

CHAPTER VII

ANDRES DE FONSECA

Now I shall dwell but briefly on all the adventures which befell me during the year or so that I remained in Spain, for were I to set out everything at length, this history would have no end, or at least mine would find me before I came to it.

Many travellers have told of the glories of Seville, to which ancient Moorish city I journeyed with all speed, sailing there up the Guadalquivir, and I have to tell of lands from which no other wanderer has returned to England, and must press on to them. To be short then; foreseeing that it might be necessary for me to stop some time in Seville, and being desirous to escape notice and to be at the smallest expense possible, I bethought me that it would be well if I could find means of continuing my studies of medicine, and to this end I obtained certain introductions from the firm of merchants to whose care I had been recommended, addressed to doctors of medicine in Seville. These letters at my request were made out not in my own name but in that of 'Diego d'Aila,' for I did not wish it to be known that I was an Englishman. Nor, indeed, was this likely, except my speech should betray me, for, as I have said, in appearance I was very Spanish, and the hindrance of the language was one that lessened every day, since having already learned it from my mother, and taking every opportunity to read

and speak it, within six months I could talk Castilian except for some slight accent, like a native of the land. Also I have a gift for the acquiring of languages.

When I was come to Seville, and had placed my baggage in an inn, not one of the most frequented, I set out to deliver a letter of recommendation to a famous physician of the town whose name I have long forgotten. This physician had a fine house in the street of Las Palmas, a great avenue planted with graceful trees, that has other little streets running into it. Down one of these I came from my inn, a quiet narrow place having houses with patios or courtyards on either side of it. As I walked down this street I noticed a man sitting in the shade on a stool in the doorway of his patio. He was small and withered, with keen black eyes and a wonderful air of wisdom, and he watched me as I went by. Now the house of the famous physician whom I sought was so placed that the man sitting at this doorway could command it with his eyes and take note of all who went in and came out. When I had found the house I returned again into the quiet street and walked to and fro there for a while, thinking of what tale I should tell to the physician, and all the time the little man watched me with his keen eyes. At last I had made up my story and went to the house, only to find that the physician was from home. Having inquired when I might find him I left, and once more took to the narrow street, walking slowly till I came to where the little man sat. As I passed him, his broad hat with which he was fanning himself slipped to the ground before my feet. I stooped down, lifted it from the

pavement, and restored it to him.

'A thousand thanks, young sir,' he said in a full and gentle voice. 'You are courteous for a foreigner.'

'How do you know me to be a foreigner, senor?' I asked, surprised out of my caution.

'If I had not guessed it before, I should know it now,' he answered, smiling gravely. 'Your Castilian tells its own tale.'

I bowed, and was about to pass on, when he addressed me again.

'What is your hurry, young sir? Step in and take a cup of wine with me; it is good.'

I was about to say him nay, when it came into my mind that I had nothing to do, and that perhaps I might learn something from this gossip.

'The day is hot, senor, and I accept.'

He spoke no more, but rising, led me into a courtyard paved with marble in the centre of which was a basin of water, having vines trained around it. Here were chairs and a little table placed in the shade of the vines. When he had closed the door of the patio and we were seated, he rang a silver bell that stood upon the table, and a girl, young and

fair, appeared from the house, dressed in a quaint Spanish dress.

'Bring wine,' said my host.

The wine was brought, white wine of Oporto such as I had never tasted before.

'Your health, senor?' And my host stopped, his glass in his hand, and looked at me inquiringly.

'Diego d'Aila,' I answered.

'Humph,' he said. 'A Spanish name, or perhaps an imitation Spanish name, for I do not know it, and I have a good head for names.'

'That is my name, to take or to leave, senor?'--And I looked at him in turn.

'Andres de Fonseca,' he replied bowing, 'a physician of this city, well known enough, especially among the fair. Well, Senor Diego, I take your name, for names are nothing, and at times it is convenient to change them, which is nobody's business except their owners'. I see that you are a stranger in this city--no need to look surprised, senor, one who is familiar with a town does not gaze and stare and ask the path of passers-by, nor does a native of Seville walk on the sunny side of the street in summer. And now, if you will not think me impertinent, I will

ask you what can be the business of so healthy a young man with my rival yonder?' And he nodded towards the house of the famous physician.

'A man's business, like his name, is his own affair, senor,' I answered, setting my host down in my mind as one of those who disgrace our art by plying openly for patients that they may capture their fees. 'Still, I will tell you. I am also a physician, though not yet fully qualified, and I seek a place where I may help some doctor of repute in his daily practice, and thus gain experience and my living with it.'

'Ah is it so? Well, senor, then you will look in vain yonder,' and again he nodded towards the physician's house. 'Such as he will take no apprentice without the fee be large indeed; it is not the custom of this city.'

'Then I must seek a livelihood elsewhere, or otherwise.'

'I did not say so. Now, senor, let us see what you know of medicine, and what is more important, of human nature, for of the first none of us can ever know much, but he who knows the latter will be a leader of men--or of women--who lead the men.'

And without more ado he put me many questions, each of them so shrewd and going so directly to the heart of the matter in hand, that I marvelled at his sagacity. Some of these questions were medical, dealing chiefly with the ailments of women, others were general and dealt more

with their characters. At length he finished.

'You will do, senor,' he said; 'you are a young man of parts and promise, though, as was to be expected from one of your years, you lack experience. There is stuff in you, senor, and you have a heart, which is a good thing, for the blunders of a man with a heart often carry him further than the cunning of the cynic; also you have a will and know how to direct it.'

I bowed, and did my best to hold back my satisfaction at his words from showing in my face.

'Still,' he went on, 'all this would not cause me to submit to you the offer that I am about to make, for many a prettier fellow than yourself is after all unlucky, or a fool at the bottom, or bad tempered and destined to the dogs, as for aught I know you may be also. But I take my chance of that because you suit me in another way. Perhaps you may scarcely know it yourself, but you have beauty, senor, beauty of a very rare and singular type, which half the ladies of Seville will praise when they come to know you.'

'I am much flattered,' I said, 'but might I ask what all these compliments may mean? To be brief, what is your offer?'

'To be brief then, it is this. I am in need of an assistant who must possess all the qualities that I see in you, but most of all one which

I can only guess you to possess--discretion. That assistant would not be ill-paid; this house would be at his disposal, and he would have opportunities of learning the world such as are given to few. What say you?'

'I say this, senor, that I should wish to know more of the business in which I am expected to assist. Your offers sound too liberal, and I fear that I must earn your bounty by the doing of work that honest men might shrink from.'

'A fair argument, but, as it happens, not quite a correct one. Listen: you have been told that yonder physician, to whose house you went but now, and these'--here he repeated four or five names--'are the greatest of their tribe in Seville. It is not so. I am the greatest and the richest, and I do more business than any two of them. Do you know what my earnings have been this day alone? I will tell you; just over twenty-five gold pesos,* more than all the rest of the profession have taken together, I will wager. You want to know how I earn so much; you want to know also, why, if I have earned so much, I am not content to rest from my labours. Good, I will tell you. I earn it by ministering to the vanities of women and sheltering them from the results of their own folly. Has a lady a sore heart, she comes to me for comfort and advice. Has she pimples on her face, she flies to me to cure them. Has she a secret love affair, it is I who hide her indiscretion; I consult the future for her, I help her to atone the past, I doctor her for imaginary ailments, and often enough I cure her of real ones. Half the secrets of

Seville are in my hands; did I choose to speak I could set a score of noble houses to broil and bloodshed. But I do not speak, I am paid to keep silent; and when I am not paid, still I keep silent for my credit's sake. Hundreds of women think me their saviour, I know them for my dupes. But mark you, I do not push this game too far. A love philtre--of coloured water--I may give at a price, but not a poisoned rose. These they must seek elsewhere. For the rest, in my way I am honest. I take the world as it comes, that is all, and, as women will be fools, I profit by their folly and have grown rich upon it.

* About sixty-three pounds sterling.

'Yes, I have grown rich, and yet I cannot stop. I love the money that is power; but more than all, I love the way of life. Talk of romances and adventure! What romance or adventure is half so wonderful as those that come daily to my notice? And I play a part in every one of them, and none the less a leading part because I do not shout and strut upon the boards.'

'If all this is so, why do you seek the help of an unknown lad, a stranger of whom you know nothing?' I asked bluntly.

'Truly, you lack experience,' the old man answered with a laugh. 'Do you then suppose that I should choose one who was NOT a stranger--one who might have ties within this city with which I was unacquainted. And as for knowing nothing of you, young man, do you think that I have followed

this strange trade of mine for forty years without learning to judge at sight? Perhaps I know you better than you know yourself. By the way, the fact that you are deeply enamoured of that maid whom you have left in England is a recommendation to me, for whatever follies you may commit, you will scarcely embarrass me and yourself by suffering your affections to be seriously entangled. Ah! have I astonished you?

'How do you know?' I began--then ceased.

'How do I know? Why, easily enough. Those boots you wear were made in England. I have seen many such when I travelled there; your accent also though faint is English, and twice you have spoken English words when your Castilian failed you. Then for the maid, is not that a betrothal ring upon your hand? And when I spoke to you of the ladies of this country, my talk did not interest you overmuch as at your age it had done were you heart-whole. Surely also the lady is fair and tall? Ah! I thought so. I have noticed that men and women love their opposite in colour, no invariable rule indeed, but good for a guess.'

'You are very clever, *senor*.'

'No, not clever, but trained, as you will be when you have been a year in my hands, though perchance you do not intend to stop so long in Seville. Perhaps you came here with an object, and wish to pass the time profitably till it is fulfilled. A good guess again, I think. Well, so be it, I will risk that; object and attainment are often far apart. Do

you take my offer?'

'I incline to do so.'

'Then you will take it. Now I have something more to say before we come to terms. I do not want you to play the part of an apothecary's drudge. You will figure before the world as my nephew, come from abroad to learn my trade. You will help me in it indeed, but that is not all your duty. Your part will be to mix in the life of Seville, and to watch those whom I bid you watch, to drop a word here and a hint there, and in a hundred ways that I shall show you to draw grist to my mill--and to your own. You must be brilliant and witty, or sad and learned, as I wish; you must make the most of your person and your talents, for these go far with my customers. To the hidalgo you must talk of arms, to the lady, of love; but you must never commit yourself beyond redemption. And above all, young man'--and here his manner changed and his face grew stern and almost fierce--'you must never violate my confidence or the confidence of my clients. On this point I will be quite open within you, and I pray you for your own sake to believe what I say, however much you may mistrust the rest. If you break faith with me, YOU DIE. You die, not by my hand, but you die. That is my price; take it or leave it. Should you leave it and go hence to tell what you have heard this day, even then misfortune may overtake you suddenly. Do you understand?'

'I understand. For my own sake I will respect your confidence.'

'Young sir, I like you better than ever. Had you said that you would respect it because it was a confidence, I should have mistrusted you, for doubtless you feel that secrets communicated so readily have no claim to be held sacred. Nor have they, but when their violation involves the sad and accidental end of the violator, it is another matter. Well now, do you accept?'

'I accept.'

'Good. Your baggage I suppose is at the inn. I will send porters to discharge your score and bring it here. No need for you to go, nephew, let us stop and drink another glass of wine; the sooner we grow intimate the better, nephew.'

It was thus that first I became acquainted with Senor Andres de Fonseca, my benefactor, the strangest man whom I have ever known. Doubtless any person reading this history would think that I, the narrator, was sowing a plentiful crop of troubles for myself in having to deal with him, setting him down as a rogue of the deepest, such as sometimes, for their own wicked purposes, decoy young men to crime and ruin. But it was not so, and this is the strangest part of the strange story. All that Andres de Fonseca told me was true to the very letter.

He was a gentleman of great talent who had been rendered a little mad by misfortunes in his early life. As a physician I have never met his

master, if indeed he has one in these times, and as a man versed in the world and more especially in the world of women, I have known none to compare with him. He had travelled far, and seen much, and he forgot nothing. In part he was a quack, but his quackery always had a meaning in it. He fleeced the foolish, indeed, and even juggled with astronomy, making money out of their superstition; but on the other hand he did many a kind act without reward. He would make a rich lady pay ten gold pesos for the dyeing of her hair, but often he would nurse some poor girl through her trouble and ask no charge; yes, and find her honest employment after it. He who knew all the secrets of Seville never made money out of them by threat of exposure, as he said because it would not pay to do so, but really because though he affected to be a selfish knave, at bottom his heart was honest.

For my own part I found life with him both easy and happy, so far as mine could be quite happy. Soon I learned my role and played it well. It was given out that I was the nephew of the rich old physician Fonseca, whom he was training to take his place; and this, together with my own appearance and manners, ensured me a welcome in the best houses of Seville. Here I took that share of our business which my master could not take, for now he never mixed among the fashion of the city. Money I was supplied with in abundance so that I could ruffle it with the best, but soon it became known that I looked to business as well as to pleasure. Often and often during some gay ball or carnival, a lady would glide up to me and ask beneath her breath if Don Andres de Fonseca would consent to see her privately on a matter of some importance, and I would

fix an hour then and there. Had it not been for me such patients would have been lost to us, since, for the most part, their timidity had kept them away.

In the same fashion when the festival was ended and I prepared to wend homewards, now and again a gallant would slip his arm in mine and ask my master's help in some affair of love or honour, or even of the purse. Then I would lead him straight to the old Moorish house where Don Andres sat writing in his velvet robe like some spider in his web, for the most of our business was done at night; and straight-way the matter would be attended to, to my master's profit and the satisfaction of all. By degrees it became known that though I was so young yet I had discretion, and that nothing which went in at my ears came out of my lips; that I neither brawled nor drank nor gambled to any length, and that though I was friendly with many fair ladies, there were none who were entitled to know my secrets. Also it became known that I had some skill in my art of healing, and it was said among the ladies of Seville that there lived no man in that city so deft at clearing the skin of blemishes or changing the colour of the hair as old Fonseca's nephew, and as any one may know this reputation alone was worth a fortune. Thus it came about that I was more and more consulted on my own account. In short, things went so well with us that in the first six months of my service I added by one third to the receipts of my master's practice, large as they had been before, besides lightening his labours not a little.

It was a strange life, and of the things that I saw and learned, could

they be written, I might make a tale indeed, but they have no part in this history. For it was as though the smiles and silence with which men and women hide their thoughts were done away, and their hearts spoke to us in the accents of truth. Now some fair young maid or wife would come to us with confessions of wickedness that would be thought impossible, did not her story prove itself; the secret murder perchance of a spouse, or a lover, or a rival; now some aged dame who would win a husband in his teens, now some wealthy low-born man or woman, who desired to buy an alliance with one lacking money, but of noble blood. Such I did not care to help indeed, but to the love-sick or the love-deluded I listened with a ready ear, for I had a fellow-feeling with them. Indeed so deep and earnest was my sympathy that more than once I found the unhappy fair ready to transfer their affections to my unworthy self, and in fact once things came about so that, had I willed it, I could have married one of the loveliest and wealthiest noble ladies of Seville.

But I would none of it, who thought of my English Lily by day and night.