

CHAPTER IV

THOMAS TELLS HIS LOVE

Having made the Spaniard as fast as I could, his arms being bound to the tree behind him, and taking his sword with me, I began to run hard after Lily and caught her not too soon, for in one more minute she would have turned along the road that runs to the watering and over the bridge by the Park Hill path to the Hall.

Hearing my footsteps, she faced about to greet me, or rather as though to see who it was that followed her. There she stood in the evening light, a bough of hawthorn bloom in her hand, and my heart beat yet more wildly at the sight of her. Never had she seemed fairer than as she stood thus in her white robe, a look of amaze upon her face and in her grey eyes, that was half real half feigned, and with the sunlight shifting on her auburn hair that showed beneath her little bonnet. Lily was no round-checked country maid with few beauties save those of health and youth, but a tall and shapely lady who had ripened early to her full grace and sweetness, and so it came about that though we were almost of an age, yet in her presence I felt always as though I were the younger. Thus in my love for her was mingled some touch of reverence.

'Oh! it is you, Thomas,' she said, blushing as she spoke. 'I thought you were not--I mean that I am going home as it grows late. But say, why do

you run so fast, and what has happened to you, Thomas, that your arm is bloody and you carry a sword in your hand?'

'I have no breath to speak yet,' I answered. 'Come back to the hawthorns and I will tell you.'

'No, I must be wending homewards. I have been among the trees for more than an hour, and there is little bloom upon them.'

'I could not come before, Lily. I was kept, and in a strange manner. Also I saw bloom as I ran.'

'Indeed, I never thought that you would come, Thomas,' she answered, looking down, 'who have other things to do than to go out maying like a girl. But I wish to hear your story, if it is short, and I will walk a little way with you.'

So we turned and walked side by side towards the great pollard oaks, and by the time that we reached them, I had told her the tale of the Spaniard, and how he strove to kill me, and how I had beaten him with my staff. Now Lily listened eagerly enough, and sighed with fear when she learned how close I had been to death.

'But you are wounded, Thomas,' she broke in; 'see, the blood runs fast from your arm. Is the thrust deep?'

'I have not looked to see. I have had no time to look.'

'Take off your coat, Thomas, that I may dress the wound. Nay, I will have it so.'

So I drew off the garment, not without pain, and rolled up the shirt beneath, and there was the hurt, a clean thrust through the fleshy part of the lower arm. Lily washed it with water from the brook, and bound it with her kerchief, murmuring words of pity all the while. To say truth, I would have suffered a worse harm gladly, if only I could find her to tend it. Indeed, her gentle care broke down the fence of my doubts and gave me a courage that otherwise might have failed me in her presence. At first, indeed, I could find no words, but as she bound my wound, I bent down and kissed her ministering hand. She flushed red as the evening sky, the flood of crimson losing itself at last beneath her auburn hair, but it burned deepest upon the white hand which I had kissed.

'Why did you do that, Thomas?' she said, in a low voice.

Then I spoke. 'I did it because I love you, Lily, and do not know how to begin the telling of my love. I love you, dear, and have always loved as I always shall love you.'

'Are you so sure of that, Thomas?' she said, again.

'There is nothing else in the world of which I am so sure, Lily. What I wish to be as sure of is that you love me as I love you.'

For a moment she stood quiet, her head sunk almost to her breast, then she lifted it and her eyes shone as I had never seen them shine before.

'Can you doubt it, Thomas?' she said.

And now I took her in my arms and kissed her on the lips, and the memory of that kiss has gone with me through my long life, and is with me yet, when, old and withered, I stand upon the borders of the grave. It was the greatest joy that has been given to me in all my days. Too soon, alas! it was done, that first pure kiss of youthful love--and I spoke again somewhat aimlessly.

'It seems then that you do love me who love you so well.'

'If you doubted it before, can you doubt it NOW?' she answered very softly. 'But listen, Thomas. It is well that we should love each other, for we were born to it, and have no help in the matter, even if we wished to find it. Still, though love be sweet and holy, it is not all, for there is duty to be thought of, and what will my father say to this, Thomas?'

'I do not know, Lily, and yet I can guess. I am sure, sweet, that he wishes you to take my brother Geoffrey, and leave me on one side.'

'Then his wishes are not mine, Thomas. Also, though duty be strong, it is not strong enough to force a woman to a marriage for which she has no liking. Yet it may prove strong enough to keep a woman from a marriage for which her heart pleads--perhaps, also, it should have been strong enough to hold me back from the telling of my love.'

'No, Lily, the love itself is much, and though it should bring no fruit, still it is something to have won it for ever and a day.'

'You are very young to talk thus, Thomas. I am also young, I know, but we women ripen quicker. Perhaps all this is but a boy's fancy, to pass with boyhood.'

'It will never pass, Lily. They say that our first loves are the longest, and that which is sown in youth will flourish in our age. Listen, Lily; I have my place to make in the world, and it may take a time in the making, and I ask one promise of you, though perhaps it is a selfish thing to seek. I ask of you that you will be faithful to me, and come fair weather or foul, will wed no other man till you know me dead.'

'It is something to promise, Thomas, for with time come changes. Still I am so sure of myself that I promise--nay I swear it. Of you I cannot be sure, but things are so with us women that we must risk all upon a throw, and if we lose, good-bye to happiness.'

Then we talked on, and I cannot remember what we said, though these words that I have written down remain in my mind, partly because of their own weight, and in part because of all that came about in the after years.

And at last I knew that I must go, though we were sad enough at parting. So I took her in my arms and kissed her so closely that some blood from my wound ran down her white attire. But as we embraced I chanced to look up, and saw a sight that frightened me enough. For there, not five paces from us, stood Squire Bozard, Lily's father, watching all, and his face wore no smile.

He had been riding by a bridle-path to the watering ford, and seeing a couple trespassing beneath the oaks, dismounted from his horse to hunt them away. Not till he was quite near did he know whom he came to hunt, and then he stood still in astonishment. Lily and I drew slowly apart and looked at him. He was a short stout man, with a red face and stern grey eyes, that seemed to be starting from his head with anger. For a while he could not speak, but when he began at length the words came fast enough. All that he said I forget, but the upshot of it was that he desired to know what my business was with his daughter. I waited till he was out of breath, then answered him that Lily and I loved each other well, and were plighting our troth.

'Is this so, daughter?' he asked.

'It is so, my father,' she answered boldly.

Then he broke out swearing. 'You light minx,' he said, 'you shall be whipped and kept cool on bread and water in your chamber. And for you, my half-bred Spanish cockerel, know once and for all that this maid is for your betters. How dare you come wooing my daughter, you empty pill-box, who have not two silver pennies to rattle in your pouch! Go win fortune and a name before you dare to look up to such as she.'

'That is my desire, and I will do it, sir,' I answered.

'So, you apothecary's drudge, you will win name and place, will you! Well, long before that deed is done the maid shall be safely wedded to one who has them and who is not unknown to you. Daughter, say now that you have finished with him.'

'I cannot say that, father,' she replied, plucking at her robe. 'If it is not your will that I should marry Thomas here, my duty is plain and I may not wed him. But I am my own and no duty can make me marry where I will not. While Thomas lives I am sworn to him and to no other man.'

'At the least you have courage, hussey,' said her father. 'But listen now, either you will marry where and when I wish, or tramp it for your bread. Ungrateful girl, did I breed you to flaunt me to my face? Now for you, pill-box. I will teach you to come kissing honest men's daughters without their leave,' and with a curse he rushed at me, stick aloft, to

thrash me.

Then for the second time that day my quick blood boiled in me, and snatching up the Spaniard's sword that lay upon the grass beside me, I held it at the point, for the game was changed, and I who had fought with cudgel against sword, must now fight with sword against cudgel. And had it not been that Lily with a quick cry of fear struck my arm from beneath, causing the point of the sword to pass over his shoulder, I believe truly that I should then and there have pierced her father through, and ended my days early with a noose about my neck.

'Are you mad?' she cried. 'And do you think to win me by slaying my father? Throw down that sword, Thomas.'

'As for winning you, it seems that there is small chance of it;' I answered hotly, 'but I tell you this, not for the sake of all the maids upon the earth will I stand to be beaten with a stick like a scullion.'

'And there I do not blame you, lad,' said her father, more kindly. 'I see that you also have courage which may serve you in good stead, and it was unworthy of me to call you "pill-box" in my anger. Still, as I have said, the girl is not for you, so be gone and forget her as best you may, and if you value your life, never let me find you two kissing again. And know that to-morrow I will have a word with your father on this matter.'

'I will go since I must go,' I answered, 'but, sir, I still hope to live to call your daughter wife. Lily, farewell till these storms are overpast.'

'Farewell, Thomas,' she said weeping. 'Forget me not and I will never forget my oath to you.'

Then taking Lily by the arm her father led her away.

I also went away--sad, but not altogether ill-pleased. For now I knew that if I had won the father's anger, I had also won the daughter's unalterable love, and love lasts longer than wrath, and here or hereafter will win its way at length. When I had gone a little distance I remembered the Spaniard, who had been clean forgotten by me in all this love and war, and I turned to seek him and drag him to the stocks, the which I should have done with joy, and been glad to find some one on whom to wreak my wrongs. But when I came to the spot where I had left him, I found that fate had befriended him by the hand of a fool, for there was no Spaniard but only the village idiot, Billy Minns by name, who stood staring first at the tree to which the foreigner had been made fast, and then at a piece of silver in his hand.

'Where is the man who was tied here, Billy?' I asked.

'I know not, Master Thomas,' he answered in his Norfolk talk which I will not set down. 'Half-way to wheresoever he was going I should say,

measured by the pace at which he left when once I had set him upon his horse.'

'You set him on his horse, fool? How long was that ago?'

'How long! Well, it might be one hour, and it might be two. I'm no reckoner of time, that keeps its own score like an innkeeper, without my help. Lawks! how he did gallop off, working those long spurs he wore right into the ribs of the horse. And little wonder, poor man, and he daft, not being able to speak, but only to bleat sheeplike, and fallen upon by robbers on the king's roads, and in broad daylight. But Billy cut him loose and caught his horse and set him on it, and got this piece for his good charity. Lawks! but he was glad to be gone. How he did gallop!'

'Now you are a bigger fool even than I thought you, Billy Minns,' I said in anger. 'That man would have murdered me, I overcame him and made him fast, and you have let him go.'

'He would have murdered you, Master, and you made him fast! Then why did you not stop to keep him till I came along, and we would have haled him to the stocks? That would have been sport and all. You call me fool--but if you found a man covered with blood and hurts tied to a tree, and he daft and not able to speak, had you not cut him loose? Well, he's gone, and this alone is left of him,' and he spun the piece into the air.

Now, seeing that there was reason in Billy's talk, for the fault was mine, I turned away without more words, not straight homewards, for I wished to think alone awhile on all that had come about between me and Lily and her father, but down the way which runs across the lane to the crest of the Vineyard Hills. These hills are clothed with underwood, in which large oaks grow to within some two hundred yards of this house where I write, and this underwood is pierced by paths that my mother laid out, for she loved to walk here. One of these paths runs along the bottom of the hill by the edge of the pleasant river Waveney, and the other a hundred feet or more above and near the crest of the slope, or to speak more plainly, there is but one path shaped like the letter O, placed thus [symbol of O laying on its side omitted], the curved ends of the letter marking how the path turns upon the hill-side.

Now I struck the path at the end that is furthest from this house, and followed that half of it which runs down by the river bank, having the water on one side of it and the brushwood upon the other. Along this lower path I wandered, my eyes fixed upon the ground, thinking deeply as I went, now of the joy of Lily's love, and now of the sorrow of our parting and of her father's wrath. As I went, thus wrapped in meditation, I saw something white lying upon the grass, and pushed it aside with the point of the Spaniard's sword, not heeding it. Still, its shape and fashioning remained in my mind, and when I had left it some three hundred paces behind me, and was drawing near to the house, the sight of it came back to me as it lay soft and white upon the grass, and I knew that it was familiar to my eyes. From the thing, whatever it

might be, my mind passed to the Spaniard's sword with which I had tossed it aside, and from the sword to the man himself. What had been his business in this parish?--an ill one surely--and why had he looked as though he feared me and fallen upon me when he learned my name?

I stood still, looking downward, and my eyes fell upon footprints stamped in the wet sand of the path. One of them was my mother's. I could have sworn to it among a thousand, for no other woman in these parts had so delicate a foot. Close to it, as though following after, was another that at first I thought must also have been made by a woman, it was so narrow. But presently I saw that this could scarcely be, because of its length, and moreover, that the boot which left it was like none that I knew, being cut very high at the instep and very pointed at the toe. Then, of a sudden, it came upon me that the Spanish stranger wore such boots, for I had noted them while I talked with him, and that his feet were following those of my mother, for they had trodden on her track, and in some places, his alone had stamped their impress on the sand blotting out her footprints. Then, too, I knew what the white rag was that I had thrown aside. It was my mother's mantilla which I knew, and yet did not know, because I always saw it set daintily upon her head. In a moment it had come home to me, and with the knowledge a keen and sickening dread. Why had this man followed my mother, and why did her mantilla lie thus upon the ground?

I turned and sped like a deer back to where I had seen the lace. All the way the footprints went before me. Now I was there. Yes, the wrapping

was hers, and it had been rent as though by a rude hand; but where was she?

With a beating heart once more I bent to read the writing of the footsteps. Here they were mixed one with another, as though the two had stood close together, moving now this way and now that in struggle. I looked up the path, but there were none. Then I cast round about like a beagle, first along the river side, then up the bank. Here they were again, and made by feet that flew and feet that followed. Up the bank they went fifty yards and more, now lost where the turf was sound, now seen in sand or loam, till they led to the bole of a big oak, and were once more mixed together, for here the pursuer had come up with the pursued.

Despairingly as one who dreams, for now I guessed all and grew mad with fear, I looked this way and that, till at length I found more footsteps, those of the Spaniard. These were deep marked, as of a man who carried some heavy burden. I followed them; first they went down the hill towards the river, then turned aside to a spot where the brushwood was thick. In the deepest of the clump the boughs, now bursting into leaf, were bent downwards as though to hide something beneath. I wrenched them aside, and there, gleaming whitely in the gathering twilight was the dead face of my mother.