

CHAPTER X

THE CHASE

About the time that Margaret and Betty were being rowed aboard the San Antonio, Peter Brome and his servants, who had been delayed an hour or more by the muddy state of the roads, pulled rein at the door of the house in Holborn. For over a month he had been dreaming of this moment of return, as a man does who expects such a welcome as he knew awaited him, and who on the morrow was to be wed to a lovely and beloved bride. He had thought how Margaret would be watching at the window, how, spying him advancing down the street, she would speed to the door, how he would leap from his horse and take her to his arms in front of every one if need be--for why should they be ashamed who were to be wed upon the morrow?

But there was no Margaret at the window, or at any rate he could not see her, for it was dark. There was not even a light; indeed the whole face of the old house seemed to frown at him through the gloom. Still, Peter played his part according to the plan; that is, he leapt from his horse, ran to the door and tried to enter, but could not for it was locked, so he hammered on it with the handle of his sword, till at length some one came and unbolted. It was the hired man with whom Margaret had left the letter, and he held a lantern in his hand.

The sight of him frightened Peter, striking a chill to his heart.

"Who are you?" he asked; then, without waiting for an answer, went on, "Where are Master Castell and Mistress Margaret?"

The man answered that the master was not yet back from his ship, and that the Lady Margaret had gone out nearly three hours before with her cousin Betty and a sailor--all of them on horseback.

"She must have ridden to meet me, and missed us in the dark," said Peter aloud, whereon the man asked whether he spoke to Master Brome, since, if so, he had a letter for him.

"Yes," answered Peter, and snatched it from his hand, bidding him close the door and hold up the lantern while he read, for he could see that the writing was that of Margaret.

"A strange story," he muttered, as he finished it. "Well, I must away," and he turned to the door again.

As he stretched out his hand to the key, it opened, and through it came Castell, as sound as ever he had been.

"Welcome, Peter!" he cried in a jolly voice. "I knew you were here, for I saw the horses; but why are you not with Margaret?"

"Because Margaret has gone to be with you, who should be hurt almost to

death, or so says this letter."

"To be with me--hurt to the death! Give it me--nay, read it, I cannot see."

So Peter read.

"I scent a plot," said Castell in a strained voice as he finished, "and I think that hound of a Spaniard is at the bottom of it, or Betty, or both. Here, you fellow, tell us what you know, and be swift if you would keep a sound skin."

"That would I, why not?" answered the man, and told all the tale of the coming of the sailor.

"Go, bid the men bring back the horses, all of them," said Castell almost before he had done; "and, Peter, look not so dazed, but come, drink a cup of wine. We shall need it, both of us, before this night is over. What! is there never a fellow of all my servants in the house?" So he shouted till his folk, who had returned with him from the ship, came running from the kitchen.

He bade them bring food and liquor, and while they gulped down the wine, for they could not eat, Castell told how their Mistress Margaret had been tricked away, and must be followed. Then, hearing the horses being led back from the stables, they ran to the door and mounted, and,

followed by their men, a dozen or more of them, in all, galloped off into the darkness, taking another road for Tilbury, that by which Margaret went, not because they were sure of this, but because it was the shortest.

But the horses were tired, and the night was dark and rainy, so it came about that the clock of some church struck three of the morning before ever they drew near to Tilbury. Now they were passing the little quay where Margaret and Betty had entered the boat, Castell and Peter riding side by side ahead of the others in stern silence, for they had nothing to say, when a familiar voice hailed them--that of Thomas the groom.

"I saw your horses' heads against the sky," he explained, "and knew them."

"Where is your mistress?" they asked both in a breath.

"Gone, gone with Betty Dene in a boat, from this quay, to be rowed to the Margaret, or so I thought. Having stabled the horses as I was bidden, I came back here to await them. But that was hours ago, and I have seen no soul, and heard nothing except the wind and the water, till I heard the galloping of your horses."

"On to Tilbury, and get boats," said Castell. "We must catch the Margaret ere she sails at dawn. Perhaps the women are aboard of her."

"If so, I think Spaniards took them there, for I am sure they were not English in that craft," said Thomas, as he ran by the side of Castell's horse, holding to the stirrup leather.

His master made no answer, only Peter groaned aloud, for he too was sure that they were Spaniards.

An hour later, just as the dawn broke, they with their men climbed to the deck of the Margaret while she was hauling up her anchor. A few words with her captain, Jacob Smith, told them the worst. No boat had left the ship, no Margaret had come aboard her. But some six hours before they had watched the Spanish vessel, San Antonio, that had been berthed above them, pass down the river. Moreover, two watermen in a skiff, who brought them fresh meat, had told them that while they were delivering three sheep and some fowls to the San Antonio, just before she sailed, they had seen two tall women helped up her ladder, and heard one of them say in English, "Lead me to my father."

Now they knew all the awful truth, and stared at each other like dumb men.

It was Peter who found his tongue the first, and said slowly:

"I must away to Spain to find my bride, if she still lives, and to kill that fox. Get you home, Master Castell."

"My home is where my daughter is," answered Castell fiercely. "I go a-sailing also."

"There is danger for you in that land of Spaniards, if ever we get yonder," said Peter meaningly.

"If it were the mouth of hell, still I would go," replied Castell. "Why should I not who seek a devil?"

"That we do both," said Peter, and stretching out his hand he took that of Castell. It was the pledge of the father and the lover to follow her who was all to them, till death stayed their quest.

Castell thought a little while, then gave orders that all the crew should be called together on deck in the waist of the ship, which was a carack of about two hundred tons burden, round fashioned, and sitting deep in the water, but very strongly built of oak, and a swift sailer. When they were gathered, and with them the officers and their own servants, accompanied by Peter, he went and addressed them just as the sun was rising. In few and earnest words he told them of the great outrage that had been done, and how it was his purpose and that of Peter Brome who had been wickedly robbed of the maid who this day should have become his wife, to follow the thieves across the sea to Spain, in the hope that by the help of God, they might rescue Margaret and Betty. He added that he knew well this was a service of danger, since it might chance that there would be fighting, and he was loth to ask any man to

risk life or limb against his will, especially as they came out to trade and not to fight. Still, to those who chose to accompany them, should they win through safely, he promised double wage, and a present charged upon his estate, and would give them writings to that effect. As for those who did not, they could leave the ship now before she sailed.

When he had finished, the sailormen, of whom there were about thirty, with the stout-hearted captain, Jacob Smith, a sturdy-built man of fifty years of age, at the head of them, conferred together, and at last, with one exception--that of a young new-married man, whose heart failed him--they accepted the offer, swearing that they would see the thing through to the end, were it good or ill, for they were all Englishmen, and no lovers of the Spaniards. Moreover, so bitter a wrong stirred their blood. Indeed, although for the most part they were not sailors, six of the twelve men who had ridden with them from London prayed that they might come too, for the love they had to Margaret, their master, and Peter; and they took them. The other six they sent ashore again, bearing letters to Castell's friends, agents, and reeves, as to the transfer of his business and the care of his lands, houses, and other properties during his absence. Also, they took a short will duly signed by Castell and witnessed, wherein he left all his goods of whatever sort that remained unsettled or undevise, to Margaret and Peter, or the survivor of them, or their heirs, or failing these, for the purpose of founding a hospital for the poor. Then these men bade them farewell and departed, very heavy at heart, just as the anchor was hauled home, and the sails began to draw in the stiff morning breeze.

About ten o'clock they rounded the Nore bank safely, and here spoke a fishing-boat, who told them that more than six hours before they had seen the San Antonio sail past them down Channel, and noted two women standing on her deck, holding each other's hands and gazing shorewards. Then, knowing that there was no mistake, there being nothing more that they could do, worn out with grief and journeying, they ate some food and went to their cabin to sleep.

As he laid him down Peter remembered that at this very hour he should have been in church taking Margaret as his bride--Margaret, who was now in the power of the Spaniard--and swore a great and bitter oath that d'Aguilar should pay him back for all this shame and agony. Indeed, could his enemy have seen the look on Peter's face he might well have been afraid, for this Peter was an ill man to cross, and had no forgiving heart; also, his wrong was deep.

For four days the wind held, and they ran down Channel before it, hoping to catch sight of the Spaniard; but the San Antonio was a swift caravel of 250 tons with much canvas, for she carried four masts, and although the Margaret was also a good sailer, she had but two masts, and could not come up with her. Or, for anything they knew, they might have missed her on the seas. On the afternoon of the fourth day, when they were off the Lizard, and creeping along very slowly under a light breeze, the look-out man reported a ship lying becalmed ahead. Peter, who had the eyes of a hawk, climbed up the mast to look at her, and

presently called down that he believed from her shape and rig she must be the caravel, though of this he could not be sure as he had never seen her. Then the captain, Smith, went up also, and a few minutes later returned saying that without doubt it was the San Antonio.

Now there was a great and joyful stir on board the Margaret, every man seeing to his sword and their long or cross bows, of which there were plenty, although they had no bombards or cannon, that as yet were rare on merchant ships. Their plan was to run alongside the San Antonio and board her, for thus they hoped to recover Margaret. As for the anger of the king, which might well fall on them for this deed, since he would think little of the stealing of a pair of Englishwomen, of that they must take their chance.

Within half an hour everything was ready, and Peter, pacing to and fro, looked happier than he had done since he rode away to Dedham. The light breeze still held, although, if it reached the San Antonio, it did not seem to move her, and, with the help of it, by degrees they came to within half a mile of the caravel. Then the wind dropped altogether, and there the two ships lay. Still the set of the tide, or some current, seemed to be drawing them towards each other, so that when the night closed in they were not more than four hundred paces apart, and the Englishmen had great hopes that before morning they would close, and be able to board by the light of the moon.

But this was not to be, since about nine o'clock thick clouds rose up

which covered the heavens, while with the clouds came strong winds blowing off the land, and, when at length the dawn broke, all they could see of the San Antonio was her topmasts as she rose upon the seas, flying southwards swiftly. This, indeed, was the last sight they had of her for two long weeks.

From Ushant all across the Bay the airs were very light and variable, but when at length they came off Finisterre a gale sprang up from the north-east which drove them forward very fast. It was on the second night of this gale, as the sun set, that, running out of some mist and rain, suddenly they saw the San Antonio not a mile away, and rejoiced, for now they knew that she had not made for any port in the north of Spain, as, although she was bound for Cadiz, they feared she might have done to trick them. Then the rain came on again, and they saw her no more.

All down the coast of Portugal the weather grew more heavy day by day, and when they reached St. Vincent's Cape and bore round for Cadiz, it blew a great gale. Now it was that for the third time they viewed the San Antonio labouring ahead of them, nor, except at night, did they lose sight of her any more until the end of that voyage. Indeed, on the next day they nearly came up with her, for she tried to beat in to Cadiz, but, losing one of her masts in a fierce squall, and seeing that the Margaret, which sailed better in this tempest, would soon be aboard of her, abandoned her plan, and ran for the Straits of Gibraltar.

Past Tarifa Point they went, having the coast of Africa on their right; past the bay of Algeiras, where the San Antonio did not try to harbour; past Gibraltar's grey old rock, where the signal fires were burning, and so at nightfall, with not a mile between them, out into the Mediterranean Sea.

Here the gale was furious, so that they could scarcely carry a rag of canvas, and before morning lost one of their topmasts. It was an anxious night, for they knew not if they would live through it; moreover, the hearts of Castell and of Peter were torn with fear lest the Spaniard should founder and take Margaret with her to the bottom of the sea. When at length the wild, stormy dawn broke, however, they saw her, apparently in an evil case, labouring away upon their starboard bow, and by noon came to within a furlong of her, so that they could see the sailors crawling about on her high poop and stern. Yes, and they saw more than this, for presently two women ran from some cabin waving a white cloth to them; then were hustled back, whereby they learned that Margaret and Betty still lived and knew that they followed, and thanked God.

Presently, also, there was a flash, and, before ever they heard the report, a great iron bullet fell upon their decks and, rebounding, struck a sailor, who stood by Peter, on the breast, and dashed him away into the sea. The San Antonio had fired the bombard which she carried, but as no more shots came they judged that the cannon had broke its lashings or burst.

A while after the San Antonio, two of whose masts were gone, tried to

put about and run for Malaga, which they could see far away beneath the snow-capped mountains of the Sierra. But this the Spaniard could not do, for while she hung in the wind the Margaret came right atop of her, and as her men laboured at the sails, every one of the Englishmen who could be spared, under the command of Peter, let loose on them with their long shafts and crossbows, and, though the heaving deck of the Margaret was no good platform, and the wind bent the arrows from their line, they killed and wounded eight or ten of them, causing them to loose the ropes so that the San Antonio swung round into the gale again. On the high tower of the caravel, his arm round the sternmost mast, stood d'Aguilar, shouting commands to his crew. Peter fitted an arrow to his string and, waiting until the Margaret was poised for a moment on the crest of a great sea, aimed and loosed, making allowance for the wind.

True to line sped that shaft of his, yet, alas! a span too high, for when a moment later d'Aguilar leapt from the mast, the arrow quivered in its wood, and pinned to it was the velvet cap he wore. Peter ground his teeth in rage and disappointment; almost he could have wept, for the vessels swung apart again, and his chance was gone.

"Five times out of seven," he said bitterly, "can I send a shaft through a bull's ring at fifty paces to win a village badge, and now I cannot hit a man to save my love from shame. Surely God has forsaken me!"

Through all that afternoon they held on, shooting with their bows whenever a Spaniard showed himself, and being shot at in return, though little damage was done to either side. But this they noted--that the San Antonio had sprung a leak in the gale, for she was sinking deeper in the water. The Spaniards knew it also, and, being aware that they must either run ashore or founder, for the second time put about, and, under the rain of English arrows, came right across the bows of the Margaret, heading for the little bay of Calahonda, that is the port of Motril, for here the shore was not much more than a league away.

"Now," said Jacob Smith, the captain of the Margaret, who stood under the shelter of the bulwarks with Castell and Peter, "up that bay lies a Spanish town. I know it, for I have anchored there, and if once the San Antonio reaches it, good-bye to our lady, for they will take her to Granada, not thirty miles away across the mountains, where this Marquis of Morella is a mighty man, for there is his palace. Say then, master, what shall we do? In five more minutes the Spaniard will be across our bows again. Shall we run her down, which will be easy, and take our chance of picking up the women, or shall we let them be taken captive to Granada and give up the chase?"

"Never," said Peter. "There is another thing that we can do--follow them into the bay, and attack them there on shore."

"To find ourselves among hundreds of the Spaniards, and have our throats cut," answered Smith, the captain, coolly.

"If we ran them down," asked Castell, who had been thinking deeply all this while, "should we not sink also?"

"It might be so," answered Smith; "but we are built of English oak, and very stout forward, and I think not. But she would sink at once, being near to it already, and the odds are that the women are locked in the cabin or between decks out of reach of the arrows, and must go with her."

"There is another plan," said Peter sternly, "and that is to grapple with her and board her, and this I will do."

The captain, a stout man with a flat face that never changed, lifted his eyebrows, which was his only way of showing surprise.

"What!" he said. "In this sea? I have fought in some wars, but never have I known such a thing."

"Then, friend, you shall know it now, if I can but find a dozen men to follow me," answered Peter with a savage laugh. "What? Shall I see my mistress carried off before my eyes and strike no blow to save her? Rather will I trust in God and do it, and if I die, then die I must, as a man should. There is no other way."

Then he turned and called in a loud voice to those who stood around or

loosed arrows at the Spaniard:

"Who will come with me aboard yonder ship? Those who live shall spend their days in ease thereafter, that I promise, and those who fall will win great fame and Heaven's glory."

The crew looked at the waves running hill high, and the water-logged Spaniard labouring in the trough of them as she came round slowly in a wide circle, very doubtfully, as well they might, and made no answer. Then Peter spoke again.

"There is no choice," he said. "If we give that ship our stem we can sink her, but then how will the women be saved? If we leave her alone, mayhap she will founder, and then how will the women be saved? Or she may win ashore, and they will be carried away to Granada, and how can we snatch them out of the hand of the Moors or of the power of Spain? But if we can take the ship, we may rescue them before they go down or reach land. Will none back me at this inch?"

"Aye, son," said old Castell, "I will."

Peter stared at him in surprise. "You--at your years!" he said.

"Yes, at my years. Why not? I have the fewer to risk."

Then, as though he were ashamed of his doubts, one brawny sailorman

stepped forward and said that he was ready for a cut at the Spanish thieves in foul weather as in fair. Next all Castell's household servants came out in a body for love of him and Peter and their lady, and after them more sailors, till nearly half of those aboard, something over twenty in all, declared that they were ready for the venture, wherein Peter cried, "Enough." Smith would have come also; but Castell said No, he must stop with the ship.

Then, while the carack's head was laid so as to cut the path of the San Antonio circling round them slowly like a wounded swan, and the boarders made ready their swords and knives, for here archery would not avail them, Castell gave some orders to the captain. He bade him, if they were cut down or taken, to put about and run for Seville, and there deliver over the ship and her cargo to his partners and correspondents, praying them in his name to do their best by means of gold, for which the sale value of the vessel and her goods should be chargeable, or otherwise, to procure the release of Margaret and Betty, if they still lived, and to bring d'Aguilar, the Marquis of Morella, to account for his crime. This done, he called to one of his servants to buckle on him a light steel breastplate from the ship's stores. But Peter would wear no iron because it was too heavy, only an archer's jerkin of bull-hide, stout enough to turn a sword-cut, such as the other boarders put on also with steel caps, of both of which they had a plenty in the cabin.

Now the San Antonio, having come round, was steering for the mouth of the bay in such fashion that she would pass them within fifty yards.

Hoisting a small sail to give his ship way, the captain, Smith, took the helm of the Margaret and steered straight at her so as to cut her path, while the boarders, headed by Peter and Castell, gathered near the bowsprit, lay down there under shelter of the bulwarks, and waited.