

CHAPTER VIII

D'AGUILAR SPEAKS

"Losses?" said d'Aguilar. "Do I hear the wealthy John Castell, who holds half the trade with Spain in the hollow of his hand, talk of losses?"

"Yes, Señor, you do. Things have gone ill with this ship of mine that has barely lived through the spring gales. But be seated."

"Indeed, is that so?" said d'Aguilar as he sat down. "What a lying jade is rumour! For I was told that they had gone very well. Doubtless, however, what is loss to you would be priceless gain to one like me."

Castell made no answer, but waited, feeling that his visitor had not come to speak with him of his trading ventures.

"Señor Castell," said d'Aguilar, with a note of nervousness in his voice, "I am here to ask you for something."

"If it be a loan, Señor, I fear that the time is not opportune." And he nodded towards the sheet of figures.

"It is not a loan; it is a gift."

"Anything in my poor house is yours," answered Castell courteously, and

in Oriental form.

"I rejoice to hear it, Señor, for I seek something from your house."

Castell looked a question at him with his quick black eyes.

"I seek your daughter, the Señora Margaret, in marriage."

Castell stared at him, then a single word broke from his lips.

"Impossible."

"Why impossible?" asked d'Aguilar slowly, yet as one who expected some such answer. "In age we are not unsuited, nor perhaps in fortune, while of rank I have enough, more than you guess perhaps. I vaunt not myself, yet women have thought me not uncomely. I should be a good friend to the house whence I took a wife, where perchance a day may come when friends will be needed; and lastly, I desire her not for what she may bring with her, though wealth is always welcome, but--I pray you to believe it--because I love her."

"I have heard that the Señor d'Aguilar loves many women, yonder in Granada."

"As I have heard that the Margaret had a prosperous voyage, Señor Castell. Rumour, as I said but now, is a lying jade. Yet I will not copy

her. I have been no saint. Now I would become one, for Margaret's sake. I will be true to your daughter, Señor. What say you now?"

Castell only shook his head.

"Listen," went on d'Aguilar. "I am more than I seem to be; she who weds me will not lack for rank and titles."

"Yes, you are the Marquis de Morella, the reputed son of Prince Carlos of Viana by a Moorish mother, and therefore nephew to his Majesty of Spain."

D'Aguilar looked at him, then bowed and said:

"Your information is good--as good as mine, almost. Doubtless you do not like that bar in the blood. Well, if it were not there, I should be where Ferdinand is, should I not? So I do not like it either, though it is good blood and ancient--that of those high-bred Moors. Now, may not the nephew of a king and the son of a princess of Granada be fit to mate with the daughter of--a Jew, yes, a Marano, and of a Christian English lady, of good family, but no more?"

Castell lifted his hand as though to speak; but d'Aguilar went on:

"Deny it not, friend; it is not worth while here in private. Was there not a certain Isaac of Toledo who, hard on fifty years ago, left Spain,

for his own reasons, with a little son, and in London became known as Joseph Castell, having, with his son, been baptized into the Holy Church? Ah! you see you are not the only one who studies genealogies."

"Well, Señor, if so, what of it?"

"What of it? Nothing at all, friend Castell. It is an old story, is it not, and, as that Isaac is long dead and his son has been a good Christian for nearly fifty years and had a Christian wife and child, who will trouble himself about such a matter? If he were openly a Hebrew now, or worse still, if pretending to be a Christian, he in secret practised the rites of the accursed Jews, why then----"

"Then what?"

"Then, of course, he would be expelled this land, where no Jew may live, his wealth would be forfeit to its king, whose ward his daughter would become, to be given in marriage where he willed, while he himself, being Spanish born, might perhaps be handed over to the power of Spain, there to make answer to these charges. But we wander to strange matters. Is that alliance still impossible, Señor?"

Castell looked him straight in the eyes and answered:

"Yes."

There was something so bold and direct in his utterance of the word that for a moment d'Aguilar seemed to be taken aback. He had not expected this sharp denial.

"It would be courteous to give a reason," he said presently.

"The reason is simple, Marquis. My daughter is already betrothed, and will ere long be wedded."

D'Aguilar did not seem surprised at this intelligence.

"To that brawler, your kinsman, Peter Brome, I suppose?" he said interrogatively. "I guessed as much, and by the saints I am sorry for her, for he must be a dull lover to one so fair and bright; while as a husband--" And he shrugged his shoulders. "Friend Castell, for her sake you will break off this match."

"And if I will not, Marquis?"

"Then I must break it off for you in the interest of all of us, including, of course, myself, who love her, and wish to lift her to a great place, and of yourself, whom I desire should pass your old age in peace and wealth, and not be hunted to your death like a mad dog."

"How will you break it, Marquis? by--"

"Oh no, Señor!" answered d'Aguilar, "not by other men's swords--if that is what you mean. The worthy Peter is safe from them so far as I am concerned, though if he should come face to face with mine, then let the best man win. Have no fear, friend, I do not practise murder, who value my own soul too much to soak it in blood, nor would I marry a woman except of her own free will. Still, Peter may die, and the fair Margaret may still place her hand in mine and say, 'I choose you as my husband.'"

"All these things, and many others, may happen, Marquis; but I do not think it likely that they will happen, and for my part, whilst thanking you for it, I decline your honourable offer, believing that my daughter will be more happy in her present humble state with the man she has chosen. Have I your leave to return to my accounts?" And he rose.

"Yes, Señor," answered d'Aguilar, rising also; "but add an item to those losses of which you spoke, that of the friendship of Carlos, Marquis de Morella, and on the other side enter again that of his hate. Man!" he added, and his dark, handsome face turned very evil as he spoke, "are you mad? Think of the little tabernacle behind the altar in your chapel, and what it contains."

Castell stared at him, then said:

"Come, let us see. Nay, fear no trick; like you I remember my soul, and do not stain my hands with blood. Follow me, so you will be safe."

Curiosity, or some other reason, prompted d'Aguilar to obey, and presently they stood behind the altar.

"Now," said Castell, as he drew the tapestry and opened the secret door, "look!" D'Aguilar peered into the place; but where should have been the table, the ark, the candlesticks, and the roll of the law of which Betty had told him, were only old dusty boxes filled with parchments and some broken furniture.

"What do you see?" asked Castell.

"I see, friend, that you are even a cleverer Jew than I thought. But this is a matter that you must explain to others in due season. Believe me, I am no inquisitor." Then without more words he turned and left him.

When Castell, having shut the secret door and drawn the tapestry, hurried from the chapel, it was to find that the marquis had departed.

He went back to his office much disturbed, and sat himself down there to think. Truly Fate, that had so long been his friend, was turning its face against him. Things could not have gone worse. D'Aguilar had discovered the secret of his faith through his spies, and, having by some accursed mischance fallen in love with his daughter's beauty, was become his bitter enemy because he must refuse her to him. Why must he refuse her? The man was of great position and noble blood; she would become the wife of one of the first grandees of Spain, one who stood

nearest to the throne. Perhaps--such a thing was possible--she might live herself to be queen, or the mother of kings. Moreover, that marriage meant safety for himself; it meant a quiet age, a peaceable death in his own bed--for, were he fifty times a Marano, who would touch the father-in-law of the Marquis de Morella? Why? Just because he had promised her in marriage to Peter Brome, and through all his life as a merchant he had never yet broken with a bargain because it went against himself. That was the answer. Yet almost he could find it in his heart to wish that he had never made that bargain; that he had kept Peter, who had waited so long, waiting for another month. Well, it was too late now. He had passed his word, and he would keep it, whatever the cost might be.

Rising, he called one of the servants, and bade her summon Margaret. Presently she returned, saying that her mistress had gone out walking with Betty, adding also that his horse was at the door for him to ride to the river, where he was to pass the night on board his ship.

Taking paper, he bethought him that he would write to Margaret, warning her against the Spaniard. Then, remembering that she had nothing to fear from him, at any rate at present, and that it was not wise to set down such matters, he told her only to take good care of herself, and that he would be back in the morning.

That evening, when Margaret was in her own little sitting-chamber which adjoined the great hall, the door opened, and she looked up from the

work upon which she was engaged, to see d'Aguilar standing before her.

"Señor!" she said, amazed, "how came you here?"

"Señora," he answered, closing the door and bowing, "my feet brought me. Had I any other means of coming I think that I should not often be absent from our side."

"Spare me your fine words, I pray you, Señor," answered Margaret, frowning. "It is not fitting that I should receive you thus alone at night, my father being absent from the house." And she made as though she would pass him and reach the door.

D'Aguilar, who stood in front of it, did not move, so perforce she stopped half way.

"I found that he was absent," he said courteously, "and that is why I venture to address you upon a matter of some importance. Give me a few minutes of your time, therefore, I beseech you."

Now, at once the thought entered Margaret's mind that he had some news of Peter to communicate to her--bad news perhaps.

"Be seated, and speak on, Señor," she said, sinking into a chair, while he too sat down, but still in front of the door.

"Señora," he said, "my business in this country is finished, and in a few days I sail hence for Spain." And he hesitated a moment.

"I trust that your voyage will be pleasant," said Margaret, not knowing what else to answer.

"I trust so also, Señora, since I have come to ask you if you will share it. Listen, before you refuse. To-day I saw your father, and begged your hand of him. He would give me no answer, neither yea nor nay, saying that you were your own mistress, and that I must seek it from your lips."

"My father said that?" gasped Margaret, astonished, then bethought her that he might have had reasons for speaking so, and went on rapidly, "Well, it is short and simple. I thank you, Señor; but stay in England."

"Even that I would be willing to do for your sake Señora, though, in truth, I find it a cold and barbarous country."

"If so, Señor d'Aguilar, I think that I should go to Spain. I pray you let me pass."

"Not till you have heard me out, Señora, when I trust that your words will be more gentle. See now I am a great man in my own country. Although it suits me to pass here incognito as plain Señor d'Aguilar I

am the Marquis of Morella, the nephew of Ferdinand the King, with some wealth and station, official and private. If you disbelieve me, I can prove it to you."

"I do not disbelieve," answered Margaret indifferently, "it may well be so; but what is that to me?"

"Then is it not something, Lady, that I, who have blood-royal in my veins, should seek the daughter of a merchant to be my wife?"

"Nothing at all--to me, who am satisfied with my humble lot."

"Is it nothing to you that I should love as I do, with all my heart and soul? Marry me, and I tell you that I will lift you high, yes, perhaps even to the throne."

She thought a moment, then asked:

"The bribe is great, but how would you do that? Many a maid has been deceived with false jewels, Señor."

"How has it been done before? Not every one loves Ferdinand. I have many friends who remember that my father was poisoned by his father and Ferdinand's, he being the elder son. Also, my mother was a princess of the Moors, and if I, who dwell among them as the envoy of their Majesties, threw in my sword with theirs--or there are other ways. But I

am speaking things that have never passed my lips before, which, were they known, would cost me my head--let it serve to show how much I trust you."

"I thank you, Señor, for your trust; but this crown seems to me set upon a peak that it is dangerous to climb, and I had sooner sit in safety on the plain."

"You reject the pomp," went on d'Aguilar in his passionate, pleading voice, "then will not the love move you? Oh! you shall be worshipped as never woman was. I swear to you that in your eyes there is a light which has set my heart on fire, so that it burns night and day, and will not be quenched. Your voice is my sweetest music, your hair is a cord that binds me to you faster than the prisoner's chain, and, when you pass, for me Venus walks the earth. More, your mind is pure and noble as your beauty, and by the aid of it I shall be lifted up through the high places of the earth to some white throne in heaven. I love you, my lady, my fair Margaret; because of you, all other women are become coarse and hateful in my sight. See how much I love you, that I, one of the first grandees of Spain, do this for your sweet sake," and suddenly he cast himself upon his knees before her, and lifting the hem of her dress pressed it to his lips.

Margaret looked down at him, and the anger that was rising in her breast melted, while with it went her fear. This man was much in earnest; she could not doubt it. The hand that held her robe trembled like shaken

water, his face was ashen, and in his dark eyes swam tears. What cause had she to be afraid of one who was so much her slave?

"Señor," she said very gently, "rise, I pray you. Do not waste all this love upon one who chances to have caught your fancy, but who is quite unworthy of it, and far beneath you; one, moreover, by whom it may not be returned. Señor, I am already affianced. Therefore, put me out of your mind and find some other love."

He rose and stood in front of her.

"Affianced," he said, "I knew it. Nay, I will say no ill of the man; to revile one more fortunate is poor argument. But what is it to me if you are affianced? What to me if you were wed? I should seek you all the same, who have no choice. Beneath me? You are as far above me as a star, and it would seem as hard to reach. Seek some other love? I tell you, lady, that I have sought many, for not all are so hard to win, and I hate them every one. You I desire alone, and shall desire till I be dead, aye, and you I will win or die. No, I will not die till you are my own. Have no fear, I will not kill your lover, save perhaps in fair fight; I will not force you to give yourself to me, should I find the chance, but with your own lips I will yet listen to you asking me to be your husband. I swear it by Him Who died for us. I swear that, laying aside all other ends, to that sole purpose I will devote my days. Yes, and should you chance to pass from earth before me, then I will follow you to the very gates of death and clasp you there."

Now again Margaret's fear returned to her. This man's passion was terrible, yet there was a grandeur in it; Peter had never spoken to her in so high a fashion.

"Señor," she said almost pleadingly, "corpses are poor brides; have done with such sick fancies, which surely must be born of your Eastern blood."

"It is your blood also, who are half a Jew, and, therefore, at least you should understand them."

"Mayhap I do understand, mayhap I think them great in their own fashion, yes, noble even, and admire, if it can be noble to seek to win away another man's betrothed. But, Señor, I am that man's betrothed, and all of me, my body and my soul, is his, nor would I go back upon my word, and so break his heart, to win the empire of the earth. Señor, once more I implore you to leave this poor maid to the humble life that she has chosen, and to forget her."

"Lady," answered d'Aguilar, "your words are wise and gentle, and I thank you for them. But I cannot forget you, and that oath I swore just now I swear again, thus." And before she could prevent him, or even guess what he was about to do, he lifted the gold crucifix that hung by a chain about her neck, kissed it, and let it fall gently back upon her breast, saying, "See, I might have kissed your lips before you could have stayed

me, but that I will never do until you give me leave, so in place of them I kiss the cross, which till then we both must carry. Lady, my lady Margaret, within a day or two I sail for Spain, but your image shall sail with me, and I believe that ere long our paths must cross again. How can it be otherwise since the threads of your life and mine were intertwined on that night outside the Palace of Westminster --intertwined never to be separated till one of us has ceased to be, and then only for a little while. Lady, for the present, farewell."

Then swiftly and silently as he had come, d'Aguilar went.

It was Betty who let him out at the side door, as she had let him in. More, glancing round to see that she was not observed--for it chanced now that Peter was away with some of the best men, and the master was out with others, no one was on watch this night--leaving the door ajar that she might re-enter, she followed him a little way, till they came to an old arch, which in some bygone time had led to a house now pulled down. Into this dark place Betty slipped, touching d'Aguilar on the arm as she did so. For a moment he hesitated, then, muttering some Spanish oath between his teeth, followed her.

"Well, most fair Betty," he said, "what word have you for me now?"

"The question is, Señor Carlos," answered Betty with scarcely suppressed

indignation, "what word you have for me, who dared so much for you to-night? That you have plenty for my cousin, I know, since standing in the cold garden I could hear you talk, talk, talk, through the shutters, as though for your very life."

"I pray that those shutters had no hole in them," reflected d'Aguilar to himself. "No, there was a curtain also; she can have seen nothing." But aloud he answered: "Mistress Betty, you should not stand about in this bitter wind; you might fall ill, and then what should I suffer?"

"I don't know, nothing perhaps; that would be left to me. What I want to understand is, why you plan to come to see me, and then spend an hour with Margaret?"

"To avert suspicion, most dear Betty. Also I had to talk to her of this Peter, in whom she seems so greatly interested. You are very shrewd, Betty--tell me, is that to be a match?"

"I think so; I have been told nothing, but I have noticed many things, and almost every day she is writing to him, though why she should care for that owl of a man I cannot guess."

"Doubtless because she appreciates solid worth, Betty, as I do in you. Who can account for the impulses of the heart, which come, say some of the learned, from heaven, and others, from hell? At least it is no affair of ours, so let us wish them happiness, and, after they are

married, a large and healthy family. Meanwhile, dear Betty, are you making ready for your voyage to Spain?"

"I don't know," answered Betty gloomily. "I am not sure that I trust you and your fine words. If you want to marry me, as you swear, and be sure I look for nothing less, why cannot it be before we start, and how am I to know that you will do so when we get there?"

"You ask many questions, Betty, all of which I have answered before. I have told you that I cannot marry you here because of that permission which is necessary on account of the difference in our ranks. Here, where your place is known, it is not to be had; there, where you will pass as a great English lady--as of course you are by birth--I can obtain it in an hour. But if you have any doubts, although it cuts me to the heart to say it, it would be best that we should part at once. I will take no wife who does not trust me fully and alone. Say then, cruel Betty, do you wish to leave me?"

"You know I don't; you know it would kill me," she answered in a voice that was thick with passion, "you know I worship the ground you tread on, and hate every woman you go near, yes, even my cousin who has been so good to me, and whom I love. I will take the risk and come with you, believing you to be an honest gentleman, who would not deceive a girl who trusts him; and if you do, may God deal with you as I shall, for I am no toy to be broken and thrown away, as you would find out. Yes, I will take the risk because you have made me love you so that I cannot

live without you."

"Betty, your words fill me with rapture, showing me that I have not misread your noble mind; but speak a little lower--there are echoes in this hole. Now for the plans, for time is short, and you may be missed. When I am about to sail I will invite Mistress Margaret and yourself to come aboard my ship."

"Why not invite me without my cousin Margaret?" asked Betty.

"Because it would excite suspicion which we must avoid--do not interrupt me. I will invite you both or get you there upon some other pretext, and then I will arrange that she shall be brought ashore again and you taken on. Leave it all to me, only swear that you will obey any instructions I may send you for if you do not, I tell you that we have enemies in high places who may part us for ever. Betty, I will be frank, there is a great lady who is jealous, and watches you very closely. Do you swear?"

"Yes, yes, I swear. But about the great lady?"

"Not a word about her--on your life--and mine. You shall hear from me shortly. And now, sweetheart--good-night."

"Good-night," said Betty, but still she did not stir.

Then, understanding that she expected something more, d'Aguilar nerved

himself to the task, and touched her hair with his lips.

Next moment he regretted it, for even that tempered salute fanned her passion into flame.

Throwing her arms about his neck Betty drew his face to hers and kissed him many times, till at length he broke, half choking, from her embrace, and escaped into the street.

"Mother of Heaven!" he muttered to himself, "the woman is a volcano in eruption. I shall feel her kisses for a week," and he rubbed his face ruefully with his hand. "I wish I had made some other plan; but it is too late to change it now--she would betray everything. Well, I will be rid of her somehow, if I have to drown her. A hard fate to love the mistress and be loved of the maid!"