

CHAPTER II

JOHN CASTELL

When the king was gone, Peter turned to those men who had stood by him and thanked them very heartily. Then he said to Margaret:

"Come, Cousin, that is over for this time, and you have had your wish and seen his Grace. Now, the sooner you are safe at home, the better I shall be pleased."

"Certainly," she replied. "I have seen more than I desire to see again. But before we go let us thank this Spanish señor----" and she paused.

"D'Aguilar, Lady, or at least that name will serve," said the Spaniard in his cultured voice, bowing low before her, his eyes fixed all the while upon her beautiful face.

"Señor d'Aguilar, I thank you, and so does my cousin, Peter Brome, whose life perhaps you saved--don't you, Peter? Oh! and so will my father."

"Yes," answered Peter somewhat sulkily, "I thank him very much; though as for my life, I trusted to my own arm and to those of my friends there. Good night, Sir."

"I fear, Señor," answered d'Aguilar with a smile, "that we cannot part

just yet. You forget, I have become bond for you, and must therefore accompany you to where you live, that I may certify the place. Also, perhaps, it is safest, for these countrymen of mine are revengeful, and, were I not with you, might waylay you."

Now, seeing from his face that Peter was still bent upon declining this escort, Margaret interposed quickly.

"Yes, that is wisest, also my father would wish it. Señor, I will show you the way," and, accompanied by d'Aguilar, who gallantly offered her his arm, she stepped forward briskly, leaving Peter to follow with her cousin Betty.

Thus they walked in the twilight across the fields and through the narrow streets beyond that lay between Westminster and Holborn. In front tripped Margaret beside her stately cavalier, with whom she was soon talking fast enough in Spanish, a tongue which, for reasons that shall be explained, she knew well, while behind, the Scotchman's sword still in his hand, and the handsome Betty on his arm, came Peter Brome in the worst of humours.

John Castell lived in a large, rambling, many-gabled, house, just off the main thoroughfare of Holborn, that had at the back of it a garden surrounded by a high wall. Of this ancient place the front part served as a shop, a store for merchandise, and an office, for Castell was a very wealthy trader--how wealthy none quite knew--who exported woollen

and other goods to Spain under the royal licence, bringing thence in his own ships fine, raw Spanish wool to be manufactured in England, and with it velvet, silks, and wine from Granada; also beautiful inlaid armour of Toledo steel. Sometimes, too, he dealt in silver and copper from the mountain mines, for Castell was a banker as well as a merchant, or rather what answered to that description in those days.

It was said that beneath his shop were dungeon-like store-vaults, built of thick cemented stone, with iron doors through which no thief could break, and filled with precious things. However this might be, certainly in that great house, which in the time of the Plantagenets had been the fortified palace of a noble, existed chambers whereof he alone knew the secret, since no one else, not even his daughter or Peter, ever crossed their threshold. Also, there slept in it a number of men-servants, very stout fellows, who wore knives or swords beneath their cloaks, and watched at night to see that all was well. For the rest, the living-rooms of this house where Castell, Margaret his daughter, and Peter dwelt, were large and comfortable, being new panelled with oak after the Tudor fashion, and having deep windows that looked out upon the garden.

When Peter and Betty reached the door, not that which led into the shop, but another, it was to find that Margaret and d'Aguilar, who were walking very quickly, must have already passed it, since it was shut, and they had vanished. At his knock--a hard one--a serving-man opened, and Peter strode through the vestibule, or ante-chamber, into the hall,

where for the most part they ate and sat, for thence he heard the sound of voices. It was a fine room, lit by hanging lamps of olive oil, and having a large, open hearth where a fire burned pleasantly, while the oaken table in front of it was set for supper. Margaret, who had thrown off her cloak, stood warming herself at the fire, and the Señor d'Aguilar, comfortably seated in a big chair, which he seemed to have known for years, leaned back, his bonnet in his hand, and watched her idly.

Facing them stood John Castell, a stout, dark-bearded man of between fifty and sixty years of age, with a clever, clean-cut face and piercing black eyes. Now, in the privacy of his home, he was very richly attired in a robe trimmed with the costliest fur, and fastened with a gold chain that had a jewel on its clasp. When Castell served in his shop or sat in his counting-house no merchant in London was more plainly dressed; but at night, loving magnificence at heart, it was his custom thus to indulge in it, even when there were none to see him. From the way in which he stood, and the look upon his face, Peter knew at once that he was much disturbed. Hearing his step, Castell wheeled round and addressed him at once in the clear, decided voice which was his characteristic.

"What is this I am told, Peter? A man killed by you before the palace gates? A broil! A public riot in which things went near to great bloodshed between the English, with you at the head of them, and the bodyguard of his Excellency, de Ayala. You arrested by the king, and

bailed out by this señor. Is all this true?"

"Quite," answered Peter calmly.

"Then I am ruined; we are all ruined. Oh! it was an evil hour when I took one of your bloodthirsty trade into my house. What have you to say?"

"Only that I want my supper," said Peter. "Those who began the story can finish it, for I think their tongues are nimbler than my own," and he glanced wrathfully at Margaret, who laughed outright, while even the solemn d'Aguilar smiled.

"Father," broke in Margaret, "do not be angry with cousin Peter, whose only fault is that he hits too hard. It is I who am to blame, for I wished to stop to see the king against his will and Betty's, and then--then that brute," and her eyes filled with tears of shame and anger, "caught hold of me, and Peter threw him down, and afterwards, when he attacked him with a sword, Peter killed him with his staff, and--all the rest happened."

"It was beautifully done," said d'Aguilar in his soft voice and foreign accent. "I saw it all, and made sure that you were dead. The parry I understood, but the way you got your smashing blow in before he could thrust again--ah! that----"

"Well, well," said Castell, "let us eat first and talk afterwards. Señor d'Aguilar, you will honour my poor board, will you not, though it is hard to come from a king's feast to a merchant's fare?"

"It is I who am honoured," answered d'Aguilar; "and as for the feast, his Grace is sparing in this Lenten season. At least, I could get little to eat, and, therefore, like the señor Peter, I am starved."

Castell rang a silver bell which stood near by, whereon servants brought in the meal, which was excellent and plentiful. While they were setting it on the table, the merchant went to a cupboard in the wainscoting, and took thence two flasks, which he uncorked himself with care, saying that he would give the señor some wine of his own country. This done, he said a Latin grace and crossed himself, an example which d'Aguilar followed, remarking that he was glad to find that he was in the house of a good Christian.

"What else did you think that I should be?" asked Castell, glancing at him shrewdly.

"I did not think at all, Señor," he answered; "but alas! every one is not a Christian. In Spain, for instance, we have many Moors and--Jews."

"I know," said Castell, "for I trade with them both."

"Then you have never visited Spain?"

"No; I am an English merchant. But try that wine, Señor; it came from Granada, and they say that it is good."

D'Aguilar tasted it, then drank off his glass.

"It is good, indeed," he said; "I have not its equal in my own cellars there."

"Do you, then, live in Granada, Señor d'Aguilar?" asked Castell.

"Sometimes, when I am not travelling. I have a house there which my mother left me. She loved the town, and bought an old palace from the Moors. Would you not like to see Granada, Señora?" he asked, turning to Margaret as though to change the subject. "There is a wonderful building there called the Alhambra; it overlooks my house."

"My daughter is never likely to see it," broke in Castell; "I do not purpose that she should visit Spain."

"Ah! you do not purpose; but who knows? God and His saints alone," and again he crossed himself, then fell to describing the beauties of Granada.

He was a fine and ready talker, and his voice was very pleasant, so Margaret listened attentively enough, watching his face, and forgetting

to eat, while her father and Peter watched them both. At length the meal came to an end, and when the serving-men had cleared away the dishes, and they were alone, Castell said:

"Now, kinsman Peter, tell me your story."

So Peter told him, in few words, yet omitting nothing.

"I find no blame in you," said the merchant when he had done, "nor do I see how you could have acted otherwise than you did. It is Margaret whom I blame, for I only gave her leave to walk with you and Betty by the river, and bade her beware of crowds."

"Yes, father, the fault is mine, and for it I pray your pardon," said Margaret, so meekly that her father could not find the heart to scold her as he had meant to do.

"You should ask Peter's pardon," he muttered, "seeing that he is like to be laid by the heels in a dungeon over this business, yes, and put upon his trial for causing the man's death. Remember, he was in the service of de Ayala, with whom our liege wishes to stand well, and de Ayala, it seems, is very angry."

Now Margaret grew frightened, for the thought that harm might come to Peter cut her heart. The colour left her cheek, and once again her eyes swam with tears.

"Oh! say not so," she exclaimed. "Peter, will you not fly at once?"

"By no means," he answered decidedly. "Did I not say it to the king, and is not this foreign lord bond for me?"

"What can be done?" she went on; then, as a thought struck her, turned to d'Aguilar, and, clasping her slender hands, looked pleadingly into his face and asked: "Señor, you who are so powerful, and the friend of great people, will you not help us?"

"Am I not here to do so, Señora? Although I think that a man who can call half London to his back, as I saw your cousin do, needs little help from me. But listen, my country has two ambassadors at this Court--de Ayala, whom he has offended, and Doctor de Puebla, the friend of the king; and, strangely enough, de Puebla does not love de Ayala. Yet he does love money, which perhaps will be forthcoming. Now, if a charge is to be laid over this brawl, it will probably be done, not by the churchman, de Ayala, but through de Puebla, who knows your laws and Court, and--do you understand me, Señor Castell?"

"Yes," answered the merchant; "but how am I to get at de Puebla? If I were to offer him money, he would only ask more."

"I see that you know his Excellency," remarked d'Aguilar drily. "You are right, no money should be offered; a present must be made after the

pardon is delivered--not before. Oh! de Puebla knows that John Castell's word is as good in London as it is among the Jews and infidels of Granada and the merchants of Seville, at both of which places I have heard it spoken."

At this speech Castell's eyes flickered, but he only answered:

"May be; but how shall I approach him, Señor?"

"If you will permit me, that is my task. Now, to what amount will you go to save our friend here from inconvenience? Fifty gold angels?"

"It is too much," said Castell; "a knave like that is not worth ten. Indeed, he was the assailant, and nothing should be paid at all."

"Ah! Señor, the merchant is coming out in you; also the dangerous man who thinks that right should rule the world, not kings--I mean might. The knave is worth nothing, but de Puebla's word in Henry's ear is worth much."

"Fifty angels be it then," said Castell, "and I thank you, Señor, for your good offices. Will you take the money now?"

"By no means; not till I bring the debt discharged. Señor, I will come again and let you know how matters stand. Farewell, fair maiden; may the saints intercede for that dead rogue who brought me into your company,

and that of your father and your cousin of the quick eye and the stalwart arm! Till we meet again," and, still murmuring compliments, he bowed himself out of the room in charge of a manservant.

"Thomas," said Castell to this servant when he returned, "you are a discreet fellow; put on your cap and cloak, follow that Spaniard, see where he lodges, and find out all you can about him. Go now, swiftly."

The man bowed and went, and presently Castell, listening, heard a side door shut behind him. Then he turned and said to the other two:

"I do not like this business. I smell trouble in it, and I do not like the Spaniard either."

"He seems a very gallant gentleman, and high-born," said Margaret.

"Aye, very gallant--too gallant, and high-born--too high-born, unless I am mistaken. So gallant and so high-born----" And he checked himself, then added, "Daughter, in your wilfulness you have stirred a great rock. Go to your bed and pray God that it may not fall upon your house and crush it and us."

So Margaret crept away frightened, a little indignant also, for after all, what wrong had she done? And why should her father mistrust this splendid-looking Spanish cavalier?

When she was gone, Peter, who all this while had said little, looked up and asked straight out:

"What are you afraid of, Sir?"

"Many things, Peter. First, that use will be made of this matter to extort much money from me, who am known to be rich, which is a sin best absolved by angels. Secondly, that if I make trouble about paying, other questions will be set afoot."

"What questions?"

"Have you ever heard of the new Christians, Peter, whom the Spaniards call Maranos?"

He nodded.

"Then you know that a Marano is a converted Jew. Now, as it chances--I tell you who do not break secrets--my father was a Marano. His name does not matter--it is best forgotten; but he fled from Spain to England for reasons of his own, and took that of the country whence he came--Castile, or Castell. Also, as it is not lawful for Jews to live in England, he became converted to the Christian faith--seek not to know his motives, they are buried with him. Moreover, he converted me, his only child, who was but ten years old, and cared little whether I swore by 'Father Abraham' or by the 'Blessed Mary.' The paper of my baptism

lies in my strong box still. Well, he was clever, and built up this business, and died unharmed five-and-twenty years ago, leaving me already rich. That same year I married an Englishwoman, your mother's second cousin, and loved her and lived happily with her, and gave her all her heart could wish. But after Margaret's birth, three-and-twenty years gone by, she never had her health, and eight years ago she died. You remember her, since she brought you here when you were a stout lad, and made me promise afterwards that I would always be your friend, for except your father, Sir Peter, none other of your well-born and ancient family were left. So when Sir Peter--against my counsel, staking his all upon that usurping rogue Richard, who had promised to advance him, and meanwhile took his money--was killed at Bosworth, leaving you landless, penniless, and out of favour, I offered you a home, and you, being a wise man, put off your mail and put on woollen and became a merchant's partner, though your share of profit was but small. Now, again you have changed staff for steel," and he glanced at the Scotchman's sword that still lay upon a side table, "and Margaret has loosed that rock of which I spoke to her."

"What is the rock, Sir?"

"That Spaniard whom she brought home and found so fine."

"What of the Spaniard?"

"Wait a while and I will tell you." And, taking a lamp, he left the

room, returning presently with a letter which was written in cipher, and translated upon another sheet in John Castell's own hand.

"This," he said, "is from my partner and connection, Juan Bernaldez, a Marano, who lives at Seville, where Ferdinand and Isabella have their court. Among other matters he writes this: 'I warn all brethren in England to be careful. I have it that a certain one whose name I will not mention even in cipher, a very powerful and high-born man, and, although he appears to be a pleasure-seeker only, and is certainly of a dissolute life, among the greatest bigots in all Spain, has been sent, or is shortly to be sent, from Granada, where he is stationed to watch the Moors, as an envoy to the Court of England to conclude a secret treaty with its king. Under this treaty the names of rich Maranos that are already well known here are to be recorded, so that when the time comes, and the active persecution of Jews and Maranos begins, they may be given up and brought to Spain for trial before the Inquisition. Also he is to arrange that no Jew or Marano may be allowed to take refuge in England. This is for your information, that you may warn any whom it concerns.'"

"You think that d'Aguilar is this man?" asked Peter, while Castell folded up the letter and hid it in the pocket of his robe.

"I do; indeed I have heard already that a fox was on the prowl, and that men should look to their hen-houses. Moreover, did you note how he crossed himself like a priest, and what he said about being among good

Christians? Also, it is Lent and a fast-day, and by ill-fortune, although none of us ate of it, there was meat upon the table, for as you know," he added hurriedly, "I am not strict in such matters, who give little weight to forms and ceremonies. Well, he observed it, and touched fish only, although he drank enough of the sweet wine. Doubtless a report of that meat will go to Spain by the next courier."

"And if it does, what matter? We are in England, and Englishmen will not suffer their Spanish laws and ways. Perhaps the señor d'Aguilar learned as much as that to-night outside the banqueting-hall. There is something to be feared from this brawl at home; but while we are safe in London, no more from Spain."

"I am no coward, but I think there is much more to be feared, Peter. The arm of the Pope is long, and the arm of the crafty Ferdinand is longer, and both of them grope for the throats and moneybags of heretics."

"Well, Sir, we are not heretics."

"No, perhaps not heretics; but we are rich, and the father of one of us was a Jew, and there is something else in this house which even a true son of Holy Church might desire," and he looked at the door through which Margaret had passed to her chamber.

Peter understood, for his long arms moved uneasily, and his grey eyes flashed.

"I will go to bed," he said; "I wish to think."

"Nay, lad," answered Castell, "fill your glass and stay awhile. I have words to say to you, and there is no time like the present. Who knows what may happen to-morrow?"