

to share all that might befall him, and perhaps, by sharing it, extract some portion of the bitterness from the cup which he was compelled to drink, she was calm and hopeful. But now, the sheet-anchor of her soul was gone, and she was drifting, at the mercy of the waves, she knew not whither.

"My sweet cousin," said Guatimozin gently, as he arrested her flying step, "why this sudden abandonment to grief and despair. Dark as the clouds may be over our heads, all is not lost. Know you not, my love, that ten thousand times ten thousand brave hearts and strong arms are pledged, by every bond of loyalty and love, to rush to the rescue, the moment that any violence is offered to the sacred person of our lord. Be assured not a hair of his head shall be touched."

"Ah! my brave Guatimozin! I know full well your courage and your zeal. But of what avail to us will be the direst vengeance you arms can wreak on the strangers, after the violence is done, and the honored head of my father—oh! that I should live to speak it!—laid low at their feet!"

"Fear not, my beloved, they dare not, with all their boasted power, they dare not lay a rude hand upon that sacred person. They know, they feel, that they are treading on a volcano that might burst out at any moment, and overwhelm them in hopeless destruction. It is this sense of impending danger only that has induced them to invite the Emperor to their quarters, and so to urge their suit, that he could not, as their professed friend, deny it. While he is there, they will feel safe, for his hand alone can stay the pent up fires, that they break not forth at once. Fear not. I go to-night to Iztapalapan, to confer with your royal uncle, the intrepid Cuicahuac. The noble Cacama joins us there, convinced already that his was a mistaken policy, when he counselled your father to receive the strangers courteously, and treat them as friends."

"And what can Cacama do?"

"That is yet to be seen. He is convinced of his error, and is ready to atone for it with his life.—With Cacama, with Cuicahuac, with a thousand more like them—chiefs who never feared danger, and never knew defeat—why should we despair, or even doubt?"

"But how know you, Guatimozin, that these Castilian strangers regard their own safety as any way involved in that of Montezuma?"

"I know not, but I believe that they do."

"What oracle? What omens? I pray you explain?"

"The omens were their own troubled looks and clouded brows, while this strange negotiation was pending, and the guarded watchfulness, with which they now protect their guest, and prevent the intrusion upon his privacy of any considerable number of his friends, at the same time."

"Prince Guatimozin, do I understand the import of those terrible words? Is my father already a prisoner in his own palace?"

"What else, my sweet cousin, seeing he cannot come forth, if he would, and we can only approach him by permission?"

"O ye gods! has it come to this? Fly, Guatimozin. Fly to Iztapalapan. I release you from your pledge. Sound the alarm throughout the realm. And, if need be, I will arm, with you to the rescue."

"Not so fast, brave princess; it is just this rashness that may endanger the precious head we would rescue. His life is safe at present; let us not put it to hazard, by moving too soon, or striking a useless blow."

"But I see not yet, my dear cousin, how it is ascertained that my father is secure from further outrage. May it not be their policy to take away the head, hoping thus to dishearten and distract our people, and make them an easy prey to their victorious arms?"

"If so, they know not the spirit of the Aztec.—To a man, throughout these broad realms, they would shed their last drop, to avenge the foul sacrilege, nor rest in their work of vengeance, till every altar in the land was drenched in the blood of the captive foe. But you forget that I have an oracle as well as an omen to sustain my faith."

"What oracle has condescended, at last, to give us light? I thought they had all been silent, not deigning, since the advent of these mysterious strangers, any response to our prayers."

"Karee is never deaf, or silent, where the welfare of Tecuichpo is concerned."

"Karee?"

"Yes, love, Karee! I want no better or more trusty oracle. She has, you know, a sort of ubiquity. Nothing escapes her keen observation.—Few mysteries are too deep for her sagacity to unravel. In her brief occasional encounters with the strangers, she has gathered the meaning of not a few of the words of their strange tongue. What she has once heard she never forgets. Presuming that no one could understand them, they have talked freely and boldly in her presence. And it is from her that I learn, that the Castilian general said to one of his officers, as he crossed the court yard, this morning:—While we have the Emperor with us, we are safe. We must see to it, he does not escape."

"Escape!" shrieked the agitated Princess; "then he is indeed a prisoner. But these white men are gods, are the gods treacherous?"

"The gods of the deep are all treachery, but not those of the blue fields and bright stars above us. But, be they gods from below, or gods from above, they are not the gods of Anahuac, nor shall they chain a foot of its soil, till it is drenched with the blood of the Aztec. Farewell. Fear not. I will yet see you return in triumph to the imperial halls of Tenochtitlan."

CHAPTER VII.

TREACHERY AND RETRIBUTION—MASCARE OF THE AZTEC NOBILITY—DEATH OF MONTEZUMA.

And bloody treason triumphed.

Feeling dies not by the knife;
That cuts at once and kills; its tortured strife
Is with distilled affection, drop by drop
Oozing its bitterness. Our world is life
With grief and sorrow; all that we would prop,
Or would be propped with, falls; where shall
The ruin stop?

Passing lightly over some of the subsequent incidents of this stirring period, we must hasten to the catastrophe of our long drawn tale.

Secure in the possession of his royal prisoner, Cortez now thought he might safely leave the capital, for a while, and respond to a demand which pressed urgently upon him, to relieve his little army at Vera Cruz, threatened with destruction by the Aztecs, but a new band of conquerors from Spain, who had come to dispute the spoils with the conquerors. Leaving one of his principal officers in command, with a part of the forces, he placed himself at the head of the remainder, and marched quietly off on his new expedition.

Alvarado was a brave knight, but of a rash and headlong disposition, and utterly destitute of that cool prudence and far-seeing sagacity which was requisite for so important a station. He soon involved himself in a most wicked and unjust quarrel with the Aztecs, which had well nigh overwhelmed him and his diminished band in utter ruin.

Not long after the departure of Cortez, one of the great national festivals of the Aztecs occurred, at which the flower of the nobility, not of Tenochtitlan alone, but of all the neighbouring cities and towns, were present. They came only to the peaceful performance of the wonted rites of their religion, and consequently came unarmed. Their numbers were very great. They were all apparelled in the richest costume of their country. Their snow white vestments, their splendid mantles of feather-work, powdered all over with jewels; their sandals of gold or silver, and their gaudy head-dresses of many-colored plumes, made an imposing and magnificent display, as they moved in solemn procession, to the simple music of their shells and horns, towards the court yard of the great Teocalli, where the festival was to be celebrated. The immense area was thronged with the gay multitude of worshippers, who, unsuspecting of treachery, gave themselves up to the wild dances and all the customary evolutions of Indian festivity. In the midst of their solemn sports, Alvarado, with his band of armed followers, rushed in, like so many tigers let loose upon their prey, and put them to an indiscriminate slaughter. Scarce one of that gay company escaped the ruthless massacre. The holy place was drenched with the best blood of Anahuac, and mourning, desolation, and woe were carried into all the principal families in the land.

It was a fearful stroke, and fearfully was it repaid upon the heads of the guilty murderers. On

every side the cry of vengeance arose, and its hoarse murmurs came rolling in upon the capital, like the howlings of a gathering tempest. Myriads of outraged Aztecs, smarting and chafing under their wounds, and thirsting for a worthy revenge; thronged the avenues to the capital, and demanded the treacherous strangers to be offered in sacrifice to their offended gods. Guatimozin, and many other brave, powerful, fearless chiefs were there, eager to seize the opportunity to chastize the inoffensive intruder. Day after day, they stormed the quarters of the beleaguered foe, pouring in upon them volleys of arrows, darts and stones, that sorely discomfited, though it could not dislodge them.—Every assailable point was so well guarded by those terrible engines of destruction, the fire-belching artillery, that the assailants, numerous as they were, and spurred on by an ungovernable rage, could make but little impression upon them.—Nevertheless, they would inevitably have carried the defences, and swept away the little band of ruthless murderers, had not Montezuma interposed, and besought them, for his sake, to desist from their hostile attacks. From regard to his safety, they suspended their active operations, but did not relinquish their settled purpose of vengeance.

One means of annoyance was left to them, which would soon have reduced the fortress to submission, had not an unexpected succor arrived. All supplies were cut off from the camp,—already famine began to stare them in the face, and relax the iron sinew and with it the iron will, of the haughty Castilian. They were beginning to be reduced to extremities. A few days more, and the undefended garrison would have fallen into the hands of those merciless avengers of blood, who would have doomed every individual to the sacrifice.

At this critical juncture, the all powerful, invincible Cortez returned, his forces greatly increased by the accession of the very band that had been sent against him—Navez, who had been commissioned to displace him, having become his friend, and arrayed himself, with his whole company and munitions of war, under his banner. Hearing of the disastrous position of his friends in the capital, he hastened with rapid strides and forced marches to their relief. His progress was unimpeded by any hostilities on the part of Aztecs, or their allies, till he entered the city, and joined his forces with those of Alvarado in the beleaguered citadel. It was a relief to the beleaguered garrison to see him admit a free ingress of the entire force of the enemy, preferring rather to shut them up to famine there, than to meet them in the open field.

No sooner was the General, with his augmented army, enclosed within the walls of the fortress, than active and fearful demonstrations of the roused and unappeasable spirit of the people began to be made. The streets and lanes of the city, which were silent and deserted as he passed through them to his quarters, began to swarm with innumerable multitudes of warriors, as if the stones, and the very dust of the earth, were suddenly transformed into armed men. The flat roofs of their temples and dwellings were covered on every side with fierce wild figures, frantic with rage, who taunted the Spaniards with their cruel treachery, and threatened them, in the most violent language, with a terrible revenge.—"You are now again in our power," they cried, "and you cannot escape. Shut up in your narrow quarters, you are doomed to the lingering tortures of famine, and wo to the traitorous Aztec, that furnishes a morsel to relieve your hunger. When, at length, the faintness of death overtakes you, and you can no longer offer resistance to our arms, we will again spread the tables in your prison-house, and fatten you for the sacrifice."

No longer restrained by their reverence for Montezuma, whose pusillanimity had been the cause of all his and their troubles, they recommended their active operations, and stormed the defences with an energy and perseverance that was truly appalling. Day after day they deluged the place with arrows and missiles of every kind, which fell in pitiless showers upon the heads of the besieged, till scarcely one was left without some wound or bruise. In vain did they apply, as before, to their royal prisoner, to appease the rage of his subjects, and induce them once more to send them the customary supplies. In moody silence he shut himself up in his room, brooding over the ingratitude and treachery of Cortez, and the injuries and insults he had received at his hand.

Exasperated by this sudden reversal of his schemes of conquest, and maddened by the sense of hunger which began to be severely felt in his camp Cortez resolved to strike terror into the ranks of the besiegers, by a vigorous sortie at the head of all his cavalry. First sweeping the avenue by a well directed fire from his heavy guns, which were planted at the main entrance of the fortress, he rushed out with all his steel clad cavaliers, trampling the unprotected assailants under the iron hoofs of his horses, and dealing death on every side. The mighty mass gave way before the terrific charge of the advancing column, but immediately closed in upon its rear as it passed, till it was completely swallowed up in an interminable sea of fierce and angry foes, whose accumulating waves swept in from every avenue, and threatened to sweep them all away, in despite of the fury and power of their dreaded chargers. Convinced of his danger, the intrepid Castilian wheeled his horse about, and with a furious shout, called on his brave band to break a way through the serried ranks of the enemy. Plunging, rearing and leaping, under the double spur of the rider, and the piercing shafts of his foe, the fiery animals broke in upon the living wall that impeded their way, and rushed fiercely on, trampling down hundreds in their path, till they regained the open avenue, that was defended by their own artillery. It was not without serious loss, however, that this retreat was achieved. The fierce Aztecs threw themselves upon the horses, in the crowd, hanging upon their legs, sometimes inflicting serious wounds upon them, and sometimes grappling with their riders, dragging them from their saddles, and carrying off to captivity or sacrifice. At the same time, they were sorely beset by showers of stones and darts that poned upon their heads from every building as they passed, battering and breaking their armor, and terribly bruising both the horse and his rider.

These sorties were several times repeated, but always with the same doubtful success. The loss of the Spaniards was always much less than that of their enemy. But the latter could better afford to lose a thousand, than the former to lose one. Their ranks were instantly replenished with fresh combatants, who crowded in upon the scene of conflict, like the countless thousands of the over-peopled North, that swarmed upon the fair fields of Italy, as if some led-up world had been suddenly emptied of its inhabitants. Their numbers seemed rather to increase than to diminish with every new sortie. In the same proportion their fierce resolution increased.

The haughty Spaniard was now convinced that he had wholly mistaken the character of the people, whom he had thought to trample down at his pleasure. A spirit was raised which could not be laid, either by persuasion or by force. He saw and felt his danger, without the power to avert it. At length, either by threats or entreaties, or both, he prevailed on the captive Montezuma once more to interpose in his behalf, by employing what authority remained to him against his own best friends and faithful subjects.

The Aztecs, forsaken of their monarch, had bold and talented leaders, who were competent both to devise and to execute the measures deemed necessary for the public good, and to lead on their marshalled hosts, to battle and to victory. Cacama, the young Prince of Tezcuco, burning to retrieve his fatal error in counselling and aiding the friendly reception of the Spaniards, now joined all his resources with those of Cuicahuac and Guatimozin, in endeavoring to recover the ground they had lost. Their first object was, to rescue the Emperor from his inglorious imprisonment, never doubting that, with his sacred person at their head, they would be able to annihilate the treacherous intruders at a blow.

Not far from the city of Tezcuco, and standing out on the bosom of the lake, several hundred yards from the shore, was a solitary castle of a heavy and sombre architecture, built upon piles, at such an elevation as to be above the influence of any extraordinary swell in the waters of the lake. Consequently, when at its ordinary level, boats could pass freely under. At this place the princes were accustomed to meet for private deliberation.

Cortez was informed of these meetings, and knew too well the effect of the counsels there matured, not to wish them broken up. With a boldness of design peculiar to himself, he resolved to make Montezuma the instrument of their destruc-