

CHAPTER VI

GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART

Within twelve days of the burial of my mother and the telling of the story of his marriage to her by my father, I was ready to start upon my search. As it chanced a vessel was about to sail from Yarmouth to Cadiz. She was named the 'Adventuress,' of one hundred tons burden, and carried wool and other goods outwards, purposing to return with a cargo of wine and yew staves for bows. In this vessel my father bought me a passage. Moreover, he gave me fifty pounds in gold, which was as much as I would risk upon my person, and obtained letters from the Yarmouth firm of merchants to their agents in Cadiz, in which they were advised to advance me such sums as I might need up to a total of one hundred and fifty English pounds, and further to assist me in any way that was possible.

Now the ship 'Adventuress' was to sail on the third day of June. Already it was the first of that month, and that evening I must ride to Yarmouth, whither my baggage had gone already. Except one my farewells were made, and yet that was the one I most wished to make. Since the day when we had sworn our troth I had gained no sight of Lily except once at my mother's burial, and then we had not spoken. Now it seemed that I must go without any parting word, for her father had sent me notice that if I came near the Hall his serving men had orders to thrust me from the

door, and this was a shame that I would not risk. Yet it was hard that I must go upon so long a journey, whence it well might chance I should not return, and bid her no goodbye. In my grief and perplexity I spoke to my father, telling him how the matter stood and asking his help.

'I go hence,' I said, 'to avenge our common loss, and if need be to give my life for the honour of our name. Aid me then in this.'

'My neighbour Bozard means his daughter for your brother Geoffrey, and not for you, Thomas,' he answered; 'and a man may do what he wills with his own. Still I will help you if I can, at the least he cannot drive me from his door. Bid them bring horses, and we will ride to the Hall.'

Within the half of an hour we were there, and my father asked for speech with its master. The serving man looked at me askance, remembering his orders, still he ushered us into the justice room where the Squire sat drinking ale.

'Good morrow to you, neighbour,' said the Squire; 'you are welcome here, but you bring one with you who is not welcome, though he be your son.'

'I bring him for the last time, friend Bozard. Listen to his request, then grant it or refuse it as you will; but if you refuse it, it will not bind us closer. The lad rides to-night to take ship for Spain to seek that man who murdered his mother. He goes of his own free will because after the doing of the deed it was he who unwittingly suffered

the murderer to escape, and it is well that he should go.'

'He is a young hound to run such a quarry to earth, and in a strange country,' said the Squire. 'Still I like his spirit and wish him well.

What would he of me?'

'Leave to bid farewell to your daughter. I know that his suit does not please you and cannot wonder at it, and for my own part I think it too early for him to set his fancy in the way of marriage. But if he would see the maid it can do no harm, for such harm as there is has been done already. Now for your answer.'

Squire Bozard thought a while, then said:

'The lad is a brave lad though he shall be no son-in-law of mine. He is going far, and mayhap will return no more, and I do not wish that he should think unkindly of me when I am dead. Go without, Thomas Wingfield, and stand under yonder beech--Lily shall join you there and you may speak with her for the half of an hour--no more. See to it that you keep within sight of the window. Nay, no thanks; go before I change my mind.'

So I went and waited under the beech with a beating heart, and presently Lily glided up to me, a more welcome sight to my eyes than any angel out of heaven. And, indeed, I doubt if an angel could have been more fair than she, or more good and gentle.

'Oh! Thomas,' she whispered, when I had greeted her, 'is this true that you sail oversea to seek the Spaniard?'

'I sail to seek the Spaniard, and to find him and to kill him when he is found. It was to come to you, Lily, that I let him go, now I must let you go to come to him. Nay, do not weep, I have sworn to do it, and were I to break my oath I should be dishonoured.'

'And because of this oath of yours I must be widowed, Thomas, before I am a wife? You go and I shall never see you more.'

'Who can say, my sweet? My father went over seas and came back safe, having passed through many perils.'

'Yes, he came back and--not alone. You are young, Thomas, and in far countries there are ladies great and fair, and how shall I hold my own in your heart against them, I being so far away?'

'I swear to you, Lily--'

'Nay, Thomas, swear no oaths lest you should add to your sins by breaking them. Yet, love, forget me not, who shall forget you never. Perhaps--oh! it wrings my heart to say it--this is our last meeting on the earth. If so, then we must hope to meet in heaven. At the least be sure of this, while I live I will be true to you, and father or

no father, I will die before I break my troth. I am young to speak so largely, but it shall be as I say. Oh! this parting is more cruel than death. Would that we were asleep and forgotten among men. Yet it is best that you should go, for if you stayed what could we be to each other while my father lives, and may he live long!

'Sleep and forgetfulness will come soon enough, Lily; none must await them for very long. Meanwhile we have our lives to live. Let us pray that we may live them to each other. I go to seek fortune as well as foes, and I will win it for your sake that we may marry.'

She shook her head sadly. 'It were too much happiness, Thomas. Men and women may seldom wed their true loves, or if they do, it is but to lose them. At the least we love, and let us be thankful that we have learned what love can be, for having loved here, perchance at the worst we may love elsewhere when there are none to say us nay.'

Then we talked on awhile, babbling broken words of love and hope and sorrow, as young folks so placed are wont to do, till at length Lily looked up with a sad sweet smile and said:

'It is time to go, sweetheart. My father beckons me from the lattice. All is finished.'

'Let us go then,' I answered huskily, and drew her behind the trunk of the old beech. And there I caught her in my arms and kissed her again

and yet again, nor was she ashamed to kiss me back.

After this I remember little of what happened, except that as we rode away I saw her beloved face, wan and wistful, watching me departing out of her life. For twenty years that sad and beautiful face haunted me, and it haunts me yet athwart life and death. Other women have loved me and I have known other partings, some of them more terrible, but the memory of this woman as she was then, and of her farewell look, overruns them all. Whenever I gaze down the past I see this picture framed in it and I know that it is one which cannot fade. Are there any sorrows like these sorrows of our youth? Can any bitterness equal the bitterness of such good-byes? I know but one of which I was fated to taste in after years, and that shall be told of in its place. It is a common jest to mock at early love, but if it be real, if it be something more than the mere arising of the passions, early love is late love also; it is love for ever, the best and worst event which can befall a man or woman. I say it who am old and who have done with everything, and it is true.

One thing I have forgotten. As we kissed and clung in our despair behind the bole of the great beech, Lily drew a ring from her finger and pressed it into my hand saying, 'Look on this each morning when you wake, and think of me.' It had been her mother's, and to-day it still is set upon my withered hand, gleaming in the winter sunlight as I trace these words. Through the long years of wild adventure, through all the time of after peace, in love and war, in the shine of the camp fire, in the glare of the sacrificial flame, in the light of lonely stars

illuminating the lonely wilderness, that ring has shone upon my hand, reminding me always of her who gave it, and on this hand it shall go down into the grave. It is a plain circlet of thick gold, somewhat worn now, a posy-ring, and on its inner surface is cut this quaint couplet:

Heart to heart, Though far apart.

A fitting motto for us indeed, and one that has its meaning to this hour.

That same day of our farewell I rode with my father to Yarmouth. My brother Geoffrey did not come with us, but we parted with kindly words, and of this I am glad, for we never saw each other again. No more was said between us as to Lily Bozard and our wooing of her, though I knew well enough that so soon as my back was turned he would try to take my place at her side, as indeed happened. I forgive it to him; in truth I cannot blame him much, for what man is there that would not have desired to wed Lily who knew her? Once we were dear friends, Geoffrey and I, but when we ripened towards manhood, our love of Lily came between us, and we grew more and more apart. It is a common case enough. Well, as it chanced he failed, so why should I think unkindly of him? Let me rather remember the affection of our childhood and forget the rest. God rest his soul.

Mary, my sister, who after Lily Bozard was now the fairest maiden in the country side, wept much at my going. There was but a year between us, and we loved each other dearly, for no such shadow of jealousy had fallen on our affection. I comforted her as well as I was able, and telling her all that had passed between me and Lily, I prayed her to stand my friend and Lily's, should it ever be in her power to do so. This Mary promised to do readily enough, and though she did not give the reason, I could see that she thought it possible that she might be able to help us. As I have said, Lily had a brother, a young man of some promise, who at this time was away at college, and he and my sister Mary had a strong fancy for each other, that might or might not ripen into something closer. So we kissed and bade farewell with tears.

And after that my father and I rode away. But when we had passed down Pirnhow Street, and mounted the little hill beyond Waingford Mills to the left of Bungay town, I halted my horse, and looked back upon the pleasant valley of the Waveney where I was born, and my heart grew full to bursting. Had I known all that must befall me, before my eyes beheld that scene again, I think indeed that it would have burst. But God, who in his wisdom has laid many a burden upon the backs of men, has saved them from this; for had we foreknowledge of the future, I think that of our own will but few of us would live to see it. So I cast one long last look towards the distant mass of oaks that marked the spot where Lily lived, and rode on.

On the following day I embarked on board the 'Adventuress' and we sailed. Before I left, my father's heart softened much towards me, for he remembered that I was my mother's best beloved, and feared also lest we should meet no more. So much did it soften indeed, that at the last hour he changed his mind and wished to hold me back from going. But having put my hand to the plough and suffered all the bitterness of farewell, I would not return to be mocked by my brother and my neighbours. 'You speak too late, father,' I said. 'You desired me to go to work this vengeance and stirred me to it with many bitter words, and now I would go if I knew that I must die within a week, for such oaths cannot be lightly broken, and till mine is fulfilled the curse rests on me.'

'So be it, son,' he answered with a sigh. 'Your mother's cruel death maddened me and I said what I may live to be sorry for, though at the best I shall not live long, for my heart is broken. Perhaps I should have remembered that vengeance is in the hand of the Lord, who wreaks it at His own time and without our help. Do not think unkindly of me, my boy, if we should chance to meet no more, for I love you, and it was but the deeper love that I bore to your mother which made me deal harshly with you.'

'I know it, father, and bear no grudge. But if you think that you owe me anything, pay it by holding back my brother from working wrong to me and Lily Bozard while I am absent.'

'I will do my best, son, though were it not that you and she have grown so dear to each other, the match would have pleased me well. But as I have said, I shall not be long here to watch your welfare in this or any other matter, and when I am gone things must follow their own fate. Do not forget your God or your home wherever you chance to wander, Thomas: keep yourself from brawling, beware of women that are the snare of youth, and set a watch upon your tongue and your temper which is not of the best. Moreover, wherever you may be do not speak ill of the religion of the land, or make a mock of it by your way of life, lest you should learn how cruel men can be when they think that it is pleasing to their gods, as I have learnt already.'

I said that I would bear his counsel in mind, and indeed it saved me from many a sorrow. Then he embraced me and called on the Almighty to take me in His care, and we parted.

I never saw him more, for though he was but middle-aged, within a year of my going my father died suddenly of a distemper of the heart in the nave of Ditchingham church, as he stood there, near the rood screen, musing by my mother's grave one Sunday after mass, and my brother took his lands and place. God rest him also! He was a true-hearted man, but more wrapped up in his love for my mother than it is well for any man to be who would look at life largely and do right by all. For such love, though natural to women, is apt to turn to something that partakes of selfishness, and to cause him who bears it to think all else of small account. His children were nothing to my father when compared to my

mother, and he would have been content to lose them every one if thereby he might have purchased back her life. But after all it was a noble infirmity, for he thought little of himself and had gone through much to win her.

Of my voyage to Cadiz, to which port I had learned that de Garcia's ship was bound, there is little to be told. We met with contrary winds in the Bay of Biscay and were driven into the harbour of Lisbon, where we refitted. But at last we came safely to Cadiz, having been forty days at sea.