CHAPTER IX

THOMAS BECOMES RICH

For many months we heard no more of de Garcia or of Isabella de Siguenza. Both had vanished leaving no sign, and we searched for them in vain. As for me I fell back into my former way of life of assistant to Fonseca, posing before the world as his nephew. But it came about that from the night of my duel with the murderer, my master's health declined steadily through the action of a wasting disease of the liver which baffled all skill, so that within eight months of that time he lay almost bedridden and at the point of death. His mind indeed remained quite clear, and on occasions he would even receive those who came to consult him, reclining on a chair and wrapped in his embroidered robe. But the hand of death lay on him, and he knew that it was so. As the weeks went by he grew more and more attached to me, till at length, had I been his son, he could not have treated me with a greater affection, while for my part I did what lay in my power to lessen his sufferings, for he would let no other physician near him.

At length when he had grown very feeble he expressed a desire to see a notary. The man he named was sent for and remained closeted with him for an hour or more, when he left for a while to return with several of his clerks, who accompanied him to my master's room, from which I was excluded. Presently they all went away, bearing some parchments with

them.

That evening Fonseca sent for me. I found him very weak, but cheerful and full of talk.

'Come here, nephew,' he said, 'I have had a busy day. I have been busy all my life through, and it would not be well to grow idle at the last. Do you know what I have been doing this day?'

I shook my head.

'I will tell you. I have been making my will--there is something to leave; not so very much, but still something.'

'Do not talk of wills,' I said; 'I trust that you may live for many years.'

He laughed. 'You must think badly of my case, nephew, when you think that I can be deceived thus. I am about to die as you know well, and I do not fear death. My life has been prosperous but not happy, for it was blighted in its spring--no matter how. The story is an old one and not worth telling; moreover, whichever way it had read, it had all been one now in the hour of death. We must travel our journey each of us; what does it matter if the road has been good or bad when we have reached the goal? For my part religion neither comforts nor frightens me now at the last. I will stand or fall upon the record of my life. I have done evil

in it and I have done good; the evil I have done because nature and temptation have been too strong for me at times, the good also because my heart prompted me to it. Well, it is finished, and after all death cannot be so terrible, seeing that every human being is born to undergo it, together with all living things. Whatever else is false, I hold this to be true, that God exists and is more merciful than those who preach Him would have us to believe.' And he ceased exhausted.

Often since then I have thought of his words, and I still think of them now that my own hour is so near. As will be seen Fonseca was a fatalist, a belief which I do not altogether share, holding as I do that within certain limits we are allowed to shape our own characters and destinies. But his last sayings I believe to be true. God is and is merciful, and death is not terrible either in its act or in its consequence.

Presently Fonseca spoke again. 'Why do you lead me to talk of such things? They weary me and I have little time. I was telling of my will. Nephew, listen. Except certain sums that I have given to be spent in charities--not in masses, mind you--I have left you all I possess.'

'You have left it to ME!' I said astonished.

'Yes, nephew, to you. Why not? I have no relations living and I have learned to love you, I who thought that I could never care again for any man or woman or child. I am grateful to you, who have proved to me that my heart is not dead, take what I give you as a mark of my gratitude.'

Now I began to stammer my thanks, but he stopped me. 'The sum that you will inherit, nephew, amounts in all to about five thousand gold pesos, or perhaps twelve thousand of your English pounds, enough for a young man to begin life on, even with a wife. Indeed there in England it may well be held a great fortune, and I think that your betrothed's father will make no more objection to you as a son-in-law. Also there is this house and all that it contains; the library and the silver are valuable, and you will do well to keep them. All is left to you with the fullest formality, so that no question can arise as to your right to take it; indeed, foreseeing my end, I have of late called in my moneys, and for the most part the gold lies in strong boxes in the secret cupboard in the wall yonder that you know of. It would have been more had I known you some years ago, for then, thinking that I grew too rich who was without an heir, I gave away as much as what remains in acts of mercy and in providing refuge for the homeless and the suffering. Thomas Wingfield, for the most part this money has come to me as the fruit of human folly and human wretchedness, frailty and sin. Use it for the purposes of wisdom and the advancing of right and liberty. May it prosper you, and remind you of me, your old master, the Spanish quack, till at last you pass it on to your children or the poor. And now one word more. If your conscience will let you, abandon the pursuit of de Garcia. Take your fortune and go with it to England; wed that maid whom you desire, and follow after happiness in whatever way seems best to you. Who are you that you should meet out vengeance on this knave de Garcia? Let him be, and he will avenge himself upon himself. Otherwise

you may undergo much toil and danger, and in the end lose love, and life, and fortune at a blow.'

'But I have sworn to kill him,' I answered, 'and how can I break so solemn an oath? How could I sit at home in peace beneath the burden of such shame?'

'I do not know; it is not for me to judge. You must do as you wish, but in the doing of it, it may happen that you will fall into greater shames than this. You have fought the man and he has escaped you. Let him go if you are wise. Now bend down and kiss me, and bid me farewell. I do not desire that you should see me die, and my death is near. I cannot tell if we shall meet again when in your turn you have lain as I lie now, or if we shape our course for different stars. If so, farewell for ever.'

Then I leant down and kissed him on the forehead, and as I did so I wept, for not till this hour did I learn how truly I had come to love him, so truly that it seemed to me as though my father lay there dying.

'Weep not,' he said, 'for all our life is but a parting. Once I had a son like you, and ours was the bitterest of farewells. Now I go to seek for him again who could not come back to me, so weep not because I die. Good-bye, Thomas Wingfield. May God prosper and protect you! Now go!'

So I went weeping, and that night, before the dawn, all was over with Andres de Fonseca. They told me that he was conscious to the end and

died murmuring the name of that son of whom he spoke in his last words to me.

What was the history of this son, or of Fonseca himself, I never learned, for like an Indian he hid his trail as step by step he wandered down the path of life. He never spoke of his past, and in all the books and documents that he left behind him there is no allusion to it. Once, some years ago, I read through the cipher volumes of records that I have spoken of, and of which he gave me the key before he died. They stand before me on the shelf as I write, and in them are many histories of shame, sorrow, and evil, of faith deluded and innocence betrayed, of the cruelty of priests, of avarice triumphant over love, and of love triumphant over death--enough, indeed, to furnish half a hundred of true romances. But among these chronicles of a generation now past and forgotten, there is no mention of Fonseca's own name and no hint of his own story. It is lost for ever, and perhaps this is well. So died my benefactor and best friend.

When he was made ready for burial I went in to see him and he looked calm and beautiful in his death sleep. Then it was that she who had arrayed him for the grave handed to me two portraits most delicately painted on ivory and set in gold, which had been found about his neck. I have them yet. One is of the head of a lady with a sweet and wistful countenance, and the other the face of a dead youth also beautiful, but very sad. Doubtless they were mother and son, but I know no more about them.

On the morrow I buried Andres de Fonseca, but with no pomp, for he had said that he wished as little money as possible spent upon his dead body, and returned to the house to meet the notaries. Then the seals were broken and the parchments read and I was put in full possession of the dead man's wealth, and having deducted such sums as were payable for dues, legacies, and fees, the notaries left me bowing humbly, for was I not rich? Yes, I was rich, wealth had come to me without effort, and I had reason to desire it, yet this was the saddest night that I had passed since I set foot in Spain, for my mind was filled with doubts and sorrow, and moreover my loneliness got a hold of me. But sad as it might be, it was destined to seem yet more sorrowful before the morning. For as I sat making pretence to eat, a servant came to me saying that a woman waited in the outer room who had asked to see his late master. Guessing that this was some client who had not heard of Fonseca's death I was about to order that she should be dismissed, then bethought me that I might be of service to her or at the least forget some of my own trouble in listening to hers. So I bade him bring her in. Presently she came, a tall woman wrapped in a dark cloak that hid her face. I bowed and motioned to her to be seated, when suddenly she started and spoke.

'I asked to see Don Andres de Fonseca,' she said in a low quick voice. 'You are not he, senor.'

'Andres de Fonseca was buried to-day,' I answered. 'I was his assistant in his business and am his heir. If I can serve you in any way I am at

your disposal.'

'You are young--very young,' she murmured confusedly, 'and the matter is terrible and urgent. How can I trust you?'

'It is for you to judge, senora.'

She thought a while, then drew off her cloak, displaying the robes of a nun.

'Listen,' she said. 'I must do many a penance for this night's work, and very hardly have I won leave to come hither upon an errand of mercy. Now I cannot go back empty-handed, so I must trust you. But first swear by thine blessed Mother of God that you will not betray me.'

'I give you my word,' I answered; 'if that is not enough, let us end this talk.'

'Do not be angry with me,' she pleaded; 'I have not left my convent walls for many years and I am distraught with grief. I seek a poison of the deadliest. I will pay well for it.'

'I am not the tool of murderers,' I answered. 'For what purpose do you wish the poison?'

'Oh! I must tell you--yet how can I? In our convent there dies to-night

a woman young and fair, almost a girl indeed, who has broken the vows she took. She dies to-night with her babe--thus, oh God, thus! by being built alive into the foundations of the house she has disgraced. It is the judgment that has been passed upon her, judgment without forgiveness or reprieve. I am the abbess of this convent--ask not its name or mine--and I love this sinner as though she were my daughter. I have obtained this much of mercy for her because of my faithful services to the church and by secret influence, that when I give her the cup of water before the work is done, I may mix poison with it and touch the lips of the babe with poison, so that their end is swift. I may do this and yet have no sin upon my soul. I have my pardon under seal. Help me then to be an innocent murderess, and to save this sinner from her last agonies on earth.'

I cannot set down the feelings with which I listened to this tale of horror, for words could not carry them. I stood aghast seeking an answer, and a dreadful thought entered my mind.

'Is this woman named Isabella de Siguenza?' I asked.

'That name was hers in the world,' she answered, 'though how you know it I cannot guess.'

'We know many things in this house, mother. Say now, can this Isabella be saved by money or by interest?'

'It is impossible; her sentence has been confirmed by the Tribunal of Mercy. She must die and within two hours. Will you not give the poison?'

'I cannot give it unless I know its purpose, mother. This may be a barren tale, and the medicine might be used in such a fashion that I should fall beneath the law. At one price only can I give it, and it is that I am there to see it used.'

She thought a while and answered: 'It may be done, for as it chances the wording of my absolution will cover it. But you must come cowled as a priest, that those who carry out the sentence may know nothing. Still others will know and I warn you that should you speak of the matter you yourself will meet with misfortune. The Church avenges itself on those who betray its secrets, senor.'

'As one day its secrets will avenge themselves upon the Church,' I answered bitterly. 'And now let me seek a fitting drug--one that is swift, yet not too swift, lest your hounds should see themselves baffled of the prey before all their devilry is done. Here is something that will do the work,' and I held up a phial that I drew from a case of such medicines. 'Come, veil yourself, mother, and let us be gone upon this "errand of mercy."'

She obeyed, and presently we left the house and walked away swiftly through the crowded streets till we came to the ancient part of the city along the river's edge. Here the woman led me to a wharf where a boat

was in waiting for her. We entered it, and were rowed for a mile or more up the stream till the boat halted at a landing-place beneath a high wall. Leaving it, we came to a door in the wall on which my companion knocked thrice. Presently a shutter in the woodwork was drawn, and a white face peeped through the grating and spoke. My companion answered in a low voice, and after some delay the door was opened, and I found myself in a large walled garden planted with orange trees. Then the abbess spoke to me.

'I have led you to our house,' she said. 'If you know where you are, and what its name may be, for your own sake I pray you forget it when you leave these doors.'

I made no answer, but looked round the dim and dewy garden.

Here it was doubtless that de Garcia had met that unfortunate who must die this night. A walk of a hundred paces brought us to another door in the wall of a long low building of Moorish style. Here the knocking and the questioning were repeated at more length. Then the door was opened, and I found myself in a passage, ill lighted, long and narrow, in the depths of which I could see the figures of nuns flitting to and fro like bats in a tomb. The abbess walked down the passage till she came to a door on the right which she opened. It led into a cell, and here she left me in the dark. For ten minutes or more I stayed there, a prey to thoughts that I had rather forget. At length the door opened again, and she came in, followed by a tall priest whose face I could not see, for

he was dressed in the white robe and hood of the Dominicans that left nothing visible except his eyes.

'Greeting, my son,' he said, when he had scanned me for a while. 'The abbess mother has told me of your errand. You are full young for such a task.'

'Were I old I should not love it better, father. You know the case. I am asked to provide a deadly drug for a certain merciful purpose. I have provided that drug, but I must be there to see that it is put to proper use.'

'You are very cautious, my son. The Church is no murderess. This woman must die because her sin is flagrant, and of late such wickedness has become common. Therefore, after much thought and prayer, and many searchings to find a means of mercy, she is condemned to death by those whose names are too high to be spoken. I, alas, am here to see the sentence carried out with a certain mitigation which has been allowed by the mercy of her chief judge. It seems that your presence is needful to this act of love, therefore I suffer it. The mother abbess has warned you that evil dogs the feet of those who reveal the secrets of the Church. For your own sake I pray you to lay that warning to heart.'

'I am no babbler, father, so the caution is not needed. One word more. This visit should be well feed, the medicine is costly.'

'Fear not, physician,' the monk answered with a note of scorn in his voice; 'name your sum, it shall be paid to you.'

'I ask no money, father. Indeed I would pay much to be far away to-night. I ask only that I may be allowed to speak with this girl before she dies.'

'What!' he said, starting, 'surely you are not that wicked man? If so, you are bold indeed to risk the sharing of her fate.'

'No, father, I am not that man. I never saw Isabella de Siguenza except once, and I have never spoken to her. I am not the man who tricked her but I know him; he is named Juan de Garcia.'

'Ah!' he said quickly, 'she would never tell his real name, even under threat of torture. Poor erring soul, she could be faithful in her unfaith. Of what would you speak to her?'

'I wish to ask her whither this man has gone. He is my enemy, and I would follow him as I have already followed him far. He has done worse by me and mine than by this poor girl even. Grant my request, father, that I may be able to work my vengeance on him, and with mine the Church's also.'

'"Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord; "I will repay." Yet it may be, son, that the Lord will choose you as the instrument of his wrath.

An opportunity shall be given you to speak with her. Now put on this dress'--and he handed me a white Dominican hood and robe--'and follow me.'

'First,' I said, 'let me give this medicine to the abbess, for I will have no hand in its administering. Take it, mother, and when the time comes, pour the contents of the phial into a cup of water. Then, having touched the mouth and tongue of the babe with the fluid, give it to the mother to drink and be sure that she does drink it. Before the bricks are built up about them both will sleep sound, never to wake again.'

'I will do it,' murmured the abbess; 'having absolution I will be bold, and do it for love and mercy's sake!'

'Your heart is too soft, sister. Justice is mercy,' said the monk with a sigh. 'Alas for the frailty of the flesh that wars against the spirit!'

Then I clothed myself in the ghastly looking dress, and they took lamps and motioned to me to follow them.