

CHAPTER VII

NEWS FROM SPAIN

Peter Brome was a very quiet man, whose voice was not often heard about the place, and yet it was strange how dull and different the big, old house in Holborn seemed without him. Even the handsome Betty, with whom he was never on the best of terms, since there was much about her of which he disapproved, missed him, and said so to her cousin, who only answered with a sigh. For in the bottom of her heart Betty both feared and respected Peter. The fear was of his observant eyes and caustic words, which she knew were always words of truth, and the respect for the general uprightness of his character, especially where her own sex was concerned.

In fact, as has been hinted, some little time before, when Peter had first come to live with the Castells, Betty, thinking him a proper man of gentle birth, such a one indeed as she would wish to marry, had made advances to him, which, as he did not seem to notice them, became by degrees more and more marked. What happened at last they two knew alone, but it was something that caused Betty to become very angry, and to speak of Peter to her friends as a cold-blooded lout who thought only of work and gain. The episode was passing, and soon forgotten by the lady in the press of other affairs; but the respect remained. Moreover, on one or two occasions, when the love of admiration had led her into griefs, Peter had proved a good friend, and what was better, a friend

who did not talk. Therefore she wished him back again, especially now, when something that was more than mere vanity and desire for excitement had taken hold of her, and Betty found herself being swept off her feet into very deep and doubtful waters.

The shopmen and the servants missed him also, for to him all disputes were brought for settlement, nor, provided it had not come about through lack of honesty, were any pains too great for him to take to help them in a trouble. Most of all Castell missed him, since until Peter had gone he did not know how much he had learned to rely upon him, both in his business and as a friend. As for Margaret, her life without him was one long, empty night.

Thus it chanced that in such a house any change was welcome, and, though she liked him little enough, Margaret was not even displeased when one morning Betty told her that the lord d'Aguilar was coming to call on her that day, and purposed to bring her a present.

"I do not seek his presents," said Margaret indifferently; then added, "But how do you know that, Betty?"

The young woman coloured, and tossed her head as she answered:

"I know it, Cousin, because, as I was going to visit my old aunt yesterday, who lives on the wharf at Westminster, I met him riding, and he called out to me, saying that he had a gift for you and one for

me also."

"Be careful you do not meet him too often, Betty, when you chance to be visiting your aunt. These Spaniards are not always over-honest, as you may learn to your sorrow."

"I thank you for your good counsel," said Betty, shortly, "but I, who am older than you, know enough of men to be able to guard myself, and can keep them at a distance."

"I am glad of it, Betty, only sometimes I have thought that the distance was scarcely wide enough," answered Margaret, and left the subject, for she was thinking of other things.

That afternoon, when Margaret was walking in the garden, Betty, whose face seemed somewhat flushed, ran up to her and said that the lord d'Aguilar was waiting in the hall.

"Very good," answered Margaret, "I will come. Go, tell my father, that he may join us. But why are you so disturbed and hurried?" she added wonderingly.

"Oh!" answered Betty, "he has brought me a present, so fine a present--a mantle of the most wonderful lace that ever I saw, and a comb of mottled shell mounted in gold to keep it off the hair. He made me wait while he showed me how to put it on, and that was why I ran."

Margaret did not quite see the connection; but she answered slowly:

"Perhaps it would have been wiser if you had run first. I do not understand why this fine lord brings you presents."

"But he has brought one for you also, Cousin, although he would not say what it was."

"That I understand still less. Go, tell my father that the Señor d'Aguilar awaits him."

Then she went into the hall, and found d'Aguilar looking at an illuminated Book of Hours in which she had been reading, that was written in Spanish in one column and in Latin in that opposite. He greeted her in his usual graceful way, that, where Margaret was concerned, was easy and well-bred without being bold, and said at once:

"So you read Spanish, Señora?"

"A little. Not very well, I fear."

"And Latin also?"

"A little again. I have been taught that tongue. By studying them thus I try to improve myself in both."

"I perceive that you are learned as you are beautiful," and he bowed courteously.

"I thank you, Señor; but I lay claim to neither grace."

"What need is there to claim that which is evident?" replied d'Aguilar; then added, "But I forgot, I have brought you a present, if you will be pleased to accept it. Or, rather, I bring you what is your own, or at the least your father's. I bargained with his Excellency Don de Ayala, pointing out that fifty gold angels were too much to pay for that dead rogue of his; but he would give me nothing back in money, since with gold he never parts. Yet I won some change from him, and it stands without your door. It is a Spanish jennet of the true Moorish blood, which, hundreds of years ago, that people brought with them from the East. He needs it no longer, as he returns to Spain, and it is trained to bear a lady." Margaret did not know what to answer, but, fortunately, at that moment her father appeared, and to him d'Aguilar repeated his tale, adding that he had heard his daughter say that the horse she rode had fallen with her, so that she could use it no more.

Now, Castell did not wish to accept this gift, for such he felt it to be; but d'Aguilar assured him that if he did not he must sell it and return him the price in money, as it did not belong to him. So, there being no help for it, he thanked him in his daughter's name and his own,

and they went into the stable-yard, whither it had been taken, to look at this horse.

The moment that Castell saw it he knew that it was a creature of great value, pure white in colour, with a long, low body, small head, gentle eyes, round hoofs, and flowing mane and tail, such a horse, indeed, as a queen might have ridden. Now again he was confused, being sure that this beast had never been given back as a luck-penny, since it would have fetched more than the fifty angels on the market; moreover, it was harnessed with a woman's saddle and bridle of the most beautifully worked red Cordova leather, to which were attached a silver bit and stirrup. But d'Aguilar smiled, and vowed that things were as he had told them, so there was nothing more to be said. Margaret, too, was so pleased with the mare, which she longed to ride, that she forgot her scruples, and tried to believe that this was so. Noting her delight, which she could not conceal as she patted the beautiful beast, d'Aguilar said:

"Now I will ask one thing in return for the bargain that I have made--that I may see you mount this horse for the first time. You told me that you and your father were wont to go out together in the morning. Have I your leave, Sir," and he turned to Castell, "to ride with you before breakfast, say, at seven of the clock, for I would show the lady, your daughter, how she should manage a horse of this blood, which is something of a trick?"

"If you will," answered Castell--"that is, if the weather is fine," for the offer was made so courteously that it could scarcely be refused.

D'Aguilar bowed, and they re-entered the house, talking of other matters. When they were in the hall again, he asked whether their kinsman Peter had reached his destination safely, adding:

"I pray you, do not tell me where it is, for I wish to be able to put my hand upon my heart and swear to all concerned, and especially to certain fellows who are still seeking for him, that I know nothing of his hiding-place."

Castell answered that he had, since but a few minutes before a letter had come from him announcing his safe arrival, tidings at which Margaret looked up, then, remembering her promise, said that she was glad to hear of it, as the roads were none too safe, and spoke indifferently of something else. D'Aguilar added that he also was glad, then, rising, took his leave "till seven on the morrow."

When he had gone, Castell gave Margaret a letter, addressed to her in Peter's stiff, upright hand, which she read eagerly. It began and ended with sweet words, but, like his speech, was brief and to the point, saying only that he had accomplished his journey without adventure, and was very glad to find himself again in the old house where he was born, and amongst familiar fields and faces. On the morrow he was to see the tradesmen as to alterations and repairs which were much needed, even the

moat being choked with mud and weeds. His last sentence was: "I much mistrust me of that fine Spaniard, and I am jealous to think that he should be near to you while I am far away. Beware of him, I say--beware of him. May the Mother of God and all the saints have you in their keeping! Your most true affianced lover."

This letter Margaret answered before she slept, for the messenger was to return at dawn, telling Peter, amongst other things, of the gift which d'Aguilar had brought her, and how she and her father were forced to accept it, but bidding him not be jealous, since, although the gift was welcome, she liked the giver little, who did but count the hours till her true lover should come back again and take her to himself.

Next morning she was up early, clothed in her riding-dress, for the day was very fine, and by seven o'clock d'Aguilar appeared, mounted on a great horse. Then the Spanish jennet was brought out, and deftly he lifted her to the saddle, showing her how she must pull but lightly on the reins, and urge or check her steed with her voice alone, using no whip or spur.

A perfect beast it proved to be, indeed, gentle as a lamb, and easy, yet very spirited and swift.

D'Aguilar was a pleasant cavalier also, talking of many things grave and gay, until at length even Castell forgot his thoughts, and grew cheerful as they cantered forward through the fresh spring morning by heath and

hill and woodland, listening to the singing of the birds, and watching the husbandmen at their labour. This ride was but the first of several that they took, since d'Aguilar knew their hours of exercise, even when they changed them, and whether they asked him or not, joined or met them in such a natural fashion that they could not refuse his company.

Indeed, they were much puzzled to know how he came to be so well acquainted with their movements, and even with the direction in which they proposed to ride, but supposed that he must have it from the grooms, although these were commanded to say nothing, and always denied having spoken with him. That Betty should speak of such matters, or even find opportunity of doing so, never chanced to cross their minds, who did not guess that if they rode with d'Aguilar in the morning, Betty often walked with him in the evening when she was supposed to be at church, or sewing, or visiting her aunt upon the wharf at Westminster. But of these walks the foolish girl said nothing, for her own reasons.

Now, as they rode together, although he remained very courteous and respectful, the manner of d'Aguilar towards Margaret grew ever more close and intimate. Thus he began to tell her stories, true or false, of his past life, which seemed to have been strange and eventful enough; to hint, too, of a certain hidden greatness that pertained to him which he did not dare to show, and of high ambitions which he had. He spoke also of his loneliness, and his desire to lose it in the companionship of a kindred heart, if he could find one to share his wealth, his station, and his hopes; while all the time his dark eyes, fixed on Margaret, seemed to say, "The heart I seek is such a one as yours." At length,

at some murmured word or touch, she took affright, and, since she could not avoid him abroad, determined to stay at home, and, much as she loved the sport, to ride no more till Peter should return. So she gave out that she had hurt her knee, which made the saddle painful to her, and the beautiful Spanish mare was left idle in the stable, or mounted only by the groom.

Thus for some days she was rid of d'Aguilar, and employed herself in reading and working, or in writing long letters to Peter, who was busy enough at Dedham, and sent her thence many commissions to fulfil.

One afternoon Castell was seated in his office deciphering letters which had just reached him. The night before his best ship, of over two hundred tons burden, which was named the Margaret, after his daughter, had come safely into the mouth of the Thames from Spain. That evening she was to reach her berth at Gravesend with the tide, when Castell proposed to go aboard of her to see to the unloading of her cargo. This was the last of his ships which remained unsold, and it was his plan to re-load and victual her at once with goods that were waiting, and send her back to the port of Seville, where his Spanish partners, in whose name she was already registered, had agreed to take her over at a fixed price. This done, it was only left for him to hand over his business to the merchants who had purchased it in London, after which he would be free to depart, a very wealthy man, and spend the evening of his days at peace in Essex, with his daughter and her husband, as now he so greatly longed to do. So soon as they were within the river banks the captain of

this ship, Smith by name, had landed the cargo-master with letters and a manifest of cargo, bidding him hire a horse and bring them to Master Castell's house in Holborn. This the man had done safely, and it was these letters that Castell read.

One of them was from his partner Bernaldez in Seville; not in answer to that which he had written on the night of the opening of this history--for this there had been no time--yet dealing with matters whereof it treated. In it was this passage:

"You will remember what I wrote to you of a certain envoy who has been sent to the Court of London, who is called d'Aguilar, for as our cipher is so secret, and it is important that you should be warned, I take the risk of writing his name. Since that letter I have learned more concerning this grandee, for such he is. Although he calls himself plain Don d'Aguilar, in truth he is the Marquis of Morella, and on one side, it is said, of royal blood, if not on both, since he is reported to be the son born out of wedlock of Prince Carlos of Viana, the half-brother of the king. The tale runs that Carlos, the learned and gentle, fell in love with a Moorish lady of Aguilar of high birth and great wealth, for she had rich estates at Granada and elsewhere, and, as he might not marry her because of the difference of their rank and faiths, lived with her without marriage, of which union one son was born. Before Prince Carlos died, or was poisoned, and while he was still a prisoner at Morella, he gave to, or procured for this boy the title of marquis, choosing from some fancy the name of Morella, that place where he had

suffered so much. Also he settled some private lands upon him. After the prince died, the Moorish lady, his lover, who had secretly become a Christian, took her son to live at her palace in Granada, where she died also some ten years ago, leaving all her great wealth to him, for she never married. At this time it is said that his life was in danger, for the reason that, although he was half a Moor, too much of the blood-royal ran in his veins. But the Marquis was clever, and persuaded the king and queen that he had no ambition beyond his pleasures. Also the Church interceded for him, since to it he proved himself a faithful son, persecuting all heretics, especially the Jews, and even Moors, although they are of his own blood. So in the end he was confirmed in his possessions and left alone, although he refused to become a priest.

"Since then he has been made an agent of the Crown at Granada, and employed upon various embassies to London, Rome, and elsewhere, on matters connected with the faith and the establishment of the Holy Inquisition. That is why he is again in England at this moment, being charged to obtain the names and particulars concerning all Maranos settled there, especially if they trade with Spain. I have seen the names of those of whom he must inquire most closely, and that is why I write to you so fully, since yours is first upon the list. I think, therefore, that you do wisely to wind up your business with this country, and especially to sell your ships to us outright and quickly, since otherwise they might be seized--like yourself, if you came here. My counsel to you is--hide your wealth, which will be great when we have paid you all we owe, and go to some place where you will be forgotten

for a while, since that bloodhound d'Aguilar, for so he calls himself, after his mother's birthplace, has not tracked you to London for nothing. As yet, thanks be to God, no suspicion has fallen on any of us; perhaps because we have many in our pay."

When Castell had finished transcribing all this passage he read it through carefully. Then he went into the hall, where a fire burned, for the day was cold, and threw the translation on to it, watching until it was consumed, after which he returned to his office, and hid away the letter in a secret cupboard behind the panelling of the wall. This done, he sat himself in his chair to think.

"My good friend Juan Bernaldez is right," he said to himself; "d'Aguilar, or the Marquis Morella, does not nose me and the others out for nothing. Well, I shall not trust myself in Spain, and the money, most of it, except what is still to come from Spain, is put out where it will never be found by him, at good interest too. All seems safe enough--and yet I would to God that Peter and Margaret were fast married, and that we three sat together, out of sight and mind, in the Old Hall at Dedham. I have carried on this game too long. I should have closed my books a year ago; but the trade was so good that I could not. I was wise also, who in this one lucky year have nearly doubled my fortune. And yet it would have been safer, before they guessed that I was so rich. Greed--mere greed--for I do not need this money which may destroy us all! Greed! The ancient pitfall of my race."

As he thought thus there came a knock upon his door. Snatching up a pen he dipped it in the ink-horn and, calling "Enter," began to add a column of figures on a paper before him.

The door opened; but he seemed to take no heed, so diligently did he count his figures. Yet, although his eyes were fixed upon the paper, in some way that he could not understand he was well aware that d'Aguilar and no other stood in the room behind him, the truth being, no doubt, that unconsciously he had recognised his footstep. For a moment the knowledge turned him cold--he who had just been reading of the mission of this man--and feared what was to come. Yet he acted well.

"Why do you disturb me, Daughter?" he said testily, and without looking round. "Have not things gone ill enough with half the cargo destroyed by sea-water, and the rest, that you must trouble me while I sum up my losses?" And, casting the pen down, he turned his stool round impatiently.

Yes! there sure enough stood d'Aguilar, very handsomely arrayed, and smiling and bowing as was his custom.