

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BATTLE ON THE MESA

THE stars had marked the middle of the night, and the Castillian camp slept, save for the guards who paced quietly through the pine groves, and the Te-hua sentinels on the summit above, who rested in silence at the places where foot-holds carved by pre-historic Lost Others in the face of the rock wall, afforded a trail for the enemy if the enemy could find it.

Between the Castilians in the pine below, and the Te-hua sentinels on the rock mesa of the ruins above, there stretched the line of cave dwellings high in the rock wall. These needed no guard — for there the Te-hua warriors slept, and Tahn-té read the fate of things in the crystal, and made prayers.

But to the east where he had forbidden wandering feet, a man and woman did crouch in a crevice, and watch while the shining ones overhead travelled to the center of the sky and then towards the mountains in the trail of the sun.

For Tahn-té they watched — and the watching was so long that the man slept at intervals in the arms of the woman — but the woman did not sleep! Victory was too near — and triumph beat in her blood, and like a panther of the hills waiting for prey did she listen for the steps of the man who had known her humiliation.

But when the steps did come, they came not from the Po-Ahtun-ho, nor were they the steps of a man.

A woman crept lightly as a mountain squirrel from one to another of the boulders on the eastern hill, and at last climbed to the dwellings of the Ancient Ones, and reached the portal of the sacred place of the star.

This was the place where the wise men of old watched the coming of the gods as they gazed upon earth through the mask of the glimmering stars. It was not a place for women, for no woman had been Reader of the Stars within known records of the Tehua people. Yet it surely was a woman who crept upwards in the night to the place where women feared to go.

Yahn Tsyn-deh slipped like a snake from the crevice and watched from the shadow of a rock, and was richly repaid. It was the Woman of the Twilight who came to the place where Tahn-té had forbidden the Castilians and warriors to walk, and against the sky Yahn could see the outline of a water jar borne on her back by the head-band of woven hemp. She halted for breath, and leaned, a frail, breathless ghost of a woman, against the wall.

Then with a pebble she tapped on the portal of the star, four times she made the signal ere another met her in the dusk, and took from her the burden, and clung to her hand in dread.

In the dusk of the starlight they sat and whispered, for no fire dare be lit within, and the girl of the blue-bird wing ate the bread and drank water, and breathed her gratitude while she strove to understand the words of the mother of Tahn-té.

That there was danger she knew for she had seen the many men. Like things enchanted had she seen them — the men who looked like part of the animals they rode! In dread and fear had she waited for Tahn-té while she watched the Ancient Star glowing

like an eye of wrath in the western heavens. It was looking back with an evil look because no gift had been made to it on the altars of the valley people. Tahn-té had told her that so long as it shone must she remain hidden. She did not need to ask why. When with the Navahu savages she had been taunted at times because the altars of her people knew well the blood of human sacrifice which they offered with elaborate ceremony to propitiate the gods of the stars in the sky.

“Tahn-té?” she whispered to the mother, but the mother shook her head. Apart from all woman-kind must a priest live when times of stress come. Tahn-té was fasting and making prayers. A girl hidden in the caves must not go hungry, but the thought of her must not mingle with thoughts of penance for the tribe. All heads of the spiritual orders do penance and make prayers for clear vision when the evil days come.

“And they are here?” questioned the girl.

“They are here. The land was smiling, the corn was good, all was good. Then the Great Star came — and the men of iron came — the corn was laid low by the God of the Winds. The Most Mysterious has sent signs to his people, and the signs are evil and come quickly. My son, the Po-Ahtun-ho, has seen these signs, and the gods have talked with him.”

The maid knew that a mere stray creature could not find room in the thoughts of so great a man — at so great a time; and she sat silent, but she reached out and held the hand of his mother. Since he could not speak with her he had sent to her the woman most high and most dear. He could not come, but he had not forgotten!

“He will come again?” she murmured, and some

memory in the heart of the Twilight Woman made her speech very gentle.

“He will come again when the battle is over, and the days of the purification are over. It is the work of the Po-Ahtun-ho to see that the stranger is ever fed and covered with a shelter. So has he brought you here, and so has he brought the lion skin robe to you here. When the young moon has grown to the great circle, and the strangers have gone again to the camp by the river, then will the Po-Ahtun-ho come to you here in this place. He will come as the circle moon rises over Na-im-be hills. Many prayers will be made ere that night time, and he will come with wisdom to say the thing to be done. Until then the strangers must not see you, and the young foolish men of our tribe must not see you.”

Not much of this was understood by the bewildered maid who must be kept hidden in secret even in the land of her own people.

But Yahn Tsyn-deh, crouching in the sand outside the portal, heard and understood, and her heart was glad with happiness, for a vengeance would fall double strong on Tahn-té if it touched also the medicine god woman, his mother!

From the broken, whispered sentences — half Navahu — half Te-hua — did Yahn know that the hidden woman was indeed the Navahu witch maid by whom evil spirits had been led from the west into the great valley.

It had been a wonder night in the life of Yahn Tsyn-deh. The love of her wild heart had been given back to her — and vengeance against his rival had been put within reach of her hands! The heights of Puyé were enchanted — and the Ancient Star had shone on her with kindness. It was a good

time in her life and she must work in quickness ere the change came, for the watchful gods of the sky do not stand still when the signs are good signs.

And she crept back to the arms of her lover, and they watched together the medicine shadow woman creep downward until the dark hid her.

Yahn counseled that at once they go to the governor and tell that which they heard, but Ka-yema said "no," for if the Navahu enemy did come, the power of Tahn-té was needed by the Te-hua warriors — it was not the time to kill the witch woman or kill the prayer thoughts.

"You are strong to fight without Tahn-té," whispered the girl who made herself as a vine in her clinging clasp of him.

"But not to fight against Tahn-té and his secret powers of the sky," answered Ka-yemo. "The old men know he is strong in visions. When the time comes that he fall low in their sight, there will be many days that their hearts will be sick. We must not make these days come when we have enemies to fight."

"Do you fear?" demanded the temptress petulantly. It irked her that his first thought was of caution — while hers was of annihilation for the man who loomed so large that no other man could be seen in the land.

"If you think I fear would you find me here in this witch place with you?" he asked. "It has been forbidden that any one comes here — yet have I come!"

Plainly he felt brave that he had defied the Po-Ahtun-ho in so much as he had walked to the forbidden sacred places, and Yahn felt a storm of rage sweep over her at the knowledge. But it had been

a storm of rage like that by which he had once been driven away from her! And she smothered all the words she would have spoken, and clung to him, and whispered of his greatness,— and the pride he could bring to the clan when Tahn-té, the lover of witches, no longer made laws in the land.

In her own heart she was making prayers that the alarm of the Navahu warriors prove a false thing, and the vision of Tahn-té be laughed at by the clans. To hear him laughed at would help much!

But that was not to be, for ere the dawn broke, came shouts from Shufinne — and signal fires, and the Te-hua men of Puyé ran swiftly to guide their Castilian brothers in arms, and the savages who had hoped to steal women in the darkness, found that thunder and lightning and death fought for the Te-hua people — and the men of iron rode them down with the charmed animals and strange battle cries.

When the daylight came there were dead Navahu on the field south of Shufinne — the flower of the shields had bloom! Two dead Te-hua men were also there, and a wounded Navahu had been taken captive by Juan Gonzalvo. Ka-yemo carried two fresh scalps, and Don Ruy lay huddled in a little arroyo, where a lance thrust had struck him reeling from the saddle, and Tahn-té had leaped forward to grapple with the Navahu who, hidden on the edge of the steep bank, waited the coming of the horseman and lunged at him as head and shoulders came above the level.

Where the breastplate ends at the throat he struck, and the blade of volcanic glass cut through the flesh. At the savage yell of triumph the horse swerved — stumbled, and with a clatter of metals rolled down the embankment.

As the Navahu rushed downward with lifted axe and eager scalping knife, an arrow from the bow of Tahn-té pierced the temple of the savage, and with a grunt he whirled and fell dead beside the Castilian.

The horse had quickly regained his feet, but the rider lay still, the blood pulsing from his throat and staining the yellow sand. With dextrous fingers Tahn-té removed the helmet and breastplate that the position of the body might be eased. With sinew of deer from his pouch, and a bone awl of needle-like sharpness, he drew together the edges of the wound, then turning to where the Navahu lay prone on his face in the sand, he deftly cut a strip of the brown skin a finger's width across, and in length from shoulder to girdle; this he took from the yet warm body as he would take the bark from a willow tree, and bound it about the throat with the flesh side to the wound.

"Take my horse and follow," whispered Don Ruy, who had recovered breath and speech,— "I am not yet so dead that I need the grave digger — you can ride — take my horse and follow."

Tahn-té had leaped to the saddle, when a cry at the edge of the arroyo caused him to halt, it was so pitiful a cry, and tumbling down through the sand and gravel came Master Chico with staring eyes of fear, and lips that were pale and quivering. The flayed back of the savage had he caught sight of, and the white face of Don Ruy who looked dead enough for masses despite his own assertion to the contrary, and the lad flung himself on his excellency with a wail that was far from that of a warrior, and then slipped silently into unconsciousness.

With the thought that a death wound had struck

the lad who had come to die with his master, Tahn-té turned the face back until the head rested on the arm of the Castilian, lightly he ran his hands over the body, and then halted, his eyes on the face of Don Ruy, who gazed strangely at the white face on his arm. The cap was gone, the eyes were closed, and the open lips showed the white teeth. In every way the face was more childish than it had ever appeared to him — childish and something more — something —

Then Tahn-té, who held the wrist of Chico, laid it gently on the hand of Don Ruy.

“Only into the twilight land has she gone, Señor,” he said softly — “even now the heart beats on the trail to come back — to you!”

Don Ruy stared incredulously into the eyes of the Indian, and a flush crept over his own pale face as he remembered many things.

“Doña Bradamante!” he murmured, and nodded to Tahn-té, who leaped on the horse and rode where the yells of the victors sounded in the piñons towards the hills. Beyond all the other horsemen he rode, and saw far above in the scrubby growth, the enemy seeking footholds where the four-footed animals could not follow. Then, when Ka-yemo had called the names of the trailers who were to follow the enemy beyond the summit, Tahn-té the Po-Athun-ho turned back and chanted the prayer of a prophet to whom the god had sent true dreams.

The Castilians watched him as he came; so proudly did he carry himself that the men swore an army of such horsemen would win half the battle by merely showing themselves, and the old men of Tehua knew as they looked on him, and as they counted the slain and wounded, that Tahn-té had indeed been given the

gift of the god-sight to save the women of the valley.

Juan Gonzalvo swore ugly oaths at sight of the horse of Don Ruy. Since the pagan had taken it as his own, it was plain to be seen that some woeful thing had chanced to his excellency.

But to their many questions Tahn-té led them to the arroyo where Don Ruy was indeed wounded, and where a pale secretary was carrying water in his hat to bathe his excellency's head, and his excellency let it be done, and exchanged a long look of silence with Tahn-té, who understood.

The ankle of Don Ruy had a twist making it of no use to stand upon. The Po-Ahtun-ho made a gesture to Chico to hold the horse while he, with a soldier to help, put it straight with a dextrous wrench, and the secretary several paces away, turned white at the pain of it.

Then was his excellency helped again to his saddle, and the men from Mexico marvelled at the surgery of the pagan priest who killed and flayed one man to mend another with.