

CHAPTER XIX

BETTY PAYS HER DEBTS

Betty Dene was not a woman afflicted with fears or apprehensions. Born of good parents, but in poverty, for six-and-twenty years she had fought her own way in a rough world and made the best of circumstances. Healthy, full-blooded, tough, affectionate, romantic, but honest in her way, she was well fitted to meet the ups and downs of life, to keep her head above the waters of a turbulent age, and to pay back as much as she received from man or woman.

Yet those long hours which she passed alone in the high turret chamber, waiting till they summoned her to play the part of a false bride, were the worst that she had ever spent. She knew that her position was, in a sense, shameful, and like to end in tragedy, and, now that she faced it in cold blood, began to wonder why she had chosen so to do. She had fallen in love with the Spaniard almost at first sight, though it is true that something like this had happened to her before with other men. Then he had played his part with her, till, quite deceived, she gave all her heart to him in good earnest, believing in her infatuation that, notwithstanding the difference of their place and rank, he desired to make her his wife for her own sake.

Afterwards came that bitter day of disillusion when she learned, as Inez had said to Castell, that she was but a stalking heifer used for

the taking of the white swan, her cousin and mistress--that day when she had been beguiled by the letter which was still hid in her garments, and for her pains heard herself called a fool to her face. In her heart she had sworn to be avenged upon Morella then, and now the hour had come in which to fulfil her oath and play him back trick for cruel trick.

Did she still love the man? She could not say. He was pleasing to her as he had always been, and when that is so women forgive much. This was certain, however--love was not her guide to-night. Was it vengeance then that led her on? Perhaps; at least she longed to be able to say to him, "See what craft lies hid even in the bosom of an outwitted fool."

Yet she would not have done it for vengeance' sake alone, or rather she would have paid herself in some other fashion. No, her real reason was that she must discharge the debt due to Margaret and Peter, and to Castell who had sheltered her for years. She it was who had brought them into all this woe, and it seemed but just that she should bring them out again, even at the cost of her own life and womanly dignity. Or, perchance, all three of these powers drove her on,--love for the man if it still lingered, the desire to be avenged upon him, and the desire to snatch his prey from out his maw. At least she had set the game, and she would play it out to its end, however awful that might be.

The sun sank, the darkness closed about her, and she wondered whether ever again she would see the dawn. Her brave heart quailed a little, and she gripped the dagger hilt beneath her splendid, borrowed robe,

thinking to herself that perhaps it might be wisest to drive it into her own breast, and not wait until a balked madman did that office for her. Yet not so, for it is always time to die when one must.

A knock came at the door, and her courage, which had sunk so low, burned up again within her. Oh! she would teach this Spaniard that the Englishwoman, whom he had made believe was his desired mistress, could be his master. At any rate, he should hear the truth before the end.

She unlocked the door, and Inez entered bearing a lamp, by the light of which she scanned her with her quiet eyes.

"The bridegroom is ready," she said slowly that Betty might understand, "and sends me to lead you to him. Are you afraid?"

"Not I," answered Betty. "But tell me, how will the thing be done?"

"The marquis meets us in the ante-room to that hall which is used as a chapel, and there on behalf of the household I, as the first of the women, give you both the cups of wine. Be sure that you drink of that which I hold in my left hand, passing the cup up beneath your veil so as not to show your face, and speak no word, lest he should recognise your voice. Then we shall go into the chapel, where the priest Henriques waits, also all the household. But that hall is great, and the lamps are feeble, so none will know you there. By this time also the drugged wine will have begun to work upon Morella's brain, wherefore, provided that

you use a low voice, you may safely say, 'I, Betty, wed thee, Carlos,' not 'I, Margaret, wed thee.' Then, when it is over, he will lead you away to the chambers prepared for you, where, if there is any virtue in my wine, he will sleep sound to-night, that is, as soon as the priest has given me the marriage-lines, whereof I will hand you one copy and keep the others. Afterwards----" and she shrugged her shoulders.

"What becomes of you?" asked Betty, when she had fully mastered these instructions.

"Oh! I and the priest start to-night for a ride together to Seville, where his money awaits him; ill company for a woman who means henceforth to be honest and rich, but better than none. Perhaps we shall meet again there, or perhaps we shall not; at least, you know where to seek me and the others, at the house of the Señor Bernaldez. Now it is time. Are you ready to be made a marchioness of Spain?"

"Of course," answered Betty coolly, and they started.

Through the empty halls and corridors they went, and oh! surely no Eastern plot that had been conceived in them was quite so bold and desperate as theirs. They reached the ante-chamber to the chapel, and took their stand outside of the circle of light that fell from its hanging lamps. Presently a door opened, and through it came Morella, attended by two of his secretaries. He was splendidly arrayed in his usual garb of black velvet, and about his neck hung chains of gold and

jewels, and to his breast were fastened the glittering stars and orders pertaining to his rank. Never, or so thought Betty, had Morella seemed more magnificent and handsome. He was happy also, who was about to drink of that cup of joy which he so earnestly desired. Yes, his face showed that he was happy, and Betty, noting it, felt remorse stirring in her breast. Low he bowed before her, while she curtsied to him, bending her tall and graceful form till her knee almost touched the ground. Then he came to her and whispered in her ear:

"Most sweet, most beloved," he said, "I thank heaven that has led me to this joyous hour by many a rough and dangerous path. Most dear, again I beseech you to forgive all the sorrow and the ill that I have brought upon you, remembering that it was done for your adored sake, that I love you as woman has been seldom loved, you and you only, and that to you, and you only, will I cling until my death's day. Oh! do not tremble and shrink, for I swear that no woman in Spain shall have a better or a more loyal lord. You I will cherish alone, for you I will strive by night and day to lift you to great honour and satisfy your every wish. Many and pleasant may the years be that we shall spend side by side, and peaceful our ends when at last we lay us down side by side to sleep awhile and wake again in heaven, whereof the shadow lies on me to-night. Remembering the past, I do not ask much of you--as yet; still, if you are minded to give me a bridal gift that I shall prize above crowns or empires, say that you forgive me all that I have done amiss, and in token, lift that veil of yours and kiss me on the lips."

Betty heard this speech, whereof she only fully understood the end, and trembled. This was a trial that she had not foreseen. Yet it must be faced, for speak she dared not. Therefore, gathering up her courage, and remembering that the light was at her back, after a little pause, as though of modesty and reluctance, she raised the pearl-embroidered veil, and, bending forward beneath its shadow, suffered Morella to kiss her on the lips.

It was over, the veil had fallen again, and the man suspected nothing.

"I am a good artist," thought Inez to herself, "and that woman acts better than the wooden Peter. Scarcely could I have done it so well myself."

Then, the jealousy and hate that she could not control glittering in her soft eyes, for she too had loved this man, and well, Inez lifted the golden cups that had been prepared, and, gliding forward, beautiful in her brodered, Eastern robe, fell upon her knee and held them to the bridegroom and the bride. Morella took that from her right hand, and Betty that from her left, nor, intoxicated as he was already with that first kiss of love, did he pause to note the evil purpose which was written on the face of his discarded slave. Betty, passing the cup beneath her veil, touched it with her lips and returned it to Inez; but Morella, exclaiming, "I drink to you, sweet bride, most fair and adored of women," drained his to the dregs, and cast it back to Inez as a gift in such fashion that the red wine which clung to its rim stained her

white robes like a splash of blood.

Humbly she bowed, humbly she gathered the precious vessel from the floor; but when she rose again there was triumph in her eyes--not hate.

Now Morella took his bride's hand and, followed by his gentlemen and Inez, walked to the curtains that were drawn as they came into the great hall beyond, where had mustered all his household, perhaps a hundred of them. Between their bowing ranks they passed, a stately pair, and, whilst sweet voices sang behind some hidden screen, walked onward to the altar, where stood the waiting priest. They kneeled down upon the gold-embroidered cushions while the office of the Church was read over them. The ring was set upon Betty's hand--scarce, it would seem, could he find her finger--the man took the woman to wife, the woman took the man for husband. His voice was thick, and hers was very low; of all that listening crowd none could hear the names they spoke.

It was over. The priest bowed and blessed them. They signed some papers, there by the light of the altar candles. Father Henriques filled in certain names and signed them also, then, casting sand upon them, placed them in the outstretched hand of Inez, who, although Morella never seemed to notice, gave one to the bride, and thrust the other two into the bosom of her robe. Then both she and the priest kissed the hands of the marquis and his wife, and asked his leave to be gone. He bowed his head vaguely, and--if any had been there to listen--within ten short minutes they might have heard two horses galloping hard towards the

Seville gate.

Now, escorted by pages and torch-bearers, the new-wed pair repassed those dim and stately halls, the bride, veiled, mysterious, fateful; the bridegroom, empty-eyed, like one who wanders in his sleep. Thus they reached their chamber, and its carved doors shut behind them.

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It was early morning, and the serving-women who waited without that room were summoned to it by the sound of a silver gong. Two of them entered and were met by Betty, no longer veiled, but wrapped in a loose robe, who said to them:

"My lord the marquis still sleeps. Come, help me dress and make ready his bath and food."

The women stared at her, for now that she had washed the paint from her face they knew well that this was the Señora Betty and not the Dona Margaret, whom, they had understood, the marquis was to marry. But she chid them sharply in her bad Spanish, bidding them be swift, as she would be robed before her husband should awake. So they obeyed her, and when she was ready she went with them into the great hall where many of the household were gathered, waiting to do homage to the new-wed pair, and greeted them all, blushing and smiling, saying that doubtless the marquis would be among them soon, and commanding them meanwhile to go

about their several tasks.

So well did Betty play her part indeed, that, although they also were bewildered, none questioned her place or authority, who remembered that after all they had not been told by their lord himself which of these two English ladies he meant to marry. Also, she distributed among the meaner of them a present of money on her husband's behalf and her own, and then ate food and drank some wine before them all, pledging them, and receiving their salutations and good wishes.

When all this was done, still smiling, Betty returned to the marriage-chamber, closing its door behind her, sat her down on a chair near the bed, and waited for the worst struggle of all--that struggle on which hung her life. See! Morella stirred. He sat up, gazing about him and rubbing his brow. Presently his eyes lit upon Betty, seated stern and upright in her high chair. She rose and, coming to him, kissed him and called him "Husband," and, still half-asleep, he kissed her back. Then she sat down again in her chair and watched his face.

It changed, and changed again. Wonder, fear, amaze, bewilderment, flitted over it, till at last he said in English:

"Betty, where is my wife?"

"Here," answered Betty.

He stared at her. "Nay, I mean the Dona Margaret, your cousin and my lady, whom I wed last night. And how come you here? I thought that you had left Granada."

Betty looked astonished.

"I do not understand you," she answered. "It was my cousin Margaret who left Granada. I stayed here to be married to you, as you arranged with me through Inez."

His jaw dropped.

"Arranged with you through Inez! Mother of Heaven! what do you mean?"

"Mean?" she answered--"I mean what I say. Surely"--and she rose in indignation--"you have never dared to try to play some new trick upon me?"

"Trick!" muttered Morella. "What says the woman? Is all this a dream, or am I mad?"

"A dream, I think. Yes, it must be a dream, since certainly it was to no madman that I was wed last night. Look," and she held before him that writing of marriage signed by the priest, by him, and by herself, which stated that Carlos, Marquis of Morella, was on such a date, at Granada, duly married to the Señora Elizabeth Dene of London in England.

He read it twice, then sank back gasping; while Betty hid away the parchment in her bosom.

Then presently he seemed to go mad indeed. He raved, he cursed, he ground his teeth, he looked round for a sword to kill her or himself, but could find none. And all the while Betty sat still and gazed at him like some living fate.

At length he was weary, and her turn came.

"Listen," she said. "Yonder in London you promised to marry me; I have it hidden away, and in your own writing. By agreement I fled with you to Spain. By the mouth of your messenger and former love this marriage was arranged between us, I receiving your messages to me, and sending back mine to you, since you explained that for reasons of your own you did not wish to speak of these matters before my cousin Margaret, and could not wed me until she and her father and her lover were gone from Granada. So I bade them farewell, and stayed here alone for love of you, as I fled from London for love of you, and last night we were united, as all your household know, for but now I have eaten with them and received their good wishes. And now you dare--you dare to tell me, that I, your wife--I, who have sacrificed everything for you, I, the Marchioness of Morella, am not your wife. Well, go, say it outside this chamber, and hear your very slaves cry 'Shame' upon you. Go, say it to your king and your bishops, aye, and to his Holiness the Pope himself, and listen to

their answer. Why, great as you are, and rich as you are, they will hale you to a mad-house or a prison."

Morella listened, rocking himself to and fro upon the bed, then with an oath sprang towards her, to be met by a dagger-point glinting in his eyes.

"Hear me again," she said as he shrank back from that cold steel. "I am no slave and no weakling; you shall not murder me or thrust me away. I am your wife and your equal, aye, and stronger than you in body and in mind, and I will have my rights in the face of God and man."

"Certainly," he said with a kind of unwilling admiration--"certainly you are no weakling. Certainly, also, you have paid back all you owe me with a Jew's interest. Or, mayhap, you are not so clever as I think, but just a strong-minded fool, and it is that accursed Inez who has settled her debts. Oh! to think of it," and he shook his fist in the air, "to think that I believed myself married to the Dona Margaret, and find you in her place--you!"

"Be silent," she said, "you man without shame, who first fly at the throat of your new-wedded wife and then insult her by saying that you wish you were wedded to another woman. Be silent, or I will unlock the door and call your own people and repeat your monstrous talk to them." And she drew herself to her full height and stood over him on the bed.

Morella, his first rage spent, looked at her reflectively, and not without a certain measure of homage.

"I think," he remarked, "that if he did not happen to be in love with another woman and to believe that he had married her, you, my good Betty, would make a useful wife to any man who wished to get on in the world. I understood you to say that the door is locked, and if I might hazard a guess, you have the key, as also you happen to have a dagger. Well, I find the air in this place close, and I want to go out."

"Where to?" asked Betty.

"Let us say, to join Inez."

"What," she asked, "would you already be running after that woman again? Do you already forget that you are married?"

"It seems that I am not to be allowed to forget it. Now, let us bargain. I wish to leave Granada for a while, and without scandal. What are your terms? Remember that there are two to which I will not consent. I will not stop here with you, and you shall not accompany me. Remember also, that, although you hold the dagger at present, it is not wise of you to try to push this jest too far."

"As you did when you decoyed me on board the San Antonio," said Betty.

"Well, our honeymoon has not begun too sweetly, and I do not mind if you

go away for a while--to look for Inez. Swear now that you mean me no harm, and that you will not plot my death or disgrace, or in any way interfere with my liberty or position here in Granada. Swear it on the Rood." And she took down a silver crucifix that hung upon the wall over the bed and handed it to him. For she knew Morella's superstitions, and that if once he swore upon this symbol he dare not break his oath.

"And if I will not swear?" he asked sullenly.

"Then," she answered, "you stop here until you do, you who are anxious to be gone. I have eaten food this morning, you have not; I have a dagger, you have none; and, being as we are, I am sure that no one will venture to disturb us until Inez and your friend the priest have gone further than you can follow."

"Very well, I will swear," he said, and he kissed the crucifix and threw it down, "You can stop here and rule my house in Granada, and I will do you no mischief, nor trouble you in any way. But if you come out of Granada, then we cross swords."

"You mean that you intend to leave this city? Then, here is paper and ink. Be so good as to sign an order to the stewards of your estates, within the territories of the Moorish king, to pay all their revenue to me during your absence, and to your servants to obey me in everything."

"It is easy to see that you were brought up in the house of a Jew

merchant," said Morella, biting the pen and considering this woman who, whether she were hawk or pigeon, knew so well how to feather her nest. "Well, if I grant you this position and these revenues, will you leave me alone and cease to press other claims upon me?"

Now Betty, bethinking her of those papers that Inez had carried away with her, and that Castell and Margaret would know well how to use them if there were need, bethinking her also that if she pushed him too far at the beginning she might die suddenly as folk sometimes did in Granada, answered:

"It is much to ask of a deluded woman, but I still have some pride, and will not thrust myself in where it seems I am not wanted. Therefore, so be it. Till you seek me or send for me, I will not seek you so long as you keep your bargain. Now write the paper, sign it, and call in your secretaries to witness the signature."

"In whose favour must I word it?" he asked.

"In that of the Marquessa of Morella," she answered, and he, seeing a loophole in the words, obeyed her, since if she were not his wife this writing would have no value.

Somehow he must be rid of this woman. Of course he might cause her to be killed; but even in Granada people could not kill one to whom they had seemed to be just married without questions being asked. Moreover, Betty

had friends, and he had enemies who would certainly ask them if she vanished away. No, he would sign the paper and fight the case afterwards, for he had no time to lose. Margaret had slipped away from him, and if once she escaped from Spain he knew that he would never see her more. For aught he knew, she might already have escaped or be married to Peter Brome. The very thought of it filled him with madness. There had been a conspiracy against him; he was outwitted, robbed, befooled. Well, hope still remained--and vengeance. He could still fight Peter, and perhaps kill him. He could hand over Castell, the Jew, to the Inquisition. He could find a way to deal with the priest Henriques and the woman Inez, and, perhaps, if fortune favoured him he could get Margaret back into his power.

Oh! yes, he would sign anything if only thereby he was set at liberty and freed for a while from this servant who called herself his wife, this strong-minded, strong-bodied, clever Englishwoman, of whom he had thought to make a tool, and who had made a tool of him.

So Betty dictated and he wrote: yes, it had come to this--she dictated and he wrote, and signed too. The order was comprehensive. It gave power to the most honourable Marquessa of Morella to act for him, her husband, in all things during his absence from Granada. It commanded that all rents and profits due to him should be paid to her, and that all his servants and dependants should obey her as though she were himself, and that her receipt should be as good as his receipt.

When the paper was written, and Betty had spelt it over carefully to see that there was no omission or mistake, she unlocked the door, struck upon the gong, and summoned the secretaries to witness their lord's signature to a settlement. Presently they came, bowing, and offering many felicitations, which to himself Morella vowed he would remember against them.

"I have to go a journey," he said. "Witness my signature to this document, which provides for the carrying on of my household and the disposal of my property during my absence."

They stared and bowed.

"Read it aloud first," said Betty, "so that my lord and husband may be sure that there is no mistake."

One of them obeyed, but before ever he had finished the furious Morella shouted to them from the bed:

"Have done and witness, then go, order me horses and an escort, for I ride at once."

So they witnessed in a great hurry, and left the room. Betty left with them, holding the paper in her hand, and when she reached the large hall where the household were gathered waiting to greet their lord, she commanded one of the secretaries to read it out to all of them, also to

translate it into the Moorish tongue that every one might understand. Then she hid it away with the marriage lines, and, seating herself in the midst of the household, ordered them to prepare to receive the most noble marquis.

They had not long to wait, for presently he came out of the room like a bull into the arena, whereon Betty rose and curtsied to him, and at her word all his servants bowed themselves down in the Eastern fashion. For a moment he paused, again like the bull when he sees the picadors and is about to charge. Then he thought better of it, and, with a muttered curse, strode past them.

Ten minutes later, for the third time within twenty-four hours, horses galloped from the palace and through the Seville gate.

"Friends," said Betty in her awkward Spanish, when she knew that he had gone, "a sad thing has happened to my husband, the marquis. The woman Inez, whom it seems he trusted very much, has departed, stealing a treasure that he valued above everything on earth, and so I, his new-made wife, am left desolate while he tries to find her."