



Fair Margaret

By Rider Haggard



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 that 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 this Spaniard almost at first sight, though it is true that 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's 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 bawled 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 waits," 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?"

"He meets us in the ante-room to that hall which is used as a chapel, and there on behalf of the household I give you

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 Senor Bernaldez. Now it is time. Are you ready to be made a marchioness of Spain?"

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



A door opened, and through it came Morella.

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 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, when 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,

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 brought 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, 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 night was at her back, after a little pause, as though of modesty and reluctance, she lifted 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 took up the golden cups that had been prepared, and, gliding forward, beautiful in her brocade 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 lifted the precious vessel from the floor; but when she arose again there was a 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 gathered 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 knelt down upon the gold-embroidered cushions while the office of the Church was read over them. The ring was set upon Betty's hand—secure, it would seem, could he find her finger—the man took the woman to wife, the woman took the man for husband.