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Chapter I

WHY THOMAS WINGFIELD TELLS HIS TALE

Now glory be to God who has given us the victory! It is true, the strength of Spain is shattered, her ships are sunk or fled, the sea has swallowed her soldiers and her sailors by hundreds and by thousands, and England breathes again. They came to conquer, to bring us to the torture and the stake – to do to us free Englishmen as Cortes did by the Indians of Anahuac. Our manhood to the slave bench, our daughters to dishonour, our souls to the loving-kindness of the priest, our wealth to the Emperor and the Pope! God has answered them with his winds, Drake has answered them with his guns. They are gone, and with them the glory of Spain.

I, Thomas Wingfield, heard the news to-day on this very Thursday in the Bungay market-place, whither I went to gossip and to sell the apples which these dreadful gales have left me, as they hang upon my trees.

Before there had been rumours of this and of that, but here in Bungay was a man named Young, of the Youngs of Yarmouth, who had served in one of the Yarmouth ships in the fight at Gravelines, aye and sailed north after the Spaniards till they were lost in the Scottish seas.

Little things lead to great, men say, but here great things lead to little, for because of these tidings it comes about that I, Thomas Wingfield, of the Lodge and the

parish of Ditchingham in the county of Norfolk, being now of a great age and having only a short time to live, turn to pen and ink. Ten years ago, namely, in the year 1578, it pleased her Majesty, our gracious Queen Elizabeth, who at that date visited this county, that I should be brought before her at Norwich. There and then, saying that the fame of it had reached her, she commanded me to give her some particulars of the story of my life, or rather of those twenty years, more or less, which I spent among the Indians at that time when Cortes conquered their country of Anahuac, which is now known as Mexico. But almost before I could begin my tale, it was time for her to start for Cossey to hunt the deer, and she said it was her wish that I should write the story down that she might read it, and moreover that if it were but half as wonderful as it promised to be, I should end my days as Sir Thomas Wingfield. To this I answered her Majesty that pen and ink were tools I had no skill in, yet I would bear her command in mind. Then I made bold to give her a great emerald that once had hung upon the breast of Montezuma's daughter, and of many a princess before her, and at the sight of it her eyes glistened brightly as the gem, for this Queen of ours loves such costly playthings. Indeed, had I so desired, I think that I might then and there have struck a bargain, and set the stone against a title; but I, who for many years had been the prince of a great tribe, had no wish to be a knight. So I kissed the royal hand, and so tightly did it grip the gem within that the knuckle joints shone white, and I went my ways, coming back home to this my house by the Waveney on that same day.

Now the Queen's wish that I should set down the story of my life remained in my mind, and for long I have desired to do it before life and story end together. The labour, indeed, is great to one unused to such tasks; but why should I fear labour who am so near to the holiday of death? I have seen things that no other Englishman has seen, which are worthy to be recorded; my life has been most strange, many a time it has pleased God to preserve it when all seemed lost, and this perchance He has done that the lesson of it might become known to others. For there is a lesson in it and in the things that I have seen, and it is that no wrong can ever bring about a right, that wrong will breed wrong at last, and be it in man or people, will fall upon the brain that thought it and the hand that wrought it.

Look now at the fate of Cortes – that great man whom I have known clothed with power like a god. Nearly forty years ago, so I have heard, he died poor and disgraced in Spain; he, the conqueror – yes, and I have learned also that his son Don Martin has been put to the torture in that city which the father won with so great cruelties for Spain. Malinche, she whom the Spaniards named Marina, the chief and best beloved of all the women of this same Cortes, foretold it to him in her anguish when after all that had been, after she had so many times preserved him and his soldiers to look upon the sun, at the last he deserted her, giving her in marriage to Don Juan Xaramillo. Look again at the fate of Marina herself. Because she loved this man Cortes, or Malinche, as the Indians named him after her, she brought evil on her native land; for without her aid Tenochtitlan, or

Mexico, as they call it now, had never bowed beneath the yoke of Spain – yes, she forgot her honour in her passion. And what was her reward, what right came to her of her wrongdoing? This was her reward at last: to be given away in marriage to another and a lesser man when her beauty waned, as a worn-out beast is sold to a poorer master.

Consider also the fate of those great peoples of the land of Anahuac. They did evil that good might come. They sacrificed the lives of thousands to their false gods, that their wealth might increase, and peace and prosperity be theirs throughout the generations. And now the true God has answered them. For wealth He has given them desolation, for peace the sword of the Spaniard, for prosperity the rack and the torment and the day of slavery. For this it was that they did sacrifice, offering their own children on the altars of Huitzel and of Tezcat.

And the Spaniards themselves, who in the name of mercy have wrought cruelties greater than any that were done by the benighted Aztecs, who in the name of Christ daily violate His law to the uttermost extreme, say shall they prosper, shall their evil-doing bring them welfare? I am old and cannot live to see the question answered, though even now it is in the way of answering. Yet I know that their wickedness shall fall upon their own heads, and I seem to see them, the proudest of the peoples of the earth, bereft of fame and wealth and honour, a starveling remnant happy in nothing save their past. What Drake began at Gravelines God will finish in many another place and time, till at last Spain is of no more account and lies as low as the empire of Montezuma lies to-day.

Thus it is in these great instances of which all the world may know, and thus it is even in the life of so humble a man as I, Thomas Wingfield. Heaven indeed has been merciful to me, giving me time to repent my sins; yet my sins have been visited on my head, on me who took His prerogative of vengeance from the hand of the Most High. It is just, and because it is so I wish to set out the matter of my life's history that others may learn from it. For many years this has been in my mind, as I have said, though to speak truth it was her Majesty the Queen who first set the seed. But only on this day, when I have heard for certain of the fate of the Armada, does it begin to grow, and who can say if ever it will come to flower? For this tidings has stirred me strangely, bringing back my youth and the deeds of love and war and wild adventure which I have been mingled in, fighting for my own hand and for Guatemoc and the people of the Otomie against these same Spaniards, as they have not been brought back for many years. Indeed, it seems to me, and this is no rare thing with the aged, as though there in the far past my true life lay, and all the rest were nothing but a dream.

From the window of the room wherein I write I can see the peaceful valley of the Waveney. Beyond its stream are the common lands golden with gorse, the ruined castle, and the red roofs of Bungay town gathered about the tower of St. Mary's Church. Yonder far away are the king's forests of Stowe and the fields of Flixton Abbey; to the right the steep bank is green with the Earsham oaks, to the left the fast marsh lands spotted with cattle stretch on to Beccles and Lowestoft, while behind me my gardens and orchards rise in terraces up the turfy hill that in old

days was known as the Earl's Vineyard. All these are about me, and yet in this hour they are as though they were not. For the valley of the Waveney I see the vale of Tenochtitlan, for the slopes of Stowe the snowy shapes of the volcans Popo and Iztac, for the spire of Earsham and the towers of Ditchingham, of Bungay, and of Beccles, the soaring pyramids of sacrifice gleaming with the sacred fires, and for the cattle in the meadows the horsemen of Cortes sweeping to war.

It comes back to me; that was life, the rest is but a dream. Once more I feel young, and, should I be spared so long, I will set down the story of my youth before I am laid in yonder churchyard and lost in the world of dreams. Long ago I had begun it, but it was only on last Christmas Day that my dear wife died, and while she lived I knew that this task was better left undone. Indeed, to be frank, it was thus with my wife: She loved me, I believe, as few men have the fortune to be loved, and there is much in my past that jarred upon this love of hers, moving her to a jealousy of the dead that was not the less deep because it was so gentle and so closely coupled with forgiveness. For she had a secret sorrow that ate her heart away, although she never spoke of it. But one child was born to us, and this child died in infancy, nor for all her prayers did it please God to give her another, and indeed remembering the words of Otomie I did not expect that it would be so. Now she knew well that yonder across the seas I had children whom I loved by another wife, and though they were long dead, must always love unalterably, and this thought wrung her heart. That I had been the husband of another woman she could forgive, but that this woman

should have borne me children whose memory was still so dear, she could not forget if she forgave it, she who was childless. Why it was so, being but a man, I cannot say; for who can know all the mystery of a loving woman's heart? But so it was. Once, indeed, we quarrelled on the matter; it was our only quarrel.

It chanced that when we had been married but two years, and our babe was some few days buried in the churchyard of this parish of Ditchingham, I dreamed a very vivid dream as I slept one night at my wife's side. I dreamed that my dead children, the four of them, for the tallest lad bore in his arms my firstborn, that infant who died in the great siege, came to me as they had often come when I ruled the people of the Otomie in the City of Pines, and talked with me, giving me flowers and kissing my hands. I looked upon their strength and beauty, and was proud at heart, and, in my dream, it seemed as though some great sorrow had been lifted from my mind; as though these dear ones had been lost and now were found again. Ah! what misery is there like to this misery of dreams, that can thus give us back our dead in mockery, and then departing, leave us with a keener woe?

Well, I dreamed on, talking with my children in my sleep and naming them by their beloved names, till at length I woke to look on emptiness, and knowing all my sorrow I sobbed aloud. Now it was early morning, and the light of the August sun streamed through the window, but I, deeming that my wife slept, still lay in the shadow of my dream as it were, and groaned, murmuring the names of those whom I might never see again. It chanced,

however, that she was awake, and had overheard those words which I spoke with the dead, while I was yet asleep and after; and though some of this talk was in the tongue of the Otomie, the most was English, and knowing the names of my children she guessed the purport of it all. Suddenly she sprang from the bed and stood over me, and there was such anger in her eyes as I had never seen before nor have seen since, nor did it last long then, for presently indeed it was quenched in tears.

‘What is it, wife?’ I asked astonished.

‘It is hard,’ she answered, ‘that I must bear to listen to such talk from your lips, husband. Was it not enough that, when all men thought you dead, I wore my youth away faithful to your memory? though how faithful you were to mine you know best. Did I ever reproach you because you had forgotten me, and wedded a savage woman in a distant land?’

‘Never, dear wife, nor had I forgotten you as you know well; but what I wonder at is that you should grow jealous now when all cause is done with.’

‘Cannot we be jealous of the dead? With the living we may cope, but who can fight against the love which death has completed, sealing it for ever and making it immortal! Still, THAT I forgive you, for against this woman I can hold my own, seeing that you were mine before you became hers, and are mine after it. But with the children it is otherwise. They are hers and yours alone. I have no part nor lot in them, and whether they be dead or living I know well you love them always, and will love them beyond the grave if you may find them there. Already I grow old, who waited twenty years and more before

I was your wife, and I shall give you no other children. One I gave you, and God took it back lest I should be too happy; yet its name was not on your lips with those strange names. My dead babe is little to you, husband!

Here she choked, bursting into tears; nor did I think it well to answer her that there was this difference in the matter, that whereas, with the exception of one infant, those sons whom I had lost were almost adolescent, the babe she bore lived but sixty days.

Now when the Queen first put it in my mind to write down the history of my life, I remembered this outbreak of my beloved wife; and seeing that I could write no true tale and leave out of it the story of her who was also my wife, Montezuma's daughter, Otomie, Princess of the Otomie, and of the children that she gave me, I let the matter lie. For I knew well, that though we spoke very rarely on the subject during all the many years we passed together, still it was always in Lily's mind; nor did her jealousy, being of the finer sort, abate at all with age, but rather gathered with the gathering days. That I should execute the task without the knowledge of my wife would not have been possible, for till the very last she watched over my every act, and, as I verily believe, divined the most of my thoughts.

And so we grew old together, peacefully, and side by side, speaking seldom of that great gap in my life when we were lost to each other and of all that then befell. At length the end came. My wife died suddenly in her sleep in the eighty-seventh year of her age. I buried her on the south side of the church here, with sorrow indeed, but

not with sorrow inconsolable, for I know that I must soon rejoin her, and those others whom I have loved.

There in that wide heaven are my mother and my sister and my sons; there are great Guatemoc my friend, last of the emperors, and many other companions in war who have preceded me to peace; there, too, though she doubted of it, is Otomie the beautiful and proud. In the heaven which I trust to reach, all the sins of my youth and the errors of my age notwithstanding, it is told us there is no marrying and giving in marriage; and this is well, for I do not know how my wives, Montezuma's daughter and the sweet English gentlewoman, would agree together were it otherwise.

And now to my task.