

CHAPTER XI

THE MEETING ON THE SEA

For another minute or more the San Antonio held on until she divined the desperate purpose of her foe. Then, seeing that soon the carack's prow must crash into her frail side, she shifted her helm and came round several points, so that in the end the Margaret ran, not into her, but alongside of her, grinding against her planking, and shearing away a great length of her bulwark. For a few seconds they hung together thus, and, before the seas bore them apart, grapnels were thrown from the Margaret whereof one forward got hold and brought them bow to bow. Thus the end of the bowsprit of the Margaret projected over the high deck of the San Antonio.

"Now for it," said Peter. "Follow me, all." And springing up, he ran to the bowsprit and began to swarm along it.

It was a fearful task. One moment the great seas lifted him high into the air, and the next down he came again till the massive spar crashed on to the deck of the San Antonio with such a shock that he nearly flew from it like a stone from a sling. Yet he hung on, and, biding his chance, seized a broken stay-rope that dangled from the end of the bowsprit like a lash from a whip, and began to slide down it. The gale caught him and blew him to and fro; the vessel, pitching wildly, jerked him into the air; the deck of the San Antonio rose up and receded like

a thing alive. It was near--not a dozen feet beneath him--and loosing his hold he fell upon the forward tower without being hurt then, gaining his feet, ran to the broken mast and flinging his left arm about it, with the other drew his sword.

Next instant--how, he never knew--Castell was at his side, and after him came two more men, but one of these rolled from the deck into the sea and was lost. As he vanished, the chain of the grappling iron parted, and the Margaret swung away from them, leaving those three alone in the power of their foes, nor, do what she would, could she make fast again. As yet, however, there were no Spaniards to be seen, for the reason that none had dared to stand upon this high tower whereof the bulwarks were all gone, while the bowsprit of the Margaret crashed down upon it like a giant's club, and, as she rolled, swept it with its point.

So there they stood, clinging to the mast and waiting for the end, for now their friends were a hundred yards away, and they knew that their case was desperate. A shower of arrows came, loosed from other parts of the ship, and one of these struck the man with them through the throat, so that he fell to the deck claspings at it, and presently rolled into the sea also. Another pierced Castell through his right forearm, causing his sword to drop and slide away from him. Peter seized the arrow, snapped it in two, and drew it out; but Castell's right arm was now helpless, and with his left he could do no more than cling to the broken mast.

"We have done our best, son," he said, "and failed. Margaret will learn that we would have saved her if we could, but we shall not meet her here."

Peter ground his teeth, and looked about him desperately, for he had no words to say. What should he do? Leave Castell and rush for the waist of the ship and so perish, or stay and die there? Nay, he would not be butchered like a bird on a bough, he would fall fighting.

"Farewell," he called through the gale. "God rest our souls!" Then, waiting till the ship steadied herself, he ran aft, and reaching the ladder that led to her tower, staggered down it to the waist of the vessel, and at its foot halted, holding to the rail.

The scene before him was strange enough, for there, ranged round the bulwarks, were the Spanish men, who watched him curiously, whilst a few paces away, resting against the mast, stood d'Aguilar, who lifted his hand, in which there was no weapon, and addressed him.

"Señor Brome," he shouted, "do not move another step or you are a dead man. Listen to me first, and then do what you will. Am I safe from your sword while I speak?"

Peter nodded his head in assent, and d'Aguilar drew nearer, for even in that more sheltered place it was hard to hear because of the howling of

the tempest.

"Señor," he said to Peter, "you are a very brave man, and have done a deed such as none of us have seen before; therefore, I wish to spare you if I may. Also, I have worked you bitter wrong, driven to it by the might of love and jealousy, for which reason also I wish to spare you. To set upon you now would be but murder, and, whatever else I do, I will not murder. First, let me ease your mind. Your lady and mine is aboard here; but fear not, she has come and will come to no harm from me, or from any man while I live. If for no other reason, I do not desire to affront one who, I hope, will be my wife by her own free will, and whom I have brought to Spain that she might not make this impossible by becoming yours. Señor, believe me, I would no more force a woman's will than I would do murder on her lover."

"What did you, then, when you snatched her from her home by some foul trick?" asked Peter fiercely.

"Señor, I did wrong to her and all of you, for which I would make amends."

"What amends? Will you give her back to me?"

"No, that I cannot do, even if she should wish it, of which I am not sure; no--never while I live."

"Bring her forth, and let us hear whether she wishes it or no," shouted Peter, hoping that his words would reach Margaret.

But d'Aguilar only smiled and shook his head, then went on:

"That I cannot either, for it would give her pain. Still, Señor, I will repay the heavy debt that I owe to you, and to you also, Señor." And he bowed towards Castell who, unseen by Peter, had crept down the ladder, and now stood behind him staring at d'Aguilar with cold rage and indignation. "You have wrought us much damage, have you not? hunting us across the seas, and killing sundry of us with your arrows, and now you have striven to board our ship and put us to the sword, a design in which God has frustrated you. Therefore your lives are justly forfeit, and none would blame us if we slew you. Yet I spare you both. If it is possible I will put you back aboard the Margaret, and if it is not possible you shall be set free ashore to go unmolested whither you will. Thus I will wipe out my debt and be free of all reproach."

"Do you take me for such a man as yourself?" asked Peter, with a bitter laugh. "I do not leave this ship alive unless my affianced wife, Mistress Margaret, goes with me."

"Then, Señor Brome, I fear that you will leave it dead, as indeed we may all of us, unless we make land soon, for the vessel is filling fast with water. Still, knowing your metal, I looked for some such words from you, and am prepared with another offer which I am sure you will not refuse.

Señor, our swords are much of the same length, shall we measure them against each other? I am a grandee of Spain, the Marquis of Morella, and it will, therefore, be no dishonour for you to fight with me."

"I am not so sure," said Peter, "for I am more than that--an honest man of England, who never practised woman-stealing. Still, I will fight you gladly, at sea or on shore, wherever and whenever we meet, till one or both are dead. But what is the stake, and how do I know that some of these," and he pointed to the crew, who were listening intently, "will not stab me from behind?"

"Señor, I have told you that I do not murder, and that would be the foulest murder. As for the stake, it is Margaret to the victor. If you kill me, on behalf of all my company, I swear by our Saviour's Blood that you shall depart with her and her father unharmed, and if I kill you, then you both shall swear that she shall be left with me, and no suit or question raised but to her woman I give liberty, who have seen more than enough of her."

"Nay," broke in Castell, speaking for the first time "I demand the right to fight with you also when my arm is healed."

"I refuse it," answered d'Aguilar haughtily. "I cannot lift my sword against an old man who is the father of the maid who shall be my wife, and, moreover, a merchant and a Jew. Nay, answer me not, lest all these should remember your ill words. I will be generous, and leave you out of

the oath. Do your worst against me, Master Castell, and then leave me to do my worst against you. Señor Brome, the light grows bad, and the water gains upon us. Say, are you ready?"

Peter nodded his head, and they stepped forward.

"One more word," said d'Aguilar, dropping his sword-point. "My friends, you have heard our compact. Do you swear to abide by it, and, if I fall, to set these two men and the two ladies free on their own ship or on the land, for the honour of chivalry and of Spain?"

The captain of the San Antonio and his lieutenants answered that they swore on behalf of all the crew.

"You hear, Señor Brome. Now these are the conditions--that we fight to the death, but, if both of us should be hurt or wounded, so that we cannot despatch each other, then no further harm shall be done to either of us, who shall be tended till we recover or die by the will of God."

"You mean that we must die on each other's swords or not at all, and if any foul chance should overtake either, other than by his adversary's hand, that adversary shall not dispatch him?"

"Yes, Señor, for in our case such things may happen," and he pointed to the huge seas that towered over them, threatening to engulf the water-logged caravel. "We will take no advantage of each other, who wish

to fight this quarrel out with our own right arms."

"So be it," said Peter, "and Master Castell here is the witness to our bargain."

D'Aguilar nodded, kissed the cross-hilt of his sword in confirmation of the pact, bowed courteously, and put himself on his defence.

For a moment they stood facing each other, a well-matched pair--Peter, lean, fierce-faced, long-armed, a terrible man to see in the fiery light that broke upon him from beneath the edge of a black cloud; the Spaniard tall also, and agile, but to all appearance as unconcerned as though this were but a pleasure bout, and not a duel to the death with a woman's fate hanging on the hazard. D'Aguilar wore a breastplate of gold-inlaid black steel and a helmet, while Peter had but his tunic of bull's hide and iron-lined cap, though his straight cut-and-thrust sword was heavier and mayhap half an inch longer than that of his foe.

Thus, then, they stood while Castell and all the ship's company, save the helmsman who steered her to the harbour's mouth, clung to the bulwarks and the cordage of the mainmast, and, forgetful of their own peril, watched in utter silence.

It was Peter who thrust the first, straight at the throat, but d'Aguilar parried deftly, so that the sword point went past his neck, and before it could be drawn back again, struck at Peter. The blow fell upon the

side of his steel cap, and glanced thence to his left shoulder, but, being light, did him no harm. Swiftly came the answer, which was not light, for it fell so heavily upon d'Aguilar's breastplate, that he staggered back. After him sprang Peter, thinking that the game was his, but at that moment the ship, which had entered the breakers of the harbour bar, rolled terribly, and sent them both reeling to the bulwarks. Nor did she cease her rolling, so that, smiting and thrusting wildly, they staggered backwards and forwards across the deck, gripping with their left hands at anything they could find to steady them, till at length, bruised and breathless, they fell apart unwounded, and rested awhile.

"An ill field this to fight on, Señor," gasped d'Aguilar.

"I think that it will serve our turn," said Peter grimly, and rushed at him like a bull. It was just then that a great sea came aboard the ship, a mass of green water which struck them both and washed them like straws into the scuppers, where they rolled half drowned. Peter rose the first, coughing out salt water, and rubbing it from his eyes, to see d'Aguilar still upon the deck, his sword lying beside him, and holding his right wrist with his left hand.

"Who gave you the hurt?" he asked, "I or your fall?"

"The fall, Señor," answered d'Aguilar; "I think that it has broken my wrist. But I have still my left hand. Suffer me to arise, and we will

finish this fray."

As the words passed his lips a gust of wind, more furious than any that had gone before, concentrated as it was through a gorge in the mountains, struck the caravel at the very mouth of the harbour, and laid her over on her beam ends. For a while it seemed as though she must capsize and sink, till suddenly her mainmast snapped like a stick and went overboard, when, relieved of its weight, by slow degrees she righted herself. Down upon the deck came the cross yard, one end of it crashing through the roof of the cabin in which Margaret and Betty were confined, splitting it in two, while a block attached to the other fell upon the side of Peter's head and, glancing from the steel cap, struck him on the neck and shoulder, hurling him senseless to the deck, where, still grasping his sword, he lay with arms outstretched.

Out of the ruin of the cabin appeared Margaret and Betty, the former very pale and frightened, and the latter muttering prayers, but, as it chanced, both uninjured. Clinging to the tangled ropes they crept forward, seeking refuge in the waist of the ship, for the heavy spar still worked and rolled above them, resting on the wreck of the cabin and the bulwarks, whence presently it slid into the sea. By the stump of the broken mainmast they halted, their long locks streaming in the gale, and here it was that Margaret caught sight of Peter lying upon his back, his face red with blood, and sliding to and fro as the vessel rolled.

She could not speak, but in mute appeal pointed first to him and then to

d'Aguilar, who stood near, remembering as she did so her vision in the house at Holborn, which was thus terribly fulfilled. Holding to a rope, d'Aguilar drew near to her and spoke into her ear. "Lady," he said, "this is no deed of mine. We were fighting a fair fight, for he had boarded the ship when the mast fell and killed him. Blame me not for his death, but seek comfort from God."

She heard, and, looking round her wildly, perceived her father struggling towards her; then, with a bitter cry, fell senseless on his breast.