

CHAPTER V

CASTELL'S SECRET

In John Castell's house it was the habit, as in most others in those days, for his dependents, clerks, and shopmen to eat their morning and mid-day meals with him in the hall, seated at two lower tables, all of them save Betty, his daughter's cousin and companion, who sat with them at the upper board. This morning Betty's place was empty, and presently Castell, lifting his eyes, for he was lost in thought, noted it, and asked where she might be--a question that neither Margaret nor Peter could answer.

One of the servants at the lower table, however--it was that man who had been sent to follow d'Aguilar on the previous night--said that as he came down Holborn a while before he had seen her walking with the Spanish don, a saying at which his master looked grave.

Just as they were finishing their meal, a very silent one, for none of them seemed to have anything to say, and after the servants had left the hall, Betty arrived, flushed as though with running.

"Where have you been that you are so late?" asked Castell.

"To seek the linen for the new sheets, but it was not ready," she answered glibly. "The mercer kept you waiting long," remarked Castell

quietly. "Did you meet any one?"

"Only the folk in the street."

"I will ask you no more questions, lest I should cause you to lie and bring you into sin," said Castell sternly. "Girl, how far did you walk with the Señor d'Aguilar, and what was your business with him?"

Now Betty knew that she had been seen, and that it was useless to deny the truth.

"Only a little way," she answered, "and that because he prayed me to show him his path."

"Listen, Betty," went on Castell, taking no notice of her words. "You are old enough to guard yourself, therefore as to your walking abroad with gallants who can mean you no good I say nothing. But know this--no one who has knowledge of the matters of my house," and he looked at her keenly, "shall mix with any Spaniard. If you are found alone with this señor any more, that hour I have done with you, and you never pass my door again. Nay, no words. Take your food and eat it elsewhere."

So she departed half weeping, but very angry, for Betty was strong and obstinate by nature. When she had gone, Margaret, who was fond of her cousin, tried to say some words on her behalf; but her father stopped her.

"Pshaw!" he said, "I know the girl; she is vain as a peacock, and, remembering her gentle birth and good looks, seeks to marry above her station; while for some purpose of his own--an ill one, I'll warrant--that Spaniard plays upon her weakness, which, if it be not curbed, may bring trouble on us all. Now, enough of Betty Dene; I must to my work."

"Sir," said Peter, speaking for the first time, "we would have a private word with you."

"A private word," he said, looking up anxiously. "Well, speak on. No, this place is not private; I think its walls have ears. Follow me," and he led the way into the old chapel, whereof, when they had all passed it, he bolted the door. "Now," he said, "what is it?"

"Sir," answered Peter, standing before him, "having your leave at last, I asked your daughter in marriage this morning."

"At least you lose no time, friend Peter; unless you had called her from her bed and made your offer through the door you could not have done it quicker. Well, well, you ever were a man of deeds, not words, and what says my Margaret?"

"An hour ago she said she was content," answered Peter.

"A cautious man also," went on Castell with a twinkle in his eye, "who

remembers that women have been known to change their minds within an hour. After such long thought, what say you now, Margaret?"

"That I am angry with Peter," she answered, stamping her small foot, "for if he does not trust me for an hour, how can he trust me for his life and mine?"

"Nay, Margaret, you do not understand me," said Peter. "I wished not to bind you, that is all, in case----"

"Now you are saying it again," she broke in vexed, and yet amused. "Do so a third time, and I will you at your word."

"It seems best that I should remain silent. Speak you," said Peter humbly.

"Aye, for truly you are a master of silence, as I should know, if any do," replied Margaret, bethinking her of the weary months and years of waiting. "Well, I will answer for you.--Father, Peter was right; I am content to marry him, though to do so will be to enter the Order of the Silent Brothers. Yes, I am content; not for himself, indeed, who has so many faults, but for myself, who chance to love him," and she smiled sweetly enough.

"Do not jest on such matters, Margaret."

"Why not, father? Peter is solemn enough for both of us--look at him. Let us laugh while we may, for who knows when tears may come?"

"A good saying," answered Castell with a sigh. "So you two have plighted your troth, and, my children, I am glad of it, for who knows when those tears of which Margaret spoke may come, and then you can wipe away each other's? Take now her hand, Peter, and swear by the Rood, that symbol which you worship"--here Peter glanced at him, but he went on--"swear, both of you that come what may, together or separate, through good report or evil report, through poverty or wealth, through peace or persecutions, through temptation or through blood, through every good or ill that can befall you in this world of bittersweet, you will remain faithful to your troth until you be wed, and after you are wed, faithful to each other till death do part you."

These words he spoke to them in a voice that was earnest almost to passion, searching their faces the while with his quick eyes as though he would read their very hearts. His mood crept from him to them; once again they felt something of that fear which had fallen on them in the garden when they passed into the shadow of the Spaniard. Very solemnly then, and with little of true lovers' joy, did they take each other's hands and swear by the Cross and Him Who hung on it, that through these things, and all others they could not foretell, they would, if need were, be faithful to the death.

"And beyond it also," added Peter; while Margaret bowed her stately head

in sweet assent.

"Children," said Castell, "you will be rich--few richer in this land--though mayhap it would be wise that you should not show all your wealth at once, or ape the place of a great house, lest envy should fall upon your heads and crush you. Be content to wait, and rank will find you in its season, or if not you, your children. Peter, I tell you now, lest I should forget it, that the list of all my moneys and other possessions in chattels or lands or ships or merchandise is buried beneath the floor of my office, just under where my chair stands. Lift the boards and dig away a foot of rubbish, and you will find a stone trap, and below an iron box with the deeds, inventories, and some very precious jewels. Also, if by any mischance that box should be lost, duplicates of nearly all these papers are in the hands of my good friend and partner in our inland British trade, Simon Levett, whom you know. Remember my words, both of you."

"Father," broke in Margaret in an anxious voice, "why do you speak of the future thus?--I mean, as though you had no share in it? Do you fear aught?"

"Yes, daughter, much, or rather I expect, I do not fear, who am prepared and desire to meet all things as they come. You have sworn that oath, have you not? And you will keep it, will you not?"

"Aye!" they answered with one breath.

"Then prepare you to feel the weight of the first of those trials whereof it speaks, for I will no longer hold back the truth from you. Children, I, whom for all these years you have thought of your own faith, am a Jew as my forefathers were before me, back to the days of Abraham."

The effect of this declaration upon its hearers was remarkable. Peter's jaw dropped, and for the second time that day his face went white; while Margaret sank down into a chair that stood near by, and stared at him helplessly. In those times it was a very terrible thing to be a Jew. Castell looked from one to the other, and, feeling the insult of their silence, grew angry.

"What!" he exclaimed in a bitter voice, "are you like all the others? Do you scorn me also because I am of a race more ancient and honourable than those of any of your mushroom lords and kings? You know my life: say, what have I done wrong? Have I caught Christian children and crucified them to death? Have I defrauded my neighbour or oppressed the poor? Have I mocked your symbol of the Host? Have I conspired against the rulers of this land? Have I been a false friend or a cruel father? You shake your heads; then why do you stare at me as though I were a thing accursed and unclean? Have I not a right to the faith of my fathers? May I not worship God in my own fashion?" And he looked at Peter, a challenge in his eyes. "Sir," answered Peter, "without a doubt you may, or so it seems to me. But then, why for all these years

have you appeared to worship Him in ours?"

At this blunt question, so characteristic of the speaker, Castell seemed to shrink like a pin-pricked bladder, or some bold fighter who has suddenly received a sword-thrust in his vitals. All courage went out of the man, his fiery eyes grew tame, he appeared to become visibly smaller, and to put on something of the air of those mendicants of his own race, who whine out their woes and beg alms of the passer-by. When next he spoke, it was as a suppliant for merciful judgment at the hands of his own child and her lover.

"Judge me not harshly," he said. "Think what it is to be a Jew--an outcast, a thing that the lowest may spurn and spit at, one beyond the law, one who can be hunted from land to land like a mad wolf, and tortured to death, when caught, for the sport of gentle Christians, who first have stripped him of his gains and very garments. And then think what it means to escape all these woes and terrors, and, by the doffing of a bonnet, and the mumbling of certain prayers with the lips in public, to find sanctuary, peace, and protection within the walls of Mother Church, and thus fostered, to grow rich and great."

He paused as though for a reply, but as they did not speak, went on:

"Moreover, as a child, I was baptized into your Church; but my heart, like that of my father, remained with the Jews, and where the heart goes the feet follow."

"That makes it worse," said Peter, as though speaking to himself.

"My father taught me thus," Castell went on, as though pleading his case before a court of law.

"We must answer for our own sins," said Peter again.

Then at length Castell took fire.

"You young folk, who as yet know little of the terrors of the world, reproach me with cold looks and colder words," he said; "but I wonder, should you ever come to such a pass as mine, whether you will find the heart to meet it half as bravely? Why do you think that I have told you this secret, that I might have kept from you as I kept it from your mother, Margaret? I say because it is a part of my penance for the sin which I have sinned. Aye, I know well that my God is a jealous God, and that this sin will fall back on my head, and that I shall pay its price to the last groat, though when and how the blow will strike me I know not. Go you, Peter, or you, Margaret, and denounce me if you will. Your priests will speak well of you for the deed, and open to you a shorter road to Heaven, and I shall not blame you, nor lessen your wealth by a single golden noble."

"Do not speak so madly, Sir," said Peter; "these matters are between you and God. What have we to do with them, and who made us judges over you?"

We only pray that your fears may come to nothing, and that you may reach your grave in peace and honour."

"I thank you for your generous words, which are such as befit your nature," said Castell gently; "but what says Margaret?"

"I, father?" she answered, wildly. "Oh! I have nothing to say. He is right. It is between you and God; but it is hard that I must lose my love so soon." Peter looked up, and Castell answered:

"Lose him! Why, what did he swear but now?"

"I care not what he swore; but how can I ask him, who is of noble, Christian birth, to marry the daughter of a Jew who all his life has passed himself off as a worshipper of that Jesus Whom he denies?"

Now Peter held up his hand.

"Have done with such talk," he said. "Were your father Judas himself, what is that to you and me? You are mine and I am yours till death part us, nor shall the faith of another man stand between us for an hour. Sir, we thank you for your confidence, and of this be sure, that although it makes us sorrowful, we do not love or honour you the less because now we know the truth."

Margaret rose from her chair, looked a while at her father, then with a

sob threw herself suddenly upon his breast.

"Forgive me if I spoke bitterly," she said, "who, not knowing that I was half a Jewess, have been taught to hate their race. What is it to me of what faith you are, who think of you only as my dearest father?"

"Why weep then?" asked Castell, stroking her hair tenderly.

"Because you are in danger, or so you say, and if anything happened to you--oh! what shall I do then?"

"Accept it as the will of God, and bear the blow bravely, as I hope to do, should it fall," he answered, and, kissing her, left the chapel.

"It seems that joy and trouble go hand in hand," said Margaret, looking up presently.

"Yes, Sweet, they were ever twins; but provided we have our share of the first, do not let us quarrel with the second. A pest on the priests and all their bigotry, say I! Christ sought to convert the Jews, not to kill them; and for my part I can honour the man who clings to his own faith, aye, and forgive him because they forced him to feign to belong to ours. Pray then that neither of us may live to commit a greater sin, and that we may soon be wed and dwell in peace away from London, where we can shelter him."

"I do--I do," she answered, drawing close to Peter, and soon they forgot their fears and doubts in each other's arms.

On the following morning, that of Sunday, Peter, Margaret, and Betty went together to Mass at St. Paul's church; but Castell said that he was ill, and did not come. Indeed, now that his conscience was stirred as to the double life he had led so long, he purposed, if he could avoid it, to worship in a Christian church no more. Therefore he said that he was sick; and they, knowing that this sickness was of the heart, answered nothing. But privately they wondered what he would do who could not always remain sick, since not to go to church and partake of its Sacraments was to be published as a heretic.

But if he did not accompany them himself, Castell, without their knowledge, sent two of his stoutest servants, bidding these keep near to them and see that they came home safe.

Now, when they left the church, Peter saw two Spaniards, whose faces he thought he knew, who seemed to be watching them, but, as he lost sight of them presently in the throng, said nothing. Their shortest way home ran across some fields and gardens where there were few houses. This lane, then, they followed, talking earnestly to each other, and noting nothing till Betty behind called out to them to beware. Then Peter looked up and saw the two Spaniards scrambling through a gap in the fence not six paces ahead of them, saw also that they laid their hands upon their sword-hilts.

"Let us pass them boldly," he muttered to Margaret; "I'll not turn my back on a brace of Spaniards," but he also laid his hand upon the hilt of the sword he wore beneath his cloak, and bade her get behind him.

Thus, then, they came face to face. Now, the Spaniards, who were evil-looking fellows, bowed courteously enough, and asked if he were not Master Peter Brome. They spoke in Spanish; but, like Margaret Peter knew this tongue, if not too well, having been taught it as a child, and practised it much since he came into the service of John Castell, who used it largely in his trade.

"Yes," he answered. "What is your business with me?"

"We have a message for you, Señor, from a certain comrade of ours, one Andrew, a Scotchman, whom you met a few nights ago," replied the spokesman of the pair. "He is dead, but still he sends his message, and it is that we should ask you to join him at once. Now, all of us brothers have sworn to deliver that message, and to see that you keep the tryst. If some of us should chance to fail, then others will meet you with the message until you keep that tryst."

"You mean that you wish to murder me," said Peter, setting his mouth and drawing the sword from beneath his cloak. "Well, come on, cowards, and we will see whom Andrew gets for company in hell to-day. Run back, Margaret and Betty--run." And he tore off his cloak and threw it over

his left arm.

So for a moment they stood, for he looked fierce and ill to deal with. Then, just as they began to feint in front of him, there came a rush of feet, and on either side of Peter appeared the two stout serving-men, also sword in hand.

"I am glad of your company," he said, catching sight of them out of the corners of his eyes. "Now, Señors Cut-throats, do you still wish to deliver that message?"

The answer of the Spaniards, who saw themselves thus unexpectedly out-matched, was to turn and run, whereon one of the serving-men, picking up a big stone that lay in the path, hurled it after them with all his force. It struck the hindmost Spaniard full in the back, and so heavy was the blow that he fell on to his face in the mud, whence he rose and limped away, cursing them with strange, Spanish oaths, and vowing vengeance.

"Now," said Peter, "I think that we may go home in safety, for no more messengers will come from Andrew to-day."

"No," gasped Margaret, "not to-day, but to-morrow or the next day they will come, and oh! how will it end?"

"That God knows alone," answered Peter gravely as he sheathed his sword.

When the story of this attempt was told to Castell he seemed much disturbed.

"It is clear that they have a blood-feud against you on account of that Scotchman whom you killed in self-defence," he said anxiously. "Also these Spaniards are very revengeful, nor have they forgiven you for calling the English to your aid against them. Peter, I fear that if you go abroad they will murder you."

"Well, I cannot stay indoors always, like a rat in a drain," said Peter crossly, "so what is to be done? Appeal to the law?"

"No; for you have just broken the law by killing a man. I think you had best go away for a while till this storm blows over."

"Go away! Peter go away?" broke in Margaret, dismayed.

"Yes," answered her father. "Listen, daughter. You cannot be married at once. It is not seemly; moreover, notice must be given and arrangement made. A month hence will be soon enough, and that is not long for you to wait who only became affianced yesterday. Also, until you are wed, no word must be said to any one of this betrothal of yours, lest those Spaniards should lay their feud at your door also, and work you some mischief. Let none know of it, I charge you, and in company be distant to each other, as though there were nothing between you."

"As you will, Sir," replied Peter; "but for my part I do not like all these hidings of the truth, which ever lead to future trouble. I say, let me bide here and take my chance, and let us be wed as soon as may be."

"That your wife may be made a widow before the week is out, or the house burnt about our ears by these rascals and their following? No, no, Peter; walk softly that you may walk safely. We will hear the report of the Spaniard d'Aguilar, and afterwards take counsel."