

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE FALCON STOOPS

It was the marriage day of Margaret and Peter. Clad in white armour that had been sent to him as a present from the queen, a sign and a token of her good wishes for his success in his combat with Morella, wearing the insignia of a Knight of St. James hanging by a ribbon from his neck, his shield emblazoned with his coat of the stooping falcon, which appeared also upon the white cloak that hung from his shoulders, behind him a squire of high degree, who carried his plumed casque and lance, and accompanied by an escort of the royal guards, Peter rode from his quarters in the prison to the palace gates, and waited there as he had been bidden. Presently they opened, and through them, seated on a palfrey, appeared Margaret, wonderfully attired in white and silver, but with her veil lifted so that her face could be seen. She was companioned by a troop of maidens mounted, all of them, on white horses, and at her side, almost outshining her in glory of apparel, and attended by all her household, rode Betty, Marchioness of Morella--at any rate for that present time.

Although she could never be less than beautiful, it was a worn and pale Margaret who bowed her greetings to the bridegroom without those palace gates. What wonder, since she knew that within a few hours his life must be set upon the hazard of a desperate fray. What wonder, since she knew that to-morrow her father was doomed to be burnt living upon the

Quemadero.

They met, they greeted; then, with silver trumpets blowing before them, the glittering procession wound its way through the narrow streets of Seville. But few words passed between them, whose hearts were too full for words, who had said all they had to say, and now abided the issue of events. Betty, however, whom many of the populace took for the bride, because her air was so much the happier of the two, would not be silent. Indeed she chid Margaret for her lack of gaiety upon such an occasion.

"Oh, Betty!--Betty!" answered Margaret, "how can I be gay, upon whose heart lies the burden of to-morrow?"

"A pest upon the burden of to-morrow!" exclaimed Betty. "The burden of to-day is enough for me, and that is not so bad to bear. Never shall we have another such ride as this, with all the world staring at us, and every woman in Seville envying us and our good looks and the favour of the queen."

"I think it is you they stare at and envy," said Margaret, glancing at the splendid woman at her side, whose beauty she knew well over-shadowed her own rarer loveliness, at any rate in a street pageant, as in the sunshine the rose overshadows the lily.

"Well," answered Betty, "if so, it is because I put the better face on things, and smile even if my heart bleeds. At least, your lot is more

hopeful than mine. If your husband has to fight to the death presently, so has mine, and between ourselves I favour Peter's chances. He is a very stubborn fighter, Peter, and wonderfully strong--too stubborn and strong for any Spaniard."

"Well, that is as it should be," said Margaret, smiling faintly, "seeing that Peter is your champion, and if he loses, you are stamped as a serving-girl, and a woman of no character."

"A serving-girl I was, or something not far different," replied Betty in a reflective voice, "and my character is a matter between me and Heaven, though, after all, it might scrape through where others fail to pass. So these things do not trouble me over much. What troubles me is that if my champion wins he kills my husband."

"You don't want him to be killed then?" asked Margaret, glancing at her.

"No, I think not," answered Betty with a little shake in her voice, and turning her head aside for a moment. "I know he is a scoundrel, but, you see, I always liked this scoundrel, just as you always hated him, so I cannot help wishing that he was going to meet some one who hits a little less hard than Peter. Also, if he dies, without doubt his heirs will raise suits against me."

"At any rate your father is not going to be burnt to-morrow," said Margaret to change the subject, which, to tell the truth, was an

awkward one.

"No, Cousin, if my father had his deserts, according to all accounts, although the lineage that I gave of him is true enough, doubtless he was burnt long ago, and still goes on burning--in Purgatory, I mean--though God knows I would never bring a faggot to his fire. But Master Castell will not be burnt, so why fret about it."

"What makes you say that?" asked Margaret, who had not confided the details of a certain plot to Betty.

"I don't know, but I am sure that Peter will get him out somehow. He is a very good stick to lean on, Peter, although he seems so hard and stupid and silent, which, after all, is in the nature of sticks. But look, there is the cathedral--is it not a fine place?--and a great crowd of people waiting round the gate. Now smile, Cousin. Bow and smile as I do."

They rode up to the great doors, where Peter, springing to the ground, assisted his bride from her palfrey. Then the procession formed, and they entered the wonderful place, preceded by vergers with staves, and by acolytes. Margaret had never visited it before, and never saw it again, but all her life the memory of it remained clear and vivid in her mind. The cold chill of the air within, the semi-darkness after the glare of the sunshine, the seven great naves, or aisles, stretching endlessly to right and left, the dim and towering roof, the pillars that

sprang to it everywhere like huge forest trees aspiring to the skies, the solemn shadows pierced by lines of light from the high-cut windows, the golden glory of the altars, the sounds of chanting, the sepulchres of the dead--a sense of all these things rushed in upon her, overpowering her and stamping the picture of them for ever on her memory.

Slowly they passed onward to the choir, and round it to the steps of the great altar of the chief chapel. Here, between the choir and the chapel, was gathered the congregation--no small one--and here, side by side to the right and without the rails, in chairs of state, sat their Majesties of Spain, who had chosen to grace this ceremony with their presence. More, as the bride came, the queen Isabella, as a special act of grace, rose from her seat and, bending forward, kissed her on the cheek, while the choir sang and the noble music rolled. It was a splendid spectacle, this marriage of hers, celebrated in perhaps the most glorious fane in Europe. But even as Margaret noted it and watched the bishops and priests decked with glittering embroideries, summoned there to do her honour, as they moved to and fro in the mysterious ceremonial of the Mass, she bethought her of other rites equally glorious that would take place on the morrow in the greatest square of Seville, where these same dignitaries would condemn fellow human beings--perhaps among them her own father--to be married to the cruel flame.

Side by side they knelt before the wondrous altar, while the incense-clouds from the censers floated up one by one till they were

lost in the gloom above, as the smoke of to-morrow's sacrifice would lose itself in the heavens, she and her husband, won at last, won after so many perils, perhaps to be lost again for ever before night fell upon the world. The priests chanted, the gorgeous bishop bowed over them and muttered the marriage service of their faith, the ring was set upon her hand, the troths were plighted, the benediction spoken, and they were man and wife till death should them part, that death which stood so near to them in this hour of life fulfilled. Then they two, who already that morning had made confession of their sins, kneeling alone before the altar, ate of the holy Bread, sealing a mystery with a mystery.

All was done and over, and rising, they turned and stayed a moment hand in hand while the sweet-voiced choir sang some wondrous chant. Margaret's eyes wandered over the congregation till presently they lighted upon the dark face of Morella, who stood apart a little way, surrounded by his squires and gentlemen, and watched her. More, he came to her, and bowing low, whispered to her:

"We are players in a strange game, my lady Margaret, and what will be its end, I wonder? Shall I be dead to-night, or you a widow? Aye, and where was its beginning? Not here, I think. And where, oh where shall this seed we sow bear fruit? Well, think as kindly of me as you can, since I loved you who love me not."

And again bowing, first to her, then to Peter, he passed on, taking no note of Betty, who stood near, considering him with her large eyes, as

though she also wondered what would be the end of all this play.

Surrounded by their courtiers, the king and queen left the cathedral, and after them came the bridegroom and the bride. They mounted their horses and in the glory of the southern sunlight rode through the cheering crowd back to the palace and to the marriage feast, where their table was set but just below that of their Majesties. It was long and magnificent; but little could they eat, and, save to pledge each other in the ceremonial cup, no wine passed their lips. At length some trumpets blew, and their Majesties rose, the king saying in his thin, clear voice that he would not bid his guests farewell, since very shortly they would all meet again in another place, where the gallant bridegroom, a gentleman of England, would champion the cause of his relative and countrywoman against one of the first grandees of Spain whom she alleged had done her wrong. That fray, alas! would be no pleasure joust, but to the death, for the feud between these knights was deep and bitter, and such were the conditions of their combat. He could not wish success to the one or to the other; but of this he was sure, that in all Seville there was no heart that would not give equal honour to the conqueror and the conquered, sure also that both would bear themselves as became brave knights of Spain and England.

Then the trumpets blew again, and the squires and gentlemen who were chosen to attend him came bowing to Peter, and saying that it was time for him to arm. Bride and bridegroom rose and, while all the spectators fell back out of hearing, but watching them with curious eyes, spoke

some few words together.

"We part," said Peter, "and I know not what to say."

"Say nothing, husband," she answered him, "lest your words should weaken me. Go now, and bear you bravely, as you will for your own honour and that of England, and for mine. Dead or living you are my darling, and dead or living we shall meet once more and be at rest for aye. My prayers be with you, Sir Peter, my prayers and my eternal love, and may they bring strength to your arm and comfort to your heart."

Then she, who would not embrace him before all those folk, curtsied till her knee almost touched the ground, while low he bent before her, a strange and stately parting, or so thought that company; and taking the hand of Betty, Margaret left him.

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Two hours had gone by. The Plaza de Toros, for the great square where tournaments were wont to be held was in the hands of those who prepared it for the auto-da-fé of the morrow, was crowded as it had seldom been before. This place was a huge amphitheatre--perchance the Romans built it--where all sorts of games were celebrated, among them the baiting of bulls as it was practised in those days, and other semi-savage sports. Twelve thousand people could sit upon the benches that rose tier upon tier around the vast theatre, and scarce a seat was empty. The arena



itself, that was long enough for horses starting at either end of it to come to their full speed, was strewn with white sand, as it may have been in the days when gladiators fought there. Over the main entrance and opposite to the centre of the ring were placed the king and queen with their lords and ladies, and between them, but a little behind, her face hid by her bridal veil, sat Margaret, upright and silent as a statue. Exactly in front of them, on the further side of the ring in a pavilion, and attended by her household, appeared Betty, glittering with gold and jewels, since she was the lady in whose cause, at least in name, this combat was to be fought à l'outrance. Quite unmoved she sat, and her presence seemed to draw every eye in that vast assembly which talked of her while it waited, with a sound like the sound of the sea as it murmurs on a beach at night.

Now the trumpets blew, and silence fell, and then, preceded by heralds in golden tabards, Carlos, Marquis of Morella, followed by his squires, rode into the ring through the great entrance. He bestrode a splendid black horse, and was arrayed in coal-black armour, while from his casque rose black ostrich plumes. On his shield, however, painted in scarlet, appeared the eagle crowned with the coronet of his rank, and beneath, the proud motto--"What I seize I tear." A splendid figure, he pressed his horse into the centre of the arena, then causing it to wheel round, pawing the air with its forelegs, saluted their Majesties by raising his long, steel-tipped lance, while the multitude greeted him with a shout. This done, he and his company rode away to their station at the north end of the ring.

Again the trumpets sounded, and a herald appeared, while after him, mounted on a white horse, and clad in his white armour that glistened in the sun, with white plumes rising from his casque, and on his shield the stooping falcon blazoned in gold with the motto of "For love and honour" beneath it, appeared the tall, grim shape of Sir Peter Brome. He, too, rode out into the centre of the arena, and, turning his horse quite soberly, as though it were on a road, lifted his lance in salute. Now there was no cheering, for this knight was a foreigner, yet soldiers who were there said to each other that he looked like one who would not easily be overthrown.

A third time the trumpets sounded, and the two champions, advancing from their respective stations, drew rein side by side in front of their Majesties, where the conditions of the combat were read aloud to them by the chief herald. They were short. That the fray should be to the death unless the king and queen willed otherwise and the victor consented; that it should be on horse or on foot, with lance or sword or dagger, but that no broken weapon might be replaced and no horse or armour changed; that the victor should be escorted from the place of combat with all honour, and allowed to depart whither he would, in the kingdom or out of it, and no suit or blood-feud raised against him; and that the body of the fallen be handed over to his friends for burial, also with all honour. That the issue of this fray should in no way affect any cause pleaded in Courts ecclesiastical or civil, by the lady who asserted herself to be the Marchioness of Morella, or by the most noble

Marquis of Morella, whom she claimed as her husband.

These conditions having been read, the champions were asked if they assented to them, whereon each of them answered, "Aye!" in a clear voice. Then the herald, speaking on behalf of Sir Peter Brome, by creation a knight of St. Iago and a Don of Spain, solemnly challenged the noble Marquis of Morella to single combat to the death, in that he, the said marquis, had aspersed the name of his relative, the English lady, Elizabeth Dene, who claimed to be his wife, duly united to him in holy wedlock, and for sundry other causes and injuries worked towards him, the said Sir Peter Brome, and his wife, Dame Margaret Brome, and in token thereof, threw down a gauntlet, which gauntlet the Marquis of Morella lifted upon the point of his lance and cast over his shoulder, thus accepting the challenge.

Now the combatants dropped their visors, which heretofore had been raised, and their squires, coming forward, examined the fastenings of their armour, their weapons, and the girths and bridles of their horses. These being pronounced sound and good, pursuivants took the steeds by the bridles and led them to the far ends of the lists. At a signal from the king a single clarion blew, whereon the pursuivants loosed their hold of the bridles and sprang back. Another clarion blew, and the knights gathered up their reins, settled their shields, and set their lances in rest, bending forward over their horses' necks.

An intense silence fell upon all the watching multitude as that of night

upon the sea, and in the midst of it the third clarion blew--to Margaret it sounded like the trump of doom. From twelve thousand throats one great sigh went up, like the sigh of wind upon the sea, and ere it died away, from either end of the arena, like arrows from the bow, like leuens from a cloud, the champions started forth, their stallions gathering speed at every stride. Look, they met! Fair on each shield struck a lance, and backward reeled their holders. The keen points glanced aside or up, and the knights, recovering themselves, rushed past each other, shaken but unhurt. At the ends of the lists the squires caught the horses by the bridles and turned them. The first course was run.

Again the clarions blew, and again they started forward, and presently again they met in mid career. As before, the lances struck upon the shields; but so fearful was the impact, that Peter's shivered, while that of Morella, sliding from the topmost rim of his foe's buckler, got hold in his visor bars. Back went Peter beneath the blow, back and still back, till almost he lay upon his horse's crupper. Then, when it seemed that he must fall, the lacings of his helm burst. It was torn from his head, and Morella passed on bearing it transfixed upon his spear point.

"The Falcon falls," screamed the spectators; "he is unhorsed."

But Peter was not unhorsed. Freed from that awful pressure, he let drop the shattered shaft and, grasping at his saddle strap, dragged himself back into the selle. Morella tried to stay his charger, that he might

come about and fall upon the Englishman before he could recover himself; but the brute was heady, and would not be turned till he saw the wall of faces in front of him. Now they were round, both of them, but Peter had no spear and no helm, while the lance of Morella was cumbered with his adversary's casque that he strove to shake free from it, but in vain.

"Draw your sword," shouted voices to Peter--the English voices of Smith and his sailors--and he put his hand down to do so, then bethought him of some other counsel, for he let it lie within its scabbard, and, spurring the white horse, came at Morella like a storm.

"The Falcon will be spiked," they screamed. "The Eagle wins!--the Eagle wins!" And indeed it seemed that it must be so. Straight at Peter's undefended face drove Morella's lance, but lo! as it came he let fall his reins and with his shield he struck at the white plumes about its point, the plumes torn from his own head. He had judged well, for up flew those plumes, a little, a very little, yet far enough to give him space, crouching on his saddle-bow, to pass beneath the deadly spear. Then, as they swept past each other, out shot that long, right arm of his and, gripping Morella like a hook of steel, tore him from his saddle, so that the black horse rushed forward riderless, and the white sped on bearing a double burden.

Grasping desperately, Morella threw his arms about his neck, and intertwined, black armour mixed with white, they swayed to and fro, while the frightened horse beneath rushed this way and that till,

swerving suddenly, together they fell upon the sand, and for a moment lay there stunned.

"Who conquers?" gasped the crowd; while others answered, "Both are sped!" And, leaning forward in her chair, Margaret tore off her veil and watched with a face like the face of death.

See! As they had fallen together, so together they stirred and rose--rose unharmed. Now they sprang back, out flashed the long swords, and, while the squires caught the horses and, running in, seized the broken spears, they faced each other. Having no helm, Peter held his buckler above his head to shelter it, and, ever calm, awaited the onslaught.

At him came Morella, and with a light, grating sound his sword fell upon the steel. Before he could recover himself Peter struck back; but Morella bent his knees, and the stroke only shore the black plumes from his casque. Quick as light he drove at Peter's face with his point; but the Englishman leapt to one side, and the thrust went past him. Again Morella came at him, and struck so mighty a blow that, although Peter caught it on his buckler, it sliced through the edge of it and fell upon his unprotected neck and shoulder, wounding him, for now red blood showed on the white armour, and Peter reeled back beneath the stroke.

"The Eagle wins!--the Eagle wins! Spain and the Eagle" shouted ten thousand throats. In the momentary silence that followed, a single

voice, a clear woman's voice, which even then Margaret knew for that of Inez, cried from among the crowd:

"Nay, the Falcon stoops!"

Before the sound of her words died away, maddened it would seem, by the pain of his wound, or the fear of defeat, Peter shouted out his war-cry of "A Brome! A Brome"! and, gathering himself together, sprang straight at Morella as springs a starving wolf. The blue steel flickered in the sunlight, then down it fell, and lo! half the Spaniard's helm lay on the sand, while it was Morella's turn to reel backward--and more, as he did so, he let fall his shield.

"A stroke!--a good stroke!" roared the crowd. "The Falcon!--the Falcon!"

Peter saw that fallen shield, and whether for chivalry's sake, as thought the cheering multitude, or to free his left arm, he cast away his own, and grasping the sword with both hands rushed on the Spaniard. From that moment, helmless though he was, the issue lay in doubt no longer. Betty had spoken of Peter as a stubborn swordsman and a hard hitter, and both of these he now showed himself to be. As fresh to all appearance as when he ran the first course, he rained blow after blow upon the hapless Spaniard, till the sound of his sword smiting on the good Toledo steel was like the sound of a hammer falling continually on the smith's red iron. They were fearful blows, yet still the tough steel held, and still Morella, doing what he might, staggered back beneath

them, till at length he came in front of the tribune, in which sat their Majesties and Margaret. Out of the corner of his eye Peter saw the place, and determined in his stout heart that then and there he would end the thing. Parrying a cut which the desperate Spaniard made at his head, he thrust at him so heavily that his blade bent like a bow, and, although he could not pierce the black mail, almost lifted Morella from his feet. Then, as he reeled backwards, Peter whirled his sword on high, and, shouting "Margaret!" struck downwards with all his strength. It fell as lightning falls, swift, keen, dazzling the eyes of all who watched. Morella raised his arm to break the blow. In vain! The weapon that he held was shattered, the casque beneath was cloven, and, throwing his arms wide, he fell heavily to the ground and lay there moving feebly.

For an instant there was silence, and in it a shrill woman's voice that cried:

"The Falcon has stooped. The English hawk has stooped!"

Then there arose a tumult of shouting. "He is dead!" "Nay, he stirs."

"Kill him!" "Spare him; he fought well!"

Peter leaned upon his sword, looking at the fallen foe. Then he glanced upwards at their Majesties, but these sat silent, making no sign, only he saw Margaret try to rise from her seat and speak, to be pulled back to it again by the hands of women. A deep hush fell upon the watching



thousands who waited for the end. Peter looked at Morella. Alas! he still lived, his sword and the stout helmet had broken the weight of that stroke, mighty though it had been. The man was but wounded in three places and stunned. "What must I do?" asked Peter in a hollow voice to the royal pair above him.

Now the king, who seemed moved, was about to speak; but the queen bent forward and whispered something to him, and he remained silent. They both were silent. All the intent multitude was silent. Knowing what this dreadful silence meant, Peter cast down his sword and drew his dagger, wherewith to cut the lashings of Morella's gorget and give the coup de grâce.

Just then it was that for the first time he heard a sound, far away upon the other side of the arena, and, looking thither, saw the strangest sight that ever his eyes beheld. Over the railing of the pavilion opposite to him a woman climbed nimbly as a cat, and from it, like a cat, dropped to the ground full ten feet below, then, gathering up her dress about her knees, ran swiftly towards him. It was Betty! Betty without a doubt! Betty in her gorgeous garb, with pearls and braided hair flying loose behind her. He stared amazed. All stared amazed, and in half a minute she was on them, and, standing over the fallen Morella, gasped out:

"Let him be! I bid you let him be."

Peter knew not what to do or say, so advanced to speak with her, whereon with a swoop like that of a swallow she pounced upon his sword that lay in the sand and, leaping back to Morella, shook it on high, shouting:

"You will have to fight me first, Peter."

Indeed, she did more, striking at him so shrewdly with his own sword that he was forced to spring sideways to avoid the stroke. Now a great roar of laughter went up to heaven. Yes, even Peter laughed, for no such thing as this had ever before been seen in Spain. It died away, and again Betty, who had no low voice, shouted in her villainous Spanish:

"He shall kill me before he kills my husband. Give me my husband!"

"Take him, for my part," answered Peter, whereon, letting fall the sword, Betty, filled with the strength of despair, lifted the senseless Spaniard in her strong white arms as though he were a child, and his bleeding head lying on her shoulder, strove to carry him away, but could not.

Then, while all that audience cheered frantically, Peter with a gesture of despair threw down his dagger and once more appealed to their Majesties. The king rose and held up his hand, at the same time motioning to Morella's squires to take him from the woman, which, seeing their cognizance, Betty allowed them to do.

"Marchioness of Morella," said the king, for the first time giving her that title, "your honour is cleared, your champion has conquered, and this fierce fray was to the death. What have you to say?"

"Nothing," answered Betty, "except that I love the man, though he has treated me and others ill, and, as I knew he would if he crossed swords with Peter, has got his deserts for his deeds. I say I love him, and if Peter wishes to kill him, he must kill me first."

"Sir Peter Brome," said the king, "the judgment lies in your hand. We give you the man's life, to grant or to take."

Peter thought a while, then answered:

"I grant him his life if he will acknowledge this lady to be his true and lawful wife, and live with her as such, now and for ever, staying all suits against her."

"How can he do that, you fool," asked Betty, "when you have knocked all his senses out of him with that great sword of yours?"

"Perhaps," suggested Peter humbly, "some one will do it for him."

"Yes," said Isabella, speaking for the first time, "I will. On behalf of the Marquis of Morella I promise these things, Don Peter Brome, before

all these people here gathered. I add this: that if he should live, and it pleases him to break this promise made on his behalf to save him from death, then let his name be shamed, yes, let it become a byword and a scorn. Proclaim it, heralds."

So the heralds blew their trumpets and one of them called out the queen's decree, whereat the spectators cheered again, shouting that it was good, and they bore witness to that promise.

Then Morella, still senseless, was borne away by his squires, Betty in her blood-stained robe marching at his side, and his horse having been brought to him again, Peter, wounded though he was, mounted and galloped round the arena amidst plaudits such as that place had never heard, till, lifting his sword in salutation, suddenly he and his gentlemen vanished by the gate through which he had appeared.

Thus strangely enough ended that combat which thereafter was always known as the Fray of the Eagle and the English Hawk.