

CHAPTER X

THE PASSING OF ISABELLA DE SIGUENZA

Silently we went down the long passage, and as we went I saw the eyes of the dwellers in this living tomb watch us pass through the gratings of their cell doors. Little wonder that the woman about to die had striven to escape from such a home back to the world of life and love! Yet for that crime she must perish. Surely God will remember the doings of such men as these priests, and the nation that fosters them. And, in deed, He does remember, for where is the splendour of Spain to-day, and where are the cruel rites she gloried in? Here in England their fetters are broken for ever, and in striving to bind them fast upon us free Englishmen she is broken also--never to be whole again.

At the far end of the passage we found a stair down which we passed. At its foot was an iron-bound door that the monk unlocked and locked again upon the further side. Then came another passage hollowed in the thickness of the wall, and a second door, and we were in the place of death.

It was a vault low and damp, and the waters of the river washed its outer wall, for I could hear their murmuring in the silence. Perhaps the place may have measured ten paces in length by eight broad. For the rest its roof was supported by massive columns, and on one side there was a

second door that led to a prison cell. At the further end of this gloomy den, that was dimly lighted by torches and lamps, two men with hooded heads, and draped in coarse black gowns, were at work, silently mixing lime that sent up a hot steam upon the stagnant air. By their sides were squares of dressed stone ranged neatly against the end of the vault, and before them was a niche cut in the thickness of the wall itself, shaped like a large coffin set upon its smaller end. In front of this niche was placed a massive chair of chestnut wood. I noticed also that two other such coffin-shaped niches had been cut in this same wall, and filled in with similar blocks of whitish stone. On the face of each was a date graved in deep letters. One had been sealed up some thirty years before, and one hard upon a hundred.

These two men were the only occupants of the vault when we entered it, but presently a sound of soft and solemn singing stole down the second passage. Then the door was opened, the mason monks ceased labouring at the heap of lime, and the sound of singing grew louder so that I could catch the refrain. It was that of a Latin hymn for the dying. Next through the open door came the choir, eight veiled nuns walking two by two, and ranging themselves on either side of the vault they ceased their singing. After them followed the doomed woman, guarded by two more nuns, and last of all a priest bearing a crucifix. This man wore a black robe, and his thin half-frenzied face was uncovered. All these and other things I noticed and remembered, yet at the time it seemed to me that I saw nothing except the figure of the victim. I knew her again, although I had seen her but once in the moonlight. She was changed indeed, her

lovely face was fuller and the great tormented eyes shone like stars against its waxen pallor, relieved by the carmine of her lips alone. Still it was the same face that some eight months before I had seen lifted in entreaty to her false lover. Now her tall shape was wrapped about with grave clothes over which her black hair streamed, and in her arms she bore a sleeping babe that from time to time she pressed convulsively to her breast.

On the threshold of her tomb Isabella de Siguenza paused and looked round wildly as though for help, scanning each of the silent watchers to find a friend among them. Then her eye fell upon the niche and the heap of smoking lime and the men who guarded it, and she shuddered and would have fallen had not those who attended her led her to the chair and placed her in it--a living corpse.

Now the dreadful rites began. The Dominican father stood before her and recited her offence, and the sentence that had been passed upon her, which doomed her, 'to be left alone with God and the child of your sin, that He may deal with you as He sees fit.'* To all of this she seemed to pay no heed, nor to the exhortation that followed. At length he ceased with a sigh, and turning to me said:

'Draw near to this sinner, brother, and speak with her before it is too late.'

* Lest such cruelty should seem impossible and

unprecedented, the writer may mention that in the museum of the city of Mexico, he has seen the desiccated body of a young woman, which was found immured in the walls of a religious building. With it is the body of an infant.

Although the exact cause of her execution remains a matter of conjecture, there can be no doubt as to the manner of her death, for in addition to other evidences, the marks of the rope with which her limbs were bound in life are still distinctly visible. Such in those days were the mercies of religion!

Then he bade all present gather themselves at the far end of the vault that our talk might not be overheard, and they did so without wonder, thinking doubtless that I was a monk sent to confess the doomed woman.

So I drew near with a beating heart, and bending over her I spoke in her ear.

'Listen to me, Isabella de Siguenza!' I said; and as I uttered the name she started wildly. 'Where is that de Garcia who deceived and deserted you?'

'How have you learnt his true name?' she answered. 'Not even torture would have wrung it from me as you know.'

'I am no monk and I know nothing. I am that man who fought with de

Garcia on the night when you were taken, and who would have killed him had you not seized me.'

'At the least I saved him, that is my comfort now.'

'Isabella de Siguenza,' I said, 'I am your friend, the best you ever had and the last, as you shall learn presently. Tell me where this man is, for there is that between us which must be settled.'

'If you are my friend, weary me no more. I do not know where he is. Months ago he went whither you will scarcely follow, to the furthest Indies; but you will never find him there.'

'It may still be that I shall, and if it should so chance, say have you any message for this man?'

'None--yes, this. Tell him how we died, his child and his wife--tell him that I did my best to hide his name from the priests lest some like fate should befall him.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes. No, it is not all. Tell him that I passed away loving and forgiving.'

'My time is short,' I said; 'awake and listen!' for having spoken thus

she seemed to be sinking into a lethargy. 'I was the assistant of that Andres de Fonseca whose counsel you put aside to your ruin, and I have given a certain drug to the abbess yonder. When she offers you the cup of water, see that you drink and deep, you and the child. If so none shall ever die more happily. Do you understand?'

'Yes--yes,' she gasped, 'and may blessings rest upon you for the gift. Now I am no more afraid--for I have long desired to die--it was the way I feared.'

'Then farewell, and God be with you, unhappy woman.'

'Farewell,' she answered softly, 'but call me not unhappy who am about to die thus easily with that I love.' And she glanced at the sleeping babe.

Then I drew back and stood with bent head, speaking no word. Now the Dominican motioned to all to take the places where they had stood before and asked her:

'Erring sister, have you aught to say before you are silent for ever?'

'Yes,' she answered in a clear, sweet voice, that never even quavered, so bold had she become since she learned that her death would be swift and easy. 'Yes, I have this to say, that I go to my end with a clean heart, for if I have sinned it is against custom and not against God.'

I broke the vows indeed, but I was forced to take those vows, and, therefore, they did not bind. I was a woman born for light and love, and yet I was thrust into the darkness of this cloister, there to wither dead in life. And so I broke the vows, and I am glad that I have broken them, though it has brought me to this. If I was deceived and my marriage is no marriage before the law as they tell me now, I knew nothing of it, therefore to me it is still valid and holy and on my soul there rests no stain. At the least I have lived, and for some few hours I have been wife and mother, and it is as well to die swiftly in this cell that your mercy has prepared, as more slowly in those above. And now for you--I tell you that your wickedness shall find you out, you who dare to say to God's children--"Ye shall not love," and to work murder on them because they will not listen. It shall find you out I say, and not only you but the Church you serve. Both priest and Church shall be broken together and shall be a scorn in the mouths of men to come.'

'She is distraught,' said the Dominican as a sigh of fear and wonder went round the vault, 'and blasphemes in her madness. Forget her words. Shrive her, brother, swiftly ere she adds to them.'

Then the black-robed, keen-eyed priest came to her, and holding the cross before her face, began to mutter I know not what. But she rose from the chair and thrust the crucifix aside.

'Peace!' she said, 'I will not be shriven by such as you. I take my sins to God and not to you--you who do murder in the name of Christ.'

The fanatic heard and a fury took him.

'Then go unshriven down to hell, you--' and he named her by ill names and struck her in the face with the ivory crucifix.

The Dominican bade him cease his revilings angrily enough, but Isabella de Siguenza wiped her bruised brow and laughed aloud a dreadful laugh to hear.

'Now I see that you are a coward also,' she said. 'Priest, this is my last prayer, that you also may perish at the hands of fanatics, and more terribly than I die to-night.'

Then they hurried her into the place prepared for her and she spoke again:

'Give me to drink, for we thirst, my babe and I!'

Now I saw the abbess enter that passage whence the victim had been led. Presently she came back bearing a cup of water in her hand and with it a loaf of bread, and I knew by her mien that my draught was in the water. But of what befell afterwards I cannot say certainly, for I prayed the Dominican to open the door by which we had entered the vault, and passing through it I stood dazed with horror at some distance. A while went by, I do not know how long, till at length I saw the abbess

standing before me, a lantern in her hand, and she was sobbing bitterly.

'All is done,' she said. 'Nay, have no fear, the draught worked well.

Before ever a stone was laid mother and child slept sound. Alas for her soul who died unrepentant and unshriven!'

'Alas for the souls of all who have shared in this night's work,' I answered. 'Now, mother, let me hence, and may we never meet again!'

Then she led me back to the cell, where I tore off that accursed monk's robe, and thence to the door in the garden wall and to the boat which still waited on the river, and I rejoiced to feel the sweet air upon my face as one rejoices who awakes from some foul dream. But I won little sleep that night, nor indeed for some days to come. For whenever I closed my eyes there rose before me the vision of that beautiful woman as I saw her last by the murky torchlight, wrapped in grave clothes and standing in the coffin-shaped niche, proud and defiant to the end, her child clasped to her with one arm while the other was outstretched to take the draught of death. Few have seen such a sight, for the Holy Office and its helpers do not seek witnesses to their dark deeds, and none would wish to see it twice. If I have described it ill, it is not that I have forgotten, but because even now, after the lapse of some seventy years, I can scarcely bear to write of it or to set out its horrors fully. But of all that was wonderful about it perhaps the most wonderful was that even to the last this unfortunate lady should still have clung to her love for the villain who, having deceived her by a

false marriage, deserted her, leaving her to such a doom. To what end can so holy a gift as this great love of hers have been bestowed on such a man? None can say, but so it was. Yet now that I think of it, there is one thing even stranger than her faithfulness.

It will be remembered that when the fanatic priest struck her she prayed that he also might die at such hands and more terribly than she must do. So it came about. In after years that very man, Father Pedro by name, was sent to convert the heathen of Anahuac, among whom, because of his cruelty, he was known as the 'Christian Devil.' But it chanced that venturing too far among a clan of the Otomie before they were finally subdued, he fell into the hands of some priests of the war god Huitzel, and by them was sacrificed after their dreadful fashion. I saw him as he went to his death, and without telling that I had been present when it was uttered, I called to his mind the dying curse of Isabella de Siguenza. Then for a moment his courage gave way, for seeing in me nothing but an Indian chief, he believed that the devil had put the words into my lips to torment him, causing me to speak of what I knew nothing. But enough of this now; if it is necessary I will tell of it in its proper place. At least, whether it was by chance, or because she had a gift of vision in her last hours, or that Providence was avenged on him after this fashion, so it came about, and I do not sorrow for it, though the death of this priest brought much misfortune on me.

This then was the end of Isabella de Siguenza who was murdered by priests because she had dared to break their rule.

So soon as I could clear my mind somewhat of all that I had seen and heard in that dreadful vault, I began to consider the circumstances in which I found myself. In the first place I was now a rich man, and if it pleased me to go back to Norfolk with my wealth, as Fonseca had pointed out, my prospects were fair indeed. But the oath that I had taken hung like lead about my neck. I had sworn to be avenged upon de Garcia, and I had prayed that the curse of heaven might rest upon me till I was so avenged, but in England living in peace and plenty I could scarcely come by vengeance. Moreover, now I knew where he was, or at least in what portion of the world I might seek him, and there where white men are few he could not hide from me as in Spain. This tidings I had gained from the doomed lady, and I have told her story at some length because it was through it and her that I came to journey to Hispaniola, as it was because of the sacrifice of her tormentor, Father Pedro, by the priests of the Otomie that I am here in England this day, since had it not been for that sacrifice the Spaniards would never have stormed the City of Pines, where, alive or dead, I should doubtless have been to this hour; for thus do seeming accidents build up the fates of men. Had those words never passed Isabella's lips, doubtless in time I should have wearied of a useless search and sailed for home and happiness. But having heard them it seemed to me, to my undoing, that this would be to play the part of a sorry coward. Moreover, strange as it may look, now I felt as though I had two wrongs to avenge, that of my mother and that of Isabella de Siguenza. Indeed none could have seen that young and lovely

lady die thus terribly and not desire to wreak her death on him who had betrayed and deserted her.

So the end of it was that being of a stubborn temper, I determined to do violence to my own desires and the dying counsels of my benefactor, and to follow de Garcia to the ends of the earth and there to kill him as I had sworn to do.

First, however, I inquired secretly and diligently as to the truth of the statement that de Garcia had sailed for the Indies, and to be brief, having the clue, I discovered that two days after the date of the duel I had fought with him, a man answering to de Garcia's description, though bearing a different name, had shipped from Seville in a carak bound for the Canary Islands, which carak was there to await the arrival of the fleet sailing for Hispaniola. Indeed from various circumstances I had little doubt that the man was none other than de Garcia himself, which, although I had not thought of it before, was not strange, seeing that then as now the Indies were the refuge of half the desperadoes and villains who could no longer live in Spain. Thither then I made up my mind to follow him, consoling myself a little by the thought that at least I should see new and wonderful countries, though how new and wonderful they were I did not guess.

Now it remained for me to dispose of the wealth which had come to me suddenly. While I was wondering how I could place it in safety till my

return, I heard by chance that the 'Adventuress' of Yarmouth, the same ship in which I had come to Spain a year before, was again in the port of Cadiz, and I bethought me that the best thing I could do with the gold and other articles of value would be to ship them to England, there to be held in trust for me. So having despatched a message to my friend the captain of the 'Adventuress,' that I had freight of value for him, I made my preparations to depart from Seville with such speed as I might, and to this end I sold my benefactor's house, with many of the effects, at a price much below their worth. The most of the books and plate, together with some other articles, I kept, and packing them in cases, I caused them to be transported down the river to Cadiz, to the care of those same agents to whom I had received letters from the Yarmouth merchants.

This being done I followed thither myself, taking the bulk of my fortune with me in gold, which I hid artfully in numerous packages. And so it came to pass that after a stay of a year in Seville, I turned my back on it for ever. My sojourn there had been fortunate, for I came to it poor and left it a rich man, to say nothing of what I had gained in experience, which was much. Yet I was glad to be gone, for here Juan de Garcia had escaped me, here I had lost my best friend and seen Isabella de Siguenza die.

I came to Cadiz in safety and without loss of any of my goods or gold, and taking boat proceeded on board the 'Adventuress,' where I found her

captain, whose name was Bell, in good health and very glad to see me. What pleased me more, however, was that he had three letters for me, one from my father, one from my sister Mary, and one from my betrothed, Lily Bozard, the only letter I ever received from her. The contents of these writings were not altogether pleasing however, for I learned from them that my father was in broken health and almost bedridden, and indeed, though I did not know it for many years after, he died in Ditchingham Church upon the very day that I received his letter. It was short and sad, and in it he said that he sorrowed much that he had allowed me to go upon my mission, since he should see me no more and could only commend me to the care of the Almighty, and pray Him for my safe return. As for Lily's letter, which, hearing that the 'Adventuress' was to sail for Cadiz, she had found means to despatch secretly, though it was not short it was sad also, and told me that so soon as my back was turned on home, my brother Geoffrey had asked her in marriage from her father, and that they pushed the matter strongly, so that her life was made a misery to her, for my brother waylaid her everywhere, and her father did not cease to revile her as an obstinate jade who would fling away her fortune for the sake of a penniless wanderer.

'But,' it went on, 'be assured, sweetheart, that unless they marry me by force, as they have threatened to do, I will not budge from my promise. And, Thomas, should I be wedded thus against my will, I shall not be a wife for long, for though I am strong I believe that I shall die of shame and sorrow. It is hard that I should be thus tormented, and for one reason only, that you are not rich. Still I have good hope that

things may better themselves, for I see that my brother Wilfred is much inclined towards your sister Mary, and though he also urges this marriage on me to-day, she is a friend to both of us and may be in the way to make terms with him before she accepts his suit.' Then the writing ended with many tender words and prayers for my safe return.

As for the letter from my sister Mary it was to the same purpose. As yet, she said, she could do nothing for me with Lily Bozard, for my brother Geoffrey was mad with love for her, my father was too ill to meddle in the matter, and Squire Bozard was fiercely set upon the marriage because of the lands that were at stake. Still, she hinted, things might not always be so, as a time might come when she could speak up for me and not in vain.

Now all this news gave me much cause for thought. More indeed, it awoke in me a longing for home which was so strong that it grew almost to a sickness. Her loving words and the perfume that hung about the letter of my betrothed brought Lily back to me in such sort that my heart ached with a desire to be with her. Moreover I knew that I should be welcome now, for my fortune was far greater than my brother's would ever be, and parents do not show the door to suitors who bring more than twelve thousand golden pieces in their baggage. Also I wished to see my father again before he passed beyond my reach. But still between me and my desire lay the shadow of de Garcia and my oath. I had brooded on vengeance for so long that I felt even in the midst of this strong temptation that I should have no pleasure in my life if I forsook my

quest. To be happy I must first kill de Garcia. Moreover I had come to believe that did I so forsake it the curse which I had invoked would surely fall upon me.

Meanwhile I did this. Going to a notary I caused him to prepare a deed which I translated into English. By this deed I vested all my fortune except two hundred pesos that I kept for my own use, in three persons to hold the same on my behalf till I came to claim it. Those three persons were my old master, Doctor Grimstone of Bungay, whom I knew for the honestest of men, my sister Mary Wingfield, and my betrothed, Lily Bozard. I directed them by this deed, which for greater validity I signed upon the ship and caused to be witnessed by Captain Bell and two other Englishmen, to deal with the property according to their discretion, investing not less than half of it in the purchase of lands and putting the rest out to interest, which interest with the rent of the lands was to be paid to the said Lily Bozard for her own use for so long as she remained unmarried.

Also with the deed I executed a will by which I devised the most of my property to Lily Bozard should she be unmarried at the date of my death, and the residue to my sister Mary. In the event of the marriage or death of Lily, then the whole was to pass to Mary and her heirs.

These two documents being signed and sealed, I delivered them, together with all my treasure and other goods, into the keeping of Captain Bell, charging him solemnly to hand them and my possessions to Dr. Grimstone

of Bungay, by whom he would be liberally rewarded. This he promised to do, though not until he had urged me almost with tears to accompany them myself.

With the gold and the deeds I sent several letters; to my father, my sister, my brother, Dr. Grimstone, Squire Bozard, and lastly to Lily herself. In these letters I gave an account of my life and fortunes since I had come to Spain, for I gathered that others which I had sent had never reached England, and told them of my resolution to follow de Garcia to the ends of the earth.

'Others,' I wrote to Lily, 'may think me a madman thus to postpone, or perchance to lose, a happiness which I desire above anything on earth, but you who understand my heart will not blame me, however much you may grieve for my decision. You will know that when once I have set my mind upon an object, nothing except death itself can turn me from it, and that in this matter I am bound by an oath which my conscience will not suffer me to break. I could never be happy even at your side if I abandoned my search now. First must come the toil and then the rest, first the sorrow and then the joy. Do not fear for me, I feel that I shall live to return again, and if I do not return, at least I am able to provide for you in such fashion that you need never be married against your will. While de Garcia lives I must follow him.'

To my brother Geoffrey I wrote very shortly, telling him what I thought of his conduct in persecuting an undefended maiden and striving to do

wrong to an absent brother. I have heard that my letter pleased him very ill.

And here I may state that those letters and everything else that I sent came safely to Yarmouth. There the gold and goods were taken to Lowestoft and put aboard a wherry, and when he had discharged his ship, Captain Bell sailed up the Waveney with them till he brought them to Bungay Staithe and thence to the house of Dr. Grimstone in Nethergate Street. Here were gathered my sister and brother, for my father was then two months buried--and also Squire Bozard and his son and daughter, for Captain Bell had advised them of his coming by messenger, and when all the tale was told there was wonder and to spare. Still greater did it grow when the chests were opened and the weight of bullion compared with that set out in my letters, for there had never been so much gold at once in Bungay within the memory of man.

And now Lily wept, first for joy because of my good fortune, and then for sorrow because I had not come with my treasure, and when he had seen all and heard the deeds read by virtue of which Lily was a rich woman whether I lived or died, the Squire her father swore aloud and said that he had always thought well of me, and kissed his daughter, wishing her joy of her luck. In short all were pleased except my brother, who left the house without a word and straightway took to evil courses. For now the cup was dashed from his lips, seeing that having come into my father's lands, he had brought it about that Lily was to be married to

him by might if no other means would serve. For even now a man can force his daughter into marriage while she is under age, and Squire Bozard was not one to shrink from such a deed, holding as he did that a woman's fancies were of no account. But on this day, so great is the power of gold, there was no more talk of her marrying any man except myself, indeed her father would have held her back from such a thing had she shown a mind to it, seeing that then Lily would have lost the wealth which I had settled on her. But all talked loudly of my madness because I would not abandon the chase of my enemy but chose to follow him to the far Indies, though Squire Bozard took comfort from the thought that whether I lived or died the money was still his daughter's. Only Lily spoke up for me, saying 'Thomas has sworn an oath and he does well to keep it, for his honour is at stake. Now I go to wait until he comes to me in this world or the next.'

But all this is out of place, for many a year passed away before I heard of these doings.