

Law and Ordure

I have never got on with authority. In my time I have been a thief, a drunk, and a runaway slave, among many other things, and so perhaps that is not surprising.

On the other hand, in the position I was in now, as the pampered servant of a rich merchant's daughter, I felt safe enough to treat the large figure of the policeman dominating my mistress's courtyard as a potential nuisance rather than a threat.

Besides, I knew him of old. His name was Chimalli, or 'Shield', and he kept order in the merchant's parish of Pochtlan, in the Aztec island city of Mexico. As I listened to him outlining the problem he wanted help with, I recalled that he had once seen a colleague brutally murdered on my account, as well as being knocked unconscious himself. To say the least, I probably owed him a favour.

My mistress – a lady whose name, Oceloxochitl, meant 'Tiger Lily' – was listening too, frowning in a polite show of concentration. 'If I understand you,' she said when the policeman had finished, 'you're saying you're sure this man, this dealer in night soil, is a thief, but you don't know what he's stolen?'

The large former warrior gave an embarrassed cough. He wriggled slightly to shift the knot of his cloak back onto his right shoulder, where it belonged, and the hair piled on top of his head bobbed with the movement. 'I know what it sounds like, Lily,' he said apologetically. 'But I've known Azcatl from when he was pilfering maize cobs as a kid, and I've watched his career go downhill from there. One of the nobles complained he'd seen him wearing a cotton mantle. That's illegal for a commoner, as you know, but what troubled me was that he'd never be able to afford something like that, not in a bundle of years. Either he stole it, or he stole the money to pay for it.'

'Maybe business has been brisk,' I suggested.

'Nobody ever made that sort of money selling manure.'

Lily's objection was more realistic. 'He's dealing out of a boat in the marketplace, though, you said. Isn't it a matter for the market police?'

'Not unless he's giving short measure. They probably aren't that keen to check!' Shield looked at me then. 'Anyway, I'm stumped. But Yaotl's good at thinking this sort of thing out, so I wondered...'

'Oh, of course,' said Lily quickly, before I could object.

Mexico boasted the World's biggest market. Every day, up to sixty thousand people gathered in the northern district of Tlatelolco to buy and sell everything from gold and precious feathers to human dung to spread on the fields.

Shield's suspect, Azcatl – the name meant 'Ant' – had a regular pitch alongside his competitors, who sold their wares from boats moored in the canal that bounded one side of the vast marketplace.

'You know how this business works.' Shield's voice had a nasal twang as we inspected the boats, the result of breathing only through his mouth. 'They collect the stuff from the public privies and bring it here. They usually sell it by the canoe load. The farmer agrees a price and the seller paddles it around to where it's needed.' This would not be a difficult operation in a city that had more canals than streets and was surrounded by fields made from sludge dredged from the lake.

I looked along the line of boats. They were all much alike, canoes made by the laborious process of hollowing out tree trunks, and none was in the best of condition. Ant's was a little smarter than most: although it was smeared in muck and partly covered with rags, it appeared to have had a coat of paint once upon a time.

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Its owner was a short, thin man with greying hair shaved in a commoner's tonsure. His breechcloth had marks on it whose origin did not bear thinking about. He greeted us with a cheerful grin while Shield told him who I was.

'Well, I've told him everything, I think,' he said to me, 'but I can tell it all to you as well, if you like. I'm here all day regardless, after all.'

'Business not brisk, then?' Shield said sourly.

'You know how it is.'

'You should try dropping your prices. Five large capes for a boatload of sewage is daft.'

'But if I did that,' Ant said in a reasonable tone, 'it'd take forever to pay my uncle back for this boat.'

'I was going to ask about that,' I said. 'It's your only expense, I suppose? I mean, it's not as if your stock-in-trade costs you anything?'

Shield's supposed thief sighed. 'True enough. I deal in what people are only too happy to get rid of! But the boat had to come from somewhere, and a lot of work goes into building them.' He patted the solid wooden hull affectionately. 'My uncle – he lives in Citlaltepec, across the water – he let me have the boat so I could have an honest job, and said I was to pay him back when I could.' The sigh became something like a sob. 'It was for my mother's sake, you see, she couldn't bear to see her only son throwing his life away as a petty thief...'

'Don't give me that,' Shield growled. 'You've got three brothers and your mother's the worst of the lot of you.'

'Have you met this uncle?' I asked him.

'You've got to be joking. Citlaltepec's at the northern end of the lake. It would take days to get there and I've no right to ask questions there anyway.'

'I see him when I can, though,' Ant put in eagerly. 'It's the least I can do, and I really mean to pay him back, even though all the time I spend on the lake visiting him means I have less time to spend on my business here. And,' he simpered, 'I try to look after his boat as best I can, considering what I have to use it for.'

When we were finished in the marketplace, I went for a walk.

Ant said nothing else that was of any use, and Shield made it clear that in his opinion questioning the rest of his family would be a waste of time. 'He comes from a long line of layabouts. The parish took their plot of land away from them a generation or two back, for neglecting it. Whatever his game is, he and his brothers are probably in it together, and you won't get a straight answer out of any of them.'

I wandered along narrow paths between canals and the whitewashed walls, until I found myself at the city's northern edge, looking out between two willow trees towards the expanse of water stretching away towards the far shore.

The afternoon was merging into evening, but still the lake was crowded with boats. Most of our trade with the outside world was done by canoes plying the waters between Mexico and the countless towns and villages that ringed the surrounding lake. It always heartened me to see them, their constant orderly activity signalling that all was well with my city.

I raised my eyes from the boats towards the distant shore, which I could barely see from where I stood. I thought about the town of Citlaltepec and Ant's uncle who apparently lived there. No doubt that was what had drawn me to this spot, I realised, and then I had an idea. I knew what Ant had stolen, and how to trap him. It would be easy, just so long as I could persuade my mistress to buy a boatload of manure.

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‘Well, there he is,’ said Shield, a few days later. ‘I have to hand it to you, Yaotl, you were quite right. He disappeared for two days and now here he is, in his usual place, as if he’d been there all along. How did you know he’d be back?’

‘His brother told Lily he’d be here today,’ I said.

‘I don’t know he was his brother,’ Lily cautioned. ‘Though he may have been one of them, from the description. What now, Yaotl?’

‘Well, you made a deal,’ I suggested. ‘You may as well go ahead and close it.’

Ant’s eyes narrowed as we approached. He had been expecting Lily to come to complete the purchase she had previously agreed with his brother, but Shield and I were an unwelcome surprise. However, by the time the woman hailed him, it was too late for him to run.

‘I understand you will sell me that boatload of manure for five large cloaks?’

For a moment he looked undecided; then greed got the better of him. ‘Er, yes, that’s right...’

‘And the boat’s included?’

Ant’s look of dismay was enough for our policeman. A heavy hand descended onto the thief’s arm. Shield’s voice was rich with satisfaction. ‘I’ve waited a long time for this! I’m arresting you, Azcatl, for the theft of this boat... and an unknown number of others!’

‘Such a simple scheme,’ I explained later, when Lily and I talked it over in her courtyard. ‘He steals the boats from villagers on the mainland, as far away from Mexico as possible, and covers his absences by pretending he was seeing this uncle – who probably doesn’t exist. The villagers complain to their own headmen, I suppose, but it doesn’t occur to them to come to the city. Where would they begin looking anyway? In the meantime Ant has his brothers putting the word out that they’ve a canoe going very cheap to anyone prepared to buy a load of manure at the same time, and no questions asked. Even though they need cleaning the boats are still a bargain at that price – though it’s high enough to deter anyone who genuinely only wants some muck to spread on his fields. And because nobody wants to look at the boat too closely, and it never occurred to anyone that the vessel he was using for his deliveries was never the same one twice, Ant could sell his stolen goods from under the noses of the market police!’

Lily had heard this before, of course, but she was used to the pleasure I could take at my own cleverness. She listened to me silently before remarking, with a smile: ‘It’s a pity it hasn’t done us a bit of good.’

‘What do you mean? Shield must be pretty happy, and it never hurts to have the police owe you a favour.’

‘That’s right, except he isn’t happy. In fact he’s livid.’ Lily’s smile broadened as mine faded and the laughter lines around her mouth and eyes deepened. ‘You see, Ant won’t admit he stole the boats. He claims the villagers gave them to him.’

‘What? But that’s...’

‘Ridiculous? Of course, but since nobody knows which of the scores of settlements out there he took these canoes from, and since their owners haven’t come forward, poor old Shield can’t prove Ant’s lying. The judges won’t convict him without some proof, and all the evidence Shield can offer them is a boatload of filth!’

My mistress’s last words were all but lost in an unladylike peel of laughter. There was nothing I could do but join in.