

CHAPTER XIII

THE ADVENTURE OF THE INN

Peter did not sleep well, for, notwithstanding all the barber's dressing, his hurt pained him much. Moreover, he was troubled by the thought that Margaret must be sure that both he and her father were dead, and of the sufferings of her sore heart. Whenever he dozed off he seemed to see her awake and weeping, yes, and to hear her sobs and murmurings of his name. When the first light of dawn crept through the high-barred windows, he arose and called Castell, for they could not dress without each other's help. Then they waited until they heard the sound of men talking and of beasts stamping in the courtyard without. Guessing that this was the barber with the mules, they unlocked their door and, finding the servant yawning in the passage, persuaded her to let them out of the house.

The barber it was, sure enough, and with him a one-eyed youth mounted on a pony, who, he said, would guide them to Granada. So they returned with him into the house, where he looked at their wounds, shaking his head over that of Peter, who, he said, ought not to travel so soon. After this came more haggling as to the price of the mules, saddlery, saddle-bags in which they packed their few spare clothes, hire of the guide and his horse, and so forth, since, anxious as they were to get away, they did not dare to seem to have money to spare.

At length everything was settled, and as their host, Father Henriques, had not yet appeared, they determined to depart without bidding him farewell, leaving some money in acknowledgment of his hospitality and as a gift to his church. Whilst they were handing it over to the servant, however, together with a fee for herself, the priest joined them, unshaven, and holding his hand to his tonsured head whilst he explained, what was not true, that he had been celebrating some early Mass in the church; then asked whither they were going.

They told him, and pressed their gift upon him, which he accepted, nothing loth, though its liberality seemed to make him more urgent to delay their departure. They were not fit to travel; the roads were most unsafe; they would be taken captive by the Moors, and thrown into a dungeon with the Christian prisoners; no one could enter Granada without a passport, he declared, and so forth, to all of which they answered that they must go.

Now he appeared to be much disturbed, and said finally that they would bring him into trouble with the Marquis of Morella--how or why, he would not explain, though Peter guessed that it might be lest the marquis should learn from them that this priest, his chaplain, had been plundering the ship which he thought sunk, and possessing himself of his jewels. At length, seeing that the man meant mischief and would stop them in some fashion if they delayed, they bade him farewell hastily, and, pushing past him, mounted the mules that stood outside and rode away with their guide.

As they went they heard the priest, who now was in a rage, abusing the barber who had sold them the beasts, and caught the words "Spies," "English señoras," and "Commands of the Marquis," so that they were glad when at length they found themselves outside the town, where as yet few were stirring, and riding unmolested on the road to Granada.

This road proved to be no good one, and very hilly; moreover, the mules were even worse than they had thought, that which Peter rode stumbling continually. Now they asked the youth, their guide, how long it would take them to reach Granada; but all he answered them was:

"Quien sabe?" (Who knows?) "It depends upon the will of God."

An hour later they asked him again, whereon he replied:

Perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow, perhaps never, as there were many thieves about, and if they escaped the thieves they would probably be captured by the Moors.

"I think there is one thief very near to us," said Peter in English, looking at this ill-favoured young man, then added in his broken Spanish, "Friend, if we fall in with robbers or Moors, the first one who dies will be yourself," and he tapped the hilt of his sword.

The lad uttered a Spanish curse, and turned the head of his pony round

as though he would ride back to Motril, then changed his mind and pushed on a long way in front of them, nor could they come near him again for hours. So hard was the road and so feeble were the mules that, notwithstanding a midday halt to rest them, it was nightfall before they reached the top of the Sierra, and in the last sunset glow, separated from them by the rich vega or plain, saw the minarets and palaces of Granada. Now they wished to push on, but their guide swore that it was impossible, as in the dark they would fall over precipices while descending to the plain. There was a venta or inn near by, he said, where they could sleep, starting again at dawn.

When Castell said that they did not wish to go to an inn, he answered that they must, since they had eaten what food they had, and here on the road there was no fodder for the beasts. So, reluctantly enough, they consented, knowing that unless they were fed the mules would never carry them to Granada, whereon the guide, pointing out the house to them, a lonely place in a valley about a hundred yards from the road, said that he would go on to make arrangements, and galloped off.

As they approached this hostelry, which was surrounded by a rough wall for purposes of defence, they saw the one-eyed youth engaged in earnest conversation with a fat, ill-favoured man who had a great knife stuck in his girdle. Advancing to them, bowing, this man said that he was the host, and, in reply to their request for food and a room, told them that they could have both.

They rode into the courtyard, whereon the inn-keeper locked the door in the wall behind them, explaining that it was to keep out robbers, and adding that they were fortunate to be where they could sleep quite safely. Then a Moor came and led away their mule to the stable, and they accompanied the landlord into the sitting-room, a long, low apartment furnished with tables and benches, on which sat several rough-looking fellows, drinking wine. Here the host suddenly demanded payment in advance, saying that he did not trust strangers. Peter would have argued with him; but Castell, thinking it best to comply, unbuttoned his garments to get at his money, for he had no loose coin in his pocket, having paid away the last at Motril.

His right hand being still helpless, this he did with his left, and so awkwardly that the small doubloon he took hold of slipped from his fingers and fell on to the floor. Forgetting that he had not re-fastened the belt, he bent down to pick it up, whereon a number of gold pieces of various sorts, perhaps twenty of them, fell out and rolled hither and thither on the ground. Peter, watching, saw the landlord and the other men in the room exchange a quick and significant glance. They rose, however, and assisted to find the money, which the host returned to Castell, remarking with an unpleasant smile, that if he had known that his guests were so rich he would have charged them more for their accommodation.

"Of your good heart I pray you not," answered Castell, "for that is all our worldly goods," and even as he spoke another gold piece, this time a

large doubloon, which had remained in his clothing, slipped to the floor.

"Of course, Señor," the host replied as he picked this up also and handed it back politely, "but shake yourself, there may still be a coin or two in your doublet." Castell did so, whereon the gold in his belt, loosened by what had fallen out, rattled audibly, and the audience smiled again, while the host congratulated him on the fact that he was in an honest house, and not wandering on the mountains, which were the home of so many bad men.

Having pocketed his money with the best grace he could, and buckled his belt beneath his robe, Castell and Peter sat down at a table a little apart, and asked if they could have some supper. The host assented, and called to the Moorish servant to bring food, then sat down also, and began to put questions to them, of a sort which showed that their guide had already told all their story.

"How did you learn of our shipwreck?" asked Castell by way of answer.

"How? Why, from the people of the marquis, who stopped here to drink a cup of wine when he passed to Granada yesterday with his company and two señoras. He said that the San Antonio had sunk, but told us nothing of your being left aboard of her."

"Then forgive us, friend, if we, whose business is of no interest to

you, copy his discretion, as we are weary and would rest."

"Certainly, Señors--certainly," replied the man; "I go to hasten your supper, and to fetch you a flask of the wine of Granada worthy of your degree," and he left them.

A while later their food came--good meat enough of its sort--and with it the wine in an earthenware jug, which, as he filled their horn mugs, the host said he had poured out of the flask himself that the crust of it might not slip. Castell thanked him, and asked him to drink a cup to their good journey; but he declined, answering that it was a fast day with him, on which he was sworn to touch only water. Now Peter, who had said nothing all this time, but noted much, just touched the wine with his lips, and smacked them as though in approbation while he whispered in English to Castell:

"Drink it not; it is drugged!"

"What says your son?" asked the host.

"He says that it is delicious, but suddenly he has remembered what I too forgot, that the doctor at Motril forbade us to touch wine for fear lest we should worsen the hurts that we had in the shipwreck. Well, let it not be wasted. Give it to your friends. We must be content with thinner stuff." And taking up a jug of water that stood upon the table, he filled an empty cup with it and drank, then passed it to Peter, while

the host looked at them sourly.

Then, as though by an afterthought, Castell rose and politely presented the jug of wine and the two filled mugs to the men who were sitting at a table close by, saying that it was a pity that they should not have the benefit of such fine liquor. One of these fellows, as it chanced, was their own guide, who had come in from tending the mules. They took the mugs readily enough, and two of them tossed off their contents, whereon, with a smothered oath, the landlord snatched away the jug and vanished with it.

Castell and Peter went on with their meal, for they saw their neighbours eating of the same dish, as did the landlord also, who had returned, and, it seemed to Peter, was watching the two men who had drunk the wine with an anxious eye. Presently one of these rose from the table and, going to a bench on the other side of the room, flung himself down upon it and became quite silent, while their one-eyed guide stretched out his arms and fell face forward so that his head rested on an empty plate, where he remained apparently insensible. The host sprang up and stood irresolute, and Castell, rising, said that evidently the poor lad was sleepy after his long ride, and as they were the same, would he be so courteous as to show them to their room?

He assented readily, indeed it was clear that he wished to be rid of them, for the other men were staring at the guide and their companion, and muttering amongst themselves.

"This way, Señors," he said, and led them to the end of the place where a broad step-ladder stood. Going up it, a lamp in his hand, he opened a trap-door and called to them to follow him, which Castell did. Peter, however, first turned and said good-night to the company who were watching them; at the same moment, as though by accident or thoughtlessly, half drawing his sword from its scabbard. Then he too went up the ladder, and found himself with the others in an attic.

It was a bare place, the only furniture in it being two chairs and two rough wooden bedsteads without heads to them, mere trestles indeed, that stood about three feet apart against a boarded partition which appeared to divide this room from some other attic beyond. Also, there was a hole in the wall immediately beneath the eaves of the house that served the purpose of a window, over which a sack was nailed. "We are poor folk," said the landlord as they glanced round this comfortless garret, "but many great people have slept well here, as doubtless you will also," and he turned to descend the ladder.

"It will serve," answered Castell; "but, friend, tell your men to leave the stable open, as we start at dawn, and be so good as to give me that lamp."

"I cannot spare the lamp," he grunted sulkily, with his foot already on the first step.

Peter strode to him and grasped his arm with one hand, while with the other he seized the lamp. The man cursed, and began to fumble at his belt, as though for a knife, whereon Peter, putting out his strength, twisted his arm so fiercely that in his pain he loosed the lamp, which remained in Peter's hand. The inn-keeper made a grab at it, missed his footing and rolled down the ladder, falling heavily on the floor below.

Watching from above, to their relief they saw him pick himself up, and heard him begin to revile them, shaking his fist and vowing vengeance. Then Peter shut down the trap-door. It was ill fitted, so that the edge of it stood up above the flooring, also the bolt that fastened it had been removed, although the staples in which it used to work remained. Peter looked round for some stick or piece of wood to pass through these staples, but could find nothing. Then he bethought him of a short length of cord that he had in his pocket, which served to tie one of the saddle-bags in its place on his mule. This he fastened from one staple to the other, so that the trap-door could not be lifted more than an inch or two.

Reflecting that this might be done, and the cord cut with a knife passed through the opening, he took one of the chairs and stood it so that two of its legs rested on the edge of the trap-door and the other two upon the boarding of the floor. Then he said to Castell:

"We are snared birds; but they must get into the cage before they wring our necks. That wine was poisoned, and, if they can, they will murder us

for our money--or because they have been told to do so by the guide. We had best keep awake to-night."

"I think so," answered Castell anxiously. "Listen, they are talking down below."

Talking they were, as though they debated something, but after a while the sound of voices died away. When all was silent they hunted round the attic, but could find nothing that was unusual to such places. Peter looked at the window-hole, and, as it was large enough for a man to pass through, tried to drag one of the beds beneath it, thinking that if any such attempt were made, he who lay thereon would have the thief at his mercy, only to find, however, that these were screwed to the floor and immovable. As there was nothing more that they could do, they went and sat upon these beds, their bare swords in their hands, and waited a long while, but nothing happened.

At length the lamp, which had been flickering feebly for some time, went out, lacking oil, and except for the light which crept through the window-place, for now they had torn away the sacking that hung over it, they were in darkness.

A little while later they heard the sound of a horse's hoofs, and the door of the house open and shut, after which there was more talking below, and mingling with it a new voice which Peter seemed to remember.

"I have it," he whispered to Castell. "Here is our late host, Father Henriques, come to see how his guests are faring."

Another half-hour and the waning moon rose, throwing a beam of light into their chamber; also they heard horse's hoofs again. Going to the window, Peter looked out of it and saw the horse, a fine beast, being held by the landlord, then a man came and mounted it and, at some remark of his, turned his face upwards towards their window. It was that of Father Henriques.

The two whispered together for a while till the priest blessed the landlord in Latin words and rode away, and again they heard the door of the house close.

"He is off to Granada, to warn Morella his master of our coming," said Castell, as they reseated themselves upon the beds.

"To warn Morella that we shall never come, perhaps; but we will beat him yet," replied Peter.

The night wore on, and Castell, who was very weary, sank back upon the bolster and began to doze, when suddenly the chair that was set upon the trap-door fell over with a great clatter, and he sprang up, asking what that noise might be.

"Only a rat," answered Peter, who saw no good in telling him the

truth--namely, that thieves or murderers had tried to open the trap-door.

Then he crept down the room, felt the cord, to find that it was still uncut, and replaced the chair where it had been. This done, Peter came back to the bed and threw himself down upon it as though he would slumber, though never was he more wide awake. The weariness of Castell had overcome him again, however, for he snored at his side.

For a long while nothing further happened, although once the ray of moonlight was cut off, and for an instant Peter thought that he saw a face at the window. If so, it vanished and returned no more. Now from behind their heads came faint sounds, like those of stifled breathing, like those of naked feet; then a slight creaking and scratching in the wall--a mouse's tooth might have caused it--and suddenly, right in that ray of moonlight, a cruel-looking knife and a naked arm projected through the panelling.

The knife flickered for a second over the breast of the sleeping Castell as though it were a living thing that chose the spot where it would strike. One second--only one--for the next Peter had drawn himself up, and with a sweep of the sword which lay unscabbarded at his side, had shorn that arm off above the elbow, just where it projected from the panelling.

"What was that?" asked Castell again, as something fell upon him.

"A snake," answered Peter, "a poisonous snake. Wake up now, and look."

Castell obeyed, staring in silence at the horrible arm which still clasped the great knife, while from beyond the panelling there came a stifled groan, then a sound as of a heavy body stumbling away.

"Come," said Peter, "let us be going, unless we would stop here for ever. That fellow will soon be back to seek his arm."

"Going! How?" asked Castell.

"There seems to be but one road, and that a rough one, through the window and over the wall," answered Peter. "Ah! there they come; I thought so." And as he spoke they heard the sound of men scrambling up the ladder.

They ran to the window-place and looked out, but there seemed to be no one below, and it was not more than twelve feet from the ground. Peter helped Castell through it, then, holding his sound arm with both his own, lowered him as far as he could, and let go. He dropped on to his feet, fell to the ground, then rose again, unhurt. Peter was about to follow him when he heard the chair tumble over again, and, looking round, saw the trap-door open, to fall back with a crash. They had cut the cord!

The figure of a man holding a knife appeared in the faint light, followed by the head of another man. Now it was too late for him to get through the window-place safely; if he attempted it he would be stabbed in the back. So, grasping his sword with both hands, Peter leapt at that man, aiming a great stroke at his shadowy mass. It fell upon him somewhere, for down he went and lay quite still. By now the second man had his knee upon the edge of flooring. Peter thrust him through, and he sank backwards on to the heads of others who were following him, sweeping the ladder with his weight, so that all of them tumbled in a heap at its foot, save one who hung to the edge of the trap frame by his hands. Peter slammed its door to, crushing them so that he loosed his grip, with a howl. Then, as he had nothing else, he dragged the body of the dead man on to it and left him there.

Next he rushed to the window, sheathing his sword as he ran, scrambled through it, and, hanging by his arms, let himself drop, coming to the ground safely, for he was very agile, and in the excitement of the fray forgot the hurt to his head and shoulder.

"Where now?" asked Castell, as he stood by him panting.

"To the stable for the mules. No, it is useless; we have no time to saddle them, and the outer gate is locked. The wall--the wall--we must climb it! They will be after us in a minute."

They ran thither and found that, though ten feet high, fortunately this

wall was built of rough stone, which gave an easy foothold. Peter scrambled up first, then, lying across its top, stretched down his hand to Castell, and with difficulty--for the man was heavy and crippled--dragged him to his side. Just then they heard a voice from their garret shout:

"The English devils have gone! Get to the door and cut them off."

"Come on," said Peter. So together they climbed, or rather fell, down the wall on to a mass of prickly-pear bush, which broke the shock but tore them so sorely in a score of places that they could have shrieked with the pain. Somehow they freed themselves, and, bleeding all over, broke from that accursed bush, struggling up the bank of the ditch in which it grew, ran for the road, and along it towards Granada.

Before they had gone a hundred yards they heard shoutings, and guessed that they were being followed. Just here the road crossed a ravine full of boulders and rough scrubby growth, whereas beyond it was bare and open. Peter seized Castell and dragged him up this ravine till they came to a place where, behind a great stone, there was a kind of hole, filled with bushes and tall, dead grass, into which they plunged and hid themselves.

"Draw your sword," he said to Castell. "If they find us, we will die as well as we can."

He obeyed, holding it in his left hand.

They heard the robbers run along the road; then, seeing that they had missed their victims, these returned again, five or six of them, and fell to searching the ravine. But the light was very bad, for here the rays of the moon did not penetrate, and they could find nothing. Presently two of them halted within five paces of them and began to talk, saying that the swine must still be hidden in the yard, or perhaps had doubled back for Motril.

"I don't know where they are hidden," answered the other man; "but this is a poor business. Fat Pedro's arm is cut clean off, and I expect he will bleed to death, while two of the other fellows are dead or dying, for that long-legged Englishman hits hard, to say nothing of those who drank the drugged wine, and look as though they would never wake. Yes, a poor business to get a few doubloons and please a priest, but oh! if I had the hogs here I----" And he hissed out a horrible threat. "Meanwhile we had best lie up at the mouth of this place in case they should still be hidden here."

Peter heard him and listened. All the other men had gone, running back along the road. His blood was up, and the thorn pricks stung him sorely. Saying no word, out of his lair he came with that terrible sword of his aloft.

The men caught sight of him, and gave a gasp of fear. It was the last

sound that one of them ever made. Then the other turned and ran like a hare. This was he who had uttered the threat.

"Stop!" whispered Peter, as he overtook him--"stop, and do what you promised."

The brute turned, and asked for mercy, but got none.

"It was needful," said Peter to Castell presently; "you heard--they were going to wait for us."

"I do not think that they will try to murder any more Englishmen at that inn," panted Castell, as he ran along beside him.