

## CHAPTER V

### THOMAS SWEARS AN OATH

For a while I stood amazed with horror, staring down at the dead face of my beloved mother. Then I stooped to lift her and saw that she had been stabbed, and through the breast, stabbed with the sword which I carried in my hand.

Now I understood. This was the work of that Spanish stranger whom I had met as he hurried from the place of murder, who, because of the wickedness of his heart or for some secret reason, had striven to slay me also when he learned that I was my mother's son. And I had held this devil in my power, and that I might meet my May, I had suffered him to escape my vengeance, who, had I known the truth, would have dealt with him as the priests of Anahuac deal with the victims of their gods. I understood and shed tears of pity, rage, and shame. Then I turned and fled homewards like one mad.

At the doorway I met my father and my brother Geoffrey riding up from Bungay market, and there was that written on my face which caused them to ask as with one voice:

'What evil thing has happened?'

Thrice I looked at my father before I could speak, for I feared lest the blow should kill him. But speak I must at last, though I chose that it should be to Geoffrey my brother. 'Our mother lies murdered yonder on the Vineyard Hill. A Spanish man has done the deed, Juan de Garcia by name.' When my father heard these words his face became livid as though with pain of the heart, his jaw fell and a low moan issued from his open mouth. Presently he rested his hand upon the pommel of the saddle, and lifting his ghastly face he said:

'Where is this Spaniard? Have you killed him?'

'No, father. He chanced upon me in Grubswell, and when he learned my name he would have murdered me. But I played quarter staff with him and beat him to a pulp, taking his sword.'

'Ay, and then?'

'And then I let him go, knowing nothing of the deed he had already wrought upon our mother. Afterwards I will tell you all.'

'You let him go, son! You let Juan de Garcia go! Then, Thomas, may the curse of God rest upon you till you find him and finish that which you began to-day.'

'Spare to curse me, father, who am accursed by my own conscience. Turn your horses rather and ride for Yarmouth, for there his ship lies and

thither he has gone with two hours' start. Perhaps you may still trap him before he sets sail.'

Without another word my father and brother wheeled their horses round and departed at full gallop into the gloom of the gathering night.

They rode so fiercely that, their horses being good, they came to the gates of Yarmouth in little more than an hour and a half, and that is fast riding. But the bird was flown. They tracked him to the quay and found that he had shipped a while before in a boat which was in waiting for him, and passed to his vessel that lay in the Roads at anchor but with the most of her canvas set. Instantly she sailed, and now was lost in the night. Then my father caused notice to be given that he would pay reward of two hundred pieces in gold to any ship that should capture the Spaniard, and two started on the quest, but they did not find her that before morning was far on her way across the sea.

So soon as they had galloped away I called together the grooms and other serving men and told them what had chanced. Then we went with lanterns, for by now it was dark, and came to the thick brushwood where lay the body of my mother. I drew near the first, for the men were afraid, and so indeed was I, though why I should fear her lying dead who living had loved me tenderly, I do not know. Yet I know this, that when I came to the spot and saw two eyes glowering at me and heard the crash of bushes as something broke them, I could almost have fallen with fear, although I knew well that it was but a fox or wandering hound haunting the place

of death.

Still I went on, calling the others to follow, and the end of it was that we laid my mother's body upon a door which had been lifted from its hinges, and bore her home for the last time. And to me that path is still a haunted place. It is seventy years and more since my mother died by the hand of Juan de Garcia her cousin, yet old as I am and hardened to such sad scenes, I do not love to walk that path alone at night.

Doubtless it was fancy which plays us strange tricks, still but a year ago, having gone to set a springe for a woodcock, I chanced to pass by yonder big oak upon a November eve, and I could have sworn that I saw it all again. I saw myself a lad, my wounded arm still bound with Lily's kerchief, climbing slowly down the hill-side, while behind me, groaning beneath their burden, were the forms of the four serving men. I heard the murmur of the river and the wind that seventy years ago whispered in the reeds. I saw the clouded sky flawed here and there with blue, and the broken light that gleamed on the white burden stretched upon the door, and the red stain at its breast. Ay, I heard myself talk as I went forward with the lantern, bidding the men pass to the right of some steep and rotten ground, and it was strange to me to listen to my own voice as it had been in youth. Well, well, it was but a dream, yet such slaves are we to the fears of fancy, that because of the dead, I, who am almost of their number, do not love to pass that path at night.

At length we came home with our burden, and the women took it weeping

and set about their task with it. And now I must not only fight my own sorrows but must strive to soothe those of my sister Mary, who as I feared would go mad with grief and horror. At last she sobbed herself into a torpor, and I went and questioned the men who sat round the fire in the kitchen, for none sought their beds that night. From them I learned that an hour or more before I met the Spaniard, a richly-dressed stranger had been seen walking along the church-path, and that he had tied his horse among some gorse and brambles on the top of the hill, where he stood as though in doubt, till my mother came out, when he descended and followed her. Also I learned that one of the men at work in the garden, which is not more than three hundred paces from where the deed was done, heard cries, but had taken no note of them, thinking forsooth that it was but the play of some lover from Bungay and his lass chasing each other through the woods, as to this hour it is their fashion to do. Truly it seemed to me that day as though this parish of Ditchingham were the very nursery of fools, of whom I was the first and biggest, and indeed this same thought has struck me since concerning other matters.

At length the morning came, and with it my father and brother, who returned from Yarmouth on hired horses, for their own were spent. In the afternoon also news followed them that the ships which had put to sea on the track of the Spaniard had been driven back by bad weather, having seen nothing of him.

Now I told all the story of my dealings with the murderer of my mother,

keeping nothing back, and I must bear my father's bitter anger because knowing that my mother was in dread of a Spaniard, I had suffered my reason to be led astray by my desire to win speech with my love. Nor did I meet with any comfort from my brother Geoffrey, who was fierce against me because he learned that I had not pleaded in vain with the maid whom he desired for himself. But he said nothing of this reason. Also that no drop might be lacking in my cup, Squire Bozard, who came with many other neighbours to view the corpse and offer sympathy with my father in his loss, told him at the same time that he took it ill that I should woo his daughter against his wish, and that if I continued in this course it would strain their ancient friendship. Thus I was hit on every side; by sorrow for my mother whom I had loved tenderly, by longing for my dear whom I might not see, by self-reproach because I had let the Spaniard go when I held him fast, and by the anger of my father and my brother. Indeed those days were so dark and bitter, for I was at the age when shame and sorrow sting their sharpest, that I wished that I were dead beside my mother. One comfort reached me indeed, a message from Lily sent by a servant girl whom she trusted, giving me her dear love and bidding me to be of good cheer.

At length came the day of burial, and my mother, wrapped in fair white robes, was laid to her rest in the chancel of the church at Ditchingham, where my father has long been set beside her, hard by the brass effigies that mark the burying place of Lily's forefather, his wife, and many of their children. This funeral was the saddest of sights, for the bitterness of my father's grief broke from him in sobs and my sister

Mary swooned away in my arms. Indeed there were few dry eyes in all that church, for my mother, notwithstanding her foreign birth, was much loved because of her gentle ways and the goodness of her heart. But it came to an end, and the noble Spanish lady and English wife was left to her long sleep in the ancient church, where she shall rest on when her tragic story and her very name are forgotten among men. Indeed this is likely to be soon, for I am the last of the Wingfields alive in these parts, though my sister Mary has left descendants of another name to whom my lands and fortune go except for certain gifts to the poor of Bungay and of Ditchingham.

When it was over I went back home. My father was sitting in the front room well nigh beside himself with grief, and by him was my brother. Presently he began to assail me with bitter words because I had let the murderer go when God gave him into my hand.

'You forget, father,' sneered Geoffrey, 'Thomas woos a maid, and it was more to him to hold her in his arms than to keep his mother's murderer safely. But by this it seems he has killed two birds with one stone, he has suffered the Spanish devil to escape when he knew that our mother feared the coming of a Spaniard, and he has made enmity between us and Squire Bozard, our good neighbour, who strangely enough does not favour his wooing.'

'It is so,' said my father. 'Thomas, your mother's blood is on your hands.'

I listened and could bear this goading injustice no longer.

'It is false,' I said, 'I say it even to my father. The man had killed my mother before I met him riding back to seek his ship at Yarmouth and having lost his way; how then is her blood upon my hands? As for my wooing of Lily Bozard, that is my matter, brother, and not yours, though perhaps you wish that it was yours and not mine. Why, father, did you not tell me what you feared of this Spaniard? I heard some loose talk only and gave little thought to it, my mind being full of other things. And now I will say something. You called down God's curse upon me, father, till such time as I should find this murderer and finish what I had begun. So be it! Let God's curse rest upon me till I do find him. I am young, but I am quick and strong, and so soon as may be I start for Spain to hunt him there till I shall run him down or know him to be dead. If you will give me money to help me on my quest, so be it--if not I go without. I swear before God and by my mother's spirit that I will neither rest nor stay till with the very sword that slew her, I have avenged her blood upon her murderer or know him dead, and if I suffer myself to be led astray from the purpose of this oath by aught that is, then may a worse end than hers overtake me, may my soul be rejected in heaven, and my name be shameful for ever upon the earth!'

Thus I swore in my rage and anguish, holding up my hand to heaven that I called upon to witness the oath.



My father looked at me keenly. 'If that is your mind, son Thomas, you shall not lack for money. I would go myself, for blood must be wiped out with blood, but I am too broken in my health; also I am known in Spain and the Holy Office would claim me there. Go, and my blessing go with you. It is right that you should go, for it is through your folly that our enemy has escaped us.'

'Yes, it is right that he should go,' said Geoffrey.

'You say that because you wish to be rid of me, Geoffrey,' I answered hotly, 'and you would be rid of me because you desire to take my place at the side of a certain maid. Follow your nature and do as you will, but if you would outwit an absent man no good shall come to you of it.'

'The girl is to him who can win her,' he said.

'The girl's heart is won already, Geoffrey. You may buy her from her father but you can never win her heart, and without a heart she will be but a poor prize.'

'Peace! now is no time for such talk of love and maids,' said my father, 'and listen. This is the tale of the Spanish murderer and your mother. I have said nothing of it heretofore, but now it must out. When I was a lad it happened that I also went to Spain because my father willed it. I went to a monastery at Seville, but I had no liking for monks and their ways, and I broke out from the monastery. For a year or more I made my

living as I best might, for I feared to return to England as a runaway. Still I made a living and not a bad one, now in this way and now in that, but though I am ashamed to say it, mostly by gaming, at which I had great luck. One night I met this man Juan de Garcia--for in his hate he gave you his true name when he would have stabbed you--at play. Even then he had an evil fame, though he was scarcely more than a lad, but he was handsome in person, set high in birth, and of a pleasing manner. It chanced that he won of me at the dice, and being in a good humour, he took me to visit at the house of his aunt, his uncle's widow, a lady of Seville. This aunt had one child, a daughter, and that daughter was your mother. Now your mother, Luisa de Garcia, was affianced to her cousin Juan de Garcia, not with her own will indeed, for the contract had been signed when she was only eight years old. Still it was binding, more binding indeed than in this country, being a marriage in all except in fact. But those women who are thus bound for the most part bear no wife's love in their hearts, and so it was with your mother. Indeed she both hated and feared her cousin Juan, though I think that he loved her more than anything on earth, and by one pretext and another she contrived to bring him to an agreement that no marriage should be celebrated till she was full twenty years of age. But the colder she was to him, the more was he inflamed with desire to win her and also her possessions, which were not small, for like all Spaniards he was passionate, and like most gamblers and men of evil life, much in want of money.

'Now to be brief, from the first moment that your mother and I set eyes

on each other we loved one another, and it was our one desire to meet as often as might be; and in this we had no great difficulty, for her mother also feared and hated Juan de Garcia, her nephew by marriage, and would have seen her daughter clear of him if possible. The end of it was that I told my love, and a plot was made between us that we should fly to England. But all this had not escaped the ears of Juan, who had spies in the household, and was jealous and revengeful as only a Spaniard can be. First he tried to be rid of me by challenging me to a duel, but we were parted before we could draw swords. Then he hired bravos to murder me as I walked the streets at night, but I wore a chain shirt beneath my doublet and their daggers broke upon it, and in place of being slain I slew one of them. Twice baffled, de Garcia was not defeated. Fight and murder had failed, but another and surer means remained. I know not how, but he had won some clue to the history of my life, and of how I had broken out from the monastery. It was left to him, therefore, to denounce me to the Holy Office as a renegade and an infidel, and this he did one night; it was the night before the day when we should have taken ship. I was sitting with your mother and her mother in their house at Seville, when six cowled men entered and seized me without a word. When I prayed to know their purpose they gave no other answer than to hold a crucifix before my eyes. Then I knew why I was taken, and the women ceased clinging to me and fell back sobbing. Secretly and silently I was hurried away to the dungeons of the Holy Office, but of all that befell me there I will not stop to tell.

'Twice I was racked, once I was seared with hot irons, thrice I was

flogged with wire whips, and all this while I was fed on food such as we should scarcely offer to a dog here in England. At length my offence of having escaped from a monastery and sundry blasphemies, so-called, being proved against me, I was condemned to death by fire.

'Then at last, when after a long year of torment and of horror, I had abandoned hope and resigned myself to die, help came. On the eve of the day upon which I was to be consumed by flame, the chief of my tormentors entered the dungeon where I lay on straw, and embracing me bade me be of good cheer, for the church had taken pity on my youth and given me my freedom. At first I laughed wildly, for I thought that this was but another torment, and not till I was freed of my fetters, clothed in decent garments, and set at midnight without the prison gates, would I believe that so good a thing had befallen me through the hand of God. I stood weak and wondering outside the gates, not knowing where to fly, and as I stood a woman glided up to me wrapped in a dark cloak, who whispered "Come." That woman was your mother. She had learned of my fate from the boasting of de Garcia and set herself to save me. Thrice her plans failed, but at length through the help of some cunning agent, gold won what was denied to justice and to mercy, and my life and liberty were bought with a very great sum.

'That same night we were married and fled for Cadiz, your mother and I, but not her mother, who was bedridden with a sickness. For my sake your beloved mother abandoned her people, what remained to her of her fortune after paying the price of my life, and her country, so strong is the

love of woman. All had been made ready, for at Cadiz lay an English ship, the "Mary" of Bristol, in which passage was taken for us. But the "Mary" was delayed in port by a contrary wind which blew so strongly that notwithstanding his desire to save us, her master dared not take the sea. Two days and a night we lay in the harbour, fearing all things not without cause, and yet most happy in each other's love. Now those who had charge of me in the dungeon had given out that I had escaped by the help of my master the Devil, and I was searched for throughout the country side. De Garcia also, finding that his cousin and affianced wife was missing, guessed that we two were not far apart. It was his cunning, sharpened by jealousy and hate, that dogged us down step by step till at length he found us.

'On the morning of the third day, the gale having abated, the anchor of the "Mary" was got home and she swung out into the tideway. As she came round and while the seamen were making ready to hoist the sails, a boat carrying some twenty soldiers, and followed by two others, shot alongside and summoned the captain to heave to, that his ship might be boarded and searched under warrant from the Holy Office. It chanced that I was on deck at the time, and suddenly, as I prepared to hide myself below, a man, in whom I knew de Garcia himself, stood up and called out that I was the escaped heretic whom they sought. Fearing lest his ship should be boarded and he himself thrown into prison with the rest of his crew, the captain would then have surrendered me. But I, desperate with fear, tore my clothes from my body and showed the cruel scars that marked it.

"You are Englishmen," I cried to the sailors, "and will you deliver me to these foreign devils, who am of your blood? Look at their handiwork," and I pointed to the half-healed scars left by the red-hot pincers; "if you give me up, you send me back to more of this torment and to death by burning. Pity my wife if you will not pity me, or if you will pity neither, then lend me a sword that by death I may save myself from torture."

'Then one of the seamen, a Southwold man who had known my father, called out: "By God! I for one will stand by you, Thomas Wingfield. If they want you and your sweet lady they must kill me first," and seizing a bow from the rack he drew it out of its case and strung it, and setting an arrow on the string he pointed it at the Spaniards in the boat.

'Then the others broke into shouts of:

"If you want any man from among us, come aboard and take him, you torturing devils," and the like.

'Seeing where the heart of the crew lay, the captain found courage in his turn. He made no answer to the Spaniards, but bade half of the men hoist the sails with all speed, and the rest make ready to keep off the soldiers should they seek to board us.

'By now the other two boats had come up and fastened on to us with their

hooks. One man climbed into the chains and thence to the deck, and I knew him for a priest of the Holy Office, one of those who had stood by while I was tormented. Then I grew mad at the thought of all that I had suffered, while that devil watched, bidding them lay on for the love of God. Snatching the bow from the hand of the Southwold seaman, I drew the arrow to its head and loosed. It did not miss its mark, for like you, Thomas, I was skilled with the bow, and he dived back into the sea with an English yard shaft in his heart.

'After that they tried to board us no more, though they shot at us with arrows, wounding one man. The captain called to us to lay down our bows and take cover behind the bulwarks, for by now the sails began to draw. Then de Garcia stood up in the boat and cursed me and my wife.

"I will find you yet," he screamed, with many Spanish oaths and foul words. "If I must wait for twenty years I will be avenged upon you and all you love. Be assured of this, Luisa de Garcia, hide where you will, I shall find you, and when we meet, you shall come with me for so long as I will keep you or that shall be the hour of your death."

'Then we sailed away for England, and the boats fell astern.

'My sons, this is the story of my youth, and of how I came to wed your mother whom I have buried to-day. Juan de Garcia has kept his word.'

'Yet it seems strange,' said my brother, 'that after all these years he should have murdered her thus, whom you say he loved. Surely even the vilest of men had shrunk from such a deed!'

'There is little that is strange about it,' answered my father. 'How can we know what words were spoken between them before he stabbed her? Doubtless he told of some of them when he cried to Thomas that now they would see what truth there was in prophecies. What did de Garcia swear years since?--that she should come with him or he would kill her. Your mother was still beautiful, Geoffrey, and he may have given her choice between flight and death. Seek to know no more, son'--and suddenly my father hid his face in his hands and broke into sobs that were dreadful to hear.

'Would that you had told us this tale before, father,' I said so soon as I could speak. 'Then there would have lived a devil the less in the world to-day, and I should have been spared a long journey.'

Little did I know how long that journey would be!