

CHAPTER XXXIX

THOMAS COMES BACK FROM THE DEAD

Now on the morrow of my visit to Marina, the Captain Diaz came to see me and told me that a friend of his was in command of a carak which was due to sail from the port of Vera Cruz for Cadiz within ten days, and that this friend was willing to give me a passage if I wished to leave Mexico. I thought for a while and said that I would go, and that very night, having bid farewell to the Captain Diaz, whom may God prosper, for he was a good man among many bad ones, I set out from the city for the last time in the company of some merchants. A week's journey took us safely down the mountains to Vera Cruz, a hot unhealthy town with an indifferent anchorage, much exposed to the fierce northerly winds. Here I presented my letters of recommendation to the commander of the carak, who gave me passage without question, I laying in a stock of food for the journey.

Three nights later we set sail with a fair wind, and on the following morning at daybreak all that was left in sight of the land of Anahuac was the snowy crest of the volcan Orizaba. Presently that vanished into the clouds, and thus did I bid farewell to the far country where so many things had happened to me, and which according to my reckoning I had first sighted on this very day eighteen years before.

Of my journey to Spain I have nothing of note to tell. It was more prosperous than such voyages often are, and within ten weeks of the date of our lifting anchor at Vera Cruz, we let it drop in the harbour of Cadiz. Here I sojourned but two days, for as it chanced there was an English ship in the harbour trading to London, and in her I took a passage, though I was obliged to sell the smallest of the emeralds from the necklace to find the means to do so, the money that Marina gave me being spent. This emerald sold for a great sum, however, with part of which I purchased clothing suitable to a person of rank, taking the rest of the gold with me. I grieved to part with the stone indeed, though it was but a pendant to the pendant of the collar, but necessity knows no law. The pendant stone itself, a fine gem though flawed, I gave in after years to her gracious majesty Queen Elizabeth.

On board the English ship they thought me a Spanish adventurer who had made moneys in the Indies, and I did not undeceive them, since I would be left to my own company for a while that I might prepare my mind to return to ways of thought and life that it had long forgotten. Therefore I sat apart like some proud don, saying little but listening much, and learning all I could of what had chanced in England since I left it some twenty years before.

At length our voyage came to an end, and on a certain twelfth of June I found myself in the mighty city of London that I had never yet visited, and kneeling down in the chamber of my inn, I thanked God that after

enduring so many dangers and hardships, it had pleased Him to preserve me to set foot again on English soil. Indeed to this hour I count it nothing short of marvellous that this frail body of a man should survive all the sorrows and risks of death by sickness, hunger, battle, murder, drowning, wild beasts, and the cruelty of men, to which mine had been exposed for many years.

In London I bought a good horse, through the kind offices of the host of my inn, and on the morrow at daybreak I set out upon the Ipswich road. That very morning my last adventure befell me, for as I jogged along musing of the beauty of the English landscape and drinking in the sweet air of June, a cowardly thief fired a pistol at me from behind a hedge, purposing to plunder me if I fell. The bullet passed through my hat, grazing the skull, but before I could do anything the rascal fled, seeing that he had missed his mark, and I went on my journey, thinking to myself that it would indeed have been strange, if after passing such great dangers in safety, I had died at last by the hand of a miserable foot-pad within five miles of London town.

I rode hard all that day and the next, and my horse being stout and swift, by half-past seven o'clock of the evening I pulled up upon the little hill whence I had looked my last on Bungay, when I rode thence for Yarmouth with my father. Below me lay the red roofs of the town; there to the right were the oaks of Ditchingham and the beautiful tower of St. Mary's Church, yonder the stream of Waveney wandered, and before me stretched the meadow lands, purple and golden with marsh weeds in

bloom. All was as it had been, I could see no change at all, the only change was in myself. I dismounted, and going to a pool of water near the roadway I looked at the reflection of my own face. I was changed indeed, scarcely should I have known it for that of the lad who had ridden up this hill some twenty years ago. Now, alas! the eyes were sunken and very sorrowful, the features were sharp, and there was more grey than black in the beard and hair. I should scarcely have known it myself, would any others know it, I wondered? Would there be any to know it indeed? In twenty years many die and others pass out of sight; should I find a friend at all among the living? Since I read the letters which Captain Bell of the 'Adventuress' had brought me before I sailed for Hispaniola, I had heard no tidings from my home, and what tidings awaited me now? Above all what of Lily, was she dead or married or gone?

Mounting my horse I pushed on again at a canter, taking the road past Waingford Mills through the fords and Pirnhow town, leaving Bungay upon my left. In ten minutes I was at the gate of the bridle path that runs from the Norwich road for half a mile or more beneath the steep and wooded bank under the shelter of which stands the Lodge at Ditchingham. By the gate a man loitered in the last rays of the sun. I looked at him and knew him; it was Billy Minns, that same fool who had loosed de Garcia when I left him bound that I might run to meet my sweetheart. He was an old man now and his white hair hung about his withered face, moreover he was unclean and dressed in rags, but I could have fallen on his neck and embraced him, so rejoiced was I to look once more on one whom I had known in youth.

Seeing me come he hobbled on his stick to the gate to open it for me, whining a prayer for alms.

'Does Mr. Wingfield live here?' I said, pointing up the path, and my breath came quick as I asked.

'Mr. Wingfield, sir, Mr. Wingfield, which of them?' he answered. 'The old gentleman he's been dead nigh upon twenty years. I helped to dig his grave in the chancel of yonder church I did, we laid him by his wife--her that was murdered. Then there's Mr. Geoffrey.'

'What of him?' I asked.

'He's dead, too, twelve year gone or more; he drank hisself to dead he did. And Mr. Thomas, he's dead, drowned over seas they say, many a winter back; they're all dead, all dead! Ah! he was a rare one, Mr. Thomas was; I mind me well how when I let the furriner go--' and he rambled off into the tale of how he had set de Garcia on his horse after I had beaten him, nor could I bring him back from it.

Casting him a piece of money, I set spurs to my weary horse and cantered up the bridle path, leaving the Mill House on my left, and as I went, the beat of his hoofs seemed to echo the old man's words, 'All dead, all dead!' Doubtless Lily was dead also, or if she was not dead, when the tidings came that I had been drowned at sea, she would have married.

Being so fair and sweet she would surely not have lacked for suitors, nor could it be believed that she had worn her life away mourning over the lost love of her youth.

Now the Lodge was before me; it had changed no whit except that the ivy and creepers on its front had grown higher, to the roof indeed, and I could see that people lived in the house, for it was well kept, and smoke hung above the chimneys. The gate was locked, and there were no serving men about, for night fell fast, and all had ceased from their labour. Leaving the house on the right I passed round it to the stables that are at the back near the hillside garden, but here the gate was locked also, and I dismounted not knowing what to do. Indeed I was so unmanned with fear and doubt that for a while I seemed bewildered, and leaving the horse to crop the grass where he stood, I wandered to the foot of the church path and gazed up the hill as though I waited for the coming of one whom I should meet.

'What if they were all dead, what if SHE were dead and gone?' I buried my face in my hands and prayed to the Almighty who had protected me through so many years, to spare me this last bitterness. I was crushed with sorrow, and I felt that I could bear no more. If Lily were lost to me also, then I thought that it would be best that I should die, since there was nothing left for which I cared to live.

Thus I prayed for some while, trembling like a leaf, and when I looked up again, ere I turned to seek tidings from those that dwelt in the

house, whoever they might be, the twilight had fallen completely, and lo! nightingales sang both far and near. I listened to their song, and as I listened, some troubled memory came back to me that at first I could not grasp. Then suddenly there rose up in my mind a vision of the splendid chamber in Montezuma's palace in Tenochtitlan, and of myself sleeping on a golden bed, and dreaming on that bed. I knew it now, I was the god Tezcat, and on the morrow I must be sacrificed, and I slept in misery, and as I slept I dreamed. I dreamed that I stood where I stood this night, that the scent of the English flowers was in my nostrils as it was this night, and that the sweet song of the nightingales rang in my ears as at this present hour. I dreamed that as I mused and listened the moon came up over the green ash and oaks, and lo! there she shone. I dreamed that I heard a sound of singing on the hill--

But now I awoke from this vision of the past and of a long lost dream, for as I stood the sweet voice of a woman began to sing yonder on the brow of the slope; I was not mad, I heard it clearly, and the sound grew ever nearer as the singer drew down the steep hillside. It was so near now that I could catch the very words of that sad song which to this day I remember.

Now I could see the woman's shape in the moonlight; it was tall and stately and clad in a white robe. Presently she lifted her head to watch the flitter of a bat and the moonlight lit upon her face. It was the face of Lily Bozard, my lost love, beautiful as of yore, though grown older and stamped with the seal of some great sorrow. I saw, and so

deeply was I stirred at the sight, that had it not been for the low paling to which I clung, I must have fallen to the earth, and a deep groan broke from my lips.

She heard the groan and ceased her song, then catching sight of the figure of a man, she stopped and turned as though to fly. I stood quite still, and wonder overcoming her fear, she drew nearer and spoke in the sweet low voice that I remembered well, saying, 'Who wanders here so late? Is it you, John?'

Now when I heard her speak thus a new fear took me. Doubtless she was married and 'John' was her husband. I had found her but to lose her more completely. Of a sudden it came into my mind that I would not discover myself till I knew the truth. I advanced a pace, but not so far as to pass from the shadow of the shrubs which grow here, and taking my stand in such a fashion that the moonlight did not strike upon my face, I bowed low in the courtly Spanish fashion, and disguising my voice spoke as a Spaniard might in broken English which I will spare to write down.

'Madam,' I said, 'have I the honour to speak to one who in bygone years was named the Senora Lily Bozard?'

'That was my name,' she answered. 'What is your errand with me, sir?'

Now I trembled afresh, but spoke on boldly.

'Before I answer, Madam, forgive me if I ask another question. Is this still your name?'

'It is still my name, I am no married woman,' she answered, and for a moment the sky seemed to reel above me and the ground to heave beneath my feet like the lava crust of Xaca. But as yet I did not reveal myself, for I wished to learn if she still loved my memory.

'Senora,' I said, 'I am a Spaniard who served in the Indian wars of Cortes, of which perhaps you have heard.'

She bowed her head and I went on. 'In those wars I met a man who was named Teule, but who had another name in former days, so he told me on his deathbed some two years ago.'

'What name?' she asked in a low voice.

'Thomas Wingfield.'

Now Lily moaned aloud, and in her turn caught at the pales to save herself from falling.

'I deemed him dead these eighteen years,' she gasped; 'drowned in the Indian seas where his vessel foundered.'

'I have heard say that he was shipwrecked in those seas, senora, but he

escaped death and fell among the Indians, who made a god of him and gave him the daughter of their king in marriage,' and I paused.

She shivered, then said in a hard voice, 'Continue, sir; I listen to you.'

'My friend Teule took the part of the Indians in the wars, as being the husband of one of their princesses he must do in honour, and fought bravely for them for many years. At length the town that he defended was captured, his one remaining child was murdered, his wife the princess slew herself for sorrow, and he himself was taken into captivity, where he languished and died.'

'A sad tale, sir,' she said with a little laugh--a mournful laugh that was half choked by tears.

'A very sad tale, senora, but one which is not finished. While he lay dying, my friend told me that in his early life he had plighted troth with a certain English maid, named--'

'I know the name--continue.'

'He told me that though he had been wedded, and loved his wife the princess, who was a very royal woman, that many times had risked her life for his, ay, even to lying at his side upon the stone of sacrifice and of her own free will, yet the memory of this maiden to whom he was

once betrothed had companioned him through life and was strong upon him now at its close. Therefore he prayed me for our friendship's sake to seek her out when I returned to Europe, should she still live, and to give her a message from him, and to make a prayer to her on his behalf.'

'What message and what prayer?' Lily whispered.

'This: that he loved her at the end of his life as he had loved her at its beginning; that he humbly prayed her forgiveness because he had broken the troth which they two swore beneath the beech at Ditchingham.'

'Sir,' she cried, 'what do you know of that?'

'Only what my friend told me, senora.'

'Your friendship must have been close and your memory must be good,' she murmured.

'Which he had done,' I went on, 'under strange circumstances, so strange indeed that he dared to hope that his broken troth might be renewed in some better world than this. His last prayer was that she should say to me, his messenger, that she forgave him and still loved him, as to his death he loved her.'

'And how can such forgiveness or such an avowal advantage a dead man?' Lily asked, watching me keenly through the shadows. 'Have the dead then

eyes to see and ears to hear?'

'How can I know, senora? I do but execute my mission.'

'And how can I know that you are a true messenger. It chanced that I had sure tidings of the drowning of Thomas Wingfield many years ago, and this tale of Indians and princesses is wondrous strange, more like those that happen in romances than in this plain world. Have you no token of your good faith, sir?'

'I have such a token, senora, but the light is too faint for you to see it.'

'Then follow me to the house, there we will get light. Stay,' and once more going to the stable gate, she called 'John.'

An old man answered her, and I knew the voice for that of one of my father's serving men. To him she spoke in low tones, then led the way by the garden path to the front door of the house, which she opened with a key from her girdle, motioning to me to pass in before her. I did so, and thinking little of such matters at the moment, turned by habit into the doorway of the sitting-room which I knew so well, lifting my feet to avoid stumbling on its step, and passing into the room found my way through the gloom to the wide fireplace where I took my stand. Lily watched me enter, then following me, she lit a taper at the fire which smouldered on the hearth, and placed it upon the table in the window in

such fashion that though I was now obliged to take off my hat, my face was still in shadow.

'Now, sir, your token if it pleases you.'

Then I drew the posy ring from my finger and gave it to her, and she sat down by the table and examined it in the light of the candle, and as she sat thus, I saw how beautiful she was still, and how little time had touched her, except for the sadness of her face, though now she had seen eight-and-thirty winters. I saw also that though she kept control of her features as she looked upon the ring, her breast heaved quickly and her hand shook.

'The token is a true one,' she said at length. 'I know the ring, though it is somewhat worn since last I saw it, it was my mother's; and many years ago I gave it as a love gage to a youth to whom I promised myself in marriage. Doubtless all your tale is true also, sir, and I thank you for your courtesy in bringing it so far. It is a sad tale, a very sad tale. And now, sir, as I may not ask you to stay in this house where I live alone, and there is no inn near, I propose to send serving men to

conduct you to my brother's dwelling that is something more than a mile away, if indeed,' she added slowly, 'you do not already know the path! There you will find entertainment, and there the sister of your dead companion, Mary Bozard, will be glad to learn the story of his strange adventures from your lips.'

I bowed my head and answered, 'First, senora, I would pray your answer to my friend's dying prayer and message.'

'It is childish to send answers to the dead.'

'Still I pray for them as I was charged to do.'

'How reads the writing within this ring, sir?'

'Heart to heart, Though far apart,'

I said glibly, and next instant I could have bitten out my tongue.

'Ah! you know that also, but doubtless you have carried the ring for many months and learned the writing. Well, sir, though we were far apart, and though perchance I cherished the memory of him who wore this ring, and for his sake remained unwed, it seems that his heart went a straying--to the breast indeed of some savage woman whom he married, and who bore him children. That being so, my answer to the prayer of your dead friend is that I forgive him indeed, but I must needs take back the vows which I swore to him for this life and for ever, since he has broken them, and as best I may, strive to cast out the love I bore him since he rejected and dishonoured it,' and standing up Lily made as

though she tore at her breast and threw something from her, and at the same time she let fall the ring upon the floor.

I heard and my heart stood still. So this was the end of it. Well, she had the right of me, though now I began to wish that I had been less honest, for sometimes women can forgive a lie sooner than such frankness. I said nothing, my tongue was tied, but a great misery and weariness entered into me. Stooping down I found the ring, and replacing it on my finger, I turned to seek the door with a last glance at the woman who refused me. Halfway thither I paused for one second, wondering if I should do well to declare myself, then bethought me that if she would not abate her anger toward me dead, her pity for me living would be small. Nay, I was dead to her, and dead I would remain.

Now I was at the door and my foot was on its step, when suddenly a voice, Lily's voice, sounded in my ears and it was sweet and kind.

'Thomas,' said the voice, 'Thomas, before you go, will you not take count of the gold and goods and land that you placed in my keeping?'

Now I turned amazed, and lo! Lily came towards me slowly and with outstretched arms.

'Oh! foolish man,' she whispered low, 'did you think to deceive a woman's heart thus clumsily? You who talked of the beech in the Hall garden, you who found your way so well to this dark chamber, and spoke

the writing in the ring with the very voice of one who has been dead so long. Listen: I forgive that friend of yours his broken troth, for he was honest in the telling of his fault and it is hard for man to live alone so many years, and in strange countries come strange adventures; moreover, I will say it, I still love him as it seems that he loves me, though in truth I grow somewhat old for love, who have lingered long waiting to find it beyond my grave.'

Thus Lily spoke, sobbing as she spoke, then my arms closed round her and she said no more. And yet as our lips met I thought of Otomie, remembering her words, and remembering also that she had died by her own hand on this very day a year ago.

Let us pray that the dead have no vision of the living!