

CHAPTER XXI

THE CALL OF THE ANCIENT STAR

WHEN the moon had scarce reached the center of the sky, a gray faced man slipped through the corn fields of the river lands, and spoke to the Spanish sentry who paced before the dwellings where the camp was made outside the wall.

The sentry wondered who the woman was who had held him belated, for many were now coming from Shufinne, and some of them were pretty.

But Capitan Gonzalvo laid himself down to dream of no woman. He crept to the pallet of Padre Vicente. There were no words lest others be aroused, but a pressure of a hand was enough to bring the padre to his feet, the sleep of the man was ever light as that of one who does sentry duty day time and night time.

Out into the open of the summer night they both passed, and in the shadow of a wall where the Te-hua sentinel could not see, a man of iron broke down and half sobbed a confession of horror.

The padre paced to and fro in the dusk of the night, and gave not over much care to the shaken heart of the penitent.

“A hundred Aves, and half as many rosaries,—and candles for the altar of San Juan when we return to Mexico.” He tabulated the penance on his fingers, with his mind clearly not on those details.

“Take you courage now, and hark to me,” he said

brusquely. "You say you saw the maid and the man dead one on the other; — and that you fled across the mesa at sight of their faces. That pretty Apache devil told you that the witch lived at that place, and that the Po-Ahtun-ho was her lover. How know you that it was not indeed witchcraft you looked upon? How know you that the infernal magic was not used to change the faces of the two that you be sent home not knowing which are dead and which are living? This may yet be turned to our advantage."

Juan Gonzalvo was past thinking. Not though gold was found as plentiful as the white stones of Puyé would he again go to the witch accursed spot! His own armor had been touched by the fire of hell in that place until he had lain it aside while he waited for the coming of the sorcerer, and the sorcerer had in some way kept hidden — magic spells had been worked to blind the eyes of Gonzalvo to the faces of the others — even though light was given for the arrows to speed true! He would fight living Indians in the open: — but no more would he trail witches in the dark!

So he mumbled and made prayers and calmed himself somewhat at sight of the calm, ever cool padre.

"Go you to your rest," said his reverence at last, — "and forget all the work of this night."

"Forget? — but they will be found — they —"

"I will see that they are found, but let it not trouble you," stated Padre Vicente. "We must meet trickery by trickery here. Go to your bed, and sleep too sound for early waking."

"But — how —" — between the shock and fear of the night, Gonzalvo fairly clung to the quiet strength of the padre.

"Take your sleep: — and keep a still tongue forever! I have had a dream or a vision this night"

and the padre smiled grimly. "I can as well afford a vision as can the elect of the Po-Ahtun! — and my vision will send people of Ka-yemo's clan to search for dead friends on the heights of Puyé!"

"And if they find there also — ?"

"Ah!" and the padre nodded and smiled that the thought had penetrated the shocked mind of Capitan Gonzalvo; — "If they find there also the evidence that their high priest is the lover of a witch — and that he runs from council prayers to meet her in the night: — is that not the best of all things the saints could send us? You have done good work for the cause this night, Juan Gonzalvo. Go now to your sleep — and when you hear of that which is found on Puyé, you hear it for the first time!"

The council of that night had been a late council because of the quaking of the earth. Every one knew it was time that a sacrifice be made to the visitor in the sky. All of evil was coming to the land because this had not been done. One Yutah slave belonged to the Quan clan, and a robe and shell beads must be given by the vote of the council to that clan. It would be a better thing to use the new Navahu who was made captive by the men of iron, but their new brothers would not listen to this wisdom.

When the sun looked over the edge of the mountain in the new day the sun must see the heart lifted high; — and the body must go to the murmuring river — then only could hope come that the evil magic be lifted from the land of the Te-hua people.

Thus the vote had been, and thus had Tahn-té been held in council long after the time the Moon Mother came over Ni-am-be mountains.

Don Ruy was at that council, and asked to speak against the offering of blood to the god whose eye was

as the star. But Tahn-té listened and then spoke, "Your own god of the book asks for sacrifice — your god of the book accepted his own son as a sacrifice — and that people prospered! Your priests teach the blood atonement, and the death they gave the earth-born god was a hard death — if he had really died there! Being a god he could not die in that way; — all medicine men who know strong magic know that. But the blood was spilled and the spirit went away from that place — the earth gods always go away like that while they are young; — never do they die. There are days — and there are nights, when they come back! They speak in many ways to earth people. You men of iron do not to-day make blood sacrifice to your gods; — so you say! Yet your people go out to battle and kill many people for your god — also many of your own people are killed in such god wars — your tribes of different names call these wars 'holy'. Our people do not think like that. Even the wild tribes hold the Great Mystery sacred in their hearts. They will fight for hunting ground, or to steal women or corn — but to fight about the gods would bring evil magic on the land — the old men could not be taught that it is a good thing! Also your Holy Office has the torch, and the rack, and the long death of torture for the man who cannot believe. The priests of your jealous god do that work, and their magic is strong over men. You talk against our altars, but on our altars there is not torture,— there is one quick pain — and the door of the Twilight Land is open and the spirit is loose! This world where we live is a very ancient world, but it is not yet finished. All the old men can tell you that. It may be in the unborn days that earth creatures may see the

world when it finished,— and when the gods come back, and speak in the sunlight to men. In that time the sacrifice may be a different sacrifice. But in this time we follow the ancient way for the gods have not shown us a different way.”

“ You have studied much in books — you have learned much from men,” said Don Ruy — “ You could change the minds of these people in this matter.”

Tahn-té looked kindly on him, but shook his head.

“ Not in the ages of ten men can you change the mind of the men you called Indian,” he said, “ in my one life I could not make them see this as you see it — yet am I called strong among them. Also I could not tell them that the way of the white priest when he breaks the bones in torture until the breath goes, is a better way than to take the heart quickly for the god! That would be a lie if I said it, and true magic does not come to the man who knows that he is himself a teller of lies! ”

The men of the council went their separate ways to sleep in the kivas, well content that the angry god was to be appeased at the rising of the sun,— and Don Ruy rolled himself in his blanket and lay near the door where Ysobel and her husband lived apart from the camp, with only the secretary inside their walls. But Don Ruy slept little — and cursed the heathenish logic of Tahn-té, and wished him to the devil.

And stealthily as a serpent in the grasses,— or a panther in the hills, Tahn-té sped from the council of sacrifice, to the hills where he knew a girl had waited long for his coming.

Little thought gave he to trailers. The night before had been the night of the scalp dance — and now the trembling earth, and the council, had left the

men weary for the rest of sleep. He ran swiftly and steadily in the open as any courier to Shufinne might run.

But those of the Tain-tsain clan who followed, noted that he did not go to Shufinne,— he climbed instead the steeps where they were to climb, and for that reason their coming was stealthy, and the cleverest men were sent ahead, and all said prayers and cast prayer meal to the gods,— for this was a strange thing the white priest had seen in a vision — it was to be proven if he was of the prophets!

The two couriers of the clan knew it was proven when they saw the two dead people near the head of the stone stairway. And when they heard the sobs of a woman within the dwelling of the Reader of the Stars in the ancient days — also the soothing tones of a man,— they crept back into the shadows and told the leaders. And a circle of men was made about the place, and in silence they waited.

Ere their hearts had ceased to beat quickly from the run, that which they waited for stepped forth; — a man to whom a creature clung — her face was hidden against his breast, and he led her with care lest she see the dead people on the stairway — for the Navahu shrinks more than another from sight or touch of the dead!

“ There are other places — and safe places,” he said to her and held her close. “ Does not the blue-bird find nesting place in the forest? And does not her mate find her there in the summer nights? ”

And then — with his arms around her, and his robe covering her, his path was closed by a warrior who stood before him! His eyes turned quickly on every side, but on every side was a circle of men,—

and the men were all of the clan of Ka-yemo to whom Tahn-té had never been precious since the days of boyhood — and the camp of Coronado.

And the younger men were for claiming the maid when they saw her face, and the older men read triumph against Tahn-té for the work of this night.

“That which is meant for the gods is not to be given to men,” they said in chiding to the young men, and Tahn-té knew what they meant when they said it.

“It is the Navahu witch maid of Te-gat-ha,” cried another — “look — brothers! This is a Navahu arrow through the eye of Ka-yemo, and through the heart of Yahn Tsyn-deh. Alone here she has destroyed them! — and alone here would Tahn-té the Po-Ahtun-ho have cherished her! The priest of the men of iron is a man of strong magic. His vision has sent us to find the one who has made angry the gods of our land!”

“Go you and gather pine for the altar,” said the head of the clan, and two youths ran joyously down the slope; — for they were to aid in driving evil magic from the valley!

“This maid did not touch those dead people,” said Tahn-té, — “for that she must not suffer.”

“You Summer people are easily held by witches’ craft,” retorted one of the men insolently, — a day before he would only have addressed Tahn-té with reverence.

“Was she not marked for sacrifice at Te-gat-ha?” — “Has she not caused the killing of the corn?” “Did not the Navahu men come to destroy us because of her?” “Is the earth not angry that she has hidden in the sacred places?”

These questions came thick and fast for Tahn-té

to answer, and Tahn-té held her hand and knew there was no answer to be made. And Phent-zha, who was the oldest man there, looked at him keenly.

“Are you also not more weak in magic for her coming” he asked,—“is your heart not grown sick? The magic of the white priest is against you; — and it is strong! When we have taken the heart from this witch, and you have again fasted in the hills, the sick land and the sick people will be made better.”

The maid looked from face to face in the glare of freshly lit torches, and caught little of meaning from the rapid speech. But no one touched her, and she looked with confidence into the eyes of Tahn-té. He had not moved from his tracks, and he held himself proudly as he faced the man who had long wished his humiliation.

“When the time comes to fast in the hills, I will know it,” he said,—“and no hand touches the heart of this maid, but — my own!”

“It is at sunrise,” said the governor, stilled by the look of the Po-Ahtun-ho — “a runner has been sent — the council will be waiting for the enchantress, and the women to prepare her will be waiting.”

“I will lead her,” said Tahn-té and took her hand, and from the medicine pouch he took one bead of the by-otle, and in Navahu he bade her eat of it in secret, which she did wonderingly, and the men of the Tain-tsain clan walked before and after them and held torches, and they went down the steep of Puyé before the moon had touched the pines of the western hills. And a runner was sent to Shufinne that the people there might come and put Yahn Tsyn-deh and her lover under the earth together.