long sweep, with thirty cavalry, three hundred foot soldiers, and large forces of Tlaxcalan and Tetzcucan archers, swordsmen, and spearmen. Leaving Sandoval in command at Tetzcuco, to defend the city and protect my shipbuilders against enemy attack, I set forth to reduce these enemy positions before attacking Mexic itself. After passing Chalco we moved into the mountains. This was a perilous region in which to travel, exposing us to arrow attacks, and, what was worse, constant harassment by rolled stones from the forts high over our heads. And here Doña Marina, ever at my side, was of more worth than our Indian guides, for in periods of her life she had not yet revealed to me she had dwelt in a mountainous region and understood mountain warfare. She perceived how our following up this gully would expose ourselves to bombardment, but by ascending another

gully we would be protected by adjacent ravines where the missiles would lodge.

No doubt remained that my best counselor on the force, with the possible exception of Sandoval, was a woman born in Mexic, sold into slavery by her mother and stepfather, abiding thence a long time. In this period she had been brought to Oaxaca where she had performed some sort of marriage ceremony with the Great Teul Quetzalcoatl, the ramifications of which, including my own identification in the savage mind with the Great Teul, had brought her finally into my arms and me into hers. Indeed, one of my terrors was of losing Marina at some not-distant time, and I could not rid myself of it, and the strangeness of her story that I knew made the loss seem more likely. If Fate once takes a special interest in an individual, and deals strangely with him, she does not know when to stop. I had known this to happen a score of times. One to whom strange happenings befell was forever meeting another just around the corner.

Without Marina's approbation but not against her opposition, I made two attacks on a stout garrison on a mountain top—both of which were foiled in the same day. Bivouacking in a wild-mulberry patch, where we were grateful to find springs in this arid region, I was up at dawn, and in the first light I decried a force of Mexic leaving a nearby stronghold to follow the sierra to the fort of their countrymen. To these they would lend help against a renewed attack they felt certain I would make. So I forged a swift plan to take advantage of this movement. Dividing my army in secrecy I sent one part to occupy the deserted stronghold while I advanced on the other. The trick worked; one force attacked from below and the other from the side, and the two camps of Mexics threw down their arms.

The main goal of our expedition was on the fresh-water lake in the Valley of Mexic, to reach which we had to cross a range of mountains, then descend slopes clothed with pines and dwarf-oak trees. When cleared of these we could look down upon one of the loveliest scenes in the Seven Kingdoms. In this well-watered region, being exceedingly rich and populous, many towns or villages had been built on embankments along causeways, and some stood on pilings over the water had beautiful floating gardens. I chose for our assault the largest and richest city, Xochimilco, the name meaning Field of Flowers. It had countless houses, no few mansions, and several teocallis.

Its winning was a hard fight, in which I had the most narrow and terrifying escape from death or capture in all my New World adventures. Indeed, it was the enemy's determination to capture me that saved me from

being killed, because for a matter of seconds I was at the mercy of their swords.

In the thick of the fight I was wounded in the head and unhorsed, and fell into a swarm of Mexics. They had caught me by the arms and legs and were hustling me to a canoe when a Tlaxcalan soldier sprang like a jaguar among my captors. Gonzales and my page also leaped to my rescue, and in a few seconds I had gained my saddle and was laying about with my lance.

After the battle, when I summoned the valiant Tlaxcatec and wished to praise and reward him, he said he had had nothing to do with my salvation, and he thought it had been worked by St. Peter. I did not know he had ever heard of St. Peter. He seemed reluctant to be questioned further so I gave him leave to go, leaving me with another mystery I would never solve.

The new emperor could not afford to let us hold the Field of Flowers almost at his doorstep, the effect of which would be disastrous on his allies far and near. Yet a great force of foot soldiers and canoeists sent to dislodge us were routed with great losses. On the other hand a heavy blow was dealt our cause when ten Spaniards, in the looting of the rich city, their arms full of treasure, were taken by surprise by a company of canoeists, seized, thrown into the boats, and carried away for sacrifice. My men could have stood the loss of a hundred in battle better than they stood this. It was their quiet resolve, the same being true of their captured comrades, that they would not be taken alive; yet it had happened despite that vow and could happen again. And well we knew when the prisoners were sacrificed, for the great drum in the teocalli was beaten in exultation, a most horrid rolling sound enveloping the city, when the priests' knives cleft each man's chest with a surgeon's skill to tear out the still-living heart. But also we knew that no Spaniard flinched, or asked for mercy, and all died cursing the heathen gods or in stately silence, for such was the haughty spirit of the men bred in Castile and in Leon.

At Tacuba we had completed the circuition of the valley, with the loss of no few brave followers, and the gaining of many new allies; and at least we had driven a wedge of distrust and estrangement between many a tribe and town and the Mexic power. To the beautiful city of Xochimilco, Field of Flowers, we had set fire and razed to the ground, not in revenge for the death in battle of comrades there, for that was the fortunes of war, but for the ten who had been sacrificed to heathen gods. And that act struck fear into the savage heart of the new emperor, not as sharp or lethal as the priests' knives in the bosoms of our comrades. But now and then it would wake him from sound sleep, and he would remember those leaping flames against the sky,

and their fierce and ominous crackle; and the question would plague his soul whether despite his godlike place and his mighty armies and his vast military preparations, Mexic must again bow before a little company of aliens, and the gods to whom he had fed such costly flesh would come shattering down, and himself would be no more than a bleeding, battered corpse found in the ruins.

And now a wonderful thing, once a dim dream, and then a dubious scheme, and later an undertaking presenting all but insurmountable difficulties, was an established fact. Our thirteen brigantines were shipshape and seaworthy, ready to sail, and the canal that would admit them into the lagoons had been dug, and we had a mighty weapon against not only the myriad canoes, but also, along with our guns, against great walls close to the waters. I was the admiral of a fleet of warships. The great attack against the Mexic stronghold could presently begin.

I was in a wonderfully jubilant mood and my heart was as light as on the night Doña Marina had surrendered to me her lovely person, along with her absolute loyalty. Still, she had retained a spiritual and mental independence, which was itself an aspect of her loyalty, whereby she could speak her mind where there was need, and save me mighty follies, and even depart from me if ever she stood in the way of my vast ambitions. But as in the most darkling storm there is hope for a rainbow, every rose has its thorn. This thorn pricked me in my very soul.

7

I knew naught of it until a soldier who must remain unnamed, that being my promise, came to my headquarters and asked a private audience with me. When I said I would grant it a little later, he protested its utter urgency, and begged our retirement to some cell where there was no danger of his being overheard. When I saw his pallor and his wild eyes I complied instantly, and when we were alone, he threw himself at my feet, weeping.

As soon as he could control himself, he confessed a murderous conspiracy against me, hatched, it seemed, by an obscure soldier named Villafana. Having sailed with Narvaez, he knew where to look first for his ilk among the Narvaez faction, and it appeared he had an almost uncanny power of discovering hate of me in every breast where it had lodged, and of detecting stifled rancor or unfed spite or great discontent in whom I had deemed loyal followers and put great trust. All these had joined the plot, pledging their lives and fortunes, and all details of the act had been perfected

at many meetings. While I was at breakfast with some of my officers, a parcel was to be delivered to me, which the conspirators would say had just arrived from Vera Cruz containing papers of great import, which I could be expected to open and peruse at once. While my own and my officers' attention was riveted on this business, the murderous band were to fall upon us and kill us with their swords.

Among the victims of the fell design were to be Sandoval, Alvarado, Olid, and two other officers whom they knew they could never persuade to their further plans, and instead would seek implacable revenge. Command of the army was to be offered to Verdugo, brother-in-law to Velazquez, but my informant was quick to tell me that this man was not party to the plot. After our murders were a *fait accompli*, the cry for peace and abandonment of our venture would be raised, not an unwelcome cry to many of my followers who pined for the safety of Cuba and for the breaking of the spell I had somehow put upon them, forcing them to an undertaking dangerous and difficult against which their souls rebelled: in a sense those who hated themselves for ever being put in such a perilous pass. Chosen men among the conspirators would be immediately put in power; and they had little doubt that such a lesion in our body would break its spirit, and the men turn to the mutineers for lack of other leadership, and thus their plans and program would be carried out.

Losing not a minute, I sent for Sandoval and my other captains who were marked for murder, and with my alcalde we went speedily to Villafana's quarters. We found him with several of his fellows, and at sight of us he seized a paper from under his jerkin and tried to swallow it. I caught his arm and snatched away the document, and while the captains and alcalde were arresting and binding him and his companions, I read a list of names. At my seeing some of these, daggers of grief pierced my heart, and I well-nigh wished the plot had succeeded, and yet by urgings of my soul I tore the paper into little scraps and dropped them in a glowing brazier. Thus only I, and the conspirators themselves, would ever know their guilt.

A court-martial, headed by myself, was swiftly called, and Villafana was condemned to death, which we dealt him forthwith by hanging him from his own window, so his body could be seen dangling against the wall. And many an eye that gazed upon it rounded with terror, its owner never doubting that his turn was next. Since I let the fact be known that I had alone read the list, I furthered the danger of my assassination without delay, but when that delay ensued, and even those caught with the culprit were liberated, no such attempt was made, and their only punishment was by their consciences and

my contempt and distrust. It seemed to me that some had grace enough to try to redeem themselves, in the eyes of God and in my eyes, for in the great attack we soon made, they did not eschew the battle, and fought like lions.

CHAPTER 15

Grim Victory

1

Before them, to the whole body of my Spaniards, I revealed the cause of Villafana's hanging, without giving the least hint of his accomplices. I asked that any member of my force who felt bitterness against me, or felt he had cause for complaint, to speak it without fear of punishment in my own ears. They listened without a sound, and somehow I felt that they were never before more dedicated to success of our great emprise.

At my officers' insistence, I accepted a bodyguard, and my whole force approved the act, for the very thought of my being taken off when we were already so committed to the war frightened them out of their wits.

On the twenty-eighth of April, we held a great review and then fiesta, for today the ships sailed stately one by one down their ways and through the canal into the lagoon. The passage was three leagues long, twelve feet wide, its sides of stone or of banked earth braced with palisades. Mass was performed, cannon fired, musicians played a thrilling military march, and the banners of Castile fluttered in the breeze, and a great shouting rose from the thousands of spectators. Many of the natives had never seen a ship, and their awe of the big fleet skimming over the waters, so lightly yet so proudly, moved my men as it moved me, and with high propriety we ended the ceremony by singing *Te Deum*.

Afterward I took stock of my whole force and equipment for battle. I had now eighty-seven horsemen, eight hundred and nineteen infantrymen including one hundred and eighteen cannoneers and crossbowmen. Three hundred had been appointed to man the twelve ships—one of the smallest proving inadequate for battle—and half of this number must fight while the other half sailed, and there was mighty grumbling and cursing from the latter half, because they did not want to be sailors but warriors, wielding weapons, and gathering loot. But I had chosen men from Palos and other ports who knew something of the craft and would learn more, and I

promised them their full share of booty. And there came to be competition between ship and ship as to which would win the race in a great charge upon fleets of canoes, and in the count of canoes sunk and paddlers captured or killed.

Now I had sent for the levies promised me by various Indian chieftains, and the pledges were invariably kept, and no less than fifty thousand well-armed native soldiers assembled at Tetzcuco with their banners and panoply of war. When our sailors shouted "Castile and Tlaxcala" in welcome, the haughty Indians made saucy reply by shouting "Tlaxcala and Castile."

To attack the city walls I established three camps at the ends of the three causeways. Thus the three forces could attack in unison and by use of the brigantines move swiftly from one camp to another in any need. Also they could intercept most of the supplies sent by the emperor's allies. Two of the divisions were ordered to press the siege as soon as they could march upon the walls, but the third, under Sandoval, must first complete the destruction of Iztapalapa, half-razed already on my first entry into the valley in the present war. This city was too strong to let stand in our rear.

All went surprisingly well with one minor disappointment, which I should have expected if I had given heed to common sense. I had been so charmed by Xicotencatl the Younger's history as a warrior, first as my fierce enemy, then as my ally, and again my enemy, and again my ally; all the same time impressed by him personally, such a fearless and gifted captain, that I had persuaded myself that he had changed his coat for the last time and I could count on him to the end. Doña Marina told me bluntly that I was a fool to put faith in him, that in fact he harbored a deep hate of all things Spanish and the day would come when it would prevail. I had laughed at her doubts, but now I could laugh out of the other side of my mouth, this expression one Marie de Estrada had used, perhaps native to Northern Spain, and which I had found apt. The hard fact was, that he had deserted, taking with him a good number of his kinsmen, and made off for Tlaxcala.

I sent an adequate force to overtake and arrest him, which they did, and then there was no other course than hang him, on a gallows so high that it honored him, and erected in the great square of the teocalli. No man of the *Corps Perdu* could have walked more nonchalantly, yet with such hauteur and grace, to the rope; and atop a ladder leaned against the tree, he insisted on putting the noose around his neck with his own hands "because I do not want any dirty Spanish hands to touch my face."

My heart sank somewhat as I watched him die, for in every outward aspect he was a knightly prince, of exceeding handsomeness, and since he was torn between hatred of the Spanish and of the Mexics his behavior was understandable, and not unethical in an extreme degree. Anyway the Aztec had no word for ethics, Marina had informed me. Of course I confiscated his considerable riches for the Crown.

And his death caused me to remember my parting with Montezuma when he had been mortally wounded, a few days before his death. If his last prophecy were true, that the white man would prevail in the Aztec country and destroy its religion and change its ways, and Aztec blood would in time disappear from the veins of its populace, Xicotencatl's last choice was the right choice for an Aztec patriot.

2

The divisions of our forces took different roads to the city walls. Two were to seize Tacuba and then advance on Chapultepec, the source of Mexic's water supply. Their march was uncontested until they reached the aqueduct of stone and plaster atop a narrow dike, where a powerful force of Mexics were assembled for its protection. There followed a sharp battle, but to my men fell the victory, and they succeeded in cutting the pipes. Thus the main stronghold of Mexic was deprived of water.

Sandoval had not yet reduced Iztapalapa. A vast fleet of canoes had assembled to protect it, and now for the first time my fleet could be battle-tested. Near the southern end of a lake we passed by an isolated mountain, from the crest of which stones were slung and arrows launched. To rid the lake of such annoyance in the future, I landed on the promontory with a hundred and fifty men. We scaled the heights, despite the shower of missiles, and put its defenders to the sword. One of my captains was eager to make slaves of their wives and children, but this I forbade.

When I had gained my ship, a prodigious fleet of canoes had appeared to attack us. Naught could be more to my liking, and an unequal naval battle began, or I had better say a massacre. The ships wheeled left and right, wherever the canoes were thickest, and ran down scores of them, while the soldiers aboard with their long pikes slew the crews of those that were still afloat, and our archers picked off those at longer distance from our partly shielded deck. God knew how many Mexics were slain that night, for He only could keep count, but truly the number was appalling to contemplate. From that moment we were masters of the two lagoons, and well-defended

bridges were no longer a prime concern. Then we heard that the new emperor went to the teocalli, and there made his pledge that the Mexics would hold out to the last extremity, and perish together rather than surrender to the alien. And if this were true, it could only mean that he and his councilors had abandoned hope of victory.

Our fleets guarded the camps, so it became the Mexic practice to attack by night, whereby they could loose their arrows and the canoes escape in the darkness. One day they came up the causeways, yelling like demons, but our guns were trained on these approaches, and the carnage that these wrought was terrible to behold. Still there was one causeway that we did not command, Tepejacac, and over this supplies from the loyal kingdoms could reach the Mexic fortifications.

So I planned attack by land and water. The Mexics erected barricades, from which our land force could not dislodge them, but the brigantines drew nigh and dealt them cross fire, and the soldiers on ships or land stoutly cheered each other when the enemy fled in disorder. Then my force advanced up one of the great avenues, destroying as they went all buildings that would serve the Mexics as strongholds.

A number of Mexics had taken refuge in the teocalli, and there my men pursued them and drove them forth and then destroyed the images of the Great Teules and ravished their gold masks and adornments. But on issuing forth, the Mexics made a surprise attack which threw a section of my army into confusion. Vast numbers of Mexics rallied to complete our rout, and for a while it seemed we were to lose a major battle, but the cavalry rushed to our rescue. The Magic of the Horse was still lodged in the Aztec mind, and they could not hold, and fled again into the teocalli. Since night was drawing on, we did not press our advantage.

Other great battles followed, and the numbers of the Mexic were so vast, and their courage so great, our gain was slow. Then I began a systematic destruction of the great edifices of the city, the first being the old palace where we had once lodged and made our last stand ere our flight from the capital in defeat. All buildings other than of stone were set on fire, and by throwing torches we ignited the wooden parts of the palace itself. Soon the floors and walls took fire, along with their countless draperies, and the whole structure became a pyre to the Aztec's horror. Then, against my heart, we destroyed the beautiful aviary connecting with the palace, and after killing with muskets the large and more fierce animals in the zoo, we let the little beasts escape and gave the building to the flame.

Retreating then, a maddened Aztec army attacked us from all sides, each man sworn to kill one Spaniard or one allied Indian before he himself died. Their leader attacked the prince commanding our Tetzcucan allies, but the latter killed the Mexic noble with a great blow of his mace.

But all these successes brought us within a hair's breadth of our undoing. Hungry for the booty of the capital, my men talked one another into overconfidence, and my captains caught the same fever. They were weary of repulsing constant small attacks and of losing men in cleverly designed ambush; why not capture Mexic in one grand assault? The chief advocate was Escalante, our treasurer, a man of noble birth and strength of mind; and when I listened to his arguments, was it the second of these, strength of mind, that swayed me most, or by some weakness I had never been able to mend, was it his noble birth? Some hard core of my brain kept urging we were not yet ready to achieve a *coup de main*; that the morale of Mexic soldiers was still too high; and the population was not yet weakened and worn down and in despair because of our blockade.

Marina's spies reported great stores of corn still heaped in the granaries. The people had not the least aversion to eating human flesh, and thousands of my Indian allies and no few Spaniards had been killed in the continuous conflict, and almost always their corpses had been snatched away as the opposing forces moved this way and that, from one contested bridge or stronghold to another. Thinking as a European, I could not believe that this grisly fare would not sicken their souls, and they would force their leaders to accept the generous terms on which I offered peace. But always my overtures were rebuffed, and the slow, steady slaughter went on.

I am not sure that the poorer people did not eat the bodies of the Emperor's Indian allies, or even their fellow Mexics.

The constant harassment that the enemy was still strong enough to deal to us, killing our sentinels, raiding our outlying camps, preventing our rest and the proper care of our wounded, and attacking by night, should have strengthened my will against the persuasions of Escalante and my captains. Instead, my own impatience made me their advocate. Despite Doña Marina's protests, and at last her outburst of fury, I gave the command for the great attack.

The day was set. I divided the main of my forces into three armies, one under Escalante to occupy the principal street and then advance to the great market, the capture of which would be a mighty prize. The second division would be commanded by Tapia, and Jorge Alvarado, the latter not as rash as

his famous brother, but brilliant and brave. These were to proceed up one of two main streets running parallel; and the third division, directly under my command, must capture the other. Sandoval, holding the northern causeway, was to withdraw a large part of its defenders to reinforce Alvarado. Picked cavalry and some cannoneers would take a stand in reserve before the great street of Tacuba, which was appointed our rallying point.

All my captains were instructed not to advance one step without first securing a line of retreat, by filling up all water gaps in the causeways. At first all went well. My instructions were obeyed; we reduced one barricade after another; our allies' canoes moved along the canals in our support. Nimble and blood-hungry Tlaxcatecs scaled the terraces of the buildings, passing from one house to another, slaying and hurling down the embattled enemy. Apparently the Mexics had been taken by surprise and did not offer the ferocious resistance as was their wont. My men could hear the shouts of triumph from their comrades in adjoining streets and our attack became a race between our three divisions for the great prize of the market.

The thought struck me, which at first I sought to throw off, but which kept boring into my brain, that our advance was too fast. At last I gave it full heed. This triumph was too easy; there was something terribly wrong. Was the enemy drawing us into the heart of the city where a great host was waiting to surround and annihilate us? I paused to choose a body of scouts to follow me and appraise the situation. In that brief pause, I received a scribbled note from Escalante that he had all but gained his goal.

With my scouts I moved ahead of the main force and almost at once came to a water gap, thirty feet wide, that Escalante's men had made a mock of filling. They had dropped stones and pieces of timber and sped on toward their objective, rich loot. At once I ordered my followers to fill up the gap and I helped with frantic hands.

We were too late. Piercing our ears rose the shrill blast of the horn of Guatemuza, a sacred instrument kept in the private quarters of the emperor to signal great events or to order battle. At once the yells of triumph we had been hearing were drowned out by war whoops and savage shouts of a vast horde of Mexic warriors in irresistible attack. So furious was their assault, that the advance of my army was not merely checked. First it must give ground, then it must retreat. And that retreat turned into a calamitous rout.

Veritable clouds of stones and arrows fell on and amidst them, and at the same time their fore and flanks and even their rear was under terrible assault. Not only our native allies broke in wild disorder. The mainstay of the army

were Spanish troops but for once their great hardihood and self-control and manly pride was shattered by the fury of the attack, and they trampled their own fallen comrades in their horrid flight.

Just before reaching the water gap I had noticed that the dikes here appeared to have been recently sheared off; but in my haste to close the gap I had not given thought to the reason. Now I saw it all too plain. The horde of fugitives, pressed and pursued from behind, swayed from side to side along the narrow causeway, and one and one and then in little knots and clusters they were thrust overside, and the banks were too steep to arrest their fall, and below the Mexic canoes waited their human freight. Meanwhile our small force stood firm. Advancing toward us were our comrades in wild flight, many of them helpless victims of sure-footed Mexics on the brinks, and countless more in the rear ranks were being butchered by their pursuers without raising a hand in their own defense.

They came to the water gap, and tried to stop, but the melee behind them thrust them forward. Many toppled in; others piled on top of them, the swimmers were pressed down by the weight of bodies. It was the Battle of the Bridges returning not as a nightmare but in horrid fact. Some who fell swam into the canal and then tried to climb the steep dikes on our side of the gap, only to topple and be captured by the canoeists. As my comrades and I gave hand to those struggling in the gap, pulling out all we could, I was shouting to the struggling mob beyond, and it must be my voice was heard, and some caught sight of me, the picked target of hundreds of arrows and stones, because the Mexic canoeists had recognized me. I was determined to die rather than fly my post of deadly peril, and the men perceived this, and I saw some of them turn about to face their pursuers, and in some degree they blocked the rush, and that movement was felt throughout the long line of frenzied fugitives, and they bethought themselves, and by instinct made more and more resistance to their blood-hungry, howling foe.

But at last the gap was closed by bodies and my men could begin to cross the ghastly bridge. Then Quinones, Captain of my Guard, caught the bridle of my horse and turned him from the battle, crying out that thus I could best serve my followers, and if I perished they would also. So I walked my horse, barely in advance of the troops who had crossed, and these were more and more, and some sort of order was being restored throughout the long rank. And now the price of any one of my soldiers' lives became higher for the enemy who craved it, and more and more of them died in the paying, and the rout turned into a fighting retreat.

When all who yet lived or had not been captured gained the square before the great street of Tacuba, and could get out of the way of the trained guns, these began to blaze, raking the Mexic host on the causeway. And as they faltered, and while the cannoneers were reloading, I led a little body of cavalry against the now-hesitant foe, and again the Magic of the Horse made their souls quake, and the Mexics began to retreat.

The other two divisions were under heavy attack, but no water gap had cut off their retreat, and we rode to help them. Our troops fought the harder at this light relief, and the Mexic pressure in their rear was eased, and most of these pursuers gave up the chase. Then the divisions were united, and other cavalry joined with mine to form a rear guard.

But the battle was not yet over. Sandoval and Alvarado had heard the awful turmoil, had guessed the truth, and hastened to their comrades' help. The now-retreating Mexics fell upon them, and rolled in their sight dismembered heads of some of their Spanish captives, shouting "Malinche! Malinche!" But this trick to dishearten cool-headed Sandoval was a total failure, and although he ordered retreat, his shouts of encouragement saved it from turning into a rout. And now the enemy came into the cross-fire range of the brigantines on each side of the causeway, and fast and thick they fell; yet in their fury that the main of my armies had escaped, they pursued Sandoval's and Alvarado's forces clear to the entrenchments of our camp.

Then Sandoval rode to our camp, to see how I fared. I had several wounds, but deigned to speak of them, and together we faced the dispirited, defeated army. There was naught I could say to cheer them now. Our losses had been frightful, including over sixty Spaniards captured alive along with a vastly greater number of allied Indians. Seven of our horses had been killed and two light cannons captured, which in terms of our military power was nearly as great a loss as our men killed and captured.

The defeat was heavy on my head, mine alone, for, first, ordering the attack before we were fully prepared, and second, not making sure that my captains obeyed orders. I had not punished them enough for their previous disobedience; I had not sent trusty troops to see personally that no water gap had remained unstopped. So I offered my command to Sandoval, and indeed implored him to take it, but he waited until I had spoken and wiped away my tears, and then he looked me in the eyes and answered in a strong voice.

"Sir, I will not do so, for if you do not retain command, the shattered hopes of the whole host would be lost, and then our cause too is lost, along

with all our lives."

We need not wait long for the exultant throbbing of the great drum of the teocalli. And in our plain sight we saw our comrades being marched and bludgeoned up the steps to the Dish of the Eagles. Then in an awful silence we saw them die, but if the Mexics thought that this would set a crown upon their victory, by causing us to quail, and we would break off the war and fly the city, they did not know the Spanish heart.

As the long file of our comrades climbed the steps to a horrid death, fury blazed in every eye, and the craving for revenge set fire to every brain, and a new zeal was born in every soul. And when the bodies of all our fellows chosen for tonight's feast to the Great Teules lay in a bloody pile at the foot of the steps, and the yelling Mexics came and carried them off to devour, the men fingered their weapons, their faces twisted with hate, and could hardly wait for our regrouping and repair for the order to attack. And from that hour on, the War of the Recapture of Mexic would be war to the death.

3

This the Mexics knew, when they sought to take advantage of what they thought was our complete demoralization and terror. A howling, yelling host came sweeping over the dike. But though we could not yet attack, we could make stout defense, and with deadly aim our cannoneers fired our guns, and our muskets blazed, and our crossbowmen sped their shrieking shafts; and the Mexic loss was so great, and the sight of their mangled comrades so awful in their sight, that they must draw back.

Yet there could be no denial of the severity of our defeat or of the extremity of our pass. We could not recover our wounded or the bodies of our dead; and already we heard the noise of high revelry in the singing, dancing, and shouting city, in preparation of a ghastly feast. And as dark fell we heard company after company of our native allies packing and preparing for departure, and there was nothing we could do to stop them; and if we tried, those who might remain loyal would go over to the enemy. Truly I could not blaze with anger at the deserters. Once more we warriors out of the Sunrise had revealed our vulnerability, and we were not teules after all, but mortal men who could run like sheep, and again we were beaten men, they thought, who could not rally strength under our sacred banner. Indeed, it was no longer sacred in their sight, only a cloth on a stick without meaning, or we would not lie balked and docile while the Mexic devoured our dead.

Our plight was indeed terrifying. Our powder was nearly spent, requiring a bold band of volunteers under Ordas to make the long journey to the volcanoes to gather sulfur from their hot vents to mix with charcoal and crude saltpeter we had found in limestone caves. Every man bore wounds, which must be most crudely treated to prevent gangrene; the flow of our supplies was certain to be reduced to less than half. Every night our camps would be raided despite long vigils by exhausted sentries.

That night, and in the next few days, the false were divided from the true. Not all of our allies deserted; the main of our Tlaxcatecs stood fast; and some of the Tetzcucans, including their knightly champion, did not break troth. Also some of the towns who had agreed to furnish us supplies kept their bargain. What wondrous strength of will and self-honor and reverence of their given word this act demanded, when at any hour they might learn of our vanquishment, leaving them to the wrath of the Mexic swords and sacrificial knives!

At night a thousand bonfires blazed on the terraced roofs of the houses. The great drum rolled all night its dismal cadence, and the trumpets shrieked and the turmoil of the triumph-maddened city frighted the wild ducks on the lagoons. For eight nights the squares of the teocallis were bathed in a fiery glow, and we could see the priests about the Dish of the Eagles, and their victims being bludgeoned up the stairs, most of them Indian allies but no few Spanish whom we had hoped had died on the battlefield.

On the ninth night the fires were lighted and slowly burned down and out without any procession of victims, nor did the priests show themselves at the Dish of the Eagles. I took it that tonight certain planets were in certain Houses, and by the reckonings of the astrologers, the gods would observe a fast, or for some other mystic reason this was not an auspicious time for the awful ceremony. At first I thought not to mention the matter to Marina, who was nursing our chubby son, and the sight of them was so beautiful that I did not even wish to speak of the hideous things; yet when the big drum was silent, and the city strangely hushed and Don Martin had been tucked into bed, I decided to question her.

As I might have known, she had noted the absence of the drum beat and of revelry in the city, and instead of finding an easy explanation, she was completely mystified.

“I know of nothing to account for this interruption of the feast. There has been no change in the moon, she is a little short of midway toward her rounding. No festival or birthday of some god is imminent for which they

would save those marked for sacrifice; yet by your account of Spaniards captured alive—the number you hoped as the maximum but which in your heart you knew was not nearly high enough—there are still a few and perhaps more than a few awaiting the knife. This is the ninth night after the battle. Number nine is sacred to the Aztecs, and the sacrifice would naturally be greater than any preceding night, not less, nor most mysteriously absent. Something great has happened for good or ill. Tomorrow I will question my best spies."

She did so, but these were as puzzled as herself. We waited in extreme anxiety for the night to lower, and again we saw the fires lighted, and the priests were busied about the Dish of the Eagles, and our hopes took a heavy fall. But when the captives began to climb the stairs we looked in vain for any Spanish. Since the victims were invariably forced to climb naked of back and breast, there was no possibility of our mistaking Indians for Spaniards; all of these were dusky-colored backs, without one white skin agleam in the distant glimmer of the fire. And there was a prodigious number. The stairs were crowded and the procession long; and I could not doubt there was something like two thousand.

Nor did the great drum dispatch its ominous throbbings over the city.

Marina was more mystified than ever. She was up at daylight to meet the spies; and they reported what to her was a most strange thing, which she could hardly believe. The victims had not been our allied Indians; the enemy held no such number; instead they were the slaves belonging to the emperor and his great noblemen.

Marina went apart from me and lost herself in meditation, recalling all she knew of Indian religious thought and practice. Still she could not arrive at any plausible solution to the mystery.

"I can almost believe that the priests have seen signs that the gods do not want any more Spanish sacrificed at this time, or sacrifice of Indians allied with the Spanish," she told me.

On the following night there was again a great sacrifice of slaves, but the number was considerably less than the night before. And this was the pattern of procedure for several nights following—the sacrifice of their own slaves in greater or lesser number. On the seventeenth night of the battle there was again no sacrifice, and on the eighteenth night a single victim climbed the dreadful stairs, and he was a Spaniard. He had a peculiar limp, and I and my captains were certain that he was Guzman, my chamberlain, and hence

regarded by the Mexics as their most important captive, and the most gratifying to their gods.

But on the following day Marina's best spy who could communicate with an officer traitor to the emperor, solved the mystery.

Immediately after the battle the priests had sought signs from the gods of how soon the balked and beaten Spanish would be completely wiped out, or their remnants take flight to Vera Cruz. Also the astrologers had consulted the stars, and the answer given by the gods and the students of the stars had been the same—on or before the eighth day after the battle. But the oracles had lied; and even the stars in their courses had foretold falsely. We had not been destroyed, nor had we fled.

"Of course the Mexics thought what I had first guessed, that the gods were not satisfied with the great offerings of Spaniards and instead were angered," Marina told me. "The Mexics reasoned that the deities wanted them to show gratitude for their victory, not by sacrifice of the enemy whom the gods had permitted them to capture, but of their own property, their slaves. That explained the immense number of slaves sent to the Dish of the Eagles on succeeding nights. Still there was no flight of the Spanish, not another great victory, the city is still besieged, and the supply of food more scanty every day."

And now we could understand the return to our camps of the deserting Indians, first in small groups, and then in larger companies. The word had passed throughout the Aztec country, carried by merchants and wandering storytellers, of the failure of the prophecies. The people heard of our yet strong stand, of the havoc wrought by our brigantines among the fleets of canoes, of our holding of the terminals of the streets. The deserters had become uneasy, and then came to the conclusion that they had done wrong in breaking troth with us, and a great many were trying to retrieve it by return to their posts. Moreover, a few small tribes that had maintained neutrality in the war sent embassies to me, to find out if I would accept allegiance at this late day.

The belief was growing in the land that the Great Teules had been unable to keep their promises, and they might yet be cast down by a wooden cross and an image of a woman and child.

We had learned to live and fight on with what we had. Our blockade of the capital was strengthened rather than weakened, because of the nightly hunts by our brigantines for canoes trying to bring food into the city. How the canoeists came to fear the ships that came up so suddenly and swiftly in the darkness of night, and which never fired a shot when they could run down and over the helpless craft!

By conserving what powder we had and using sparingly what we could make, firing a volley at Mexic forces advancing up the causeway only when they came in point-blank range, we arrested attack after attack. This was a death that the Mexic most dreaded, because of the mangling of their bodies against which they had not only natural repugnance but superstitious terror.

The emperor did not cease from uttering terrible threats, not only to us Spaniards and our allies, but to kings and caciques that had taken neither side in the great war, and especially to more distant provinces that had furnished us men and supplies. And he had commanded his loyal chieftains to attack the disloyal, and this was a matter that must be seen to, not mere boastful puffs of wind. The caciques of Cuernavaca, a long day's march, and the Otomies somewhat further distant, sent embassies of frightened chiefs, begging our protection from more powerful neighbor states that would do the emperor's will, and told me plainly that their people would be massacred and their help to us cut short, unless we moved quickly. My captains opposed the effort, saying we ourselves were too weak to spare any of our troops, and this was sober truth, but sometimes one truth must be disregarded because of a greater truth.

"The greater our weakness," I told my officers, "the greater our need to make a show of strength."

So I sent Tapia with a hundred men in answer to the first call, and Sandoval with about two hundred to fill the second, more urgent need; and ordered their return within ten days. Within seven days they were both in camp, their jobs well done—each having won a sharp battle, and burned the crops and the towns and villages. The soldiers were greatly pleased with their own brisk performance, especially since they had garnered no little spoil.

And now when we needed it most, we had a windfall at Vera Cruz. Windfall was the right word, for the winds had blown out of her course a well-laden ship bound for Florida, to help that old believer in fairy-tales,

Ponce de Leon, in one of his will-o'-the-wisp pursuits. Its guns, powder, and other military stores, dispatched to us posthaste, made our mouths water.

I had sworn unto God that I would not again launch a great attack until the ground was laid, and plans made to meet every possible contingency. This meant nothing less than the destruction of one of the most beautiful cities in the world, at which havoc my soul protested. But cities can be rebuilt, more beautiful than before, but lost wars cannot be fought again, and lives lost in vain cannot be relived. We were here at great cost; if we failed, decades must pass before another army could be brought here and gain our now-favorable position. So I ordered that in filling up the gaps we use the stones of the mansions and beautiful buildings that lined the lagoons, and we must level every building along the great streets, to make a broad battlefield where our well-trained troops could maneuver, and our cavalry could make great charges, and our cannons could be best employed.

My soldiers made no objection, perceiving the utter necessity of this pitiless operation, and all our Indian allies rejoiced. From some districts of neutral stand or even inimical to us came swarms of peasants with coas—an Aztec digging tool—axes, heavy pries, and sledge hammers with obsidian heads. The breaks in the causeways were filled with masonry impossible to remove, and one great edifice after another crashed in ruin, and the debris was dumped into the canals. This the Mexics watched, and countless were their attempts to stop this laying waste of their ancient and proud city. But the rushings of their ill-fed soldiers were met with ruthless cannon fire, and not a day passed without a further spread of desolation and a deeper darkening of their hearts.

Gone and forgotten was their brief triumph, and famine stalked the city overcrowded now by refugees from the enemy towns we had demolished; and they must drink what little water they could take at night from the lagoons, stinking from decayed corpses. They took to eating rats, lizards, and snakes they could catch, and a sticky scum that gathered on still pools and bays. Eager to save what remained of the city, I sent three Mexic noblemen whom we had captured to make overtures of peace with Guatemuza, demanding only that they cease their revolt against the Emperor and accept Spanish rule and the Christian religion. I sent my personal message to him to have pity on his own people by surrender, and he might have done so except for the opposition of the priests, who knew that the fall of the heathen gods meant their own fall. No doubt they still believed in their hideous idols, and that some day, somehow, these would save the city.

And Guatemuza was so moved that he swore an oath that if any of his subjects even mentioned surrender, he thus signed his own death warrant.

I waited two days for his formal answer, and it was given by the opening of every gate in the capital, and the rushing forth of a countless horde of soldiers and of civilians armed with such weapons as they could seize. But our strongposts on the dikes prevented our being out-flanked, and the emplacement of our cannons permitted a shattering fire along the thronged causeways. Up and down ranged our brigantines, their guns belching fire, and no enemy canoes could live, and the Mexics toppled in red piles or in long ranks of mangled bodies. The smoke of the guns settled over the capital, so that it seemed obscured by heavy twilight, which indeed it was, the twilight before deep dark of a once-beautiful and mighty city. The attackers who remained alive reeled back in utter chaos, and their war cries died away.

Pitilessly we went on with our work of destruction. Toppling to the ground in ruin and crumbling in flame fell the proud palaces, the mighty teocallis with their once-mighty idols; the beautiful canals became blocked and foul. More and more people died every day from starvation, at first the very old and then the children. Still the Mexics attacked our forces guarding the workers of ruin, only to be driven off by our cavalry or the long spears of our Indian allies. At sundown, when we had shut within our camp those laborers we did not wholly trust, we set traps or lay in ambush, because the enemy was certain to raid under cover of darkness. No few of our outposts were overwhelmed and the men slain but the Mexic losses were vastly greater.

My division had toiled and fought its way to the great street to Tacuba, which permitted egress to Alvarado's camp. Nearby stood a large stone palace which the Aztecs had garrisoned as a fortress. This we besieged, using battering-rams, and when its wall began to crumble, we set it on fire. And when the garrison fled from the flames, we cut them down to the last man.

Now we heard more and more of the decay within the very citadel of the city. In ever greater number, Mexics stole forth at night to offer their self-surrender, their only price that we would give them something to eat. These were civilians, and the emaciation of their faces and bodies spoke more eloquently than their pitiful requests. Evidently what little food there was, was used or being hoarded for the soldiers and an elite few. The fighting men were lean, but were not yet wasting away; while these deserters were

truly living skeletons. What they told us confirmed the reports of Marina's spies that I had thought grossly exaggerated.

The mass of the people had no food at all that could be so called. They dug for roots, ate grass, tree leaves, and even bark. Their only drink was brackish water pressed from the mud of the salt lake. God had made certain animals to graze or browse on grass or tree leaves, but human organs could not digest such fodder, and with Starvation, came its ever trusty comrade, Pestilence. The sun never rose or set without the demise of an appalling and ever growing number, and at the beginning of the famine, their fellows buried them. Soon they had neither the strength nor the tools nor the ground, so their dead were carried into houses to mold and decay; and of late this, too, had become impossible, and the pitiful corpses were piled up in the streets. And now I knew what it was that my men and I had seen at a long distance from the high roofs and which we had mistaken for heaps of fire logs.

All this we could discern for ourselves, at close range, as we drove our way ever deeper into the city. Such sights as we beheld in the houses were no more fit for human eyes than grass for human stomachs; and truly our dreams would be haunted by them as long as we lived. It was the women and children suffering such horrors that touched my Spaniards most; for the dying eyes of the men still glared with hatred. But our Indian allies cared not whether the sufferers were men or women, children or babes in arms; and the only mercy that they would grant was death somewhat quick, although hideously cruel, by setting fire to the houses.

To Sandoval I had given the mission of destroying the great teocalli close to the market, hardly less if any in size to the great teocalli in the square. He had met with fierce resistance by soldiers and fanatical priests, and for a short space his small force was almost overwhelmed, but with reinforcement he prevailed. Then he slew the priests who still tried to beat the great drums sounding their own doom. Then he set fire to the vast edifice and it became another great torch in the sky, as if by the wrath of God. Few of the Mexic lives were spared, but our men did rescue from the flames the heads of a score or more of their fellows who had been sacrificed at the Dish of the Eagles, and these they buried in ground consecrated by our priest. And my fancies wandered, and peered into age far distant, when all of the New World would be part of Christendom, and this site might be chosen for a noble church commemorating the martyrs who had died in its winning.

One broad canal remained to be crossed before we could ingress the city, and from the rooftops a force of Mexics attacked with missiles our troops

and laborers who were filling it with stone and debris of buildings just destroyed. But these men were so fiercely intent on destroying the last barrier between them and their ancient enemies that they stood to their task, and as one man fell, another rushed to take his place.

When we had captured the great market, one of the last places of refuge of the people ridden by famine and plague, we set fire to the *cu*. A great wail rose from the wretched throng, because the gods on which they trusted for final salvation were being burned to ashes before their eyes.

And now the scenes became so horrible, and the stench so terrible, and we could not move through the streets, once crowded with animated beings but now packed with dead, that I resolved to appeal once more to the emperor. If he did not yield, I would destroy what remained of the city and put its inhabitants out of pain. Indeed, those half alive begged me to do so, in most piteous appeal. And when the emperor sacrificed my messenger, a noble Mexic whom we had captured in battle, I sent word that unless he met me in the public square at a certain hour, our forces would attack the citadel, and in this fight we would loose our most fierce Indian allies who would grant no quarter.

Still the haughty king held out; and my heart bade me send one more messenger, and on the day appointed I waited three hours for him to yield and save the lives of thousands. He did not come, and then began the last battle of the war. What need to tell of this awful conflict between the living and the half-dead, its hopelessness and therefore uselessness adding to the horror of the half-alive fighting in a final frenzy of fury, when they were almost too weak to stand? Yet we must kill them to keep them from killing us, and God knew we would have stopped the slaughter if we could, and at the enemy's insistence it continued hour after hour, hours that God must have marked on his long record of awful hours since the human race began, when He could scarcely bring Himself to look down, and the Specter Death seemed monarch of the universe, not He.

5

I had expected Guatemuza to die fighting with his nobles, in final and haughty defiance, yet I had taken thought of what might be an attempt at flight to some allied king, with whom he could still resist and delay our final conquest by weeks or months. During this time, he might well believe that some dire plague, or other calamity befalling us by the power of his heathen gods, would permit his recapture and rebuilding of his demolished capital.

So I had posted sentinels and guards, and when they saw three piraguas, great canoes powered by thirty or more rowers, set off across the lake, they signaled in a brigantine, one of our most swift, under Captain Holquin. The emperor's heathen gods could not even stay or change the wind that filled Holquin's sails, and he gave swift chase, and although the boat crews stroked in a maniacal frenzy of despair, the ship drew nigh, and the crossbowmen leveled their shafts, and bade the craft halt.

Then the crews cried for them not to touch trigger, for their emperor was aboard. And up rose Guatemuza, with spear in hand, but when he saw the barbed points of the arrows aimed at his breast, he dropped the weapon and folded his hands.

"Tell Malinche I am his prisoner," he said, "but pray you do no harm to my wife and my followers."

To this my captain agreed, and the emperor and his noble retinue were brought aboard his ship, and these were not half-starved, and beneath rough overgarments wore their finery glistening with jewels. And since the Mexics not in the heat of the battle saw their ruler taken, and cried out the news, my soldiers knew that something of greatest import had occurred. Those near enough to hear the cry dropped their weapons, and many of their chests heaved with great sobs, and some of them fell upon their swords, and the noise of battle began to die away, and soon there was no sound or no movement, for the captains restrained our allies from killing all. Victors and vanquished gazed no longer at each other in hate or fear, but instead looked out over the lake to the minute but sharp figures of the brigantine and the three great canoes.

Later I heard to my shock and surprise that a quarrel rose between Holquin and Sandoval, when the latter presumed on his higher rank to demand custody of the fallen emperor. Each wanted the honor of the capture, to be worked on his escutcheon. I soon had word of the dispute and instantly sent command to Holquin to bring Guatemuza before me, and I would settle the matter of honors. In the interim I had the terrace spread with crimson cloth and matting, and a table set with food and drink. Then with Doña Marina at my side, we waited the emperor's appearance.

A company of infantry escorted him to the foot of the terrace and stood at attention during the interview. The conquered emperor climbed the steps with regal dignity. I perceived a young man, most personable, of paler skin than most Mexics, intelligent countenance, and well-made body. I advanced to meet him and greeted him courteously.

"I have done all I could, to defend myself and my people," he answered. "Now you may do with me as you see fit." And then touching the hilt of my sword, "You had better put an end of my life with your steel and be rid of me at once."

I replied that he would be treated with all honor, for he had proven himself a brave warrior. Then I inquired as to the whereabouts of his wife, and when he answered that she was aboard a brigantine, I gave orders that she be escorted into my presence.

I guessed her age at twelve, or at most thirteen. She was the daughter of Montezuma and would be considered a great beauty in any land on earth, in my sight second only to Doña Marina. As soon as my courtesies had been paid I ordered the evacuation of the city, my troops and the remnants of the Mexic army, and the remaining population. In truth it was not fit for the vilest human being's habitation. My men brought in our wounded who had a chance for life; the Mexics did the same for their wounded; but I knew not how to deal with that vast host of dead, the freshly killed or those in all stages of decay. I thought to ask Frey Olmedo to send up a prayer for the souls of all, friend or enemy, and then cut and roll down thousands of pine trees from the mountainsides into the city, and by casting brands of burning rosin and tar, start a great conflagration. All that was left of the city was tottering stone walls, and the flame would sweep clean a great deal of the loathsome debris of battle, and later we could bury the charred bones in an enormous pit.

That night a storm broke of violence rarely seen in Mexic, the greatest that old men could remember, and it was hard to believe that it was merely weather and not the work of the ousted, dishonored, and dying gods in their last fury of defeat. Bolt after bolt of lightning was hurled down, and the zigzag flashes illuminated the whole scene, revealing broken walls in vivid outline against the sky, and the rumbling and roaring thunder seemed the beating of a thousand such drums as that whose dismal throbs had plagued our souls, now silenced forever.

The wind howled as if all the damned souls in hell were giving voice to infinite despair. And high waves rushed down the lagoons before its mighty gusts, and some broke over the dikes, with great splashings, and the minds of all were stunned by this elemental violence. Was the world coming to an end with the death of the heathen gods? The mad thought engulfed my brain and I could hardly shake it off.

And then Marina came, holding Martin by one hand, and slipped the other into mine, and pressed my hand, and I saw her beauty in a great flash of lightning, a dozen or more bolts hurled at once. And it seemed that of all that had happened, and all that we had done, our victories and our defeats, she alone had clear meaning in my mind and soul.

CHAPTER 16

The Adventuress

1

Throughout the storm an endless stream of refugees made their pitiful way along the causeway, some so weak that they were blown off by the pitiless gusts. On these occasions only two or three stopped and looked down, then the desolate march went on. And all the next day, and the next night, and next day and night, it never ceased, the march of the half-dead, blindly seeking some mysterious restoration, a healing of their ghastly wounds, food and rest, and balm for broken hearts. And long from now, when the old and the middle-aged were dust and ashes in their graves, and the now-toddling children were aged folk, dimly peering, wearily tottering their last steps, they would still remember the last thunder of the last battle suddenly ceasing, and the beginning of the thunder in the heavens, reverberating from the most distant hills, and the wild lightning—so fit an epilogue to the last days of the Aztec Empire, when the Great Teules died. And none of these who had escaped with their lives would ever be the same. It would be as if they were reborn in a different world.

I reckoned the number of refugees at fifty thousand men, two hundred thousand women, and only about the same number of children, because from among these, in proportion to their numbers, famine and disease had taken the heaviest toll.

My plan of a great conflagration to clean the site of the ruined city was not put into practice, because of the healing agencies of nature, and its horrible living agents lessened the danger of pestilence. The sun that could cause decay could also heal; and the fetid mists had been blown and dispelled by the great storm. Something like a hundred thousand Indians, led by my Spaniards, worked at grave-digging and at mass burials, their wage was such booty as they could find on the pitiful dead. Since it was in small amount, most of the victims' treasures having been confiscated to support the war, their task being a most gruesome one, I did not deny them this.

To us Spaniards, who searched the ruined palaces and the burned-out temples, fell no more than a hundred and forty thousand gold castilians, worth about a million and a half silver ducats. No doubt many times this amount had been buried, or lost in the lagoons during the Battle of the Bridges, or perhaps cast into deep water to prevent its seizure by a greedy enemy.

I made presents to the caciques of my allied armies, praised them and their bravery, and promised further compensation from the Emperor, when he knew how well they had served. But their great payment was the vanquishment of the Mexics and the destruction of the city they had supported in utmost luxury, and the end of cruel oppression, and the reclamation of lost hope.

After some days of revelry at which Olmedo protested, but which I did not try to arrest, we held a great and solemn service of thanksgiving. He led the long procession, over which fluttered our holy banner, and the flags of Castile; and the men pronounced the litany, and exhibited our holy symbols. Then Olmedo spoke, urging fair treatment and no abuse of the conquered Indians, for only by the help and will of God had we made the conquest. Then some of my captains and I received the sacrament, and offered in prayer our thanks to the God of Battles.

On the next day I began the work of reorganization of the empire and its allied states. My chief counselor was Doña Marina, first of all; and also Father Olmedo and Sandoval lent their quick and able minds. But I went to many an aged cacique to seek advice. Successions of hereditary office must be assigned; border disputes prevented, new offices appointed; tribute and obedience to Emperor Charles assured, and Christian worship take the place of heathen practices. We expected minor troubles on the frontier, yet my soldiers were given long furloughs, one company at a time, and they enjoyed fishing in the clear lakes and mountain streams, and hunting deer, wild sheep, and even jaguars and cougars in the mountains and forests; and the pursuit of small game. Some of my officers took quarters in nearby towns that had escaped the desolation of war; and the Devil Rider Astores, because he was a man of means, rented from a great chieftain his summerhouse, erected on stilts on a clear and beautiful lake, fed by a mountain stream, only two miles from Tetzcuco.

This led to an underhand, perhaps dishonorable adventure on which Marina and I embarked together. My only excuse was an increased interest in Marie de Estrada, her mission here, and her connection with Bishop Fonseca that he would give her a warrant of inquiry. Both she and Juan

Astores had received letters from Spain forwarded by the Viceroy of Santo Domingo, and put aboard the ship that had brought me most valuable supplies. I thought this was a coincidence, but Doña Marina suspected something more than a casual flirtation between the two. At least this was what she told me, but I could never forget that Doña Marina, too, had secrets of her own, indeed a secret life that she did not share with me, and in this Marie might be in some way involved.

One of Marie's half-Spanish half-Moroccan maids had boasted to Sheba, Marina's Negro servant, that Astores had invited her mistress to a tête-à-tête dinner at his resort. Sheba had lost no time in confiding this to Doña Marina, and the latter made the bold and somewhat outrageous proposal that we spy on the pair. It would be perfectly easy, Marina told me. We had only to take one of the canoes from the landing and paddle silently under the lake house, and listen with all our ears.

"What fools we would look if we were caught," was my mild protest.

"We will not be caught. That I swear. There will be only a wisp of moon that night, and I can paddle a canoe without a splash. If worse came to worst you could say that you had heard the rumor that their letters had been in the handwriting of Velazquez, and although you did not believe it, you could not forget that both Marie and Velazquez were favorites of Bishop Fonseca and Astores had once served as Velazquez' alcalde in a Cuban town. And instead of spreading the rumor, no doubt false, you decided to make a private investigation as to what was between them."

"All we will hear is a sweet song of love, punctuated by pantings," I predicted.

"I would not object to hearing that. I would like to know how Marie goes about it, to get a priceless pearl from you, and a warrant from Bishop Fonseca."

In all truth, I was almost as eager as was Doña Marina to undertake the adventure. In herself, Marie was a fascinating mystery. I had the utmost admiration for her strength of will, whereby she had marched with us to a most perilous war, and for her bravery throughout that war. She and Marina had worked together as nurses after our battles and all honored her as a great noblewoman in secret and exciting service to the Crown. And it happened that Astores had given me an invitation to fish any day or night in the lake, teeming with fat trout.

Rather shamefacedly I agreed to Marina's plans. I made an excuse to visit in the late afternoon an old cacique living half a league from the lake,

and there I dismissed my orderly, telling him not to come for me until ten o'clock, but to keep my whereabouts secret. Marina would join me there, riding a horse that I could well spare her, and which she had mastered in one afternoon. Soon after nightfall I took hurried leave of my host, for I heard the clatter of the beast's hoofs on the stony road. We tied our horses some distance from the lake, and walked there, innocently carrying Indian fishing rods, which were strong timber stalks of a plant I did not know, resembling bamboo. Also I had a wooden bucket of small, fresh-water shrimp.

Marie had come hence in a litter. We saw her bearers' cooking fire some distance up the lake shore, and their shapes in its light; but they did not hear or see us. The new moon was so little and dim that we launched a canoe from the landing without the slightest danger of discovery. Marina paddled as do Indians when hunting waterfowl at night, in absolute silence. They managed this by turning the paddle blade edgewise as they drew it forward for the next stroke; although this slowed their pace.

The windows of the summerhouse, open for this warm night, were softly lighted as we approached and slipped between its pilings. Water is a natural sounding board; besides there were holes for ventilation in the floor, and we heard our quarries' voices as clearly as though we were in the room.

Evidently they had just completed dinner and Astores had dismissed his servant, who I guessed was fraternizing with the litter bearers on the lake shore. The two were seated on what was no doubt a splendid couch, commonly found in the palaces and the pleasure resorts of rich caciques.

"Well, if you had not refused the marquisate—what you did to be rid of it and go your wild way was obviously premeditated—you would have missed one of the great adventures of all history," Marie was saying.

"I am glad that you understand," Astores replied. "But in that adventure I lost almost all the true, real friends I had ever won or ever hope to win."

"What now, Juan? More wild ways?"

"Marie, I do not know. After serving under General Cortez, strangely driven, strangely inspired, he who held our heads above the sea of blood, any other service would seem tame." And then I was truly ashamed to be an eavesdropper on this great soldier and true nobleman.

"I honor the general as you do. However, now that Mexic is conquered, any other campaign that he commands will sicken in comparison. But why not conduct your own campaign? Why not secure an appointment as governor of one of the New World kingdoms? I think you could be an

independent governor. The general will certainly be made Governor of Mexic and nearby kingdoms, but I doubt if Bishop Fonseca will make him Viceroy of all New Spain: he does not believe in putting too great power in any one pair of hands. There are vast territories to the west and north to be opened for settlement, and the governor of one of these could have a wonderfully adventurous life."

"How could I procure such an office? I am attainted."

"Bah! Bishop Fonseca is a favorite of the Emperor, perhaps the foremost. He could arrange for your absolution in five minutes, without your succession of the marquisate being restored."

"And you, Marie," Astores remarked after a long pause, "are a favorite of Bishop Fonseca."

"I would hardly say that. If I did say it, it might imply a relationship between us that does not exist."

"The thought could not cross my mind. Yet you were given a very important warrant which shows his confidence in you."

"I wish I could claim that, Juan. The paper is impressive looking, but he knew perfectly well I would make no report to the Crown. He knew I wanted to visit the New World—I wanted adventure instead of the humdrum life I lived in Seville."

"Why should it be humdrum? You are beautiful—obviously you are a lady of high birth—you could have made a brilliant marriage. Court life, with its intrigue, and its closeness to great events, can hardly be called dull."

"I can't have that, Juan—I must live the life of an adventuress or I would have had no life worth living. You spoke of being attainted—you managed to be so by your own choice—you did not want the cares and responsibilities of the marquisate. May I tell you that I, too, am attainted, but not by my own will?"

"Marie, I do not understand what you mean."

"There is a blot on my escutcheon."

As she spoke those words, I remembered a cozy fire in a somewhat small, elegant house in Seville. They were precisely the same words she had spoken to me and I could remember the expression on her face, a little forlorn, deeply touching, her eyes brilliant from a sheen of tears, a smile of resignation on her face.

“Marie, you have told me very little about your family and early history,” Astores said, speaking very slowly. “It is possible that your father was guilty of treason, the real thing, perhaps for which he suffered death, not merely of a bawdy joke I told on Ferdinand at a great feast. Still, I don’t believe it.”

“Can you think of nothing else that would prevent my acceptance by a society to which one of my parents was born?”

“That is not a very hard riddle. I do think of something—in fact you gave it away when you said ‘one of my parents,’ not ‘my parents.’ It could mean that your father married far beneath him, or your mother far beneath her. But it could more likely mean that your father and mother were not married at all.”

“That is what I do mean.”

“That is Spanish society for you. Its poets sing of true love, but when true lovers make love, and for some reason cannot marry each other, the fruit of that true love is exiled.” Astores spoke with a rough note of anger in his voice. He was a great romanticist at heart—otherwise he would have never joined our *Corps Perdu*, and the ricochet of righteous anger is a strong sympathy for the person who has been wronged. As they spoke on, his whole manner toward her had changed. It was protecting and gentle.

She did not give any names, tell any facts. But she implied, as she had with me, indeed, she made perfectly plain to the dullest wits, that her father was a great lord and her noble mother had had a lover by whom she had had a child, and that child was hence beyond the pale. But she had made the best of it, taken her joy in art and learning, and finally in perilous adventure. Astores spoke glowingly of how she had never asked for help on the mountain passes, how she had never quailed in the darkest hours of the war, how she had sought no privileges, had eaten the rough food and slept in the hard beds, and had walked side by side with Marina as a nurse for the wounded.

And at that moment, Marina leaned toward me, put her lips against my ear, and whispered, “The fish is in the net.”

I was a little put out with Marina for saying this. Astores had told nothing less than the truth about Marie’s courage and what could only be called great sportsmanship. I remembered her, a sword in her hand, helping protect a wounded soldier in the Battle of the Bridges. It was true that she had had on her right side the deadliest swordsman in my force, but I felt ashamed that I should think of it, when it was only coincidence.

With what seemed embarrassment, Marie had changed the subject.

"Being the governor, the first governor of a new province of the Emperor, the first Spaniard to explore its mountains and rivers, to rule with justice instead of cruelty, to think always of the people and not his own purse—that would not appeal to you, Juan?"

"Marie, it would be a dream come true—provided I was fit to rule."

"It would be lonely duty. You would have a great burden on your shoulders. The only partner you could hope for, would be your wife, but I am sure that there are a good many—not a great number, I admit—Spanish girls of birth as high as your own, who would share your fortunes there. How old are you, Juan?"

"Thirty-seven."

"How old am I? I am almost thirty-four. You must choose a young wife, the daughter of a grandee; she would be your forever delight."

"You haven't told me how I am to obtain this governorship."

"I think it would be easily obtainable. My mother was closely connected with a very powerful man; he took a big-brotherly interest in her; she is dead but he still mourns her. He thinks I am like her—which is not in the least true—it is only his romantic dream. I can say so, Juan, without boasting."

"Bishop Fonseca!"

"Let us speak no more of it, now. However, please give it serious thought." And then I remembered what Marie had told me about my good-luck piece when I had just shown it to her; both of us had thought we would not meet again, and then she had remembered that a post of a ship's clerk was open, which necessitated our meeting again. But in the meantime I must not tell anyone about my talisman, and on no account show it to anyone, for that was supposed to reduce its power. Why should I remember this long-ago event so clearly? What had it to do with Astores and Marie? I did not like this yielding to base suspicion.

My thoughts had wandered; in the meantime Marie had begun speaking about her life in the West Indies.

"Were you there when Cordoba brought out his Indian hatchets with shafts of solid gold—but they proved to be brass?" Marie had asked in gay tone. "I was still in Spain, but I heard the story. I felt sorry for the poor fellow! But my friends thought it the best joke of the year."

"It was not Cordoba who brought home the hatchets. It was Grijalva."

"Juan, you are wrong. Cordoba himself told me about it—I am positive it was Cordoba. I am glad that I caught you in the mistake. You are such a cavalier—I know all about what you did at the Bridges—I won't say any more about it, for I don't want to embarrass my host—but you are an idol of the Indians about Vera Cruz—but even Homer was known to nod."

"You did not catch me in a mistake. I caught you in one."

"Juan, would you like to place a small wager?"

"Gladly. How much?"

"It would have to be little. I have only a few coins in my little purse. And I insist on paying bets on the spot—a matter of principle—but this time I won't have to pay."

"How many centavos? I will wager ten."

"I have only three or four. Well, I will be bold, because I am perfectly certain of winning. Will you place four centavos against a—why not be bold, for we are old friends now—a kiss?"

I bent and whispered in Marina's ear, glad that in the darkness she could not see me blush. The bet between Marie and me had concerned voyages of Columbus.

"I wish to go at once," I told Marina.

"And I wish to stay—and you can't paddle a boat without splashing."

The little farce continued—and as I listened, I concluded that farce was not the right word. Spanish farce was a caricature; the parts were overplayed. This was drama, and all the more compelling because, although I knew the argument, I could not grasp its ultimate theme. How could the bet be settled, Astores asked, when they had no book? Oh, but he had a book! Marie had noted it on his shelf when they had had lunch together and gone fishing. He was not going to get out of paying that easily!

She was right—Astores now remembered a brief account of recent voyages brought with some letters on the supply ship from Santo Domingo. He had not found time to read it.

I heard a little smack as Marie laid a closed book on a wooden table.

"Juan, you wouldn't like to double that bet, would you?" she asked, with a child's delight.

“Ten centavos against two kisses.”

“Shall I show you, or would you care to look?”

“You can show me.”

“Gladly. Here we are. Cordoba, left Cuba’s north coast in 1517 . . . Estero de Lagaratos[46] . . . Florida . . . Sails for Havana. Two captured Indians. Chest of gold . . . idols thought to be work of exiled Jews . . . Juan, it doesn’t mention the hatchets. . . . What book was it—?”

“I suggest, Marie, that you turn to the chapter of Grijalva.”

“I will look, but it won’t be there. Juan de Grijalva. Sailed April 5, 1518. River Tabasco . . . Decided to return to Cuba.” Then, after a long wait, “I’m afraid . . . Juan, I have to say it . . . I’m not going to get those ten centavos!”

“Let it be a lesson to you, Marie, not to be so positive with an old soldier!”

“Sit down, Juan.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Don’t ever say I do not pay my gambling debts.” And then there fell a long silence.

“Are you ready to leave, Marina?” I whispered in my companion’s ear.

“Not nearly,” she answered, “and don’t bother me.”

The two were speaking now, but almost in a whisper. She seemed to be explaining something; his responses were tender and sympathetic. Then in her earnestness, she spoke in a clearly audible tone.

“You must understand, Juan, only a very few times in my life have I ever yielded. The first time, when I was sixteen, to a great artist whom I idolized, and whose wife was in a madhouse. Once from sheer loneliness to a sailor lad—a boy of humble parentage but a gentleman in heart and spirit. Two—perhaps three times to my betrothed in Santo Domingo who died in an accident, but in true love of me had remembered me in his will. You are unmarried—I am also—you have not even an Indian sweetheart—you have fought a great and grievous war and looked into the eyes of death; so the sin, if there is any, would be venial. I want nothing from you but your respect and what affection we can freely give each other. But that much I must have. I am a lady of Spain.”

"That much I give you with a full heart," Astores replied, "and it may be—it is almost an intuition—that we will come to give each other far much more."

"Then turn down the light in your chamber very low, and I will come."

Then I tugged at Doña Marina's hand. She brushed my hand away.

"In the name of the Saints haven't you heard enough?" I whispered in her ear. "The conclusion is foregone."

"I am not so sure. . . . She is dealing with a very sensitive man, an idealist. I doubt if she knows it. If it happens as you think, he will marry her, and she is drunk with triumph. But she may—your own expression—overplay her hand. One little mistake now . . ."

I had heard the door close and a bolt slide home. Marie was undressing, I thought, but with modesty and in the darkest corner of a dimly lighted room. I remembered her lovely body. Astores caught glimpses of her pale flesh and was giving way to the most blissful anticipations. And then I heard Marie's voice, and I believed Doña Marina that, indeed, she was a little drunk with triumph. . . .

"Juan, I must confess something. It wouldn't have made any real difference, but I can't help but be glad you never went with an Indian girl."

"Some of them are very beautiful," he answered, in a faraway tone, "but I had been a soldier of fortune, and now I was fighting the first war that I could feel was almost a holy war, not just for the winning of another province for a king. I had no thought, no energy, for anything else but trying to help General Cortez win that war."

"General Cortez may be the greatest captain of our times, but he was not so dedicated as you were. Do you not believe he should have set an example for his followers by not taking an Indian woman?"

There fell a long silence and Marina caught and pressed my hand in intense excitement.

"I doubt if we could have won the war without Marina," Astores answered in quiet tones. "And Marie, my comrades in the *Corps Perdu*—only five of us are still alive—all had Indian girls."

"Thinking of it in that light, I am glad they did. They had some happiness—"

"And Marie, you must excuse me. I find I do not want to go through with this. We will remain good friends, and you have my replete respect, but the fires that you lit in me are going out, why I cannot explain to you. I have a bottle of excellent Burgundy being cooled in the lake—I have only to draw it up on a string. Let us dress and return to my hall and drink a toast to each other's happiness and welfare."

---

[46] The River of Alligators.

2

Doña Marina waited only a few seconds more. Marie had made no audible sound. Then my companion dipped her paddle in utter silence and the canoe began to move into open water. So we stole away, and neither of us spoke, and we gained the landing and beached the canoe. Marie's litter carriers were still seated about their cooking fire, smoking cigarros and toasting fish or meat. We made quietly up the road to where we had left our horses. These we walked until we were far out of hearing of the summerhouse, and then trotted the beasts to the house of the old cacique, where my orderly was waiting.

He gave me his salute, which I returned, and when Marina and I headed back toward the lights of Tetzcuco, he fell in behind us at a good distance, as was his wont.

"Well, Marina, the fish got out of the net," I remarked, riding close to her, and without the least danger of us being overheard.

"Yes, he did, more to your surprise than to mine. Male instinct is often conquered by nobler feelings. This fish was bigger than Marie knew."

"Marina, are you glad or sorry?"

"Hernan, I do not quite know. No one can blame Marie for her campaign, which I have seen developing ever since the battle, and it has met with crushing defeat. I can well imagine her humiliation and the almost murderous rage that she must conceal. If she had won, she would no longer be exiled from exalted society, and I have no doubt that very shortly she would be the marchioness of one of the noblest houses in Spain. But the fact remains that we would have seen no more of her here."

"And as it is, she is still at large?"

"At large. That expression means—unconfined. She will move again in some other direction. Not toward you—she knows now that would be no use."

"That statement could be called a boast, a sureness of yourself which is always dangerous, but I must admit you speak the truth."

"Captain Alvarado is head over heels in love with his little princess. There remains, in Vera Cruz, Señor Farfan. I keep thinking that her truly great love—lust I should say—is for gold. Some of our kings and caciques have had it, not for what it will buy, but the thing itself. I thought I saw it in her face on the night before the flight when you let everyone take as much treasure as he desired. But she does not disdain great jewels."

"Marina, that remark is hardly worthy of you."

"Pardon me, Malinche, my beloved. Truly I did not mean to remind you of that dealing, so soon after the reminder which you received tonight. I was thinking that jewels can be sold for gold. And do you observe that her ornament is almost invariably gold rather than jewels? What of the jewels she chose from the chests of Montezuma, when she realized she must travel light? I do not think they are at present in her possession. She may have sent them to Spain on one of the ships that carried your letters to the Emperor, but I think she lost them in the first water gap. She dropped something and tried to get it—in my awful pain I grabbed her hand just in time. She uttered one wail—then very bravely fought for her life. But as far as we know, Señor Farfan has neither gold nor jewels in great abundance. What did she want of him? Nothing, after she had set her heart on Astores, but that venture failed."

"Can we not give her credit for being drawn to some kind, good man such as Farfan by natural affection?"

"I will try, Hernan, but it is difficult."

"She once asked, her question addressed to herself as much as to me, what she wanted of me. I was eighteen; she was seventeen; I had no money, no great name, no brilliant prospects."

"I suppose she saw something in your face."

"She permitted me to kiss her. She arranged it so I would dare. And she told me that if I were captain, even of a small vessel, she believed she would sail with me."

"That is no great wonder. A great many people have looked into your face, and heard your voice and did sail with you. Would you have let her?"

"I can't answer that. *Only the gods can look down the road we did not take*."

"I am glad, Hernan, you did not take that road."

And then Marina must swing off her horse and toss the reins to my orderly, for we had gained my quarters, and she must run like a deer to look at Martin, sleeping in the little cradle I had made and put in reach of Marina's and my bed. And when I joined her there, and we had looked down at the toddler, his pale-brown face rosy with sleep, Marina took my hand, and spoke in low tones.

"Whatever happens, provided he lives, will he be legitimatized, and your heir?" she asked.

"Most certainly, but I do not like to hear you say 'whatever happens.'"

"I must say it. I must get your promise. So will you pledge me, in his sweet presence and in the presence of the angels that must hover over the beds of innocent babes, and sometimes weep in thought of the long, rough roads that they must walk—that you will not put him aside for the son of some noble Spanish lady, the daughter of a great grandee who also has borne you sons?"

"Marina, you ask me and I will answer, although the question stabs at my heart, and I know not why. If it is my fate to wed a very princess of Castile, I pledge you in the ever presence of God, Martin Cortez will be my heir and among any other children my best beloved."

Marina's eyes filled with tears. "I cannot tell you, Hernan, what sweet happiness that promise gives me. I will never speak of it again; because your saying it, as you did say it, causes it to be not merely the expression of a present intention but an established fact. I will be happy with you as long as we are together. All things end on this earth; all happiness is temporal unless it be that of Heaven which is beyond my ken. So I will take what is given, and my heart will be light, and we will try to shut from our minds the awful sorrows we have seen, although we can never expel them from our hearts and souls and perhaps we should not try. But we will remember with glory and wonder, the fort that the soldiers made about me, and the last ride of the *Corps Perdu* and other great heroism our eyes have seen. And now let us undress and go to bed, and let us make love to each other before I go to sleep in your arms, and our joined dreams will be sweet."

From the tedious work of administration, Marina and I found pleasant relief in laying out, on paper, the new city of Mexico the building of which I hoped could be completed in five years. It also provided a little balm for my troubled heart, because the destruction of the old city, of utter military necessity in our late campaign, would have been unnecessary except for my blunder in leaving Pedro Alvarado in command of my garrison when I was away dealing with Narvaez.

My wish was that it be as beautiful a city as any in Europe. Through the munificence of God in providing its setting, it might well be more beautiful than any there. We planned to widen the streets and cut others, because the canals could never be restored to their former use and charm, and wheeled vehicles, carriages, carts, and wagons, must largely take the place of canoes.

Plaza Mayor would occupy the great square where had stood Montezuma's palace and the mighty teocalli. On the site of the temple of the war god, above the very ruins of the images, would rise a beautiful cathedral that I hoped would be dedicated to St. Francis, whose very name was associated with humanitarianism and mercy. In one corner of the square, we visioned the Palace of the Viceroy, its walls of stone, and with thousands of cedar beams. Marina suggested a Franciscan Convent at Aviaru, to be erected by some great architect. The region of Tlatelolco where the Mexics made their last stand was highly suitable for Spanish houses. Here also I visioned a great fortress, to be named Matadero, with at least seventy cannon; for I did not try to persuade myself that some other great Indian confederacy would not revolt and try to wrench back into heathendom the holy city.

Nor would these cannon lack powder. There was an unlimited amount of saltpeter available in nearby limestone caverns, sulfur could be obtained in lavish quantities around the mouths of volcanoes, and there was abundant wood to make charcoal.

The time came that I must say farewell, for some months if not years or perhaps forever, to the Tlaxcatecs, the most faithful of our allies during the great war. While a great many had deserted after our well-nigh shattering defeat at the Battle of the Causeways, almost all of these had returned to duty after the failure of the prophecies of the priests and the astrologers of our destruction within eight days; and these had fought in the final battle, and many had died. To their great cacique I made my solemn vow that if it were within my power I would prevent any of their nation ever being sold

into slavery. Also I gave him rich gifts and largess to all his men; and lesser gifts to the chiefs and the troops of less-constant allies.

Leaving administration officers and a garrison of volunteers, most of whom had Indian wives or concubines greatly beloved, the main of my force set off for Vera Cruz. Here were letters to me from the Duke of Bejar, my father's fast friend, and always my supporter. Although he wrote that the times were troubled in Spain, because of feuds between great houses, and Charles was away in Germany, and Don Adrian had been left as his preceptor, still the people and many great folk at court were my partisans against Bishop Fonseca and his tool Velazquez, and more would become so when the late news of my reconquest of Mexic had been noised abroad. The situation might become worse before it bettered, but that bettering was inevitable when the full truth was known.

The most imposing letter, of heavy vellum, and bearing the royal seal, was addressed not to me but to Captain the Honorable Juan Astores. Not an hour passed before he came to tell me its import. According to the date of its writing, before Emperor Charles had left Spain, its delivery had been delayed for about two months, probably at Santo Domingo, a mystery Astores could not explain. But its contents were plain enough, no less than blunt, and it was signed by Charles' imperial hand.

Astores' younger brother, Antonio Aragaza, late heir to the Marquisate of Teruel, having died gloriously in Italy, the Emperor had seen fit to absolve the attaintment put upon Don Juan Aragaza e Astores by the late King Ferdinand, and to designate him as the lawful heir, he would bear the title at his father's demise. Thus it was the Emperor's desire for Don Juan Aragaza e Astores' return as soon as possible to Spain, to prepare himself for his responsibilities and his duties to God and Crown as the future Marquis de Teruel.

"I need not ask as to your answer," I remarked.

"The expressed wish of the Emperor is a command," he answered, with a faintly bitter smile.

"I will miss you, Juan."

"Why? I am a dead man already. My soul died with those of my companions at the Battle of the Bridges."

"By God, it lived again at the Battle of the Water Gap of Woe."

"Aye, that day it lived indeed, and the men crossed at the gap. And as we part, I wish you to know that except for these summons I would have

followed your banner as long as it flew aloft, and served you, not asking your cause, with such power as I have; and in the future, whether I am marquis or what else, my sword is yours at your lightest call. Farewell!"

He knelt and kissed my hand, and when he rose we embraced, and we thought upon what we had shared together, and we both wept.

4

When I told Doña Marina, her eyes glimmered, and she made only one remark, extraneous to the main subject.

"I wonder how that letter came to be delayed in Santo Domingo—or quite possibly in a pigeonhole in a desk at the chancellery in Seville?"

The question would never be answered. Anyway, it did not matter for although the heir to a marquisate could not by the unwritten law of Spanish nobility knowingly propose marriage to a woman of blotted escutcheon, the delay of the letter had not served Marie's purpose, and instead had cost her a humiliating and unredeemable defeat. And Juan's loss, if it could be called that, was Farfan's gain. Within one month after Marina's and my eavesdropping, this plain, good man, owner of no great estate near Vera Cruz, announced his betrothal to Marie de Estrada, and went about beaming with happiness.

A few days after the ceremony, which both Marina and I attended, arrived Christobal de Tapia, whom I had sent back from Mexico, along with Narvaez, lately in Santo Domingo. They had instructions from Don Adrian, Preceptor of Charles V, to put me under arrest, Tapia to assume my duties as commander in chief of the Emperor's forces until such time as a board of inquiry could sit on certain questions. These were, first, if I had sent to the Emperor his rightful fifth of the taken treasure; second, if I had dealt fairly with Guatemuza; and third, if I had acted without authority; and fourth, if I had conspired against Velazquez.

It appeared that the righteous indignation of Tapia and Narvaez at my despotic, if not treasonable conduct had declined somewhat, and hence their belligerence, with every day's widening of the distance between them and the imposing presence of the Government House, the chancelleries, and the strong-walled jail, and all other signs of ministerial power at Santo Domingo. The closer they had drawn to our wild shores, with a few towns and villages, unexplored rivers, formidable mountains, and numerous savage tribes of Indians, the greater their sense of caution. When I received them,

with utmost courtesy, they were not in the least bellicose, and when in their honor I had my whole force parade before them, in full armor, our banners flying, our horses prancing, our cannon not lugged but drawn on wooden wheels by gangs of laborers, I felt that diplomacy would be an empty form.

In truth, I met Tapia alone, he being the bearer and designator of Don Adrian's orders, and we drank wine and discussed old times. He did not wish to act hastily, he said. Now on the ground, he perceived that the situation was a good deal different than rumor had it, both in Seville and in Santo Domingo. At this point I asked whether, along with his official mission, he and Narvaez had brought trade goods and other salable property, which was the custom of most official and non-official visitors to New Spain. He replied that not to waste space aboard the ship, he and Narvaez had six horses, four milk cows, a great many cases of wine and a few of Italian brandy, and several hundredweight of farm tools.

"All those things are greatly needed here," I told him. "In fact, I myself would like to buy them, for the development of various plantations, and because of our shortage, I will pay a handsome price."

When in an offhand manner he inquired of the amount, I replied in the same tone that I would pay a thousand castilians, equivalent of ten thousand silver pesos, he replied that I was indeed generous, and that he accepted gladly, and there was no need for him to consult Narvaez before concluding the bargain.

So it happened that the ship remained in port about ten days, while trade goods brought by the crew were profitably sold or traded for cloth and slaves. Meanwhile, both gentlemen and ship's officers had visited at settlers' homes in and about Vera Cruz, among them the handsome and beautifully furnished home of Señor and Señora Farfan. Then the entire company, except for a few uncaught deserters, set sail for Santo Domingo.

Some more months passed with only small event, including a march, led by Sandoval, on a tribe of refractory Indians north of Xocotla. The marriage of Marie and Señor Farfan seemed an unqualified success. The two entertained a good deal and in quite high style, doubtless by means of funds supplied by Marie. Newcomers to New Spain on ships no longer a rarity, prospective settlers, merchants, and a scattering of wives for reunion with long-absent husbands, invariably were invited to see the ruins of what was once a great teocalli on the Farfan estate. Indeed, it was the señor's pride; trees that obstructed views having been cut away, weeds dug out, and an old pathway cleared for easier entrance and egress. But no ancient stone was

moved from its place, and no tumble-down wall restored. He wanted his guests to see it just as the Hand of Time had shaped it, and his preoccupation with it seemed to me at once delightful and vaguely touching.

Yet it seemed that the thing that he loved became his destroyer.

From time to time loose stones tumbled from a decaying wall; and one morning one of his servants came wildly riding to my headquarters to tell me sorrowful news. While digging up the root of a tree that he feared was undermining the wall, a rock from the top had fallen, striking him on the head, killing him instantly. I sent my alcalde at once, along with stretcher-bearers, and within an hour I, too, was on the scene.

One of the Spanish-Moroccan girls received me, saying that her mistress had retired in shock and grief to her chamber, but she would speak to me if I so desired. I said I would certainly not intrude upon her privacy, and talked to the alcalde, who had already questioned a gardener and other Indian employees. The only witness to the unfortunate event had been Marie herself, and she was not actually a witness, because she had been some hundred yards distant, planting some poinsettias, and was gazing in another direction. Señor Farfan had made no outcry—the block of stone weighed fully eighty pounds and had fallen about eight feet—but she had heard its heavy thud against the ground. The wall itself had leaned slightly outward, and Farfan's foreman had warned his master repeatedly that it should be either repaired or torn down, but it had been part of the original wall of the teocalli, and he would not hear of any alteration.

The alcalde reported to the Council of Vera Cruz that the gentleman had come to his death by most unfortunate accident. The coffin was not opened at the funeral ceremony, because the victim's skull had been broken, hence there were few morbid sight-seers at the crowded church. But all officials and most European settlers attended; and quite a number of decorous Indians sat in the rear pews or squatted in the aisles, because Farfan had been a kind master and a friend of many hard-pressed native families. Marie was, of course, in the front pew, wearing a heavy veil, her demeanor dignified with the self-control of the highborn; yet she did not speak, and could only shake her head, when offered condolence.

Her husband's remains were buried in the churchyard and in due course a marker was placed at the head of the grave, along with a rough but impressive image, carved by an Indian stone worker, of St. Iago, the patron saint of Farfan and of many soldiers.

Marie received visits from officials and friends during this period, always with the utmost dignity, saying very little about her loss, and usually with dry eyes. She appeared in black at the official reading of his will, which was brief and simple, leaving all his possessions to his loving and greatly beloved wife, the former Marie de Estrada. But she confessed to Marina and me that she hated the ruins of the teocalli, that the sight of it was poisoning her life, and under these circumstances she knew that her late husband would want them torn down and the ground replanted and set with royal palm trees.

The work began and Doña Marina, who from her Indian friends heard all that happened in the colony of any note, told me that it was most carefully performed by a hundred or more Indians closely watched by three or four trusty slaves. The walls were not blasted down with gunpowder, or knocked down by battering-rams; it amounted to moving the stones one by one. The same was true of the foundations, and the delving seemed much deeper than necessary.

"The plain truth is, Hernan, that Marie is treasure-hunting," Marina burst out when we were watching the stars come out, Martin sound asleep within a mosquito net.

I started to answer in gentle reproof, when I remembered an incident of some digging my troops had done, on the site of a small, long-vanished *cu* in Mexic, when we were setting about to erect a chapel. They had found quite a number of gold bracelets and necklaces and other Aztec ornaments, tossed there as offerings to the god that the *cu* was to house. When I had wondered at it, a Tabascan Indian told me that this was a common practice in the building of the foundations of *cues* in ancient days among his own people, and the offerings had been almost incredibly numerous and rich when a great teocalli was to be raised to house one or more of the Great Teules. Kings and great caciques were lavish in their gifts, for gold, though precious even then, was far more abundant in ancient times than now.

"If she finds a great deal of gold," Marina went on, speaking very softly, "it will go far toward comforting Marie for the loss of a beloved husband."

"I agree with you, Marina, but I do not like to hear you say it. I do not want to think about it."

"Malinche, in your life you have had to contemplate a great many matters which you would like to ignore or forget. There was once a murder in your army—it was not premeditated—but as a bachelor of law you saw it was murder just the same, and you ordered the man hanged. Even

premeditated murder—a term you use—may have mitigating circumstances. The murderer might be crazy in some way—he might harbor a terrible grudge against life itself—perhaps God Himself—or be possessed, as we Indians believe, by a demon. Still, he must be hanged or at least kept in jail. Now an accident has happened to a husband when a person who would benefit by his death was on the scene. That person believed a rich treasure was to be found in the walls and foundations of a great, ancient teocalli now in ruins, but in her husband's lifetime he would not let one stone be moved. She was a woman who spends a great deal of money—she must have it and spend it to atone for something of which she had been denied—we heard with our own ears her failure to seduce, by which she might marry, a man of great name and riches. It is possible that she knew his young brother had been killed and his attaintment had been removed; and when he would hear of it, knowing he had become heir of a marquisate, he could no longer ask a woman of blotted escutcheon to be his wife. But if they were already formally betrothed, that unwritten law of the nobility was no longer binding. As a gentleman first, and as a member of that order second, he would keep his word."

"Marina, there are too many 'possibles' in what you say, not enough facts."

"Let me go on. That venture failed. So she must take her second-best chance, which was to marry Farfan and find a great treasure under the ruins of the teocalli. And remember, she was thirty-six, an age when not many chances of a rich marriage come to a Spanish girl, especially one with no great established fortune and a blot on her escutcheon."

"You reminded me that I am a lawyer," I told Marina, having assembled my thoughts. "Not a word you have said would have weight in court. True, she wanted a rich husband. Many a girl has married for riches, not love. The alcalde found no evidence that Farfan had been murdered. True, she believed that a great treasure might be found in the ruins, and after her husband's death, she was free to try to retrieve it, and the point could be made that this was a motive for murder, but there is no *de facto* evidence. Marie does not try to conceal her bastardy from people to whom the fact would have any importance. She loves gold, she may have a miser's craving for it; but she is not a miser, she spends freely of what she has. Born a bastard, she may be bitterly jealous of a girl cousin of whom she told me, inferior to her in everything but name and wealth. She may have suffered humiliations of which she does not speak, but for which she wishes to atone.

"But there is no reason to believe in what might be called 'bad blood,'" I went on as in a courtroom. "There is no evidence against her story that her mother was a truly noble lady who had a lover, base-born perhaps, but that we do not know; we have cause to believe her story that Bishop Fonseca had a big-brotherly love for her mother, and we know that he gave Marie a warrant whereby she could pursue her adventurous life. He may have let her live free in a house he owned in Seville—now and then he lent her his carriage—he did not want her to follow in her mother's footsteps and fall in love with a nobody, and it may have been—I believe it was—his hand that wielded the whip when he discovered her entertaining in her bedroom, a youth of no great name and no fortune. In the mind of a judge, her story would hang together. She is a liar, but so are many other women. No one can deny her native aristocracy—it is in her face—or her culture and intelligence. And certainly we cannot suspect her of cruel and savage murder of a good man without factual evidence."

"You forget one little thing, Malinche."

"I do not know what it is."

"It was something that Marie told Astores when we were eavesdroppers. She was once betrothed to some man of wealth in Santo Domingo, and he died an accidental death, and she was handsomely remembered in his will."

"Oh, the devil!" I broke out, after a long, thoughtful silence. "Our most interesting—inventive—even fascinating Marie de Estrada will have to be watched."

5

Across the waters, Fortune smiled so benignly upon my pursuits that all the way to the New World I ought to have been warned. Although I had not the least notion what had happened, yet in that period before I learned the truth I had indeed felt lighthearted as to my political prospects. Still, I could not get rid of a dark spot in my heart that I could not probe or yet illuminate. I knew only it had to do with Doña Marina.

Following a brisk campaign in the Panuco region, with no small deal of savage fighting, after which I had celebrated my victory with the founding of a new town, Santisteban del Purero, in the autumn of the year 1522, I was prepared to send an imposing embassy to the Emperor Charles. My ambassadors would be Quinones and Davila; my chief argument was a gorgeous present of gold and jewels. The former was forty-five thousand

pesos, including some exquisite pieces of goldsmithery, and jewels of incalculable value. One of these was, perhaps, the largest emerald known on earth, pyramidic in shape, with a base as wide as my palm. Also, they would bear the proper and necessary letters of allegiance, a description of new states and provinces won to his Crown, and the impressive number of heathen temples destroyed and of truly a vast horde of infidels baptized in the true Faith.

Although I did not know it yet, the journey began with a series of disasters. The ship had to fly to the Azores to escape pirates, and there Quinones fought a duel consequential to a love affair and was seriously wounded. Making for Spain, they were chased by the famous free-booter, Jean Florin, who overtook our vessel, grappled her, sacked her, and made off with the mighty tribute. Florin was a French Protestant; his conscience would not tolerate such lavish treasure falling into the hands of a Catholic Emperor; so he bore the whole booty to his own king, Francis I.

But King Francis showed it to everyone, including Charles' ambassadors, and the word of it was noised abroad; and the Emperor began negotiations for its return. About then met the board appointed to investigate Cortez, and around the table were some of his mightiest subjects, Bishop Fonseca not being in the number. Charles' own chancellor, Gattinara, was the greatest dignitary, but hardly second was the Duke of Bejar, a close friend of my faithful friend Puertocarrero. Every charge against me was dismissed. The magnitude of the conquest of Mexic was finally recognized. Fonseca had suffered severe defeat in the mere convening of the board; and its findings might well send him plummeting toward obscurity.

Months before, the Emperor, returning from Holland, had made me Governor and Chief Justice of New Spain with a splendid salary; the document was duly signed by the Imperial hand in October of the year 1522. The defeat of Fonseca was indeed dire; although he might in time regain some of his lost power. But in the wake of that great ship was the longboat of Velazquez, and it was overwhelmed by the backwash of the wreck. I need never again consider him a formidable antagonist.

How these great doings in Europe would affect Marie de Estrada's fortunes remained to be seen. Most certainly she would not be the gainer.

Yet, when she emerged from mourning, she appeared at a dinner that Marina and I gave to Señor de Quexo, whom Fonseca had sent to make trouble for me. I already knew of my vindication, that the official document and a personal letter from the Emperor had been dispatched, so I could

extend rich hospitality and courtesies to the emissary whose machinations were already doomed. He sat at Doña Marina's right hand. On his right hand sat Marie; and because of the warrant she held from his own master he devoted to her his most assiduous attentions. He especially admired a forearm ornament, made in one piece, not very thick but fully five inches long, split lengthwise and with enough elasticity that she could slip it on over her hand. I, too, was taken by it, for by my best guess it was many centuries old. It depicted a stylized sun, with rays, in *repoussé* work.

"How did you come by such a treasure?" De Quexo asked in a moment of stillness at the table. Aware of that stillness, and of many eyes upon her, Marie answered soberly and to some length.

"It is a strange story, señor. My estate, left to me by my husband, Pero Sanchez Farfan, contained the site of an ancient teocalli, the word meaning a huge temple to the Aztec gods. Pero was killed by the fall of one of the stone blocks from the top of an old wall. From thence forward, I could not bear the sight of the ruins on which he had lavished so much affection, and which had caused his death, so I determined to remove them. Because I thought to keep its stones intact, hoping they could be used in the building of a holy church, the curse upon them thus lifted forever, I had my workmen remove them with care, instead of reducing them to rubble. In a little hollow cut between four of the stones I found this bracelet."

"Magnificent!" Señor de Quexo exclaimed.

"My good fortune—in this one respect—did not stop there. Finding it, caused me to remember how someone had told me that in the building of the great temples, offerings of gold were often made to the ground on which the temple would stand or were walled up in the foundation. I could not remember who my informant was—it was soon after my arrival—I was seeing and hearing so many wonders that I gave it no thought—but I have a feeling, Doña Marina, that it was you."

"It might easily have been I, but I do not remember," was Marina's grave answer.

"In any event, I had all that remained of the structure, the foundation, and the ground beneath, searched as carefully as possible. I must say that I found nothing as handsome as this bracelet, but everything I did find my Indians tell me is most ancient."

"How much was its total value?" inquired De Quexo, an ill-mannered fellow.

Marie's expression changed. Apparently, she was somewhat embarrassed.

"Let us say six thousand silver ducats, and that is probably an overestimate, certainly not under."

Conversation moved sideways to another topic. I was thinking that six thousand ducats was four or five times the worth of the total estate of my father, Hidalgo Martin Cortez, but according to Marie's standards, a small fortune indeed. I had no reason to doubt the estimate—I could see no gain for Marie by lying—and I suspected that the most likely places in the ruin for the finding of gold had long ago been searched. Only Marie's careful sifting had divulged this much.

"Marina, did you tell Marie about gold being frequently found in the foundation of old *cues*?" I asked, when we two were again alone.

"I remember now that I did."

"Rather lately?"

"No, before our second march to Mexic."

"We wondered then at her interest in Farfan. Later, she switched it to Astores, much bigger game, but we both know why it was switched back. But your memory was not sharp at the dinner party."

"I had reasons for it to be dimmed," was a quiet reply that caused the subject to drop. And a fact I had long surmised was now my certain knowledge—in accomplishing her own designs, Doña Marina was as apt a liar as Marie. But always she had a nobler cause.

In three days arrived the ship bearing the Emperor's letters.

Velazquez had not managed to set boiling even one small pot. The missives included my patent as Governor and Chief Justice of New Spain, and a most generous letter of praise of me and my followers, and a thrilling giving of Imperial thanks. Truly, I had come a long way from the youth who daydreamed on a farm in Extremadura; but I had a long way to go, such as the discovery and the conquest of the yet unknown lands, vastly enlarging the expanse of New Spain, before I reached my destination. I had not yet been made a duke, or even a marquis; I had been made governor but not viceroy, the two duties greatly similar, but the emoluments and the honors and pomp pertaining thereto vastly greater in the case of the latter. One was appointed to rule under the king, the other was to rule in place of the king.

Unless my star made swift descent I would doubtless receive a noble title, vast grants of land, and become eligible to marriage with the daughter of a great Castilian, and thus found the noble house of Cortez. Yet my thoughts refused to linger on this last prospect. Indeed they balked at any contemplation that involved Doña Marina beyond tomorrow.

My intention was to make official announcement of my honors on the fifteenth of February, the Emperor's birthday, not far off; along with a great fete, including a grand review of my army with the dignitaries of the colony watching from a grandstand. Actually, I assumed the duties at once, so far no different than before except the addition of my exalted office inscribed below my signature on important letters. Yet behind Doña Marina and my secretary and treasurer, it so happened that Marie was the first to hear the news of my appointment.

Numerous horses had arrived on the last boats, and I could spare one as a gift to Marie, in token of my gratitude for her valiant services in the Mexic Campaigns. She was already a splendid equestrian, and an errand concerning a boundary line brought her to Government House, as my official quarters must now be called, when the Imperial warrant and letter were still warm from my hands. I sent word for her to call at my private office.

"How are you, Hernan, and are you happy?" she inquired. "You look so."

"I have had favorable news," I answered, "and from now on you must not address me in public by my Christian name; but pray omit the formality in our private conversation."

"That must mean you have a title of nobility along with your position of captain-general. I hope this is true, for the good God knows you deserve it." Her voice was cordial, and her eyes appeared extraordinarily bright, although their brilliance seemed more suggestive of well-controlled excitement rather than of congratulation.

"No, I am not made even a don. But I am officially the Governor of New Spain, and so I am entitled to be addressed as Excellency."

She drew a sharp breath and exhaled it slowly. I could not tell whether she was glad or sorry; I knew only that she was astonished in the extreme. It came to me that she had expected, from my first words, that I had been made a don, an honor frequently given to successful military commanders.

“Governor!” she echoed; and I knew she could hardly believe her ears. “Well, you were that, already, in fact; but it must be you have received the official warrant.”

“Would you like to see it?” I asked, with an impulse of malice not in the least justified.

“I assume it is signed by Bishop Fonseca, Minister of Indian Affairs, in the name of the Emperor. I am well acquainted with his handsome signature, and I need not see it again.”

“The signature of His Grace is not on it. It is signed by the Emperor.”

“This can mean only that the charges against you have been dismissed by the Board of Inquiry.”

“Yes.”

“You said of all New Spain, not merely the kingdoms of your present conquests?”

“Yes, my dominion extends from Vera Cruz to the Ocean Sea in the west, and north through Florida, and southward to Darien and Venezuela. In fact all the lands claimed by Spain except, of course, the Islands.”

“If, indeed, Velazquez is your enemy, which is commonly reported, it must be that his power is in decline.”

“I think that a warrantable assumption.” And this was an understatement to say the least.

“Then it must be he has lost the favor of Bishop Fonseca?”

“Or of the Emperor himself,” I replied in careless tones.

Marie craved to ask one more question. I could almost see it panting on her tongue. But she bit it back.

“It is only your deserving, my lord—Hernan, I will say, as you gave me leave,” she said in a warm voice after pause. “You honor me by letting me be among the first to know it. And it is my honor too, in a measure, because I was in your company in the Second Conquest.”

When she left, I kissed her hand. By strict punctilio, she should have knelt and kissed mine. No little water had gone over the dam since I had kissed it the first time, at the conclusion of a festival to St. Vincent in Seville, far away in time and space.

CHAPTER 17

Death Strikes at Night

1

A minor incident, occurring some days later, involved Marie. A soldier named Villa, who had belonged to the Narvaez contingent in my army and who was absent from our first roll call after leaving Mexic and whom I had counted among the dead or eaten, had appeared, in rags and half-starved, in Vera Cruz. His story was, reported to my captains, that weakness from a bleeding wound had caused him to fall out of ranks on the first day's march from Mexic; but later he had rallied a little strength, hidden from our pursuers, made his way northward, and finally found shelter in an Indian village. To his vast regret, sickness had prevented his return to my army on my second march; still he had fought at the Battle of the Bridges and believed he was entitled to at least half a common soldier's share, if not a whole, of such gold as was saved from our first disastrous flight.

On the contrary, his captain told me that he believed Villa had remained with our fugitive army until just before the Battle of Otumba, and then wilfully deserted. Moreover, he had gained the region of Vera Cruz one or more months ago, and had lived with an Indian family. Meanwhile, he had tried to discover his status on the rolls, whether listed as a casualty, a prisoner, or a deserter.

I agreed to see him briefly, and asked him how he had paid his way during his extensive journeys and his stay in the immediate region.

"I had a few small gold pieces I had not lost in the Battle of the Bridges," he replied, "as well as a gold bracelet I had forced on my own wrist, under my jerkin. I had taken it from the chests in the palace on the night of our flight, and I sold it to a widow lady, at whose house I begged for some old clothes of her dead husband. She let me have a pair of boots, far too big for me, and the weight of the gold bracelet as counted in silver ducats. But I have spent these too, while aworrying whether to come to

headquarters, afeared I might be accused of desertion, instead of being bad hurt which is God's truth."

"Was the bracelet thin, about half a foot long, with an image of the sun worked in the gold?"

"I saw a raised circle, with lines running out from it, but I don't know whether it stood for the sun."

I dismissed the detail for a moment, while considering the man's claim. I could not have him hanged because of his captain's vague charge, and I certainly did not want him in my forces. But there was no doubt he had been present, and had probably fought in the tragic battle, so I awarded him three hundred silver pesos and proposed he obtain a job on one of the new plantations, or ship as an apprentice seaman on some ship bound for the Islands.

When he had gone, I gave thought to the matter of the bracelet. Unquestionably it was the same that the "widow lady," Marie, had claimed to have found in taking down a stone wall, and which had inspired her to make a careful search of the whole ruin. I had merely caught her in a lie intended to conceal that from first to last her sole interest in Farfan was the ruins of the ancient teocalli on his estate. Doña Marina had waked that interest by merely playing a girl's trick to deflect such designs as Marie might have on me.

Then by a little deeper thought I decided that those designs had not been elaborate or determined, especially since, a few days after her arrival, she heard of the Mexic revolt. They had not been strengthened by my second conquest; and the only good reason that I could postulate was that she did not think I would get very far in wealth or position, because of my powerful enemies in Cuba and in Seville itself. If this had been her opinion, she had been mistaken.

I decided not to mention the matter of the bracelet to Marina. She needed no extra spur to keep close watch on Marie. It gave me a boyish satisfaction to keep one secret from her when she kept so many from me. Also, into one whole side of her mind and soul I had had no glance whatever, what I could call the Indian side. Many things that she felt and believed in this hemisphere would utterly confound me, and therein she had scouted things I felt and believed, dismissed them as one more aberration of these peculiar white-skinned creatures who had come out of the Sun.

The fact remained that another of Doña Marina's prophecies came true.

The occasion was the arrival of the *Santa Agatha*, a fine, large ship whose home port was Santo Domingo. She had put in at the harbor of Ayagualco, a poor port, because of her rudder being bent by a near collision with a basking whale, and she needed repairs before her captain dared essay the channel into Vera Cruz. Happily, the passengers' arrival at our capital need not be long delayed, for a caravel was lying there, and they could transfer themselves and their baggage and endure only one night's cramping to gain their destination.

Immediately after dropping his anchor, Captain Manuel of the caravel called on me in Cuyoacan, near Vera Cruz, where I made my summer headquarters, it being cooler there, and untroubled by mosquitoes, the pest of the capital. Manuel informed me that my wife Catalina was aboard the *Santa Agatha*, with two maids, but she had declined passage on his caravel, saying she would wait at Ayagualco until I could send equipage proper for the First Lady of New Spain.

Catalina! In this last year her existence had crossed my mind about once a day. I had consoled myself that she would never want to face the discomforts of this lonely land, especially since I had obtained and maintained for her a large house in Santo Domingo, where she lived in some state. In truth, there had been no prospect of her coming until this coast had been made secure against Indian attack, but I had assumed she had not realized that this security had been obtained; and in my rare letters to her I had mentioned every little tribal dispute within twenty leagues, to be settled by a corporal's guard; and I had not remarked on their triviality or distance, and left the impression these had put the civil population in peril.

This had meant only one thing; that I had not wanted her to come. I respected her highly but my brief infatuation with her had burned out even before our marriage, and was now dry ash. When I had, indeed, faced the issue, I had pictured an amicable dissolution of the marriage on the grounds of my long desertion and my numerous proven infidelities, of course with a lavish money settlement toward which she would have a natural leaning. But my being made Governor of New Spain had pricked these bubbles of my fancy. In her girlhood she had been told by an astrologer that she would become a fine lady, the wife of a famous man, and now that it had come true, she wished to enjoy the condition.

God knew I could not blame her for this; besides I remembered her as a sweet woman without serious faults, the greatest being prodigality; although I suspected by the tone of her letters she had turned somewhat sour.

"Did she say anything else—any message to me—that you recall?" I asked.

Captain Manuel was a young man with a fine, thin Valencian skin, subject to sudden flushes.

"Yes, my lord, she did. But I am loath to repeat it, despite her instruction."

"Well, what was it?"

"Her Excellency said that by waiting for suitable conveyance, she would give you a few days more with your Indian wenches."

"Thank you, Captain. May I reward you for the trouble you have taken in my wife's and my behalf, with a small cask of French brandy?"

"My lord, I am a sailor!"

As soon as he had gone, I sought out Marina, who was giving Martin his supper of maize cakes and milk. At once she put him in charge of his nurse and came with me to my chamber.

"Catalina has come," I announced.

"Do not expect me, Malinche, to fall in a faint. I thought she would not be far behind your warrant as governor."

"Well, what shall I do?"

"Sandoval and a company is near Ayagualco. Send him a litter and some bearers, with a message to escort her here. Since he is now a general, second in command, Catalina should consider it an honorable reception."

"I'll see to it at once."

I left Marina only long enough to give the necessary orders. When I returned to our chamber I found her lowering the hem of a beautiful satin gown I had bought from a Spanish merchant, and which she had not yet worn, it being a little too short for so tall a girl.

"I thought to wear it at the first dinner you give in Catalina's honor," she remarked calmly, hanging the garment in her closet. "Provided—of course—any Indians are invited."

"If we omitted Indian wives or sweethearts, we would not have much of a dinner," I replied, at which patent fact we both laughed.

"But her coming is no laughing matter, Malinche," Marina said, instantly grave. "She is your legal, wedded wife."

"Well, what will I do?"

"Hernan, it is not really my affair. But a few facts are obvious—that she will preside at Government House in Vera Cruz and share with you the master's chamber. What happens there—" And Marina spread her strong, lovely hands.

"Nothing will happen there. After all these years—after what you and I have been through together—she can have all the honors due her position, but not me as a husband indeed. That is a fact."

"She did marry you, Malinche, and by that marriage you were reconciled with Velazquez, and saved from being sent to Santo Domingo in irons. Still—what goes on behind the curtain is your affair and hers, certainly not mine. If you please, we will not speak of that. However, in respect to her, I think while you go to Vera Cruz, I should remain here for a short or a long period, the latter for you to decide."

"Marina, when Catalina and I were in Cuba, I had an Indian mistress on my farm, and a daughter by her. You are more than my mistress; the work and troubles and triumphs and joys which we shared have made you my mate. The day may come that our union may be dissolved. It could be dissolved by the death of one of us, or by—the word I must use is Fate. But it will not be dissolved by the coming here, to be the First Lady of New Spain, of a woman with whom, against my will, to save me dire defeat, imprisonment, and possibly from the rope, I performed the rite of marriage. I will ask you to occupy the house now occupied by my chief magistrate, Ocambo, who will move to the mansion I had planned as the guest house. When I am here at Cuyoacan, you and Sheba and two other servants can have the hunting lodge of your friend, Don Juan Xaramillo, plain but comfortable, which he only uses in the fall and winter when jaguars and pumas are in good fur, and stags are fat and in horn. There we will have at least one meal together every day, and the early hours of every night. But as a mark of respect to Catalina, you may make your annual visit to the old cacique, Taltecle, and his household in Tabasco, remaining, at most, one week."

Marina had evidenced not the least shock or distress at the news of Catalina's arrival; this was intrinsic to her pride as a Mexic princess. Yet I knew their real depth by the change in her countenance, and especially in her hazel eyes, when I told her my decision. It caused me to remember her expression when I had kissed her good night after her telling me of her

betrayal and sale into slavery by her own mother and stepfather and she had thought that I would think her sweet mouth was poison.

"There is one question I would like to ask, Malinche," she said with a slight tremor in her tone.

"What is it?"

"Remember I am an Indian. Marie is the only Spanish woman I know well, but I have met and talked, watched and listened to the few others who have come here to join their soldier husbands, or, just lately, as settlers. When an Indian says anything it is because he wants to tell you something, or find out something; he does not give thought to what you will think of him for saying it. My question is, should the respect you wish to show Catalina begin tonight? She has arrived in the New World."

"I will begin to show her that respect—for the benefit of others—when we have actually met; and remember it is only for one week."

She came to me and put her strong yet tender arms about my neck, and kissed me with her whole heart's love.

"I am more glad than I can tell you, for a reason that I do not want to tell you, but I feel I should."

"Do what your feelings prompt, as you always have."

"With you, yes. Not with Marie. I will tell you, Malinche, but I beg you, do not ask me to say more, or make an explanation."

"As you wish."

"This is high summer. On what is the twenty-second of December on your calendar, begins the Oaxacan New Year as determined by their astrologers. You said that Fate might part us. On our New Year's Day, less than six months from now, I do not dare doubt we will be parted forever, for on that day my marriage to Quetzalcoatl will be consummated."

My brain reeled in its bony cage and the spirit of my life burned dim.

"Great God! You have not spoken of this for so long, I had begun to think it was a dream."

I kept my agreement to say no more, but she saw what was in my face and enfolded me in her strong and tender arms.

2

Catalina's reception at Government House in Vera Cruz was all that her pomp-loving soul could ask. The company of soldiers escorting her under Sandoval formed an aisle on each side of the boardwalk leading to the portico, their swords at salute; a considerable crowd had gathered. At her descent from her litter, Father Olmedo greeted her and she kissed the golden cross he held out to her; and behind her walked her younger brother while Olmedo escorted her up the aisle, her two Spanish maids decorously bringing up the rear. Flanked by my chief officials and captains, I met her on the portico. We embraced, our cheeks touching, and then with a deep bow I kissed her hand.

I had not laid eyes upon her for nearly four years. She was still young, pretty, and fresh looking, although the line from nostrils to the corners of her lips had deepened. She was dressed a little too gorgeously, and her manner, when I presented my officials and officers, was somewhat too imperious for my liking. While both of these slight faults might bear upon her success as the First Lady of New Spain, neither was as important as a fault noticed by no one else. On her breath was the strong smell of brandywine.

Before the day was done, I had found an office for her brother, with appurtenances of power, but almost lacking in the thing itself. Long before midnight, I had perceived that my personal problem, that of presenting the appearance of happy conjugal relationship with Catalina, would be nothing like as difficult as I had feared, and quite possibly did not exist. Her body did not crave a mate. Instead it craved the warmth of wine, and her mind and soul desired its stimulation, its mendacious fortifications and consolations, and the heavy sleep that it induced. When I had put on my night garments and lay down beside her on the bed, she was in drunken slumber. I returned to a couch in an anteroom of my office, and at sunrise rose and again lay down beside her.

When one of her maids brought in a breakfast tray she found me there, and I called Catalina's name, but she did not waken.

"Doubtless your mistress is exhausted from her long journey," I remarked to the maid.

"No doubt she is, poor dear," the girl replied, "and I will bring her a hot breakfast when she pulls her bell cord." But the slightest, brief shift of her glance into mine revealed her complete understanding of the situation.

Hence my problem was not how to avoid conjugal relations with my wedded wife, but to conceal her vice, as far as possible, from my army and the colonies. I made it a point when I was in residence always to lie down on her bed some minutes or even an hour on first retiring, because until she fell into heavy slumber she would often pull the bell cord, summoning servants to complain of a headache, which she wished soothed with a small glass of brandywine, or to smooth rumpled sheets, or even to give babbled orders for this or that gown to be pressed or altered, or to humor any fancy that crossed her muddled mind. In the morning I was always there to order my own breakfast, to be served in the anteroom, so that the Lady Catalina could have her morning meal when she had completed her rest.

The door of my wine center I kept locked, and I had a lock made for a cabinet in the pantry, to which I had the only key. To try to deprive her of spirit altogether would be worse than useless: such was the advice of a ship's doctor who had retired and settled at Vera Cruz. He told me of the stealth which a true dipsomaniac will employ to satisfy her craving; the utter shame to which she will descend; and to the disgrace she would bring upon me and my exalted office if I did not force her to moderation, rather than try to enforce abstinence. At four in the afternoon I could give her a large flask, holding nearly two quarts, of reinforced wine. This she would consume in about four hours, two of these spent in babbling before she would sink into drunken sleep. However, Doctor Moura instructed me to deny her the bottle until she ate at least one nourishing meal, otherwise she would suffer from horrid delirium.

For my own bottles, of which I kept two, one a moderately sweet wine that pleased my taste, and the other, amontillado, one fifth of which was pure spirit, I had an ingenious hiding place behind some heavy tomes of the theory and practice of law. Not even Gonzales shared the secret.

When we gave official dinners, or dined out, I issued no wine to Catalina except a small glass or two before she presented herself. Her hearty imbibing at the dinner made her talkative, laughing more loudly and often than was proper, but only once, at a long-drawn dinner, did she disgrace herself and me by quarreling.

As to my meeting Marina at least once and usually twice a day in her chambers, Catalina made not one objection, and I could not see that she cared in the least.

It was not Marina, but Sandoval, who reported a circumstance that probably meant nothing; and anything that it might have meant we could not

guess. Among Narvaez' army was an ordinary-looking fellow named Ruiz, the same as one of our greatest poets of long ago. He had not enlisted in my army and had sailed on Ponce de Leon's ship, which the winds had delivered into my hands, and from which I had confiscated precious stores. In the rather long interval he had seemed plentifully supplied with pesos. Now he reappeared in Vera Cruz, having sailed hence on the same vessel which had brought Catalina. Again his purse was heavy, and although he went about looking at various plantations, with the view, possibly ostensible, of buying one to raise cocoa, he departed on the same ship on which he had arrived after a stay of a fortnight. Such a short visit here had wakened Sandoval's suspicions that he might be a spy for my enemies in Santo Domingo or even in Spain, but there was no tangible evidence of this, and the matter soon slipped my mind.

I took more interest in the friendship developing now between Catalina and Marie. The only natural bond between them that I could discover was my wife's idolatry of Marie; and the latter's pleasure in the adulation. Indeed, Catalina confided to me her belief that Marie was none other than the bastard daughter of Isabella la Catalica, Queen of Aragon. Marie had made no such ridiculous claim—Catalina emphasized that point—but Catalina had put "two and two together." The uniting of these twain she recited in a drunken babble; and its matter was mainly that in the year 1486, when the Queen was thirty-five years old, Ferdinand was suspected of a love affair with one of Isabella's ladies-in-waiting. In this same year a humbly born poet, of personal beauty, was a hanger-on at the palace. This poet, whose name was now forgotten, had written an ode to the Queen which Catalina had read, and in which she discerned hints by *double-entendre* of an amorous attachment; also Isabella had made a three-months' stay at Arevals, previous to Marie's birth.

Her concluding argument was what we students at Salamanca used to call a Solomon. It so chanced that my treasurer, Alonzo de Estrada, an ambitious man of dubious origin, slightly older than Marie, boasted openly that he was the bastard son of King Ferdinand. So when Isabella's daughter was privately christened, the Queen had bestowed on her also the name of Estrada, as a sly hint to her husband that she knew of his escapade, and had taken appropriate revenge! I did not take the trouble to refute any part of the absurd story, hatched in Catalina's romantic fancies, by stating the great refutation which was the Queen's passionate devotion to the Holy Church and all of its tenets.

"We are both widows, in a way of speaking," Catalina told me, immediately after a visit from Marie to Government House. This was one of the few references she had ever made to the *de facto* rupture of our marriage. "We are both well educated, although I am a woman of one book compared to her. Also, we are the best-born ladies in New Spain, I the legitimate daughter of a don and she the daughter of—but I will not say something for you to scoff."

Nor could I deny what seemed an honest fondness on Marie's part for my unfortunate wife. Twice, when duty demanded my absence from Vera Cruz, she had spent the whole night at Government House. On both occasions she had constrained Catalina's indulgence, not only by example, but because my wife was ashamed to play the sot in the great lady's presence.

The busy days rolled by, and the summer of our calendar was almost at its end. I had kept track of the days, my thoughts lingering darkly on the creeping but implacable nearing to a certain day, the twenty-second of December, when Marina was to keep a mysterious contract with a god that did not exist except in the Aztec mind. The twenty-first of September, the day before the official beginning of autumn, oddly verified by the arrival on a pond of bright-feathered teals of a migratory species, was a day to mark in my book forever and tragic remembrance.

3

It began as might any other day, with a torrid burst of brilliant light when the sun heaved up over the rim of ocean. I was to be absent for dinner, on the business of the installation of a cacique at a village twelve miles distant. The ceremonies were longer than I had expected, and the feast more elaborate, hence Sandoval and I and a small escort did not take horse for our return until two hours after sundown. The road was perfectly safe from outlaw Indians or even jaguars, but it was narrow and stony and almost pitch dark, so we must walk our horses. Thus I did not see the lights of Government House until just before midnight.

It was my custom after a hard ride in the heat to drink a cup of amontillado just before I slept. So, on entering the house, and dismissing a sleepy servant, I went to the hiding place of the little supply I kept on hand. Carrying a lantern I thrust my hand between two of the heavy tomes on the wide shelf and groped for the long-necked bottle I wanted. Instead, I found only the short-necked flask containing my sweet, light wine.

A few seconds' search revealed that my little trove had been discovered, and the amontillado filched. The conclusion I reached was instant and inevitable: that Catalina had begun her day's debauch earlier than usual, had drained the big flask that a tried and trusted servant had brought her at the hour prescribed, that she had consumed it more rapidly than usual, and by lucky search, or perhaps by spying on me when she was not as helplessly deep in wine as I supposed, had penetrated the secret. It was useless to be angry—a feeling known to all closely associated with victims of the vine. But rather than go to the cask, I drank a pint of the light wine.

I undressed in my anteroom, observed the shape of my wife in what seemed the heavy slumber, almost insensible, that follows hard upon the last dizziness and confusion caused by the last glass. She lay under a sheet, except for the upper part of her face and one naked arm flung wide. I blew out the candle on my bedstand and tried to go to sleep.

At this I did not succeed, probably because I was used to a glass of stronger wine at bedtime. Then I fell to thinking of Martin, who slept in the same adjoining room with his nurse, and I felt an unexplainable impulse to take a glance at him, to see that he had not kicked off his cover that he needed this cool night, and that all else was well. So with flint and steel I relighted the bedside candle, and taking it with me, I went into his chamber.

I was soon assured. Martin was now three years and some months old, strong and well-grown, able to lisp a respectable number of Spanish words, and a quite astonishing vocabulary of Indian words, because of spending most of his time with Marina. Since I had acknowledged him as my son and heir, she had insisted that he spend the nights at Government House, and usually had him put to bed here at eight o'clock. By this hour Catalina's wine was usually dying in her swiftly, and she was neither noisy nor reeling about. He and his nurse were both sound asleep, so I kissed his rosy cheek and returned to my chamber.

I lay down without blowing out the candle. Still my feeling of discomfort, even of something terribly wrong, did not dissipate but grew stronger; and at first I could not track down its source. Then I observed that Catalina had not moved in the least trifle in my absence or since my return, and, listening sharply, I was only aware of heavy and it seemed sinister silence, not of her breathing.

Leaning over, I touched her arm. Instantly an icy chill ran through my veins and smote my heart and soul. Her flesh was only faintly warm, and a cold sweat was on it, and it did not feel like the flesh of a living person.

4

Instantly I sprang out of bed and with my candle lighted every lamp in the room. Catalina was lying on her side, and the lamplight in her eyes showed them glazed. A necklace of gold beads had been broken and some of them glimmered on the pillow and the white sheets. At her throat were dark blotches.

My shout brought Martin's nurse, who at once sped to call Violante and Ann Rodriguez, Catalina's maids. A moment later De Sota, my steward, appeared, and he need glance but once into Catalina's face to know what he must do.

"My lord, I will summon the Good Father and Doctor Moura."

"Do so, I pray you, and send my page for the alcalde."

The maids just entering the door heard my final word, and one of them moaned, for this official was not usually summoned soon after a death, unless it was patently natural. Meanwhile, I was keeping the most rigid self-control, although by no small effort. The worst was the waiting for the physician, actually a very brief wait. In the meantime, Ann's sharp eyes saw the light gleam on a smooth surface under the bed near the edge, and brought forth an almost empty bottle. It was the long-necked bottle for which I had sought in vain tonight.

When Moura came with his orderly he felt for a pulse which he could not find. Then he examined with great care the bruises on the neck that now looked pitifully scrawny; and I must hold hard not to give way to tears. I was almost certain what the doctor would say—that Catalina had died of acute alcoholic poisoning, and while trying to breathe out of dying lungs she had grasped her own throat.

In about five minutes he beckoned me aside, but did not tell me what I had expected and hoped to hear. His first words comprised a question.

"What was Doña Catalina's daily consumption of wine?"

"About two quarts of fortified wine between the hours of four o'clock and eight. But in my absence she might have emptied the flask in a shorter period."

"What the maid found was a bottle, not a flask."

"That was from a hiding place that I did not know she knew."

"Did you miss any more from the cache?"

"Only that one bottle was missing."

"Had she access to any more, of which we have not found the container?"

"I do not think so."

"It seems a little strange that an additional quart, half again her usual consumption, could have caused the death of a seasoned inebriate."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"In all she has consumed nearly a quart of pure spirit. That is enough to kill if consumed in a short time. Would the maids know at what time she began drinking?"

I asked one of them and was told that Catalina did not leave her garden until four o'clock. She had finished the flask about eight as usual, and had retired to her room in her usual condition at that hour.

"Yet she has been dead at least four hours," the doctor said thoughtfully. "It is now one o'clock. This means she was dead at nine, quite possible, if she procured the bottle almost immediately and consumed it with great rapidity."

A thought struck him, and he called a command to the maid Ann.

"Look under the bed and see if a good quantity of wine has been spilled."

The girl looked, and came out with a white face.

"Oh, Your Excellency!" she cried out to me. "The carpet is soaking wet with wine, and here is the goblet. My lady dropped it and the bottle, too, from her hand."

"Give me that bottle and see that you do not spill a drop of the little that remains," the physician ordered.

This was about the depth of an inch. Moura poured a few drops on his palm, and sniffed them long and deeply. Then he rubbed them, cupped his hands, and again sniffed.

"I don't like the smell of it," he told me, in low tones.

"You can't identify it?"

"Not certainly. But there is a certain suggestion of *mitlayetl*, the Indian name for their crude nicotinic acid, a deadly poison."

"Who under God would want to poison Catalina?" I burst out.

No one answered. There was no possible answer; she was harmless except to herself. But there were many, more than I wished to think upon, who might want to poison me.

The alcalde came. As soon as he was informed of the little that we knew, he asked to see my hiding place for wine, behind big tomes of law. But he did not look at it; instead he looked at the books along the whole shelf. By now his assistant came; and the senior officer remarked to the junior, "Take note, Antonio, of the other books on the shelf."

"The numbers are not in sequence and some are upside down," Antonio remarked after careful examination.

"The person who put the nicotinic acid in the amontillado would not have left them in such disorder. That was done by a woman in drink, who had some notion where His Excellency had hidden the wine but not the exact place. I do not think that the idea had occurred to the poisoner that her ladyship would find and drink the wine Governor Cortez had hidden. Governor, do you agree with me?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"I will reason further. The poisoner knew you would be gone for the day, and you would surely take your accustomed drink when you returned. Since you are not a connoisseur and are a heavy smoker, you would not be expected to detect its smell. Anyway, it is your habit when drinking to open your throat and pour. You would have downed a teacupful before you became suspicious—and then it would be too late. I dare say half a cup full of the pure poison was put in the bottle—a tablespoonful of the poisoned wine would deal death. Probably sitting on the edge of the bed, Her Excellency drank one small goblet—perhaps half a goblet—dropped this and the open bottle as she clutched her throat in the death struggle, then lay down and covered her nakedness and died."

"I think that is how it happened." But I wished the two intelligent, dutiful officers would shut up.

Instead, I spoke. It was only to ask Antonio to summon Ann Rodriguez, the more alert of the two sisters. Had Her Excellency received visitors this afternoon? No, she had not. Had any come earlier in the day?

"Oh, yes, General Señor the Governor!" Ann answered, eager to show the popularity and prestige of her late mistress. "Quite a number of ladies called at ten this morning, in a body. It happened that several merchants had

arrived the night before from Quecatero, in the far south, and set up stalls in the market. All the great ladies flocked there, and all had spent freely of silver pesos and even of gold, for their maids all carried large parcels. Also the ladies had each given two silver pesos, making a sum of twenty-four pesos, to buy their whole stock of furs we call chinchilla, pearl colored and most soft and beautiful; thirty-six skins in all, enough to make a cape for my Mistress Catalina to wear when the Emperor comes to Vera Cruz to make my lord a duke, and my lady a duchess, not long from now as is the common talk. And my mistress slept late, and had her noonday meal in bed, and then, suffering from a headache, she slept briefly again, and at four rose, and I told her that the ladies had left a gift, but she would look at it a little later, and oh, she did this and that, and oh, she never did go to look at it and oh, she went to bed again and—and—and—she never did lay eyes on the beautiful things—and—and now she never will." And the girl began to sob most pitifully.

No less than the alcalde put his arm about her shoulders and comforted her until she quieted.

"I have only one or two more questions, Ann," I told her, "and then you may go."

"Yes, my lord, and I will answer truthfully, as God is my judge."

"Do you know which of the ladies proposed making this wonderful gift to Doña Catalina?"

"Yes, my lord. It was the Señora Moura, wife of the doctor señor. I heard one of the ladies say, 'Mercedes, it was a most happy thought you had, for us to buy together this beautiful gift for the First Lady.' The ladies applauded, and at first Señora Moura protested she did not deserve the credit, but the other ladies insisted it was rightly hers."

"And which of the ladies first made the remark to Señora Moura?"

"I am not sure. I believe it was the great Señora Marie de Estrada Farfan."

"Did the ladies remain together, in the hall, during the visit here?"

"Not altogether so. Some of them moved about the parlors, in small groups, or alone, to gaze at some of the wonders that you, my lord, brought from the Mexic wars."

I gave the girl leave to go, and then some instructions to the alcalde and Chief Magistrate Ocambo. It was to collect all the people present in the

death chamber, and all who had gone in or out. To these I told that the First Lady, Catalina, had died from a great dosage of strong wine when she was suffering from a headache, and thus her death was wholly accidental, the truth as far as it went. They were to maintain this everywhere and to every person, and put forward no fanciful theories of their own, such as suicide or the like; and if any of them whispered one hint of the same, he would lose his position and be put in the stocks as a malicious liar.

These instructions the alcalde obeyed, speaking in a firm and menacing voice, severely frightening all but one of his hearers, and he alone, Doctor Moura, spoke of the matter to me, and this in the strictest privy.

"Your Excellency, I will obey the alcalde—unless I am brought before the council and am sworn, in which case I will speak the truth, as a gentleman and physician."

"And the truth is—?"

"That your wife drank poisoned wine intended for you to drink."

"I do not think the council need meet. And I pray you, accept my thanks, and a fee of a hundred ducats, for your professional services."

"I will accept your thanks as a friend, but no fee, for I performed no service; and I offer you my heartfelt condolences, and now by your leave go to my own place."

Litter bearers bore away the body of Catalina to the shop of a carpenter, to be measured for a coffin, this to be made of mangrove wood, which will not rot in moist ground. Then I went to my own most private place, a small room with a heavy door, which when bolted from within could not be entered except through one small window, or port, with an iron grill that had a strong lock on the outside, of which I carried the only key. In this room was the treasure I was assembling as my personal gift to the Emperor, when I should come to his Court, and naught else except a small table and wooden chair, pen and inkhorn, and a tablet in which to record the items.

There my thoughts dwelt briefly on Marie de Estrada. Evidently she killed as might the great, venomous snake we called the bushmaster, in his case to procure food, and in hers to obtain riches, but he often struck at any creature passing by the covert where he lay, and thus he often killed men, women, or children, whose deaths were of no earthly good to him. I did not know how my assassination would directly benefit Marie, and perhaps never would know; but I could be sure of mind that had she succeeded in her task, and had she remained unhanged, she would greatly benefit. Yet for the

present killing of a passer-by she would not swing, for there was no grain of evidence against her that would stand in a respectable court of law.

And then she fled from my thoughts and in her place came the prophet Nathan, and again he pointed at me his inflexible finger, and pronounced 'Thou art the man!' I had slain my wedded wife Catalina by causing her to become a drunkard. This I had done by not sending for her when the coast was settled, and too well I could imagine the remarks of the ladies who had called upon her in the Islands, those she deemed her friends—such remarks as women make with their serpent tongues when they wish to sting without being charged with malice.

"*Oh, I just heard that Señora So-and-so is sailing next week for New Spain. Her husband, the captain, wrote that he could not endure her absence a day longer than was needful to bring her there; and this will amuse you, dear Catalina. He actually gave an Indian Mexican a silver button to provide his wife's ship with fair winds. And how you must worry, my poor friend, about your husband General Cortez, ever taking horse and riding back and forth on such great affairs that he cannot give time to you, and to provide you a civilized and safe existence there. Little does he know how gladly you would suffer privation, or even deadly peril, to be at his side, and see to his health, and perform other wifely duties*."

I could hear the cat emphasize *other*. Also I pictured her sister feline singing the same tune in different words.

"*Your husband's name is on every tongue. That is where your name should be also, my dear Catalina, and if I were you I would write him, reminding him that of you two you are the best born, and that although he may prefer docile Indian women for his bedmates, you are a Spanish lady and his lawful wife, and stating in no uncertain terms, that unless he pays you your rightful due, you will appeal to the Emperor.*"

I thought of Catalina meeting every ship that brought mail from New Spain, and asking if there was a letter for her, to receive almost always the same answer. True, I had sent her rich presents at Christ Mass and on her birthdays, but my letters had been brief and far apart, and doubtless her days had been long and empty, until she tried to shorten them by self-escape, the witches' brew for daydreams and drunken sleep.

Even when she had come over, without my leave or invitation, I had not recognized her as my wife indeed; yet I had served an ugly Indian princess, the daughter of a cacique in Campoala with a service I had denied Catalina.

But what cut me the most sharply was remembrance of Catalina's midnight visit to a long-deserted church in Cuba, where I was a fugitive from the stern and vengeful law. There she promised me her utmost help and urged me be of stout heart; and that she would send up her prayers with mine to blessed Santa Maria, asking that she speak in my behalf to Almighty God.

Then I wondered if any man of earth earthly could raise to great eminence without trampling on the bodies, and the wounding of their hearts and souls, of innocent folk. Worse yet was the same trampling on folk who loved the ruthless climbers, and deserved love in return, and those who had served them in humble ways, and rejoiced in their gathering of laurels, and remembered them in their prayers, only for themselves to be cast aside and forgotten. I had done this thing, and had not finished doing it, and thus it might be in the eyes of God the Father I was not man but monster. Yet because His Son had lived on earth, and knew its troubled roads, and men's base but sometimes noble nature, and by His own wounds knew man's inhumanity to man, He might yet say:

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

And then I wept, and my body was shaken to my soul's depth with great sobs, and when I could not promise that I would forego such baseness in the future, or even pray that I might, I howled as might a soul forever damned in hell.

But there was no hell. Marina had told us out of her woman's heart why it could not be so. As a lawyer, I knew that it was incompatible and forever an anomaly in a religion based on human love and forgiveness. In others' remembrance of good deeds done on earth, the dead might find comfort, even bliss, or at least sweet repose. But of evil deeds done in life, the souls of the doers might never be wholly rid, and sometimes these might dream.

CHAPTER 18

Temple of Quetzalcoatl

1

The first rule of alcaldes and other officers when inquiring into mysterious crimes to try to identify their perpetrators, is to look for a motive. A motive for my assassination was soon known to me.

It reached me, strangely enough, from across the Ocean Sea in a letter from my father, Hidalgo Martin Cortez. After its fond beginning, it read:

> I have returned from the Court of the Emperor, where I was most courteously received, and even closeted with His Majesty for a short space. Of more immediate importance to you, I have met with the great Duke of Bejar, the Prior of St. John, and the Count of Aquillar, all of whom are sensible to your great deeds and conquests for God and King, and all these men of mighty power are most eager for suitable recognition and reward to be made to you, when you come to meet your Emperor face to face.
>
> It is proposed that you be made a marquis, and be officially appointed Viceroy of all New Spain, an office of far greater affluence and power than that of the Viceroy at Santo Domingo. You would be given vast holdings of land, surpassing in breadth and perhaps in wealth the richest dukedom in Spain. Now it so happens that Count Aquillar has a daughter, Doña Juana, the niece of the great Prior, newly turned thirteen, and a beautiful maiden, devout, well schooled, accomplished, and of a gay and agreeable nature. Her uncle has proposed to me that the son of a Hidalgo and a doña in her own name, the most famous of all conquerors since Colon, would not be an unfit husband for this young noblewoman of such qualities, especially since you are yet young, not quite eight-and-thirty, yet old enough that most youthful follies are behind you. The matter is by no means settled, and cannot be until you and Doña Juana have met face to face, but I can truly say she

vastly admires you, and wishes to hear all news of you, for in her mind you are the hero of the age, and I take it she would not be in the least averse to be a marchioness and the Vicereine of Continent beyond the Seas.

Yet as your sire, I must remind you that if you have already found a woman whom you deeply love and trust, as I suspect; she an Indian princess who has borne you a son and heir, you should ponder long before you put her aside to marry any Spanish noblewoman. True, such a marriage as the great Prior so honored me as to propose, would no doubt further your ambitions in Court, and add to the number of your faithful friends; but without it you could still have the honors and emoluments of your great conquests, including a noble title. This matter I would not mention except that a physician from Santo Domingo told me in privy that Doña Catalina will not live long, because of damage to her vital organs caused by confirmed inebriety.

As you have warm friends in Spain, you also have enemies. The hatred of one of these, the greatest, is more virulent than ever, now that you have triumphed over him. He brought his biggest guns to bear against your being made governor, but all of them misfired; and in the way of mighty failures among men, he has chosen someone on whom to vent his fury, whom he believes the prime villain of his downfall, and that is yourself. Aye, he blames you for his loss of favor with the Emperor, and his prestige among the people; and the best news any ship could bring him would be of your death by natural causes or—and I must speak the truth—by murder. So it is beholden upon you, Hernan, to take the utmost care against assassination, and surround yourself with guards, and take the precautions of a king. When in wine he told a cup-mate that he would pay ten thousand gold castilians, a hundred thousand ducats, to him or her who would take you off, and send you down to hell, where, he swore by a holy name, you properly belonged.

Truly it pains me that a Man of the Cloth, a Bishop ordained by his Holiness the Pope, should fall to such depths of murderous depravity.

Then with a little news of the farm, and assurances of his own and my mother's welfare, and protestations of their love and my ever remembrance

in their prayers, to the great warmth of my heart he signed himself "Papa."

Of a certain I would not show this letter to Doña Marina, on account of its references to her, and it became my studied decision not to recount to her what it contained concerning Bishop Fonseca. I was not certain that Marina, an Indian woman, would observe the dictates of ancient law, which is or should be the expression of the wisdom of the human race as to the relationships between man and man, and man with his own kind, and men with kings. She did not hold in awe certain doctrines of Holy Church, because these were the promulgations of priests and apostles; and God to her was a vengeful God as were most Aztec gods. Her feelings about Jesus and the Holy Mother were most sweet and tender, but these might not subdue the Indian side of her nature. She already knew that Marie had had the opportunity to poison my bottle of wine; and if she had done so, she had murdered Catalina. What she did not know was any plausible motive for her trying to murder me; but if she read my father's letter she would find such motive, knowing well Marie's lust for gold.

Granting this motive, I still perceived that despite circumstantial evidence, there was not a grain of direct evidence that Marie had ever murdered anyone. This fact, to give pause to any righteous judge, still might not stop my Indian princess if she soberly decided the earth would be better off with Marie in it instead of on it. However, I thought her heart and brain would work in this wise: she did not want on her soul the murder of a woman who, despite appearances, might be innocent of murder; and her action would be a stricter guard of her son and lover.

It so happened that with Captain Don Juan Xaramillo, of whom Marina was so fond, I became better acquainted if not indeed his good friend. I had always admired him as an officer, cautious for the most part, steady under attack, of high bravery in its need, not dashing but reliable.

Our first intimacy was my request for use of his hunting lodge at Cuyoacan, in which to house Marina at such times I was at residence there with Catalina, a need that never arose because of the latter's early death. When, soon after her death, in the month of October 1523, I felt a need of change of scene and recovery from shock and if possible a rest from official duties. Hence I retired to Cuyoacan to enjoy the good hunting in that region. Knowing the grounds, Xaramillo took leave also, and it followed that often we sallied forth together to hunt deer whose succulent flesh was ever welcomed by my train, and jaguars and pumas who pursued these deer. With muskets loaded with shot instead of balls we had several pleasant outings

shooting, but more often missing, wild ducks and various upland cocks when on the wing.

I had discovered by now that he was the best-born man in my present army, now that Astores had returned to Spain at the Emperor's request. The younger son of a count, he had been offered a countship by Isabella, to refuse it because he preferred adventure, oddly enough combined with study, in the New World. His particular passion was Aztec legends, ways, and arts, which he desired to chronicle for future scholars.

One day, when watching a deer trail, we beheld the final scene of a drama of the wild.

Dim through the brushwood we marked the approach of a lordly buck, the largest I had ever seen in Mexic, rivaling the red deer found in the forests of Northern Spain, making his way up the path. About the same time we caught glimpses of a small, skinny jaguar, perhaps a yearling but more likely a two-year old tabby, who rashly pounced out at the big stag. But he struck at her with his forefeet, and then managed to spike her in the flank, whereupon the feline took flight.

With pride amounting to arrogance the stag continued his advance, feeling himself no doubt the monarch of the forest. And when just about level with our hiding place, at no more than sixty paces, as he strode along with his russet hide glossy in the sunrise perfectly framed by the greenery behind, the shamed and wounded jaguar returned to the attack.

She was only a beast, but within that beast's mind and soul was what we call instinct; and well she knew it was against the law of jaguars to flee from deer. More than that, she had taken not a crippling wound, but one that bled freely, for her flank was blood red. The stag struck at her again with his knife-sharp forefeet, but the stroke missed. Then the jaguar rose on her hind legs, and her right foreleg drew back with mighty power and swiftness, and she smote a swinging, sideways blow on the top of the stag's neck. The buck dropped as if poleaxed, the neckbone broken.

And then when I had half raised my crossbow and glanced into Xaramillo's eyes, he gave me a small smile and shook his head.

"That brave cat deserves to live, now she has conquered so great an adversary," he whispered. And then in the way of jaguars, the victor caught the skin of the buck's neck between her strong fangs, and began to drag his body into the thickets. There she would have her banquet, and perhaps some squalling, fighting cubs would share it with her.

When I had shot a fat roe, and had called my attendants to gut the carcass and have it carried to my soldiers' camp, my companion and I walked to a leafy glade, where we could enjoy our breakfast, along with a bottle of wine, which he had brought in his haversack. And in this lovely, quiet dell, out of hearing of everyone, he spoke to me with intimacy and earnestness.

"My general, on the last ship from Santo Domingo I had a letter from the count, my father, visiting the viceroy there," Xaramillo told me. "At home he is a warm friend of the Duke of Bejar, and he wrote of your growing fame throughout the Empire, and the powerful friends your victories have won for you at Court. He thought it well-nigh certain that when you return to Spain to meet the Emperor, you will be ennobled and receive great grants of land. Also you would be given the viceregalship of all New Spain, or, if you wished to dwell in Seville, the Office of Minister of Indian Affairs which will soon be vacated by Bishop Fonseca. Finally, my sire ventured to say, the news of Her Excellency's death having newly arrived, that you might wish to contract marriage with the daughter of a grandee."

"I have heard no hint of a possible ministership, but I may say that the rest you mention might come to pass."

"Your Excellency, may I ask a most intimate question? I dare seek permission because the answer will affect my life so deeply, and your giving it will not affect your life."

"Ask it, my friend."

"Assuming that you are amenable to accepting high office in Seville, and living there, wedded to a Spanish noblewoman, would you have Marina with you there?"

"No, that is impossible."

"Then would you find happiness, dwelling in Spain? You would certainly not feel the freedom that you feel in New Spain. Even for the very great, there is constant conflict with rivals for power, victories but also defeats, the favor of a young and violable Emperor to look to, even humiliations, the waging and waning of popularity with the people, endless ceremonies, sometimes the opposition of the prelates, and suchlike annoyances and obstacles to a capable and dedicated man who knows what is needed to be done, and is impatient with delays, malfeasance, and greed. This much I know is true. I lived in Seville as a boy and in my young manhood. I cannot help believe you would be happier as Viceroy of New

Spain, where you would have far less interference with the exercise of your power. And in this I argue against my heart."

"I am not sure I know what you mean."

"You have told me that if you go to reside in Spain you will not take Marina with you, and hence you might consent to my having her for my own. But if you marry a Spanish noblewoman, and bring her here as your vicereine, you still might wish to retain Marina as your companion and sweetheart."

"If I return here as viceroy, wedded to the daughter of a grandee, I would still have to give up Marina. Not doing so would bring upon me the censure and enmity of the kinsmen and friends of my noble wife. I would have to live according to the code of the Spanish nobility—which permits covert but not open concubinage by the lords."

"In that case, sir, would you have any objection to her marriage with me?"

"I would have no right to object and instead I would approve and rejoice, if Marina herself is agreeable."

"My lord, I think she would marry me if her life with you is ended. We hold each other in deep friendship and high respect. If this should occur, I would resign my commission and with Marina as my guide, spend the remainder of my days recording the customs, beliefs, religion, and language of the Aztec people for students unborn. I have abundant wealth. Our lives together would be adventurous. And in a reasonably near future I believe I could win her wifely love."

"I believe it also, Juan my friend. If Marina and I must part, you would be my choice as her husband, and I would ask the honor of being godfather to your first child."

When I said this, Juan gently took my hand in his and kissed it. Then we rose, soon mounted our horses, and joined my train to return to Cuyoacan.

2

The last days of October brought their cool to the lofty plateaus and bitter frost to the mountain crests, and the dread date of the twenty-second of December less than two moons distant. Suspense was mounting in my mind and soul, although without clear interpretation by my brain. In all outer aspects Marina seemed calm; if I would name one distinct change in her

behavior, it was an increased hunger for my embraces, and this could not mean otherwise than she had good reason to fear that all might soon end. But of no other fear did she give sign. As she played with Martin her laughter was gay as ever. As always she was quick to give me counsel in matters of my dealings with the Indians, and although I was fairly fluent in the language of Tabasco, and well grounded in Mexic, I still used her as an interpreter in dealing with all Aztec nations, because she could catch nuances in their speech that I would miss, then translate them for me in rapid and precise Spanish.

She rarely spoke of Marie de Estrada but saw her quite often, their meetings of obvious excitement to Marie, and of deep, hidden meaning to Marina. Also I suspected that Marina was making friends, completely in secret, with one of the two half-Moorish maids in Marie's attendance. While one of them had a Christian name, Cecilia, the other was named for Fatima, kin or sweetheart of the Prophet. Possibly her mother and her Spanish father had played fair in the naming, each parent so honoring a favorite. It was Fatima with whom Doña Marina had covert dealings.

Early in November, Marina made the odd request that on a certain night, which happened to be that of a saint's day, I give a dinner to some of my married captains and to various settlers. I was to specify that since it would be a large affair, each lady could bring only one maid in attendance, because too many would crowd the kitchens and other servants' rooms. It was a foregone conclusion that Marie would bring Cecilia rather than Fatima, since the former was her favorite, and, more Spanish looking than her sister, could compare better with those ladies who had pure Spanish maids.

The dinner went off without incident. Its only difference from other state affairs was Marie's gaiety that seemed born of excitement extraneous to the dinner itself. I was almost certain her fortunes had turned for the better, or that she expected them to do so in the very near future.

Marina was not present at the dinner and made unnoticed entrance to the chamber that we shared. When the guests had left, I found her waiting quietly, lovely looking in an Indian robe; and still I had no notion why she had proposed the dinner and of her own activities meanwhile, except that it permitted her to visit Marie's rooms in the latter's absence. Whatever her mission, it had succeeded, if I were to judge by the triumphant shine in Marina's dark eyes.

"Malinche, is it still your intention to go with me to Oaxaca where I am to wed Quetzalcoatl?" And she spoke as calmly of this mysterious affair as though her marriage was to be to a Oaxacan cacique.

“It is my firm intention.”

“The distance is about three hundred miles, eight days easy journey on horseback. We will be passing through no enemy country, yet I suggest you bring a small detachment of Tlaxcalan cavalry. They will not be allowed to witness the ceremony at the temple, but they will be well housed in the town.”

“Those arrangements suit me well, but I warn you, if I suspect danger to you of any sort, I will lead there a larger company and destroy the temple and its gods before the date of the marriage.”

“What good would it do, Malinche? I have told you I have made a vow on my honor as a princess, all the more binding that I am now your favorite; and I would disappear in the night and go to some other temple, deeply hidden in the forest, where the marriage could be consummated as was sworn.” And looking into her face, I had no choice but believe her.

“And Malinche, with your consent, I will ask Marie de Estrada to go with us and be my bridesmaid.”

I dropped my hands in my lap. When I sought reason for a protest, I could find none, except the well-grounded suspicion that Marie had tried to poison me. Marina was perfectly confident that no new attempt upon my life would be made during the journey, and I had replete confidence in her. And I had been taught by bitter experience to be guided by Marina in Indian affairs, as well as in other matters, and not to interfere in her private or secret designs.

“I will be delighted by Marie’s company,” I replied at last, with a feeble attempt at irony.

“I am most grateful. And, Malinche, I must ask your forgiveness for my silence, my secretiveness, in this matter. If I told you now, you would be greatly distressed and fearful for me, but I swear to tell you all, or almost all, on the night before we arrive at the teocalli in the city of Oaxaca. Trust me, my dearest love. I will do only what I must do, and although I must stand in deadly peril of our forever parting, I will seize every chance for a happy ending, and you know my powers are not to be despised.”

With this I must be content.

What I knew about Oaxaca was most scant. The word was used to mean an enormous area on the Western Ocean south, west, northwest, and southwest of Vera Cruz. It lay generally southward of Mount Popocatepetl, and I had heard of a city, or an Indian tribe, called Chilpancingo in the foothills of the lofty Sierra Madre. After my final victory over the Mexic I had received tribute from this people or place, forwarded to me through the King of Tlaxcala.

My gold seekers had reached what must have been the northern or eastern frontier of Oaxaca, by setting forth from Tlaxcala, and advancing up the Mescala River. They had not reached Chilpancingo, but they had heard from a Mexic-speaking merchant of a town or city named Oaxaca, where gold was abundant, about two hundred miles west by south.

There could be little doubt that the main of the mighty weight of gold accumulated in the Aztec country had come out of the southwest, largely alluvial gold in pebbles and pieces, but vast amounts in bars, showing their content had been taken directly from the veins and smelted. All apart from Marina's affairs there, which I so deeply dreaded, I wished to be the first captain to enter the City of Gold of Oaxaca, and it was my official duty to investigate an almost certainly great source of revenue to the Crown.

We set out from Tlaxcala early in December. Our whole party was horsed, myself, Marina, Marie, Sheba, old Taltecle, and a Tlaxcalan guide who had been southward of the village we called Puebla de los Angeles to the great loop of the Ayoyac River hence four days' ride from Oaxaca. The old Tabascan chief Taltecle, who had given me Marina, had been to the city itself in his slave-trading days; and I was not sure he had not bought her from her scoundrel stepfather, although the affection between them persuaded me that he was one of several traders who had got her secondhand to sell to the priests of Oaxaca. He had forgotten the route, and I did not know Marina's reasons for including him in our party. He led a guard of about twenty highborn young Tlaxcatecs, all of whom, and their elder as well, had long since learned to ride. I had decided against taking any Spanish troops. Marina had persuaded Marie not to bring her half-Moroccan maids, saying that her own maid Sheba would serve them both and hinting that Marie would learn secrets not to be shared with anyone.

All of this region was of good elevation, cool at night, not overly hot except in the sun of midday. We followed a wide and fertile river valley between ridges and high ground. This valley and those that flanked it were

well populated, with abundant but not heavy rainfall. The principal crop was maize, but there were many plantations of tobacco, cocoa, indigo, sugar, and cotton, and cherry and plum orchards. The people seemed the happiest, and among the most handsome, I had seen in the New World. They did not seem as ghost-haunted as the Aztecs; I took it that their gods were less demanding of human sacrifice. Indeed old Taltecle told me it was performed only on holidays, usually by volunteers who were tired of life and wished to live in the Sun, and no Oaxacan would dream of eating human flesh.

Truly they were a happy, bright-eyed people, full of laughter, and not in the least afraid or hostile to us. The horses and myself were the chief objects of their curiosity and wonder; they paid almost no attention to Doña Marina, but seemed awed and deeply deferential in the presence of Marie. A great many children offered her flowers; one I took for the priest of a village crowned her with a wreath of flowers. Moreover, they gave her gold ornaments, curiously resembling the little golden snake that Marina had previously worn with a clasp pin at her throat, but which I had not seen since the journey began.

"It is most flattering," Marie told me in exultant excitement. "Of course I am the first Spanish woman they have seen, and they point to my blue eyes and red-gold hair as if it is a wonder out of heaven."

"It may be, in their sight," I replied.

We were abundantly supplied with food such as ground maize, fish from their mountain streams and lakes, fowls, and fruit; and when we tried to pay for these, in silver or gold cubes, they shook their heads, bowed low, and kissed their hands with which then they touched the ground.

The journey was one of the most pleasant of itself that I had ever made in the New World, but of deep trouble to my spirit. So well I knew Marina as to perceive that her heart was far from light and her mind never free from fear. Plainly she did not know the outcome at journey's end; it was still, in a very true sense, in the lap of the gods.

On the eve of the twenty-first of December, we made our camp on an eminence from which we could look down on the lights of Oaxaca, capital of the kingdom. Fires had been lighted on the terrace roofs, probably because this was New Year's Eve among the Aztecs, but quite possibly because of our arrival. This site was a favorite one for wandering merchants, because of a hot spring, common in this mountainous and volcanic region, that permitted washing clothes and a bathhouse—to which hot water could be brought in wooden buckets by their servants. Marie de Estrada was eager

for a bath, and she was persuaded to use the house first; and two young, well-dressed and, I thought, highborn Oaxacans seemed proud to be her water bearers.

There were enough rest houses for us all; built by the merchants or for visitors to the shrine. The best was assigned to Marina and me, but the next-best to Marie de Estrada. Marina told her that Sheba would waken her at sunrise, and she must wear her richest gown, as well as one of the small gold serpents given her at our camps, and other gold jewelry she had brought with her.

"The more you wear," I heard Marina tell her in an undertone, "the more you will be given. That is what I hope."

Marina did not take her turn at the bathhouse, and in the first deep dark, when the camp had quieted, she asked me to walk with her a short distance down the hill, below the hot spring. I did so, and we came to a pool glimmering in the moonlight, its water far warmer than the night air off the mountains, as we could tell by small, ghostly clouds of steam rising from its surface and instantly whisked away by the night breeze. I noticed that Marina had brought heavy cotton cloths that would serve her as towels, another larger, an Indian robe, a small vial, and a cake of soap.

"I have much to tell you, Malinche, and then I will bathe, and then I will have more to tell you."

We sat on a grassy knoll beside the pool and I lighted a cigarro. Marina said no word for a little while, for she was assembling her thoughts and, perhaps, rallying her courage. The night was balmy but not hot.

"You must understand, Malinche, a little about the Cult of Kukulcan, which is practiced at the teocalli in Oaxaca," she began in calm and quiet tones. "It is the leading cult to the southward, throughout the whole isthmus, and in parts of Venezuela; perhaps here is its northern-most temple. Kukulcan is its chief deity. *Kukul* is the Mayan word for the Quetzal, our bright-feathered bird, and *can* is snake. Thus the Aztecs have the name Quetzalcoatl, which is also translated as Feathered Snake. But the ritual here is not quite the same as in the Aztec kingdoms. There he is linked with the goddess Xochitl, the mother-god of Quetzalcoatl, but in the Mayan cult she is his first wife rather than his mother. She is presented as is Kukulcan with yellow hair and blue eyes. Obviously that goes back to the Feathered Snake, the Dragon Ship out of the East five centuries ago and the name given her captain. As you know, he became a Great Teul while his followers became lesser teules.

"Possibly he had a blond wife. Possibly he married a fair woman from among the Aztecs, a partial albino, as you say, or who by some other chance happened to be fair. On every New Year's Day he marries another wife, the most pale-colored that volunteers or that the priest can buy. Some may be part-albinos, or perhaps show the outcropping of his own blood, for his children took dusky women, and so did the lesser tueles who followed him, and their blood crops out sometimes among the Aztecs. Usually his brides are pale-brown of skin, with hazel or gray eyes, but sometimes dark-brown of skin, but with yellow hair and blue eyes. Three terms of years ago, each by your counting fifty-two years long, slaves in a great canoe were blown by a southeast gale to a great cold land that grew no trees, only such dwarf trees as grow next to the snow on our mountains. They captured from a dying tribe six girls or women all with golden hair and blue eyes. And these slavers brought them to Mexic, and then to Oaxaca, and sold them for many chests of gold. Waiting their turn, some of these women took husbands in our land, and bore young, but on the first day of every year, one became the bride of Quetzalcoatl, but some of their daughters escaped into Mexic, and their children's children's children live there still."

"Three such terms add to a hundred and fifty-six years," I remarked when she paused. "It is possible, if these descendants married other descendants, fair hair or light-colored eyes or pale-brown skin might show up now and then." But I did not know why I made this statement. My mind was not on it. I was gazing into Marina's face in the voluminous light of the full moon, graced by it indeed, the brown face of an Indian princess, and the glimmer was not bright enough to disclose her hazel eyes.

"Now I will bathe. This is incumbent upon me. While I do, you may read this paper. If you cannot read it by moonlight, light a wisp of grass. It is very short. I found it when I opened a drawer, the key of which was hidden but not well, and it was folded among papers. In the same drawer were gold ornaments and a few small jewels."

She handed it to me, and by puffing on my cigarro I was able to read it. Meanwhile, Marina was pouring onto her hair and working into it the pale liquid she had brought in a vial, I supposed some lotion she used before washing her hair.

The letter had no date, or address of the sender. It read:

Faithful Servant:

Must our master doubt the faith of you among all people? Since your pledge was given and the first payment made, and still

no good news, only evil news. If good news comes you will be paid the balance, nine thousand in gold. Until it does come, not one centavo.

R.

"It was not very clear to me," I murmured still puffing hard on the cigarro.

"It will become so, when you think it over," came a voice from some distance, and below me. I looked, and Marina was lazily swimming in the pool. "Of course I do not know, but I think 'R' stands for the name Ruiz."

Ruiz . . . That was the name of one of our great poets two centuries dead . . . Then I remembered it was also the name of one of Narvaez' men who had sailed on De Leon's ship that I had sacked and let go, and who later had returned to Vera Cruz on the same ship that had brought Catalina, and had looked at land for settling here. But he had stayed only two weeks before he again sailed.

I started to ask Marina a question, for a glimmer of an idea was in my mind. She would not have heard me, she was so busy soaping her hair, diving to rinse it, then soaping it again.

"Set fire to the letter," she called, "and let it burn to ashes."

I did so, doubting the wisdom of it, but still remembering this was Marina's affair, not mine.

Suddenly she stood up in water that disclosed her breast, and this I saw, tawny in the moonlight, beautifully molded, but it must be that her hair was covered with white foam because I did not see it. She saw me staring, and again dived, and again came up, her hair not black but misty looking, and as she waded to shore I knew why. Long ago I had seen a strand of golden hair in her dark head, and thought that she had dyed it. Instead she had failed to dye it. All of her hair was a pale, red-gold.

4

Marina spread out the layer of the big cotton cloths she had brought, carefully dried her feet on the smaller cloth, and standing on the big cloth began to dry herself. All this was watched by the full-faced moon, who had no care; but I watched with bounding heart, wondering if some of the brown

of her skin would be wiped off. But none did so; it looked dark as ever in the silvery light. But the wonder of her golden hair remained.

"You are startled, Malinche," she said in a low, gay voice. "If you were an old man, with a weak heart, you would faint. But the mystery is a simple one. My own sire, when he saw that my hair was the wrong color for an Aztec woman, dyed it the right color, and I have kept it dyed with very good and lasting black dye that the Mexics use in their cloth, no week passing without my doing so. My sire did not ever want it known that I was born with the fair hair of Quetzalcoatl, because maidens with such hair would sell for a small chest of gold. But my mother knew the truth, and she could not forget about it, she thought of it by day and dreamed of it by night—such a wondrous gift for her bridegroom. So, together, they conspired to sell me to some slavers, telling them the secret, and to bury a young slave girl in a coffin marked by my name and lineage. So I was brought here, and in this very pool, after they had rubbed into my hair a potion that loosens the dye, I was told to bathe with soap, and then when it had dried and was dressed, I was made to put on beautiful feather cloth, and sold to the priests of Kukulcan to become his bride."

"Why have you held out hope for me?" I cried at last. "Why, throughout this journey, have you let me think that somehow you might escape this awful doom!"

"Do you remember, Malinche, I promised you that on the last night of the journey, I would tell you all except one thing. Nor will I tell you that now. Only believe me that I, too, hold hope, however dim, and I ask you to believe my boast that ill becomes me—that my powers are not to be despised."

A long time I sat in silence. I longed to believe this had not happened really, that it could not happen, that I was Hernan Cortez, the son of a poor knight, born on a barren plain in Extremadura, and I had come to Mexico step after logical step; but looking down from the eminence I could see the dark shape of the teocalli of the Oaxacans looming against the deep-blue sky, and now and again saw the torches of the priests as they moved in and about the building.

After a long silence, in which I heard the flutelike notes of a night-singing bird in a nearby copse, and was thinking they were as sweet as those from the magic throat of our nightingale, Marina spoke again.

"Malinche, do not be perplexed. Except for this change, I am still Tzin Malintzin. Behold my dark skin, and the Indian cast of my face. I am still

your beloved, as you are mine, for—this night."

"This night . . ." I echoed. "For the love of God and the Angels, tell me the rest. No doubt you escaped from the temple. Why have you come back? Are you mad? By Heaven, I will bind you hand and foot, and waken my men and we will—"

"Malinche, in the month of March by your calendar, in your year Fifteen Hundred and Nineteen, I was betrothed to Quetzalcoatl, kneeling before his image, the priests performing solemn ceremony. This betrothal was tantamount to marriage. But Quetzalcoatl cannot take brides unto him until New Year's Day after betrothal, which falls on the twenty-second of December on your calendar, which you call the winter solstice. Thus he must wait until that date of the year Fifteen Hundred and Nineteen by your calendar. In those months I would be treated as a goddess, with highborn maids in attendance, partaking in many feasts and ceremonies, and often be honored with copal incense, and wear certain garments and insignia. It is the same as when a Spanish girl has taken a vow of marriage before the priest with the youth of her choice, even though they have not yet retired to the bridal chamber. My troth had been plighted, the troth of a daughter of a no little prince but a great prince of honor. But after the ceremony of betrothal I took thought that although this was a Holy Year, the Year of the Acatl, which you called Fifteen Hundred and Nineteen, the year Quetzalcoatl would take me unto him would not be a Holy Year, for it would occur on your twenty-second of December, our New Year, and our Holy Year, the Year of the Reeds, which would be over the day before. Now I wished it not to take place in a common year, the Year of the Flint, but in a Holy Year, again the Year of the Acatl, which would not come again until New Year by your calendar the twenty-second of December, Fifteen Hundred and Twenty-three. If that could be, I would have the honor of Quetzalcoatl taking me unto him in the Holy Year, and also I would live on earth four more years."

Then I must breathe the holy name of the Mother of God.

"So I spoke to the slaver Taltecle, born a cacique, and begged him to discover if Quetzalcoatl would let me go until then," Marina went on. "Then the priests spoke to me, and heard my oath that I would indeed return to Oaxaca the eve of that holy day. To this I swore by the goddess Xochitl, my husband's mother or wife, under whose star I was born and in whose particular care I was. And it so chanced there was a volunteer who most craved marriage with Quetzalcoatl, because her husband had lately died, and she wished to go and live with him in the Sun—a pale-colored girl she was, with brown hair and gray eyes."

Marina had paused briefly to assemble her thoughts, and I tried to gather mine to comprehend this strange story. So I spoke to her.

"Marina, pray speak as plainly as possible. I think I understand so far, but it is very difficult."

"It seems so simple to me; still some of it is not easy to translate into Spanish. So the priests gave thought to my petition, and perceived the fitness of the marriage being consummated on a Holy New Year's Day, instead of some other, since I was the highest born of his brides of several years, and the first for many years who had hair golden as his own, or of the goddess Xochitl. It happened also that the head priest was friend to Taltecle, perhaps because Taltecle had striven so hard to furnish Kukulcan with suitable brides; and Taltecle and I had become friends on the journey, for he was old enough to be my father and my ways reminded him of the way of a little daughter who had died; so he pled earnestly in my behalf. And finally there was a report in Oaxaca that strange ships had been seen off the coast, and from these red-bearded men had landed, and it might be that their captain was Quetzalcoatl returned in the flesh, as the prophecy had foretold would come to pass that very year. And the priests gave thought that if this were true, he might want his bride to remain in the flesh also, for his pleasure. So they consulted with Kukulcan, or Quetzalcoatl, and his answer was consent to my going, but whatever befell, I was to come to his temple on the First Day of the next Year of Ce Acatl, and to this I had taken oath, and so I am here."

The rest of the story I knew. With Taltecle and his family she had gone to dwell in Tabasco. When I had conquered that land, Marina had asked Taltecle, now its chief cacique, to give her to me, which he had done. And in time she found out to her satisfaction I was not god but man. Yet she might not have done so, had I myself claimed to be a god, and kept up the show, in which case she would consider her marriage to Quetzalcoatl had been consummated in the flesh, and although she would have kept her vow to come to Oaxaca on the day appointed, yet it would not hold such danger for her as it now held. How much else would have happened had I been able to play that part? How many who had died would yet live, and the great and beautiful city of the Mexics would still stand instead of lie in rubble! But those things belonged to the past, and the tragedy of Marina was immediate.

"Put the whole matter out of your mind, Malinche," she told me in deepest earnestness, "and remember this may be our last night together, and that we are lovers."

“Marina, I am not that much of a man.”

“You do not know how much of a man you are, until comes the moment of need; and my need is greater than I can tell. And here in the pouch of my robe I have another vial, which is the essence of a mushroom we call peyote. [47] It is a most powerful drug, but not in the least dangerous if not used habitually. Especially it is taken by lovers before a long parting, for it increases carnality. More than that, it frees the soul from its strange confines so it may journey far in time and space, and behold signs and wonders, and perceive the meanings of great mysteries. Also it permits the revelation of its secrets, and its takers see visions, and of these they can speak freely and sometimes as poets speak, when their demons are upon them. Will you drink half the contents of the vial, whereupon I will drink the other half?”

“Aye.”

So I brought the crystal vial to my lips, and drank until it was half empty, as I could tell when I held it between me and the moon. And then Marina drank the remaining half.

When she had done so, she spread out the larger of the two cloths on the soft grass, and removed the robe she had put on, and she unlaced my boots, and unfastened my sword belt, and helped me remove my shirt. And soon we both lay naked, my white body against her dusky body, and this darkness and this whiteness seemed to have a deeper meaning than I had ever before divined, and tonight a deeper beauty, but I did not know why or how. And then she asked me if the peyote was exerting its strange power, and if so, how did I feel?

“There was at first a tingling in my hands and feet and at the back of my neck and down my back, but now it is fading away,” I answered, the words easy on my tongue. “Also my heart is deeply moved by your presence here, alone and apart from anyone, on what may be our last night together. But my soul is stirring in a strange way, and it seems that it has escaped from my body and is soaring far above me and beyond, and I hardly know my name and how I have come here. Yet I behold the moon in her perfect round, and we look each other in the face as hundreds of times before; yet she is of more meaning to me than ever before, infinitely greater, the Light of the Night that God hung overhead ever rising at her appointed hour, and ever setting, year upon year, century after century. And her beams are soft and lovely, and century after century she will still keep the promise that she made to God. And I behold the stars in their wondrous courses, only the great stars tonight, for the little stars have not lit their lamps in awe of their

great mistress as she climbs the vault of the sky unto her throne. Marina, we have found each other fully, this fatal night. Tell me of your love!"

"That I cannot, but I will prove it to you in the act of love, if that, too, is your desire. In the full sight of the moon we will make our loves, and she shall glimmer on your white flesh, and glint on my brown and silken flesh, and she will remember her own marriage with the Sun, and although he is King of the Day and she Queen of the Night, yet rarely the day passes that they do not retire a little while behind the rim of the ocean, and there they swiftly join, running to meet each other as did Adonis and Venus in the tale you told me. Even so, the moon runs to meet her lover the Sun in some strange and distant wildwood, both so enflamed with love that when they meet, they fall, and their bodies join and their beauties join, and for a little while they are one, god and goddess both of the same flesh.

"But in such swift uniting we will not emulate them, until long and blissful moments have passed by. And all other moments, those past and those yet to come, will not exist, those hatched or yet to hatch in the womb of time. Hence all that has ever come between us is wiped away, and what may come between us on the morrow, perhaps forever, does not exist. Beside this glimmering pool we will find each other, as I doubt not did Adam and Eve on the bank of a glimmering pool on a night of the full moon in Eden. And mighty God had forbidden that they lie together there, yet they proved themselves wiser than He by their disobedience, for thereby you and I, and countless other lovers, may lie tonight."

Marina drew a deep breath, gave the moon a long and loving glance, and then spoke on.

"Open your eyes, beloved, to my beauty, for tonight it is at its zenith, the beauty of a woodland goddess. Behold, it was made for a lover, as was Eve's, as God himself knew when he shaped her. And when the time came for my soul, dwelling in its native star, to take flesh, he had already shaped my lover, who awaited me. Already he was tall, some fifteen years out of the womb of the beautiful Spanish woman I saw in the picture in your room. Even now he walked the earth of Extremadura far across the Ocean Sea, or he sat at a desk in the solemn halls of Salamanca, or rode astride Del Mar in pursuit of hares in the dewy dawn; but he never dreamed who awaited him in a new world, although perhaps he had visions of it between sleep and wake.

"No, we will not make haste tonight, Malinche, but let our fires mount slowly . . . That is the way . . . a light touching of our lips that sends a

tingling shock to every cell of our bodies . . . and then a deep, long, clinging kiss, a divine communion in itself, excluding all other, excluding the whole world . . . and now your hands and mine no longer able to be still, but must wander in exultant search, pausing here and there when the Love-God bids it pause, for he knows the sentient places, the mystic fountains which, when God made Eve and Adam, He must have foreseen would bring to naught His stern injunction. And my hands make as bold as yours—and is bold the word, or instead keep troth with yours?—for is not love an equal sharing, far removed from the favor of a king given to a supine slave girl? But by the touch that you make now, the fires within me are wildly fired, and they consume me; and I am helpless in these gales that blow away the last of my restraint, and this cup that I have tasted I cannot put back half empty on the board, and indeed I must drain it to the last drop, so the full feast may begin.

"Malinche, I love you! Tonight I want you wholly, and if again I conceive it does not matter, for the babe will go with me where I go, on the land or on the water or amid the stars. Delay no longer. The moon looks down, impatient of her other watchings, and the stars burn with strange fire. See, the outer gate of my citadel slowly opens. The inner gate is soft and yielding and it yearns for the coming of the guest. Come in unto me, Malinche! I am an Indian woman; I do not understand what the duennas teach, what modesty demands at such a moment and in such a need.

"That moment is in full bloom; the time is now. The gentle passage through the door; the music soft and sweet; and now it is pouring forth, and I thrill to every note and change. And now it is become a paean, the song sung by the sea nymphs, as when Tetzalcoatl and his Indian sweetheart lay in the hollow of the sands in a last embrace.

"His ship was victualed and straining at her cable, longing for the winds of her lover the sea and the rough embrace of his waves. Yet Tetzalcoatl . . . and his beloved . . . made no haste, until . . . until their own gales swept them on . . . and up . . . and they found what we are finding . . . I know not its name . . . I cannot speak . . . and at last the music dies away in mystery and beauty . . . and we listen to its last sweet note . . . and it too ends.

"And now I will arise, and take my knife from its sheath on a belt, and on the nearest tree I will carve a sign, one that you do not understand. The bark will grow clean around it, and passers-by will see it, knowing not what it means; but the tree will know, and on many a night when the warm wind blows through his leaves, the two will speak to each other, and they will both remember the gale that blew tonight; and often the moon will look down and her light will fall softly upon his leaves, and she will remember,

so will he, and often when he grows old he will bear the sign proudly; but she will never grow old, and although a myriad times she will behold our like, still this she will not forget."

---

[47] Peyote is still used by Southwest Indians and by Bohemians in Mexico City as a rhapsodiac and probably as an aphrodisiac.

5

Her poetic outburst ceased. In haunted silence we dressed and made our way to the house erected by merchants, whether of goods animate or inanimate; and I guessed from its appearance it was at least a hundred years old, and many a bride of Quetzalcoatl had spent the night here, in deadly terror or in yearning for tomorrow's consummation of divine marriage with a god.

The sun rose betimes, and we ate the food left at our doors during the night, maize cakes, wild honey, little dried fish, and fruit, all which might have symbolistic meaning on the morn of the New Year. Then our party, including our Tlaxcalan escort, mounted our horses and rode slowly down the hill.

Because Doña Marina wore a dark scarf over her head, Marie de Estrada did not at once notice the sudden change in the color of my companion's hair. I could not doubt that Taltecle and the Tlaxcatecs had observed it at once, but without the least astonishment. No doubt the story of her childhood and of her being sold into slavery and married to Quetzalcoatl was well known among the Tlaxcalan chieftains and that they perceived that this affair was between a Great Teul and his bride, and the less notice they took of it, the wiser they would show. And at last I understood the veneration, almost amounting to worship, that the people of this tribe and that of Tabasco had evinced toward her.

But Marie de Estrada was amazed.

"What in the world, Doña Marina!" she exclaimed. "Why have you dyed your hair?"

"The priests of the temple we will visit admire blond hair," Marina answered calmly, "A goddess that they worship had blond hair and blue eyes. I hope their gifts of gold to me will be more generous."

I knew what was on Marie de Estrada's lips to say. Indeed they shaped the words—"I do not think that is quite fair!" To speak them out loud would

too plainly expose her own inordinate greed and by inhaling sharply she repressed them. But her countenance could not quite conceal her fury and malice.

"I liked it better in its natural color," Marie remarked with such civility as she could muster. "It went so well with your beautiful brown complexion."

Midway of the hill we met a band of priests in white robes, some of them ringing silver bells, and some playing Mexic flutes, and one beat a low-voiced drum. And now a throng of wide-eyed people followed them, and they pressed about Marina and gave her flowers. Fearing not her mare, they put a great rope of flowers about its neck. Until now, the people along our route had thought Marie, not Doña Marina, was the god's bride because of her white skin, blue eyes, as well as golden hair, but the priests knew better, for well they remembered the ceremony of betrothal. They evidenced not the least surprise at her return. But I thought that Marie, having no gleam of the real truth, resented the adulation paid to Marina rather than to herself.

The priests led us straight to the teocalli. Although pyramidic in shape, it had no outside stairway, and no Eagle Dish; and the stones were larger than those of Mexic *cues*, and beautifully fitted. And as Marina stood in a kind of courtyard, and priest after priest came up and dropped on his knees before her, speaking some language I did not understand, I walked a short distance to a structure that excited my curiosity.

It was an immense reservoir, fully half an acre in extent, built of stone blocks. The water stood at a level at least twenty feet below its ledges, and a priest told me it was fifty or more feet in depth. Fishes of brilliant color flashed near the surface and other fish caused whirls in its shadowed depths. It had no visible inlet or outlet, so I reckoned it was fed by an artesian spring, the water maintaining this level by hydraulic pressure.

By moving a little, out of the sun's glare, I could detect the faintest glimmer of white objects in the profundities of the bottom. These I could not identify and now had no time to try, because the head priest was leading the way into the big entrance of the temple. Doña Marina was directly behind him and spoke to him in a language I did not recognize, although the few words that I caught indicated it was a Mexic dialect. He nodded, and Marina turned to speak to Marie.

"The High Priest permits you to enter, and if Quetzalcoatl gives his permission, you will be given much gold."

I, too, was allowed to enter, and so was the old cacique, Taltecle. No special deference was shown me, although the priests knew well that I was Amenche, Lord of the Aztec Nations, nor did I receive one surly or resentful glance. This front room was plainly a reception hall, honoring the god whose great house we had entered. In its center was a ten-foot model of a dragon ship, not well wrought as far as resemblance went, if some old paintings I had seen in Spain of the Vikings landing on our coasts had been at all true in detail. The stem and stern did not resemble those of the conventional dragon, but more the neck and head and tail of the big constrictor I knew as boa. The sail was shaped like a wing and was of red feather cloth. But instead of wood, the hull was made of silver, inlaid with gold, and the shields along the gunnels were alternately gold and silver, some of them with emblems suggestive of modern arms. Two figures of men stood in the bow, wrought in silver with golden mustaches and beards, and bejeweled eyes, and two more in the stern, one a great deal larger than the other. The smaller of the two resembled almost exactly the two figures in the bow, but the larger was plainly solid gold, the mustache and beard made red by some dye mixed with the molten gold. Mailed shirts were indicated rather crudely, but the weapons of all four figures were magnificently wrought, being a silver sword with a golden hilt in one hand of the three smaller images, and in the other hand a silver battle-ax with a curved blade. The larger image held both weapons wrought in gold.

Around the walls were other holy objects commemorating Quetzalcoatl's coming, and then his rule as a god. I did not look closely at them to perceive their symbolism, and had taken only a sharp brief glance at the ship's model, because my main attention was locked on Marina, talking earnestly with the head priest. In a few minutes she threw me a bright smile, and entered alone through a curtained doorway.

In a few minutes she returned, with two streaks of black paint on her cheeks, a gold coronet about her hair, and a white cotton cape over her shoulders. I was terribly alarmed by these symbols and adornments, because I had seen the same on the body of the wife of a great cacique during my first months in Mexic, when I had gone with Montezuma to pay last respects to the dead. Yet her expression did not indicate that she had heard her doom pronounced, and instead she seemed radiant with happiness.

Without a word to me she approached Marie and addressed her in Spanish.

"The priests told me that Quetzalcoatl was greatly honored by the visit to his house of a great lady from out of the Sun," Marina said. "He had never

seen so beautiful a lady, or so the priests read the signs. He instructed them to give you a large amount of gold out of his treasury."

Marie's breast swelled and her eyes shone, but instantly she controlled her exultation, and spoke in an anxious tone.

"But what is to happen to you, Marina?"

"Nothing more than I bargained for."

"You don't mean—you couldn't—that you will be—"

"Sacrificed to Quetzalcoatl? No, because Malinche and I have been lovers. Quetzalcoatl did not blame me, when I had thought that Malinche was himself, returned in human form; but since he is not, only some lesser sort of teul, Quetzalcoatl regards me as having died since I was here last, and this cape and the black paint are emblems of the dead. Yet, if you want a great deal of gold, you must go into the chapel and kneel before him. Say in Spanish that you honor him as a Great Teul, and will obey his commands, and speak in a deeply earnest tone, and look at him as though you adored him. If you hear a priest sound a little gong, it will mean that he is pleased with you, that you will be given much gold, and you have his leave to go and receive the gifts from the hands of the priests, who will take them from the Sacred Treasury."

"I am a Christian woman, still I will take no harm in putting on a little show, to indicate I am grateful for the gifts."

"How much gold do you want?" Marina asked, in as calm a voice as she might ask me how many maize cakes I wanted for supper.

"How can I say? I do not wish to appear greedy."

"Then why not say as much as you can carry in your hands and on your body. The priests would think that a modest request."

"But not as much as my horse can carry?"

"These priests have never seen a horse before, and I do not believe they would want to put on him gold that they hold sacred."

"Then I will take what I am given, and be more than grateful."

"Then you must go out of the temple, leading the way, and take your stand in front of the big doorway, facing the East. The gold will be brought to you, and bouquets of flowers to hold in your hands."

There she took her stand, and far inside the temple we heard bronze or some other metal clang against a stone, and I thought a vault had been opened. A moment later a priest appeared, carrying a chain of gold as long as a bushmaster snake—and the two were akin to each other, I thought wildly. This he hung at the back of Marie's neck, brought the ends over her shoulders, crossed them in front of her breast, carried them to the back of her waist, crossed them again, and once again in front of her waist, then let them dangle. Marie drew her finger ends along the gold with a caressing motion. Her cheekbones flushed and her eyes shone.

The priest addressed Marina, who replied.

"Marie, the holy father asked if you can carry any more. The chain weighs fully sixty pounds."

"How far do I have to carry it; to prove my strength?"

"Only ten steps."

"Then more, much more."

A second priest came forward with about twenty plain gold bracelets. The Mexic are not a large-membered race, and their daughters, especially among the nobility, have small hands and feet; so Marie met with some difficulty in slipping the rings over her hands, but she managed to don all twenty.

"Those weigh two pounds apiece," Marina told her. "That is a total of one hundred pounds."

"If it is only a few feet, I can carry fifty pounds more."

"The leg rings are not Oaxacan. They are brought from some barbarous land rich in gold. They are large and awkward, four of them weighing ten pounds apiece. You will have to take off your sandals to work your foot into the rings. Already you have a king's treasure—"

"I said I would carry fifty pounds more and I will keep my word."

A priest came forward with the anklets, and by pointing her unshod feet downward, one at a time, she slipped them into the rings.

"That leaves ten pounds," Marie said, her breath somewhat short. "Why not a piece of fine worked gold, say another chain to go over the long chain just below my waist, to keep the ends from clattering."

Marina spoke to a priest, who hurried away. He brought back a soft golden rope about four feet long, and spoke to Marina.

“This is the nearest the priest can come, to make the weight you desired, but it weighs nearer twenty than ten pounds,” Marina reported in a doubtful tone. “Do you think—”

“Of course I will accept it, now that he has brought it. It would be uncivil not to do so.” And Marina fixed it over the big chain some inches below the waist.

“Now where shall I walk?” Marie asked.

“Only to the pool. There you must look at your own reflection in the water, to see how you glimmer in the sun. I will walk beside you; take my arm if you need it. That little help will not count against you.”

The scene, somehow horrid, had begun to have a quality of madness. With slow steps the heavily burdened woman started across the court toward the stone tank.

She reeled a little, but bravely pushed on. Finally, she gained the brink, braced her legs, took a solid stand, and bent her head to peer down.

She had not needed Marina’s arm to gain that perilous position; but now she was given it, by way of a hard, swift thrust in the middle of the back. There could be but one consequence which I beheld with horror. Marie pitched forward, dropped out of sight, and then the great splash flung up water above the brink, and it gleamed in the sun, white as silver, blue as turquoise, yellow as gold.

I ran to the edge and peered down, but there was naught to see but a ring of water swiftly expanding with a wavelike roll until it broke against the high implacable walls.

“Great God, Marina, what have you done!” I shouted above the prodigious splash.

“Why, Malinche,” she answered with a sheen on her eyes, and a small, flagitious smile, “I have only kept the wedding contract I made to Quetzalcoatl. One of its conditions was, that its consummation need not occur if I brought him a substitute of brighter color and acceptable in his sight. The Great Teul was perfectly satisfied with Marie, so are the priests, so am I with his choice, and Marie should be satisfied too, for she died rich. Of course when the tank is drained, the gold can be reclaimed.”

CHAPTER 19

Hail and Farewell

1

Beside the tragic Muse in royal and stately march, her beauteous face half-veiled, skipped and romped and made mouths those two buffoons, Comedy and Farce.

For instance, the Great Teocalli of Kukulcan in Oaxaca had among its priesthood a master at picture writing. He knew perfectly the Mexic language and was able to tell me through Marina that he wished to make two such writings, both very large, of today's events, one to be sent to an archpriest, very like the great prelate known as the Serpent Woman in the Mexic religious organization, whose headquarters were at the greatest of all Mayan temples, named Kukulcancu in Cozotitlan[48] which was a mighty city near the mouth of a mighty river that Marina thought must be the Orinoco. The other writing I could send to my own master, Carlostzin,[49] who dwelt in the Sunrise.

This priest was a bright-eyed loquacious fellow, and took the opportunity to present an idea that had enflamed his lively imagination. In sum, it was the union of the Christian religion with the Aztec and the Mayan religions, preserving the best features of each. Indians who sought a holy death, as did today's immolated, could find it by drowning in baptismal founts, made somewhat larger, of Redbeards' church; the Mexic would abandon their practice of eating victims of sacrifice and the bodies would be fed to lions, plainly numerous in what we called Spain, as shown by his picture on many of our banners. Carlostzin would be the recipient of one of the writings, and could see with his own eyes the happy face of today's sacrifice as she walked laden with gold to the reservoir, the Indian name of which was translatable as the Long Bath of the Blessed.

A great many people brought wreaths of flowers to cast on its waters. A great fiesta began in the city, to celebrate the New Year begun under such happy auspices, surely a year of good crops, especially of corn, since the

color of the immolant's hair was the color of ripe corn, and of indigo, since her eyes were the color of the dye obtained from the fruit of that New World shrub. Quetzalcoatl would be happy to have a new wife so closely resembling Xochitl, his first wife; and his benisons would be felt far and wide.

A feature of the parade was a wooden structure, plainly in crude imitation of the movable forts we had made in that dark hour before our flight from the palace in Mexic, and which had proved too clumsy for maneuver. On this Marina, the old cacique Taltecle, Sheba, and I were permitted to ride, accompanied by the caciques and dignitaries in gorgeous dress, the sides of the car being lowered for the crowds to see us well. Carrying the contraption was at least a hundred youths, wearing an Oaxacan version of jerkins and breeches. At the feast that followed, Doña Marina was given a name that appeared to mean the Staff of the Lame, and undoubtedly referred to her escorting Marie to the brink of the reservoir, and giving her a kindly thrust when, her spirit strong but her flesh weak, she had hesitated to take the sacrificial plunge. As a memorial of this, she was given a wonderfully wrought staff of silver, with a gold top in which was set a dazzling emerald the size of a large hazelnut. The staff was, of course, some kind of ceremonial baton and perhaps worth a third of the gold that at last had brought Marie to sudden death. While these macabre incidents were occurring, the vision in my mind of other immolants, hopelessly swimming about the adamant walls—crying and calling for help until exhausted—lay heavy on my soul.

"I cannot keep the staff," Marina told me, a sheen of tears in her eyes, when we were alone in our guest house on the hill.

"What will you do with it?" I replied. "It belongs in a museum of the beautiful grotesque. Yet you might present it to the Emperor who will never know its history. He might grant you a royal favor."

"He is your Emperor, not mine. I want none of the favors he can bestow, even the right to ride a donkey. No, I will pry out the emerald, put in its place a piece of jadeite that the Mexics so admire . . . then I may give it to my old friend and great benefactor, Taltecle."

"What will you do with the jewel?"

"I will give it to you, Malinche, in place of the great black pearl which you lost by swindle so many years ago in Seville. That may help pay the account Marie owes to your God."

"It is a long account," I remarked, after a long pause. "I wonder what demon caused her to get so in debt. An insensate lust for gold? What caused her to have that lust?"

"She had little else of note, even according to the story she told you. No family—her mother could not acknowledge her—she could not be her daughter in any real sense— By that story she would never be allowed to meet her father or lay eyes on him—no brothers, sisters, kin of any sort, nor could she move in society and make friends. Perhaps the old woman passing as her duenna loved her, but this I doubt, since too much loneliness was enforced upon her, too much secrecy; so I suspect the old woman hated her. Fatima certainly hated her, or she would not have given me access to her private papers. How her other maid, Cecilia, felt about her, we will never know. She did not have real beauty. Her face would have been beautiful if she had been loved, but that she had missed, and the magic of beauty had never been worked. She was unusually clever but not as greatly so as she believed—she made one mistake after another—and she had considerable but not great talent for histrionics."

"It was good enough to take me in," I said ruefully.

"Malinche, you are rather easily taken in. That is one reason I love you. Perhaps most great men are like that—their own greatness must seem so natural and every day they expect to find it in everyone; they put fine words in other people's mouths and then applaud them; men of imagination, they see what they want to see. You are the only truly great man I know; but Montezuma had a kind of greatness, and so does Sandoval, and my friend Xaramillo is at least a very great aristocrat.

"As for Marie," Marina went on, "she was not in a position to make good use of such gifts as she possessed; and I do not mean wholly because of her ostracism. When still very young, I think she discovered something that few young people grasp, thank God. They must grow up and sometimes reach middle age before they perceive it; and the very innocent or sentimental may never waken to the tragic truth. I mean the awesome power of gold. It will buy position, flattery, what passes for love, a circle of sycophants, a substitute for distinction, even such titles and honors as you hold so precious and will give so much. I believe that she was in a position to see that power at work. Someone near her performed what seemed miracles with the yellow stuff. Malinche, murder is more common than we think. All that is needed is wild desire and willingness to take risk and a pitiless heart. People are not born with pitiless hearts; a cub of a desert wolf will respond to love. Our world is such that hardening of a heart even to the

expulsion of all pity is a common thing. Yet it was I who ladened her down with gold—I knew how to persuade the priests—I wanted her death to be as sudden and merciful as possible—and I did not want you to leap down while she was swimming about the tank and crying for help. You would have drowned—in time. The priests would not have let down a rope or a ladder; they would have believed that Quetzalcoatl—or Kukulcan—or whatever name of the imperious deity—wanted both of you."

"What are you trying to tell me, Marina?"

"I do not know. I have not a pitiless heart, yet I can take life. That is true of soldiers—of judges—even of priests in a Christian church. Malinche, does your Book say anything against slavery?"

"Not in so many words. Our Lord Jesus said—"

"I know. Do unto others . . . I wonder if I broke that injunction when I brought about Marie's death. I do not believe that I did. If I had been in her place, wantonly killing for my own gain—regardless of how I came to be so, in all probability not my fault—still I would, in my inmost soul, want someone to kill me. To be free, not a slave, means to have freedom of choice. If I were a slave on the islands, and was flogged because I could not get my work done in time, I would try to kill the flogger. I think I would manage to do it, somehow. Your religion opposes slavery in principle yet tolerates it in practice. It will not tolerate heresy, which is only freedom of choice; it burns the heretics. The story of the Virgin and the Child is so beautiful; and what He taught is so beautiful. In most ways, almost all perhaps, you Spaniards are thousands of years ahead of us Indians. Are not the words of Jesus thousands of years ahead of you Spaniards?"

"Marina, I do not doubt they are."

"I feel so helpless—and so puzzled. Yet I cannot wish that my mother and stepfather had murdered me with their own hands instead of selling me into slavery."

"Marina, do you not know there is no use to talk or even think about such things? Just now you are fighting guilt. You are trying to take the guilt of the whole human race on your head; and Jesus did that, still he could not expunge that guilt. Let us each drink a cup of wine, the warming juice of the grape. I wish you could see the vines loaded with grapes; that one sight makes life worth living. A few minutes ago you implied that what Marie had done was not wholly her fault. What did you mean by it? The whole mystery is by no means cleared up. Do not try to justify Marie; that is impossible by the laws we live by, lacking any better, not knowing where to look for any

better. Instead, finish telling me the story. I think if anyone knows it fairly well, you are the one. Who was Marie?"

"I think *who* she was, resulting in *what* she was, is the story. Otherwise it was very simple—a terrible realization of the power of gold, and hence a terrible love for gold."

"But why did she so crave that power?" I asked. "Tell me, Marina."

"I think I know. Pour the cup of wine that you promised me."

I did so, and I thanked God for wine, regardless of what it sometimes did to people, especially the heartbroken and the ashamed. The sorrow visible in Marina's face became less deep and touching. We sat down on the bed, and Marina took my hand, and I had never in my life felt so close to anyone, except sometimes to a comrade, any comrade, beside me in dire battle.

---

[48] The Place of the Snake.

[49] Charles V.

2

"Before we can understand who Marie was, we must look at her deeds," my strange, wild, wise Marina told me. "Let us try to be sure as we can about these. You are a lawyer; you will think there is no *de facto* evidence. I did not need any more evidence than I had."

"Begin at the first, Marina."

"I do not know if Marie murdered her betrothed in the West Indies after she made sure he had provided for her in his will. I do not believe there is the least doubt that she brutally murdered her husband Farfan, when he seemed to stand in the way of her finding a great treasure in the walls and foundations of an ancient teocalli. She was not a hundred yards distant planting poinsettias—a common, womanly occupation—she was creeping along the wall. Fatima, Marie's half-Moroccan maid, saw her there. And in her attempt to kill you, with poisoned wine, she killed Catalina. Her reward was to be nine thousand ducats, possibly silver, but more likely gold castilians—she had been advanced a thousand ducats. The man Ruiz was only the agent of the man who so required that you should die that he would pay so much. The first plan could not be proposed by letter—that would be too dangerous—Ruiz was sent here to meet Marie personally. Only when no

news reached Santo Domingo, or more likely Castile, of your sudden death did he risk the sending of a veiled threat by letter. I found it as I told you—on the night I asked you to give a party that would cause her absence and the absence of the maid Cecilia faithful to her, and leave to help me in my search the maid Fatima who hated her. When I read that letter, proving to my satisfaction what was already so plain, I was resolved that Marie should commit no more murders. And there was only one sure way to assure the keeping of that resolve. That way I took."

"The plot to kill me misfired," I said after a little wait. "No, that is not the right word—the ball miscarried. I am curious to know who hated or feared me in that degree. If the murder price was ten thousand silver ducats—a good, round sum—I could attribute it to Velazquez, though perhaps wrongly. But if the price was ten thousand castilians, as you think, it would be beyond his means, unless he is grown immensely rich in the islands. My death would hardly requite him for such lavish expenditure—unless he can hate harder than I ever believed of him."

"Let us not fumble in the dark, but consider what we know—or think we know—about Marie. Do not tell me, please, Malinche, that the evidence against her is still 'circumstantial.' If in the face of all this circumstantial evidence she is still innocent, then all reason, all order, and all law of cause and effect would be confounded. Let us recall what she told you and which, in effect, she told Astores, about herself. We have only her word for that, and we must remember she was a plausible and ready liar. She let you both believe she was the daughter of a noblewoman who was unfaithful to her husband and had a baby by her lover. Yet the cuckold held no hard feelings toward her, and, in fact, sent her money and did her favors—a generous and just man truly, if the tale is true, for certainly Marie had nothing to do with what sperm and what ovum brought her into being. We take it that this husband helped his wife arrange her delivery in secret, no doubt for the sake of his own pride, and sent money to Marie whereby she could live in luxury. So we must assume he was a rich man. And later she spoke of how Bishop Fonseca had known her mother, indeed had had a big-brotherly love for her, and had given Marie a warrant, so she could gratify her love of adventure in the New World and escape from her humdrum life. So according to her story she had two elderly benefactors, one a noble cuckold, and the other a Minister of the Crown. We know that she craved a good marriage. Could not either of these benefactors provide her with such? It seems to me that by the influence of her mother's old friend, a mighty man of Spain, and her cuckold father, himself rich and generous toward her, they could have persuaded the son of an impoverished nobleman to marry her, promising him great

preferment; or promise the son of a rich merchant a patent of nobility from Ferdinand. They did neither. As for her real father, her mother's lover, we hear nothing. You suspected, Malinche, that he was poor and of humble birth. Marie persuaded romantic Catalina that he was a poet living at Court."

"All that is true, but for me it throws no light on the mystery."

"Then why not assume that the stories she told you and, later, Astores, and how many others we cannot guess, were complete fabrication? Let us start over. Who promised her ten thousand ducats, silver or gold we know not, if she would assassinate you? Velazquez? Not very likely, when his fortune was in decline, and could not be remedied by your murder. Not the noble cuckold, who was so kind and good to his wife's bastard. And if Bishop Fonseca cared for Marie, because of a big-brotherly love for her erring mother, he would hardly bribe her to stain her hands and destroy her soul by committing murder."

"Marina, you make all we have believed until now seem so farfetched."

"It *is* too farfetched to believe. But suppose . . ." And Marina paused, her candid eyes on mine.

"There was no kind cuckold," she went on again. "Bishop Fonseca had no big-brotherly love for Marie's nobly born mother or any other kind of love. Yet behind her looms the great shape of—whom? Say it, Malinche."

"Bishop Fonseca himself. But he was a great prelate besides a great minister of the King."

"You told me about Cardinal Alexander, who lived in your own time. He, too, was a great prelate, but he had a bastard son, Cesare Borgia, the ruthless murderer, yet Alexander became Pope."

"I admit it fits in. Bishop Fonseca was no Cardinal Alexander. He was an aristocrat, but of no great house, who had his way to make. And the scandalous life of Cesare Borgia, son of a cardinal, later a Pope's son, would cause the Church not to take lightly the peccadilloes of a Spanish bishop. Of course he must conceal the existence of a bastard daughter, if this theory is right. I was told that her benefactor visited her in a closed carriage, and wore a cowl. Sometimes he lent her a carriage—certainly he let her live in luxury not too ostentatious. You thought she had never been loved. In fact, Marie once hinted to me that her benefactor—the nobleman-cuckold married to her mother—did not love her but feared her, and if he treated her badly she would tell the secret and expose him to shame. That same fear might make him want her to make a good marriage, for in that case she would be less

likely to admit her own bastardy. Even the whipping of a young nobody who bedded her might fit in, but not very well.

"So much for the story Marie told me and later told Astores," I went on, the scales falling from my eyes. "But Bishop Fonseca had much more to lose by her revealing the truth than would a proud nobleman being exposed to ridicule as a cuckold. Bishop Fonseca would be defrocked and ruined. So he wanted to get her out of Spain and in a position good enough that she could not herself afford to tell the truth. She still thought that the young nobody would turn out to be somebody for her to marry; she could easily persuade her father to give me a start in Santo Domingo. Later she went there—I had gone to Cuba—she became betrothed to a rich man—I had sailed for the mainland and conquered Mexico. By now she had spent most of the money she had inherited from her betrothed, and Bishop Fonseca gave her a 'warrant'—she could certainly make something of herself there and his secret would be safe."

"But she did not make out too well," Marina reminded me. "She had no chance at you because of me, she failed with Astores, she reaped six thousand ducats and a small estate by marrying Farfan. Meanwhile, Bishop Fonseca was not making out too well. She wanted more money, and he most desperately wanted to get rid of you. Your swift and spectacular rise was putting him in the shade. He suffered his first great defeat when the charges he had made against you were dismissed; and a second shattering defeat when the Emperor made you Governor of New Spain. Let us say he was crazed with hate, but I do not believe it. He was a bold, ruthless, brilliant gambler with fate. So he sent a messenger to arrange with someone he had reason to believe he could trust to remedy all his troubles. But his trust was misplaced. Marie bungled the job. Bishop Fonseca may or may not have heard of Catalina's death; if he did he accepted the story that she died of acute alcoholic poisoning; and certainly he heard no good news of your death. I thought I knew what he would do—send a guarded letter stopping all remittances until the good news did come; he was so desperate he was no longer fearful of her telling a secret. I felt sure there would be such a letter, actually it was written by Ruiz, and I felt sure Marie would keep it, for blackmail or other uses."

Marina had been speaking rapidly and with suppressed excitement. Now she paused to get her breath, and her expression changed, and she went on quietly, although in a deeply earnest voice.

"Malinche, it was not until I found and read that letter that I enticed Marie to go with me to Oaxaca, although I had laid the ground before then. I

was by no means certain that the Great Teul Kukulcan—Quetzalcoatl—would accept her as a substitute for me. But if he did, she would never earn the promised nine thousand ducats."

"But if he did not, you would have been thrown into the tank to drown."

"That is the form of sacrifice at Oaxaca—but generally the victims are little girls and virgins sacrificed to his wife Xochitl. And I would not have been thrown in. I would have dived in, in keeping a vow of honor." But this last I already knew.

"Fonseca's senseless, cruel persecution of Colon!" I exclaimed. "His constant attempts to thwart me, and when these failed, to murder me! Was the cause only that no name in his age be greater than his own?"

"Perhaps, or perhaps natural malignance. Possibly Marie had inherited it, but that I do not believe. Under different circumstances, a good home, her strength of will and courage might have carried her far, not to the bottom of a sacrificial font weighed down with gold."

"Still I can hardly believe that Marie is Bishop Fonseca's daughter."

"That is because you are a fool!" Marina replied spitefully. "You are capable of prodigious follies. I think within a year you will commit the greatest folly of your life. But as for your remark—let me answer in plain words. That Marie de Estrada was Fonseca's daughter is as plain as the long, fine Spanish nose on your bleached-white face!"

3

Until that second I thought Marina had revered my white skin and craved its like. But she was of different stuff than Montezuma in this respect. In many respects she differed from anyone I had ever met or would ever meet. The troops had dubbed her Doña, and their pet name for her was "Our Luck." In Spain we have the word genius.[50] It is not easy to define, impossible to account for because it appears in all walks of life, in the sons or daughters of peasants and of kings and queens. It was said that Leonardo da Vinci was the son of an unfamed Florentine lawyer and a peasant girl. Botticelli was the son of a low-born tanner. Perhaps the word means only an ability to see better than normal people, with eyes of the mind, for very Homer was said to have been blind.

I had seen a few great paintings at the Queen's Gallery with Marie; later at other galleries, because these had fascinated me. I saw more in those

pictures, painted by the hand of man, than if I had myself looked at their subjects. Leonardo saw through and into everything that his eyes beheld or his imagination created. There was no use for the people in his pictures to put on veils, whether over their faces or their minds or their souls. Three of my captains had seen "The Last Supper" and had been moved to tears, and sensitive Sandoval told me his very soul had changed within his body. Captain Xaramillo had seen the "Mona Lisa" and had remarked to me that she resembled Marina; and I thought it rather odd that he had put it in this manner, instead of saying Marina resembled "Mona Lisa." The latter was a much older woman, he said; whether more or less beautiful he could not say; but the expression in her eyes was the same.

The wild thought struck me that I had been intimately associated with an Aztec genius. In that case it might be her wondrous eyes that might cause me to part with her—she saw into me and through me too clearly. It might be I could not live up to Marina; when I knew full well I could live up to any duke's daughter I might marry in Spain. But if Xaramillo had her, he would not try to live up to her. He would only adore her.

In the morning after New Year's Day I was invited to visit the teocalli. Although called the temple of Kukulcan, and he did stand a little forward of his first wife, Xochitl, she received equal honors from the priests and the people. And it was a lovely thing to enter a house of heathen gods whose walls were not smeared with blood, where there were no human hearts burning in braziers, and no sacrificial knives. Neither of these deities as perceived in Oaxaca wanted bloody sacrifice; and I thought they could soon be persuaded to stop human sacrifice in the great tank, and instead symbolize it in some way. If this were true, this would be the last temple in the Aztec country whose images I would demand torn down and our sacred images erected in their place.

Marina did not accompany me on this excursion, fearing that Quetzalcoatl, on thinking the matter over during the night, might change his mind.

Now I must give thought to the country's great richness in gold, because the Emperor demanded more and more gold, for his palaces, his favorites, his wars, and his grandeurs. So in the next morning I met with the king, and he swore allegiance, and I swore that as long as I was governor none of his people would be sold into slavery nor would we invade his kingdom,[51] as long as he sent one ton of gold every year to Vera Cruz, one fifth of which would be sent to the Emperor, and the other four-fifths used for the building and decoration of Christian churches, monasteries, and other good uses. And

some would be saved for the university I hoped would be founded within thirty years.[52]

The king remarked on the sun having a red glare on first rising, certain sign that Quetzalcoatl was satisfied with his new bride. And in that case Marie had become a lesser teul, and a little cu would be built to house her image, and her hair would be solid gold, all visible flesh would be silver, and her eyes sapphires. She would be known as Cihuatonath, which Doña Marina thought might mean The Woman of Gold. And children would festoon the image with flowers, and young virgins pray to her that they might have rich, noble, and virile husbands.

On the following morning we began our homeward march. How to account for Marie's absence we could hardly decide, but the old cacique, Marina's protector, suggested that we say she dived into a deep pool and was drowned. Her maid Cecilia wept and wailed at the news, and the Spanish ladies expressed sorrow at her loss in their usual manner and voice, but resignation and even a certain satisfaction was visible in their manner. Her name was rarely mentioned thereafter.

I went on with my duties of administration. Particularly, this meant building up our military strength, the mainstay of which was bronze cannons. We could obtain copper in abundance, although tin was scarce and expensive. Then I learned of a province in Taxco where tin was used as money, and I sent Spanish smiths to garner it. They discovered tin mines and iron as well, the latter to be of great use hereafter. Also the occurrence of sulfur to make gunpowder provided a great adventure for Montana and Mesa, who took it from the very mouth of Popocatepetl.

Marina was most pleased with me that I had not made slaves of the whole remaining population of Mexic. Also she took keen interest in the small expeditions I sent out, searching for good harbors in the north, and in the west and south where rolled the great South Sea discovered by Balboa. Meanwhile the rumor reached me by letter from Santo Domingo that the great Magellan, born a Portuguese but naturalized as a Spaniard, had crossed that sea, being killed in the attempt, but that nineteen survivors of his expedition had reached Seville, after circumnavigating the whole world. And thus it was proven a sphere of about twenty-five thousand miles in circumference, as the great Greek Eratosthenes had calculated seventeen and a half centuries before; and as Dr. Batiste at Salamanca had taught me. If I lived seventeen and a half centuries I could not explore it all!

The same ship brought me news of the death of Bishop Fonseca, and he was mourned at churches and cathedrals throughout the Spanish Empire, but the true cause of his death was the ebbing of his misused power, and the loss of the favor of the Emperor. I bore his memory no ill will. Perhaps his numerous attempts to cast me down had made me stand all the more strong.

And now I had another letter from the Duke of Bejar, urging me to come to Spain where royal recognition and honors awaited me. With his was a guarded letter from the Count of Aquillar, congratulating me on my victory, and hoping to welcome me in his palace before too long. And it included this passage:

> My daughter, Doña Juana de Zuniga, the niece of the Duke of Bejar, has asked me to include in this missive the message that your triumphs have given her great joy, and pride that she is also of the Spanish race, and she will remember you in her prayers, petitioning your success in ever greater victories for God and Emperor, and a safe return to your native land.

At which I made bold in a letter of reply to Count Aquillar to express my felicity in her thought and prayers for me, and I was venturing to send her a token of my gratitude, which I hoped she would not take amiss. The token was one of twenty great emeralds I had in my private treasury, each worth a thousand gold castilians, and carved to resemble a lion sejant, which was in her father's coat of arms.

I told Marina of this presentation, and she showed not the least surprise or agitation. But she wakened me at midnight with a kiss, and spoke softly and strangely.

"What you intend to do, Malinche, my beloved, do soon."

Then she turned away and went back to sleep.

I lay long awake. Well I knew what I intended to do sooner or later, despite the protests of my heart, and Don Juan Xaramillo was saddened by my numerous delayings. And just now was a suitable time for our parting, partly because he had now resigned his captaincy, and was eager to explore dimly known territories beyond Quecholac. These were perfectly safe from Indian attack and rich in very ancient Aztec ruins, but he could not hope to make the journey without a most gifted interpreter, and for that interpreter he most greatly desired Marina, to be his wife as well. At this same time I must make the long journey to Las Hibueras,[53] the language of whose

people she did not know. I would march there to cope with Olid, whom I had dispatched there previously to conquer the land, and who had rebelled against me.

The route was the same for the first part of the two journeys, by way of Orizaba. There I meant to pitch camp, and rest the men, ere they marched to a mighty river which the wandering Indian storytellers had told Marina was impossible to cross at this time of year. Yet we must cross it, conquer the mutinous army, and hang its leader who had never given me wholehearted loyalty, or insurrection would break out everywhere, and my vast Mexic empire, which I held under the Emperor, would fall apart.

I meant to set out about the middle of October. The year was 1524, and I had kept Marina more than a year since our ever memorable journey to Oaxaca. About the first of October, I told Marina of my intention.

"And if what you predicted is written in the stars—that we must part—we might choose Orizaba as a suitable place to say farewell," I told her.

"Whether or not it is written in the stars, I would insist upon it. I am not going to stand in the way of your lifetime's ambition to marry a grandee's daughter, be given a lordly title, and become a cup mate with the Emperor. Since that is your wish I am not going to stand in my own way of happiness in no small measure, that I can have as the wife of Juan. He will not wait for me forever. He is a patient man, but a strong man too. Malinche, let us call it settled. Juan and I both will go with you as far as Orizaba, then we will go our way, and you will go yours, and I will ask the blessing of God upon your journey, and you ask the same on ours. And I will never cease to be thankful for these years with you, a long count now, and that each of us gave the other love, true love, that will never die even when each of us has come to love another."

"Will you consider yourself my wife until the day of parting?"

"Yes, until you yourself give me away to Juan at Orizaba; and I will sleep in your pavilion until then, but tonight we will join our bodies for the last time."

Nor did we scant the rite, although every ecstasy was underlaid with sorrow; and at its end we both wept bitterly. Still, we knew no better course than the one that we must take; in all truth, my being what I was, and her proud spirit being what it was, we had no choice.

On the twelfth of October we began our journeys together, I leading a strong force, with Marina riding on my right hand, and Don Juan Xaramillo

on her right hand. We journeyed in the utmost state, with my steward and butler, a commissary complete with a pastry cook, a doctor and a surgeon, grooms and pages, falconers, and musicians. A big herd of hogs was driven by swineherds, to supply meat when game was scarce. Behind me was Sandoval, my second in command, other captains, the once-emperor Cauuhtemoc, and other Mexic chiefs, who in a way were hostages against their tribesmen rising in rebellion in my absence.

We came to Orizaba and pitched a splendid camp with bright pavilions and many banners. And having had my carpenters erect a stand, my whole force marched in review before Marina, and, the eyes of every soldier fixed on her as he passed, and each gave her austere salute, and every Mexican lord bowed, kissed his hand, and touched the earth. And the soldier-musicians played the same march with which we had set forth for our first conquest of Mexic.

Then Marina and I took our places for the ceremony of farewell on one side of a small, open field, with Juan directly opposite. Behind us on each flank ranged the soldiers, standing at attention; before us stood Juan in rich civilian dress, wearing his ancestral sword.

The drum began to beat. The musicians played softly and sorrowfully. Followed only by Sandoval and a small guard of honor, Marina and I walked solemnly toward the center of the field; Juan did likewise.

There we met; he removed his plumed hat, I held my sword at salute. Then I spoke:

"Don Juan Xaramillo, once my faithful follower, ever my true friend, to you I present my dearest treasure, for you to have and hold as long as you both desire. Sir, do you accept the gift?"

"General Cortez, my lord, I do!"

"Marina, long my beloved, do you go willingly into his keeping and the shelter of his love?"

"Malinche, my lord, I do."

"Then she is yours, and you have my leave to go."

With bowed heads, they turned away. I thought to wait a moment more, and truly it was my desire, as if something proper to the ceremony and grateful to my heart had been left undone. And in that moment, when they had gone no more than twenty steps, Marina stopped, as if taking thought of something, and then slowly she turned and walked back to me.

I thought she meant to put her arms about my neck in a last embrace, and kiss me. Instead, her right arm drew back, as I had seen an injured jaguar draw back his foreleg, and with the same swiftness and power. And with that same swiftness and power her arm swept toward me, not a thrust but a long swing, the hammer blow of the great felines, and her half-closed hand struck me with terrific force full on the side of my jaw. And I was knocked off my feet into the dust where I belonged.

Then Marina turned and rejoined Juan and did not look back. My pages rushed to pick me up and brush away the dust from my fine raiment, but I waved them back, and clambered up and brushed off that appropriate dust with my own hands. From a page I took the bridle rein of my charger, found my stirrup with my foot, and swung up. The beast's slow and restless wheeling permitted me a brief but strict review of all my troops.

"Dress ranks!" I shouted, breaking the deep silence.

Instantly the men began to straighten their lines.

"Squads, right turn, and stand to arms."

This order, too, the men obeyed, with the precision and hauteur of the parade of the Emperor's Guard. Then I rallied my shattered strength and shouted in full voice.

"*March!*"

And march they did, these men so tall and soldierly erect, that with them as I rode before them I felt hardly level.

---

[50] *Ingenio*.

[51] A Spanish settlement, Huaxycac, was founded in Oaxaca previous to 1529.

[52] The University of Mexico, now one of the greatest in the American continents, was founded in 1553.

[53] Honduras.

EPILOGUE

I, Frey Bertoleme de Olmedo, once chaplain and spiritual father to the armed forces of Queen Isabella and, later, of the Emperor Charles Fifth in the New World, pen these lines in epilogue to the autochronicle of General Hernan Cortez, Conqueror of Mexico, and Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca.

I make so bold because, after the day of General Cortez' parting with Doña Marina, he never again put pen to paper except in writing official reports, orders to his officers, proclamations, and missives to the Emperor, to native kings and caciques, and personal letters. Yet I believe those who read his chronicle, perhaps centuries hence, knowing his fame and of its winning and why it will live forever, yet may welcome a most brief recital of those events of his later life, pursuant and resultant of his great adventures and victories in the New World.

In faith, his officer and friend, Captain Don Juan Xaramillo, had foretold General Cortez an approximation of these events, because this nobly born captain had been reared in and about the Court of Aragon and Castile. Well he knew of the tides of sentiment that rise and fall there, of the variable winds of royal favor, of plots and counterplots for this preferment or for that debasement, of shifting friends or enemies, of the autocratic wielding of Imperial power tempered by the high resolution or the base whims of the populace. On the day the two men had been alone in the forest, Don Juan Xaramillo had confided this knowledge to General Cortez, and by and large his prognostications came true.

On his return to Spain, the general was most honorably received by the Emperor and his court. He was made Viceroy of New Spain, and Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca, which descends from the Plateau of the Mexic, and he was given prodigious grants of land, large as all Portugal, to be possessed by him and his heirs forever. Also, he married that noble and beautiful young lady, Doña Juana de Zuniga, daughter of Count of Aquillar and niece of the Duke of Bejar, and by her he had daughters, one of whom married the son of Marquis of Astorga. Yet Don Martin Cortez, the son borne him by Doña Marina, was appointed heir to his title and estate; he having been legitimatized by the Pope; and his illegitimate children were legally acknowledged and enriched.

Yet the river of his life both in Spain, and in New Spain where, for a term, he served as viceroy, did not flow ever calm and glistening in the sun of Fortune, and instead its floods had swirls and whirlpools, and storms and severe droughts. He was promoted, demoted, promoted again, and at times neglected utterly, and seemed a man forgot. Yet if sometimes he must hang about the palace with courtiers, waiting for audiences with the Emperor, when he was in New Spain he was ever taking horse, and riding with his troops up and down and across the great lands, founding cities, making discoveries, developing plantations, starting industries, and serving well its people. He made numerous expeditions to unknown lands, including the vast peninsula called Lower California; and ever he was hearing of equally great lands beyond the furthest horizons of the Spaniards; and the frontiers of some of these he gained, but some he did not reach. And among the latter were the so-called Twenty Cities, the region of which remained vague, but the mere mention of which excited the great conqueror, for he believed these were as rich in treasure as was once Mexic.

Yet a kindly calm settled over his life in the late decades. He maintained a noble house on the outskirts of Seville, and it became a kind of academy for the great men not only of Spain but of lands afar. Here they met, and discussed all the arts and sciences, religions and philosophies, and no voice was heard with more respect than that of the host. And here the bowl was passed, and toasts were drunk, and sometimes the general was in the mood to tell of the wonders that he had seen, or summarize some great adventure, at which his listeners marveled. Best of all Doña Juana gave him true and wifely love, and his sons and daughters loved and venerated him, and not one brought down shame upon his graying head.

On the first of December 1547, hard upon the general's sixty-third birthday, I was summoned to Castillena se la Cuesta, his noble and chief residence, to hear the confession of his sins, and give him such spiritual comfort as was in my power. On the morning of the second of December, he was very low, and I administered Extreme Unction. Then a high fever rose, forerunning death, and delirium engulfed his brain.

It took the form we could well expect. He believed that he had fitted out an expedition, and he and his intrepid troops were about to set forth. He was riding here and there, making his final inspections of the men's arms and their supplies, and the names that he called were the great names of his hitherto life, those of his captains in his great emprise, some of them even now lying in mossy graves, some far distant, or enfeebled by the weight of years. And then his confused utterances became strangely and wonderfully

clear, and either in the ears of imagination, or in truth, his voice had still an echo of its youthful ring.

"Alvarado, have the crossbowmen extra strings?" he asked. "Mesa, Montana, what of the guns? See that they set firmly upon their carts; and are your matches ready? For it comes to me that a great force of the enemy await us beyond yonder hill. But my cavalry will cut a road through their ranks, plying their lances and striking at eyes and faces, and the infantry will follow fast, and we will overwhelm them as we overwhelmed the great army of the Serpent Woman at Otumba . . .

"When that force is broken and dispersed our road is open! Aye, we will advance, over the icy mountain, across the grisly desert, and then we will see the towers of the first of the Twenty Cities, some of them roofed with gold, glistening in the sun. Aye, we will meet with resistance brave and strong, and the battle will be most dire, until we gain and take the teocallis and cast down the heathen gods.

"General Sandoval! Be on guard against a feint, for that is the Indian way, a force of five thousand to block our road and do us battle, and then slowly retreat, selling their lives dearly, until we are drawn into their ambush, where fifty thousand will attack our front and flanks. Marina, what weapons does the enemy wield, other than spear and sword and bow and arrow and slings? Are their shields of bronze, or ironwood ringed with brass? And I fear their spear points are not of flint, but metal . . . Even so, we will prevail. Marina, you have served well. Without your wisdom, and your counsel, and your deathless troth, we would have never come this far.

"Tarry with me a while longer, great Marina, defender of our host . . . Captain Leon! You are not wearing your golden swagger. Ah, I remember, you lost it in the water gap on the Night of Woe, and what else was it that you lost? My memory fails; our march has been so long, and I am a little weary. Pardon me, I pray you, my mighty and valiant soldiers! After this next battle I will rest and refresh myself; I will not fail you; together we will march and together we will strive, and by our united efforts, blessed by God, we will conquer the Twenty Cities, and they, too, will become part of Christendom and the domain of our Emperor Charles.

"Captain Xaramillo! I do not see you in your accustomed place. Aye, I remember, I parted with you at Orizaba, and why do my eyes fill with tears, as though I were a tender maiden, not stout Cortez? It was something—someone—who departed in your company, someone most dear, someone irreplaceable in my heart, the very beat of my heart it seems, the light of my

life. But I do not remember. I will not let myself remember. That parting was in my destiny, which no man may combat. . . . And my brave men, do not believe that these tears you see are of weakness; they flow over what is lost; but they will gleam with the fierce fires of battle, when we meet the enemy host.

"The hour strikes. The moment has come to advance. And why is my sword not in my hand? I can see it—it is held ready—in the hand of Gonzales, ever my faithful servant—but I cannot behold his shape, give me a cloth to wipe away the mist of tears, I see only the sword hanging in the air. Hand it to me, Gonzales, so I may take its hilt in my strong grasp, and I will not lay it down until the victory is won!"

General Cortez' voice fell silent and he raised himself on one elbow, and was gazing at his sword hung in its scabbard on the wall. Swiftly I took it down, and drawing it from its sheath, I held it toward him, hilt foremost.

At once he sat upright and seized the hilt and brandished the blade over his head.

"Onward!" he commanded, in a failing, feeble voice. Then he drew a deep, spasmodic breath, and his voice grew strong, and the shout of "Onward March!" rang in the room.

And then the upraised sword began to lower, and he himself was toppling sideways. Yet he found breath for one more utterance, hardly more than a hoarse whisper, yet all who had gathered about him heard it clear.

"Onward to Victory."

And with those words, ever the motto of his life, and the spur of his mighty deeds, General Cortez sank down to the death, and his breath stilled, but in his open eyes I thought I saw reflected the towers of a distant city, their golden roofs agleam in a rising sun.

THE END

BOOKS BY EDISON MARSHALL

BIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS

Cortez and Marina A novel of Cortez and the Conquest of Mexico
The Conqueror A novel of Alexander the Great
Great Smith A novel of Captain John Smith

HERO NOVELS

West with the Vikings A novel of the Viking discovery of America
The Pagan King A novel of King Arthur
Earth Giant A novel of Heracles (Hercules in Roman myth)
The Viking A novel of Ogier the Dane
Caravan to Xanadu A novel of Marco Polo

HISTORICAL NOVELS

Yankee Pasha The adventures of a young American frontiersman from Salem to Tartary after the Revolutionary War

Benjamin Blake A tale of the bastard son of an English squire in the South Sea Islands in the period of our Revolutionary War

American Captain The adventures of a young mariner in Maine, Malta, North Africa, East Africa, and England at the turn of the eighteenth century

The Infinite Woman A tale inspired by the life of Lola Montez

Gypsy Sixpence A novel of a young Lancer on the Afghan frontier in India, his character and his story suggested by those of Richard Burton

The Upstart A novel of strolling players in England about 1730

The Upstart A novel of strolling players in England about 1750

The Gentleman The adventures of a Charleston gambler at home, in the West Indies, and in South Africa prior to the Civil War

GOTHIC ROMANCE

Castle in the Swamp A novel of the Carolina low country in the nineteenth century

REGIONAL NOVELS

Princess Sophia A novel of Alaska in the period 1898-1918
The Inevitable Hour A novel of Martinique in the period 1890-1902

PERSONAL MEMOIRS OF BIG-GAME HUNTING

The Heart of the Hunter A looking-backward over hunting trails in Canada, Alaska, Africa, Indo-China, and India, and where they led

Shikar and Safari A factual and objective account of various big-game hunts

BOOKS OF SHORT STORIES

Love Stories of India
The Heart of Little Shikara Stories of animals of forest and jungle
The Elephant Remembers A jungle book

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.
Even though the book was written in 1963, the author was still using an older adventure-fiction convention of inventing "Native-sounding" words rather than drawing from real Indigenous languages.