

CHAPTER XV

PETER PLAYS A PART

"Stop," said Peter from the shadow of the doorway, "I fear this business, Inez, and I do not understand why it is needful. Why cannot you say what you have to say here?"

"Are you mad?" she answered almost fiercely through her veil. "Do you think that it can be any pleasure for me to seem to make love to a stone shaped like a man, for whom I care nothing at all--except as a friend?" she added quickly. "I tell you, Señor Peter, that if you do not do as I tell you, you will never hear what I have to say, for I shall be held to have failed in my business, and within a few minutes shall vanish from you for ever--to my death perhaps; but what does that matter to you? Choose now, and quickly, for I cannot stand thus for long."

"I obey you, God forgive me!" said the distraught Peter from the darkness of the doorway; "but must I really----?"

"Yes, you must," she answered with energy, "and some would not think that so great a penance."

Then she lifted the corner of her veil coyly and, peeping out beneath it, called in a soft, clear voice, "Oh! forgive me, dear friend, if I have run too fast for you, forgetting that you are still so very weak."

Here, lean upon me; I am frail, but it may serve." And she passed up the steps again, to reappear in another moment with Peter's hand resting on her shoulder.

"Be careful of these steps," she said, "they are so slippery"--a statement to which Peter, whose pale face had grown suddenly red, murmured a hearty assent. "Do not be afraid," she went on in her flute-like voice; "this is the secret garden, where none can hear words, however sweet, and none can see even a caress, no, not the most jealous woman. That is why in old days it was called the Sultana's Chamber, for there at the end of it was where she bathed in the summer season. What say you of spies? Oh! yes, in the palace there are many, but to look towards this place, even for the Guardian of the Women, was always death. Here there are no witnesses, save the flowers and the birds."

As she spoke thus they reached the central path, and passed up it slowly, Peter's hand still upon the shoulder of Inez, and her white arm about him, while she looked up into his eyes.

"Bend closer over me," she whispered, "for truly your face is like that of a wooden saint," and he bent. "Now," she went on, "listen. Your lady lives, and is well--kiss me on the lips, please, that news is worth it. If you shut your eyes you can imagine that I am she."

Again Peter obeyed, and with a better grace than might have been expected.

"She is a prisoner in this same palace," she went on, "and the marquis, who is mad for love of her, seeks by all means, fair or foul, to make her his wife!"

"Curse him!" exclaimed Peter with another embrace.

"Till a few days ago she thought you dead; but now she knows that you are alive and recovering. Her father, Castell, escaped from the place where he was put, and is in hiding among his friends, the Jews, where even Morella cannot find him; indeed, he believes him fled from the city. But he is not fled, and, having much gold, has opened a door between himself and his daughter."

Here she stopped to return the embrace with much warmth. Then they passed under some trees, and came to the marble baths where the sultanas were supposed to have bathed in summer, for this place had been one of the palaces of the Kings of Granada before they lived in the Alhambra. Here Inez sat down upon a seat and loosened some garment about her throat, for the evening was very hot.

"What are you doing?" Peter asked doubtfully, for he was filled with many fears.

"Cooling myself," she answered; "your arm was warm, and we may sit here for a few minutes."

"Well, go on with your tale," he said.

"I have little more to say, friend, except that if you wish to send any message, I might perhaps be able to take it."

"You are an angel," he exclaimed.

"That is another word for messenger, is it not? Continue."

"Tell her--that if she hears anything of all this business, it isn't true."

"On that point she may form her own opinion," replied Inez demurely. "If I were in her place I know what mine would be. Don't waste time; we must soon begin to walk again."

Peter stared at her, for he could understand nothing of all this play. Apparently she read his look, for she answered it in a quiet, serious voice:

"You are wondering what everything means, and why I am doing what I do. I will tell you, Señor, and you can believe me or not as you like. Perhaps you think that I am in love with you. It would not be wonderful, would it? Besides, in the old tales, that always happens--the lady who nurses the Christian knight and worships him and so forth."

"I don't think anything of the sort; I am not so vain."

"I know it, Señor, you are too good a man to be vain. Well, I do all these things, not for love of you, or any one, but for hate--for hate. Yes, for hate of Morella," and she clenched her little hand, hissing the words out between her teeth.

"I understand the feeling," said Peter. "But--but what has he done to you?"

"Do not ask me, Señor. Enough that once I loved him--that accursed priest Henriques sold me into his power--oh! a long while ago, and he ruined me, making me what I am, and--I bore his child, and--and it is dead. Oh! Mother of God, my boy is dead, and since then I have been an outcast and his slave--they have slaves here in Granada, Señor--dependent on him for my bread, forced to do his bidding, forced to wait upon his other loves; I, who once was the sultana; I, of whom he has wearied. Only to-day--but why should I tell you of it? Well, he has driven me even to this, that I must kiss an unwilling stranger in a garden," and she sobbed aloud.

"Poor girl!--poor girl!" said Peter, patting her hand kindly with his thin fingers. "Henceforth I have another score against Morella, and I will pay it too."

"Will you?" she asked quickly. "Ah! if so, I would die for you, who now live only to be revenged upon him. And it shall be my first vengeance to rob him of that noble-looking mistress of yours, whom he has stolen away and has set his heart upon wholly, because she is the first woman who ever resisted him--him, who thinks that he is invincible."

"Have you any plan?" asked Peter.

"As yet, none. The thing is very difficult. I go in danger of my life, for if he thought that I betrayed him he would kill me like a rat, and think no harm of it. Such things can be done in Granada without sin, Señor, and no questions asked--at least if the victim be a woman of the murderer's household. I have told you already that if I had refused to do what I have done this evening I should certainly have been got rid of in this way or that, and another set on at the work. No, I have no plan yet, only it is I through whom the Señor Castell communicates with his daughter, and I will see him again, and see her, and we will make some plan. No, do not thank me. He pays me for my services, and I am glad to take his money, who hope to escape from this hell and live on it elsewhere. Yet, not for all the money in the world would I risk what I am risking, though in truth it matters not to me whether I live or die. Señor, I will not disguise it from you, all this scene will come to the Dona Margaret's ears, but I will explain it to her."

"I pray you, do," said Peter earnestly--"explain it fully."

"I will--I will. I will work for you and her and her father, and if I cease to work, know that I am dead or in a dungeon, and fend for yourselves as best you may. One thing I can tell you for your comfort--no harm has been done to this lady of yours. Morella loves her too well for that. He wishes to make her his wife. Or perhaps he has sworn some oath, as I know that he has sworn that he will not murder you--which he might have done a score of times while you have lain a prisoner in his power. Why, once when you were senseless he came and stood over you, a dagger in his hand, and reasoned out the case with me. I said, 'Why do you not kill him?' knowing that thus I could best help to save your life. He answered, 'Because I will not take my wife with her lover's blood upon my hands, unless I slay him in fair fight. I swore it yonder in London. It was the offering which I made to God and to my patron saint that so I might win her fairly, and if I break that oath, God will be avenged upon me here and hereafter. Do my bidding, Inez. Nurse him well, so that if he dies, he dies without sin of mine,' No, he will not murder you or harm her. Friend Pedro, he dare not."

"Can you think of nothing?" asked Peter.

"Nothing--as yet nothing. These walls are high, guards watch them day and night, and outside is the great city of Granada where Morella has much power, and whence no Christian may escape. But he would marry her. And there is that handsome fool-woman, her servant, who is in love with him--oh! she told me all about it in the worst Spanish I ever heard, but the story is too long to repeat; and the priest, Father Henriques--he

who wished that you might be killed at the inn, and who loves money so much. Ah! now I think I see some light. But we have no more time to talk, and I must have time to think. Friend Pedro, make ready your kisses, we must go on with our game, and, in truth, you play but badly. Come now, your arm. There is a seat prepared for us yonder. Smile and look loving. I have not art enough for both. Come!--come!" And together they walked out of the dense shadow of the trees and past the marble bath of the sultanas to a certain seat beneath a bower on which were cushions, and lying among them a lute.

"Seat yourself at my feet," she said, as she sank on to the bench. "Can you sing?"

"No more than a crow," he answered.

"Then I must sing to you. Well, it will be better than the love-making." Then in a very sweet voice she began to warble amorous Moorish ditties that she accompanied upon the lute, whilst Peter, who was weary in body and disturbed in mind, played a lover's part to the best of his ability, and by degrees the darkness gathered.

At length, when they could no longer see across the garden, Inez ceased singing and rose with a sigh.

"The play is finished and the curtain down," she said; "also it is time that you went in out of this damp. Señor Pedro, you are a very bad

actor; but let us pray that the audience was compassionate, and took the will for the deed."

"I did not see any audience," answered Peter.

"But it saw you, as I dare say you will find out by-and-by. Follow me now back to your room, for I must be going about your business--and my own. Have you any message for the Señor Castell?"

"None, save my love and duty. Tell him that, thanks to you, although still somewhat feeble, I am recovered of my hurt upon the ship and the fever which I took from the sun, and that if he can make any plan to get us all out of this accursed city and the grip of Morella I will bless his name and yours."

"Good, I will not forget. Now be silent. Tomorrow we will walk here again; but be not afraid, then there will be no more need for love-making."

Margaret sat by the open window-place of her beautiful chamber in Morella's palace. She was splendidly arrayed in a rich, Spanish dress, whereof the collar was stiff with pearls, she who must wear what it pleased her captor to give her. Her long tresses, fastened with a jewelled band, flowed down about her shoulders, and, her hand resting on her knee, from her high tower prison she gazed out across the valley at the dim and mighty mass of the Alhambra and the ten thousand lights of

Granada which sparkled far below. Near to her, seated beneath a silver hanging-lamp, and also clad in rich array, was Betty.

"What is it, Cousin?" asked the girl, looking at her anxiously. "At least you should be happier than you were, for now you know that Peter is not dead, but almost recovered from his sickness and in this very palace; also, that your father is well and hidden away, plotting for our escape. Why, then, are you so sad, who should be more joyful than you were?"

"Would you learn, Betty? Then I will tell you. I am betrayed. Peter Brome, the man whom I looked upon almost as my husband, is false to me."

"Master Peter false!" exclaimed Betty, staring at her open-mouthed. "No, it is not possible. I know him; he could not be, who will not even look at another woman, if that is what you mean."

"You say so. Then, Betty, listen and judge. You remember this afternoon, when the marquis took us to see the wonders of this palace, and I went thinking that perhaps I might find some path by which afterwards we could escape?"

"Of course I remember, Margaret. We do not leave this cage so often that I am likely to forget."

"Then you will remember also that high-walled garden in which we walked, where the great tower is, and how the marquis and that hateful priest Father Henriques and I went up the tower to study the prospect from its roof, I thinking that you were following me."

"The waiting-women would not let me," said Betty. "So soon as you had passed in they shut the door and told me to bide where I was till you returned. I went near to pulling the hair out of the head of one of them over it, since I was afraid for you alone with those two men. But she drew her knife, the cat, and I had none."

"You must be careful, Betty," said Margaret, "lest some of these heathen folk should do you a mischief."

"Not they," she answered; "they are afraid of me. Why, the other day I bundled one of them, whom I found listening at the door, head first down the stairs. She complained to the marquis, but he only laughed at her, and now she lies abed with a plaster on her nose. But tell me your tale."

"We climbed the tower," said Margaret, "and from its topmost room looked out through the windows that face south at all the mountains and the plain over which they dragged us from Motril. Presently the priest, who had gone to the north wall, in which there are no windows, and entered some recess there, came out with an evil smile upon his face, and whispered something to the marquis, who turned to me and said:

"The father tells me of an even prettier scene which we can view yonder. Come, Señora, and look.'

"So I went, who wished to learn all that I could of the building. They led me into a little chamber cut in the thickness of the stone-work, in the wall of which are slits like loop-holes for the shooting of arrows, wide within, but very narrow without, so that I think they cannot be seen from below, hidden as they are between the rough stones of the tower.

"This is the place,' said the marquis, 'where in the old days the kings of Granada, who were always jealous, used to sit to watch their women in the secret garden. It is told that thus one of them discovered his sultana making love to an astrologer, and drowned them both in the marble bath at the end of the garden. Look now, beneath us walk a couple who do not guess that we are the witnesses of their vows.'

"So I looked idly enough to pass the time, and there I saw a tall man in a Moorish dress, and with him, for their arms were about each other, a woman. As I was turning my head away who did not wish to spy upon them thus, the woman lifted her face to kiss the man, and I knew her for that beautiful Inez who has visited us here at times, as a spy I think. Presently, too, the man, after paying her back her embrace, glanced about him guiltily, and I saw his face also, and knew it."

"Who was it?" asked Betty, for this gossip of lovers interested her.

"Peter Brome, no other," Margaret answered calmly, but with a note of despair in her voice. "Peter Brome, pale with recent sickness, but no other man."

"The saints save us! I did not think he had it in him!" gasped Betty with astonishment.

"They would not let me go," went on Margaret; "they forced me to see it all. The pair tarried for a while beneath some trees by the bath and were hidden there. Then they came out again and sat them down upon a marble seat, while the woman sang songs and the man leaned against her lovingly. So it went on until the darkness fell, and we went, leaving them there. Now," she added, with a little sob, "what say you?"

"I say," answered Betty, "that it was not Master Peter, who has no liking for strange ladies and secret gardens."

"It was he, and no other man, Betty."

"Then, Cousin, he was drugged or drunk or bewitched, not the Peter whom we know."

"Bewitched, perchance, by that bad woman, which is no excuse for him."

Betty thought a while. She could not doubt the evidence, but from her face it was clear that she took no severe view of the offence.

"Well, at the worst," she said, "men, as I have known them, are men. He has been shut up for a long while with that minx, who is very fair and witching, and it was scarcely right to watch him through a slit in a tower. If he were my lover, I should say nothing about it."

"I will say nothing to him about that or any other matter," replied Margaret sternly. "I have done with Peter Brome."

Again Betty thought, and spoke.

"I seem to see a trick. Cousin Margaret, they told you he was dead, did they not? And then that news came to us that he was not dead, only sick, and here. So the lie failed. Now they tell you, and seem to show you, that he is faithless. May not all this have been some part played for a purpose by the woman?"

"It takes two to play such parts, Betty. If you had seen----"

"If I had seen, I should have known whether it was but a part or love made in good earnest; but you are too innocent to judge. What said the marquis all this while, and the priest?"

"Little or nothing, only smiled at each other, and at length, when it

grew dark and we could see no more, asked me if I did not think that it was time to go--me! whom they had kept there all that while to be the witness of my own shame."

"Yes, they kept you there--did they not?--and brought you there just at the right time--did they not?--and shut me out of the tower so that I might not be with you--oh! and all the rest. Now, if you have any justice in you, Cousin, you will hear Peter's side of this story before you judge him."

"I have judged him," answered Margaret coldly, "and, oh! I wish that I were dead."

Margaret rose from her seat and, stepping to the window-place in the tower which was built upon the edge of a hill, searched the giddy depth beneath with her eyes, where, two hundred feet below, the white line of a roadway showed faintly in the moonlight.

"It would be easy, would it not," she said, with a strained laugh, "just to lean out a little too far upon this stone, and then one swift rush and darkness--or light--for ever--which, I wonder?"

"Light, I think," said Betty, jerking her back from the window--"the light of hell fire, and plenty of it, for that would be self-murder, nothing else, and besides, what would one look like on that road? Cousin, don't be a fool. If you are right, it isn't you who ought to go

out of that window; and if you are wrong, then you would only make a bad business worse. Time enough to die when one must, say I--which, perhaps, will be soon enough. Meanwhile, if I were you, I would try to speak to Master Peter first, if only to let him know what I thought of him."

"Mayhap," answered Margaret, sinking back into a chair, "but I suffer--how can you know what I suffer?"

"Why should I not know?" asked Betty. "Are you the only woman in the world who has been fool enough to fall in love? Can I not be as much in love as you are? You smile, and think to yourself that the poor relation, Betty, cannot feel like her rich cousin. But I do--I do. I know that he is a villain, but I love this marquis as much as you hate him, or as much as you love Peter, because I can't help myself; it is my luck, that's all. But I am not going to throw myself out of a window; I would rather throw him out and square our reckoning, and that I swear I'll do, in this way or the other, even if it should cost me what I don't want to lose--my life," And Betty drew herself up beneath the silver lamp with a look upon her handsome, determined face, which was so like Margaret's and yet so different, that, could he have seen it, might well have made Morella regret that he had chosen this woman for a tool.

While Margaret studied her wonderingly she heard a sound, and glanced up to see, standing before them, none other than the beautiful Spaniard, or Moor, for she knew not which she was, Inez, that same woman whom, from her hiding-place in the tower, she had watched with Peter in the garden.

"How did you come here?" she asked coldly.

"Through the door, Señora, that was left unlocked, which is not wise of those who wish to talk privately in such a place as this," she answered with a humble curtsy.

"The door is still unlocked," said Margaret, pointing towards it.

"Nay, Señora, you are mistaken; here is its key in my hand. I pray you do not tell your lady to put me out, which, being so strong, she well can do, for I have words to say to you, and if you are wise you will listen to them."

Margaret thought a moment, then answered:

"Say on, and be brief."