

CHAPTER XXII

“AT THE TRAIL’S END!”

THE morning stars were shining through the gray threatening sky, when a slender blanket draped figure stepped from Ysobel’s doorway into the dusk, and came near putting foot on Don Ruy Sandoval who lay there as if on guard.

There was a little gasp, and the blanket was clutched more closely.

“Your Excellency!” breathed Chico wonderingly — “awake so early — and — here?”

“Awake so late,” amended his excellency, — “and is this not a good place to be?”

“In truth I am having doubts of my own,” confessed the secretary with attempted lightness. “What with barbaric battles, and earth quakings, — and a night when the breath of volcanoes seemed abroad in the land and strange lightnings came up from the earth — it suggests no dreams of paradise! Don Diego thinks it is because the expedition has not been more eager for souls.”

“Has he not converted Säh-pah and won a lady-love?” asked Don Ruy — “he is at least that much in advance of the rest of us. I’ve had no luck, and you are as much of a bachelor as ever you were.”

Chico contemplated the morning star in silence, and Don Ruy smiled.

“If the enchanted ring of Señor Ariosta should fall at your feet from yon star; — or the lamp of

Alladin would come out of the earth in one of these quakings, what would you ask it to do with us all, since this camp is not to your liking?" he asked.

"I would wish you safe in Mexico with no sorcerer to doctor your wounds if you were bent on acquiring such pleasures."

"No learned professor could have brought healing more quickly," contended Don Ruy,— "and the sorcerer, if so he be, has given me food for thought at least. Which reminds me that you are not to go to the river mesa this morning in case you see the barbarians trooping that way for ceremonies."

A runner came panting past them from towards the hills, and the gate was opened for him and closed again, and a herald from the terrace shouted aloud sentences arousing all who yet slept; — not only arousing them, but causing unexpected shrieks and cries of consternation from many dwellings. There were the lamentations of the old women of the Tain-tsain clan, and their wails sent the thrill of a mysterious dread through the night that was dying, for the day had not yet come.

"What is it — what?" asked the secretary in a whisper of dread. "You know what the thing is; — tell me!"

"Not so nice a thing that you should trade a convent garden for it," confessed Don Ruy — "if the wishing ring were mine you would be wafted there before that star goes pale."

"Oh!" — and the secretary strove to assume a lightness not to be honestly felt in that chorus of wails. "You would make me a messenger to your lady of the tryst — and I would tell her that since luck with the pagan maids has not been to your fancy, you

may please to walk past her balcony and again cast an eye in that direction!”

“And at the same time you might whisper to her that I would not now need to glance at her the second time to know her,” he added. “Even the armor of a Bradamante could not mask her eyes, or dull for me the music of her voice.”

“Excellency!”

“It is a most strange place to make words for the wooing of a lady, is it not?”—asked Don Ruy looking up at the slender form wrapped in the blanket.—“But new worlds are in making when earth quakes come,—and our to-morrows may be strange ones, and—sweetheart comrade, I have lain at your door each night since your head rested on my shoulder there in the arroyo.”

Someway Don Ruy made his arm long enough to reach the blanket and draw the hesitating figure to him, and rested his cheek against the russet sandals, and then a very limp Master Chico was on the ground beside him, and was hearing all the messages any lady of any balcony would like Love to send her.

“I cannot forgive you letting me carry all that water for a fainting fit—and there was no fainting fit!” she protested at last,—“all these days I’ve lived in terror;—not quite certain!”

“Think you nothing of the uncertain weeks you have given me?”—he retorted.—“I had my puzzled moments I do assure you! And now that I think of it—I’m in love with a lady whose actual name I have not been told!”

“Are we not equal in that?” she whispered, and he laughed and held her close as a bandaged throat would allow.

“ Ruy Sandoval is a good enough name to go to the priest with,” he said, “ and if ‘ Doña Bradamante ’ has no other I’ll give her one if she’ll take it.”

“ Despite the Indian grandmother, and the madness of longing for life in the open — and —.”

“ And the Viceroy and court of Spain to boot! ” he declared recklessly. “ Sweetheart, I must have the right to guard you in a new way if need be, for these are strange days.”

Even while they spoke the stars were shot over by the green light of a promised dawn, and against the faint sky line of the mesa a strange procession came. Men carrying long fringes of the cedar such as grow in the moist places in the cañons,— also festoons of the ground pine, and flowers of the sun with the brilliant petals like warm rays.

The bearers of these ran swiftly, but the others moved more steadily, and Don Ruy called to José to learn for him the meanings of things, and why Tahn-té, the Ruler, walked like that as if in prayer, and clasped hands with a girl who smiled up in his face as a child on a holiday, though all the older men looked as though walking to battle.

“ It is the witch maid who has brought evil magic on the land,” said José, who had heard the herald — also she has enchanted the Po-Ahtun-ho with devil’s arts, and has killed Yahn Tsyn-deh and Kaye-mo with Navahu arrows on Puyé. They say she laughs to show that no knife can harm her, and she goes to the altar instead of the Yutah; — for it is she the earth groaned for.”

“ Go — ” — said Don Ruy to his lately claimed “ Doña Bradamante ” — “ keep within the house with Ysobel until we come again. There may be much to

do, Lady mine, but there are no records for you to keep this day.”

And without protest or reply he was obeyed. There was something so awful in the sight of the smiling maid of the bluebird wing, and the wails of the women who mourned those she had destroyed, that one would willingly flee the sight of their meeting.

But the Te-hua guards closed around the enchantress and the fanatics of vengeance were barred out. Those meant for the Mesa of the Hearts were not to be given to people!

Publicly the governor made thanks to the priest of the men of iron; — he it was who had smelled out the witch — and sent the men where her dead was found! Plain it was that their white brothers helped in magic and in battle. Let the old men think wisely and well before they let such brothers go from the land. For the angry gods, and the quaking earth, the priest of the beard had found the cause; — also the cure had he found. Did not the sun symbol belong to this man for this work? Let the old men think well of this thing!

Don Ruy held José at his side, and listened, and hearing all, he faced the padre with the first anger they had seen in his reckless kindly eyes.

“For your own ends of the gold search you have done this thing?” he demanded. “To a death on the altar have you sent that child-woman? Good priest of the church, you make a man wonder if the saints indeed listen, and God is above!”

“Oh — impious!” groaned Don Diego, and crossed himself in horror. “Oh Excellency — your words are apostate — unsay them and tempt not Almighty Power!”

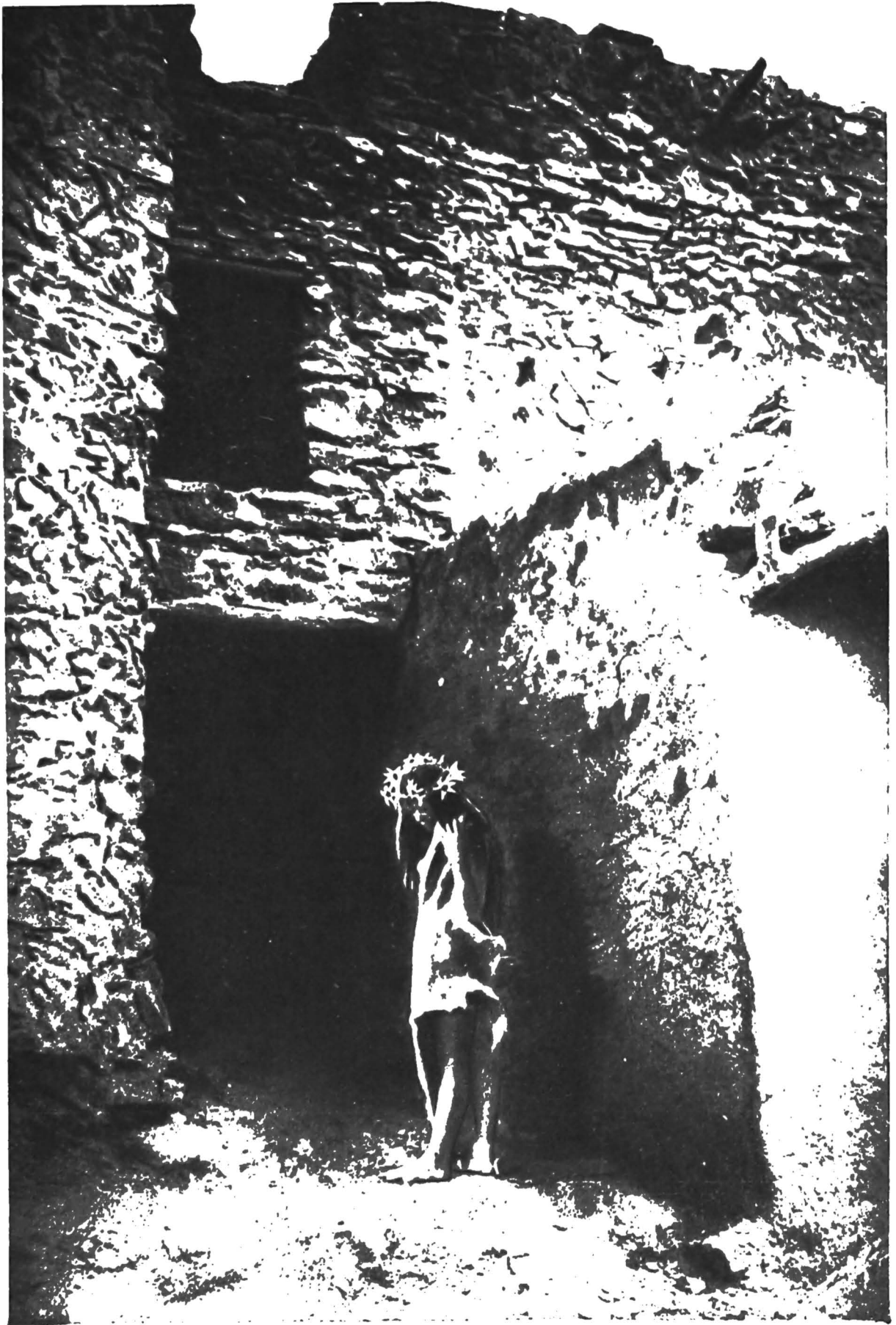
The padre turned pale with anger and shut his teeth close under the dark beard. But he was not a coward, and the habit of domination through special privileges was a habit of many years, and it served him against the merely temporal power of even regal influences.

“Of the witch creature I gave them no word,” he said — “it was their thrice accursed sorcerer they were sent in search of. But the two belong to each other, and the old men of the order know now that their high priest is in league with devils. Never again will he be the Ruler. His power is overthrown. He cannot save even his own witch-mate from the vengeance of the clans. The thing we have crossed these deserts for will be given to us since his voice against us is silenced. Is that a thing to regret, Excellency? I thought it was for this we made entrance to the land — and for this you joined hands for the expedition!”

He had recovered his ease of manner, and even a mocking tone crept into the final words. Don Ruy looked around the faces of the Castilians and Mexicans and saw no more of special emotion in the light of the gray dawn than they had shown at the dance of the scalps in the glow of torches so few hours ago.

To them all it was only a witch being led to death, and they had seen that same thing in Christian lands. It was not a thing for special wonder, — except that this sorceress was young, and that she looked at the young Indian Ruler, and smiled often, and little sounds like a mere murmur of a song came sometimes from her lips.

*“Just at daylight Doli calls
The bluebird has a voice
His voice melodious*



ONLY A WITCH LED TO DEATH

*That flows in gladness
Doli calls! Doli calls!*”

The guard shrank away from her as she began. The Navahu captive who had been long a slave, said it was the song of the Dawn, and that it was the last song of many songs which were part of the wonderful “ Night Chant ” ceremony of his people,— it was a ceremony to heal all things of the ills of life.

But despite his words the Te-hua men shrank away, and the Te-hua women had trembling hands as they stripped her, and crowned her with the sacred pine, and fastened around her a girdle of the feathery young cedar, and in the green of the crown they thrust the golden disks of the flowers of the sun. She lifted the lion skin from the ground and held it close as a garment, and stood alone against the terrace wall. The people shrank and half feared to look at her lest the Dawn song be a witch charm to enchant them.

Po-tzah had brought to Tahn-té the white robe of the priest who makes sacrifice, and a long knife of white flint for which the sheath was softest of deer-skin, and the symbols painted on it were those of the Father Sun and Mother Moon.

And while the maid held close the garment he had given her, and chanted her Dawn song dreamily, Tahn-té lifted from the ground the wing of the blue-bird tossed aside by the medicine women who made her ready for the sacrifice, and he placed it in the white band about his own head so that he wore two instead of one, and then he lifted his voice and spoke, and no other sound was heard but his voice, and the low song of the witch maid.

“ Men of Te-hua,” he said. “ If I speak not you will not know the truth; — and it may be that you

will live many days ere you believe this truth! The maid who has come down from the hills is not a stranger to Povi-whah — and has done no evil. The daughter of Kā-ye-fah is this maid. She is Kā-ye-povi, the child who was lost. All you people know of the years of the grieving of her father who was strong for that which was good. His child has come back to find her own people. On the trail she was lost, and evil magic of the men of iron have made hard your hearts when she came to you. I have waited until all the people were here to listen. Now I speak. To speak at Puyé to the clan of Tain-tsain would not have been wise. They were sent by the vision of the white priest to find a witch woman. It is the child of Kā-ye-fah they find, and instead of glad hearts, and glad speech, she is given by the Te-hua people only the crown of the sacred pine. Let her own clan of the Towa Toan speak!”

A thrill of wonder ran through the crowd, but no kind faces were there, and Tahn-té took from his medicine pouch the last seed of the sacred medicine given to man by the gods. There had been many seeds when they left Puyé. He knew he was daring the gods, and that the penalty would be heavy. But her fearless face, and the music of her Dawn song was payment for much.

And to the gods he would answer!

The gray dawn was gone, and the green dawn was merging into the yellow where the stars are lost.

The head of the Towa Toan clan spoke from a terrace.

“We have heard the words of Tahn-té. The witch maid is not known by our people, and our clan does not claim her! By evil magic has the song of this maid blinded the eyes of Tahn-té,— and by evil

magic will she make desolate the land if she is let live. The white priest has strong medicine — and good medicine of the gods. The men of Te-gat-ha and the men of Navahu knew her as a witch, and sought her. They did not find her because the men of iron were not their brothers. To us they are brothers. I give thanks, and we think they should have that which they seek with us. Their priest works also for our god, and the symbol of the god is not to be hidden from him. Also the altar waits; — and the stars are going away!”

Tahn-té touched the hand of the maid.

“Come!” he said gently, and as he touched her hand, he gave to her the last seed from the fruit of the sacred plant,—“eat for the trail you must walk over, and sing for me alone the song holy of the Navahu Sun God; I take you to meet him on the Mesa of the Hearts.”

Don Ruy tried to press through the guard, but the orders of the heads of the clans had been strong orders. The Castilian brothers might follow; but the stars were going away, and there was no time for words after the crown was made. The flowers must not wither above a living face.

And the maid entered the canoe with the Po-Ahtun-ho and the Te-hua boatmen plied the paddles so that the crossing was quick, and all the others followed, and some men swam, and the Castilian horses and riders went also. And a second priest of the Po-Ahtun went with a white robe, and a good knife in his girdle. Tahn-té was called “sorcerer” by the wise men of iron, and it was best to trust not entirely to the heart of a sorcerer. He was plainly bewitched, and his heart might grow weak when he looked on the altar, and looked on the maid!

Tahn-té pointed to the upturned face of the God-Maid on the bosom of the south mesa.

“That was my altar to you all the days of my boyhood,” he said softly, “there I met the god thoughts; there were the serpents tamed. It is the God-Maid of this valley and her face is ever to the sun. To her was my love given while I waited for your face! Listen! — and know this is so — and sing now the song of the Sun God and the earth’s end.”

With her eyes on his she chanted the words, and the Te-hua oarsmen dared not look on her face for very terror. The words they did not know — but no victim had ever yet gone singing to that altar.

*“In my thoughts I approach — I approach!
The Sun God approaches,
Earth’s end he approaches.
Estsan-atlehi approaches
In old age walking
The beautiful trail.
In my thoughts I approach — I approach!
The Moon God approaches
Earth’s end he approaches —”*

The canoe touched the shore, and the maid clasped the hand of Tahn-té and went over the sand lightly as a child who wanders through flower fields to a festival. He looked in her eyes and knew that the magic of the sacred seed was strong, and that the hand of no man could hurt her.

“Your trail is to the hills,” he said.—“To the heart of the forest you go. Where the bluebird builds her nest — there you build the nest where we meet again. You see your wings in my hair? I wear both of them that they lead me again to your trail when the time comes. When the bluebird calls

to her mate, I will hear your voice in that call. When the anger of the gods has passed, I will find you again in the Light beyond the light at the trail’s end.”

“At the trail’s end,” she said as a child repeats a lesson — “I build the nest for you, and sing the blue-bird song for you at the trail’s end.”

“Thanks to the gods that it will be so,” he said, and sprinkled prayer meal to the four ways. — “The Spirit People stand witness! The gods will be good in that After-world; — I will find you again.”

They had reached the edge of the mesa — and the pale yellow of the sky had been covered with a weird murky red. For all the many followers, a strange hush was on the height, and far in the south low thunder was heard. The same still, heavy air of the night was brooding over the world, and long rays of copper and dull red were flung like banners to the zenith. Each man’s eyes looked strange questions into the eyes of his neighbor, and the Te-hua men came not close to the witch maid, and the man at the altar.

*“The Sun God approaches — approaches!
Earth’s end he approaches!”*

They could hear the low chant of her witch song, and they could see Tahn-té offer prayer meal to the Spirit People of the four ways, and to the upper and the nether world. At his word she laid herself on the rock, and no other priest was asked to help, or to hold her, and that was a sacrifice such as had never been seen in that place.

“No hand but mine shall touch you: — O Bird of my Wilderness!” he said.

“In the Light beyond the light I wait for you at

the trail's end," she said, and laughed that his hand rested on her breast.

And the sun, blood red, came over the edge of the world, and Don Ruy cried aloud at the lifted hand of Tahn-té, and the gleam of the white flint knife.

But the guard closed in, and one of his own men caught him, and asked for pardon afterwards, and when he could again see the altar, the knife was red, and a heart was held outward to the sun that looked like the flame of burning worlds.

And a long, shivering, high keyed chant of the Te-hua people went upwards to the sky, that the gods might know they were witness. But in the midst of it the rumbling as of thunder was under their feet and the earth rocked. Sulphurous fumes came upwards from the long closed crevices of the solitary mesa; and to the south there was the crash as of falling worlds, and the great mesa of The Face lifted before their eyes, and settled again as a wave of the river lifts and breaks on the shore.

The chant of the sacrifice was silenced on their lips, and they fled downward at that sight, for the face of the God-Maid of the mesa no longer looked upwards to the sun! The outline of the brow, and the cheek, and the dainty woman's chin they could still see; — but the face was turned from them — turned toward the south — where the gods have ever gone in an evil season!

And only Don Ruy Sandoval saw the heart put back in the breast of the witch maid, and saw her wrapped in the white robe of the Po-Ahtun-ho, and saw the crevice where the Powers of the Under-world had opened a grave for her there on the Mesa of the Hearts.

And even he watched afar off; for there was that in

the face of the Indian priest not to be understood by the white man who felt both pity and horror.

But he waited at the foot of the mesa, and held the canoe while the Po-Ahtun-ho, who had the logic of a white man, but the heart of an Indian, came down and entered it in silence, and as they crossed the river, stared as though scarcely seeing it, at The Face now turned southwards on the mesa.

“You — loved her?” said Don Ruy at last and something of the tone of a lover in the voice made Tahn-té close his eyes for a moment, and then look at the Castilian. He did not need to speak.

“Yet — you could do — *that?*”

“When the gods are angered against earth people, it is always the most precious they demand in sacrifice,” he said. “When we make vows, the gods watch that we keep the vows — else we pay, Señor, — we pay — we pay!”