

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLOT

On the morning following these conversations, just after Margaret and Betty had breakfasted, Inez appeared, and, as before, locked the door behind her.

"Señoras," she said calmly, "I have arranged that little business of which I spoke to you yesterday, or at least the first act of the play, since it remains for you to write the rest. Now I am sent to say that the noble Marquis of Morella craves leave to see you, Dona Margaret, and within an hour. So there is no time to lose."

"Tell us what you have done, Inez?" said Margaret.

"I have seen your worshipful father, Dona Margaret; here is the token of it, which you will do well to destroy when you have read." And she handed her a slip of paper, whereon was written in her father's writing, and in English:

"BELOVED DAUGHTER,

"This messenger, who I think may be trusted by you, has made arrangements with me which she will explain. I approve, though the risk is great. Your cousin is a brave girl, but, understand, I do not force

her to this dangerous enterprise. She must choose her own road, only I promise that if she escapes and we live I will not forget her deed. The messenger will bring me your answer. God be with us all, and farewell.

"J.C."

Margaret read this letter first to herself and then aloud to Betty, and, having read, tore it into tiny fragments and threw them from the turret window.

"Speak now," she said; and Inez told her everything.

"Can you trust the priest?" asked Margaret, when she had finished.

"He is a great villain, as I have reason to know; still, I think I can," she answered, "while the cabbage is in front of the donkey's nose--I mean until he has got all the money. Also, he has committed himself by taking some on account. But before we go further, the question is--does this lady play?" and she pointed to Betty.

"Yes, I play," said Betty, when she understood everything. "I won't go back upon my word; there is too much at stake. It is an ugly business for me, I know well enough, but," she added slowly, setting her firm mouth, "I have debts to pay all round, and I am no Spanish putty to be squeezed flat--like some people," and she glanced at the humble-looking Inez. "So, before all is done, it may be uglier for him."

When she had mastered the meaning of this speech the soft-voiced Inez lifted her gentle eyes in admiration, and murmured a Spanish proverb as to what is supposed to occur when Satan encounters Beelzebub in a high-walled lane. Then, being a lady of resource and experience, the plot having been finally decided upon, not altogether with Margaret's approval, who feared for Betty's fate when it should be discovered, Inez began to instruct them both in various practical expedients, by means of which the undoubted general resemblance of these cousins might be heightened and their differences toned down. To this end she promised to furnish them with certain hair-washes, pigments, and articles of apparel.

"It is of small use," said Betty, glancing first at herself and then at the lovely Margaret, "for even if they change skins, who can make the calf look like the fawn, though they chance to feed in the same meadow? Still, bring your stuffs and I will do my best; but I think that a thick veil and a shut mouth will help me more than any of them, also a long gown to hide my feet."

"Surely they are charming feet," said Inez politely, adding to herself, "to carry you whither you wish to go." Then she turned to Margaret and reminded her that the marquis desired to see her, and waited for her answer.

"I will not meet him alone," said Margaret decidedly.

"That is awkward," answered Inez, "as I think he has words to say to you which he does not wish others to hear, especially the señora yonder," and she nodded towards Betty.

"I will not meet him alone," repeated Margaret.

"Yet, if things are to go forward as we have arranged, you must meet him, Dona Margaret, and give him that answer which he desires. Well, I think it can be arranged. The court below is large. Now, while you and the marquis talk at one end of it, the Señora Betty and I might walk out of earshot at the other. She needs more instruction in our Spanish tongue; it would be a good opportunity to begin our lessons."

"But what am I to say to him?" asked Margaret nervously.

"I think," answered Inez, "that you must copy the example of that wonderful actor, the Señor Peter, and play a part as well as you saw him do, or even better, if possible."

"It must be a very different part then," replied Margaret, stiffening visibly at certain recollections.

The gentle Inez smiled as she said:

"Yes, but surely you can seem jealous, for that is natural to us all,

and you can yield by degrees, and you can make a bargain as the price of yourself in marriage."

"What exact bargain should I make?"

"I think that you shall be securely wed by a priest of your own Church, and that letters, signed by that priest and announcing the marriage, shall be delivered to the Archbishop of Seville, and to their Majesties King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Also, of course, you must arrange that the Señor Brome and your father, the Señor Castell, and your cousin Betty here shall be escorted safe out of Granada before your marriage, and that you shall see them pass through the gate beneath your turret window, swearing that thereafter, at nightfall of the same day, you will suffer the priest to do his office and make you Morella's wife. By that time they should be well upon their road, and, after the rite is celebrated, I will receive the signed papers from the priest and follow them, leaving the false bride to play her part as best she can."

Again Margaret hesitated; the thing seemed too complicated and full of danger. But while she thought, a knock came on the door.

"That is to tell me that Morella awaits your answer in the court," said Inez. "Now, which is it to be? Remember that there is no other chance of escape for you, or the others, from this guarded town--at least I can see none."

"I accept," said Margaret hurriedly, "and God help us all, for we shall need Him."

"And you, Señora Betty?"

"Oh! I made up my mind long ago," answered Betty coolly. "We can only fail, when we shall be no worse off than before."

"Good. Then play your parts well, both of you. After all, they should not be so difficult, for the priest is safe, and the marquis will never scent such a trick as this. Fix the marriage for this day week, as I have much to think of and make ready," and she went.

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Half an hour later Margaret sat under the cool arcade of the marble court, and with her, Morella, while upon the further side of its splashing fountain and out of earshot, Betty and Inez walked to and fro in the shadow.

"You sent for me, Marquis," said Margaret presently, "and, being your prisoner, I have come because I must. What is your pleasure with me?"

"Dona Margaret," he answered gravely, "can you not guess? Well, I will tell you, lest you should guess wrong. First, it is to ask your forgiveness as I have done before, for the many crimes to which my love,

my true love, for you has driven me. This time yesterday I knew well that I could expect none. To-day I dare to hope that it may be otherwise."

"Why so, Marquis?"

"Last evening you looked into a certain garden and saw two people walking there--yonder is one of them," and he nodded towards Inez.

"Shall I go on?"

"No," she answered in a low voice, and passing her hands before her face. "Only tell me who and what is that woman?" and in her turn she looked towards Inez.

"Is it necessary?" he asked. "Well, if you wish to know, she is a Spaniard of good blood who with her sister was taken captive by the Moors. A certain priest, who took an interest in the sister, brought her to my notice and I bought her from them; so, as her parents were dead and she had nowhere else to go, she elected to stay in my house. You must not judge such things too harshly; they are common here. Also, she has been very useful to me, being clever, for through her I have intelligence of many things. Of late, however, she has grown tired of this life, and wishes to earn her freedom, which I have promised her in return for certain services, and to leave Granada."

"Was the nursing of my betrothed one of those services, Marquis?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will, Señora. Certainly I forgive her this indiscretion, if at last she has shown you the truth about that man for whose sake you have endured so much. Margaret, now that you know him for what he is, say, do you still cling to him?"

She rose and walked a few steps down the arcade, then came back and asked:

"Are you any better than this fallen man?"

"I think so, Margaret, for since I knew you I am a risen man; all my old self is left behind me, I am a new creature, and my sins have been for you, not against you. Hear me, I beseech you. I stole you away, it is true, but I have done you no harm, and will do you none. For your sake also I have spared your father when I had but to make a sign to remove him from my path. I suffered him to escape from the prison where he was confined, and I know the place where he thinks himself hidden to-day among the Jews of Granada. Also, I nursed Peter Brome back to life, when at any hour I could have let him die, lest afterwards I might have it on my conscience that, but for my love for you, he might perhaps still be living. Well, you have seen him as he is, and what say you now? Will you still reject me? Look on me," and he drew up his tall and stately shape, "and tell me, am I such a man as a woman should be ashamed to own as

husband? Remember, too, that I have much to give you in this land of Spain, whereof you shall become one of the greatest ladies, or perhaps in the future," he added significantly, "even more. War draws near, Margaret; this city and all its rich territories will fall into the hands of Spain, and afterwards I shall be their governor, almost their king."

"And if I refuse?" asked Margaret.

"Then," he answered sternly, "you bide here, and that false lover of yours bides here, and your father bides here to take the chance of war as Christian captives with a thousand others who languish in the dungeons of the Alhambra, while, my mission ended, I go hence to play my part in battle amongst my peers, as one of the first captains of their Most Catholic Majesties. Yet it is not to your fears that I would appeal, but to your heart, for I seek your love and your dear companionship through life, and, if I can help it, desire to work you and yours no harm."

"You desire to work them no harm. Then, if I were to fall in with your humour, would you let them go in safety?--I mean my father and the Señor Brome and my cousin Betty, whom, if you were as honest as you pretend to be, you should ask to bide with you as your wife, and not myself."

"The last I cannot do," he answered, flushing. "God knows I meant her no hurt, and only used her to keep near to and win news of you, thinking

her, to tell truth, somewhat other than she is."

"Are no women honest here in Spain, then, my lord Marquis?"

"A few, a very few, Dona Margaret. But I erred about Betty, whom I took for a simple serving-girl, and to whom, if need be, I am ready to make all amends."

"Except that which is due to a woman you have asked to be your wife, and who in our country could claim the fulfilment of your promise, or declare you shamed. But you have not answered. Would they go free?"

"As free as air--especially the Señora Betty," he added with a little smile, "for to speak truth, there is something in that woman's eyes which frightens me at times. I think that she has a long memory. Within an hour of our marriage you shall look down from your window and see them depart under escort, every one, to go whither they will."

"Nay," answered Margaret, "it is not enough. I should need to see them go before, and then, if I consented, not till the sun had set would I pay the price of their ransom."

"Then do you consent? he asked eagerly.

"My lord Marquis, it would seem that I must. My betrothed has played me false. For a month or more I have been prisoner in your palace, which I

understand has no good name, and, if I refuse, you tell me that all of us will be cast into yonder dungeons to be sold as slaves or die prisoners of the Moors. My lord Marquis, fate and you leave me but little choice. On this day week I will marry you, but blame me not if you find me other than you think, as you have found my cousin whom you befooled. Till then, also, I pray you that you will leave me quite untroubled. If you have arrangements to make or commands to send, the woman Inez yonder will serve as messenger, for of her I know the worst."

"I will obey you in all things, Dona Margaret," he answered humbly. "Do you desire to see your father or--" and he paused.

"Neither of them," she answered. "I will write to them and send my letters by this Inez. Why should I see them," she added passionately, "who have done with the old days when I was free and happy, and am about to become the wife of the most noble Marquis of Morella, that honourable grandee of Spain, who tricked a poor girl by a false promise of marriage, and used her blind and loving folly to trap and steal me from my home? My lord, till this day week I bid you farewell," and, walking from the arcade to the fountain, she called aloud to Betty to accompany her to their rooms.

The week for which Margaret had bargained had gone by. All was prepared. Inez had shown to Morella the letters that his bride to be wrote to her father and to Peter Brome; also the answers, imploring and passionate, to the same. But there were other letters and other answers which she

had not shown. It was afternoon, swift horses were ready in the courtyard, and with them an escort, while, disguised as Moors, Castell and Peter waited under guard in a chamber close at hand. Betty, dressed in the robes of a Moorish woman, and thickly veiled, stood before Morella, to whom Inez had led her.

"I come to tell you," she said, "that at sundown, three hours after we have passed beneath her window, my cousin and mistress will wait to be made your wife, but if you try to disturb her before then she will be no wife of yours, or any man's."

"I obey," answered Morella; "and, Señora Betty, I pray your pardon, and that you will accept this gift from me in token of your forgiveness." And with a low bow he handed to her a beautiful necklace of pearls.

"I take them," said Betty, with a bitter laugh, "as they may serve to buy me a passage back to England. But forgive you I do not, Marquis of Morella, and I warn you that there is a score between us which I may yet live to settle. You seem to have won, but God in Heaven takes note of the wickedness of men, and in this way or in that He always pays His debts. Now I go to bid farewell to my cousin Margaret, but to you I do not bid farewell, for I think that we shall meet again," and with a sob she let fall the veil which she had lifted above her lips to speak and departed with Inez, to whom she whispered as they went, "He will not linger for any more good-byes with Betty Dene."

They entered Margaret's room and locked the door behind them. She was seated on a low divan wrapped in a loose robe, and by her side, glittering with silver and with gems, lay her bridal veil and garments.

"Be swift," said Inez to Betty, who stripped off her Moorish dress and the long, flowing veil that was wrapped about her head, whereon it was seen that her hair had changed greatly in colour, from yellow to dark chestnut indeed, while her eyes, ringed about with pigments, and made lustrous by drugs dropped into them, looked no longer blue, but black like Margaret's. Yes, and wonder of wonders, on the right side of the chin and on the back of the neck were moles, or beauty-spots, just such as Margaret had borne there from her birth! In short, their stature being much the same, though Betty was more thickly built, except in the strongest light it would not have been easy to distinguish them apart, even unveiled, for at all such arts of the altering of the looks of women, Inez was an adept, and she had done her best.

Now Margaret clothed herself in the white robes and the thick head-dress that hid her face, all except a little crack left for the eyes to peep through, whilst Betty, with the help of Inez, arrayed herself in the wondrous wedding robe beset with jewels that was Morella's bridal gift, and hid her dyed tresses beneath the pearl-sewn veil. Within ten minutes all was finished, even to the dagger that Betty had tied about her beneath her robe, and the two transformed women stood staring at each other.

"It is time to go," said Inez.

Then Margaret broke out:

"I do not like this business; I never did. When he discovers all, that man's rage will be terrible, and he will kill her. I repent that I have consented to the plot."

"It is too late to repent now, Señora," said Inez.

"Cannot Betty be got away also?" asked Margaret desperately.

"It is just possible," answered Inez; "thus, before the marriage, according to the old custom here, I hand the cups of wine to the bridegroom and the bride. That for the marquis will be drugged, since he must not see too clear to-night. Well, I might brew it stronger so that within half an hour he would not know whether he were married or single, and then, perhaps, she might escape with me and come to join you. But it is very risky, and, of course, if we were discovered--the stitch would be out of the wineskin, and the cellar floor might be stained!"

Now Betty interrupted:

"Keep your stitches whole, Cousin; if any skins are to be pricked it can't be helped, and at least you won't have to wipe up the mess. I am not going to run away from the man, more likely he will run away from

me. I look well in this fine dress of yours, and I mean to wear it out. Now begone--begone, before some of them come to seek me. Don't you grieve for me; I'll lie in the bed that I have made, and if the worst comes to the worst, I have money in my pocket--or its worth--and we will meet again in England. Come, give my love and duty to Master Peter and your father, and if I should see them no more, bid them think kindly of Betty Dene, who was such a plague to them."

Then, taking Margaret in her strong arms, she kissed her again and again, and fairly thrust her from the room.

But when they were gone, poor Betty sat down and cried a little, till she remembered that hot tears might melt the paint upon her face, and, drying them, went to the window and watched.

A while later, from her lofty niche, she saw six Moorish horsemen riding along the white road to the embattled gate. After them came two men and a woman, all splendidly mounted, also dressed as Moors, and then six other horsemen. They passed the gate which was opened for them and began to mount the slope beyond. At the crest of it the woman halted and, turning, waved a handkerchief. Betty answered the signal, and in another minute they had vanished, and she was alone.

Never did she spend a more weary afternoon. Two hours later, still watching at her window, she saw the Moorish escort return, and knew that all was well, and that by now, Margaret, her lover, and her father were

safely started on their journey. So she had not risked her life in vain.