

## CHAPTER XIV

### INEZ AND HER GARDEN

For two hours or more John Castell and Peter travelled on the Granada road, running when it was smooth, walking when it was rough, and stopping from time to time to get their breath and listen. But the night was quite silent, no one seemed to be pursuing them. Evidently the remaining cut-throats had either taken another way or, having their fill of this adventure, wanted to see no more of Peter and his sword.

At length the dawn broke over the great misty plain, for now they were crossing the vega. Then the sun rose and dispelled the vapours, and a dozen miles or more away they saw Granada on its hill. They saw each other also, and a sorry sight they were, torn by the sharp thorns, and stained with blood from their scratches. Peter was bare-headed too, for he had lost his cap, and almost beside himself now that the excitement had left him, from lack of sleep, pain, and weariness. Moreover, as the sun rose, it grew fearfully hot upon that plain, and its fierce rays, striking full upon his head, seemed to stupefy him, so that at last they were obliged to halt and weave a kind of hat out of corn and grasses, which gave him so strange an appearance that some Moors, whom they met going to their toil, thought that he must be a madman, and ran away.

Still they crawled forward, refreshing themselves with water whenever they could find any in the irrigation ditches that these people used for

their crops, but covering little more than a mile an hour. Towards noon the heat grew so dreadful that they were obliged to lie down to rest under the shade of some palm-like trees, and here, absolutely outworn, they sank into a kind of sleep.

They were awakened by a sound of voices, and staggered to their feet, drawing their swords, for they thought that the thieves from the inn had overtaken them. Instead of these ruffianly murderers, however, they saw before them a body of eight Moors, beautifully mounted upon white horses, and clad in turbans and flowing robes, the like of which Peter had never yet beheld, who sat there regarding them gravely with their quiet eyes, and, as it seemed, not without pity.

"Put up your swords, Señors," said the leader of these Moors in excellent Spanish--indeed, he seemed to be a Spaniard dressed in Eastern garments--"for we are many and fresh; and you are but two and wounded."

They obeyed, who could do nothing else.

"Now tell us, though there is little need to ask," went on the captain, "you are those men of England who boarded the San Antonio and escaped when she was sinking, are you not?"

Castell nodded, then answered:

"We boarded her to seek----"

"Never mind what you sought," the captain answered; "the names of exalted ladies should not be mentioned before strange men. But you have been in trouble again since then, at the inn yonder, where this tall señor bore himself very bravely. Oh! we have heard all the story, and give him honour who can wield a sword so well in the dark."

"We thank you," said Castell, "but what is your business with us?"

"Señor, we are sent by our master, his Excellency, the high Lord and Marquis of Morella, to find you and bring you to be his guests at Granada."

"So the priest has told. I thought as much," muttered Peter.

"We pray you to come without trouble, as we do not wish to do any violence to such gallant men," went on the captain. "Be pleased to mount two of these horses, and ride with us."

"I am a merchant, with friends of my own at Granada," answered Castell.

"Cannot we go to them, who do not seek the hospitality of the marquis?"

"Señor, our orders are otherwise, and here the word of our master, the marquis, is a law that may not be broken."

"I thought that Boabdil was king of Granada," said Castell.

"Without doubt he is king, Señor, and by the grace of Allah will remain so, but the marquis is allied to him in blood; also, while the truce lasts, he is a representative of their Majesties of Spain in our city," and, at a sign, two of the Moors dismounted and led forward their horses, holding the stirrups, and offering to help them to the saddle.

"There is nothing for it," said Peter; "we must go." So, awkwardly enough, for they were very stiff, they climbed on to the beasts and rode away with their captors.

The sun was sinking now, for they had slept long, and by the time they reached the gates of Granada the muezzins were calling to the sunset prayer from the minarets of the mosques.

It was but a very dim and confused idea that Peter gathered of the great city of the Moors, as, surrounded by their white-robed escort, he rode he knew not whither. Narrow winding streets, white houses, shuttered windows, crowds of courteous, somewhat silent people, all men, and all clad in those same strange, flowing dresses, who looked at them curiously, and murmured words which afterwards he came to learn meant "Christian prisoners," or sometimes "Christian dogs"; fretted and pointed arches, and a vast fairy-like building set upon a hill. He was dazed with pain and fatigue as, a long-legged, blood-stained figure, crowned with his quaint hat of grasses, he rode through that wondrous and imperial place.

Yet no man laughed at him, absurd as he must have seemed; but perhaps this was because under the grotesqueness of his appearance they recognised something of his quality. Or they might have heard rumours of his sword-play at the inn and on the ship. At any rate, their attitude was that of courteous dislike of the Christian, mingled with respect for the brave man in misfortune.

At length, after mounting a long rise, they came to a palace on a mount, facing the vast, red-walled fortress which seemed to dominate the place, which he afterwards knew as the Alhambra, but separated from it by a valley. This palace was a very great building, set on three sides of a square, and surrounded by gardens, wherein tall cypress-trees pointed to the tender sky. They rode through the gardens and sundry gateways till they came to a courtyard where servants, with torches in their hands, ran out to meet them. Somebody helped him off his horse, somebody supported him up a flight of marble steps, beneath which a fountain splashed, into a great, cool room with an ornamented roof. Then Peter remembered no more.

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A time went by, a long, long time--in fact it was nearly a month--before Peter really opened his eyes to the world again. Not that he had been insensible for all this while--that is, quite--for at intervals he had become aware of that large, cool room, and of people talking about

him--especially of a dark-eyed, light-footed, and pretty woman with a white wimple round her face, who appeared to be in charge of him. Occasionally he thought that this must be Margaret, and yet knew that it could not, for she was different. Also, he remembered that once or twice he had seemed to see the haughty, handsome face of Morella bending over him, as though he watched curiously to learn whether he would live or not, and then had striven to rise to fight him, and been pressed back by the soft, white hands of the woman that yet were so terribly strong.

Now, when he awoke at last, it was to see her sitting there with a ray of sunlight from some upper window falling on her face, sitting with her chin resting on her hand and her elbow on her knee, and contemplating him with a pretty, puzzled look. She made a sweet picture thus, he thought. Then he spoke to her in his slow Spanish, for somehow he knew that she would not understand his own tongue.

"You are not Margaret," he said.

At once the dream went out of the woman's soft eyes; she became intensely interested, and, rising, advanced towards him, a very gracious figure, who seemed to sway as she walked.

"No, no," she said, bending over him and touching his forehead with her taper fingers; "my name is Inez. You wander still, Señor."

"Inez what?" he asked.

"Inez only," she answered, "Inez, a woman of Granada, the rest is lost. Inez, the nurse of sick men, Señor."

"Where then is Margaret--the English Margaret?"

A veil of secrecy seemed to fall over the woman's face, and her voice changed as she answered, no longer ringing true, or so it struck his senses made quick and subtle by the fires of fever:

"I know no English Margaret. Do you then love her--this English Margaret?"

"Aye," he answered, "she was stolen from me; I have followed her from far, and suffered much. Is she dead or living?"

"I have told you, Señor, I know nothing, although"--and again the voice became natural--"it is true that I thought you loved somebody from your talk in your illness."

Peter pondered a while, then he began to remember, and asked again:

"Where is Castell?"

"Castell? Was he your companion, the man with a hurt arm who looked like a Jew? I do not know where he is. In another part of the city, perhaps.

I think that he was sent to his friends. Question me not of such matters, who am but your sick-nurse. You have been very ill, Señor. Look!" And she handed him a little mirror made of polished silver, then, seeing that he was too weak to take it, held it before him.

Peter saw his face, and groaned, for, except the red scar upon his cheek, it was ivory white and wasted to nothing.

"I am glad Margaret did not see me like this," he said, with an attempt at a smile, "bearded too, and what a beard! Lady, how could you have nursed one so hideous?"

"I have not found you hideous," she answered softly; "besides, that is my trade. But you must not talk, you must rest. Drink this, and rest," and she gave him soup in a silver bowl, which he swallowed readily enough, and went to sleep again.

Some days afterwards, when Peter was well on the road to convalescence, his beautiful nurse came and sat by him, a look of pity in her tender, Eastern eyes.

"What is it now, Inez?" he asked, noting her changed face.

"Señor Pedro, you spoke to me a while ago, when you woke up from your long sleep, of a certain Margaret, did you not? Well, I have been inquiring of this Dona Margaret, and have no good news to tell of her."



Peter set his teeth, and said:

"Go on, tell me the worst."

"This Margaret was travelling with the Marquis of Morella, was she not?"

"She had been stolen by him," answered Peter.

"Alas! it may be so; but here in Spain, and especially here in Granada, that will scarcely screen the name of one who has been known to travel with the Marquis of Morella."

"So much the worse for the Marquis of Morella when I meet him again," answered Peter sternly. "What is your story, Nurse Inez?"

She looked with interest at his grim, thin face, but, as it seemed to him, with no displeasure.

"A sad one. As I have told you, a sad one. It seems that the other day this señora was found dead at the foot of the tallest tower of the marquis's palace, though whether she fell from it, or was thrown from it, none know."

Peter gasped, and was silent for a while; then asked:

"Did you see her dead?"

"No, Señor; others saw her."

"And told you to tell me? Nurse Inez, I do not believe your tale. If the Dona Margaret, my betrothed, were dead I should know it; but my heart tells me that she is alive."

"You have great faith, Señor," said the woman, with a note of admiration in her voice which she could not suppress, but, as he observed, without contradicting him.

"I have faith," he answered. "Nothing else is left; but so far it has been a good crutch."

Peter made no further allusion to the subject, only presently he asked:

"Tell me, where am I?"

"In a prison, Señor."

"Oh! a prison, with a beautiful woman for jailer, and other beautiful women"--and he pointed to a fair creature who had brought something into the room--"as servants. A very fine prison also," and he looked about him at the marbles and arches and lovely carving.

"There are men without the gate, not women," she replied, smiling.

"I daresay; captives can be tied with ropes of silk, can they not? Well, whose is this prison?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know, Señor. The Moorish king's perhaps--you yourself have said that I am only the jailer."

"Then who pays you?"

"Perhaps I am not paid, Señor; perhaps I work for love," and she glanced at him swiftly, "or hate," and her face changed.

"Not hate of me, I think," said Peter.

"No, Señor, not hate of you. Why should I hate you who have been so helpless and so courteous to me?" and she bent the knee to him a little.

"Why indeed? especially as I am also grateful to you who have nursed me back to life. But then, why hide the truth from a helpless man?"

Inez glanced about her; the room was empty now. She bent over him and whispered:

"Have you never been forced to hide the truth? No, I read it in your face, and you are not a woman--an erring woman."

They looked into each other's eyes a while, then Peter asked: "Is the Dona Margaret really dead?"

"I do not know," she answered; "I was told so." And as though she feared lest she should betray herself, Inez turned and left him quickly.

The days went by, and through the slow degrees of convalescence Peter grew strong again. But they brought him no added knowledge. He did not know where he dwelt or why he was there. All he knew was that he lived a prisoner in a sumptuous palace, or as he suspected, for of this he could not be sure, since the arched windows of one side of the building were walled up, in the wing of a palace. Nobody came near to him except the fair Inez, and a Moor who either was deaf or could understand nothing that he said to him in Spanish. There were other women about, it is true, very pretty women all of them, who acted as servants, but none of these were allowed to approach him; he only saw them at a distance.

Therefore Inez was his sole companion, and with her he grew very intimate, to a certain extent, but no further. On the occasion that has been described she had lifted a corner of her veil which hid her true self, but a long while passed before she enlarged her confidence. The veil was kept down very close indeed. Day by day he questioned her, and

day by day, without the slightest show of irritation, or even annoyance, she parried his questions. They knew perfectly well that they were matching their wits against each other; but as yet Inez had the best of the game, which, indeed, she seemed to enjoy. He would talk to her also of all sorts of things--the state of Spain, the Moorish court, the danger that threatened Granada, whereof the great siege now drew near, and so forth--and of these matters she would discourse most intelligently, with the result that he learned much of the state of politics in Castile and Granada, and greatly improved his knowledge of the Spanish tongue.

But when of a sudden, as he did again and again, he sprang some question on her about Morella, or Margaret, or John Castell, that same subtle change would come over her face, and the same silence would seal her lips.

"Señor," she said to him one day with a laugh, "you ask me of secrets which I might reveal to you--perhaps--if you were my husband or my love, but which you cannot expect a nurse, whose life hangs on it, to answer. Not that I wish you to become my husband or my lover," she added, with a little nervous laugh.

Peter looked at her with his grave eyes.

"I know that you do not wish that," he said, "for how could I attract one so gay and beautiful as you are?"

"You seem to attract the English Margaret," she replied quickly in a nettled voice.

"To have attracted, you mean, as you tell me that she is dead," he answered; and, seeing her mistake, Inez bit her lip. "But," he went on, "I was going to add, though it may have no value for you, that you have attracted me as your true friend."

"Friend!" she said, opening her large eyes, "what talk is this? Can the woman Inez find a friend in a man who is under sixty?"

"It would appear so," he answered. And again with that graceful little curtsy of hers she went away, leaving him very puzzled. Two days later she appeared in his room, evidently much disturbed.

"I thought that you had left me altogether, and I am glad to see you, for I tire of that deaf Moor and of this fine room. I want fresh air."

"I know it," she answered; "so I have come to take you to walk in a garden."

He leapt for joy at her words, and snatching at his sword, which had been left to him, buckled it on.

"You will not need that," she said.

"I thought that I should not need it in yonder inn, but I did," he answered. Whereat she laughed, then turned, put her hand upon his shoulder and spoke to him earnestly.

"See, friend," she whispered, "you want to walk in the fresh air--do you not?--and to learn certain things--and I wish to tell you them. But I dare not do it here, where we may at any moment be surrounded by spies, for these walls have ears indeed. Well, when we walk in that garden, would it be too great a penance for you to put your arm about my waist--you who still need support?"

"No penance at all, I assure you," answered Peter with something like a smile. For after all he was a man, and young; while the waist of Inez was as pretty as all the rest of her. "But," he added, "it might be misunderstood."

"Quite so, I wish it to be misunderstood: not by me, who know that you care nothing for me and would as soon place your arm round that marble column."

Peter opened his lips to speak, but she stopped him at once.

"Oh! do not waste falsehoods on me, in which of a truth you have no art," she said with evident irritation. "Why, if you had the money, you would offer to pay me for my nursing, and who knows, I might take it!

Understand, you must either do this, seeming to play the lover to me, or we cannot walk together in that garden."

Peter hesitated a little, guessing a plot, while she bent forward till her lips almost touched his ear and said in a still lower voice:

"And I cannot tell you how, perhaps--I say perhaps--you may come to see the remains of the Dona Margaret, and certain other matters. Ah!" she added after a pause, with a little bitter laugh, "now you will kiss me from one end of the garden to the other, will you not? Foolish man! Doubt no more; take your chance, it may be the last."

"Of what? Kissing you? Or the other things?"

"That you will find out," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Come!"

Then, while he followed dubiously, she led him down the length of the great room to a door with a spy-hole in the top of it, that was set in a Moorish archway at the corner.

This door she opened, and there beyond it, a drawn scimitar in his hand, stood a tall Moor on guard. Inez spoke a word to him, whereon he saluted with his scimitar and let them pass across the landing to a turret stair that lay beyond, which they descended. At its foot was another door, whereon she knocked four times. Bolts shot back, keys turned, and it was



opened by a black porter, beyond whom stood a second Moor, also with drawn sword. They passed him as they had passed the first, turned down a little passage to the right, ending in some steps, and came to a third door, in front of which she halted.

"Now," she said, "nerve yourself for the trial."

"What trial?" he asked, supporting himself against the wall, for he found his legs still weak.

"This," she answered, pointing to her waist, "and these," and she touched her rich, red lips with her taper finger-points. "Would you like to practise a little, my innocent English knight, before we go out? You look as though you might seem awkward and unconvincing."

"I think," answered Peter drily, for the humour of the situation moved him, "that such practice is somewhat dangerous for me. It might annoy you before I had done. I will postpone my happiness until we are in the garden."

"I thought so," she answered; "but look now, you must play the part, or I shall suffer, who am bearing much for you."

"I think that I may suffer also," he murmured, but not so low that she did not catch his words.

"No, friend Pedro," she said, turning on him, "it is the woman who suffers in this kind of farce. She pays; the man rides away to play another," and without more ado she opened the door, which proved to be unlocked and unguarded.

Beyond the foot of some steps lay a most lovely garden. Great, tapering cypresses grew about it, with many orange-trees and flowering shrubs that filled the soft, southern air with odours. Also there were marble fountains into which water splashed from the mouths of carven lions, and here and there arbours with stone seats, whereon were laid soft cushions of many colours. It was a veritable place of Eastern delight and dreams, such as Peter had never known before he looked upon it on that languorous eve--he who had not seen the sky or flowers for so many weary weeks of sickness. It was secluded also, being surrounded by a high wall, but at one place the tall, windowless tower of some other building of red stone soared up between and beyond two lofty cypress-trees.

"This is the harem garden," Inez whispered, "where many a painted favourite has flitted for a few happy, summer hours, till winter came and the butterfly was broken," and, as she spoke, she dropped her veil over her face and began to descend the stairs.