

CHAPTER XXXVII

VENGEANCE

During that meal Bernal Diaz spoke of our first meeting on the causeway, and of how I had gone near to killing him in error, thinking that he was Sarceda, and then he asked me what was my quarrel with Sarceda.

In as few words as possible I told him the story of my life, of all the evil that de Garcia or Sarceda had worked upon me and mine, and of how it was through him that I was in this land that day. He listened amazed.

'Holy Mother!' he said at length, 'I always knew him for a villain, but that, if you do not lie, friend Wingfield, he could be such a man as this, I did not know. Now by my word, had I heard this tale an hour ago, Sarceda should not have left this camp till he had answered it or cleared himself by combat with you. But I fear it is too late; he was to leave for Mexico at the rising of the moon, to stir up mischief against me because I granted you terms--not that I fear him there, where his repute is small.'

'I do not lie indeed,' I answered. 'Much of this tale I can prove if need be, and I tell you that I would give half the life that is left to me to stand face to face in open fight with him again. Ever he has escaped me, and the score between us is long.'

Now as I spoke thus it seemed to me that a cold and dreadful air played upon my hands and brow and a warning sense of present evil crept into my soul, overcoming me so that I could not stir or speak for a while.

'Let us go and see if he has gone,' said Diaz presently, and summoning a guard, he was about to leave the chamber. It was at this moment that I chanced to look up and see a woman standing in the doorway. Her hand rested on the doorpost; her head, from which the long hair streamed, was thrown back, and on her face was a look of such anguish that at first, so much was she changed, I did not know her for Otomie. When I knew her, I knew all; one thing only could conjure up the terror and agony that shone in her deep eyes.

'What has chanced to our son?' I asked.

'DEAD, DEAD!' she answered in a whisper that seemed to pierce my marrow.

I said nothing, for my heart told me what had happened, but Diaz asked, 'Dead--why, what has killed him?'

'De Garcia! I saw him go,' replied Otomie; then she tossed her arms high, and without another sound fell backwards to the earth.

In that moment I think that my heart broke--at least I know that nothing has had the power to move me greatly since, though this memory moves me

day by day and hour by hour, till I die and go to seek my son.

'Say, Bernal Diaz,' I cried, with a hoarse laugh, 'did I lie to you concerning this comrade of yours?'

Then, springing over Otomie's body I left the chamber, followed by Bernal Diaz and the others.

Without the door I turned to the left towards the camp. I had not gone a hundred paces when, in the moonlight, I saw a small troop of horsemen riding towards us. It was de Garcia and his servants, and they headed towards the mountain pass on their road to Mexico. I was not too late.

'Halt!' cried Bernal Diaz.

'Who commands me to halt?' said the voice of de Garcia.

'I, your captain,' roared Diaz. 'Halt, you devil, you murderer, or you shall be cut down.'

I saw him start and turn pale.

'These are strange manners, senior,' he said. 'Of your grace I ask--'

At this moment de Garcia caught sight of me for the first time, for I had broken from the hold of Diaz who clutched my arm, and was moving

towards him. I said nothing, but there was something in my face which told him that I knew all, and warned him of his doom. He looked past me, but the narrow road was blocked with men. I drew near, but he did not wait for me. Once he put his hand on the hilt of the sword, then suddenly he wheeled his horse round and fled down the street of Xaca.

De Garcia fled, and I followed after him, running fast and low like a hound. At first he gained on me, but soon the road grew rough, and he could not gallop over it. We were clear of the town now, or rather of its ruins, and travelling along a little path which the Indians used to bring down snow from Xaca in the hot weather. Perhaps there are some five miles of this path before the snow line is reached, beyond which no Indian dared to set his foot, for the ground above was holy. Along this path he went, and I was content to see it, for I knew well that the traveller cannot leave it, since on either side lie water-courses and cliffs. Mile after mile de Garcia followed it, looking now to the left, now to the right, and now ahead at the great dome of snow crowned with fire that towered above him. But he never looked behind him; he knew what was there--death in the shape of a man!

I came on doggedly, saving my strength. I was sure that I must catch him at last, it did not matter when.

At length he reached the snow-line where the path ended, and for the first time he looked back. There I was some two hundred paces behind him. I, his death, was behind him, and in front of him shone the snow.

For a moment he hesitated, and I heard the heavy breathing of his horse in the great stillness. Then he turned and faced the slope, driving his spurs into the brute's sides. The snow was hard, for here the frost bit sharply, and for a while, though it was so steep, the horse travelled over it better than he had done along the pathway. Now, as before, there was only one road that he could take, for we passed up the crest of a ridge, a pleat as it were in the garment of the mountain, and on either side were steeps of snow on which neither horse nor man might keep his footing. For two hours or more we followed that ridge, and as we went through the silence of the haunted volcan, and the loneliness of its eternal snows, it seemed to me that my spirit entered into the spirit of my quarry, and that with its eyes I saw all that was passing in his heart. To a man so wronged the dream was pleasant even if it were not true, for I read there such agony, such black despair, such haunting memories, such terror of advancing death and of what lay beyond it, that no revenge of man's could surpass their torment. And it was true--I knew that it was true; he suffered all this and more, for if he had no conscience, at least he had fear and imagination to quicken and multiply the fear.

Now the snow grew steeper, and the horse was almost spent, for he could scarcely breathe at so great a height. In vain did de Garcia drive his spurs into its sides, the gallant beast could do no more. Suddenly it fell down. Surely, I thought, he will await me now. But even I had not fathomed the depth of his terrors, for de Garcia disengaged himself from the fallen horse, looked towards me, then fled forward on his feet,

casting away his armour as he went that he might travel more lightly.

By this time we had passed the snow and were come to the edge of the ice cap that is made by the melting of the snow with the heat of the inner fires, or perhaps by that of the sun in hot seasons, I know not, and its freezing in the winter months or in the cold of the nights. At least there is such a cap on Xaca, measuring nearly a mile in depth, which lies between the snow and the black rim of the crater. Up this ice climbed de Garcia, and the task is not of the easiest, even for one of untroubled mind, for a man must step from crack to crack or needle to needle of rough ice, that stand upon the smooth surface like the bristles on a hog's back, and woe to him if one break or if he slip, for then, as he falls, very shortly the flesh will be filed from his bones by the thousands of sword-like points over which he must pass in his descent towards the snow. Indeed, many times I feared greatly lest this should chance to de Garcia, for I did not desire to lose my vengeance thus. Therefore twice when I saw him in danger I shouted to him, telling him where to put his feet, for now I was within twenty paces of him, and, strange to say, he obeyed me without question, forgetting everything in his terror of instant death. But for myself I had no fear, for I knew that I should not fall, though the place was one which I had surely shrunk from climbing at any other time.

All this while we had been travelling towards Xaca's fiery crest by the bright moonlight, but now the dawn broke suddenly on the mountain top, and the flame died away in the heart of the pillar of smoke. It was

wonderful to see the red glory that shone upon the ice-cap, and on us two men who crept like flies across it, while the mountain's breast and the world below were plunged in the shadows of night.

'Now we have a better light to climb by, comrade!' I called to de Garcia, and my voice rang strangely among the ice cliffs, where never a man's voice had echoed before.

As I spoke the mountain rumbled and bellowed beneath us, shaking like a wind-tossed tree, as though in wrath at the desecration of its sacred solitudes. With the rumbling came a shower of grey ashes that rained down on us, and for a little while hid de Garcia from my sight. I heard him call out in fear, and was afraid lest he had fallen; but presently the ashes cleared away, and I saw him standing safely on the lava rim that surrounds the crater.

Now, I thought, he will surely make a stand, for could he have found courage it had been easy for him to kill me with his sword, which he still wore, as I climbed from the ice to the hot lava. It seemed that he thought of it, for he turned and glared at me like a devil, then went on again, leaving me wondering where he believed that he would find refuge. Some three hundred paces from the edge of the ice, the smoke and steam of the crater rose into the air, and between the two was lava so hot that in places it was difficult to walk upon it. Across this bed, that trembled as I passed over it, went de Garcia somewhat slowly, for now he was weary, and I followed him at my ease, getting my breath again.

Presently I saw that he had come to the edge of the crater, for he leaned forward and looked over, and I thought that he was about to destroy himself by plunging into it. But if such thoughts had been in his mind, he forgot them when he had seen what sort of nest this was to sleep in, for turning, he came back towards me, sword up, and we met within a dozen paces of the edge. I say met, but in truth we did not meet, for he stopped again, well out of reach of my sword. I sat down upon a block of lava and looked at him; it seemed to me that I could not feast my eyes enough upon his face. And what a face it was; that of a more than murderer about to meet his reward! Would that I could paint to show it, for no words can tell the fearfulness of those red and sunken eyes, those grinning teeth and quivering lips. I think that when the enemy of mankind has cast his last die and won his last soul, he too will look thus as he passes into doom.

'At length, de Garcia!' I said.

'Why do you not kill me and make an end?' he asked hoarsely.

'Where is the hurry, cousin? For hard on twenty years I have sought you, shall we then part so soon? Let us talk a while. Before we part to meet no more, perhaps of your courtesy you will answer me a question, for I am curious. Why have you wrought these evils on me and mine? Surely you must have some reason for what seems to be an empty and foolish wickedness.'

I spoke to him thus calmly and coldly, feeling no passion, feeling nothing. For in that strange hour I was no longer Thomas Wingfield, I was no longer human, I was a force, an instrument; I could think of my dead son without sorrow, he did not seem dead to me, for I partook of the nature that he had put on in this change of death. I could even think of de Garcia without hate, as though he also were nothing but a tool in some other hand. Moreover, I KNEW that he was mine, body and mind, and that he must answer and truly, so surely as he must die when I chose to kill him. He tried to shut his lips, but they opened of themselves and word by word the truth was dragged from his black heart as though he stood already before the judgment seat.

'I loved your mother, my cousin,' he said, speaking slowly and painfully; 'from a child I loved her only in the world, as I love her to this hour, but she hated me because I was wicked and feared me because I was cruel. Then she saw your father and loved him, and brought about his escape from the Holy Office, whither I had delivered him to be tortured and burnt, and fled with him to England. I was jealous and would have been revenged if I might, but there was no way. I led an evil life, and when nearly twenty years had gone by, chance took me to England on a trading journey. By chance I learned that your father and mother lived near Yarmouth, and I determined to see her, though at that time I had no thought of killing her. Fortune favoured me, and we met in the woodland, and I saw that she was still beautiful and knew that I loved her more than ever before. I gave her choice to fly with me or to die, and after

a while she died. But as she shrank up the wooded hillside before my sword, of a sudden she stood still and said:

"Listen before you smite, Juan. I have a death vision. As I have fled from you, so shall you fly before one of my blood in a place of fire and rock and snow, and as you drive me to the gates of heaven, so he shall drive you into the mouth of hell."

'In such a place as this, cousin,' I said.

'In such a place as this,' he whispered, glancing round.

'Continue.'

Again he strove to be silent, but again my will mastered him and he spoke.

'It was too late to spare her if I wished to escape myself, so I killed her and fled. But terror entered my heart, terror which has never left it to this hour, for always before my eyes was the vision of him of your mother's blood, before whom I should fly as she fled before me, who shall drive me into the mouth of hell.'

'That must be yonder, cousin,' I said, pointing with the sword toward the pit of the crater.

'It is yonder; I have looked.'

'But only for the body, cousin, not for the spirit.'

'Only for the body, not for the spirit,' he repeated after me.

'Continue,' I said.

'Afterwards on that same day I met you, Thomas Wingfield. Already your dead mother's prophecy had taken hold of me, and seeing one of her blood I strove to kill him lest he should kill me.'

'As he will do presently, cousin.'

'As he will do presently,' he repeated like a talking bird.

'You know what happened and how I escaped. I fled to Spain and strove to forget. But I could not. One night I saw a face in the streets of Seville that reminded me of your face. I did not think that it could be you, yet so strong was my fear that I determined to fly to the far Indies. You met me on the night of my flight when I was bidding farewell to a lady.'

'One Isabella de Siguenza, cousin. I bade farewell to her afterwards and delivered her dying words to you. Now she waits to welcome you again, she and her child.'

He shuddered and went on. 'In the ocean we met again. You rose out of the sea. I did not dare to kill you at once, I thought that you must die in the slave-hold and that none could bear witness against me and hold me guilty of your blood. You did not die, even the sea could not destroy you. But I thought that you were dead. I came to Anahuac in the train of Cortes and again we met; that time you nearly killed me. Afterwards I had my revenge and I tortured you well; I meant to murder you on the morrow, though first I would torture you, for terror can be very cruel, but you escaped me. Long years passed, I wandered hither and thither, to Spain, back to Mexico, and elsewhere, but wherever I went my fear, the ghosts of the dead, and my dreams went with me, and I was never fortunate. Only the other day I joined the company of Diaz as an adventurer. Not till we reached the City of Pines did I learn that you were the captain of the Otomie; it was said that you were long dead. You know the rest.'

'Why did you murder my son, cousin?'

'Was he not of your mother's blood, of the blood that should bring my doom upon me, and did I owe you no reward for all the terrors of these many years? Moreover he is foolish who strives to slay the father and spares the son. He is dead and I am glad that I killed him, though he haunts me now with the others.'

'And shall haunt you eternally. Now let us make an end. You have your

sword, use it if you can. It will be easier to die fighting.'

'I cannot,' he groaned; 'my doom is upon me.'

'As you will,' and I came at him, sword up.

He ran from before me, moving backwards and keeping his eyes fixed upon mine, as I have seen a rat do when a snake is about to swallow it. Now we were upon the edge of the crater, and looking over I saw an awful sight. For there, some thirty feet beneath us, the red-hot lava glowing sullenly beneath a shifting pall of smoke, rolled and spouted like a thing alive. Jets of steam flew upwards from it with a screaming sound, lines of noxious vapours, many-coloured, crept and twisted on its surface, and a hot and horrid stench poisoned the heated air. Here indeed was such a gate as I could wish for de Garcia to pass through to his own abode.

I looked, pointed with my sword, and laughed; he looked and shrieked aloud, for now all his manhood had left him, so great was his terror of what lay beyond the end. Yes, this proud and haughty Spaniard screamed and wept and prayed for mercy; he who had done so many villainies beyond forgiveness, prayed for mercy that he might find time to repent. I stood and watched him, and so dreadful was his aspect that horror struck me even through the calm of my frozen heart.

'Come, it is time to finish,' I said, and again I lifted my sword, only

to let it fall, for suddenly his brain gave way and de Garcia went mad before my eyes!

Of all that followed I will not write. With his madness courage came back to him, and he began to fight, but not with ME.

He seemed to perceive me no more, but nevertheless he fought, and desperately, thrusting at the empty air. It was terrible to see him thus doing battle with his invisible foes, and to hear his screams and curses, as inch by inch they drove him back to the edge of the crater. Here he stood a while, like one who makes a last stand against overpowering strength, thrusting and striking furiously. Twice he nearly fell, as though beneath a mortal wound, but recovering himself, fought on with Nothingness. Then, with a sharp cry, suddenly he threw his arms wide, as a man does who is pierced through the heart; his sword dropped from his hand, and he fell backwards into the pit.

I turned away my eyes, for I wished to see no more; but often I have wondered Who or What it was that dealt de Garcia his death wound.