

CHAPTER III

PETER GATHERS VIOLETS

Peter obeyed, sat down in a big oak chair by the dying fire, and waited in his silent fashion.

"Listen," said Castell. "Fifteen months ago you told me something, did you not?"

Peter nodded.

"What was it, then?"

"That I loved my cousin Margaret, and asked your leave to tell her so."

"And what did I answer?"

"That you forbade me because you had not proved me enough, and she had not proved herself enough; because, moreover, she would be very wealthy, and with her beauty might look high in marriage, although but a merchant's daughter."

"Well, and then?"

"And then--nothing," and Peter sipped his wine deliberately and put it

down upon the table.

"You are a very silent man, even where your courting is concerned," said Castell, searching him with his sharp eyes.

"I am silent because there is no more to say. You bade me be silent, and I have remained so."

"What! Even when you saw those gay lords making their addresses to Margaret, and when she grew angry because you gave no sign, and was minded to yield to one or the other of them?"

"Yes, even then--it was hard, but even then. Do I not eat your bread? and shall I take advantage of you when you have forbid me?"

Castell looked at him again, and this time there were respect and affection in his glance.

"Silent and stern, but honest," he said as though to himself, then added, "A hard trial, but I saw it, and helped you in the best way by sending those suitors--who were worthless fellows--about their business. Now, say, are you still of the same mind towards Margaret?"

"I seldom change my mind, Sir, and on such a business, never."

"Good! Then I give you my leave to find out what her mind may be."

In the joy which he could not control, Peter's face flushed. Then, as though he were ashamed of showing emotion, even at such a moment, he took up his glass and drank a little of the wine before he answered.

"I thank you; it is more than I dared to hope. But it is right that I should say, Sir, that I am no match for my cousin Margaret. The lands which should have been mine are gone, and I have nothing save what you pay me for my poor help in this trade; whereas she has, or will have, much."

Castell's eyes twinkled; the answer amused him.

"At least you have an upright heart," he said, "for what other man in such a case would argue against himself? Also, you are of good blood, and not ill to look on, or so some maids might think; whilst as for wealth, what said the wise king of my people?--that oftentimes riches make themselves wings and fly away. Moreover, man, I have learned to love and honour you, and sooner would I leave my only child in your hands than in those of any lord in England."

"I know not what to say," broke in Peter.

"Then say nothing. It is your custom, and a good one--only listen. Just now you spoke of your Essex lands in the fair Vale of Dedham as gone. Well, they have come back, for last month I bought them all, and more,

at a price larger than I wished to give because others sought them, and but this day I have paid in gold and taken delivery of the title. It is made out in your name, Peter Brome, and whether you marry my daughter, or whether you marry her not, yours they shall be when I am gone, since I promised my dead wife to befriend you, and as a child she lived there in your Hall."

Now moved out of his calm, the young man sprang from his seat, and, after the pious fashion of the time, addressed his patron saint, on whose feast-day he was born.

"Saint Peter, I thank thee--"

"I asked you to be silent," interrupted Castell, breaking him short.

"Moreover, after God, it is one John who should be thanked, not St. Peter, who has no more to do with these lands than Father Abraham or the patient Job. Well, thanks or no thanks, those estates are yours, though I had not meant to tell you of them yet. But now I have something to propose to you. Say, first, does Margaret think aught of that wooden face and those shut lips of yours?"

"How can I know? I have never asked her; you forbade me."

"Pshaw! Living in one house as you do, at your age I would have known all there was to know on such a matter, and yet kept my word. But there, the blood is different, and you are somewhat over-honest for a lover.

Was she frightened for you, now, when that knave made at you with the sword?"

Peter considered the question, then answered:

"I know not. I did not look to see; I looked at the Scotchman with his sword, for if I had not, I should have been dead, not he. But she was certainly frightened when the fellow caught hold of her, for then she called for me loud enough."

"And what is that? What woman in London would not call for such a one as Peter Brome in her trouble? Well, you must ask her, and that soon, if you can find the words. Take a lesson from that Spanish don, and scrape and bow and flatter and tell stories of the war and turn verses to her eyes and hair. Oh, Peter! are you a fool, that I at my age should have to teach you how to court a woman?"

"Mayhap, Sir. At least I can do none of these things, and poesy wearies me to read, much more to write. But I can ask a question and take an answer."

Castell shook his head impatiently.

"Ask the question, man, if you will, but never take the answer if it is against you. Wait rather, and ask it again--"

"And," went on Peter without noticing, his grey eyes lighting with a sudden fire, "if need be, I can break that fine Spaniard's bones as though he were a twig."

"Ah!" said Castell, "perhaps you will be called upon to make your words good before all is done. For my part, I think his bones will take some breaking. Well, ask in your own way--only ask and let me hear the answer before to-morrow night. Now it grows late, and I have still something to say. I am in danger here. My wealth is noised abroad, and many covet it, some in high places, I think. Peter, it is in my mind to have done with all this trading, and to withdraw me to spend my old age where none will take any notice of me, down at that Hall of yours in Dedham, if you will give me lodging. Indeed for a year and more, ever since you spoke to me on the subject of Margaret, I have been calling in my moneys from Spain and England, and placing them out at safe interest in small sums, or buying jewels with them, or lending them to other merchants whom I trust, and who will not rob me or mine. Peter, you have worked well for me, but you are no chapman; it is not in your blood. Therefore, since there is enough for all of us and more, I shall pass this business and its goodwill over to others, to be managed in their name, but on shares, and if it please God we will keep next Yule at Dedham."

As he spoke the door at the far end of the hall opened, and through it came that serving-man who had been bidden to follow the Spaniard.

"Well," said Castell, "what tidings?"

The man bowed and said:

"I followed the Don as you bade me to his lodging, which I reached without his seeing me, though from time to time he stopped to look about him. He rests near the palace of Westminster, in the same big house where dwells the ambassador de Ayala, and those who stood round lifted their bonnets to him.

"Watching I saw some of these go to a tavern, a low place that is open all night, and, following them there, called for a drink and listened to their talk, who know the Spanish tongue well, having worked for five years in your worship's house at Seville. They spoke of the fray to-night, and said that if they could catch that long-legged fellow, meaning Master Brome yonder, they would put a knife into him, since he had shamed them by killing the Scotch knave, who was their officer and the best swordsman in their company, with a staff, and then setting his British bulldogs on them. I fell into talk with them, saying that I was an English sailor from Spain, which they were too drunk to question, and asked who might be the tall don who had interfered in the fray before the king came. They told me he is a rich señor named d'Aguilar, but ill to serve in Lent because he is so strict a churchman, although not strict in other matters. I answered that to me he looked like a great noble, whereon one of them said that I was right, that there was no blood in Spain higher than his, but unfortunately, there was a bend in its stream, also an inkpot had been upset into it."

"What does that mean?" asked Peter.

"It is a Spanish saying," answered Castell, "which signifies that a man is born illegitimate, and has Moorish blood in his veins."

"Then I asked what he was doing here, and the man answered that I had best put that question to the Holy Father and to the Queen of Spain. Lastly, after I had given the soldier another cup, I asked where the don lived, and whether he had any other name. He replied that he lived at Granada for the most part, and that if I called on him there I should see some pretty ladies and other nice things. As for his name, it was the Marquis of Nichel. I said that meant Marquis of Nothing, whereon the soldier answered that I seemed very curious, and that was just what he meant to tell me--nothing. Also he called to his comrades that he believed I was a spy, so I thought it time to be going, as they were drunk enough to do me a mischief."

"Good," said Castell. "You are watchman tonight, Thomas, are you not? See that all doors are barred so that we may sleep without fear of Spanish thieves. Rest you well, Peter. Nay, I do not come yet; I have letters to send to Spain by the ship which sails to-morrow night."

When Peter had gone, John Castell extinguished all the lamps save one. This he took in his hand and passed from the hall into an apartment that in old days, when this was a noble's house, had been the private chapel.

There was an altar in it, and over the altar a crucifix. For a few moments Castell knelt before the altar, for even now, at dead of night, how knew he what eyes might watch him? Then he rose and, lamp in hand, glided behind it, lifted some tapestry, and pressed a spring in the panelling beneath. It opened, revealing a small secret chamber built in the thickness of the wall and without windows; a mere cupboard that once perhaps had been a place where a priest might robe or keep the sacred vessels.

In this chamber was a plain oak table on which stood candles and an ark of wood, also some rolls of parchment. Before this table he knelt down, and put up earnest prayers to the God of Abraham, for, although his father had caused him to be baptized into the Christian Church as a child, John Castell remained a Jew. For this good reason, then, he was so much afraid, knowing that, although his daughter and Peter knew nothing of his secret, there were others who did, and that were it revealed ruin and perhaps death would be his portion and that of his house, since in those days there was no greater crime than to adore God otherwise than Holy Church allowed. Yet for many years he had taken the risk, and worshipped on as his fathers did before him.

His prayer finished, he left the place, closing the spring-door behind him, and passed to his office, where he sat till the morning light, first writing a letter to his correspondent at Seville, and then painfully translating it into cipher by aid of a secret key. His task done, and the cipher letter sealed and directed, he burned the draft,

extinguished his lamp, and, going to the window, watched the rising of the sun. In the garden beneath blackbirds sang, and the pale primroses were abloom.

"I wonder," he said aloud, "whether when those flowers come again I shall live to see them. Almost I feel as though the rope were tightening about my throat at last; it came upon me while that accursed Spaniard crossed himself at my table. Well, so be it; I will hide the truth while I can, but if they catch me I'll not deny it. The money is safe, most of it; my wealth they shall never get, and now I will make my daughter safe also, as with Peter she must be. I would I had not put it off so long; but I hankered after a great marriage for her, which, being a Christian, she well might make. I'll mend that fault; before to-morrow's morn she shall be plighted to him, and before May-day his wife. God of my fathers, give us one month more of peace and safety, and then, because I have denied Thee openly, take my life in payment if Thou wilt."

Before John Castell went to bed Peter was already awake--indeed, he had slept but little that night. How could he sleep whose fortunes had changed thus wondrously between sun set and rise? Yesterday he was but a merchant's assistant--a poor trade for one who had been trained to arms, and borne them bravely. To-day he was a gentleman again, owner of the broad lands where he was bred, and that had been his forefathers' for many a generation. Yesterday he was a lover without hope, for in himself he had never believed that the rich John Castell would suffer him, a landless man, to pay court to his daughter, one of the loveliest and

wealthiest maids in London. He had asked his leave in past days, and been refused, as he had expected that he would be refused, and thenceforward, being on his honour as it were, he had said no tender word to Margaret, nor pressed her hand, nor even looked into her eyes and sighed. Yet at times it had seemed to him that she would not have been ill-pleased if he had done one of these things, or all; that she wondered, indeed, that he did not, and thought none the better of him for his abstinence. Moreover, now he learned that her father wondered also, and this was a strange reward of virtue.

For Peter loved Margaret with heart and soul and body. Since he, a lad, had played with her, a child, he loved her, and no other woman. She was his thought by day and his dream by night, his hope, his eternal star. Heaven he pictured as a place where for ever he would be with Margaret, earth without her could be nothing but a hell. That was why he had stayed on in Castell's shop, bending his proud neck to this tradesman's yoke, doing the bidding and taking the rough words of chapmen and of lordly customers, filling in bills of exchange, and cheapening bargains, all without a sign or murmur, though oftentimes he felt as though his gorge would burst with loathing of the life. Indeed, that was why he had come there at all, who otherwise would have been far away, hewing a road to fame and fortune, or digging out a grave with his broadsword. For here at least he could be near to Margaret, could touch her hand at morn and evening, could watch the light shine in her beauteous eyes, and sometimes, as she bent over him, feel her breath upon his hair. And now his purgatory was at an end, and of a sudden the gates of joy were open.

But what if Margaret should prove the angel with the flaming sword who forbade him entrance to his paradise? He trembled at the thought. Well, if so, so it must be; he was not the man to force her fancy, or call her father to his aid. He would do his best to win her, and if he failed, why then he would bless her, and let her go.

Peter could lie abed no longer, but rose and dressed himself, although the dawn was not fully come. By his open window he said his prayers, thanking God for mercies past, and praying that He would bless him in his great emprise. Presently the sun rose, and there came a great longing on him to be alone in the countryside, he who was country-born and hated towns, with only the sky and the birds and the trees for company.

But here in London was no country, wherever he went he would meet men; moreover, he remembered that it might be best that just now he should not wander through the streets unguarded, lest he should find Spaniards watching to take him unawares. Well, there was the garden; he would go thither, and walk a while. So he descended the broad oak stairs, and, unbolting a door, entered this garden, which, though not too well kept, was large for London, covering an acre of ground perhaps, surrounded by a high wall, and having walks, and at the end of it a group of ancient elms, beneath which was a seat hidden from the house. In summer this was Margaret's favourite bower, for she too loved Nature and the land, and all the things it bore. Indeed, this garden was her joy, and the flowers

that grew there were for the most part of her own planting--primroses, snowdrops, violets, and, in the shadow of the trees, long hartstongue ferns.

For a while Peter walked up and down the central path, and, as it chanced, Margaret, who also had risen early and not slept too well, looking through her window curtains, saw him wandering there, and wondered what he did at this hour; also, why he was dressed in the clothes he wore on Sundays and holidays. Perhaps, she thought, his weekday garments had been torn or muddied in last night's fray. Then she fell to thinking how bravely he had borne him in that fray. She saw it all again; the great red-headed rascal tossed up and whirled to the earth by his strong arms; saw Peter face that gleaming steel with nothing but a staff; saw the straight blows fall, and the fellow go reeling to the earth, slain with a single stroke.

Ah! her cousin, Peter Brome, was a man indeed, though a strange one, and remembering certain things that did not please her, she shrugged her ivory shoulders, turned red, and pouted. Why, that Spaniard had said more civil words to her in an hour than had Peter in two years, and he was handsome and noble-looking also; but then the Spaniard was--a Spaniard, and other men were--other men, whereas Peter was--Peter, a creature apart, one who cared as little for women as he did for trade.

Why, then, if he cared for neither women nor trade, did he stop here? she wondered. To gather wealth? She did not think it; he seemed to have

no leanings that way either. It was a mystery. Still, she could wish to get to the bottom of Peter's heart, just to see what was hid there, since no man has a right to be a riddle to his loving cousin. Yes, and one day she would do it, cost what it might.

Meanwhile, she remembered that she had never thanked Peter for the brave part which he had played, and, indeed, had left him to walk home with Betty, a journey that, as she gathered from her sprightly cousin's talk while she undressed her, neither of them had much enjoyed. For Betty, be it said here, was angry with Peter, who, it seemed, once had told her that she was a handsome, silly fool, who thought too much of men and too little of her business. Well, since after the day's work had begun she would find no opportunity, she would go down and thank Peter now, and see if she could make him talk for once.

So Margaret threw her fur-trimmed cloak about her, drawing its hood over her head, for the April air was cold, and followed Peter into the garden. When she reached it, however, there was no Peter to be seen, whereon she reproached herself for having come to that damp place so early and meditated return. Then, thinking that it would look foolish if any had chanced to see her, she walked down the path pretending to seek for violets, and found none. Thus she came to the group of great elms at the end, and, glancing between their ancient boles, saw Peter standing there. Now, too, she understood why she could find no violets, for Peter had gathered them all, and was engaged, awkwardly enough, in trying to tie them and some leaves into a little posy by the help of a stem of

grass. With his left hand he held the violets, with his right one end of the grass, and since he lacked fingers to clasp the other, this he attempted with his teeth. Now he drew it tight, and now the brittle grass stem broke, the violets were scattered, and Peter used words that he should not have uttered even when alone.

"I knew you would break it, but I never thought you could lose your temper over so small a thing, Peter," said Margaret; and he in the shadow looked up to see her standing there in the sunlight, fresh and lovely as the spring itself.

Solemnly, in severe reproof, she shook her head, from which the hood had fallen back, but there was a smile upon her lips, and laughter in her eyes. Oh! she was beautiful, and at the sight of her Peter's heart stood still. Then, remembering what he had just said, and certain other things that Master Castell had said, he blushed so deeply that her own cheeks went red in sympathy. It was foolish, but she could not help it, for about Peter this morning there was something strange, something that bred blushes.

"For whom are you gathering violets so early," she asked, "when you ought to be praying for that Scotchman's soul?"

"I care nothing for his soul," answered Peter testily. "If the brute had one, he can look after it himself; and I was gathering the violets--for you."

She stared. Peter was not in the habit of making her presents of flowers. No wonder he had looked strange.

"Then I will help you to tie them. Do you know why I am up so early? It is for your sake. I behaved badly to you last night, for I was cross because you wanted to thwart me about seeing the king. I never thanked you for all you did, you brave Peter, though I thanked you enough in my heart. Do you know that when you stood there with that sword, in the middle of those Englishmen, you looked quite noble? Come out into the sunlight, and I will thank you properly."

In his agitation Peter let the remainder of the flowers fall. Then an idea struck him, and he answered:

"Look! I can't; if you are really grateful for nothing at all, come in here and help me to pick up these violets--a pest on their short stalks!"

She hesitated a little, then by degrees drew nearer, and, bending down, began to find the flowers one by one. Peter had scattered them wide, so that at first the pair were some way apart, but when only a few remained, they drew close. Now there was but one violet left, and, both stretching for it, their hands met. Margaret held the violet, and Peter held Margaret's fingers. Thus linked they straightened themselves, and as they rose their faces were very near together and oh! most sweet were

Margaret's wonderful eyes; while in the eyes of Peter there shone a flame. For a second they looked at each other, and then of a sudden he kissed her on the lips.