

CHAPTER IV

LOVERS DEAR

"Peter!" gasped Margaret--"Peter!"

But Peter made no answer, only he who had been red of face went white, so that the mark of the sword-cut across his cheek showed like a scarlet line upon a cloth.

"Peter!" repeated Margaret, pulling at her hand which he still held, "do you know what you have done?"

"It seems that you do, so what need is there for me to tell you?" he muttered.

"Then it was not an accident; you really meant it, and you are not ashamed."

"If it was, I hope that I may meet with more such accidents."

"Peter, leave go of me. I am going to tell my father, at once."

His face brightened.

"Tell him by all means," he said; "he won't mind. He told me----"

"Peter, how dare you add falsehood to--to--you know what. Do you mean to say that my father told you to kiss me, and at six o'clock in the morning, too?"

"He said nothing about kissing, but I suppose he meant it. He said that I might ask you to marry me."

"That," replied Margaret, "is a very different thing. If you had asked me to marry you, and, after thinking it over for a long while, I had answered Yes, which of course I should not have done, then, perhaps, before we were married you might have--Well, Peter, you have begun at the wrong end, which is very shameless and wicked of you, and I shall never speak to you again."

"I daresay," said Peter resignedly; "all the more reason why I should speak to you while I have the chance. No, you shan't go till you have heard me. Listen. I have been in love with you since you were twelve years old--"

"That must be another falsehood, Peter, or you have gone mad. If you had been in love with me for eleven years, you would have said so."

"I wanted to, always, but your father refused me leave. I asked him fifteen months ago, but he put me on my word to say nothing."

"To say nothing--yes, but he could not make you promise to show nothing."

"I thought that the one thing meant the other; I see now that I have been a fool, and, I suppose, have overstayed my market," and he looked so depressed that Margaret relented a little.

"Well," she said, "at any rate it was honest, and of course I am glad that you were honest."

"You said just now that I told falsehoods--twice; if I am honest, how can I tell falsehoods?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask me riddles? Let me go and try to forget all this."

"Not till you have answered me outright. Will you marry me, Margaret? If you won't, there will be no need for you to go, for I shall go and trouble you no more. You know what I am, and all about me, and I have nothing more to say except that, although you may find many finer husbands, you won't find one who would love and care for you better. I know that you are very beautiful and very rich, while I am neither one nor the other, and often I have wished to Heaven that you were not so beautiful, for sometimes that brings trouble on women who are honest and only have one heart to give, or so rich either. But thus things are, and I cannot change them, and, however poor my chance of hitting the dove, I

determined to shoot my bolt and make way for the next archer. Is there any chance at all, Margaret? Tell me, and put me out of pain, for I am not good at so much talking."

Now Margaret began to grow disturbed; her wayward assurance departed from her.

"It is not fitting," she murmured, "and I do not wish--I will speak to my father; he shall give you your answer."

"No need to trouble him, Margaret. He has given it already. His great desire is that we should marry, for he seeks to leave this trade and to live with us in the Vale of Dedham, in Essex, where he has bought back my father's land."

"You are full of strange tidings this morning, Peter."

"Yes, Margaret, our wheel of life that went so slow turns fast enough to-day, for God above has laid His whip upon the horses of our Fate, and they begin to gallop, whither I know not. Must they run side by side, or separate? It is for you to say."

"Peter," she said, "will you not give me a little time?"

"Aye, Margaret, ten whole minutes by the clock, and then if it is nay, all your life, for I pack my chest and go. It will be said that I feared

to be taken for that soldier's death."

"You are unkind to press me so."

"Nay, it is kindest to both of us. Do you then love some other man?"

"I must confess I do," she murmured, looking at him out of the corners of her eyes.

Now Peter, strong as he was, turned faint, and in his agitation let go her hand which she lifted, the violets still between her fingers, considering it as though it were a new thing to her.

"I have no right to ask you who he is," he muttered, striving to control himself.

"Nay, but, Peter, I will tell you. It is my father--what other man should I love?"

"Margaret!" he said in wrath, "you are fooling me."

"How so? What other man should I love--unless, indeed, it were yourself?"

"I can bear no more of this play," he said. "Mistress Margaret, I bid you farewell. God go with you!" And he brushed past her.

"Peter," she said when he had gone a few yards, "would you have these violets as a farewell gift?"

He turned and hesitated.

"Come, then, and take them."

So back he came, and with little trembling fingers she began to fasten the flowers to his doublet, bending ever nearer as she fastened, until her breath played upon his face, and her hair brushed his bonnet. Then, it matters not how, once more the violets fell to earth, and she sighed, and her hands fell also, and he put his strong arms round her and drew her to him and kissed her again and yet again on the hair and eyes and lips; nor did Margaret forbid him.

At length she thrust him from her and, taking him by the hand, led him to the seat beneath the elms, and bade him sit at one end of it, while she sat at the other.

"Peter," she whispered, "I wish to speak with you when I can get my breath. Peter, you think poorly of me, do you not? No--be silent; it is my turn to talk. You think that I am heartless, and have been playing with you. Well, I only did it to make sure that you really do love me, since, after that--accident of a while ago (when we were picking up the violets, I mean), you would have been in honour bound to say it, would

you not? Well, now I am quite sure, so I will tell you something. I love you many times as well as you love me, and have done so for quite as long. Otherwise, should I not have married some other suitor, of whom there have been plenty? Aye, and I will tell you this to my sin and shame, that once I grew so angry with you because you would not speak or give some little sign, that I went near to it. But at the last I could not, and sent him about his business also. Peter, when I saw you last night facing that swordsman with but a staff, and thought that you must die, oh! then I knew all the truth, and my heart was nigh to bursting, as, had you died, it would have burst. But now it is all done with, and we know each other's secret, and nothing shall ever part us more till death comes to one or both."

Thus Margaret spoke, while he drank in her words as desert sands, parched by years of drought, drink in the rain--and watched her face, out of which all mischief and mockery had departed, leaving it that of a most beautiful and most earnest woman, to whom a sense of the weight of life, with its mingled joys and sorrows, had come home suddenly. When she had finished, this silent man, to whom even his great happiness brought few words, said only:

"God has been very good to us. Let us thank God."

So they did, then, even there, seated side by side upon the bench, because the grass was too wet for them to kneel on, praying in their simple, childlike faith that the Power which had brought them together,

and taught them to love each other, would bless them in that love and protect them from all harms, enemies, and evils through many a long year of life.

Their prayer finished, they sat together on the seat, now talking, and now silent in their joy, while all too fast the time wore on. At length--it was after one of these spells of blissful silence--a change came over them, such a change as falls upon some peaceful scene when, unexpected and complete, a black stormcloud sweeps across the sun, and, in place of its warm light, pours down gloom full of the promise of tempest and of rain. Apprehension got a hold of them. They were both afraid of what they could not guess.

"Come," she said, "it is time to go in. My father will miss us."

So without more words or endearments they rose and walked side by side out of the shelter of the elms into the open garden. Their heads were bent, for they were lost in thought, and thus it came about that Margaret saw her feet pass suddenly into the shadow of a man, and, looking up, perceived standing in front of her, grave, alert, amused, none other than the Señor d'Aguilar. She uttered a little stifled scream, while Peter, with the impulse that causes a brave and startled hound to rush at that which frightens it, gave a leap forward towards the Spaniard.

"Mother of God! do you take me for a thief?" he asked in a laughing

voice, as he stepped to one side to avoid him.

"Your pardon," said Peter, shaking himself together; "but you surprised us appearing so suddenly where we never thought to see you."

"Any more than I thought to see you here, for this seems a strange place to linger on so cold a morning," and he looked at them again with his curious, mocking eyes that appeared to read the secret of their souls, while they grew red as roses beneath his scrutiny. "Permit me to explain," he went on. "I came here thus early on your service, to warn you, Master Peter, not to go abroad to-day, since a writ is out for your arrest, and as yet I have had no time to quash it by friendly settlement. Well, as it chanced, I met that handsome lady who was with you yesterday, returning from her marketing--a friendly soul--she says she is your cousin. She brought me to the house, and having learned that your father, whom I wished to see, was at his prayers, good man, in the old chapel, led me to its door and left me to seek him. I entered, but could not find him, so, having waited a while, strayed into this garden through the open door, purposing to walk here till some one should appear, and, you see, I have been fortunate beyond my expectations or deserts."

"So!" said Peter shortly, for the man's manner and elaborated explanations filled him with disgust. "Let us seek Master Castell that he may hear the story."

"And we thank you much for coming to warn us," murmured Margaret. "I will go find my father," and she slipped past him towards the door.

D'Aguilar watched her enter it, then turned to Peter and said:

"You English are a hardy folk who take the spring air so early. Well, in such company I would do the same. Truly she is a beauteous maiden. I have some experience of the sex, but never do I remember one so fair."

"My cousin is well enough," answered Peter coldly, for this Spaniard's very evident admiration of Margaret did not please him.

"Yes," answered d'Aguilar, taking no notice of his tone, "she is well enough to fill the place, not of a merchant's daughter, but of a great lady--a countess reigning over towns and lands, or a queen even; the royal robes and ornaments would become that carriage and that brow."

"My cousin seeks no such state who is happy in her quiet lot," answered Peter again; then added quickly, "See, here comes Master Castell seeking you."

D'Aguilar advanced and greeted the merchant courteously, noticing as he did so that, notwithstanding his efforts to appear unconcerned, Castell seemed ill at ease.

"I am an early visitor," he said, "but I knew that you business folk

rise with the lark, and I wished to catch our friend here before he went out," and he repeated to him the reason of his coming.

"I thank you, Señor," answered Castell. "You are very good to me and mine. I am sorry that you have been kept waiting. They tell me that you looked for me in the chapel, but I was not there, who had already left it for my office."

"So I found. It is a quaint place, that old chapel of yours, and while I waited I went to the altar and told my beads there, which I had no time to do before I left my lodgings."

Castell started almost imperceptibly, and glanced at d'Aguilar with his quick eyes, then turned the subject and asked if he would not breakfast with them. He declined, however, saying that he must be about their business and his own, then promptly proposed that he should come to supper on the following night that was--Sunday--and make report how things had gone, a suggestion that Castell could not but accept.

So he bowed and smiled himself out of the house, and walked thoughtfully into Holborn, for it had pleased him to pay this visit on foot, and unattended. At the corner whom should he meet again but the tall, fair-haired Betty, returning from some errand which she had found it convenient to fulfil just then.

"What," he said, "you once more! The saints are very kind to me this

morning. Come, Señora, walk a little way with me, for I would ask you a few questions."

Betty hesitated, then gave way. It was seldom that she found the chance of walking through Holborn with such a noble-looking cavalier.

"Never look at your working-dress," he said.

"With such a shape, what matters the robe that covers it?"--a compliment at which Betty blushed, for she was proud of her fine figure.

"Would you like a mantilla of real Spanish lace for your head and shoulders? Well, you shall have one that I brought from Spain with me, for I know no other lady in the land whom it would become better. But, Mistress Betty, you told me wrong about your master. I went to the chapel and he was not there."

"He was there, Señor," she answered, eager to set herself right with this most agreeable and discriminating foreigner, "for I saw him go in a moment before, and he did not come out again."

"Then, Señora, where could he have hidden himself? Has the place a crypt?"

"None that I have heard of; but," she added, "there is a kind of little room behind the altar."

"Indeed. How do you know that? I saw no room."

"Because one day I heard a voice behind the tapestry, Señor, and, lifting it, saw a sliding door left open, and Master Castell kneeling before a table and saying his prayers aloud."

"How strange! And what was there on the table?"

"Only a queer-shaped box of wood like a little house, and two candlesticks, and some rolls of parchment. But I forgot, Señor; I promised Master Castell to say nothing about that place, for he turned and saw me, and came at me like a watchdog out of its kennel. You won't say that I told you, will you, Señor?"

"Not I; your good master's private cupboard does not interest me. Now I want to know something more. Why is that beautiful cousin of yours not married? Has she no suitors?"

"Suitors, Señor? Yes, plenty of them, but she sends them all about their business, and seems to have no mind that way."

"Perhaps she is in love with her cousin, that long-legged, strong-armed, wooden-headed Master Brome."

"Oh! no, Señor, I don't think so; no lady could be in love with him--he

is too stern and silent."

"I agree with you, Señora. Then perhaps he is in love with her."

Betty shook her head, and replied:

"Peter Brome doesn't think anything of women, Señor. At least he never speaks to or of them."

"Which shows that probably he thinks about them all the more. Well, well, it is no affair of ours, is it? Only I am glad to hear that there is nothing between them, since your mistress ought to marry high, and be a great lady, not a mere merchant's wife."

"Yes, Señor. Though Peter Brome is not a merchant, at least by birth, he is high-born, and should be Sir Peter Brome if his father had not fought on the wrong side and sold his land. He is a soldier, and a very brave one, they say, as all might see last night."

"No doubt, and perhaps would make a great captain, if he had the chance, with his stern face and silent tongue. But, Señora Betty, say, how comes it that, being so handsome," and he bowed, "you are not married either? I am sure it can be from no lack of suitors."

Again Betty, foolish girl, flushed with pleasure at the compliment.

"You are right, Señor," she answered. "I have plenty of them; but I am like my cousin--they do not please me. Although my father lost his fortune, I come of good blood, and I suppose that is why I do not care for these low-born men, and would rather remain as I am than marry one of them."

"You are quite right," said d'Aguilar in his sympathetic voice. "Do not stain your blood. Marry in your own class, or not at all, which, indeed, should not be difficult for one so beautiful and charming." And he looked into her large eyes with tender admiration.

This quality, indeed, soon began to demonstrate itself so actively, for they were now in the fields where few people wandered, that Betty, who although vain was proud and upright, thought it wise to recollect that she must be turning homewards. So, in spite of his protests, she left him and departed, walking upon air.

How splendid and handsome this foreign gentleman was, she thought to herself, really a great cavalier, and surely he admired her truly. Why should he not? Such things had often been. Many a rich lady whom she knew was not half so handsome or so well born as herself, and would make him a worse wife--that is, and the thought chilled her somewhat--if he were not already married.

From all of which it will be seen that d'Aguilar had quickly succeeded in the plan which only presented itself to him a few hours before. Betty

was already half in love with him. Not that he had any desire to possess this beautiful but foolish woman's heart, who saw in her only a useful tool, a stepping-stone by means of which he might draw near to Margaret.

For with Margaret, it may be said at once, he was quite in love. At the sight of her sweet yet imperial beauty, as he saw her first, dishevelled, angry, frightened, in the crowd outside the king's banqueting-hall, his southern blood had taken sudden fire. Finished voluptuary though he was, the sensation he experienced then was quite new to him. He longed for this woman as he had never longed for any other, and, what is more, he desired to make her his wife. Why not? Although there was a flaw in it, his rank was high, and therefore she was beneath him; but for this her loveliness would atone, and she had wit and learning enough to fill any place that he could give her. Also, great as was his wealth, his wanton, spendthrift way of life had brought him many debts, and she was the only child of one of the richest merchants in England, whose dower, doubtless, would be a fortune that many a royal princess might envy. Why not again? He would turn Inez and those others adrift--at any rate, for a while--and make her mistress of his palace there in Granada. Instantly, as is often the fashion of those who have Eastern blood in their veins, d'Aguilar had made up his mind, yes, before he left her father's table on the previous night. He would marry Margaret and no other woman.

Yet at once he had seen many difficulties in his path. To begin with, he mistrusted him of Peter, that strong, quiet man who could kill a great

armed knave with his stick, and at a word call half London to his side. Peter, he was sure, being human, must be in love with Margaret, and he was a rival to be feared. Well, if Margaret had no thoughts of Peter, this mattered nothing, and if she had--and what were they doing together in the garden that morning?--Peter must be got rid of, that was all. It was easy enough if he chose to adopt certain means; there were many of those Spanish fellows who would not mind sticking a knife into his back in the dark.

But sinful as he was, at such steps his conscience halted. Whatever d'Aguilar had done, he had never caused a man to be actually murdered, he who was a bigot, who atoned for his misdoings by periods of remorse and prayer, in which he placed his purse and talents at the service of the Church, as he was doing at this moment. No, murder must not be thought of; for how could any absolution wash him clean of that stain? But there were other ways. For instance, had not this Peter, in self-defence it is true, killed one of the servants of an ambassador of Spain? Perhaps, however, it would not be necessary to make use of them. It had seemed to him that the lady was not ill pleased with him, and, after all, he had much to offer. He would court her fairly, and if he were rejected by her, or by her father, then it would be time enough to act. Meanwhile, he would keep the sword hanging over the head of Peter, pretending that it was he alone who had prevented it from falling, and learn all that he could as to Castell and his history.

Here, indeed, Fortune, in the shape of the foolish Betty, had favoured

him. Without a doubt, as he had heard in Spain, and been sure from the moment that he first saw him, Castell was still secretly a Jew. Mistress Betty's story of the room behind the altar, with the ark and the candles and the rolls of the Law, proved as much. At least here was evidence enough to send him to the fires of the Inquisition in Spain, and, perhaps, to drive him out of England. Now, if John Castell, the Spanish Jew, should not wish, for any reason, to give him his daughter in marriage, would not a hint and an extract from the Commissions of their Majesties of Spain and the Holy Father suffice to make him change his mind?

Thus pondering, d'Aguilar regained his lodgings, where his first task was to enter in a book all that Betty had told him, and all that he had observed in the house of John Castell.