

CHAPTER XVI

BETTY SHOWS HER TEETH

"Señora," said Inez, "you think that you have something against me."

"No," answered Margaret, "you are--what you are; why should I blame you?"

"Well, against the Señor Brome then?"

"Perhaps, but that is between me and him. I will not discuss it with you."

"Señora," went on Inez, with a slow smile, "we are both innocent of what you thought you saw."

"Indeed; then who is guilty?"

"The Marquis of Morella."

Margaret made no answer, but her eyes said much.

"Señora, you do not believe me, nor is it wonderful. Yet I speak the truth. What you saw from the tower was a play in which the Señor Brome took his part badly enough, as you may have noticed, because I told him

that my life hung on it. I have nursed him through a sore sickness, Señora, and he is not ungrateful."

"So I judged; but I do not understand you."

"Señora, I am a slave in this house, a discarded slave. Perhaps you can guess the rest, it is a common story here. I was offered my freedom at a price, that I should weave myself into this man's heart, I who am held fair, and make him my lover. If I failed, then perhaps I should be sold as a slave--perhaps worse. I accepted--why should I not? It was a small thing to me. On the one hand, life, freedom, and wealth, an hidalgo of good blood and a gallant friend for a little while, and, on the other, the last shame or blackness which doubtless await me now--if I am found out. Señora, I failed, who in truth did not try hard to succeed. The man looked on me as his nurse, no more, and to me he was one very sick, no more. Also, we grew to be true friends, and in this way or in that I learned all his story, learned also why the trap was baited thus--that you might be deceived and fall into a deeper trap. Señora, I could not explain it all to him, indeed, in that chamber where we were spied on, I had but little chance. Still, it was necessary that he should seem to be what he is not, so I took him into the garden and, knowing well who watched us, made him act his part, well enough to deceive you it would seem."

"Still I do not understand," said Margaret more softly. "You say that your life or welfare hung on this shameful business. Then why do you

reveal it to me now?"

"To save you from yourself, Señora, to save my friend the Señor Brome, and to pay back Morella in his own coin."

"How will you do these things?"

"The first two are done, I think, but the third is difficult. It is of that I come to speak with you, at great risk. Indeed, had not my master been summoned to the court of the Moorish king I could not have come, and he may return at any time."

"Have you some plan?" asked Margaret, leaning towards her eagerly.

"No plan as yet, only an idea." She turned and looked at Betty, adding,

"This lady is your cousin, is she not, though of a different station, and somewhat far away?"

Margaret nodded.

"You are not unlike," went on Inez, "of much the same height and shape, although the Señora Betty is stronger built, and her eyes are blue and her hair golden, whereas your eyes are black and your hair chestnut. Beneath a veil, or at night, it would not be easy to tell you apart if your hands were gloved and neither of you spoke above a whisper."

"Yes," said Margaret, "what then?"

"Now the Señora Betty comes into the play," replied Inez. "Señora Betty, have you understood our talk?"

"Something, not quite all," answered Betty.

"Then what you do not understand your lady must interpret, and be not angry with me, I pray you, if I seem to know more of you and your affairs than you have ever told me. Render my words now, Dona Margaret."

Then, after this was done, and she had thought awhile, Inez continued slowly, Margaret translating from Spanish into English whenever Betty could not understand:

"Morella made love to you in England, Señora Betty--did he not?--and won your heart as he has won that of many another woman, so that you came to believe that he was carrying you off to marry you, and not your cousin?"

"What affair is that of yours, woman?" asked Betty, flushing angrily.

"None at all, save that I could tell much such another story, if you cared to listen. But hear me out, and then answer me a question, or rather, answer the question first. Would you like to be avenged upon this high-born knave?"

"Avenged?" answered Betty, clenching her hands and hissing the words through her firm, white teeth. "I would risk my life for it."

"As I do. It seems that we are of one mind there. Then I think that perhaps I can show you a way. Look now, your cousin has seen certain things which women placed as she is do not like to see. She is jealous, she is angry--or was until I told her the truth. Well, to-night or to-morrow, Morella will come to her and say, 'Are you satisfied? Do you still refuse me in favour of a man who yields his heart to the first light-of-love who tempts him? Will you not be my wife?' What if she answer, 'Yes, I will.' Nay, be silent both of you, and hear me out. What if then there should be a secret marriage, and the Señora Betty should chance to wear the bride's veil, while the Dona Margaret, in the robe of Betty, was let go with the Señor Brome and her father?"

Inez paused, watching them both, and playing with the fan she held, while, the rendering of her words finished, Margaret and Betty stared at her and at each other, for the audacity and fearfulness of this plot took their breath away. It was Margaret who spoke the first.

"You must not do it, Betty," she said. "Why, when the man found you out, he would kill you." But Betty took no heed of her, and thought on. At length she looked up and answered:

"Cousin, it was my vain folly that brought you all into this trouble,

therefore I owe something to you, do I not? I am not afraid of the man--he is afraid of me; and if it came to killing--why, let Inez lend me that knife of hers, and I think that perhaps I should give the first blow. And--well, I think I love him, rascal though he is, and, afterwards, perhaps we might make it up, who can say?--while, if not---- But tell me, you, Inez, should I be his legal wife according to the law of this land?"

"Assuredly," answered Inez, "if a priest married you and he placed the ring upon your hand and named you wife. Then, when once the words of blessing have been said, the Pope alone can loose that knot, which may be risked, for there would be much to explain, and is this a tale that Morella, a good servant of the Church, would care to take to Rome?"

"It would be a trick," broke in Margaret--"a very ugly trick."

"And what was it he played on me and you?" asked Betty. "Nay, I'll chance it, and his rage, if only I can be sure that you and Peter will go free, and your father with you."

"But what of this Inez?" asked Margaret, bewildered.

"She will look after herself," answered Inez. "Perchance, if all goes well, you will let me ride with you. And now I dare stop no longer, I go to see your father, the Señor Castell, and if anything can be arranged, we will talk again. Meanwhile, Dona Margaret, your affianced is nearly

well again at last and sends his heart's love to you, and, I counsel you, when Morella speaks turn a gentle ear to him."

Then with another deep curtsey she glided to the door, unlocked it, and left the room.

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An hour later Inez was being led by an old Jew, dressed in a Moslem robe and turban, through one of the most tortuous and crowded parts of Granada. It would seem that this Jew was known there, for his appearance, accompanied by a veiled woman, apparently caused no surprise to those followers of the Prophet that he met, some of whom, indeed, saluted him with humility.

"These children of Mahomet seem to love you, Father Israel," said Inez.

"Yes, yes, my dear," answered the old fellow with a chuckle; "they owe me money, that is why, and I am getting it in before the great war comes with the Spaniards, so they would sweep the streets for me with their beards--all of which is very good for the plans of our friend yonder. Ah! he who has crowns in his pocket can put a crown upon his head; there is nothing that money will not do in Granada. Give me enough of it, and I will buy his sultana from the king."

"This Castell has plenty?" asked Inez shortly.

"Plenty, and more credit. He is one of the richest men in England. But why do you ask? He would not think of you, who is too troubled about other things."

Inez only laughed bitterly, but did not resent the words. Why should she? It was not worth while.

"I know," she answered, "but I mean to earn some of it all the same, and I want to be sure that there is enough for all of us."

"There is enough, I have told you there is enough and to spare," answered the Hebrew Israel as he tapped on a door in a dirty-looking wall.

It opened as though by magic, and they crossed a paved patio, or courtyard, to a house beyond, a tumble-down place of Moorish architecture.

"Our friend Castell, being in seclusion just now, has hired the cellar floor," said Israel with a chuckle to Inez, "so be pleased to follow me, and take care of the rats and beetles."

Then he led her down a rickety stair which opened out of the courtyard into vaults filled with vats of wine, and, having lit a taper, through these, shutting and locking sundry doors behind him, to what appeared to

be a very damp wall covered with cobwebs, and situated in a dark corner of a wine-cave. Here he stopped and tapped again in his peculiar fashion, whereon a portion of the wall turned outwards on a pivot, leaving an opening through which they could pass.

"Well managed, isn't it?" chuckled Israel. "Who would think of looking for an entrance here, especially if he owed the old Jew money? Come in, my pretty, come in."

Inez followed him into this darksome hole, and the wall closed behind them. Then, taking her by the arm, he turned first to the right, next to the left, opened a door with a key which he carried, and, behold, they stood in a beautifully furnished room well lighted with lamps, for it seemed to have no windows. "Wait here," he said to Inez, pointing to a couch on which she sat herself down, "while I fetch my lodger," and he vanished through some curtains at the end of the room.

Presently these opened again, and Israel reappeared through them with Castell, dressed now in Moorish robes, and looking somewhat pale from his confinement underground, but otherwise well enough. Inez rose and stood before him, throwing back her veil that he might see her face.

Castell searched her for a while with his keen eyes that noted everything, then said:

"You are the lady with whom I have been in communication through our friend here, are you not? Prove it to me now by repeating my messages."

Inez obeyed, telling him everything.

"That is right," he said, "but how do I know that I can trust you? I understand you are, or have been, the lover of this man Morella, and such an one he might well employ as a spy to bring us all to ruin."

"Is it not too late to ask such questions, Señor? If I am not to be trusted, already you and your people are in the hollow of my hand?"

"Not at all, not at all, my dear," said Israel. "If we see the slightest cause to doubt you, why, there are many great vats in this place, one of which, at a pinch, would serve you as a coffin, though it would be a pity to spoil the good wine."

Inez laughed as she answered:

"Save your wine, and your time too. Morella has cast me off, and I hate him, and wish to escape from him and rob him of his prize. Also, I desire money to live on afterwards, and this you must give to me or I do not stir, or rather the promise of it, for you Jews keep your word, and I do not ask a maravedi from you until I have played my part."

"And then how many maravedis do you ask, young woman?"

Inez named a sum, at the mention of which both of them opened their

eyes, and old Israel exclaimed drily:

"Surely--surely you must be one of us."

"No," she answered, "but I try to follow your example, and, if I am to live at all, it shall be in comfort."

"Quite so," said Castell, "we understand. But now tell us, what do you propose to do for this money?"

"I propose to set you, your daughter, the Dona Margaret, and her lover, the Señor Brome, safe and free outside the walls of Granada, and to leave the Marquis of Morella married to another woman."

"What other woman? Yourself?" asked Castell, fixing on this last point in the programme.

"No, Señor, not for all the wealth of both of you. To your dependent and your daughter's relative, the handsome Betty."

"How will you manage that?" exclaimed Castell, amazed.

"These cousins are not unlike, Señor, although the link of blood between them is so thin. Listen now, I will tell you." And she explained the outlines of her plan.

"A bold scheme enough," said Castell, when she had finished, "but even if it can be done, would that marriage hold?"

"I think so," answered Inez, "if the priest knew--and he could be bribed--and the bride knows. But if not, what would it matter, since Rome alone can decide the question, and long before that is done the fates of all of us will be settled."

"Rome--or death," said Castell; and Inez read what he was afraid of in his eyes.

"Your Betty takes her chance," she replied slowly, "as many a one has done before her with less cause. She is a woman with a mind as strong as her body. Morella made her love him and promised to marry her. Then he used her to steal your daughter, and she learned that she had been no more than a stalking-heifer, from behind which he would net the white swan. Do you not think, therefore, that she has something to pay him back, she through whom her beloved mistress and cousin has been brought into all this trouble? If she wins, she becomes the wife of a grandee of Spain, a marchioness; and if she loses, well, she has had her fling for a high stake, and perhaps her revenge. At least she is willing to take her chance, and, meanwhile, all of you can be gone."

Castell looked doubtfully at the Jew Israel, who stroked his white beard and said:

"Let the woman set out her scheme. At any rate she is no fool, and it is worth our hearing, though I fear that at the best it must be costly."

"I can pay," said Castell, and motioned to Inez to proceed.

As yet, however, she had not much more to say, save that they must have good horses at hand, and send a messenger to Seville, whither the Margaret had been ordered to proceed, bidding her captain hold his ship ready to sail at any hour, should they succeed in reaching him.

These things, then, they arranged, and a while later Inez and Israel departed, the former carrying with her a bag of gold.

That same night Inez sought the priest, Henriques of Motril, in that hall of Morella's palace which was used as a private chapel, saying that she desired to speak with him under pretence of making confession, for they were old friends--or rather enemies.

As it chanced she found the holy father in a very ill humour. It appeared that Morella also was in a bad humour with Henriques, having heard that it was he who had possessed himself of the jewels in his strong-box on the San Antonio. Now he insisted upon his surrendering everything, and swore, moreover, that he would hold him responsible for all that his people had stolen from the ship, and this because he said that it was his fault that Peter Brome had escaped the sea and come on to Granada.

"So, Father," said Inez, "you, who thought yourself rich, are poor again."

"Yes, my daughter, and that is what chances to those who put their faith in princes. I have served this marquis well for many years--to my soul's hurt, I fear me--hoping that he who stands so high in the favour of the Church would advance me to some great preferment. But instead, what does he do? He robs me of a few trinkets that, had I not found them, the sea would have swallowed or some thief would have taken, and declares me his debtor for the rest, of which I know nothing."

"What preferment did you want, Father? I see that you have one in your mind."

"Daughter, a friend had written to me from Seville that if I have a hundred gold doubloons to pay for it, he can secure me the place of a secretary in the Holy Office where I served before as a familiar until the marquis made me his chaplain, and gave the benefice of Motril, which proved worth nothing, and many promises that are worth less. Now those trinkets would fetch thirty, and I have saved twenty, and came here to borrow the other fifty from the marquis, to whom I have done so many good turns--as you know well, Inez. You see the end of that quest," and he groaned angrily.

"It is a pity," said Inez thoughtfully, "since those who serve the

Inquisition save many souls, do they not, including their own? For instance," she added, and the priest winced at the words, "I remember that they saved the soul of my own sister and would have saved mine, had I been--what shall I say?--more--more prejudiced. Also, they get a percentage of the goods of wicked heretics, and so become rich and able to advance themselves."

"That is so, Inez. It was the chance of a lifetime, especially to one who, like myself, hates heretics. But why speak of it now when that cursed, dissolute marquis----" and he checked himself.

Inez looked at him.

"Father," she asked, "if I happen to be able to find you those hundred gold doubloons, would you do something for me?"

The priest's foxy face lit up.

"I wonder what there is that I would not do, my daughter!"

"Even if it brought you into a quarrel with the marquis?"

"Once I was a secretary to the Inquisition of Seville, he would have more reason to fear me than I him. Aye, and fear me he should, who bear him no love," answered the priest with a snarl.

"Then listen, Father. I have not made my confession yet; I have not told you, for instance, that I also hate this marquis, and with good cause--though perhaps you know that already. But remember that if you betray me, you will never see those hundred gold doubloons, and some other holy priest will be appointed secretary at Seville. Also worse things may happen to you."

"Proceed, my daughter," he said unctuously; "are we not in the confessional--or near it?"

So she told him all the plot, trusting to the man's avarice and other matters to protect her, for Inez hated Fray Henriques bitterly, and knew him from the crown of his shaven head to the soles of his erring feet, as she had good cause to do. Only she did not tell him whence the money was to come.

"That does not seem a very difficult matter," he said, when she had finished. "If a man and a woman, unwed and outside the prohibited degrees, appear before me to be married, I marry them, and once the ring has passed and the office is said, married they are till death or the Pope part them."

"And suppose that the man thinks he is marrying another woman, Father?"

The priest shrugged his shoulders.

"He should know whom he is marrying; that is his affair, not the Church's or mine. The names need not be spoken too loudly, my daughter."

"But you would give me a writing of the marriage with them set out plain?"

"Certainly. To you or to anybody else; why should I not?--that is, if I were sure of this wedding fee."

Inez lifted her hand, and showed beneath it a little pile of ten doubloons.

"Take them, Father," she said; "they will not be counted in the contract. There are others where they came from, whereof twenty will be paid before the marriage, and eighty when I have that writing at Seville."

He swept up the coins and pocketed them, saying:

"I will trust you, Inez."

"Yes," she answered as she left him, "we must trust each other now--must we not?--seeing that you have the money, and both our necks are in the same noose. Be here, Father, to-morrow at the same time, in case I have more confessions to make, for, alas! this is a sinful world, as you should know very well."