Fair Margaret

By

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FAIR MARGARET

CHAPTER I

HOW PETER MET THE SPANIARD

It was a spring afternoon in the sixth year of the reign of King Henry VII. of England. There had been a great show in London, for that day his Grace opened the newly convened Parliament, and announced to his faithful people--who received the news with much cheering, since war is ever popular at first--his intention of invading France, and of leading the English armies in person. In Parliament itself, it is true, the general enthusiasm was somewhat dashed when allusion was made to the finding of the needful funds; but the crowds without, formed for the most part of persons who would not be called upon to pay the money, did not suffer that side of the question to trouble them. So when their gracious liege appeared, surrounded by his glittering escort of nobles and men-at-arms, they threw their caps into the air, and shouted themselves hoarse.

The king himself, although he was still young in years, already a weary-looking man with a fine, pinched face, smiled a little sarcastically

at their clamour; but, remembering how glad he should be to hear it who still sat upon a somewhat doubtful throne, said a few soft words, and sending for two or three of the leaders of the people, gave them his royal hand, and suffered certain children to touch his robe that they might be cured of the Evil. Then, having paused a while to receive petitions from poor folk, which he handed to one of his officers to be read, amidst renewed shouting he passed on to the great feast that was made ready in his palace of Westminster.

Among those who rode near to him was the ambassador, de Ayala, accredited to the English Court by the Spanish sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella, and his following of splendidly attired lords and secretaries. That Spain was much in favour there was evident from his place in the procession. How could it be otherwise, indeed, seeing that already, four years or more before, at the age of twelve months, Prince Arthur, the eldest son of the king, had been formally affianced to the Infanta Catherine, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, aged one year and nine months? For in those days it was thought well that the affections of princes and princesses should be directed early into such paths as their royal parents and governors considered likely to prove most profitable to themselves.

At the ambassador's left hand, mounted on a fine black horse, and dressed richly, but simply, in black velvet, with a cap of the same material in which was fastened a single pearl, rode a tall cavalier. He was about five-and-thirty years of age, and very handsome, having

piercing black eyes and a stern, clean-cut face.

In every man, it is said, there can be found a resemblance, often far off and fanciful enough, to some beast or bird or other creature, and certainly in this case it was not hard to discover. The man resembled an eagle, which, whether by chance or design, was the crest he bore upon his servants' livery, and the trappings of his horse. The unflinching eyes, the hooked nose, the air of pride and mastery, the thin, long hand, the quick grace of movement, all suggested that king of birds, suggested also, as his motto said, that what he sought he would find, and what he found he would keep. Just now he was watching the interview between the English king and the leaders of the crowd whom his Grace had been pleased to summon, with an air of mingled amusement and contempt.

"You find the scene strange, Marquis," said the ambassador, glancing at him shrewdly.

"Señor, here in England, if it pleases your Excellency," he answered gravely, "Señor d'Aguilar. The marquis you mentioned lives in Spain--an accredited envoy to the Moors of Granada; the Señor d'Aguilar, a humble servant of Holy Church," and he crossed himself, "travels abroad--upon the Church's business, and that of their Majesties'."

"And his own too, sometimes, I believe," answered the ambassador drily. "But to be frank, what I do not understand about you, Señor d'Aguilar, as I know that you have abandoned political ambitions, is why you do not

enter my profession, and put on the black robe once and for all. What did I say--black? With your opportunities and connections it might be red by now, with a hat to match."

The Señor d'Aguilar smiled a little as he replied.

"You said, I think, that sometimes I travel on my own business. Well, there is your answer. You are right, I have abandoned worldly ambitions--most of them. They are troublesome, and for some people, if they be born too high and yet not altogether rightly, very dangerous. The acorn of ambition often grows into an oak from which men hang."

"Or into a log upon which men's heads can be cut off. Señor, I congratulate you. You have the wisdom that grasps the substance and lets the shadows flit. It is really very rare."

"You asked why I do not change the cut of my garments," went on d'Aguilar, without noticing the interruption. "Excellency, to be frank, because of my own business. I have failings like other men. For instance, wealth is that substance of which you spoke, rule is the shadow; he who has the wealth has the real rule. Again, bright eyes may draw me, or a hate may seek its slaking, and these things do not suit robes, black or red."

"Yet many such things have been done by those who wore them," replied the ambassador with meaning.

"Aye, Excellency, to the discredit of Holy Church, as you, a priest, know better than most men. Let the earth be evil as it must; but let the Church be like heaven above it, pure, unstained, the vault of prayer, the house of mercy and of righteous judgment, wherein walks no sinner such as I," and again he crossed himself.

There was a ring of earnestness in the speaker's voice that caused de Ayala, who knew something of his private reputation, to look at him curiously.

"A true fanatic, and therefore to us a useful man," he thought to himself, "though one who knows how to make the best of two worlds as well as most of them;" but aloud he said, "No wonder that our Church rejoices in such a son, and that her enemies tremble when he lifts her sword. But, Señor, you have not told me what you think of all this ceremony and people."

"The people I know well, Excellency, for I dwelt among them in past years and speak their language; and that is why I have left Granada to look after itself for a while, and am here to-day, to watch and make report----" He checked himself, then added, "As for the ceremony, were I a king I would have it otherwise. Why, in that house just now those vulgar Commons--for so they call them, do they not?--almost threatened their royal master when he humbly craved a tithe of the country's wealth to fight the country's war. Yes, and I saw him turn pale and tremble at

the rough voices, as though their echoes shook his throne. I tell you, Excellency, that the time will come in this land when those Commons will be king. Look now at that fellow whom his Grace holds by the hand, calling him 'sir' and 'master,' and yet whom he knows to be, as I do, a heretic, a Jew in disguise, whose sins, if he had his rights, should be purged by fire. Why, to my knowledge last night, that Israelite said things against the Church----"

"Whereof the Church, or its servant, doubtless made notes to be used when the time comes," broke in de Ayala. "But the audience is done, and his Highness beckons us forward to the feast, where there will be no heretics to vex us, and, as it is Lent, not much to eat. Come, Señor! for we stop the way."

Three hours had gone by, and the sun sank redly, for even at that spring season it was cold upon the marshy lands of Westminster, and there was frost in the air. On the open space opposite to the banqueting-hall, in front of which were gathered squires and grooms with horses, stood and walked many citizens of London, who, their day's work done, came to see the king pass by in state. Among these were a man and a lady, the latter attended by a handsome young woman, who were all three sufficiently striking in appearance to attract some notice in the throng.

The man, a person of about thirty years of age, dressed in a merchant's robe of cloth, and wearing a knife in his girdle, seemed over six feet in height, while his companion, in her flowing, fur-trimmed cloak, was,

for a woman, also of unusual stature. He was not, strictly speaking, a handsome man, being somewhat too high of forehead and prominent of feature; moreover, one of his clean-shaven cheeks, the right, was marred by the long, red scar of a sword-cut which stretched from the temple to the strong chin. His face, however, was open and manly, if rather stern, and the grey eyes were steady and frank. It was not the face of a merchant, but rather that of one of good degree, accustomed to camps and war. For the rest, his figure was well-built and active, and his voice when he spoke, which was seldom, clear and distinct to loudness, but cultivated and pleasant--again, not the voice of a merchant.

Of the lady's figure little could be seen because of the long cloak that hid it, but the face, which appeared within its hood when she turned and the dying sunlight filled her eyes, was lovely indeed, for from her birth to her death-day Margaret Castell--fair Margaret, as she was called--had this gift to a degree that is rarely granted to woman. Rounded and flower-like was that face, most delicately tinted also, with rich and curving lips and a broad, snow-white brow. But the wonder of it, what distinguished her above everything else from other beautiful women of her time, was to be found in her eyes, for these were not blue or grey, as might have been expected from her general colouring, but large, black, and lustrous; soft, too, as the eyes of a deer, and overhung by curling lashes of an ebon black. The effect of these eyes of hers shining above those tinted cheeks and beneath the brow of ivory whiteness was so strange as to be almost startling. They caught the beholder and held him, as might the sudden sight of a rose in snow, or

the morning star hanging luminous among the mists of dawn. Also, although they were so gentle and modest, if that beholder chanced to be a man on the good side of fifty it was often long before he could forget them, especially if he were privileged to see how well they matched the hair of chestnut, shading into black, that waved above them and fell, tress upon tress, upon the shapely shoulders and down to the slender waist.

Peter Brome, for he was so named, looked a little anxiously about him at the crowd, then, turning, addressed Margaret in his strong, clear voice.

"There are rough folk around," he said; "do you think you should stop here? Your father might be angered, Cousin."

Here it may be explained that in reality their kinship was of the slightest, a mere dash of blood that came to her through her mother. Still they called each other thus, since it is a convenient title that may mean much or nothing.

"Oh! why not?" she answered in her rich, slow tones, that had in them some foreign quality, something soft and sweet as the caress of a southern wind at night. "With you, Cousin," and she glanced approvingly at his stalwart, soldier-like form, "I have nothing to fear from men, however rough, and I do greatly want to see the king close by, and so does Betty. Don't you, Betty?" and she turned to her companion.

Betty Dene, whom she addressed, was also a cousin of Margaret, though only a distant connection of Peter Brome. She was of very good blood, but her father, a wild and dissolute man, had broken her mother's heart, and, like that mother, died early, leaving Betty dependent upon Margaret's mother, in whose house she had been brought up. This Betty was in her way remarkable, both in body and mind. Fair, splendidly formed, strong, with wide, bold, blue eyes and ripe red lips, such was the fashion of her. In speech she was careless and vigorous. Fond of the society of men, and fonder still of their admiration, for she was romantic and vain, Betty at the age of five-and-twenty was yet an honest girl, and well able to take care of herself, as more than one of her admirers had discovered. Although her position was humble, at heart she was very proud of her lineage, ambitious also, her great desire being to raise herself by marriage back to the station from which her father's folly had cast her down--no easy business for one who passed as a waiting-woman and was without fortune.

For the rest, she loved and admired her cousin Margaret more than any one on earth, while Peter she liked and respected, none the less perhaps because, try as she would--and, being nettled, she did try hard enough--her beauty and other charms left him quite unmoved.

In answer to Margaret's question she laughed and answered:

"Of course. We are all too busy up in Holborn to get the chance of so many shows that I should wish to miss one. Still, Master Peter is very

wise, and I am always counselled to obey him. Also, it will soon be dark."

"Well, well," said Margaret with a sigh and a little shrug of her shoulders, "as you are both against me, perhaps we had best be going. Next time I come out walking, cousin Peter, it shall be with some one who is more kind."

Then she turned and began to make her way as quickly as she could through the thickening crowd. Finding this difficult, before Peter could stop her, for she was very swift in her movements, Margaret bore to the right, entering the space immediately in front of the banqueting-hall where the grooms with horses and soldiers were assembled awaiting their lords, for here there was more room to walk. For a few moments Peter and Betty were unable to escape from the mob which closed in behind her, and thus it came about that Margaret found herself alone among these people, in the midst, indeed, of the guard of the Spanish ambassador de Ayala, men who were notorious for their lawlessness, for they reckoned upon their master's privilege to protect them. Also, for the most part, they were just then more or less in liquor.

One of these fellows, a great, red-haired Scotchman, whom the priest-diplomatist had brought with him from that country, where he had also been ambassador, suddenly perceiving before him a woman who appeared to be young and pretty, determined to examine her more closely, and to this end made use of a rude stratagem. Pretending to stumble, he grasped

at Margaret's cloak as though to save himself, and with a wrench tore it open, revealing her beautiful face and graceful figure.

"A dove, comrades!--a dove!" he shouted in a voice thick with drink, "who has flown here to give me a kiss." And, casting his long arms about her, he strove to draw her to him.

"Peter! Help me, Peter!" cried Margaret as she struggled fiercely in his grip.

"No, no, if you want a saint, my bonny lass," said the drunken Scotchman, "Andrew is as good as Peter," at which witticism those of the others who understood him laughed, for the man's name was Andrew.

Next instant they laughed again, and to the ruffian Andrew it seemed as though suddenly he had fallen into the power of a whirlwind. At least Margaret was wrenched away from him, while he spun round and round to fall violently upon his face.

"That's Peter!" exclaimed one of the soldiers in Spanish.

"Yes," answered another, "and a patron saint worth having"; while a third pulled the recumbent Andrew to his feet.

The man looked like a devil. His cap had gone, and his fiery red hair was smeared with mud. Moreover, his nose had been broken on a cobble

stone, and blood from it poured all over him, while his little red eyes glared like a ferret's, and his face turned a dirty white with pain and rage. Howling out something in Scotch, of a sudden he drew his sword and rushed straight at his adversary, purposing to kill him.

Now, Peter had no sword, but only his short knife, which he found no time to draw. In his hand, however, he carried a stout holly staff shod with iron, and, while Margaret clasped her hands and Betty screamed, on this he caught the descending blow, and, furious as it was, parried and turned it. Then, before the man could strike again, that staff was up, and Peter had leapt upon him. It fell with fearful force, breaking the Scotchman's shoulder and sending him reeling back.

"Shrewdly struck, Peter! Well done, Peter!" shouted the spectators.

But Peter neither saw nor heard them, for he was mad with rage at the insult that had been offered to Margaret. Up flew the iron-tipped staff again, and down it came, this time full on Andrew's head, which it shattered like an egg-shell, so that the brute fell backwards, dead.

For a moment there was silence, for the joke had taken a tragic turn. Then one of the Spaniards said, glancing at the prostrate form:

"Name of God! our mate is done for. That merchant hits hard."

Instantly there arose a murmur among the dead man's comrades, and one of

them cried:

"Cut him down!"

Understanding that he was to be set on, Peter sprang forward and snatched the Scotchman's sword from the ground where it had fallen, at the same time dropping his staff and drawing his dagger with the left hand. Now he was well armed, and looked so fierce and soldier-like as he faced his foes, that, although four or five blades were out, they held back. Then Peter spoke for the first time, for he knew that against so many he had no chance.

"Englishmen," he cried in ringing tones, but without shifting his head or glance, "will you see me murdered by these Spanish dogs?"

There was a moment's pause, then a voice behind cried:

"By God! not I," and a brawny Kentish man-at-arms ranged up beside him, his cloak thrown over his left arm, and his sword in his right hand.

"Nor I," said another. "Peter Brome and I have fought together before."

"Nor I," shouted a third, "for we were born in the same Essex hundred."

And so it went on, until there were as many stout Englishmen at his side as there were Spaniards and Scotchmen before him.

"That will do," said Peter, "we want no more than man to man. Look to the women, comrades behind there. Now, you murderers, if you would see English sword-play, come on, or, if you are afraid, let us go in peace."

"Yes, come on, you foreign cowards," shouted the mob, who did not love these turbulent and privileged guards.

By now the Spanish blood was up, and the old race-hatred awake. In broken English the sergeant of the guard shouted out some filthy insult about Margaret, and called upon his followers to "cut the throats of the London swine." Swords shone red in the red sunset light, men shifted their feet and bent forward, and in another instant a great and bloody fray would have begun.

But it did not begin, for at that moment a tall señor, who had been standing in the shadow and watching all that passed, walked between the opposing lines, as he went striking up the swords with his arm.

"Have done," said d'Aguilar quietly, for it was he, speaking in Spanish. "You fools! do you want to see every Spaniard in London torn to pieces? As for that drunken brute," and he touched the corpse of Andrew with his foot, "he brought his death upon himself. Moreover, he was not a Spaniard, there is no blood quarrel. Come, obey me! or must I tell you who I am?"

"We know you, Marquis," said the leader in a cowed voice. "Sheath your swords, comrades; after all, it is no affair of ours."

The men obeyed somewhat unwillingly; but at this moment arrived the ambassador de Ayala, very angry, for he had heard of the death of his servant, demanding, in a loud voice, that the man who had killed him should be given up.

"We will not give him up to a Spanish priest," shouted the mob. "Come and take him if you want him," and once more the tumult grew, while Peter and his companions made ready to fight.

Fighting there would have been also, notwithstanding all that d'Aguilar could do to prevent it; but of a sudden the noise began to die away, and a hush fell upon the place. Then between the uplifted weapons walked a short, richly clad man, who turned suddenly and faced the mob. It was King Henry himself.

"Who dare to draw swords in my streets, before my very palace doors?" he asked in a cold voice.

A dozen hands pointed at Peter.

"Speak," said the king to him.

"Margaret, come here," cried Peter; and the girl was thrust forward to

him.

"Sire," he said, "that man," and he pointed to the corpse of Andrew, "tried to do wrong to this maiden, John Castell's child. I, her cousin, threw him down. He drew his sword and came at me, and I killed him with my staff. See, it lies there. Then the Spaniards--his comrades--would have cut me down, and I called for English help. Sire, that is all."

The king looked him up and down.

"A merchant by your dress," he said; "but a soldier by your mien. How are you named?"

"Peter Brome, Sire."

"Ah! There was a certain Sir Peter Brome who fell at Bosworth Field--not fighting for me," and he smiled. "Did you know him perchance?"

"He was my father, Sire, and I saw him slain--aye, and slew the slayer."

"Well can I believe it," answered Henry, considering him. "But how comes it that Peter Brome's son, who wears that battle scar across his face, is clad in merchant's woollen?"

"Sire," said Peter coolly, "my father sold his lands, lent his all to the Crown, and I have never rendered the account. Therefore I must live

as I can."

The king laughed outright as he replied:

"I like you, Peter Brome, though doubtless you hate me."

"Not so, Sire. While Richard lived I fought for Richard. Richard is gone; and, if need be, I would fight for Henry, who am an Englishman, and serve England's king."

"Well said, and I may have need of you yet, nor do I bear you any grudge. But, I forgot, is it thus that you would fight for me, by causing riot in my streets, and bringing me into trouble with my good friends the Spaniards?"

"Sire, you know the story."

"I know your story, but who bears witness to it? Do you, maiden, Castell the merchant's daughter?"

"Aye, Sire. The man whom my cousin killed maltreated me, whose only wrong was that I waited to see your Grace pass by. Look on my torn cloak."

"Little wonder that he killed him for the sake of those eyes of yours, maiden. But this witness may be tainted." And again he smiled, adding,

"Is there no other?"

Betty advanced to speak, but d'Aguilar, stepping forward, lifted his bonnet from his head, bowed and said in English:

"Your Grace, there is; I saw it all. This gallant gentleman had no blame. It was the servants of my countryman de Ayala who were to blame, at any rate at first, and afterwards came the trouble."

Now the ambassador de Ayala broke in, claiming satisfaction for the killing of his man, for he was still very angry, and saying that if it were not given, he would report the matter to their Majesties of Spain, and let them know how their servants were treated in London.

At these words Henry grew grave, who, above all things, wished to give no offence to Ferdinand and Isabella.

"You have done an ill day's work, Peter Brome," he said, "and one of which my attorney must consider. Meanwhile, you will be best in safe keeping," and he turned as though to order his arrest.

"Sire," exclaimed Peter, "I live at Master Castell's house in Holborn, nor shall I run away."

"Who will answer for that," asked the king, "or that you will not make more riots on your road thither?"

"I will answer, your Grace," said d'Aguilar quietly, "if this lady will permit that I escort her and her cousin home. Also," he added in a low voice, "it seems to me that to hale him to a prison would be more like to breed a riot than to let him go."

Henry glanced round him at the great crowd who were gathered watching this scene, and saw something in their faces which caused him to agree with d'Aguilar.

"So be it, Marquis," he said. "I have your word, and that of Peter Brome, that he will be forthcoming if called upon. Let that dead man be laid in the Abbey till to-morrow, when this matter shall be inquired of. Excellency, give me your arm; I have greater questions of which I wish to speak with you ere we sleep."