

CHAPTER IX

THE SNARE

On the following morning, when Castell returned, Margaret told him of the visit of d'Aguilar, and of all that had passed between them, told him also that he was acquainted with their secret, since he had spoken of her as half a Jew.

"I know it, I know it," answered her father, who was much disturbed and very angry, "for yesterday he threatened me also. But let that go, I can take my chance; now I would learn who brought this man into my house when I was absent, and without my leave."

"I fear that it was Betty," said Margaret, "who swears that she thought she did no wrong."

"Send for her," said Castell. Presently Betty came, and, being questioned, told a long story.

She said she was standing by the side door, taking the air, when Señor d'Aguilar appeared, and, having greeted her, without more words walked into the house, saying that he had an appointment with the master.

"With me?" broke in Castell. "I was absent."

"I did not know that you were absent, for I was out when you rode away in the afternoon, and no one had spoken of it to me, so, thinking that he was your friend, I let him in, and let him out again afterwards. That is all I have to say."

"Then I have to say that you are a hussy and a liar, and that, in one way or the other, this Spaniard has bribed you," answered Castell fiercely. "Now, girl, although you are my wife's cousin, and therefore my daughter's kin, I am minded to turn you out on to the street to starve."

At this Betty first grew angry, then began to weep; while Margaret pleaded with her father, saying that it would mean the girl's ruin, and that he must not take such a sin upon him. So the end of it was, that, being a kind-hearted man, remembering also that Betty Dene was of his wife's blood, and that she had favoured her as her daughter did, he relented, taking measures to see that she went abroad no more save in the company of Margaret, and that the doors were opened only by men-servants.

So this matter ended.

That day Margaret wrote to Peter, telling him of all that had happened, and how the Spaniard had asked her in marriage, though the words that he used she did not tell. At the end of her letter, also, she bade him have no fear of the Señor d'Aguilar or of any other man, as he knew where her

heart was.

When Peter received this writing he was much vexed to learn that both Master Castell and Margaret had incurred the enmity of d'Aguilar, for so he guessed it must be, also that Margaret should have been troubled with his love-making; but for the rest he thought little of the matter, who trusted her as he trusted heaven. Still it made him anxious to return to London as soon as might he, even though he must take the risk of the Spaniards' daggers. Within three days, however, he received other letters both from Castell and from Margaret, which set his fears at rest.

These told him that d'Aguilar had sailed for Spain indeed, Castell said that he had seen him standing on the poop of the Ambassador de Ayala's vessel as it dropped down the Thames towards the sea. Moreover, Margaret had a note of farewell from his hand, which ran:

"Adieu, sweet lady, till that predestined hour when we meet again. I go, as I must, but, as I told you, your image goes with me.

"Your worshipper till death,

"MORELLA."

"He may take her image so long as I keep herself and if he comes back

with his worship, I promise him that death and he shall not be far apart," was Peter's grim comment as he laid the paper down. Then he went on with his letters, which told that now, when the Spaniards had gone, and there was nothing more to fear, he was awaited in London. Indeed, Castell fixed a day when he should arrive--May 31st--that was within a week, adding that on its morrow--namely, June 1st, for Margaret would not be wed in May, the Virgin Mary's month, since she held it to be unlucky--their marriage might take place as quietly as they would.

Margaret wrote the same news, and in such sweet words that he kissed her letter, then hastened to answer it, shortly, after his custom, for Peter was no great scribe, saying, that if the saints willed it he would be with them by nightfall on the last day of May, and that in all England there was no happier man than he.

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Now all that week Margaret was very busy preparing her marriage robe, and other garments also, for it was settled that on the next day they should ride together down to Dedham, in Essex, whither her father would follow them shortly. The Old Hall was not ready, indeed, nor would it be for some time; but Peter had furnished certain rooms in it which might serve them for the summer season, and by winter time the house would be finished and open.

Castell was busy also, for now, having worked very hard at the task, his

ship the Margaret was almost refitted and laden, so that he hoped to get her to sea on this same May 31st, and thus be clear of the last of his business, except the handing over of his warehouses and stock to those who had bought them. These great affairs kept him much at Gravesend, where the ship lay, but, as he had no dread of further trouble now that d'Aguilar and the other Spaniards, among them that band of de Ayala's servants who had vowed to take Peter's life, were gone, this did not disturb him.

Oh! happy, happy was Margaret during those sweet spring days, when her heart was bright and clear as the skies from which all winter storms had passed. So happy was she indeed, and so full of a hundred joyful cares, that she found no time to take note of her cousin Betty, who worked with her at her wedding broideries, and helped to make preparations for the journey which should follow after. Had she done so, she might have seen that Betty was anxious and distressed, like one who waited for some tidings that did not come, and from hour to hour fought against anguish and despair But she took no note, whose heart was too full of her own matters, and who did but count the hours till she should see her lover back and pass to his arms, a wife.

Thus the time went on until the appointed day of Peter's return, the morrow of her marriage, for which all things were now prepared, down to Peter's wedding garments, that were finer than any she had yet seen him wear, and the decking of the neighbouring church with flowers. In the early morning her father rode away to Gravesend with the most of his

men-servants for the ship Margaret was to sail at the following dawn and there was yet much to be done before she could lift anchor. Still, he had promised to be back by nightfall in time to meet Peter who, leaving Dedham that morning, could not reach them before then.

At length it was past four of the afternoon, and everything being finished, Margaret went to her room to dress herself anew, that she might look fine in Peter's eyes when he should come. Betty she did not take with her, for there were things to which her cousin must attend; moreover, her heart was so full that she wished to be alone a while.

Betty's heart was full also, but not with joy. She had been deceived. The fine Spanish Don, who had made her love him so desperately, had sailed away and left her without a word. She could not doubt it, he had been seen standing on the ship--and not one word. It was cruel, cruel, and now she must help another woman to be made a happy wife, she who was beggared of hope and love. Moodily, full of bitterness, she went about her tasks, biting her lips and wiping her fine eyes with the sleeve of her robe, when suddenly the door opened, and a servant, not one of their own, but a strange man who had been brought in to help at the morrow's feast, called out that a sailor wished to speak with her.

"Then let him enter here; I have no time to go out to listen to his talk," snapped Betty.

Presently the sailor was shown in, the man who brought him leaving the

room at once. He was a dark fellow, with sly black eyes, who, had he not spoken English so well, might have been taken for a Spaniard.

"Who are you, and what is your business?" asked Betty sharply.

"I am the carpenter of the ship Margaret," he answered, "and I am here to say that our master Castell has met with an accident there, and desires that Mistress Margaret, his daughter, should come to him at once."

"What accident?" asked Betty.

"In seeing to the stowage of cargo he slipped and fell down the hold, hurting his back and breaking his right arm, and that is why he cannot write. He is in great pain; but the physician whom we summoned bade me tell Mistress Margaret that at present he has no fear for his life. Are you Mistress Margaret?"

"No," answered Betty; "but I will go to her at once; do you bide here."

"Then are you her cousin, Mistress Betty Dene, for if so I have something for you?"

"I am. What is it?"

"This," said the man, drawing out a letter which he handed to her.

"Who gave you this?" asked Betty suspiciously. "I do not know his name, but he was a noble-looking Spanish Don, and a liberal one too. He had heard of the accident on the Margaret, and, knowing my errand, asked me if I would deliver this letter to you, for the fee of a gold ducat, and promise to say nothing of it to any one else."

"Some rude gallant, doubtless," said Betty, tossing her head; "they are ever writing to me. Bide here; I go to Mistress Margaret."

Once she was outside the door Betty broke the seal of the letter eagerly enough, for she had been taught with Margaret, and could read well.

It ran:

"BELOVED,

"You thought me faithless and gone, but it is not so. I was silent only because I knew you could not come alone who are watched; but now the God of Love gives us our chance. Doubtless your cousin will bring you with her to visit her father, who lies on his ship sadly hurt. While she is with him I have made a plan to rescue you, and then we can be wed and sail at once--yes, to-night or to-morrow, for with much trouble, knowing that you wished it, I have even succeeded in bringing that

about, and a priest will be waiting to marry us. Be silent, and show no doubt or fear, whatever happens, lest we should be parted for always. Be sure then that your cousin comes that you may accompany her. Remember that your true love waits you.

"C. d'A."

When Betty had mastered the contents of this amorous effusion she went pale with joy, and turned so faint that she was like to fall. Then a doubt struck her that it might be some trick. No, she knew the writing--it was d'Aguilar's, and he was true to her, and would marry her as he had promised, and take her to be a great lady in Spain. If she hesitated now she might lose him for ever--him whom she would follow to the end of the world. In an instant her mind was made up, for Betty had plenty of courage. She would go, even though she must desert the cousin whom she loved.

Thrusting the letter into her bosom she ran to Margaret's room, and, bursting into it, told her of the man and his sad message. But of that letter she said nothing. Margaret turned white at the news, then, recovering herself, said:

"I will come and speak with him at once." And together they went down the stairs.

To Margaret the sailor repeated his story, nor could all her questions shake it. He told her how the mischance had happened, for he had seen it, so he said, and where her father's hurts were, adding, that although the physician held that as yet he was in no danger of his life, Master Castell thought otherwise, and did nothing but cry that his daughter should be brought to him at once.

Still Margaret doubted and hesitated, for she feared she knew not what.

"Peter should be here within two hours at most," she said to Betty.

"Would it not be best to wait for him?"

"Oh! Margaret, and what if your father should die in the meanwhile?

Perhaps he knows better how deep his hurts are than does this leech. If so, you would have a sore heart for all your life. Sure you had better go, or at the least I will."

Still Margaret wavered, till the sailor said:

"Lady, if it is your will to come, I can guide you to where a boat waits to take you across the river. If not, I must be gone, for the ship sails with the moonrise, and they only wait your coming to carry the master, your father, to the warehouse on shore thinking it best that you should be present. If you do not come, this will be done as gently as possible, and there you must seek him to-morrow, alive or dead." And the man took up his cap as though to leave.

"I will come with you," said Margaret. "Betty you are right; order the two horses to be saddled mine and the groom's, with a pillion on which you can ride, for I will not send you or go alone, understand that this sailor has his own horse."

The man nodded, and accompanied Betty to the stable. Then Margaret took pen and wrote hastily to Peter, telling him of their evil chance, and bidding him follow her at once to the ship, or, if it had sailed to the warehouse. "I am loth to go," she added "alone with a girl and a strange man, yet I must since my heart is torn with fear for my beloved father. Sweetheart, follow me quickly."

This done, she gave the letter to that servant who had shown in the sailor, bidding him hand it, without fail, to Master Peter Brome when he came, which the man promised to do.

Then she fetched plain dark cloaks for herself and Betty, with hoods to them, that their faces might not be seen, and presently they were mounted.

"Stay!" said Margaret to the sailor as they were about to start. "How comes it that my father did not send one of his own men instead of you, and why did none write to me?"

The man looked surprised; he was a very good actor.

"His people were tending him," he said, "and he bade me to go because I knew the way, and had a good, hired horse ashore which I have used when riding with messages to London about new timbers and other matters. As for writing, the physician began a letter, but he was so slow and long that Master Castell ordered me to be off without it. It seems," the man added, addressing Betty with some irritation, "that Mistress Margaret misdoubts me. If so, let her find some other guide, or bide at home. It is naught to me, who have only done as I was bidden."

Thus did this cunning fellow persuade Margaret that her fears were nothing, though, remembering the letter from d'Aguilar, Betty was somewhat troubled. The thing had a strange look, but, poor, vain fool, she thought to herself that, even if there were some trick, it was certainly arranged only that she might seem to be taken, who could not come alone. In truth she was blind and mad, and cared not what she did, though, let this be said for her, she never dreamed that any harm was meant towards her cousin Margaret, or that a lie had been told as to Master Castell and his hurts.

Soon they were out of London, and riding swiftly by the road that followed the north bank of the river, for their guide did not take them over the bridge, as he said the ship was lying in mid-stream and that the boat would be waiting on the Tilbury shore. But there was more than twenty miles to travel, and, push on as they would, night had fallen ere ever they came there. At length, when they were weary of the dark and

the rough road, the sailor pulled up at a spot upon the river's brink--where there was a little wharf, but no houses that they could see--saying that this was the place. Dismounting, he gave his horse to the groom to hold, and, going to the wharf, asked in a loud voice if the boat from the Margaret was there, to which a voice answered, "Aye." Then he talked for a minute to those in the boat, though what he said they could not hear, and ran back again, bidding them dismount, and adding that they had done well to come, as Master Castell was much worse, and did nothing but cry for his daughter.

The groom he told to lead the horses a little way along the bank till he found an inn that stood there, where he must await their return or further orders, and to Betty he suggested that she should go with him, as there was but little place left in the boat. This she was willing enough to do, thinking it all part of the plan for her carrying off; but Margaret would have none of it, saying that unless her cousin came with her she would not stir another step. So grumbling a little the sailor gave way, and hurried them both to some wooden steps and down these into a boat, of which they could but dimly see the outline.

So soon as ever they were seated side by side in the stern it was pushed off, and rowed away rapidly into the darkness, while one of the sailors lit a lantern which he fastened to the bow, and far out on the river, as though in answer to the signal, another star of light appeared, towards which they headed. Now Margaret, speaking through the gloom, asked the rowers of her father's state; but the sailor, their guide, prayed her

not to trouble them, as the tide ran very swiftly and they must give all their mind to their business lest they should overset. So she was silent, and, racked with doubts and fears, watched that star of light growing ever nearer, till at length it hung above them.

"Is that the ship Margaret?" cried their guide, and again a voice answered "Aye."

"Then tell Master Castell that his daughter has come at last," he shouted again, and in another minute a rope had been thrown to them, and they were fast alongside a ladder on to which Betty, who was nearest to it, was pushed the first, except for their guide, who had run up the wooden steps very swiftly.

Betty, who was active and strong, followed him, Margaret coming next. As she reached the deck Betty thought she heard a voice say in Spanish, of which she understood something, "Fool! Why have you brought both?" but the answer she could not catch. Then she turned and gave her hand to Margaret, and together they walked forward to the foot of the mast.

"Lead me to my father," said Margaret.

Whereon the guide answered:

"Yes, this way, Mistress, but come alone, for the sight of two of you at once may disturb him."

"Nay," she answered, "my cousin comes with me." And she took Betty's hand and clung to it.

Shrugging his shoulders the sailor led them forwards, and as they went she noted that men were hauling on a sail, while other men, who sang a strange, wild song, worked on what seemed to be a windlass. Now they reached a cabin, and entered it, the door being shut behind them. In the cabin a man sat at a table with a lamp hanging over his head. He rose and turned towards them, bowing, and Margaret saw that it was--d'Aguilar!

Betty stood silent; she had expected to meet him, though not here and thus. Her foolish heart bounded so at the sight of him that she seemed to choke, and could only wonder dimly what mistake had been made, and how he would explain to Margaret and get her away, leaving herself and him together to be married. Indeed, she searched the cabin with her eyes to see where the priest was waiting, then noting a door beyond, thought that doubtless he must be hidden there. As for Margaret, she uttered a little stifled cry, then, being a brave woman, one of that high nature which grows strong in the face of trouble, straightened herself to her full height and said in a low, fierce voice:

"What do you here? Where is my father?"

"Señora," he answered humbly, "I am on board my ship, the San Antonio,

and as for your father, he is either on his ship, the Margaret, or more likely, by now, at his house in Holborn."

At these words Margaret reeled back till the wall of the cabin stayed her, and there she rested.

"Spare me your reproaches," went on d'Aguilar hurriedly. "I will tell you all the truth. First, be not anxious as to your father; no accident has happened to him; he is sound and well. Forgive me if you have suffered pain and doubt; but there was no other way. That tale was only one of love's snares and tricks----" He paused, overcome, fascinated by Margaret's face, which of a sudden had grown awful--that of a goddess of vengeance, of a Medusa, which seemed to chill his blood to ice.

"A snare! A trick!" she muttered hoarsely, while her eyes flamed on him like burning stars. "Thus then I pay you for your tricks." And in an instant he became aware that she had snatched a dagger from her bosom and was springing on him.

He could not move; those fearful eyes held him fast. In another moment that steel would have pierced his heart. But Betty had seen also, and, thrusting her strong arms about Margaret, held her back, crying:

"Listen, you do not understand. It is I he wants--not you; I whom he loves, and who love him, and am about to marry him. You he will send back home."

"Loose me," said Margaret, in such a voice that Betty's arms fell from her, and she stood there, the dagger still in her hand. "Now," she said to d'Aguilar, "the truth, and be swift with it. What means this woman?"

"She knows best," answered d'Aguilar uneasily. "It has pleased her to wrap herself in this web of conceits."

"Which it has pleased you to spin, perchance. Speak, girl!"

"He made love to me," gasped Betty; "and I love him. He promised to marry me. He sent me a letter but to-day--here it is," and she drew it out.

"Read," said Margaret; and Betty read.

"So you have betrayed me," said Margaret, "you, my cousin, whom I have sheltered and cherished."

"No," cried Betty. "I never thought to betray you; sooner would I have died. I believed that your father was hurt, and that while you were visiting him that man would take me."

"What have you to say?" asked Margaret of d'Aguilar in the same dreadful voice. "You offered your accursed love to me--and to her, and you have snared us both. Man, what have you to say?"

"Only this", he answered, trying to look brave, "that woman is a fool, whose vanity I played on that I might make use of her to keep near to you."

"Do you hear, Betty? do you hear?" cried Margaret with a terrible little laugh; but Betty only groaned as though she were dying.

"I love you, and you only," went on d'Aguilar "As for your cousin, I will send her ashore. I have committed this sin because I could not help myself. The thought that you were to be married to another man to-morrow drove me mad, and I dared all to take you from his arms, even though you should never come to mine. Did I not swear to you," he said with an attempt at his old gallantry, "that your image should accompany me to Spain, whither we are sailing now?" And as he spoke the words the ship lurched a little in the wind.

Margaret made no answer, only toyed with the dagger blade, and watched him with eyes that glittered more coldly than its steel.

"Kill me, if you will, and have done," he went on in a voice that was desperate with love and shame. "So shall I be rid of all this torment."

Then Margaret seemed to awake, for she spoke to him in a new voice--a measured, frozen voice. "No," she answered, "I will not stain my hands even with your blood, for why should I rob God of His own vengeance? If

you attempt to touch me, or even to separate me from this poor woman whom you have fooled, then I will kill--not you, but myself, and I swear to you that my ghost shall accompany you to Spain, and from Spain down to the hell that awaits you. Listen, Carlos d'Aguilar, Marquis of Morella, this I know about you, that you believe in God and hear His anger. Well, I call down upon you the vengeance of Almighty God. I see it hang above your head. I say that it shall fall upon you, waking and sleeping, loving and hating, in life and in death to all eternity. Do your worst, for you shall do it all in vain. Whether I die or whether I live, every pang that you cause me to suffer, every misery that you have brought, or shall bring, upon the head of my betrothed, my father, and this woman, shall be repaid to you a millionfold in this world and the next. Now do you still wish that I should accompany you to Spain, or will you let me go?"

"I cannot," he answered hoarsely; "it is too late."

"So be it, I will accompany you to Spain, I and Betty Dene, and the vengeance of Almighty God that hovers over you. Of this at least be sure--I hate you, I despise you, but I fear you not at all. Go." Then d'Aguilar stumbled from that cabin, and the two women heard the door bolted behind him.