

CHAPTER XXIX

DE GARCIA SPEAKS HIS MIND

At first I was not taken into the chamber that I had left, but placed in a little room opening out of it where the guard slept. Here I waited a while, bound hand and foot and watched by two soldiers with drawn swords. As I waited, torn by rage and fear, I heard the noise of hammering through the wall, followed by a sound of groans. At length the suspense came to an end; a door was opened, and two fierce Tlascalan Indians came through it and seized me by the hair and ears, dragging me thus into my own chamber.

'Poor devil!' I heard one of the Spanish soldiers say as I went.

'Apostate or no, I am sorry for him; this is bloody work.'

Then the door closed and I was in the place of torment. The room was darkened, for a cloth had been hung in front of the window bars, but its gloom was relieved by certain fires that burned in braziers. It was by the light of these fires chiefly that I saw the sight. On the floor of the chamber were placed three solid chairs, one of them empty. The other two were filled by none other than Guatemoc, Emperor of the Aztecs, and by his friend and mine the cacique of Tacuba. They were bound in the chairs, the burning braziers were placed at their feet, behind them stood a clerk with paper and an inkhorn, and around them Indians were

busy at some dreadful task, directed to it by two Spanish soldiers. Near the third chair stood another Spaniard who as yet took no part in the play; it was de Garcia. As I looked, an Indian lifted one of the braziers and seizing the naked foot of the Tacuban prince, thrust it down upon the glowing coals. For a while there was silence, then the Tacuban broke into groans. Guatemoc turned his head towards him and spoke, and as he spoke I saw that his foot also was resting in the flames of a brazier. 'Why do you complain, friend,' he said, in a steady voice, 'when I keep silence? Am I then taking my pleasure in a bed? Follow me now as always, friend, and be silent beneath your sufferings.'

The clerk wrote down his words, for I heard the quill scratching on the paper, and as he wrote, Guatemoc turned his head and saw me. His face was grey with pain, still he spoke as a hundred times I had heard him speak at council, slowly and clearly. 'Alas! are you also here, my friend Teule?' he said; 'I hoped that they had spared you. See how these Spaniards keep faith. Malinche swore to treat me with all honour; behold how he honours me, with hot coals for my feet and pincers for my flesh. They think that we have buried treasure, Teule, and would wring its secret from us. You know that it is a lie. If we had treasure would we not give it gladly to our conquerors, the god-born sons of Quetzal? You know that there is nothing left except the ruins of our cities and the bones of our dead.'

Here he ceased suddenly, for the demon who tormented him struck him across the mouth saying, 'Silence, dog.'

But I understood, and I swore in my heart that I would die ere I revealed my brother's secret. This was the last triumph that Guatemoc could win, to keep his gold from the grasp of the greedy Spaniard, and that victory at least he should not lose through me. So I swore, and very soon my oath must be put to the test, for at a motion from de Garcia the Tlascalans seized me and bound me to the third chair.

Then he spoke into my ear in Castilian: 'Strange are the ways of Providence, Cousin Wingfield. You have hunted me across the world, and several times we have met, always to your sorrow. I thought I had you in the slave ship, I thought that the sharks had you in the water, but somehow you escaped me whom you came to hunt. When I knew it I grieved, but now I grieve no more, for I see that you were reserved for this moment. Cousin Wingfield, it shall go hard if you escape me this time, and yet I think that we shall spend some days together before we part. Now I will be courteous with you. You may have a choice of evils. How shall we begin? The resources at my command are not all that we could wish, alas! the Holy Office is not yet here with its unholy armoury, but still I have done my best. These fellows do not understand their art: hot coals are their only inspiration. I, you see, have several,' and he pointed to various instruments of torture. 'Which will you select?'

I made no answer, for I had determined that I would speak no word and utter no cry, do what they might with me.

'Let me think, let me think,' went on de Garcia, smoothing his beard.

'Ah, I have it. Here, slaves.'

Now I will not renew my own agonies, or awake the horror of any who may chance to read what I have written by describing what befell me after this. Suffice it to say that for two hours and more this devil, helped in his task by the Tlascalans, worked his wicked will upon me. One by one torments were administered to me with a skill and ingenuity that cannot often have been surpassed, and when at times I fainted I was recovered by cold water being dashed upon me and spirits poured down my throat. And yet, I say it with some pride, during those two dreadful hours I uttered no groan however great my sufferings, and spoke no word good or bad.

Nor was it only bodily pain that I must bear, for all this while my enemy mocked me with bitter words, which tormented my soul as his instruments and hot coals tormented my body. At length he paused exhausted, and cursed me for an obstinate pig of an Englishman, and at that moment Cortes entered the shambles and with him Marina.

'How goes it?' he said lightly, though his face turned pale at the sight of horror.

'The cacique of Tacuba has confessed that gold is buried in his garden, the other two have said nothing, general,' the clerk answered, glancing down his paper.

'Brave men, indeed!' I heard Cortes mutter to himself; then said aloud, 'Let the cacique be carried to-morrow to the garden of which he speaks, that he may point out the gold. As for the other two, cease tormenting them for this day. Perhaps they may find another mind before to-morrow. I trust so, for their own sakes I trust so!'

Then he drew to the corner of the room and consulted with Sarceda and the other torturers, leaving Marina face to face with Guatemoc and with me. For a while she stared at the prince as though in horror, then a strange light came into her beautiful eyes, and she spoke to him in a low voice, saying in the Aztec tongue:

'Do you remember how once you rejected me down yonder in Tobasco, Guatemoc, and what I told you then?--that I should grow great in spite of you? You see it has all come true and more than true, and you are brought to this. Are you not sorry, Guatemoc? I am sorry, though were I as some women are, perchance I might rejoice to see you thus.'

'Woman,' the prince answered in a thick voice, 'you have betrayed your country and you have brought me to shame and torment. Yes, had it not been for you, these things had never been. I am sorry, indeed I am sorry--that I did not kill you. For the rest, may your name be shameful for ever in the ears of honest men and your soul be everlastingly accursed, and may you yourself, even before you die, know the bitterness of dishonour and betrayal! Your words were fulfilled, and so shall mine

be also.'

She heard and turned away trembling, and for a while was silent. Then her glance fell upon me and she began to weep.

'Alas! poor man,' she said; 'alas! my friend.'

'Weep not over me, Marina,' I answered, speaking in Aztec, 'for our tears are of no worth, but help me if you may.'

'Ah that I could!' she sobbed, and turning fled from the place, followed presently by Cortes.

Now the Spaniards came in again and removed Guatemoc and the cacique of Tacuba, carrying them in their arms, for they could not walk, and indeed the cacique was in a swoon.

'Farewell, Teule,' said Guatemoc as he passed me; 'you are indeed a true son of Quetzal and a gallant man. May the gods reward you in times to come for all that you have suffered for me and mine, since I cannot.'

Then he was borne out and these were the last words that I ever heard him utter.

Now I was left alone with the Tlascalans and de Garcia, who mocked me as before.

'A little tired, eh, friend Wingfield?' he said sneering. 'Well, the play is rough till you get used to it. A night's sleep will refresh you, and to-morrow you will be a new man. Perhaps you believe that I have done my worst. Fool, this is but a beginning. Also you think doubtless that your obstinacy angers me? Wrong again, my friend, I only pray that you may keep your lips sealed to the last. Gladly would I give my share of this hidden gold in payment for two more such days with you. I have still much to pay you back, and look you, I have found a way to do it. There are more ways of hurting a man than through his own flesh--for instance, when I wished to be revenged upon your father, I struck him through her whom he loved. Now I have touched you and you wonder what I mean. Well, I will tell you. Perhaps you may know an Aztec lady of royal blood who is named Otomie?'

'Otomie, what of her?' I cried, speaking for the first time, since fear for her stirred me more than all the torments I had borne.

'A triumph indeed; I have found a way to make you speak at last; why, then, to-morrow you will be full of words. Only this, Cousin Wingfield; Otomie, Montezuma's daughter, a very lovely woman by the way, is your wife according to the Indian customs. Well, I know all the story and--she is in my power. I will prove it to you, for she shall be brought here presently and then you can console each other. For listen, dog, to-morrow she will sit where you are sitting, and before your eyes she shall be dealt with as you have been dealt with. Ah! then you will

talk fast enough, but perhaps it will be too late.'

And now for the first time I broke down and prayed for mercy even of my foe.

'Spare her,' I groaned; 'do what you will with me, but spare her! Surely you must have a heart, even you, for you are human. You can never do this thing, and Cortes would not suffer it.'

'As for Cortes,' he answered, 'he will know nothing of it--till it is done. I have my warrant that charges me to use every means in my power to force the truth from you. Torture has failed; this alone is left. And for the rest, you must read me ill. You know what it is to hate, for you hate me; multiply your hate by ten and you may find the sum of mine for you. I hate you for your blood, I hate you because you have your mother's eyes, but much more do I hate you for yourself, for did you not beat me, a gentleman of Spain, with a stick as though I were a hound? Shall I then shrink from such a deed when I can satisfy my hate by it? Also perhaps, though you are a brave man, at this moment you know what it is to fear, and are tasting of its agony. Now I will be open with you; Thomas Wingfield, I fear you. When first I saw you I feared you as I had reason to do, and that is why I tried to kill you, and as time has gone by I have feared you more and more, so much indeed, that at times I cannot rest because of a nameless terror that dogs me and which has to do with you. Because of you I fled from Spain, because of you I have played the coward in more frays than one. The luck has always been mine

in this duel between us, and yet I tell you that even as you are, I fear you still. If I dared I would kill you at once, only then you would haunt me as your mother haunts me, and also I must answer for it to Cortes. Fear, Cousin Wingfield, is the father of cruelty, and mine makes me cruel to you. Living or dead, I know that you will triumph over me at the last, but it is my turn now, and while you breathe, or while one breathes who is dear to you, I will spend my life to bring you and them to shame and misery and death, as I brought your mother, my cousin, though she forced me to it to save myself. Why not? There is no forgiveness for me, I cannot undo the past. You came to take vengeance on me, and soon or late by you, or through you, it will be glutted, but till then I triumph, ay, even when I must sink to this butcher's work to do it,' and suddenly he turned and left the place.

Then weakness and suffering overcame me and I swooned away. When I awoke it was to find that my bonds had been loosed and that I lay on some sort of bed, while a woman bent over me, tending me with murmured words of pity and love. The night had fallen, but there was light in the chamber, and by it I saw that the woman was none other than Otomie, no longer starved and wretched, but almost as lovely as before the days of siege and hunger.

'Otomie! you here!' I gasped through my wounded lips, for with my senses came the memory of de Garcia's threats.

'Yes, beloved, it is I,' she murmured; 'they have suffered that I nurse

you, devils though they are. Oh! that I must see you thus and yet be helpless to avenge you,' and she burst into weeping.

'Hush,' I said, 'hush. Have we food?'

'In plenty. A woman brought it from Marina.'

'Give me to eat, Otomie.'

Now for a while she fed me and the deadly sickness passed from me, though my poor flesh burned with a hundred agonies.

'Listen, Otomie: have you seen de Garcia?'

'No, husband. Two days since I was separated from my sister Tecuichpo and the other ladies, but I have been well treated and have seen no Spaniard except the soldiers who led me here, telling me that you were sick. Alas! I knew not from what cause,' and again she began to weep.

'Still some have seen you and it is reported that you are my wife.'

'It is likely enough,' she answered, 'for it was known throughout the Aztec hosts, and such secrets cannot be kept. But why have they treated you thus? Because you fought against them?'

'Are we alone?' I asked.

'The guard is without, but there are none else in the chamber.'

'Then bend down your head and I will tell you,' and I told her all.

When I had done so she sprang up with flashing eyes and her hand pressed upon her breast, and said:

'Oh! if I loved you before, now I love you more if that is possible, who could suffer thus horribly and yet be faithful to the fallen and your oath. Blessed be the day when first I looked upon your face, O my husband, most true of men. But they who could do this--what of them? Still it is done with and I will nurse you back to health. Surely it is done with, or they had not suffered me to come to you?'

'Alas! Otomie, I must tell all--it is NOT done with,' and with faltering voice I went on with the tale, yes, and since I must, I told her for what purpose she had been brought here. She listened without a word, though her lips turned pale.

'Truly,' she said when I had done, 'these Teules far surpass the pabas of our people, for if the priests torture and sacrifice, it is to the gods and not for gold and secret hate. Now, husband, what is your counsel? Surely you have some counsel.'

'I have none that I dare offer, wife,' I groaned.

'You are timid as a girl who will not utter the love she burns to tell,'
Otomie answered with a proud and bitter laugh. 'Well, I will speak it
for you. It is in your mind that we must die to-night.'

'It is,' I said; 'death now, or shame and agony to-morrow and then death
at last, that is our choice. Since God will not protect us, we must
protect ourselves if we can find the means.'

'God! there is no God. At times I have doubted the gods of my people and
turned to yours; now I renounce and reject Him. If there were a God of
mercy such as you cling to, could He suffer that such things be? You are
my god, husband, to you and for you I pray, and you alone. Let us have
done now with pleading to those who are not, or who, if they live,
are deaf to our cries and blind to our misery, and befriend ourselves.
Yonder lies rope, that window has bars, very soon we can be beyond the
sun and the cruelty of Teules, or sound asleep. But there is time yet;
let us talk a while, they will scarcely begin their torments before the
dawn, and ere dawn we shall be far.'

So we talked as well as my sufferings would allow. We talked of how we
first had met, of how Otomie had been vowed to me as the wife of Tezcat,
Soul of the World, of that day when we had lain side by side upon the
stone of sacrifice, of our true marriage thereafter, of the siege
of Tenochtitlan and the death of our first-born. Thus we talked till
midnight was two hours gone. Then there came a silence.

'Husband,' said Otomie at last in a hushed and solemn voice, 'you are worn with suffering, and I am weary. It is time to do that which must be done. Sad is our fate, but at least rest is before us. I thank you, husband, for your gentleness, I thank you more for your faithfulness to my house and people. Shall I make ready for our last journey?'

'Make ready!' I answered.

Then she rose and soon was busy with the ropes. At length all was prepared and the moment of death was at hand.

'You must aid me, Otomie,' I said; 'I cannot walk by myself.'

She came and lifted me with her strong and tender arms, till I stood upon a stool beneath the window bars. There she placed the rope about my throat, then taking her stand by me she fitted the second rope upon her own. Now we kissed in solemn silence, for there was nothing more to say. Yet Otomie said something, asking:

'Of whom do you think in this moment, husband? Of me and of my dead child, or of that lady who lives far across the sea? Nay, I will not ask. I have been happy in my love, it is enough. Now love and life must end together, and it is well for me, but for you I grieve. Say, shall I thrust away the stool?'

'Yes, Otomie, since there is no hope but death. I cannot break my faith with Guatemoc, nor can I live to see you shamed and tortured.'

'Then kiss me first and for the last time.'

We kissed again and then, as she was in the very act of pushing the stool from beneath us, the door opened and shut, and a veiled woman stood before us, bearing a torch in one hand and a bundle in the other. She looked, and seeing us and our dreadful purpose, ran to us.

'What do you?' she cried, and I knew the voice for that of Marina. 'Are you then mad, Teule?'

'Who is this who knows you so well, husband, and will not even suffer that we die in peace?' asked Otomie.

'I am Marina,' answered the veiled woman, 'and I come to save you if I can.'