

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE DOOM OF JOHN CASTELL

His evidence finished, the Marquis of Morella sat down, whereon, the king and queen having whispered together, the head alcalde asked Betty if she had any questions to put to him. She rose with much dignity, and through her interpreter said in a quiet voice:

"Yes, a great many. Yet she would not debase herself by asking a single one until the stain which he had cast upon her was washed away, which she thought could only be done in blood. He had alleged that she was a woman of no character, and he had further alleged that their marriage was null and void. Being of the sex she was, she could not ask him to make good his assertions at the sword's point, therefore, as she believed she had the right to do according to all the laws of honour, she asked leave to seek a champion--if an unfriended woman could find one in a strange land--to uphold her fair name against this base and cruel slander."

Now, in the silence that followed her speech, Peter rose and said:

"I ask the permission of your Majesties to be that champion. Your Majesties will note that according to his own story I have suffered from this marquis the bitterest wrong that one man can receive at the hands of another. Also, he has lied in saying that I am not true to my

affianced lady, the Dona Margaret, and surely I have a right to avenge the lie upon him. Lastly, I declare that I believe the Señora Betty to be a good and upright woman, upon whom no shadow of shame has ever fallen, and, as her countryman and relative, I desire to uphold her good name before all the world. I am a foreigner here with few friends, or none, yet I cannot believe that your Majesties will withhold from me the right of battle which all over the world in such a case one gentleman may demand of another. I challenge the Marquis of Morella to mortal combat without mercy to the fallen, and here is the proof of it."

Then, stepping across the open space before the bar, he drew the leathern gauntlet off his hand and threw it straight into Morella's face, thinking that after such an insult he could not choose but fight.

With an oath Morella snatched at his sword; but, before he could draw it, officers of the court threw themselves on him, and the king's stern voice was heard commanding them to cease their brawling in the royal presences.

"I ask your pardon, Sire," gasped Morella, "but you have seen what this Englishman did to me, a grandee of Spain."

"Yes," broke in the queen, "but we have also heard what you, a grandee of Spain, did to this gentleman of England, and the charge you brought against him, which, it seems, the Dona Margaret does not believe."

"In truth, no, your Majesty," said Margaret. "Let me be sworn also, and I can explain much of what the marquis has told to you. I never wished to marry him or any man, save this one," and she touched Peter on the arm, "and anything that he or I may have done, we did to escape the evil net in which we were snared."

"We believe it," answered the queen with a smile, then fell to consulting with the king and the alcaldes.

For a long time they debated in voices so low that none could hear what they said, looking now at one and now at another of the parties to this strange suit. Also, some priest was called into their council, which Margaret thought a bad omen. At length they made up their minds, and in a low, quiet voice and measured words her Majesty, as Queen of Castile, gave the judgment of them all. Addressing herself first to Morella, she said:

"My lord Marquis, you have brought very grave charges against the lady who claims to be your wife, and the Englishman whose affianced bride you admit you snatched away by fraud and force. This gentleman, on his own behalf and on behalf of these ladies, has challenged you to a combat to the death in a fashion that none can mistake. Do you accept his challenge?"

"I would accept it readily enough, your Majesty," answered Morella in sullen tones, "since heretofore none have doubted my courage; but I must

remember that I am"--and he paused, then added--"what your Majesties know me to be, a grandee of Spain, and something more, wherefore it is scarcely lawful for me to cross swords with a Jew-merchant's clerk, for that was this man's high rank and office in England."

"You could cross them with me on your ship, the San Antonio," exclaimed Peter bitterly, "why then are you ashamed to finish what you were not ashamed to begin? Moreover, I tell you that in love or war I hold myself the equal of any woman-thief and bastard in this kingdom, who am one of a name that has been honoured in my own."

Now again the king and queen spoke together of this question of rank--no small one in that age and country. Then Isabella said:

"It is true that a grandee of Spain cannot be asked to meet a simple foreign gentleman in single combat. Therefore, since he has thought fit to raise it, we uphold the objection of the Marquis of Morella, and declare that this challenge is not binding on his honour. Yet we note his willingness to accept the same, and are prepared to do what we can to make the matter easy, so that it may not be said that a Spaniard, who has wrought wrong to an Englishman, and been asked openly to make the amend of arms in the presence of his sovereigns, was debarred from so doing by the accident of his rank. Señor Peter Brome, if you will receive it at our hands, as others of your nation have been proud to do, we propose, believing you to be a brave and loyal man of gentle birth, to confer upon you the knighthood of the Order of St. James, and thereby

and therein the right to consort with as equal, or to fight as equal, any noble of Spain, unless he should be of the right blood-royal, to which place we think the most puissant and excellent Marquis of Morella lays no claim."

"I thank your Majesties," said Peter, astonished, "for the honour that you would do to me, which, had it not been for the fact that my father chose the wrong side on Bosworth Field, being of a race somewhat obstinate in the matter of loyalty, I should not have needed to accept from your Majesties. As it is I am very grateful, since now the noble marquis need not feel debased in settling our long quarrel as he would desire to do."

"Come hither and kneel down, Señor Peter Brome," said the queen when he had finished speaking.

He obeyed, and Isabella, borrowing his sword from the king, gave him the accolade by striking him thrice upon the right shoulder and saying:

"Rise, Sir Peter Brome, Knight of the most noble Order of Saint Iago, and by creation a Don of Spain."

He rose, he bowed, retreating backwards as was the custom, and thereby nearly falling off the dais, which some people thought a good omen for Morella. As he went the king said:

"Our Marshal, Sir Peter, will arrange the time and manner of your combat with the marquis as shall be most convenient to you both. Meanwhile, we command you both that no unseemly word or deed should pass between you, who must soon meet face to face to abide the judgment of God in battle à l'outrance. Rather, since one of you must die so shortly, do we entreat you to prepare your souls to appear before His judgment-seat. We have spoken."

Now the audience appeared to think that the court was ended, for many of them began to rise; but the queen held up her hand and said:

"There remain other matters on which we must give judgment. The señora here," and she pointed to Betty, "asks that her marriage should be declared valid, or so we understand, and the Marquis of Morella asks that his marriage with the said señora should be declared void, or so we understand. Now this is a question over which we claim no power, it having to do with a sacrament of the Church. Therefore we leave it to his Holiness the Pope in person, or by his legate, to decide according to his wisdom in such manner as may seem best to him, if the parties concerned should choose to lay their suit before him. Meanwhile, we declare and decree that the señora, born Elizabeth Dene, shall everywhere throughout our dominions, until or unless his Holiness the Pope shall decide to the contrary, be received and acknowledged as the Marchioness of Morella, and that during his lifetime her reputed husband shall make due provision for her maintenance, and that after his death, should no decision have been come to by the court of Rome upon her suit,

she shall inherit and enjoy that proportion of his lands and property which belongs to a wife under the laws of this realm."

Now, while Betty bowed her thanks to their Majesties till the jewels on her bodice rattled, and Morella scowled till his face looked as black as a thunder-cloud above the mountains, the audience, whispering to each other, once more rose to disperse. Again the queen held up her hand, for the judgment was not yet finished.

"We have a question to ask of the gallant Sir Peter Brome and the Dona Margaret, his affianced. Is it still their desire to take each other in marriage?"

Now Peter looked at Margaret, and Margaret looked at Peter, and there was that in their eyes which both of them understood, for he answered in a clear voice:

"Your Majesty, that is the dearest wish of both of us."

The queen smiled a little, then asked: "And do you, Señor John Castell, consent and allow your daughter's marriage to this knight?"

"I do, indeed," he answered gravely. "Had it not been for this man here," and he glanced with bitter hatred at Morella, "they would have been united long ago, and to that end," he added with meaning, "such little property as I possessed has been made over to trustees in England

for their benefit and that of their children. Therefore I am henceforward dependent upon their charity."

"Good," said the queen. "Then one question remains to be put, and only one. Is it your wish, both of you, that you should be wed before the single combat between the Marquis of Morella and Sir Peter Brome? Remember, Dona Margaret, before you answer, that in this event you may soon be made a widow, and that if you postpone the ceremony you may never be a wife."

Now Margaret and Peter spoke a few words together, then the former answered for them both.

"Should my lord fall," she said in her sweet voice that trembled as she uttered the words, "in either case my heart will be widowed and broken. Let me live out my days, therefore, bearing his name, that, knowing my deathless grief, none may thenceforth trouble me with their love, who desire to remain his bride in heaven."

"Well spoken," said the queen. "We decree that here in our cathedral of Seville you twain shall be wed on the same day, but before the Marquis of Morella and you, Sir Peter Brome, meet in single combat. Further, lest harm should be attempted against either of you," and she looked sideways at Morella, "you, Señora Margaret, shall be my guest until you leave my care to become a bride, and you, Sir Peter, shall return to



lodge in the prison whence you came, but with liberty to see whom you will, and to go when and where you will, but under our protection, lest some attempt should be made on you."

She ceased, whereon suddenly the king began speaking in his sharp, thin voice.

"Having settled these matters of chivalry and marriage," he said, "there remains another, which I will not leave to the gentle lips of our sovereign Lady, that has to do with something higher than either of them--namely, the eternal welfare of men's souls, and of the Church of Christ on earth. It has been declared to us that the man yonder, John Castell, merchant of London, is that accursed thing, a Jew, who for the sake of gain has all his life feigned to be a Christian, and, as such, deceived a Christian woman into marriage; that he is, moreover, of our subjects, having been born in Spain, and therefore amenable to the civil and spiritual jurisdiction of this realm."

He paused, while Margaret and Peter stared at each other affrighted. Only Castell stood silent and unmoved, though he guessed what must follow better than either of them.

"We judge him not," went on the king, "who claim no authority in such high matters, but we do what we must do--we commit him to the Holy Inquisition, there to take his trial!"

Now Margaret cried aloud. Peter stared about him as though for help, which he knew could never come, feeling more afraid than ever he had been in all his life, and for the first time that day Morella smiled. At least he would be rid of one enemy. But Castell went to Margaret and kissed her tenderly. Then he shook Peter by the hand, saying:

"Kill that thief," and he looked at Morella, "as I know you will, and would if there were ten as bad at his back. And be a good husband to my girl, as I know you will also, for I shall ask an account of you of these matters when we meet where there is neither Jew nor Christian, priest nor king. Now be silent, and bear what must be borne as I do, for I have a word to say before I leave you and the world.

"Your Majesties, I make no plea for myself, and when I am questioned before your Inquisition the task will be easy, for I desire to hide nothing, and will tell the truth, though not from fear or because I shrink from pain. Your Majesties, you have told us that these two, who, at least, are good enough Christians from their birth, shall be wed. I would ask you if any spiritual crime, or supposed crime, of mine will be allowed to work their separation, or to their detriment in any way whatsoever."

"On that point," answered the queen quickly, as though she wished to get in her words before the king or any one else could speak, "you have our royal word, John Castell. Your case is apart from their case, and nothing of which you may be convicted shall affect them in person or,"

she added slowly, "in property."

"A large promise," muttered the king.

"It is my promise," she answered decidedly, "and it shall be kept at any cost. These two shall marry, and if Sir Peter lives through the fray they shall depart from Spain unharmed, nor shall any fresh charge be brought against them in any court of the realm, nor shall they be persecuted or proceeded against in any other realm or on the high seas at our instance or that of our officers. Let my words be written down, and one copy of them signed and filed and another copy given to the Dona Margaret."

"Your Majesty," said Castell, "I thank you, and now, if die I must, I shall die happy. Yet I make bold to tell you that had you not spoken them it was my purpose to kill myself, here before your eyes, since that is a sin for which none can be asked to suffer save the sinner. Also, I say that this Inquisition which you have set up shall eat out the heart of Spain and bring her greatness to the dust of death. The torture and the misery of those Jews, than whom you have no better or more faithful subjects, shall be avenged on the heads of your children's children for so long as their blood endures."

He finished speaking, and, while something that sounded like a gasp of fear rose from that crowded court as the meaning of Castell's bold words came home to his auditors, the crowd behind him separated, and there

appeared, walking two by two, a file of masked and hooded monks and a guard of soldiers, all of whom doubtless were in waiting. They came to John Castell, they touched him on the shoulder, they closed around him, hiding him as it were from the world, and in the midst of them he vanished away.

Peter's memories of that strange day in the Alcazar at Seville always remained somewhat dim and blurred. It was not wonderful. Within the space of a few hours he had been tried for his life and acquitted. He had seen Betty, transformed from a humble companion into a magnificent and glittering marchioness, as a chrysalis is transformed into a butterfly, urge her strange suit against the husband who had tricked her, and whom she had tricked, and, for the while at any rate, more than hold her own, thanks to her ready wit and native strength of character.

As her champion, and that of Margaret, he had challenged Morella to a single combat, and when his defiance was refused on the ground of his lack of rank, by the favour of the great Isabella, who wished to use him as her instrument, doubtless because of those secret ambitions of Morella's which Margaret had revealed to her, he had been suddenly advanced to the high station of a Knight of the Order of St. James of Spain, to which, although he cared little for it, otherwise he might vainly have striven to come.

More, and better far, the desire of his heart would at length be attained, for now it was granted to him to meet his enemy, the man whom

he hated with just cause, upon a fair field, without favour shown to one or the other, and to fight him to the death. He had been promised, further, that within some few days Margaret should be given to him as wife, although it well might be that she would keep that name but for a single hour, and that until then they both should dwell safe from Morella's violence and treachery; also that, whatever chanced, no suit should lie against them in any land for aught that they did or had done in Spain.

Lastly, when all seemed safe save for that chance of war, whereof, having been bred to such things, he took but little count; when his cup, emptied at length of mire and sand, was brimming full with the good red wine of battle and of love, when it was at his very lips indeed, Fate had turned it to poison and to gall. Castell, his bride's father, and the man he loved, had been haled to the vaults of the Inquisition, whence he knew well he would come forth but once more, dressed in a yellow robe "relaxed to the civil arm," to perish slowly in the fires of the Quemadero, the place of burning of heretics.

What would his conquest over Morella avail if Heaven should give him power to conquer? What kind of a bridal would that be which was sealed and consecrated by the death of the bride's father in the torturing fires of the Inquisition? How would they ever get the smell of the smoke of that sacrifice out of their nostrils? Castell was a brave man; no torments would make him recant. It was doubtful even if he would be at the pains to deny his faith, he who had only been baptized a Christian

by his father for the sake of policy, and suffered the fraud to continue for the purposes of his business, and that he might win and keep a Christian wife. No, Castell was doomed, and he could no more protect him from priest and king than a dove can protect its nest from a pair of hungry peregrines.

Oh that last scene! Never could Peter forget it while he lived--the vast, fretted hall with its painted arches and marble columns; the rays of the afternoon sun piercing the window-places, and streaming like blood on to the black robes of the monks as, with their prey, they vanished back into the arcade where they had lurked; Margaret's wild cry and ashen face as her father was torn away from her, and she sank fainting on to Betty's bejewelled bosom; the cruel sneer on Morella's lips; the king's hard smile; the pity in the queen's eye; the excited murmurings of the crowd; the quick, brief comments of the lawyers; the scratching of the clerk's quill as, careless of everything save his work, he recorded the various decrees; and above it all as it were, upright, defiant, unmoved, Castell, surrounded by the ministers of death, vanishing into the blackness of the arcade, vanishing into the jaws of the tomb.