

CHAPTER XXVIII

THOMAS IS DOOMED

At the words of Cortes two Spaniards came forward, and seizing me one by either arm, they led me across the roof of the house towards the stairway. Otomie had heard also, and though she did not understand the words, she read the face of Cortes, and knew well that I was being taken to imprisonment or death. As I passed her, she started forward, a terror shining in her eyes. Fearing that she was about to throw herself upon my breast, and thus to reveal herself as my wife, and bring my fate upon her, I glanced at her warningly, then making pretence to stumble, as though with fear and exhaustion, I fell at her feet. The soldiers who led me laughed brutally, and one of them kicked me with his heavy boot. But Otomie stooped down and held her hand to me to help me rise, and as I did so, we spoke low and swiftly.

'Farewell, wife,' I said; 'whatever happens, keep silent.'

'Farewell,' she answered; 'if you must die, await me in the gates of death, for I will join you there.'

'Nay, live on. Time shall bring comfort.'

'You are my life, beloved. With you time ends for me.' Now I was on my

feet again, and I think that none noted our whispered words, for all were listening to Cortes, who rated the man that had kicked me.

'I bade you guard this traitor, not to kick him,' he said angrily in Castilian. 'Will you put us to open shame before these savages? Do so once more, and you shall pay for it smartly. Learn a lesson in gentleness from that woman; she is starving, yet she leaves her food to help your prisoner to his feet. Now take him away to the camp, and see that he comes to no harm, for he can tell me much.'

Then the soldiers led me away, grumbling as they went, and the last thing that I saw was the despairing face of Otomie my wife, as she gazed after me, faint with the secret agony of our parting. But when I came to the head of the stairway, Guatemoc, who stood near, took my hand and shook it.

'Farewell, my brother,' he said with a heavy smile; 'the game we played together is finished, and now it is time for us to rest. I thank you for your valour and your aid.'

'Farewell, Guatemoc,' I answered. 'You are fallen, but let this comfort you, in your fall you have found immortal fame.'

'On, on!' growled the soldiers, and I went, little thinking how Guatemoc and I should meet again.

They took me to a canoe, and we were paddled across the lake by Tlascalans, till at length we came to the Spanish camp. All the journey through, my guards, though they laid no hand on me, fearing the anger of Cortes, mocked and taunted me, asking me how I liked the ways of the heathen, and whether I ate the flesh of the sacrifices raw or cooked; and many another such brutal jest they made at my expense. For a while I bore it, for I had learned to be patient from the Indians, but at last I answered them in few words and bitter.

'Peace, cowards,' I said; 'remember that I am helpless, and that were I before you strong and armed, either I should not live to listen to such words, or you would not live to repeat them.'

Then they were silent, and I also was silent.

When we reached their camp I was led through it, followed by a throng of fierce Tlascalans and others, who would have torn me limb from limb had they not feared to do so. I saw some Spaniards also, but the most of these were so drunk with mescal, and with joy at the tidings that Tenochtitlan had fallen, and their labours were ended at last, that they took no heed of me. Never did I see such madness as possessed them, for these poor fools believed that henceforth they should eat their very bread off plates of gold. It was for gold that they had followed Cortes; for gold they had braved the altar of sacrifice and fought in a hundred fights, and now, as they thought, they had won it.

The room of the stone house where they prisoned me had a window secured by bars of wood, and through these bars I could see and hear the revellings of the soldiers during the time of my confinement. All day long, when they were not on duty, and most of the night also, they gambled and drank, staking tens of pesos on a single throw, which the loser must pay out of his share of the countless treasures of the Aztecs. Little did they care if they won or lost, they were so sure of plunder, but played on till drink overpowered them, and they rolled senseless beneath the tables, or till they sprang up and danced wildly to and fro, catching at the sunbeams and screaming 'Gold! gold! gold!'

Listening at this window also I gathered some of the tidings of the camp. I learned that Cortes had come back, bringing Guatemoc and several of the princes with him, together with many of the noble Aztec ladies. Indeed I saw and heard the soldiers gambling for these women when they were weary of their play for money, a description of each of them being written on a piece of paper. One of these ladies answered well to Otomie, my wife, and she was put up to auction by the brute who won her in the gamble, and sold to a common soldier for a hundred pesos. For these men never doubted but that the women and the gold would be handed over to them.

Thus things went for several days, during which I sat and slept in my prison untroubled by any, except the native woman who waited on me and brought me food in plenty. During those days I ate as I have never eaten before or since, and I slept much, for my sorrows could not rid my body

of its appetites and commanding need for food and rest. Indeed I verily believe that at the end of a week, I had increased in weight by a full half; also my weariness was conquered at length, and I was strong again.

But when I was neither sleeping nor eating I watched at my window, hoping, though in vain, to catch some sight of Otomie or of Guatemoc. If I might not see my friends, however, at least I saw my foe, for one evening de Garcia came and stared at my prison. He could not see me, but I saw him, and the devilish smile that flickered on his face as he went away like a wolf, made me shiver with a presage of woes to come. For ten minutes or more he stood gazing at my window hungrily, as a cat gazes at a caged bird, and I felt that he was waiting for the door to be opened, and KNEW that it would soon be opened.

This happened on the eve of the day upon which I was put to torture.

Meanwhile, as time went on, I noticed that a change came over the temper of the camp. The soldiers ceased to gamble for untold wealth, they even ceased from drinking to excess and from their riotous joy, but took to hanging together in knots discussing fiercely I could not learn of what. On the day when de Garcia came to look at my prison there was a great gathering in the square opposite my prison, to which I saw Cortes ride up on a white horse and richly dressed. The meeting was too far away for me to overhear what passed, but I noted that several officers addressed Cortes angrily, and that their speeches were loudly cheered by the soldiers. At length the great captain answered them at some length, and

they broke up in silence. Next morning after I had breakfasted, four soldiers came into my prison and ordered me to accompany them.

'Whither?' I asked.

'To the captain, traitor,' their leader answered.

'It has come at last,' I thought to myself, but I said only:

'It is well. Any change from this hole is one for the better.'

'Certainly,' he replied; 'and it is your last shift.'

Then I knew that the man believed that I was going to my death. In five minutes I was standing before Cortes in his private house. At his side was Marina and around him were several of his companions in arms. The great man looked at me for a while, then spoke.

'Your name is Wingfield; you are of mixed blood, half English and half Spanish. You were cast away in the Tobasco River and taken to Tenochtitlan. There you were doomed to personate the Aztec god Tezcat, and were rescued by us when we captured the great teocalli. Subsequently you joined the Aztecs and took part in the attack and slaughter of the noche triste. You were afterwards the friend and counsellor of Guatemoc, and assisted him in his defence of Tenochtitlan. Is this true, prisoner?'

'It is all true, general,' I answered.

'Good. You are now our prisoner, and had you a thousand lives, you have forfeited them all because of your treachery to your race and blood.

Into the circumstances that led you to commit this horrible treason I cannot enter; the fact remains. You have slain many of the Spaniards and their allies; that is, being in a state of treason you have murdered them. Wingfield, your life is forfeit and I condemn you to die by hanging as a traitor and an apostate.'

'Then there is nothing more to be said,' I answered quietly, though a cold fear froze my blood.

'There is something,' answered Cortes. 'Though your crimes have been so many, I am ready to give you your life and freedom upon a condition.

I am ready to do more, to find you a passage to Europe on the first occasion, where you may perchance escape the echoes of your infamy if God is good to you. The condition is this. We have reason to believe that you are acquainted with the hiding place of the gold of Montezuma, which was unlawfully stolen from us on the night of the *noche triste*.

Nay, we know that this is so, for you were seen to go with the canoes that were laden with it. Choose now, apostate, between a shameful death and the revealing to us of the secret of this treasure.'

For a moment I wavered. On the one hand was the loss of honour with life and liberty and the hope of home, on the other a dreadful end. Then I

remembered my oath and Otomie, and what she would think of me living or dead, if I did this thing, and I wavered no more.

'I know nothing of the treasure, general,' I answered coldly. 'Send me to my death.'

'You mean that you will say nothing of it, traitor. Think again. If you have sworn any oaths they are broken by God. The empire of the Aztecs is at an end, their king is my prisoner, their great city is a ruin. The true God has triumphed over these devils by my hand. Their wealth is my lawful spoil, and I must have it to pay my gallant comrades who cannot grow rich on desolation. Think again.'

'I know nothing of this treasure, general.'

'Yet memory sometimes wakens, traitor. I have said that you shall die if yours should fail you, and so you shall to be sure. But death is not always swift. There are means, doubtless you who have lived in Spain have heard of them,' and he arched his brows and glared at me meaningly, 'by which a man may die and yet live for many weeks. Now, loth as I am to do it, it seems that if your memory still sleeps, I must find some such means to rouse it--before you die.'

'I am in your power, general,' I answered. 'You call me traitor again and again. I am no traitor. I am a subject of the King of England, not of the King of Spain. I came hither following a villain who has wrought

me and mine bitter wrong, one of your company named de Garcia or Sarceda. To find him and for other reasons I joined the Aztecs. They are conquered and I am your prisoner. At the least deal with me as a brave man deals with a fallen enemy. I know nothing of the treasure; kill me and make an end.'

'As a man I might wish to do this, Wingfield, but I am more than a man, I am the hand of the Church here in Anahuac. You have partaken with the worshippers of idols, you have seen your fellow Christians sacrificed and devoured by your brute comrades. For this alone you deserve to be tortured eternally, and doubtless that will be so after we have done with you. As for the hidalgo Don Sarceda, I know him only as a brave companion in arms, and certainly I shall not listen to tales told against him by a wandering apostate. It is, however, unlucky for you,' and here a gleam of light shot across the face of Cortes, 'that there should be any old feud between you, seeing that it is to his charge that I am about to confide you. Now for the last time I say choose. Will you reveal the hiding place of the treasure and go free, or will you be handed over to the care of Don Sarceda till such time as he shall find means to make you speak?'

Now a great faintness seized me, for I knew that I was condemned to be tortured, and that de Garcia was to be the torturer. What mercy had I to expect from his cruel heart when I, his deadliest foe, lay in his power to wreak his vengeance on? But still my will and my honour prevailed against my terrors, and I answered:

'I have told you, general, that I know nothing of this treasure. Do your worst, and may God forgive you for your cruelty.'

'Dare not to speak that holy Name, apostate and worshipper of idols, eater of human flesh. Let Sarceda be summoned.'

A messenger went out, and for a while there was silence. I caught Marina's glance and saw pity in her gentle eyes. But she could not help me here, for Cortes was mad because no gold had been found, and the clamour of the soldiers for reward had worn him out and brought him to this shameful remedy, he who was not cruel by nature. Still she strove to plead for me with him, whispering earnestly in his ear. For a while Cortes listened, then he pushed her from him roughly.

'Peace, Marina,' he said. 'What, shall I spare this English dog some pangs, when my command, and perchance my very life, hangs upon the finding of the gold? Nay, he knows well where it lies hid; you said it yourself when I would have hung him for a traitor, and certainly he was one of those whom the spy saw go out with it upon the lake. Our friend was with them also, but he came back no more; doubtless they murdered him. What is this man to you that you should plead for him? Cease to trouble me, Marina, am I not troubled enough already?' and Cortes put his hands to his face and remained lost in thought. As for Marina, she looked at me sadly and sighed as though to say, 'I have done my best,' and I thanked her with my eyes.

Presently there was a sound of footsteps and I looked up to see de Garcia standing before me. Time and hardship had touched him lightly, and the lines of silver in his curling hair and peaked beard did but add dignity to his noble presence. Indeed, when I looked at him in his dark Spanish beauty, his rich garments decked with chains of gold, as he bowed before Cortes hat in hand, I was fain to confess that I had never seen a more gallant cavalier, or one whose aspect gave the lie so wholly to the black heart within. But knowing him for what he was, my very blood quivered with hate at the sight of him, and when I thought of my own impotence and of the errand on which he had come, I ground my teeth and cursed the day that I was born. As for de Garcia, he greeted me with a little cruel smile, then spoke to Cortes.

'Your pleasure, general?'

'Greeting to you, comrade,' answered Cortes. 'You know this renegade?'

'But too well, general. Three times he has striven to murder me.'

'Well, you have escaped and it is your hour now, Sarceda. He says that he has a quarrel with you; what is it?'

De Garcia hesitated, stroking his peaked beard, then answered: 'I am loth to tell it because it is a tale of error for which I have often sorrowed and done penance. Yet I will speak for fear you should think

worse of me than I deserve. This man has some cause to dislike me, since to be frank, when I was younger than I am to-day and given to the follies of youth, it chanced that in England I met his mother, a beautiful Spanish lady who by ill fortune was wedded to an Englishman, this man's father and a clown of clowns, who maltreated her. I will be short; the lady learned to love me and I worsted her husband in a duel. Hence this traitor's hate of me.'

I heard and thought that my heart must burst with fury. To all his wickedness and offences against me, de Garcia now had added slander of my dead mother's honour.

'You lie, murderer,' I gasped, tearing at the ropes that bound me.

'I must ask you to protect me from such insult, general,' de Garcia answered coldly. 'Were the prisoner worthy of my sword, I would ask further that his bonds should be loosed for a little space, but my honour would be tarnished for ever were I to fight with such as he.'

'Dare to speak thus once more to a gentleman of Spain,' said Cortes coldly, 'and, you heathen dog, your tongue shall be dragged from you with red-hot pincers. For you, Sarceda, I thank you for your confidence. If you have no worse crime than a love affair upon your soul, I think that our good chaplain Olmedo will frank you through the purgatorial fires. But we waste words and time. This man has the secret of the treasure of Guatemoc and of Montezuma. If Guatemoc and his nobles will

not tell it, he at least may be forced to speak, for the torments that an Indian can endure without a groan will soon bring truth bubbling from the lips of this white heathen. Take him, Sarceda, and hearken, let him be your especial care. First let him suffer with the others, and afterwards, should he prove obdurate, alone. The method I leave to you. Should he confess, summon me.'

'Pardon me, general, but this is no task for an hidalgo of Spain. I have been more wont to pierce my enemies with the sword than to tear them with pincers,' said de Garcia, but as he spoke I saw a gleam of triumph shine in his black eyes, and heard the ring of triumph through the mock anger of his voice.

'I know it, comrade. But this must be done; though I hate it, it must be done, there is no other way. The gold is necessary to me--by the Mother of God! the knaves say that I have stolen it!--and I doubt these stubborn Indian dogs will ever speak, however great their agony. This man knows and I give him over to you because you are acquainted with his wickedness, and that knowledge will steel your heart against all pity. Spare not, comrade; remember that he must be forced to speak.'

'It is your command, Cortes, and I will obey it, though I love the task little; with one proviso, however, that you give me your warrant in writing.'

'It shall be made out at once,' answered the general. 'And now away with

him.'

'Where to?'

'To the prison that he has left. All is ready and there he will find his comrades.'

Then a guard was summoned and I was dragged back to my own place, de Garcia saying as I went that he would be with me presently.