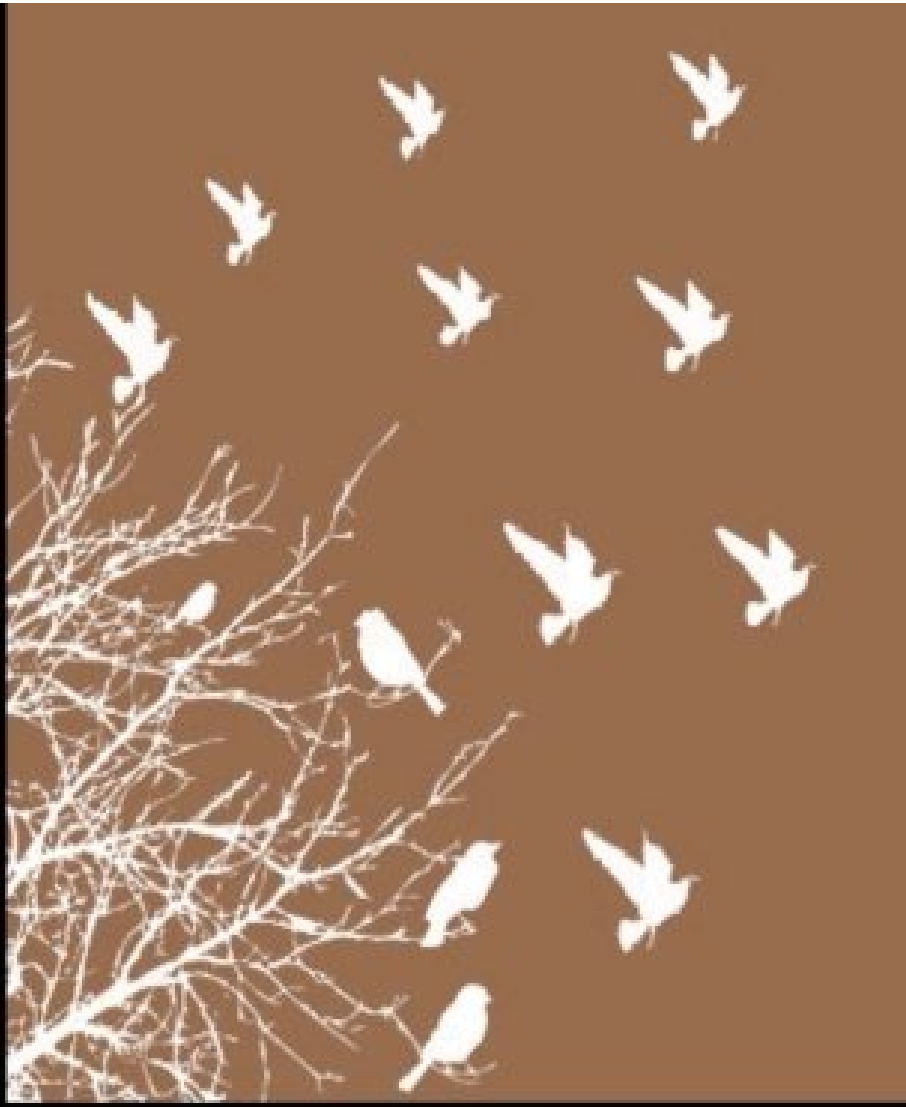
The Sorceress of Rome



Jefferson Publication

Nathan Gallizier

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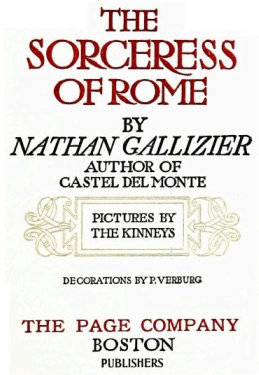
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Cover art



Was Stephania not overacting her part? (See page 311)



Title page

THE SORCERESS OF ROME

BY

NATHAN GALLIZIER

AUTHOR OF

CASTEL DEL MONTE

PICTURES BY
THE KINNEYS

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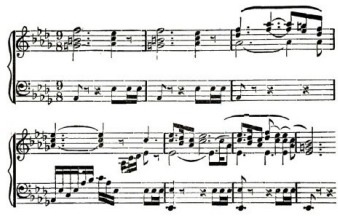
Somewhere, in desolate wind-swept
space,
In Twilight-land, in no-man's land,
Two hurrying shapes met face to face
And bade each other stand.

"And who are you?" cried one agape
Shuddering in the gloaming light.
"I know not," said the second shape,
"I only died last night."

THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH.



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music fragment

INTRODUCTION

The darkness of the tenth century is dissipated by no contemporary historian. Monkish chronicles alone shed a faint light over the discordant chaos of the Italian world. Rome was no longer the capital of the earth. The seat of empire had shifted from the banks of the Tiber to the shores of the Bosporus, and the seven hilled city of Constantine had assumed the imperial purple of the ancient capital of the Cæsars.

Centuries of struggles with the hosts of foreign invaders had in time lowered the state of civilization to such a degree, that in point of literature and art the Rome of the tenth century could not boast of a single name worthy of being transmitted to posterity.

Even the memory of the men whose achievements in the days of its glory constituted the pride and boast of the Roman world, had become almost extinct. A great lethargy benumbed the Italian mind, engendered by the reaction from the incessant feuds and broils among the petty tyrants and oppressors of the country.

Together with the rest of the disintegrated states of Italy, united by no common bond, Rome had become the prey of the most terrible disorders. Papacy had fallen into all manner of corruption. Its former halo and prestige had departed. The chair of St. Peter was sought for by bribery and controlling influence, often by violence and assassination, and the city was oppressed by factions and awed into submission by foreign adventurers in command of bands collected from the outcasts of all nations.

From the day of Christmas in the year 800, when at the hands of Pope Leo III, Charlemagne received the imperial crown of the West, the German Kings dated their right as rulers of Rome and the Roman world, a right, feebly and ineffectually contested by the emperors of the East. It was the dream of every German King immediately upon his election to cross the Alps to receive at the hand of the Pope the crown of a country which resisted and resented and never formally recognized a superiority forced upon it. Thus from time to time we find Rome alternately in revolt against German rule, punished,

subdued and again imploring the aid of the detested foreigners against the misrule of her own princes, to settle the disputes arising from pontifical elections, or as protection against foreign invaders and the violence of contending factions.

Plunged in an abyss from which she saw no other means of extricating herself, harassed by the Hungarians in Lombardy and the Saracens in Calabria, Italy had, in the year 961, called on Otto the Great, King of Germany, for assistance. Little opposition was made to this powerful monarch. Berengar II, the reigning sovereign of Italy, submitted and agreed to hold his kingdom of him as a fief. Otto thereupon returned to Germany, but new disturbances arising, he crossed the Alps a second time, deposed Berengar and received at the hands of Pope John XII the imperial dignity nearly suspended for forty years.

Every ancient prejudice, every recollection whether of Augustus or Charlemagne, had led the Romans to annex the notion of sovereignty to the name of Roman emperor, nor were Otto and his two immediate descendants inclined to waive these supposed prerogatives, which they were well able to enforce. But no sooner had they returned to Germany than the old habit of revolt seized the Italians, and especially the Romans who were ill disposed to resume habits of obedience even to the sovereign whose aid they had implored and received. The

flames of rebellion swept again over the seven hilled city during the rule of Otto II, whose aid the Romans had invoked against the invading hordes of Islam, and the same republican spirit broke out during the brief, but fantastic reign of his son, the third Otto, directing itself in the latter instance chiefly against the person of the youthful pontiff, Bruno of Carinthia, the friend of the King, whose purity stands out in marked contrast against the depravity of the monsters, who, to the number of ten, had during the past five decades defiled the throne of the Apostle. Gregory V is said to have been assassinated during Otto's absence from Rome.

The third rebellion of Johannes Crescentius, Senator of Rome, enacted after the death of the pontiff and the election of Sylvester II, forms but the prelude to the great drama whose final curtain was to fall upon the doom of the third Otto, of whose love for Stephania, the beautiful wife of Crescentius, innumerable legends are told in the old monkish chronicles and whose tragic death caused a lament to go throughout the world of the Millennium.



decoration

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Book the First

The Truce of God

"As I came through the desert, thus
it was
As I came through the desert: All was
black,
In heaven no single star, on earth no
track;
A brooding hush without a stir or note,
The air so thick it clotted in my throat.
And thus for hours; then some enormous
things
Swooped past with savage cries and
clanking wings;
But I strode on austere;
No hope could have no fear."
—*James Thomson*.

BOOK THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

THE GRAND CHAMBERLAIN

 t was the hour of high noon on a sultry October day in Rome, in the year of our Lord nine hundred and ninety-nine. In the porphyry cabinet of the imperial palace on Mount Aventine, before a table covered with parchments and scrolls, there sat an individual, who even in the most brilliant assembly would have attracted general and immediate attention.

Judging from his appearance he had scarcely passed his thirtieth year. His bearing combined a marked grace and intellectuality. The finely shaped head poised on splendid shoulders denoted power and intellect. The pale, olive tints of the face seemed to intensify the brilliancy of the black eyes whose penetrating gaze revealed a singular compound of mockery and cynicism. The mouth, small but firm, was not devoid of disdain, and even cruelty, and the smile of the thin, compressed lips held something more subtle than any passion that can be named. His ears, hands and feet were of that delicacy and smallness, which is held to denote aristocracy of birth. And there was in his manner that indescribable combination of unobtrusive dignity and affected elegance which, in all ages and countries, through all changes of manners and customs has rendered the demeanour of its few chosen possessors the

instantaneous interpreter of their social rank. He was dressed in a crimson tunic, fastened with a clasp of mother-of-pearl. Tight fitting hose of black and crimson terminating in saffron-coloured shoes covered his legs, and a red cap, pointed at the top and rolled up behind brought the head into harmony with the rest of the costume.

Now and then, Benilo, the Grand Chamberlain, cast quick glances at the sand-clock on the table before him; at last with a gesture of mingled impatience and annoyance, he pushed back the scrolls he had been examining, glanced again at the clock, arose and strode to a window looking out upon the western slopes of Mount Aventine.

The sun was slowly setting, and the light green silken curtains hung motionless, in the almost level rays. The stone houses of the city and her colossal ruins glowed with a brightness almost overpowering. Not a ripple stirred the surface of the Tiber, whose golden coils circled the base of Aventine; not a breath of wind filled the sails of the deserted fishing boats, which swung lazily at their moorings. Over the distant Campagna hung a hot, quivering mist and in the vineyards climbing the Janiculan Mount not a leaf stirred upon its slender stem. The ramparts of Castel San Angelo dreamed deserted in the glow of the westering sun, and beyond the horizon of ancient Portus, torpid, waveless and suffused in a flood of dazzling brightness, the Tyrrhene Sea stretched

toward the cloudless horizon which closed the sun-bright view.

How long the Grand Chamberlain had thus abstractedly gazed out upon the seven-hilled city gradually sinking into the repose of evening, he was scarcely conscious, when a slight knock, which seemed to come from the wall, caused him to start. After a brief interval it was repeated. Benilo drew the curtains closer, gave another glance at the sand-clock, nodded to himself, then, approaching the opposite wall, decorated with scenes from the Metamorphoses of Ovid, touched a hidden spring. Noiselessly a panel receded and, from the chasm thus revealed, something like a shadow passed swiftly into the cabinet, the panel closing noiselessly behind it.

Benilo had reseated himself at the table, and beckoned his strange visitor to a chair, which he declined. He was tall and lean and wore the gray habit of the Penitent friars, the cowl drawn over his face, concealing his features.

For some minutes neither the Grand Chamberlain nor his visitor spoke. At last Benilo broke the silence.

"You are the bearer of a message?"

The monk nodded.

"Tell me the worst! Bad news is like decaying fruit. It becomes the more rotten with the keeping."

"The worst may be told quickly enough," said

the monk with a voice which caused the Chamberlain to start.

"The Saxon dynasty is resting on two eyes."

Benilo nodded.

"On two eyes," he repeated, straining his gaze towards the monk.

"They will soon be closed for ever!"

The Chamberlain started from his seat.

"I do not understand."

"The fever does not temporize."

"'Tis the nature of the raven to croak. Let thine improvising damn thyself."

"Fate and the grave are relentless. I am the messenger of both!"

"King Otto dying?" the Chamberlain muttered to himself. "Away from Rome,—the Fata Morgana of his dreams?"

A gesture of the monk interrupted the speaker.

"When a knight makes a vow to a lady, he does not thereby become her betrothed. She oftener marries another."

"Yet the Saint may work a miracle. The Holy Father is praying so earnestly for his deliverance, that Saint Michael may fear for his prestige, did he not succour him."

"Your heart is tenderer than I had guessed."

"And joined by the prayers of such as you—"

The monk raised his hand.

"Nay,—I am not holy enough."

"I thought they were all saints at San Zeno."

"That is for Rome to say."

There was a brief pause during which Benilo gazed into space. The monk heard him mutter the word "Dying—dying" as if therein lay condensed the essence of all his life.

Reseating himself the Chamberlain seemed at last to remember the presence of his visitor, who scrutinized him stealthily from under his cowl. Pointing to a parchment on the table before him, he said dismissing the subject:

"You are reported as one in whom I may place full trust, in whom I may implicitly confide. I hate the black cassocks. A monk and misfortune are seldom apart. You see I dissemble not."

The Grand Chamberlain's visitor nodded.

"A viper's friend must needs be a viper,—like to like!"

"'Tis not the devil's policy to show the cloven hoof."

"Yet an eavesdropper is best equipped for a prophet."

Again the Chamberlain started.

Straining his gaze towards the monk, who stood immobile as a phantom, he said:

"It is reported that you are about to render a great service to Rome."

The monk nodded.

"A country without a king is bad! But to carry

the matter just a trifle farther,—to dream of Christendom without a Pope—"

"You would not dare!" exclaimed Benilo with real or feigned surprise, "you would not dare! In the presence of the whole Christian world? Rome can do nothing without the Sun,—nothing without the Pope. Take away his benediction: 'Urbi et Orbi'—What would prosper?"

"You are a poet and a Roman. I am a monk and a native of Aragon."

Benilo shrugged his shoulders.

"'Tis but the old question: Cui bono? How many pontiffs have, within the memory of man, defiled the chair of Saint Peter? Who are your reformers? Libertines and gossipers in the taverns of the Suburra, among fried fish, painted women, and garlic; in prosperity proud, in adversity cowards, but infamous ever! The fifth Gregory alone soars so high above the earth, he sees not the vermin, the mire beneath."

"Perhaps they wished to let the mire accumulate, to furnish work for the iron broom of your tramontane saint! Are not his shoulders bent in holy contemplation, like the moon in the first quarter? Is he not shocked at the sight of misery and of dishevelled despair? His sensitive nerves would see them with the hair dressed and bound like that of an antique statue."

"Ay! And the feudal barons stick in his palate

like the hook in the mouth of the dog fish."

"We want no more martyrs! The light of the glow-worm continues to shine after the death of the insect."

"It was a conclave, that disposed of the usurper, John XVI."

"Ay! And the bravo, when he discovered his error, paid for three candles for the pontiff's soul, and the monk who officiated at the last rites praised the departed so loudly, that the corpse sat up and laughed. And now he is immortal and possesses the secret of eternal life," the monk concluded with downcast eyes.

"Yet there is one I fear,—one who seems to enlist a special providence in his cause."

"Gerbert of Cluny—"

"The monk of Aurillac!"

"They say that he is leagued with the devil; that in his closet he has a brazen head, which answers all questions, and through which the devil has assured him that he shall not die, till he has said mass in Jerusalem."

"He is competent to convert a brimstone lake."

"Yet a true soldier seeks for weak spots in the armour."

"I am answered. But the time and the place?"

"In the Ghetto at sunset."

"And the reward?"

"The halo of a Saint."

"What of your conscience's peace?"

"May not a man and his conscience, like ill-mated consorts, be on something less than speaking terms?"

"They kill by the decalogue at San Zeno."

"Exitus acta probat!" returned the monk solemnly.

Benilo raised his hand warningly.

"Let him disappear quietly—ecclesiastically."

"What is gained by caution when one stands on an earthquake?" asked the monk.

"You deem not, then, that Heaven might take so strong an interest in Gerbert's affairs, as to send some of the blessed to his deliverance?" queried Benilo suavely.

The Chamberlain's visitor betrayed impatience.

"If Heaven troubled itself much about what is done on earth, the world's business would be well-nigh bankrupt."

"Ay! And even the just may fall by his own justice!" nodded Benilo. "He should have made his indulgences dearer, and harder to win. Why takes he not the lesson from women?"

There was a brief pause, during which Benilo had arisen and paced up and down the chamber. His visitor remained immobile, though his eyes followed Benilo's every step.

At last the Grand Chamberlain paused directly before him.

"How fares his Eminence of Orvieto? He was ailing at last reports," he asked.

"He died on his way to Rome, of a disease, sudden as the plague. He loved honey,—they will accuse the bees."

With a nod of satisfaction Benilo continued his perambulation.

"Tell me better news of our dearly beloved friend, Monsignor Agnello, Archbishop of Cosenza, Clerk of the Chamber and Vice-Legate of Viterbo."

"He was found dead in his bed, after eating a most hearty supper," the monk spoke dolefully.

"Alas, poor man! That was sudden. But such holy men are always ready for their call," replied the Grand Chamberlain with downcast eyes. "And what part has his Holiness assigned me in his relics?"

"Some flax of his hair shirt, to coil a rope therewith," replied the monk.

"A princely benefaction! But your commission for the Father of Christendom? For indeed I fear the vast treasures he has heaped up, will hang like a leaden mountain on his ascending soul."

"The Holy Father himself has summoned me to Rome!" The words seemed to sound from nowhere. Yet they hovered on the air like the knell of Fate.

The Grand-Chamberlain paused, stared and shuddered.

"And who knows," continued the monk after a pause, "but that by some divine dispensation all the

refractory cardinals of the Sacred College may contract some incurable disease? Have you secured the names,—just to ascertain if their households are well ordered?"

"The name of every cardinal and bishop in Rome at the present hour."

"Give it to me."

A hand white as that of a corpse came from the monk's ample parting sleeves in which Benilo placed a scroll, which he had taken from the table.

The monk unrolled it. After glancing down the list of names, he said:

"The Cardinal of Gregorio."

The Chamberlain betokened his understanding with a nod.

"He claims kinship with the stars."

"The Cardinal of San Pietro in Montorio."

An evil smile curved Benilo's thin, white lips.

"An impostor, proved, confessed,—his conscience pawned to a saint—"

"The Cardinal of San Onofrio,—he, who held you over the baptismal fount," said the monk with a quick glance at the Chamberlain.

"I had no hand in my own christening."

The monk nodded.

"The Cardinal of San Silvestro."

"He vowed he would join the barefoot friars, if he recovered."

"He would have made a stalwart mendicant. All

the women would have confessed to him."

"It is impossible to escape immortality," sighed Benilo.

"Obedience is holiness," replied the other.

After carefully reviewing the not inconsiderable list of names, and placing a cross against some of them, the monk returned the scroll to its owner.

When the Chamberlain spoke again, his voice trembled strangely.

"What of the Golden Chalice?"

"Offerimus tibi Domine, Calicem Salutaris," the monk quoted from the mass. "What differentiates Sacramental Wine from Malvasia?"

The Chamberlain pondered.

"Perhaps a degree or two of headiness?"

"Is it not rather a degree or two of holiness?" replied the monk with a strange gleam in his eyes.

"The Season claims its mercies."

"Can one quench a furnace with a parable?"

"The Holy Host may work a miracle."

"It is the concern of angels to see their sentences enforced."

"Sic itur ad astra," said the Chamberlain devoutly.

And like an echo it came from his visitor's lips:

"Sic itur ad astra!"

"We understand each other," Benilo spoke after a pause, arising from his chair. "But remember," he added with a look, which seemed to pierce his

interlocutor through and through. "What thou dost, monk, thou dost. If thy hand fail, I know thee not!"

Stepping to the panel, Benilo was about to touch the secret spring, when a thought arrested his hand.

"Thou hast seen my face," he turned to the monk. "It is but meet, that I see thine."

Without a word the monk removed his cowl. As he did so, Benilo stood rooted to the spot, as if a ghost had arisen from the stone floor before him.

"Madman!" he gasped. "You dare to show yourself in Rome?"

A strange light gleamed in the monk's eyes.

"I came in quest of the End of Time. Do you doubt the sincerity of my intent?"

For a moment they faced each other in silence, then the monk turned and vanished without another word through the panel which closed noiselessly behind him.

When Benilo found himself once more alone, all the elasticity of temper and mind seemed to have deserted him. All the colour had faded from his face, all the light seemed to have gone from his eyes. Thus he remained for a space, neither heeding his surroundings, nor the flight of time. At last he arose and, traversing the cabinet, made for a remote door and passed out. Whatever were his thoughts, no outward sign betrayed them, as with the suave and impenetrable mien of the born courtier, he entered the vast hall of audience.

A motley crowd of courtiers, officers, monks and foreign envoys, whose variegated costumes formed a dazzling kaleidoscope almost bewildering to the unaccustomed eye, met the Chamberlain's gaze.

The greater number of those present were recruited from the ranks of the Roman nobility, men whose spare, elegant figures formed a striking contrast to the huge giants of the German imperial guard. The mongrel and craven descendants of African, Syrian and Slavonian slaves, a strange jumble of races and types, with all the visible signs of their heterogeneous origin, stared with insolent wonder at the fair-haired sons of the North, who took their orders from no man, save the grandson of the mighty emperor Otto the Great, the vanquisher of the Magyars on the tremendous field of the Lech.

A strange medley of palace officials, appointed after the ruling code of the Eastern Empire, chamberlains, pages and grooms, masters of the outer court, masters of the inner court, masters of the robe, masters of the horse, seneschals, high stewards and eunuchs, in their sweeping citron and orange coloured gowns, lent a glowing enchantment to the scene.

No glaring lights marred the pervading softness of the atmosphere; all objects animate and inanimate seemed in complete harmony with each other. The entrance to the great hall of audience was flanked with two great pillars of Numidian marble, toned by

time to hues of richest orange. The hall itself was surrounded by a colonnade of the Corinthian order, whereon had been lavished exquisite carvings; in niches behind the columns stood statues in basalt, thrice the size of life. Enormous pillars of rose-coloured marble supported the roof, decorated in the fantastic Byzantine style; the floor, composed of serpentine, porphyry and Numidian marble, was a superb work of art. In the centre a fountain threw up sprays of perfumed water, its basin bordered with glistening shells from India and the Archipelago.

Passing slowly down the hall, Benilo paused here and there to exchange greetings with some individual among the numerous groups, who were conversing in hushed whispers on the event at this hour closest to their heart, the illness of King Otto III, in the cloisters of Monte Gargano in Apulia whither he had journeyed on a pilgrimage to the grottoes of the Archangel. Conflicting rumours were rife as to the course of the illness, and each seemed fearful of venturing a surmise, which might precipitate a crisis, fraught with direst consequences. The times and the Roman temper were uncertain.

The countenance of Archbishop Heribert of Cologne, Chancellor of the Empire, reflected grave apprehension, which was amply shared by his companions, Archbishop Willigis of Mentz, and Luitprand, Archbishop of Cremona, the Patriarch of Christendom, whose snow-white hair formed a

striking contrast to the dark and bronzed countenance of Count Benedict of Palestrina, and Pandulph of Capua, Lord of Spoleto and Beneventum, the lay-members of the group. The conversation, though held in whispered tones and inaudible to those moving on the edge of their circle, was yet animated and it would seem, that hope had but a small share in the surmises they ventured on what the days to come held in store for the Saxon dynasty.

Without paying further heed to the motley throng, which surged up and down the hall of audience, seemingly indifferent to the whispered comments upon himself as a mere man of pleasure, Benilo seated himself upon a couch at the western extremity of the hall. With the elaborate deliberation of a man who disdains being hurried by anything whatsoever, he took a piece of vellum from his doublet, on which from time to time he traced a few words. Assuming a reclining position, he appeared absorbed in deep study, seemingly unheedful of his surroundings. Yet a close observer might have remarked that the Chamberlain's gaze roamed unsteadily from one group to another, until some chance passer-by deflected its course and Benilo applied himself to his ostentatious task more studiously than before.

"What does the courtier in the parrot-frock?" Duke Bernhardt of Saxony, stout, burly, asthmatic,

addressed a tall, sallow individual, in a rose-coloured frock, who strutted by his side with the air of an inflated peacock.

John of Calabria gave a sigh.

"Alas! He writes poetry and swears by the ancient Gods!"

"By the ancient Gods!" puffed the duke, "a commendable habit! As for his poetry,—the bees sometimes deposit their honey in the mouth of a dead beast."

"And yet the Philistines solved not Samson's riddle," sighed the Greek.

"Ay! And the devil never ceases to cut wood for him, who wishes to keep the kettle boiling," spouted the duke with an irate look at his companion as they lost themselves among the throngs. Suddenly a marked hush, the abrupt cessation of the former all-pervading hum, caused Benilo to glance toward the entrance of the audience hall. As he did so, the vellum rolled from his nerveless hand upon the marble floor.

CHAPTER II

THE PAGEANT IN THE NAVONA

 he man, who had entered the hall of audience with the air of one to whom every nook and corner was familiar, looked what he was, a war-worn veteran, bronzed and hardened by the effect of many campaigns in many climes. Yet his robust frame and his physique betrayed but slight evidence of those fatigues and hardships which had been the habits of his life. Only a tinge of gray through the close-cropped hair, and now and then the listless look of one who has grown weary with campaigning, gave token that the prime had passed. In repose his look was stern and pensive, softening at moments into an expression of intense melancholy and gloom. A long black mantle, revealing traces of prolonged and hasty travel, covered his tall and stately form. Beneath it gleamed a dark suit of armour with the dull sheen of dust covered steel. His helmet, fashioned after a dragon with scales, wings, and fins of wrought brass, resembled the headgear of the fabled Vikings.

This personage was Margrave Eckhardt of Meissen, commander-in-chief of the German hosts, Great Warden of the Eastern March, and chief adviser of the imperial youth, who had been entrusted to his care by his mother, the glorious Empress Theophano, the deeply lamented consort of

Emperor Otto II of Saracenic renown.

The door through which he entered revealed a company of the imperial body-guard, stationed without, in gilt-mail tunics, armlets and greaves, their weapon the formidable mace, surmounted by a sickle-shaped halberd.

The deep hush, which had fallen upon the assembly on Eckhardt's entrance into the hall, had its significance. If the Romans were inclined to look with favour upon the youthful son of the Greek princess, in whose veins flowed the warm blood of the South, and whose sunny disposition boded little danger to their jealously guarded liberties, their sentiments toward the Saxon general had little in common with their evanescent enthusiasm over the "Wonder-child of the World." But if the Romans loved Eckhardt little, Eckhardt loved the Romans less, and he made no effort to conceal his contempt for the mongrel rabble, who, unable to govern themselves, chafed at every form of government and restraint.

Perhaps in the countenance of none of those assembled in the hall of audience was there reflected such intensity of surprise on beholding the great leader as there was in the face of the Grand Chamberlain, the olive tints of whose cheeks had faded to ashen hues. His trembling hands gripped the carved back of the nearest chair, while from behind the powerful frame of the Patricius Ziazo he gazed

upon the countenance of the Margrave.

The latter had approached the group of ecclesiastics, who formed the nucleus round the venerable Archbishop of Cremona.

"What tidings from the king?" queried the patriarch of Christendom.

Eckhardt knelt and kissed Luitprand's proffered hand.

"The Saint has worked a miracle. Within a fortnight Rome will once more greet the King of the Germans."

Sighs of relief and mutterings of gladness drowned the reply of the archbishop. He was seen to raise his hands in silent prayer, and the deep hush returned anew. Other groups pushed eagerly forward to learn the import of the tidings.

The voice of Eckhardt now sounded curt and distinct, as he addressed Archbishop Heribert of Cologne, Chancellor of the Holy Roman Empire.

"If the God to whom you pray or your patron-saint, has endowed you with the divine gift of persuasion,—use it now to prompt your king to leave this accursed land and to return beyond the Alps. Roman wiles and Roman fever had well-nigh claimed another victim. My resignation lies in the hands of the King. My mission here is ended. I place your sovereign in your hands. Keep him safe. I return to the Eastern March."

Exclamations of surprise, chiefly from the

German element, the Romans listening in sullen silence, rose round the commander, like a sullen squall.

Eckhardt waved them back with uplifted arm.

"The king requires my services no longer. He refuses to listen to my counsel! He despises his own country. His sun rises and sets in Rome. I no longer have his ear. His counsellors are Romans! The war is ended. My sword has grown rusty. Let another bear the burden!—I return to the Eastern March!"

During Eckhardt's speech, whose curtness barely cloaked the grief of the commander over a step, which he deemed irrevocable, the pallor in the features of the Grand Chamberlain had deepened and a strange light shone in his eyes, as, remote from the general's scrutiny, he watched and listened.

The German contingent, however, was not to be so easily reconciled to Eckhardt's declaration. Bernhardt, the Saxon duke, Duke Burkhardt of Suabia, Count Tassilo of Bavaria and Count Ludeger of the Palatinate united their protests against a step so fatal in its remotest consequences, with the result that the Margrave turned abruptly upon his heels, strode from the hall of audience, and, passing through the rank and file of the imperial guard, found himself on the crest of Mount Aventine.

Evening was falling. A solemn hush held enthralled the pulses of the universe. A dazzling glow of gold swept the western heavens, and the chimes of

the Angelus rang out from untold cloisters and convents. To southward, the towering summits of Soracté glowed in sunset gold. The dazzling sheen reflected from the marble city on the Palatine proved almost too blinding for Eckhardt's gaze, and with quick, determined step, he began his descent towards the city.

At the base of the hill his progress suffered a sudden check.

A procession, weird, strange and terrible, hymning dirge-like the words of some solemn chant, with the eternal refrain "Miserere! Miserere!" wound round the shores of the Tiber. Four files of masked, black spectres, their heads engulfed in black hoods, wooden crucifixes dangling from their necks, carrying torches of resin, from which escaped floods of reddish light, at times obscured by thick black smoke, marched solemnly behind a monk, whose features could but vaguely be discerned in the tawny glare of the funereal light. No phantom procession at midnight could have inspired the popular mind with a terror so great as did this brotherhood of Death, more terrifying than the later monks and ascetics of Zurbaran, who so paraded the frightfulness of nocturnal visions in the pure, unobscured light of the sun. In numbers there were approximately four hundred. Their superior, a tall, gaunt and terrible monk, escorted by his acolytes, held aloft a large black crucifix. A fanatic of the iron type, whose

austerity had won him a wide ascendency, the monk Cyprianus, his cowl drawn deeply over his face, strode before the brotherhood. The dense smoke of their torches, hanging motionless in the still air of high noon, soon obscured the monks from view, even before the last echoes of their sombre chant had died away.

Without a fixed purpose in his mind, save that of observing the temper of the populace, Eckhardt permitted himself to be swept along with the crowds. Idlers mostly and inquisitive gapers, they constituted the characteristic Roman mob, always swarming wherever there was anything to be seen, however trifling the cause and insignificant the attraction. They were those who, not choosing to work, lived by brawls and sedition, the descendants of that uproarious mob, which in the latter days of the empire filled the upper rows in theatre and circus, the descendants of the rabble, whose suffrage no Cæsar was too proud to court in the struggle against the free and freedom-loving remnants of the aristocracy.

But there were foreign elements which lent life and contrast to the picture, elements which in equal number and profusion no other city of the time, save Constantinople, could offer to the bewildered gaze of the spectator.

Moors from the Western Caliphate of Cordova, Saracens from the Sicilian conquest, mingled with

white-robed Bedouins from the desert; Greeks from the Morea, Byzantines, Epirotes, Albanians, Jews, Danes, Poles, Slavs and Magyars, Lombards, Burgundians and Franks, Sicilians, Neapolitans and Venetians, heightened by the contrast of speech, manner and garb the dazzling kaleidoscopic effect of the scene, while the powerful Northern veterans of the German king thrust their way with brutal contempt through the dregs of Romulus.

After having extricated himself from the motley throngs, Eckhardt, continuing his course to southward and following the Leonine wall, soon found himself in the barren solitudes of Trastevere. Here he slackened his pace, and, entering a cypress avenue, seated himself on a marble bench, a relic of antiquity, offering at once shade and repose.

Here he fell into meditation.

Three years had elapsed since the death of a young and beloved wife, who had gone from him after a brief but mysterious illness, baffling the skill of the physicians. In the ensuing solitude he had acquired grave habits of reflection. This day he was in a more thoughtful mood than common. This day more than ever, he felt the void which nothing on earth could fill. What availed his toils, his love of country, his endurance of hardships? What was he the better now, in that he had marched and watched and bled and twice conquered Rome for the empire? What was this ambition, leading him up the steepest

paths, by the brinks of fatal precipices? He scarcely knew now, it was so long ago. Had Ginevra lived, he would indeed have prized honour and renown and a name, that was on all men's lips. And Eckhardt fell to thinking of the bright days, when the very skies seemed fairer for her presence. Time, who heals all sorrows, had not alleviated his grief. At his urgent request he had been relieved of his Roman command. The very name of the city was odious to him since her death. Appointed to the office of Great Warden of the East and entrusted with the defence of the Eastern border lands against the ever-recurring invasions of Bulgarians and Magyars, the formidable name of the conqueror of Rome had in time faded to a mere memory.

Not so in the camp. Men said he bore a charmed existence, and indeed his counsels showed the forethought and caution of the skilled leader, while his personal conduct was remarkable for a reckless disregard of danger. It was observed, though, that a deep and abiding melancholy had taken possession of the once free and easy commander. Only under the pressure of imminent danger did he seem to brighten into his former self. At other times he was silent, preoccupied. But the Germans loved their leader. They discussed him by their watch-fires; they marvelled how one so ready on the field was so sparing with the wine cup, how the general who could stop to fill his helmet from the running stream

under a storm of arrows and javelins and drink composedly with a jest and a smile could be so backward at the revels.

In the year 996, Crescentius, the Senator of Rome raised the standards of revolt, expelled Gregory the Fifth and nominated a rival pontiff in the infamous John the Sixteenth. Otto, then a mere youth of sixteen summers, had summoned his hosts to the rescue of his friend, the rightful pontiff. Reluctantly, and only moved by the tears of the Empress Theophano, who placed the child king in his care and charge, Eckhardt had resumed the command of the invading army. Twice had he put down the rebellion of the Romans, reducing Crescentius to the state of a vassal, and meting out terrible punishment to the hapless usurper of the tiara. After recrossing the Alps, he had once more turned his attention to the bleak, sombre forests of the North, when the imperial youth was seized with an unconquerable desire to make Rome the capital of the empire. Neither prayers nor persuasions, neither the threats of the Saxon dukes nor the protests of the electors could shake Otto's indomitable will. Eckhardt was again recalled from the wilds of Poland to lead the German host across the Alps.

Meanwhile increasing rumours of the impending End of Time began to upheave and disturb the minds. A mystical trend of thought pervaded the world, and as the Millennium drew nearer and

nearer pilgrims of all ages and all stages began to journey Rome-ward, to obtain forgiveness for their sins, and to die within the pale of the Church. At first he resisted the strange malady of the age, which slowly but irresistibly attacked every order of society. But its morbid influences, seconded by the memory of his past happiness, revived during his last journey to Rome, at last threw Eckhardt headlong into the dark waves of monasticism.

During the present, to his mind, utterly purposeless expedition, it had seemed to Eckhardt that there was no other salvation for the loneliness in his heart, save that which beamed from the dismal gloom of the cloister. At other times a mighty terror of the great lonesomeness of monastic life seized him. The pulses of life began to throb strangely, surging as a great wave to his heart and threatening to precipitate him anew into the shifting scenes of the world. Yet neither mood endured.

Ginevra's image had engraved itself upon his heart in lines deep as those which the sculptors trace on ivory with tools reddened with fire. Vainly had he endeavoured to cloud its memory by occupying his mind with matters of state, for the love he felt for her, dead in her grave, inspired him with secret terror. Blindly he was groping through the labyrinth for a clue—It is hard to say: "Thy will be done."

Passing over the sharp, sudden stroke, so numbing to his senses at the time, that a long

interval had to elapse, ere he woke to its full agony; passing over the subsequent days of yearning, the nights of vain regret, the desolation which had laid waste his life,—Eckhardt pondered over the future. There was something ever wanting even to complete the dull torpor of that resignation, which philosophy inculcates and common sense enjoins. In vain he looked about for something on which to lean, for something which would lighten his existence. The future was cold and gray, and with spectral fingers the memories of the past seemed to point down the dull and cheerless way. He had lost himself in the labyrinth of life, since her guiding hand had left him, and now his soul was racked by conflicting emotions; the desire for the peace of a recluse, and the longing for such a life of action, as should temporarily drown the voices of anguish in his heart.

When he arose Rome was bathed in the crimson after glow of departing day. The Tiber presented an aspect of peculiar tranquillity. Hundreds of boats with many-coloured sails and fantastically decorated prows stretched along the banks. Barges decorated with streamers and flags were drawn up along the quays and wharfs. The massive gray ramparts of Castel San Angelo glowed in the rich colours of sunset, and high in the azure hung motionless the great standard, with the marble horses and the flaming torch.

Retracing his steps, Eckhardt soon found himself

in the heart of Rome. An almost endless stream of people, recruiting themselves from all clans and classes, flowed steadily through the ancient Via Sacra. Equally dense crowds enlivened the Appian Way and the adjoining thoroughfares, leading to the Forum. In the Navona, then enjoying the distinction of the fashionable promenade of the Roman nobility, the throngs were densest and a vast array of vehicles from the two-wheeled chariot to the Byzantine lectica thronged the aristocratic thoroughfare. Seemingly interminable processions divided the multitudes, and the sombre and funereal chants of pilgrims and penitents resounded on every side.

Pressing onward step for step, Eckhardt reached the arch of Titus; thence, leaving the fountain of Meta Sudans, and the vast ruins of the Flavian Amphitheatre to the right, he turned into the street leading to the Caelimontana Gate, known at this date by the name of Via di San Giovanni in Laterano. Here the human congestion was somewhat relieved. Some patrician chariots dashed up and down the broad causeway; graceful riders galloped along the gravelled road, while a motley crowd of pedestrians loitered leisurely along the sidewalks. Here a group of young nobles thronged round the chariot of some woman of rank; there, a grave, morose-looking scribe, an advocate or notary in the cloister-like habit of his profession, pushed his way through the crowd.

While slowly and aimlessly Eckhardt pursued his way through the shifting crowds, a sudden shout arose in the Navona. After a brief interval it was repeated, and soon a strange procession came into sight, which, as the German leader perceived, had caused the acclamation on the part of the people. In order to avoid the unwelcome stare of the Roman rabble, Eckhardt lowered his vizor, choosing his point of observation upon some crumbled fragment of antiquity, whence he might not only view the approaching pageant, but at the same time survey his surroundings. On one side were the thronged and thickly built piles of the ancient city. On the opposite towered the Janiculan hill with its solitary palaces and immense gardens. The westering sun illumined the distant magnificence of the Vatican and suffered the gaze to expand even to the remote swell of the Apennines.

The procession, which slowly wound its way towards the point where Eckhardt had taken his station, consisted of some twelve chariots, drawn by snow-white steeds, which chafed at the bit, reared on their haunches, and otherwise betrayed their reluctance to obey the hands which gripped the rein —the hands of giant Africans in gaudy, fantastic livery. The inmates of these chariots consisted of groups of young women in the flower of beauty and youth, whose scant airy garments gave them the appearance of wood-nymphs, playing on quaintly

shaped lyres. While renewed shouts of applause greeted the procession of the New Vestals, as they styled themselves in defiance of the trade they plied, and the gaze of the thousands was riveted upon them,—a new commotion arose in the Navona. A shout of terror went up, the crowds swayed backward, spread out and then were seen to scatter on both sides, revealing a chariot, harnessed to a couple of fiery Berber steeds, which, having taken fright, refused to obey the driver's grip and dashed down the populous thoroughfare. With every moment the speed of the frightened animals increased, and no hand was stretched forth from all those thousands to check their mad career. The driver, a Nubian in fantastic livery, had in the frantic effort to stop their onward rush, been thrown from his seat, striking his head against a curb-stone, where he lay dazed. Here some were fleeing, others stood gaping on the steps of houses. Still others, with a cry of warning followed in the wake of the fleeting steeds. Adding to the dismay of the lonely occupant of the chariot, a woman, magnificently arrayed in a transparent garb of black gossamer-web, embroidered with silver stars, the reins were dragging on the ground. Certain death seemed to stare her in the face. Though apprehensive of immediate destruction she disdained to appeal for assistance, courting death rather than owe her life to the despised mongrel-rabble of Rome. Despite the

terrific speed of the animals she managed to retain over her face the veil of black gauze, which completely enshrouded her, though it revealed rather than concealed the magnificent lines of her body. Eckhardt fixed his straining gaze upon the chariot, as it approached, but the sun, whose flaming disk just then touched the horizon, blinded him to a degree which made it impossible for him to discern the features of a face supremely fair.

For a moment it seemed as if the frightened steeds were about to dash into an adjoining thoroughfare.

Breathless and spellbound the thousands stared, yet there was none to risk his life in the hazardous effort of stopping the blind onrush of the maddened steeds. Suddenly they changed their course towards the point where, hemmed in by the densely congested throngs, Eckhardt stood. Snatching the cloak from his shoulders, the Margrave dashed through the living wall of humanity and leaped fearlessly in the very path of the snorting, onrushing steeds. With a dexterous movement he flung the dark cover over their heads, escaping instantaneous death only by leaping quickly to one side. Then dashing at the bits he succeeded, alone and unaided, in stopping the terrified animals, though dragged along for a considerable space. A great shout of applause went up from the throats of those who had not moved a hand to prevent the impending disaster. Unmindful

of this popular outburst, Eckhardt held the frightened steeds, which trembled in every muscle and gave forth ominous snorts, until the driver staggered along. Half dazed from his fall and bleeding profusely from a gash in the forehead, the Nubian, almost frightened out of his wits, seized the lines and resumed his seat. The steeds, knowing the accustomed hand, gradually quieted down.

At the moment, when Eckhardt turned, to gain a glimpse of the occupant of the chariot, a shriek close by caused him to turn his head. The procession of the New Vestals had come to a sudden stand-still, owing to the blocking of the thoroughfare, through which the runaway steeds had dashed, the clearing behind them having been quickly filled up with a human wall. During this brief pause some individual, the heraldry of whose armour denoted him a Roman baron, had pounced upon one of the chariots and seized one of its scantily clad occupants. The girl had uttered a shriek of dismay and was struggling to free herself from the ruffian's clutches, while her companions vainly remonstrated with her assailant. To hear the shriek, to turn, to recognize the cause, and to pounce upon the Roman, were acts almost of the same moment to Eckhardt. Clutching the girl's assailant by the throat, without knowing in whose defence he was entering the contest, he thundered in accents of such unmistakable authority, as to give him little doubt of the alternative: "Let her go!"

With a terrible oath, Gian Vitelozzo released his victim, who quickly remounted her chariot, and turned upon his assailant.

"Who in the name of the foul fiend are you, to interfere with my pleasure?" he roared, almost beside himself with rage as he perceived his prey escaping his grasp.

Through his closed visor, Eckhardt regarded the noblemen with a contempt which the latter instinctively felt, for he paled even ere his antagonist spoke. Then approaching the baron, Eckhardt whispered one word into his ear. Vitelozzo's cheeks turned to leaden hues and, trembling like a whipped cur, he slunk away. The crowds, upon witnessing the noble's dismay, broke into loud cheers, some even went so far as to kiss the hem of Eckhardt's mantle.

Shaking himself free of the despised rabble whose numbers had been a hundred times sufficient to snatch his prey from Vitelozzo and his entire clan, Eckhardt continued upon his way, wondering whom he had saved from certain death, and whom, as he thought, from dishonour. The procession of the New Vestals had disappeared in the haze of the distance. Of the chariot and its mysterious inmate not a trace was to be seen. Without heeding the comments upon his bravery, unconscious that two eyes had followed his every step, since he left the imperial palace, Eckhardt slowly proceeded upon his way, until he found himself at the base of the Palatine.

CHAPTER III
ON THE PALATINE

 he moon was rising over the distant Alban hills, when Eckhardt began his ascent. Now and then, he paused on a spot, which offered a particularly striking view of the city, reposing in the fading light of day. No sound broke the solemn stillness, save the tolling of convent-bells on remote Aventine, or the sombre chant of pilgrims before some secluded shrine.

Like the ghost of her former self, Rome seemed to stretch interminably into the ever deepening purple haze.

Colossal watch-towers, four-cornered, massive, with twin-like steeples and crenelated ramparts, dominated the view on all sides. Their shadows fell afar from one to another. Here and there, conspicuous among the houses, loomed up the wondrous structures of old Rome, sometimes singly, sometimes in thickly set groups. Beyond the walls the aqueducts pursued their long and sinuous path-ways through the Campagna. The distant Alban hills

began to shroud their undulating summits in the slowly rising mists of evening.

What a stupendous desolation time had wrought!

As he slowly proceeded up the hill, Eckhardt beheld the Palatine's enormous structures crumbled to ruin. The high-spanned vaulted arches and partitions still rested on their firm foundations of Tophus stone, their ruined roofs supported by massive pillars, broken, pierced and creviced. Resplendent in the last glow of departing day towered high the imperial palaces of Augustus, Tiberius and Domitian. The Septizonium of Alexander Severus, still well preserved in its seven stories, had been converted into a feudal stronghold by Alberic, chief of the Optimates, while Caligula's great piles of stone rose high and dominating in the evening air. The Jovian temples were still standing close to the famous tomb of Romulus, but the old triumphal course was obstructed with filth. In crescent shape here and there a portico was visible, shadeless and long deprived of roofing. High towered the Coliseum's stately ruins; Circus and Stadium were overgrown with bushes; of the baths of Diocletian and Caracalla, once magnificent and imposing, only ruins remained. Crumbling, weatherbeaten masonry confronted the eye on every turn. Endless seemed the tangled maze of crooked lanes, among which loomed a temple-gable green with moss or a solitary column;

an architrave resting on marble columns, looked down upon the huts of poverty. Nero's golden palace and the Basilica of Maxentius lay in ruins; but in the ancient Forum temples were still standing, their slender columns pointing to the skies with their ornate Corinthian capitals.

The Rome of the Millennium was indeed but the phantom of her own past. On all sides the eye was struck with inexorable decay. Where once triumphal arches, proud, erect, witnessed pomp and power, crumbling piles alone recorded the memory of a glorious past. Great fragments strewed the virgin-soil of the Via Sacra from the splendid arch of Constantine to the Capitol. The Roman barons had turned the old Roman buildings into castles. The Palatine and the adjoining Coelian hill were now lorded over by the powerful house of the Pierleoni. Crescentius, the Senator of Rome, claimed Pompey's theatre and the Mausoleum of the Emperor Hadrian, Castel San Angelo; in the waste fields of Campo Marzio the Cavalli had seized the Mausoleum of Augustus; the Aventine was claimed by the Romani and Stefaneschi; the Stadium of Domitian by the Massimi. In the Fora of Trajan and Nerva the Conti had ensconced themselves; the theatre of Marcellus was held by the Caetani and the Guidi ruled in the tomb of Metellus.

There was an inexpressible charm in the sadness of this desolation which chimed strangely with

Eckhardt's own life, now but a memory of its former self.

It was a wonderful night. Scarce a breath of air stirred the dying leaves. The vault of the sky was unobscured, arching deep-blue over the higher rising moon. To southward the beacon fires from the Tor di Vergera blazed like a red star low down in the horizon. Wrapt in deep thought, Eckhardt followed the narrow road, winding his way through a wilderness of broken arches and fallen porticoes, through a region studded with convents, cloisters and the ruins of antiquity. Gray mists began to rise over housetops and vineyards, through which at intervals the Tiber gleamed like a yellow serpent in the moonlight. Near the Ripetta long spirals of dark smoke curled up to the azure night-sky and the moon cast a glory on the colossal statue of the Archangel Michael, where it stood on the gloomy keep of Castel San Angelo. The rising night-wind rustled in organ-tones among the cypress trees; the fountains murmured, and in a silvery haze the moon hung over the slumbering city.

Slowly Eckhardt continued the ascent of the Palatine and he had scarcely reached the summit, when out of the ruins there rose a shadow, and he found himself face to face with Benilo, the Grand Chamberlain.

"By St. Peter and St. Paul and all the saints I can remember!" exclaimed the latter, "is it Eckhardt, the

Margrave, or his ghost? But no matter which,—no man more welcome!"

"I am but myself," replied Eckhardt, as he grasped the proffered hand.

"Little did I hope to meet you here," Benilo continued, regarding Eckhardt intently. "I thought you far away among the heathen Poles."

"I hate the Romans so heartily, that now and then I love to remind them of my presence."

"Ay! Like Timon of Athens, you would bequeath to them your last fig-tree, that they may hang themselves from its branches," Benilo replied with a smile.

"I should require a large orchard. Is Rome at peace?"

"The burghers wrangle about goats' wool, the monks gamble for a human soul, and the devil stands by and watches the game," replied Benilo.

"Have you surprised any strange rumours during my absence?" questioned Eckhardt guardedly.

"They say much or little, as you will," came the enigmatic reply. "I have heard your name from the lips of one, who seldom speaks, save to ill purpose."

Eckhardt nodded with a grim smile, while he fixed his eyes on his companion. Slowly they lost themselves in the wilderness of crumbling arches and porticoes.

At last Eckhardt spoke, a strange mixture of mirth and irony in his tones.

"But your own presence among these ruins? Has Benilo, the Grand Chamberlain become a recluse, dwelling among flitter mice and jack-daws?"

"I have not sipped from the fount of the mystics," Benilo replied. "But often at the hour of dusk I seek the solitudes of the Palatine, which chime so strangely with my weird fancies. Here I may roam at will and without restraint,—here I may revel in the desolation, enlivened only now and then by the shrill tones of a shepherd's pipe; here I may ramble undisturbed among the ruins of antiquity, pondering over the ancient greatness of Rome, pondering over the mighty that have fallen.—I have just completed an Ode—all but the final stanzas. It is to greet Otto upon his return. The Archbishop of Cologne announced the welcome tidings of the king's convalescence—truly, a miracle of the saint!"

Eckhardt had listened attentively, then he remarked drily:

"Let each man take his own wisdom and see whither it will lead him. Otto is still pursuing a mocking phantom under the ruins of crumbled empires, but to find the bleached bones of some long-forgotten Cæsar! Truly, a worthy cause, in which to brave the danger of Alpine snows and avalanches—and the fever of the Maremmas."

"We both try to serve the King—each in his way," Benilo replied, contritely.

Eckhardt extended his hand.

"You are a poet and a philosopher. I am a soldier and a German.—I have wronged you in thought—forgive and forget!"

Benilo readily placed his hand in that of his companion. After a pause Eckhardt continued:

"My business in Rome touches neither emperor nor pope. Once, I too, wooed the fair Siren Rome. But the Siren proved a Vampire.—Rome is a enamel house.—Her caress is Death."

There was a brief silence.

"'Tis three years since last we strode these walks," Eckhardt spoke again. "What changes time has wrought!"

"Have the dead brought you too back to Rome?" queried Benilo with averted gaze.

"Even so," Eckhardt replied, as he strode by Benilo's side. "The dead! Soon I too shall exchange the garb of the world for that of the cloister."

The Chamberlain stared aghast at his companion.

"You are not serious?" he stammered, with well-feigned surprise.

Eckhardt nodded.

"The past is known to you!" he replied with a heavy sigh. "Since she has gone from me to the dark beyond, I have striven for peace and oblivion in every form,—in the turmoil of battle, before the shrines of the Saints.—In vain! I have striven to tame this wild passion for one dead and in her grave. But

this love cannot be strangled as a lion is strangled, and the skill of the mightiest athlete avails nothing in such a struggle. The point of the arrow has remained in the wound. Madness, to wander for ever about a grave, to think eternally, fatefully of one who cannot see you, cannot hear you, one who has left earth in all the beauty and splendour of youth."

A pause ensued, during which neither spoke.

They walked for some time in silence among the gigantic ruins of the Palatine. Like an alabaster lamp the moon hung in the luminous vault of heaven. How peacefully fair beneath the star-sprinkled violet sky was this deserted region, bordered afar by tall, spectral cypress-trees whose dark outlines were clearly defined against the mellow luminance of the ether. At last Eckhardt and his companion seated themselves on the ruins of a shattered portico, which had once formed the entrance to a temple of Saturnus.

Each seemed to be occupied with his own thoughts, when Eckhardt raised his head and gazed inquiringly at his companion, who had likewise assumed a listening attitude. Through the limpid air of the autumnal night, like faint echoes from dream-land, there came softly vibrating harp-tones, mingled with the clash of tinkling cymbals, borne aloft from distant groves. Faint ringing chimes, as of silver bells, succeeded these broken harmonies, followed by another clash of cymbals, stormily persistent, then

dying away on the evanescent breezes.

A strange, stifling sensation oppressed Eckhardt's heart, as he listened to these bells. They seemed to remind him of things which had long passed out of his life, the peaceful village-chimes in his far-away Saxon land, the brief dream of the happy days now for ever gone. But hark! had he not heard these sounds before? Had they not caressed his ears on the night, when accompanying the king from Aix-la-Chapelle to Merséburg, they passed the fateful Hoerselberg in Thuringia?

Eckhardt made the sign of the cross, but the question rising to his lips was anticipated by Benilo, who pointed towards a remote region of the Aventine, just as the peals of the chiming bells, softened by distance into indistinct tremulous harmonies, and the clarion clearness of the cymbals again smote the stillness with their strangely luring clangour.

"Yonder lies the palace of Theodora," Benilo remarked indifferently.

Eckhardt listened with a strange sensation.

He remembered the pageant he had witnessed in the Navona, the pageant, from whose more minute contemplation he had been drawn by the incident with Gian Vitelozzo.

"Who is the woman?" he questioned with some show of interest.

"Regarding that matter there is considerable

speculation," replied Benilo.

"Have you any theory of your own?"

The Chamberlain shrugged his shoulders.

"Heard you ever of a remote descendant of Marozia, still living in Italy?"

"I thought they had all been strangled long ago."

"But if there were one, deem you, that the harlot-blood which flowed in the veins of her mother and all the women of her house would be sanctified by time, a damp convent-cell, and a rosary?"

"I know nothing of a surviving limb of that lightning-blasted trunk."

"Did not the direct line of Marozia end with John XI, whom she succeeded in placing in the chair of St. Peter, ere she herself was banished to a convent, where she died?" questioned Benilo.

"So it is reported! And this woman's name is?"

"Theodora!"

"You know her?"

Benilo met Eckhardt's gaze unflinchingly.

"I have visited her circle," he replied indifferently.

Eckhardt nodded. He understood.

Dexterously changing the subject Benilo continued after a pause.

"If you had but some heart-felt passion, to relieve your melancholy; if you could but love somebody or something," he spoke sympathetically. "Truly, it was never destined for the glorious career

of Eckhardt to end behind the bleak walls of a cloister."

Eckhardt bowed his head.

"Philosophy is useless. Strange ailments require strange cures."

For some time they gazed in silence into the moonlit night. Around them towered colossal relics of ancient grandeur, shattered walls, naked porticoes. Wildernesses of broken arches stretched interminably into the bluish haze, amidst woods and wild vegetation, which had arisen as if to reassert their ancient possessions of the deserted site.

At last Eckhardt spoke, hesitatingly at first, as one testing his ground, gradually with firmer purpose, which seemed to go straight to the heart of his companion.

"There is much about Ginevra's sudden death that puzzles me, a mystery which I have in vain endeavoured to fathom. The facts are known to you, I can pass them over, dark as everything seems to me at this very moment. So quickly, so mysteriously did she pass out of my life, that I could not, would not trust the testimony of my senses. I left the house on the Caelian hill on that fateful night, and though I felt as if my eyes were bursting from my head, they did not shed a single tear. Where I went, or what I did, I could not tell. I walked about, as one benumbed, dazed, as it sometimes happens, when the cleaving stroke of an iron mace falls upon one's

helmet, deafening and blinding. This I remember—I passed the bridge near the tower of Nona and, ascending the Borgo, made for the gate of San Sebastian. The monks of Della Regola soon appeared, walking two by two, accompanied by a train of acolytes, chanting the Miserere, and bearing the coffin covered with a large pall of black velvet."

Eckhardt paused, drawing a deep breath. Then he continued, slowly:

"All this did not rouse me from the lethargy which had benumbed my senses. Only the one thought possessed me: Since we had been severed in life, in death at least we could be united. We were both journeying to the same far-off land, and the same tomb would give us repose together. I followed the monks with a triumphant but gloomy joy, feeling myself already transported beyond the barriers of life. Ponte Sisto and Trastevere passed, we entered San Pancrazio."

There was another pause, Benilo listening intently.

"The body placed in the chapel, prior to the performance of the last rites," Eckhardt continued, "I hurried away from the place and wandered all night round the streets like a madman, ready to seek my own destruction. But the hand of Providence withheld me from the crime. I cannot describe what I suffered; the agony, the despair, that wrung my inmost heart. I could no longer support a life that

seemed blighted with the curse of heaven, and I formed the wildest plans, the maddest resolutions in my whirling brain. For a strange, terrible thought had suddenly come over me. I could not believe that Ginevra was dead. And the longer I pondered, the greater became my anxiety and fear. Late in the night I returned to the chapel. I knelt in the shadow of the vaulted arches, leaning against the wall, while the monks chanted the Requiem. I heard the 'Requiescat in Pace,' I saw them leave the chapel, but I remained alone in the darkness, for there was no lamp save the lamp of the Virgin. At this moment a bell tolled. The sacristan who was making the rounds through the church, preparatory to closing, passed by me. He saw me, without recognizing who I was, and said: 'I close the doors.' 'I shall remain,' I answered. He regarded me fixedly, then said: 'You are bold! I will leave the door ajar—stay, if you will!' And without speaking another word he was out. I paid little heed to him, though his words had strangely stirred me. What did he mean? After a few moments my reasoning subsided, but my determination grew with my fear. Everything being still as the grave, I approached the coffin, cold sweat upon my brow. Removing the pall which covered it, I drew my dagger which was strong and sharp, intending to force open the lid, when suddenly I felt a stinging, benumbing pain on my head, as from the blow of a cudgel. How long I lay unconscious, I know not.

When after some days I woke from the swoon, the monks had raised a heavy stone over Ginevra's grave, during the night of my delirium. I left Rome, as I thought, for ever. But strange misgivings began to haunt my sleep and my waking hours. Why had they not permitted me to see once more the face I had so dearly loved, ere they fastened down for ever the lid of the coffin? 'Tis true, they contended that the ravages of the fever to which she had succumbed had precipitated the decomposition of her body. Still—the more I ponder over her death, the more restless grows my soul. Thus I returned to Rome, even against my own wish and will. I will not tarry long. Perchance some light may beam on the mystery which has terrified my dreams, from a source, least expected, though so far I have in vain sought for the monk who conducted the last rites, and whose eyes saw what was denied to mine."

There was a dead silence, which lasted for a space, until it grew almost painful in its intensity. At last Benilo spoke.

"To return to the night of her interment. Was there no one near you, to dispel those dread phantoms which maddened your brain?"

"I had suffered no one to remain. I wished to be alone with my grief."

"But whence the blow?"

"The masons had wrenched away an iron bar, in walling up the old entrance. Had the height been

greater, I would not be here to tell the tale."

Benilo drew a deep breath. He was ghastly pale.

"But your purpose in Rome?"

"I will find the monk who conducted the last rites—I will have speech with Nilus, the hermit. If all else fails, the cloister still remains."

"Let me entreat you not to hasten the irrevocable step. Neither your king nor your country can spare their illustrious leader."

"Otto has made his peace with Rome. He has no further need of me," Eckhardt replied with bitterness. "But this I promise. I shall do nothing, until I have had speech with the holy hermit of Gaëta. Whatever he shall enjoin, thereby will I abide. I shall do nothing hastily, or ill-advised."

They continued for a time in silence, each wrapt in his own thoughts. Without one ray of light beaming on his course, Eckhardt beheld a thousand vague and shadowy images passing before his eyes. That subterranean love, so long crouched at his soul's stairway, had climbed a few steps higher, guided by some errant gleam of hope. The weight of the impossible pressed no longer so heavily upon him, since he had lightened his burden by the long withheld confession. The vertigo of fatality had seized him. By a succession of irregular and terrible events he believed himself hurried towards the end of his goal. A mighty wave had lifted him up and bore him onward.

"Whither?"

From the distance, borne aloft on the wings of the night-wind, came faintly the chant of pilgrims from secluded shrines on the roadway. Eckhardt's mind was made up. He would seek Nilus, the hermit. Perchance he would point out to him the road to peace and set at rest the dread misgivings, which tortured him beyond endurance. This boon obtained, what mattered all else? The End of Time was nigh. It would solve all mysteries which the heart yearned to know.

And while Benilo seemed to muse in silence over the strange tale which his companion had poured into his ear, the latter weighed a resolve which he dared not even breathe, much less confide to human ear. Truly, the task required of Nilus was great.

At last Eckhardt and Benilo parted for the night. Eckhardt went his way, pondering, and wondering what the morrow would bring, and Benilo returned among the ruins of the Palatine, where he remained seated for a time, staring up at the starry night-sky, as if it contained the solution of all that was dark and inscrutable in man's existence.

CHAPTER IV

THE WANTON COURT OF THEODORA



strange restlessness had seized the Chamberlain, after his meeting with the German commander. The moon illumined the desolate region with her white beams, dividing the silent avenues into double edged lines of silvery white, and bluish shadows. The nocturnal day with its subdued tints disguised and mantled the desolation. The mutilated columns, the roofs, crumbled beneath the torrents and thunders of centuries, were less conspicuous than when seen in the clear, merciless light of the sun. The lost parts were completed by the half tints of shadows; only here and there a brusque beam of light marked the spot, where a whole edifice had crumbled away. The silent genii of Night seemed to have repaired the ancient city to some representation of fantastic life.

As he hurried along the slopes of the hill, Benilo fancied at times that he beheld vague forms, lurking in the shadows; but they seemed to vanish the moment he approached. Low whisperings, an undefined hum, floated through the silence. First he attributed the noises to a fluttering in his ears, to the sighing of the night-wind or to the flight of some snake or lizard through the nettles. In nature all things live, even death; all things make themselves heard, even silence. Never before had Benilo felt

such an involuntary terror. Once or twice he precipitately changed his course, hurrying down some narrow lane, between desolate looking rows of houses, low and ill-favoured, whose inmates recruited themselves from the lowest types of the mongrel population of Rome.

At the Agrippina below the bridge of Nero he paused and gave a sigh of relief. The phantoms seemed to have vanished. No breath of life broke the stillness. As on a second Olympus the marble palaces of the Cæsars towered on the summit of the Capitoline hill, glistening white in the ghostly moonlight. Below, the Tiber sent his sluggish waves down toward Ostia, rocking the fleet of numberless boats and barges which swung lazily at their moorings.

Benilo found himself in a quarter of Rome which had been abandoned for centuries. Ruins of temples and porticoes were strewn in the waste which he traversed. Here at least he could breathe more freely. No one was likely to surprise his presence in these solitudes. The superstition of the age prevented the Romans from frequenting the vale between Mounts Aventine and Testaccio after dark, for it was believed to be the abode of evil spirits.

As the Chamberlain made his way through the wilderness of fallen columns, shattered porticoes, and tangles of myrrh and acanthus, the faint clash of cymbals, like the echo of some distant bacchanalia,

fell upon his ear. A strange fitful melody, rising and falling with weird thrilling cadence, was borne upon the perfumed breezes.

He had not advanced very far, when through an avenue of tall spectral cypress trees he emerged upon a smooth and level lawn, shut in by black groups of cedar, through the entwined branches of which peeped the silver moon.

Traversing a broad marble terrace, garlanded with a golden wealth of orange trees and odorous oleanders, Benilo approached a lofty building, surrounded at some distance by a wall of the height of half-grown palms. A great gate stood ajar, which appeared to be closely guarded. Leaning against one of the massive pillars which supported it, stood an African of giant stature, in scarlet tunic and white turban, who, turning his gleaming eyeballs on Benilo, nodded by way of salutation. Entering the forbidden grounds, the Chamberlain found himself in a spacious garden which he traversed with quick, elastic step, as one familiar with the locality.

As Benilo advanced under the leafy branches, swaying in melancholy relief against the blue-green sky, the sight of thousands of coloured lamps hanging in long festoons from tree to tree first caused him to start and to look about. A few moments later he was walking between quaintly clipped laurel and yew-bushes, which bordered the great avenue starred with semi-circular lights, where

bronze and marble statues held torches and braziers of flame.

Sounds of joy and merry-making fell upon his ear, causing a frown, like a black shadow, to flit over his face, deepening by stages into ill-repressed rage. In whichever manner the dark prophecies concerning the Millennium may have affected the Romans and the world at large, it was quite evident they disturbed not the merry circle assembled in the great hall beyond.

At last Benilo found himself at the entrance of a vast circular hall. The picture which unfolded itself to his gaze was like a fairy fantasy. Gilded doors led in every direction into vast corridors, ending in a peri-style supported by pillars. These magnificent oval halls admitted neither the light of day nor the season of the year. The large central hall, at the threshold of which Benilo stood, reviewing the spectacle before him, had no windows. Silver candelabra, perpetually burning behind transparent curtains of sea-green gauze diffused a jewel-like radiance.

And here, in the drowsy warmth, lounging on divans of velvet, their feet sunk in costly Indian and Persian carpets, drinking, gossiping, and occasionally bursting into fitful snatches of song, revelled a company of distinguished men, richly clad, representatives of the most exclusive Roman society of the time. They seemed bent upon no other

purpose save to enjoy the pleasure of the immediate hour. Africans in fantastic attire carried aloft flagons and goblets, whose crystalline sheen reflected the crimson glow of the spicy Cyprian.

Benilo's arrival had not been noticed. In the shadow of the entrance he viewed the brilliant picture with its changing tints, its flash of colour, its glint of gold, the enchanting women, who laughingly gossipped and chatted with their guests, freed from the least restraint in dress or manner, thus adding the last spark to the fire of the purple Chianti. But as he gazed round the circle, the shade of displeasure deepened in Benilo's countenance.'

Bembo, the most renowned wit in the seven-hilled city, had just recited one of his newest and most poignant epigrams, sparing neither emperor nor pope, and had been rewarded by the loud applause of his not too critical audience and a smile from the Siren, who, in the absence of the hostess, seemed to preside over that merry circle. With her neck and shoulders half veiled in transparent gauze, revealing rather than concealing the soft, undulating lines of her supple body and arms, her magnificent black hair knotted up at the back of her head and wreathed with ivy, Roxané smiled radiantly from the seat of honour, which she had usurped, the object of mad desire of many a one present, of eager admiration to all. A number of attendants moved quickly and noiselessly about the spacious hall, decorated with

palms and other tropical plants, while among the revellers the conversation grew more lively every moment.

In the shadow of the great door Benilo paused and listened.

"Where is the Queen of the Groves?" Roffredo, a dissolute youth, questioned his neighbour, who divided his attention between the fair nymph by his side and the goblet which trembled in his hands.

"Silence!" replied the personage to whom the young noble had addressed himself, with a meaning glance.

Roffredo and the girl by his side glanced in the direction indicated by the speaker.

"Benilo," replied the Patrician. "Is he responsible for Theodora's absence?"

Oliverotto uttered a coarse laugh.

Then he added with a meaning glance:

"I will enlighten you at some other time. But is it true that you have rescued some errant damsel from Vitelozzo's clutches? Why do you not gladden our eyes with so chaste a morsel?"

Roffredo shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows, whether it was the vulture's first visit to the dove's nest?" he replied with a disgusting smile. "'Tis not a matter of much consequence."

Benilo heard the lie and the empty boast. He hated the prating youth for reasons of his own, but cared not to interfere at this stage, unconscious that

his presence had been remarked.

"Is she fair?" questioned the girl by Roffredo's side.

"Some might call her so," replied the latter.

The girl pouted and raised the goblet to her lips.

"Reveal her name to us!" croaked Bembo, who, though at some distance, had heard every word of the discourse. "And I will forthwith dedicate to her five and twenty stanzas on her virtue!"

"Who spoke the fatal word?" laughed Roxané, who presided over the circle. "What is amusing you so much, you ancient wine-cask?" She then turned to the poet, whose rather prosaic circumference well justified the epithet.

"The old theme—women!" croaked Bembo good-humouredly.

"Forget it!" shouted Roffredo, draining his goblet. "Rather than listen to your tirades, they would grasp the red hot hand of the devil."

"Ah! We live in a sorry age and it behooves us to think of the end," Roxané sighed with a mock air of contrition, which called forth a general outburst of mirth.

"You are the very one to ponder over the most convenient mode of exit into the beyond," sneered the Lord of Gravina.

"What have we here?" rasped Bembo. "Who dares to speak of death in this assembly?"

"Nay, we would rather postpone the option till it

finds us face to face with that villainous concoction you served us, to make us forget your more villainous poetry," shouted Oliverotto, hobbling across the hall and slapping the poet on the back. "I knew not that Roman soil produced so vile vintage!"

"'Twas Lacrymae Christi," remonstrated Bembo. "Would you have Ambrosia with every epigram on your vileness?"

"Nay, it was Satan's own brew," shrieked the baron, his voice strident as that of a cat, which has swallowed a fish bone.

And Oliverotto clinked his goblet and cast amorous glances right and left out of small watery eyes.

Bembo regarded him contemptuously.

"By the Cross! You are touched up and painted like a wench! Everything about you is false, even to your wit! Beware, fair Roxané,—he is ogling you as a bullfrog does the stars!"

At this stage an intermezzo interrupted the light, bantering tone of conversation. A curtain in the background parted. A bevy of black haired girls entered the hall, dressed in airy gowns, which revealed every line, every motion of their bodies. They encircled the guests in a mad whirl, inclining themselves first to one, then to the other. They were led by one, garbed as Diana, with the crescent moon upon her forehead, her black hair streaming about the whiteness of her statuesque body like dark sea-

waves caressing marble cliffs. Taking advantage of this stage of the entertainment Benilo crossed the vast hall unnoticed and sat apart from the revellers in gloomy silence, listening with ill-concealed annoyance to the shouts of laughter and the clatter of irritating tongues. The characteristic wantonness of his features had at this moment given place to a look of weariness and suffering, a seemingly unaccustomed expression; it was a look of longing, the craving of a passion unsatisfied, a hope beyond his hope. Many envied him for his fame and profligacy, others read in his face the stamp of sullen cruelty, which vented itself wherever resistance seemed useless; but there was none to sound his present mood.

Benilo had not been at his chosen spot very long, when some one touched him on the shoulder. Looking up, he found himself face to face with an individual, wrapt in a long mantle, the colour of which was a curious mixture of purple and brown. His face was shaded by a conical hat, a quaint combination of Byzantine helmet and Norse head-gear, being provided with a straight, sloping brim, which made it impossible to scrutinize his features. This personage was Hezilo, a wandering minstrel seemingly hailing from nowhere. At least no one had penetrated the mystery which enshrouded him.

"Are you alone insensible to the charms of these?" And Benilo's interlocutor pointed to the

whirling groups.

"I was thinking of one who is absent," Benilo replied, relapsing into his former listless attitude.

"Why not pluck the flowers that grow in your path, waiting but your will and pleasure?"

Benilo clenched his hands till the nails were buried in the flesh.

"Have you ever heard of an Eastern drug, which mirrors Paradise before your senses?"

Hezilo shook his head. "What of it?"

"He who becomes its victim is doomed irretrievably. While under its baleful spell, he is happy. Deprive him of it and the horrors of hell are upon him. No rest! No peace! And like the fiend addicted to the drug is the thrice accursed wretch who loves Theodora."

Hezilo regarded the Chamberlain strangely.

"Benilo deploring the inconstancy of woman," he said with noiseless laugh. Then, beckoning to one of the attendants, he took from the salver thus offered to him a goblet, which he filled with the dark crimson wine.

"Drink and forget," he cried. "You will find it even better than your Eastern drug."

Benilo shook his head and pushed away the proffered wine.

"Your advice comes too late!"

For a moment neither spoke. Benilo, busied with his own thoughts, sat listening to the boisterous

clamour of the revellers, while the harper's gaze rested unseen upon him.

After a pause he broke the silence.

"How chanced it," he said, placing his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder, "that Benilo, who has broken all ten commandments and, withal, hearts untold, Benilo, who could have at his feet every woman in Rome, became woman's prey, her abject slave? That he is grovelling in the dust, where he might be lord and master? That he whines and whimpers, where he should command?"

Benilo turned fiercely upon his interlocutor.

"Who dares say that I whine and whimper and grovel at her feet? Fools all! On a mountain pass the trip is easier down than up! Know you what it means to love a woman with mad consuming passion, but to be cast aside for some blatant ass, to catch a few crumbs of favour tossed in one's face? Men like that rhyming zebra Bembo, who sings of love, which he has never felt."

"Still you have not answered my question," said the harper with quiet persistence. "Why are you the slave where you should be the master? Theodora is whimsical, heartless, cruel; still she is a woman."

"She is a devil, a heartless beautiful devil who grinds the hearts of men beneath her feet and laughs. Sometimes she taunts me till I could strangle her—ah! But I placed myself in the demon's power and having myself broken the compact which bound me

to her, body and soul—from the lord I was, I have sunk to the slave I am,—you see, I speak free from the heart, what little she has left of it."

The harper nodded.

"Why not leave Rome for a time?" he said. "Your absence might soften Theodora's heart. Your sins, whatever they were, will appear less glaring in the haze of the distance."

Benilo looked up like an infuriated tiger.

"Has she appointed you my guardian?" he laughed harshly.

"I have had no words with her," replied the harper. "But one with eyes to see, cannot help but sound your ailment."

The Chamberlain relaxed.

"The drug is in the blood," he replied wearily.

"Then win her back, if you can," said the harper.

Benilo clenched his hands while he glared up at the other. "It is a game between the devil and despair, and the devil has the deal."

"A losing game for you, should either win."

Benilo nodded.

"I know it! Yet one single word would make me master where I am the slave."

"And you waver?"

"Silence!" growled Benilo. "Tempt me no more!"

Their discourse at this point was rudely interrupted by the clamour of the guests, bent upon silencing Bembo's exuberance, whose tongue, like a

ribbon in the wind, fluttered incessantly. He bore himself with the airs of some orator of antiquity, rolling his eyes until they showed the whites beneath, and beating the air with his short, chubby arms.

"If Bembo is to be believed there is not in all Rome one faithful wife nor one innocent girl," roared the lord of Bracciano, a burly noble who was balancing a dainty dancer on his knee, while she held his faun-like head encircled with her arms.

"Pah!" cried Guido da Fermo, a baron whose chief merit consisted in infesting the roads in the Patrimony of St. Peter. "There are some, but they are scarce, remarkably scarce!"

"Make your wants known at the street corners," exclaimed Roffredo, taking the cue. "And I wager our fair Queen would be the first to claim the prize."

And the young Patrician whose face revealed traces of grossest debauchery gazed defiantly round the hall, as if challenging some one to take up the gauntlet, if he dared.

"Be careful!" whispered the girl Nelida, his companion. "Benilo is looking at you!"

Roffredo laughed boisterously.

"Theodora's discarded lover? Why should I muffle my speech to please his ear?"

The girl laughed nervously.

"Because the tongue of a fool, when long enough, is a rope to hang him by,—and he loves her

still!"

"He loves her still," drawled the half-intoxicated Patrician, turning his head toward the spot where Benilo sat listening with flaming eyes. "The impudence!"

And he staggered to his feet, holding aloft the goblet with one hand, while the other encircled the body of the dancing girl, who tried in vain to silence him.

"Fill your goblets," he shouted,—"fill your goblets full—to the brim."

He glanced round the hall with insolent bravado, while Benilo, who had not lost a word the other had spoken, leaned forward, his thin lips straightening in a hard white line, while his narrowing eyelids and his trembling hands attested his pent up ire louder than words.

"A toast to the absent," shrieked Roffredo. "A toast to the most beautiful and the most virtuous woman in Rome, a toast to—"

He paused for an instant, for a white-cheeked face close to his, whispered:

"Stop! On your life be silent!"

But Roffredo paid no heed.

He whirled the crystal goblet round his head, spilling some of the contents over the girl, who shrank from it, as from an evil omen. The purple Chianti looked like blood on her white skin.

"To Theodora!" shouted the drunken youth, as

all except Benilo raised their goblets to join in the toast. "To Theodora, the Wanton Queen, whose eyes are aglow with hell's hot fire, whose scarlet lips would kiss the fiend, whose splendid arms would embrace the devil, were he passing fair to look upon!"

He came no further.

"May lightning strike you in your tracks!" Benilo howled, insane with long suppressed rage, as he hurled a heavy decanter he had snatched from the board, at the head of the offender.

A shrill outcry, dying away into a moan, then into silence, the crash of broken flagons, a lifeless form gliding from his paralyzed arms to the floor, roused Roffredo to the reality of what had happened. The heavy decanter having missed its aim, had struck the girl Nelida squarely in the forehead, and the dark stream of blood which flowed over her eyes, her face, her neck, down her arms, her airy gown, mingled with the purple wine from the Patrician's spilled goblet.

It was a ghastly sight. In an instant pandemonium reigned in the hall. The painted women shrieked and rushed for safety behind columns and divans, leaving the men to care for the dying girl, whom Bembo and Oliverotto tenderly lifted to a divan, where the former bandaged the terribly gashed head.

While he did so the poor dancing girl breathed

her last.

The awful sight had effectually sobered Benilo. For a moment the drunken noble stared as one petrified on the deed he had wrought, then the sharp blade of his poniard hissed from its scabbard and with a half smothered outcry of fury he flew at Roffredo's throat.

"This is your deed, you lying cur!" he snarled into the trembling youth's face, whom the catastrophe had completely unnerved and changed into a blanched coward. "Retract your lying boast or I'll send you to hell ere you can utter a Pater-Noster!"

With the unbounded fury of a maniac who has broken his chains and against whose rage no mortal strength may cope, Benilo brought Roffredo down on the floor, where he knelt on his breast, holding his throat in a vice-like grip, which choked any words the prostrate youth might endeavour to speak.

The terror of the deed, which had cast its pall over the merry revellers, and the suddenness of the attack on Roffredo had so completely paralyzed those present, that none came to the rescue of the prostrate man, who vainly struggled to extricate himself from his opponent's clutches. His eyes ablaze with rage, Benilo had set the point of his dagger against the chest of his victim, whom now no power on earth seemed able to save, as his cowardly associates made no effort to stay the Chamberlain's hand.

He who had seen Benilo, in the palace on the Aventine, composing an ode in the hall of audience, would have been staggered at the complete transformation from a diplomatic courtier to a fiend incarnate, his usually sedate features distorted with mad passion and rage. A half-choked outcry of brute fear and despair failed to bring any one to the prostrate boaster's aid, most of those present, including the women, thronging round the dead girl Nelida, and Roffredo's fate seemed sealed. But at that moment, something happened to stay Benilo's uplifted hand.

CHAPTER V
THE WAGER

 t the moment when Benilo had raised his poniard, to drive it through his opponent's heart, the diaphanous curtains dividing the great hall from the rest of the buildings were flung aside and in the entrance there appeared a woman like some fierce and majestic fury, who at a moment's glance took in the whole scene and its import. Her manner was that of a queen, of a queen who was wont to bend all men

to her slightest caprice. Every eye in the large hall was bent upon her and every soul felt a thrill of wonder and admiration. The ivory pallor of her face was enhanced by the dark gloss of her raven hair. The slumbrous starry eyes were meant to hold the memories of a thousand love-thoughts. A dim suffused radiance seemed to hover like an aureole above her dazzling white brow, crowning the perfect oval of her face, adorned with a clustering wealth of raven-black tresses. She was arrayed in a black, silk-embroidered diaphanous robe, the most sumptuous the art of the Orient could supply. Of softest texture, it revealed the matchless contours of her form and arms, of her regal throat, heightening by the contrast the ivory sheen of her satin-skin.

But those eyes which, when kindled with the fires of love, might have set marble aflame, were blazing with the torches of wrath, as looking round the hall, she darted a swift inquiring glance at the chief offenders, one of whom could not have spoken had he wished to, for Benilo was fairly strangling him.

The rest of the company had instinctively turned their faces towards the Queen of the Groves, endeavouring at the same time to hide the sight of the dead girl from her eyes by closely surrounding the couch, with their backs to the victim. But their consternation as well as the very act betrayed them. From the struggling men on the floor, Theodora's

gaze turned to the affrighted company and she half guessed the truth. Advancing towards her guests, she pushed their unresisting forms aside, raised the cover from the dead girl with the bloody bandage over the still white face, bent over it quickly to kiss the dark, silken hair, then she demanded an account of the deed. One of the women reported in brief and concise terms what had happened before she arrived. At the sight of this flower, broken and destroyed, Theodora's anger seemed for a moment to subside, like a trampled spark, before a great pity that rose in her heart. In an instant the whole company rushed upon her with excited gestures and before the Babel of jabbering tongues, each striving to tell his or her story in a voice above the rest, the Fury returned.

Theodora stamped her foot and commanded silence. At the sight of the woman, Benilo's arms had fallen powerlessly by his side and Roffredo, taking advantage of an unwatched moment, had pushed the Chamberlain off and staggered to his feet.

"Whose deed is this?" Theodora demanded, holding aloft the covering of the couch.

"It was my accursed luck! The decanter was intended for this lying cur, whose black heart I will wrench out of his body!"

And Benilo pointed to the shrinking form of Roffredo.

"What had he done?"

"He had insulted you!"

"That proves his courage!" she replied with a withering glance of contempt.

Then she beckoned to the attendants.

"Have the girl removed and summon the Greek —though I fear it is too late."

There was a ring of regret in her tones. It vanished as quickly as it had come.

The body of Nelida, the dancing girl, was carried away and the guests resumed their seats. Roxané had reluctantly abandoned her usurped place of honour. A quick flash, a silent challenge passed between the two women, as Theodora took her accustomed seat.

"A glass of wine!" she commanded imperiously, and Roffredo, reassured, rushed to the nearest attendant, took a goblet from the salver and presented it to the Queen of the Groves.

"Ah! Thanks, Roffredo! So it was you who insulted me in my absence?" she said with an undertone of irony in her voice, which had the rich sound of a deep-toned bell.

"I said you would embrace the devil, did he but appear in presentable countenance!" Roffredo replied contritely, but with a vicious side glance at Benilo.

An ominous smile curved Theodora's crimson lips.

"The risk would be slight, since I have kept company with each of you," she replied. "And our virtuous Benilo took up the gauntlet?"

Her low voice was soft and purring, yet laden

with the poison sting of irony, as through half-closed lids she glanced towards the Chamberlain, who sat apart in moody silence like a spectre at the feast.

Benilo scented danger in her tone and answered cautiously:

"Only a coward will hear the woman he loves reviled with impunity."

Theodora bowed with mock courtesy.

"If you wish to honour me with this confession, I care as little for the one as the other. From your temper I judge some innocent dove had escaped your vulture's talons."

Benilo met the challenge in her smouldering look and answered with assumed indifference:

"Your spies have misinformed you! But I am in no mood to constitute the target of your jests!"

"There is but one will which rules these halls," Theodora flashed out. "If obedience to its mandates is distasteful to you, the gates are open—spread your pinions and fly away!"

She flung back her head and their eyes met.

Benilo turned away, uttering a terrible curse between his clenched teeth.

There was a deep hush in the hall, as if the spirit of the dead girl was haunting the guests. The harps played a plaintive melody, which might indeed have stolen from some hearth of ashes, when stirred by the breath of its smouldering spark, like phantom-memories from another world, that seemed to call to

Theodora's inner consciousness, each note a foot-step, leading her away beyond the glint and glitter of the world that surrounded her, to a garden of purity and peace in the dim, long-forgotten past. Theodora sat in a reverie, her strange eyes fixed on nothingness, her red lips parted, disclosing two rows of teeth, small, even, pearly, while her full, white bosom rose and fell with quickened respiration.

"The Queen of the Groves is in a pensive mood to-night," sneered the Lord of Bracciano, who had been engaged in mentally weighing her charms against those of Roxané.

Theodora sighed.

"I may well be pensive, for I have seen to-day, what I had despaired of ever again beholding in Rome—can you guess what it is?"

Shouts of laughter broke, a jarring discord, harshly upon her speech.

"We are perishing with curiosity," shouted, as with one voice, the debauched nobles and their feminine companions.

"In the name of pity, save our lives!" begged a girl nearest to Theodora's seat.

"Can you guess?" the Queen of the Groves repeated simply, as she gazed round the assembly.

All sorts of strange answers were hurled at the throne of the Queen of the Groves. She heeded them not. Perhaps she did not even hear them.

At last she raised her head.

Without commenting on the guesses of her guests, she said:

"I have seen in Rome to-day—a man!"

Benilo squirmed. The rest of the guests laughed harshly and Bembo, the Poet asked with a vapid grin:

"And is the sight so wondrous that the Queen of Love sits dreaming among her admirers like a Sphinx in the African desert?"

"Had he horns?" shouted the Lord of Bracciano.

"Or a cloven hoof?" cried Oliverotto.

"What was he like?" sneered a third.

Theodora turned upon her questioners, a dash of scorn in her barbed reply.

"I speak of a man, not reptiles like you—you all!"

"Mercy, oh queen, mercy!" begged the apoplectic poet, amid the noisy clamour of his jeering companions. But heedless of their jabbering tongues Theodora continued earnestly:

"Not such men as the barons of Rome are pleased to call themselves, cowardly, vicious,—beasts, who believe not in God nor the devil, and whose aim in life is but to clothe their filthy carcass in gaudy apparel and appease the cravings of their lust and their greed! I speak of a man, something the meaning of which is as dark to you as the riddle of the Sphinx."

The company gazed at each other in mute bewilderment.

Theodora was indeed in a most singular mood.

"Are we not at the Court of Theodora?" shouted the Lord of Bracciano, who was experiencing some inconvenience in the feat of embracing with his short arms the two women between whom he was seated. "Or has some sudden magic transported us to the hermitage of the mad monk, who predicts the End of Time?"

"Nay," Benilo spoke up for the first time since Theodora's rebuke had silenced him, "perhaps our beautiful Queen of Love has in store for her guests just such a riddle as the one the Sphinx proposed to the son of Iokasté—with but a slight variation."

The illiterate high-born rabble of Rome did not catch the drift of the Patrician's speech, but the pallor on Theodora's cheeks deepened.

Roxané alone turned to the speaker.

"And the simile?" she asked in her sweet siren-voice, tremulous with the desire to clash with her more beautiful rival.

Benilo shrugged his shoulders, but he winced under Theodora's deadly gaze.

"The simile?" he replied with a jarring laugh. "It is this, that incest and adultery are as old as the Athenian asses, that never died, and that the Sphinx eventually drowned herself in the Aegean Sea."

Theodora made no reply, but relapsed into her former state of thoughtfulness. As she turned from Benilo, her eyes met those of Roxané, and again the two women flashed defiance at each other.

Again the laughter of the revellers rose, louder than before.

"By the Cross," shouted the poet, "the Queen of Love will take the veil."

"Has she chosen the convent, whose nuns she will cause to be canonized by her exemplary life and glorious example," jeered Roxané.

"We shall sing a thousand Aves and buy tapers as large as her unimpeached virtue!" cried another of the women.

"I fear one nunnery is damned from chapel to refectory," growled Benilo, keeping his eyes on the floor, as if fearful of meeting those he instinctively felt burning upon him.

"Silence!" cried Theodora at last, stamping her foot on the floor, while a glow of hot resentment flushed her cheeks. "Your merriment and clamour only draws the sharper line between you and that other, of whom I spoke."

Roffredo looked up with a smile of indolence.

"And who is the demi-god?" he drawled lazily.

She measured him with undisguised scorn and contempt.

"The name! The story!" bellowed several individuals, raising their goblets and half spilling their contents in their besotten mood.

In a strange voice, melodious as the sound of Æolian harps when the night wind passes over their strings, amid profound silence Theodora related to

her assembled guests the incident of the runaway steeds in which she had so prominently figured, the chariot having been her own,—the occupant herself. She omitted not a detail of the stranger's heroic deed, passing from her own thrilling experience to Vitelozzo's assault upon one of the New Vestals, and his discomfiture at the hand of him who had saved her life.

"And while your Roman scum hissed and hooted and raised not a finger in the girl's defence, her rescuer alone braved Vitelozzo's fury—I saw him whisper something into the ruffian's ear and the mighty lord skulked away like a frightened cur. By heaven, I have seen a man!" the Queen of the Groves concluded ecstatically, disdaining to dwell on her own rescue.

For a lingering moment there hovered silence on the assembly. Gradually it gave way to a flutter of questions.

"Who is he?" queried one.

"What is he like?" shouted another.

Theodora did not heed the questions. Only her lovely face, framed by hair dark as the darkest midnight, had grown a shade more pale and pensive.

Suddenly she turned to the last questioner, a woman.

"What was he like?" she replied. "Tall, and in the prime of manhood; his face concealed by his vizor."

The woman sighed amorously. The men nodded

to each other with meaning glances. The danger of the convent seemed passed.

Benilo, who during Theodora's narrative had proven an ideal listener, of a sudden clenched his fist and gazed round for the harper, who sat in a remote corner of the hall.

Another moment's musing, then the Chamberlain ground his teeth together with the fierce determination to carry out at all hazards, what he had resolved in his mind. Theodora herself was playing into his hands.

"Do you know this incomparable hero, this modern Theseus?" he drawled out slowly and with deliberate impudence, addressing the Queen of the Groves.

Theodora's gaze was sharp as steel.

"What is it to you?" she hissed.

Benilo shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Nothing whatever! I also know him!"

There was something in his tone, which struck the ever-watchful ear of Theodora like a danger-knell.

"You know him?" echoed a chorus of voices from every part of the great hall.

He waved back the eager questioners.

"I know him!" he declared emphatically, then he was silent.

Theodora seemed to have grown nervous.

"Are you serious?"

"Never more so!" Benilo replied, with a slight peculiar hardening of the lips.

"Is he a Roman?" cried a voice.

"All Romans according to our fair Queen's judgment, are curs and degenerates," Benilo drawled insultingly.

Theodora nodded.

"Even so," she replied coldly.

"This demi-god, however, is also slightly known to you," the Chamberlain continued, now fairly facing the Queen of Love, "even though he has not yet found his way to your bowers."

Theodora winced.

"Why do you taunt me?" she flashed back angrily.

Benilo heeded her not. Instead of replying, he addressed himself to the company, speaking in a dry, half-bantering tone, while Theodora watched him like a tigress.

"Once upon a time, the Queen of Love boasted that mortal man did not breathe who would resist her charms. Now there is at this hour one man here in Rome, whom even the matchless Theodora dare not summon to her circle, one man before whose 'No' her vain-glorious boast would break like a bubble, one man whose soul she may not sap and send to hell! And this one man is even the hero of her dreams, her rescuer,—the rescuer of a maiden of spotless virtue, the vanquisher of a giant! Do I speak

truth, divine Theodora?"

Those who watched the expression on the face of the Queen of the Groves marvelled alike at Benilo's audacity and the startling absence of a passionate outburst on the part of the woman. And though the blood seethed through Theodora's veins, the sudden change of front on Benilo's part seemed to stagger her for a moment. It was a novel sensation to see the man who had heretofore been like clay in the moulder's hands now daring to flout her openly and to hold up her wounded pride as a target for the jests of those present. It was a novel sensation, to find herself publicly berated, but the shaft sank deep. Theodora's eyes flashed scorn and there was something cruel in her glances. Benilo felt its sting like a whiplash. His nerves quivered and he breathed hard. But he had gone too far to recede. His spirit had risen in arms against the disdain of the woman he loved,—loved with a passion that seemed to have slept in a tomb for ages and suddenly gathered new strength, like a fire kindled anew over dead ashes.

Acting on a sudden impulse, he raised his head and looked at her with a fearlessness which for the moment appeared to startle her self-possession, for a deep flush coloured the fairness of her face and, fading, left it pale as marble. Still Theodora did not speak and the breathless silence which had succeeded Benilo's last taunt resembled the ominous hush of the heated atmosphere before a thunder-

clap. No one dared speak and the Chamberlain, apparently struck by the sudden stillness, looked round from the tumbled cushions where he reclined.

"You do not answer my question, fair Theodora," he spoke at last, an undertone of mockery ringing through his speech. "I grant you power over some weak fools," and Benilo glanced round the assembly, little caring for the mutter which his words raised, "but you will at least admit that there is one man in Rome at this very hour, on whom all your charms and blandishments would be wasted as a caress on cold marble."

Another deep and death-like pause ensued; then Theodora's silvery cold tones smote the profound silence with sharp retort, as goaded at last beyond forbearance by his scoffing tone she sprang to her feet.

"There is not a man in Rome," she hissed into Benilo's face, "not in Italy, not in all the world, whom I could not bend to the force of my will. Where I choose, I conquer!"

A sardonic laugh broke from Benilo's lips.

"And by what means?"

"Benilo," she flashed forth in withering contempt, "I know not what your object is in taunting me—and I care not—but by Lucifer, you go too far! Name to me a man in Rome, name whom you will, and if I fail to win him in one month—"

"What then?"

For a moment she hesitated.

"Name the wager yourself!"

An ominous smile curved Benilo's lips.

"All the wealth I possess against you—as my wife!"

She laughed scornfully and shuddered, but did not reply.

"Are you afraid?" he cried, tauntingly.

"What a fate!" she replied with trepidation in her tone. "But I accept it, even it!"

She turned her back on him after a look of such withering contempt as one might cast on some reptile, and took her former seat, when again she was startled by his voice. Its mock caressing tones caused her to clench her firm white hands and bend forward as if tempted to strangle the viper, that had dared to place its glittering coils in her path.

"It now remains but to name the champion, just to prevent the wrong bird from fluttering into the nest," said Benilo, addressing the company.

"The champion! The champion!" they shouted, breathing more freely, since the expected lightning did not strike.

"Fill the goblets!" Benilo exclaimed, and in a moment the wine was poured, the guests arose and gathered round the central figures.

Benilo raised his goblet and turned to Theodora, wincing under her look of contempt.

"The champion is to be my choice and to be

accepted unconditionally?" he questioned.

"Not so!" she flashed forth, half rising from her seat, her eyes flaming with wrath. "I would not have my words distorted by so foul a thing as you! It is to be the rescuer of the girl, he before whom the lord Vitelozzo slunk away like a whipped cur! You have taunted me with my lack of power face to face with that one—and that one alone, the only man among a crowd of curs!"

Benilo paused, then he said with a hard, cold smile:

"Agreed!" And he placed the goblet to his lips. The guests did likewise and drank the singular toast, as if it had not implied a glaring insult to each present, including the one who reëchoed it.

"And now for his name!" Benilo continued. "Just to prevent a mischance."

The irony of his words and the implied insult cut Theodora to the quick. With hands tightly clenched as If she would strangle her tormentor, she sprang to her feet.

"I object!" she gasped, almost choked with rage, while her startled listeners seemed to lack even voice to vent their curiosity before this new and unexpected outburst.

"I appeal to the company assembled, who has witnessed the wager between the Queen of Love and her faithful and obedient lover," Benilo sneered, looking round among the guests. "How know we,

what is concealed under a vizor, beneath a rusty suit of armour? Security lies but in the name of the unconscious victim of Theodora's magic, is it not so?"

The smile on the Chamberlain's countenance caused him to appear more repulsive than his former expression of wildest rage. But, prompted by an invincible curiosity, the guests unanimously assented.

"Be it so!" gasped Theodora, sinking back in her seat. "I care not."

Benilo watched her closely, and as he did so he almost repented of his hasty wager. Just at that moment his gaze met that of the harper, who stood like some dark phantom behind the throne of the Queen of the Groves, and the Chamberlain stifled the misgivings, which had risen within him. And though smiling in anticipation of the blow he was about to deliver, a blow which should prove the sweetest balm for the misery she had caused him by her disdain, he still wavered, as if to torment her to the extremest limits. Then, with a voice audible in the remotest parts of the great hall, he spoke, his eye in that of Theodora, slowly emphasizing each title and name:

"Margrave Eckhardt of Meissen, Commander-in-chief of the German hosts!"

There was the silence of death in the hall.

For a moment Theodora stared fixed and immobile as a marble statue, her face pale as death,

while a thin stream of purple wine, spilled from her trembling goblet, trickled down her white, uplifted arm. Then she rushed upon him, and knocking the goblet out of his hand, causing it to fall with a splintering crash at Benilo's feet, she shrieked till the very walls re-echoed the words:

"You lie! You lie!"

Benilo crossed his arms over his chest, and, looking squarely into the woman's eyes, he repeated in the same accents of defiance:

"Margrave Eckhardt of Meissen, Commander-in-chief of the German hosts."

"Again I tell you you lie! You lie!" shrieked the woman, now almost beside herself. "Is there no one among all this scum here assembled, to chastise this viper? Hear me!" she cried as, affrighted, the guests shrank back from her blazing eyes and panting breath, while with all the superhuman beauty of a second Medusa she stood among them, and if her gaze could have killed, none would have survived the hour. "Hear me! Benilo has lied to you, as time and again he has lied to me! He, of whom he speaks, is dead,—has died—long ago!"

Benilo breathed hard. "Then he has arisen from the dead and returned to earth,—to Rome—" he spoke with biting irony in his tones. "A strange hereditary disease affecting the members of his house."

When he saw the deadly pallor which covered

the woman's face, and the terror reflected in her eyes, Benilo continued:

"And deem you in all truth, O sagacious Theodora, that a word from the lips of any other man would have caused Vitelozzo to release his prey? Deem you not in your undoubted wisdom that it required a reason, even weightier than the blow of a gauntleted hand, to accomplish this marvellous feat? And,—since you are dumb in the face of these arguments,—will you not enlighten us all why Theodora, the beautiful, the chaste, would deprive him of the plume, to whom it rightfully belongs,—the German commander, Margrave Eckhardt of Meissen, who risked his life to save that of our beautiful queen?"

Theodora turned upon her tormenter like an animal at bay.

"I have heard enough! I will not! The wager is off!"

And rising she prepared to leave the hall without another word.

It would have been difficult for the most profound physiognomist to analyze Benilo's feelings, when he saw his purpose, his revenge, foiled. Looking up he met the enigmatic gaze of the harper resting upon him with a strange mixture of derision and disdain.

"Stay!" Benilo cried to Theodora as she grasped the curtain in the act of pushing it aside. He knew if

she passed beyond it, he had lost beyond retrieve. But she paused and turned, mute inquiry and defiance in her look.

"The Queen of the Groves has made a wager before you all," the Chamberlain shouted, lashing himself into the rage needful to make him carry out his design unflinchingly. "After being informed of the person of the champion she has repudiated it! The reasons are plain,—the champion is beyond her reach! The Queen of the Groves is too politic to play a losing game, especially when she knows that she is sure to lose! The charms of our Goddess are great, but alas! There is one man in Rome whom she dare not challenge!"

He paused to study the effect of his words upon her.

She regarded him with her icy stare.

"It is not a question of power—but of my will!"

"So be it!" retorted Benilo. "But since the Queen of Love has refused my wager for reasons no doubt good and efficient, perhaps there is in this company one less pure, one less scrupulous, one of beauty as great, who might win, where Theodora shuns the risk! Will you take up the gauntlet, fair Roxané, and lure to the Groves, Eckhardt, the general?"

"Benilo—beware!"

Shrill, sharp like breaking glass, like the cry of a wounded animal maddened with rage and agony, the outcry seemed wrenched from Theodora's white,

drawn lips. Her large, splendid eyes flashed unutterable scorn upon the Chamberlain and her lithe form swayed and crouched as that of a tigress about to spring.

"Will Roxané take the wager?" Benilo repeated defiantly.

The anticipation of the on-coming contest caused Roxané's cheek to blanch. But not to be thought deficient in courage, to meet her rival, she replied:

"Since the Queen of the Groves shuns the test, perhaps I might succeed, where—"

She did not finish the sentence.

Like a lightning flash Theodora turned from the man, who had roused her ire, to the woman who had stung her pride with ill-veiled mockery, and while she slowly crept towards her opponent, her low voice, tremulous with scorn, stung as a needle would the naked flesh.

"And do you dream that Eckhardt of Meissen has aught to fear from you, fair Roxané? Deem you, that the proud Roxané with all her charms, could cause the general of the German host to make one step against his will?"

For a moment the two women stood face to face, measuring each other with deadly looks.

"And what if I would?" flashed Roxané.

Two white hands slowly but firmly encircled her throat.

"I would strangle you!" hissed Theodora, her face deadly pale.

Roxané's cheeks too had lost their colour. She knew her opponent and she instinctively felt she had reached the limit. She gave a little nervous laugh as she drew Theodora's reluctant hands from the marble whiteness of her throat, where their touch had left a rosy imprint.

"I do not wish your Saxon bear," she said. "If you can tame him, we come to his skin!"

"By Lucifer!" replied the Queen of the Groves, "did I but choose to, I would make him forget heaven and hell and bring him to my feet!"

"How dramatic!" sneered Benilo. "Words are air! We want proofs!"

She whirled upon him.

"And what will become of the snake, when the hunter appears?"

Benilo paled. For a moment his arrogance deserted him. Then he said with an ominous scowl:

"Let the hunter beware!"

She regarded him with icy contempt. Then she turned to the revellers.

"Since Benilo has dared to cross swords with me," she cried, "though I despise him and all of you, I accept the challenge, if there is one in this company who will confirm that it was Eckhardt who discomfited Vitelozzo."

From the background of the hall, where he had

sat a silent listener, there came forward an individual in the gaudy attire of a Roman nobleman. He was robust and above the middle height, and the lineaments of his coarse face betrayed predominance of brute instincts over every nobler sentiment.

"Vitelozzo! Vitelozzo!" the guests shouted half amazed, half amused.

The robber-baron nodded as he faced Theodora on the edge of the circle.

"I have listened to your discourse," he snarled curtly. "For your opinions I care not. And as for the skullion to whom I gave in,—out of sheer good will,—ha, ha!—may the devil pull the boots from his legs!—'twas no meaner a person than he, at whose cradle the fiend stood sponsor, Eckhardt—the general—but I will yet have the girl, I'll have her yet!"

And with a vigorous nod Vitelozzo took up a brimming decanter and transported himself into the background whence he had arisen.

His word had decided the question.

For a moment there was an intense hush. Then Theodora spoke:

"Eckhardt of Meissen, the commander of the German hosts, shall come to my court! He shall be as one of yourselves, a whimpering slave to my evil beauty! I will it,—and so it shall be!"

For a moment she glanced at Benilo and the blood froze in his veins. Heaven and earth would he

have given now to have recalled the fateful challenge. But it was too late. For a time he trembled like an aspen. No one knew what he had read in Theodora's Medusa-like face.

Some of the revellers, believing the great tension relieved, now pushed eagerly forward, surrounding the Queen of the Groves and plying her with questions. They were all eager to witness a triumph so difficult to achieve, as they imagined, that even Theodora, though conscious of her invincible charms, had winced at the task.

But the Queen of Love seemed to have exchanged the attributes of her trade for those of a Fury, for she turned upon them like an animal wounded to death, that sees the hounds upon its track and cannot escape.

"Back! All of you!" she hissed, raising her arms and sweeping them aside. "What is it after all? Is he not a man, like—no! Not like you, not like you!—Why should I care for him?—Perhaps he has wife and child at home:—the devils will laugh the louder!"

She paused a moment, drawing a deep breath. Then she slowly turned towards the cringing Chamberlain. Her voice was slow and distinct and every word struck him as the blow from a whip.

"I accept your wager," she said, "and I warn you that I will win! Win, with all the world, with all your villainy, with the Devil himself against me. Eckhardt

shall come to the Groves! But," she continued with terrible distinctness, "if aught befall him, ere we have stood face to face, I shall know the hand that struck the blow, were it covered by the deepest midnight that ever blushed at your foulness, and by the devil, —I will avenge it!"

After these words Theodora faced those assembled with her splendid height in all the glory of her beauty. Another moment she was gone.

For a time deep silence succeeded.

Never had such a scene been witnessed in the Groves. Never had the Queen of Love shown herself in so terrible a mood. Never had mortal dared to brave her anger, to challenge her wrath. Truly, the end of time must be nigh when her worshippers would dare defy the Goddess of the Shrine.

But after Theodora had disappeared, the strain gradually relaxed and soon wore away entirely. With all, save Benilo. His calm outward demeanour concealed only with an effort his terrible apprehensions, as he mixed freely, to divert suspicion, with the revellers. These thought the moments too precious to waste with idle speculations and soon the orgy roared anew through the great hall.

Benilo alone had retreated to its extreme end, where he allowed himself to drop into a divan, which had just been deserted by a couple, who had been swept away by the whirling Bacchanale. Here

he sat for some time, his face buried in his hands, when looking up suddenly he found himself face to face with Hezilo.

"I have done it," he muttered, "and I fear I have gone too far!"

He paused, scanning the harper's face for approval. Its expression he could not see, but there was no shade of reproof in the voice which answered:

"At best you have but erred in the means."

"I wished to break her pride, to humble her, and now the tables are turned; it is I, who am grovelling in the dust."

"No woman was by such means ever wooed or won," the harper replied after a brief pause. "Theodora will win the wager. But whether she win or lose, she will despise you for ever more!"

Benilo pressed his hands against his burning temples.

"My heart is on fire! The woman maddens me with her devilish charms, until I am on the verge of delirium."

"You have been too pliant! You have become her slave! Her foot is on your neck! You have lost yourself! Better a monstrous villain, than a simpering idiot, who whines love-ditties under his lady's bower and bellows his shame to the enduring stars! Dare to be a man,—despite yourself!"

So absorbed was Benilo in his own thoughts,

that the biting irony of the other's speech was lost upon him.

He extended his hand to his strange counsellor.

"It shall be as you say: The Rubicon is passed. I have no choice."

The stranger nodded, but he did not touch the proffered hand.

At last the Chamberlain rose to leave the hall.

The sounds of lutes and harps quivered through the Groves of Theodora; flutes and cymbals, sistrum and tympani mingled their harmonies with the tempest of sound that hovered over the great orgy, which was now at its height. The banquet-hall whirled round him like a vast architectural nightmare. Through the dizzy glare he beheld perspectives and seemingly endless colonnades. Everything sparkled, glittered, and beamed in the light of prismatic irises, that crossed and shattered each other in the air. Viewed through that burning haze even the inanimate objects seemed to have waked to some fantastic representation of life.—But through it all he saw one face, supremely fair in its marble cold disdain,—and unable to endure the sight longer Benilo the Chamberlain rushed out into the open.

In the distance resounded the chant of pilgrims traversing the city and imploring the mercy and clemency of heaven.

CHAPTER VI
JOHN OF THE CATACOMBS

 nce outside of the pavillion, Benilo uttered a sigh of relief. He had resolved to act without delay. Ere dawn he would be assured that he held in his grasp the threads of the web. There was no time to be lost. Onward he hurried, the phantom of the murdered girl floating before his eyes in a purple haze.

While bearing himself ostensibly in the character of a mere man of pleasure, Benilo the Chamberlain lost no opportunity of ingratiating himself with the many desperate spirits who were to be found in the city ready and willing to assist at any enterprise, which should tend to complicate the machine of government. While he rushed into every extravagance and pleasure, surpassing the companions of his own rank in his orgies, he suffered no symptoms of a deeper feeling to escape him, than that of excellence in trifling, the wine cup, the pageant, the passing show. It may have been a strain

of mongrel blood, filtering through his veins, which tempered his endurance with the pliancy essential to intrigue, a strain that was apparent in the sculptured regularity of his features. His movements had the pliant ease, the stealthy freedom of the tiger. Had he been caught like Milo, he would have writhed himself out of the trap with the sinuous persistency of the snake. There was something snake-like in the small, glittering eyes, the clear smoothness of the skin. With all its brightness no woman worthy of the name but would have winced with womanly instincts of aversion and repugnance from his glances. With all its beauty, none, save Otto alone, had ever looked confidingly into his face. Men turned indeed to scan him approvingly as he passed, but they owned no sympathy with the smooth, set brow, the ever present smile in the lips of Benilo the Chamberlain.

After deliberating upon the course he was about to pursue Benilo approached the shores of the Tiber. Under the cypress avenues it was dark, and the air came up chill and damp from the stream. A sombre blue over-arched the labyrinth of pillars and ruins, of friezes and statues, of groves and glades which lay dreaming in the pale light of the moon. No other light, save the moist glimmer of the stars whose mist-veiled brightness heralded the approach of a tempest, fell on the chaos of undefined forms. Utter solitude, utter silence prevailed. More and more Benilo lost himself in the wilderness of this ill-

favoured region.

The shortest way to the haunts of John of the Catacombs, of whom he was in immediate search, lay across the ancient Alta Semita, where now the Via di Porta Pia winds round the Quirinal hill. But for reasons of his own the Chamberlain chose to make a detour, preferring streets whose deserted character would not be likely to bring him into contact with some unwelcome, nocturnal rambler. Wrapping himself more closely in his cloak and looking cautiously about, he hastened along the North Western declivity of the Quirinal hill, until he reached the remains of a wall built, so tradition has it, by Servius Tullius. This quarter had ever since the time of the emperors enjoyed the worst reputation in all Rome. The streets were tortuous, the houses, squalid, the whole surroundings evil. Benilo moved cautiously along the wall, for a few drinking shops were still open and frequented by a motley throng, with whom it was not safe to mingle, for to provoke a brawl, might engender grave consequences. Wretched women plied their shameful trade by the light of flickering clay-lamps; and watery-eyed hags, the outcasts of all nations, mingled with sailors, bandits and bravi. Drunken men lay snoring under tables and coarse songs were shouted from hoarse throats, half drowned by the uproarious clamour of two fellows who were playing at dice. Suddenly there was a commotion followed by piercing shrieks.

The gamblers had fallen out over their pretty stakes. After a short squabble one had drawn his knife on the other and stabbed him in the side. The wounded man fell howling on the ground and the assassin took to his heels. The dancers of the establishment, heedless of the catastrophe, began at once to rattle their castagnettes and sway and whirl in disgraceful pantomime.

After Benilo had passed the shameful den and reached the end of the alley he found himself once more in one of the waste regions of the city. Truly many an emperor was more easily discovered than John of the Catacombs. The region had the appearance as if an earthquake had shattered into dust the splendid temples and porticoes of antiquity, so great was the destruction, which confronted him on every turn. High in the air could be heard the hoarse cry of the vulture, wheeling home from some feast of carnage; in the near-by marshes the croaking of the frogs alternated with the dismal cry of the whippoorwill.

Suddenly the Chamberlain paused and for a moment even his stout heart stopped beating, and his face turned a ghastly pallor. For directly before him there arose out of the underbrush, with back apparently turned towards him, some formless apparition in the dark habit of a monk, the cowl drawn over his head. But when he attained his natural height, he faced Benilo, although the latter

would have sworn that he did not see him turn.

It was with some degree of fascination that Benilo watched the person and the movements of this human monster. What appeared of his head from under the cowl seemed to have become green with cadaverous tints. One might say that the mustiness of the sepulchre already covered the bluish down of his skin. His eyes, with their strong gaze sparkled from beneath a large yellowish bruise, and his drooping jaws were joined to the skin by two lines as straight as the lines of a triangle. The bravo's trembling hands, the colour of yellow wax, were only a net-work of veins and nerves. His sleeves fluttered on his fleshless arms like a streamer on a pole. His robe fell from his shoulders to his heels perfectly straight without a single fold, as rigid as the drapery in the later pictures of Cimabue or Orcagna. There appeared to be nothing but a shadow under the brown cowl and out of that shadow stared two stony eyes. John of the Catacombs looked like a corpse returned to earth, to write his memoirs.

At the sight of the individual, reputed the greatest scourge in Rome, the Chamberlain could not repress a shudder, and his right hand sought mechanically the hilt of his poniard.

"Why—thou art a merry dog in thy friar's cowl, Don Giovan, though it will hardly save thee from the gallows," exclaimed Benilo, approaching slowly. "Since when dost affect monastic manners?"

"Since the fiend is weary of saints, their cowls go begging," a harsh grating voice replied, while a hideous sneer lit up the almost fleshless skull of the bravo, as with his turbid yellow eyes, resembling those of a dead fish, he stared in Benilo's face.

"And for all that," the denisen of the ruins continued, watching from under inflamed eyelids the effect his person produced on his Maecenas, "and for all that I shall make as good a saint as was ever catalogued in your martyrology."

"The fiend for aught might make the same," replied Benilo. "What is your business here?"

"Watching over dead men's bones," replied the bravo doggedly.

"Never lie to the devil,—you will neither deceive him nor me! Not that I dispute any man's right to be hanged or stabbed—least of all thine, Don Giovan."

"'Tis for another to regulate all such honours," replied the bravo. "And it is an old saying, never trust a horse or a woman!"

Benilo started as if the bravo had read his thoughts.

"You prate in enigmas," he said after a pause. "I will be brief with you and plain. We should not scratch, when we tickle. I am looking for an honest rogue. I need a trusty and discreet varlet, who can keep his tongue between his teeth and forget not only his master's name, but his own likewise. Have you the quality?"

John of the Catacombs stared at the speaker as if at a loss to comprehend his meaning. Instead of answering he glanced uneasily in the direction of the river.

"Speak out, man, my time is brief," urged the Chamberlain, "I have learned to value your services even in the harm you have wrought, and if you will enter my service, you shall some day hang the keys of a nobler tower on your girdle than you ever dreamt of."

The bravo winced, but did not reply. Suddenly he raised his head as if listening. A sound resembling the faint splash of an oar broke the stillness. A yell vibrated through the air, a louder splash was heard, then all was deep silence as before.

"That sounded not like the prayer of a Christian soul departing," Benilo said with an involuntary shudder, noting the grin of satisfaction which passed over the outlaw's face. "What was that?"

"Of my evil brother an evil instrument," replied John of the Catacombs enigmatically.

"I fear you will have to learn manners in my school, Don Giovan," said Benilo in return. "But your answer. Are you ready?"

"This very night?" gasped the bravo, suspecting the offer and fearful of a snare.

"Why not?" demanded the Chamberlain curtly.

"I am bound in another's service!"

"You are an over-punctilious rogue, Don Giovan.

To-morrow then!"

"Agreed!" gurgled the bravo, extending a monstrously large hand from under his gown, with a forefinger of extraordinary length, on the end of which there was a wart.

Benilo pretended not to see the proffered member. But before addressing himself further to John of the Catacombs he glanced round cautiously.

"Are we alone?"

The bravo nodded.

"Is my presence here not proof enough?"

The argument prevailed.

"To our business then!" Benilo replied guardedly, seating himself upon a fragment of granite and watching every gesture of the bravo.

"There arrived to-day in Rome, Eckhardt the general. His welfare is very dear to me! I should be disconsolate came he to harm in the exercise of his mission, whatever that be!"

There was a brief pause during which their eyes met.

The outlaw's face twitched strangely. Or was it the play of the moonbeams?

"Being given to roaming at random round the city," Benilo continued, speaking very slowly as if to aid the bravo's comprehension, "for such is their wont in their own wildernesses,—I am fearful he might go astray,—and the Roman temper is uncertain. Yet is Eckhardt so fearless, that he would

scorn alike warning or precaution. Therefore I would have you dog his footsteps from afar,—but let him not suspect your presence, if you wish to see the light of another morning. Wear your monk's habit, it becomes you! You look as lean and hungry and wolfish as a hermit of twelve years' halo, who feeds on wild roots and snails. But to me you will each day report the points of interest, which the German leader has visited, that I too may become familiar with their attraction. Do I speak plainly?"

"I will follow him as his shadow," gurgled the bravo.

Benilo held out a purse which John of the Catacombs greedily devoured with his eyes.

"You are a greedy knave," he said at last with a forced laugh. "But since you love gold so dearly, you shall feast your eyes on it till they tire of its sheen. Be ready at my first call and remember—secrecy and despatch!"

"When shall it be?" queried the bravo.

"A matter of a day or two at best—no longer! Meanwhile you will improve your antiquarian learning by studying the walks of Rome in company with the German general. But remember your distance, unless you would meet the devil's grandame instead of creeping back to your hovels. And where, by the way, may a pair of good eyes discover John of the Catacombs in case of urgent need?"

The bravo seemed to ponder.

"There is an old inn behind the Forum. It will save your messenger the trouble to seek me in the Catacombs. Have him ask for the lame brother of the Penitents,—but do not write, for I cannot read it."

Benilo nodded.

"If I can trust you, the gain will be yours," he said. "And now—lead the way!"

John of the Catacombs preceded his new patron through the tall weeds which almost concealed him from view, until they reached a clearing not far from the river, whose turbid waves rolled sluggishly towards Ostia. Here they parted, the bravo retracing his steps towards the region whence they had come, while Benilo made for the gorge between Mounts Aventine and Testaccio. It was an ill-famed vale, noted even in remote antiquity for the gross orgies whence it had gained its evil repute, after the cult of Isis had been brought from Egypt to Rome.

The hour was not far from midnight. The moon had passed her zenith and was declining in the horizon. Her pale spectral rays cast an uncertain light over the region and gave the shadows a weird and almost threatening prominence. In this gorge there dwelt one Dom Sabbat, half sorcerer, half madman, towards whose habitation Benilo now directed his steps. He was not long reaching a low structure, half concealed between tall weeds and high boulders. Swiftly approaching, Benilo knocked

at the door. After a wait of some duration shuffling foot steps were to be heard within. A door was being unbarred, then the Chamberlain could distinguish the unfastening of chains, accompanied by a low dry cough. At last the low door was cautiously opened and he found himself face to face with an almost shapeless form in the long loose habit of the cloister, ending in a peaked cowl, cut as it seemed out of one cloth, and covering the face as well as the back of the head, barring only two holes for the eyes and a slit for the mouth. After the uncanny host had, by the light of a lantern, which he could shade at will, peered closely into his visitor's face, he silently nodded, beckoning the other to enter and carefully barred the door behind him. Through a low, narrow corridor, Dom Sabbat led the way to a sort of kitchen, such as an alchemist might use for his experiments and with many grotesque bends bade his visitor be seated, but Benilo declined curtly, for he was ill at ease.

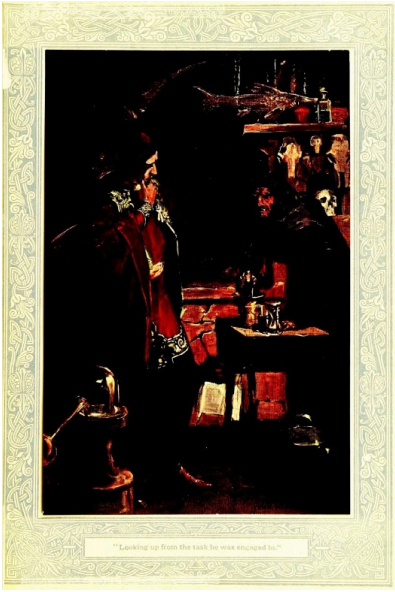
"I have little time to spare," he said, scarcely noticing the alchemist's obeisance, "and less inclination to enter into particulars. Give me what I want and let me be gone out of this atmosphere, which is enough to stifle the lungs of an honest man."

"Hi, hi, my illustrious friend," fawned the other with evident enjoyment of his patron's impatience. "Was the horoscope not right to a minute? Did not

the charm work its unpronounced intent?"

"'Tis well you remind me! It required six stabs to finish your bungling work! See to it, that you do not again deceive me!"

"You say six stabs?" replied Dom Sabbat, looking up from the task he was engaged in, of mixing some substances in a mortar. "Yet Mars was in the Cancer and the fourth house of the Sun. But perhaps the gentleman had eaten river-snails with nutmeg or taken a bath in snake skins and stags-antlers?"



"Looking up from the task he was engaged in."

"To the devil with your river-snails!" exploded Benilo. "The love-philtre and quickly,—else I will have you smoked out of your devil's lair ere the moon be two hours older!"

The alchemist shook his head, as if pained by his patron's ill temper. Yet he could not abstain from tantalizing him by assuming a misapprehension of his meaning.

"The hour," he mumbled slowly, and with studied hesitation, "is not propitious. Evil planets are in the ascendant and the influence of your good genius is counteracted by antagonistic spells."

"Fool!" growled Benilo, at the same time raising his foot as if to spurn the impostor like a dog. "You keep but one sort of wares such as I require,—let me have the strongest."

Neither the gesture nor the insult were lost on Dom Sabbat, yet he preserved a calm and imperturbable demeanour, while, as if soliloquizing, he continued his irritating inquiries.

"A love-philtre? They are priceless indeed;—even a nun,—three drops of that clear tasteless fluid,—and she were yours."

Again Benilo's lips straightened in a hard, drawn line. Stooping over the alchemist, he whispered two words into his ear, which caused Dom Sabbat to glance up with such an expression of horror that Benilo involuntarily burst into a loud laugh, which sent the other spinning to his task.

Ransacking some remote corner in his devil's kitchen he at last produced a tiny phial, which he wrapped in a thin scroll. This he placed with trembling hands into those eagerly stretched out to grasp it and received therefor a hand full of gold coin, the weight of which seemed to indicate that secrecy was to constitute no small portion of the bargain.

After having conducted his visitor to the entrance, where he took leave of him with many bends of the head and manifold protestations of devotion, Dom Sabbat locked his abode and Benilo hastened towards the city.

As he mentally surveyed the events of the evening even to their remotest consequences, he seemed to have neglected no precaution, nor omitted anything which might eventually prevent him from triumphing over his opponents. But even while reviewing with a degree of satisfaction the business of the night, terrible misgivings, like dream shadows, drooped over his mind. After all it was a foolhardy challenge he had thrown to fate. Maddened by the taunts of a woman, he had arrayed forces against himself which he must annihilate, else they would tear him to pieces. The time for temporizing had passed. He stood on the crater of a volcano, and his ears, trained to the sounds of danger, could hear the fateful rumbling in the depths below.

In that fateful hour there ripened in the brain of

Benilo the Chamberlain a thought, destined in its final consequences to subvert a dynasty. After all there was no security for him in Rome, while the Germans held sway in the Patrimony of St. Peter. But —indolent and voluptuous as he was—caring for nothing save the enjoyment of the moment, how was he to wield the thunderbolt for their destruction, how was he to accomplish that, in which Crescentius had failed, backed by forces equal to those of the foreigners and entrenched in his impregnable stronghold?

As Benilo weighed the past against the future, the scales of his crimes sank so deeply to earth that, had Mercy thrown her weight in the balance it would not have changed the ultimate decree of Retribution. Only the utter annihilation of the foreign invaders could save him. Eckhardt's life might be at the mercy of John of the Catacombs. The poison phial might accomplish what the bravo's dagger failed to do,—but one thing stood out clearly and boldly in his mind; the German leader must not live! Theodora dared not win the wager,—but even therein lay the greater peril. The moment she scented an obstacle in her path, she would move all the powers of darkness to remove it and it required little perspicuity to point out the source, whence it proceeded.

At the thought of the humiliation he had received at her hands, Benilo gnashed his teeth in impotent rage. His pride, his vanity, his self-love,

had been cruelly stabbed. He might retaliate by rousing her fear. But if she had passed beyond the point of caring?

As, wrapt in dark ruminations, Benilo followed the lonely path, which carried him toward the city, there came to him a thought, swift and sudden, which roused the evil nature within him to its highest tension.

Could his own revenge be more complete than by using his enemies, one for the destruction of the other? And as for the means,—Theodora herself would furnish them. Meanwhile—how would Johannes Crescentius bear the propinquity of his hereditary foe, the emperor? Might not the Senator be goaded towards the fateful brink of rebellion? Then,—Romans and Germans once more engaged in a death grapple,—his own time would come, must come, the time of victory and ultimate triumph.

CHAPTER VII

THE VISION OF SAN PANCRAZIO



wo days had elapsed since Eckhardt's arrival in Rome. At the close of each day, he had met

Benilo on the Palatine, each time renewing the topic of their former discourse. Benilo had listened attentively and, with all the eloquence at his command, had tried to dissuade the commander from taking a step so fateful in its remotest consequences. On the evening of the third day the Chamberlain had displayed a strange disquietude and replied to Eckhardt's questions with a wandering mind. Then without disclosing the nature of the business which he professed to have on hand, they parted earlier than had been their wont.

The shades of evening began to droop with phantom swiftness. Over the city brooded the great peace of an autumnal twilight. The last rays of the sun streaming from between a heavy cloud-bank, lay across the landscape in broad zones of brilliancy. In the pale green sky, one by one, the evening stars began to appear, but through the distant cloud-bank quivered summer lightning like the waving of fiery whips.

Feeling that sleep would not come to him in his present wrought up state of mind, Eckhardt resolved to revisit the spot which held the dearest he had possessed on earth. Perhaps, that prayer at the grave of Ginevra would bring peace to his soul and rest to his wearied heart. His feet bore him onward unawares through winding lanes and deserted streets until he reached the gate of San Sebastiano. There, he left the road for a turfy hollow, where groups of

black cypress trees stretched out their branches like spectral arms, uplifted to warn back intruders. He stood before the churchyard of San Pancrazio.

Pausing for a moment irresolutely before its gloomy portals Eckhardt seemed to waver before entering the burial ground. Hushing his footsteps, as from a sense of awe, he then followed the well-known path. The black foliage drooped heavily over him; it seemed to draw him in and close him out of sight, and although there was scarcely any breeze, the dying leaves above rustled mysteriously, like voices whispering some awful secret, known to them alone. A strange mystery seemed to pervade the silence of their sylvan shadows, a mystery, dread, unfathomable, and guessed by none. With a dreary sense of oppression, yet drawn onward by some mysterious force, Eckhardt followed the path, which here and there was over-grown with grass and weeds. Uneasily he lifted the overhanging branches and peered between the dense and luminous foliage. Up and down he wistfully gazed, now towards the winding path, lined by old gravestones, leading to the cloister; now into the shadowy depths of the shrubbery. At times he paused to listen. Never surely was there such a silence anywhere as here. The murmur of the distant stream was lost. The leaves seemed to nod drowsily, as out of the depths of a dream and the impressive stillness of the place seemed a silent protest against the solitary intruder,

a protest from the dead, whose slumber the muffled echo of his footsteps disturbed.

For the first time Eckhardt repented of his nocturnal visit to the abode of the dead. Seized with a strange fear, his presence in the churchyard at this hour seemed to him an intrusion, and after a moment or two of silent musing he turned back, finding it impossible to proceed. Absently he gazed at the decaying flowers, which turned their faces up to him in apparent wonderment; the ferns seemed to nod and every separate leaf and blade of grass seemed to question him silently on the errand of his visit. Surely no one, watching Eckhardt at this place and at this hour, if there was such a one near by chance, would have recognized in him the stern soldier who had twice stormed the walls of Rome.

Onward he walked as in the memory of a dream, a strange dream, which had visited him on the preceding night, and which now suddenly waked in his memory. It was a vague haunting thing, a vision of a great altar, of many candles, of himself in a gown of sack-cloth, striving to light them and failing again and again, yet still seeing their elusive glare in a continual flicker before his eyes. And as he mused upon his dream his heart grew heavy in his breast. He had grown cowardly of pity and renewed grief.

Following a winding path, so overgrown with moss that his footsteps made no sound upon it, which he believed would lead him out of the

churchyard, Eckhardt was staggered by the discovery that he had walked in a circle, for almost directly before him rose the grassy knoll tufted with palms, between which shone the granite monument over Ginevra's grave. Believing at this moment more than ever in his life in signs and portents, Eckhardt slowly ascended the sloping ground, now oblivious alike to sight and sound, and lost in the depths of his own thoughts. Bitter thoughts they were and dreamily vague, such as fever and nightmare bring to us. Relentlessly all the long-fought misery swept over him again, burying him beneath waves so vast, that time and space seemed alike to vanish. He knelt at the grave and with a fervour such as is born of a mind completely lost in the depths of mysticism, he prayed that he might once more behold Ginevra, as her image lived in his memory. The vague deep-rooted misery in his heart was concentrated in this greatest desire of his life, the desire to look once more upon her, who had gone from him for ever.

After having exhausted all the pent-up fervour of his soul Eckhardt was about to rise, little strengthened and less convinced of the efficacy of his prayer, when his eyes were fixed upon the tall apparition of a woman, who stood in the shadow of the cypress trees and seemed to regard him with a strange mixture of awe and mournfulness. With parted lips and rigid features, the life's blood frozen in his veins, Eckhardt stared at the apparition, his

face covered with a pallor more deadly than that of the phantom, if phantom indeed it was. A long white shroud fell in straight folds from her head to her feet, but the face was exposed, and as he gazed upon it, at once so calm and so passionate, so cold and yet so replete with life,—he knew it was Ginevra who stood before him. Her eyes, strangely undimmed by death, burnt into his very soul, and his heart began to palpitate with a mad longing. Spreading out his arms in voiceless entreaty, the half-choken outcry: "Ginevra! Ginevra!" came from his lips, a cry in which was mingled at once the most supreme anguish and the most supreme love.

But as the sound of his voice died away, the apparition had vanished, and seemed to have melted into air. Only a lizard sped over the stone in the moonlight and in the branches of the cypress trees above resounded the scream of some startled night-bird. Then everything faded in vague unconsciousness, across which flitted lurid lights and a face that suddenly grew dim in the strange and tumultuous upheaval of his senses. The single moment had seemed an hour, so fraught with strange and weird impressions.

Dazed, half-mad, his brow bathed in cold dew, Eckhardt staggered to his feet and glanced round like one waking from a dream. The churchyard of San Pancrazio was deserted. Not another human being was to be seen. Surely his senses, strangely

overwrought though they were, had not deceived him. Here,—close beside him,—the apparition had stood but a moment ago; with his own eyes he had seen her, yet no human foot had trampled the fantastic tangle of creepers, that lay in straggling length upon the emerald turf. He lingered no longer to reason. His brain was in a fiery whirl. Like one demented, Eckhardt rushed from the church-yard. There was at this moment in his heart such a pitiful tumult of broken passions, hopelessness and despair, that the acute, unendurable pain came later.

As yet, half of him refused to accept the revelation. The very thought crushed him with a weight of rocks. Amid the deceitful shadows of night he had fallen prey to that fear from which the bravest are not exempt in such surroundings. The distinctness of his perception forbade him to doubt the testimony of his senses. Yet, what he had seen, was altogether contrary to reason. A thousand thoughts and surmises, one wilder than the other, whirled confusedly through his brain. A great benumbing agony gnawed at his heart. That, which he in reason should have regarded as a great boon began to affect him like a mortal injury. By fate or some mysterious agency he had been permitted to see her once more, but the yearning had increased, for not a word had the apparition vouchsafed him, and from his arms, extended in passionate entreaty, it had fled into the night, whence it had arisen.

Accustomed to the windings of the churchyard, Eckhardt experienced little difficulty in finding his way out. He paced through the wastes of Campo Marzio at a reckless speed, like a madman escaped from his guards. His brain was aflame; his cheeks, though deadly pale, burned as from the hidden fires of a fever. The phenomenon had dazzled his eyes like the keen zigzag of a lightning flash. Even now he saw her floating before him, as in a luminous whirlwind, and he felt, that never to his life's end could he banish her image from his heart. His love for the dead had grown to vastness like those plants, which open their blossoms with a thunder clap. He felt no longer master of himself, but like one whose chariot is carried by terrified and uncontrollable steeds towards some steep rock bristling precipice.

Gradually, thanks to the freshness of the night-air, Eckhardt became a little more calm. Feeling now but half convinced of the reality of the vision, he sought by the authentication of minor details to convince himself that he was not the victim of some strange hallucination. But he felt, to his dismay, that every natural explanation tell short of the truth, and his own argumentation was anything but convincing.

In the climax of wonderment Eckhardt had questioned himself, whether he might not actually be walking in a dream; he even seriously asked himself whether madness was not parading its phantoms before his eyes. But he soon felt constrained to

admit, that he was neither asleep nor mad. Thus he began gradually to accept the fact of Ginevra's presence, as in a dream we never question the intervention of persons actually long dead, but who nevertheless seem to act like living people.

The moon was sinking through the azure when Eckhardt passed the Church of the Hermits on Mount Aventine. The portals were open; the ulterior dimly lighted. The spirit of repentance burned at fever heat in the souls of the Romans. From day-break till midnight, and from midnight till day-break, there rose under the high vaulted arches an incessant hum of prayer. The penitential cells, the vaults underneath the chapels, were never empty. The crowds which poured into the city from all the world were ever increasing, and the myriad churches, chapels and chantries rang night and day with Kyrie Eleison litanies and sermons, purporting to portray the catastrophe, the hail of brimstone and fire, until the terrified listeners dashed away amid shrieks and yells, shaken to the inmost depths of their hearts with the fear that was upon them.

There were still some belated worshippers within, and as Eckhardt ascended the stone steps, he was seized with an incontrollable desire to have speech with Nilus, the hermit of Gaëta, who, he had been told, was holding forth in the Church of the Hermits. To him he would confess all, that sorely troubled his mind, seeking his counsel and advice.

The immense blackness within the Basilica stretched vastly upward into its great arching roof, giving to him who stood pigmy-like within it, an oppression of enormity. Black was the centre of the Nave and unutterably still. A few torches in remote shrines threw their lugubrious light down the aisles. The pale faces of kneeling monks came now and then into full relief, when the scant illumination shifted, stirred by ever so faint a breath of air, heavy with the scent of flowers and incense.

Almost succumbing under the strain of superstitious awe, exhausted in body and mind by the strange malady, which had seized his soul, his senses reeling under the fumes of incense and the funereal chant of the monks, his eyes burning with the fires of unshed tears, Eckhardt sank down before the image of the Mother of God, striving in vain to form a coherent prayer.

How long he had thus remained he knew not. The sound of footsteps in the direction of the North transept roused him after a time to the purpose of his presence. Following the direction indicated to him by one of the sacristans, Eckhardt groped his way through the dismal gloom towards the enclosure where Nilus of Gaëta was supposed to hold his dark sessions. By the dim light of a lamp he perceived in the confessional the shadowy form of a monk, and approaching the wicket, he greeted the occupant with a humble bend of the head. But, what was

visible of the monk's countenance was little calculated to relieve the oppression which burdened Eckhardt's soul.

From the mask of the converted cynic peered the eyes of a fanatic. The face was one, which might have suggested to Luca Signorelli the traits of his Anti-Christ in the Capella Nuova at Orvieto. In the deep penetrating eyes was reflected the final remorse of the wisdom, which had renounced its maker. The face was evil. Yet it was a face of infinite grief, as if mourning the eternal fall of man.

Despite the advanced hour of night the monk was still in his seat of confession, and the mighty leader of the German host, wrapt in his long military cloak, knelt before the emaciated anchorite, his face, manner and voice all betraying a great weariness of mind. A look of almost bodily pain appeared in Eckhardt's stern countenance as, at the request of the monk, who had receded within the gloom of the confessional, he recounted the phenomena of the night, after having previously acquainted him with the burden of his grief.

The monk listened attentively to the weird tale and shook his head.

"I am most strangely in my senses," Eckhardt urged, noting the monk's gesture. "I have seen her,—whether in the body, or the spirit, I know not,—but I have seen her."

"I have listened, my son," said the monk after a

pause, in his low sepulchral voice.—"Ginevra loved you,—so you say. What could have wrought a change in her, such as you hint? For if she loved you in life, she loves you in death. Why should she—supposing her present—flee from your outstretched arms? If your love could compel her to return from the beyond,—why should it lack the power to make the phantom give response?"

"Could I but fathom that mystery,—could I but fathom it!"

"Did you not speak to her?"

"My lips but uttered her name!"

"I am little versed in matters of this kind," the monk replied in a strange tone. "'Tis but the natural law, which may not be transgressed with impunity. Is your faith so small, that you would rather uproot the holiest ties, than deem yourself the victim of some hallucination, mayhap some jeer of the fiend? Dare you raise yourself on a pedestal, which takes from her her defenceless virtue, cold and silent as her lips are in death?"

Every word of the monk struck Eckhardt's heart with a thousand pangs. A deep groan broke from his lips.

"Madman that I was," he muttered at last, "to think that such a tale was fit for mortal ears."

Then he turned to the monk.

"Have you no solace to give to me, no light upon the dark path, I am about to enter upon,—the life of

the cloister, where I shall end my days?"

There was a long pause. Surprise seemed to have struck the monk dumb. Eckhardt's heart beat stormily in anticipation of the anchorite's reply.

"But," a voice sounded from the gloom, "have you the patience, the humility, which it behooves the recluse to possess, and without which all prayers and penances are in vain?"

"Show me how I can humble myself more, than at this hour, when I renounce a life of glory, ambition and command. All I want is peace,—that peace which has forsaken me since her death!"

His last words died in a groan.

"Peace," repeated the monk. "You seek peace in the seclusion of the cloister, in holy devotions. I thought Eckhardt of too stern a mould, to be goaded and turned from his duty by a mere whim, a pale phantom."

A long silence ensued.

"Father," said the Margrave at last, speaking in a low and broken voice, "I have done no act of wrong. I will do no act of wrong, while I have control over myself. But the thought of the dead haunts me night and day. Otto has no further need of me. Rome is pacified. The life at court is irksome to me. The king loves to surround himself with perfumed popinjays, discarding the time-honoured customs of our Northland for the intricate polity of the East.—There is no place for Eckhardt in that sphere of mummery."

For a few moments the monk meditated in silence.

"It grieves me to the heart," he spoke at last, "to hear a soldier confess to being tempted into a life of eternal abnegation. I judge it to be a passing madness, which distance and work alone can cure. You are not fitted in the sight of God and His Mother for the spiritual life, for in Mezentian thraldom you have fettered your soul to a corpse in its grave, a sin as black as if you had been taken in adultery with the dead. Remain in Rome no longer! Return to your post on the boundaries of the realm. There,—in your lonely tent, pray nightly to the Immaculate One for her blessing and pass the day in the saddle among the scattered outposts of your command! The monks of Rome shall not be festered by the presence among them of your fevered soul, and you are sorely needed by God and His Son for martial life."

"Father, you know not all!" Eckhardt replied after a brief pause, during which he lay prostrate, writhing in agony and despair. "From youth up have I lived as a man of war.—To this I was bred by my sire and grandsire of sainted memory. I have always hoped to die on some glorious field. But it is all changed. I, who never feared mortal man, am trembling before a shadow. My love for her, who is no more, has made me a coward. I tremble to think that I may not find her in the darkness, whither soon I may be going. To this end alone I would purchase

the peace, which has departed. The thought of her has haunted me night and day, ever since her death! How often in the watches of the night, on the tented field, have I lain awake in silent prayer, once more to behold her face, that I can never more forget!"

There was another long pause, during which the monk cast a piercing glance at the prostrate soldier. Slowly at last the voice came from the shadows.

"Then you still believe yourself thus favoured?"

"So firmly do I believe in the reality of the vision, that I am here to ask your blessing and your good offices with the Prior of St. Cosmas in the matter closest to my heart."

"Nay," the monk replied as if speaking to himself, "if you have indeed been favoured with a vision, then were it indeed presumptuous in one, the mere interpreter of the will divine, to oppose your request! You have chosen a strict brotherhood, though, for when your novitiate is ended, you will not be permitted to ever again leave the walls of the cloister."

"Such is my choice," replied Eckhardt. "And now your blessing and intercession, father. Let the time of my novitiate be brief!"

"I will do what I can," replied the monk, then he added slowly and solemnly:

"Christ accepts your obedience and service! I purge you of your sins in the name of the Trinity and the Mother of God, into whose holy keeping I now

commit you! Go in peace!"

"I go!" muttered the Margrave, rising exhausted from his long agony and staggering down the dark aisles of the church.

Eckhardt's footsteps had no sooner died away in the gloom of the high-vaulted arches, than two shadows emerged from behind a pillar and moved noiselessly down towards the refectory.

In the dim circle of light emanating from the tapers round the altar, they faced each other a moment.

"What ails the Teuton?" muttered the Grand Chamberlain, peering into the muffled countenance of the pseudo-confessor.

"He upbraids the fiend for cheating him of the smile of a corpse," the monk Cyprianus replied with strangely jarring voice.

"And yet you fear I will lose my wager?" sneered the Chamberlain.

The monk shrugged his shoulders.

"They have a proverb in Ferrara: 'He who may not eat a peach, may not smell at it.'"

"And you were not revealed to him, you, for whom he has scoured the very slime of the Tiber?" Benilo queried, ignoring the monk's facetiousness.

"'Tis sad to think, what changes time has wrought," replied the latter with downcast eyes. "Truly it behooves us to think of the end,—the end of time!"

And without another word the monk passed down the aisles and his tall form was swallowed in the gloom of the Church of the Hermits.

"The end!" Benilo muttered to himself as he thoughtfully gazed after the monk. "Croak thou thine own doom, Cyprianus! One soul weighs as much as another in the devil's balance!"

With these words Benilo passed through the portals of the church and was soon lost to sight among the ruins of the Aventine.

CHAPTER VIII

CASTEL SAN ANGELO



ight had spread her pinions over the ancient capital of the Cæsars and deepest silence had succeeded the thousand cries and noises of the day. Few belated strollers still lingered in the deserted squares. Under the shadows of the Borgo Vecchio slow moving figures could be seen flitting noiselessly as phantoms through the marble ruins of antiquity, pausing for a moment under the high unlighted arches, talking in undertones and vanishing in the night, while the remote swell of monkish chants,

monotonous and droning, died on the evanescent breezes.

Round Castel San Angelo, rising, a giant Mausoleum, vast and sombre out of the solitudes of the Flaminian Way, night wove a more poetic air of mystery and quiet, and but for the tread of the ever wakeful sentinels on its ramparts, the colossal tomb of the emperor Hadrian would have appeared a deserted Memento Mori of Imperial Rome, the possession of which no one cared to dispute with the shades of the Cæsars or the ghosts of the mangled victims, which haunted the intricate labyrinth of its subterranean chambers and vaults.

A pale moon was rising behind the hills of Albano, whose ghostly rays cast an unsteady glow over the undulating expanse of the Roman Campagna, and wove a pale silver mounting round the crest of the imperial tomb, whose towering masses seemed to stretch interminably into the night, as if oppressed with their own memories.

What a monstrous melodrama was contained in yonder circular walls! They wore a comparatively smiling look only in the days when Castel San Angelo received the dead. Then according to the historian Procopius, the immense three-storied rotunda, surmounted by a pyramidal roof had its sides covered with Parian marble, intersected with columns and surmounted with a ring of Grecian statues. The first story was a quadrangular basement,

decorated with festoons and tablets of funeral inscriptions, colossal equestrian groups in gilt bronze at the four corners.

Within the memory of living generation, this pile had been the theatre of a tragedy, almost unparalleled in the annals of Rome, the scene of the wildest Saturnalia, that ever stained the history of mediæval state. An incongruous relic of antique profligacy and the monstrosities of the lower empire, drawing its fatal power from feudal institutions, Theodora, a woman illustrious for her beauty and rank, had at the dawn of the century quartered herself in Castel San Angelo. From there she exercised over Rome a complete tyranny, sustained against German influence by an Italian party, which counted amongst its chiefs Adalbert, Count of Tuscany, the father of this second Messalina. Her fateful beauty ruled Church and state. Theodora caused one pontiff after another to be deposed and nominated eight popes successively. She had a daughter as beautiful and as powerful as herself and still more depraved. Marozia, as she was called, reigned supreme in Castel San Angelo and caused the election of Sergius III, Anastasius III and John X, the latter a creature of Theodora, who had him appointed to the bishopric of Ravenna. Intending to deprive Theodora and her lover, the Pope, of the dominion of Rome, Marozia invaded the Lateran with a band of ruffians, put to the sword the brother

of the Pope, and incarcerated the pontiff, who died in prison either by poison or otherwise. Tradition relates that his corpse was placed in Theodora's bed, and superstition believes that he was strangled by the devil as a punishment for his sins.

Left as widow by the premature death of the Count of Tusculum and married to Guido, Prince of Tuscany, Marozia, after the demise of her second husband, was united by a third marriage to Hugo of Provence, brother of Guido. Successively she placed on the pontifical throne Leo VI and Stephen VIII, then she gave the tiara to John XI, her younger son. One of her numerous offspring imprisoned in the same dungeon both his mother and his brother, the Pope, and then destroyed them. Rumour hath it, however, that a remote descendant, who had inherited Marozia's fatal beauty, had been mysteriously abducted at an early age and concealed in a convent, to save her from the contamination and licentiousness, which ran riot in the blood of the women of her house. She had been heard of no more and forgotten long ago.

After the changes and vicissitudes of half a century the family of the Crescentii had taken possession of Castel San Angelo, keeping their state in the almost impregnable stronghold, without which the possession of Rome availed but little to any conqueror. It was a period marked by brutal passions and feudal anarchy. The Romans had degenerated to

the low estate of the barbarian hordes, which had during the great upheaval extinguished the light of the Western empire. The Crescentii traced their origin even to that Theodora of evil fame, who had perished in the dungeons of the formidable keep, and Johannes Crescentius, the present Senator and Patricius, seemed wrapt in dark ruminations, as from the window of a chamber in the third gallery he looked out into the night, gazing upon the eddying Tiber below, bordered by dreary huts, thinly interspersed with ilex, and the barren wastes, from which rose massive watch-towers. Far away to Southward sloped the Alban hills. From the dark waving greens of Monte Pincio the eye, wandering along the ridge of the Quirinal, reached to the mammoth arches of Constantine's Basilica, to the cypress bluffs of Aventine. Almost black they looked at the base, so deep was their shade, contrasted with the spectral moon-light, which flooded their eminences.

The chamber in which the Senator of Rome paced to and fro, was large and exceedingly gloomy, being lighted only by a single taper which threw all objects it did not touch into deep shadow. This fiery illumination, casting its uncertain glimmer upon the face of Crescentius, revealed thereon an expression of deepest gloom and melancholy and his thoughts seemed to roam far away.

The workings of time, the traces of furious

passions, the lines wrought by care and sorrow were evident in the countenance of the Senator of Rome and sometimes gave it in the eyes of the physiognomist an expression of melancholy and devouring gloom. Only now and then there shot athwart his features, like lightning through a distant cloud-bank, a look of more strenuous daring—of almost terrifying keenness, like the edge of a bare and sharpened sword.

The features of Johannes Crescentius were regular, almost severe in their classic outlines. It was the Roman type, softened by centuries of amalgamation with the descendants of the invading tribes of the North. The Lord of Castel San Angelo was in the prime of manhood. The dark hair was slightly touched with gray, his complexion bronzed. The gray eyes with their glow like polished steel had a Brutus-like expression, grave and impenetrable.

The hour marked the close of a momentous interview. Benilo, the Grand Chamberlain, had just left the Senator's presence. He had been the bearer of strange news which, if it proved true, would once more turn the tide of fortune in the Senator's favour. He had urged Crescentius to make the best of the opportunity—the moment might never return again. He had unmasked a plot, the plausibility of which had even staggered the Senator's sagacious mind. At first Crescentius had fiercely resented the Chamberlain's suggestions, but by degrees his

resistance had lessened and after his departure the course outlined by Benilo seemed to hold rut a strange fascination.

After glancing at the sand-clock on the table Crescentius ascended the narrow winding stairs leading to the upper galleries of the formidable keep, whose dark, blackened walls were lighted by tapers in measured intervals, and made his way through a dark passage, until he reached the door of an apartment at the opposite end of the corridor. He knocked and receiving no response, entered, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

On the threshold he paused taking in at a glance the picture before him.

The apartment was of moderate size. The lamp in the oratory was turned low. The windows facing the Campagna were open and the soft breeze of night stole into the flower-scented room. There was small semblance of luxury about the chamber, which was flanked on one side by an oratory, on the other, by a sleeping room, whose open door permitted a glimpse of a great, high bed, hung with draperies of sarcenet.

On a couch, her head resting on her bare, white arms reclined Stephania, the consort of the Senator of Rome. Tenderly the night wind caressed the soft dark curls, which stole down her brow. Her right hand supported a head exquisitely beautiful, while the fingers of the left played mechanically with the folds of her robe. Zoë, her favourite maiden, sat in

silence on the floor, holding in her lap a red and blue bird, which now and then flapped its wings and gave forth a strange cry. All else was silent within and without.

Stephania's thoughts dwelt in bygone days.

Listless and silent she reclined in her pillows, reviewing the past in pictures that mocked her soul. Till a few hours ago she had believed that she had conquered that madness. But something had inflamed her hatred anew and she felt like a goddess bent upon punishing the presumption of mortal man.

The memory of her husband holding the emperor's stirrup upon the latter's entry into Rome had rekindled in her another thought which she most of all had striven to forget. It alone had, to her mind, sufficed to make reconciliation to existing conditions impossible. Shame and hate seethed anew in her soul. She could have strangled the son of Theophano with her own hands.

But did Crescentius himself wish to break the shackles which were forever to destroy the prestige of a noble house, that had for more than a century ruled the city of Rome? Was he content to be the lackey of that boy, before whom a mighty empire bowed, a youth truly, imbued with the beauty of body and soul which fall but rarely to one mortal's lot—but yet a youth, a barbarian, the descendant of the Nomad tribes of the great upheaval? Was there no one, worthy of the name of a great Roman, who

would cement the disintegrated states of Italy, plant his standards upon the Capitol and proclaim himself lord of new Roman world? And he, her husband, from whom at one time she had expected such great things, was he not content with his lot? Was he not at this very moment offering homage to the despised foreigners, kissing the sandals of a heretical pope, whom a bribed Conclave had placed in the chair of St. Peter through the armed manifestation of an emperor's will?

The walls of Castel San Angelo weighed upon her like lead, since Rome was again defiled by these Northern barbarians, whom her countrymen were powerless to repulse, whom they dared not provoke and under whose insolence they smarted. Stephania heaved a deep sigh. Then everything faded from her vision, like a landscape shrouded in mist and she relapsed in twilight dreams of a past that had gone forever.

For a moment Crescentius lingered on the threshold, as if entranced by the vision of her loveliness. The stern and anxious look, which his face had worn during the interview with the Chamberlain, passed off like a summer storm, as he stood before his adored wife. She started, as his shadow darkened the doorway, but the next moment he was at her side, and taking both her white hands in his, he drew her towards him and gazed with love and scrutiny into the velvet depths of her eyes.

For a moment her manner seemed slightly embarrassed and there was something in her tone which did not escape the Senator's trained ear.

"I am glad you came," she said after the usual interchange of greetings such as lovers indulge in when brought together after a brief separation. "My lord's time has been greatly occupied in the emperor's absence."

Crescentius failed not to note the reproach in the tone of his wife, even through her smile. She seemed more radiantly beautiful than ever at this moment.

"And what would my queen have?" he asked. "All I have, or ever shall have, is hers."

"Queen indeed,—queen of a sepulcher, of the Mausoleum of an emperor," she replied scornfully. "But I ask not for jewels or palaces—or women's toys. I am my lord's helpmate. I am to take counsel in affairs of state."

A musing glance broke from the Senator's eyes.

"Affairs of state," he said, with a smile and a sigh. "Alas,—I hoped when I turned my back on Aventine, there would be love awaiting me and oblivion—in Stephania's arms. But I have strange news for you,—has it reached your ear?"

She shook her head. "I know of nothing stranger than the prevailing state."

He ignored the veiled reproach.

"Margrave Eckhardt of Meissen, the German commander-in-chief, is bent upon taking holy orders.

I thought it was an idle rumour, some gossip of the taverns, but within the hour it has been confirmed to me by a source whose authenticity is above doubt."

"And your informant?"

"Benilo, the Chamberlain."

"And whence this sudden world weariness?"

"The mastering grief for the death of his wife."

Stephania fell to musing.

"Benilo," she spoke after a time, "has his own ends in view—not yours. Trust him not!"

Crescentius felt a strange misgiving as he remembered his late discourse with the Chamberlain, and the latter's suggestion, the primary cause of his visit to Stephania's apartments.

"I fear you mistrust him needlessly," he said after a pause. "Benilo's friendship for the emperor is but the mantle, under which he conceals the lever that shall raise the Latin world."

Stephania gazed absently into space.

"As I lay dreaming in the evening light, looking out upon the city, which you should rule, by reason of your name, by reason of your descent,—of a truth, I did marvel at your patience."

A laugh of bitter scorn broke from the Senator's lips.

"Can the living derive force and energy from a past, that is forgotten? Rome does not want tragedies! It wants to be danced to, sung to and amused. Anything to make the rabble forget their

own abasement. 'Panem et Circenses' has been for ever their cry."

"Yet ours is a glorious race! Of a blood which has flowed untarnished in the veins of our ancestors for centuries. It has been our proud boast, that not a drop of the mongrel blood of foreign invaders ever tainted our own. It is not for the Roman rabble I grieve,—it is for ourselves."

"You have wondered at my patience, Stephania, at my endurance of the foreign yoke, at my seeming indifference to the traditions of our house. Would you, after all, counsel rebellion?"

"I would but have you remember, that you are a Roman," Stephania replied with her deep-toned voice. "Stephania's husband, and too good to hold an emperor's stirrup."

"Then indeed you sorely misjudge me, if you think that under this outward mask of serene submission there slumbers a spirit indifferent to the cause of Rome. If the prediction of Nilus is true, we have not much time to lose. Send the girl away! It is not well that she hear too much."

The last words, spoken in a whisper, caused Stephania to dismiss the Greek maid. Then she said:

"And do you too, my lord, believe in these monkish dreams?"

"The world cannot endure forever."

Crescentius paused, glanced round the apartment, as if to convince himself that there was

no other listener. Then he rose, and strode to the curtain, which screened the entrance to an inner chamber. Not until he had convinced himself that they were alone, did he resume his seat by the side of Stephania. Then he spoke in low and cautious accents:

"I have brooded over the present state, until I am well nigh mad. I have brooded ever since the first tidings of Otto's approach reached the city, how to make a last, desperate dash for freedom and our old rights. I have conceived a plan, as yet known to none but to myself. Too many hunters spoil the chase. We cannot count on the people. Long fasts and abstinences have made them cowards. Let them listen to the monks! Let them howl their Misereres! I will not break into their rogue's litany nor deprive them of their chance in purgatory."

He paused for a moment, as if endeavouring to bring order into his thoughts, then he continued, slowly.

"It is but seemly that the Romans in some way requite the affection so royally showered on them by the German King. Therefore it is in my mind to arrange such festivities in honour of Otto's return from the shrines of Monte Gargano, as shall cause him to forget the burden of government."

"And enhance his love for our sunny land," Stephania interposed.

"That malady is incurable," Crescentius replied.

"Otto is a fantastic. He dreams of making Rome the capital of the earth,—a madness harmless in itself, were it not for Bruno in the chair of St. Peter. Single handed their efforts might be stemmed. Their combined frenzy will sweep everything before it. These festivities are to dazzle the eyes of the stalwart Teutons whose commander is a very Cerberus of watchfulness. Under the cover of merry-making I shall introduce into Castel San Angelo such forces from the Calabrian themes as will supplant the lack of Roman defenders. And as for the Teutons—their souls will be ours through our women; their bodies through our men."

Crescentius paused. Stephania too was silent, less surprised at the message than its suddenness. She had never wholly despaired of him. Now his speech revealed to her that Crescentius could be as crafty in intrigue as he was bold in warfare. Proud as she was and averse to dissimulation the intrigue unmasked by the Senator yet fascinated her, as the only means to reach the long coveted goal. "Rome for the Romans" had for generations been the watchword of her house and so little pains had she taken to disguise her feelings that when upon some former occasion Otto had craved an audience of her, an unheard of condescension, inspired as much by her social position as by the fame of her unrivalled beauty, the imperial envoy had departed with an ill-disguised rebuff, and Stephania had shut herself up

within the walls of a convent till Otto and his hosts had returned beyond the Alps.

"Within one week, Eckhardt is to be consecrated," Crescentius continued with slight hesitation, as if not quite assured of the directness of his arguments with regard to the request he was about to prefer. "Every pressure is being brought to bear upon him, to keep him true to his purpose. Even a guard is—at Benilo's instigation—to be placed at the portals of St. Peter's to prevent any mischance whatsoever during the ceremony."

He paused, to watch the effect of his speech upon Stephania and to ascertain if he dared proceed. But as he gazed into the face of the woman he loved, he resolved that not a shadow of suspicion should ever cloud that white brow, caressed by the dark wealth of her silken hair.

"The German leader removed for ever," Crescentius continued, "immured alive within the inexorable walls of the cloister—small is indeed the chance for another German victory."

"But will King Otto acquiesce to lose his great leader?"

"Benilo is fast supplanting Eckhardt in Otto's favour. Benilo wishes what Otto wishes. Benilo sees what Otto sees. Benilo speaks what Otto thinks. Rome is pacified; Rome is content; Rome is happy; what need of heavy armament? Eckhardt reviles the Romans,—he reviles Benilo, he reviles the new state,

—he insists upon keeping his iron hosts in the Neronian field,—within sight of Castel San Angelo. It was to be Benilo or Eckhardt—you know the result."

"But if you were deceived," Stephania replied with a shudder. "Your eagle spirit often ascends where mine fails to follow. Yet,—be not over-bold."

"I am not deceived! I bide my time. 'Tis not by force men slay the rushing bull. Otto would regenerate the Roman world. But he himself is to be the God of his new state, a jealous God who brooks no rival—only subjects or slaves. He has nursed this dream until it is part of himself, of his own flesh and blood. What may you expect of a youth, who, not content to absorb the living, calls the dead to his aid? He shall nevermore recross the Alps alive."

Crescentius' tone grew gloomy as he continued.

"I bear the youth no grudge, nor ill-will.—But Rome cannot share. He has a power of which he is himself unconscious; it is the inheritance from his Hellenic mother. Were he conscious of its use, hardly the grave would be a safe refuge for us. Once Rome triumphed over Hellas. Shall Hellas trample Rome in the dust in the person of this boy, whose unspoken word will sweep our old traditions from the soil?"

"But this power, this weakness as you call it—what is it?" Stephania interposed, raising her head questioningly. "I know you have not scrutinized the armour, which encases that fantastic soul, without an effort to discover a flaw."

"And I have discovered it," Crescentius replied, his heart beating strangely. Stephania herself was leading up to the fatal subject of his visit; but in the depths of his soul he trembled for fear of himself, and wished he had not come.

"And what have you discovered?" Stephania persisted curiously.

"The weak spot in the armour," he replied, avoiding her gaze.

"Is there a remedy?"

"We lack but the skilful physician."

Stephania raised herself from her recumbent position. With pale and colourless face she stared at the speaker.

"Surely—you would not resort to—"

She paused, her lips refusing to utter the words.

Crescentius shook his head.

"If such were my desire, the steel of John of the Catacombs were swifter. No,—it is not like that," he continued musingly, as if testing the ground inch by inch, as he advanced. "A woman's hand must lead the youth to the fateful brink. A woman must enwrap him and entrap him; a woman must cull the hidden secrets from his heart;—a woman must make him forget time and eternity, forget the volcano, on whose crater he stands,—until the great bell of the Capitol shall toll the hour of doom for German dominion in Rome."

He paused, trembling, lest she might read and

anticipate the thoughts of his heart.

But she seemed not to guess them, for with a smile she said:

"They say the boy has never loved."

"Thereon have I built my plans. Some Circe must be found to administer to him the fatal lotus,—to estrange him from his country, from his leaders, from his hosts."

"But where is one to be trusted so supremely?" she questioned.

Crescentius had anticipated the question.

"There is but one in all Rome—but one."

"And she?" the question came almost in a whisper. "Do you know her?"

Crescentius breathed hard. For a moment he closed his eyes, praying inwardly for courage. At last he replied with seeming indifference:

"I have known her long. She is loyal to Rome and true to herself."

"Her name?" she insisted.

"Stephania."

A wild laugh resounded in the chamber. Its echoes seemed to mock those two, who faced each other, trembling, colourless.

"That was Benilo's advice."

Like a knife-thrust the words from Stephania's lips pierced the heart of the Senator of Rome.

Stephania stared at him in such bewilderment, as if she thought him mad. But when he remained

silent, when she read in his downcast eyes the mute confirmation of his speech, she sprang from her couch, facing him in the whole splendour of her beauty.

"Surely you are jesting, my lord, or else you rave, you are mad?" she cried. "Or can it be, that my ears tinkle with some mockery of the fiend? Speak! You have not said it! You did not! You dared not."

She removed a stray lock of hair from her snow white brow, while her eyes burnt into those of Crescentius, like two orbs of living fire.

"Your ears did not belie you, Stephania," the Senator said at last. "I said you are the one—the only one."

With these words he took her hands in his and attempted to draw her down beside him, but she tore them from his grasp, while her face alternately paled and flushed.

"Nay," she spoke with cutting irony, "the Senator of Rome is a model husband. He disdains the dagger and poison phial, instead he barters his wife. You have an admirable code of morality, my lord! 'Tis a pity I do not share your views, else the fiend might teach me how to profit by your suggestion."

Crescentius did not interrupt the flow of her indignation, but his face betrayed a keenness of anguish which did not escape Stephania's penetrating gaze. She approached him and laying her hands on his shoulders bade him look her in the eye.

"How could you say this to me?" she spoke in softer, yet reproachful tones. "How could you? Has it come to the pass where Rome can but be saved by the arts of a wanton? If so, then let Rome perish,—and we ourselves be buried under her ruins."

Her eyes reflected her noble, undaunted spirit and never had Stephania appeared more beautiful to the Senator, her husband.

"Your words are the seal of loyalty upon your soul, Stephania," Crescentius replied. "Think you, I would cast away my jewel, cast it before these barbarians? But you do not understand. I will be more plain. It was not that part you were to assume."

Stephania resumed her seat by his side. Her bosom heaved and her eyes peered dimly through a mist of tears.

"Of all the hosts who crossed the Alps with him," Crescentius spoke with a voice, unsteady at first, but gradually gaining the strength of his own convictions, "none shares the emperor's dreams, none his hopes of reconstruction. An embassy from the Palatinate is even now on the way, to demand his return.—Not he! But there is one, the twin of his mind and soul—Gregory the Pontiff, who will soon have his hands full with a refractory Conclave, and will not be able to succour his friend in the realization of his fantastic dreams. He must be encouraged,—his watchfulness beguiled until we are strong enough to strike the final blow. Only an

intellect equal to his own dares assail the task. He must be led by a firm hand, by a hand which he trusts—but by a hand never forgetful of its purpose, a hand closed to bribery of chattel or soul. He must be ruled by a mind that grasps all the strange excrescences of his own diseased brain. Let him build up his fantastic dream-empire, while Rome rallies her forces for a final reckoning, then let the mirage dissolve. This is the part I had assigned to you. I can entrust it to none else. Our hopes hang upon the fulfilment. Thus, his hosts dissatisfied, the electors muttering beyond the Alps, the Romans awakening to their own disgrace, the king at odds with his leaders and himself, the pontiff menaced by the hostile Cardinals, there is one hope left to us, to crush the invaders—our last. If it miscarries,—there will not be gibbets enough in the Campagna for the heads that will swing."

Stephania had gradually regained her composure. Raising her eyes to those of Crescentius, she said with hesitation:

"There is truth in your words, but I like not the task. I hate Otto with all my Roman heart; with all my soul do I hate that boy whose lofty aims shame our depravity. 'Tis an ill time for masks and mummeries. Why not entrust the task to the one so eminently fitted for it,—Benilo, the glittering snake?"

"There will be work enough for all of us," Crescentius replied evasively. Somehow he hated to

admit even to his wife, that he mistrusted the Chamberlain's serpent wisdom. He had gone too far. He dared not recede without betraying his own misgivings.

Stephania heaved a deep sigh.

"What would you have me do?"

"You have so far studiously avoided the king. You have not even permitted him to feast his eyes on the most beautiful woman in all Rome. Be gracious to him, enter into his vagaries, point out to him old temples and forgotten tombs, newly dug-up friezes and musty crypts! Tell him of our legends and lead him back into the past, from whose labyrinth no Ariadne will guide him back to the present hour,—It is for Rome I ask."

"Truly, were I a man, I would not trap my foe by woman's wiles, as long as I could grip mace or lance. Is there no man among all these Romans of yours treacherous enough for the task?"

"It is even their treachery I dread," replied Crescentius. "Ambition or the lust of gain may at the last moment carry victory from the field. My maxim, you know: Trust none—Fear none! These festivities are to dazzle the aim of suspicion, to attach the people once more to our cause and to give you the desired opportunity to spread your nets. Then lead him step for step away from life, until he shall himself become but a spectre of the past."

"It is a game unworthy of you and me,"

Stephania replied after a long pause. "To beguile a trusting foe—but the end? What is it to be?"

"Once in the councils of the king, you will lull his suspicions to slumber! You will counteract the pressure of his flaxen-haired leaders! You will make him a puppet in your hands, that has no will save yours. Then sound the watchword: Rome and Crescentius!"

"I too love glory," Stephania spoke almost inaudibly. "Glory achieved by valour, not intrigue. Give me time, my lord. As yet I hardly know if I am fitted for the high mission you have laid out for me. Give me but time."

"There shall be no further mention of this matter between us," Crescentius replied. "You will be worthy of your self and of Rome, whose fates I have laid into your hands. The task is grave, but great will be the reward. Where will the present state lead to? Is there to be no limit to humiliation? Is every rebellion unlawful? Has Fate stamped on our brow, Suffer and be silent?"

"For whom then is this comedy to be enacted?"

Crescentius shrugged his shoulders.

"Say for ourselves if you will. Deem you, Stephania, I would put my head in the sling for that howling mob down yonder in their hovels? For the rabble which would stone him, who gives them bread? Or for the barons of Rome, who have encroached upon our sovereignty? If Fate will but

grant me victory, their robber dens shall crumble into dust, as if an earthquake had levelled them. For this I have planned this Comedy of Love—for this alone."

Stephania slowly rose from her seat beside the Senator. Every vestige of colour had faded from her face.

"Surely I have not heard aright," she said. "Did you say 'Comedy of Love'?"

Crescentius laughed, a low but nervous laugh.

"Why stare you so, Stephania, as if I bade you in all truth to betray me? Is it so hard to feign a little affection for this wingless cherub whom you are to mould to your fancies? The choice is his,—until—"

"Until it is his no longer," Stephania muttered under her breath, which quickly came and went.

There was a pause of some duration, during which the Senator of Rome restlessly paced the apartment. Stephania had resumed her former station and seemed lost in deep rumination. From without no sounds were audible. The city slept. The evening star burnt low down in the horizon. The moon sickle slept on the crests of the mountains of Albano.

At last Stephania rose and laid her white arm on the shoulder of the Senator of Rome.

"I will do your bidding," she said slowly, looking straight into his eyes, "for the glory of Rome and your own!"

"For our glory," Crescentius replied with a deep sigh of relief. "I knew you would not fail me in this hour of need."

Stephania raised her hand, as if deprecating the reward.

"For your glory alone, my lord,—it will suffice for both of us," she replied hurriedly, as her arms sank down by her side.

"Be it so, since you so wish it," Crescentius replied. "I thank you, Stephania! And now farewell. It waxes late and grave matters of state require my instant attention. Await not my return to-night."

And kissing her brow, Crescentius hurriedly left his wife's apartment and ascended a spiral stairway, leading to the chamber of his astrologer. Suddenly he staggered, as if he had seen his own ghost and turned sick at heart.

"What have I done!" he gasped, grasping his forehead with both hands. "What have I done!"

Was it a presentiment that suddenly rushed over Him, prompting him to retrace his steps, prompting him to take back his request? For a moment he wavered. His pride and his love struggled for supremacy,—but pride conquered. He would not have Stephania think that he feared a rival on earth. He would not have her believe that he questioned her love.

After Crescentius had departed from the chamber, Stephania gazed long and wistfully into the

starlit night without, so calm and so serene.

Then a laugh, wild and shrill, broke from her lips, and sinking back among her cushions, a shower of tears came to her relief.

CHAPTER IX

THE SERMON IN THE GHETTO



he Contubernium Hebræorum, as it is loftily styled in the pontifical edicts of the time, the Roman Ghetto, was a district of considerable extent, reclaimed originally from the swamps of the Tiber at the foot of the Capitoline Hill, and surrounded either by lofty walls, or houses which were not permitted to have even a loop-hole to the exterior. Five massive gates, guarded by the halberdiers of the Roman magistrate were opened at sun-rise and closed at sun-set to emit and to receive back their jealously guarded inmates, objects of unutterable contempt and loathing with the populace, into whose heart the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages had infused a veneration and love for the person of the Redeemer rather than for his attributes, and whose passions and devotions were as yet unalloyed by the

skepticism and indifference which began to pervade the higher ranks of society in the century of the Renaissance.

Three or four times a year, a grand attempt at conversion was made, the Pope appointing the most renowned ecclesiastics to deliver the sermons.

On the occasion about to be described towards the end of the year 999, the Jews had good reason to expect a more than commonly devout throng in the train of the pontifical delegate. They had prepared accordingly. Upon entering the gates of the Ghetto the beholder was struck with the dreary and melancholy aspect of the houses and the emptiness of the little shops which appeared like holes in the walls. Such precious wares as they possessed had been as carefully concealed as those they had abstracted on the eve of their departure from Egypt. The exceeding narrowness of the streets, which were in some parts scarcely wide enough to allow two persons to walk abreast, and seemed in a manner arched, in-as-much as one story extended above the others, increased the disagreeable effect. Noisome smells greeted the nostrils on every turn and the flutter of rags from numerous dark lattices seemed to testify to the poverty within.

Such the Roman Ghetto appeared on the eve of the great harangue for which the reigning Pontiff, Gregory V, had, in accordance with the tradition of the Holy See, delegated the most renowned light of

the church. Not a Jew was to be seen, much less a Jewess, throughout the whole line of march from the gates of the Ghetto to the large open square where they held their markets, and where they had been summoned to assemble in mass. The long narrow and intricate windings misled many who did not keep pace with the Pope's delegate and his attendants, but the greater part of the rabble rushed into the square like a mountain stream, leaping over opposing boulders, shouting, laughing, yelling and crushing one another, as if they were taking possession of a conquered city.

The square itself was paved with volcanic tufa, very unevenly laid. In the center was a great fountain of granite without the least ornament, intended exclusively for the use of the inmates of this dreary quarter. Into this square radiated numberless streets and alleys giving its disordered architecture the appearance of being reft and split into chasms, some of the houses being doubtfully propped with timbers.

Round the fountain stone benches had been arranged with tables of similar crude material, at which usually sat the Elders, who decided all disputes, regulated the market and governed this inner empire partly by the maxims of common sense and justice, partly by the laws prescribed by their sacred books, severe indeed and executed with rigour, without provoking a thought of appeal to the

milder and often opposing Christian judicature.

But now this Sanhedrim was installed in its place of honour for a different purpose; to hear with outward complacency and inner abhorrence their ancient law denounced and its abolition or reform advocated. For this purpose a movable pulpit, which resembled a bronze caldron on a tripod, carried by four Jewish converts, was duly planted under the supreme direction of the companion friar of the pontifical delegate, who ordered its position reversed several times, ere it seemed to suit his fancy.

The delegate of the Pope himself, surrounded by the pontifical guards, was still kneeling in silent prayer, when a stranger, who had followed the procession from afar, entered the Ghetto, unremarked in the general tumult and ensconced himself out of observation in a dark doorway. From his point of vantage, Eckhardt had leisure to survey the whole pandemonium. On his left there rose an irregular pile of wood-work, built not without some pretentions to architecture, with quaint carvings and devices of birds and beasts on the exposed joints and window-frames, but in a state of ruinous decay. About midheight sloped a pent-house with a narrow balcony, supported like many of the other buildings by props of timber, set against it from the ground. The lower part of the house was closed and barred and had the appearance of having been forsaken for decades.

While, himself unseen Eckhardt surveyed every detail of his surroundings; the preparations for the sermon continued. Beyond the seats of the Elders was assembled the great mass of those who were to profit by the exhortation, remarkable for their long unkempt beards, their glittering eyes and their peculiar physiognomies.

Beyond the circle of these compelled neophytes a tumultuous mob struggled for the possession of every point, whence a view of the proceedings could be obtained, quarrelling, scoffing and buffeting the unresisting Jews, whose policy it was not to offer the least pretext for pillage and general massacre, which on these occasions hovered over their heads by a finer thread than that to which hung the sword of Damocles. Without expostulations they submitted to the rude swaying of the mob, to their blows and revilings, opposing to their tormentors a seemingly inexhaustible endurance. But the horror, anxiety, and rage which glowed in their bosoms were strongly reflected in their faces, peering through the smoky glare of innumerable torches, which they were compelled to exhibit at all the windows of their houses. Engaged in this office only now and then a woman appeared for a brief instant, for the most part withered and old, or veiled and muffled with more than Turkish scrupulousness.

At last the pulpit was duly hoisted and placed to the satisfaction of the attending friar. The Pope's

delegate having concluded his prayer arose and two of the Elders advanced, to present him with a copy of the Old Testament, for from their own laws were they to be refuted. They offered it with a deep Oriental bend and the humble request, that the representative of his Holiness, their sovereign, would be pleased to deliver his message. The monk replied briefly that it was not the message of any earthly power which he was there to deliver and then mounted the pulpit by a ladder, which his humbler associate held for him. The attendant friar then sprinkled a lustration round the pulpit with a bunch of hyssop, which he had dipped in an urn of holy water. This he showered liberally upon the Elders who dared not resent it, and ground their teeth in impotent rage.

Strangely interested, as Eckhardt found himself in the scene about to be enacted, watching the rolling human sea under the dark blue night-sky, he found his own curiosity shared by a second personage, who had taken his position immediately below the door-way, in which he stood concealed. This worthy wore a large hat, slouched over his face, which gave him the appearance of a peasant from the marshes; but his dirty gray mantle and crooked staff denoted him a pilgrim. Of his features very little was to be seen, save his glittering minx-eyes. These he kept fixed on the balcony of the ruined house, which had also attracted Eckhardt's attention. At

other times that worthy's gaze searched the shadows beneath the gloomy structure with something of mingled scrutiny and scorn.

"Surely this boasted steel-hearted knave of yours means to play us false? Where is the rogue? He keeps us waiting long."

These words, as Eckhardt perceived, were addressed to an individual, who, to judge from the mask he wore, did not wish to be recognized.

"Were it against the fiend, I would warrant him," answered a hushed voice. "But folks here have a great reverence for this holy man, who goes to comfort a plague-stricken patient more cheerfully than another visits his lady-love. And, if he needs must die, were it not wiser to venture the deed in some of the lonely places he haunts, than here in the midst of thousands?"

"Nay," replied his companion in an undertone, every word of which was understood by his unseen listener. "Here alone can a tumult be raised without much danger, and as easily quelled. I do not set forests on fire, to warm my feet. Here they will lay the mischief to the Jews—elsewhere, suspicion would be quickly aroused, for what bravo would deem it worth his while to slay a wretched monk?"

Again the pseudo-pilgrim's associate peered into the shadows. Then he plucked his companion by the sleeve of his mantle.

"Yonder he comes—and by all my sins—

streaming like a water-dog! Raise your staff, but no —he sees us," concluded the masked individual, shrinking back into the shadows.

Presently a third individual joined the pilgrim and his friend.

"Don Giovan! Thou dog! How long hast kept me gaping for thee!" the principal speaker hissed into the bravo's face as he limping approached. "But, by the mass,—who baptized thee so late in life?"

There was something demoniacal in the sunken, cadaverous countenance of John of the Catacombs, as he peered into the speaker's eyes. His ashen-pale face with the low brow and inflamed eyelids, never more fittingly illustrated a living sepulchre. He growled some inarticulate response, half stifled by impotent rage and therefore lost upon his listener. For at this moment the voice of the preacher was heard above all the confused noise and din in the large square, reading a Hebrew text, which he subsequently translated into Latin. It was the powerful voice of the speaker, which prevented Eckhardt from distinctly hearing the account which the bravo gave of his forced immersion. But towards the conclusion of his talk, the pilgrim drew the bravo deeper into the shadows of the overhanging balcony and now their conversation became more distinct.

"Dog of a villain!" he addressed John of the Catacombs. "How dare you say that you will fail me in this? Have you forgotten our compact?"

"That I have not, my lord," replied the bravo, shuddering with fear and the cold of his dripping garments. "But an angel was sent for the prevention of the deed! No man would have braved John of the Catacombs and lived."

"Thou needest not proclaim my rank before all this rabble," growled the pseudo-pilgrim. "Have I not warned thee, idiot? Deemest thou an angel would have touched thee, without blasting thee? What had thine assailant to do to stir up the muddy waves? An angel! Coward? Is the bribe not large enough? Name thine own hire then!"

"A pyramid of gold shall not bribe me to it," replied the bravo doggedly. "But I am a true man and will keep no hire which I have not earned. So come with me to the catacombs, and I will restore all I have received of your gold. But the saints protect that holy man—I will not touch him!"

The pilgrim regarded the speaker with ill-repressed rage.

"Holy—maybe—," he sneered, "holy, according to thy country's proverb: 'La Cruz en los pechos, el diablo en los hechos.' Thou superstitious slave! What has one like thou to fear from either angel or devil?"

"May my soul never see paradise, if I lift steel against that holy man!" persisted the bravo.

"Fool! Coward! Beast!" snarled the pilgrim, gnashing his teeth like a baffled tiger. "You refuse, when this monk's destruction will set the mob in

such roaring mutiny as will give your noble associates, whom I see swarming from afar, a chance to commence a work that will enrich you for ever?"

"For ever?" repeated the bravo, somewhat dubiously. "But—it is impossible. See you not he is surrounded by the naked swords of the guards? I thought he would have come darkling through some narrow lane, according to his wont, else I should never—moreover I have taken an oath, my lord, and a man would not willingly damn himself!"

"Will you ever and ever forget my injunction and how much depends upon its observance?" snarled the disguised pilgrim, looking cautiously around. "I warn you again, not to proclaim my rank before all your cut-throats! You swore," he then continued more sedately, "not to lift steel against him! But have I not seen you bring down an eagle's flight with your cross-bow? Where is it?"

"I have sold it to some foreign lord, from beyond the Alps, where they love such distant fowling," the bravo replied guardedly. "I for my part prefer to steal my game with a club, or a dagger."

"You have no choice! Wait! I think I can yet provide you with a weapon such as you require! I have for some time observed yonder worthy, whoever he may be, staring at that old bower, as if it contained some enchanted princess," said the pilgrim, emerging slightly from under the shadows of the doorway and beckoning John of the Catacombs

to his side. This movement brought the two—for the third seemed to be engaged in a look-out for probable danger—closer to Eckhardt, but luckily without coming in contact with him, for it may be conjectured that he had no desire to expose himself to a conflict in the dark, with three such opponents.

The personage indicated by the disguised pilgrim had indeed for some time been engaged in scrutinizing the form of a young girl, who, seemingly attracted by the novelty of the scene below had appeared behind a window of the apparently deserted house, vainly soliciting her attentions with gestures and smiles. He was of middling height, but very stout and burly of frame, a kind of brutal good humour and joviality being not entirely unmingled with his harsher traits.

"By the mass!" the disguised pilgrim turned to the object of his scrutiny, in whom we recognize no lesser a personage than Gian Vitelozzo, as he cautiously approached and saluted him. "I see your eyes are caught too!"

He winked at the window which seemed to hold the fascination for the other, then nodded approval.

"Saw you ever a prettier piece of flesh and blood?"

"Yet she looks more like a waxen image than a woman of the stuff you mention, Sir Pilgrim," returned the nobleman in a barbarous jargon of tenth century Latin.

"She is poisoned by the stench amid which she lives, and it were charity to take her out of it," replied the pilgrim, with a swift glance at the cross-bow slung over the other's shoulders.

"Ay, by the mass! You speak truth!" affirmed Vitelozzo, while a fourth personage, whom he had not heretofore observed, had during their discourse emerged from the shadows and had silently joined the survey.

"Would the whole Ghetto were put to plunder!" sighed the baron, turning to the pilgrim, "but I am under severe penance now by order of the Vicar of the Church."

"You must indeed have wrought some special deed of grace, to need his intercession," the pilgrim sneered with disgusting familiarity.

Vitelozzo peered into the face of his interlocutor, doubtful whether to resent the pleasantry or to feel flattered. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"'Twas but for relieving an old man of some few evil days of pains and aches," he then replied carelessly. "But since we are at questioning,—what merit is yours to travel so far with the cockle-shells? Surely 'twas not just to witness the crumbling of this planet into its primeval dust?"

"They say—I killed my brother," replied the disguised pilgrim coldly.

"Mine was but my uncle," said Vitelozzo eagerly, as if rejoicing in the comparative inferiority of his

crime. "'Tis true he had pampered me, when a child, but who can wait for ever for an inheritance?"

"Ay—and old men never die," replied the pseudo-pilgrim gloomily. "You are a bold fellow and no doubt a soldier too," he continued, simulating ignorance of the other's rank, in order to gain his point. "I have been a good part of mine a silly monk. As you see, I am still in the weeds. Yet I will wager, that I dare do the very thing, which you are even now but daring to think."

"What am I thinking then? I pray your worship enlighten my poor understanding," replied the nobleman sarcastically.

"You are marking how conveniently those timbers are set to the balcony of yonder crow's nest, for a man to climb up unobserved, and that you would be glad if you could summon the courage to scale it to the scorn of this circumcized mob," said the pilgrim.

Vitelozzo laughed scornfully.

"For the fear of it? I have clambered up many a strong wall with only my dagger's aid, when boiling lead poured down among us like melting snow and the devil himself would have kept his foot from the ladder. But," he concluded as if remembering that it behooved not his own dignity to continue parley with the pilgrim, "who are you, that you dare bandy words with me?"

The pilgrim considered it neither opportune nor

discreet to introduce himself.

"My staff against your cross-bow," he replied boastfully instead. "You dare not attempt it and I will succeed in it!"

"By the foul fiend! Not until I have failed," replied Vitelozzo, colouring. "Hold my cross-bow while I climb. But if you mean mischief or deceit, know better than to practise it, for I am not what I seem, but a great lord, who would as soon crack your empty pate as an egg!"

The pseudo-pilgrim replied apparently with some warmth, but as the preacher's tone now rose above the surrounding buzz only the conclusion of his speech was audible, wherein he declared that he would restore the noble's cross-bow or rouse his friends to his assistance in the event of danger. This compact concluded Eckhardt noted that the Roman baron gave his helmet, cross-bow and other accoutrements, which were likely to prove an impediment, into the care of the pilgrim, and prepared to accomplish his insolent purpose.

The disguised pilgrim, whose identity Eckhardt had vainly endeavoured to establish, now retired instantly and rejoined his companions, who had been eagerly listening in their concealment under the doorway. The newcomer, who had for a time swelled their number, had retreated unobserved after having concluded his observations, as it seemed, to his satisfaction, for Eckhardt saw him nod to himself ere

he vanished from sight.

"Here then is a weapon, Don Giovan, if you would not rather have the point in your own skull," the pilgrim said, handing the bravo a small bow of peculiar construction which Vitelozzo was wont to carry on his fowling expeditions, as he styled his nightly excursions.

"Moreover," the pilgrim continued encouragingly, noting the manifest reluctance on the part of the bravo, "I have caused you a pretty diversion. When the tumult, which this villain will raise, shall begin, you have but to adjust the arrow and watch the monk's associate. When he raises his hand—let fly!"

John of the Catacombs shivered, but did not reply, while Eckhardt scrutinized the monk indicated by the pilgrim, as well as the glare of the torches and their delusive light would permit. But his face being averted, he again turned his attention to the trio in the shadows below.

The pontifical delegate meanwhile continued his sermon as unconcerned as if his deadliest enemy did not stand close beside him ready to imprint on his brow the pernicious kiss of Judas.

"Fear you aught for your foul carcass and the thing you call your soul?" the pilgrim snarled, seemingly exasperated by the reluctance of the instrument to obey the master's behest. "Fear you for your salvation, when so black a wretch as Vitelozzo

—for I know the ruffian, who slew his benefactor,—hazards both for a fool's frolic? The monk is a fair mark! Look but at him perched in the pulpit yonder, with his arms spread out as if he would fly straightway to heaven!"

"He looks like a black crucifixion," muttered the bravo with a shudder.

"Tush, fool! You can easily conceal yourself in these shadows, for the blame will fall on the Jews and the uproar which I will raise at different extremities of the crowd will divert all attention from the perpetrator of the deed!"

John of the Catacombs seemed to yield gradually to the force of the other's arguments. The deed accomplished, it had been agreed that they would dive into the very midst of the congested throngs and urge the inflamed minds to the extermination of the hated race of the Ghetto.

Eckhardt's consternation upon listening to this devilish plot was so great, that for a time he lost sight of the would-be assailant of the young girl, whom he was unable to see from his concealment almost directly beneath the balcony. Again he was staggered by the dilemma confronting him, how best to direct his energies for the prevention of the double crime. To rush forth and, giving a signal to the pontifical guards, to proclaim the intended treachery, would perhaps in any other country, age or place have been sufficient to counteract the plot. But in

this case it was most likely to secure the triumph of the offenders. It was far from improbable, that the projectors of this deed of darkness, upon finding their sinister designs baffled, would fall combined upon whosoever dared to cross their path, and silence him for ever ere he had time to reveal their real purpose. In the rancorous irritation and mutually suspicious state of men's minds the least spark might kindle a universal blaze. The fears and hatred of both parties would probably interpret the first flash of steel into a signal for preconcerted massacre and the very consequences sought to be averted would inevitably follow.

A further circumstance which baffled Eckhardt was the cause of the implacable hatred, which the moving spirit of the trio seemed to bear the pontifical delegate. But the sagacious intellect of the man into whose hands fate had so opportunely placed a lever for preventing a crime, whose consequences it was difficult to even surmise, suggested these dangers and their remedies almost simultaneously. Thus he patiently awaited the separation of the colleagues on their several enterprises, regarding the monk with renewed interest in this new and appalling light.

His tall and commanding form was to be seen from every point. The austerity and gloom of the speaker's countenance only seemed to aid in displaying more brilliantly the irradiations of the

mind which illumined it. His harangue seemed imbued with something of supernatural inspiration and dark as had appeared to Eckhardt the motive for the contemplated crime, the probable reason suddenly flashed through his mind. For in the pulpit stood Gerbert of Aurillac, Archbishop of Rheims, Bishop of Ravenna, the teacher of the Emperor, the friend of the Pontiff, he who was so soon as Sylvester II to be crowned with the Triple Tiara of St. Peter.

But there was no time for musing if the double crime was to be prevented. For John of the Catacombs, who had now turned his back on the crowds, had possessed himself of Vitelozzo's cross-bow and was tightening the bow-strings. With equal caution, to avoid betraying his presence, Eckhardt unsheathed his sword. But the jar of the blade against the scabbard, though ever so slight, startled the outlaw's attention. He paused for a moment, listening and glancing furtively about. Then he muttered to himself: "A rat," and resumed his occupation, while Eckhardt slowly stepped from his concealment, taking his station directly behind the kneeling bravo, unseen by the pilgrim and the latter's silent companion.

A brilliant glow, emanating from some mysterious source near the monk and which many afterwards contended as having proceeded directly from his person, suddenly illumined not only the square, the pontifical delegate, and the monk, who

held his arms aloft as if imploring a benediction, but likewise the towering form of Eckhardt, leaning on his bare and glittering brand.

With a yell as if he had seen a wild beast crouching for its deadly spring, John of the Catacombs sprang up, only to be instantly struck down by a mighty blow from the commander's gauntleted hand. He lay senseless on the ground, covered with blood. The bow had fallen from his grasp. Setting his foot on the outlaw's breast, Eckhardt hesitated for a moment whether to rid Rome of so monstrous a villain, or spare him, in order to learn the real instigators of the crime, when a piercing shriek from above convinced him that while the bravo had failed, the high-born ruffian had been more successful.

There was no time for parley.

Trampling with his crushing weight over the bravo's breast Eckhardt turned towards the spot whence the cry of distress had come. An intense hush fraught with doubts and fears had fallen upon the monk's audience at the ominous outcry,—a cry which might have been but the signal for some preconcerted outrage, and the hush deepened when the tall powerful form of the German leader was seen stalking toward the deserted house and entering it through a door, which Gian Vitelozzo had forced, the obstacle which had luckily prevented him from reaching before his unsuspecting victim. The ruffian

could be seen from below, holding in his arms on the balcony the shrieking and struggling girl, disregarding in his brutal eagerness all that passed below. Suddenly his shoulder was grasped as in the teeth of a lion, and so powerful was the pressure that the noble's arms were benumbed and dropped powerlessly by his side. Before he recovered from his surprise and could make one single effort at resistance, Eckhardt had seized him round the waist and hurled him down on the square amidst a roaring thunder of applause mingled with howls of derision and rage. Those immediately beneath the balcony, consisting chiefly of the scum and rabble, who cared little for the monk's arguments, rejoiced at the prompt retribution meted out to one of their oppressors, though the discomfiture of the hapless victim had left them utterly indifferent. Why should they carry their skin to market to right another's wrong?

Thus they offered neither obstacle nor assistance when the Roman baron, in no wise hurt by his fall, as the balcony was at no great height from the ground, rose in a towering rage and challenged his assailant to descend and to meet him in mortal combat. But by this time the disturbance had reached the monk's ears, and at once perceiving the cause from his lofty point of vantage, Gerbert shouted to his audience to secure the brawler in the name of God and the Church. The mob obeyed, though

swayed by reluctance and doubts, while the pontifical guards closed round the offending noble to cut off his escape. But Gian Vitelozzo seemed to possess sovereign reasons for dreading to find himself in the custody of the Vicar of the Church and promptly took to flight.

Overthrowing the first who opposed him, the rest offering no serious resistance, he forced his way to one of the narrow passages of the Ghetto, fled through it, relinquishing his accoutrements and vanished in the shadows, which haunted this dismal region by day and by night. But Gerbert of Aurillac was not to be so easily baffled. He had recognized the Roman baron despite his demeaning attire. With a voice of thunder he ordered his entire following to the ruffian's pursuit, and noting the direction in which Vitelozzo had disappeared, he leaped, despite his advanced years, from his pulpit and waving a cross high in the air, led the pursuit in person, which inaugurated a general stampede of nobles, Jews, pilgrims, monks and the ever-present rabble of Rome.

This unforeseen incident having drawn off the crowd, which had invaded the Ghetto, in the preacher's wake, the great square was quickly deserted and the torches in the high windows were extinguished as if a sudden wind-storm had snuffed out their glowing radiance.

CHAPTER X
THE SICILIAN DANCER

 fter a fruitless search for the hapless victim of the Roman baron's licentiousness, in order to restore her in safety to her kindred or friends, Eckhardt concluded at last that she had found a haven of security and turned his back upon the Ghetto and its panic-stricken inmates without bestowing another thought upon an incident, in itself not uncommon and but an evidence of the deep-rooted social disorder of the times. His thoughts reverted rather to the attempt upon the life of the pontifical delegate, which some happy chance had permitted him to frustrate, but in vain did he try to fathom the reasons prompting a deed, the accomplishment of which seemed to hold out such meagre promise of reward to its perpetrators, whose persons were enshrouded in a veil of mystery. Eckhardt could only assign personal reasons to an attempt, which, if successful, could not enrich the moving spirits of the plot, a consideration always uppermost in men's minds, and pondering thus over the strange events, the commander aimlessly pursued

his way in a direction opposite to the one the monk and his following had chosen for the pursuit of the baron. How long he had thus strolled onward, he knew not, when he found himself in the space before the Capitol. The moon gleamed pale as an alabaster lamp in the dark azure of the heavens, trembling luminously on the waters of a fountain which flowed from beneath the Capitoline rock.

Here some scattered groups of the populace sat or lolled on the ground, discussing the events of the day, jesting, laughing or love-making. Others paraded up and down, engaged in conversation and enjoying the balmy night air, tinged with the breath of departing summer.

Wearied with thought, Eckhardt made his way to the fountain, and, seated on the margin regardless of the chattering groups which continually clustered round it and dispersed, he felt his spirits grow calm in the monotony of the gurgling flow of the water, which was streaming down the rock and spurting from several grotesque mouths of lions and dolphins. The stars sparkled over the dark, towering cypresses, which crowned the surrounding eminences, and the palaces and ruins upon them stood forth in distinctness of splendour or desolation against the luminous brightness of the moonlit sky.

Eckhardt's ruminations were interrupted by the sound of a tambourine, and looking up from his reverie, he perceived that the populace were

gathering in a wide circle before the fountain, attracted by the sound of the instrument. In the background, kept thus remote by the vigilance of an old woman and two half-savage Calabrians, who seemed to be the proprietors of the show, stood a young woman in the garb of a Sicilian, apparently just preparing to dance. She seemed to belong to a class of damsels who were ordained under severe penalties to go masked during all religious festivals, to protect the pilgrims from the influence of their baleful charms. Else there could be no reason why an itinerant female juggler or minstrel who employed the talents, which the harmonious climate of Italy lavishes on its poorest children, to enable them to earn a scant living from the rude populace, should affect the modesty or precaution of a mask. But her tall, voluptuous form as she stood collecting her audience with the ringing chimes of her tambourine, garbed as she was in that graceful Sicilian costume, which still retains the elegance of its Greek original, proved allurement enough despite her mask. While thus unconsciously diverting his disturbed fancies, Eckhardt became aware, that he had himself attracted the notice of the dancer, for he encountered her gaze beaming on him from the depths of her green-speckled mask, which its ordainer had intended to represent the corruption of disease, but which the humour of the populace had transmuted into a more pleasant association, by calling them,

"Cardinal melons."

The dancer started from her somewhat listless attitude into one of gayety and animation, when she saw how earnestly the dark stranger scrutinized her, and tripping across the intervening space, she paused before him and said in a voice whose music flowed to his heart in its mingled humility and tenderness:

"Sainted Stranger! Will you disdain dancing the Tarantella with a poor Sicilian sinner for the love of Santa Rosalia?"

"Thou art like to make many for the love of thyself," replied Eckhardt. "But it were little seemly to behold a sinner in my weeds join in the dance with one in thine."

As he spoke, he peered so intently into the masked visage of the Sicilian dancer, that she precipitately retreated.

"Nay—then I must use my spells," she replied after a moment's thought, and glancing round the circle, which was constantly increasing, she added slowly, "my spells to raise the dead, since love and passion are dead in your consecrated breast! Mother—my mandolin!"

The smile of her lips seemed to gleam even through her mask as she threw her tambourine by its silver chain over her shoulders, taking instead the instrument, which one of the Calabrians handed to her. Tuning her mandolin she again turned to Eckhardt.

"But first you must fairly answer a question, else I shall not know which of my spells to use: for with some memory alone avails,—with others hope."

And without waiting his reply, she began to sing in a voice of indescribable sweetness. After the second stanza she paused, apparently to await the reply to her question, while a murmur of delight ran through the ranks of her listeners. The first sound of her voice had fixed Eckhardt's attention, not alone for its exquisite purity and sweetness, but the strange, mysterious air which hovered round her, despite her demeaning attire.

Yet his reply partook of the asperity of his Northern forests.

"Deem you such gossamer subtleties were likely to find anchorage in this restless breast, which, you hear, I strike and it answers with the sound of steel?"

"Nay, then so much the worse for you," replied the dancer. "For where the pure spirit comes not,—the dark one will," and she continued her song in a voice of still more mellow and alluring sweetness.

Suddenly she approached him again, her air more mysterious than ever.

"Ah!" she whispered. "And I could teach you even a sweeter lesson,—but you men will never learn it, as long as women have been trying to teach it on earth."

"Wherefore then wear you this mask?" questioned Eckhardt with a severity in his tone,

which seemed to stagger the girl.

"To please one greater than myself," the dancer replied with a mock bow, which produced a general outburst of laughter.

"Well then,—what do you want with me? Why do you shrink away?"

"Nay,—if you will not dance with me, I must look for another partner, for my mother grows impatient, as you may see by the twirling of her girdle," replied the girl pettishly. "I never cared who it was before,—and now simply because I like you, you hate me."

"You know it is the bite of the poison spider, for which the Tarantella is the antidote," spoke Eckhardt sternly.

Without replying the girl began her dance anew, flitting before her indifferent spectator in a maze of serpentine movements, at once alluring and bewildering to the eye. And to complete her mockery of his apathy, she continued to sing even during all the vagaries of her dance.

The crowd looked on with constantly increasing delight testifying its enthusiasm with occasional outbursts of joyful acclamation. Showers of silver, even gold, which fell in the circle, showed that the motley audience had not exhausted its resources in pious contributions, and the coins were greedily gathered in by the old woman and her comrades, while several nobles who had joined the concourse

whispered to the hag, gave her rings and other rich pledges, all of which she accepted, repaying the donors with the less substantial coin of promise.

Suddenly the relentless fair one concluded her mazy circles by forming one with her nude arms over Eckhardt's head and inclining herself towards him, she whispered a few words into his ear. A lightning change seemed to come over the commander's countenance, intensifying its pallor, and struck with the impression she had produced, the Sicilian continued her importunities, nodding towards the old hag in the background, until Eckhardt half reluctantly, half wrathfully permitted himself to be drawn towards the group, of which the old woman formed the center. Pausing before her and whispering a few words into her ear, which caused the hag to glance up with a scowling leer, the girl took a small bronze mirror of oval shape from beneath her tunic and after breathing upon the surface, requested the old woman to proceed with the spell. The two Calabrians hurriedly gathered some dried leaves, which they stuffed under a tripod, that seemed to constitute the entire stock-in-trade of the group. After placing thereon a copper brazier, on which the old woman scattered some spices, the latter commanded the girl to hold the mirror over the fumes, which began to rise, after the two Calabrians had set the leaves on fire. The flames, which greedily licked them up, cast a strange

illumination over the scene. The crowds attracted by the uncommon spectacle pushed nearer and nearer, while Eckhardt watched the process with an air of ill-disguised impatience and annoyance leaning upon his huge brand.

The old woman was mumbling some words in a strange unintelligible jargon and the Calabrians were replenishing the consumed leaves with a new supply they had gathered up, when Eckhardt's strange companion drawing closer, whispered to him:

"Now your wish! Think it—but do not speak!"

Eckhardt nodded, half indifferently, half irritated, when the girl suddenly held the bronze mirror before his eyes and bade him look. But no sooner had he obeyed her behest, than with an outcry of amazement he darted forward and fairly captured his unsuspecting tormentor.

"Who are you?" he questioned breathlessly, "to read men's thoughts and the silent wish of their heart?"

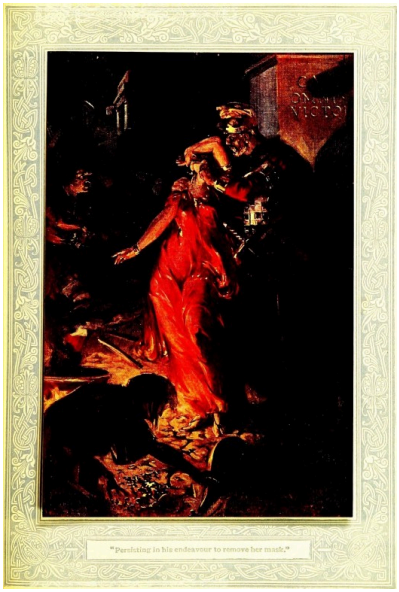
But in his eagerness he probably hurt the girl against the iron scales, of whose jangling he had boasted, for she uttered a cry and called in great terror: "Rescue—Rescue!"

Before the words were well uttered the two Calabrians rushed towards them with drawn daggers. The mob also raised a shout and seemed to meditate interference. This uproar changed the nature of the dancer's alarm.

"In our Holy Mother's name—forbear—" she addressed the two Calabrians, and the mob, and turning to her captor, she muttered in a tone of almost abject entreaty:

"Release me—noble stranger! Indeed I am not what I seem, and to be recognized here would be my ruin. Nay—look not so incredulous! I have but played this trick on you, to learn if you indeed hated all woman-kind. You think me beautiful,—ah! Could you but see my mistress! You would surely forget these poor charms of mine."

"And who is your mistress?" questioned Eckhardt persisting in his endeavour to remove her mask, and still under the spell of the strange and to him inexplicable vision in the bronze mirror.



Persisting in his endeavour to remove her mask.

"Mercy—mercy! You know it is a grievous offence to be seen without my Cardinal melon," pleaded the girl with a return of the wiling witchery in her tones and attempting, but in vain, to release herself from Eckhardt's determined grasp.

"Who is your mistress?" insisted the Margrave. "And who are you?"

"Release the wanton! How dare you, a soldier of the church, break the commands of the Apostolic lieutenant?" exclaimed a husky voice and a strong arm grasped Eckhardt's shoulder. Turning round, the

latter saw himself confronted by the towering form of the monk Nilus, who seemed ignorant of the person and rank of him he was addressing and whose countenance flamed with fanatic wrath.

"Ay! And it hath come to my turn to rescue damsels, and moreover to serve the church," added another speaker in a bantering tone and Eckhardt instantly recognized the Lord Vitelozzo, who having eluded the pursuit of the monk of Cluny, held a mace he had secured in lieu of his cross-bow high and menacingly in the air.

"Friar, look to your ally, if such he be, lest I do what I should have done before and make a very harmless rogue of him," said Eckhardt, holding the girl with one hand while with the other he unsheathed his sword.

"Peace, fool!" the monk addressed his would-be ally, drawing him back forcibly. "The church needs not the aid of one rogue to subdue another. Let the girl go, my son!" he then turned to the Margrave.

"Nay, father—by these bruises, which still ache, I will retrieve my wrong and rescue the wench," insisted the Roman, again raising his massive weapon, but the monk and some bystanders wedged themselves between Eckhardt and his opponent.

"Nay, then, now we are like to have good sport," exclaimed a fourth. "A monk, a woman and a soldier, —it requires not more to set the world ablaze."

"Stranger,—I implore you, release me,"

whispered Eckhardt's captive with frantic entreaty amidst the ever increasing tumult of the bystanders, who appeared to be divided, some favouring the monk, while others sided with the girl's captor, whose intentions they sorely misconstrued. "I would not stand revealed to yonder monk for all the world!" concluded the girl in fear-struck tones.

At this moment a cry among the bystanders warned Eckhardt that Vitelozzo's wrath had at length mastered every effort to restrain him, and, whirling round, to defend himself he was compelled to release the girl. But instead of making the use she might have been expected to do of her liberty, she called to the monk, to part the combatants in the name of the saints.

But it required no expostulation on the part of the friar, for when Eckhardt turned fully upon him, Vitelozzo, for the first time recognizing his antagonist, beat a precipitate retreat, but at some distance he turned, shouting derisively:

"An olive for a fig! Your dove has flown!" and when Eckhardt, recovering from his surprise, wheeled about, he found, much to his chagrin, the Roman's words confirmed by the absence of the girl as well as of her associates, who managed to make their escape at the moment when the impending encounter had momentarily drawn off the attention of the crowd.

"The devil can speak truth, they say, though I

believed it not till now," muttered Eckhardt to himself as, vexed and mystified beyond measure, he strode through the scattering crowds.

Had it been some jeer of the fiend? Had he been made the victim of some monstrous deceit?

Who was the Sicilian dancer, whose manners and golden language belied her demeaning attire, whose strange eyes had penetrated into the darkness of his soul, whose voice had thrilled him with the echoes of one long silent and forever?

The magic mirror in which, as in a haze, he had seen the one face he most longed to see,—the strange and sudden fulfillment of the unspoken wish of his heart,—the dancer's marked persistence in the face of his declared abhorrence,—her mask and her incongruous companions,—her fear of the monk and concern for himself,—all these incidents, which one by one floated on the mirror of his memory, rose ever and anon before his inner gaze—each time more mystifying and bewildering.

In deep rumination Eckhardt pursued his way, gazing absently upon the roofless columns and shattered walls, everywhere visible, over which the star-light shone—ghostly and transparent, backed by the frowning and embattled fortresses of the Cavalli, half hidden by the dark foliage that sprang up amidst the very fanes and palaces of old. Now and then he paused with a deep and heavy sigh, as he pondered over the dark and desolate path upon which he was

about to enter, over the lack of a guiding hand in which he might trust, over the uncertainty of the step, which, once taken was beyond recall.

Suddenly a light caught the solitary rambler's eye, a light almost like a star, scarcely larger indeed, but more red and intense in its ray. Of itself it was nothing uncommon and might have shone from either convent or cottage. But it streamed from a part of the Aventine, which contained no habitations of the living, only deserted ruins and shattered porticoes of which even the names and memories of their former inhabitants had been long forgotten. Aware of this, Eckhardt felt a slight awe, as the light threw its unsteady beam over the dreary landscape; for he was by no means free from the superstition of the age and it was near the hour consecrated to witches and ghosts.

But fear, whether of this world or the next, could not long daunt the mind of the Margrave; and after a brief hesitation he resolved to make a digression from his way, to discover the cause of the phenomenon. Unconsciously Eckhardt's tread passed over the site of the ill-famed temple of Isis which had at one time witnessed those wildest of orgies commemorated by the pen of Juvenal. At last he came to a dense and dark copse from an opening in the center of which gleamed the mysterious light. Penetrating the gloomy foliage Eckhardt found himself before a large ruin, grey and roofless.

Through a rift in the wall, forming a kind of casement and about ten feet from the ground, the light gleamed over the matted and rank soil, embedded, as it were, in vast masses of shade. Without knowing it, Eckhardt stood on the very spot once consecrated to the cult of the Egyptian goddess, and now shunned as an abode of evil spirits. The walls of the ruin were covered with a dense growth of creepers, which entwined even the crumbled portico to an extent that made it almost impossible to penetrate into its intricate labyrinth of corridors.

While indulging in a thousand speculations, occasioned by the hour and the spot, Eckhardt suddenly perceived a shadow in the portico. Only the head was visible in the moonlight, which bathed the ruin, and it disappeared almost as quickly as it had been revealed. While meditating upon the expediency of exploring the mystery which confronted him, Eckhardt was startled by the sound of footsteps. Straining his gaze through the haze of the moonlight he beheld emerging from the portico of the temple the tall form of a man, wrapt in a long black cloak. He wore a conical hat with sloping brim which entirely shadowed his face and on his right arm he carried the apparently lifeless body of a girl. With the object of preventing a probable crime Eckhardt stepped from his place of concealment just as the stranger was about to pass him with his mysterious burden and placed his hands arrestingly

on the other's shoulder.

"Who are you? And what is your business here?" he questioned curtly, attempting to remove the stranger's vizor.

"The one matters little to your business,—the other little to mine," the tall individual replied enigmatically while he dexterously resisted his questioner's effort to gain a glimpse at his face. "But," he added in a strange oracular tone, which moved Eckhardt despite himself, "if you value my aid in your hour of trial—assist me now in my hour of need!"

"Your aid?" echoed Eckhardt, staring amazed at his companion. "Do you know me? In what can you assist me?"

"You are Eckhardt the Margrave," replied the stranger; then inclining his head slightly towards him he whispered a word, the effect of which seemed to paralyze his listener, for his arresting hand fell and he retreated a step or two, surveying him in speechless wonder.

"Who are you?" he stammered at last.

The stranger raised the long visor of his conical hat. An exclamation of surprise came from Eckhardt's lips.

"Hezilo, the harper!"

The other replied with a silent nod.

"And we have never met!"

"I seldom go out!" said the harper.

"What know you of Ginevra?" begged the Margrave.

The harper shook his head.

"This is neither the time, nor the place. I must be gone—to shelter my burden! We shall meet again! If you follow me," he concluded, noting Eckhardt's persistence, "you will learn nothing and only endanger my safety and that of this child!"

"Is she dead?" Eckhardt questioned with a shudder.

"Would she were!" replied the stranger mournfully.

"Can I assist you?"

"I thank you! The burden is light. We will meet again."

There was something in the harper's tone which arrested Eckhardt's desire to ignore his injunction. How long he remained on the site of the ill-famed ruin, the Margrave hardly knew. When the fresh breeze of night, blowing from the Campagna, roused him at last from his reverie the mysterious stranger and his equally mysterious burden had disappeared in the haze of the moonlit night. Like one walking in a dream Eckhardt slowly retraced his steps to his palace on the Caelian Mount, where an imperial order sanctioning his purpose and relieving him of his command awaited him.

CHAPTER XI
NILUS OF GAËTA



grand high mass in honour of the pilgrims was on the following eve to be celebrated in the ancient Basilica of St. Peter's. But vast as was its extent, only a part of the pilgrims could be contained and the bronze gates were thrown open to allow the great multitude which filled the square to share the benefits and some of the glories of the ceremony.

The Vatican Basilica of the tenth century, far from possessing its present splendour, was as yet but the old consecrated palace, hallowed by memories of the olden time, in which Charlemagne enjoyed the hospitality of Leo III, when at his hands he received the imperial crown of the West. Similar to the restored church of St. Paul fuori le Mure, as we now see it, it was some twenty feet longer and considerably wider, having five naves divided off by four rows of vast monolith columns. There were ninety-six columns in all, of various marbles, differing in size and style, for they had been the first

hasty spoils of antique palaces and temples. The walls above the order of columns were decorated with mosaics such as no Roman hand could then produce or even restore. A grand arch, such as we see at the older Basilicas to-day, inlaid with silver and adorned with mosaic, separated the nave from the chancel, below which was the tribune, an inheritance from the prætor's court of old. It now contained the high altar and the sedile of the Vicar of Christ. Before the altar stood the Confession, the vault wherein lay the bones of St. Peter, with a screen of silver crowned with images of saints and virgins. And the whole was illumined by a gigantic candelabrum holding more than a thousand lighted tapers.

The chief attraction, however, was yet wanting, for the pontiff and his court still tarried in the Vatican receiving the homage of the foreign pilgrims. While listlessly noting the preparations from his chosen point of vantage, Eckhardt discovered himself the object of scrutiny on the part of a monk, who had been listlessly wandering about and who disappeared no sooner than he had caught the eye of the great leader.

Unwilling to continue the target of observation on the part of those who recognized him despite his closed visor, Eckhardt entered the Basilica and took up his station near a remote shrine, whence he could witness the entrance of the pontifical procession,

without attracting undue attention to his person. When the pontifical train did appear, it seemed one mass of glitter and sumptuous colour, as it filed down the aisles of the Basilica. The rich copes of the ecclesiastics, stiff with gold and gorgeous brocade, the jewelled mantles of the nobles, the polished breast plates and tasselled spears of the guards passed before his eyes in a bewildering confusion of splendour. In his gilded chair, under a superb canopy, Gregory, the youthful pontiff, was borne along, surrounded by a crowd of bishops, extending his hands in benediction as he passed the kneeling worshippers.

An infinite array of officials followed. Then came pilgrims of the highest rank, each order marching in separate divisions, in the fantastic costumes of their respective countries. In their wake marched different orders of monks and nuns, the former carrying torches, the latter lighted tapers, although the westering sun still flamed down the aisles in cataracts of light. After these fraternities and sisterhoods, Crescentius, the Senator, was seen to enter with his suite, conspicuous for the pomp of their attire, the taste of Crescentius being to sombre colours.

Descending from his elevated station, Gregory proceeded to officiate as High Priest in the august solemnity. Come with what prejudices one might, it was not in humanity to resist the impressions of

overwhelming awe, produced by the magnificence of the spectacle and the sublime recollections with which the solemnity itself in every stage is associated. Despite his extreme youth, Gregory supported all the venerableness and dignity of the High Priest of Christendom and when at the conclusion of the high mass he bestowed his benediction on all Christendom, Eckhardt was kneeling with the immense multitude, perhaps more convinced than the most enthusiastic pilgrim, that he was receiving benediction direct from heaven.

The paroxysm only subsided, when raising his head, he beheld a gaunt monk in the funereal garb of the brotherhood of Penitent Friars ascend the chancel. He was tall, lean as a skeleton and from his shrivelled face two eyes, sunken deep in their sockets, burnt with the fire of the fanatic. This was the celebrated hermit, Nilus of Gaëta, of whose life and manners the most wonderful tales were current. He was believed to be of Greek extraction, perhaps owing to his lengthy residence in Southern Italy, near the shrines of Monte Gargano in Apulia. In the pursuit of recondite mysteries of the Moorish and Cabalistical schools, he had attained such proficiency, that he was seized with a profound disgust for the world and became a monk. Several years he spent in remote and pagan lands, spreading the tidings of salvation, until, as it was whispered, he received an extraordinary call to the effect, as was

more mysteriously hinted, to turn the church from diverse great errors, into which she had fallen, and which threatened her downfall. Last, not least, he was to prepare the minds of mortal men for the great catastrophe of the Millennium,—the End of Time, the end of all earthly vanity. Special visions had been vouchsafed him, and there was that in his age, in his appearance and his speech which at once precluded the imposter. Nilus of Gaëta himself believed what he preached.

There was a brief silence, during which the Romans acquainted their foreign guests in hurried whispers with the name and renown of the reputed hermit. The latter stood motionless in the chancel and seemed to offer up a silent prayer, ere he pronounced his harangue.

His sermon was delivered in Latin, still the common language of Italy, even in its corrupt state, and its quality was such as to impress at once the most skeptical with the extraordinary gifts of the preacher.

The monk began with a truly terrific picture of the state of society and religion throughout the Christian world, which he delineated with such gloom and horror, that but for his arabesque entanglement and his gorgeousness of imagery one might have believed him a spirit of hell, returned to paint the orb of the living with colours borrowed from its murkiest depths. But with all the fantastic

convolutions of his reasoning the fervour of a real eloquence soon began to overflow the twisted fountains, in which the scholastic rhetoric of the time usually confined its displays. These qualities Nilus especially exhibited when describing the pure dawn of Christianity, in which the pagan gods had vanished like phantoms of night. He declared that they were once more deified upon earth and the clear light all but extinguished. And treating the antique divinities as impersonations of human passions and lusts, the monk's eloquence suddenly took the most terrible tints, and considering the nature of some of the crimes which he thus delineated and anathematized, his audience began to suspect personal allusions of the most hideous nature.

After this singular exordium, the monk proceeded in his harangue and it seemed as if his words, like the lava overflow from a volcano, withered all that was green and flowery in their path. The Universe in his desponding eloquence seemed but a vast desolation. All the beautiful illusions which the magic of passion conjures into the human soul died beneath his touch, changing into the phantoms, which perhaps they are. The vanity of hope, the shallowness of success, the bitterness which mingles with the greatest glory, the ecstasy of love,—all these the monk painted in the most powerful colours, to contrast them with the

marble calm of that drooping form crucified upon the hill of Calvary.

Spellbound, the immense multitude listened to the almost superhuman eloquence of the friar. As yet his attacks had dealt only in generalities. The Senator of Rome seemed to listen to his words with a degree of satisfaction. A singularity remarked in his character by all his historians, which, by some, has been considered as proof of a nature not originally evil, was his love of virtue in the abstract. Frequent resolutions and recommendations to reform were perhaps only overcome by his violent passions, his ambition and the exigencies of his ambiguous state between church and empire. But as the monk detailed the crimes and monstrosities of the age, the calm on the Senator's face changed to a livid, satirical smile, and occasionally he pointed the invectives of the friar by nodding to those of his followers who were supposed to be guilty of the crimes alleged, as if to call upon them to notice that they were assailed, and many a noble shrank behind his neighbour whose conscience smote him of one or all the crimes enumerated by Nilus.

In one of his most daring flights the monk suddenly checked himself and announcing his vision of impending judgment, he bid his listeners prepare their souls in a prophetic and oracular tone, which was distinctly audible, amid all the muttering which pervaded the Basilica.

A few moments of devout silence followed. The monk was expected to kneel, to offer up a prayer for divine mercy. But he stood motionless in the chancel, and after waiting a short time, Gregory turned to an attendant:

"Go and see what ails the disciple of Benedict,—we will ourselves say the Gratias."

After rising, he stepped to the altar with the accustomed retinue of cardinals and prelates and chanted the benediction. At the conclusion Crescentius approached the altar alone, demanded permission to make a duteous offering and emptied a purse of gold on the salver.

"A most princely and regal benefaction," muttered the Pontifical Datary—"a most illustrious example."

"Charlemagne gave more, but so will I, when like him I come to receive the crown of the West," muttered the Senator of Rome. His example was immediately followed, and in a few moments the altar was heaped round with presents of extraordinary magnificence and bounty. Sacks of gold and silver were emptied out, jewels, crucifixes, relics, amber, gold-dust, ivories, pearls and rare spices were heaped up in promiscuous profusion, and in return each donor received a branch of consecrated palm from the hand of the Datary, whose keen eyes reflected the brightness of the treasures whose receipts he thus acknowledged.

The chant from various chapels now poured down the aisles its torrents of melody, the vast multitudes joining in the Gloria in Excelsis. Eckhardt's remote station had not permitted him to witness all that had happened. His gaze was still riveted on the friar, who was now staggering from the pulpit, when a terrific event turned and absorbed his attention.

The great bell of the Basilica was tolling and the vibration produced by so many sounds shook the vast and ancient pile so violently that a prodigious mass of iron, which formed one of the clappers of the bell, fell from the belfry in the airy spire and dashing with irresistible force through every obstruction, reached the floor at the very feet of the Pontiff, crushing a deep hole in the pavement and throwing a million pieces of shattered marble over him and his retinue.

The vast assembly was for a moment motionless with terror and surprise, expecting little less than universal destruction in the downfall of the whole edifice on their heads, with all its ponderous mass of iron and stone. A cry arose that the Pontiff had been killed, which was echoed in a thousand varying voices, according as men's fears or hopes prevailed. But in the first moment of panic, when it was doubtful whether or not the entire center of the Basilica would crumble upon the assembly, Eckhardt had rushed from the comparative safety of his own

station to the side of the Pontiff as if to shield him, when with the majesty of a prophet interposing between offended heaven and the object of its wrath, Gerbert of Aurillac uttered with deep fervour and amid profound silence a De Profundis. The multitudes were stilled from their panic, which might have been attended with far more serious consequences than the accident itself. There was a solemn pause, broken only by a sea-like response of "Amen"—and a universal sigh of relief, which sounded like the soughing of the wind in a great forest.

All distinctions of rank seemed blotted out in that supreme moment. Then the voice of Nilus was heard thundering above the breathless calm, while he held aloft an ebony crucifix, in which he always carried the host:

"The summits of St. Peter still stand! When they too fall, pilgrims of the world—even so shall Christendom fall with them."

At a sign from the Pontiff his attendants raised aloft the canopy, under which he had entered. But he refused to mount the chair and heading the bishops and cardinals, he left the church on foot. The Datary gave one look of hopeless despair, as the masses crowded out of the Basilica, and abandoned all hope of restoring order. In an incredibly short time the vast area was emptied, Crescentius being one of the last to remain in its deepening shadows. With a

degree of vacancy he gazed after the vanishing crowds, more gorgeous in their broken and mingled pomp, as they passed out of the high portals, than when marshalled in due rank and order.

He too was about to leave, when he discerned a monk who stood gazing, as it were, incredulously at the shattered altar-pavement and the mass of iron deeply embedded in it. Hastily he advanced towards him, but as he approached he was struck by observing the monk raise his eyes, sparkling with mad fury, to the lighted dome above and clench his hands as if in defiance of its glory.

"Thou seemest to hold thy life rather as a burden than a blessing, monk, since thus thou repayest thy salvation," Crescentius addressed the friar, somewhat staggered by his attitude.

"Ay! If I have done Heaven a temporal injury,—be comforted, ye saints—for ye have wrought me an eternal one!" growled the monk between clenched teeth.

"Heaven?" questioned Crescentius, almost tempted to the conclusion that the monk, whoever he was, was out of his senses.

"Even Heaven," replied the monk. "One cubit nearer the altar,—I thought the struggle over in my soul between the dark angel and the bright—I had strung my soul to its mighty task,—yet I shrank from it, a second, and more cowardly Judas."

Crescentius gazed at the friar without grasping

his meaning.

"Take thy superior out of the church, he is mad and blasphemes," he turned to the monk's companion who listened stolidly to his raving.

"Ay!" spoke the strange monk, gnashing his teeth and shaking his fist towards heaven, "even the church shall anon be rent in twain and form a chasm, down which countless generations shall tumble into the abyss—'twere just retribution!"

"Tell me but this, monk, how could Heaven itself throw obstacles in the way of thine intent?" questioned Crescentius, perceiving that the monk had turned to depart and more convinced than ever that he was speaking to a madman.

"How? How? Oh, thou slow of understanding,—how?"

And the monk pointed downward, to the crushed and shattered marble of the pavement, in which the iron clapper of the bell lay embedded.

Crescentius receded involuntarily before the fierce, insane gleam in the monk's eyes, while the terrible import of his speech suddenly flashed upon his understanding. Crossing himself, he left the strange friar to himself and passed swiftly through the motley crowds which were waiting their turn of admission to the subterranean chapel of the Grand Penitentiarius.

Another had remained in the dense gloom of the Basilica, though he had not witnessed the scene

which had just come to a close. After the Pontiff's departure, Eckhardt had retired to the shrine of Saint Michael, where he knelt in silent prayer. His mind was filled with fantastic imaginings, inspired chiefly by his recent pilgrimage to the shrines of Monte Gargano. The deep void within him made itself doubly felt in this hour and more than ever he felt the need of divine interposition in order to retain that consciousness of purpose which was to guide his future course.

At last he arose. A remote chant fell upon his ears, and he saw a procession moving slowly from the refectory into the nave of the Basilica. By the dusky glare of the torches, which they carried, Eckhardt distinguished a number of penitent friars, bearing aloft the banner, destined in after-generations to become the standard of the Holy Inquisition, a Red Cross in a black field with the motto: "In Hoc Signo Vinces." Among them and seemingly the chief personage, strode the strange friar. With down-cast head and eyes he walked, eyes which, while they seemed fixed on the ground in self-abasement, stealthily scanned the features of those he passed.

"I marvel the holy saints think it worth while to trouble themselves about the soul of every putrid, garlic-chewing knave," said an old beggar on the steps of the Cathedral to an individual with whose brief review Eckhardt was much struck. He was a

man past the middle-age, with the sallow complexion peculiar to the peasants of the marshes. His broad hat, garnished with many coloured ribbons, was drawn over his visage, though not sufficiently so, to conceal the ghastly scars, with which it was disfigured. His lurking, suspicious eye and the peculiar manner with which, from habit, he carried his short cloak drawn over his breast, as if to conceal the naked stiletto, convinced Eckhardt that, whatsoever that worthy might assume to be, he was one of those blackest of the scourges of Italy, which the license of the times had rendered fearfully numerous, the banditti and bravi.

"Whether the saints care or no," that individual returned, "the monk is competent to convert the fiend himself. What an honour for the brotherhood to have produced such a saint."

Scarcely bestowing more than a thought upon so usual an evidence of social disorder, which neither pontifical nor imperial edicts had been able to correct, Eckhardt passed out, without noticing that he had himself attracted at least equal attention from the worthy described, who after having satisfied his curiosity, slunk back among the crowds and was lost to sight.

CHAPTER XII

RED FALERNIAN

 he palace of Theodora resounded with merriment, though it was long past midnight.

Round a long oval table in the great hall sat a score or more of belated revellers, their Patrician garbs in disorder, and soiled with wine, their faces inflamed, their eyes red and fiery, their tongues heavy and beyond the bounds of control. Here and there a vacant or overturned chair showed where a guest had fallen in the debauch, and had been permitted to remain on his self-chosen bed of repose. A band of players hidden in a remote gallery still continued to fill up the pauses in the riotous clamour with their barbaric strains.

At the head of the table, first in place as in rank sat Benilo, the Chamberlain. He seemed to take little interest in the conversation, for, resting his head on his hands, he stared into his untouched goblet, as if he endeavoured to cast some augury from the rising and vanishing bubbles of the wine.

Next to him sat Pandulph, Lord of Spoleto and Beneventum. His low, though well-set figure, dark hair, keen, black eyes and swarthy features bespoke his semi-barbaric extraction. His countenance was far from comely, when in repose, even ugly and

repulsive, but in his eyes lay the force of a powerful will and a depth and subtlety of intellect, that made men fear, when they could not love him. On the right of the Count sat the Lord of Civitella, a large, sensual man, with twinkling grey eyes, thick nose and full red lips. His broad face, flushed with wine, glowed like the harvest moon rising above the horizon. Opposite him sat the Patricius Ziazo, crafty and unscrupulous, a parasite who flattered whosoever ministered to his pleasure. The Patricius was conversing with an individual who outshone Pandulph in rapine, the Lord of Civitella in coarseness and himself in sycophancy, Guido of Vanossa, an arrogant libertine, whose pinched features and cunning leer formed the true index to his character. The Lords of Sinigaglia, Torre del Grecco, Bracciano, Cavallo and Caetano swelled the roll of infamy on the boards of Theodora,—worthy predecessors of the Orsini and Savelli, who were to oppress the city in after time.

Among those who had marked the beginning of the evening by more than ordinary gaiety, Benilo had by his splendid dissipation excited the general envy and admiration among his fellow revellers. His face was inflamed, his dark eyes were glittering with the adder tongues of the serpent wine, and his countenance showed traces of unlimited debauchery. It seemed to those present, as if the ghost of the girl Nelida, whom he had killed in this very hall, was

haunting him, so madly did he respond to the challenges from all around, to drink. But as the wine began to flood every brain, as the hall presented a scene of riotous debauch, his former reckless mood seemed for the nonce to have changed to its very opposite. Through the fumes of wine the dead girl seemed to regard him with sad, mournful eyes.

"Fill the goblets," cried Pandulph, with a loud and still clear voice. "The lying clock says it is day. But neither cock-crows nor clock change the purple night to dawn in the Groves of Theodora, save at the will of the Goddess herself. Fill up, companions! The lamp-light in the wine cup is brighter than the clearest sun that ever shone."

"Well spoken, Pandulph! Name the toast and we will pledge it, till the seven stars count fourteen and the seven hills but one," said the Cavallo looking up. "I see four hour glasses even now and every one of them lies, if it says it is dawn."

"You shall have my toast," said Pandulph, raising his goblet. "We have drunk it twenty times already, but we will drink it twenty times more:—the best prologue to wine ever devised by wit of man—Woman."

A shadow moved in the dusky background and peered unseen into the hall.

"And the best epilogue," replied the Lord of Civitella, visibly drunk. "But the toast—my cup is waiting."

"To the health—wealth—and love by stealth of Theodora!" yelled Pandulph, gulping down the contents of his goblet.

Benilo's face turned ashen pale, but he smiled.

"To Theodora!"

Every tongue repeated the name, the goblets were drained.

"My Lord, it is your turn now," said Pandulph, turning to the Lord of Civitella. "The good folks of Urbino have not yet rung the fire-bells against you, but some say they soon will. Who shall it be?"

The Lord of Civitella filled up his cup with unsteady hand, until it was running over and propping his body against the table as he stood up, he said:

"A toast to Roxané! And as for my foragers—they sweep clean."

The toast was drunk with rapturous applause.

"Right you are," bellowed the Cavallo. "Better brooms were never made on the Posilippo,—not a straw lies in your way."

"Did you accomplish it without fight?" sneered the Lord of Bracciano.

"Fight? Why fight? The burghers never resist a noble! We conjure the devil down with that. When we skin our eels, we don't begin at the tail."

"Better to steal the honey, than to kill the bees that make it."

"But what became of the women and children

after this swoop of your foragers?" asked the Lord of Bracciano, who appeared to entertain some few isolated ideas of honour floating on the top of the wine he had gulped down.

"The women and children?" replied the Lord of Civitella with a mocking air, crossing his thumbs, like the peasants of Lugano, when they wish to inspire belief in their words. "They can breakfast by gaping! They can eat wind, like the Tarentines,—it will make them spit clear."

The Lord of Bracciano, irritated at the mocking sign and proverbial allusion to the gaping propensities of the people round the Lago, started up in wrath and struck his clenched fist on the table.

"My Lord of Civitella," he cried, "do not cross your damned thumbs at me, else I will cut them off! The people of Bracciano have still corn in plenty, until your thieving bands scorch their fingers in the attempt to steal it."

Andrea Cavallo interposed to stop the rising quarrel.

"Do not mind the Lord of Civitella," he whispered to Bracciano. "He is drunk!"

"The rake! The ingrate!" growled Bracciano, "after my men opened the traps, in which the Vicar of the Church had caught him."

"Nay! If you gape at man's ingratitude, your mouth will be wide enough, ere you die, my lord," spoke Pandulph with a sardonic laugh. "And men in

our day stand no more on precedence in plots than in love affairs,—do they, my lord Benilo?"

"Nay, I'll dispute no man's right to be hanged or quartered before me—least of all yours, my Lord Pandulph," the Chamberlain replied venomously.

"My lord Benilo," replied Pandulph, "you are, when drunk, the greatest ruffian in Christendom, and the biggest knave when sober. Bring in more tankards, and we will not look for day till midnight booms again on the old tower of San Sebastian! I call for full brimmers, varlets,—bring your largest cups! We will drink another toast five fathoms deep in wine, strong enough to melt Cleopatra's pearls, and to a jollier dame than Egypt's queen."

The servitors flew out and in. In a few moments the table was replenished with huge drinking cups, silver flagons and all the heavy impediments of the army of Bacchus.

"We drink to the Fair Lady of the Groves,—and in her presence, too!" shouted the Lord of Spoleto, raising his goblet anew. "Why is she not among us? They say," he turned to Benilo with a sneer, "that you are so jealous of the charms of your bird of paradise, that you have forbidden her to appear before your friends."

Roaring peals of laughter crowned Pandulph's speech.

Benilo saw the absurdity of anger, but he felt it nevertheless.

"She chooses not to leave her bower even to look on you, my Lord Pandulph. I warrant you, she has not slept all night, listening to your infernal din."

A renewed outburst of mirth was the response.

"Then you will permit us to betake ourselves forthwith to her gilded chamber to implore pardon on our knees for disturbing her rest."

"Well spoken—by the boot of St. Benedict!" roared Guido of Vanossa.

"You may measure my foot and satisfy yourself that I am able to wear it," shouted the Lord of Civitella. "On our knees we will crawl to the Sanctuary of our Goddess,—on our knees!"

"But before we start on our pilgrimage, we will drain a draught long as the bell-rope of the Capitol," bellowed the Lord of Bracciano.

"Fill up the tankards!" exclaimed the Lord of Spoleto. "My goblet is as empty as an honest man's purse,—and one of my eyes is sober yet."

"Do not take it to heart!" spoke Guido of Vanossa, whose eyes were full of tears and wine. "You will not die in the jolly fellow's faith!" And with unsteady voice he began to sing a stanza in dog-Latin:

"Dum Vinum potamus
Fratelli cantiamo
A Bacco sia Onore!
Te Deum laudamus!"

"Would your grace had a better voice, you have a good will!" stammered the lord of Sinigaglia. "'Tis ample time to repent when you can do no better. Besides—if you are damned, it is in rare good company!"

"Ay! Saint and Sinner come to the same end!" gurgled the Lord Pandulph, ogling the purple Falernian.

"Fill up your goblets! Though it be a merry life to lead, I doubt if it will end in so cheery a death!" said Benilo, his eye wandering slowly from one to the other.

"Fill up the goblets!" shouted the Lord of Spoleto, rising and supporting his bulky carcass on the heavy oaken table.

With a sleepy leer he blinked at the guests.

"Down on your knees," he roared suddenly, his former intent reverting to him. "To the Sanctuary of the Goddess! On our knees we will implore her to receive us into her favour."

A strange spirit of recklessness had seized Benilo. Instead of resenting or resisting the proposition, he was the first to get down on all fours. His example had an electrifying effect. Although they swayed to and fro like sail-boats on angry sea-waves, all those still sober enough imitated the Chamberlain amid cheers and grunts, and slowly the singular

procession, led by Benilo, set in motion with the expressed purpose of invading Theodora's apartments, which were situated beyond the great hall. The Lord Pandulph resembled some huge bear as on all fours he hobbled across the mosaic floor beside the Lord of Bracciano, who panted, grunted and swore and called on the saints, to witness his self-abasement. Being gouty and stout, he was at one time seized with a cramp in his leg and struck out vigorously with the result of striking the Lord of Civitella squarely in the jaw, whereupon the latter, toppling over, literally flooded the hall with profanity and surplus wine. The other ten hobbled behind the leaders, cursing their own folly, but enjoying to a degree the novelty of the pageant.

Thus they had traversed the great hall at a speed as great as their singular mode of locomotion and their intoxicated condition would permit. The background of the hall was but dimly lighted; the great curtain strung between the two massive pillars, which guarded the entrance into Theodora's apartments, excluded the glow of the multi-coloured lamps, strung in regular intervals in the corridor beyond.

Benilo was the first to reach the curtain. Resting one hand on the floor, he raised the other, after the manner of a dog, trying to push its folds aside, when they suddenly and noiselessly parted. Something hissed through the air, striking the object of its aim a

stinging blow in the face—a cry of pain and rage, and Benilo, who had sprung to his feet, stood face to face with Theodora. At the same moment the lights in the great hall were turned on to a full blaze, revealing in its entire repelling atrocity the spectacle of the drunken revellers, who, upon experiencing a sudden check to their further progress, had come to a sluggish halt, some of them unable to retain their balance and toppling over in their tracks.

"Beasts! Swine!" hissed the woman, her eyes ablaze with wrath, the whip which had struck Benilo in the face, still quivering in her infuriated grasp. "Out with you—out!"

The sound of a silver whistle, which she placed between her lips, brought some five or six giant Africans to the spot. They were eunuchs, whose tongues had been torn out, and who, possessing no human weakness, were ferocious as the wild beasts of their native desert. Theodora gave them a brief command in their own tongue and ere the amazed revellers knew what was happening to them, they found themselves picked up by dusky, muscular arms and unceremoniously ejected from the hall, those lying in a semi-conscious stupor under the tables sharing the same fate.

CHAPTER XIII

DEAD LEAVES

 hile the Nubians set about in cleaning the hall and removing the last vestiges of the night's debauch, Theodora faced Benilo with such contempt in her dark eyes, that for a moment the Chamberlain's boasted insolence almost deserted him, and though seething with rage at the chastisement inflicted upon him he awaited her speech in silence. She faced him, leaning against a marble statue, her hands playing nervously with the whip.

"For once I have discovered you in your true station, the station of the foul, crouching beast, to which you were born, had not some accident played into the devil's hands by giving you the glittering semblance of the snake," she said slowly and with a disdain ringing from her words, which cut even his debased nature to the core. "I have whipped you, as one whips a cur: do you still desire me for your wife?"

With lips tightly compressed he looked down, not daring to meet her fierce gaze of hatred, which was burning into his very brain.

"I see little reason for changing my mind," he replied after a brief pause, while as he spoke his

cheek seemed to burn with shame, where the whip had struck it, and her evil, terrible beauty, exposed in her airy night-robe, roused all the wild demoniacal passions in his soul.

The whip trembled in her hands.

"And you call yourself a man!" she said with a withering look of contempt, under which he winced.

Then she continued in a hard and cheerless voice, wherein spoke more than simple aversion, a voice that seemed as it were petrified with grief, with remorse and hatred of the man who had been the cause of her fall.

"Listen to me, Benilo,—mark well my words. What I have been, you know: the beloved, the adored wife of a man, who would have carried me through life's storms under the shelter of his love,—a man, who would have shed the last drop of his life's blood for Ginevra,—that was. For two years we lived in happiness. I had begged him never to lift the veil which shrouded my birth,—a wish he respected, a promise he kept. In the field and at court he pursued the even tenor of his way,—happy and content with my love. Then there crept into our home a hypocrite, a liar, a fiend, who could mock the devils in hell to scorn. He stands there,—Benilo, his name,—a foul thing, who shrank from nothing to gain his ends. Some fiend revealed to him the awful secret of Ginevra's birth, a secret which he used to draw her step by step from the man she loved, to perpetrate a

deceit, the cunning of which would put the devils to blush. He promised to restore to her what is her own by right of her birth. He roused in her all the evil which ran riot in her blood, and when she had given herself to him, he revealed himself the lying fiend he was. Stung by the furies of remorse, which haunted her night and day,—in her despair the woman made her love the prize, wherewith to purchase that for which she had broken the holiest ties. But those she made happy were beasts,—enjoying her favour, giving nothing in return. My heart is sick of it,—sick of this sham, sick of this baseness. Heaven once vouchsafed me a sinner's glimpse of paradise, of a home of purity and peace where indeed I might have been a queen,—a queen so different from the one who rules a gilded charnel-house."

Benilo had listened in silent amazement. He failed to sound the drift of Theodora's speech. The whip-lash burned on his cheek. Her sudden dejection gave him back some of his former courage.

"I believe Theodora is discovering that she once possessed a conscience," he said with a sardonic smile. "How does the violent change agree with you?" he drawled insolently, for the first time raising his eyes to hers.

She appeared not to heed the question, but nodding wearily she said:

"I am not myself to-night. Despite all which has happened, I stand here a suppliant before the man

who has ruined my life. I have something else to say."

"Then I fear you have played your game and lost," he said brutally.

Theodore interrupted his speech with a gesture, and when she spoke, a shade of sadness touched her halting tones.

"Last night he came to me in my dream.—I will never forget the expression with which he regarded me. I am weary of it all,—weary unto death."

"Unfortunately our wager does not concern itself with sleep-walking—though it seems your only chance of luring your over-scrupulous mate to your bower."

The woman started.

"Surely, you do not mean to hold me to the wager?"

He smiled sardonically.

"Considering the risk I run in this affair—why not? Eckhardt is a man of action—so is Benilo,—who has performed the rare miracle of compelling the grave to return to his arms Ginevra, a queen indeed,—of her kind."

Surely some extraordinary change had taken place in the bosom of the woman before him. She received the thrust without parrying it.

"I see," he continued after a brief pause, "Eckhardt proves too mighty a rock, even for Theodora to move!"

"His will is strong—but all night in his lonely cell he called Ginevra's name."

"You are well informed. Why not take the veil yourself,—since a life of serene placidity seems so suddenly to your taste?"

"And where is it written that I shall not?" she questioned, looking him full in the eye. Benilo winced. If she would but quarrel. He felt insecure in her present mood.

"Here—on the tablets of my memory, where a certain wager is recorded," he replied.

She turned upon him angrily.

"It is you who forced me to it against my will.—I took up your gauntlet, stung by your biting ridicule, goaded by your insults to a weak and senseless folly."

"Then you acknowledge yourself vanquished?"

"I am not vanquished. What I undertake, I carry through—if I wish to carry it through."

"It has to my mind ceased to be a matter of choice with you," drawled the Chamberlain. "In three days Eckhardt's fate will be sealed,—as far as this world of ours is concerned. You see, your chances are small and you have no time to lose."

"Day after to-morrow—holy Virgin—so soon?" gasped Theodora.

"You have inadvertently called on one whose calls you have not of late returned," sneered the Chamberlain, with insolent nonchalance.

"Day after to-morrow," Theodora repeated,

stroking her brow with one white hand. "Day after to-morrow!"

"Do not despair," Benilo drawled sardonically. "Much can happen in two days."

She did not seem to hear him. Her thoughts seemed to roam far away. Then they returned to earth. For a moment she studied the man before her in silence, then dropping the whip, she stretched out her hand to him.

"Release me from this wager," she pleaded, "and all shall be forgotten and forgiven."

He did not touch the hand. It fell.

"Theodora," he whispered hoarsely. "You will never know how I love you! I am not as evil as I seem. But there are moments when I lose control and madness chokes my better self, in the hopeless hunt for your love. Theodora—bury the past! Give up this baleful existence—live with me again."

She laughed a shrill laugh.

"Your concubine! And you have the courage to ask this?"

"You know I love the very ground you tread on."

"Is that all you have to tell me?"

"Is not that enough?"

"No—it is not enough!" she replied with flashing eyes. "Between us stand the barriers of eternity!"

He paled.

"Do not dismiss me like this. It is far more cruel than you know. If you kill my hope, you leave me a

prey to the devils of jealousy and madness,—the evil things of your own creation! Come back to me! I only ask the love you gave me once,—the love you thought you gave me,—a grain, a crumb."

She turned her face away.

"Never again! Never again!"

The fevered blood raced swiftly from his cheek. For a moment he watched her in silence, his eyes like slits in his hard, pale face, then he turned on his heel and laughed aloud.

A shudder she could not repress crept over the woman's soft, white skin.

"Benilo!" she called to him. He turned and came slowly back.

"Benilo," she continued nervously, "release me from this wager! I cannot go on—I cannot. If he is bent upon leaving the world, let him retire in peace and do not stir the misery which lies couchant in the hidden depths of his soul. He has suffered enough,—more than enough,—more than should fall to one man's lot. Do not drive me to madness,—I cannot do it—I cannot."

"Your thoughts are only for him. For me you have nothing," he replied fiercely.

"I owe him everything—nothing to you!"

"Then go to him, to release you,—I will not!"

"I cannot do it! Be merciful!"

The Chamberlain bowed and answered mockingly.

"It rests with you!"

"With me?"

"Acknowledge your defeat!"

"What do you mean?" she asked with rising fear.

Benilo shrugged his shoulders.

"We made a wager—the loser pays."

"But the forfeit?" she cried in terror. "You would not claim—you would not chain me to you for ever?"

He regarded her with a slow triumphant smile and answered cruelly:

"Forever? At one time the thought had less terrors for you!"

She disregarded his sarcasm, continuing in the same plaintive tone of entreaty, which was music in Benilo's ear.

"But surely—you do not mean it! You would not profit by a woman's angry folly. I was mad,—insane,—I knew not what I said, what I did! Benilo, I will admit defeat,—failure,—anything,—only release me from this fearful wager. I ask you as a man,—have pity on me!"

"What pity have you lavished on me?"

"Were you deserving of pity?"

"My love—"

"Your love! What is your love, but the lust of the wild beast?" she exclaimed, flying into a passion, but instantly checking herself.

"Think of it, Benilo," she urged in desperation, "I could conquer, if I would. Once Eckhardt lays eyes

on me, I can lead him to my will. Never can I forget the look he gave me when I faced him before my own tomb in the churchyard of San Pancrazio. Never will that wild expression of despair and longing, which spoke to me from his mute eyes, fade from my memory. Whether he believed that I was a pale, mocking phantom—what he imagined that I was, I know not—I could win him, if I would."

"Then win him!" snarled Benilo, through his straight thin lips.

"No! No!" she cried piteously. "Eckhardt is noble. He believed in me,—he trusted me. He believes me dead. He has no inkling of the vile thing I am! I listened to his prayer to the Virgin—once more he asked to see the face of the woman he had loved above everything on earth. And you ask me to tear the veil from his eyes and drag him down into the sloth and slime of my existence! His faith falls upon me like a knotted scourge,—his love—a blow upon my guilty head. He gave me life-long love in payment for a lie; he gave me love unwavering and true beyond the grave. When I think of it all—I long to die of shame! You caused me to believe he was dead,—that he had fallen defending the Eastern March. I thanked Heaven for the message; I envied him his eternal rest. It was one of your black deceits, —perhaps one of your mildest. Let it pass! But again to enter into his life—No! no!" she moaned. "By the God of Love—I will not!"

She gave a wild moan and covered her face with her hands. Benilo looked on in silence, scarce crediting the proof of sight and sound. Once—twice he moved his lips, ere speech would flow.

"You have but to choose," he said. "Come to me—my wife or concubine,—I care not which, and I pledge you my word, he shall die! I have but spared him until I sounded your humour!"

She shivered, and raised her hands as if to conjure away some apparition.

"No—no—never!" she gasped. "You would not dare! You would not dare! You are but frightening me! Have pity on me and let me go!"

"I do not detain you! Go if you will, but remember the wager!"

Her head drooped, while Benilo drew nearer, bending his exultant eyes on her wilted form, and in the passion which mastered him, he grasped her wrists and drew her hands apart, then kissed her passionately upon the lips.

With a hunted cry, she wrenched herself away, and leaping backward, faced him, her voice choked with panting fury:

"Fool! Devil! Coward! Could you not respect a woman's grief for the degradation you have forced upon her? Dog! I might have paid your forfeit had I died of shame! But now—I will not!" She snapped her fingers in his face. "This for your wager! This for an oath to you—the vermin of the earth!"

Benilo took a backward step, awed by the flaming madness in her eyes.

"Take care!" he growled threateningly.

"The vermin that crawls in the dust, I say," she reiterated panting, "the dust—the dust! Better a thousand deaths than the brute love you offer! Between us it is a duel to the death! I will win him back,—if I have to barter my evil beauty for eternal damnation,—if our entwined souls burn to crisp in purgatory,—I will win him back, revealing myself to him the foul thing I am,—and by way of contrast sing your praises, my Lord Benilo—believe me,—the devils themselves shall be wroth with jealousy at my song."

There was something in the woman's eye, which staggered the Chamberlain.

"You would not dare!" he exclaimed aghast.

"I dare everything! You have challenged me and now your coward soul quails before the issue!—You would have me recede,—go! I've done with you!"

"Not yet," Benilo replied, with his sinister drawl —edging nearer the woman. "I have something else to say to you! Your words are but air! You have measured your strength with mine and failed! Go to your old time love! Tell him you found a conscience, —tell him where you found it,—and see if he allows you leisure to confess all your other peccadilloes, trifling though they be! Still—the risk is equal. I have a mind to take the chance! Once more, Theodora,—

confess yourself defeated,—acknowledge that the champion is beyond your reach—be mine—and the wager shall be wiped out!"

She recoiled from him, raising her hands in unfeigned horror and cried:

"Never—never."

Benilo shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will!"

"Then you would have me make him untrue to his vows? You would have me add this sin too, to my others?"

He laughed sardonically, while he feasted his eyes on her great beauty.

"It will not add much to the burden, I ween."

She gave him one look, in which fear mingled with contempt and turned to go, when with a spring, stealthy as the panther's, he overtook her, and pinning down her arms, bent back the proud head and once more pressed his lips upon the woman's.

With a cry like a wounded animal she released herself, pushed him back with the strength of her vigorous youth and spat in his face.

"Do you still desire me?" she hissed with flaming eyes.

He sprang at her with a furious oath, but his outstretched fingers grasped the air. Theodora had vanished. Recoiling from the towering forms of the Africans, who guarded the corridor leading to her apartments, Benilo staggered blindly back into the

dark deserted halls. Here he found himself face to face with Hezilo the harper, who seemed to rise out of the shadows like some ill-omened phantom.

"If you waver now," the harper spoke with his strange unimpassioned voice,—"you are lost!"

The Chamberlain stopped before the harper's arresting words.

"What can I do?" he groaned with a deep breath. "My soul half sinks beneath the mighty burden I have heaped upon it, it quails before the fatal issue."

"You have measured your strength with the woman's," replied the harper. "She has felt the conquering whip-hand. Onward! Unflinchingly! Relentlessly! She dare not face the final issue!"

"I need new courage, as the dread hour approaches!" Benilo replied, his breath coming fast between his set teeth. "And from your words, your looks, I drink it!"

"Then take it from this also: If now you fail hardly the grave would be a refuge."

Benilo peered up at his strange counsellor.

"Man or devil,—who are you to read the depths of the soul of man?" he queried amazed, vainly endeavouring to penetrate the vizor, which shaded the harper's face.

"Perhaps neither," a voice answered which seemed to come from the remotest part of the great hall, yet it was Hezilo the harper, who spoke, "Perchance some spirit, permitted to return to earth

to goad man to his final and greatest fall."

"It shall be as you say!" Benilo spoke, rousing himself. "Onward! Relentlessly! Unflinchingly!"

He staggered from the hall.

"Perhaps I too should have flagged and failed, had not one thought whispered hope to me in the long and solitary hours which fill up the interstices of time," muttered the harper, gazing after the Chamberlain's vanishing form.

The voices died to silence. The pale light of dawn peered into the deserted hall.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PHANTOM AT THE SHRINE



t last the evening had come, when Eckhardt was for ever to retire from the world, to spend the remainder of his days in prayers and penances, within the dismal walls of the cloister. The pontiff himself was to officiate at the high ceremony, which was to close the last chapter in the great general's life. Daylight was fading fast, and the faint light, which still glimmered through the western windows of St. Peter's Basilica had long since lost its

sunset ruddiness and was little more than a pale shadow. The candles, their mighty rival departed, blazed higher now in merry fitfulness, delighting to play in grotesque imagery over the monkish faces, which haunted the gloom.

One end of the Basilica was now luminous with the pale glow of innumerable slender tapers of every length, ranged in gradated order round the altar. Their mellow radiance drove the gloom a quarter of the way down the cathedral. The massive bronze doors at the farther end were still shut and locked. The only way of entering the church was through the sacristy, by way of the north transepts, to which only the monks had access. No sound that should ring out within these mighty walls to-night could reach the ears of those who might be in the streets without.

Meanwhile the quiescent echoes of the vast Basilica were disturbed by fitful murmurs from the Sacristy. Far in the distance, from the north transept, might be distinguished light footfalls. Slowly a double file of monks entered the church, walking to the rhythm of a subdued processional chant, which rose through the sombre shadows of the aisles. At the same time the great portals of the Basilica were thrown open to the countless throngs, which had been waiting without and which now, like waters released from the impediment of a dam, rushed into the immense area, waiting to receive them.

The rumour of Eckhardt's impending

consecration had added no little to the desire of the Romans to be present at a spectacle such as had not within the memory of man fallen to their lot to behold, and it seemed as if all Rome had flocked to the ancient Basilica to witness the great and touching ordeal at which the youthful Pontiff himself was to officiate. Seemingly interminable processions of monks, bearing huge waxen tapers, of choristers, acolytes and incense-bearers, with a long array of crosses and other holy emblems continued to pour into the Basilica. The priests were in their bright robes of high-ceremony. The choristers chanted a psalm as they passed on and the incense bearers swung their silver censers.

The Pontiff's face was a rarely lovely one to look upon; it was that of a mere youth. His chin was smooth as any woman's and the altar cloth was not as white as his delicate hands. The halo of golden hair, which encircled his tonsure, gave him the appearance of a saint. Marvellously, indeed, did stole, mitre and staff become the delicate face and figure of Bruno of Carinthia, and if there was some incongruity between the spun gold of his fair hair and the severity of the mitre, which surrounded it, there was none in all that assembly to note it.

At the door, awaiting the pontifical train, stood the venerable Gerbert of Aurillac, impressive in his white and gold dalmatica against the red robes of the chapter. Preceded by two cardinals the Pontiff

mounted the steps, entering through the great bronze portals of the Basilica, which poured a wave of music and incense out upon the hushed piazza. Then they closed again, engulfing the brilliant procession.

The chant ceased and the monks silently ranged themselves in a close semi-circle about the high-altar. There was a brief and impressive silence, while the deep, melodious voice of the Archbishop of Rheims was raised in prayer. The monks chanted the Agnus Dei, then a deep hush of expectation fell upon the multitudes.

The faint echoes of approaching footsteps now broke the intense silence which pervaded the immense area of the Basilica. Accompanied by two monks, Eckhardt slowly strode down the aisle, which the reverential tread of millions had already worn to unevenness. In an obscured niche he had waited their signal, racked by doubts and fears, and less convinced than ever that the final step he was about to take would lead to the desired goal. From his station he could distinguish faint silhouettes of the glittering spars in the vaulting, and the sculptured chancel, twisted and beaten into fantastic shapes and the line of ivory white Apostles. As he approached the monks gathered closely round the chancel, where, under the pontifical canopy, stood the golden chair of the Vicar of Christ.

Eckhardt did not raise his eyes. Once only, as in mute questioning, did his gaze meet that of Gregory,

then he knelt before the altar. His ardent desire was about to be fulfilled. As this momentous time approached, Eckhardt's hesitation in taking the irrevocable step seemed to diminish—and gradually to vanish. He was even full of impatient joy. Never did bridegroom half so eagerly count the hours to his wedding, as did the German leader the moments which were for ever to relieve him of that gnawing pain that consumed his soul. In the broken fitful slumber of the preceding night he had seen himself chanting the mass. To be a monk seemed to him now the last and noblest refuge from the torments which gnawed the strings of his heart. At this moment he would have disdained the estate of an emperor or king. There was no choice left now. The bridge leading into the past was destroyed and Eckhardt awaited his anointment more calmly.

Gregory's face was grave and to a close observer it would have appeared to withhold approval from that which added greater glory to the Church, as if anticipating proportionately greater detriment for the state. As Eckhardt knelt in silent prayer, all but entranced in religious ecstasy, he noted not the nearness of Benilo, who watched him like a tiger from the half gloom of his station. The hush in the Basilica was well-nigh oppressive. The Romans, who had flocked hither to witness the uncommon sight of a victorious leader abandoning the life at a court for the cassock of a monk, and perhaps inwardly

calculating the immense consequences of a step so grave, waited breathlessly until that step should be accomplished. Those whose sympathies lay with the imperial party were filled with grave misgivings, for if Eckhardt's example found imitators in the German host, the cause of the emperor would grow weaker in proportion as the prestige of the Romans and the monks increased.

The benediction had been pronounced. The Communion in both kind had been partaken. The palms of Eckhardt had been anointed with consecrated oil, and finally the celebration of the Holy Rite had been offered up in company with the officiating Cardinal.

It was done. There remained little more than the cutting of the tonsure, and from the world, which had once claimed him—from the world to which he still unconsciously clung with fevered pulses,—Eckhardt was to vanish for ever. As the officiating Cardinal of San Gregorio approached the kneeling general, the latter chanced to raise his head. A deadly pallor overspread his features as his eyes gazed beyond the ecclesiastic at one of the great stone pillars, half of which was wrapt in dense gloom. The ceremony, so splendid a moment ago, seemed to fade before the aspect of those terrible eyes, which peered into his own from a woman's face, pale as death. Throughout the church darkness seemed suddenly to reign, The candles paled in their

sconces of gold before the glare of those eyes, calculated to make or mar the destinies of man.

Against the incense saturated gloom, her beauty shone out like a heavenly revelation; she seemed herself the fountain of light, to give it rather than to receive it. For a moment Eckhardt lowered his gaze, little doubting but that the apparition was some new temptation of the fiend, to make him waver at the decisive moment. The ceremony proceeded. But when after a few moments, not being able to withstand the lure, he looked up again, he saw her glittering in a bright penumbra, which dazzled him like the burning disk of the sun. And as he gazed upon the strange apparition, tall with the carriage of a goddess, her eyes darting rays like stars, winging straight for his heart—and she the very image of his dead wife, just as she had appeared to him on that memorable night in the churchyard of San Pancrazio, —he hardly knew whether the flame that lighted those orbs came from heaven to strengthen his resolve, or from hell, to foil it. But from devil or angel assuredly it came.

Her white teeth shone in the terrible smile, with which she regarded him. The smooth alabaster skin of her throat glistened with a pearly sheen. Her white robe, falling from her head to her feet, straight as the winding sheet of death, matched the marble pallor of her complexion, and her hands, seemingly holding the shroud in place, were as white as fresh

fallen snow.

As Eckhardt continued to gaze upon her, he felt the floodgates of his memory re-open; he felt the portals of the past, which had seemed locked and barred, swing back upon their hinges, grating deep down in his soul. And with the sight of the phantom standing before him, so life-like, so beautiful, all the mad longing bounded back into his heart. Gripped by a terrible pain, he heard neither the chant, nor the words of the Cardinal. Everything around him seemed to fade, but the terrible being still held his gaze with those deep and marvellous eyes, that had all the brightness and life of the sapphire seas.

Eckhardt felt he was being carried far from the sphere of the cloister into a world at whose gates new desires were knocking. While he mechanically muttered the responses to the queries, which the Cardinal put to him, his whole soul began to rise in arms against the words his tongue was uttering. A secret force seemed to drag them from him, he felt the gaze of the thousands weighing upon him like a cope of lead. Yet it seemed that no one in all that vast assembly heeded the strange apparition, and if there appeared any hesitancy in Eckhardt's responses, or a strange restlessness in his demeanour, it was charged to the consciousness of the momentous change, the responsibility of the irrevocable step, crushing life, ambition and hope.

But the countenance of the mysterious

apparition did not change as the ceremony progressed. Steadfastly, with tender and caressing gaze she seemed to regard him, her whole soul in her straining eyes. With an effort, which might have moved a mountain, Eckhardt strove to cry out, that he would never be a monk. It was in vain. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. Not even by sign could he resist. Wide awake, he seemed to be in the throes of one of those nightmares, wherein one cannot utter the words on which life itself depends. The apparition seemed instinctively to read and to comprehend the torture, which racked Eckhardt's breast. And the glance she cast upon him seemed so fraught with the echoes of despair, that it froze his heart to the core.

Was it indeed but an apparition?

Was this terrible semblance to his dead wife more than a mere accident?

The chalice, with the blood of Christ, trembled in Eckhardt's hand. He was about to pass it to his lips. But try as he might, he could not avert his gaze. Those terrible eyes, the marble calm of the face of his dead wife seemed to draw him onward,—onward. —Forgotten was church, and ceremony, and vow; forgotten everything before that phantom from beyond the grave. It held him with a power which mocked to scorn every effort to escape its spell. The apparition lured him on, as almost imperceptibly it began to recede, without once abandoning its gaze.

A wild shriek re-echoed through the high-vaulted dome of the Basilica of St. Peter. It was the shriek of a madman, who has escaped his guards, but fears to be overtaken. The golden chalice fell from Eckhardt's nerveless grasp, spilling its contents over the feet of the Cardinal of San Gregorio who raised his hands in unfeigned dismay and muttered an anathema. Then, with a white, wet face, Eckhardt staggered blindly to his feet, groping, with outstretched arms, toward the apparition—which seemed to recede farther and farther away into the gloom.

The hush of death had fallen upon the assembly. The monk Cyprianus raised aloft his arms, as though invoking divine interposition and exorcising the fiend. His eyes, the eyes of the assembled thousands and the stare of Benilo, the Chamberlain, followed the direction of Eckhardt's outstretched arms. Suddenly he was seen to pause before one of the massive pillars, pale as death, mumbling strange words, accompanied by stranger gestures. Then he gazed about like one waking from a terrible dream—the spot where the apparition had mocked him but a moment ago was deserted! Had it been but another temptation of the fiend?

But no! It was impossible. This woman had made him utterly her own; her glance had sufficed to snap asunder the fetters of a self-imposed yoke, as though her will, powerful even after death, had

suddenly passed upon him. Though he saw her not at the present moment, he had but to close his eyes, to see her as distinctly as if she were still present in the body. And in that moment Eckhardt felt all the horrors of the path he was about to choose, the dead and terrible aspect of the life he was about to espouse. To be a monk, to crawl till death in the chill shade of the cloister, to see none save living spectres, to watch by the nameless corpses of folks unknown, to wear his raiment for his coffin's pall—a terrible dread seized him. One brief hour spent before an altar and some gabbled words were about to cut him off for ever from the society of the living. With his own hand he was about to seal the stone upon his tomb, and turn the key in the lock of the door of Life.

Like a whirlwind these thoughts passed through Eckhardt's brain. Then he imagined once more that he saw the eyes of his dead wife gazing upon him, burning into the very depths of his soul. What made their aspect so terrible to him, he was not just then in the frame to analyze. Some mysterious force, which had left the sweetness of her face unmarred, seemed to have imparted something to her eyes that inspired him with an unaccountable dread.

As he paused thus before the pillar, pressing his icy hands to his fevered temples, vainly groping for a solution, vainly endeavouring to break the fetters which bound his will and seemed to crush his

strength, there broke upon his ears the loud command of the officiating monk, to return and bid the Fiend desist. These words broke the deadly spell which had benumbed his senses and caused him to remain riveted to the spot, where the phantom had hovered. His sunken eyes glared as those of a madman, as he slowly turned in response to the monk's behest. The hot breath came panting from between his parched lips. Then, without heeding the ceremony, without heeding the monks or the spectators who had flocked hither to witness his consecration, Eckhardt dashed through the circle of which he had formed the central figure and, ere the amazed spectators knew what happened or the monks could stem his precipitate flight, the chief of the imperial hosts rushed out of the church in his robes of consecration and vanished from sight.

So quickly, so unexpectedly did it all happen, that even the officiating Cardinal seemed completely paralyzed by the suddenness of Eckhardt's flight. There was no doubt in the mind of Cyprianus that the Margrave had gone mad and his whispered orders sent two monks speeding after the demented neophyte. Deep, ominous silence hovered over the vast area of the Basilica. It seemed as if the very air was fraught with deep portent, and ominous forebodings of impending danger filled the hearts of the assembled thousands. The people knelt in silent prayer and breathless expectation. Would Eckhardt

return? Would the ceremony proceed?

Among all those, who had so eagerly watched the uncommon spectacle of whose crowning glory they were about to see themselves deprived, there was but one to whom the real cause of the scene which had just come to a close, was no mystery. Benilo alone knew the cause of Eckhardt's flight. To the last moment he had triumphed, convinced that no temptation could turn from his chosen path a mind so stern as Eckhardt's. But when the effect of the mysterious vision upon the kneeling general became apparent, when his restlessness grew with every moment, up to the terrible climax, accentuated by his madman's yell, when, unmindful of the monk's admonition—he saw him rush out of the church in his consecrated robes—then Benilo knew that the general would not return. For the time all the insolent boastfulness of his nature forsook him and he shivered as one seized with a sudden chill. Without awaiting what was to come, unseen and unnoticed amidst the all-pervading consternation, the Chamberlain rushed out of the Basilica by the same door through which Eckhardt had gained the open.

Under his canopy sat the Vice-Gerent of Christ, surrounded by the consecrated cardinals and bishops and the monks of the various orders. Without an inkling of the true cause prompting Eckhardt's precipitate flight Gregory had witnessed the terrible

scene, which had just come to a close. But inwardly he rejoiced. For only when every opposition to Eckhardt's mad desire had appeared fruitless, had the Pontiff acquiesced in granting to him the special dispensation, which shortened the time of his novitiate to the limit of three days.

But it was not a matter for the moment, for Gregory himself was to partake of the Communion and the monk Cyprianus, who was to perform the holy office, a tribute to the order whose superior he was, had just blessed the host. In his consecrated hand the wine was to turn into the blood of Christ, Gregory had just partaken of the holy wafer. Now the monk placed the golden tube in the golden chalice and, drawing his cowl deeply over his forehead, passed the other end of the tube to the Pontiff.

Gregory placed the golden tube to his lips, and as he sipped the wine, changed into blood, the two cardinals on duty approached the sacred throne, a torch in one hand, a small bundle of tow in the other. According to custom they set the tow on fire.

Again the unison chant of the monks resounded; the assembled thousands lying prostrate in prayer.

Suddenly there arose a strange bustle round the pontifical canopy. Suppressed murmurs broke the silence. Monks were to be seen rushing hither and thither. Gregory had fainted! The monk Cyprianus seemed vainly endeavouring to revive him. For a

moment the crowds remained in awe-struck silence, then, as if the grim spectre of Death had visibly appeared amongst them, the terror-stricken worshippers rushed out of the Basilica of St. Peter and soon the terrible rumour was rife in the streets of Rome. Pope Gregory the Fifth was dying.

CHAPTER XV
THE DEATH WATCH



he sun had sunk to rest and the noises of the day were dying out, one by one. The deep hush of the hour of dusk settled once more over the city, shaken to its very depths by the terrible catastrophe and upheaved by the fanaticism of the monks, who roused the populace to a paroxysm of frenzy and fear which gave way to pandemonium itself, when the feelings of the masses, strung to their utmost tension, leaped into the opposite extreme. Crescentius had remained shut up in Castel San Angelo, but the monk Cyprianus could be seen stalking through the city at the hour of dusk, and whosoever met him crossed himself devoutly, and prayed to have time for confession, when the end

was nigh.

The importance of the impending change impressed itself upon every mind. The time when worldly power alone could hope to successfully cope with the crying evils of a fast decaying age, of a world, grown old and stale and rotten, upon which had not yet fallen the beam of the Renaissance, was not yet at hand, and the fatal day of Canossa had not yet illumined the century with its lurid glare.

Therefore Otto had chosen Bruno, the friend of his boyhood, for the highest honours in Christendom, Bruno, one in mind, one in soul with himself, and the Conclave had by its vote ratified the imperial choice. But Bruno himself had not wished the honour. While he shared the high ideals of his royal friend he lacked that confidence in himself, which was so essential a requirement for the ruler whose throne swayed on the storm-tossed billows of the Roman See. Bruno was of a rather retrospective turn of mind, and it was doubtful, whether he would be able to carry out the sweeping reforms planned by Theophano's idealistic son, and regarded with secret abhorrence by the Italian cardinals. Only with the aid of the venerable Gerbert had Gregory consented to enter upon the grave duties awaiting him at the head of the Christian world at a time when that world seemed to totter in its very foundations. And he had paid the penalty, cut down in the prime of life.

In the Vatican chapel on a bier, round which were burning six wax candles in silver-sticks, lay the fast decaying body of Gregory V. Terrible rumours concerning the Pontiff's death were abroad in the city. The doors of the Pope's private apartments had been found locked from within. The terrified attendants had not ventured to return to the Vatican until the gray morning light of the succeeding day broke behind the crests of the Apennines. They had broken down the door, rumour had it, but to recoil from the terrible sight which met their eyes. On his bed lay the dead Pontiff. The head and right arm almost touched the floor, as if in the death-struggle he had lost his balance. Traces of burnt parchment on the floor and an empty phial on the table beside him intensified, rather than cleared up the mystery. And as they approached, terror-stricken, and endeavoured to lift the body, the right arm almost severed itself from the trunk at their touch, and the body was fast turning black. The handsome features of the youth were gray and drawn, his hair clammy and dishevelled and the open eyes stared frightfully into space as if vainly searching for the murderer.

Whatever Gerbert's suspicions were when, too late, he arrived in the death chamber, no hint escaped his lips. Under his personal care the body of the hapless youth was prepared for interment, then he hurriedly convoked the Conclave and ordered the gates of Rome closed against any one attempting to

leave the city.

The Vatican chapel was hung with funereal tapestry. Everywhere were seen garlands of flowers entwined with branches of cypress. In the middle of the chapel stood the bier, covered with black velvet. A choir of monks, robed in vestments of black damask, was chanting the last Requiem. The Cardinal of Sienna was conducting the last rites. As the echoes of the chant died away under the vaulted arches, a monk approached the bier, and sprinkled the corpse with holy water. The Cardinal pronounced the benediction; the monk bent slightly over the body when a drop from the forehead of the dead Pontiff rebounded to his face. He shuddered and hastily retreated behind the monks, who formed into the recessional. Only two remained in the chapel. Contrary to all custom they extinguished the candles which had burnt down half-way. The smaller ones they left to flicker out, until they should pitifully flare up once, more, then to go out in the great darkness like the soul of man, when his hour has come.

The last and only one to remain within the chapel to hold the death-watch with the Pontiff, was Eckhardt, the Margrave. Wrapt in his dark fancies he sat beside the bier. After his precipitate flight all memory of what succeeded had vanished. Exhausted and tottering he had found himself in the palace on the Caelian Mount, where he shut himself up till the

terrible tidings of the Pontiff's death penetrated to the solitude of his abode. Now it seemed to him that the moment he would set foot in the streets of Rome, some dark and fearful revelation awaited him. Since that night, when the strange apparition had drawn him from the altars of Christ, had caused him to renounce the vows his lips were about to pronounce, a terrible fear and suspicion had gripped his soul. The presentiment of some awful mystery haunted him night and day, as he brooded over the terrible fascination of those eyes, which had laid their spell upon him, the amazing resemblance of the apparition to the wife of his soul, long dead in her grave. And the more he pondered the heavier grew his heart within him, and he groped in vain for a ray of light on his dark and lonely path,—vainly for a guiding hand, to conduct him from the labyrinth of doubt and fear into the realms of oblivion and peace. The Margrave's senses reeled from the heavy fumes of flowers and incense, which filled the Basilica. The light from a cresset-lantern on the wall, contending singly with the pale mournful rays of the moon, which cast a dim light through the long casement, over pillars and aisles, fell athwart his pallid face. The terrible incidents of the past night, which had thrown him back into the throes of the world, and had snuffed out the Pontiff's life, weighed heavily upon him, and for the nonce, the commander abandoned every attempt to clear the terrible

mystery which enshrouded him. He almost despaired of combating the spectre single-handed, and now the one man, who might by counsel and precept have guided his steps, had been struck down by the assassin's hand.

The sanctity of the place, the solemnity of the hour, and the deep silence around were well calculated to deepen the melancholy mood of the solitary watcher. Weird were the fancies that swept over his mind, memories of a long forgotten past, and dim, indistinct plans for the future, till at length, wearied with his own reflections over that saddest of all earthly enigmas, what might have been, he seated himself on a low bench beside the bier. The moonbeams grew fainter and more faint, as the time wore on, and the sharp distinction between light and shadow faded fast from the marble floor.

Thicker and thicker drooped the shadows round the bier of the dead Pontiff. The silence seemed to deepen. The moon was gone. Save for the struggling rays of the cresset-lantern above him, the blackness of night closed round the solemn and ghostly scene.

The scent of flowers and the fumes of incense weighed heavily on Eckhardt's senses. Vainly did he combat the drowsiness; the silence, the dim light and the heavy fumes at last laid their benumbing spell upon him and lulled him to sleep. His head fell back and his eyes closed.

But his sleep was far from calm. Weird dreams

beset him. Again he lived over the terrible ordeal of the preceding night. Again he saw himself surrounded, hemmed in by a vast concourse. Again he saw the phantom at the shrine, the phantom with Ginevra's face,—Ginevra's eyes; again he heard her strange luring words. The wine spilled from the sacred chalice looked like blood on the marble stairs of the altar. He heard his own voice, strange, unearthly; gripped by a choking sensation he rushed from the crowded Basilica, the air of which seemed to stifle him,—rushed in pursuit of the phantom with Ginevra's face,—Ginevra's eyes. At the threshold of the church a hand seized his own,—a woman's hand. How long, since he had felt a woman's hand in his own! It was cold as the skin of a serpent, yet it burnt like fire. And the hand drew him onward, ever onward. There was no resisting the gaze of those eyes which burnt into his own.

A deep azure overspread the sky. The trees were clothed in the raiment of spring. Blindly he staggered onward. Blindly he followed his strange guide through groves, fragrant with the perfumes of flowers,—the air seemed as a bower of love. The hand drew him onward with its chill, yet burning touch. The way seemed endless. Faster and faster grew their speed. At last they seemed to devour the way. The earth flitted beneath them as a gray shadow. The black trees fled in the darkness like an army in rout. They delved into glens, gloomy and

chill. The night-birds clamoured in the forest deeps; will-o'-the-wisps gleamed over stagnant pools and now and then the burning eyes of spectres pierced the gloom, who lined a dark avenue in their nebulous shrouds.

And the hand drew him onward—ever onward! Neither spoke. Neither questioned. At last he found himself in a churchyard. The scent of faded roses hovered on the air like the memory of a long-forgotten love. They passed tombstone after tombstone, gray, crumbling, with defaced inscriptions; the spectral light of the moon in its last quarter dimly illumined their path till at last they reached a stone half hidden behind tall weeds and covered with ivy, moss and lichen. The earth had been thrown up from the grave, which yawned to receive its inmate. Owls and bats flocked and flapped about them with strange cries; the foxes barked their answer far away and a thousand evil sounds rose from the stillness. As they paused before the yawning grave he gazed up into his companion's face. Pale as marble Ginevra stood by his side, the long white shroud flowing unbroken to her feet. Through the smile of her parted lips gleamed her white teeth, as she pointed downward, to the narrow berth, then her arms encircled his neck like rings of steel; her eyes seemed to pierce his own, he felt unable to breathe, he felt his strength giving way, together they were sinking into the night of the grave—

A shrill cry resounded through the silence of the Basilica. Awakened by the terrible oppression of his dream,—roused by the sound of his own voice, Eckhardt opened his eyes and gazed about, fearstruck and dismayed. After a moment or two he arose, to shake off the spell, which had laid its benumbing touch upon him, when he suddenly recoiled, then stood rooted to the spot with wild, dilated eyes. At the foot of the Pontiff's bier stood the tall form of a woman. The fitful rays of the cresset-lantern above him illumined her white, flowing garb. A white transparent veil drooped from her head to her feet; but the diaphanous texture revealed a face pale and beautiful, and eyes which held him enthralled with their slumbrous, mesmeric spell. Breathless with horror Eckhardt gazed upon the apparition; was it but the continuation of his dream or was he going mad?

As the phantom slowly began to recede into the shadows, Eckhardt with a supreme effort shook off the lethargy which benumbed his limbs. He dared remain no longer inert, he must penetrate the mystery, whatever the cost, whatever the risk. With imploring, outstretched arms he staggered after the apparition,—if apparition indeed it was,—straining his gaze towards her slowly receding form—and so absorbed was he in his pursuit, that he saw not the shadow which glided into the mortuary chapel. Suddenly some dark object hurled itself against him;

quick as a flash, and ere he could draw a second breath, a dagger gleamed before Eckhardt's eyes; he felt the contact of steel with his iron breast-plate, he heard the weapon snap asunder and fall at his feet, but when he recovered from his surprise, the would-be assassin, without risking a second stroke, had fled and the apparition seemed to have melted into air. Eckhardt found himself alone with the dead body of the Pontiff.

With loud voice he called for the sentry, stationed without, and when that worthy at last made his appearance, his heavy, drooping eyelids and his drowsy gait did not argue in favour of too great a watchfulness. Making the sentry doff his heavy iron shoes, Eckhardt bade him secure a torch, then he made the round of the chapel, preceded by his stolid companion. The Margrave's anxiety found slight reflex in the coarse features of his subordinate, who understood just enough of what was wanted of him to comprehend the disappointment in his master's countenance. As every door was locked and bolted, the only supposition remaining was that the bravo had discovered some outlet from within. But Eckhardt's tests proved unavailing. The floor and the walls seemed of solid masonry which to penetrate seemed impossible. The broken blade offered no clue either to the author or perpetrator of this deed of darkness, and after commanding the sentry to keep his watch for the remainder of the night, inside,

Eckhardt endeavoured once more to compose himself to rest, while the man-at-arms stretched his huge limbs before the pontifical bier.

The bells of St. Peter's chimed shrill and loud as a mighty multitude, greater even than that of the preceding night, swept within its portals toward the chapel of Boniface VIII. There, filling every inch of space, only the more fortunate of the crowd gained a glimpse of the coffin, which had been closed, for the corpse was decaying fast, the effect of the terrible and mysterious poison which had been mixed in the holy wine. At length, as the solemn chant of the choristers began to swell through the edifice, preluding the celebration of the Death Mass for the departed Pontiff, a silence as of the tomb pervaded the vast edifice.

Thus the day wore on,—thus the day departed.

The solemn chant had died away. The sun of another day had set.

The funeral cortege set in motion. Fifty torches surrounded the bier and so numerous were the lamps in the windows of the streets through which the funeral procession passed, so abundant the showers of roses which poured upon the bier, that the people declared it surpassed the procession Corpus Domini.

Interchanging solemn hymns, the cortege arrived at last before the church of San Pietro in Montorio, where the body was to be placed in the niche provisionally appointed, where it was to

remain till the death of the succeeding pope should consign it to its final place of rest.

The ceremony ended, the people dispersed. Few loiterers remained on the pavement of the church. The sacristan announced that it was about to be closed, and waiting until, as he thought, all had departed, he turned the ponderous doors on their hinges and shut them with a crash. The report, reverberating from arch to arch, shook the ancient sepulchre through its every angle. The lamps, which at wide intervals burned feebly before the shrines of the saints, lent additional solemnity and awe to the obscurity of the place. One torch was left to light a narrow circle round the entrance to the crypt.

Silence had succeeded when out of the shadow of the tomb there passed two figures, who upon entering the narrow circle of light emanating from the dim, flickering taper, faced each other in mute amazement and surprise.

"What are you doing here?" spoke the one, in the garb of a monk, as they stood revealed to each other in the half gloom.

With a gesture of horror and dismay the other, a woman, wrapt in a dark mantle, which covered her tall and stately form from head to foot, turned away from him.

"I give you back the question," she replied, dread and fear in her tones.

"My presence here concerns the dead," said the

monk.

"They say, the hand of the dead Pontiff has touched his murderer."

The monk paled. For a moment he almost lost his self-control.

"He had to die some way," he replied with a shrug.

"Monster!" she exclaimed, recoiling from him, as if she had seen a snake in her path.

"He travelled in godly company," said the monk Cyprianus with a dark laugh. "An entire Conclave will welcome him at the gates of Paradise. Why are you here?" the monk concluded, a shade of suspicion lingering in his tones.

"Am I accountable to you?" flashed Theodora.

"Being what you are through my intercession,—perhaps," replied the monk.

She measured him with a look of unutterable contempt.

"Because the prying eyes of a perjured wretch, who screened his vileness behind the cassock of the monk, dared to offend the majesty of Death and to disturb the repose of the departed, you come to me like some importunate slave dissatisfied with his hire? You dare to constitute yourself my guardian, to call Theodora a thing of your creation? Take care! You speak to a descendant of Marozia. I have had enough of whimpering monks. For the service demanded of you in a certain hour you have been

paid. So clear the way, and trouble me no more!"

The monk did not stir.

"The fair Theodora has not inherited Ginevra's memory," he said with a sneer. "The gold was to purchase the repose of Ginevra's soul."

Theodora shuddered, as if oppressed with the memories of the past.

"Candles and masses," she said, as one soliloquizing. "How signally they failed!"

The monk shrugged his shoulders.

"If a thousand Aves, and tapers six foot long fail in their purpose,—what undiscovered penance could perform the miracle?"

There was something in the gleam of the monk's eye which brought Theodora to herself.

"What do you want of me?" she questioned curtly.

"The fulfilment of your pledge."

"You have been paid."

The monk waved his hands.

"'Tis not for gold, I have ventured this—"

And he pointed to the crypts below.

She recoiled from him, regarding him with a fixed stare.

"What do you want of me?" she again asked with a look, in which hate and wonder struggled for the mastery.

"The new Conclave will be made up of your creatures. Their choice must fall—on me!"

"On the perjured assassin?" shrieked the woman. "Out of my way! I've done with you!"

The monk stirred not. From his drawn white face two eyes like glowing coals burnt into those of the woman.

"Remember your pledge!"

"Out of my way, assassin! Dare you so high? The chair of St. Peter shall never be defiled by such a one —as you!"

"And thus Theodora rewards the service rendered to Ginevra," the monk said, breathing hard, and making a step towards her. She watched him narrowly, her hand concealed under her cloak.

"Dare but to touch the hem of this robe with your blood-stained hands—"

Cyprianus retreated before the menace in her eyes.

"I thought I had lived too long for surprises," he said calmly. "Yet, considering that I bear here in this bosom a secret, which one, I know, would give an empire to obtain,—Cyprianus can be found tractable."

With a last glance at the woman's face, stony in its marble-cold disdain, the monk turned and left the church through the sacristy. For a moment Theodora remained as one spell-bound, then she drew her mantle more closely about her and left the sepulchre by an exit situated in an opposite direction. No sooner had her footsteps died to silence when two

shadowy forms sped noiselessly through the incense-saturated dusk of S. Pietro in Montorio, pausing on the threshold of the door, through which the monk Cyprianus had gained the open.

"I need that man!" whispered the taller into the ear of his companion, pointing with shadowy finger to the swiftly vanishing form of the monk.

The other nodded with a horrid grin, which glowed upon his visage like phosphorus upon a skull.

With a quick nod of understanding, the Grand Chamberlain and John of the Catacombs quitted the steps of S. Pietro in Montorio.

Darkness fell.

Night enveloped the trembling world with her star embroidered robe of dark azure.

CHAPTER XVI

THE CONCLAVE



vast concourse surrounded the portals of the Vatican. It seemed as if the entire population of Rome, from the Porta del Popolo to the Coliseum, from the baths of Diocletian to Castel San Angelo, had assembled by appointment in the Piazza of St.

Peter. For so dense was the multitude, that its pressure filled the adjacent thoroughfares, the crowds clinging round columns, winding along the broken outlines of the walls, and grouping themselves among the ruins of temples and fallen porticoes.

The eyes of all were fixed upon that wing of the pontifical palace where the Conclave, hurriedly convoked, was assembled, and as Gregory V had now been dead sixteen days, the cardinals were proceeding with the election of a new Pope. Never possibly, from the hour when the first successor of St. Peter mounted the throne of the Apostle, had there been exhibited so much unrest and disquietude as there was in this instance to be observed among the masses. The rumour that Gregory had died of poison had proved true, and the Romans had been seized with a strange fear, urging all ranks towards the Vatican or Monte Cavallo, according as the scarlet assembly held its sittings in one place or another. During the temporary interregnum, the Cardinal of Sienna, president of the Apostolic Chamber, had assumed the pontifical authority.

For three days the eyes of the Romans had been fixed upon a chimney in the Vatican, whence the first signal should issue, proclaiming the result of the pending election. Yet at the hour when the Ave Maria announced the close of day, a small column of smoke, ascending like a fleecy cloud of vapour to the

sky, had been the only reward for their anxiety, and with cries mingled with shouts of menace, discordant murmurs of raillery and laughter the crowds had each day dispersed. For the smoke announced that the Romans were still without a Pontiff, that the ballot-list had been burnt, and that the Sacred College had not yet chosen a successor to Gregory.

The day had been spent in anxious expectation. Hour passed after hour, without a sign either to destroy or to excite the hope, when the first stroke of five was heard. Slowly the bells tolled the hour, every note falling on the hearts of the people, whose anxious gaze was fixed on the chimney of the Vatican. The last stroke sounded; its vibrations faintly fading on the silent air of dusk, when a thunderous clamour, echoing from thousands of throats, shook the Piazza of St. Peter, succeeded by a death-like silence of expectation as with a voice, loud and penetrating, Cardinal Colonna, who had stepped out upon the balcony, announced to the breathless thousands:

"I announce to you tidings of great joy: Gerbert of Aurillac, Archbishop of Rheims, Bishop of Ravenna and Vice-Chancellor of the Church, has been elected to the exalted office of Pontiff and has ascended the chair of St. Peter under the name of Sylvester II."

As the Cardinal finished his announcement a monk in the grey habit of the Penitent friars was

seen to pale and to totter, as if he were about to fall. Declining the aid of those endeavouring to assist him he staggered through the crowds, covering his face with his arms and was soon lost to sight.

The thunderous applause at the welcome tidings was followed by sighs of relief, as the people retired to their houses and hovels. The place, where a few minutes before a nation seemed collected, was again deserted, save for a few groups, composed of such whom curiosity might detain or others who, residing in the immediate neighbourhood, were less eager to depart. Even these imperceptibly diminished, and when the hour of eight was repeated from cloisters and convents, the lights in the houses gradually disappeared, save in one window of the Vatican, whence a lamp still shed its fitful light through the nocturnal gloom.

Book the Second
The Sorceress

"As I came through the desert, thus
it was
As I came through the desert: I was

twain;
Two selves distinct, that cannot join again.
One stood apart and knew but could not stir,
And watched the other stark in swoon and her;
And she came on and never turned aside,
Between such sun and moon and roaring tide:
And as she came more near,
My soul grew mad with fear."
—*James Thomson.*

CHAPTER I

THE MEETING

 ot many days after, in the still noontide of mellow autumn, a small band of horsemen drew towards Rome. They rode along the Via Appia, between the ancient tombs; all about them, undulant to the far horizon, stretched a brown

wilderness dotted with ruins. Ruins of villas, of farms, of temples, with here and there a church or a monastery, that told of the newer time. Olives in scant patches, a lost vineyard, a speck of tilled soil, proved that men still laboured amid this vast and awful silence, but rarely did a human figure meet the eye. Marshy ground and stagnant pools lay on either hand, causing them to glance sadly at those great aqueducts, which had in bygone ages carried water from the hills into Rome.

They rode in silence, tired with their journey, occupied with heavy or anxious thoughts. Otto, King of the Germans, impatient to arrive, was generally a little ahead of the rest of the company. The pallor of his smooth and classic face was enhanced by the coarse military cloak, dark and travel-stained, which covered his imperial vestments. A lingering expression of sadness was revealed in his eyes, and his lips were tightly compressed in wordless grief, for the tidings of the untimely death of the Pontiff, the friend of his youth and his boyhood days, had reached him just after his departure from the shrines of St. Michael in Apulia. Dark hints had been contained in the message, which Sylvester II, Gregory's chosen successor and Otto's former teacher, had despatched to the ruler of the Roman world, urging his immediate return,—for the temper of the Romans brooked no trifling, their leaders being ever on the alert for mischief.

Earthworks and buildings of military purpose presently appeared, recalling the late blockade; churches and oratories told them they were passing the sacred ground of the Catacombs, then they trotted along a hollow way and saw before them the Appian gate. Only two soldiers were on guard; these, not recognizing the German king, took a careless view of the travellers, then let them pass without speaking.

At the base of the Aventine the cavalcade somewhat slackened its pace. Slowly they ascended the winding road, until they reached the old wall of Servius Tullius. Here Otto reined in his charger, pausing, for a moment, to observe the view. To the west and south-west stretched the brown expanse of the Campagna, merging into the distant gray of the Roman Maremma, while beyond that point a clear blue line marked the Ionian Sea. Beneath them the Tiber wound its coils round St. Bartholomew's Island, the yellow water of the river, stirred into faint ripples by the breeze, looking from the distance like hammered brass. Beyond the Tiber rose the Janiculan Mount, behind which the top of the Vatican hill was just visible. To southward the view was bounded by the Church of Santa Prisca above them and far off rose the snow-capped cone of Soracté. Northeast and east lay the Palatine and Esquiline with the Campaniles of Santa Maria Maggiore and San Pietro in Vincoli. Over the Caelian

Mount they could see the heights of the Sabine hills, and running their eyes along the Appian way, they could almost descry the Alban lake. At a sign from their sovereign the cavalcade slowly set in motion. Passing the monastery of St. Jerome and its dependencies, the three churches of the Aventine, Santa Sabina, Santa Maria Aventina and St. Alexius, the imperial cavalcade at last drew rein before the gates of Otto's Golden Palace on the Aventine.

Again in his beloved Rome, Otto's first visit was to Bruno's grave. He had dismissed his attendants, wishing to be alone in his hour of grief. Long he knelt in tears and silent prayers before the spot, which seemed to contain half his young life, then he directed his steps towards the Basilica of St. Peter, there to conclude his devotions.

It was now the hour of Vespers.

The area of St. Peters was filled with a vast and silent crowd, flowing in and out of the Confessor's station, which was in the subterranean chapel, that contains the Apostle's tomb, the very lode-stone of devotion throughout the Christian word.

After having finished his devotions, Otto was seized with the desire to seek the confessor, in order to obtain relief from the strange oppression which hovered over him like a presentiment of evil. Taking his station in line with a number of penitents, in the dusky passage leading to the confessional, the scene within was now and then revealed to his gaze for the

short space of a moment, when the bronze gates opened for the entrance or exit of some heavily burdened sinner. The tomb was stripped of all its costly ornaments, and lighted only by the torches of some monks, whose office it was to interpret the Penitentiarius, whenever occasion arose. These torches shed a mournful glow over the dusk, suiting the place of sepulchre of martyred saints. On the tomb itself stood an urn of black marble, beneath which was an alabaster tablet, on which was engraved the prophecy concerning the Millennium and the second coming of Christ, and the conditions of penance and prayer, which were to enable the faithful to share in and obtain its benefits. Only now and then, when the curtain waved aside, the person of the Grand Penitentiarius became visible, his hands rigidly clasped, and his usually pale and stern visage overspread with even a darker haze of its habitual gloom.

While Otto was anxiously waiting his turn to be admitted to the presence of the Confessor, the gates of the confessional suddenly swung open and a woman glided out. She was closely veiled and in his mental absorption Otto might scarcely have noticed her at all, but for the singular intensity of the gaze, with which the monk followed her retreating form.

As she passed the German King in the narrow passage, her veil became entangled and she paused to adjust it. As she did so, her features were for the

brief space of a moment revealed to Otto, and with such an air of bewilderment did he stare at her, that she almost unconsciously raised her eyes to his. For a moment both faced each other, motionless, eye in eye—then the woman quickened her steps and hastened out. After she had disappeared, Otto touched his forehead like one waking from a trance. Never, even in this city of beautiful women, had he seen the like of her, never had his eyes met such perfection, such exquisite beauty and loveliness. She combined the stately majesty of a Juno with the seductive charms of Aphrodite. In dark ringlets the silken hair caressed the oval of her exquisite face, a face of the soft tint of Parian marble, and the dark lustrous eyes gave life to the classic features of this Goddess of Mediæval Rome. Before she vanished from sight, the woman, seemingly obeying an impulse not her own, turned her head in the direction of Otto. This was due perhaps to the strange discrepancy between his face and his attire, or to the presence of one so young and of appearance so distinguished among the throngs which habitually crowded the confessional.

How long he stood thus entranced, Otto knew not, nor did he heed the curious gaze of those who passed him on entering and leaving the confessional. At last he roused himself, and, oblivious of his station and rank, flew down the dark, vaulted passage at such a speed as almost to knock down

those who encountered him in his headlong pursuit of the fair confessionist. It was more than a matter of idle curiosity to him to discover, if possible, her station and name, and after having attracted to himself much unwelcome attention by his rash and precipitate act, he gradually fell into a slower pace. He reached the end of the dark passage in time to see what he believed to be her retreating form vanish down a corridor and disappear in one of the numerous side-chapels. Concluding that she had entered to perform some special devotion, he resolved to await her return.

Considerable time elapsed. At last, growing impatient, Otto entered the chapel. He found it draped throughout with black, an altar in the center, dimly illumined. Some monks were chanting a Requiem, and before the altar there knelt a veiled woman, apparently under the spell of some deep emotion, for Otto heard her sob when she attempted to articulate the responses to the solemn and pathetic litany, which the Catholic church consecrates to her dead.

But the German King's observation suffered an immediate check.

A verger came forward on those soundless shoes, which all vergers seem to have, and little guessing the person or quality of the intruder informed him of the woman's desire, that none should be admitted during the celebration of the mass. Otto stared his

informant in the face, as if he were at a loss to comprehend his meaning, and the latter repeated his request somewhat more slowly, under the impression that the stranger's seeming lack of understanding was due to his unfamiliarity with the speaker's barbarous jargon.

Otto slowly retreated and deferring his intended visit to the chapel of the Confessor to an hour more opportune, left the Basilica. As he recalled to himself, trace after trace, line upon line, that exquisite face, whose creamy pallor was enhanced by the dark silken wealth of her hair, and from whose perfect oval two eyes had looked into his own, which had caused his heart-beats to stop and his brain to whirl, he could hardly await the moment when he should learn her name, and perhaps be favoured with the assurance that her visit on that evening was not likely to have been her last to the Confessor's shrine.

Imbued with this hope, he slowly traversed the streets of Rome, experiencing a restful, even animating contentment in breathing once more the atmosphere of the thronging city, of being once more in a great center of humanity. At a familiar corner sat an old man with an iron tripod, over which, by a slow fire, he roasted his chestnuts, a sight well remembered, for often had he passed him. He threw him some coins and continued upon his way. Beyond, at his shop-door stood a baker, deep in altercation with his patrons. From an alley came a

wine-vender with his heavy terra-cotta jars. Before an osteria a group of pifferari piped their pastoral strains. A few women of the sturdy, low-browed Contadini-type hastened, basket-laden, homeward. A patrol of men-at-arms marched down the Navona, while up a narrow tortuous lane flitted a company of white-robed monks, bearing to some death-bed the last consolation of the church.

Otto had partaken of no food since morning and nature began to assert her rights. Finding himself at the doorway of an inn for wayfarers, with a pretentious coat-of-arms over the entrance, he entered unceremoniously, and seated himself apart from the rather questionable company which patronized the Inn of the Mermaid. Here the landlord, a burly Calabrian, served his unknown guest with a most questionable beverage, faintly suggestive of the product of the vintage, and viands so strongly seasoned that they might have undertaken a pilgrimage on their own account.

For these commodities, making due allowance for his guest's abstracted state of mind, the uncertainty of the times and the crowded state of the city, the host of the Mermaid only demanded a sum equal to five times the customary charge, which Otto paid without remonstrance, whereupon the worthy host of the Mermaid called to witness all the saints of the calendar, that he deserved to spend the remainder of his life in a pig-sty, for having been so

moderate in his reckoning.

As one walking in a dream, Otto returned to his palace on the Aventine. Had he wavered in the morning, had the dictates of reason still ventured to assert themselves—the past hour had silenced them for ever. Before his gaze floated the image of her who had passed him in the Basilica. At the thought of her he could hear the beating of his own heart. Rome—the dominion of the earth—with that one to share it—delirium of ecstasy! Would it ever be realized! Then indeed the dream of an earthly paradise would be no mere fable!

CHAPTER II

THE QUEEN OF NIGHT



week had passed since Otto's arrival in Rome. Eckhardt, wrapped in his own dark fancies, had only appeared at the palace on the Aventine when compelled to do so in the course of his newly resumed duties. The terrible presentiment which had haunted him night and day since he left the gray, bleak winter skies of his native land, had become intensified during the past days. Day and night he

brooded over the terrible fascination of those eyes which had laid their spell upon him, over the amazing resemblance of the apparition to the one long dead in her grave. And the more he pondered the heavier grew his heart within him, and vainly he groped for a ray of light upon his dark and lonely path, vainly for a guiding hand to conduct him from the labyrinth of doubt and fear.

It had been a warm and sultry day. Towards evening dark clouds had risen over the Tyrrhene Sea and spread in long heavy banks across the azure of the sky. Sudden squalls of rain swept down at short intervals, driving the people into shelter. All the life of the streets took refuge in arcades or within dimly lighted churches. Soon the slippery marble pavements were deserted, and the water from the guttered roofs dripped dolefully into overflowing cisterns. A strange atmosphere of discomfort and apprehension lay over the city.

The storm increased as evening fell. From the seclusion of the gloomy chamber he occupied in the old weather-beaten palace of the Pierleoni, Eckhardt looked out into the growing darkness. The clouds chased each other wildly and the driving rain obliterated every outline.

How long he had thus stood, he did not know. A rattle of hailstones against the window, a gust of wind, which suddenly blew into his face, and the lurid glare of lightning which flashed through the

ever-deepening cloud-bank, roused Eckhardt from his reverie to a sense of reality. The lamp on the table shed a fitful glare over the surrounding objects. Now the deep boom of thunder reverberating through the hills caused him to start from his listless attitude. Just as he turned, the lamp gave a dismal crackle and went out, leaving him in Stygian gloom. With an exclamation less reverent than expressive, Eckhardt groped his way through the darkness, vainly endeavouring to find a flint-stone. A flash of lightning which came to his aid not only revealed to him the desired object, but likewise a tall, shadowy form standing on the threshold. From the dense obscurity which enshrouded him, Eckhardt could not, in the intermittent flashes of lightning, see the stranger's features, but a singular, and even to himself quite inexplicable perversity of humour, kept him silent and unwilling to declare his presence, although he instinctively felt that the strange visitor, whoever he was, had seen him. Meanwhile the latter advanced a pace or two, paused, peered through the gloom and spoke with a voice strangely blended with deference and irony:

"Is Eckhardt of Meissen present?"

Without once taking his eyes from the individual, whose dark form now stood clearly revealed in the lightning flashes, which followed each other at shorter intervals, the same strange obstinacy stiffened Eckhardt's tongue, and concealed

in the gloom, he still held his peace. But the stranger drew nearer, till in height and breadth he seemed suddenly to overshadow the Margrave, and once again the voice spoke:

"Is Eckhardt of Meissen present?"

"I am here!" the latter replied curtly, rising out of the darkness, and striking the flint-stones, he succeeded, after some vain efforts, in relighting the lamp. As he did so, a tremendous peal of thunder shook the house and the stranger precipitately retreated into the shadow of the doorway.

"You are the bearer of a message?" Eckhardt turned towards him, with unsteady voice. The stranger made no move to deliver what the other seemed to expect.

"Everything in death has its counterpart in life," he replied with a calm, passionless voice which, by its very absence of inflection, thrilled Eckhardt strangely. "If you have the courage—follow me!"

Without a word the Margrave placed upon his head a skullcap of linked mail, and after having adjusted his armour, turned to the mysterious messenger.

"Who bade you speak those words?"

"One you have seen before."

"Where?"

"Your memory will tell you."

"Her name?"

"You will hear it from her own lips."

"Where will you lead me?"

"Follow me and you will see."

"Why do you conceal your face?"

"To hide the blush for the thing called man."

The stranger's enigmatic reply added to Eckhardt's conviction that this night of all was destined to clear the mystery which enshrouded his life.

A mighty struggle, such as he had never before known, seemed to rend his soul, as with throbbing heart he followed his strange guide on his mysterious errand. Thus they sped through the storm-swept city without meeting one single human being. At the top of the Esquiline they came to a momentary standstill, for the storm raged with a force that nothing could resist. Leaning for a moment against a ruined portico, Eckhardt gazed westward over the night-wrapt city. In the driving rain he could scarcely distinguish the huge structures of the Flavian Amphitheatre and the palaces on the Capitoline hill. The Janiculan Mount stood out like a darker storm-cloud against the lowering sky, and the air was filled with a dull moan and murmur like the breathing of a sleeping giant. On the southern slope of the hill the wind attacked them with renewed fury, and the blasts howled up the Clivus Martis and the Appian Way. The region seemed completely deserted. Only a solitary travelling chariot rolled now and then, clattering, over the stones.

The road gradually turned off to the right. The dark mass to their left was the tomb of the Scipios and there in front, hardly visible in the darkness of night, rose the arch of Drusus, through which their way led them. Eckhardt took care to note every landmark which he passed, to find the way, should occasion arise, without his guide. The latter, constantly preceding him, took no note of the Margrave's scrutiny, but continued unequivocally upon his way, leaving it to Eckhardt to follow him, or not.

A blinding flash of lightning illumined the landscape far away to the aqueducts and the Alban hills, followed by a deafening peal of thunder. The uproar of the elements for a time shook Eckhardt's resolution.

Just then he heard the clanging of a gate.

An intoxicating perfume of roses and oleander wooed his bewildered senses as his guide conducted him through a labyrinthine maze of winding paths. Only an occasional gleam of lightning revealed to the Margrave that they traversed a garden of considerable extent. Now the shadowy outlines of a vast structure, illumined in some parts, appeared beyond the dark cypress avenue down which they strode at a rapid pace.

Suddenly Eckhardt paused, addressing his guide: "Where am I, and why am I here?"

The stranger turned, regarding him intently.

Then he replied:

"I have nothing to add to my errand. If you fear to follow me, there is yet time to retreat."

Had he played upon a point less sensitive, Eckhardt might have turned his back even now upon the groves, whose whispering gloom was to him more terrible than the din of battle, and whose mysterious perfumes exercised an almost bewildering effect upon his overwrought senses.

A moment's deliberation only and Eckhardt replied:

"Lead on! I follow!"

He was now resolved to penetrate at every hazard the mystery which mocked his life, his waking hours and his dreams.

On they walked.

Here and there, from branch-shadowed thickets gleamed the stone-face of a sphinx or the white column of an obelisk, illumined by the lightnings that shot through the limitless depth of the midnight sky. The storm rustled among the arched branches, driving the dead and dying leaves in a mad whirl through the wooded labyrinth.

At last, Eckhardt's strange guide stopped before a cypress hedge of great height, which loomed black in the night, and penetrating through an opening scarce wide enough for one man, beckoned to Eckhardt to follow him. As the latter did so he stared in breathless bewilderment upon the scene which

unfolded itself to his gaze.

The cypress hedge formed the entrance to a grotto, the interior of which was faintly lighted by a crystal lamp of tenderest rose lustre.

For a moment Eckhardt paused where he stood, then he touched his head with both hands, as if wondering if he were dreaming or awake. If it was not the work of sorcery, if he was not the victim of some strange hallucination, if it was not indeed a miracle—what was it? He gazed round, awe-struck, bewildered. His guide had disappeared.

The denizen of the grotto, a woman reclining on a divan, like a goddess receiving the homage of her worshippers, was the image of the one who had gone from him for ever, and the longer his gaze was riveted on this enchanting counterfeit of Ginevra, the more his blood began to seethe and his senses to reel.

Slowly he moved toward the enchantress, who from her half-reclining position fixed her eyes in a long and questioning gaze upon the new-comer, a gaze which thrilled him through and through. He dared not look into those eyes, which he felt burning into his. His head was beginning to spin and his heart to beat with a strange sensation of wonderment and fear. Never till this hour had he seen Ginevra's equal in beauty, and now that it broke on his vision, it was with the face, the form, the hair, the eyes, the hands, of the woman so passionately loved. Only the

face was more pale—even with the pallor of death, and there was something in the depths of those eyes which he had never seen in Ginevra's. But the light, the perfume, the place and the seductive beauty of the woman before him, garbed as she was in a filmy, transparent robe of silvery tissue, which clung like a pale mist about the voluptuous curves of her body, flowing round her like the glistening waves of a cascade, began to play havoc with his senses.

"Welcome, stranger, in the Groves of Enchantment," she spoke, waving her beautiful snowy arms toward her visitor. "I rejoice to see that your courage deserves the welcome."

There was an undercurrent of laughter in her musical tones, as she pointed to a seat by her side. Unable to answer, unable to resist, Eckhardt moved a few paces nearer. His brain whirled. For a moment Ginevra's image seemed forgotten in the contemplation of the rival of her dead beauty. A wild, desperate longing seized him. On a sudden impulse he turned away, in a dizzy effort to escape from the mesmeric gleam of those sombre, haunting eyes, which pierced the very depths of his soul. Fascinated, at the same time repelled, his very soul yearned for her whose embrace he knew was destruction and he was filled with a strange sudden fear. There was something terrible in the steadfast contemplation which the woman bestowed upon him,—something that seemed to lie outside the pale

of human passions, and the pallor of her exquisite face seemed to increase in proportion as the devouring fire of her eyes burnt more intensely.

"Are you afraid of me?" she laughed, raising her arms and holding them out toward him.

Still he hesitated. His breast heaved madly as his eyes met those, which swam in a soft languor, strangely intoxicating. Her lips parted in a faint sigh.

"Eckhardt," she said tremulously, "Eckhardt."

Then she paused as if to watch the effect of her words upon him.

Mute, oppressed by indistinct hovering memories, Eckhardt fed his gaze on her seductive fairness, but a terrible pain and anguish gnawed at his heart. Not only the face, even the voice was that of Ginevra.

"Everything in death has its counterpart in life:"—

That had been the pass-word to her presence.

One devouring look—and forgetting all fear and warning and all presence of mind he rushed towards that flashing danger-signal of beauty, that seemed to burn the very air encompassing it, that living image of his dead wife, and with wild eyes, outstretched arms and breathless utterance, he cried: "Ginevra!"

She whom he thus called turned toward him, as he came with the air of a madman upon her, and her marvellous loveliness, as she raised her dark eyes questioningly to his, checked his impetuous haste,

held him tongue-tied, bewildered and unmanned.

And truly, nothing more beautiful in the shape of woman could be imagined than she. Her fairness was of that rare and subtle type which has in all ages overwhelmed reason, blinded judgment and played havoc with the passions of men.

Well did she know her own surpassing charm and thoroughly did she estimate the value of her fatal power to lure and to madden and to torture all whom she chose to make the victim of her almost resistless attraction. Her hair, black as night, was arranged loosely under a jewelled coif. Her eyes, large and brilliant, shone from under brows delicately arched. Her satin skin was of the creamy, colourless, Southern type, in startling contrast to the brilliant scarlet of the small bewitching mouth.

Beautiful and delicate as the ensemble was, there was in that enchanting face a lingering expression, which a woman would have hated and a man would have feared.

"Ginevra!" Eckhardt cried, then he checked himself, for, her large eyes, suddenly cold as the inner silence of the sea, surveyed him freezingly, as though he were some insolently obtrusive stranger. But her face was pale as that of a corpse.

"Ginevra!" he faltered for the third time, his senses reeling and he no longer master of himself. "Surely you know me—Eckhardt,—him whose name you have just called! Speak to me, Ginevra—speak!

By all the love I have borne for you—speak, Ginevra, —speak!"

A shadow flitted through the background and paused behind Theodora's couch. Neither had seen it, though Theodora shuddered as if she had felt the strange presence of something uncalled, unbidden.

A strange light of mockery, or of annoyance, gleamed in the woman's eyes. Her crimson lips parted, showing two rows of even, small white teeth, then a gleam of amusement shot athwart her face, raising the delicately pencilled corners of the eye-brows, as she broke into a soft peal of careless mocking laughter.

"I am not Ginevra," she said. "Who is Ginevra? I am Theodora—the Queen of Love."

Again, as she saw his puzzled look, she gave way to her silvery, mocking mirth, while her eyes flung him a glittering challenge to approach. Eckhardt had recovered partial control over his feelings and met her taunting gaze steadfastly and with something of sadness. His face had grown very pale and all the warmth and rapture had died out of his voice, when he spoke again.

"I am Eckhardt," he said quietly, with the calm of a madman who argues for a fixed idea,—"and you are Ginevra—or her ghost—I know not which. Why did you return to the world from your cold and narrow bed in the earth and shun the man who worships you as one worships an idol? Is it for some

transgression in the flesh that your soul cannot find rest?"

An ominous shuffling behind her caused Theodora to start. She turned her head as if by chance and when again she faced Eckhardt, she was as pale as death. Noting her momentary embarrassment, Eckhardt made a resolute step toward her, catching her hands in his own. He was dazed.

"Is this your welcome back in the world, Ginevra?" he pleaded with a passionate whisper. "Have you no thought what this long misery apart from you has meant? Remember the old days,—the old love,—have pity—speak to me as of old."

His voice in its very whisper thrilled with the strange music that love alone can give. His eyes burnt and his lips quivered. Suddenly he seemed to wake to a realization of the scene. He had been mocked by a fatal resemblance to his dead wife. His heart was heavy with the certainty, but the spell remained.

Without warning he threw himself on his knees, holding her unresisting hands in his.

"Demon or Goddess," he faltered, and his voice, even to his own ears, had a strange sound. "What would you have with me? Speak, for what purpose did you summon me? Who are you? What do you want with me?"

Her low laugh stirred the silence into a faint

tuneful echo.

"Foolish dreamer," she murmured half tenderly, half mockingly. "Is it not enough for you to know that you have been found worthy to join the few chosen ones to whom this earthly paradise is not a book with seven seals? Like your sad-eyed, melancholy countrymen, you would analyze the essence of love and try to dissolve it into its own heterogeneous particles. If you were given the choice of the fairest woman you would descend into the mouldering crypts of the past, to unearth the first and last Helen of Troy. Ah! Is it not so? You Northmen prefer a theoretical attachment to the body of living, breathing, loving woman?"

He looked at her surprised, perplexed, and paused an instant before he made reply. Was she mocking him? Did she speak truth?

"Surely so peerless an enchantress, with admirers so numerous, cannot find it worth her while to add a new worshipper to the idolatrous throng?" he answered.

"Ah! Little you know," she murmured indolently, with a touch of cold disdain in her accents. "My worshippers are my puppets, my slaves! There is not a man amongst them," she added, raising her voice, "not a man! They kiss the hand that spurns their touch! As for you," she added, leaning forward, so that the dark shower of her hair brushed his cheek and her drowsy eyes sank into his own, "As for you—

you are from the North.—I love a nature of strongly repressed and concentrated passion, of a proud and chilly temper. Like our volcanoes they wear crowns of ice, but fires unquenchable smother in their depths. And—might not at a touch from the destined hand the flame in your heart leap forth uncontrolled?"

Eckhardt met the enchantress' look with one of mingled dread and intoxication. She smiled, and raising a goblet of wine to her lips, kissed the brim and gave it to him with an indescribably graceful swaying gesture of her whole form, which resembled a tall white lily bending to the breeze. He seized the cup eagerly and drank thirstily from it. Again her magic voice, more melodious than the sounds of Æolian harps thrilled his ears and set his pulses to beating madly.

"But you have not yet told me," she whispered, while her head drooped lower and lower, till her dark fragrant tresses touched his brow, "you have not yet told me that you love me?"

Was it the purple wine that was so heavy on his senses? Heavier was the drowsy spell of the enchantress' eyes. Eckhardt started up. His heart ached with the memory of Ginevra, and a dull pang shot through his soul. But the spell that was upon him was too heavy to be broken by human effort. Nothing short of the thunder of Heaven could save him now.

Theodora's words chimed in his ear, while her hands clasped his own with their soft, electrifying touch. With a supreme effort he endeavoured to shake off the spell, into whose ravishment he was being slowly but surely drawn, his efforts at resistance growing more feeble and feeble every moment.

Again the voice of the Siren sent its musical cadence through his brain in the fateful question:

"Do you love me?"

Eckhardt attempted to draw back, but could not.

Entwining her body with his arms, he devoured her beauty with his eyes. From the crowning masses of her dusky hair, over the curve of her white shoulders and bosom, down to the blue-veined feet in the glistening sandals, his gaze wandered hungrily, searchingly, passionately. His heart beat with wild, mad desire, but, though his lips moved, no words were audible.

She too, was silent, apparently watching the effect of her spell upon him, sure of the ultimate fateful result. In reality she listened intently, as if expecting some unwelcome intrusion, and once her dark fear-struck eyes tried to penetrate the deep shadows of the grotto. She had heard something stir, —and a mad fear had seized her heart.

Eckhardt, unconscious of the woman's misgivings, gazed upon her as one dazed. He felt, if he could but speak the one word, he would be saved

and yet—something warned him that, if that word escaped his lips, he would be lost. Half recumbent on her couch, Theodora watched her victim narrowly. A smile of delicate derision parted her lips, as she said:

"What ails you? Are you afraid of me? Can you not be happy, Eckhardt," she whispered into his brain, "happy as other men,—and loved?"

She bent toward him with arms outstretched. Closely she watched his every gesture, endeavouring, in her great fear, to read his thoughts.

"I cannot," he replied with a moan, "alas—I cannot!"

"And why not?" the enchantress whispered, bending closer toward him. She must make him her own, she must win the terrible wager; from out of the gloom she felt two eyes burning upon her with devilish glee. She preferred instant death to a life by the side of him she hated with all the strength of a woman's hate for the man who has lied to her, deceived her, and ruined her life. Noting the fateful effect of her blandishments upon him, she threw herself with a sudden movement against Eckhardt's breast, entwining him so tightly with her arms that she seemed to draw the very breath from him. Her splendid dark eyes, ablaze with passion, sank into his, her lips curved in a sweet, deadly smile. Roused to the very height of delirium, Eckhardt wound his arms round Theodora's body. A dizziness had seized him. For a moment Ginevra—past, present and

future seemed forgotten. Closer and closer he felt himself drawn towards the fateful abyss—slowly the enchantress was drawing him onward,—until there would be no more resistance,—all flaming delirium, and eternal damnation.

With one white arm she reached for the goblet, but ere her fingers touched it, a shadowy hand, that seemed to come from nowhere and belong to no visible body, changed the position of the drinking vessels. Neither noted it. Theodora kissed the brim of the first goblet and started to sip from its contents when a sudden pressure on her shoulder caused her to look up. Her terror at what she saw was so great that it choked her utterance. Two terrible eyes gazed upon her from a white, passion-distorted face, which silently warned her not to drink. So great was her terror, that she noticed not that Eckhardt had taken the goblet from her outstretched hand, and putting it to his lips on the very place where the sweetness of her mouth still lingered, drained it to the dregs.

Wild-eyed with terror she stared at the man before her. A strange sensation had come over him. His brain seemed to be on fire. His resistance was vanquished. He could not have gone, had he wished to.

The night was still. The silence was rendered even more profound by the rustling of the storm among the leaves.

Suddenly Eckhardt's hand went to his head. He

started to rise from his kneeling position, staggered to his feet, then as if struck by lightning he fell heavily against the mosaic of the floor.

With a wild shriek of terror, Theodora had risen to her feet—then she sank back on the couch staring speechlessly at what was passing before her. The gaunt form of a monk, clad in the habit of the hermits of Mount Aventine, had rushed into the grotto, just as Eckhardt fell from the effect of the drug. Lifting him up, as if he were a mere toy, the monk rushed out into the open and disappeared with his burden, while four eyes followed him in speechless dread and dismay.

CHAPTER III

THE ELIXIR OF LOVE

 t was late on the following evening, when in the hermitage of Nilus of Gaëta, Eckhardt woke from the death-like stupor which had bound his limbs since the terrible scenes of the previous night. Thanks to the antidotes applied by the friar as soon as he reached the open, the deadly effect of the poison had been stemmed ere it had time to penetrate Eckhardt's system, but even despite this timely precaution, the benumbing effect of the drug was not to be avoided, and during the time when the stupor maintained its sway Nilus had not for a moment abandoned the side of his patient. A burning thirst consumed him, as he awoke. Raising himself on his elbows and vainly endeavouring to reconcile his surroundings, the monk who was seated at the foot of his roughly improvised bed rose and brought him some water. It was Nilus himself, and only after convincing himself that the state of the Margrave's condition was such as to warrant his immediately

satisfying the flood of inquiries addressed to him, did the hermit go over the events of the preceding night, starting from the point where Eckhardt had lost consciousness and his own intervention had saved him.

Eckhardt's hand went to his head which still felt heavy and ached. His brain reeled at the account which Nilus gave him, and there was a choking dryness in his throat when the friar accused Theodora of the deed.

"For such as she the world was made. For such as she fools and slaves abase themselves," the monk concluded his account. "Pray that your eyes may never again behold her accursed face."

Eckhardt made no reply. What could he say in extenuation of his presence in the groves? And by degrees, as consciousness and memory returned, as he strained his reasoning faculties in the endeavour to find some cause for the woman's attempt to poison him, after having mocked him with her fatal likeness to Ginevra—his most acute logic could not reconcile her actions. For a moment he tried to persuade himself that he was in a dream, and he strove in vain to wake from it. It was amazing in what brief time and with what vividness all that could render death terrible, and this death of all most terrible, rushed upon his imagination. Despite the languor and inertness which still continued, one terrible certainty rose before him. Far from having solved the mystery,

it had intensified itself to a degree that seemed to make any further attempt at solution hopeless. During the twilight consciousness of his senses numerous faces swam around him,—but of all these only one had remained with him, Ginevra's pale and beautiful countenance, her sweet but terrible eyes. But the ever-recurring thought was madness.—Ginevra was dead.

But the hours spent in the seclusion of the friar's hermitage were not entirely lost to Eckhardt. They ripened a preconceived and most fantastic plan in his mind, which he no sooner remembered, than he began to think seriously of its execution.

A second night spent in Nilus's hermitage had sufficiently restored Eckhardt's vitality to enable him to leave it on the following morning. After having taken leave of the monk, confessing himself his debtor for life, the Margrave chose the road toward the Imperial palace, as his absence was likely to give rise to strange rumours, which might retard or prevent the task he had resolved to accomplish. He was in a state bordering on nervous collapse, when he reached the gates of the palace, where the Count Palatine, in attendance, ushered him into an ante-room pending his admission to Otto's presence. Eckhardt's thoughts were gloomy and his countenance forbidding as he entered, and he did not notice the presence of Benilo, the Chamberlain. When the latter glanced up from his occupation, his

countenance turned to ashen hues and he stared at the leader of the imperial hosts as one would at an apparition from the beyond. The hands, which held a parchment, strangely illuminated, shook so violently that he was compelled to place the scroll on the table before him. Eckhardt had been so wrapt in his own dark ruminations that he saw and heard nothing, thus giving Benilo an opportunity to collect himself, though the stereotyped smile on the Chamberlain's lips gave the lie to his pretense of continuing interested in the contents of the chart which lay on the table before him.

But Benilo's restlessness, his eagerness to acquaint himself with the purpose of Eckhardt's visit, did not permit him to continue the task in which the general's entrance had found him engaged. The Chamberlain seemed undaunted by Eckhardt's apparent preoccupation of mind.

"We have just achieved a signal victory," he addressed the Margrave after a warm greeting, which was to veil his misgivings, while his unsteady gaze roamed from the parchment on the table to Eckhardt's clouded brow. "The Byzantine ceremonial will be henceforth observed at the Imperial court."

"What shall it all lead to?" replied Eckhardt wearily.

"To the fulfilment of the emperor's dream," Benilo replied with his blandest smile, "his dream of the ten-fold crown of Constantine Porphyrogenitus."

"I thought the Saxon crown weighed heavily enough."

"That is because your crown is material," Benilo deigned to expound, "not the symbolic crown of the East, which embodies all the virtues of the gold and iron. It was a stupendous task which confronted us—but together we have solved the problem. In the Graphia, after much vain research and study, and in the 'Origines' of Isidor, we found that which shall henceforth constitute the emblem of the Holy Roman Empire; not the Iron Crown of Lombardy, nor the Silver Crown of Aix-la-Chapelle, nor the Golden Crown of Rome—but all three combined with the seven of the East."

"Ten crowns?" exclaimed Eckhardt aghast. "On the emperor's frail brow?"

"Nay," spoke Benilo, with the same studied smile upon his lips, while he relinquished not for a moment the basilisk gaze with which he followed every movement of the Margrave. "Nay! They oppress not the brow of the anointed. The Seven Crowns of the East are: The crown of Ivy, the crown of the Olive, the crown of Poplar Branches and Oak, the crown of Laurels, the Mitra of Janus, the crown of the Feathers of the Pea-fowl, and last of all the crown set with diamonds, which Diocletian borrowed from the King of the Persians and whereon appeared the inscription: 'Roma Caput Mundi Regit Orbis Frena Rotundi.'"

Eckhardt listened half dazed to this exhibition of antiquarian learning on the part of the Chamberlain. What were these trifles to avail the King in establishing order in the discordant chaos of the Roman world?

But Benilo was either in excellent spirits over the result of his antiquarian researches which had made him well nigh indispensable to Otto, and into which he condescended to initiate so unlettered an individual as Eckhardt; or he tormented the latter with details which he knew wearied the great leader, to keep his mind from dwelling on dangerous matters. Thus continuing his information on these lines with a suave air of superiority, he cited the treatise of Pigonius concerning the various modes of triumph and other antiquated splendours as enumerated in the Codex, until Eckhardt's head swam with meaningless titles and newly created offices. Even an admiral had been appointed: Gregory of Tusculum. In truth, he had no fleet to command, because there existed no fleet, but the want had been anticipated. Then there were many important offices to be filled, with names long as the ancient triumphal course; and would not the Romans feel flattered by these changes? Would they not willingly console themselves with the loss of their municipal liberties, knowing that Hungary, and Poland, Spain and Germany were to be Roman provinces as of old?

Eckhardt saw through it all.

Knowing Otto's fantastic turn of mind, Benilo was guiding him slowly but surely away from life, into the wilderness of a decayed civilization, whose luring magic was absorbing his vital strength. Else why this effort to rear an edifice which must crumble under its own weight, once the architect was removed from this hectic sphere?

With the reckless enthusiasm of his character the imperial youth had plunged into the deep ocean of learning, to whose shores his studies with Benilo conducted him. The animated pictures which the ponderous tomes presented, into whose dust and must he delved, the dramatic splendour of the narrative in which the glowing fancies of the chroniclers had clothed the stirring events of the times, deeply impressed his susceptible mind, just as the chords of Æolian harps are mute till the chance breeze passes which wakes them into passionate music. Gerbert, now Sylvester II, had no wish to stifle nor even to stem this natural sensibility, but rather to divert its energies into its proper channels, for he was too deeply versed in human science not to know that even the eloquence of religion is cold and powerless, unless kindled by those fixed emotions and sparkling thoughts which only poetical enthusiasm can strike out of the hard flint of logic.

But now the activity of Otto's genius, lacking the proper channels, vented its wild profusion in inert

speculation and dreamy reverie. Indistinct longings ventured out on that shimmering restless sea of love and glory, which his imagination painted in the world, a vague yearning for the mysterious which was hinted at in that mediæval lore.

All things were possible in those legends. No scent of autumn haunted the deep verdure of those forests, even the harsh immutable laws of nature seemed to yield to their magic. Death and Despair and Sorrow were but fore-shadowed angels, not the black fiends of Northern imagery. Their heroes and heroines died, but reclining on beds of violets, the songs of nightingales sweetly warbling them to rest.

And the son of the Greek princess resented fiercely any intrusion in to his paradise. It was a thankless task to recall him to the hour and to reality.

The appearance of a page, who summoned Eckhardt into Otto's presence, put an end to Benilo's effusive archæology, and as the Margrave disappeared in the emperor's cabinet, Benilo wondered how much he knew.

What transpired during his protracted audience remained for the present the secret of those two. But when Eckhardt left the palace, his brow was even more clouded than before. While his conference with Otto had not been instrumental in dissipating the dread misgivings which tortured his mind, he had found himself face to face with the revelation that a

fraud had been perpetrated upon him. For Otto disclaimed all knowledge of signing any order which relieved Eckhardt of his command, flatly declaring it a forgery. While its purpose was easy to divine, the question remained whose interest justified his venturing so desperate a chance? Eckhardt parted from his sovereign with the latter's full approval of the course his leader intended to pursue, and so far from granting him the dispensation once desired, Otto did not hesitate to pronounce the vision which had interposed at the fatal moment between Eckhardt and the fulfilment of his desire, a divine interposition.

Slowly the day drew to a close. The eve of the great festival approached.

When darkness finally fell over the Capitoline hill, the old palace of the Cæsars seemed to waken to a new life. In the great reception hall a gorgeous spectacle awaited the guests. The richly dressed crowds buzzed like a swarm of bees. Their attires were iridescent, gorgeous in fashions borrowed from many lands. The invasion of foreigners and the enslavement of Italy could be read in the garbs of the Romans. The robes of the women, fashioned after the supreme style of Constantinople, hanging in heavy folds, stiff with gold and jewels, suggested rather ecclesiastical vestments. The hair was confined in nets of gold.

Stephania, the consort of the Senator of Rome,

was by common accord the queen of the festival which this night was to usher in. Attracting, as she did on every turn, the eyes of heedless admirers, her triumphant beauty seemed to have chosen a fit device in the garb which adorned her, some filmy gossamer web of India, embroidered with moths burning their wings in flame.

Whether or no she was conscious of the lavish admiration of the Romans, her eyes, lustrous under the dark tresses, were clear and cold; her smile calm, her voice, as she greeted the arriving guests, melodious and thrilling like the tones of a harp. Amid the noise and buzz, she seemed a being apart, alien, solitary, like a water lily on some silent moon-lit pool. At last a loud fanfare of trumpets and horns announced the arrival of the German king. Attended by his suite the son of Theophano, whose spiritualized beauty he seemed to have inherited, received the homage of the Senator of Rome, the Cavalli, Caetani, Massimi and Stephaneschi. Stephania was standing apart in a more remote part of the hall, surrounded by women of the Roman nobility. Her face flushed and paled alternately as she became aware of the commotion at the entrance. The airy draperies of summer, which revealed rather than concealed her divine beauty, gave her the appearance of a Circe, conquering every heart at sight.

As she slowly advanced toward the imperial

circle, with the three appropriate reverences in use, the serene composure of her countenance made it seem as if she had herself been born in purple. But as Otto's gaze fell upon the consort of the Senator of Rome, he suddenly paused, a deep pallor chasing the flush of joy from the beardless face. Was she not the woman he had met at the gates of the confessional? A great pain seized his heart as the thought came to him, that she of whom he had dreamed ever since that day, she in whose love he had pictured to himself a heaven, was the consort of another. Before him stood Stephania, the wife of his former foe, the wife of the Senator of Rome. And as he gazed into her large limpid eyes, at the exquisite contour of her head, at the small crimson lips, the clear-cut beauty of the face, of the tint of richest Carrara marble, Otto trembled. Unable to speak a word, fearful lest he might betray his emotions, he seized the white, firm hand which she extended to him with a bewitching smile.

"So we are to behold the King's majesty, at last," she said with a voice whose very accent thrilled him through and through. "I thought you were never going to do us that honour,—master of Rome, and master—of Rome's mistress."

Her speech, as she bent slightly toward him, whispering rather than speaking the last words, filled Otto's soul with intoxication. Stunned by the manner of his reception, her mysterious words still ringing in

his ears, Otto muttered a reply, intelligible to none but herself, nerving his whole nature to remain calm, though his heart beat so loudly that he thought all present must hear its wild throbs even through his imperial vestments.

As slowly, reluctantly he retreated from her presence, to greet the rest of the assembled guests, Otto marked not the meaning-fraught exchange of glances between the Senator of Rome and his wife. The smiles of the beautiful women around him were as full of warning as the scowls of a Roman mob. Once or twice Otto gazed as if by chance in the direction of Stephania. Each time their eyes met. Truly, if the hatred of Crescentius was a menace to his life, the favour of Stephania seemed to summon him to dizzy, perilous heights.

At last the banquet was served, the company seated and amidst soft strains of music, the festival took its course. Otto now had an opportunity to study in detail the galaxy of profligate courtiers and beauties, which shed their glare over the sunset of Crescentius's reign. But so absorbed was he in the beauty of Stephania, that, though he attempted to withdraw his eyes, lest their prolonged gaze should attract observation, still they ever returned with increased and devouring eagerness to feast upon her incomparable beauty, while with a strange agony of mingled jealousy and anger he noted the court paid to the beautiful wife of Crescentius by the Roman

barons, chief among them Benilo. It seemed, as if the latter wanted to urge the king to some open and indiscreet demonstration by the fire of his own admiration, and, dear as he was to his heart, Otto heaved a sigh of relief at the thought that he had guarded his secret, which if revealed, would place him beyond redemption in the power of his enemy, the Senator.

Stephania herself seemed for the nonce too much absorbed in her own amusements to notice the emotions she had evoked in the young king of the Germans. But when she chanced to turn her smiling eyes from the Senator, her husband, she suddenly met the ardent gaze of Otto riveted upon her with burning intensity. The smile died on her lips and for a moment the colour faded from her cheeks. Otto flushed a deep crimson and played in affected indifference with the tassels of his sword, and for some moments they seemed to take no further heed of each other. What happened at the banquet, what was spoken and the speakers, to Otto it was one whirling chaos. He saw nothing; he heard nothing. The gaze of Stephania, the wife of Crescentius, had cast its spell over him and there was but one thought in his mind,—but one dream in his heart.

At the request of some one, some of the guests changed their seats. Otto noted it not. Peals of laughter reverberated through the high arched Sala; some one recited an ode on the past greatness of

Rome, followed by loud applause; to Otto it was a meaningless sound. Suddenly he heard his own name from lips whose tones caused him to start, as if electrified.

Stephania sat by his side. Crescentius seemed conversing eagerly with some of the barons. Raising her arm, white as fallen snow, she poured a fine crimson wine into a goblet, until it swelled to the golden brim. There was a simultaneous bustle of pages and attendants, offering fruits and wine to the guests, and Otto mechanically took some grapes from a salver which was presented to him, but never for a moment averted his gaze from Stephania, until she lifted the goblet to her lips.

"To thee!" she whispered with a swift glance at Otto, which went to his heart's core. She sipped from the goblet, then, bending to him, held it herself to his lips. His trembling hands for a moment covered her own and he drank strangely deep of the crimson wine, which made his senses reel, and in the trance in which their eyes met, neither noticed the sphinx-like expression on the face of Benilo, the Grand Chamberlain.

But if the wine, of which Otto had partaken with Stephania, was not in reality compounded of magic ingredients, the most potent love philtre could scarcely have been more efficacious. For the first time it seemed as if he had yielded up his whole soul and being to the fascination of marvellous beauty,

and with such loveliness exhausting upon him all its treasures of infinite charm, wit and tenderness, stirred by every motive of triumph and rivalry,—even if a deceptive apology had not worked in his own mind, it would scarcely have been possible to resist the spell.

The banquet passed off in great splendour, enlivened by the most glittering and unscrupulous wit. Thousands of lamps shed their effulgence on the scene, revealing toward the end a fantastic pageant, descending the grand stair-case to some equally strange and fantastic music. It was a procession of the ancient deities; but so great was the illiterate state of mind among the Romans of that period, that the ideas they represented of the olden time were hopelessly perplexed and an antiquarian, had there been one present, would have thrown up his hands in despair at the incongruous attire of the pagan divinities who had invaded the most Christian city. During this procession Otto's eyes for the third time sought those of Stephania. She seemed to feel it, for she turned and her lips responded with a smile.

The night passed like some fantastic dream, conjured up from fairy land. And Otto carried his dreaming heart back to the lonely palace on the Aventine.

CHAPTER IV

THE SECRET OF THE TOMB

 hile the revelling on the Capitoline hill was at its height, Eckhardt had approached Benilo and drawing him aside, engaged him in lengthy conversation. The Chamberlain's countenance had lost its studied calm and betrayed an amazement which vainly endeavoured to vent itself in adequate utterance. He appeared to offer a strenuous opposition to Eckhardt's request, an opposition which yielded only when every argument seemed to have failed. At last they had parted, Eckhardt passing unobserved to a terrace and gaining a path that led through an orange grove behind the Vatican gardens. A few steps brought him to a gate, which opened on a narrow vicolo. Here he paused and clapped his hands softly together. The signal was repeated from the other side and Eckhardt thereupon lifted the heavy iron latch, which fastened the gate on the inner side and, passing out, carefully closed it behind him. Here he was joined by another personage wrapt in a long, dark cloak, and together they proceeded through a maze of dark, narrow and unfrequented alleys. Lane after lane they traversed, all unpaved

and muddy. Another ten minutes' walk between lightless houses, whose doors and windows were for the most part closed and barred, and they reached an old time-worn dwelling with a low unsightly doorway. It was secured by strong fastenings of bolts and bars, as though its tenant had sufficient motives for affecting privacy and retirement. The very nature of his calling would however have secured him from intrusion either by day or by night, from any one not immediately in need of his services. For here lived Il Gobbo, the grave digger, a busy personage in the Rome of those days. Eckhardt and his companion exchanged a swift glance as they approached the uncanny dwelling; eyeless, hoary with vegetation, rooted here and there, the front of the house gave no welcome. Eckhardt whispered a question to his companion, which was answered in the affirmative. Then he bade him knock. After a wait of brief duration, the summons was answered by a low cough within. Shuffling footsteps were heard, then the unbarring of a door, followed by the creaking of hinges, and the low bent figure of an old man appeared. Il Gobbo, the grave digger wore a loose gray tunic, which reached to his knees. What was visible of his countenance was cadaverous and ashen gray, as that of a corpse. His small rat-like eyes, whose restless vigilance argued some deficiency or warping of the brain, a tendency, however remote, to insanity, scrutinized the stranger with marked

suspicion, while a long nose, curving downward over a projecting upper lip, which seemed in perpetual tremor, imbued his countenance with something strangely Mephistophelian.

In a very few words Eckhardt's companion requested the grave digger to make ready and follow them, and that worthy, seeing nothing strange in a summons of this sort, complied at once, took pick and spade, and after having locked and barred his habitation, asked his solicitor to which burial grounds he was to accompany them.

"To San Pancrazio," was Eckhardt's curt reply. The silence had become almost insufferable to him, and something in the manner of his speech caused the grave digger to bestow on him a swift glance. Then he preceded them in silence on the well-known way.

It was a wonderful night.

There was not a breath of air to stir the dying leaves of the trees. The clouds, which had risen at sunset in the West, had vanished, leaving the sky unobscured, arching deep blue over the yellow moon.

As they approached the Ripetta, the grave digger suddenly paused and, facing the Margrave and his companion, inquired where the corpse was awaiting them.

A strange, jarring laugh broke from Eckhardt's lips.

"Never fear, my honest friend! It is a very well conditioned corpse, that will play us no pranks and run away. Corpses do sometimes—so I have been told. What think you, honest Il Gobbo?"

The grave digger bestowed a glance upon his interlocutor, which left little doubt as to what he thought of his patron's sanity, then he crossed himself and hastened onward. The Tiber lay now on their left, and an occasional flash revealed the turbid waves rolling down toward the sea in the moonlight. Eckhardt and his companion exchanged not a word, as silently they strode behind their uncanny guide. On their left hand now appeared the baths of Caracalla, their external magnificence slowly crumbling to decay, waterless and desolate. Towering on their right rose the Caelian hill in the moonlight, covered with ruins and neglected gardens. The rays of the higher rising moon fell through the great arches of the Neronian Aqueduct and near by were the round church of St. Stephen and a cloister dedicated to St. Erasmus. As they proceeded over the narrow grass-grown road, the silence which encompassed them was as intense as among the Appian sepulchres. At the gate of San Sebastiano, all traces of the road vanished. A winding path conducted them through a narrow valley, the silence of which was only broken by the occasional hoot of an owl, or the flitting across their path of a bat, which like an evil thought, seemed

afraid of its own shadow. Then they passed the ancient church of Santa Ursula, which for many years formed the center of a churchyard. The path became more sterile and desolate with every step, only a few dwarfish shrubs breaking the monotony, to make it appear even more like a wilderness, until they came upon a ruined wall, and following its course for some distance, reached a heavy iron gate. It gave a dismal, creaking sound as Il Gobbo pushed it open and entered the churchyard of San Pancrazio in advance of his companions.

Pausing ere he continued upon a way as yet unknown to him, he again turned questioningly toward his mysterious summoners, for as far as his eye could reach in the bright moonlight, he could discover no trace of a funeral cortege or ever so small number of mourners. Instead of satisfying Il Gobbo's curiosity, Eckhardt briefly ordered him to follow him, and the grave digger, shaking his head with grave doubt, followed the mysterious stranger, who seemed so familiar with this abode of Death. They traversed the churchyard at a rapid pace, until they reached a mortuary chapel situated in a remote region. Here Eckhardt and his companion paused, and the former, turning about and facing Il Gobbo, pointed to a grave in the shadows of the chapel.

"Know you this grave?" the Margrave accosted the grave digger, pointing to the grass-plot at his feet.

The grave digger seemed to grope through the depths of his memory; then he bent low as if to decipher the inscription on the stone, but this effort was in so far superfluous, as he could not read.

"Here lies one Ginevra,—the wife of the German Commander—"

He paused, again searching his memory, but this time in vain.

"Eckhardt," supplied the Margrave himself.

"Eckhardt—Eckhardt," the grave digger echoed, crossing himself at the sound of the dreaded name.

"Open the grave!" Eckhardt broke into Il Gobbo's babbling, who had been wondering to what purpose he had been brought here.

Il Gobbo stared up at the speaker as if he mistrusted his hearing, but made no reply.

"Open the grave!" Eckhardt repeated, leaning upon his sword.

Il Gobbo shook his head. No doubt the man was mad; else why should he prefer the strange request? He looked questioningly at Eckhardt's companion, as if expecting the latter to interfere. But he moved not. A strange fear began to creep over the grave digger.

"Here is a purse of gold, enough to dispel the qualms of your conscience," Eckhardt spoke with terrible firmness in his tones, offering Il Gobbo a leather purse of no mean size. But the latter pushed it back with abhorrence.

"I cannot—I dare not. Who are you to prefer this

strange request?"

"I am Eckhardt, the general! Open the grave!"

Il Gobbo cringed as though he had been struck a blow from some invisible hand.

"I dare not—I dare not," he whined, deprecating the proffered gift. "The sin would be visited upon my head.—It is written: Disturb not the dead."

A terrible look passed into Eckhardt's face.

"Is this purse not heavy enough? I will add another."

"It is not that—it is not that," Il Gobbo replied, almost weeping with terror. "I dread the vengeance of the dead! They will not permit the sacrilege to pass unpunished."

"Then let the punishment fall on my head!" replied Eckhardt with terrible voice. "Take your spade, old man, for by the Almighty God who looks down upon us, you will not leave this place alive, unless you do as you are told."

The old grave digger trembled in every limb. Helplessly he gazed about; imploringly he looked up into the face of Eckhardt's immobile companion, but he read nothing in the eyes of these two, save unrelenting determination. Instinctively he knew that no argument would avail to deter them from their mad purpose.

Eckhardt watched the old man closely.

"You dug this grave yourself, three years ago," he then spoke in a tone strangely mingled of despair

and irony. "It is a poor grave digger who permits his dead to leave their cold and narrow berth and go forth among the living in the form they bore on earth! It has been whispered to me," he continued with a terrible laugh, "that some of your graves are shallow. I would fain be convinced with my own eyes, just to be able to give your calumniators the lie! Therefore, good Il Gobbo, take up your spade with all speed, and imagine, as you perform your task, that you are not opening this grave to disturb the repose of her who sleeps beneath the sod, but preparing a reception to one still in the flesh! Proceed!"

The last word was spoken with such menace that the grave digger reluctantly complied, and taking up the spade, which he had dropped, he pushed it slowly into the sod. Leaning silently on his sword, his face the pallor of death, Eckhardt and his companion watched the progress of the terrible work, watched one shovel of earth after the other fly up, piling up by the side of the grave; watched the oblong opening grow deeper and deeper, till after a breathless pause of some duration the spade of the grave digger was heard to strike the top of the coffin.

Il Gobbo, who all but his head stood now in the grave, looked up imploringly to Eckhardt, hoping that at the last moment he would desist from the terrible sacrilege he was about to commit. But when he read only implacable determination in the

commander's face, he again turned to his task and continued to throw up the earth until the coffin stood free and unimpeded in its narrow berth.

"I cannot raise it up," the old man whined. "It is too heavy."

"We will assist you! Out it shall come if all the devils in hell clung to it from beneath. Bring your ropes and bring them quickly! Hear you?" thundered Eckhardt in a frenzy. His self-enforced calm was fast giving way before the terrible ordeal he was passing through.

"Would it not be safer to go down and open the lid?" questioned Eckhardt's companion, for the first time breaking the silence.

"There is not room enough,—unless the berth is widened," Eckhardt replied. Then he turned to Il Gobbo, who was slowly scrambling out of the grave.

"Widen the berth—we will come down to you!"

The grave digger returned to his task; then after a time, which seemed eternity to those waiting above, his head again appeared in the opening. One shovel of earth after another flew up at the feet of Eckhardt and his companion. Again and again they heard the spade strike against the coffin, till at last something like a groan out of the gloom below informed them that the task had been accomplished.

"Have you any tools?" Eckhardt shouted to Il Gobbo.

"None to serve that end," stammered the grave

digger.

"Then take your spade and prise the lid open!" cried Eckhardt. He was trembling like an aspen, and his breath came hard through his half-closed lips. The expression of his face and his demeanour were such as to vanquish the last scruples of Il Gobbo, who belaboured the coffin with much good will, which was mocked by the result, for it seemed to have been hermetically sealed.

After waiting some time in deadly, harrowing suspense, Eckhardt addressed his companion.

"I hate to abase my good sword for such a purpose,—but the coffin shall be opened." And without warning he bounded down into the grave, while Il Gobbo, thinking his last moment at hand, had dropped pick and spade, and stood, more dead than alive, at the foot of the grave.

Picking up the grave digger's spade, Eckhardt dealt the coffin such a terrific blow that he splintered its top to atoms. A second blow completely severed the lid, and it lurched heavily to one side, lodging between the coffin and the earth wall.

The ensuing silence was intense.

The moon, which had risen high in the heavens, illumined with her beams the chasm in which Eckhardt stood, bending over the coffin. What his eyes beheld was too terrible for words to express. Only one tress of dark silken hair had escaped the dread havoc of death, which the open coffin

revealed. It was a sight such as would cause the blood to freeze in the veins of the bravest. It was the visible execution of the judgment pronounced in the garden of Eden: "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return."

Only one dark silken tress of all that splendour of body and youth!

Eckhardt leaped from the grave and stood aside, leaving it for his companion to give his final instructions to Il Gobbo, the grave digger, and the reward for his night's labour.

As they strode from the churchyard of San Pancrazio, neither spoke. The havoc of death, which Eckhardt's eyes had beheld, the contrast between the image of Ginevra, such as it lived in his memory, and the sight which had met his eyes, had re-opened every wound in his heart. No beam of hope, no thought of heavenly mercy, penetrated the night of his soul. His heart seemed steel-cased and completely walled up. He could not even shed a tear. One hour had worked a dreadful transformation. Silently the Margrave and his companion left the churchyard. Silently they turned toward the city. At the base of Aventine, Benilo parted from Eckhardt, himself more dead than alive, promising to see him on the following day. He dared not trust himself even to ask Eckhardt what he had seen. There would be time enough when his terrible frenzy had subsided.

As Eckhardt continued upon his way, he grew

more calm. The feast of Death, which he had dared to break into, while for a time completely stupefying him with its horrors, seemed at least to have brought proof positive, that whoever Ginevra's double, it was not Ginevra returned to earth. There was much in that thought to comfort his soul, and after the fresh air of night had cooled his fevered brow, saner reflections began to gain sway over his whirling brain.

But they did not endure. What he had seen proved nothing. Another body might have been substituted in the coffin. The supposition was monstrous indeed—yet even the wildest surmises seemed justified when thrown in the scales against the fatal likeness of the woman who had drawn him from the altars of Christ, had frustrated his design to become a monk, and had, as he believed, attempted his life. Could he but find the monk who had conducted the last rites! He had searched for him in every cloister and sanctuary in Rome, yet all those of whom he inquired disclaimed all knowledge of his abode. Several times the thought had recurred to Eckhardt of returning to the Groves, to seek a second interview with the woman, and thus for ever to silence his doubts. But a strange dread had assailed and restrained him from the execution. There was something in the woman's eyes he had never seen in Ginevra's, and he felt that he would inevitably succumb, should he ever again stand face to face

with her. He almost wished that he had followed Benilo's advice,—that he had refrained from an act prompted by frenzy and despair. Vain regrets! He must find the monk, if he was still in Rome. Though everything and everybody seemed to have conspired against him nothing should bend him from his course.

CHAPTER V

THE GROTTOS OF EGERIA



or the following day the Senator of Rome had arranged a Festival of Pan, and the place appointed for the divertissement was one which the Seneschal of the Decameron might have chosen as fit for the reception of his luxurious masters, where every object was in harmony with the delicious and charmed existence which they had devised in defiance of Death. Arcades of vines, bright with the gold and russet foliage of autumn, ascended in winding terraces to a height, on which they converged, forming a spacious canopy over an expanse of brightest emerald turf, inlaid with a mosaic of flowers. In the centre there was a fountain,

which sent its spray to a great height in the clear air, refreshing soul and body with the harmony of its waters. Between the interstices of the vines, magnificent views of the whole surrounding country were offered to the eye, to which feature perhaps, or to the effect of a dazzling variety of late roses, which grew among the vines, and the lofty cypresses which made the elevation a conspicuous object in every direction, it owes its present designation of Belvedere.

Stephania's spell had worked powerfully on its intended victim. Surrounded by everything which could kindle the fires of Love and stimulate the imagination, exposed to the influence of her marvellous beauty and the infinite charm of her individuality, Otto was devoured by a passion, which hourly increased, despite the struggle which he put forth to resist it. Stephania's absence had taught him how necessary she had become to his existence, and although he was well informed that she rarely quitted Castel San Angelo, he was yet tortured by the wildest fancies, entirely oblivious that he had given all his youth, his love, his heart to a beautiful phantom,—the wife of another, who could never be his own. And though he endeavoured to reason with his madness, though he questioned himself where it would lead to, in what strange manner he had absorbed the poison which rioted in his system, it was of no avail. The dictates of Fate vanquish the

paltry laws of mortals. This love had come to him unbidden—uncalled. Why must the soul remain for ever isolated when the unbounded feast of beauty was spread to all the senses? And was it not too late to retreat? It was the last trump of the tempter.

He won.

As he approached the Minotaurus, Otto's hope brightened with the tints of the rainbow. For the first time since his return from Monte Gargano he had discarded his usual cumbrous habiliments, and though his garb was still that prescribed by the court ceremonial, it added much to display his princely person to advantage. Confiding much more in the secrecy of his movements than in the protection of his attendants, Otto had left the palace on the Aventine unobserved and arrived in the vale of Egeria with a whirl of passion and a rush of recollections, which not only took from him all power, but every wish of resistance,—a far more dangerous symptom.

Stephania's duenna was in waiting and informed him that the latter had dismissed her ladies to amuse themselves at their pleasure in the gardens, while Stephania herself was wreathing a garland for the evening in the Egerian Grotto, which formed the centre of the fantastic labyrinth called the Minotaurus, from an antique statue of the monster which adorned it. Slipping a ring of great value on the old dame's finger, as a testimony, he said, of his

gratitude, for watching over her mistress, Otto hastened onward. His heart beat so heavily when he came within view of the rose-matted arches leading to the ancient grotto, that he was obliged to pause to recover his breath. At that moment a voice fell upon his ear, but it was not the voice of Stephania, and with a feeling almost of suffocation in the intensity of his passion, Otto drew aside the foliage to ascertain whether or not his senses had belied him.

The figure of the Minotaurus was cast in bronze, a monstrous bull, crouched, head to the ground, on the marble pavement of the temple. Passing the statue, Otto made for the grotto indicated by his guide, and, raising the tapestry of ivy, which concealed it, disappeared within. Guided by the warm evening light to its entrance, he hesitated as if apprehending some treachery. Then, with quick determination he groped his way into the cavern, paused somewhat suddenly and looked about.

It was deserted, but a faint glimmer lured him to the background, where a fountain gleamed in the purple twilight.

"Rash mortal," said a voice, in tones that made his heart jump to his throat, "I think you are now as near as devout worshippers are wont to approach to my waves, though, as one of the initiated, the vestal nymphs of these caves bid you very welcome."

"I have kept my faith," Otto replied, pausing before the veiled apparition which sat on the rim of

the fountain. "But your veil hides you as effectually from my gaze as a mountain."

His agitation betrayed itself in his wavering tones.

"Are you afraid," she asked, noting his hesitancy, "lest I should prove the fiend who tempted Cyprianus?"

"All fears redouble in the darkness. Let me see your face!"

"Why have you come here?"

"Why have you summoned me?"

"Perhaps to test your courage."

"I fear nothing!"

"One word of mine, one gesture,—and you are my prisoner."

Otto remained standing. His face was pale, but no trace of fear appeared thereon.

"I trust you."

"I am a Roman,—and your enemy! I am the enemy of your people!"

"I trust you!"

"Suppose I had lured you hither to end for ever this unbearable state?"

"I trust you!"

Stephania's eyes cowered beneath Otto's gaze. Rising abruptly she averted her head, but every trace of colour had left her face as she raised the veil. Then she turned slowly and extended her hand. Otto grasped it, pressing it to his lips in an ecstasy of joy,

then he drew her down to the seat she had abandoned, kneeling by her side.

For a moment she gazed at him thoughtfully.

"What do you want of me?" she then asked abruptly.

"I would have you be my friend," he stammered, idol-worship in his eyes.

"Is a woman's friendship so rare a commodity, that you come to me?" she replied, drawing her hand from him.

"I have never known woman's love nor friendship,—and it is yours I want."

Stephania drew a long breath. Truly,—it required no effort on her part to lead him on. He made her task an easy one. Yet there rose in her heart a spark of pity. The complete trust of this boy-king was to the wife of Crescentius a novel sensation in the atmosphere of doubt and suspicion in which she had grown up. It was almost a pity to shatter the temple in which he had placed her as goddess.

The mood held sway but a moment, then with a cry of delirious gayety, she wrote the word "Friendship" rapidly on the water.

"Look," she said, "scarcely a ripple remains! That is the end. Let us but add another word, 'Farewell'—and let the trace it shall leave tell when we shall meet again."

The words died on Otto's lips. He could not fathom the lightning change which had come over

her. With mingled sadness and passion he gazed upon the lovely face, so pale and cold.

"Let us not part thus," he stammered.

Stephania had risen abruptly, shaking herself free of his kneeling form.

"What is it all to lead to?" she questioned.

Otto rose slowly to his feet. Reeling as if stunned by a blow, he staggered after her.

"Do not leave me thus," he begged with outstretched arms.

Stephania started away from him, as if in terror.

"Do not touch me,—as you are a man—"

Otto's hand went to his head. Was he waking? Was he dreaming? Was this the same woman who had but a moment ago—

He had not time to think out the thought.

He felt his neck encircled by an airy form and arms, and lips whose sweetness made his senses reel were breathlessly pressed upon his own.

But for an evanescent instant the sensation endured.

A voice whispered low: "Otto!"

When he tried to embrace the mocking phantom he grasped the empty air.

He rushed madly forward, but at this instant there arose a wild uproar and clamour around him. The silver moon on the fountain burst into a blaze of whirling light, which illumined the whole grotto. The shrill summons of a bell was to be heard as from the

depths of the fountain, and suddenly the verdant precincts were crowded with a most extraordinary company, shouting, hooting, laughing, yelling, and waving torches. Satyrs, nymphs, fauns, and all varieties of sylvan deities poured out of every nook and cranny by which there was an entrance, all shrieking execration on the profaner of the sacred solitudes and brandishing sundry weapons appropriate to their qualities. The satyrs wielded their crooked staves, the fauns their stiff pine-wreaths, the nymphs their branches of oak, and a loud clamour arose. But by far the most formidable personages were a number of shepherds with huge boar-spears, who made their appearance on every side.

"Pan! Pan!" shouted a hundred voices. "Come and judge the mortal who has dared to profane thy solitudes. Echo—where is Pan?"

Distant and faint the cry came back:

"Pan! Where is Pan?"

For a moment Otto stood rooted to the spot, believing himself in all truth surrounded by the rural gods of antiquity. He stared at the scene before him as on some strange sorcery. But suddenly a suspicion rushed upon him that he was betrayed, either to be made the jest of a company of carnival's revellers, or, perhaps, the object of vengeance of the Senator of Rome.

Gazing round with a quick fear in his heart, at

finding himself thus completely surrounded, and meditating whether to attempt a forcible escape, he was startled by the shrill shriek of sylvan pipes and attended by a riotous company of satyrs, Pan on his goat-legs hobbled into the grotto, the satyrs playing a wild march on their oaken reeds.

"Silence! Where is the guilty nymph who has lured the mortal hither?" shouted the sylvan god.

"Egeria! Egeria!" resounded numerous accusing voices.

"At thine old tricks again luring wisdom whither it should least come?" questioned Pan, severely. "Yes, hide thyself in thy blushing waves! But the mortal,—where is he?"

"Here! Here!" exclaimed the nymphs with one voice. "Had it been old Silenus or one of his satyrs,—we had not wondered."

"The King! the King!" resounded on all sides amidst a general outburst of laughter.

Otto became more and more convinced that the scene had been enacted to mock him, and though he did not understand the drift of their purpose, at which Stephania had doubtlessly connived, a cold hand seemed to clutch his heart.

"In very truth, you have the laughing side of the jest," he turned to the Sylvan god. "But if you will confront me with the nymph, I will prove that at least we ought to share in equal punishment," Otto concluded his defence, endeavouring to make the

best of his dangerous position.

"This shall not be!" exclaimed a nymph near by. "Bring him along and our queen shall judge him."

Ere Otto could give vent to remonstrance, he found himself hemmed in by the shepherds with their spears. His doubts as to the ultimate purpose of the revellers seemed now to call for some imperative decision, but while he remembered the dismal legends of these haunts, his lips still tingled with the magic fire of Stephania's kiss and it seemed impossible to him that she could really mean to harm him. Still he had grave misgivings, when suddenly a mocking voice saluted him and into the cave strode Johannes Crescentius, Senator of Rome,—apparently from the valley without, a smiling look of welcome on his face.

"Fear nothing, King Otto," he said jovially. "Your sentence shall not be too severe. Your forfeit shall be light, if you will but discover and point out to us the nymph who usurped the part of Egeria, that we may further address ourselves to her for her reprehensible conduct."

The feelings with which Otto listened to this beguiling and perhaps perfidious statement may be imagined. But he replied with great presence of mind.

"It were a vain effort indeed to recognize one nymph from another in the gloom. Lead on then, since it is the Senator of Rome who guarantees my

immunity from the fate of Orpheus."

Marching like a prisoner of war and surrounded by the shepherd spearmen, Otto affected to enter into the spirit of the jest and suffered himself quietly to be bound with chains of ivy which the least effort could snap asunder. The moment he stepped forth from the grotto his path was beset by a multitude of the most extraordinary phantoms. The surrounding woods teemed with the wildest excrescences of pagan worship; statues took life; every tree yielded its sleeping Dryad; strange melodies resounded in every direction; Nayades rose in the stream and laughingly showered their spray upon him. With a cheerful hunting blast Diana and her huntresses appeared on an overhanging rock and darted blunt arrows with gilded heads at him, until he arrived at an avenue of lofty elms, whose overarching branches, filigreed by the crimson after-glow of departing day, resembled the interior of a Gothic cathedral and formed a natural hall of audience fit for the rural divinities. Bosquets of orange trees, whose ivory tinted blossoms gleamed like huge pearls out of the dark green of the foliage, wafted an inexpressibly sweet perfume on the air.

The vista terminated in an open, semi-circular court, surrounded by terraces of richest emerald hue, in the midst of which rose an improvised throne. The rising moon shone upon it with a light, like that of a rayless sun, and Otto discovered that the terraces

were thronged with a splendid court, assembled round a woman who occupied the throne.

As the prisoner approached, environed by his grotesque captors, laughter as inextinguishable as that which shook the ancient gods of Olympus on a similar occasion, resounded among the occupants of the terrace. Continuing his forced advance, Otto discovered with a strange beating of the heart in the splendidly attired queen, Stephania, the wife of Crescentius.

A bodice of silver-tissue confined her matchless form, which with every heave of her bosom threw iridescent gleams, and a diadem which shone as with stars, so bright were its jewels, flashed upon her brow.

She looked a queen indeed, and but for the ivory pallor of her face it would have been impossible to guess that she was in any way concerned with the object of the strange pageant, which now approached her throne.

The sphinx-like countenance of the Senator of Rome seemed to evince no very great enthusiasm in the frolic; the invited guests appeared not to know how to look, and took their cue from the Lord of Castel San Angelo.

When Otto was at last brought face to face with his fair judge, his own pallor equalled that of Stephania, and both resembled rather two marble statues than beings of flesh and blood. Stephania's

lips were tightly compressed, and when Pan recited his accusation, complaining of an attempt to profane his solitudes and to misguide one of his chastest nymphs, so far from overwhelming the culprit with the laughing raillery of which she was mistress and an outburst of which all seemed to expect, Stephania was silent and kept her eyes fixed on the ground, as if she feared to raise them and to meet Otto's burning gaze.

"Answer, King of the Germans," urged Crescentius with a smile, "else you are lost!"

"The charges are too vague," Otto replied. "Let Pan, if he has any witness, of what has happened, allege particulars—and if he does—by his crooked staff, even my accusers shall acquit me without denial on my part."

General mutterings and suppressed laughter followed this singular defence, during which Stephania's countenance took all the pallid tints, which the return of his consciousness and dignity had chased from Otto's cheeks.

But she did not think it wise to prolong the scene.

"Since the august offender," she said hastily and without lifting her long silken lashes, "cannot discover among my retinue the nymph who enticed him into the grotto, I pronounce this sentence upon him: 'Let his ignorance be perpetual.'"

Then she invited him to a seat in the circle over

which she presided and her graciousness obviously caused Otto's spirits to rise, for, starting up, as it were, into new existence at the word, he took his station in a manner which enabled him to see Stephania's face and her glorious eyes.

At the beck of her hand there now approached a band of musicians and the effect of their harmonies beneath the hushed and now star-resplendent skies was inexpressibly delicious. The dreams of Elysium seemed to be realized. These indeed seemed to be the happy fields, in the atmosphere of which the delighted spirit was consoled for every woe, and as Otto almost unwittingly gazed upon the woman before him, so passionately loved and to him lost for ever; as he marked the languor and melancholy which had stolen over her countenance, he could hardly restrain himself from throwing himself and all he called his, at her feet.

Emperor and king though he was,—the one jewel he craved lay beyond the confines of his dominion.

After the conclusion of the serenade, the nymphs of Stephania's retinue showered their flowers upon the sylvan gods, who eagerly scrambled over them, when Stephania started up, as from a dream.

"How is this?" she hurriedly exclaimed, "I still hold my flowers? And you are all matched by the chances of the fragrant blossoms? But King Otto is likewise without his due share, and so it would seem

that fate would have him my companion at the collation awaiting us. Therefore, my lords and ladies, link hands as the flow'ry oracles direct. I shall follow last with my exalted guest."

Otto did not remark the quick glance which flashed between Crescentius and his wife. The ladies of Stephania's retinue immediately conformed to the expressed wish of the hostess by taking the arms of the cavaliers who had chanced upon their flowers.

A number of pages, beautiful as cupids, lighted the way with torches which flamed with a perfumed lustre, and the procession moved anew towards the grotto, where, during their absence, a repast had been spread. But the last couple had preceded them some twenty paces, ere Stephania, without raising her eyes, took Otto's motionless arm.

The memory of all that had passed, a natural feeling of embarrassment on both sides, prolonged the silence between them. Stephania doubtlessly fathomed his thoughts, for she smiled with a degree of timidity not unmingled with doubt, as she broke the silence.

The question, though softly spoken, came swift as a dart and equally unexpected.

"Have you ever loved, King Otto?"

Otto looked up with a start into her radiant face.

He had anticipated some veiled rebuke for his own strange conduct, anything,—not this.

He breathed hard, then he replied:

"Until I came to Rome, I never gazed on beauty that won from me more than the applause of the eye, which a statue or a painting, equally beautiful, might have claimed."

She nodded dreamily.

"I have heard it said that the blue-eyed, sunny-haired maidens of your native North make us Romans appear poor in your sight!"

"Not so! The red rose is not discarded for the white. The contrast only heightens the beauty."

"I have heard it said," Stephania continued, choosing a circuitous path instead of the direct one her guests had taken, "that you Teutons have ideals even, while you starve on bread and water. And I have been told that, were you permitted to choose for your life's companion the most beautiful woman on earth, you would hie yourselves into the gray ages of the world's dawn for the realization of your dreams. Has your ideal been realized, since you have established your residence in Rome, King Otto?"

There was a brief pause, then he replied, looking straight ahead:

"Love comes more stealthily than light, of which even the dark cypresses are enamoured in your Italian noondays."

"You evade my question."

"What would you have me say?"

She gave him a quick glance, which set his pulses to throbbing wildly and sent the hot blood

seething through his veins.

"Is your heart free, King Otto?"

A drear sense of desolation and loneliness came over the youth.

"Free," he replied almost inaudibly.

She gave a little, nervous laugh.

"But how know you that, surrounded by such loveliness, as that which you have this very night witnessed in my circle, your hour may not strike at last?"

Otto raised his eyes to those of the woman by his side.

"Fair lady, beautiful as Love's oracle itself, my heart is in little danger even from your fairest satellites. But mistake not my meaning. I am not insusceptible to the fever of the Gods! Love I have sought under all forms and guises! And if I found it not, if I have listened to its richest eloquence as to some song in a foreign tongue, which my heart understood not,—it is not that I have lacked the soul for love. Love I found not, though phantoms I have eagerly chased in this troubled dream of life. What avails it, to contend with one's destiny? And this is mine!"

Stephania laughed.

"You speak like some hoary anchorite from the Thebaide. Truly, now I begin to understand, why your chroniclers call you the 'Wonder-child of the World.' Lover, idealist, and cynic in one!"

"Nay—you wrong me! Cynic I am not! My mother was a princess of Greece. The fairest woman my eyes ever gazed upon—save one! She died in her youth and beauty, following my father, the emperor, into his early grave. I was left alone in the world, alone with the monks, alone in the great gloom of our tall and spectral pines! The monks understood not my craving for the sun and the blue skies. The whiter snows of Thuringia chilled my heart and froze my soul! I longed for Rome—I craved for the South. My dead mother's blood flows in my veins. Hither I came, braving the avalanches and the fever and the wrath of the electors, I came, once more to challenge the phantoms of the past from their long forgotten tombs, to make Rome—what once she was—the capital of the earth. Rome's dream is Eternity!"

Stephania listened in silence and with downcast eyes.

Never had the ear of the beautiful Roman heard words like these. The illiteracy, vileness, and depravity of her own countrymen never perhaps presented itself to her in so glaring a contrast, as when thrown into comparison with the ideal son of the Empress Theophano and Otto II, of Saracenic renown. His words were like some strange music, which flatters the senses, that try in vain to retain their harmonies.

There was a pause during which neither spoke.

Otto thought he felt the soft pressure of

Stephania's arm against his own.

"You spoke of one who alone might challenge the dead empress in point of fairness," the woman spoke at last and her voice betrayed an emotion which she vainly strove to conceal. "Who is that one?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Theophano's beauty was renowned. Even our poets sing of her."

"I will tell you at some other time."

"Tell me now!"

"We are approaching the grotto. Your guests are waiting."

"Tell me now!"

"Crescentius is expecting us. He will be wondering at our tardiness."

"Tell me now!"

Otto breathed hard.

"Oh, why do you ask, Stephania, why do you ask?"

"Who is the woman?"

The question fell huskily from her lips.

The answer came, soft as a zephyr that dies as it passes:

"Stephania!"

Quickening their steps they reached the grotto, without daring to face each other. The woman's heart throbbed as impetuously as that of the youth, as they found themselves at the entrance of the Grotto of

Egeria in a blaze of light, emanating from innumerable torches artfully arranged among the stalactites, which diffused brilliant irradiations. The sumptuous dresses of the nobles and barons blazed into view; the spray from the fountain leaped up to a great height and descended in showers of liquid jewels of iridescent hues.

A collation of fruits and wines wooed the appetite of the guests on every hand. Sweet harmonies floated from the adjoining groves, and, amidst a general buzz of delight and admiration, Stephania took her seat at the festal board between the Senator of Rome and the German king.

The flower of beauty, wit and magnificence of the Senator's Roman court had been culled to grace this festival, for there was no one present, who was not remarked for at least one of these attributes, some even by the union of all. The most beautiful women of Rome surrounded the consort of the Senator, who outshone them all. Even envy could not deny her the crown.

Nevertheless, and for the first time, perhaps, Stephania seemed to misdoubt the supremacy and power of her great beauty, and while she affected being absorbed in other matters, her eye watched with devouring anxiety every glance of her exalted guest, whose feverish vivaciousness betrayed to her his inmost thoughts.

The Senator's countenance was that of the

Sphinx of the desert. He appeared neither to see nor to hear.

Otto meanwhile, in order to remove from his path the terrible temptation which he felt growing with every instant, in order to divert Eckhardt's attention, who he instinctively felt was watching his every gesture, and to stifle any possible suspicions, which Crescentius might entertain, affected to be struck with the appearance of one of Stephania's ladies, who resembled her in stature and in the colour of her hair. He intentionally mistook her for the fairy in the grotto, laughingly challenging her acquaintance, which she as merrily denied, declaring herself to be the wife of one of the barons present. But Otto would not be convinced and attached himself to her with a zeal, which brought on both many pointed jests on the part of the assembled revellers.

Stephania immediately observed the ruse, but as her eye met that of the Senator, an unaccountable terror seized her. She turned away and pretended to join her guests in their merriment. Among those present were some of the most imaginative and prolific minds of an age, otherwise dark and illiterate, yet the brilliant play and coruscations of Stephania's wit, the depth of some of the glittering remarks which fell from her lips, were not surpassed by any. At times she exhibited a tone of recklessness almost bordering on defiance and mockery, the

lightning's power to scorch as well as to illumine, but when relapsing into what appeared her more natural mood, it was scarcely possible to resist the grace and seductiveness of her manner. Even the doctrines, which half in gayety, half in haughty acceptance of the character assigned to her on this evening, she promulgated, full of poetical epicureanism, fell with so sweet a harmony from her lips, that saints could not have wished them mended.

Otto, meanwhile, continued to play his serf-assigned part, but he lost not a single word or gesture of Stephania and his fervour towards his chosen partner rose in proportion with Stephania's gayety. But he did not fail to observe that her siren-smile was directed towards himself and his soul drank in the beams of her beauty, as the palm-tree absorbs the fervid suns of Africa, motionless with delight.

While gayety and convivial enjoyment seemed at their height, Eckhardt strode from the grotto, unobserved by the revellers and entered a secluded path leading into the remoter regions of the park. Otto's predilection for the wife of the Senator of Rome had escaped him as little as had her own seeming coquetry, and he had looked on in silence, until, seized with profound disgust, he could bear it no longer.

What he had always feared was coming to pass.

When the Romans could no longer vanquish

their foes on the field of battle, they destroyed them with their women.

The gardens which Eckhardt traversed resembled the fabled treasure-house of Aladdin. Every tree glistened with sparkling clusters of red, blue and green lights, every flowerbed was bordered with lines and circles of iridescent globes, and the fountains tossed up spiral columns of amber, rose and amethyst spray against the transparent azure of the summer skies, in which a lustrous golden moon shone full.

But a madness seemed suddenly to have seized the revellers.

No one knew whither Crescentius had gone.

No one knew who was a dancer, a flute-player, a noble.

Satyrs and fauns fell to chasing nymphs with shouting. Everywhere laughter and shouts were heard, whispers and panting breaths. Darkness covered certain parts of the groves. Truly it was a long time, since anything similar had been seen in Rome.

Roused and intoxicated by the contamination, the fever had at last seized Otto. Rushing into the forest, he ran with the others. New flocks of nymphs swarmed round him every moment. Seeing at last a band of maidens led by one arrayed as Diana, he sprang to it, intending to scrutinize the goddess more closely. They encircled him in a mad whirl, and,

evidently bent upon making him follow, rushed away the next moment like a herd of deer. But he stood rooted to the spot with wildly beating heart.

A great yearning, such as he had never felt before, seized him at that moment and the love for Stephania rushed to his heart as a tremendous tidal wave. Never had she seemed to him so pure, so dear, so beloved, as in that forest of frenzied madness. A moment before he had himself wished to drink of that cup, which drowned past and present; now he was seized with repugnance and remorse. He felt stifled in this unholy air; his eyes sought the stars, glimmering through the interstices of the interwoven branches.

A shadow fell across his path.

He turned. Before him stood Eckhardt, the Margrave.

"I have seen and heard," he spoke in response to Otto's questioning gaze. "King of the Germans, I have enough of Rome, enough of feasts, enough of conquests. I am stifling. I cannot breathe in this accursed air. Command the return beyond the Alps. On these siren rocks your ship will founder! Rome is no place for you!"

Otto stared at the man as if he feared he had lost his senses.

"King of the Germans," Eckhardt continued, "on my knees I entreat you—at the risk of your displeasure,—return beyond the Alps! See what has

become of you! See what a woman has made of you, you, the son of the vanquisher of the Saracens!"

He stretched out his arms entreatingly, as if to lead him away.

Otto covered his face with both hands.

"And I love only her in the wide, wide world," he muttered.

At this juncture a light, elastic step resounded on the gravel path.

Benilo stepped into the clearing.

"Stephania awaits the king in the pavillion."

Eckhardt laid his hands on Otto's shoulders, straining his eyes in silent entreaty into those of the King.

"Do not go!" he begged.

Otto winced, but the presence of Benilo caused him to shake himself free of the Margrave's restraining hand.

"Stephania is waiting," he stammered.

"Then you will not grant my request?" Eckhardt spoke with quivering voice.

"In Rome we live,—in Rome we die!"

Taking Benilo's arm he hastened away, leaving Eckhardt to ponder over his prophetic words.

For a moment the Margrave remained, straining his gaze after Otto's retreating form.

His heart was heavy,—heavy to breaking. Dared he enter the arena against the Sorceress of Rome? He laughed aloud.

There are moments when the tragedy of our own life is almost amusing.

CHAPTER VI
BEYOND THE GRAVE

 ckhardt turned to go, but he had barely moved, when, as if risen from the earth, there stood before him the tall, veiled form of a woman, who whispered, flooding his face with her burning breath:

"I love you! Come! No one will see us!"

Eckhardt trembled in every limb. He would have known that voice, even if it had spoken to him from the depths of the grave. The heavy veil which shrouded the woman's face prevented him from scrutinizing her features.

"Who are you?" he stammered, just to say something. Swift as thought she threw her arms round him, but to recede as swiftly.

"Hurry! See how lonely it is! I love you! Come!"

"Who are you?"

"Can you not guess?"

He stretched out his arms toward her, but she

gambolled before him, as a butterfly, flitting from flower to flower.

"Night of Love—night of madness," she whispered. "To-night, if you but will it, the secret is yours!"

Her voice thrilled him through and through. The perfume of the Poppy-flower sank benumbing into his heart. It was her voice,—it was her form,—was it but a mocking phantom,—what was it? Again she approached him.

"Lift the veil!" she spoke in a voice of command.

With trembling hand he started to obey, when the leaves of the nearest myrtle-bush began to rustle.

Eckhardt heard nothing, saw nothing.

As Benilo stepped into the moonlight, the apparition vanished like a dream phantom, but from the distance her laugh was heard, strange in some way, and ominous.

Eckhardt rushed after the fading vision like a madman.

Would it mock him for ever, wherever he was, wherever he went?

How long he had followed it, in headlong, breathless pursuit, as on that fateful eve, when it had lured him from the altars of Christ, he knew not. When he at last desisted from the mad and fruitless chase, he found himself at the base of the Capitoline Hill. Here were scattered the ruins of the old Mamertine prisons, once a series of cells rising in

stages against the rock to a considerable height. Here were the baths of Mamertius, where Jugurtha, the Numidian, was starved. There Simon Bar Gioras, the Jew, was strangled, he, who to the last maintained the struggle against the victorious son of Vespasian. In the cell to the right Appius Claudius, the Triumvir, was said to have committed suicide. Another cell reëchoed from the clangour of the chains of Simon Petrus. It was not a region where men tarried long, and few relished the fare of the low taverns, which were strung along the gray wall of Servius Tullius. For weird and dismal wails were at times to be heard in clear moonlight nights, and the region of the Capitoline Hill, cut by the old Gemonian stairs, was in ill repute, as in the days of Republican Rome.

He had not gone very far when he found himself before the entrance of a cavern, and Eckhardt's attention was caught by a strange red glow as from some fire within. As he gazed it died out, and he was left in doubt, whether it was an illusion of his imagination, or some phenomenon peculiar to the spot. The prisoners of the Roman state were no longer conveyed hither for safe-keeping, but confined in the dismal dungeons of Torre di Nona and Corte Savella. The glimmer he had seen could not therefore emanate from the cell of some unfortunate, here awaiting his sentence. Vainly he strained his gaze. All was darkness again within, and although the moon was high in a clear sky, set with innumerable

stars, their distant glimmer could not penetrate the murky depths.

Eckhardt waited some minutes and the glimmer reappeared. What urged him onward to explore the cause of the strange light he could not have told. Still he dared not venture into the gloom without the aid of a torch. Quickly resolved he retraced his steps towards the few scattered houses, near the ancient wall, entered a dimly lighted, evil-smelling shop, purchased torch and flints and returned to the entrance of the cavern.

After lighting his torch he entered slowly and carefully, marking every step he took in the dust and sand, which covered the ground of the cave. The farther he advanced the more singular grew the spectacle which greeted his gaze.

The cavern was of great extent, composed of enormous masses of rocks, seemingly tossed together in chaotic confusion, and glittering all over in the blaze of innumerable irradiations, as with serpents of coloured light, so singularly brilliant and twisted were the stalactites which clustered within. There was one rock, in which a strong effort of the imagination might have shaped resemblance to a crucifix. Fastened to this by an iron rivet, a chain and a belt round his waist, lay the form of a man, apparently in a deadly swoon, as if exhausted from the struggle against the massive links. Some embers still burned near the prisoner and had probably been

the means of attracting Eckhardt's attention.

Startled by the strange sight which encountered his gaze, Eckhardt eagerly surveyed the person of the prisoner. He appeared a man who had passed his prime, and his frame betokened a scholar rather than an athlete. His head being averted, Eckhardt was not able to scan his features.

At first Eckhardt was inclined to attribute the prisoner's plight to an attack by outlaws who had stripped him, and then, to secure secrecy and immunity, had left him to his fate. But a second consideration staggered this presumption, for as he raised his torch above the man's head, he discovered the tonsure which proclaimed him a monk, and what bandit, ever so desperate, would perpetrate a deed, which would consign his soul to purgatory for ever more? Besides, what wealth had a friar to tempt the avidity of a bravo?

Vainly puzzling his brain, as to the probable authorship of a deed, as dark as the identity of the hapless creature, thus securely fettered to the stone, he looked round. There was no vestige of drink or food; perhaps the man was starved and slowly expiring in the last throes of exhaustion. His breath came in rasping gasps and the short-cropped raven-blue hair slightly tinged with gray heightened the cadaverous tints of the body, which was of the colour of dried parchment.

The sudden flow of light, which flooded his

eyes, perhaps long unaccustomed thereto, caused the prostrate man to writhe and to start from his swoon. His eyes, deeply sunk in their sockets, and flashing a strange delirious light, stared with awe and fear into the flame of the torch.

But no sooner had he encountered Eckhardt's gaze than he uttered a cry of dismay and would have relapsed into his swoon, had not the Margrave grasped him by the shoulder in an effort to support the weak, tottering body. But the cry had startled him, and so great was Eckhardt's dismay, that his fingers relaxed their hold and the man fell back, striking his head against the rock.

"I am dying—fetch me some water," he begged piteously and Eckhardt stepped outside of the cavern and filled his helmet from a well, whose crystal stream seemed to pour from the fissures of the Tarpeian rock. This he carried to the hapless wretch, raising his head and holding it to his lips. The prisoner drank greedily and stammered his thanks in a manner as if his tongue had swollen too big for his mouth.

There was a breathless silence, then Eckhardt said:

"I have sought you long—everywhere. How came you in this plight?"

The monk looked up. In his eyes there was a great fear.

"Pity—pity!" he muttered, vainly endeavouring

to raise himself.

Eckhardt's stern gaze was his sole reply.

The ensuing silence seemed to both an eternity.

The monk could not bear the Margrave's gaze, and had closed his eyes.

"What of Ginevra?"

Slowly the words fell from Eckhardt's lips.

The monk groaned. His limbs writhed and strained against the chains that fettered him to the rock. But he made no reply.

"What of Ginevra?" Eckhardt repeated inexorably.

Still there came no answer.

Eckhardt stooped over the prostrate form like a spirit of vengeance descended from on high and so fiercely burned his gaze upon the monk that the latter vainly endeavoured to turn away his face. He could feel those eyes, even though his own were closed.

"You stand in the shadow of death," Eckhardt spoke, "You will never leave this cavern alive! Answer briefly and truthfully,—and I will have your body consigned to consecrated earth and masses said for your soul. Remain obdurate and rot where you lie, till the trumpet blast of resurrection day chases the worms from their loathsome feast!"

The dying man answered with a groan.

"What of Ginevra?" Eckhardt questioned for the third time.

The monk breathed hard. A tremor shook his limbs as he gasped:

"Ginevra—lives."

Eckhardt's hands went to his head. He closed his eyes in mortal agony and for a moment nothing but his heavy breathing was to be heard in the cavern. When he again looked down upon the prostrate man, he saw his lips turn purple, saw the film of death begin to cover his eyes. How much there was to be asked. How brief the time!

"You chanted the Requiem over the body of Ginevra, knowing her to be among the living?"

The monk nodded feebly.

Eckhardt's breath came hard. His breast heaved, as if it must burst and his hand shook so violently that some of the hot pitch from the taper struck the prisoner on the shoulder. He writhed with a groan.

"What prompted the hellish deceit?" Eckhardt continued. "Did she not have my love?"

The monk shook his head.

"It was not enough. It was not enough!"

"What more had I to give?"

"Marozia's inheritance—the emperor's tomb!"

"Marozia's inheritance?" Eckhardt repeated, like one in a dream. "The emperor's tomb? What madness is this? She never hinted at a wish unfulfilled."

"She asked you never to lift the veil from her past!"

The monk's words fell like a thunderbolt on

Eckhardt's head.

"How came you by this knowledge?" he questioned aghast.

"Give me some water—I am choking," gasped the monk.

Again Eckhardt held the helmet to his lips, while he prayed that the spark of life might remain long enough in that enfeebled body, to clear the mystery, at whose brink he stood.

The monk drank greedily, and when his thirst seemed appeased the water ran out of the corners of his mouth. He again relapsed into a swoon; he heard Eckhardt's questions, but lacked strength to answer.

Stooping over him, Eckhardt grasped him by the shoulder and shook him mercilessly. He must not die, until he knew all.

A terrible certainty flashed through his mind.

This monk knew what was to him a seven times sealed book.

He had repeated to him Ginevra's wish,—now, nor heaven nor hell should turn him from his path.

"I thought,—Marozia's descendants were all dead," he said, fear and hesitation in his tones.

The monk feebly shook his head.

"One lives,—the deadliest of the flock."

A chill as of death seemed to benumb Eckhardt's limbs.

"One lives," he gasped. "Her name?"

Delirium seemed to have seized the prostrate

wretch. He mumbled strange words while his fingers were digging into the sand, as if he were preparing his own grave.

"Her name!" thundered Eckhardt into the monk's ear.

The latter raised himself straight up and stared at the Margrave with dead, expressionless eyes.

"In the world, Ginevra,—beyond the grave—Theodora!"

"Theodora!" A groan broke from Eckhardt's lips.

"And is this her work?"

He pointed to the monk's chains, and the iron rivets driven into the rocks.

The monk shook his head. The spark of life flickered up once more.

"Five days without food,—without water,—left here to perish—by a villain—whom the lightnings of heaven may blast—the betrayer of God and of man,—I am dying,—remember,—burial—masses—"

The monk fell back with a gasp. The death-rattle was in his throat.

Eckhardt knelt by his side, raised his head and tried to stem the fleeting tide of life.

"His name! His name!" he shrieked, mad with fear, anguish and despair. "His name! Oh God, let him live but long enough for that,—his name?"

It was too late.

The spark of life had gone out. The murderer of Gregory stood before a higher bar of judgment.

There was a long silence in the rock caves under the Gemonian Stairs. Nothing was to be heard, save the hard breathing of the despairing man. He saw it all now,—all, but the instigator, the abettor of the terrible crime against him. If Ginevra was indeed the last link in that long chain of infamy, which had held its high revels in Castel San Angelo during the past decades, she could never hope to come into her own without some potent ally. The thought lay very near, that she might be intriguing in this very hour to regain the lost power of Marozia. But a second consideration at least staggered this theory. It rather seemed as if the man on whom she had relied for the realization of her terrible ambition had deceived her, after he had made her his own,—or had in some way failed to keep his pledge,—until, in the endeavour to find the support she required, she had sunk from the arms of one into those of another.

A wild shriek resounded through the cavern.

Eckhardt trembled at the sound of his own despair.

Like a caged, wild beast he paced up and down in the darkness.

The torch had fallen from his grasp and continued to glimmer on the sand.

Had it lain within his power he would have shaken down the mighty rock over his head and buried himself with the hapless victim chained to the stone.

In vain he tried to order his chaotic thoughts.

Monstrous deception she had practised upon him!

All her endearments, all her caresses, her kisses, her whisperings of love,—were they but the threads of the one vast fabric of a lie?

It seemed too monstrous to be true; it seemed too monstrous to grasp!

And all for what?

The fleeting phantom of dominion, which must vanish as it came—unsatisfied.

How long he remained thus, he knew not. His torch had well nigh burnt down when at length he roused himself from his deadly stupor. Groping his way to the entrance of the cave, he stepped into the open.

Like one dazed he returned to his palace.

But he could not sleep.

Profound were the emotions, which were awakened in his bosom, as he set foot within his chamber. Scenes of other days arose before him with the vividness of reality. He beheld himself again in the full vigour of manhood, ardent, impassioned, blessed with the hand of the woman he loved and anticipating a cloudless future. He beheld her as she was when he first called her his own, young, proud, beautiful. Her accents were those of endearment, her looks tenderness and love. They smote him now like a poniard's point driven to his very heart. He did not

think he could have borne a pang so keen and live.

Why,—he asked in despair—could not the past be recalled or for ever cancelled? Why could not men live their loves over again, to repair, what they might have omitted, neglected and regain their lost happiness?

Pressing his hands before his eyes, he tried to shut out the beautiful, agonizing vision.

It could not be excluded.

Staggering towards a chair, he sank upon it, a prey to unbearable anguish. Avenging furies beset him and lashed him with whips of steel.

He could not rest. He strode about the room. He even thought of quitting the house, denouncing himself as a madman for having come here at all. But where was he to go? He must endure the tortures. Perhaps they would subside. Little hope of it.

He walked to the fire-place. The air of autumn was chill without. The embers, still glowing with a crimson reflection, had sunk in the grate. Aye—there he stood, where he had stood years ago, and oh, how unlike his former self! How different in feeling! Then he had some youth left, at least, and hope. Now he was crushed by the weight of a mystery which haunted him night and day. Could he but quit Rome! Could he but induce the king to return beyond the Alps. Little doubt, that under the immense gray sky, which formed so fitting a cupola for his grief, his soul might find rest. Here, with the feverish pulses of

life beating madly round him, here, vegetating without purpose, without aim, he felt he would eventually go mad. He had inhaled the poison of the poppy-flower:—he was doomed.

Eckhardt did not attempt to court repose. Sleep was out of the question in his present wrought-up state of mind. Then wherefore seek his couch until he was calmer?

Calmer!

Could he ever be calm again, till his brain had ceased to work and his heart to beat? Should he ever know profound repose until he slept the sleep of death?

Yet what was to insure him rest even within the tomb? Might he not encounter her in the beyond,—a thing apart from him through all eternity? During the brief period while he had cherished the thought of disappearing from the world for ever, he had pondered over many problems, which neither monk nor philosophers had been able to solve.

Could we but know what would be our lot after death!

There was a time, when he had rebelled against the thought that our footsteps are filled up and obliterated, as we pass on, like in a quicksand.

There was a time, he could not bear to think, that yesterday was indeed banished and gone for ever,—that a to-morrow must come of black and endless night.

And now he craved for nothing more than annihilation, complete unrelenting annihilation. He knew not what he believed. He knew not what he doubted. He knew not what he denied.

He was on the verge of madness.

And the devil was busy in his heart, suggesting a solution he had hitherto shunned. The thought filled him with dread, tossing him to and fro on a tempestuous sea of doubt and yet pointing to no other refuge from black despair.

He strove to resist the dread suggestion, but it grew upon him with fearful force and soon bore down all opposition.

If all else failed—why not leap over the dark abyss?

A dreadful calm succeeded his agitation. It was vain to puzzle his brain with a solution of the problem which confronted him, a problem which mocked to scorn his efforts and his prayers.

He closed his eyes, vainly groping for an escape from the dreadful labyrinth of doubt, and sinking deeper and deeper into rumination. Nature at last asserted her rights, and he fell into fitful, uneasy slumbers, in which all the misery of his life seemed to sweep afresh through his heart and to uproot the remotest depths of his tortured soul.

When Eckhardt woke from his stupor, the gray dawn was breaking. As he started up, a face which had appeared against the window quickly vanished.

Was it but part of his dream or had he seen Benilo, the Chamberlain?

CHAPTER VII
ARA COELI



t was not till late that night, that Otto found himself alone. He had at last withdrawn from the maddening revelry. Silence was falling on the streets of Rome and the dimness of midnight upon the sky, through which blazing meteors had torn their brilliant furrows. After dismissing his attendants, the son of Theophano sat alone in the lonely chamber of his palace on the Aventine. A sense of death-like desolation had come over him. Never had the palace seemed so vast and so silent. And he—he, the lord of it all—he had no loving heart to turn to, no one, that understood him with a woman's intuition. The waves of destiny seemed to close over him and the circumstances of his past rose poignant and vivid before his fading sight.

But uppermost in his soul was the certainty that he could not further behold Stephania with impunity. When he recalled the meeting in the

Minotaurus and the subsequent events of the evening, he lost all peace of mind. What then would be the result of a new meeting? What would become of him, should he thereafter find himself unable to contain his passion in darkness and in silence? Would he exhibit to the world the ridiculous spectacle of an insane lover, or would he, by some unheedful action, bring down upon himself the disdainful pity of the woman, unable as he was to resist the vertigo of her fascination?

He gazed out into the moonlit night. The ancient monuments stood out mournful and deserted as a line of tombs. The city seemed a graveyard, and himself but a disembodied ghost of the dead past.

Gradually the hour laid its tranquillizing hush upon him. By degrees, with the dim light of the candles, he grew drowsy. His mental images became more and more indistinct, and he gradually drifted away into the land of dreams. After a time he was awakened by a light that shone upon his face. Starting up, Otto was for a moment overcome by a strange sensation of faintness, which vanished as he gazed into the face of Benilo, whom his anxiety had carried to the side of the King after having in vain searched for him among the late revellers on the Capitoline hill.

Otto smiled at the expression of anxiety in the Roman's face.

"'Twas naught, save that I was weary," he replied

to Benilo's concerned inquiry. "'Tis many a week since we revelled so late. But perchance you had best leave me now, that I may rest."

Benilo withdrew and Otto fell into a fitful slumber filled with hazy visions, in which the persons of Crescentius and Stephania were strangely mingled, melting rapidly from one into the other.

He slept later than usual on the following day. When the shadows of evening began to fall over the undulating expanse of the Roman Campagna, Otto left the palace on the Aventine by a postern gate. This hour he wished to be free from all affairs of state, from all intrusions and cares. This hour he wished fitly to prepare himself for the great work of his life. In the dreamy solitude he would question his own heart as to his future course with regard to Stephania.

The evening was serene and fair. The brick skeletons of arches, vaults and walls glowed fiery in the rays of the sinking sun. Among olives and acanthus was heard the bleating of sheep and the chirrup of the grasshopper.

Otto descended the tangled foot-path on the northern slope of the Aventine, not far from the gardens of Capranica, and soon reached the foot of the Capitoline hill, the ruins of the temple of Saturnus, the place where in the days of glory had stood the ancient Forum. From the arch of Septimius Severus as far as the Flavian Amphitheatre the Via

Sacra was flanked with wretched hovels. Their foundations were formed of fragments of statues, of the limbs and torsos of Olympian gods. For centuries the Forum had been a quarry. Christian churches languished on the ruins of pagan shrines. Still lofty columns soared upward through the desolation, carrying sculptured architraves, last traces of a vanished art. Here a feudal tower leaned against the arch of Titus; beside it a tavern befouled the fallen columns, the marble slabs, the half defaced inscription. Behind it rose the arch, white and pure, less shattered than the remaining monuments. The sunlight streaming through it from the direction of the Capitol lighted up the bas-relief of the Emperor's triumph, the malodorous curls of smoke from the tavern appearing like clouds of incense.

Otto's heart beat fast as, turning once more into the Forum, he heard the dreary jangling of bells from the old church of Santa Maria Liberatrice, sounding the Angelus. It seemed to him like a dirge over the fallen greatness of Rome. Half unconsciously he directed his steps toward the Coliseum. Seating himself on the broken steps of the Amphitheatre, he gazed up at the blue heavens, shining through the gaps in the Coliseum walls.

Sudden flushes of crimson flamed up in the western horizon. Slowly the sun was sinking to rest. A pale yellow moon had sailed up from behind the stupendous arches of Constantine's Basilica, severing

with her disk a bed of clouds, transparent and delicately tinted as sea-shells. The three columns in front of Santa Maria Liberatrice shone like phantoms in the waning light of evening. And the bell sounding the Christian Angelus seemed more than ever like a dirge over the forgotten Rome of the past.

Wrapt in deep reveries, Otto continued upon his way. He had lost all sense of life and reality. It was one of those moments when time and the world seem to stand still, drifting away on those delicate imperceptible lines that lie between reality and dream-land. And the solitary rambler gave himself up to the half painful, half delicious sense of being drawn in, absorbed and lost in infinite imaginings, when the intense stillness around him was broken by the peals of distant convent bells, ringing with silvery clearness through the evening calm.

Suddenly Otto paused, all his life-blood rushing to his heart.

At the lofty flight of stairs, by which the descent is made from Ara Coeli, stood Stephania.

She had come out of the venerable church, filled with the devout impressions of the mass just recited. The chant still rang in her ears as she passed down the long line of uneven pillars, which we see to-day, and across the sculptured tombs set in the pavement which the reverential tread of millions has worn to smooth indistinctness. Now the last rays of the sun flooded all about her, mellowing the tints of verdure

and drooping foliage, and softening the outlines of the Alban hills.

As she looked down she saw the German king and met his upturned gaze. For a moment she seemed to hesitate. The sunlight fell on her pale face and touched with fire the dark splendour of her hair. Slowly she descended the long flight of stairs.

They faced each other in silence and Otto had leisure to steal a closer look at her. He was struck by the touch of awe which had suddenly come upon her beauty. Perhaps the evening light spiritualized her pure and lofty countenance, for as Otto looked upon her it seemed to him that she was transformed into a being beyond earthly contact and his heart sank with a sense of her remoteness.

Timidly he lifted her hand and pressed his lips upon it.

Silence intervened, a silence freighted with the weight of suspended destinies. There was indeed more to be felt between them, than to be said. But what mattered it, so the hour was theirs? The narrow kingdom of to-day is better worth ruling than the widest sweep of past and future, but not more than once does man hold its fugitive sceptre. Otto felt the nearness of that penetrating sympathy, which is almost a gift of divination. The mere thought of her had seemed to fill the air with her presence.

Steadily, searchingly, she gazed at the thoughtful and earnest countenance of Otto, then she

spoke with a touch of domineering haughtiness:

"Why are you here?"

He met her gaze eye in eye.

"I was planning for the future of Rome,—and dreaming of the past."

She bent her proud head, partly in acknowledgment of his words, partly to conceal her own confusion.

"The past is buried," she replied coldly, "and the future dark and uncertain."

"And why may it not be mine,—to revive that past?"

"No sunrise can revive that which has died in the sunset glow."

"Then you too despair of Rome ever being more than a memory of her dead self?"

She looked at him amusedly.

"I am living in the world—not in a dream."

Otto pointed to the Capitoline hill.

"Yet see how beautiful it is, this Rome of the past!" he spoke with repressed enthusiasm. "Is it not worth braving the dangers of the avalanches that threaten to crush rider and horse—even the wrath of your countrymen, who see in us but unbidden, unwelcome invaders? Ah! Little do they know the magic which draws us hither to their sunny shores from the gloom of our Northern forests! Little they know the transformation this land of flowers works on the frozen heart, that yearns for your glowing,

sun-tinted vales!"

"Why did you come to Rome?" she questioned curtly. "To remind us of these trifles,—and incidentally to dispossess us of our time-honoured rights and power?"

Otto shook his head.

"I came not to Rome to deprive the Romans of their own,—rather to restore to them what they have almost forgotten—their glorious past."

"It is useless to remind those who do not wish to be reminded," she replied. "The avalanche of centuries has long buried memory and ambition in those you are pleased to call Romans. Desist, I beg of you, to pursue a phantom which will for ever elude you, and return beyond the Alps to your native land!"

"And Stephania prefers this request?" Otto faltered, turning pale.

"Stephania—the consort of the Senator of Rome."

There was a pause.

Through the overhanging branches glimmered the pale disk of the moon. A soft breeze stirred the leaves of the trees. There was a hushed breathlessness in the air. Fantastic, dream-like, light and shadows played on the majestic tide of the Tiber, and all over the high summits of the hills mysterious shapes, formed of purple and gray mists, rose up and crept softly downward, winding in and out the valleys, like wandering spirits, sent on some hidden,

sorrowful errand.

Gazing up wistfully, Stephania saw the look of pain in Otto's face.

"I ask what I have," she said softly, "because I know the temper of my countrymen."

"What would you make of me?" he replied. "On this alone my heart is set. Take it from me,—I would drift an aimless barque on the tide of time."

She shook her head but avoided his gaze.

"You aim to accomplish the impossible. Crows do not feed on the living, and the dead do not rise again. Ah! How, if your miracle does not succeed?"

Otto drew himself up to his full height.

"Gloria Victis,—but before my doom, I shall prove worthy of myself."

Suddenly a strange thought came over him.

"Stephania," he faltered, "what do you want with me?"

"I want you to be frankly my foe," exclaimed the beautiful wife of Crescentius. "You must not pass by like this, without telling me that you are. You speak of a past. Sometimes I think it were better, if there had been no past. Better burn a corpse than leave it unburied. All the friends of my dreams are here,—their shades surround us,—in their company one grows afraid as among the shroudless dead. It is impossible. You cannot mean the annihilation of the past, you cannot mean to be against Rome—against me!"

Otto faced her, pale and silent, vainly striving to speak. He dared not trust himself. As he stepped back, she clutched his arm.

"Tell me that you are my enemy," she said, with heart-broken challenge in her voice.

"Stephania!"

"Tell me that you hate me."

"Stephania—why do you ask it?"

"To justify my own ends," she replied. Then she covered her face with her hands.

"Tell me all," she sobbed. "I must know all. Do you not feel how near we are? Are you indeed afraid to speak?"

She gazed at him with moist, glorious eyes.

Striding up and down before the woman, Otto vainly groped for words.

"Otto," she approached him gently, "do you believe in me?"

"Can you ask?"

"Wholly?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought,—feared,—that you suffered from the same malady as we Romans."

"What malady?"

"Distrust."

There was a pause.

"The temple is beautiful in the moonlight," Stephania said at last. "They tell me you like relics of the olden time. Shall we go there?"

Otto's heart beat heavily as by her side he strode down the narrow path. They approached a little ruined temple, which ivy had invaded and overrun. Fragments lay about in the deep grass. A single column only remained standing and its lonely capital, clear cut as the petals of a lily, was outlined in clear silhouette against the limpid azure.

At last he spoke—with a voice low and unsteady.

"Be not too hard on me, Stephania, for my love of the world that lies dead around us. I scarcely can explain it to you. The old simple things stir strange chords within me. I love the evening more than the morning, autumn better than spring. I love all that is fleeting, even the perfume of flowers that have faded, the pleasant melancholy, the golden fairy-twilight. Remembrance has more power over my soul than hope."

"Tell me more," Stephania whispered, her head leaning back against the column and a smile playing round her lips. "Tell me more. These are indeed strange sounds to my ear. I scarcely know if I understand them."

He gazed upon her with burning eyes.

"No—no! Why more empty dreams, that can never be?"

She pointed in silence to the entrance of the temple.

Otto held out both hands, to assist her in

descending the sloping rock. She appeared nervous and uncertain of foot. Hurriedly and agitated, anxious to gain the entrance she slipped and nearly fell. In the next moment she was caught up in his arms and clasped passionately to his heart.

"Stephania—Stephania," he whispered, "I love you—I love you! Away with every restraint! Let them slay me, if they will, by every death my falsehood deserves,—but let it be here,—here at your feet."

Stephania trembled like an aspen in his strong embrace, and strove to release herself, but he pressed her more closely to him, scarcely knowing that he did so, but feeling that he held the world, life, happiness and salvation in this beautiful Roman. His brain was in a whirl; everything seemed blotted out, —there was no universe, no existence, no ambition, nothing but love,—love,—love,—beating through every fibre of his frame.

The woman was very pale.

Timidly she lifted her head. He gazed at her in speechless suspense; he saw as in a vision the pure radiance of her face, the star-like eyes shining more and more closely into his. Then came a touch, soft and sweet as a rose-leaf pressed against his lips and for one moment he remembered nothing. Like Paris of old, he was caught up in a cloud of blinding gold, not knowing which was earth, which heaven.

For a moment nothing was to be heard, save the hard breathing of these two, then Otto held

Stephania off at an arm's length, gazing at her, his soul in his eyes.

"You are more beautiful than the angels," he whispered.

"The fallen angels," was her smiling reply.

Then with a quick, spontaneous movement she flung her bare arms round his neck and drew him toward her.

"And if I did come toward you to prophesy glory and the fulfilment of your dreams?" she murmured, even as a sibyl. "You alone are alive among the dead! What matters it to me that your love is hopeless, that our wings are seared? My love is all for the rejected! I love the proud and solitary eagle better than the stained vulture."

He felt the fire of the strange insatiate kiss of her lips and reeled. It seemed as if the Goddess of Love in the translucence of the moon, had descended, embracing him, mocking to scorn the anguish that consumed his heart, but to vanish again in the lunar shadows.

"Stephania—" he murmured reeling, drunk with the sweetness of her lips.

Never perhaps had the beautiful Roman bestowed on mortal man such a glance, as now beamed from her eyes upon the youth. The perfume of her hair intoxicated his senses. Her breath was on his cheek, her sweet lips scarce a hand's breath from his own.

Had Lucifer, the prince of darkness, himself appeared at this moment, or Crescentius started up like a ghost from the gaping stone floor, Stephania could scarcely have changed as suddenly as she did, to the cold impassive rigidity of marble. Following the direction of her stony gaze, Otto beheld emerging as it were from the very rocks above him a dark face and mailed figure, which he recognized as Eckhardt's. Whether or not the Margrave was conscious of having thus unwittingly interrupted an interview,—if he had seen, his own instincts at once revealed to him the danger of his position. Eckhardt's countenance wore an expression of utter unconcern, as he passed on and vanished in the darkness.

For a moment Otto and Stephania gazed after his retreating form.

"He has seen nothing," Otto reassured her.

"To-morrow," she replied, "we meet here again at the hour of the Angelas. And then," she added changing her tone to one of deepest tenderness, "I will test your love,—your constancy,—your loyalty."

They faced each other in a dead silence.

"Do not go," he faltered, extending his hands.

She slowly placed her own in them. It was a moment upon which hung the fate of two lives. Otto felt her weakness in her look, in the touch of her hands, which shivered, as they lay in his, as captive birds. And the long smothered cry leaped forth from his heart: What was crown, life, glory—without love!

Why not throw it all away for a caress of that hand? What mattered all else?

But the woman became strong as he grew weak.

"Go!" she said faintly. "Farewell,—till to-morrow."

He dropped her hands, his eyes in hers.

Giving one glance backward, where Eckhardt had disappeared, Stephania first began to move with hesitating steps, then seized by an irresistible panic, she gathered up her trailing robe and ran precipitately up the steep path, her fleeting form soon disappearing in the moonlight.

Otto remained another moment, then he too stepped out into the clear moonlit night. In silent rumination he continued his way toward the Aventine.

Past and future seemed alike to have vanished for him. Time seemed to have come to a stand-still.

Suddenly he imagined that a shadow stealthily crossed his path. He paused, turned—but there was no one.

Calmly the stars looked down upon him from the azure vault of heaven.

And like a spider in his web, Johannes Crescentius sat in Castel San Angelo.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GOTHIC TOWER

 eep quiet reigned in the city, when a man, enveloped in a mantle, whose dimly shadowed form was outlined against the massive, gray walls of Constantine's Basilica glided slowly and cautiously from among the blocks of stone scattered round its foundations and advanced to the fountain which then formed the centre of the square, where the Obelisk now stands. There he stopped and, concealed by the obscurity of the night and the deeper shadows of the monument, glanced furtively about, as if to be sure that he was unobserved. Then drawing his sword, he struck three times upon the pavement, producing at each stroke light sparks from its point. This signal, for such it was, was forthwith answered. From the remote depths of the ruins the cry of the screech-owl was thrice in succession repeated, and, guided by the ringing sound, a second figure emerged from the weeds, which were in some places the height of a man. Obeying the signal of the first comer, the second, who was likewise enveloped in a mantle, silently joined him and together they proceeded half-way down the Borgo Vecchio, then turned to the right and entered a street, at the remote extremity of which there was a figure of the

Madonna with its lamp.

Onward they walked with rapid steps, traversed the Borgo Santo Spirito and followed the street Della Lingara to where it opens upon the church Regina Coeli. After having pursued their way for some time in silence they entered a narrow winding path, which conducted them through a deserted valley, the silence of which was only broken by the occasional hoot of an owl or the fitful flight of a bat. In the distance could be heard the splashing of water from the basin of a fountain, half obscured by vines and creepers, from which a thin, translucent stream was pouring and bubbling down the Pincian hillsides in the direction of Santa Trinita di Monte.

They lost themselves in a maze of narrow and little frequented lanes, until at last they found themselves before a gray, castellated building, half cloister, half fortress, rising out of the solitudes of the Flaminian way, before which they stopped. Over the massive door were painted several skeletons in the crude fashion of the time, standing upright with mitres, sceptres and crowns upon their heads, holding falling scrolls, with faded inscriptions in their bony grasp.

The one, who appeared to be the moving spirit of the two, knocked in a peculiar manner at the heavy oaken door. After a wait of some duration they heard the creaking of hinges. Slowly the door swung inward and closed immediately behind them. They

entered a gloomy passage. A number of owls, roused by the dim light from the lantern of the warden, began to fly screeching about, flapping their wings against the walls and uttering strange cries. After ascending three flights of stairs, preceded by the warden, whose appearance was as little inviting as his abode, they paused before a chamber, the door of which their guide had pushed open, remaining himself on the threshold, while his two visitors entered.

"How is the girl?" questioned the foremost in a whisper, to which the warden made whispered reply.

Beckoning his companion to follow him, the stranger then passed into the room, which was dimly illumined by the flickering light of a taper. Throwing off his mantle, Eckhardt surveyed with a degree of curiosity the apartment and its scanty furnishings. Nothing could be more dreary than the aspect of the place. The richly moulded ceiling was festooned with spiders' webs and in some places had fallen in heaps upon the floor. The glories of Byzantine tapestry had long been obliterated by age and time. The squares of black and white marble with which the chamber was paved were loosened and quaked beneath the foot-steps and the wide and empty fireplace yawned like the mouth of a cavern.

Straining his gaze after the harper who was bending over a couch in a remote corner of the room, Eckhardt was about to join him when Hezilo

approached him.

"Would you like to see?" he asked, his eyes full of tears.

Eckhardt bowed gravely, and with gentle footsteps they approached a bed in the corner of the room, on which there reposed the figure of a girl, lying so still and motionless that she might have been an image of wax. Her luxurious brown hair was spread over the pillow and out of this frame the pinched white face with all its traces of past beauty looked out in pitiful silence. One thin hand was turned palm downward on the coverlet, and as they approached the fingers began to work convulsively.

Hezilo bent over her, and touched her brow with his lips.

"Little one," he said, "do you sleep?"

The girl opened her sightless eyes, and a faint smile, that illumined her face, making it wondrously beautiful, passed over her countenance.

"Not yet," she spoke so low that Eckhardt could scarcely catch the words, "but I shall sleep soon."

He knew what she meant, for in her face was already that look which comes to those who are going away. Hezilo looked down upon her in silence, but even as he did so a change for the worse seemed to come to the sick girl, and they became aware that the end had begun. He tried to force some wine between her lips, but she could not swallow, and now, instead of lying still, she continued tossing her

head from side to side. Hezilo was undone. He could do nothing but stand at the head of the bed in mute despair, as he watched the parting soul of his child sob its way out.

"Angiola—Angiola—do not leave me—do not go from me!" the harper cried in heart-rending anguish, kneeling down before the bed of the girl and taking her cold, clammy hands into his own. Impelled by a power he could not resist, Eckhardt knelt and tried to form some words to reach the Most High. But they would not come; he could only feel them, and he rose again and took his stand by the dying girl.

She now began to talk in a rambling manner and with that strength which comes at the point of death from somewhere; her voice was clear but with a metallic ring. What Eckhardt gathered from her broken words, was a story of trusting love, of infamous wrong, of dastardly crime. And the harper shook like a branch in the wind as the words came thick and fast from the lips of his dying child. After a while she became still—so still, that they both thought she had passed away. But she revived on a sudden and called out:

"Father,—I cannot see,—I am blind,—stoop down and let me whisper—"

"I am here little one, close—quite close to you!"

"Tell him,—I forgive— And you forgive him too —promise!"

The harper pressed his lips to the damp forehead

of his child but spoke no word.

"It is bright again—they are calling me—Mother! Hold me up—I cannot breathe."

Hezilo sank on his knees with his head between his hands, shaken by convulsive sobs, while Eckhardt wound his arm round the dying girl, and as he lifted her up the spirit passed. In the room there was deep silence, broken only by the harper's heart-rending sobs. He staggered to his feet with despair in his face.

"She said forgive!" he exclaimed with broken voice. "Man—you have seen an angel die!"

"Who is the author of her death?" Eckhardt questioned, his hands so tightly clenched, that he almost drove the nails into his own flesh.

If ever words changed the countenance of man, the Margrave's question transformed the harper's grief into flaming wrath.

"A devil, a fiend, who first outraged, then cast her forth blinded, to die like a reptile," he shrieked in his mastering grief. "Surely God must have slept, while this was done!"

There was a breathless hush in the death-chamber.

Hezilo was bending over the still face of his child. The dead girl lay with her hands crossed over her bosom, still as if cut out of marble and on her face was fixed a sad little smile.

At last the harper arose.

Staggering to the door he gave some whispered instructions to the individual who seemed to fill the office of warden, then beckoned silently to Eckhardt to follow him and together they descended the narrow winding stairs.

"I will return late—have everything prepared," the harper at parting turned to the warden, who had preceded them with his lantern. The latter nodded gloomily, then he retraced his steps within, locking the door behind him.

Under the nocturnal starlit sky, Eckhardt breathed more freely. For a time they proceeded in silence, which the Margrave was loth to break. He had long recognized in the harper the mysterious messenger who in that never-to-be-forgotten night had conducted him to the groves of Theodora, and who he instinctively felt had been instrumental in saving his life. Something told him that the harper possessed the key to the terrible mystery he had in vain endeavoured to fathom, yet his thoughts reverted ever and ever to the scene in the tower and to the dead girl Angiola, and he dreaded to break into the harper's grief.

They had arrived at the place of the Capitol. It was deserted. Not a human being was to be seen among the ruins, which the seven-hilled city still cloaked with her ancient mantle of glory. Dark and foreboding the colossal monument of the Egyptian lion rose out of the nocturnal gloom. The air was

clear but chill, the starlight investing the gray and towering form of basalt with a more ghostly whiteness. At the sight of the dread memory from the mystic banks of the Nile, Eckhardt could not suppress a shudder; a strange oppression laid its benumbing hand upon him.

Involuntarily he paused, plunged in gloomy and foreboding thoughts, when the touch of the harper's hand upon his shoulder caused him to start from his sombre reverie.

Drawing the Margrave into the shadow of the pedestal, which supported the grim relic of antiquity, Hezilo at last broke the silence. He spoke slowly and with strained accents.

"The scene you were permitted to witness this night has no doubt convinced you that I have a mission to perform in Rome. Our goal is the same, though we approach it from divergent points. They say man's fate is pre-ordained, irrevocable, unchangeable—from the moment of his birth. A gloomy fantasy, yet not a baseless dream. By a strange succession of events the thread of our destiny has been interwoven, and the knowledge which you would acquire at any cost, it is in my power to bestow."

"Of this I felt convinced, since some strange chance brought us face to face," Eckhardt replied gloomily.

"'Twas something more than chance," replied the

harper. "You too felt the compelling hand of Fate."

"What of the awful likeness?" Eckhardt burst forth, hardly able to restrain himself at the maddening thought, and feeling instinctively that he should at last penetrate the web of lies, though ever so finely spun.

The harper laid a warning finger on his lips.

"You deemed her but Ginevra's counterfeit?"

"Ginevra! Ginevra!" Eckhardt, disregarding the harper's caution, exclaimed in his mastering agony. "What know you of her? Speak! Tell me all! What of her?"

"Silence!" enjoined his companion. "How know we what these ruins conceal? I guided you to the Groves at the woman's behest. What interest could she have in your destruction?"

Eckhardt was supporting himself against the pedestal of the Egyptian lion, listening as one dazed to the harper's words. Then he broke into a jarring laugh.

"Which of us is mad?" he cried. "Wherein did I offend the woman? She plied but the arts of her trade."

"You are speaking of Ginevra," replied the harper.

"Ginevra," growled Eckhardt, his hair bristling and his eyes flaming as those of an infuriated tiger while his fingers gripped the hilt of his dagger.

"You are speaking of Ginevra!" the harper

repeated inexorably.

With a moan Eckhardt's hands went to his head. His breast heaved; his breath came and went in quick gasps.

"I do not understand,—I do not understand."

"You made no attempt to revisit the Groves," said the harper.

Eckhardt stroked his brow as if vainly endeavouring to recall the past.

"I feared to succumb to her spell."

"To that end you had been summoned."

"I have since been warned. Yet it seemed too monstrous to be true."

"Warned? By whom?"

"Cyprianus, the monk!"

The harper's face turned livid.

"No blacker wretch e'er strode the streets of Rome. And he confessed?"

"A death-bed confession, that makes the devils laugh," Eckhardt replied, then he briefly related the circumstances which had led him into the deserted region of the Tarpeian Rock and his chance discovery of the monk, whose strange tale had been cut short by death.

"He has walked long in death's shadow," said the harper. "Fate was too kind, too merciful to the slayer of Gregory."

There was a brief pause, during which neither spoke. At last the harper broke the silence.

"The hour of final reckoning is near,—nearer than you dream, the hour when a fiend, a traitor must pay the penalty of his crimes, the hour which shall for ever more remove the shadow from your life. The task required of you is great; you may not approach it as long as a breath of doubt remains in your heart. Only certainty can shape your unrelenting course. Had Ginevra a birth-mark?"

Eckhardt breathed hard.

"The imprint of a raven-claw on her left arm below the shoulder."

Hezilo nodded. A strange look had passed into his eyes.

"There is a means—to obtain the proof."

"I am ready!" replied Eckhardt with quivering lips.

"If you will swear on the hilt of this cross, to be guarded by my counsel, to let nothing induce you to reveal your identity, I will help you," said the harper.

Eckhardt touched the proffered cross, nodding wearily. His heart was heavy to breaking, as the harper slowly outlined his plan.

"The woman has been seized by a mortal dread of her betrayer,—the man who wrecked her life and yours. No questions now,—this is neither the hour or the place! In time you shall know, in time you shall be free to act! Acting upon my counsel, she has bid me summon to her presence a sooth-sayer, one Dom Sabbat, who dwells in the gorge between Mounts

Testaccio and Aventine. To him I am to carry these horoscopes and conduct him to the Groves on the third night before the full of the moon."

The harper's voice sank to a whisper, while Eckhardt listened attentively, nodding repeatedly in gloomy silence.

"On that night I shall await you in the shadows of the temple of Isis. There a boat will lie in waiting to convey us to the water stairs of her palace."

The harper extended his hand, wrapping himself closer in his mantel.

"The third night before the full of the moon!" he said. "Leave me now, I implore you, that I may care for my dead. Remember the time, the place, and your pledge!"

Eckhardt grasped the proffered hand and they parted.

The harper strode away in the direction of the gorge below Mount Aventine, while Eckhardt, oppressed by strange forebodings, shaped his course towards his own habitation on the Caelian Mount.

Neither had seen two figures in black robes, that lingered in the shadows of the Lion of Basalt.

No sooner had Eckhardt and Hezilo departed, than they slowly emerged, standing revealed in the star-light as Benilo and John of the Catacombs. For a moment they faced each other with meaning gestures, then they too strode off in the opposite directions, Benilo following the harper on his

singular errand, while the bravo fastened himself to the heels of the Margrave, whom he accompanied like his own shadow, only relinquishing his pursuit when Eckhardt entered the gloomy portals of his palace.

CHAPTER IX
THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER

 hile these events transpired in Rome, a feverish activity prevailed in Castel San Angelo. In day time the huge mausoleum presented the same sullen and forbidding aspect as ever but without revealing a trace of the preparations, which were being pushed to a close within. Under cover of night the breaches had been repaired; huge balistae and catapults had been placed in position on the ramparts, and the fortress had been rendered almost impregnable to assault, as in the time of Vitiges, the Goth.

Events were swiftly approaching the fatal crisis. While Otto languished in the toils of Stephania, whose society became more and more indispensable to him, while with pernicious flattery Benilo closed the ear of the king to the cries of his German subjects and estranged him more and more from his leaders, his country, and his hosts, while Eckhardt vainly strove to arouse Otto to the perils lurking in his utter

abandonment to Roman councillors and Roman polity, the Senator of Rome had introduced into Hadrian's tomb a sufficiently strong body of men, not only to withstand a siege, but to vanquish any force, however superior to his own, to frustrate any assault, however ably directed. While the German contingents remained on Roman soil he dared not engage his enemy in a last death-grapple for the supremacy over the Seven Hills, which Otto's war-worn veterans from the banks of the Elbe and Vistula had twice wrested from him. The final draw in the great game was at hand. On this day the envoys of the Electors would arrive in Rome to demand Otto's immediate return to his German crown-lands, whose eastern borders were sorely menaced by the ever recurring inroads of Poles and Magyars. In the event of Otto's refusing compliance with the Electoral mandate, Count Ludeger of the Palatinate was to relieve Eckhardt of his command and to lead the German contingents back across the Alps.

But it was no part of the Senator's policy to permit Otto to return. For while there remained breath in the youth, Rome remained the Fata Morgana of his dreams, and Crescentius remained the vassal of Theophano's son. He could never hope to come into his own as long as the life of that boy-king overshadowed his own. Therefore every pressure must be brought to bear upon the headstrong youth, to defy the Electoral mandate, to

rebuff, to offend the Electoral envoys. Then, the great German host recalled, Eckhardt relieved of his command, Otto isolated In a hostile camp, Stephania should cry the watchword for his doom. The inconsiderable guard remaining would be easily vanquished and the son of Theophano, utterly abandoned and deserted, should fall an easy prey to the Senator's schemes, a welcome hostage in the dungeons of Castel San Angelo, for him to deal with according to the dictates of the hour. The task to urge Otto to this fatal step had been assigned to Benilo, but Crescentius was prepared for all emergencies arising from any unforeseen turn of affairs. He had gone too far to recede. If now he quailed before the impending issue, the mighty avalanche he had started would hurl him to swift and certain doom.

Since that fateful hour, when in a moment of unaccountable weakness Crescentius had listened to Benilo's serpent-wisdom, and had arrayed his own wife against the German King, the Senator of Rome had seen but little of Stephania. The preparations for the impending revolt of the Romans, in whose fickle minds his emissaries found a fertile soil for the seed of treason and discontent, engaged him night and day. He seemed present at once on the ramparts, in the galleries and in the vaults of his formidable keep. But when chance for a fleeting moment brought the Senator face to face with his consort, the meaning-

fraught smile on the lips of Stephania seemed to assure him that everything was going well. Otto was lost to the world. Heaven and earth seemed alike blotted out for him in her presence. Together they continued to stroll among the ruins, while Stephania poured strange tales into the youth's ear, tales which crept to his brain, like the songs of the Sirens that lure the mariner among the crimson flowers of their abode. And Eckhardt despised the Romans too heartily to fear them, and even therein he revealed the heel of Achilles.

If the present day was gained, the Senator's diplomacy would carry victory from the field, and Benilo had well plied his subtle arts. Yet Crescentius was resolved to attend in person the audience of the envoys. He would with his own ears hear the King's reply to the Electors. If Benilo had played him false? He hardly knew why a lingering suspicion of the Chamberlain crept into his mind at all. But he shook himself free of the thought, which had for a moment clouded the future with its sombre shadow.

As the Senator of Rome hurriedly traversed the galleries of the vast mausoleum, he suddenly found himself face to face with Stephania.

Her face was pale and her eyes revealed traces of tears.

At the first words she uttered, Crescentius paused, surprise and gladness in his eyes.

"We are well met, my lord," she said, after a

brief greeting, an unwonted tremor vibrating in her tones. "I have sought you in vain all the morning. Release me from the task you have imposed upon me! I cannot go on! I am not further equal to it. It is a game unworthy of you or me!"

The surprise at her words for a moment choked the Senator's utterance and almost struck him dumb.

"Imposed upon?" he replied. "I thought you had accepted the mission freely. Is the boy rebellious?"

"On the contrary! Were he so, perhaps I should not now prefer this request. He is but too pliant."

"He has made your task an easy one," Crescentius nodded meaningly.

"He has laid his whole soul bare to me; not a thought therein, ever so remote, which I have not sounded. I can not stand before him. My brow is crimsoned with the flush of shame. He gave me truth for a lie,—friendship for deceit. He deserves a better fate than the Senator of Rome has decreed for him."

Crescentius breathed hard.

"The weakness does you honour," he replied after a pause. "Perchance I should have spared you the task. I placed him in your hands, because I dared trust no one else. And now it is too late—too late!"

"It is not too late," replied Stephania.

Crescentius pointed silently to the ramparts, where a score of men were placing a huge catapult in position.

"It is not too late!" she repeated, her cheeks

alternately flushing and paling. "To-day, my lord informed me, the King stands at the Rubicon. To-day he must choose, If it is to be Rome, if Aix-la-Chapelle. If he elects to return to the gray gloom of his northern skies, to the sombre twilight of his northern forests, let him go, my lord,—let him go! Much misery will be thereby averted,—much heart-rending despair!"

Crescentius had listened in silence to Stephania's pleading. There was a brief pause, during which only his heavy breathing was heard.

"His choice is made," he replied at last in a firm tone.

"I do not understand you, my lord!"

The Senator regarded his wife with singularly fixed intentness.

"The toils of the Siren Rome are too firm to be snapped asunder like a spider's web."

She covered her face with her hands. Her breath came and went with quick, convulsive gasps.

"It is shameful—shameful—" she sobbed. "Had I never lent myself to the unworthy task! How could you conceive it, my lord, how could you? But it was not your counsel! May his right hand wither, who whispered the thought into your ear!"

Crescentius winced. He felt ill at ease.

"Is it so hard to play the confessor to yonder wingless cherub?" he said with a forced smile.

Stephania straightened herself to her full height.

"When I undertook the shameless task, I believed the son of Theophano a tyrant, an oppressor, his hands stained with the best of Roman blood! Such your lying Roman chroniclers had painted him. I gloried in the thought, to humble a barbarian, whose vain-glorious, boastful insolence meditated new outrages upon us Romans. Yet his is a purer, a loftier spirit, than is to be found in all this Rome of yours! Were it not nobler to acknowledge him your liege, than to destroy him by woman's wiles and smiles?"

"I cannot answer you on these points," Crescentius spoke after a pause, during which the olive tints of his countenance had faded to ashen hues. "I regard those dreams, whose mock-halo has blinded you, in a different light. It is the wise man who rules the state,—it is the dreamer who dashes it to atoms. We have gone too far! I could not release you,—even if I would!"

Stephania breathed hard. Her hands were tightly clasped.

"It can bring glory to neither you, nor Rome," she said in a pleading voice. "Let him depart in peace, my lord, and I will thank you to my dying hour!"

"How know you he wishes to depart?"

"How know you he wishes to remain?"

"His destiny is Rome. Here he will live—and here he will die!" the Senator spoke with slow emphasis. "But we have not yet agreed upon the

signal," he continued with cold and merciless voice. "After the departure of the envoys you will lead the King into his favourite haunts, the labyrinth of the Minotaurus, to the little temple of Neptune. There I will in person await him. When you see the gleam of spearpoints in the thickets, you will wave your kerchief with the cry: 'For Rome and Crescentius.' No harm shall befall the youth,—unless he resist. He shall have honourable conduct to the guest chamber, prepared for him,—below."

And Crescentius pointed downward with the thumb of his right hand.

Stephania's bosom rose and fell in quick respiration.

"I am not accustomed to prefer a request and be denied," she said proudly, her face the pallor of death. "Is this your last word, my lord?"

Crescentius met her gaze unflinchingly.

"It is my last," he replied. "Yet one choice remains with you: You may betray the King,—or the Senator of Rome!"

He turned to go, but something whispered to him to stay. At that moment he despised himself for having imposed upon his wife a task, against which Stephania's loftier nature had rebelled and he inwardly cursed the hour which had ripened the seed and him, who had sown it. Gazing after Stephania's retreating form, all the love he bore her surged up into his heart as he cried her name.

Arrested by his voice, Stephania turned and paused for a moment swift as thought, but in that moment she seemed to read the very depths of his soul and the utter futility of further entreaty. Without a word she ascended the spiral stairway leading to the upper galleries and re-entered her own apartments, while with long and wistful gaze Crescentius followed the vanishing form of his wife.

And it seemed as if the Senator's prophecy was to be fulfilled. At the reading of the Electoral manifesto, Otto had been seized with an uncontrollable fit of rage. He had torn the document to shreds and cast its fragments at the feet of the Bavarian duke, who acted as spokesman for his colleagues, the dukes of Thuringia, Saxony and Westphalia. Neither the arguments of the Electoral envoys, nor the violent denunciations of Eckhardt, who aired his hatred of Rome in language never before heard in the presence of a sovereign, could stand before Benilo's eloquent pleading. On his knees the Chamberlain implored the King not to abandon Rome and his beloved Romans. Vainly the German dukes pointed to the dangers besetting the realm, vainly to the inadequate defences of the Eastern March. With a majesty far above his years, Otto declared his supreme will to make Rome the capital of the earth, and to restore the pristine majesty of the Holy Roman Empire. Rome was his destiny. Here he would live, and here

he would die. Rome was pacified. He required no longer the presence of the army. Let Bavaria and Saxony defend their own boundaries as best they might; let the Count Palatine lead his veteran hosts across the Alps. He would remain. This his reply to the Electors.

On the eve of that eventful day the German dukes departed, while the Count Palatine proceeded to Tivoli, to prepare the great armament for their winter march across the Alps. It had come to pass as Crescentius had predicted. The die was cast. Rome, the Siren, had conquered.

In the night following these events, Rome in her various quarters presented a strange aspect of secret activity.

In the fortresses of the Cavalli and Caetani lights flitted to and fro through the gratings in the main court. Benilo, the Chamberlain, might be seen stealing from the postern gate. Towards the ruins of the Coliseum men whose dress bespoke them of the lowest rank, were seen creeping from lanes and alleys. From these ruins at a later hour, glided again the form of the Grand Chamberlain. Later yet,—when a gray light is breaking in the east, the gates of Rome, by St. John Lateran, are open. Benilo is conversing with the Roman guard. The mountains are dim with a mournful and chilling haze when Benilo enters the palace on the Aventine.

CHAPTER X

THE TEMPLE OF NEPTUNE

 haken to the inmost depths of his soul by a storm of forebodings, hope, fear and passion, Otto had shaken himself free from the throng of flattering friends and courtiers and had sought the solitude of his own chamber. He had dismissed the envoys of the Electors with the unalterable reply that he would not return to his gloomy Saxon-land. Let the Saxon dukes defend the borders of the realm, let them keep Poles and Slavs in check. His own destiny was Rome. Here he would live, and here he would die. Deeply offended, the German envoys had departed. The consequences might be far-reaching indeed. Tearing off his accoutrements and all insignia of office and rank, Otto flung himself on his couch in solitary seclusion. All had been against him, —save Benilo. Benilo alone understood him. Benilo alone encouraged the young king to follow out his destiny. Benilo alone had pointed out that the earth might be governed from the ancient seat of empire without detriment to any of the nations of the Holy Roman Empire. Benilo alone had demonstrated the

necessity of Otto's presence in his chosen capital, whose heterogeneous elements would obey no lesser authority.

Weary and torn by conflicting emotions he at last sank down before the image of Mary and prayed to the Mother of God to guide his steps in the dark wilderness in which he found himself entangled. Thus transported out of himself far beyond the vociferous pageant of that exhausting day, Otto gave himself with all the mystical fervour of his Hellenic nature to visions of the future.

Thus the evening approached. Long before the hour appointed he slowly bent his steps towards the little temple of Neptune, crowning the olive-clad summits of Mount Aventine and overlooking the vale of Egeria and the meandering course of the Tiber. The clouds above, beautiful with changing sunset tints, mottled the broken surface of the river with hues of bronze and purple between the leaves of the creeping water-plants, which clogged the movement of the stream. On the river-bank the rushes were starred with iris and ranunculus.

The sun was declining in the horizon. A solemn stillness, like the presage of some divine event, held the pulses of the universe. A soft rose crept into the shimmer of the water, cresting the summits of far off Soracté. The transient, many-tinted glories of the autumn sunset were reflected in opalescent lights on the waves of the Tiber, and swept the landscape in

one dazzling glow of gold and amber, strangely blending with the gold and russet of the autumn foliage. The floating smell of flowers invisible hovered on the air; a mystic yearning seemed to pervade all nature in that chill, melancholy odour, that puts men in mind of death. The soft masses of leaves decayed caused a brushing sound under the feet of the lonely rambler.

Round him in the silent woods burnt the magnificent obsequies of departing summer.

Fire-flies moved through the embalmed air, like the torches of unseen angels. The late roses exhaled their mystic odour, and silently like dead butterflies, here and there a wan leaf dropped from the branches.

At every step the wood became more lonely. It was as untroubled by any sound as an abandoned cemetery. Birds there were few, the shade of the laurel-grove being too dense and no song of theirs was heard. A grasshopper began his shrill cry, but quickly ceased, as if startled by its own voice. Insects alone were humming faintly in a last slender ray of sunlight, but ventured not to quit its beam for the neighbouring gloom. Sometimes Otto trended his path along wider alleys bordered by titanic walls of weird cypress, casting dark shade as a moonless night. Here and there subterranean waters made the moss spongy. Streams ran everywhere, chill as melted snow, but silently, with no tinkling ripples, as

if muted by the melancholy of the enchanted wood. Moss stifled the sound of the falling drops and they sank away like the tears of an unspoken love.

For a moment; Otto lingered among a tangle of elder-bushes. The oblique sun rays filtering through the dense laurel became almost lunar, as if seen through the smoke of a funeral torch.

Along the edge of the road goats were contentedly browsing and a rugged sun-burnt little lad with large black eyes was driving a flock of geese. Storm clouds lined with gold were rising in the North over the unseen Alps, and high up in the clear sky there burned a single star.

Deep in thought, Otto passed the walls of the cloisters of St. Cosmas.

Onward he walked as in the memory of a dream.

Through the purple silence came faintly the chant of the monks:

"Fac me plagis vulnerari
Pac me cruce inebriari
Ob amorem Filii."

At last the Ionic marble columns, softly steeped in the warmth of departing day, came into sight. Silence and coolness encompassed him. The setting sun still cast his glimmer on the capitals of the columns whose fine, illumined scroll work,

contrasted with the penumbral shadows of the interior, seemed soft and bright as tresses of gold.

A hand softly touched Otto's shoulder. A voice whispered:

"If you would know all—come! Come and I will tell you the secret which never yet I have uttered to mortal man."

In the departing light, veiled by the thick cypresses and pale as the moon-beams, just as in the Egerian wilderness in the whiteness of summer-lightnings, she put her face close to his, her face white as marble, with its scarlet lips, its witch-like eyes.

On they walked in silence, hand in hand.

On they walked along the verge of a precipice, where none have walked before, resisting the vertigo and the fatal attraction of the abyss. If they should prove unequal to the strain,—overstep the magic circle?

Stephania was pale and trembled. She smiled,—but the smile troubled him, he scarce knew why. He tried to think it was the melancholy, caused by the wild and stormy look of the sunset and the loud cawing of the hereditary rooks, which seemed to croak an everlasting farewell to life and hope in the oaks of the convent.

Must he repulse the love that surged up to him in resistless waves?

Must he renounce the near for the far-away, the

ideal, whose embodiment she was, for the commonplace?

Slowly the sun sank to rest in a sea of crimson and gold, a fiery funeral of foliage and flowers.

A clock boomed from a neighbouring tower. The heavy measured clang vibrated long through the stillness, quivering In the air, like a warning knell of fate.

Softly she drew him into the dusk of the pagan temple, drew him down beside her on one of the scattered fragments of antiquity, a dog-eared God of black Syenite from Egypt, which had shared the fate of its Latin equals.

But he could not sit beside—her.

Abruptly he rose; standing before her, the passion of the long fight surged up in him. Stephania sat motionless, and for a time neither spoke.

At last Otto broke the silence. His voice was strained as if he were suffering some great pain.

"I have come!" he said. "I have cut every bridge between present and past! I am here.—Have you thought of my appeal?"

"Oh, why do you torture me?" she replied half sobbing, "I venture to ask for a delay, and you arraign me as though I stood at the bar of judgment."

"It is our day of judgment," he replied. "It is the day when life confronts us with our own deeds,—when we must answer for them, when we must justify them. For if we are but triflers, we cannot

stand in the face either of heaven or of hell!"

He bent down and took her hands in his.

"Stephania," he said, "I too have doubted, I too have wavered:—give me but one word of assurance, —my love for you is a wound which no eternity can cure."

She broke from him, to hide her weeping.

"Have you thought of the forfeit?" she faltered after a time.

"I would not forego the doom!—You alone are my light in this dark country of the world. Do not stifle the voice in your heart with reasons—"

"Reasons! Reasons!" she interrupted. "What does the heart know of reasons! Mine has long forgotten their pleadings—else, were I here?"

Something in her voice and gesture was like a lightning flash over a dark landscape. In an instant he saw the pit at his feet.

"What then," he faltered, "is this to lead to?"

"Some one has been with you," she said quickly. "These words were not yours."

He rallied with a fault smile.

"A pretext for not heeding them."

"Eckhardt has been with you! He has maligned me to you!"

"He has warned me against you!"

She turned very pale.

"And you heeded?"

"I am here, Stephania!"

The subtle perfume clinging to her gown mounted to his brain, choking back reason and resistance.

"Yet again I ask you, what is this to lead to? I am afraid of the future as a child of the dark!"

She held his hands tightly clasped.

"Oh!" she sobbed, "why will you torture me? I have borne much for our love's sake—but to answer you now is to relive it and I lack the strength."

He held her hands fast, his eyes in hers.

"No, Stephania," he said, "your strength never failed you when there was call on it, and our whole past calls on it now! Eckhardt tells me that the Romans hate me,—that they resent the love I bear them—oh, if it were true!"

Stephania gazed at him with wide astonished eyes.

"Ah! It is this then," she said with a sigh of relief. "A moment's thought must show you what passions are here at work. You must rise above such fears. As for us,—no one can judge between us, but ourselves. Shake off these dread fancies! There lies but one goal before us. You pointed the way to it once. Surely you would not hold me back from it now?"

Gently she drew him down by her side. Through the crevices in the roof glimmered the evening star.

She saw the conflict, which raged within him, the instinct to break away from her, who could never more be his own. She saw the fear which bound him

to her,—she saw the great love he bore her, and she knew that he was hers soul and body, her instrument, her toy,—her lover if she so willed.

He spoke to her of his childhood in the bleak northern forests; of the black pines of Thuringia, of the snow-drifts, which froze his heart; of the sad sea horizons brooding infinitely away; of the gloomy abbey of Merséburg, in the Saxon-land, where the great Emperor Otto, his grandsire, was sleeping towards the day of resurrection, where under the abbot's guidance he had first been initiated into the magic of a sunnier clime. He spoke to her of his Greek mother, the Empress Theophano, whose great beauty was only rivalled by her own, and of that eventful night, when he descended into the crypts of Aix-la-Chapelle and opened the tomb of Charlemagne, then dead almost two hundred years. He told her how he had fought against this mad, unreasoning love, which had at first sight of her crept into his heart, urging naught in palliation of his offence, but like a flagellant laying bare his tortured flesh to a self-inflicted scourge. He begged her to decide for him, to guide him, lonely antagonist of destiny—dared he ask for more? She was the wife of the Senator of Rome.

As he ceased speaking, Otto covered his face with his hands, but Stephania drew them down and held them firmly in her own. Truly, if it was victory to accomplish the end, by drawing out a loving,

confiding heart, the victory was with the vanquished. And with the memory of the compact she had sealed a wondrous pity flashed through the woman's soul, a mighty longing, to lift the son of the Greek Princess up into joyous peace! No thought of evil marred her pure desire,—alas! She knew not at that moment, that even in that pity lay his direst snare, and hers.

The decisive moment was at hand. In the thickets before the temple her eye discerned the gleam of spear-points. For a moment a violent tremor passed through her body. She had hardly strength sufficient to maintain her presence of mind, and her face was pale as that of a corpse.

Would she, a second Delilah, deliver Otto to her countrymen—the Romans?

It was some time ere she felt sufficiently composed to speak. Her throat was dry and she seemed to choke.

Otto remarked her discomfiture, far from guessing its cause.

"I will fetch you some water," he said, starting up to leave the temple.

Quick as lightning she had arisen, holding him back.

"It is nothing," she whispered nervously. "Do not leave me!"

And he obeyed.

Stephania closed her eyes as if to exclude the sight of the spear-points.

"Otto," she said softly, after a pause, for the first time calling him by his name, "I fear there is one great lesson you have never learned."

"And what is this lesson?"

"That, what you are doing for the Romans might also be done for you! Is there no heart to share your sorrow, to help you bear the pain of disappointment, which must come to you sooner or later? You told me, you had never loved before we met—"

He nodded assent.

"Never—Never!"

"Ah! Then you do not know. You seek for light, where the sun can never shine! Striving for the highest ideals of mankind we can rise from the black depths of doubt but by one ladder,—that of a woman's love!"

Again the dreadful doubt assailed him.

"If you mean—that,—oh, do not speak of it, Stephania! The wound is already past healing."

She bent towards him and rested her head upon his shoulders.

"And yet I must,—here—and to you."

"No—no—no!" he muttered helplessly and turned away. The words of Eckhardt rushed and roared through his memory: "Once you are hers,—no human power can save you from the abyss."

But Eckhardt hated the Romans as one hates a scorpion, a basilisk.

Stephania relinquished not her victim. He must

be hers, body and soul, ere she shrieked the fatal word.—The warm blood hurtling through her veins quenched the last pitying spark.

"Ah!" she said with a sigh. "You have never known the tenderness of a woman's smile,—the touch of a woman's hand,—her soft caress,—the sound of her voice,—that haunts you everywhere,—waking,—in your dreams—"

"Stephania!" he gasped, and rose as if to flee from her, but she held him back.

"You have never known the ear that listens for your footsteps,—the lips that meet your own in a long, passionate kiss,—the kiss that thrills—and burns—and maddens—"

"Stephania—in mercy—cease!"

Again he attempted to rise, again she drew him down.

"You are not like other men—Otto! Will you always live so lonely,—so companionless,—with no one to love you with that lasting love, for which your whole soul cries out?"

Shivering he raised his arms as if to shut the sight of her from his dazzled gaze. Again, though fainter, Eckhardt's terrible warning knocked at the gates of his memory. But her purring voice with its low melodious roll, wooed his listening heart till the doors of reason tottered on their hinges. And the end —what would be the end?

"Tell me no more," he gasped, "tell me no more!

I cannot listen! I dare not listen! You will destroy me! You will destroy us both!"

Her lips parted in a smile,—that fateful smile, which caused his soul to quake. Her fine nostrils quivered, as she bent towards him.

"You cannot?" she said. "You dare not? Will you pass the cup untasted, the cup that brims with the crimson joy of love? Is there none in all the world to take you by the hand,—to lead you home?"

With a cry half inarticulate he sprang toward her,—his fierce words tumbling from delirious lips:

"Yes,—there is one,—there is one,—one who could lift me up till my soul should sing in heavenly bliss,—one who could bring to me forgetfulness and peace,—one who could change my state of exalted loneliness to a delirium of ecstasy,—one who could lead me, wherever she would—could I but lay my head on her breast,—touch her lips,—call her mine —"

Stephania stretched out her white, bare arms that made him dizzy. He stood before her quivering with hands pressed tightly against his throbbing temples. One moment only.—Half risen from her seat, her eye on the gleaming spear-points in the thicket, she seemed to crouch towards him like some beautiful animal, then a half choked out cry broke from his lips, as their eyes looked hungrily into each others, and they were clasped in a tight embrace. Stephania's arms encircled Otto's neck and she

pressed her lips on his in a long, fervid kiss, which thrilled the youth to the marrow of his bone.

At that moment a curtain of matted vines, which divided the vestibule of the little temple from its inner chambers was half pushed aside by a massive arm, wrapped with scales of linked mail. Standing behind them, Crescentius witnessed the embrace and withdrew without a word.

Was Stephania not overacting her part?

He waited for the signal.

No signal came.

Then a terrible revelation burst upon the Senator's mind.

Johannes Crescentius had lost the love of his wife.

After a time the spear-points disappeared.

The Senator of Rome saw his own danger and the forces arrayed against him. He was no longer dealing with statecraft. The weapon had been turned. With a smothered outcry of anguish he slowly retraced his steps.

Neither had seen the silent witness of their embrace.

Silence had ensued in the temple.

Each could feel the tremor in the soul of the other.

After a time Otto stumbled blindly into the open. Stephania remained alone in rigid silence.

In frozen horror she stared into the dusk.

"The game is finished,—I have won,—oh, God forgive me—God forgive me!" she moaned. "Otto ... Otto ... Otto ..."

* * * * *

"If you would know all,—come at midnight to the churchyard near Ponte Sisto," whispered a voice close by his side, as Crescentius staggered towards the Aelian bridge.

He felt a hand upon his shoulder, turned, and saw, like some ill-omened ghost in the wintry twilight, a lean pale face staring into his own.

In the darkness, under the dense shadows of the cypress-trees he could not distinguish the features of his companion, who wore the habit of a monk.

But when Crescentius turned to reply, he was alone.

"Christ too prayed a human prayer for a miracle: Father, let this cup pass from me!" he muttered, continuing upon his way.

With eyes on the ground he strode along the narrow walk, skirting the Tiber, in whose turbid waves no stars were reflected. And scarce consciously he repeated to himself:

"As like as a man and his own phantom,—his own phantom."

He passed the bridge and entered the mausoleum of the Flavian emperor. Rapidly he ascended to his own chamber.

The candle was burning low.

Up and down he paced in the endeavour to order his thoughts. But no order would come into the chaotic confusion of his mind.

What was the dominion of Rome to him now?

What the dominion of the Universe?

What devil in human shape had counselled the act in the seeds of which slumbered his own destruction?

The flame of the dying candle flickered and grew dim.

Had Stephania returned?

He heard no steps, no sound in her chamber.

At the memory of what he had seen, a groan broke from his lips.

How he hated that boy, who after wresting from him the dominion of the city, had stolen from him the love of his wife!

Stolen? Had it not been thrust upon him? What mortal could have resisted the temptation? He would die—thus it was written in the stars;—but Stephania would weep for him—

On tip-toe the Senator stole to the chamber of his wife. The door stood ajar. The chamber was empty.

The candle flared up for the last time, lighting up the gloom. Then it sank down and went out.

Crescentius was alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER XI
THE INCANTATION

 t was near the hour of midnight when a figure, muffled and concealed in an ample mantle left Castel San Angelo. The guards on duty did not challenge it and after crossing the Aelian bridge, it traversed the deserted thoroughfares until it reached the Flaminian way, which it entered. Avoiding the foot-path near the river, the figure moved stealthily along the farther side of the road, which, as far as could be discerned by the glimpses of the moon which occasionally shone forth from a bank of heavy clouds, was deserted. A few sounds arose from the banks of the river and there was now and then a splash in the water or a distant cry betokening some passing craft. Otherwise profound silence reigned. The low structures and wharfs on the opposite bank could be but imperfectly discerned, but the moonlight fell clear upon the mausoleum of Augustus and the adjacent church of St. Eufemia. The same glimmer also ran like a silver-belt across the stream and revealed the gloomy walls of the Septizonium. The world of habitations beyond this

melancholy stronghold was buried in darkness.

After crossing Ponte Sisto the muffled rambler entered a churchyard, which seemed to have been abandoned for ages. The moon was now shining brightly and silvered the massive square watchtowers, the battlements, and pinnacles with gorgeous tracery. Crescentius had hardly set foot on the moss-grown path, when two individuals wrapped in dark, flowing mantles, whose manner was as mysterious as their appearance, glided stealthily past him.

They seemed not to have noticed his presence but pursued their way through the churchyard, creeping beneath the shadow of a wall in the direction of some low structure, which appeared to be a charnel-house situated at its north-western extremity. Before this building grew a black and stunted yew-tree. Arrived at it, they paused to see whether they were observed. They did not notice the unbidden visitor, who had concealed himself behind a buttress. One of the two individuals who seemed bent by great age then unlocked the door of the charnel-house and brought out a pick-axe and a spade. Then both men proceeded some little distance from the building and began to shovel out the mould from a grass-grown grave.

Determined to watch their proceeding, Crescentius crept towards the yew-tree, behind which he ensconced himself. The bent and decrepit

one of the two meanwhile continued to ply his spade with a vigour that seemed incomprehensible in one so far stricken in years and of such infirm appearance. At length he paused, and kneeling within the shallow grave endeavoured to drag something from it. His assistant, apparently younger and possessed of greater vigour, knelt to lend his aid. After some exertion they drew forth the corpse of a woman which had been interred without a coffin and apparently in the habiliments worn during life. Then the two men raised the corpse, and conveyed it to the charnel-house. After having done so, one of them returned to the grave for the lantern and, upon returning, entered the building and closed and fastened the door behind him.

Crescentius had chosen the moment when one of the two individuals left the lone house, to enter unobserved and to conceal himself in the shadows. What he had witnessed, had exercised a terrible fascination over him, and he was determined to see to an end the devilish rites about to be performed by the personage, in quest of whom he had come. The chamber in which he found himself was in perfect keeping with the horrible ceremonial about to be performed. In one corner lay a mouldering heap of skulls, bones and other fragments of mortality; in the other a pile of broken coffins, emptied of their tenants and reared on end. But what chiefly attracted his attention, was a ghastly collection of human

limbs blackened with pitch, girded round with iron hoops and hung like meat in a shamble against the wall. There were two heads, and although the features were scarcely distinguishable owing to the liquid in which they had been immersed, they still retained a terrible expression of agony. These were the quarters of two priests recently executed for conspiracy against the Pontiff, which had been left there pending their final disposition. The implements of execution were scattered about and mixed with the tools of the sexton, while in the centre of the room stood a large wooden frame supported by rafters. On this frame, bespattered with blood and besmeared with pitch, the body was now placed. This done, the one who seemed to be the moving spirit of the two, placed the lantern beside it, and as the light fell upon its livid features, sullied with earth, and exhibiting traces of decay, Crescentius was so appalled by the sight, that he revealed his presence by a half suppressed outcry. Seeing the futility of further concealment, he stepped into the light of the lantern and was about to speak, when he heard the older address his assistant, neither of whom evinced the least surprise at his presence, while he pointed toward him:

"Look! It is the very face! The bronzed and strongly marked features,—the fierce gray eye—the iron frame of the figure we beheld in the show-stone! Thus he looked, as we tracked his perilous course."

"You know me then?" asked the intruder uneasily.

"You are the Senator of Rome!"

"You spoke of my perilous course! How have you learned this?"

"By the art that reveals all things! And in proof that your thoughts are known to me, I will tell you the inquiry you would make before it is uttered. You came here to learn whether the enterprise in which you are engaged will succeed."

"Such was my intent," replied Crescentius. "From the reports about you, I will freely admit, I regarded you as an impostor! Now I am convinced that you are skilled in the occult science and would fain consult you on the future. What is the meaning of this?" he continued pointing to the corpse before him.

"I expected you!" was the conjurer's laconic reply.

"How is that possible?" exclaimed Crescentius. "It is only within the hour, that I conceived the thought,—and only the events of this evening prompted it."

"I know all!" replied Dom Sabbat. "Yet I would caution you: beware, how you pry into the future. You may repent of your rashness, when it is too late."

"I have no fear! Let me know the worst!" replied Crescentius.

The conjurer pointed to the corpse.

"That carcass having been placed in the ground without the holy rites of burial, I have power over it. As the witch of Endor called up Samuel, as is recorded in Holy Writ,—as Erichtho raised up a corpse, to reveal to Sextus Pompejus the event of the Pharsalian war,—as the dead maid was brought back to life by Appollonius of Thyana,—so I, by certain powerful incantations will lure the soul of this corpse for a short space into its former abode, and compel it to answer my questions. Dare you be present at the ceremony?"

"I dare!" replied the Senator of Rome.

"So it be!" replied Dom Sabbat. "You will need all your courage!" and he extinguished the light.

An awful silence ensued in the charnel-house, broken only by a low murmur from the conjurer who appeared to be reciting an incantation. As he proceeded, his tones became louder and his voice that of command. Suddenly he paused and seemed to await a response. But as none was made, greatly to the disappointment of Crescentius, whose curiosity, despite his fears, was raised to the highest pitch, cried:

"Blood is wanting to complete the charm!"

"If that be all, I will speedily supply the deficiency," replied the Senator, bared his left arm and, drawing his poniard, pricked it slightly with the point of the weapon.

"I bleed now!" he cried.

"Sprinkle the corpse with the blood," commanded Dom Sabbat.

"The blood is flowing upon it!" replied Crescentius with a shudder.

Upon this the conjurer began to mutter an incantation in a louder and more authoritative tone than before. His assistant added his voice, and both joined in a sort of chorus, but in a jargon entirely unintelligible to the Senator.

Suddenly a blue flame appeared above their heads, and slowly descending, settled upon the brow of the corpse, lighting up the sunken cavities of the eyes and the discoloured and distorted features.

"She moves! She moves!" shouted the Senator frantically. "She moves! She is alive."

"Be silent!" cried Dom Sabbat, "else mischief may ensue!"

And again he started his incantation.

"Down on your knees!" he exclaimed at length with terrible voice. "The spirit is at hand."

There was a rushing sound and a stream of white, dazzling light shot down upon the corpse, which emitted a hollow groan. In obedience to Dom Sabbat's demand Crescentius had prostrated himself on the ground, but he kept his gaze steadily fixed on the body, which, to his infinite amazement, slowly arose until it stood erect upon the frame. There it remained perfectly motionless, with the arms close to the sides and the habiliments torn and dishevelled.

The blue light still retained its position upon the brow and communicated a horrible glimmer to the features. The spectacle was so dreadful, that Crescentius would have averted his eyes, but he was unable to do so. The conjurer and his familiar meanwhile continued their invocations, until, as it seemed to the Senator, the lips of the corpse moved and a voice of despair exclaimed: "Why have you called me?"

"To question you about the future!" replied Dom Sabbat rising.

"Speak and I will answer," replied the corpse.

"Ask her,—but be brief;—her time is short," said Dom Sabbat, addressing the Senator. "Only as long as that flame burns, have I power over her!"

"What is her name?" questioned the Senator.

"Marozia!"

The Senator's hand went to his forehead; he tottered and almost fell. But he caught himself.

"Spirit of Marozia," he cried, "if indeed thou standest before me, and some demon has not entered thy frame to delude me,—by all that is holy, and by every blessed saint do I adjure thee to tell me, whether the scheme, on which I am now engaged for the glory of Rome, will prosper?"

"Thou art mistaken, Johannes Crescentius," returned the corpse. "Thy scheme is not for the glory of Rome!"

"I will not pause to argue this point," continued

the Senator. "Will the end be successful?"

"The end will be death," replied the corpse.

"To the King—or to myself?"

"To both!"

"Ha!" ejaculated Crescentius, breathing hard. "To both!"

"Proceed if you have more to ask,—the flame is expiring," cried the conjurer.

"And—Stephania?" But he could not utter the question. He felt like one choking.

But before the question was formed, the light vanished and a heavy sound was heard, as of the body falling on the frame.

"It is over!" said Dom Sabbat

"Can you not summon her again?" asked Crescentius, in a tone of deep disappointment. "I must know that other."

"Impossible," replied the conjurer. "The spirit has flown and cannot be recalled. We must commit the body to the earth!"

"My curiosity is excited,—not satisfied," said the Senator. "Would it were to occur again!"

"Thus it is ever," replied Dom Sabbat. "We seek to know that which is forbidden, and quench our thirst at a fount, which but inflames our curiosity the more. You have embarked on a perilous enterprise;—be warned, Senator of Rome! If you continue to pursue it, it will lead you to perdition."

"I cannot retreat," replied Crescentius. "And I

would not, if I could. Death to both of us:—this at least is atonement!"

"I warn you again,—if you persist, you are lost!"

"Impossible,—I cannot retreat;—I could not, if I would! By no sophistry can I clear my conscience of the ties imposed upon it. I have sworn never to desist from the execution of this scheme, never—never! And so resolved am I, that if I stood alone in this very hour—I would go on."

"You stand alone!"

No one knew whence the voice had come. The three stood appalled.

A deep groan issued from the corpse.

"For the last time,—be warned!" expostulated Dom Sabbat.

"Come forth!" cried Crescentius rushing towards the door. "This place stifles me!" And he unbolted the door and threw it wide open, stepping outside.

The moon was shining brightly from a deep blue azure. Before him stood the old church of St. Damian bathed in the moonlight. The Senator gazed abstractedly at the venerable structure, then he re-entered the charnel-house, where he found the conjurer and his companion employed in placing the body of the excommunicated denizen of Castel San Angelo into a coffin, which they had taken from a pile in the corner. He immediately proffered his assistance and in a short space the task was completed. The coffin was then borne toward the

grave, at the edge of which it was laid, while the Dom Sabbat mumbled a strange Requiem over the departed.

This ended, it was laid into its shallow resting place, and speedily covered with earth.

When all was ready for their departure, Dom Sabbat turned to the Senator of Rome, bidding him farewell. Declining the proffered gold, he observed:

"If you are wise, my lord, you will profit by the awful warning you have this night received."

"Who are you?" the Senator questioned abruptly, trying to peer through the cowl which the adept of the black arts had drawn over his face, "since the devils obey your beck?"

The conjurer laughed a soundless laugh.

"Of dominion over devils I am innocent—since I rule no men!"

At the entrance of the churchyard, Crescentius parted from the conjurer and his associate, about whose personality he had not troubled himself, and returned in deep rumination to Castel San Angelo.

No sooner had the Senator of Rome departed, than the conjurer's familiar tore the trappings from his person and stood revealed to his companion as Benilo, the Chamberlain.

"Dog! Liar! Impostor," he hissed into Dom Sabbat's face, while kicking and buffeting him. "Marozia has been dead some fifty years. How dare you perpetrate this monstrous fraud? Was it this I

bade you tell the Senator of Rome?"

Dom Sabbat cringed before the blows and the flaming madness in the Chamberlain's eyes. Folding his arms over his chest and bending low he replied with feigned contrition:

"It was not for me to compel the spirit's answer! And as for the corpse, 'twas Marozia's. Thus read you the devil's favour. Until blessed by the holy rite, the body cannot return to its native dust."

"Then it was Marozia's spirit we beheld?" Benilo queried with a shudder, as they left the churchyard.

"Marozia's spirit," replied Dom Sabbat. "Yet who would raise a fabric on the memory of a lie?"

CHAPTER XII

THE HERMITAGE OF NILUS



tephania's sleep had been broken and restless. She tossed and turned in her pillows and pushed back the hair from her fevered cheeks and throbbing temples in vain. It was weary work, to lie gazing with eyes wide open at the flickering shadows cast by the night-lamp on the opposite wall. It was still less productive of sleep to shut them tight and to

abandon herself to the visions thus evoked, which stood out in life-like colours and refused to be dispelled.

Do what she would to forget him, to conjure up some other object in her soul, there stood the son of Theophano, towering like a demi-god over the mean, effeminate throng of her countrymen. Her whole being had changed in the brief space of time, since first they had met face to face. Then the woman's heart, filled with implacable hatred of that imperial phantom, which had twice wrested the dominion of Rome from the Senator's iron grasp, filled with hatred of the unwelcome intruder, had given one great bound for joy at the certainty that he was hers, —hers to deal with according to her desire,—that he had not withstood the vertigo of her fateful beauty. With the first kiss she had imprinted on his lips, she had dedicated him to the Erynnies,—it was not enough to vanquish, she must break his heart. Thus only would her victory be complete.

What a terrible change had come over her now! All she possessed, all she called her own, she would gladly have given to undo what she had done. For the first time, as with the lightning's glare, the terrible chasm was revealed to her, at the brink of which she stood. Strange irony of fate! Slowly but surely she had felt the hatred of Otto vanish from her heart. He had bared his own before her, she had penetrated the remotest depths of his soul. She had

read him as an open book. And as she revolved in her own mind the sordid aspirations of those she called her countrymen, the promptings of tyrants and oppressors,—thrown in the scales against the pure and lofty ideals of the King,—a flush of shame drove the pallor from her cheeks and caused hot tears of remorse to well up from the depths of her eyes.

For the first time the whole enormity of what she had done, of the scheme to which she had lent herself, flashed upon her, and with it a wave of hot resentment rushed through her heart. Her own blind hate and the ever-present consciousness of the low estate to which the one-time powerful house of Crescentius had fallen, had prompted her to accept the trust, to commit the deed for which she despised herself. Would the youth, whom she was to lead the sure way to perdition, have chosen such means to attain his ends? And what would he say to her at that fatal moment, when all his illusions would be shattered to atoms, his dreams destroyed and his heart broken? Would he not curse her for ever having crossed his path? Would he not tear the memory of the woman from his heart, who had trifled with its most sacred heavings? He would die, but she! She must live—live beside the man for whom she had sinned, for whose personal ends she had spun this gigantic web of deception. Otto would die:—he would not survive the shock of the revelation. His sensitive, finely-strung temperament

was not proof against such unprecedented treachery. What the Senator's shafts and catapults had failed to achieve,—the Senator's wife would have accomplished! But the glory of the deed? "Gloria Victis," he had said to her when she pointed the chances of defeat. "Gloria Victis"—and she must live!

Otto loved her;—with a love so passionate and enduring that even death would mock at separation. —They would belong to each other ever after. It was not theirs to choose. It seemed to her as if they had been destined for each other from the begin of time, as if their souls had been one, even before their birth. And all the trust reposed in her, all the love given to her—how was she about to requite them? Were her countrymen worthy the terrible sacrifice? Was Crescentius, her husband? Had his rule ennobled him? Had his rule ennobled the Romans? Were the motives not purely personal?

She knew she had gone too far to recede. And even if she would, nothing could now save the German King. The avalanche which had been started could not be stopped. The forces arrayed against Teutonic rule now defied the control of him who had evoked them. How could she save the King?

Salvation for him lay only in immediate flight from Rome! The very thought was madness. He would never consent. Not all his love for her could prompt a deed of cowardice. He would remain and perish,—and his blood would be charged to her

account in the book of final judgment.

How long were these dreadful hours! They seemed never ending like eternity. A moan broke from Stephania's lips. She hid her burning face in her white arms. Oh, the misery of this fatal love! There was no resisting it, there was no renouncing it;—ever present in her soul, omnipotent in her heart, it would not even cease with death; yea, perhaps this was but the beginning.—Would she survive the terrible hour of the final trial, when, a second Delilah, she called the Philistines down upon her trusting foe? She moaned and tossed as in the agues of a fever and only towards the gray dawn of morning she fell into a fitful slumber.

The preparations for his last rebellion against German rule had kept the Senator of Rome within the walls of the formidable keep, which since the days of Vitiges, the Goth, had defied every assault, no matter who the assailant. Crescentius had succeeded in repairing the breaches in the walls and in strengthening the defences in a manner, which would cause every attempt to carry the mausoleum by storm to appear an undertaking as mad as it was hopeless. He had augmented his Roman garrison, swelled by the men-at-arms of the Roman barons pledged to his support, by Greek auxiliaries, drawn from Torre del Grecco, and under his own personal supervision the final preparations were being pushed to a close. His activity was so strenuous that he

appeared to be in the vaults and the upper galleries of Castel San Angelo at the same time. He had been seized with a restlessness which did not permit him to remain long on any one spot. But the terrible misgivings which filled his heart with drear forebodings, which, now it was too late to recede, caused him to tremble before the final issue, drove the Senator of Rome like a madman through the corridors of the huge mausoleum. Had he in truth lost the love of his wife? Then indeed was the victory of the son of Theophano complete. He had robbed him of all, but life—a life whose last spark should ignite the funeral torches for the King and,—if it must be—for Rome.

The day was fading fast, when Crescentius mounted the stairs which led to Stephania's apartments. His heart was heavy with fear. This hour must set matters right between them;—in this hour he must know the worst,—-and from her own lips. She would not fail him at the final issue, of that, as he knew her proud spirit, he was convinced. But what availed that final issue, if he had lost the one jewel in his crown, without which the crown itself was idle mockery?

Stephania's apartments were deserted. Where was his wife? She never used to leave the Castello without informing him of the goal of her journey. Times were uncertain and the precaution well justified. With loud voice the Senator of Rome called

for Stephania's tirewoman. Receiving no immediate reply, a terrible thought rushed through his head. Perhaps she was even now with him,—with Otto! In its undiminished vividness the scene at the Neptune temple arose before him. What availed it to rave and to moan and to shriek? Was it not his own doing,—rather the counsel of one who perhaps rejoiced in his discomfiture? Crescentius' hand went to his head. Was such black treachery conceivable? Could Benilo, —-but no! Not even the fiend incarnate would hatch out such a plot, tossing on a burning pillow of anguish in sleepless midnight.

He was about to retrace his steps below, when the individual desired, Stephania's tirewoman, appeared and informed the Senator that her mistress had but just left, to seek an interview with her confessor. A momentary sigh of relief came from the lips of Crescentius. His fears had perhaps been groundless. Still he felt the imperative necessity to obtain proof positive of her innocence or guilt. Thus only could his soul find rest.

Stephania had gone to her confessor. Fate itself would never again throw such an opportunity in his way. And he made such good speed, that, when he came within sight of the ruins of the baths of Caracalla, he perceived by the advancing torches, which the guards accompanying her litter carried, that she had not yet reached her destination.

Approaching closer, he saw them halt near the

ruins and in a few moments a woman, wrapt in a dark mantilla, stepped from her litter, received by a bubbling, gesticulating monk, in whom the Senator immediately recognized Fra Biccocco, the companion of Nilus. Escorted by him, she walked hastily into the ruins, and was soon lost to sight in their intricate windings.

Recalling the observations he had made on a previous visit, Crescentius wound his way from the rear to the same point, so that none of Stephania's retinue, who were laughing and chatting among themselves, discerned him or even discovered his presence. Then he rapidly threaded his way to the chamber through which Fra Biccocco and Stephania had just passed, boldly followed them into the clearing, from which Nilus' cell was reached, and concealed himself in the long grass until Biccocco returned from the hermit's cell. Then he approached the monk's hermitage and took up his post of observation in the shadows, out of sight but able to hear every word which would be exchanged between Nilus and his confessor.

The monk of Gaëta had been far from anticipating a visitor at this late hour. Seated at his stone table, he had been reading some illuminated manuscript, when he suddenly laid down the scroll and listened. The perfect stillness of the deserted Aventine permitted some breathings of remote music from the distant groves of Theodora to strike his ear,

and after listening for a time, he arose and traversed his cell with rapid steps. He was about to reseat himself and to continue his disquisition by the pale, flickering light of the candle burning before a crucifix, when voices were audible and Biccocco entered, having scarcely time to announce Stephania, ere she followed.

"Good even, Father,—be not startled,—I was returning from my gardens of Egeria and I have brought your altar some of its choicest flowers," she said in a hushed and timid voice, while at the same time she offered the monk some beautiful white roses of a late bloom. "Moreover, I would speak a few words alone with you,—alone with you,—Father Biccocco,—with your permission."

Biccocco, looking at her, as she threw back her mantle from her shoulders, respectfully prepared to obey, almost wondering that there could be on earth anything so wondrously beautiful as this woman.

"Biccocco, I command thee, stay!" exclaimed Nilus starting up. "I would say—nay, daughter—is it thou? I knew not at first,—my sight is dim—Biccocco, let no one trouble me—but tears? What ails our gentle penitent? Has she forgotten a whole string of Aves? Or what heavier offence? It was but yesterday I counselled thee,—but a few hours are so much to a woman.—Wherefore glow thy cheeks with the fires of shame? Biccocco—leave us!"

"Father, I have sinned—yea, grievously sinned in

these few hours, since I have seen thee," said Stephania, when the restraint of Biccocco's presence was removed, little suspecting what listener had succeeded. "I have sinned and I repent,—but even in my offence lies my greatest chastisement."

"Art well assured, that it is remorse, and not regret?" replied the hermit of Gaëta. "Thy sex often mistakes one for the other. But what is the matter? Surely it might not prevent thee from taking thy needful rest, might bide the light of day, to be told, —to be listened to,—yet—thou art strangely pale!"

"I have been mad, father, crazed,—I know not what I have done! I dare not look upon thee, and tell thee! Let me arrange my flowers in thy chalice, while I speak," replied Stephania, hiding her face in the fragrant bundle.

"Not so!" replied the monk. "Eye and gesture often confess more than the apologizing lip! Kneel in thy wonted place! No other attitude becomes thy dignity or mine;—for either thou kneelest to the servant of God or thou debasest thyself before the brother of man!"

Stephania complied instantly, and Nilus, throwing himself back in his chair, fixed his eyes on the crucifix before him, without even glancing at the penitent.

"Father—you had warned me of all the ills that would befall," she began, almost inaudibly, "but I longed to see him at my feet,—and more,—much

more!"

"What is all this?" said the monk turning very pale and glancing at his fair penitent with a degree of fierceness mingled with surprise.

"Ah! You know not what a woman feels,—when —when—" She paused, breathing hard.

"Hast thou then committed a deadly sin? Some dark adultery of the soul?" exclaimed Nilus. "Nay, daughter," he continued, as she shrank within herself at his words, "I speak too harshly now! But what more hast to say? Time wears—and this soft cheek should be upon the down, or its sweetness will not bloom as freshly as some of its rivals, at dawn. Thou see'st this hermitage, from which thou wouldst lure me, yields some recollections to brighten its desolation and gloom. What is it thou wouldst say?"

Stephania stared for a moment into the monk's face, at a loss to grasp his meaning. At last she stammered.

"Yet—I but intended to win him to—some silly tryst,—wherein I intended to deride his boyish passions."

"And he refused thy lures and thou art vexed to have escaped perdition?" said the monk, more mildly.

"Nay—for he came!"

"He came! Jest not in a matter like this! He came? Thou knowest of all mankind I have reasons to wish this youth well,—this one at least!" said Nilus

somewhat incoherently.

"He came,—once,—twice,—many times! He came, I say, and—-"

"What of him? Thou hast not had him harmed for trusting his enemy?"

Stephania's cheek took the hues of marble.

"Harmed? I would rather perish myself than that he should come to harm."

Nilus was silent for a moment or two, and Stephania, as if to take courage, timidly took his hand, holding it between her own.

"I must needs avow my whole offence," she stammered, "he came,—and—"

"Why dost pause, daughter?" questioned the monk, with penetrating look.

"Nay—but hear me!" continued Stephania. "I first intended but to win his confidence,—then,—having drawn him out—expose him to the just laughter of my court."

"A most womanly deed! But where did this meeting take place?"

"In the Grottos of Egeria!"

"In the Grottos of Egeria!" the monk repeated aghast.

"And then," she continued with a great sadness in her tone, "I never felt so strangely mad,—I would have him share some offence, to justify the clamour I had provided, scarcely I know how to believe it now myself.—I did to his lips,—what I now do to your

hand."

And she kissed the monk's yellow hand with timid reverence.

"Thou! Thou! Stephania,—the wife of Crescentius, and not yet set in the first line of the book of shame!" shouted the monk, convulsively starting at every word of his own climax. "Begone—begone! The vessel is full, even to overflowing!—Tell me no more,—tell me no more!"

"Your suspicion indeed shows me all my ignominy," said Stephania, groping for his hand, which he had snatched furiously away. "But he only suffered it,—because he guessed not my intent in the darkness."

"In the darkness?"

"In the darkness."

"Deemest thou it possible to clasp the plague and to evade the contagion?" questioned the monk. "Woman, I command thee, stop! Stop ere the condemning angel closes the record!"

Stephania raised her head petulantly.

"Monk, thou knowest not all! During all this meeting the Senator of Rome was present in the Grotto and watched us from one of the ivy hollows in the cave!"

"The Senator of Rome!" exclaimed the monk with evident amazement. "How came he there?"

"By contrivance!"

"I do not understand!"

"It was at his behest that I have done the deed, to further his vast projects, call it his ambition, if you will—to which the King is the stumbling block. Ask me no more,—for I will not answer!"

Nilus seemed struck dumb by the revelation.

"Take comfort, daughter, he cannot,—he cannot —" whispered the monk, bending over her and speaking in so low a tone that the devouring listener could not distinguish one word.

For a time not a word was to be heard, Nilus inclining his ear to Stephania's lips, whose confession was oft times broken by sobs.

"Tell me all,—all!" said the monk.

"As the fatal hour approaches the strength begins to forsake me,—I cannot do it!" she groaned.

"Yet he is the enemy of Rome, so you say," the monk said mockingly.

"He is the friend of Rome and—I love him!"

In a shriek the last words broke from her lips.

"Domine an me reliquisti!" shouted the monk. "Some sign now—some sign—or—"

His raving exclamation was cut short by a sound not unlike the oracle implored. A large block of stone, dislodged by a sudden and violent movement of the unseen listener, rolled with a hollow rumble down into the vaults below.

The monk started up from the benediction which he was bending forward to pronounce, almost dashed Stephania away, rushed to his altar and casting

himself prostrate before the divine symbol which adorned it, he muttered in a frantic ecstasy of devotion:

"Gloria Domino! Gloria in Excelsis! Blessed be Thy name for ever and ever! Praise ye the Lord! He saves in the furnace of fire!"

Stephania gazed in mute amazement at the monk. His frantic appeal and its apparent fulfilment had struck dismay into her soul, and when at length he raised himself, and turned towards her, she could hardly find words to speak.

But Nilus waved his hand.

"Go now, Stephania," he commanded. "Go! I will devise some fitting penance at more leisure."

"But, Father—my request."

"Ay, truly," he replied, with supreme melancholy. "Is it not the wont of the world to throw away the flower, when we have withered it with our evil breath?"

"But I cannot do it,—I cannot do it," Stephania moaned, raising her hands imploringly to the monk.

"It is for a mightier than Nilus to counsel," the monk spoke mournfully. "Thou standest on the brink of a precipice, from which nothing but the direct intervention of Heaven can save thee! Pray to the Immaculate One for enlightenment, and if the words of a monk have weight with thee, even against him, thou callest thy lord before the world,—desist, ere thou art engulfed in the black abyss, which yawns at

thy feet.—When he is dead, it will be too late!"

And raising his lamp, to escort Stephania to her litter, the monk and the woman left the chamber, and Crescentius had barely time to conceal himself behind the boulders ere they appeared and passed by him, the monk anxiously guiding every step of his penitent.

The moon was sinking, when Stephania arrived at Castel San Angelo.

Taking the candle from the hands of the page, who had awaited her return with sleepy eyes, she dismissed him and passed into the lofty hall, dark and chill as a cellar, beyond which lay the Senator's, her husband's, apartments. She swiftly traversed the hall,—then she hesitated. No doubt he was asleep. What good was there in waking him? As she turned to retrace her steps to her own chamber, a strange and eerie gust of wind swept shrieking round the battlements, howled in the chimney, invaded the chamber with icy breath and almost extinguished the candle. Then there was a great hush. It seemed to her she could hear distant music from the Aventine, the murmur of voices, the sound of iron chains from the vaults below. To this,—or to death,—she had consigned the son of Theophano, the boy-king, who loved her.—To this?—Anguish and terror seized her soul. She felt, she must not move—must not look. There it stood,—blacker than the investing darkness, —its head bent,—shrouded in the cowl of a monk.

What was it? Once before she had seen it,—then it had faded away in the gloom. But misfortune rode invariably in its wake. She tried to scream, to call the page, but her voice choked in her throat. She staggered toward the door; her limbs refused to support her;—groaning she covered her eyes. Otto down there,—or dead,—why had she never thought of it before? Now the monk made a step toward her; the face had nothing corpse-like in it, nothing appalling, yet she felt a freezing and unearthly cold; almost fainting she staggered up the narrow winding stairs. And entering her lofty chamber Stephania fell unconscious upon her couch.

After Crescentius had returned from the hermitage of Nilus, he gave strict orders to the guards of Castel San Angelo to admit no one, no matter who might crave an audience, and entering his own chamber, he lighted a candle. He had seen and heard, and he knew that the heart of his wife had gone from him for ever! At the terrible certainty he grew dizzy. A fearful price he had paid for his perfidy,—and now, there was no one in all the world he could trust. He dared not speak. He dared not even breathe his anguish. She must never know that he knew all,—no one must know. His lips must be sealed. The world should never point at him,—for this at least!

But terrible as his suffering must be his vengeance. He who had robbed him of his priceless

gem, the wife of his soul, all he loved on earth,—he should languish and rot under her very chambers, where she might nightly hear his groans, without daring to plead for him. There was no further time for parley. The stroke must fall at once! Too long had he tarried. The Rubicon was passed.

Pacing up and down the gloomy chamber, Crescentius paused before the sand-clock. It was near midnight. Yet sleep was far from caressing his aching lids, as far as balm from his aching heart. He raised the candle in an unconscious effort, to go to his wife's apartment. He lingered. Then he placed the candle down again and seated himself in a chair. His gaze fell upon a broad stain on the floor and like one fascinated he followed its least meander to a distance of several feet from the door, when suddenly a form met his eyes, whether the off-spring of his delirious fancy or one of those inexplicable and tremendous phenomena, which are incapable of human solution, while the secrets of death remain such. His garb was that of a monk; the face bore the awful pallor of the tomb, and a mournful tenderness seemed to struggle with the rigidity of death. The phantom, if such it was, stood perfectly motionless between Crescentius and the couch, in a few moments it grew indistinct and finally faded into air.

It was then only, that Crescentius recovered breath and life, and staggered back to his chair. A few moments' rally persuaded him that what he had

seen had been merely the illusion of his excited organs. But a dreadful longing for death assailed him, a longing like that which prompts men to leap when they gaze down a precipice. He rose,—again the phantom seemed there,—this time distinct and clear. Terror rendered him motionless; the room seemed to whirl round, a million lights danced in his eyes, then he sank back covering his face with his hands.

When he again opened his eyes, his brain seemed shooting with the keenest darts of pain. He endeavoured to pray, but could not. His ideas rushed confusedly through each other. The taper was fast sinking in the socket, and it seemed as if his mind would sink with it. He emptied a goblet of wine which stood upon the table, and strove to remember what he intended to do. It seemed a vain effort and he fell back in his chair into a semi-conscious doze. An hour might have passed thus, when he became aware of a slight crackling noise in his ears and starting with a sensation of cold he looked round. The fire in the chimney had burnt into red embers, and though his own form was lost in the shadow of the chimney, the rest of the room was faintly illumined by the crimson glow from the grate.

Suddenly he saw the tapestry figure of some mythical deity opposite his own seat stir; the tapestry swelled out, then a head appeared, which peered cautiously round. The body soon followed the head,

and Crescentius rose with a sigh of relief as he stood face to face with Benilo. The Chamberlain's face was pale; his eyes, with their unsteady glow, showed traces of wakefulness. He took from his doublet a scroll which he placed into the outstretched hand of the Senator of Rome. Mechanically Crescentius unrolled it. His hands trembled as he superficially swept its contents.

"The barons pledge their support,—not a name is missing," Benilo broke the silence in hushed tones.

"What is it to be?" questioned Crescentius.

"I speak for the extreme course and for Rome. For attack—sudden and swift!"

There was a pause, Crescentius stared into the dying embers.

"Are all your plans complete?"

"The Romans wait impatiently upon my words. At the signal all Rome will rise to arms!"

"But how about the Romans? Can they be depended upon?"

"I move them at the raising of my hand!"

There was another pause.

Crescentius appeared strangely abstracted.

"But what of Otto? What of Eckhardt? Do they scent the wind from Castel San Angelo?"

"As for the Saxon cherub," Benilo replied with a disgusting smile, "he is dreaming of his—"

He did not finish the sentence, for Crescentius cast such a terrible look upon him, that the blood

froze in the traitor's veins, and his eyes sank before those blazing upon him. After a moment's hesitation he continued, the shadow of a forced smile hovering round his thin, quivering lips:

"When he is dead, we shall cause the Wonder-child to be canonized!"

But Crescentius was in no jocular mood.

"Have you chosen your men?" he queried curtly.

"They will be stationed in the labyrinth of the Minotaurus," Benilo replied. "At the signal agreed upon, they will rush forth and seize the King—"

As he spoke those words the Chamberlain gazed timidly into the Senator's face.

"The signal will not fail," Crescentius replied firmly.

"Is the mausoleum prepared to withstand an assault?" Benilo questioned guardedly.

"The hidden balistae have been disinterred. My Albanian stradiotes and the Romagnole guards occupy the chief approaches. The upper galleries are reserved for our Roman allies. They will never scale these walls while Crescentius lives. Remember—the gates of Rome are to be closed. We will smother the Saxon under our caresses! I must have Otto dead or alive! Revenge and Death are now written on my standards! Up with the flag of rebellion and perdition to the emperor and his hosts!"

The gray dawn was peeping into the windows of the Senator's chamber, when Crescentius sought his

couch for a brief and fitful repose.

CHAPTER XIII
THE LION OF BASALT



t was midnight of a dark and still evening on the Tiber and peace had for the most part descended upon the great city. The lamps in the houses were extinguished and the challenges of the watch alone were now and then to be heard. The streets were deserted, for few ventured abroad after night fall. Sluggishly the turbid tide of the Tiber rolled towards ancient Portus. The moon was hidden behind heavy cloudbanks, and when now and then it pierced a rift in the nebulous masses, it shed a spectral light over the silent hills, but to plunge them back into abysmal darkness.

The bells from distant cloisters and convents were pealing the midnight hour when out of the gloom of the waters there passed a light skiff wherein were seated two men, closely wrapped in their long, dark cloaks. The one seated on the prow was bent almost double with age, and his long beard swept the bottom of the skiff. He appeared

indifferent to his surroundings and stared straight before him into the darkness, while his companion, constantly on the alert, never seemed to take his eyes from the boatman who plied his oars in silence, causing the frail craft to descend the river with great swiftness.

At last they made for the shore. An extensive mansion loomed out of the gloom, which seemed to be the goal of their journey. Obeying the whispered directions of the taller of his passengers, the boatman steered his craft under a dark archway, whence a flight of stairs led up to the door, of what appeared to be a garden pavilion. Swiftly the sculler shot under the arch and in another moment drew up by the stairs.

Leaning heavily on the arm of his companion the soothsayer alighted from the skiff with slow and uncertain steps and after ascending the water-stairs his guide knocked three times at the door of the pavilion. It was instantly opened and an African in fantastic livery, who seemed to fill the office of Cubicular, beckoned them to enter. With all the signs of exhaustion and the weariness of his years weighing heavily upon him, the conjurer dropped into a seat, paying no heed whatever to his surroundings nor to his companion, who had withdrawn into the shadows, while he awaited the arrival of the woman, who had called on his skill.

He had not long to wait.

Noiselessly a door opened and the majestic and graceful form of a woman glided into the pavilion, robed in a long black cloak and closely veiled. She motioned to the attendants to withdraw and to the astrologer to approach.

"Most learned doctor of astral science," she said in a soft clear voice of command, "you have brought me the calculations which your learning has enabled you to make as to the future of the persons whose nativities were supplied to you?"

The astrologer had been seized with a sudden violent fit of coughing and some moments elapsed ere he seemed able to speak.

So low and weak were his tones, that the woman could not understand one word he uttered, and she began to exhibit unequivocal signs of impatience, when the conjurer's voice somewhat improved.

"The horoscopes," he said in a strangely jarring tone, "are the most wonderful that our science has ever revealed to me. They indicate most amazing changes of life, and signs of imminent peril."

"You speak of one,—or of both?"

"Of both!"

"Give me the details of each horoscope!"

The astrologer nodded.

Theodora watched him from behind her veil as closely as he did her, for ever and anon he stole furtive glances at her and was immediately seized with his cough.

His voice grated strangely in her ear as he spoke.

"The first, whose nativity I have calculated, is that of one born thirty years, one hundred and seventeen days, and ten hours from this moment. It was a birth under the sign of the Serpent, at an hour charged with vast possibilities for the future. At that instant the Zodiac was moved by portentous lights and the earth shook with tremors as I have ascertained in the records of our art!"

"What are the signs of the future?" the woman interrupted the speaker. "What is past and gone, we all know, even without the aid of your profound wisdom. What of the future, I ask?" she concluded imperiously.

"I hate to impart to you what I have found," said the astrologer cringing. "It is terrible. The declination of the house of Death stands close to the right ascension of the house of Life!"

Theodora gave a sudden start. For a moment she seemed to lose her self-control. Her piercing eyes seemed to look the astrologer through and through, though he had shrunk back into the wide girth of his mantle.

"Give me the scroll!"

She stretched out a hand white as alabaster to take the parchment whereon the astrologer had marked the rise and fall of the star records. But, as if seized with a sudden fear, she withdrew the hand ere the man of the stars could comply with her request.

"The second horoscope!" she spoke imperiously.

Again a long fit of coughing prevented the astrologer from speaking.

When it subsided, he said with profound solemnity, watching her expression intently from between his half-closed lids:

"That other, whose nativity you have sent to me, shall find death,—death, sudden and shameful—"

She stood rigid as a statue.

"Tell me more!" she gasped. "Tell me more!"

"He will die hated,—unlamented,—despised—"

She drew a deep breath.

"When shall that be?"

"There is at this moment a most ominous sign in the heavens," replied the astrologer shrinking within himself. "Venus, who rules the skies is obscured by too close attendance upon a lower and less honourable star."

Theodora held her breath.

"What comes after?" she whispered.

"The lore of astral combinations does not reveal such things. But palmistry may aid, where the constellations fail. Deign to let me trace the lines in the palm of your hand."

Flinging aside her last reserve, Theodora in her eagerness held out her palm to the astrologer. He bent over it, without touching it, shaking his head, and muttering:

"The line of life,—the line of love,—the line of

death—"

As the astrologer pronounced the last word, his hand grasped with a vice-like grip the one whose lines he had pretended to read, while with the other, which had dropped the supporting staff, he pushed back the loose sleeve of her gown, baring her arm almost to the shoulder, constantly muttering:

"The line of Death,—the line of Death,—the line of Death!"

When Theodora first felt the tightening grip on her wrist, she tried to withdraw her hand, but her strength was not equal to the task. She felt the benumbing pressure of what she imagined were the astrologer's fleshless claws, but when, with a motion almost too swift for one bent with age and infirmity, he laid bare to the shoulder the marble whiteness of her arm, she thought he had gone mad. But when the astrologer's trembling finger pointed to the red birthmark on her arm, just below her shoulder, resembling the claw of a raven, constantly muttering: "The line of Death—the line of Death," she uttered a piercing shriek for help, vainly endeavouring to shake him off.

A shadow dashed between the two, neither knew whence it came.

The astrologer saw the gleam of a dagger before his eyes, felt its point strike against the corselet of mail beneath his cloak, felt the weapon rebound and snap asunder, the fragments falling at his feet, and

releasing the woman, who stood like an image of stone, he dropped his cloak and supporting staff, and clove with one blow of his short double-edged sword the skull of his assailant to the neck. With a piercing shriek Theodora rushed from the Pavilion, followed in mad breathless pursuit by the pseudo-astrologer, who had dropped his false beard with his other disguises and stood revealed to her terror-stricken gaze as Eckhardt, the Margrave.

Without heeding the warning cry of Hezilo, his companion, he was bent upon taking the woman. In the darkness he could hear the rush of her frightened footsteps through the corridors; he seemed to gain upon her, when her giant Africans rushing through another passage came between the Margrave and his intended victim. Three steps did he make through the press and three of her guards fell beneath his sword. But a stranger in the labyrinth of the great pavilion, he could hardly hope to gain his end, even if unimpeded, and Theodora's formidable body-guard still outnumbered him three to one. Eckhardt's doom would have been sealed had not at that very moment Hezilo appeared in the passage behind him and laid an arresting hand upon his arm.

Before the harper's well-known presence the Africans fell back, raising their dead from the blood-stained floor and skulking back into the dusk of the corridor.

"You have no time to lose," urged the harper.

"Follow me!—Speak not,—question not. Remember your compact and your oath."

Eckhardt turned upon his guide like a lion at bay. His face was pale as that of a corpse. His blood-shot eyes stared, as if they must burst from their sockets; his hair bristled like that of a maniac.

"What care I?" he growled fiercely. "Compact or oath—what care I?"

"There are other considerations at stake," replied Hezilo calmly. "You promised to be guided by my counsel. The hour of final reckoning is not yet at hand."

Eckhardt's breast heaved so violently, that it almost deprived him of the faculty of speech.

"Must I turn back at the very gates of fulfilment?" he burst forth at last. But sheathing his weapon he reluctantly followed the harper and, retracing their steps, they re-entered the Pavilion. In the slain boatman they recognized the ghastly features of John of the Catacombs, though the bravo's skull was literally cloven in twain and a strange dread seized upon them at the terrible revelation. Eckhardt stood by idly, while the harper insisted upon removing the body, and wrapping his ghastly burden in his blood-stained monkish gown, showed small repugnance to carrying the bravo's carcass to the landing, where he fastened a short iron chain to the gruesome package and dropped it into the muddy waves of the Tiber.

Dark clouds swept over the face of the moon and the chill wind of autumn moaned dismally through the spectral pines, as the boat, propelled by the sturdy arms of Hezilo, flew up stream over the murky, foam-crested waves.

An icy hand seemed to grip Eckhardt's heart. The words wrung from the dying wretch in the rock-caves under the Gemonian stairs had proved true. In baring Theodora's left arm his eyes had fallen upon the well-remembered birthmark resembling the raven claw. The terrible revelation had for the nonce almost upset his reason, and caused him prematurely to drop his mask. All clarity of thought, all fixedness of purpose had deserted him; he felt as one stunned by the blinding blow of a maze. Dazed he stared before him into the gloom of the autumnal night; his hair dishevelled, his eyelids swollen, his lips compressed. He could not have uttered a word had his life depended upon it. His tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth; his brow was fevered, yet his hands were cold as ice. At last then he had stood face to face with the awful mystery, which had mocked his waking hours, his dreams,—a mystery, even now but half guessed, but half revealed. He tried to recall fragments of the monk's tale. But his brain refused to work, steeped in the apathy of despair. The future hour must give birth to the considerations of the final step, to the closing chapters of his life. Yet he felt that delay would

engender madness; long brooding had shaken his reason and swift action alone could now save it from tottering to a hopeless fall.

The frail craft shot round the elbow-like bend of the Tiber at the base of Aventine when Hezilo for the first time broke the silence. He had refrained from questioning or commenting on the result of their visit to the Groves. Now, pointing to the ramparts of Castel San Angelo he whispered into Eckhardt's ear:

"Are your forces beyond recall?"

Eckhardt stared up into the speaker's face, as if the latter had addressed him in some strange tongue. Only after Hezilo had repeated his question, Eckhardt roused himself from the lethargy, which benumbed his senses and gazed in the direction indicated by the harper.

An errant moonbeam illumined just at this moment the upper galleries of Hadrian's tomb. Straining his gaze towards the ramparts of the formidable keep, Eckhardt strove to discover a reason for Hezilo's warning. But the moon disappeared behind a bank of clouds and at that moment the sculler ran in shore.

Unconsciously his hand tightened round the hilt of his sword.

"The earth breeds hard men and weak men," he muttered. "The gods can but laugh at them or grow wroth with them. As for these Romelings,—they are not worth destroying. They will perish of

themselves."

"The hour is close at hand, when everything shall be known to you," Hezilo turned to Eckhardt at parting. "But three days remain to the full of the moon."

Weary and sick at heart Eckhardt grasped the harper's proffered hand, as they parted.

But he was in no mood to return within the four walls of his palace. He was as one upon whom has descended a thunder bolt from Heaven.

The terrible revelation deprived him of his senses, of his energies, of the desire to live,—and there was little doubt that this would have been Eckhardt's last night on earth, had there not remained one purpose to his life.

How small did even that appear by the magnitude of the crime, which had been visited upon his head. The how and why and when remained as great a mystery to him as ever. Eckhardt's memory roamed back into the years of the past. He tried to recall every word Ginevra had spoken to him; he tried to recall every wish her lips had expressed, he tried to recall every unstinted caress. And with these memories there rose up before his inner eye Ginevra's image and with it there welled up from his heart an anguish so great, that it drove the nails of his fingers deep into the flesh of his clenched hands.

He remembered her strange request never to inquire into her past, but to love her and let his trust

be the proof of his love. Then there came floating faintly, like phantoms on the dark waves of his memory, her inordinate desire for power, hinted rather than expressed,—then darkness swallowed, everything else. Only boundless anguish remained, fathomless despair. After a while his feelings suffered a reverse; they changed to a hate of the woman as great as his love had been,—a hate for the fateful siren, Rome, who had deprived him of all that was dearest to him on earth.

Bending his solitary steps towards the Capitol, he saw the veil-like mists gathering above the wild grass, which waves above the palaces of the Cæsars. On a mound of ruins he stood with folded arms musing and intent. In the distance lay the melancholy tombs of the Campagna and the circling hills faintly outlined beneath the pale starlight. Not a breeze stirred the dark cypresses and spectral pines. There was something weird in the stillness of the skies, hushing the desolate grandeur of the earth below.

He had not gone very far when a shadow fell across his path. Looking up he again found himself by the staircase of the Lion of Basalt. The weird relic from the banks of the Nile filled him with a strange dread. With a shudder he paused. Was it the ghastly and spectral light or did the face of the old Egyptian monster wear an aspect as that of life? The stony eye-balls seemed bent upon him with a malignant

scowl and as he passed on and looked behind they appeared almost preternaturally to follow his steps. A chill sank into his heart when the sound of footsteps arrested him and Eckhardt stood face to face with the hermit of Gaëta. He beckoned to the monk to accompany him, vainly endeavouring to frame the question, which hovered on his lips. The monk joined him in silence. After walking some little way Nilus suddenly paused, fixing his questioning gaze on the brooding face of his companion. Then a strange expression passed into his eyes.

"Life is full of strange surprises. Yet we cling to it, just to keep out of the darkness through which we know not the way."

Sick at heart Eckhardt listened. How little the monk knew, he thought, and Nilus was staggered at the haggard expression of the Margrave's face, as he stumbled blindly and giddily down the moonlit avenue beside him.

"Would I had never seen her!" Eckhardt groaned. "In what a fair disguise the fiend did come to tempt my soul!"

He paused. The monk drew him onward.

"Come with me to my hermitage! Thou art strangely excited and do what thou mayest,—thou must follow out thy destiny! Hesitate not to confide in me!"

"My destiny!" Eckhardt replied. "Monk, do not mock me! If thou hast any mystic power, read my

soul and measure its misery. I have no destiny, save despair."

The monk regarded him strangely.

"Because a woman is false and thy soul is weak, thou needest not at once make bosom friends with despair. It is a long time since I have been in the world. It is a long time since I have abjured its vanities. Let him who has withstood the terrible temptation, cast the first stone. For the flesh is weak and the sin is as old as the world; And perchance even the monk may be able to counsel, to guide thee in some matters,—for verily thou standest on the brink of a precipice."

"I am well-nigh mad!" Eckhardt replied wearily. "Were there but a ray of light to guide my steps."

Nilus pointed upward.

"All light flows from the fountain-head of truth. Be true to thyself! Life is duty! In its fulfilment alone can there be happiness,—and in the renunciation of that, which has been denied us by the Supreme Wisdom. No more than thou canst reverse the wheel of time, no more canst thou compel that dark power, Fate. And at best—what matters it for the short space of this earthly existence? For believe me, the End of Time is nigh,—and in the beyond all will be as if it had never been."

Nilus paused and their eyes met. And in silence Eckhardt followed the monk among the ruins of the latter's abode.

As the morning dawned, some fishermen dragging their nets off St. Bartholomew's island pulled up from the muddy waves the body of an old man clad in the loose garb of a monk. But as the day grew older a new crime and fresh scandal filled Forum and wine shops and the incident was forgotten ere night-fall.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST TRYST



he great clock on the tower of San Sebastian struck the second hour of night. The air was so pure, so transparent, that against the horizon the snow-capped summit of Soracté was visible, like a crown of glittering crystal. Mysteriously the stars twinkled in the fathomless blue of the autumnal night. Procession after procession traversed the city. From their torches smoky spirals rose up to the starry skies. The pale rays of the moon, the crimson glare of the torches, illumined faces haggard with fear, seamed with anxiety and dread. Despite the late hour, the people swarmed like ants, occupying every point of vantage, climbing lantern poles and fallen

columns, armed with clubs, halberds, scythes, pitchforks and staves. Here and there strange muffled forms were to be seen mingling with the crowds, whispering here and there a word into the ear of a chance passerby and vanishing like phantoms into the night.

Among the many abroad in the city at this hour was Eckhardt. He mistrusted the Romans, he mistrusted the Senator, he mistrusted the monks. The fire of his own consuming thoughts would not permit him to remain within the four walls of his palace. Like a grim spectre of the past he stalked through Rome, alone, unattended. How long would the terrible mystery of his life continue to mock him? How much longer must he bear the awful weight which was crushing his spirit with its relentless agony? What availed his presence in Rome? The king had long ceased to consult him on matters of state; Benilo and Stephania possessed his whole ear—and Eckhardt was no longer in his counsels.

With a degree of anxiety, which he had in vain endeavoured to dispel, Eckhardt had watched the growing intimacy between his sovereign and the Senator's wife. Time and again he had, even at the risk of Otto's fierce displeasure, warned the King against the danger lurking behind Stephania's mask of friendship. Wearied and exasperated with his importunities, Otto had asserted the sovereign, and Eckhardt's lips had remained sealed ever since,

though his watchfulness had not relaxed one jot, and even while he endeavoured to lift the veil, which enshrouded his own life, he remained circumspect and on the alert, true to his promise to the Empress Theophano, now in her grave.

The sounds which on this night fell from every side on Eckhardt's ear were not of a nature to dispel his misgivings of the Roman temper. As by a subtle intuition he felt that they were ripe for a change, though when and whence and how it would come he could not guess. His own mood was as dark as the sky-gloom lowering over the Seven Hills. Rome had made of him what he was, Rome had poisoned his life with the viper-sting of Ginevra's terrible deed, and now he longed for nothing more than for some great event, which would toss him into the foaming billows of strife, therein to sink and to go under for ever.

Drawing his mantle closer about him and lowering the vizor of his helmet, Eckhardt slowly made his way through the congested throngs. He had not proceeded very far, when he felt some one pluck him by the mantle. Turning abruptly and shaking himself free, from what he believed to be the clutches of a beggar, he was about to dismiss the offender with an oath, when to his surprise he beheld a woman dressed in the garb of a peasant, but clearly disguised, as her speech gave the lie to her affectation of low birth.

"You are Eckhardt, the Margrave?" she asked timidly.

"I am Eckhardt," the general replied curtly.

"Then lose no time to save him, else he will run into perdition as sure as yonder moon shines down upon us. Oh! He knows not the dangers that beset him;—on my knees I implore you—-save him!"

"When I understand the meaning of your gibberish, doubt not I will serve you! I pray you give me a glimpse of its purport," replied the Margrave.

The woman seemed so entirely wrapt up in her own business that she did not heed Eckhardt's question.

"I dare not whisper the secret to any one else,—and my Lord Benilo bade me seek you in case of danger. And if you cannot move him from his mad purpose, he is lost, for never was he so bent to have his own way. If you come with me, you will find him waiting on the terrace,—and do your best to lead him back,—else he will come to as evil an end as a wasp in a bee's hive,—for all the honey!"

"And whom shall I find on the terrace?" asked Eckhardt with ill-concealed impatience. He liked not the babbling crone. "Cease your spurting and speak plainly, else go your way:—I am not for such as you!"

"It wants but a moment—whom else but your King, for whom she has sent under pretext of important business,—aye,—at this very hour and on the terraces of the Minotaurus."

"Otto,—important business,—Minotaurus—" repeated Eckhardt. "Who has sent for him?"

"Stephania."

Eckhardt shrugged his shoulders.

"What is it to me? Go your way, hoary pander,—what is it to me? Hasten to him, who has paid you to tell this tale and get your ransom from him! I wager, he knows the style of old!"

The woman did not move.

"Nay, my lord, that we all should go mad at one time," she sobbed with evidently strong emotions, which were perhaps not caused by the motive alleged. "Then I must away and fulfil his destiny,—for a man cannot serve two masters,—nor a woman either."

There was something in the speaker's tone that caused a shadow of apprehension to rise in Eckhardt's mind. Was there more behind all this than she cared to confess? "Fulfil his destiny"—these words at least were not her own. A grave fear seized him. Otto might be ambushed,—carried away,—he might rot in Castel San Angelo, and no man the wiser for it.

"Stay! I will go and cross the boy's path to his guilty paradise," repeated Eckhardt after permitting the woman to draw away from him at a very slow and wistful pace and overtaking her with a couple of strides. "Lead on, but do not speak! I have no tongue to answer you!"

The woman immediately took the well-known route towards the terraces of the Minotaurus and soon they reached the spot. A covered archway at one extremity admitted on a terrace, flanked on one side by a high dead wall of the Vatican, on the other by a steep and precipitous slope, wooded with orange trees and myrtle. This spot, little frequented in day time, was deserted by night. The woman whispered that it was here, she expected the King, and cautioning Eckhardt to remove him with all speed from this danger zone, which offered no means of escape, she precipitately retired, leaving Eckhardt alone to meditate upon what he had heard, and to pursue his adventure in the darkness.

The Margrave hastened along the archway and peering into the shadows he quickly discerned the slim outline of a man, wrapt in an ample cloak, leaning against the dead wall at the end of the platform. His eyes seemed fixed intently upon the heavens, while an expression of impatience reigned uppermost in the pale, thoughtful face.

Eckhardt quickly approached the edge of the terrace, where he had discovered Otto, and although the King kept his face averted, he could scarcely hope to escape recognition.

"Otto—the King—can it be?" Eckhardt said with feigned surprise, as he faced the youth. "I beg your majesty's pardon,—are you a lodger in yonder palace or how chances it that you are here alone,—

unattended?"

"Ay—since you know me," replied Otto with a forced smile, "I will not deny my name nor business either. The ladies of the Senator's court are fair, and an ancient crone whispered to me at my devotions to Our Lady, on this terrace and at this hour, if I prayed heartily, I should have good news. Matter enough, I ween, to stir one's curiosity, but,—I fear,—I should be alone."

The blood surged thickly through Eckhardt's brain. He could scarcely breathe, as he listened to this falsehood and for a few moments he gazed in silence on the flushed and paling visage of the youth.

At last he spoke.

"Is it possible that the air of Rome can even change a nature like yours to utter a falsehood? My liege,—you are not yourself!" Eckhardt exclaimed, discarding all reserve, for he knew there was no time to be lost. And if perchance the fair serpent that had lured him hither was nigh, his words should strike her heart with shame and dismay. "It is to Stephania you go,—it is Stephania, whom you await!"

There was a brief pause during which a hectic flush chased the deep pallor from Otto's face, as he passively listened to the unaccustomed speech.

"Stephania," he repeated absently, and suffering his cloak to drop aside in his absorption, he revealed the richness and splendour of the garb beneath.

"The wife of the Senator of Rome!" Eckhardt

supplemented sternly.

"And what if it be?" Otto responded with mingled petulancy and confusion. "What if the Senator's consort has vouchsafed me a private audience?"

"Are you beside yourself, King Otto? You venture into this place alone,—unattended,—to please some woman's whim,—a woman who is playing with you,—and will lead you to perdition?"

"How dare you arraign your King and his deeds?" Otto exclaimed fiercely.

"I am here to save you—from yourself! You know not the consequences of your deed!"

"Let them be what they will! I am here, to abide them!"

Eckhardt crossed his arms over his broad chest as he regarded the offspring of the vanquisher of the Saracens with mingled scorn and pity.

"The spell is heavy upon you, here among the crimson and purple flowers, where the Siren sings you to destruction," he said with forced calmness. "But you shall no longer listen to her voice, else you are lost. Otto,—Otto,—away with me! We will leave this accursed spot and Rome together—for ever! There is no other refuge for you from the spell of the Sorceress."

"Not for all the lands on which the sun sets to-night will I refuse obedience to Stephania's call," Otto replied. "You sorely mistake your place and presume

too much on the authority placed into your hands by the august Empress, my mother. But attempt not to exercise mastery over your King or to bend him to your will and purpose—for he will do as he chooses!"

"It has come to this then," replied Eckhardt without stirring from the spot and utterly disregarding Otto's increasing nervousness. "It has come to this! Are there no chaste and fair maidens in your native land? Maidens of high birth and lineage, fit to adorn an emperor's couch? Must you needs come hither,—hither,—to this thrice accursed spot, to love an alien, to love a Roman, and of all Romans, a married woman—the wife of your arch-enemy, the Senator? Are you blind, King Otto? Can you not see the game? You alone—of all? Deem you the proud, merciless Stephania, the consort of the Senator, who hates us Teutons more than he does the fiend himself,—would meet you here in this secluded spot, with her husband's knowledge,—with her husband's connivance,—simply to listen to your dreams and vagaries? Can you not see that you are but her dupe? King Otto, you have refused to listen to my warnings: —there is sedition rife in Rome. Retire to the Aventine, bar the gates to every one,—I have despatched my fleetest messenger to Tivoli to recall our contingents,—before dawn my Saxons shall hammer at the gates of Rome!"

Otto gazed at the speaker as if the latter addressed him in some unknown tongue.

"Sedition in Rome?" he replied like one wrapt in a dream. "You are mad! The Romans love me! Even as I do them! I will not stir an inch! I remain!"

Eckhardt breathed hard. He must carry his point; he felt oppressed by the sense of a great danger.

"And thus it befalls," he said laughing aloud with the excess of bitterness, "that to this hour I owe the achievement of knowing the cause why you have declined the demands of the Electors; that I can bear to them the answer to their importunities; that in this hour I have learned the true reason of your refusing to listen to your German subjects, who crave your return, who love you and your glorious house! You say you will remain! Revel then in your Eden, until she is weary of you and Crescentius spares her the pains of the finish."

"What are you raving?" exclaimed Otto furiously.

"You are mad for love, King Otto, and a frenzied lover is the worst of fools!"

The King blushed, with the consciousness either of his innocence or guilt.

"Since you accuse me," he spoke more calmly, but a strange fire burning in his eyes, "I do not deny it,—Stephania requested a meeting on matters pertaining to Rome, and I have come! And here," Otto continued, inflexible determination ringing in his tones—"and here I will await her, if all hell or the swords of Rome barred the way. Do you hear me,

Eckhardt? Too long have I been the puppet of the Electors. Too long have I suffered your tyranny. My will is supreme,—and who so defies it, is a traitor!"

Eckhardt gazed fixedly into his sovereign's eyes.

"King Otto! Is it possible that you beguile yourself with these specious pretexts? That you assail the honour of those who have followed you hither, who have twice conquered Rome for you? Ay,—no one so blind as he who will not see! I tell you, Stephania is luring you into the betrayal of your honour,—perhaps that of the Senator,—who knows? I tell you she is deceiving you! Or,—if she pretends to love, it is to betray you! You cannot resist her magic,—it is not in humanity to do so, were it thrice subdued by years of fasting. If you repel her now, your victory will be bought with your destruction! Her undying hatred will mark you her own! But if you succumb you are lost,—the Virgin herself could not save you! You shall not remain! You shall not meet her,—not as long as the light of these eyes can watch over your credulous heart!"

Otto had advanced a step. Vainly groping for words to vent his wrath, he paced up and down before the trusted leader of his hosts.

At last he paused directly before him.

"My Lord Eckhardt," he said, "it might content you to rake amidst the slime of the city for matter, with which to asperse a pure and beautiful woman, —as for myself, while my hand can clutch the hilt of

a sword, you shall not!" he exclaimed, yielding at last to the voice of his fiery nature.

"Strike then," Eckhardt replied, raising his arms. "I have no weapon against my King!"

Otto pushed the half drawn sword back into the scabbard.

"For this," he said, "you shall abide a reckoning."

"Then let it be now!" Eckhardt exclaimed in a wild jeering tone. "Go and bid Stephania arm her champion, one against whom I may enter the lists, and I swear to you, that from his false breast I will tear the truth, which you refuse to accept, coming from your friends! But I am not in a mood to be trifled with. You shall not remain, King Otto, and I swear by these spurs, I will rather kill your paramour, than to see you betrayed to the doom which awaits you."

"Are life and death so absolutely in the hands of the Margrave of Meissen?" replied Otto in a towering rage. "In the face of your defiance I will tarry here and abide my fortune."

And clutching Eckhardt's mantle, in his wrath, his eye met the eye of the fearless general.

With a jerk the latter freed himself from Otto's grasp.

"A fool in love: A thing that men spurn and women deride."

Otto's face turned deadly pale.

"You dare? This to your King?"

"I dare everything to save you—everything! Otto —the Romans mistrust you! They love you no longer! They are ripe for a change! The longer you tarry, the fiercer will be the strife. Crescentius would rather destroy the whole city than let it be permanently wrested from his power. You have been his dupe,—hark—do you hear those voices?"

"Of all my enemies he is the one sincere."

"Then he were the more dangerous! A fanatic is always more powerful than a knave. Do you hear these voices, King Otto?"

Otto was pacing the terrace with feverish impatience.

"I hear nothing! I hear nothing! Go—and leave me!"

"And know you sold,—betrayed,—by that—"

A shadow crossed his path, noiseless on the velvety turf.

Before them stood Stephania.

"Finish your words, my Lord Eckhardt," she said facing the Margrave. "Pray, let not my presence mellow your speech."

"And it shall not!" retorted Eckhardt hotly.

"And it shall!" thundered Otto rushing upon him. "Upon your life, Eckhardt, one insult and—"

Stephania laid a tranquillizing finger on Otto's arm.

"I have heard all," she said, pale as marble, but smiling. "And I forgive."

"You have heard his accusation—and you forgive, Stephania?" cried Otto, gazing incredulously into her eyes.

"You had faith in me—I thank you—Otto!" she replied softly, and sweeping by Eckhardt, she extended both hands to the King. He grasped them tightly within his own and, bending over them, pressed his fevered lips upon them.

Suddenly all three raised their heads and listened.

A sound not unlike a distant trumpet blast, rent the stillness of night, seemed to swell with the echoes from the hills, then died away.

"What is this?" the German leader questioned, puzzled.

"The monks are holding processions,—the streets are swarming with the cassocks,—their chants can be heard everywhere."

Stephania gazed at Otto, as she answered Eckhardt's question.

The Margrave scrutinized her intently.

"I knew not the Senator loved the black crows so well, as to furnish music to their march," he replied slowly. Then he turned to the woman.

"Hear me, Stephania! You see me here, but you know not that I have ordered all my men-at-arms to attend me at the gates below! If the King's foolish passion and blind trust have been the means to execute your hellish design, know that with my own

hand I will avenge your remorseless treachery, for I will slay you if aught befall him in this night, and hang your lord, the Senator of Rome, from the ramparts of Castel San Angelo,—I swear it by the Five Wounds!"

For a moment Stephania stood petrified with terror and unable to utter a single word in response. Then she turned to Otto.

"This man is mad! Order him begone,—or I will go myself. He frightens me!"

She made a movement as if to depart, but Otto, divining her intention, barred the way.

"Stephania—remain!" he entreated. "Our general is but prompted by an over great zeal for our welfare," he concluded, restraining himself with an effort. Then breathing hard, he extended his arm, and with flaming eyes spoke to Eckhardt:

"Go!"

"I go!" the general replied with heavy heart. "If anything unusual happens in this night, King Otto, remember my words—remember my warning. My men are stationed at the wicket, through which you came. There is no other exit,—save to perdition. I leave you—may the Saints keep you till we meet again!"

With these words Eckhardt gathered his mantle about him and stalked away, leisurely at first, as if to lull to sleep every inkling of suspicion in Stephania, then faster and faster, and at last he fairly flew up

the winding road of Aventine. Those whom he met shied out of his path, as if the fiend himself was coming towards them and shaking their heads in grave wonder and fear, muttered an Ave and told their beads.

Strange noises were in the air. The chants of the monks were intermingled with the fierce howls and shrieks of a mob, harangued by some demagogue, who fed their discontentment with arguments after their own heart. Everywhere Eckhardt met skulking countenances, scowling faces, while half-suppressed oaths fell on his ear. Arrived on the Aventine he immediately ordered Haco, Captain of the Imperial Guards, to his presence.

"Bridle your charger and ride to Tivoli as if ten thousand devils were on your heels," he said, handing the young officer an order he had hurriedly and barbarously scratched on a fragment of parchment. "Pass through the Tiburtine gate and return with sunrise,—life and death depend upon your speed!"

Withdrawing immediately, Haco saddled his charger and soon the echoes of his horse's hoofs died away in the distance, while Eckhardt hurriedly entered the palace.

After he had vanished from the labyrinth of the Minotaurus, Otto and Stephania faced each other for a moment in silence. The Southern night was very still. The noises from the city had died down. By

countless thousands the stars shone in the deep, fathomless heavens.

It was Otto who first broke the heavy silence.

"Stephania," he said, "why are you here to-night?"

"What a strange question," she replied, "and from you."

"Yes—from me! From me to you. Is it because—"

He paused as if oppressed by some great dread. He dared not trust himself to speak those words in her hearing.

"Is it because I love you?" she complemented the sentence, drawing him down beside her. But the seed of doubt Eckhardt had planted in his heart had taken root.

"Stephania," he said with a strange voice, without replying directly to her question. "I have trusted in you and I will continue to trust in you, even despite the whisperings of the fiend,—until with my own eyes I behold you faithless. Eckhardt has been with me all day," he continued with unsteady voice, "he has warned me against you, he has warned me to place no trust in your words, that you are but the instrument of Crescentius; that he has organized a mutiny; that he but awaits your signal for my destruction. He has warned me that you have planned my seizure and selected this spot, to prevent intervention. Stephania, answer me—is it so?"

For a moment the woman gazed at him in dread silence, unable to speak.

"Did you believe?" she faltered at last with averted gaze, very pale.

"I am here!" he replied.

Stephania laughed nervously.

"I had forgotten!" she stammered. "How good of you!"

Otto regarded her with silent wonder, not unmingled with fear, for her countenance betrayed an anxiety he had never read in it before. And indeed her restlessness and terror seemed to increase with every moment. She answered Otto's questions evidently without knowing what she said, and her gaze turned frequently and with a devouring expression of anxiety and dread toward Castel San Angelo. Maddened and desperate with her own perfidy, she began to ruminate the most violent extremities, without perceiving one exit from the labyrinth of guile. The significance of Otto's question, his earnestness and his faith in herself put the crown on her misery. Her eyes grew dim and her senses were failing. Her limbs quaked and for a moment she was unable to speak. Otto bent over her in positive fear. The pale face looked so deathlike that his heart quailed at the thought of life,—life without her.

"I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it," he muttered, holding her hands in his tight grasp.

It seemed as if she had read his inmost,

unspoken thoughts.

"And yet it must come at last!" she replied softly, as from the depths of a dream. "What is this short span of life for such love as ours? And,—had we even everything we could crave, all the world can give,—would there not be a sting in each moment of happiness at the thought—"

She paused. Her head drooped.

"My happiness is to be with you," he stammered. "I cannot count the cost!"

"Think you that I would count the cost?" she said. "And you love me despite of all those dreadful things, which he—Eckhardt—has poured into your ear?" she continued with low, purring voice.

"Love you—love you!" he repeated wildly. "Oh, I have loved you all my life, even before I saw you,—are you not the embodied form of all those vague dreams of beauty, which haunted my earliest childhood? That beauty, which I sought yearningly, but oh! so vainly in all things, that breathe the divine essence: the lustrous darkness of night, the glories of sunset, the subtle perfume of the rose, the all-reflecting ocean of poetry in which the Universe mirrors itself? In all have I found the same deep void, which only love can fill. Not love you," he continued covering both hands he held in his with fevered kisses, "oh, Stephania, I love you better than myself,—better than all things,—here and hereafter."

Almost paralyzed with fear she listened to his

mad pleading.

"And can nothing—nothing,—destroy this love you have for me?" she faltered.

He took her yielding form in his arms. He drew her closer and closer to his heart.

"Nothing,—nothing,—nothing."

"I love you—Otto—" she whispered deliriously.

"To the end, dearest,—to the end!"

From a tavern at the foot of the hill the sounds of high revelry were borne up to them. The air was filled with the odour of dead leaves and dying creation, that subtle premonition of the end to come.

"And you have anxiously waited my coming?" she said, hiding her face in his arms.

"Oh, Stephania! The hour-glass, with which passion measures a lover's impatience, is a burning torch to his heart."

Supreme stillness intervened again.

Stephania raised her head like a deer in covert, listening for the hunters, listening for the baying of the hounds, coming nearer and nearer. Gladly at this moment would she have given her life to undo what she had done. But it was too late. Even this expiation would not avail! There was nothing now to do, but to nerve herself for that supreme moment, when all would be severed between them for aye and ever; when she would stand before him the embodiment of deception; when he would spurn her as one spurns the reptile, that repays the caressing hand with its

deadly sting; when he would curse her perhaps,—cast from him for ever the woman who had cut the thread of the life he had laid at her feet—and all, for what?

That Johannes Crescentius, the Senator of Rome might again come into his own, that he might again lord the rabble which now skulked through the streets to avenge some imaginary wrong on the head of the youth, whose love for them was to be the pass word for his destruction.

And Johannes Crescentius was her husband and lord. He loved her with as great a love as his nature was capable of, and whatever faults might be laid at the door of his regime, if faults they could even be termed in a lawless, feudal age, that knew no right save might,—to her he had never been untrue.

Stephania endeavoured to persuade herself that, what she had done, she had done for the good of Rome. Monstrous deception! She despised the mongrel rabble too heartily to even have raised a finger in its behalf. If they starved, would Crescentius give them bread? If they froze—would Crescentius clothe them? Then there remained but the question, should a Roman govern Rome, or the alien,—the foreigner. Was it for her to decide? How unworthy the cause of the sacrifice she was about to bring on the altar of her happiness. But which ever way the tongue of the scales inclined,—it was too late!

Otto had buried his head on Stephania's bosom.

She had encircled it with her arms and with gentle fingers that sent a delirium through his brain, she stroked his soft brown hair, while the cry of Delilah hovered on her lips.

He looked up into her eyes.

"Stephania,—why are you here to-night?" he whispered again, and he felt the tremor which quivered through her body.

"I came to bring you the answer which you craved at our last meeting," she replied softly. "Can you guess it?"

"Then you have chosen," he gasped, as if he were suddenly confronted with the crisis in his existence, when that which he held dearest must either slip away from him for ever or remain his through all eternity.

"I have chosen!" she whispered, her arms tightening round him, as if she would protect him against all the world.

"Kiss me," she moaned.

One delirious moment their lips met. They remained locked in tight embrace, lip to lip, heart to heart.

There was a brief breathless silence.

Suddenly the great bell of the Capitol rolled in solemn and majestic sounds upon the air, and was answered from all the belfries of Rome. But louder than the pealing tocsin, above the wild screaming and clanging of the bells rose the piercing cry:

"Death to the Saxon! Death to the King!"

They both raised their heads and listened. With wild-eyed wonder Otto gazed into Stephania's eyes. The marble statues around them were hardly as white as her features.

"What is this?" he questioned.

There was a stir in the depths of the streets below. Shouts and jeers of strident voices were broken by authoritative commands. The tramp of mailed feet was remotely audible, but above all the hubbub and din rose the cry:

"Death to the Saxon! Death to the King!"

When the first peals of the great bell quivered on the silent night air, Stephania had, with a low wail, encircled Otto's head with her arms, pressed him closely to her, as if to shield him from harm. Then, as louder and wilder the iron tongues shrieked defiance through the air, as, turning her head, she saw the fatal spear points of the Albanians gleaming through the thicket, she suddenly shook him off. With a stifled outcry, she rose to her feet; so abruptly that Otto staggered and would have fallen, had he not in time caught himself with the aid of a branch.

To the King it gave the impression of a wild hideous dream. Like one dazed, he stared first at the woman, then down the declivity.

Directly beneath where he stood a scribe was haranguing the crowds, descanting on the ancient glory of the Romans and exhorting his listeners to

exterminate all foreigners. From Castel San Angelo came an incessant sound of trumpets, which, mingling with the brazen roar of bells seemed to shake the earth. Torches lighted the streets with their smoky crimson glare. People hurried hither and thither, jostling, pushing, trampling upon each other like black shadows, like living phantoms. The fiery glow, the voices of the angry mob, the pealing of the bells,—they all struck Stephania's heart with a thousand talons of remorse and shame. Fearstruck and trembling, she gazed into the pale face of Theophano's son.

Otto was watching the distant pandemonium as one would gaze upon some strange, hideous ceremonial of occult meaning,—then he turned slowly to Stephania.

For a moment they faced each other in silence, then he stroked the disordered hair from his forehead like one waking from a dream.

"You have betrayed me."

Her lips were tightly compressed; she made no reply.

The next moment he was on his knees before her.

"Forgive me, forgive me," he faltered, "I knew not what I said!"

She breathed hard. For a moment she closed her eyes in mortal anguish.

"Then you still believe in me?" She spoke hardly

above a whisper.

"With all my heart," he replied, grasping her hands and covering them with kisses. For a moment she suffered him to exhaust his endearments, then she jerked them away from him.

"Then bid your hopes and dreams farewell and scatter your faith to the winds," she shrieked, almost beside herself with the memory of her vow and its consequences. "You are betrayed,—and I have betrayed you!"

Otto had staggered to his feet and gazed upon the beautiful apparition who faced him like some avenging fury, as if he thought that she had gone suddenly mad. For a moment she paused, as if summoning supreme energy for the execution of her task, as if to lash herself into a paroxysm sufficient to make her forget those accusing eyes and his all-mastering love.

"I have betrayed you, Kong Otto! I, Stephania, a woman! Ah! You believed my words! You were vain enough to imagine that the wife of the Senator of Rome could love you,—you,—her greatest foe, you, the Saxon, the alien, the intruder, who came here to rob us of our own, to wrest the sceptre from the rightful lord of the Seven Hills. You hoped Stephania would aid you to realize your mad dreams! How unsophisticated, how deliciously innocent is the King of the Germans! Know then that I have lied to you, when I feigned interest in your cause, know that I

have lied to you when I professed to love you! Love you," she cried, while her heart was breaking with every word she hurled against him, who listened to her speech in frozen terror. "Love you! Fool! And you were mad enough to believe it! Do you hear those bells? Do you hear the great tocsin from the Capitol? Do you hear the alarums from the ramparts of Castel San Angelo? They are calling the Romans to arms! They are summoning the Romans to revolt! Do you hear those shouts? Death to the Germans? They are for you,—for you,—for you!"

Again she paused, breathing hard, collecting all her woman's strength to finish what she had begun.

The end had come,—her task must be finished.

Her voice now assumed its natural tones, the more dreadful in their import, as she spoke in the old deep, soulful accents.

"I have lulled you to sleep," she continued, breaking the bridge, which led back into the past, span by span,—"that the Senator of Rome may once again come into his own! I have pretended interest in your monkish fancies, that Rome may once more shake off the invader's accursed yoke. I am a Roman, King Otto,—and I hate you,—hate you with every beat of my heart, that beats for Rome. King Otto, you are doomed."

He had listened to her words with wide, wondering eyes, his heart frozen with terror and anguish, his face pale as that of a corpse, returned

from its grave. He heard voices in the distance and the tread of armed feet coming nearer and nearer. Yet he stirred not. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. There were strange rushing sounds in his ears, like mocking echoes of Stephania's words.

At last his lips moved, while with a desperate effort he tried to shake off the spell.

"May God forgive you, Stephania," he gasped like a drowning man, reeled and caught himself, gazing upon her with delirious, burning eyes.

Closer and closer came the tramp of mailed feet.

Terror struck, Stephania gazed into Otto's face. The fiercest denunciation would not have so completely unnerved her as the simple words of the youth. She almost succumbed under the weight of her anguish.

"Fly,—King Otto,—fly,—save yourself," she gasped, staggering toward him in the endeavour to shake off the fatal torpor which had seized his limbs. But he saw her not, he heard not her warning. Listlessly he gazed into space.

But had those who rushed down the avenue been his enemies and death his certain lot, there would not have been time for flight.

Stephania heaved a sigh of relief as in their leader she recognized the Margrave of Meissen, followed by a score or more of the Saxon guard.

Her own fate she never gave a thought.

"Do you hear those sounds?" thundered the

gaunt German leader, rushing with drawn sword upon the scene and pausing breathlessly before Stephania's victim. "Do you hear the great bell of the Capitol, King Otto? All Rome is in revolt! Did I not warn you against the wiles of the accursed sorceress, who, like a vampire fed on your heart's blood? But by the Almighty God, she shall not live to enjoy the fruits of her hellish treason."

And suiting the action to the word, Eckhardt rushed upon Stephania, who stood calmly awaiting his onslaught and seemed to invite the stroke which threatened her life, for her lips curled in haughty disdain and her gaze met Eckhardt's in lofty scorn.

The sight of her peril accomplished what Stephania's efforts had failed to do. Swift as thought Otto had hurled himself between Eckhardt and his intended victim.

"Back," he thundered with flaming eyes. "Only over my dead body lies the way to her!"

Eckhardt's arm dropped, while a wrathful laugh broke from his lips.

"You are magnificent, King Otto! Defend the woman who has foully betrayed you! Be it so! We have no time for argument. Her life is forfeited and by the Eternal God, Eckhardt never broke his oath. Follow me! We must reach the Aventine, ere the Roman rabble bar the way. We are not strong enough to break through their numbers and they swarm like ants."

Otto stirred not.

Calmly he gazed at the Margrave, as if the danger did in no wise concern him. And while Eckhardt stamped his feet in impotent rage, mingling a score or more pagan imprecations with the very unchristian oaths he muttered between his clenched teeth, Otto turned to Stephania. His voice was calm and passionless as one's who has emerged from a terrible ordeal and has nothing more to lose, nothing more to fear.

"What will you do?" he said. "The streets are no safe thoroughfare for you in this night."

"I know not,—I care not," she replied with dead voice, from which all its bewitching tones had faded.

"Then you must come with us!" he said. "My men shall safely conduct you to Castel San Angelo. You have the word of their King!"

"By the flames of purgatory! Are you stark mad, King Otto?" roared Eckhardt, almost beside himself with rage. "Come with us she shall, but as hostage for Crescentius,—and eye for eye,—tooth for tooth!"

He did not finish. Otto waved his hand petulantly.

"The King of the Germans has pledged his word for Stephania's safe conduct, and the King of the Germans will be obeyed," he spoke, his voice the only calm and passionless thing in all the storm and uproar, which assailed them on all sides. "Through the secret passage lies her only safety. She cannot go

as she came!"

Eckhardt's eyes fairly blazed with rage.

"Secret passage!" he roared, nervously gripping the hilt of his enormous sword. "Secret passage? Are you raving, King Otto? What secret passage?"

But vainly did the Margrave endeavour to make his gestures explain his denial. Otto cared not, if indeed he noted them at all.

He beckoned to Stephania.

"Come with us!" he spoke in the same apathetic, listless tone. "Fear nothing. You have the word of the German King,—he has never broken it!"

Whether the terrible reproach implied in his words increased the stifling anguish in her heart, whether she dared not trust herself to speak, Stephania silently turned to go. But divining her intent, Otto caught at her mantle.

"Now by all the fiends!" shouted Eckhardt, unable longer to restrain himself, dashing between Stephania and the King and severing the latter's hold on the woman—"Since your heart is set upon it, I will not harm the—"

He paused involuntarily.

For from Otto's eyes there flashed upon him such a terrible look that even the old, practiced warrior stepped back abashed.

"Speak the word and I will slay you with my own hands!" spoke the son of Theophano, and for a moment subject and king faced each other in the

dread silence with flaming eyes, and faces from which every trace of colour had faded.

Eckhardt lowered his weapon.

His countenance betrayed untold anxiety.

"You invite certain destruction, King Otto," he remonstrated with subdued voice. "What matters it, if her countrymen do slay her? One serpent the less in Rome! Your mercy leads you to perdition,—-what mercy has she shown to you?"

Otto had relapsed into his former state of apathy.

"She goes with us," he said like an automaton, that knows but one speech. "Through the secret passage lies her only safety."

"She will betray it and you and all of us," growled the German leader, whose very beard seemed to bristle with wrath at Otto's obstinacy.

Otto shrugged his shoulders.

"I have spoken!"

"Guards, close round!" thundered Eckhardt. "And every dog of a Roman who approaches upon any pretext whatsoever,—strike him dead without word or parley!"

The Saxon spearmen who had guarded the approach to the avenue gathered hurriedly round them. For at that moment the great bell of the Capitol, whose tolling had ceased for a time, began its clamour anew and the shouts of the masses, subdued and hushed during the interval, rose with

increased fury. They drowned the great sob of anguish, which had welled up from Stephania's heart, but when Otto, his attention distracted for the nonce by the uproar, turned round, the woman had gone.

Nor did Eckhardt, inwardly rejoicing over the revelation, grant him one moment's respite. Surrounded by his trusty Saxon spears, Otto felt himself hurried along towards the gates of his palace, which they reached in safety, the insurrection having not yet spread to that region.

Vainly had he strained his gaze into the haze of the moonlit night. The end had come,—Stephania had gone.

When he reached his chamber, Otto sank senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER XV

THE STORM OF CASTEL SAN ANGELO



he sun of autumn hung a bloody circle over Rome, but seemed to give neither light nor warmth. The city itself presented a seething cauldron of rebellion. The gates had been closed against the advancing Germans and when, with the first streak of dawn, Haco had arrived under the Marian hill with the contingents from Tivoli, they found themselves before a city, which had to be reconquered ere they could even join the comparatively weak garrison on the Aventine, where Otto was a prisoner in his own palace. During the night Eckhardt had assayed to reach a place of concealment on the Tiburtine road, where he awaited the arrival of his forces, which he had immediately marshalled in their respective positions. Castel San Angelo rested on an impregnable rock, but Eckhardt had sworn a terrible oath, that he would scale its walls before the sun of another day rose behind the Alban hills; and although a rain of arrows

and bolts, so dense and deadly that it threatened to break the line of the assailants, was poured into the German ranks, it did not stay their determined advance.

The first line of assault consisted of heavy-armed foot-soldiers with round bucklers, short swords and massive battle-axes. Forming in close phalanx, these men of gigantic size, in hauberks and round helmets, fixed shield to shield like an iron wall, advanced in dense array to the charge. They were led on the right wing by the imperial guard, whose huge statures, fair long hair and gleaming halberds formed a strange contrast to the lighter arms and the more pliant forms of the defenders of Castel San Angelo.

The Roman army, which the Senator had stationed round the base of his formidable stronghold, could not withstand the shock of this tremendous phalanx, so far heavier in arms and numbers, and with all their courage and skill they wavered and broke into flight. Many were precipitated into the Tiber and drowned miserably within sight of their helpless comrades; most of them were mowed down by the pursuing German cavalry or shot by the German archers.

After the terrible defeat of the Senator's army by the first line of Eckhardt's battle-array, the squadrons of the second line of battle spread over the plain, preparatory to the last and final assault. The vast stronghold of the Senator looked as proud and

menacing as ever; reared upon its almost impenetrable granite-foundation it formed even at this date one of the most powerful fortresses of Western Europe. Its huge battlements were defended with a long chain of covered towers, from which Albanian bowmen shot down every living thing, that approached the circuit of its walls. Every attempt to scale the lofty stronghold with ladders had during former sieges been beaten off with fearful loss, after desperate combats at all hours of day and night. Although he had twice stormed the walls of Rome, Eckhardt had never succeeded in capturing the fortress, which he must call his own, who would be master of the Seven Hills. But the wrath of the Margrave defied every obstacle, laughed to scorn every impediment which might retard his vengeance upon the cursed rabble of Rome, those mongrel curs, with whom rebellion was a pastime and for whom oaths existed but to be broken. All day long the Germans had hurled themselves against the massive walls, sustaining terrible losses, while those within the city were equally severe. All day long they had plied their huge catapults, which hurled masses of rock and iron into the city and fortress, keeping up an incessant bombardment. They also used the balista, an immense fixed cross-bar, which shot bolts with extraordinary force and precision upon the battlements, whereon nothing living could stand exposed without certain destruction.

Seated motionless on his coal-black charger, like some dark spirit of revenge, plainly visible from the ramparts of Castel San Angelo, Eckhardt directed the assault of his army at this point, or that, according as the situation required. Many an arrow and stone struck the ground close by his side, but he seemed to bear a charmed existence and never stirred an inch from his chosen vantage ground. Already had a breach been made in one or two places in the base of the walls, yet had he not given the order to break into the city, but seemed to watch for some weak spot in the defences. It was verging towards evening. The besiegers could hear the cries and the rage of those within the walls, who dared not remain in the streets during the terrific rain of iron and stones hurled by the German machines. Despite their strenuous efforts, Castel San Angelo hurled defiance into the teeth of the Margrave, who demanded its surrender, and the task of capturing the stronghold, otherwise than by starving the garrison, seemed to hold out smaller promise with every moment, as the sun hurried on his western course. The sky became overcast and the night bade fair to be stormy.

During the assaults of the day, Eckhardt had many times strained his gaze towards the road leading to Tivoli, as if he expected some succour from that direction, when, as the sun was sinking in a crimson haze, a cloud of dust met the general's gaze and at the same moment a thunderous shout

rose from the imperial hosts. Drawn by twelve oxen, there appeared at the edge of the plain a new engine of assault, which Eckhardt had ordered constructed, anticipating an emergency, such as the present. It had remained with the host in Tivoli, and despite the comparatively short distance, it had required almost twenty-four hours to draw it over the sloping ground to Rome. It was a tower of three stages, constructed of massive beams, protected by frames and hides and crowned with a stout roof. It was now being rolled forward on broad heavy wheels to afford means of scaling the walls. As it slowly approached the ramparts of Castel San Angelo, the assault of the Germans, renewed on the whole line of the walls with redoubled fury, presented a terrific sight. The catapults and balistae were pouring stones, bolts and arrows on the defenders; the whizzing of the missiles, the shouts of the assailants, answered by furious yells from the walls, the roar of the flames, as here and there a house near the city walls caught fire from burning pitch, made a truly infernal din.

"The turret is within twenty feet of the walls,—on a level with the ramparts,—fifteen,—ten feet,—down with the scaling bridge!" shouted Haco, who was standing by the side of Eckhardt. Crashing, the gang-way went from the front of the pent house. But as he spoke, the soft earth, whereon the turret stood, gave way. The gang-way fell short, the turret toppled and split. The besieged hurled on it bolts, rocks,

boiling pitch and fire balls, and presently it collapsed with a sudden crash and fell in a heap, mangling and burying the men inside it and beneath it, and at once it blazed up, a mass of burning timber.

"It is, as I feared," said Eckhardt. "No turret lofty enough to overtop these walls can be brought up to work on ground like this. We must resort to the catapults! Let all be brought into action at once!"

The destruction of the great, movable turret, on the success of which such hopes and fears had been placed, caused the ranks of assailants and defenders to pause for a space, while both were watching the spectacle of the blazing pile. A lull ensued in the storm of battle, during which Eckhardt, while he seemed to direct his men towards a certain point near the walls, never released his gaze from Castel San Angelo. Then he gave a whispered order to Haco, who set off at once on its execution. An appalling crash rent the sky, as the German machines began their simultaneous attack on the walls of Rome, while a storming-column, forming under their protection, rushed forth towards the gates of the city. The strain on the mind of Eckhardt, who alone knew the intense crisis of that moment, was almost unbearable. He must succeed this very night; for on the morrow the peremptory order of the Electors would recall his forces beyond the Alps. There would be no respite; there could be no resistance. His only salvation lay in their undaunted courage and their

ignorance of the impending decree.

The evening grew more and more sultry.

At intervals a gust came flying, raising the white dust and rustling in the dying leaves. It passed by, leaving the stillness on the Aventine more still than before. Nothing was to be heard, save the dull, seemingly subterranean growls of thunder, and against this low threatening and sullen roar the pounding of Eckhardt's catapults against the walls. At times a flash broke across the clouds; then all stood out sharp and clear against the increasing darkness. Only the watchfires of Castel San Angelo were reflected in the sluggish tide of the Tiber, from which rose noisome odours of backwater, rotting fern leaves and decaying wood.

The Piazza of St. Peter meanwhile presented a singular spectacle, congested as it was with a multitude, which, in the glare of the lightning, resembled one waving mass of heads,—a cornfield before it has been swept by a tornado. It was an infuriated mob, which listened to the harangue of Benilo, interrupting the same ever and ever with the hysterical shout: "Death to the Saxon! Death to the Emperor!"

"Blood of St. John!" exclaimed an individual in the coarse brown garb of a smith, "Why do we bellow here? Let us to the Aventine—to the Aventine!"

His eye met that of Il Gobbo the grave-digger.

He pounced upon him like an eagle on his prey, shaking him by the shoulder.

"Gobbo! Dog! Assassin! Art deaf to good news! I tell thee, there is strife in the city,—some new sedition! It may be that our friends have conquered —down with the tyrant and oppressor! Down with the Saxon! Down with everything!"

And he laughed—a hoarse, mad laughter.

"We Romans shall yet be free,—think of it, thou villain,—a thousand curses on thee!"

The artisan had correctly interpreted the temper of the Romans, when he raised his shout: To the Aventine! To the Aventine!

"Romans! We give our enemies red war! War to the knife!" screamed the speaker at the conclusion of his harangue.

"Death to the Saxons! Death to the King!" came the answering yell.

In the midst of all this some partisan of the King ventured to reason with the mob. It was impossible to distinguish in the ensuing mêlée, but in the distance a man was being tossed and torn by the mob. For a moment his white face rose above the sea of heads, with all the despair which a drowning man shows, when it rises for the last time above the waves, then it sank back and something mangled and shapeless was flung out into the great Piazza, where it lay still.

"To the Aventine! To the Aventine!" shouted the

mob, and armed with all sorts of rude weapons they trooped off, brandishing their clubs and staves and shouting confused maledictions.

Count Ludeger of the Palatinate, to whom Eckhardt had entrusted the King's safety, had made sure that all approaches were locked and barred, while he had disposed his spearmen and archers in such a manner as to make it appear, in the case of assault, that he commanded a much superior number, than were actually at his disposal.

The warlike Count Palatine, who, aroused on an alarm, had instantly equipped himself with casque and sword, stood listening to what was passing outside, sniffing the air and rolling his eyes as if he desired nothing better than a conflict. Arranging his archers round the barred gate, with the order to hold their bows in readiness, he descended to the entrance which was surrounded by a howling mob, who demanded admittance or, if denied, declared they would enter by force. After having surveyed the assailants through a wicket, and having convinced himself that they were of the baser class, he demanded to speak with the leader of the mob. A surly individual, armed with a club, came boldly forward and demanded to see the King.

"For what purpose?" asked the Count Palatine.

"That is,—as we choose!" replied the ruffian.

By this time the archers had mounted the roof of the palace, while Count Ludeger stood in the

foreground. To him the routing of such a rabble seemed a task not worth speaking of, and it was not his intention to parley. He dared not open the gates until he was prepared to act, therefore mounting a balcony in the upper story of the palace, which looked over the entrance, he stood fully visible from where the invaders stood, whose numbers swelled with every moment. Then advancing to the parapet, he made a signal, demanding silence, and spoke in a voice audible to every ear in the throng:

"Dogs! You came hither thinking the palace was defenceless. You wish to see the King. Off! Away with your foul odours and your yelping throats! And if when you have turned tail, any cur among you dares bark back, he shall pay for it with an arrow through his chine! Away with you!"

The crowd seemed to waver and to look for their leader, but the Count Palatine gave them little time. Raising his hand he waved a signal to the archers. The low growling and snarling of the mob swelled to a yell of terror, as three score or more of their number fell under the hail of arrows. At the same moment the gate of the palace was thrown open and the guards charged the Roman mob with drawn swords, mowing down all that were in their path. Back fell the first rank of the rioters, pressing against those in the rear, and with an outcry of terror the crowd scattered in flight.

From the balcony of his palace, Otto had

witnessed the scene which had just come to a close. He saw hatred and vengeance around him in the eyes of the populace. He knew himself to be hated, deserted, betrayed, most unjustly, most cruelly, despite all he had done for the state and the people. After the mob had departed, he retreated to his chamber. Here his strength seemed utterly to forsake him. Calling his attendants, they took from him his cloak, his diadem, and his sword of state, they unlaced the imperial buskins and gilt mail, in which he was encased. He seemed eager to fling from him his gilded trappings, while his attendants watched him in perplexity and fear. He spoke not, nor gave any sign.

At length Count Ludeger, presuming on his high office, broke the silence.

"By the Mother of God, we pray you, shake off this grief and take heed of the manifold perils which surround your throne and life. You are surrounded with traitors, intrigues and plots! And the one—once nearest to your heart is your greatest foe!"

Otto raised his head and glared at the speaker like a lion at bay, but spoke not, and again covered his face and sank upon the couch.

The storm clouds gathering over Rome were scarce as dark as those on Count Ludeger's brow. For a time intense silence prevailed. At last, carried away by Otto's mute despair, the Curopalates ventured to approach the King and whispered a word in his ear.

Otto looked up, pale, staring.

Count Ludeger advanced and knelt before the emperor.

"My liege—what shall I say to the Electors?"

There was a breathless silence.

Then Otto raised himself erect on his couch.

"Say to them,—that I will die in Rome—in Rome —"

He checked himself and looked round.

"Leave me! Begone all of you!" he said. "Set double guards at the doors of this chamber and admit no one on pain of death.—I choose to be alone to-night!"

"And may not I even share my sovereign's solitude?" questioned Benilo with a look of feigned concern in his eyes.

"I wish to be alone!" Otto replied, then he beckoned Count Ludeger to his side. After all had departed, the King turned to the Count Palatine.

"Can we hold out?"

The Count's visage reflected deep gloom.

"All Rome is in the throes of revolt! All day Eckhardt has been pounding the walls of Castel San Angelo—to no avail!"

"He will storm the traitor's lair," Otto replied, "but then?" he questioned as one dream-lost.

Ludeger pointed to Northward. With a deep moan Otto's head drooped and the scalding tears streamed down between his fingers. Betrayed—

betrayed! Not by Crescentius, his natural, his hereditary foe, but by the woman whom he had loved, whom he had worshipped, whom he still loved above all else on earth. What was the possession of Rome, the rule of the universe, to him without her? He could picture to himself no happiness away from her.

When Otto looked up, Count Ludeger was gone.

For a time there was stillness, deep, intense.

A dazzling flash of light, succeeded by a deafening peal of thunder, that was like the wrath of a mighty God,—then came darkness, the howling of the storm, the sobbing of bells tossed and broken by the hurricane, into a wraith of dirge,—and now, as by some fantastic freak of nature, as the wind rose higher and higher, the iron tongue of the bell from the Capitol came wrangling and discordant through the air, as if tortured by some demon of despair. But the howlings and the tempest and the roar of the thunder had a third, most terrible ally to make that night memorable in Rome. It was the wrath of Eckhardt, the Margrave, as he marshalled his hosts to the assault. Terror-stricken the cowardly Romans scattered before the iron avalanches that swept down upon them. The scythe of the enraged mower made wide gaps in their lists and the dead and dying strewed the field in every direction. Little did Eckhardt care how many he mangled and maimed under the hoofs of his iron-shod charger. Had all

Rome been but one huge funeral pyre, he would have exulted. Rome had not been kind to him and the hour of vengeance was at hand at last!

The broken clangour of the bells of Rome, the bellowing of the thunder through the valleys, the howling of the storm—and the shouts of the storming files of his Germans struck Otto's ear in fitful pauses.

For this then he had journeyed to Rome! This was to be the end of the dream!—The man he had trusted was a traitor! The woman whose kisses still burnt upon his lips had sold, betrayed him. The candle sank lower and the shadows deepened; but the tempest howled like a legion of demons over the seven-hilled city of Rome.

What caused him to raise his head after a period of brooding, Otto knew not, nor why the opposite wall with its drear flitting shadows held his gaze spellbound. To his utter discomfiture and amazement he saw the Venus panel noiselessly open, a shadow glided into the chamber and the panel closed behind it.

Ere Otto could utter a word, Stephania stood before him.

He rose and receded before her, as one would before a spectre. Hungrily, madly his eyes gazed into her pale face, despairingly. A strange fire was alight in her orbs, as once more she stood face to face with the youth, whose soul she had absorbed as the

vampire the soul of his victim.

With fingers tightly interlaced she stood before him, then, as he would not speak, she said with a strange smile:

"You see,—I have come back."

He made no reply, but receded from her as some evil spirit to the farthest nook of the chamber.

For a time she seemed at a loss how to proceed; when she spoke again, there was a strange, jarring tone in her voice.

"Fear nothing!" she said, a great sadness vibrating in her speech. "I came not hither to renew old scenes. What has been is past for ever! Strange, that I had to come into your life, King Otto, or that you had to cross the line of mine,—who is to blame? You have once told me that you believe in a Force, called Fate. You have convinced me now,—even if my own suffering had not."

"How came you here?" Otto spoke, hardly above a whisper.

Stephania pointed below.

"Through the secret passage!"

Otto started.

"Mother of Christ!" he exclaimed. "Had they seen you they would have killed you."

A smile of disdain curved her lips.

"I should have welcomed the release."

"But what do you want here—and at this hour?"

"Your Saxons are storming Castel San Angelo. By

a feigned attack they lured its defenders to a part of the ramparts, where no real danger threatened, but to scale the walls on their rear. Send a messenger to Eckhardt to desist. Crescentius is ready to treat for honourable terms."

If there was indeed truth in her words, the message was lost on him, to whom it was conveyed. His heart was dead to the voice of gladness, as it was dead to any added pang of misery.

"Thrice the Senator of Rome has broken his word! His fate lies with himself!" he replied with a shrug.

Stephania's pallor deepened.

She stared at Otto out of large fear-struck eyes.

"You would not give him over to your Saxons?" she spoke impulsively.

"They will take him without that!"

"Castel San Angelo has never been taken,—it shall never be taken! King Otto! Think how many of your best soldiers will be crushed and mangled in the assault,—be merciful!"

"Has Crescentius been merciful to me? I came not hither to deprive him of his own.—I have not struck at the root of his life.—He has taken from me the faith in all that is human and divine,—and through you! A noble game you have played for my soul! You have won, Stephania! But the blood of Crescentius be on his own head!"

There was a lull in the uproar of the elements

without; but new banks of threatening clouds were hurrying from the West, gathering like armies of vengeful spirits over the Seven-Hilled City, and shutting off every breath of air.

An oppression throbbing with nameless fears was upon them,—a hush, as if life had ceased.

Stephania, urged by a strange dread, had stepped to the high oval window whence a view of Castel San Angelo was to be obtained. And as she gazed out into the night with wildly throbbing heart, she grew faint and wide-eyed for terror. A dull roar, like muffled thunder, ceaselessly recurring, the terrible shouts of Eckhardt's Saxons reached her ear.

Would the walls withstand their assault, ere she returned, or would the defenders yield under the terrible hail of iron and leave the Senator of Rome to his doom? Like knells of destiny boom upon boom resounded through the wail of the rising gale.

She pressed her hands despairingly against her temples, as if to calm their tempestuous throbbing, and her lips muttered a prayer, while broken voices came through the storm,— fragments of a chant from near-by cloisters:

"Ave Maria—Gratia Plena—Summa parens clementiae—Nocte surgentes—"

Otto had tiptoed to the doors of the chamber and after carefully listening had locked them. The order he had given to admit no one would secure for him a few moments of immunity from interruption

from without. Supporting himself against a casement he endeavoured to master the awful agony, which upheaved his soul at the sight of the woman who had played with his holiest affections; he tried to speak once, twice, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He thought he would choke.

The brazen blast of a trumpet from the battlements of Castel San Angelo caused him to approach and to step behind Stephania. In the now almost continuous glare of the lightning troops could be seen moving slowly along the walls and base of the fortress. The air pealed with acclamations. A thousand arrows from Frisian bowmen swept the defenders from the walls. The battlements were left naked; ladders were raised, ropes were slung, axes were brandished; of every crevice and projection of the wall the assailants availed themselves; they climbed on each other's shoulders, they leaped from point to point; torches without number were now showered on every thing that was combustible. At length a stockade near the central defence took fire.

They fought no longer in darkness. The flames rolled sheet on sheet upon their heads, mingling their glare with that of the blazing horizon. But the issue was no longer doubtful. Castel San Angelo was doomed. No longer it vindicated its claim to being impregnable. The defenders, reduced in number, exhausted by the ever and ever renewed and desperate attacks, staring in the face of certain

defeat, were becoming visibly disheartened.

Spellbound, both viewed the spectacle, which unfolded itself to their awe-struck gaze. But there was no flush of victory in Otto's face, no gladness in his eyes as, sick at the sight, he turned away. His eyes returned to the woman whose half-averted face shone out in the glow of the conflagration. Never had it seemed to him so mystic, so unearthly, so fair.

The storm was drawing nearer; the thunder bellowed louder through the heavens, the lightning flashes grew ever brighter; the great bell from the Capitol, the lesser bells of Rome, still shrieked forth their insistent clamour on the sultry air.

She silently drew near him, fixing him with her wondrous eyes.

At that moment the lightning rent the clouds and flashed on her pale face. A peal of thunder, now quite overhead, shook earth and sky, rolling through the air in majestic reverberations. Slowly it died away into the great silence, now again rent and broken by the German catapults, by the renewed shouts of the defenders and assailants. Up to this moment Stephania had still hoped that Castel San Angelo would defy the united assaults of the storming Saxons; suddenly, however, a shriek broke from her lips, she turned away from the window and hid her face in her hands. Then she rushed to where Otto was witnessing the progress of the assault and fell on her knees before him.

"Save him!" she moaned, raising her white clasped hands in despairing entreaty. "Save him! Save him!"

He raised her and, looking into her face, he read therein remorse and helpless entreaty. He knew that the moment was irrevocable for both, final and solemn as death. He felt he must break the pregnant silence, yet no word came to his lips. The more he forced his will, to find a solution, the more conscious he became of his own powerlessness and the depth of the abyss which must divide them for ever more.

"Save him, Otto—save him!" she moaned, stretching out her arms towards him,—"You alone can—you alone."

He receded from her.

"I could not save him, even if I would!"

But the woman became frantic in her fear.

The consciousness of the terrible wrong which Crescentius had suffered at her hands, though the most subtle scrutiny of her heart failed to accuse her of a deed, unworthy herself, the unwitting instrument of Fate, added to her despair. She must save the Senator of Rome, even if she should herself pay the penalty of the crime of high treason, of which he stood accused.

"You will not have it said that you crushed your foe under your heels," she cried. "You are too kind, too generous,—Otto! The Senator's resistance is broken. He could not rise a fourth time, if he would

—you have conquered. Otto,—for my sake,—by the memory of the past—"

He raised his arms. Now he was himself.

"Stop!" he said. "Why conjure up that memory which you have so cruelly poisoned and defiled? There was nothing,—even to life itself,—that I would not have given to you in exchange for your love—"

"But that it was not mine to give!" she moaned. "Can you not see?"

"You should have remembered that, ere you slowly but surely wove your net of deception round my heart. I loved you! Foe of mine, as I knew you to be, I trusted you! See, how you have requited this trust! See, what you have made of me! You but entered my life to wreck it! Once I loved the hours and the days and the nights and the stars, now my heart is a burnt-out volcano. And you who have taken all my life from me, now come to me crying for mercy for him, who showed such wondrous mercy for me! And you too—you! Did no pity ever enter your heart, when you saw that you were mercilessly chaining my life to despair? And after you revealed yourself his instrument,—Stephania, are you so mad as to think, that I would save the man who insidiously wrecked my life?"

Almost frozen with horror Stephania had listened to the voice she loved so well. The card she had played, the appeal to his generous nature, had lost. She might have foreseen it. But her wondrous

beauty still exercised its fatal spell. The moments were flying. She must save Crescentius from Eckhardt's wrath.

"You once told me that you loved me," she spoke with choked, dry throat. "You accuse me of having deceived you—ah! how little versed you are in reading a woman's heart!"

And approaching him as of old, she took his hands into hers.

"What do you mean?" Otto replied, while her touch sent the hot blood hurtling through his veins. "Some new conceit, to gain your end?"

She shook her head, while she gazed despairingly toward the Senator's last defence.

"This is not the time," she gasped. "On every moment hangs a life! Otto, save him! Save him for my sake! Can you not see that I love you? Think you, else I should be here? Can you not see that this is my last atonement? Oh, do not let me be guilty of this too! Save him,—save him, ere it is too late!" she moaned, kneeling without releasing his hands, on which she rested her head. "Save him,—save him, King Otto—or his blood be on your head!"

"On my head? On my head?" exclaimed Otto. "Heaven that has witnessed your unfathomable treachery can never ratify this invocation! Never! Never!"

She glanced up despairingly.

"Otto—he knows all! All! I saw it in his looks—

though he never spoke.—He knows—that—I love you!"

"Then you do love me?" Otto replied with large wondering eyes.

"Ask your own heart,—it will answer for mine!"

"Then if you love me,—be mine,—my wife,—my queen!"

"How can I answer you at this moment, how can I? Look yonder,—the stockades are afire,—your Saxons are scaling the walls,—-Otto,—will you have it said that you killed him to possess me?"

He snatched his hands away from her.

"But how can I save him, Stephania?—Collect your woman's wit! How can I?"

"Oh, how they swarm on the parapets!" she moaned. "Mercy, King Otto,—ere it be too late!"

"Let not the King know the mercy in Otto's heart," he replied between irresolution and resentment. "But how can I reach Eckhardt? And think you my messenger would move him? Think you, he would listen to me?"

"You are the sovereign! The King! Have you none that you can send, that you can trust? None, fleet of foot and discreet?"

Otto pondered.

Stephania's gaze was riveted on his face, as the eye of the criminal about to be condemned, hangs on the countenance of his judge, who speaks the sentence. At this moment loud shouts came through

the storm. The Germans were hoisting new ladders for the assault. In the glare of the conflagration and the incessant lightning they could be discerned swarming like ants.

Castel San Angelo appeared doomed indeed.

Otto pushed Stephania into a recess, then he made one bound towards the door. In the anteroom sat Benilo, the Chamberlain. His usually placid countenance seemed in the throes of a tremendous strain. Which way would the scales sink in the balance? A straw might turn the tide of Fate. Benilo waited. He held the last card in the great game. He would only play it at the last moment.

As Otto appeared on the threshold, he glanced up, then arose hurriedly.

"Victory is crowning your arms, King Otto!" he fawned, pointing in the region of the assault. "Soon your hereditary foe will be a myth—a—"

Otto waved his hand impatiently.

"Hasten to Castel San Angelo,—take the secret passage!—You may yet arrive in time to place this order in Eckhardt's hands!—Hurry—on every moment hangs a life."

"A life," gasped the Chamberlain. "Whose life?"

"The Senator's!"

"Ah! It is the order for his execution!" Benilo extended his hand, to receive the scroll, while a strange fire gleamed in his eyes. He had waited wisely.

"It is the order for Eckhardt,—to spare him! Hasten! Lose not a moment! Through the secret passage!"

Benilo stared in Otto's face as if he thought he had gone mad.

"Spare Crescentius? Your enemy? Spare the viper, that has thrice stung you with its poison fang?"

"I implore you by our friendship,—go!—I will explain all to you at a fitter hour;—now there is not time."

"Spare Crescentius!" Benilo repeated as if he were still unable to grasp the meaning.

"The Senator's men will lay no impediment in your way,—and to my Germans you are known.—You will,—you must—arrive in time—I pray you hasten—be gone—"

A sudden light of understanding seemed to flash athwart Benilo's pale features. Through the open door he had seen a woman's gown.

Snatching up his skull-cap, he placed the order intrusted to him inside his doublet.

"I hasten," he spoke. "Not a moment shall be lost!"

And rushing out of the chamber, he disappeared.

Stephania had listened in awestruck wonder. What was the friend of the Senator, the man who had counselled the uprising, doing in the imperial ante-chamber at this hour? But,—perchance this was but another mesh in the great web of intrigue, which

the Romans had spun round their unsuspecting foes. Perhaps,—she trembled, as she thought out the thought,—he was to seize the King, if Crescentius was victorious. He had never left the youth.—Had the Chamberlain become his sovereign's jailer? The ideas rushed confusedly through her brain, where but the one faint hope still glimmered, that Crescentius would escape his doom.

When Otto entered, she held out both hands to him.

"How can I thank you!"

He warded them off, and stepped to the window, whence the progress of the assault could be watched in the intermittent flashes of lightning. The raging storm had temporarily drowned the signals and cries of the combatants, but though the clouds hung low and heavily freighted over the city, not a drop of rain fell. The lightning became more incessant; soon it seemed as if the entire horizon was ablaze and the thunder bellowed in one continuous roar over the Seven Hills.

Stephania had stepped to Otto's side.

"I must go," she said with indescribable mournfulness in her tones. "My place is by his side! Living—or dead! Farewell, King Otto, and forgive—if you can!"

She stretched out her hands towards him. It seemed to him, as if a dark veil was suddenly drawn before his eyes. Despite the lightning there was

nothing but a great darkness around him. His victory would cause a wider, more abysmal gulf between them than his defeat.

If she went from him in this hour, he knew they would never meet on earth again.

At her words he turned and vainly endeavouring to steady his voice, he spoke.

"Stephania,—I cannot let you go! Remain here, until the worst is over! It would mean certain death to you, if my men discovered you,—and perhaps you would hardly escape a similar fate at the hands of your own countrymen."

She shook her head.

"My place is by his side,—no matter what befall! If I am killed,—never was death more welcome! Farewell, Otto—farewell—"

Her voice broke. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed piteously.

He drew them down with gentle force.

"It is not my purpose to detain you here! All I ask of you, is to wait, until my order has had time to reach Eckhardt. After the Senator has yielded,—you may go to him,—I will then myself have you escorted to Castel San Angelo. For the sake of the past,—wait!"

"The past! The past! That can never, never be revived!" she moaned. "Oh, that I were dead, that I were dead!"

He took her in his arms.

"My love,—my own,—I cannot hear you speak thus—take courage! I have long forgiven you!"

Her head rested on his shoulders. For a moment they seemed to have forgotten the world and all around them.

Suddenly the rush of mailed feet resounded in the ante-room. The door of the chamber was unceremoniously thrust open and Haco, captain of the imperial guard, entered the apartment, recoiling almost as quickly as he had done so, at the unexpected sight which met his gaze.

"How dare you?" Otto accosted him with flaming eyes, while Stephania had retreated into the shadows, covering her face, which was pale as death, with her hands.

Eckhardt's envoy prostrated himself before the King.

"I crave the King's pardon—it was my Lord Eckhardt's command to carry straight and unannounced the tidings to the King's ear—your hosts have stormed Castel San Angelo! Your enemy is no more!"

"Rise!" thundered Otto, while Stephania had rushed with a pitiful moan of anguish from her retreat, and was gazing at the messenger, as if life and death sat on his lips. "What do you mean?"

But ere the man could answer, a terrible shriek by his side caused Otto to start. Stephania had rushed to the window. Following the direction of her

gaze, his heart sank within him with the weight of his own despair.

A body was seen swinging from the ramparts,—it needed neither soothsayer nor prophet to explain what had befallen.

Eckhardt had kept his oath.

"When the imperial Chamberlain told him that you were here with the King," Haco addressed the woman, who stared with wide-eyed despair from one to the other, "Crescentius charged in person the invading hosts. Struck down twice, he staggered again to his feet, fighting like a madman in the face of certain death and against fearful odds. When he fell the third time, Eckhardt ordered him suspended from the battlements—to save him the trouble of rising again!" the captain concluded in grim humour.

"What of my pardon for the Senator?" gasped Otto.

"I know of no pardon," replied Haco.

"The pardon of which Benilo was the bearer," Otto repeated.

Haco stared at the King, as if he thought him demented.

"It was the order for the Senator's execution, which the Chamberlain placed in Eckhardt's hand," he replied, "to take place immediately upon his capture."

"Ah! This is your work then!" Stephania broke the terrible silence, which hung over them like

suspended destinies,—creeping towards Otto and pointing to the ramparts of Castel San Angelo, on which the imperial standard was being hoisted. "This you have done to me!—You have lied to me, detaining me here when I should have been with him,—whose dying hour I have filled with a despair that all eternity cannot alleviate,—let me go—I tell you, let me go! Fiend! traitor,—let me go!"

She fought him in wild despair.

Otto had barred her way. Releasing her, he looked straight into her eyes.

"Your own heart tells you, Stephania, this is the work of a traitor,—not mine!"

She gazed at him one moment. She knew his words to be true. But she would not listen to the voice of reason, when her conscience doubly smote her.

"Let me go!" she shrieked. "Let me go! My place is by the side of him you have foully slain,—murdered—after luring me away from him in his dying hour."

"You know not what you say, Stephania. Your grief has maddened you! Is not the word of the King assurance enough, that he himself is the victim of some as yet unfathomable deceit? By the memory of my mother I swear to you—I never wrote that order! Remain here until I hear from Eckhardt,—your safety —"

"Who tells you that I wish to be saved?" she

cried like a lioness at bay. "Remain here with you, whose hands are stained with his blood? Not another moment! You have no claim on Stephania! A crimson gulf has swallowed up the past and his shade divides us in death as it has divided us in life! You shall never boast that you have conquered the wife of the Senator of Rome!"

"Stephania."

He raised his arms entreatingly.

She sprang at him to gain the entrance to the Venus panel, which he covered with his person. For a moment he held her at bay, then she pushed him aside, rushed past him and disappeared in the dark passage, the door of which closed behind her with a sharp clang. She vanished in the subterranean gloom.

Haco had silently witnessed the scene.

Otto seemed to have forgotten his presence, when turning he found himself face to face with the trusty Saxon.

"Did you say—execution?" he addressed the man, his brain whirling.

"Signed by the King!" came the laconic reply.

"You may go! Bid Eckhardt repair hither at the earliest!"

Haco departed. Broken in mind and spirit Otto remained alone. Victory had crowned his cause,—but Death reigned in his heart.

CHAPTER XVI
THE FORFEIT

 rescentius was dead. Stephania's fate was left to the surmise of the victors. Since she had parted from Otto in that eventful night, no one had seen the beautiful wife of the luckless Lord of Castel San Angelo. Eckhardt was gloomier than ever. The storm of the ancient mausoleum had been accomplished with a terrible loss to the victors. The Romans, awed for a time into submission, showed ever new symptoms of dissatisfaction, and it was evident that in the event of a new outbreak, the small band constituting the emperor's bodyguard would not be able to hold out against the enmity of the conquered. The monkish processions continued day and night, and as the Millennium drew nearer and nearer the frenzied fervour of the masses rose to fever height. Fear and apprehension increased with the impending hour, the hour that should witness the End of Time and the final judgment of God. Since the storm of Castel San Angelo, Otto had locked himself in his chamber in the palace on the Aventine. No one save Benilo, Eckhardt and Sylvester, the silver-haired pontiff, had access to his person. Benilo had so far

succeeded in purging himself from the stain of treason, which clung to him since the summary execution of Crescentius, that he had been entirely restored into Otto's confidence and favour. It was not difficult for one, gifted with his consummate art of dissimulation, to convince Otto, that in the heat of combat, the passions inflamed to fever-heat, his general had mistaken the order; and Eckhardt, when questioned thereon, exhibited such unequivocal disgust, even to the point of flatly refusing to discuss the matter, that Benilo appeared in a manner justified, the more so, as the order itself could not be produced against him, Eckhardt having cast it into the flames. His vengeance had not however been satisfied with the death of Crescentius alone, for on the morning after the capture of the fortress, eleven bodies were to be seen swinging from the gibbets on Monte Malo, the carcasses of those who in a fatal hour had pledged themselves to the Senator's support.

So far the Chamberlain's victory seemed complete.

Crescentius and the barons inimical to his schemes were destroyed. There now remained but Otto and Eckhardt, and a handful of Saxons; for the main body of the army had marched Northward with Count Ludeger of the Palatinate, who had exhausted every effort to induce Otto to follow him. Had Crescentius beaten off Eckhardt's assault, Benilo

would in that fatal night have consigned his imperial friend to the dungeons of Castel San Angelo. For this he had assiduously watched in the ante-chamber. At a signal a chosen body of men stationed in the gardens below were to seize the German King and hurry him through the secret passage to Hadrian's tomb.

There now remained but one problem to deal with. With the removal of the last impediment, arrived on the last stepping stone to the realization of his ambition, Benilo could offer Theodora what in the delirium of anticipated possession he had promised, with no intention of fulfilling. He had not then reckoned with the woman's terrible temper, he had not reckoned with the blood of Marozia. She had by stages roused her discarded lover's jealousy to a delirium, which had vented itself in the mad wager, which he must win—or perish.

But one day remained until the full of the moon, but one day within which Theodora might make good her boast. Benilo, who had her carefully watched, knew that Eckhardt had not revisited the groves, he had even reason to believe that Theodora had abandoned every effort to that end. Was she at last convinced of the futility of her endeavour? Or had she some other scheme in mind, which she kept carefully concealed? The Chamberlain felt ill at ease.

As for Eckhardt, he should never leave the groves a living man. Victor or vanquished, he was

doomed. Then Otto was at his mercy. He would deal with the youth according to the dictates of the hour.

When Benilo had on that morning parted from Otto in the peristyle of the "Golden House" on the Aventine, he knew that sombre exultation, which follows upon triumph in evil. Hesitancies were now at an end. No longer could he be distracted between two desires. In his eye, at the memory of the woman, for whom he had damned himself, there glowed the fire of a fiendish joy. Not without inner detriment had Benilo accustomed himself for years to wear a double face. Even had his purposes been pure, the habit of assiduous perfidy, of elaborate falsehood, could not leave his countenance untainted. A traitor for his own ends, he found himself moving in no unfamiliar element, and all his energies now centred themselves upon the achievement of his crime, to him a crime no longer from the instant that he had irresistibly willed it.

On fire to his finger-tips, he could yet reason with the coldest clarity of thought. Having betrayed his imperial friend so far, he must needs betray him to the extremity of traitorhood. He must lead Eckhardt on to the fatal brink, then deliver the decisive blow which should destroy both. But a blacker thought than any he had yet nurtured began to stir in his mind, raising its head like a viper. Could he but discover Stephania! Then indeed his triumph would be complete!

On that point alone Otto had maintained a silence as of the grave even towards the Chamberlain, to whom he was wont to lay bare the innermost recesses of his soul. Never in his presence had he even breathed Stephania's name. Yet Benilo had seen the wife of the Senator in the King's chamber in the eventful night of the storm of Castel San Angelo, and his serpent-wisdom was not to be decoyed with pretexts, regarding the true cause of Otto's illness and devouring grief.

But lust-bitten to madness, the thoughts uppermost in Benilo's mind reverted ever to the wager,—to the woman. Theodora must be his, at any, at every cost. But one day now remained till the hour;—he winced at the thought. Vainly he reminded himself that even therein lay the greater chance. How much might happen in the brief eternity of one day; how much, if the opportunities were but turned to proper account. But was it wise to wait the fatal hour? He had not had speech with Theodora since she had laid the whip-lash on his cheek. The blow still smarted and the memory of the deadly insult stung him to immediate action. Once more he would bend his steps to her presence; once more he would try what persuasion might do; then, should fortune smile upon him, should the woman relent, he would have removed from his path the greater peril, and be prepared to deal with every emergency.

How he lived through the day he knew not. Hour after hour crawled by, an eternity of harrowing suspense. And even while wishing for the day's end, he dreaded the coming of the night.

While Benilo was thus weighing the chances of success, Theodora sat in her gilded chamber brooding with wildly beating heart over what the future held in its tightly closed hand. The hour was approaching, when she must win the fatal wager, else—she dared not think out the thought. Would the memory of Eckhardt sleep in the cradle of a darker memory, which she herself must leave behind? As in response to her unspoken query a shout of laughter rose from the groves and Theodora listened whitening to the lips. She knew the hated sound of Roxané's voice; with a gesture of profound irritation and disgust, she rose and fled to the safety of her remotest chamber, where she dropped upon an ottoman in utter weariness. Oh! not to have to listen to these sounds on this evening of all,—on this evening on which hung the fate of her life! Her mind was made up. She could stand the terrible strain no longer. One by one she had seen those vanish, whom in a moment of senseless folly she had called her friends. Only one would not vanish; one who seemed to emerge hale from every trap, which the hunter had laid,—her betrayer,—her tormentor, he who on this very eve would feast his eyes on her vanquished pride, he, who hoped to fold her this very night in

his odious embrace. The very thought was worse than death. To what a life had his villainy, his treachery consigned her! Days of anguish and fear, nights of dread and remorse! Her life had been a curse. She had brought misfortune and disaster upon the heads of all, who had loved her; the accursed wanton blood of Marozia, which coursed through her veins, had tainted her even before her birth. There was but one atonement—Death! She had abandoned the wager. But she had despatched her strange counsellor, Hezilo, to seek out Eckhardt and to conduct him this very night to her presence. How he accomplished it, she cared not, little guessing the bait he possessed in a knowledge she did not suspect. She would confess everything to him,—her life would pay the forfeit;—she would be at rest, where she might nevermore behold the devilish face of her tormentor.

With a fixed, almost vacant stare, her eyes were riveted on the door, as if every moment she expected to see the one man enter, whom she most feared in this hour and for whom she most longed.

"This then is the end! This the end!" she sobbed convulsively, setting her teeth deep into the cushions in which she hid her face, while a torrent of scalding tears, the first she had shed in years, rushed from her half-closed eyelids.

From the path she had chosen, there led no way back into the world.

She had played the great game of life and she had lost.

She might have worn its choicest crown in the love of the man whom she had deceived, discarded, betrayed, and now it was too late.

But if Eckhardt should not come?

If the harper should not succeed?

Again she relapsed into her reverie. She almost wished his mission would fail. She almost wished that Eckhardt would refuse to again accompany him to the groves. Again she relived the scene of that night, when he had laid bare her arm in the search for the fatal birth-mark. The terrible expression which had passed into his eyes had haunted her night and day. A deadly fear of him seized her.

She dared not remain. She dared not face him again. The very ground she trod seemed to scorch her feet. She must away.

The morrow should find her far from Rome.

The thought seemed to imbue her with new energy and strength. How she wished this night were ended! Again the shouts and laughter from the gardens beneath her window broke on her ear. She closed the blinds to exclude the sounds. But they would not be excluded. Ever and ever they continued to mock her. The air was hot and sultry even to suffocation: still she must prepare the most necessary things for her journey, all the precious gems and stones which would be considered a welcome

offering at any cloister. These she concealed in a mantle in which she would escape unheeded and unnoticed from these halls, over which she had lorded with her dire, evil beauty.

She had scarcely completed her preparations when the sound of footsteps behind the curtain caused her to start with a low outcry of fear. Everything was an object of terror to her now and she had barely regained her self-possession when the parting draperies revealed the hated presence of Benilo.

For a moment they faced each other in silence.

With a withering smile on his thin, compressed lips, the Chamberlain bowed.

"I was informed you were awaiting some one," he said with ill-concealed mockery in his tones. "I am here to witness your conquest, to pay my forfeit,—or to claim it."

Theodora with difficulty retained her composure; yet she endeavoured to appear unconcerned and to conceal her purpose. Her eyelids narrowed as she regarded the man who had destroyed her life. Then she replied:

"There is no wager."

Benilo started.

"What do you mean?"

"There was once a man who betrayed his master for thirty pieces of silver. But when his master was taken, he cast the money on the floor of the temple,

went forth and hanged himself."

"I do not understand you."

A look of unutterable loathing passed into her eyes.

"Enough that I might have reconquered the man,—the love I once despised, had I wished to enter again into his life, the vile thing I am—"

Benilo leered upon her with an evil smile.

"How like Ginevra of old," he sneered. "Scruples of conscience, that make the devils laugh."

She did not heed him. One thought alone held uppermost sway in her mind.

"To-morrow," she said, "I leave Rome for ever."

With a stifled curse the Chamberlain started up.

"With him? Never!"

"I did not say with him."

"No!" he retorted venomously. "But for once the truth had trapped the falsehood on your tongue."

She ignored his brutal speech. He watched her narrowly. As she made no reply he continued:

"Deem you that I would let you go back to him, even if he did not spurn you, the thing you are? You think to deceive me by telling me that the hot blood of Marozia has been chilled to that of a nun? A lie! A thousand lies! Your virtue! This for the virtue of such as you," and he snapped his fingers into her white face. "The virtue of a serpent,—of a wanton—"

There was a dangerous glitter in her eyes.

Her voice sounded hardly above a whisper as

she turned upon him.

"Monster, you—who have wrecked my life, destroyed its holiest ties and glory in the deed! Monster, who made my days a torture and my nights a curse! I could slay you with my own hands!"

He laughed; a harsh grating laugh.

"What a charming Mary of Magdala!"

Her voice was cold as steel.

"Benilo,—I warn you—stop!"

But his rage, at finding himself baffled at the last moment, caused the Chamberlain to overstep the last limits of prudence and reserve. With the stealthy step of the tiger he drew nearer.

"You tell me in that lying, fawning voice of yours that to-morrow you will leave Rome,—to go to him? To give him the love which is mine,—mine—by the redeemed gauge of the sepulchre? And I tell you, you shall not! Mine you are,—and mine you shall remain! Though," he concluded, breathing hard, "you shall be meek enough, when, learning from my own lips what manner of saint you are, he has cast you forth in the street, among your kind! And I swear by the host, I will go to him and tell him!"

She advanced a step towards him, her eyes glowing with a feverish lustre. Her white hands were upon her bosom as if to calm its tempestuous heaving.

He heeded it not, feasting his eyes on her great beauty with the inflamed lust of the libertine.

"I will save you the trouble," she said calmly, "I will tell him myself."

"And what will you tell him? That he has espoused one of the harlot brood of Marozia, one, who has sold his honour—defiled his bed—"

"And slain the fiend who betrayed her!"

A wild shriek, a tussle,—a choked outcry,—she struck—once, twice, thrice:—for a moment his hands wildly beat the air, then he reeled backward, lurched and fell, his head striking the hard marble floor.

The bloody weapon fell from Theodora's trembling hands.

"Avenged!" she gasped, staring with terrible fascination at the spot where he lay.

Benilo had raised himself upon his arm, filing his wild bloodshot eyes on the woman. He attempted to rise,—another moment, and the death rattle was in his throat. He fell back and expired.

There was no pity in Theodora's eyes, only a great, nameless fear as she looked down upon him where he lay. It had grown dark in the chamber. The blue moon-mist poured in through the narrow casement, and with it came the chimes from remote cloisters, floating as it were on the silence of night, cleaving the darkness, as it is cloven by a falling star. Theodora's heart was beating, as if it must break. Lighting a candle she softly opened the door and made her way through a labyrinth of passages and corridors in which her steps re-echoed from the high

vaulted ceilings. Farther and farther she wandered away from the inhabited part of the building, when her ear suddenly caught a metallic sound, sharp, like the striking of a gong.

For a moment she remained rooted to the spot, staring straight before her as one dazed. Then she retraced her steps towards the Pavilion, whence came singing voices and sounds of high revels.

Sometime after she had left her chamber, two Africans entered it, picked up the lifeless body of the Chamberlain, and, after carrying it to a remote part of the building, flung it into the river.

The yellow Tiber hissed in white foam over the spot, where Benilo sank. The mad current dragged his body down to the slime of the river-bed, picked it up again in its swirl, tossed it in mocking sport from one foam-crested wave to another, and finally flung it, to rot, on some lonely bank, where the gulls screamed above it and the gray foxes of the Maremmas gnawed and snapped and snarled over the bleached bones in the moonlight.

CHAPTER XVII

NEMESIS

 hile these events, so closely touching his own life, transpired in the Groves of Theodora, while a triple traitor met his long-deferred doom, and a trembling woman cowered fear-struck and tortured by terrible forebodings in her chambers, Eckhardt sat in the shaded loggia of his palace, brooding over the great mystery of his life and its impending solution; meditating upon his course in the final act of the weird drama. But one resolution stood out clearly defined in all the chaos of his thoughts. He would not leave Rome ere he had broken down behind him every bridge leading back into the past.

It had been a day such as the oldest inhabitants of Rome remembered none at this late season. The very heavens seemed to smoke with heat. The grass in the gardens was dry and brittle, as if it had been scorched by passing flames. A singularly profound stillness reigned everywhere, there being not the slightest breeze to stir the faintest rustle among the dry foliage.

How long Eckhardt had thus been lost in vague speculations on the impending crisis of his life he scarcely knew, when the sound of footsteps approaching over the gravel path caused him to shake off the spell which was heavy upon him, and

to peer through the interstices of the vines in quest of the new-comer who wore the garb of a monk, the cowl drawn over his face either for protection against the heat, or to evade recognition. Yet no sooner had he set foot in the vineshaded loggia, than Eckhardt arose from his seat, eager, breathless.

"At last!" he gasped, extending his hand, which the other grasped in silence. "At last!"

"At last!" said Hezilo.

The word seemed fraught with destinies.

"Is the time at hand?" queried Eckhardt.

"To-night!"

A groan broke from the Margrave's lips.

"To-night!"

Then he beckoned his visitor to a seat.

"I have come to fulfil my promise," spoke Hezilo.

"Tell me all!"

Hezilo nodded; yet he seemed at a loss how to commence. After a pause he began his tale in a voice strangely void of inflection, like that of an automaton gifted with speech.

Dwelling briefly on the events of his own life from the time of his arrival in Rome with the motherless girl Angiola, on her chance meeting with Benilo and the latter's pretence of interest in his child, Hezilo touched upon the Chamberlain's clandestine visits at the convent, where he had placed her, upon the girl's strange fascination for the courtier, the latter's promises and advances,

culminating in Angiola's abduction. After having betrayed his credulous victim, the Chamberlain had revealed himself the fiend he was by causing her to be concealed in an old ruin, and, to secure immunity for himself, he had her deprived of the sight of her eyes. In a voice resonant with the echoes of despair, Hezilo described the long and fruitless hunt for his lost child, of whose whereabouts the disconsolate nuns at the convent disclaimed all knowledge, till chance had guided him to the place of Angiola's concealment, in the person of an old crone, whom he had surprised among the ruins of the ill-famed temple of Isis, whither she carried food to the blind girl at certain hours of the day. At the point of his dagger he had forced a confession and by a sufficiently large bribe purchased her silence regarding his discovery. The rest was known to Eckhardt, who had witnessed Angiola's rescue from her dismal prison, as he had been present in her dying hour.

There was a long silence between them. Then Hezilo continued his account. Step for step he had fastened himself to the heels of the betrayer of his child, whose name the crone had revealed to him. Again and again he might have destroyed the libertine, had he not reserved him for a more summary and terrible execution. He had discovered Benilo's illicit amour with one Theodora, a woman of great beauty but of mysterious origin, who had

established her wanton court at Rome. As a wandering minstrel Hezilo had found there a ready welcome, and had in time gained her confidence and ear.

Eckhardt's senses began to reel as he listened to the revelations now poured into his ears. Much, which the confession of the dying wretch in the rock-caves under the Gemonian stairs had left obscure, was now illumined, as a dark landscape by lightnings from a distant cloud-bank. Ginevra's smouldering discontent with Eckhardt's seeming lack of ambition, her inordinate desire for power,—the Chamberlain's covert advances and veiled promises, aided by his chance discovery of her descent from Marozia; their conspiracy, culminating in the woman's simulated illness and death; the substitution of a strange body in the coffin, which had been sealed under pretence of premature decay,—Ginevra's flight to a convent, where she remained concealed till after Eckhardt's departure from Rome:—from stage to stage Hezilo proceeded in his strange unimpassioned tale, a tale which caused his listener's brain to spin and his senses to reel.

The monk conducting the last rites, having chanced upon the fraud, had been promised nothing less than the Triple Tiara of St. Peter as reward for his silence and complicity, as soon as Ginevra should have come into her own. Continuing, Hezilo touched upon Ginevra's reappearance in Rome under the

name of Theodora; on the Chamberlain's betrayal of the woman. He dwelt on the events leading up to the wager and the forfeit, the woman's share in luring Eckhardt from the Basilica, and Benilo's attempt to poison him at the fateful meeting in the Grotto. He concluded by pointing out the Chamberlain's utter desperation and the woman's mortal fear,—and Eckhardt listened as one dazed.

Then Hezilo briefly outlined his plans for the night.

Eckhardt's destruction had been decreed by the Chamberlain and nothing short of a miracle could save him. The utmost caution and secrecy were required. Benilo, whose attention would be divided between Theodora and Eckhardt, was to be dealt with by himself. The blood of his child cried for vengeance. Thus Eckhardt would be free to settle last accounts with the woman.

Burying his head in his hands the strong man wept like a disconsolate child, his whole frame shaken by convulsive sobs, and it was some time, ere he regained sufficient composure to face Hezilo.

"It will require all your courage," said the harper, rising to depart. "Steel your heart against hope or mercy! I will await you at sunset at the Church of the Hermits."

And without waiting the Margrave's reply, Hezilo was gone.

Eckhardt felt like one waking from a terrible

dream, the oppression of which remains after its phantoms have vanished. The suspense of waiting till dusk seemed almost unendurable. Now that the hour seemed so nigh, the dread hour of final reckoning, there was a tightening agony at Eckhardt's heart, an agony that made him long to cry out, to weep, to fling himself on his knees and pray, pray for deliverance, for oblivion, for absolute annihilation. Walking up and down the vineshaded loggia, he paused now and then to steal a look at the flaming disk of the sun, that seemed to stand still in the heavens, while at other times he stared absently into the gnarled stems, in whose hollow shelter the birds slept and the butterflies drowsed.

Even as the parted spirit of the dead might ruthfully hover over the grave of its perished mortal clay, so Eckhardt reviewed his own forlorn estate, torturing his brain with all manner of vain solutions.

This night, then,—the night which quenched the light of this agonizing day, must for ever quench his doubts and fears. He drew a long breath. A great weariness weighed down his spirit. An irresistible desire for rest came over him. The late rebellion, brief but fierce, the constant watch at the palace on the Aventine, the alarming state of the young King, who was dying of a broken heart, the futility of all counsel to prevail upon him to leave this accursed city, the lack of a friend, to whom he might confide his own misgivings without fear of betrayal,—all

these had broken down his physical strength, which no amount of bodily exertion would have been able to accomplish.

After a time he resumed his seat, burying his head in his hands.

The air of the late summer day was heavy and fragrant with the peculiar odour of decaying leaves, and the splashing of the fountain, which sent its crystal stream down towards Santa Maria del Monte, seemed like a lullaby to Eckhardt's overwrought senses. Night after night he had not slept at all; he had not dared to abandon the watch on Aventine for even a moment. Now nature asserted her rights.

Lower and lower drooped his aching lids and slowly he was beginning to slip away into blissful unconsciousness. How long he had remained in this state, he scarcely knew, when he was startled, as by some unknown presence.

Rousing himself with an effort and looking up, he was filled with a strange awe at the phenomenon which met his gaze. Right across the horizon that glistened with pale green hues like newly frozen water, there reposed a cloud-bank, risen from the Tyrrhene Sea, black as the blackest midnight, heavy and motionless like an enormous shadow fringed with tremulous lines of gold.

This cloud-bank seemed absolutely stirless, as if it had been thrown, a ponderous weight, into the azure vault of heaven. Ever and anon silvery veins of

lightning shot luridly through its surface, while poised, as it were immediately above it, was the sun, looking like a great scarlet seal, a ball of crimson fire, destitute of rays.

For a time Eckhardt stood lost in the contemplation of this fantastic sky-phenomenon. As he did so, the sun plunged into the engulfing darkness. Lowering purple shadows crept across the heavens, but the huge cloud, palpitating with lightnings, moved not, stirred not, nor changed its shape by so much as a hair's breadth.

It appeared like a vast pall, spread out in readiness for the state burial of the world, the solemn and terrible moment: The End of Time.

Fascinated by an aspect, which in so weird a manner reflected his own feelings, Eckhardt looked upon the threatening cloud-bank as an evil omen. A strange sensation seized him, as with a hesitating fear not unmingled with wonder, he watched the lightnings come and go.

A shudder ran through his frame as he paced up and down the white-pillared Loggia, garlanded with climbing vines, roses and passion flowers, dying or decayed.

"Would the night were passed," he muttered to himself, and the man who had stormed the impregnable stronghold of Crescentius quailed before the impending issue as a child trembles in the dark.

At the hour appointed he traversed the solitary

region of the Trastevere. The vast silence, the vast night, were full of solemn weirdness. The moon, at her full, soared higher and higher in the balconies of the East, firing the lofty solitudes of the heavens with her silver-beams. But immobile in the purple cavity of the western horizon there lay that ominous cloud, nerved as it were with living lightnings, which leaped incessantly from its centre, like a thousand swords, drawn from a thousand scabbards.

The deep booming noise of a bell now smote heavily on the silence. Oppressed by the weight of unutterable forebodings, Eckhardt welcomed the sound with a vague sense of relief. At the Church of the Hermits he was joined by the harper and together they rapidly traversed the region leading to the Groves. In the supervening stillness their ears caught the sound of harptones, floating through the silent autumnal night.

The higher rising moon outlined with huge angles of light and shadow the marble palaces, which stood out in strong relief against a transparent background and the Tiber, wherein her reflections were lengthened into a glittering column, was frosted with silvery ripples.

At last they reached the entrance of the groves.

"Be calm!" said Eckhardt's guide. "Let nothing that you may see or hear draw you from the path of caution. Think that, whatever you may suffer, there are others who may suffer more! Silence! No

questions now! Remember—here are only foes!"

The harper spoke with a certain harsh impatience, as if he were himself suffering under a great nervous strain, and Eckhardt, observing this, made no effort to engage him in conversation, aside from promising to be guided by his counsel. He felt ill at ease, however, as one entering a labyrinth from whose intricate maze he relies only on the firm guidance of a friend to release him.

They now entered the vast garden, fraught with so many fatal memories. At the end of the avenue there appeared the well-remembered pavilion, and, avoiding the main entrance, the harper guided Eckhardt through a narrow corridor into the great hall.

A faint mist seemed to cloud the circle of seats and the high-pitched voices of the revellers seemed lost in infinite distance. In no mood to note particulars, Eckhardt's gaze penetrated the dizzy glare, in which ever new zones of light seemed to uprear themselves, leaping from wall to wall like sparkling cascades. As in the throes of a terrible nightmare he stood riveted to the spot, for at that very moment his eyes encountered a picture which froze the very life-blood in his veins.

In the background, revealed by the parting draperies there stood, leaning against one of the rose-marble columns, the image of Ginevra. Her robe of crimson fell in two superb folds from the peaks of

her bosom to her feet. The marble pallor of her face formed a striking contrast to the consuming fire of her eyes, which seemed to rove anxiously, restlessly over the diminished circle of her guests. The most execrable villain of them all,—Benilo,—had at her hands met his long-deferred doom. Those on whom she had chiefly relied for the realization of her strange ambition now swung from the gibbets on Monte Malo,—their executioner Eckhardt. Strange irony of fate! From those remaining, who polluted the hall with their noisome presence, she had nothing to hope, nothing to fear.

And this then was the end!

It required Hezilo's almost superhuman efforts to restrain Eckhardt from committing a deed disastrous in its remotest consequences to himself and their common purpose. For in the contemplation of the woman who had wrecked his life, a tide of such measureless despair swept through Eckhardt's heart, that every thought, every desire was drowned in the mad longing to visit instant retribution on the woman's guilty head and also to close his own account with life. But the mood did not endure. A strange delirium seized him; the woman's siren-beauty entranced and intoxicated him like the subtle perfume of some rare exotic; mingled love and hate surged up in his heart; he dared not trust himself, for even though he resented, he could not resist the fatal spell of former days. The absence of Benilo, of whose

doom he was ignorant, inspired the harper with dire misgivings. After peering with ill-concealed apprehension through the shadowy vistas of remote galleries, he at last whispered to Eckhardt, to follow him, and they were entering a dimly lighted corridor, leading into the fateful Grotto, which Eckhardt had visited on that well-remembered night, when a terrific event arrested their steps, and caused them to remain rooted to the spot.

A blinding, circular sweep of lightning blazed through the windows of the pavilion, illumining it from end to end with a brilliant blue glare, accompanied by a deafening crash and terrific peal of thunder which shook the very earth beneath. A flash of time,—an instant of black, horrid eclipse,—then, with an appalling roar, as of the splitting of huge rocks, the murky gloom was rent, devoured and swept away by the sudden bursting forth of fire. From twenty different parts of the great hall it seemed at once to spring aloft in spiral coils. With a wild cry of terror those of the revellers who had not outright been struck dead by the fiery bolt, rushed towards the doors, clambering in frenzied fear over the dead, trampling on the scorched disfigured faces of the dancing girls, on whose graceful pantomime they had feasted their eyes so short a time ago.

There was no safety in the pavilion, which a moment had transformed into a seething furnace. Volumes of smoke rolled up in thick, suffocating

clouds, and the crimson glare of the flames illumined the dark night-sky far over the Aventine.

Half mad with fear from the shrieks and groans of the dying, which resounded everywhere about her, Theodora stood rooted to the spot, still clinging to the great column. Over her face swept a strange expression of loathing and exultation. Her eyes wandered to the red-tongued flames, that leaped in eddying rings round the great marble pillars, creeping every second nearer to the place where she stood, and in that one glance she seemed to recognize the entire hopelessness of rescue and the certainty of death.

For a moment the thought seemed terrifying beyond expression. None had thought of her,—all had sought their own safety! She laughed a laugh of uttermost, bitter scorn.

At last she seemed to regain her presence of mind. Turning, she started to the back of the great pavilion, with the manifest object of reaching some private way of egress, known but to herself. But her intention was foiled. No sooner had she gone back than she returned—this exit too was a roaring furnace. In terrible reverberations the thunder bellowed through the heavens, which seemed one vast ocean of flame; the elements seemed to join hands in the effort at her destruction:—So be it! It would extinguish a life of dishonour, disgrace and despair.

A haughty acceptance of her fate manifested itself in her stonily determined face. It would be atonement—though the end was terrible!

Suddenly she heard a rush close by her side. Looking up, she beheld the one she dreaded most on earth to meet, saw Eckhardt rushing blindly towards her through smoke and flames, crying frantically:

"Save her! Save her!"

Her wistful gaze, like that of a fascinated bird, was fixed on the Margrave's towering stature.

She tarried but a moment.

At the terrible crisis, on one side a roaring furnace,—on the other the man whom of all mortals she had wronged past forgiveness, her courage failed her. Remembering a secret door, leading to a tower, connected with a remote wing of the pavilion, where she might yet find safety, she dashed swift as thought through the panel, which receded at her touch, and vanished in the dark corridor beyond. Without heeding the dangers which might beset his path, Eckhardt flew after her through the gloom, till he found himself before a spiral stairway, at the terminus of the passage. A faint glimmer of light from above penetrated the gloom, and following it, he was startled by a faint outcry of terror, as on the last landing, to which he madly leaped, he found himself once more face to face with the woman, whom even at this moment he loved more in the certainty of having lost her, than ever in the pride

and ecstasy of possession.

Seemingly hemmed in by an obstacle, the nature, which he knew not, she stood before him paralyzed with horror. As his hand went out towards her, the gesture seemed to break the spell, and uttering a despairing shriek, she sprang towards a door behind the landing and rushed out.

Eckhardt's breath stopped.

A moment,—he heard an outcry of inexpressible horror,—a struggle, then a hollow dash. Hardly conscious of his own actions he uttered a shrill whistle, when the door of the tower was broken down, and the stairs were suddenly crowded with the soldiers of the imperial guard, whom the conflagration had brought to the scene.

"What woman was that?" exclaimed their leader, pointing to the place whence Theodora had made the fatal leap.

"Whoever she is—she must be dashed to pieces," replied his companion, rushing up the stairs to the trap-door and throwing his lighted torch down the murky depths. But the light was soon lost in the profound gloom.

"A rope! A rope! She must not, she shall not die thus!" cried Eckhardt in mad, heart-rending despair.

"Here is one, but it is not long enough!" exclaimed the captain of the guard, hardly able to conceal his mortification at finding himself face to face with his general.

"Hark! She groans! Help! Help me!" exclaimed Eckhardt, and tearing his cloak into strips, he fastened them together. The work was swiftly completed. These strips fastened to the rope and securely knotted, Eckhardt tied around his waist, and though the leader of the men-at-arms sought to dissuade him from his desperate purpose, he started down, clinging and swinging over a dreadful depth.

The captain of the guard swung the torch down after him as far as possible, but soon the light grew misty, the voices above indistinct, and it seemed to Eckhardt as if he were encompassed by a black mist. Still he continued his descent. His next sensation was that of an intolerable stench and a burning heat in the hand, caused no doubt by friction with the rope. A difficulty in breathing, increased darkness and singing noises in his ears were successive sensations; he began to feel dizzy and a dread assailed him, that he was about to swoon and abandon his hold. Suddenly he felt the last notch of the rope and, not knowing what depth remained, argued that any further effort was in vain. Extending first one arm, then another, he groped wildly about, striving to shout for light; but his voice died in the gloom. Gasping and almost stifled as he was, he made one last desperate effort, when suddenly his groping hand grasped something, which appeared to him either like hair or weeds. At this critical moment the captain of the guard sent down a lamp, which he had

procured. It fell hissing in the mire, but it afforded him sufficient light to see that the object of his search lay buried in the slime, and that she was gasping convulsively. Eckhardt's strength was now almost spent, but this sight seemed to restore it all. Noting a projecting ledge of stone lower down, he leaped upon it and was thus obliged to abandon his hold on the rope. Eckhardt seized the woman by the gown, dragged her from the mire and making a desperate leap, regained the ledge, then signalled to those above to draw him up by jerking the rope.

Motionless she lay on his arm and it was only by twisting it in a peculiar manner round the rope, that he was enabled to support the terrible burden. For a time they hung suspended over the abyss, yet they were gradually nearing the top. If he could only endure the agony of his twisted limbs a little longer, both were safe. He could not shout, for he felt that suffocation must ensue; his eyes and ears seemed bursting as from some stunning weight; and a deadly faintness seemed to benumb his limbs. Suddenly, as by some miracle, the burden seemed lightened, though he felt it still reclining in his arms. A wonderful support seemed to raise up his own sinking frame, then all grew bright and numerous faces strained down on him. In a few moments he was on a level with the floor and many arms stretched out, to help him land. Heedless of the roaring sea of fire in the pavilion, they carried the

wretched woman to the landing, where they laid her on the floor, attempting, for a time in vain, to restore her. She seemed suffering from some severe internal injury and her lips bubbled with gore. At length she opened her eyes and with a shriek of agony made signs that she was suffocating and desired to be raised. Eckhardt, who stood beside her, raised her, and as he did so, she regarded him with a wild and piteous gaze and murmured his name in a tone which went to the heart of all.

As he bent over her, she made a convulsive effort to rise.

"I have slain the fiend, who came between us—forgive me if you can—" she muttered, then gasping: "Heaven have mercy on my soul!" she fell back into Eckhardt's arms.

At a sign from the Margrave the men-at-arms withdrew, leaving him alone with his gruesome burden.

After they had descended, he bent over the prostrate form, he had loved so well, touching with gentle fingers the soft, dark hair, which lay against his breast. Once,—he recalled the mad delirium of holding her thus close to his heart. Now there was something dreary, weird, and terrible in what would under other conditions have been unspeakable rapture. A chill as of death ran through him as he supported the dying woman in his arms. Her silken robe, her perfumed hair, the cold contact of the gems

about her,—all these repelled him strangely; his soul was groaning under the anguish, his brain began to reel with a nameless, dizzy horror.

At last she stirred. Her body quivered in his hold, consciousness returned for a brief moment, and, with a heavy sigh, she whispered as from the depths of a dream:

"Eckhardt!"

A fierce pang convulsed the heart of the unhappy man. He started so abruptly, that he almost let her drop from his supporting arms. But his voice was choked; he could not speak.

A groan,—a convulsive shudder,—a last sigh,—and Theodora's spirit had flown from the lacerated flesh.

In silent anguish Eckhardt knelt beside the body of the woman, heedless of the hurricane which raged without, heedless of the flames, which, creeping closer and closer, began to lick the tower with their crimson tongues. At last, aroused by the warning cries of the men-at-arms below, Eckhardt staggered to his feet with the dead body, and scarcely had he emerged from the tower, when a terrible roar, a deafening crash struck his ear. The roof and walls of the great pavilion had fallen in and millions of sparks hissed up into the flaming ether.

For a moment Eckhardt paused, stupefied by the sheer horror of the scene. The pavilion was now but a hissing, shrieking pyramid of flames; the hot and

blinding glare almost too much for human eyes to endure. Yet so fascinated was he with the sublime terror of the spectacle that he could scarcely turn away from it. A host of spectral faces seemed to rise out of the flames and beckon to him, to return,—when a tremendous peal of thunder, rolling in eddying vibrations through the heavens, recalled him to the realization of the moment, and gave the needful spur to his flagging energies. Raising his aching eyes, Eckhardt saw straight before him a gloomy archway, appearing like the solemn portal of some funeral vault, dark and ominous, yet promising relief for the moment. Stumbling over the dead bodies of Roxané and Roffredo and several other corpses strewn among fallen blocks of marble, and every now and then looking back in irresistible fascination on the fiery furnace in his rear, he carried his lifeless burden to the nearest shelter. He dared not think of the beauty of that dead face, of its subtle slumbrous charm, and stung to a new sense of desperation he plunged recklessly into the dark aperture, which seemed to engulf him like the gateway of some magic cavern. He found himself in a circular, roofless court, paved with marble, long discoloured by climate and age. Here he tenderly laid his burden down, and kneeling by Ginevra's side, bid his face in his hands.

A second crash, that seemed to rend the very heavens, caused Eckhardt at last to wake from his

apathy of despair. A terrible spectacle met his eyes. The east wall of the tower, in which Ginevra had sought refuge and found death, had fallen out; the victorious fire roared loudly round its summit, enveloping the whole structure in clouds of smoke and jets of flame; whose lurid lights crimsoned the murky air like a wide Aurora Borealis. But on the platform of the tower there stood a solitary human being, cut off from retreat, enveloped by the roaring element, by a sea of flame!

With a groan of anguish, Eckhardt fixed his straining eyes on the dark form of Hezilo the harper, whom no human intervention could save from his terrible doom. Whether his eagerness, to avenge his dead child or her betrayer, had carried him too far, whether in his fruitless search for the Chamberlain he had grown oblivious of the perils besetting his path, whether too late he had thought of retreat,—clearly defined against the lurid, flame-swept horizon his tall dark form stood out on the crest of the tower; —another moment of breathless horrid suspense and the tower collapsed with a deafening crash, carrying its lonely occupant to his perhaps self-elected doom.

All that night Eckhardt knelt by the dead body of his wife. When the bleak, gray dawn of the rising day broke over the crest of the Sabine hills he rose, and went away. Soon after a company of monks appeared and carried Theodora's remains to the mortuary chapel of San Pancrazio, where they were

to be laid to their last and eternal rest.

CHAPTER XVIII
VALE ROMA

 t was the eve of All Souls Day in the year nine hundred ninety nine,—the day so fitly recalling the fleeting glories of summer, of youth, of life, a day of memories and tributes offered up to the departed.

Afar to westward the sun, red as a buckler fallen from Vulcan, still cast his burning reflections. On the horizon with changing sunset tints glowed the departing orb, brightening the crimson and russet foliage on terrace and garden walls. At last the burning disk disappeared amid a mass of opalescent clouds, which had risen in the west; the fading sunset hues swooned to the gray of twilight and the breath of scanty flowers, the odour of dead leaves touched the air with perfume faint as the remembered pathos of autumn. No breeze stirred the dead leaves still clinging to their branches, no sound broke the silence, save from a cloister the hum of many droning voices. Now and then the air was touched

with the fragrance of hayfields, reclaimed here and there upon the Campagna, and mists were slowly descending upon the snow-capped peak of Soracté. In the dim purple haze of the distance the circle of walls, a last vestige of the defence of the ancient world, stood a sun-browned line of watch-towers against the horizon. From their crenelated ramparts at long distances, a sentinel looked wearily upon the undulating stretch of vacant, fading green.

In the portico of the imperial palace on the Aventine sat Eckhardt, staring straight before him. Since the terrible night, which had culminated in the crisis of his life, the then mature man seemed to have aged decades. The lines in his face had grown deeper, the furrows on his brow lowered over the painfully contracted eyebrows. No one had ventured to speak to him, no one to break in upon his solitude. The world around him seemed to have vanished. He heard nothing, he saw nothing. His heart within him seemed to be a thing dead to all the world,—to have died with Ginevra. Only now and then he gazed with longing, wistful glances towards the far-off northern horizon, where the Alps raised their glittering crests, —a boundary line, not to be transgressed with impunity. Would he ever again see the green, waving forests of his Saxon-land, would his foot ever again tread the mysterious dusk of the glades over which pines and oaks wove their waving shadows, those glades once sacred to Odhin and the Gods of the

Northland? Those glades undefiled by the poison-stench of Rome? How he longed for that purer sphere, where he might forget—forget? Can we forget the fleeting ray of sunlight, that has brightened our existence, and departing has left sorrow and anguish and gloom?

Eckhardt's heart was heavy to breaking.

As evening wore on, it was evident, that there was some new, great commotion in the city. From every quarter pillars of dun smoke rose up in huge columns which, spreading fan-like, hung sullenly in the yellow of the sunset. Houses were burning. Swords were out. In the distance straggling parties could be seen, hurrying hither and thither.

"There is a devil's carnival brewing, or I am forsworn," muttered the Margrave as he arose and entered the palace. There he ordered every gate to be closed and barricaded. He knew Roman treachery, and he knew the weakness of the garrison.

The roar of the populace grew louder and nearer, minute by minute. Eckhardt had hardly reached the imperial antechamber, ere the crest of the Aventine fairly swarmed with a rebellious mob, whose numbers were steadily increasing. Already they outnumbered the imperial guard a hundred to one.

It soon became evident, that their clamour could not be appeased by peaceful persuasion. Disregarding Eckhardt's protests, Otto had made one

last effort to try the spell of his person upon the Romans;—but hootings and revilings had been the only reply vouchsafed by the rabble of Rome to the son of Theophano.

"Where is Benilo? We will speak to Benilo,—the friend of the people!" they shouted, and when he failed to appear, they cried: "They have slain him, as they slew Crescentius," and a shower of stones hailed against the walls of the palace.

Otto escaped unscathed. Once more in his chamber he broke down. His powers were waning; his resistance spent. The death of Crescentius,—the loss of Stephania filled him with unutterable despair. He thought of the mysterious death of Benilo, whose gashed body some fisherman had discovered in the Tiber, and whose real character Eckhardt's account of his crimes and misdeeds had at last revealed to him. He knew now that he had been the dupe of a traitor, who had systematically undermined the lofty structure of his dreams, whose fall was to bury under its ruins the last of the glorious Saxon dynasty,—a traitor, who had deliberately set about to break the heart whose unspoken secret he had read. And this was the end!

"Hark! The Romans are battering at the gates!" Haco, the captain of the guard, addressed Eckhardt, entering breathlessly and unannounced.

"Where they shall batter long enough," Eckhardt growled fiercely. "The gates are triple brass and

bolted! Hold the yelping curs in check, till we are ready!"

Haco departed and Eckhardt now prepared Otto for the necessity of flight. All Rome was in arms against them! This time it was not the Senator. The people themselves were bent upon Otto's capture or death. Resistance was madness. Without a word Otto yielded. Sick, body and soul, he cared no longer. A slow fever seemed to consume him, since Stephania had gone from him. The malady was past cure,—for he wished to die. The mute grief of the stricken youth went to Eckhardt's heart. Of his own despair he dared not even think at this hour, when the destinies of a dynasty weighed upon his shoulders, weighed him down:—he must get Otto safely out of Rome—at any, at every cost.

"Hark, below!"

An uproar of voices and heavy blows against the portals rang up to their ears.

Eckhardt seized a torch and, sword in hand, opened the secret panel.

"The back way,—the garden,—'tis for our lives!" he whispered to Otto, who had hastily thrown a dark mantle over his person which might serve to evade detention in case they met some chance straggler. The panel closed behind them and Eckhardt locked every door in the long corridor, through which they passed, to delay pursuit. They descended a flight of stairs, and found themselves in a hall, which through

a ruined portico, terminated in a garden. Here Eckhardt extinguished the torch and they paused and listened.

Before them lay a deserted garden with marble statues and weed-grown terraces. The gravel walks were strewn with tiny twigs and leaves of faded summer, and stained in places with a dark green mould. There was the soft splash of water trickling from huge mossy vases, and here and there through a break in the foliage, peered an arrowy shaft of moonlight.

Here they were to await the arrival of Haco and his men. Suddenly the glint of a halberd beyond the wall caught Eckhardt's ever watchful eye; he counted three in succession on the other side of the wall. The Romans seemed bent to deprive them of their only way of flight. Eckhardt glanced about. The wall on the western side seemed unguarded. Here the Aventine fell in a steep declivity towards the Tiber. Eckhardt perceived there was but one course and took it instantly.

At this moment Haco and his men-at-arms emerged with drawn swords from the laurel thickets, in whose concealment they had awaited their leader and King. Motioning to Otto and his companions to imitate his movements, Eckhardt crouched down and stole cautiously along the edge of the wall. Meanwhile the tumult without was increased by the hoarse braying of a horn. Men could be seen rushing

about with drawn swords or any other weapons close at hand, staves, clubs and sticks, shouting and yelling in direst confusion.

Amidst this uproar the small band reached the edge of the Tiber and their repeated signals caused a boat rowed by a gigantic fellow to approach. The oarsman, however, insisted on his pay before he would take them across.

After they had safely reached the opposite shore they bound and gagged the owner of the craft, to insure his secrecy. Then the party sped up a narrow lane and paused before a ruinous house which, to judge from its black and crumbling beams, seemed to have been recently destroyed by fire. Here they waited until one of the party secured their steeds.

During all this time Otto had not spoken a word.

Now that he was about to mount the steed, which was to bear him from Rome for ever, he turned with one last heart-breaking look toward the city.

A desire, fierce as that of hunger, wearing as that of sleep, filled him,—the desire of death.

At last he rode away with the others.

The night grew darker. The sky was full of clouds and the wind shrieked through the spectral branches of the pines. The travellers pursued their way along the well beaten tracks of the Flaminian Way, keeping a constant look-out for surprises. They re-crossed the Tiber at a ford above the city, and

then only they brought their steeds to a more leisurely gait.

Gradually the ground began to ascend.

A turn in the road brought them to a high plateau. Its rising knolls were crowned with broad and ancient plane-trees, in the midst of which towered a gibbet, from which swung the bodies of two malefactors, recently executed. Otto shuddered at the omen. Death on every turn,—death at every step. The moon at fitful intervals cast from between the rifts in the clouds a feeble radiance upon desolate fields. A company of hungry crows rose at the approach of the horsemen from the stubble, filled the air with their cawing and flapped their way swiftly out of sight. At that moment a horseman galloped past with great rapidity, seeming eagerly to scan the cavalcade. He was closely muffled and had vanished in the night, ere he could be hailed or recognized.

Rome swiftly vanished behind them. After passing the last scattered houses on the outskirts, they finally reached the open Campagna. The darkness increased and the night wore every appearance of proving a dismal one. The wind was high and swept the clouds wildly over the face of the moon.

In silence they proceeded on their way, until they espied a low range of hills, white on the summits with lightning. A dense wood skirted the road on the left for several miles. But as far as the

eye could penetrate the murky twilight, no human being, no human habitation appeared.

In the ruins of an old monastery they spent the night, and for the first in three, Otto slept. But his sleep did not refresh him, nor restore his strength. Throughout his fitful slumbers, he saw the pale face of Stephania, the face, which with so mad a longing he had dreamed into his heart, the heart she had broken, but which loved her still.

Gloomily the morning light of the succeeding day broke upon the Roman Campagna. The sun was hidden behind a lowering sky and fitful gusts of wind swept the great, barren expanse. Undaunted, though their hearts were filled with dire misgivings, the small band continued their march, northward, ever northward,—towards the goal of their journey, the Castel of Paterno, perched on the distant slopes of Soracté.

Book the Third
Our Lady of Death

"As I came through the desert, thus

it was,
As I came through the desert: From the right
A shape came slowly with a ruddy light,
A woman with a red lamp in her hand,
Bareheaded and barefooted on that strand.
A large black sign was on her breast that bowed,
A broad black band ran down her snow-white shroud.
That lamp she held, was her own burning heart,
Whose blood-drops trickled step by step apart."

—*James Thomson.*

CHAPTER I

PATERNO



he sun was nigh the horizon, and the whole west glowed with exquisite colour, reflected in the watery moors of the Campagna, as a troop of

horsemen approached the high tableland skirting the Cimminian foothills. Not a human being was visible for many miles around; only a few wild fowl fluttered over the pools and reedy islets of the marshes and the lake of Bolsena gleamed crimson in the haze of the sunset.

The boundless, undulant plain spread before them, its farms, villas and aqueducts no less eloquent of death than the tombs they had passed on the silent Via Appia. The still air and the deep hush seemed to speak to man's soul as with the voice of eternity. On the left of the horsemen yawned a deep ravine, from which arose towering cliffs, crowned with monasteries and convents. On their right lay the mountain chains of the Abruzzi, resembling dark and troubled sea-waves, and to southward the view was bounded by the billowy lines of the Sabine hills, rolling infinitely away. Beyond they saw the villages scattered through the gray Campagna and in the farthest distance the mountain shadows began to darken over the roofs of ancient Tusculum and that second Alba which rises in desolate neglect above the vanished palaces of Pompey and Domitian.

It was the day on which is observed the poetic Festa dell' Ottobrata, a festival of pagan significance, with the archaic dance and garlanded processions of harvest and vintage, when the townsfolk go out into the country, to look upon the mellow tints of autumn, to walk in the vineyards, to taste the purple

grapes, and to breathe the fragrance, filling the air with odours finer than the flavour of wine. The fields were mellowed to yellow stubble and the creepers touched by the first chill of autumn hung in crimson garlands along the russet hedges. Here and there, among the stately poplars loomed up farmhouses with thatched roofs, which from afar resembled pointed haystacks on the horizon. At intervals among the crimson and russet leafage rose a spectral cypress, like a sombre shadow. In the haze of the distance crooked olive-trees raised their branches in tints of silver-gray. The air was still, but for an occasional hum of insect life. The faint, white outlines of the Apennines shone brilliant and glistening in the evening glow. The travellers passed Camaldoli with its convents reared upon high, almost inaccessible cliffs; the cloisters of Monte Cassino had vanished behind them in silvery haze. They approached Paterno by a road skirted with villas and gardens, with ancient statues and shady alleys. The proximity of the mountains made the air chill; here and there a ray of sunlight filtered through the branches of the plane-trees.

High Paterno towered above, among its rocks and steeps.

Ever since their flight from Rome, Otto had been in the throes of a benumbing lethargy, which had deprived him of interest in everything, even life itself. Vain had been his companions' effort to rouse

him from his brooding state, vainly had they pointed out to him the beauties of the landscape. Was it the ghost of Johannes Crescentius, the Senator of Rome, that was haunting the son of Theophano?

After having crossed a swinging bridge, which swayed to and fro under the weight of their iron mail, they arrived at a narrow causeway, above which, like some contemplative spirit above the conflicting problems of life, rose the cloisters, environing the ancient Castel of Paterno. Eckhardt knocked at the barred gate with the hilt of his sword, whereupon a monk appeared at the window of a tower above the portcullis, and after reconnoitring, set some machinery in motion, by which the portcullis was raised. They then found themselves in a long, narrow causeway cut in the rock. The monk who had admitted them disappeared; another ushered them into the great hall of the cloister. The air was full of the lingering haze of License, and traces of devotional paintings on the weather-beaten walls appeared like fragments of prayers in a world-worn mind.

The hall had been made from a natural cavern and was of an exceedingly gloomy aspect, being of great extent, with deep windows only on one side, hewn in the solid granite. It was at intervals crossed by arches, marking the termination of several galleries leading to remoter parts of the monastery. In the centre was a long stone table, hewn from the

rock; a pulpit, supported on a pillar was similarly sculptured in the wall. Five or six pine-wood torches, stuck at far intervals in the granite, shed a dismal illumination through the gloom, enhanced rather than diminished by the glow of red embers on a vast hearth at the farthest extremity of the hall.

Eckhardt was about to prefer his request to the monk, who had conducted them hither, when he was interrupted by the entrance of the abbot and a long train of monks from their devotions. The monks advanced in solemn silence, their heads sunk humbly on their breasts; their superior so worn with vigils and fasts, that his gaunt and powerful frame resembled a huge skeleton. He was the only one of the group who uttered a word of welcome to his guests.

After having ordered Haco to attend to the wants of his lord, Eckhardt sought a conference with the abbot on matters which lay close to his heart. For his sovereign was ill—and his illness seemed to defy human skill. The abbot listened to Eckhardt's recital of the past events, but his diagnosis was far from quieting the latter's fears.

"You learn to speak and think very dismally among these great, sprawling pine forests," Eckhardt said moodily, at the conclusion of the conference.

"We learn to die!" replied the monk with melancholy austerity.

Consideration for his sovereign's safety,

however, prompted Eckhardt, who had been informed that straggling bands of their pursuers had followed them to the base of the hill, to continue that same night under guidance of a monk, the ascent to the almost impregnable heighths of Castel Paterno. Here Otto and his small band were welcomed by Count Tammus, the commander, who placed himself and his men-at-arms at the disposal of the German King.

CHAPTER II
MEMORIES

 tto found himself in a state chamber, whose gloomy vastness was lighted, or rather darkened by one single taper. Through the high oval windows in the deep recess of the wall peered an errant ray of moonlight, which illumined the quaint monastic paintings on the walls, and crossing the yellow candle-light, imbued them with a strange ghostly glare.

When his host had ministered to his comfort and served him with the frugal fare of the cloister, Otto hinted his desire for sleep, and his trusty Saxons

entered on their watch before their sovereign's chamber.

At last, left alone, Otto listened with a heavy heart to the monotonous tread of the sentries. It seemed to him as if he could now take a survey of the events of his life, and pass sentence upon it with the impartiality of the future chronicler. Recollection roused up recollection; and as in a panorama, the scenes of his short, but eventful career passed in review before his inner eye. He thought of what he was, contrasting it painfully with all he might have been. The image of the one being, for whom his soul yearned in its desolation, with the blinding hunger of man for woman and woman's love, rose up before his eyes, and for the first time he thought of death,—death,—in its full and ghastly actuality.

What was it, this death? Was it a sleep? Merely the absence, not the privation of those powers and senses, called life? What sort of passage must the thinking particle pass through, whatever it may be,—ere it stood naked of its clay? The breaking of the eyes in darkness,—what then succeeded? Would the thinking atom survive,—would it become the nothing that it was?

The aspect of the chamber was not one to dispel the gloomy visions that haunted him. It was scantily furnished in the crude style of the tenth century, with massive tables and chairs. A curious tapestry of eastern origin, representing some legend of the

martyrs, divided it from an adjoining cabinet serving at once as an oratory and sleeping apartment. A low fire, burning in the chimney to dispel the miasmas of the marshes, shed a crimson glow over the chamber and its lonely inmate.

For a long time those who watched before his door heard him walk restlessly up and down. At last weariness came over him and he threw himself exhausted into a chair. Then the haunting memory of Stephania conjured up before his half-dreaming senses an alluring, shimmering Fata Morgana—a castle on one of those far-away Apulian head-lands, with their purpling hills in the background and the scent of strange flowers in the air. On many a summer morning they should walk hand in hand through the Laburnum groves, and find their love anew. But the amber sheen of the landscape faded into the violet of night. The vision faded into nothingness. A peal of thunder reverberated through the heavens,—Otto started with a moan, rose, and staggered to his couch.



"The haunting memories of Stephania."

He closed his eyes; but sleep would not come.

Where was she now? Where was Stephania? Weeks had passed, since they had last met. It seemed an eternity indeed! He should have remained in Rome, till he was assured of her fate! She had left him with words of hatred, of scorn, bitter and cruel. And yet! How gladly he would have saved the man, his mortal enemy, forsooth, had it lain in his power. Gladly?—No! The man who had thrice forsworn, thrice broken his faith, deserved his doom. Now he was dead. But Rome was lost. What mattered it?

There was but one devouring thought in Otto's mind. Where was Stephania? The mad longing for her became more intense with every moment. Now that the worst had come to pass, now that the stunning blow had fallen, he must rouse himself, he must rally. He must combat this fever, which was slowly consuming him; he must find her, see her once more on earth, if but to tell her how he loved her, her and no other woman. Would the pale phantom of Crescentius still stand between them,—still part them as of yore? Not if their loves were equal. His hands were stainless of that blood. On the morrow he would despatch Haco to Rome. Surely some one would have seen her; surely some one knew where the wife of the Senator of Rome was hiding her sorrow,—her grief.

The dim light of the ceremonial lamp, which burned with a dull, veiled flame before an image of the crucified Christ, flickered, as if fanned by a passing breath.

There was deep silence in the king's bed-chamber, and the drawn tapestry shut out every sound from without.

Noiselessly a secret panel in the wall opened behind Otto's couch. Noiselessly it closed in the gray stone. Then an exquisite white hand and arm were thrust through the draperies and the lovely face of Stephania beamed on the sleeping youth. She was pale as death, but the transparency of her skin and

the absolute perfection of her form and features made her the image of an Olympian Goddess. Her dark hair, bound by a fillet of gold, enhanced the marble pallor of the exquisite face.

Never had the wonderful eyes of Stephania seemed so full of fire and of life. Stooping over the sleeper, she softly encircled his head with her snowy arms and pressed a long kiss on the dry, fevered lips.

With a moan Otto opened his eyes. For a moment he stared as if he faced an apparition from dream-land.—His breath stopped, then he uttered a choked outcry of delirious joy, while his arms tightly encircled the head which bent over him.

"At last! At last! At last! Oh, how I have longed, how I have pined for you! Stephania—my darling—my love—tell me that you do not hate me—but is it you indeed,—is it you? How did you come here—the guards,—Eckhardt,—"

He paused with a terrible fear in his heart, ever and ever caressing the dark head, the beloved face, whose eyes held his own with their magnetic spell. She suffered his kisses and caresses while stroking his damp brow with soothing hand. Then with a grave look she enjoined silence and caution, crept to the door of the adjoining room and locked it from within.

"They guard you so well, not a ghost could enter," she said with the sweet smile of by-gone days.

He arose and drew the curtains closer. Then he

sat down by her side.

"How came you here, Stephania?" he whispered with renewed fear and dread. "If you are discovered,—God have mercy on you,—and me!"

She shook her head.

"I have followed you hither from Rome,—I passed you on the night of your flight. Count Tammus, the commander of Paterno, at one time the friend of the Senator of Rome, has offered me the hospitality of the castelio. No one knows of my presence here, save an old monk, who believes me some itinerant pilgrim, in search of the End of Time," she whispered with her far-away look. "The End of Time."

"They say it is close at hand," Otto replied, holding her hands tightly in his. "Oh, Stephania, how beautiful you are! That which has broken my spirit, seems not to have touched your life!"

"My life is dead," she replied. "What remains,—remains through you. Therefore time has lacked power. But that which has been and is no more, stands immovable before my soul."

He gazed at her with large fear-struck eyes.

"Then—your heart is no longer mine?"

The grasp of the hands in his own tightened.

"Would I be here, silly dreamer? I love you—my heart knows no change. It loved but once—and you!"

All the happiness, slumbering in the deep eyes of the son of Theophano, burst forth as in a glorious

aureole of light.

"Then you have never—"

She raised her hand forbiddingly.

"I could not give to him who is gone that which I gave to you! When we first met I was your foe. I hated you with all the hate which a Roman has for the despoiler of his lands. When I gave you my love,—which, alas, was not mine to give, I did so, a powerless instrument of Fate. Side by side have we trod life's narrow path,—neither of us could turn to right or left without standing accounted to the other. It was not ours to say love this one or that other. We were brought together by that same mysterious force, to which it is vain to cry halt. We knew,—I knew,—that it must, sooner or later, carry us to doom and death; but resistlessly the whirlwind had taken us up in its glistening cloud: Thus are we lost;—you and I!"

He listened to her with a great fear in his soul.

"How cold your hands are, my love," he whispered. "Cold as if the flow of blood had ceased. Can you feel how it rushes through my veins,—so hot—so boiling hot?"

"You have the fever! Therefore my hands appear cold to you. But,—you spoke truly,—in my hand is death,—and death is cold! Life I have none,—you have taken it from me!"

"Stephania!"

It sounded like the last outcry of a broken heart.

"Why recall that which could not be averted? Were it mine to change it, oh, that I could!"

"Do you really wish it?"

"I wish but your happiness. Can you doubt?"

"I do not doubt. I love you!"

"Stephania—my darling,—my all!"

And he kissed her eyes, her lips, her hair, and she suffered his caresses as one wrapt in a blissful dream.

"I learned you were stricken with the fever,—the last defence left to us by nature against our foes. I have come, to watch over you, to care for you,—to nurse you back to health,—to life—"

"And you braved the dangers that beset your path on every turn?"

"How should I fear,—with such love in my heart for you!"

"Then you—will remain?" he whispered, his very life in his eyes.

"For a time," she answered, in a halting tone, which passed not unremarked.

"And then?" he queried.

Her head sank.

"I know not!"

"Then I will tell you, my own love! We will return to Rome together, you and I; Stephania, the empress of the West,—would not that reconcile your Romans,—appease their hate?"

Stephania gazed for a moment thoughtfully at

Otto, then she shook her head.

"I fear," she replied after a pause, "we shall nevermore return to Rome."

As she spoke, her soft fingers stroked caressingly the youth's head, which rested on her bosom, while her right hand remained tightly clasped in his.

"I do not understand you," he said with a pained look.

"Do not let us speak of it now," she replied. "You are ill;—the fever burns in your blood. It likes you well, this Roman fever,—and yet you persist in returning hither ever and ever,—as to your destiny —"

"You are my destiny, Stephania! I cannot live without you! Had you not come, I should have died! God, you cannot know how I love you, how I worship you, how I worship the very air you breathe. Stephania! On that terrible, never-to-be-forgotten day, when your words planted death in my heart, he, who of all my Saxons hates you with a hatred strong and enduring as death, warned me of you! 'Must you love a Roman,' he said to me—'and of all Romans, Stephania, the wife of the Senator? Once in the toils of the Sorceress, you are lost! Nothing can save you.'—Can I say to my heart, you shall love this one, —or you shall not love this one? Shall I say to my soul, you shall harbour the image of this one, but that other shall be to you even as a barred Eden, guarded by the angel with the flaming sword? I have

seen the maidens of my native land; I have seen the women of Rome;—but my heart was never touched until we met. My soul leaped forth to meet your own, when first we stood face to face in the chapel of the Confessor. Stephania,—my love for you is so great that I fear you."

"And why should you fear me? Were I here, did I not love you?"

"My life has been a wondrous one," he spoke after a pause. "From dazzling sun-kissed heights I have been hurled into the blackest abyss of despair. And what is my crime? Wherein have I sinned? I have loved a woman,—a woman wondrous fair,—Stephania!"

"You have loved the wife of the Senator of Rome!"

His eyes drooped. For a time neither spoke.

"Thrice have I crossed the Alps, to see, to rule this fabled land,—and now I want but rest,—peace,—Stephania—" he said with a heart-breaking smile.

"You are tired, my love," replied the beautiful Roman. "From this hour, I shall be your leech,—I shall be with you, to share your solitude,—to watch over you till the dread fever is broken. And then—"

"And then?" he repeated with anxious look.

"But will you not weary of me?" she said, avoiding the question.

He drew her close to him.

"My sweetheart—-my own—"

"And you will not fear, you will trust and obey me?"

"Were you to give me poison with your own hands, I would drain the goblet without fear or doubt."

Stephania had arisen. She was pale as death.

"If love were all!" she muttered. "If love were all!"

Then she drew the curtains closer and extinguished the light.

CHAPTER III
THE CONSUMMATION

 ome weeks had elapsed since Otto's arrival at Paterno. But the fever which consumed the son of Theophano had not yielded to the skill of the monkish mediciners, though a change for the better had been noticed after the first night of the King's arrival. But it lasted only a short time and all the danger symptoms returned anew. The monks shook their heads and the hooded disciples of Aesculapius conversed in hushed whispers, regarding the strange ailment, which would not cede before their antidotes. But they continued their unavailing efforts to save the life of the last of the glorious Saxon dynasty, the grandson of the vanquisher of the Magyars, the son of the vanquisher of the Saracens.

It was a bleak December evening.

At sunset a mist rose from the fields and the clouds grew heavier with every hour. The rain-drops hung on the branches of the plane-trees, until an occasional stir sent them pattering down.

Otto lay within, asleep.

In the door-way sat Eckhardt, muffled in a cloak. Near-by, half recumbent under a blanket, the cowl drawn over his face, sat the leech, his eyes fixed upon the log-fire on the hearth, as it sent showers of sparks into the murky darkness. In their search for fire-wood the monks had brought from the edge of a neighbouring mill-pond the debris of a skiff, whose planks had for years been alternately soaked in water and dried in the sun. When tossed upon the blaze of forest branches, these fragments emitted an odour sweet as oriental spices and their flames brightened with prismatic tints. But to the leech's brooding gaze their lurid embers seemed touched with the spell of some unholy incantation.

Without the sick-chamber two sentries, chilled and drowsy, leaned against a column supporting the low vaulting, their halberds clasped between their folded arms.

After a pause of some duration, Eckhardt arose and entering Otto's chamber bent over the couch on which he lay. After having convinced himself by the youth's regular breathing that he was resting and did not require his attendance, the Margrave strode from the sick-chamber. The fever was intermittent; now it came, now it left the youth's body. But the pale wan face and the sunken eyes gave rise to the gravest fears.

Night came swiftly and with it the intense hush

deepened. Only the pattering of rain-drops broke the stillness. In the sick-chamber nothing was to be heard save the regular breathing of the sleeper.

Thus the hours wore on. After the monk and Eckhardt had departed for the night, the secret panel opened noiselessly and Stephania entered the apartment with a strange expression of triumph and despair in her look. She glanced round, but her eyes passed unheedingly over their surroundings; she saw only that there was no one in the chamber, that no one had seen her enter. There was something utterly desperate in that glance. Noiselessly she stepped to the narrow oval window gazing out into the mist-veiled landscape.

But it seemed without consciousness.

A single thought seemed to have frozen her brain.

She stepped to Otto's couch and for a moment bent over him.

Then she retreated, as if seized with a secret terror.

For a few moments she stood behind him, with closed eyes, her face almost stony with dread and the fear of something unknown.

Near the bed there stood a pitcher which the monks replenished every evening with water cold from a mountain spring. Approaching it, she took a powder from her bosom and shook it into it, every grain. Then she turned the pitcher round and round,

to mix the fine powder, which stood on the surface. Suddenly she started, and set it down, while scalding tears slowly coursed down her pale cheeks. Desperate thoughts crowded thickly on her brain, as her stony gaze was riveted on the water, whose crystal clearness had not been clouded by the subtle poison.

"Between us stands the shade of Crescentius," she muttered. "Still I can not cease to love him,—each bound to each,—together, yet perpetually divided,—our love a flower that the hand of death will gather."

Again there was a long, intense hush. She crept to Otto's bed and knelt down by his side, hiding her wet face on her bare arms.

"When he is dead," she continued speaking softly, so as not to wake him, "the unpardonable sin will be condoned.—Otto, Otto,—how I love you,—if I loved you less,—you might live—"

At these words he stirred in the cushions. A deep sigh came from his lips, as if the mountain of a heavy dream had been lifted from his breast.

She drew back terrified, but noting that he did not open his eyes, she spoke with a moan of weariness:

"How often thus in my dreams have I seen his dead face—"

Again she bent over the sleeper. Now she could not discern a breath. A strange dread seized her, and

her face became as wan and haggard as that of the fever-stricken youth. Obeying a sudden impulse she removed the pitcher of water, placing it in a remote niche. Then she crept back to Otto's couch.

"Is he dead?" she whispered, as if seized by a strange delirium. "Is he dead? I know not,—yet none knows,—but I! None,—but I!"

She gave a start, as if she had discovered a listener, glanced wildly about the room, at each familiar object in the chamber, and met Otto's eyes.

She raised herself with a gasp of terror, as he grasped her hand.

"Who is dead?" he asked. "And who is it, that alone knows it?"

She stroked the soft fair hair from his clammy brow.

"You are delirious, my love," she whispered. "No one is dead;—you have been dreaming."

"I thought I heard you say so," he replied wearily.

The horror and bewilderment at his awakening at this moment of all, when she required all her strength for her purpose, left her dazed for a moment.

The clock struck the second hour after midnight. The sound cut the air sharply, like a stern summons. It seemed to demand: Who dares to watch at this hour of death?

Otto had again closed his eyes. Delirium had

regained its sway. He was whispering, while his fingers scratched on the cover of his couch, as if he were preparing his own grave.

Again he relapsed into a fitful slumber, filled with dreams and visions of the past.

He stands at the banks of the Rhine. The night is still. The moon is in her zenith, her yellow radiance reflected in the calm majestic tide of the river. He hears the sighing, droning swish of the waters; the sinuous dream-like murmuring of the waves resolving into tinkling chimes, far-away and plaintive, that steal up to him in the moon mists, ravishing his soul. In cadenced, languorous rhythm the song of the Rhine-daughters weeps and wooes through the night; their shimmering bodies gleam from the waters in a silvery sphere of light; they seem to beckon to him—to call to him—to lure him back—

"Home! Home!" he cries from the depths of his dream; then his voice becomes inarticulate and sinks into silence.

New phantoms crowded each other, a shifting phantasmagoria of the very beings who at that dreadful hour were most vividly fixed in his mind. And among them stood out the image of the woman, who was kneeling at his side, the woman he loved above all women on earth. Again his lips moved. He called her by name, with passionate words of love.

"Let me not die thus, Stephania! Leave me not in

this dreary abyss! Oh! Drive away those infernal spectres that stare in my face," and his words became wild and confused, as all these phantoms seemed to rush on him together, forming lurid groups, flaming and tremulous, like prolonged flashes of lightning, but growing fainter and fainter as they died away, when every faculty of the young sufferer seemed utterly suspended.

Dark clouds passed over the moon.

The wind blew in fierce gusts, howling like an imprisoned beast between the chinks of the wall. Then the night relapsed once more into silence, and in intermittent pauses large drops of rain could be heard, splashing from the height of the roof upon the ringing flagstones. To Stephania's listening ear it seemed like a dreadful pacing to and fro of spirits meditating on the past. She dragged herself to a seat in a recess of the wall, whence she could watch the sufferer and minister to his wants.

Another fit of delirium seized Otto. Restlessly he tossed on his pillows. Again a dream murmured his own impending fate into his ears.

Again he is in Aix-la-Chapelle. Again he beholds Charlemagne seated erect in his chair as in that memorable night when he visited the dead emperor in the crypts. He touches the imperial vestments; the crown glitters in the smoky flare of the torches. But through the heavy Arabian perfumes of the emperor's fantastic shroud penetrates the odour of the corpse.

The night wore on.

Recovering consciousness, Otto knew by the dying candle, by the strokes of the clocks from adjacent cloisters, that hours had passed into eternity, and that it was long past midnight. It was very still. The tread of the sentries was no longer heard. Through the window were seen pale blue flashes of lightning in a remote cloudbank, as on that memorable night in the temple of Neptune at Rome. The dull rumbling of distant thunder seemed to come from the bowels of the earth.

His head ached, his mouth was parched, thirst tormented him. He dimly remembered the pitcher of water. Who had removed it? Why had it been taken away? He tried to rise, to drag himself to the wall, but his strength was not equal to the task. He fell back in the cushions where for a time he lay motionless. Then a moan broke from his lips, which startled the figure seated by the bed. Opening his eyes Otto gazed into the pale face of Stephania. She started up with a low cry,—as from a trance. Waking and watching had benumbed her senses.

Now from her own suffering she lifted to Otto her face, wherein was reflected the great love she bore him.

He looked at her with all the love of his soul in his eyes.

"I am dying," he spoke calmly, "I know it."

An outcry of mortal anguish broke from her lips.

"No, no, no!" she moaned, entwining him with her arms. "Otto, my love—you will live,—live—live — Can you fancy us parted," she sobbed, "one from the other for ever? Or can you go from me and leave me to the great loneliness of the world? To me all on earth, but you, seems a fleeting shadow; but in this hour, I think only of the greater pang of my own fate, and pray that in another world I may be judged more mercifully,—even by you."

For some moments they remained locked in close embrace.

"Kiss me!" he whispered hungrily. "Kiss me, Stephania!"

She drew back.

"My kisses are cold, Otto, cold as those of a dead love."

"Kiss me, Stephania," he moaned, "kiss me, even if your kisses were death itself."

She breathed hard, as he held to her with all his might.

"A dead hand is drawing me downward, hold me up, Otto!" she gasped. "Hold me up! Do not let me go! Do not let me go!"

And she kissed him, until he was almost delirious, drawing him close to her heart.

"Now you are mine—mine—mine!" she whispered, kissing him again and again, while his fingers were buried in the soft, silken wealth of her hair.

"The hour is brief,—life is short and uncertain—oh, let the hour be ours! Let us drain the glittering goblet to the dregs! Then we may cast it from us and say we have been happy! Death has no terror for us! I am thirsty, Stephania,—give me the pitcher."

She trembled in every limb.

"Do not let me go! Hold me, Otto,—do not let me go!" she almost shrieked, entwining him so tightly with her arms that he could scarcely breathe.

"I feel the fever returning—the water—Stephania—"

"Do not let me go!" she begged with mortal dread.

"I am burning up."

He struggled in her arms to rise, gasping:

"Water—Water!"

And he pointed to the niche, where he had espied the pitcher.

She almost dropped him, as raising himself he pushed her from him. Her head swam giddily and she felt a feebleness in all her limbs; shudders of icy cold ran through her, followed by waves of heat, that sickened and suffocated her. But she paid little heed to these sensations. Stephania felt death in her heart, she strove to sustain herself, but failing in the effort, fell moaning across his couch.

Otto had fallen back on his pillows with eyes closed. He was spared the sight of the terrible agony of the woman he loved. At last she clutched the

pitcher and staggering feebly forward, step by step, she pushed back her hair from her brows and softly called his name.

He opened his eyes, but did not speak.

Trembling in every limb she bent over him and placing one hand under his head raised him to a sitting posture, glancing fear-struck round the chamber. She thought she had heard the tread of approaching steps.

Greedily Otto grasped the vessel, pressing his hot hands over the woman's which held it to his lips. Greedily he drank the poisoned beverage, while a heart-breaking moan came from Stephania's lips. He heard it not. He sank back into the cushions, while she knelt down by his side, weeping as if her heart would break.

The Senator of Rome was avenged.

Avenged? On whom? Whose tortures were the greater, if a spirit still possessed the power to suffer? Alas! It was not the death of her lord and husband she had avenged! She had sacrificed the love which filled her heart to the Infernals!

While these reflections were whirling through her maddened brain, the fatal poison was coursing serpent-like through Otto's veins, and creeping to his head. For a time he lay still; then he began to move uneasily in his pillows, his breathing became laboured, he beat the covers with his hands. Then he moaned, as in the last agony, and Stephania, to

whom every sound of suffering from his lips was as a thousand deaths, knelt by his side, unable to avert her gaze from the youth, dying by the hand he loved and trusted.

Fixedly she stared at the inert form on the bed. Then only the full realization of her deed seemed to burst upon her brain. She clutched despairingly at the cover, beneath which lay his restless form, his face averted, the face she so loved, yet feared, to see.

"Otto!" she moaned, "Otto!"

Her voice broke. She suddenly withdrew her hands and looked at them in horror, those white, beautiful hands, that had mixed the fatal draught. Then with a bewildered, vacant smile she beamed on her victim.

Otto had lost consciousness. Nothing stirred in the chamber. Profound silence reigned unbroken, save for the slow chime of a distant bell, tolling the hour.

Was he dead? Had the light of the eyes, she loved so well, gone out for ever?

Her hand hovered fearfully above him, as if to drive away the grim spectre of death. At last, nerving herself with a supreme effort, she touched with trembling hand the cover that hid him from view. Lifting it tearfully, she turned it back softly,—softly, murmuring his name all the time.

Then she stooped down close, and closer yet. Her red lips touched the purple ones; she stroked the

damp and clammy brow, and thrust her fingers into his soft hair. A moan came from his lips. Then, fastening her white robe more securely about her, and stepping heedfully on tip-toe, she passed out of the chamber. With uncertain step she glided along the corridor, a ghostly figure, with a white, spectral face and fevered eyes. At the foot of the spiral stairway she paused, gazing eagerly around.

Stepping to a low casement she peered into the night. Flickering lights and shadows played without; the late moon had disappeared, leaving but a silvery trail upon the sky, to faintly mark her recent passage among the stars. Everything was still. Only the plaintive cry of an owl echoed from afar. Her sandalled feet sounded on the stone-paved floor, like the soft pattering of falling leaves in autumn. Unsteadily she moved along the gray discoloured wall towards the secret panel, known but to herself. Soon her perplexed wandering gaze found what it sought, and Stephania disappeared, as if the stones had receded to receive her.

CHAPTER IV

THE ANGEL OF THE AGONY


he morning of the following day broke hazy and threatening. But as the hours wore on, the sky, which had been overcast, brightened slowly and in that instant's change the earth became covered with a radiance of sunshine and the heavens seemed filled with ineffable peace.

It was late in the day, when Otto woke from his lethargy. Hour after hour he had raved without recovering consciousness. His breathing grew weaker. He was thought to be in his last agony. Little by little the vigour of his youth had reasserted itself, little by little he had opened his eyes. His sight had become dimmed from the effects of the poison, and his reason seemed to sway and to totter; the fevered flow of blood, the wild beating of his temples, caused everything around him to scintillate in a crimson haze and flit before his vision with fitful dazzling gleams. But his eyes seemed fixed steadily in a remote recess of the room.

Those surrounding his couch had believed him nearing dissolution, and when he opened his eyes, Otto looked upon the faces of those who had guided his steps ever since he set his foot upon Italian soil, Eckhardt, Count Tammus, and Sylvester, the silver-haired pontiff who had come from Rome. Their faces told him the worst. He attempted to raise himself in

his cushions, but his strength failed him, and he fell heavily back. Anew his ideas became confused and his gaze resumed its former fixedness.

His lips moved and Eckhardt, who bent over him, to listen, turned white with rage.

"Again her accursed name," he growled, turning to the monk by his side.

"Stephania—where is Stephania?" moaned the dying youth.

A voice almost a shriek rent the silence.

"I am here,—Otto,—I am here!"

A shadow passed before the eyes of the amazed visitors in the sick-chamber, a shadow which seemed to come out of the wall itself, and the wife of the Senator of Rome staggered towards Otto's couch, who made a feeble effort to stretch out his hands toward her. He could not raise them. They were like lead. She rushed to his side, ere Eckhardt could prevent, and with a sob fell down before the couch and grasped them tightly in her own.

The petrified amazement, which had pictured itself in the features of those assembled, at the unexpected apparition, gave vent to a flurry of whispers and conjectures during which Eckhardt, with face drawn and white and haggard, had rushed through the outer chamber to the door.

"Guards!" he thundered, "Guards!"

Two spearmen appeared in the doorway.

"Seize this woman and throw her over the

ramparts!" the Margrave said with a voice whose calm formed a fearful contrast to the blazing fury in his eyes.

The men-at-arms approached with hesitation, but Sylvester barred their progress with uplifted arm.

"Vengeance is the Lord's!" he turned to Eckhardt, whose eyes, aflame with wrath, seemed the only living thing in his stony face.

A terrible laugh broke from the Margrave's lips.

"His mad pleadings saved her once! Now, all the angels in heaven and demons in hell combined shall not save her from her doom!" he replied to the Pontiff. "Seize her, my men! She has killed your king! Over the ramparts with her!"

They dared deny obedience no longer. Approaching the couch they laid hands on the kneeling woman. But the sight of violence for a moment so incensed the prostrate form in the cushions, that he started up, as he had done in the vigour of his health.

With eyes glowing with fever and wrath, Otto leaped from the bed, planting himself before the prostrate form of the woman.

"Back!" he cried. "The first who lays hand on her dies by my hand, a traitor! Down on your knees before the Empress of the Romans!"

Terror and amazement accomplished Stephanie's salvation.

Even Eckhardt was stunned. He knelt with the

rest with averted face.

"Leave the room!" Otto turned to the men-at-arms, and with heads bowed down they strode from the sick chamber and resumed their watch outside. What did it all mean? The presence of the Senator's wife at their sovereign's bedside, Eckhardt's contradictory demeanour, Otto's strange words; mystified they shook their heads, glad the terrible task had been spared them.

Otto's exertion was followed by a complete collapse, and he fell back in a swoon. After a time he seemed to rally. Without assistance he sat up straight and rigid, and turned towards the woman, whose wan face and sunken eyes made her fatal beauty all the more terrible.

"Tell me—shall I live till night?" he whispered.

And as she hid her face from him with a sob, he continued:

"Do not deceive me! I am not afraid!"

His voice broke. Every one in the room knelt down weeping. Sylvester tried to answer, but in vain. Hiding his face in his hands, the pontiff sobbed aloud.

"Softly—softly—" Otto whispered to Stephania, then turning towards the sky he whispered:

"How beautiful!"

The morning clouds were growing rosy; the twilight had become warm and mellow. The first beam of the sun appeared over the rim of the

horizon. The dying youth held his face with closed eyes towards the light. A faint shiver ran through his body and with a last effort he stretched out his arms, as if he would have rushed to meet the rising orb.

Suddenly he was seized by a convulsion; the veins swelled on neck and temples.

"Water—water!" he gasped choking.

Stephania knew the symptoms. Pale as death she staggered to her feet, filled a cup with clear spring water and held it to his lips.

Otto, grasping her hand with the cup, drank thirstily from the ice-cold draught.

Then his head fell back. A last murmur came from his half-open lips:

"Stephania,—Stephania—"

Then his life went out. With a moan of heart-rending anguish she closed his eyes. The face of the youth, kissed by the early rays of the December sun, took on a look as of one sleeping. His soul, freed from earthly love, had entered on its eternal repose.

Johannes Crescentius was avenged.

Eckhardt had watched the last moments of his king. In the awful presence of Death, he had restrained a new outburst of passion against the woman, who had so utterly made that dead youth her own. But he had sworn a terrible oath to himself, that she should pay the penalty, if that life went out, —it would be cancelling the last debt he owed on the accursed Roman soil.

And no sooner had the light faded from Otto's eyes, no sooner had they been closed under the soft touch of Stephania's hand, than Eckhardt rushed anew to the door and the terrible voice of the Margrave thundered through the stillness of the death-chamber:

"Guards! Throw this woman over the ramparts! She has killed your King!"

Again the guards rushed into the chamber. The terrible denunciation had stirred their zeal. Stephania, kneeling by Otto's couch, never stirred, but as the men-at-arms, over-awed by the spectacle that met their gaze, paused for a moment, the sound of falling crystal, breaking on the floor, startled the silver-haired pontiff.

He had seen enough.

Stepping between Stephania and her would-be slayers he waved them back.

Then he picked up a fragment of the empty flask.

"This phial," he spoke to Eckhardt, "is of the same shape and size as one discovered in a witch's grave, when they were digging the foundations for the monastery of St. Jerome!"

And he strode towards the woman and laid his hands on her head.

"She will soon answer before a higher tribunal," said the monk of Aurillac.

"Father," she whispered, holding the hands of

the corpse in her own, while her head rested on her arms,—"I cannot see,—stoop down,—and let me whisper—"

"I am here, daughter, close—quite close to you."

He inclined his ear to her mouth and listened. But though her lips moved, no words would come.

After a moment or two of intense stillness, she whispered, raising her head.

"It is bright again! They are calling me! We will go together to that far, distant land of peace. I am with you, Otto—hold me up, I cannot breathe—"

Gently Sylvester lifted her head.

"Otto,—my own love—forgive—" she gasped. A convulsive shudder passed through her body and she fell lifeless over the dead body of her victim.

Stephania's proud spirit had flown.

Sylvester muttered the prayer for the departed, and staggered to his feet.

Eckhardt pointed to her lifeless clay. In his livid face burnt relentless, unforgiving wrath.

"Throw that woman over the ramparts!" he turned to his men. "She shall not have Christian burial!"

Anew Sylvester intervened.

"Back!" he commanded the guards. "Judge not,—that ye may not be judged. What has passed between those two—lies beyond the pale of human ken. He alone, who has called, has the right to judge them! She died absolved.—May God have mercy on her

soul!"

As weeping those present turned to leave the death-chamber, Eckhardt bent over the still, dead face of Otto.

"I will hold the death-watch," he turned to Sylvester. "Have the bier prepared! To-morrow at dawn we start. We return to our Saxon-land,—we go back across the Alps. In the crypts of Aix-la-Chapelle the grandson of the great Otto shall rest; he shall sleep by the side of the great emperor, whom he visited ere he came hither; Charlemagne's phantom has claimed him at last. Rome shall not have a lock of his hair!"

"As you say—so shall it be!" replied Sylvester, his gaze turning from Otto to the lifeless clay of Stephania.

Softly he raised her dead body and laid it side by side with that of Theophano's son, joining their hands.

"Though they shall sleep apart in distant lands, their souls are one in the great beyond, that holds no mysteries for the departed."

From the chapel of the cloister at the foot of the hill, stealing through the solemn stillness of the December morning, came the chant of the monks:

"Quando corpus morietur,
Fac ut animae donetur
Paradisi gloria."

CHAPTER V
RETURN

 he Eve of the Millennium stood upon the threshold of Time.

The veiled sun of midwinter was rising and his early rays filled the blue balconies of the East with curtains of gold. From the slopes of Paterno a strange procession was to be seen winding its way down into the plains below. It was the remnant of the German host, carrying the bier with the body of the third Otto towards its distant, final resting-place. Eckhardt and Haco jointly headed the mournful cortege, which after reaching the plain, entered the northern road. Behind them lay Civita Castellana, the walls of the ancient citadel towering high above the town, which lay in the centre of a net-work of deep ravines. To their right the Sabine hills extended in long, airy lines and the wooded heights of Pellachio and San Gennaro rose to the south-east. Before them Viterbo with her hundred towers lay dark and frowning inside her bristling walls; and to northward, surmounted by its mighty cathedral dome, on a

conical hill, above the great lake of Bolsena, the gray town of Montefiascone rose out of the wintry haze.

Continually harassed by the Romans the small band hewed their way through their pursuers who abandoned their onslaughts only when the Germans reached the Nera and beheld the Campanile of St. Juvenale rising above Narni.

Slowly the imperial cortege passed through the ancient town and was soon lost in the purple mists, which enshrouded mountain and valley.

Rome lay behind them, the source of their tears and sorrows.

Onward, ever onward they rode towards the glittering crests of the Alps, the solemn twilight of the Hercynian forest, towards the distant banks of the Rhine and the crypts of Aix-la-Chapelle.

THE END.

* * * * * * * *

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