

CHAPTER II

OF THE PARENTAGE OF THOMAS WINGFIELD

I, Thomas Wingfield, was born here at Ditchingham, and in this very room where I write to-day. The house of my birth was built or added to early in the reign of the seventh Henry, but long before his time some kind of tenement stood here, which was lived in by the keeper of the vineyards, and known as Gardener's Lodge. Whether it chanced that the climate was more kindly in old times, or the skill of those who tended the fields was greater, I do not know, but this at the least is true, that the hillside beneath which the house nestles, and which once was the bank of an arm of the sea or of a great broad, was a vineyard in Earl Bigod's days. Long since it has ceased to grow grapes, though the name of the 'Earl's Vineyard' still clings to all that slope of land which lies between this house and a certain health-giving spring that bubbles from the bank the half of a mile away, in the waters of which sick folks come to bathe even from Norwich and Lowestoft. But sheltered as it is from the east winds, to this hour the place has the advantage that gardens planted here are earlier by fourteen days than any others in the country side, and that a man may sit in them coatless in the bitter month of May, when on the top of the hill, not two hundred paces hence, he must shiver in a jacket of otterskins.

The Lodge, for so it has always been named, in its beginnings having

been but a farmhouse, faces to the south-west, and is built so low that it might well be thought that the damp from the river Waveney, which runs through the marshes close by, would rise in it. But this is not so, for though in autumn the roke, as here in Norfolk we name ground fog, hangs about the house at nightfall, and in seasons of great flood the water has been known to pour into the stables at the back of it, yet being built on sand and gravel there is no healthier habitation in the parish. For the rest the building is of stud-work and red brick, quaint and mellow looking, with many corners and gables that in summer are half hidden in roses and other creeping plants, and with its outlook on the marshes and the common where the lights vary continually with the seasons and even with the hours of the day, on the red roofs of Bungay town, and on the wooded bank that stretches round the Earsham lands; though there are many larger, to my mind there is none pleasanter in these parts. Here in this house I was born, and here doubtless I shall die, and having spoken of it at some length, as we are wont to do of spots which long custom has endeared to us, I will go on to tell of my parentage.

First, then, I would set out with a certain pride--for who of us does not love an ancient name when we happen to be born to it?--that I am sprung from the family of the Wingfields of Wingfield Castle in Suffolk, that lies some two hours on horseback from this place. Long ago the heiress of the Wingfields married a De la Pole, a family famous in our history, the last of whom, Edmund, Earl of Suffolk, lost his head for treason when I was young, and the castle passed to the De la Poles

with her. But some offshoots of the old Wingfield stock lingered in the neighbourhood, perchance there was a bar sinister on their coat of arms, I know not and do not care to know; at the least my fathers and I are of this blood. My grandfather was a shrewd man, more of a yeoman than a squire, though his birth was gentle. He it was who bought this place with the lands round it, and gathered up some fortune, mostly by careful marrying and living, for though he had but one son he was twice married, and also by trading in cattle.

Now my grandfather was godly-minded even to superstition, and strange as it may seem, having only one son, nothing would satisfy him but that the boy should be made a priest. But my father had little leaning towards the priesthood and life in a monastery, though at all seasons my grandfather strove to reason it into him, sometimes with words and examples, at others with his thick cudgel of holly, that still hangs over the ingle in the smaller sitting-room. The end of it was that the lad was sent to the priory here in Bungay, where his conduct was of such nature that within a year the prior prayed his parents to take him back and set him in some way of secular life. Not only, so said the prior, did my father cause scandal by his actions, breaking out of the priory at night and visiting drinking houses and other places; but, such was the sum of his wickedness, he did not scruple to question and make mock of the very doctrines of the Church, alleging even that there was nothing sacred in the image of the Virgin Mary which stood in the chancel, and shut its eyes in prayer before all the congregation when the priest elevated the Host. 'Therefore,' said the prior, 'I pray you

take back your son, and let him find some other road to the stake than that which runs through the gates of Bungay Priory.'

Now at this story my grandfather was so enraged that he almost fell into a fit; then recovering, he bethought him of his cudgel of holly, and would have used it. But my father, who was now nineteen years of age and very stout and strong, twisted it from his hand and flung it full fifty yards, saying that no man should touch him more were he a hundred times his father. Then he walked away, leaving the prior and my grandfather staring at each other.

Now to shorten a long tale, the end of the matter was this. It was believed both by my grandfather and the prior that the true cause of my father's contumacy was a passion which he had conceived for a girl of humble birth, a miller's fair daughter who dwelt at Waingford Mills. Perhaps there was truth in this belief, or perhaps there was none. What does it matter, seeing that the maid married a butcher at Beccles and died years since at the good age of ninety and five? But true or false, my grandfather believed the tale, and knowing well that absence is the surest cure for love, he entered into a plan with the prior that my father should be sent to a monastery at Seville in Spain, of which the prior's brother was abbot, and there learn to forget the miller's daughter and all other worldly things.

When this was told to my father he fell into it readily enough, being a young man of spirit and having a great desire to see the world,

otherwise, however, than through the gratings of a monastery window. So the end of it was that he went to foreign parts in the care of a party of Spanish monks, who had journeyed here to Norfolk on a pilgrimage to the shrine of our Lady of Walsingham.

It is said that my grandfather wept when he parted with his son, feeling that he should see him no more; yet so strong was his religion, or rather his superstition, that he did not hesitate to send him away, though for no reason save that he would mortify his own love and flesh, offering his son for a sacrifice as Abraham would have offered Isaac. But though my father appeared to consent to the sacrifice, as did Isaac, yet his mind was not altogether set on altars and faggots; in short, as he himself told me in after years, his plans were already laid.

Thus it chanced that when he had sailed from Yarmouth a year and six months, there came a letter from the abbot of the monastery in Seville to his brother, the prior of St. Mary's at Bungay, saying that my father had fled from the monastery, leaving no trace of where he had gone. My grandfather was grieved at this tidings, but said little about it.

Two more years passed away, and there came other news, namely, that my father had been captured, that he had been handed over to the power of the Holy Office, as the accursed Inquisition was then named, and tortured to death at Seville. When my grandfather heard this he wept, and bemoaned himself that his folly in forcing one into the Church who had no liking for that path, had brought about the shameful end of his

only son. After that date also he broke his friendship with the prior of St. Mary's at Bungay, and ceased his offerings to the priory. Still he did not believe that my father was dead in truth, since on the last day of his own life, that ended two years later, he spoke of him as a living man, and left messages to him as to the management of the lands which now were his.

And in the end it became clear that this belief was not ill-founded, for one day three years after the old man's death, there landed at the port of Yarmouth none other than my father, who had been absent some eight years in all. Nor did he come alone, for with him he brought a wife, a young and very lovely lady, who afterwards was my mother. She was a Spaniard of noble family, having been born at Seville, and her maiden name was Donna Luisa de Garcia.

Now of all that befell my father during his eight years of wandering I cannot speak certainly, for he was very silent on the matter, though I may have need to touch on some of his adventures. But I know it is true that he fell under the power of the Holy Office, for once when as a little lad I bathed with him in the Elbow Pool, where the river Waveney bends some three hundred yards above this house, I saw that his breast and arms were scored with long white scars, and asked him what had caused them. I remember well how his face changed as I spoke, from kindness to the hue of blackest hate, and how he answered speaking to himself rather than to me.

'Devils,' he said, 'devils set on their work by the chief of all devils that live upon the earth and shall reign in hell. Hark you, my son Thomas, there is a country called Spain where your mother was born, and there these devils abide who torture men and women, aye, and burn them living in the name of Christ. I was betrayed into their hands by him whom I name the chief of the devils, though he is younger than I am by three years, and their pincers and hot irons left these marks upon me. Aye, and they would have burnt me alive also, only I escaped, thanks to your mother--but such tales are not for a little lad's hearing; and see you never speak of them, Thomas, for the Holy Office has a long arm. You are half a Spaniard, Thomas, your skin and eyes tell their own tale, but whatever skin and eyes may tell, let your heart give them the lie. Keep your heart English, Thomas; let no foreign devilments enter there. Hate all Spaniards except your mother, and be watchful lest her blood should master mine within you.'

I was a child then, and scarcely understood his words or what he meant by them. Afterwards I learned to understand them but too well. As for my father's counsel, that I should conquer my Spanish blood, would that I could always have followed it, for I know that from this blood springs the most of such evil as is in me. Hence come my fixedness of purpose or rather obstinacy, and my powers of unchristian hatred that are not small towards those who have wronged me. Well, I have done what I might to overcome these and other faults, but strive as we may, that which is bred in the bone will out in the flesh, as I have seen in many signal

instances.

There were three of us children, Geoffrey my elder brother, myself, and my sister Mary, who was one year my junior, the sweetest child and the most beautiful that I have ever known. We were very happy children, and our beauty was the pride of our father and mother, and the envy of other parents. I was the darkest of the three, dark indeed to swarthy, but in Mary the Spanish blood showed only in her rich eyes of velvet hue, and in the glow upon her cheek that was like the blush on a ripe fruit. My mother used to call me her little Spaniard, because of my swarthy, that is when my father was not near, for such names angered him. She never learned to speak English very well, but he would suffer her to talk in no other tongue before him. Still, when he was not there she spoke in Spanish, of which language, however, I alone of the family became a master--and that more because of certain volumes of old Spanish romances which she had by her, than for any other reason. From my earliest childhood I was fond of such tales, and it was by bribing me with the promise that I should read them that she persuaded me to learn Spanish. For my mother's heart still yearned towards her old sunny home, and often she would talk of it with us children, more especially in the winter season, which she hated as I do. Once I asked her if she wished to go back to Spain. She shivered and answered no, for there dwelt one who was her enemy and would kill her; also her heart was with us children and our father. I wondered if this man who sought to kill my mother was the same as he of whom my father had spoken as 'the chief of the devils,' but I only answered that no man could wish to kill one so

good and beautiful.

'Ah! my boy,' she said, 'it is just because I am, or rather have been, beautiful that he hates me. Others would have wedded me besides your dear father, Thomas.' And her face grew troubled as though with fear.

Now when I was eighteen and a half years old, on a certain evening in the month of May it happened that a friend of my father's, Squire Bozard, late of the Hall in this parish, called at the Lodge on his road from Yarmouth, and in the course of his talk let it fall that a Spanish ship was at anchor in the Roads, laden with merchandise. My father pricked up his ears at this, and asked who her captain might be. Squire Bozard answered that he did not know his name, but that he had seen him in the market-place, a tall and stately man, richly dressed, with a handsome face and a scar upon his temple.

At this news my mother turned pale beneath her olive skin, and muttered in Spanish:

'Holy Mother! grant that it be not he.'

My father also looked frightened, and questioned the squire closely as to the man's appearance, but without learning anything more. Then he bade him adieu with little ceremony, and taking horse rode away for Yarmouth.

That night my mother never slept, but sat all through it in her nursing chair, brooding over I know not what. As I left her when I went to my bed, so I found her when I came from it at dawn. I can remember well pushing the door ajar to see her face glimmering white in the twilight of the May morning, as she sat, her large eyes fixed upon the lattice.

'You have risen early, mother,' I said.

'I have never lain down, Thomas,' she answered.

'Why not? What do you fear?'

'I fear the past and the future, my son. Would that your father were back.'

About ten o'clock of that morning, as I was making ready to walk into Bungay to the house of that physician under whom I was learning the art of healing, my father rode up. My mother, who was watching at the lattice, ran out to meet him.

Springing from his horse he embraced her, saying, 'Be of good cheer, sweet, it cannot be he. This man has another name.'

'But did you see him?' she asked.

'No, he was out at his ship for the night, and I hurried home to tell you, knowing your fears.'

'It were surer if you had seen him, husband. He may well have taken another name.'

'I never thought of that, sweet,' my father answered; 'but have no fear. Should it be he, and should he dare to set foot in the parish of Ditchingham, there are those who will know how to deal with him. But I am sure that it is not he.'

'Thanks be to Jesu then!' she said, and they began talking in a low voice.

Now, seeing that I was not wanted, I took my cudgel and started down the bridle-path towards the common footbridge, when suddenly my mother called me back.

'Kiss me before you go, Thomas,' she said. 'You must wonder what all this may mean. One day your father will tell you. It has to do with a shadow which has hung over my life for many years, but that is, I trust, gone for ever.'

'If it be a man who flings it, he had best keep out of reach of this,' I said, laughing, and shaking my thick stick.

'It is a man,' she answered, 'but one to be dealt with otherwise than by blows, Thomas, should you ever chance to meet him.'

'May be, mother, but might is the best argument at the last, for the most cunning have a life to lose.'

'You are too ready to use your strength, son,' she said, smiling and kissing me. 'Remember the old Spanish proverb: "He strikes hardest who strikes last."'

'And remember the other proverb, mother: "Strike before thou art stricken," I answered, and went.

When I had gone some ten paces something prompted me to look back, I know not what. My mother was standing by the open door, her stately shape framed as it were in the flowers of a white creeping shrub that grew upon the wall of the old house. As was her custom, she wore a mantilla of white lace upon her head, the ends of which were wound beneath her chin, and the arrangement of it was such that at this distance for one moment it put me in mind of the wrappings which are placed about the dead. I started at the thought and looked at her face. She was watching me with sad and earnest eyes that seemed to be filled with the spirit of farewell.

I never saw her again till she was dead.