

CHAPTER XL

AMEN

And now there is little left for me to tell and my tale draws to its end, for which I am thankful, for I am very old and writing is a weariness to me, so great a weariness indeed that many a time during the past winter I have been near to abandoning the task.

For a while Lily and I sat almost silent in this same room where I write to-day, for our great joy and many another emotion that was mixed with it, clogged our tongues. Then as though moved by one impulse, we knelt down and offered our humble thanks to heaven that had preserved us both to this strange meeting. Scarcely had we risen from our knees when there was a stir without the house, and presently a buxom dame entered, followed by a gallant gentleman, a lad, and a maiden. These were my sister Mary, her husband Wilfred Bozard, Lily's brother, and their two surviving children, Roger and Joan. When she guessed that it was I come home again and no other, Lily had sent them tidings by the servant man John, that one was with her whom she believed they would be glad to see, and they had hurried hither, not knowing whom they should find. Nor were they much the wiser at first, for I was much changed and the light in the room shone dim, but stood perplexed, wondering who this stranger might be.

'Mary,' I said at length, 'Mary, do you not remember me, my sister?'

Then she cried aloud, and throwing herself into my arms, she wept there a while, as would any of us were our beloved dead suddenly to appear before our eyes, alive and well, and her husband clasped me by the hand and swore heartily in his amazement, as is the fashion of some men when they are moved. But the children stood staring blankly till I called the girl to me, who now was much what her mother had been when we parted, and kissing her, told her that I was that uncle of whom perhaps she had heard as dead many years ago.

Then my horse, that all this while had been forgotten, having been caught and stabled, we went to supper and it was a strange meal to me, and after meat I asked for tidings. Now I learned that the fortune which my old master Fonseca had left to me came home in safety, and that it had prospered exceedingly under Lily's care, for she had spent but very little of it for her maintenance, looking on it always as a trust rather than as her own. When my death seemed certain my sister Mary had entered on her share of my possessions, however, and with it had purchased some outlying lands in Earsham and Hedenham, and the wood and manor of Tyndale Hall in Ditchingham and Broome. These lands I made haste to say she might keep as a gift from me, since it seemed that I had greater riches than I could need without them, and this saying of mine pleased her husband Wilfred Bozard not a little, seeing that it is hard for a man to give up what he has held for many years.

Then I heard the rest of the story; of my father's sudden death, of how the coming of the gold had saved Lily from being forced into marriage with my brother Geoffrey, who afterwards had taken to evil courses which ended in his decease at the age of thirty-one; of the end of Squire Bozard, Lily's father and my old enemy, from an apoplexy which took him in a sudden fit of anger. After this it seemed, her brother being married to my sister Mary, Lily had moved down to the Lodge, having paid off the charges that my brother Geoffrey had heaped upon his heritage, and bought out my sister's rights to it. And here at the Lodge she had lived ever since, a sad and lonely woman, and yet not altogether an unhappy one, for she gave much of her time to good works. Indeed she told me that had it not been for the wide lands and moneys which she must manage as my heiress, she would have betaken herself to a sisterhood, there to wear her life away in peace, since I being lost to her, and indeed dead, as she was assured,--for the news of the wreck of the carak found its way to Ditchingham,--she no longer thought of marriage, though more than one gentleman of condition had sought her hand. This, with some minor matters, such as the birth and death of children, and the story of the great storm and flood that smote Bungay, and indeed the length of the vale of Waveney in those days, was all the tale that they had to tell who had grown from youth to middle age in quiet. For of the crowning and end of kings and of matters politic, such as the downfall of the power of the Pope of Rome and the sacking of the religious houses which was still in progress, I make no mention here.

But now they called for mine, and I began it at the beginning, and it

was strange to see their faces as they listened. All night long, till the thrushes sang down the nightingales, and the dawn shone in the east, I sat at Lily's side telling them my story, and then it was not finished. So we slept in the chambers that had been made ready for us, and on the morrow I took it up again, showing them the sword that had belonged to Bernal Diaz, the great necklace of emeralds which Guatemoc had given to me, and certain scars and wounds in witness of its truth. Never did I see folk so much amazed, and when I came to speak of the last sacrifice of the women of the Otomie, and of the horrid end of de Garcia who died fighting with his own shadow, or rather with the shadows of his own wickedness, they cried aloud with fear, as they wept when I told of the deaths of Isabella de Siguenza and of Guatemoc, and of the loss of my sons.

But I did not tell all the story to this company, for some of it was for Lily's ear alone, and to her I spoke of my dealings with Otomie as a man might speak with a man, for I felt that if I kept anything back now there would never be complete faith between us. Therefore I set out all my doubts and troublings, nor did I hide that I had learned to love Otomie, and that her beauty and sweetness had drawn me from the first moment when I saw her in the court of Montezuma, or that which had passed between us on the stone of sacrifice.

When I had done Lily thanked me for my honesty and said it seemed that in such matters men differed from women, seeing that SHE had never felt the need to be delivered from the temptation of strange loves. Still we

were as God and Nature had made us, and therefore had little right to reproach each other, or even to set that down as virtue which was but lack of leaning. Moreover, this Otomie, her sin of heathenism notwithstanding, had been a great-hearted woman and one who might well dazzle the wandering eyes of man, daring more for her love's sake than ever she, Lily, could have dared; and to end with, it was clear that at last I must choose between wedding her and a speedy death, and having sworn so great an oath to her I should have been perjured indeed if I had left her when my dangers were gone by. Therefore she, Lily, was minded to let all this matter rest, nor should she be jealous if I still thought of this dead wife of mine with tenderness.

Thus she spoke most sweetly, looking at me the while with her clear and earnest eyes, that I ever fancied must be such as adorn the shining faces of angels. Ay, and those same eyes of hers were filled with tears when I told her my bitter grief over the death of my firstborn and of my other bereavements. For it was not till some years afterwards, when she had abandoned further hope of children, that Lily grew jealous of those dead sons of mine and of my ever present love for them.

Now the tidings of my return and of my strange adventures among the nations of the Indies were noised abroad far and wide, and people came from miles round, ay, even from Norwich and Yarmouth, to see me and I was pressed to tell my tale till I grew weary of it. Also a service of thanksgiving for my safe deliverance from many dangers by land and sea

was held in the church of St. Mary's here in Ditchingham, which service was no longer celebrated after the rites of the Romish faith, for while I had sojourned afar, the saints were fallen like the Aztec gods; the yoke of Rome had been broken from off the neck of England, and though all do not think with me, I for one rejoiced at it heartily who had seen enough of priestcraft and its cruelties.

When that ceremony was over and all people had gone to their homes, I came back again to the empty church from the Hall, where I abode a while as the guest of my sister and her husband, till Lily and I were wed.

And there in the quiet light of the June evening I knelt in the chancel upon the rushes that strewed the grave of my father and my mother, and sent my spirit up towards them in the place of their eternal rest, and to the God who guards them. A great calm came upon me as I knelt thus, and I felt how mad had been that oath of mine that as a lad I had sworn to be avenged upon de Garcia, and I saw how as a tree from a seed, all my sorrows had grown from it. But even then I could not do other than hate de Garcia, no, nor can I to this hour, and after all it was natural that I should desire vengeance on the murderer of my mother though the wreaking of it had best been left in another Hand.

Without the little chancel door I met Lily, who was lingering there knowing me to be within, and we spoke together.

'Lily,' I said, 'I would ask you something. After all that has been,

will you still take me for your husband, unworthy as I am?'

'I promised so to do many a year ago, Thomas,' she answered, speaking very low, and blushing like the wild rose that bloomed upon a grave beside her, 'and I have never changed my mind. Indeed for many years I have looked upon you as my husband, though I thought you dead.'

'Perhaps it is more than I deserve,' I said. 'But if it is to be, say when it shall be, for youth has left us and we have little time to lose.'

'When you will, Thomas,' she answered, placing her hand in mine.

Within a week from that evening we were wed.

And now my tale is done. God who gave me so sad and troublous a youth and early manhood, has blessed me beyond measure in my middle age and old. All these events of which I have written at such length were done with many a day ago: the hornbeam sapling that I set beneath these windows in the year when we were married is now a goodly tree of shade and still I live to look on it. Here in the happy valley of the Waveney, save for my bitter memories and that longing for the dead which no time can so much as dull, year after year has rolled over my silvering hairs in perfect health and peace and rest, and year by year have I rejoiced more deeply in the true love of a wife such as few have known. For

it would seem as though the heart-ache and despair of youth had but sweetened that most noble nature till it grew well nigh divine. But one sorrow came to us, the death of our infant child--for it was fated that I should die childless--and in that sorrow, as I have told, Lily shewed that she was still a woman. For the rest no shadow lay between us. Hand in hand we passed down the hill of life, till at length in the fulness of her days my wife was taken from me. One Christmas night she lay down to sleep at my side, in the morning she was dead. I grieved indeed and bitterly, but the sorrow was not as the sorrows of my youth had been, since age and use dull the edge of mortal griefs and I knew and know that we are no long space apart. Very soon I shall join Lily where she is, and I do not fear that journey. For the dread of death has left me at length, as it departs from all who live long enough and strive to repent them of their sins, and I am well content to leave my safety at the Gates and my heavenly comfort in the Almighty Hand that saved me from the stone of sacrifice and has guided me through so many perils upon this troubled earth.

And now to God my Father, Who holds me, Thomas Wingfield, and all I have loved and love in His holy keeping, be thanks and glory and praise!
Amen.