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The Hill Of Venus

Nathan Gallizier
E. H. Garrett

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Author: Nathan Gallizier

Illustrator: Edmund H. Garrett
P. Verburg

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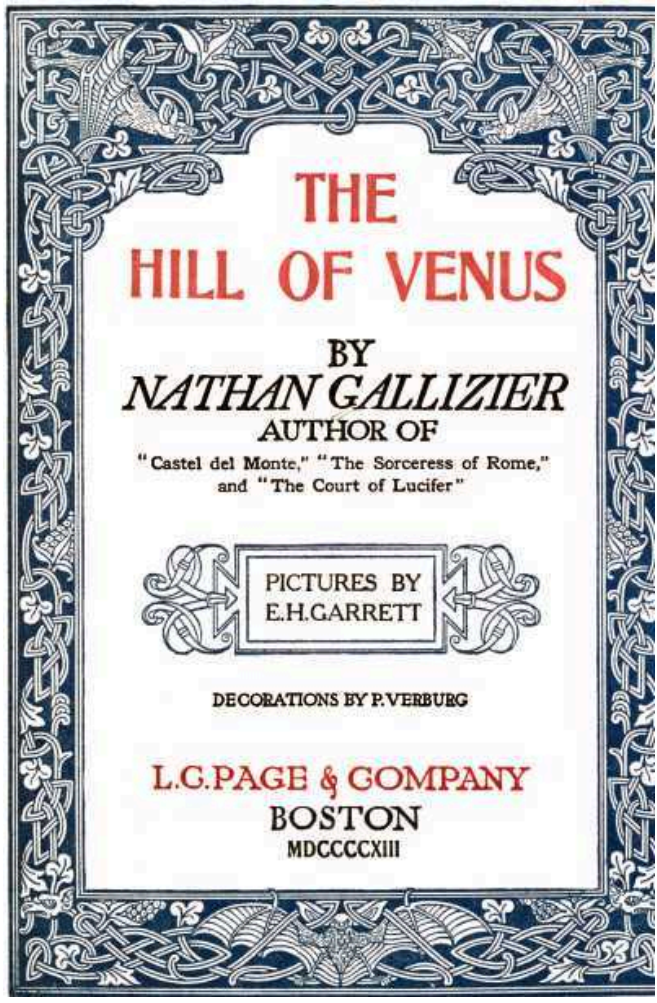
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THE HILL OF VENUS



"He stared spellbound" (*See page [108](#)*)



THE HILL OF VENUS

BY

NATHAN GALLIZIER

AUTHOR OF
"Castel del Monte," "The Sorceress of Rome,"
and "The Court of Lucifer"

PICTURES BY E. H. GARRETT

DECORATIONS BY P. VERBURG

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"Thou art all shrouded, in a gauzy veil,
Sombrous and cloudlike, all except that face
Of subtle loveliness, though weirdly pale.
Thy soft, slow-gliding footsteps leave no trace
And stir no sound. Thy drooping hands infold
Their frail white fingers, and unconscious hold
A poppy-wreath: thine anodyne of grace.

Thy hair is like a twilight round thy head,
Thine eyes are shadowed wells from Lethe-stream,
With drowsy, subterranean waters fed;
Obscurely deep without a stir or gleam.
The gazer drinks in from them with his gaze
An opiate charm, to curtain all his days,
A passive languor of oblivious dream."

—JAMES THOMSON.

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Book the First

THE SACRIFICE

The Hill of Venus

BOOK THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

THE SUMMONS



T was the time of the summer solstice in the year 1266.

Evening was falling on the Basilicata, the shadowy, hazy twilight of the fading midsummer day. The pale green leaves of the olive-branches hung limply from their boughs, but the great willows which drooped over the meandering tide of the Garigliano now and then stirred a feathery twig in response to the delicate touch of the evening breeze. The sun had entered the waters of ancient Liris for his evening bath, leaving his robes of crimson and gold draped in the western sky.

Everything in this fabled land had grown enchanted in the sunset glow. The plane-trees drooped their leaves, as if wrapped in silent dreams. In the poppy-fields the shrill insect voices were hushed, wan presage of the coming dusk. The Liris rolled his sunset crimson gold between the broken scenery of the hills, and the dark forests of the Murgie spread waving shadows over the sun-kissed Apulian plains.

To eastward the towering promontory of Monte Gargano, with the shrines of St. Michael, patron of the Sea, rose sheer and precipitous from the restless element which laved its base. The milk-white Apulian towns of Foggia, Trani and Bitonto faded

into the horizon to southward, and the shadowy outlines of Castel del Monte, rising upon a conical hill in the remote Basilicata, terminated the view to westward.

Out of the green dusk of forest aisles in which lost sunbeams quivered, there rode a horseman into the shadowy silence of the deepening twilight.

Horse and rider alike seemed to feel the sway of the hour. Their appearance did not so much as startle a bird, which from the boughs of a carob-tree was languidly carolling a slumber song, that melted away in the purple twilight without a single vibration. Rider and steed drooped; the one in his saddle, the other over the fragrant grass, into which the tired hoofs sank at every step.

The solitary traveller seemed lost in contemplation of the scenery, as he now and then paused in the shadow of the dwarfed plane and carob-trees. Round their grotesquely gnarled trunks vines clung in fantastic tapestries of living green, between which the path seemed to wind towards strange twilight worlds. Slowly, as if under the weight of some heavy spell, the horseman continued upon the deserted road, when he was suddenly roused from his abstracted reveries by the sound of the Angelus, cleaving the stillness with echoing chimes.

Reining in his steed with a convulsive start, which caused the startled animal to rear and champ at the bit, he paused and looked across the vale. He had reached a point at which the forest descended into one of those deep ravines from which arise the rocks on which most of the monasteries of Central Italy are built. On the brow of the opposite hill, arising from a grove of cypresses and pines, the airy shafts of the

cloisters of San Cataldo pierced the translucent air. The uplifted cross caught the last rays of the sun, whose misty, crimson ball was slowly sinking below the world's dark rim.

Slowly the horseman started on the winding descent into the valley below, thence on the steep climb of the opposite heights, passing numerous groups of peasants, in grotesque, gaily tinted garbs, who stood or knelt round the wayside shrine of a saint, their bronzed countenances aglow with fervor and religious zeal. Some pilgrims, known by bearing the rosemary branch, were visible among the trees in the background.—

Francesco Villani was tall and of slender stature. His face possessed almost classic regularity of features. Hair of chestnut brown, pointing to an extraction not purely Italian, clustered round the high forehead. His eyes, gazing wistfully from the well-poised head, were the brown eyes of a dreamer.

His age might have been reckoned at twenty-five. His appearance and bearing were those of one bred in the sphere of a court. His garb consisted of a russet-colored tunic, fastened with a belt of embossed leather studded with gold, particolored hose, encased in leather buskins, and a cap with a slanting plume, the ensemble denoting a page of some princely household.

A shadowy wilderness encompassed the ascent to the cloisters, whose white walls were sharply outlined against the greenish-blue of the sky. The scene which on all sides met the youth's gaze seemed almost unreal. Laden with perfume was the air, of jessamine, of styrax, of roses heavy in the breathless evening glow. Here and there, under drooping

branches, he passed a wooden cross, rudely carved, marking the resting-place of some unknown pilgrim, or early martyr of the faith. Wandering ivy wound its tendrils round the faded or half-effaced inscriptions, and ilex foliage drooped thickly over the Memento Mori on the roadside.

The hour added to the beauty of the scene.

A silver moon, hovering midway in the eastern sky, began to scintillate with trembling lustre on the dreaming world below. An intermittent breeze now and then swayed the tops of the stately holm-oaks, wafting the fragrance of almond-trees and oleander along alleys bordered by yew-trees. A nightingale poured forth its plaintive song from the shelter of branch-shadowed thickets, and from the high-domed chapel of the cloisters came the muffled chant of the monks, borne along on the wings of the evening breeze.

At last the summit was reached.

Francesco stopped before the massive gates of San Cataldo.

With a quick tightening of the lips he dismounted. Then, without a second's pause, he seized upon the rope which sounded a gong in the porter's lodge.

"Who is it that would enter?" drawled a surly voice, quaverous with age.

Francesco, with a twitch of the lips, grasped his horse's mane and pulled it, till the astonished creature gave forth a neigh of protest, at the same time rearing violently.

Then, looking up, he shouted:

"One who would see the Prior without delay."

Forthwith, the wicket was pulled back, and the weazened countenance of Fra Lorenzo, the porter, appeared in the opening.

"You would see the Prior," he gibbered, peering through the dusk upon the belated caller, and adding with the loquaciousness of old age: "If you are he the Prior expects, you have indeed need of haste."

With this enigmatical speech the small window above was shut.

A moment or two later the heavy bronze gates of San Cataldo swung slowly inward, admitting Francesco Villani and his steed. A lay-brother, who appeared at the same time from an inner court, took charge of the latter, while the youth followed his guide, till they stood directly in front of the great stone church, which towered, like a huge cloud-shadow, above them in the growing darkness. The chant of the monks, which had fallen on Francesco's ear as he climbed the height, had ceased. Deep silence reigned in San Cataldo; only a dim light, here and there, gave evidence of life within.

Passing the door of the church, they found themselves facing the visitor's entrance of the cloisters. Before entering, Francesco's guide knocked sturdily at the door.

In the shadows of the dimly lighted corridor there stood a monk, tall of stature, who seemed to await them.

He regarded the youth with gloomy curiosity, while Fra Lorenzo, bent almost double in self-abasement, slowly retreated.

"You are Francesco Villani?" spoke the Prior. Yet it sounded not like a question. Nor did he extend his hands in greeting.

"How is my father?" came the anxious reply.

"Follow me!" said the Prior, leading the way, and as Francesco strode behind the tall monk, of whose stern features he had caught but a glimpse in the shadow of the corridor, he was seized with a sudden unaccountable dread.

The expression in the face of the Prior was unreadable, but there was little doubt he was reluctant to speak.

They passed in silence down the refectory, then up a stone stairway, through a maze of corridors lighted dimly with stone lamps and torches. At last he paused before the door of a chamber which they entered, and as soon as they appeared, all those seated within arose of one accord, while the Prior silently pointed to a bed, under a silken canopy, whereon lay a white, still form. And as with quickened pulse, with quickened step, looking neither to right nor left, the youth strode to the bedside and bent over the passive form reclining among the cushions, all those present withdrew, flitting noiselessly as phantoms from the room, perchance more out of respect for the dying man than regard for the son.

"My father!" Francesco whispered softly.

Gregorio Villani, Grand Master of the Order of the Knights Hospitallers, who, in the midst of his journey from Rome to Bari, had been stricken down with a deadly fever, opened his eyes. In those gray orbs the

old-time fire still lingered and when he spoke, weak though was his voice, the wonted ring of command still dominated.

"Thanks, Francesco, for your quick obedience. It came sooner than I expected."

"It was my desire and duty," came the response, spoken almost in a whisper, as the youth was noting each passing change in his father's weakened face and frame.

There was a silence of some duration between them, as if neither dared give utterance to his thoughts and fears.

Francesco had lifted the white, resistless hand to his lips and tenderly replaced it on the coverlet.

"All is well now," the elder Villani spoke at last. "Refreshments will be brought you. After that we will speak of the business of the hour,—the purpose of your presence here. As yet—I cannot!"

The last sentence came brokenly, and with a sort of shudder. The sight of his son seemed to have unnerved the sick man. He closed his eyes as if he had been taken with a sudden sinking spell.

One of the monks, who practised the art of medicine, hurried to the bedside with a cordial, which he hastened to administer. Then Francesco, seeing his father sink back into a torpor, left his side and went to a table on which had been placed some barley bread, venison and wine.

Of this he seemed in great need indeed, being thoroughly exhausted from the long ride and the enervating emotions through which he had passed

since receiving the fatal summons.

Those who had been present in the chamber when he arrived, had now re-entered. In a corner, whence they cast occasional glances at the stricken man and at the youth who was devouring his repast with nervous haste, two confessors and the monk who had administered the cordial, sat whispering together in lugubrious consultation, while the object of their concern lay upon the heavily canopied bed, unheedful of their talk, pallid and motionless, his eyes closed, one hand clenched tightly on the coarse coverlet.

His first hunger appeased, Francesco watched the scene as one in a trance. In his mind there was no definite thought or feeling. All about him there seemed to hang a haze of apprehension, vague and elusive as the candle-light. Something was to happen, he felt, something strange, dreadful, unguessed. This unaccountable dread waxed greater until it became impossible for him to continue his repast. He finished his wine, then sat quite still on his wooden settle, his head bent, his fingers tightly interlaced.

The monks thought he was muttering a prayer.

In reality his thoughts had fled from the present hour to the memory of the scenes he had left at the gay and pleasure-loving Court of Avellino, scenes of a garden and balcony, where he had been wont to whisper his hopes and thoughts into the ears of a proud girl, whose favors, so manifestly bestowed upon himself, were vainly and eagerly sought by youths of nobler birth and unquestioned parentage, when a mysterious something recalled him to the reality of the moment.

He rose mechanically and crossed to the bed whereon the sick man lay.

The latter seemed to feel his presence and looked up.

"Are you ready?" he asked in a whisper.

Francesco bowed his head.

The elder Villani raised his thin white hands.

"I would be alone with my son," he addressed the monk sitting nearest his couch. Rising obediently, the latter imparted the sick man's wish to the others who slowly filed out of the room.

Wistfully his eyes followed their movements, till their steps had died to silence in the long corridor. Then, without Francesco's aid, the elder Villani raised himself in the cushions. There seemed to be no hint of weakness in the body, racked for weeks by the ravages of the fever.

It was the last flickering of the indomitable spirit which had with absolute assurance carried him to the goal of his ambition. From the unknown monk he had risen step by step in the service of the Church Militant, until his name resounded through the Christian and Moslem world, more powerful than that of the Pontiff, whom only in matters spiritual he acknowledged his superior.

The Knights Hospitallers had long assumed the defence of the Christian world against the ever bolder encroaching hordes of Islam; they had constituted themselves the guardians of the Holy Sepulchre, and Gregorio Villani had not shirked the duties which the fulfillment of his early ambition had imposed upon him. On his way to Rome, to rouse the

Pope to the proclamation of another crusade, he had stopped at Avellino in obedience to the voice of his heart, which yearned for the embrace of his own flesh and blood.

The boy Francesco had indeed fulfilled the promise of his childhood, and the elder Villani could not but commend his own wisdom, which had prompted him to place the youth at the Ghibelline court, disregarding the violent protests of Urban IV, who had time and again excommunicated the friends and adherents of Emperor Frederick II. But the irate enemy of the Swabian dynasty could ill afford to estrange from himself the good-will of the formidable order of St. John, and for the time, at least, he had seemingly acquiesced.

And his time had come.

The reunion between father and son had been affectionate, but when the father suddenly hinted at certain secret desires regarding his son's future, a cold hand seemed to come between them, which caused the elder Villani to part with a pang from the offspring of an illicit love. He could hardly have accounted to himself for the subtle change which his mind had undergone. And to such an extent did it prey on his thoughts, that he laid his heart open to the Pontiff. What transpired at their conference, not even the elder Villani's intimate friends ever knew. But the fact remained, that he emerged from the private audience with the cobbler's son a changed man, resolved to leave no stone unturned to make Francesco pliable to his designs.

But ere he reached the port of Bari, whence he was to embark for the Holy Land, he fell prey to a malignant fever, which compelled him to forego his

journey and to place himself under the care of the monks of San Cataldo.

Feeling his life ebbing slowly away, he had caused Francesco to be summoned to his bedside.

He could not die in peace with the blot upon his conscience, the blot from the womb of a woman,—the blot called Francesco. Ever since he had again set eyes on the youth, carefree and happy among his companions, the memory of his own sin had been present with him. The fear of punishment in the life to come increased with every day; the dread of damnation everlasting chased the slumber from his eyes, and the man who had defied the combined forces of the Caliph, trembled at the thought of his own last hour on earth. Vainly he had racked his brain for some method of atonement which would dispel the ever present fear of being barred from his seat in the Heaven of the Blessed, which would assure him immunity from the lake of everlasting fire. At last, like a revelation, it dawned upon him: clearly he saw his course. There was the one way,—there was no choice. A sacrifice must be made to save his soul, a sacrifice by one near and dear,—yet Gregorio Villani had no life claims upon any one, save his son. His son! And,—as according to the Scriptures the sins of the father shall be visited upon the children even unto the third generation and the fourth,—why, according to divine permission, might not the son be requested to take and bear the consequences of his father's sin?

Francesco stood by his father's side, glad that the decisive moment had come at last, trusting that his gloomy forebodings might be dispelled. Gregorio Villani was looking at him in silence, with fearful

eyes and slightly parted, expectant lips. Finally, lifting his hand, the old man pointed to a wooden settle. Francesco understood, and, placing it near the bed, seated himself thereon, fixing his eyes on his father's face.

The elder Villani found it difficult to begin. Finally, with a tremor in his tone, but with desperate intensity, he said:

"Francesco—do you remember our converse at Avellino?"

The youth nodded. He seemed to have anticipated a similar preliminary.

"You were not born in wedlock," the old man continued.

"So you told me," came the whispered reply.

"It was a grievous sin!"—

Francesco bowed his head.

There was a brief pause, then the elder Villani continued:

"You are my child, Francesco, the single evidence of my swerving from the narrow path of righteousness. For years have I tried to atone for my guilt. Yet, neither priest nor pontiff would grant me absolution!"—

He paused and looked searchingly into Francesco's eyes.

The youth's face showed no expression, save that of earnest attention. Taking breath again, the old man continued:

"My hours are numbered. As I have bedded myself, so I lie. In another world I shall be judged! Judged! Francesco! Have you ever thought of death?"

"I have not," was the answer given in absent tones.

"Nor had I, when I was at your age," returned the elder Villani, reverting to the ill-fated theme. "But I think of it now,—for I needs must. When one stands on the threshold of eternity, face to face with his Creator, then indeed does man begin to bethink himself. Even though a priest might have absolved me of my transgression, my own conscience could not! The vows of the Church are sacred. And now, from the height of time, I look down through the gallery of years. My prayers of anguish and repentance have brought no peace to my heart. Ever and ever remorse returns. Purgatory opens before my inner gaze and Hell yawns to receive my soul!"

Again the Grand Master paused, his strength failing rapidly.

With a strong, final effort, however, he concentrated a glance of powerful intensity upon Francesco's thoughtful face. The latter returned the look with one of earnest questioning.

"And was the sin so great?" he queried. "Others have committed worse, yet despaired not of Heaven!"

The old man sighed. He had made his decision, passed these arguments from him long ago. Now no word from any one might mitigate his judgment of himself. The thought that his own flesh and blood was taking so lenient a view of the matter, irritated and annoyed him.

"I am not Arnold of Brescia, to soothe my conscience with idle quibbles," he said after a pause. "I am your father, face to face with the Hereafter, filled with fear for the repose of my soul. The tenets of indulgence are not for me! One may be a saint on earth and knock in vain at the gates of Heaven. What are others to me? It is I that am dying!"

Like a tidal-wave breaking on the shore it came to Francesco in a sudden flood of understanding. His father had no thought save for himself. It was not the happiness of others he strove for, his own welfare his first and final goal. The ties of flesh and blood meant nothing to him, save for what he might demand of them for himself. In his earlier years he might have allayed suffering and fears with words. What were words to him now?

"What would you have me do?" queried Francesco. His voice was low and fraught with a great pity for the dying man.

A gleam passed over the latter's face. At last he had to put the question. All hung upon that moment, all;—his eternal happiness and damnation. Should he reveal his request at once, with nothing to allay its harshness?

A sudden rush of pain decided the matter.

"You ask me what you should do?" he replied slowly. "There is but one thing to do,—there is but one choice. It is for you to live the life in which I have failed. Take the vows. Become a monk, content to live apart from men, alone with tomes and prayers and God,—removed from the temptation which caused my fall!"

The sick man drew a short and painful breath, scarcely lower in sound than three words spoken close by his side, spoken as with the voice of a phantom.

"Become a monk!"—

The elder Villani did not stir. He reclined in the cushions, his eyes fixed upon his son with a pitiful look of pleading, which might do far more than words, to prepare the youth's mind for such a thought.

Slowly, almost unconsciously, Francesco moved away from the bed. His gaze wandered aimlessly about the room. His ideas refused to concentrate themselves upon anything. It was too monstrous to conceive! It was past belief, past understanding,—an ill-timed jest perhaps—but yet a jest!

And he burst out with a laugh in which there was no thought of mirth.

"A monk!"

The old man regarded him anxiously.

"I did not jest!"

The laugh died to silence, then rose again in his throat, but Francesco's eyes were terrible.

"Am I fitted for a monk?" he spoke at last. "You know what my life has been. Have not you placed me in the sphere of the court, even ere I had attained the power to think? How can I become a monk? What do I know of the way of monks? What do I know of their lives? I must have time to think!"

"There is no time," insisted the elder Villani, despair in his eyes.

"There is no time!" Francesco exclaimed aghast.

Then all the blood rushed to his heart.

"You mean that I am to decide, here and now?"

"Here and now!" came the low, inexorable voice.

The youth sprang from his seat.

"Then I say no,—no,—no!" he shouted, his eyes flashing fierce determination from the pale face. "I am not fit to be a monk! I will not be a monk! I am of the living,—I came for the sunlight, not the shadow of the cloister! Never—never—never!"

A terrible, indefinable expression passed into the eyes of the sick man. It passed out again, but the trace remained.

When he spoke again, his voice was weak, and there was a note in it of despair.

"Deem you, that I have not thought of it, that I have not weighed in the balance all your objections to the life of the cloister when I asked this thing of you? You say you are of the court! You came for the sunlight, not the shadow! What man does not! But you forget, there is a force that shapes our ends,—you forget—your origin,—your birth! I am your father and my sin is yours! We are both impure in the sight of God! I have opened a means of salvation for both of us—the Way of the Cross. A glorious way it is, for by it my soul shall belong to you! In the sight of men you are as nothing! The blot of your birth can never be effaced! But you are my son! Therefore, here on my death-bed I command you to

leave this world, that you may open the way to another,—a better one,—to both of us,—to both of us, Francesco,—to you and to me!"

There was a long silence between them, a silence of dread and expectation for the one,—of fear and despair for the other.

At last Francesco raised his head.

"And she, whom I never knew,—she who was my mother," he asked bitterly—"have you saved her soul? Or is that too left for me to do?"

"If prayers and penances avail, and masses untold,—her soul is in Heaven! Yet—how do I know if the sacrifice availed?"

Francesco again relapsed into silence.

Out of the mist before his eyes there rose his own life. He saw its shimmering past,—all the allurement for happiness it held out,—and the dreary future decreed for him, to atone for another's sin.

"What is required to make a monk of me?" he queried with a dead voice. "What cloister am I to enter?"

The sick man breathed quickly.

"All these matters have I arranged. From His Holiness himself have I letters, sanctioning the matter. You will be given the right of friar's orders that shall free you at times from the weariness and monotony of the cloister. In all difficulties or troubles you will appeal directly to the Pontiff! These privileges are great!"

"The Pontiff!" Francesco uttered with a start. "Pope Clement IV is the mortal enemy of those to whom I

have pledged my troth, to whom I owe allegiance. I am a Ghibelline!" he concluded, as if struck by a new thought. "I can never become a monk!"

For a moment the elder Villani lay silent, as if dazed by this sudden unforeseen resistance. He forced himself to answer calmly and not to betray his own misgivings.

"Your reasons are mere sophistry!" he said, after a brief pause. "Has the party of Conradino the power to pave your way to Heaven,—to save my soul from perdition? To insure your mother's eternal peace? Your path lies henceforth with the Church, from which only my own perverseness and blindness had severed you. For you henceforth there are no commands save those of the Holy Father! What are Guelphs and Ghibellines to you in this of all homes, —when I am lying at the door of death?"

"They will look upon me as an ingrate, a renegade, a traitor,—and she of all,—she—"

He covered his face with his hands.

"What say you?" asked his father drearily.

"Where am I to go?" came the monotonous response.

"You will repair to Monte Cassino, there to serve your novitiate. Your time is to be shortened by special dispensation. At the end of that period you will be called to Rome, to enter the Chapter House of the Order of St. John. It holds out greater honor and privileges than any in the world. You will take your orders directly from His Holiness. The path to glory and to holiness lies open to you. Are you satisfied?"

A moan came from Francesco's lips.

"My strength is failing,—your word,—to God!"

Francesco stood beside his father's death-bed, his arms hanging limply by his side. His damp hair clung closely to his head. His eyes were dull and unseeing.

Like a breath of the evening wind his youth had passed from him. His gaze was not upon his father's face, but turned inwardly upon the great aching void where his happiness had been.

When he spoke his words were low, his tone and his face alike without expression.

"In the sight of God, I promise to become a monk!"

The old man, straining to catch the words, drank them into his soul.

His face relaxed. A sigh passed his lips. His failing strength had apparently returned to him.

"You may call Fra Anselmo," he said gently. "But first, my son, kneel to receive my blessing!"

Francesco stumbled blindly to the bedside and forced himself to kneel. He shivered, as the sick man's hot, dry hand lay upon his hair, and only by main force he restrained himself from crying out aloud.

Then the whispered phrase of the benediction fell meaningless upon his ear:

"Pax tecum nunc et per omnia saecula,—Amen!"—

CHAPTER II

THE PLEDGE



N the antechamber of the elder Villani's sick-room, during the talk between father and son, the monks had quietly waited the termination of the interview. The Prior sat alone on a settle in a corner, his tonsured head bent so low that his face was unreadable, while with nervous fingers he stroked the cloth of his brown robe. One of the monks was engaged in expounding some dogma to his companions who obviously paid little heed to his words. A strange friar, who had on the previous night arrived from Rome, sat with the confessor of San Cataldo, but neither of them spoke. They, too, seemed to be listening for the sound of footsteps in the corridor. The two mediciners, more at ease, sat murmuring professionally between themselves, careless of the mental unrest of their colleagues of the soul. None in the room, save the strange friar, knew what the elder Villani was saying to his son, but there were few even among these world-strange men who had not guessed the truth long ago.

The minutes dragged. The floating wicks in the quaint stone lamps wavered and flickered restlessly in their sconces, while the uneven light from the cresset-lantern, hung in the centre of the chamber, cast distorted shadows over floor and ceiling. To all present the wait was tedious. To the strange friar

whose eyes roamed ever again towards the sick-chamber, it seemed interminable, and ever and anon the monk at his side leaned uneasily towards him. "Gregorio Villani will find the task no easy one. He had better left it to one of us!"

Nevertheless, when their wait was ended, and the leather hangings of the door were raised by a white hand, all in the room were startled, and gazed alert with wondering eyes, and lips on which the words had died.

It was a strange apparition that entered. For a moment each was aware of a slender figure which seemed to sway even as it grasped the curtain, of a face ghastly white, framed in a wealth of dishevelled hair, of a voice whose sound seemed but the hoarse whisper of a ghost, as he staggered towards the strange friar.

"My father desires your presence."

The monk arose quickly, glancing furtively at the face of the youth, then exchanging a swift glance with the Prior. At the same time one of the mediciners started up.

With an unspoken "Not yet!" the Prior waved him back, and Francesco followed the strange friar from the room.

A swift repugnance against his companion, seemingly born of the moment, filled the youth, as side by side they traversed the short passage-way. At the door of the sick-room, which they were about to enter, the monk suddenly paused and turned.

"You have consented?" he whispered.

Francesco's lips formed an answer, barely audible, but which the monk at his side caught at once.

Something akin to a look of involuntary admiration stole over his face and something akin to a gleam of pity flickered in his eyes. The admiration was for the mental powers of the elder Villani, which, it seemed, not even approaching Death could vanquish. The fleeting pity was for the son. But not unmingled with both was a look of triumph for himself.

On entering the sick-room the monk stepped at once to the side of the dying man. Gregorio Villani's cheeks were slightly flushed, his eyes were brilliant, but his voice was weaker than it had been.

"Francesco has granted my last wish," he said, looking searchingly into the friar's face. "Have you the briefs that are required for his going?"

The friar produced a bundle from his cassock, which he placed on the bed. Gregorio Villani took up the first scroll.

"To this one, containing the pledge, Francesco shall put his name," he said, with a glance at his son. "The second is a letter from my own hand, to the monastery and chapter, which His Holiness has decreed for him. The third is the special dispensation, granting friar's order to Francesco. Treasure it well, my son, for it will prove the greatest boon of your life! And now, in presence of this witness, you shall sign your pledge to me and to the Church!"

He looked imploringly at the youth, who stood by with pale face and eyes from which every gleam of gladness had faded. When Francesco made no reply,

the strange monk stepped to a table on which there were scattered sundry writing utensils, and dipping a pen in a composition serving as ink, brought it to Francesco.

The latter stared for a moment from the friar to his father, his eyes ablaze. Then he reached out, snatched the pen from the monk's hand and dashed it on the floor.

"Does not my word suffice?" he spoke hoarsely, catching at his throat like a drowning man.

"The flesh is weak and temptation ever near,"—the strange friar spoke in the elder Villani's stead, as he picked up the pen with a sidelong glance at the sick man. There was to be no hesitation, no wavering now. The moment lost might never again return!

"You must sign the pledge," the sick man, turning to his son, interposed tremulously. His own misgivings ran apace with those of the strange monk.

Snatching the pen from the latter's hand, Francesco bent over the scroll and scratched his name barbarously under the pledge. Then, from his nerveless fingers, it dropped anew upon the floor.

The older man, who had been watching him narrowly, heaved a sigh of relief.

"You have assured my eternal salvation and your own," he said in a weak, toneless voice. "Retire now, my son, that this holy friar and I may arrange the details of your going."

A hot flush suffused Francesco's face as he straightened himself to his full height.

"Of my going?" he said slowly. "Surely I am not yet to

go! Am I not to wait at least until—"

"My death?" finished the elder Villani, looking at him with piercing intentness. "You shall not have to wait long. I shall never see the light of another day!"

Francesco struggled to suppress a moan which rose to his lips. Then he covered his face with both hands. His nerves were giving way. Further resistance was impossible. Mentally and physically worn, he was encountering a will, pitiless, uncompromising. He felt further argument to be useless. And the strange friar, noting his condition, knew that the victory was theirs.

He placed a scroll in the elder Villani's hands.

"The absolution from His Holiness," he said, with a low, solemn voice, intended, nevertheless, to be heard by Francesco. "The conditions are fulfilled."

Francesco glanced from one to the other: he understood.

He had been sold; his youth, his life bartered away, like the life of a slave.

Fearing an outburst, the elder Villani turned to his son.

"You had best retire and seek your rest, Francesco," he said in a voice strangely mingled with concern and dread. "Fra Girolamo and I will arrange these matters between us. Leave us in good faith. You will depart on the morrow! I wish I knew you safe in the cloister even now! Go, my son,—and peace be with you!"—

Francesco turned silently to leave the room. Presently something, a quiver of feeling, stopped

him. He hesitated for a moment, then he returned to the bedside, bending over it and gazing sadly into his father's face.

"I shall see you again in the morning?" he asked gently.

"By the will of God," the sick man replied with feeble voice.

His head had sunk upon his breast. Francesco crossed the room and was gone. A moment after they heard a loud, jarring laugh without. Then all was still.

The elder Villani and the monk exchanged looks in silence. For some time neither spoke. When the silence was broken at last, it was in a way which revealed the close touch between the minds of these two.

"Was the struggle great?" questioned the monk.

"Great as the sacrifice demanded," replied the sick man. "And yet, not as fierce as I had apprehended. Francesco is my own flesh and blood! Ah! At times my heart reproaches me for what I have done!"

"A weakness you will overcome! In giving back to the Church the boy who was in a fair way to become her enemy, who had been reared in the camp of her mortal foes, who had been fed on the milk of heresy and apostasy, you have but done your duty. He will soon have forgotten that other life, which would have consigned him to tortures eternal, and will gladly accept what is required of him for the repose of your soul and his own!"

There was a brief pause, during which the elder Villani seemed to collect his waning energies. The

monk's speech had roused in him a spirit of resistance, of defiance. Who were they that would dispose of the life of his own flesh and blood? It was too late, to undo what he had done. But it should not pass without a protest.

"Monk, you know not whereof you speak," the sick man said hoarsely. "The rioting blood of youth cannot suddenly be stemmed in the veins, and congealed to ice at the command of a priest! I too was young and happy once,—long ago, and how happy! God who knows of my transgression, alone knows! I have paid the penalty with my own flesh and blood. Tell His Holiness, he may be satisfied!"

"His Holiness could demand no less," interposed the monk. "Your sin was mortal: you added to it by placing the offspring of a forbidden love at the court of the arch-heretic, thrice under ban of excommunication."

"That was my real sin,—that other would have been forgiven," replied the elder Villani bitterly, as if musing aloud. "Let those who are undefiled, cast the first stone. How beautiful she was,—how heavenly sweet! And with dying breath, as if the impending dissolution of the body had imbued her with the faculty to look into the future, she piteously begged me, as if she apprehended my weakness after her spirit had fled:—'Do not make a monk of my boy!'"

He paused with a sob, then he continued:

"Will the repose of my soul, which I have purchased with this immeasurable sacrifice, insure her own in the great beyond? What will she say to me, when we meet in the realm of shadows, when the plaint of her child is wafted to her in the fumes of the incense,

while his trembling hands swing the censer and he curses the day when he saw the light of life?"

"She will rather bless you, knowing from what temptations of the flesh you have removed him," replied the monk, peering anxiously from his cowl down to where the sick man lay.

This, at least, must be no enforced sacrifice. Gregorio Villani must stand acknowledged to himself and the world for the greater glory of the Church. He, the one time friend of Frederick, the Emperor, by whose side he had entered the gates of Antioch in the face of the fierce defence of the Saracens, he, the Ghibelline Emperor's right hand in the conquest of the Holy Sepulchre, must now and forever sever his cause from that of the arch-enemy of papacy, and die in the fold of the Church.

The monk had calculated on the sick man's waning strength, and the ebbing tide of life proved his mightiest ally.

The stricken man lay still for a time, then he heaved a sigh.

"God grant that your words be true,—that I have not cast him in the way of temptation instead."

Raising himself with difficulty upon his pillows, he glanced significantly at the envoy from Rome. Then, with voice needlessly hushed, for there was no one present to hear him, he added:

"He must depart at once! He must not return to Avellino!"

The monk pondered a while, then shook his head.

"It were hardly wise. Francesco has signed the pledge

and will not break his oath. He must himself inform the Apulian court of his decision, of his choice."

And inwardly he thought: Thus only will the sacrifice be complete and the triumph of the Church!

"Might he not inform them from wherever he goes?"

There was a strange dread in the elder Villani's eyes, which remained not unobserved by the other.

"You would not have Francesco, flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood, appear a coward who fears to proclaim his own free will?"

The monk laid stress on the last words.

The elder Villani was startled. Yet he understood.

"His own free will," he repeated as in a dream. "The boy is proud. He will never proclaim his father's shame!"

The monk smiled,—a subtle, inward smile.

Francesco's extraction was an open secret, though no one had ever alluded to it in his presence. Yet the Pope's delegate judged the youth correctly. Besides, the elder Villani's suggestion would have upset his own and his master's plans. The Church could be wholly triumphant only if Francesco openly denounced the friends, the loves of his boyhood, his youth. A stealthy flight from the court to the cloister would scarcely have added to the glory of those who had brought about the deed.

A sinking spell had seized the sick man and the monk hastened to call in the attendant mediciners. But the cordial they administered with some difficulty only

had the effect of producing more regular breathing.

Gregorio Villani's prophetic words were to be fulfilled.

Francesco meanwhile lay in the guest-chamber, which had been prepared for him. His brain rebelled against further labor and his head had scarcely found its welcome resting-place ere the darkly fringed eyelids drooped heavily, and he slept. Through the remaining hours of the night he lay wrapped in a slumber resembling that of death. Only once or twice he moaned, tossing restlessly on his pillows. The rays of the morning sun, creeping up to his eyes, held in them a drowsy dream of a girl's fair face. The dream brought no awakening, and the sun was high in the heavens, when a hand, cold and thin, was laid upon his white one, which lay listlessly above his head. Instantly he started up, ready to resent the intrusion, when he met the gaze of two sombre eyes, peering down upon him, which recalled him to the place and hour.

Before him stood the shrunken form of Fra Girolamo.

With a deep sigh, he returned to reality.

"How fares my father?" he asked quickly, his memory stirred by the sombre eyes that met his own.

"Requiescat in pace!" said the monk with bowed head.

Francesco sank back upon his cushions and hid his face in his arms. The monk heard him sob and, for a moment, his frame seemed to shake as with convulsions. At last he raised himself with an effort.

"Conduct me to him!" he then said to the friar, who

preceded him in silence to the death-chamber.

The rays of the morning sun shone upon the face of Gregorio Villani and imbued the features with a look of peace such as the living had not worn for many a day. The monks had placed his body on a bier, on each side of which two tall wax tapers burned in their sconces.

Francesco knelt down by the side of the bier, burying his head in his hands, while the monk retreated into a remote corner of the room.

When he rose at last, the watcher saw all the young life go out of his face, which suddenly grew old and cold. Light and color seemed simultaneously to depart from eyes and lips, and his limbs seemed hardly able to sustain him upright. After a pause he dared not break, for dread of revealing his sudden feeling, the youth's lifeless voice was raised in the dreary monotone of questioning.

"When will they take him away?"

The monk came nearer.

"He will be laid to rest at night-fall under the great altar of the Cathedral."

A silence fell between them.

Again Francesco spoke.

"The dial points to something like noon?"

The monk nodded.

"When will you ride?"

"At night-fall."

"It is well. You will return to Avellino, that you may bid farewell to your former master and friends. Thence you will proceed to Monte Cassino."

"To Monte Cassino," the youth echoed with a voice dead as his soul.

Then he added:

"I ride alone?"

"Alone!"

"Leave me now! I would spend the last hours here with him!"

"Will you not come to the refectory? You are in need of food, and the day is long!"

Francesco raised his hands as if in abhorrence of the thought. Then, as he turned towards the bier, he seemed newly overwhelmed at the sight of the lifeless clay before him. The memory of his father's first appearance, as he entered the sick-chamber, the ashen pallor, the traces of cruel pain, now softened or effaced by the majesty of Death, reverted to him.

He sank down beside the bier.

But try as he might, he could not pray.

Thus the monk left him.—

On that evening, in the presence of the entire chapter of the Cathedral and the monks of San Cataldo, they laid to rest under the great altar of the imposing edifice all that was mortal of Gregorio Villani, Grand Master of the Knights of St. John.

And on that evening the strange friar, who had

brought to the dying man the much craved conditional absolution, departed after a final interview with Francesco, who was to return at once to Avellino to prepare himself for the new life which had been decreed for him.

CHAPTER III

VISTAS



HE morning dawned gray with heat. The air was lifeless. The sun, rolling lazily up the eastern sky, scarcely deigned to permit his beams to penetrate the humid atmosphere. In the night a heavy dew had fallen and the lush turf on the edge of the forest was a sparkling mass of drops. The fragrance of the rose-gardens and poppy-fields environing San Cataldo was stifling. The very worms and insects lay inert about shrubs and foliage. In the west, a falling arch of heavy clouds hung low over the distant mountains. It was an unnatural morning,

which presaged a storm.

The forests of the Murgie were still dark when Francesco Villani entered their cool and fragrant depths. To him the smile of dawn on that morning had been as the mirthless smile of a ghost. For, with to-day, there had been awakened the memories of yesterday, the consciousness of his impending fate.

Fate! What a future it had prepared for him, a future void of everything which the soul of man may crave, which may delight his heart. The sins of another were to be visited upon his guiltless head,—he was to atone for his own existence.

Yet even that seemed bearable compared with the hour to come at the Court of Avellino, the hour when he must renounce all he held dear in life, appear an ingrate, a traitor; the hour of parting, a parting for life, for all eternity from the friends and companions of his youth and from one who was all the world to him. At the mere thought, the life blood froze in his veins.

The forests of the Murgie gradually thinned, and Francesco emerged upon a high level plateau, which to southward sloped into the Apulian plains, and on which the sun poured the whole fervor of his beams, till the earth itself seemed to beat up light. And there was no refuge from the heat in that vast plain, which soon spread on every side with the broad sterility of the African desert. Half blinded, Francesco cantered along, dreading every step that carried him nearer to the gates of his lost paradise.

A mysterious silence was brooding over the immense expanse, which became more desolate with every step. The wide plains reposed in a melancholy

fertility; flowering thistles were swarming with countless butterflies; dry fennel, wild and withered, rioted round the scattered remnants of broken columns, on whose summits wild birds of prey were screaming.

As the sun rode higher in the heavens, the panorama suddenly changed, as if transformed by the wand of a magician. Colossal plane and carob-trees rose on the horizon, waving fantastic shadows over innumerable old crypts and tombs and the fantastic shapes of the underbrush. To southward the view was unlimited, while in Francesco's rear the snowy cone of Soracté rose defiantly over the plains, its glistening summit towering ruddy in the light of the midday sun against the transparent azure of the sky. Wild expanses of copse alternated with pastures brilliant with flowers. Herds of black and white cattle were browsing on either side, donkeys and half wild horses, and occasionally Francesco passed a large, white masseria, like a fortress glistening in the sun. Here and there vineyards made brown patches in the landscape, and the Casellé had the appearance of thousands of Arab tents, scattered over the undulating plain to the rugged, purple hills of the Basilicata, dimly fading away towards the sun-kissed plains of Calabria.

Almost unconscious of the change, Francesco rode along with abstracted gaze, his eyes as dead as the Apulian land,—land of the dead.

The knowledge that there lay before him to southward some fifty miles of solitude nevertheless lightened the heavy burden in Francesco's breast. The oppression of the stone walls of San Cataldo had, in a manner, passed away. This day, at least, was his;

this day he was to be alone and free. Yet, as he rode, with the slowly diminishing distance his momentary relief went from him again. He seemed to himself to be passing through a mighty sea of desolate thoughts, whose waves swept over him with resistless power, leaving him utterly exhausted when they had passed. The realization of his impending fate, his present position, again took him by storm. By sharp spasms the picture of his future life and its dreary loneliness rose before his eyes, then departed as suddenly as it had come, leaving behind it a black void. The sensation was almost insufferable. In the periods of mental numbness, when even the desire for struggle seemed to have been swallowed up by the black gulf of his despair, he wondered vaguely if his brain had been turned by the sudden prospect of life's changes. The sunny, care-free days in the Castle of Avellino, the companionship of those of his own age, others whom he loved and esteemed, the hopes and ambitions nurtured and fostered in an untainted heart:—all these he saw slowly vanishing like some Fata Morgana of the desert.

Now, for the first time, discord had come, and the endless vibration of its echoes was to make his life miserable, perhaps unendurable. Created eminently for the life in the sunny sphere of a court, young, handsome of face and form, easily influenced by friendship, easily fascinated by beauty, all environment suited to the qualities and endowments of nature was suddenly to be snatched away. He was standing utterly alone in a strange land, in a new atmosphere, in which at great distances, dim, unknown figures were eyeing him, invisible, yet terrible walls waiting to enclose him and his youth as in a tomb. His world was gone. The new one was filled with shadows. Yet—why rebel, until the light

had broken upon the horizon, until the worst and best of it all was known to him? At least, in obeying the commands of his father, he had done what men would call right,—and more than right.

So were the miles before him lessened until, with the slowly declining orb of day, he came in sight of the walls and towers of Benevento, in which city he would spend the night, to continue his journey to Avellino on the morrow.

The bell of Santa Redegonda was wailing through the deep hush of evening, which brooded over the fateful city, when Francesco crossed the bridge spanning the Caloré, the waves of ancient Liris rolling golden towards the tide of the Volturno. As he slowly traversed the fatal field of Grandello, his gaze involuntarily sought the rock pile under which the body of Manfred had lain, until released by the papal legate, yet buried in unconsecrated ground. All life seemed to be extinct as in a plague-ridden town, and the warden nodded drowsily as under the shadows of the grim Longobard fortress Francesco rode through the ponderous city gate, over which, sculptured in the rose-colored granite, the Boar of Benevento showed his tusks.

After having traversed several thoroughfares, without having met a single human being, Francesco permitted his steed to be its own guide, for the moment strangely fascinated by the aspect of the city, before whose walls the destinies of an empire and an imperial dynasty had been decided. Slowly he rode under the stupendous arch of the Emperor Trajan, which now spans the road to Foggia, as it once did the Via Appia. Far away on the slopes of a mountain shone the white Apulian town of Caiazzo,

while Monte Verginé and Monte Vitolano stood out black against the azure sky.

Traversing an avenue of poplar trees, which intersected the old Norman and Longobard quarters of the town, Francesco was struck with a strange sight, that caused him to spur his steed to greater haste and to hurry shudderingly past, muttering an Ave.

On every other tree, for the entire length of the avenue, there hung a human carcass. The bodies seemed to have been but recently strung up, yet above the tree tops, in the clear sun-lit ether, a vulture wheeled slowly about, as if in anticipation of his gruesome feast.

The distorted faces and the garbs of the victims of this mass-execution left little to the mere surmise, regarding the nature of their crime. Yet an instinct almost unfailing told Francesco that these were not the bodies of thieves or bandits, and he gave a sigh of relief when the Campanile of the semioriental monastery of St. Juvenal relieved the gruesome view. After diving into the oldest part of the city, whose narrow, tortuous lanes were bordered by tall, gloomy buildings decked out in fantastic decorations in honor of one saint or another, Francesco chanced at last upon a pilgrim hobbling along who, having for some time followed in his wake, suddenly caught up with him and volunteered to guide him to an inn, of whose comfort, at the present hour, the traveller stood sorely in need. For he had not quitted the saddle since early dawn, nor had he partaken of food and drink since he rode out of the gates of San Cataldo. The endurance of his steed, like his own, was well-nigh spent, and he eagerly accepted the

pilgrim's offer.

The latter proved somewhat more loquacious than chimed with Francesco's hungry bowels, yet he submitted patiently to his guide's overflowing fount of information, the more so as much of it stimulated his waning interest. They passed the Osteria, where the famous witches of Benevento were said to have congregated. A woman, thin and hawk-faced, with high shoulders and a lame foot, was standing in the centre of a huge vault ladling a cauldron suspended from the ceiling by heavy chains. Heavy masses of smoke rolled about inside, illumined now and then by long tongues of wavering flames, which licked the stone ceiling and lighted up quaint vessels of brass hanging on the rough walls. As she ladled, the crone sang some weird incantation with the ever returning refrain:

> "The green leaves are all red,
> And the dragon ate up the stars."

They passed the stump of the famous walnut-tree, to which, riding on goats with flaming torches in their hands and singing:

> "Sotto acqua e sotto viento
> Alla noce di Beneviento,"

the witches used to fly from hundreds of miles around, and which tree had been cut down in the time of Duke Romuald, by San Barbato in holy zeal.

Passing the gloomy portals of the palace where the ill-fated Prince of Taranto had spent his last night on earth, they turned down a narrow, tortuous lane and shortly arrived before an old Abbey of Longobard memory, forbidding enough in its aspect, which now

served the purpose of a hostelry.

A battered coat-of-arms over the massive arch, under which some now indistinct motto was hewn in the stone, attracted for a moment Francesco's passing attention as he rode into the gloomy court. As he did so, his hand involuntarily gripped the hilt of the hunting knife which he carried in his belt and a hot flush of resentment swept over his pale face.

It needed not the emblem of the Fleur-de-Lis, nor their lavish display on shields and armors, to inform him that he saw before him a detachment of Anjou's detested soldiery, detested alike by the people and by the Church, for the greater glory of which a fanatic Pontiff had summoned them into Italy. In part, at least, Clement IV was to reap the reward of his own iniquity, for the Provencal scum, whom he had dignified by the name of crusaders, plundered and insulted with equal impartiality friend or foe, and in vain the exasperated Pontiff threatened to anathemize his beloved son, as he had pompously styled the brother of the King of France, who now held the keys to his dominions.

Dismounting, Francesco threw the reins of his steed to a villainous looking attendant, who had come forth and led his horse to the nearby stables. Then, by the side of the pilgrim who seemed bent upon seeing him comfortably lodged, or else to claim some recompense for his services as guide and chronicler, he strode through the ranks of Anjou's soldiery, whose insolent gaze he instinctively felt riveted upon himself, toward the guest-chamber of the inn.

That his guide was no stranger to the Abbey and that his vocation had not been exercised for the first time on the present occasion, soon became apparent to

Francesco. For the captain of the Provencals treated him with a familiarity which argued for a closer acquaintance, while the native insolence of a follower of Anjou aired itself in the lurid mirth which the pilgrim seemed to provoke.

Their brief conversation, carried on in Provencal, accompanied with unmistakable glances of derision towards himself that caused the hot blood to surge to Francesco's brow, was but in part intelligible to the latter, who was listening with an ill-assumed air of indifference.

"What? An addition to our company?" drawled the Provencal, addressing the pilgrim.

"Ay, faith, and a most proper," returned the latter sanctimoniously. "Just arrived from foreign parts."

"Has he been cooling his heels in Lombardy running from the Guelphs? Or comes he from Rimini, studying the art of cutting throats in a refined manner?"

The pilgrim shrugged. Francesco saw him clasp his rosary, as if he was about to mutter an Ave.

"Mayhaps from Padua, learning the art of poisoning at the fountain-head? Eh? Or from Bologna, having joined the guild of the coopers?"

"They say the Bolognese have tightened the hoops, since they discovered a strange amber beverage leaking from one of their casks."

At this allusion to the attempted escape of the ill-fated King Enzo from the city which was to remain his prison to the end, the Provencal laughed brutally and the pilgrim, with a significant glance at his

companion, proceeded to enter the inn.

Throwing open the door of a large apartment, battered and decayed, but showing unmistakable traces of former magnificence, he beckoned to Francesco to enter, and, without waiting the latter's pleasure, summoned the host, a large-nosed Calabrian with high cheek-bones and villainous looks. Having taken proper cognizance of their wants, the latter departed to fetch the viands. Then they took their seats at a heavy oaken table, and, gazing about the dimly lighted guest-chamber, Francesco noted that it was deserted, save for themselves and two men in plain garbs, seated at the adjoining table. They appeared to be burghers of the town, and Francesco took no further heed of them, but pondered how to rid himself of his companion, whose presence began to grow irksome to him.

The host soon entered with the repast, consisting of cheese, a rough wine and barley bread. Francesco, being exhausted and out of temper, ate in silence, and the pilgrim, after having voraciously devoured what he considered his share of the repast, arose. After muttering profuse thanks Francesco saw him exchange a nod with the two worthies at the adjoining table, then hobble from the room by a door opposite the one through which they had entered.

A chance side glance at the other guests of the Abbey, who ate, for the most part, in silence or spoke in hushed tones, informed Francesco that he was the object of their own curiosity, for though he appeared not to gaze in their direction, he repeatedly surprised them peering at him, then whispering to each other, and his nervous tension almost made their scrutiny unendurable.

Surrounded as he knew himself, however, by so questionable a company, from which the Calabrian host was by no means excluded, he resolved to restrain himself and again fell to his repast, to which he did ample justice, at intervals scrutinizing those whose scrutiny he resented and in whom, after all, he scented more than chance travellers.

The one was a man of middling height, spare frame, past the middle age of life, if judged by the worn features and the furrowed brows. The expression of his countenance was ominous and forbidding. The stony features, sallow, sunken cheeks, hollow, shiftless eyes inspired an immediate aversion.

From beneath a square cap there fell upon the sunken temples two stray locks of auburn hair. This cap, much depressed on the forehead, added to the shade from under which the eyes peered forth, beneath scant straight brows. Francesco had some difficulty in reconciling his looks with the simpleness of his gown in other respects. He might have passed for an itinerant merchant, yet there was something in his countenance which gainsaid this supposition. A small ornament in his cap especially drew Francesco's attention. It was a paltry image of the Virgin in lead, such as poorer pilgrims brought from the miraculous shrines of Lourdes. There was something strangely immovable and fateful about the clean-shaven jaw and chin, the thin compressed lips, something strangely hardened in the straight nose and the fatuous smile, in the restless glitter of the eyes.

His companion, of stouter build and a trifle taller, seemed more than ten years younger. His downcast visage was now and then lighted or distorted by a

forced smile, when by chance he gave way to that impulse at all, which was never the case, save in response to certain secret signs that seemed to pass between him and the other stranger. This personage was armed with a sword and a dagger, but, underneath their plain habits, Francesco observed that they both wore concealed a Jazeran, or flexible shirt of linked mail.

The unabated scrutiny of these two individuals at last caused such a sensation of discomfort to Francesco, who imagined that all eyes must have read and guessed his secret, that he regretted having remained under the same roof, and, but for his unfamiliarity with the roads, he would have been tempted even now to pay his reckoning and to leave the Abbey. But even while he was weighing this resolve, he surprised the gaze of the older of the two resting upon him with an expression of such undisguised mockery that at last his restraint gave way.

Rising from his seat, he slowly strode to the table where the two strangers were seated.

"Why are you staring at me?" he curtly addressed the older, who seemed in no wise abashed by his action.

"Fair son," said that personage, "you seem, from your temper and quality, at the right age to prosper, whether among men or women—if you but serve the right master. And, being in quest of a varlet for him to whom I owe fealty, I was pondering if you were too high-born to accept such a service."

Francesco regarded the speaker curiously.

"If your offer is made in good faith, I thank you," he

said. "But I fear I should be altogether unfit for the service of your master!"

"Perchance you are more proficient with the pen than the sword," replied his interlocutor. "That may be mended with time."

"The monks have taught me to read and write. But if any one question my courage, let them not provoke me."

"Magnificent," drawled he of the Leaden Lamb. "By Our Lady of Lourdes! He whom you serve would greatly miss a Paladin like you, if perchance the truce should suddenly be broken!"

This was said with a glance at his companion, who answered the sentiment with a lowering smile, which gleamed along his countenance, enlivening it as a passing meteor enlivens a winter sky.

"Paladin enough for such as either of you," Francesco retorted hotly. "I know not what master you serve, nor in what capacity, but your insolence argues little in his favor."

At this they both began to laugh and Francesco, observing the hand of the speaker's companion stealing to the hilt of his poniard, dealt him without wavering with his own sheathed weapon a sudden blow across the wrist, which made him withdraw his hand with a menacing growl.

This incident at first seemed to increase his companion's mirth.

But the laughter suddenly died out of the eyes of the older man and the look he bestowed on Francesco caused the latter to shiver despite the warmth of the

summer night.

"Hark you, fair youth," he said with a grave sternness, which, despite all he could do, overawed Francesco. "No more violence! I am not a fit subject for it, neither is my companion. What is your name and business?"

The speech was uttered in a tone of unmasked brutality which caused Francesco's hands to clench, as if he would strike his interrogator dead.

"When I desire your master's employment, I shall not fail to tell him my name and business. Until I do, suffice it for you to know, that I owe an account of myself to no one save my own liege lord!"

"And who may he be?" drawled he with the Leaden Lamb.

Francesco had it in his mind to retort in a manner which might have startled his interrogator. But though he restrained himself, he fairly flung the words into the face of the other.

"To no lesser a man than the Viceroy of Apulia!"

A sneer he did not try to conceal, distorted the older man's face and, irritated by a gesture which heightened his sinister appearance, Francesco leaned towards him.

"Perchance you boast a better?"

He, to whom the question was put, exchanged a swift look with his companion, as if to warn him to keep quiet.

"Charles of Anjou and Provence has no ugly favor to look upon," came the drawling reply.

"The blood-thirsty butcher!" burst out Francesco, with all the innate hatred of the Ghibelline for his hereditary foe. "Yet I might have thought so!"

"Indeed!" drawled he of the Leaden Lamb with a swift side glance at his companion, who moved restlessly in his seat. "And would you tell him so, were you to meet him face to face?"

"Yea,—and in his native hell!" exclaimed Francesco.

"Magnificent!" uttered his interlocutor, whose face seemed utterly bloodless in the waning evening light, while that of his companion seemed to have borrowed all its leaden tints. "Yet, fair youth, we are in King Charles' realm, and they say even the leaves of the trees have ears which carry all that is spoken to the King's own!"

"Should I see them in a human head, I should not hesitate to crop them," Francesco replied with a meaning gesture. Then he turned abruptly to return to his own table.

"A very laudable desire!" drawled he of the Leaden Lamb, appearing not to notice Francesco's intention. "And perchance, fair youth, you have but lately seen some trees bearing strange fruit."

Stirred by the memory of the poplar avenue he had so recently traversed, Francesco wheeled about.

"That have I," he flashed. "The work of a miscreant!"

He of the Leaden Lamb interposed with a warning gesture, while his companion had slowly arisen from his seat.

"The sight is in no ways strange, fair youth," he

drawled, his eyelids narrowing as, from under the shade of his headgear, he ominously glared at Francesco. "When the summer fades into autumn, and the moonlight nights are long, he who then lives may see clusters of ten, even twenty such acorns dangling from the branches. For," he continued, and his voice grew cold and hard as steel, "each rogue that hangs there, is a thief, a traitor to the Church, an excommunicated wretch! These are the tokens of Anjou's justice, and this is the fate which awaits a Ghibelline spy!"

Raising the heavy drinking vessel, the speaker, as if to lend emphasis to his words, let it crash down upon the oaken board, and, as if by a preconcerted signal, the door of the guest-chamber flew open, and in rushed the rude soldiery of Anjou, in whose wake followed the terrified Calabrian host.

Ere Francesco grasped the meaning of what had happened, his arms had been pinioned behind him and, utterly dazed, the words he heard spoken rang in his ears, like the knell of his doom.

"Fairly caught!" drawled he of the Leaden Lamb, turning to his companion, who glared viciously at Francesco. "Did I not tell you, there was more in this than the chance resemblance of a Ghibelline nose and eye? Take him away and hang him at sunrise!"

This command was addressed to the captain of the Provencals, whose witticisms at his expense had aroused such a resentment in Francesco's heart on his arrival at the inn. He felt himself jostled and buffeted by the Pontiff's crusaders, whose ill-repressed mirth now vented itself in venomous invectives, in which he in command freely joined.

Too proud to ask his tormentors for the cause of his treatment, which they would in all probability withhold, Francesco, now on the verge of mental and physical collapse, found himself dragged across a court at the remoteness of which the walls of the Abbey converged into a sort of round tower. While the host of the inn, heaping a million imprecations on the head of his newly arrived guest, and bemoaning his unpaid reckoning, unlocked a strong oaken door at the command of the Provencal leader, Francesco stood by as one too utterly dazed to resent the Calabrian's insults, and scarcely had the grinding sound of the door turning on its rusty hinges fallen on his ears, than he found himself rudely grasped and pushed into a dark, prison-like cell, apparently without any light from without. He stumbled, fell, and his ear caught the rude laughter of those without, a mirth his own endeavors to scramble to his feet had incited. For they had not released his arms, and his frantic efforts to free them from their bonds exhausted the last remnant of his strength. With a heart-rending moan he dragged himself over the wet and slimy floor to the wall, heard the key turn in the lock, and found himself alone in almost Stygian darkness.

"To be hanged at sunrise!"

The words rang in his ears like the knell of fate. For what crime had he been condemned unheard, without defence? He was too weary to think. All he knew and vaguely felt was, that it was all over, and with the thought there came a numbness almost akin to indifference, a weariness engendered by the double ordeal he had undergone in so short a space of time. What if the spark of life were to be suddenly extinguished, of a life that had become utterly

without its own recompense? What if this quick release had been decreed by fate? But to die like a malefactor, the prey of the vulture and the birds of ill-omen, which he had seen coursing above the bodies of those so recently executed;—no,—not this death at least, not this! With a last frantic effort of the faintly returning tide of life he tried to release himself of his shackles. But his efforts served only to drive the bonds deeper into his own flesh, and at last he desisted, his head falling back limply against the cold wet stone of the wall.

Outside the night was serene. The air was so pure and transparent that against the violet depths of the horizon the shimmering summits of the distant Apennines were visible like everlasting crystals. Everywhere was the silence of sleep. The Provencals, too, seemed to have succumbed to its spell. Only on a distant altana could be heard the mournful cries of a mad woman, bewailing the loss of her child: it perturbed the stillness like the keening of a bird of ill-omen. At last she, too, was silent, and Francesco, weary, exhausted, his eyelids drooping, his arms pinioned behind him, his head resting against the damp, cold stone, drifted into a restless, uneasy slumber. He heard the clock in the castle tower strike the hour of midnight, answered by the wailing chimes of the bell from Sta. Redegonda; then consciousness left him and he sank into the arms of sleep.

A strange dream haunted his pillow of anguish.

He was at the Witches' Sabbat at Benevento. The moon shone with a purple lustre on a dreary heather. The meadow-grasses rustled softly in the night wind; will-o'-the-wisps danced round old tree-trunks

gleaming with rottenness, while the owl, the bittern, the goat-sucker mourned plaintively among the reeds.

The moon was suddenly hidden by a cloud. Instead, torches flared with flames of green and blue, and black shapes interlacing and disentwining began to emerge from the denser gloom. In endless thousands they came—from Candia, from the isles of Greece, from the Brocken, from Mirandola, and from the town of Benevento; wheeling and spreading over the plain like the withered and perishing leaves of autumn, driven by an unseen gale. And in their midst sat the great He-Goat enthroned upon the mountain.

There was a screeching of pipes made of dead men's bones, the drum stretched with the skin of the hanged was beaten with the tail of a wolf. A loathsome stew, not seasoned with salt, was brewing in a vast cauldron, and round it danced herds of toads garbed as cardinals, the sacred Host in their claws.

Long wet whiskers like those of a walrus now swept his neck; a thin winding tail lashed his face; he stirred uneasily where his head had fallen against the cold slimy stone of the prison walls; yet the sleeper did not wake. And the dance whirled around him like a howling storm.

Suddenly petrifaction fell upon the assembly. All voices were hushed, all movements arrested. From the black throne in the background there came a dull roar like the growl of approaching thunder, and the assembly fell upon their knees, chanting in solemn tones the ceremonial of the Black Mass.

The sleeper stirred uneasily, yet deeper grew the

dream.

When the last sounds had died away, there was renewed stillness, then the same hoarse voice cried:

"Bring hither the bride! Bring hither the bride!"

An old man, patriarch of sorcerers, nearly bent double with age, came forward with shuffling steps.

"What is the name of the bride? What is the name of the bride?"

"Ilaria Caselli! Ilaria Caselli!" roared the great voice.

Hearing the pronouncement of her name, Francesco's blood froze in his veins.

"Ilaria! Ilaria!" rang the cry from the crowd. "Ave Arcisponsa Ilaria!"

They brought her forward, though she would have fled. They dragged her trembling before the throne. A chill, as of death smote her; she would have closed her eyes, but something caused her to look in the direction where Francesco lay, unable to move, unable to stir. His limbs seemed paralyzed; he wanted to cry out to her, his voice failed him. Vainly she called to him, vainly she strained eyes, arms and body towards him. He tried to rise, to rush to her aid, to rescue her from the clutches of the terrible apparition on the throne, when suddenly the goat-skin fell from him and he stood revealed to Francesco, as he of the Leaden Lamb, his green eyes devouring the girlish form that stood trembling before him.

Another moment, and she sank lifeless into his embrace.

The setting moon once more shone out from behind the clouds, and as the pallid crimson of her light faded behind the world's dark rim, there came from the distance the morning cry of the cock. Slowly, through the air, came the sound of a bell, and at this sound the frightened witches, swarm after swarm, streamed away from the mountain. He of the Leaden Lamb again became the great He-Goat, and sank lamentably bleating with his beautiful victim through the earth, leaving a stifling stench of sulphur behind.—

With a moan of intense agony Francesco awoke. His head was like lead, his body broken with weariness. A sharp odor of fog greeted his nostrils. He looked about for a moment, unable to determine where he was. A violent jerk, as he tried to move his arms, informed him of his condition, and with a groan he sank back, striking his head against the stone with a sharp pang. Again he closed his eyes, as if still haunted by the phantoms of the Witches' Sabbat. Had it been but a dream indeed? Vivid it stood before his soul, and out of the whole ghostly hubbub the pure face of Ilaria Caselli shone white as marble against a storm-cloud. Then, with the memory of her he loved dearer than life, with the memory of her whom he was to renounce forever, there returned the consciousness of his impending fate. Would she ever know why he had not returned,—and knowing, would her love for him endure?

The bell of Sta. Redegonda was tolling heavily and monotonously. Outside some one was knocking insistently, some one who had already knocked more than once. There was a brief pause, then the turning of a key in the lock grated unpleasantly on Francesco's ear.

As the door of his prison swung back, the dull morning light fell on the form of a monk, who had slowly entered in advance of some five or six men-at-arms, but paused almost instantly, as if looking for the object in quest of which he had come.

The import of the monk's presence at this hour was not lost upon Francesco. It was no hideous dream then, it was terrible reality; he was to die. To die without having committed a crime, without an offence with which he might charge his conscience; to die without a hearing,—without a trial. For a moment all that could render death terrible, and death in the form in which he was to meet it, most terrible of all, rushed through his mind. The love of life, despite the gloomy future it held out to him, re-asserted itself and, as a drowning man sees all the scenes of the past condensed into one last conscious moment, so before Francesco's inner gaze the pageant of his childhood, the sunny days at the Court of Avellino rushed past, as in the fleeting phantasmagoria of a dream. An hour hence, and his eyes would no longer gaze upon the scenes once dear to him as his youth;—he would have followed him, who would have consigned him to a living death;—he would have been gathered into annihilation's waste.

The monk had walked up slowly to the human heap he saw dimly writhing on the ground, and, bending over Francesco, exhorted him to think of the salvation of his soul, to which end, in consideration of his youth, the clemency of his judge had permitted him to receive the last rites of the Church.

At the sound of the monk's voice Francesco gave a start, but, as he made no reply, the friar bent over

him anew, in an endeavor to scan the features of one so obdurate as to refuse his ministrations.

A mutual outcry of surprise broke the intense stillness. They had recognized each other, the monk who had carried to Gregorio Villani the Pontiff's conditional absolution, and the youth whom that decree had consigned to a living death.

To the monk's amazed question as to the cause of his terrible plight, Francesco wearily and brokenly replied that he knew of nothing. He had been insulted, overpowered and condemned.

Turning to the leader of the Provencals, the friar sternly plied him with questions, but his replies seemed far from satisfying, for the monk demanded to be conducted straightway to their master. Francesco heard them scurry from his prison, after securing the door, and, exhausted from his mental and bodily sufferings, his limbs aching as in the throes of a fever, he fell back against the damp stone and swooned.

When he waked, he found himself on a bed in a chamber, the only window of which opened on to a courtyard. The sun was riding high in the heavens and his beams, falling aslant on the opposite wall, exercised such a magical effect on the awakened sleeper, that he sat bolt upright on his couch and, turning to the friar at his bedside, demanded to know where he was.

The friar enjoined him to be silent and arose, to fetch a repast, but when he found that Francesco's restlessness was not likely to be assuaged by this method, he slowly and cautiously informed him of the events which had transpired, since he had visited

him in his cell, to accompany him, on what was to have been, his last walk on earth.

Dwelling on the probable causes leading to his summary condemnation, the monk hinted at rumors, that Conradino, son of Emperor Conrad IV, had crossed the Alps in armed descent upon Italy, to wrest the lands of Manfred from Anjou's grasp. He further hinted at a conspiracy afoot among the Northern Italian Ghibellines, to rescue from her prison in Castel del Ovo, where she had been confined since the fatal battle of Benevento, the luckless Helena, Manfred's Queen. A fatal resemblance to one, known to have been entrusted with a similar task, had caused the swift issuance of the death-warrant on the part of Anjou's procurator, a sentence which no denial on his part would have suspended or annulled, as, incensed at Francesco's bearing and demeanor, he of the Leaden Lamb had remorselessly consigned him to his fate. And, but for his timely arrival and speedy intervention, and the vigorous protests with which the monk supported his claim of Francesco's innocence, the latter's fate would have been hopelessly sealed.

Francesco, partaking of the viands the monk had placed before him, listened attentively, while the friar assisted him, for as yet he could barely make use of his arms and hands, cut and bruised as they were from the cords of the Provencals.

The abuse and the insults to which he had been subjected since his arrival at Benevento, and the dire peril from which he had so narrowly escaped, had exasperated Francesco to a degree, that he was trembling in every limb with the memory of the outrage, and he vowed a heavy reckoning against the

fiend who, unheard and untried, would have sent him to an ignominious death. Thereupon the friar informed him, that the Provencals had departed shortly after he had been released from his prison, and exhausted, Francesco fell back among the cushions into a deep and dreamless slumber, while the friar resumed his office of watchfulness by his bedside.

He awoke strengthened, and, save for the bruises testifying to his treatment at the hands of the Provencals, his splendid youth swiftly re-asserted itself. It suffered him no longer within the ominous confines of the Witches' City.

Heedless of the friar's protests, who declared that he was not strong enough to continue his journey, he summoned the Calabrian landlord whose deferential demeanor, when he entered Francesco's presence, was at marked variance with his conduct on the previous night.

After having paid his reckoning and secured his steed, Francesco thanked the friar for his intervention on his behalf, then, with some difficulty, he mounted and rode out of the gates of Benevento, without as much as looking back with a single glance upon the city's ominous walls.

CHAPTER IV

PROSERPINA



RANCESCO arrived at Avellino at dusk. It was the hour when the castle courtyard was comparatively deserted. Only two bow-men guarded the lowered drawbridge, and they paid little heed to the familiar form of the youth as he slowly rode through the gate.

Throwing the reins of his steed to an attendant, Francesco dismounted and entered the castle, undecided what to do first. Seeing a page lounging in the hallway, he inquired if the Viceroy was in his apartments.

"He returned from the falcon hunt at dusk and has retired," came the response.

"Go, ask him if he will receive me," Francesco entreated, heavy-hearted.

The page bowed and ran up the winding stairway, leaving Francesco to wait in the hall below.

Presently he returned.

"The serving-man in my lord's antechamber has orders that my lord is to be disturbed by no one, since he is preparing for his departure on the morrow —"

"For his departure?"

The page eyed Francesco curiously, as if he wondered at his ignorance of that which was on the lips of all the court.

"You have not heard?"

"I have just returned to Avellino,—from a mission," he replied, avoiding the inquisitive gaze he knew to be upon him.

"Then you know not that King Conradino has crossed the Alps? The court departs on the morrow to join him before the walls of Pavia!"

Francesco's hand had gone to his head.

"Conradino has crossed the Alps?" he spoke as out of the depths of a dream.

"I will see the Viceroy on the morrow!"

Leaving the page to gaze after him in strange wonderment, Francesco went slowly towards the stairs. He shrank unspeakably from explanations and scenes of farewell. At the idea of pity and amazement which his fate might call up, he fairly shuddered. Perhaps there might be even sneers from his companions. And, by the time he had reached his own chamber, he was debating the possibility of departing as if for a journey with excuses to none save his liege lord, the Viceroy of Apulia.

Upon a wooden settle in his chamber, with the moonbeams pouring down from the window above it, he seated himself, and his heart beat up in his throat.

If it were true! If the ecstatic dream of his life might be realized! If face to face he might meet Conradino, the imperial youth, the rightful heir and ruler of

these enchanting Southlands which smarted under Anjou's insufferable yoke!

How often had that fair-haired youth, gazing with longing eyes towards the Land of Manfred from the ramparts of his castle in the distant Tyrol, been the topic of converse at Avellino. His very name had kindled a holy flame in every heart. At his beck, the beck of the last of the Hohenstauffen, Ghibelline Italy would fly to arms as one man. Had the hour come at last?

A cold hand suddenly clutched his heart.

What was it to him? What was anything to him now? What right had he to enter the lists of those who would flock to the banners of the imperial youth? Had he not, from the day of his birth, forfeited the right to live and to act according to the dictates of his own heart? While they fought he must look on, bound foot and hand, an enemy to the cause which was his cause. An involuntary groan broke from his lips.

Too late—too late!

He arose, and, opening a chest in the wall of his chamber, Francesco took from it a faded flower wrapped in its now dry cloth. The former scarlet glory was gone, the petals were purple and old. He recalled the joy with which he had received it. A week ago he would have proclaimed it to all the world. Now the rose and his life were alike. Now he was conscious only of a sickening, benumbing bitterness of spirit, as he laid the faded flower tenderly into its former place. Then, lighting a cresset lantern in a niche in the wall, he turned away

to look through his possessions, to pack what little he might take with him on the morrow. And the first necessity which came to his hand was a small, sharp, jewel-hilted dagger,—Ilaria's gift.

From without the encircling gardens of the castle there came strange sounds of laughter and merriment which struck Francesco with a deeper pang. For a time he resumed his seat and, with hands clasped round his knees, stared in immobile despair into the darkness. Eventually, the oppression of his mind becoming well-nigh unbearable, and, knowing that sleep would not come to him in his present overwrought state, Francesco arose and strayed out into the dimly lighted corridor, until he emerged on a terrace, whence a flight of broad marble stairs conducted to the rose-garden below. Beyond, a pile of gray buildings, rising among thickly wooded hills, was barely discernible in the misty moonlight. A fault breeze, blowing up from the gardens, bathed him in the fragrance of roses. He shuddered. From below where he stood came the sound of laughing voices.

Francesco peered down eagerly into the rose-garden, girdled by the wall of the terrace, on the summit of which he stood. The bushes were heavy with blossoms; they drooped over the white sand-strewn walk, even beneath the occasional shadow of a slender cypress that seemed to pierce the violet of the night-sky. They clambered up the sides of the fortress villa, and mingled with the ivy on the opposite sweep of the wall.

The garden was flooded with that golden moonlight which creates in the beholder the illusion of unreality; for not in the midnight dark, but where

radiance is warmest and intensest, are spirits most naturally expected by the sensitive mind.

Where the light of the moon was most translucent, there stood a man in the mythical garb of Hermes, catching therein the full moon glamour.

As he looked up he met the gaze of Francesco.

"Come down, Francesco," he cried in comical despair. "Despite my winged feet I cannot pull the car of Amor, and he refuses to use his wings!"

A strange light leaped into Francesco's eyes.

"Why not summon Pluto, God of the Underworld?"

"He declines to waive his right to march beside Proserpina, and you know the Frangipani is quite capable of making a quarrel out of a revel."

"And who is Proserpina?"

"Ilaria Caselli."

"Who calls me?" a voice at this moment spoke from the thicket, and ere either could answer a girlish figure stepped into the moonlight, paused and looked in amaze at Francesco.

The latter exchanged a few words with his companion who bowed and withdrew.

Slowly she moved towards the terrace; lithe and languid, she seemed herself the Queen of Blossoms, her dusky hair, flower-crowned, enveloped in rainbow bloom.

"Francesco!" she called, surprise and appeal in her tone. "I knew not you were here! Come down!"

"Yes,—Ilaria," he said, yet stood at gaze and made no sign to stir. The light in his eyes had died. She stood below him, half in the light, half in the shadow, her neck and throat bare, her arms in tight sleeves of flower-embroidered gauze.

"Come down!" she called more imperiously. "Why do you delay?"

He moved round the wall to the descending stair and presently was by her side.

"When did you return?" she asked, extending her hands to him.

He took them, pressed them fervently in his own, then, bending over them, kissed them passionately.

"Within the hour," he replied, his eyes in hers.

"And your mission?"

"It is accomplished!"

"I am glad," she said, and saw not the look of anguish that passed over his face. "I came to ask you," her bosom was heaving strangely, "to be near me when the pageant breaks. I am afraid of Raniero Frangipani!"

"Yet you chose the role of Proserpina, knowing—" He broke off, a shiver of constraint in his voice.

"Who told you?"

He pointed in the direction where his informant had disappeared.

"Messer Gualtiero! You knew," he then continued slowly, "that Raniero would be your companion in the pageant!"

Ilaria pouted.

"Mine is the part of Lady of Sorrows—Queen of the Underworld!"

"And the Frangipani's society is the price you pay for your high estate."

She looked at him, then dropped her eyelids on a sudden.

"Why should I fear, when you are by?"

Something clutched at Francesco's throat.

"I may not always be near you!"

She arched her eyebrows.

"Then I must look for another protector!" she retorted with a shrug.

Noting the pain her words gave him, she added more softly:

"You will not leave me again?"

"You shrink from the Frangipani," he replied, ignoring her question. "Has he insulted you? Is he your enemy?"

"It is not because he is an enemy, but rather the opposite, that I would avoid Raniero Frangipani," was her low reply.

All the color had faded from Francesco's lips.

"You mean—" the words died in the utterance.

"He wooes me!" she said low.

A fierce light leaped into Francesco's eyes. She laid a

tranquillizing finger on his arm.

"You have no cause for wrath, that I can see! And yet I would rather have you near than far. The Frangipani is filled with violent passions. He wooes me violently. Since you left Avellino," she added with seeming reluctance, "he seems to have taken new courage, and—some unexplained umbrage at—I know not what! 'Who is this Francesco Villani?' he said to me and his eyes glowered. 'What is his ancestry? What should entitle him to your regard?' Again and again he dwelled on this point,—Francesco,—you know I love you,—and I care not,—so you love me,—but you will tell me,—that I may silence him,—Francesco,—will you not?"

A shadow as from some unseen cloud swept over his face.

"I shall tell him myself,—and in your presence."

"You will not quarrel?" she said anxiously, holding out her hands to him.

He clasped the soft white fingers fiercely in his own, then pressed them to his throbbing heart. In the distance voices were heard calling, clamoring.

For some moments they gazed at each other in silence, then she said:

"They are calling me! I must return to my task of sorrow!"

"Strange words for a queen—" he said with an attempt at merriment.

"Queen of the Shades," she replied. "And I long for life—life—life! With all it has to give, with all it can

bestow!"

A strange, witch-like fire had leaped into her eyes. Her lips, thirstily ajar, revealed two rows of white even teeth, and in that moment she looked so alluringly beautiful, that Francesco in a fever of passion threw his arms about her and kissed her passionately again and again, with moist, hungry lips.

"Will you not come?" she whispered, after having utterly abandoned herself to his embrace.

He shook his head.

"I have no part in this! I will await you here!"

The voices sounded nearer. Now could be distinguished the cry: "Proserpina—Proserpina!"

She turned reluctantly, with a last glance at him, and hastened back towards the revels.

Francesco watched the slender, girlish form, until she had mingled with the shadows of the trees. Then, with a low cry of anguish, he leaned against the balustrade and covered his face with his hands.—

And now the pageant began to gather in the garden, a pageant of Love in a guise such as might have been conceived by Petrarca,—a mediaeval divertissement, such as the courts of thirteenth century Italy were wont to delight in. And Francesco, slowly waking from a disordered reverie, leaned over the balustrade, straining his gaze towards the clearing, whence peals of laughter and music of citherns and cymbals heralded the approach of a procession, which in point of fantasticality did indeed honor to those who had contrived it.

It was a pageant of the Gods, the outgrowth and conception of a mind, not yet set adrift by the speculative theory and philosophy of a Dante or Petrarca, a mind still hovering between Roman austerity and Hellenic mystery.

As the procession emerged from the inner courtyard, a level ray of moonlight fell upon attires wherein seemed blended the gayest fantasy of all times: Juno frowning jealously on the bowed figure of her Lord; Mars and Venus, and Pluto, his dark face rising over folds of sombre purple, beside the magically fair Proserpina. After these there came groups of languid lovers of all ages; enchanters and victims: Orpheus and Eurydicé, Jason and Medea, Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Iseult. Bound with great ropes of blossom or chains of tinsel, they moved sadly, crushed and sighing, behind the chariot of the King of Sighs. And he, the dismal ruler, seemed the personified memory of a figure in the lower church at Assisi, driven shrinking towards the pit by Giotto's grave angels of penance.

Round that chariot gathered fantastic shapes, clad in dim, floating garments, their faces concealed by gray masks on which the unknown artist had stamped an expression, now of wild dismay, now of grinning triumph, a presage, it would seem, of the Dreams and Errors, and the Wan Delusions, whom Petrarca conceived to be the closest companions of the lord of the mortal race.

Exclamations of delight from the balconies of the castle, where dusky groups of spectators were dimly discernible, broke the dream stillness of the night.

From his vantage point on the terrace Francesco's burning gaze, riveted on the pageant, followed the

graceful swaying form of Proserpina with the pale face and lustrous eyes upturned to him, while the procession circled round the terrace, and a Wan Delusion, following directly in her wake, flung up her shadowy arms and groaned.

For these mediaeval folk threw themselves into the pageant with the dramatic impulse native to place and time. Incited by the tragedy of Benevento, still quivering through men's memory, and the apprehension of future clouded horizons, this occasion probably meant to many of them, as to Ilaria Caselli, the rejection rather than the assumption of a disguise, the free expression through the imaginative form, so natural to them, of the allegiance to passion in which their life was passed. Each acting his or her part, they moved slowly through the garden, Orpheus gazing back wildly in search of Eurydicé, Circé chanting low spells, Tristram touching his harp strings, his eyes upon Iseult, and all at will sighing and moaning and pointing in pathetic despair to the chains that bound them, and the arrows that transfixed.

Presently they gathered round a fountain, which, in the centre of a rose-garden, sent up its iridescent spray in the silver moonlight, and Tristram, stepping to the side of it, began to sing a Canzona, almost like a church chant, artificially lovely in the intermingling of the imagery of Night and of the Dawn. Orpheus and Circé followed with a Canzona which struck Francesco's ear with music new, yet charged with echoes of much that he had suffered during the past eventful days.

With the cadenza of the last stanzas the glow of torches had faded, and the revellers moved towards

the opposite wall, whence Francesco was watching one by one, as they disappeared within a low doorway, leading to an inner stair. As they emerged upon the summit each reveller bore a lighted torch which hardly quivered in the still, balmy air of the summer night. A moment's confusion, and the entire pageant began to advance in single file against the dusky night-sky in which the moon, now soaring high above the trees, gleamed with a strange lustre. Above the garden they moved as above the far dim world, not earthly men and women in seeming, but phantoms of the air. The car of Pluto was illumined from within, and the red light struck with almost ghostly effect the gray faces and garments of the Delusions. The actors were hushed into silence by the unearthly beauty of the scene.

Francesco, from across the garden, watched with eyes heavy and weary, the Triumph of the Gods. As Proserpina came in sight, her pale face flashed on him by the light of the torches carried by Pluto. It was strangely alluring in its marble pallor, the dusky hair wreathed with jasmine stars. Francesco was seized in the grip of sudden terror. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes were passing visibly before him under the violet night-sky. In a mad, delirious impulse, he thrust out his arm, the moonlight striking full upon his face. The revellers paused for an instant, then extended their arms with welcoming shouts. Proserpina, as she came near, threw a flowery chain round his neck. Breathless, dazed, Francesco saw them move away, the blood throbbing wildly in his temples.

The moon had passed her zenith when the revellers, having twice circled the walls, descended once more into the garden and dispersed, each at his or her own

will, through the demesne. Terraces illumined by torch-light, afforded ample opportunity for wandering, and the ilex-wood which covered the castle hill, was a lure for the more venturesome. The castle itself had flung wide its portals, and a collation was being served within until a late hour. The gay company that so recently traversed the gardens had swiftly flown from one haunt of pleasure to the other. Most of the participants in the pageant, however, preferred to remain out-doors. Proserpina, Goddess of the Underworld, and the Delusions seemed still to extend their dreamy sway over the whole company. Day-light selves had disappeared, carrying with them any teasing pricks of conscience, and the greater number of the maskers continued through the night to play their parts without reserve.

When Francesco had ensconced himself on the terrace to witness the revels, he had given no thought to the continuation of the same. He wandered through the labyrinthine walks with troubled mind, every now and then shrinking, a listener both unwilling and unwelcome, from sounds that assailed his ear from rose-bower and cypress-wall. Yet the setting of beauty rendered his repugnance languid. He seemed to feel a detaining hand upon him that would not let him escape. Life had ever been, even in his happiest moods, as a masque, lived in a dream. But to-night the masque had seemed very real. The weird loveliness of the pageant had enthralled his soul, had brought home to him with new and intense poignancy the dark fate which lurked in the background. Aimlessly he strolled on, aimlessly he lost himself in the labyrinthine maze, hoping, yet fearing, to meet Ilaria Caselli.

He had noted now and again a girlish figure flitting around his pathway, in an open space, where a murmuring water flowed. It came out into the starlight and he recognized White Oenoné.

She swayed towards him timidly.

"Though Paris be lost to me, are there not other shepherds in the glades of Ida?"

Her tones blended with the murmur of the stream.

The tumult of sense swept over him. He saw her white smiling face so close to his, in the faint light of the moon her hair shone golden. Then he gave a start and thought of Ilaria, and of her strange request.

"Ay—but thy Paris will return, fair nymph," he replied courteously. "For the Greek knights have won Troy-Town at last, and the false witch who lured him from thy side, has sailed for Argos."

He turned away, noting the shade of disappointment in her face. His steps were aimless no longer. Ilaria was not in the rose-garden, nor would he find her on the terraces through which the flickering torch-light gleamed. He hastened onward towards the ilex-wood which bordered on one side close to the castle. In the dense shadow two dim figures stood. He knew without seeing that one was Ilaria.

"Ilaria!" he called.

She started, took a step towards him, then paused.

On her face he noted the same dazed, half-bewildered look which he had discovered thereon in the pageant.

"Ilaria!" he called once more. His voice had still the same purity of tone as in his childhood.

She came to him slowly, holding out both hands.

"Take me away!" she whispered with a shudder.

Then, from the deeper shadow of the wood, there stepped a form of remarkable elegance, advancing with the graceful, but assumed, demeanor of a man immured in his own conceit. He was tall, with a well-poised head of the purely Latin type. The face was long, but unusually handsome; of olive hue with regular features, that revealed many generations of aristocratic ancestry. The nostrils were delicately chiselled, the eyebrows high and narrow, the thin, cynical lips revealed the sensualist. There was nothing in the countenance of Raniero Frangipani to dismay the observer, until one looked at the eyes. They were narrow and intensely black, filled with a baleful brilliance that feared no man, yet revealed to view a soul utterly depraved.

The Frangipani having changed his masque, was clothed in the richest apparel of the time. Long hose of crimson silk encased the legs, rising from soft shoes of the same color. A coat of black silk, embroidered with golden flowers, and the Broken Loaf, the emblem of his house, was confined at the waist with a golden belt, to which was affixed a poniard with an exquisitely jewelled hilt. He advanced with the graceful yet arrogant swing of the bred courtier, yet his handsome face was not pleasant to behold, as he turned to Francesco with an insolent air:

"I think, Messer Villani, you will find the rose-garden more agreeable than the wood!"

Francesco looked at him coldly.

"I am here at the request of Madonna Ilaria," he replied quietly.

"Indeed!" sneered the Frangipani, advancing a step closer. "Madonna Ilaria did not hint that she preferred the society of a marplot to that of a Frangipani!"

Francesco made an impetuous step forward, feeling for his dagger. But Ilaria caught his arm and clung to it. The two were faintly visible in the starlight.

The Frangipani regarded them for a moment with a contemptuous smile.

"I crave your pardon," he then turned with an ironical bow to the girl. "I feared Messer Villani would be too fatigued after his journey in quest of an ancestor!"

Francesco had turned pale at this palpable insult. There was no doubt that the Frangipani had spied upon him for reasons not difficult to surmise. But ere he could carry out his intent, but too plainly revealed in his set features, Ilaria had interposed herself between the two.

"Leave us!" she turned to the Frangipani with a scorn in her voice that caused the latter to start, while she clung to Francesco's arm, hardly less pale than he.

Raniero Frangipani regarded them for a moment in silence, tapped with his foot, like one to whom a new idea has come, then with a long low sound, very much like a snarl, he vanished in the gloom.



"Ilaria had interposed herself between the two"

Francesco turned to the girl who still clung to him. She knew the look on his face, but there was in it an expression she had never seen before, penetrating,

sorrowful, crushed. His breath came and went in gasps, yet he spoke not.

"Francesco," she said after a pause, while she anxiously watched the play of light and shadow on his face. "Listen! Messer Raniero seems to bear you a grudge. Promise me to avoid a meeting with him! He has said much to me, thinking thereby to win my favor. He now knows,—let that suffice!"

"He has told you much? What has he told you?"

"You have not told me what took you away so suddenly!"

He held up his hand deprecatingly.

"A secret mission of the Viceroy's," he said blushing, as he stammered the falsehood. Yet he could not bring himself to avow even to the girl he loved best on earth, his father's shame. The pain of life could not be made less, by adding more pain.

"Trust me!" he begged. "We have always felt together,—I have never deceived you!"

"Until now!" her voice sounded shrill and strained.

"No! Ilaria, no! Were it mine to tell,—there is no secret for you in this heart of mine. But the matter concerns another! Perhaps—in time—"

He broke off and closed his eyes.

"I crave my youth!" cried Ilaria unheeding. "My youth, and the joy of life which comes but once. If one will not give me what I seek—I look elsewhere, if so I may!" Her lips trembled. "Why do you look at me so?" she continued impatiently after an instant's pause. "Before you came into the wood I saw your

eyes, and I see them still in the dark! What was the object of that mission?"

Francesco drooped his head, but made no reply. In a clover leaf at his feet a dew-drop mirrored a star, breaking the light into a thousand tiny shafts.

"I will give you your youth," he spoke at last in a low strained voice that sounded like a broken sob.

Ilaria laid her hand on his and spoke low. Her light soft fingers were fevered.

"What do you mean?"

"It is a simple matter!"

She gazed at him startled, terrified. Suddenly she threw her arms about him.

"Forgive me! Forgive!"

He pressed her to his heart and kissed her dark eyes.

Then slowly they retraced their steps towards the castle.

When Francesco reached his chamber, the moon was slowly sinking through the azure night-sky.

He noted it not. It seemed to him he was standing in the midst of a great void. All life about him had died. And he stood there, digging his own grave, and, as the last spade of turf flew up, the stifling night of annihilation swallowed up the universe.

CHAPTER V

WAVES OF DESTINY



HEN Francesco waked on the following morning, the June sun touched the tree-tops which bounded the western horizon with their delicate feathery twigs. Throughout the castle of Avellino there was the hum and murmur of life. An unusual activity prevailed; the Apulian court was preparing to depart, as the long train of horses and jennets drawn up in the courtyard indicated.

Francesco listened to the dim murmur of familiar voices, and the echoes of laughter which reached his ears as he stood contemplating himself undecidedly in a steel mirror that hung from an iron hook upon his bedroom wall.

Of what use to deck himself in fine raiment for the last time he should ever wear it? Sackcloth was henceforth to be his garment;—what matter if he went unkempt on the last day in the home he loved?

But the thought of the part he wished to play, came back to him. He could not bear the thought that his companions should know of his undoing. Despair is concealed more easily for an hour than unrest. And so Francesco heaved a long heavy sigh and went to the great carven chest wherein he kept his apparel.

Slowly, with the demeanor of one whose heart is not in what he does, he arrayed himself in his splendid

court costume, as if preparing to share the gladsomeness of his companions.

He descended into the courtyard as one walking in a dream, and as in a dream his ear caught the sounds of laughter and merriment, such as had not resounded in the Castle of Avellino since the days of Emperor Frederick II.

On every lip were the glad tidings: Conradino had crossed the Alps! Conradino was about to descend into Italy with his iron hosts to claim his heritage. Like an Angel of Vengeance he would march on to Rome, where the arch-enemy of his house sat enthroned in the chair of St. Peter. From all parts of Italy the Ghibellines were flocking to the banners of the golden-haired son of Emperor Conrad IV,—Conradino, as they lovingly called him,—the last Hohenstauffen!

From the adjoining gardens there came sounds of joyous laughter; the music of citherns and lyres rippled enchantingly on the soft breeze of the morning. It was as if an evil spell had been lifted from the land, but the spell had caught one who could not shake it off, as with stony gaze and quivering lips he walked along, noting the preparations for events, in which he was to have no further share. He noted it not that the grooms and lackeys, pages and squires regarded him curiously, as if wondering at his luxurious attire, so little in keeping with the exigencies of a tedious journey. Hardly he noted the casual greeting of a companion who passed hurriedly, as if bent on his own preparations. After rambling aimlessly through the demesne, he bethought himself that the time for repast was at hand, and after pausing here and there,

as if to convince himself that what he saw was not the phantom of a mocking dream, he returned to the castle, his heart heavy with the weight of the impending hour.

The banqueting-hall in the Castle of Avellino presented a busy scene. A small army of lackeys and pages was at work preparing a repast, the last the court was to partake ere the Viceroy set out. They were to start at dusk, owing to the extreme noon-day heat in the plains.

One great board stretched down the centre of the room, containing places enough for every occupant of the building.

Presently the doors leading into the banqueting-hall turned inward and a throng of court attendants filed into the dimly lighted room. These were followed by an array of visiting mendicants, who never failed to infest any noble household, and they had scarcely grouped themselves standing about the board, when the Viceroy, arm in arm with Galvano Lancia, entered the hall.

These two seated themselves at the board at once, watching the others as they entered. The women and their escorts, who had entered laughing and chatting among themselves, grew silent as they beheld the Viceroy already seated. One girl, garbed in a flowing gown of sea-green damask, entered the room alone. As she advanced to her place, after the prescribed courtesy to the Viceroy, her dark eyes searchingly scanned the throng of pages. Apparently she did not find among them the one she sought.

"Donna Ilaria looks for her errant knight," whispered Galvano Lancia into the ear of Conrad Capecé.

"Has not Francesco returned?" queried the Viceroy.

"I hardly expected him before to-day, even if the Grand Master's illness has not taken a fatal turn."

"Here are the monks!"

"And there—at the door—"

Conrad Capecé followed the direction of Lancia's gaze.

"Francesco!"—he finished with a gasp, staring bewildered at the youth's dazzling garb, richer even than the Viceroy's.

There was a sudden round of forbidden whispering among Francesco's companions, and significant glances passed between many at the expense of Ilaria Caselli, for Francesco's entrance had been indeed destined to create a commotion among the members of the Vice-regal household.

Conscious to the full that all eyes were upon him, Francesco paused for a moment in the doorway. Then he advanced slowly towards the seat of the Viceroy, a bright smile on his lips, a feeling akin to death freezing his heart. The grace remained still unspoken, while the monks, eager as their worldly brethren, turned upon their stools to gaze at the newcomer.

Francesco was clad in a tunic made of white cloth, heavily embroidered with gold, slashed up the sides far enough to reveal the dusky sheen of his black embroidered hose. His belt was of black and gold, and the dagger it held was hilted with gleaming jewels. The dark hair framed a face as white as his garb and the feverish lustre of the deep set eyes

matched the brilliancy of the gems in his belt.

The finishing touch to Francesco's curious attire, the one which gave the greatest significance to his appearance, was that which appeared to link him in some way to the most beautiful girl in the hall. It was a faded rose, which still seemed to cast a crimson shadow upon the gleaming purity of his tunic, the rose he had discarded in his first fit of despair, until he had bethought himself of a better course.

Under the wondering or sneering glances of all these eyes, Francesco, seemingly unabashed, advanced to the Viceroy's chair, and, bending a knee, muttered an apology for his delayed arrival.

Count Capecé bade him arise, saying audibly:

"In truth, Francesco, you shame us all for slovenliness in dress. Sit you here by my side! Your companions yonder have brilliancy enough in their midst. You shall relieve our soberness!"

With an amused smile Galvano Lancia made room between himself and the Viceroy. There was a faint color in the youth's cheeks, as he hastily dropped into the posture for grace. If no one else at the board had perceived it, he, at least, had understood the Viceroy's mild rebuke for overdress, and his mortification was sincere. For Count Capecé was dressed in a sombre suit of dark green, unembroidered and unadorned. Galvano Lancia supplemented him in a tunic of deep red, with black hose and leather belt and pouch, and the other nobles were all attired in garbs suitable for travel. There was a confused hum and medley of voices, but the one all-absorbing topic of discourse was the

appearance of Conradino on Italian soil, and the hope of the Ghibellines in the final victory of their cause.

From the first, Francesco was uncomfortable in his new place. In the eyes of his companions, when he could catch them, he read only curiosity, mingled in some instances with envy and malice. This was especially the case at that part of the board where Raniero Frangipani was seated, not too far removed from Ilaria Caselli, although the latter had dropped her eyes, without so much as vouchsafing him a glance.

Francesco noted it all, and between the unmistakable gaze of derision which came to him from the Frangipani and his associates, Ilaria's seeming unconsciousness of his presence, and the well-nigh physical discomfort of being the target of all present, in the seat assigned to him, he felt ill at ease. Before he had entered the room he had absolutely believed in his own ability to act. Now he perceived his mistake. Do what he would, his heart and his expression failed him together.

At last he fixed his eyes upon the figure of her who bore the flower symbol of their relationship. Evidently the scarlet flower was being commented upon from his rightful part of the table, for he beheld Ilaria's color rise. Unexpectedly she turned her head to glance stealthily at the faded petals that burned upon the cold purity of his vestments. In that glance she met his eyes full upon her. A shadow of mingled confusion and anger flitted across her face and, snatching her own rose from her gown, she dropped it on the floor.

Undoubtedly this performance was calculated to

throw Francesco into a state of doubt and anxiety as to her feeling for him. Yet, how little did she guess the uselessness of that coquetry! What evermore would he have to do with love or the dallying with it? What woman would be enamored of a sackcloth gown? Yet, at this moment, he perceived that his feeling for her had rooted deeper than he had admitted to himself. And now it seemed to him that, were his well of bitterness to be deepened by one jot, it would drive him mad. And as these cobwebs of thought were spun out in his tired brain, such a black look of despair came upon his face that Ilaria was even prepared to smile upon him when he turned to her again.

Galvano Lancia also saw that expression, and guessed that the Viceroy's idle whim had made the youth uncomfortable enough for this time. But in his address there was also a courtier's purpose which Count Capecé, who was looking on, understood.

"Francesco!"

The youth turned, to find Galvano Lancia's kindly eyes upon him.

"Your father is better of his illness?"

"It is well with my father!" Francesco replied laconically.

As the repast progressed, the situation was becoming almost unbearable for the son of the Grand Master. Only the desire to avoid constituting the target of the almost general curiosity, prompted Francesco to remain at the Viceroy's table. He instinctively knew the eyes of Ilaria to rest upon him and, although not another word had been spoken, the situation was

becoming greatly strained. But he did not wish to exhibit the misery which racked his soul with a thousand pangs before the gossiping courtiers and monks. Thus he ate or made a pretence at eating in silence. He had become acutely susceptible to the disagreeable features of his surroundings. The gathering heat and the heavy odor of meats and wines in the immense room, the flickering glare of the torches, the shrillness of the many voices, the noises of laughter which flowed together with the wine,—they all smote his senses with a sharp sting of irritation, disgust and measureless regret. So many, many times had he been part of all this. Now it was going from him. The thought and the attempt at its banishment sickened him. He leaned upon the table, white and faint. His eyes were closed. He had lost the courage to attempt further concealment. He instinctively knew the Frangipani was watching him and there was a suggestion in his gaze which filled him with an inward dread. How would Ilaria take it? What would become of her, after he had gone? He glanced down the board. Flagons of wine and platters of fruit were beginning to be in great demand. Story-telling and jesting, which were wont to drag out repasts to endless hours, had begun. In the midst of it all Count Capecé arose. His move was not instantly perceived, but when he was heard to call upon one of the monks for a blessing, there was a general stir at the board. The blessing given, the Viceroy started from the hall, when he found himself accosted by Francesco, who had stumbled blindly after him.

"May I have a word with you, my lord?"

Count Capecé nodded and Francesco followed him to his private cabinet, the doors of which closed behind

him.

The Viceroy had seated himself and silently beckoned to the youth to begin.

With an effort Francesco spoke:

"I returned from San Cataldo last night, but was denied admittance to your Grace, wherefore my presence here may have startled you!—"

There was something like life in Francesco's tone, now the decisive moment had come, and looking down he carefully noted the face of him who was to be his judge.

A silent nod from the Viceroy bade him proceed.

"By your Grace's leave," he continued, with a marked effort, "this must be my last day at the Court of Avellino. I am bidden on a long and tedious journey. My father would have me set out upon it at once! I had wished to acquaint your Grace of the matter last night. I crave permission to quit the royal household, that I may be free to do my father's bidding."

Francesco had spoken with marked slowness and precision, that he might force himself to maintain his calm demeanor. To his own relief he finished the speech with no hint of a break in his tone, though gravely uncomfortable under the Viceroy's steady, searching gaze.

Now, with a quiet gentleness that caused him to start painfully, he felt the latter's hand laid almost tenderly upon his arm. He gave a startled look into the frank, kindly face of the Apulian, and the response that met his eyes forced a swift wave of color into his bloodless cheeks. He would have

almost preferred the rude brutality of Anjou's men to this generosity which left him no weapons for defence. He moved uneasily where he stood, and his breath came fast.

He was very near to breaking.

"You have my permission to execute your father's behest," the Viceroy replied while his eyes were fixed on the face of the youth. "Let but the office wait its hour! You have heard the tidings which have brought joy to every Ghibelline heart. You note our preparations to depart. Conradino has crossed the Alps. To him belongs our first duty! We are bound for Pavia!"

Francesco gave an involuntary start.

"I also am bound northward!" he said, and wished he had not spoken.

The Viceroy nodded.

"The better so! You ride with us!"

Francesco looked up appealingly. His misery received a new shock from the Viceroy's lack of comprehension.

"I fear that may not be," he faltered, then noting the Viceroy's puzzled look, he added:

"The office I am bidden to perform, brooks no delay!"

Count Capecé eyed him curiously.

"What business may that be, more cogent than our own? On the hoof-beats of our horses hang the destinies of a kingdom! None may falter, none may turn back! I pry not into the nature of the office you

are bidden to perform. Yet all personal interests should be suspended before the one all-absorbing task, that beckons us towards the Po!"—

"This business may not wait!"

It was almost a wail that broke from Francesco's lips. How could he make him understand without revealing his father's shame!

A shadow flitted across the Viceroy's brow.

"You will move the more swiftly in our train!"

A choking sensation had seized the youth.

"It may not be,—I must ride,—alone!" he stammered. All the color had forsaken his face and his knees barely supported his body.

"And when shall you return?" asked the Viceroy, feigning acquiescence.

There was a moment's silence ere Francesco replied:

"I fear, my lord,—I shall not return!"

Count Capecé started.

"You speak as if you were about to renounce the Court of Avellino forever," he replied after a brief pause, charged with apprehension. "What is the meaning of this? Why do you tremble? Your father is better of his illness! No messenger has reached us from San Cataldo. Is not your presence here proof of his recovery?"

"When I left my father's side, his sickness was in nowise lessened," responded Francesco laconically.

"Not lessened!" exclaimed the Viceroy. "Then how came you here?"

"At my father's command I am here!"

"For what purpose?"

"To acquaint you of my choice—of the Church!"

He spoke the words in a hard and dry tone.

Count Capecé had arisen. He was hardly less pale than Francesco, but there was a light in his eyes that burnt into the very soul of the youth.

"You said, your choice?"

"My choice!"

"Ingrate! Renegade!"

Francesco bowed his head.

He no longer attempted to reply, or to vindicate himself. His head had fallen upon his breast. His hot eyes were closed. His temples throbbed dully. He had known it from the start. They would misjudge him, they would misjudge his motives. Years of loyalty spent at the Court of Avellino would not mitigate the judgment of the step he was about to take; they would rather aggravate it. They believed him bought by the Guelphs. And his lips must remain sealed forever! Dared he divulge his father's shame? Dared he cast an aspersion upon the guiltless head of her who had given him birth and life? A life he had not desired, forsooth, yet one that it was his to bear to the end,—whatever that end!—

The Viceroy seemed to await some explanation, some apology—an apology he could not give. What would

words avail? Had not he, Francesco, bartered his life, his soul, his destiny into eternal bondage? But now his misery gave way to his pride. Once again he raised his head; but in his pallid face there lay an expression of haughtiness, of defiance, with which he met the Viceroy's hostile gaze.

"I take my leave, my lord! As for my future life, it is not of sufficient import to require or merit your consideration."

The Viceroy pointed silently to the door.

As one dazed, Francesco crept to his chamber.

There with a great sob he sank into a settle.

He gazed about. Nothing seemed altered since the days when he had been alive. Not a trifle was changed because a human soul, a living human soul had been struck down. The chamber was just the same as before. Outside the water plashed in the fountain, the birds carolled in the trees. As for himself,—he was dead, quite dead.

He sat down on the edge of his couch and stared straight into space. His head ached. The very centre of his brain seemed to burst. It was all so dull, so stupid,—life so utterly meaningless.

He remembered he had not spoken with Ilaria. At the very thought everything grew black before his vision. Yet he could not leave with the stigma upon his soul. She at least would understand, she at least would pity him. He felt like one looking down into a self-dug grave.

He arose and stepped to the window.

It was now past the hour of high noon. The activity in the courtyard, abandoned during the heated term of the day, began gradually to revive. There was no time to be lost.

Hastily he scratched a few lines on a fragment of vellum which lay close at hand, called an attendant and bade him despatch it at once to Ilaria Caselli.

Then, weary and tired, he gathered together his scant belongings, so scant indeed as not to encumber his steed; then, his arms propped on his knees, he sat down once more and awaited the coming of dusk.

CHAPTER VI

THE BROKEN TROTH



PRING triumphed with a vaunting pageant in the park of Avellino, where the gravelled walks were snowy beneath the light of the higher risen moon, and were in shadows transmuted to dim,

violet tints. The sombre foliage of yew and box and ilex contrasted strangely with the pale glow of the young grass, sloping in emerald tinted terraces down to where the lake shimmered through the trees.

It was an enchanted spot, second only to the gardens of Castel Fiorentino, with their broad terraces and gleaming marble steps, where peacocks proudly strutted. At one end, a fountain sent its silvery spray from a tangle of oleanders. Marble kiosks and statues gleamed from the sea-green dusk of the groves. All around there rioted an untamed profusion of shrubs: fantastic flowers of night, whose fragrance hung heavy on the air. Ivy clung and climbed along the crannies of gray walls; roses sprawled in a crimson torrent of perfume over the weather-stained torsos of gods and satyrs. In the centre of an ilex-grove a marble-cinctured lake gazed still-eyed at the sky, with white swans floating dream-like on its mirrored black and silver.

The dusk deepened; the golden moon hung low in the horizon, flooding the garden with a wan spectral light. The pool lay a lake of silver, in a black fringe of trees. The night flowers breathed forth drowsy perfume, making heavy the still air of summer.

Out of the velvet shadows there now came a woman, with dusky eyes and scarlet lips and jewels that gleamed among the folds of her perfumed robe. Slowly, like a phantom, she passed through the grove towards the ivy-wreathed temple of Pomona by the marble-cinctured lake.

Francesco who had been waiting, his heart in his throat, rose with a sigh of relief, mingled with a mighty dread. Would she understand? Would she grasp the enormity of the sacrifice he must make on

the altar of duty and obedience? Could she guess, could she read the terrible pain that racked his heart and soul at the thought of parting,—a parting for life,—for all eternity? For never, even if by chance they should again cross each other's path in life, could there be aught between them save a look; their lips must be mute forevermore and the voices of their hearts hushed.

So Fate had decreed it.

Bound hand and foot, he had been sold to his own undoing, to his own doom.

In a faint whisper came his name. Two white hands were extended towards him.

He arose, stumbled forward, and the next moment found them in close embrace.

"My darling! My own! I feared I had been too bold in my feelings for you!"

And again and again he kissed her mouth, her eyes, and the dusky sheen of her hair.

"I love you!" she whispered, her arms about his neck, her witch-like eyes drinking in the love and admiration which beamed from his. "Since last night, it seemed to me, we had been parted for months!"

A dull insufferable pain gripped his heart.

For a moment he closed his eyes, then, placing his arm about her, Francesco led her to a remote terrace where the velvet turf was bathed in bluish silver-light, while far below, turning a little to eastward, wound the shimmering thread of the Volturno, rippling softly through the perfumed night into the emerald shadows of the sleeping forest.

All about these two lay dream-like silence.

What wonder they were both loath to break the spell! Francesco, with heavy heart, watched the familiar scene, not daring to think, only standing passive beside her, whose faint breath stirred elf-like the rose upon his breast.

Ilaria, too, was silent, wondering, hoping, fearing, waiting for him to speak.

A faint zephyr stole through the branches of the cypress and magnolia trees. And from afar, as from another sphere, the faint sounds of distant convent bells were wafted through the impassioned silence of the southern night.

A sudden mighty longing leaped into his heart.

To banish it, he must speak. Yet, try as he would, he could not. His lips refused to form the words and an ice-cold hand seemed to grip his heart.

Turning suddenly, he took the sweet face into his hands and held it for a pace, and looked into her eyes with such a mad hunger, such delirious longing, that she too caught the moment's spell. Her breath came in gasps; her lips were thirstily ajar; she began to lean towards him, and at last he threw his arms about her and caught the dear head so wildly to his bosom, that woman-like she guessed there was something hidden beneath it all, and while she abandoned herself to his caresses, softly responding to them, the waves of a great fear swept over her own heart.

Looking up at him, she caught the strange, wild expression in his face, an expression she had twice surprised since his return from his mysterious

voyage, once in the rose-garden, then at the repast.

"Francesco," she breathed, with anxious wonderment in her tone, "why do you look at me like that?"

Thoroughly frightened by his manner, she caught him by the arm.

He looked at her with bewildered eyes, but made no immediate response.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she repeated, her fear enhanced by his fierce look, his heaving breath. "Speak! What is it you have to tell me? They are stirring in the courtyard. We have scant time. And you—are you ready when the signal sounds? Your garb is ill-suited for a journey!"

At her words he gradually shook off the lethargy which seemed to benumb his senses.

Absently he looked down upon his garb.

"I forgot," he muttered, then the realization being forced upon him that he must speak, he took a deep breath, and the words sprang fiercely from his lips.

"Ilaria—can you guess the import of this hour? Can you guess why we are here at this moment?"

She looked up at him questioningly, but did not speak.

"We are here," he stammered, looking helplessly into her face,—"to say farewell."

"Farewell?" she repeated with wonderment. "Do you not ride with us?"

A negative gesture was slowly followed by the

words:

"I do not ride with you."

"I do not understand!" she said, hesitation in her tone. "Has the Viceroy—"

"I am no longer of the court!"

She started. He saw the roses fade from her cheeks.

"Dismissed?"

The words stung him like a whip-lash.

He bowed his head.

"I will see Count Capecé at once! He will not refuse a boon to Ilaria Caselli!"

She had arisen, as if to suit the action to the words.

He gently drew her back, disregarding her resistance, her wondering look.

"It is beyond recall!"

From the castle court there came the sound of a fanfare.

Neither noted it.

Yet a touch of impatience tinged Ilaria's words, as she turned to him anew.

"What ails you, Francesco? You are dealing in enigmas. Why are you dismissed? Why may I not see the Viceroy at once,—ere it be too late?"

"Because it *is* too late. We part—for life!"

A deadly pallor had overspread her features.

"I do not understand!" she faltered.

His head drooped. It was with difficulty he maintained his self-control.

"I feared as much,—and yet, the word must be spoken,—farewell—forever—these two words alone —"

"Forever!" she exclaimed, "and between us? No,—no, —not that,—not that!" She held out both hands to him. He caught them in his own, as a drowning man would hold on to a straw.

"And yet,—we must!" he replied, with a choking voice. "Oh, Ilaria—Ilaria—my sweetheart—my darling,—save me! Save me!"

He broke off suddenly and stared at her vacantly.

"Lord Christ,—what do I say! No, no! I did not mean that! I pray to God, that we may not."

"May not—what?" she interposed, her eyes in his. "Francesco, speak! What troubles you? What is the meaning of it all?"

"Oh, Ilaria," he said slowly, "it is indeed more difficult to tell than I had guessed. When I leave Avellino, it will be never to return!"

"But why—why, Francesco?" she questioned, alarmed by his words, but more by the wild expression of his countenance.

"How can I tell it—how can I tell it? Is it not enough for you, to know that I must go?"

"You frighten me!" she whispered, drawing nearer to him.

He took her in his arms and held her close, very close to him, pressing his lips upon her closed eyes. It was his farewell to love, to life.

"Tell me that you love me!" he begged in piteous tones.

"I love you," she breathed in whispered accents, broken by a sob. "Do you not know?"

"I love you," he cried with sudden fierceness, flinging the words in rebellion at the inexorable fate which was in store for him.

"Then,—why must we say it,—the word?" she queried anxiously. "Think you that I fear to follow you,—wherever you may go?"

For a moment he held her in close embrace, then his arms fell, as if paralyzed, from about her. He drew back one quick step, a look crossing his face that startled her even more than his strange unexplained words.

"There where I go, you could not follow me ever," he said at last with the resolution of despair. "I am bound by a sacred oath to leave the world. I have no right to ask any woman for her love! Henceforth, my home—this castle—must be a dream, a memory to me, and you, Ilaria, will stand as far above me as yonder star soars above the earth! Ilaria! I have pledged my word to my father that I will bid farewell to life and happiness, to take in their stead the lonely vows of a Benedictine monk!"

There was a dead silence.

For a moment she looked at him, as if trying fully to comprehend what it was he had said.

Then his meaning pierced her brain.

She shrank slowly away from him, then stood quite still, her eyes wide and dark with horror, her face white, as a mask of death. A great icy wave of silence seemed to have swept between them, shutting them out from the world of life.

In an instant all the softness and gentleness of her manner dropped from her like a discarded garment. She drew her trailing robes about her as if she dreaded contamination from him. A single petal from the flower he wore had fallen upon her breast. She brushed it from where it nestled. It fluttered down upon the grass.

"A monk! And you have dared to touch me!" she hissed, as if she would have spat upon him.

A mist came over Francesco's eyes. For a few moments he was conscious of nothing. All life and expression had gone from his face. He did not see the flood of grief, the anguish and the wounded pride that prompted her action. He only saw her turn about without another word, and move swiftly from him towards the castle court, her eyes blinded with tears.

Like one dazed, Francesco stood and stared at the spot whence she had gone. He saw and heard nothing save in memory. His white garb shimmered in the moonlight with more life in its purity than there was in his face. His soul was wrapped in awful bitterness at his destiny,—the punishment for his father's sin.

He had not told her. He had told no one. Twice on the same day he had been misunderstood, his

integrity assailed. He had hoped and prayed for understanding. His prayer had been denied. None there was who understood, none who even vaguely guessed the enormity of the sacrifice. Pity only he had encountered, a pity akin to contempt, from those whose cause he had seemingly deserted; disdain from her whose lips might have alleviated the burden of his destiny by a blessing that he might take with him on his lonely, solitary road.

How long he stood thus, his limbs benumbed, paralyzed with grief, afraid to move, almost afraid to breathe, he knew not. An icy hand seemed to clutch his heart.

Suddenly from the castle there came the renewed sound of fanfares, repeated in brief intervals. They were preparing to start. No one thought of him. For them he had already ceased to be.

With an effort he roused himself.

Not a moment was to be lost. He had no longer any right here, no longer the right to mingle with the happy companions of former days. The thought that she too had turned from him in his hour of need, lent him wings. He must set out at once. All that had at one time delighted him, now repelled with the consciousness, that it was not for him.

He stole back to the castle over devious paths, reached his chamber and gathered up his scant belongings. A last look round the walls he had learned to love, then he crept softly out into the corridor. Everywhere he met the rush and hubbub of hurried preparation for departure. No one heeded him. The hall below seemed to yawn beneath him like a black pit as he descended.

Crossing the courtyard amidst throngs of pages, squires, and pursuivants, he made for the stables, saddled his steed, and rode out by the postern, unheeded, unchallenged.

The land of his heart's desire had vanished behind him, like the fairy-land of golden sunset dreams that fades away when darkness comes.

CHAPTER VII

THE PASSAGE



RANCESCO rode out into the scented night and the round yellow moon rode with him. Strange things were happening beneath that moon; in the crucible of destiny a new life was forming, new feelings arising on the ashes of the old. And Francesco's heart was slowly undergoing a change as he rode through the night into a season of darkness, inevitable, irrevertible.

Ahead of him the great road stretched white in the moonlight, a broad ribbon which lost itself among hills and in the shadows of trees. In his ears was the thunder of his horse's feet, pounding insistent clamor into the quiet of the night. He would have desired wings for his steed; the wind of the speed of his going swept cool against his face. The night was gray around him, a velvet moon-steeped darkness, odorous with the fragrance of breaking earth. Far away the deep-throated bay of a dog rose and died across the world. A bell note, thinned by distance to a faint dream sound, stole over silent hill and dale; peace seemed to wrap the world round as in a cloister garden. With every mile that now carried him farther away from his Eden, from his garden of dreams, from his lost youth, new scenes unrolled themselves before him. Off in the wide Apulian plains lights twinkled here and yonder, wakeful eyes of watchfulness among the hills. He passed pale glimmering bogs, where lonely herons brooded, and wide barren heaths, over which the road led straight as an arrow's flight.

As the miles reeled away under him, his restlessness began to increase with the sweep of his horse's stride. Vague forms seemed to slip by him in the shadows; in every bush beside the road he saw white faces lurking. Strange, half-formed impressions of the new life he was about to enter upon, haunted him; strange forms in monkish garbs seemed to pass him in the gloom of the night and vanish silently as ghosts. Later he could not tell if he had seen them, or if they had been but the excrescences of his fevered brain. For always, when he had endeavored to rouse himself and look about him sanely, the road stretched before him white and desolate.

The weight of the hours past, yet more the presage of those to come, had crushed Francesco's spirit with merciless relentlessness. He was yet too young to realize the healing power of time, how it bears forgetfulness on its kindly wings, how its shadow becomes finally a shield, by which the keen daggers of remembrance are blunted and turned aside. He did not know that the human soul can suffer only so far, that greater miseries efface the memory of the lesser. The irony of his parting from Ilaria, to him forever lost, her cruel words, had stabbed his soul to the quick, and to himself he appeared to have entered into a dismal, dreary land, a boundless valley of shadows.

As he rode on, at a wild and reckless pace, the only human being on that wide expanse, all sense of pain and misery left the son of Gregorio Villani for the time, even all consciousness of the region which he traversed. He could not stop; it seemed an iron weight would crush him to earth, while, at the same time, a force against which he could not struggle drove him on. His brain seemed to be on fire; balls of flame danced before his eyes; while he looked upon them, they turned to faces grinning from out a blood-red mist. The faces drew closer and melted into one, Ilaria's face, as he had seen it last, white in its marble-cold disdain, with scarlet lips and flaming poppies in her dark scented hair.

Then the mist in his eyes cleared suddenly, and he saw the figure below the face, wreathed in a floating web of moonlight, through which white limbs gleamed, while the dusky hair streamed behind it as a cloud. Again, as he looked, the form was flying from him upon a great white horse. And as it flew, it looked back at him with laughing, witch-like eyes,

Ilaria's eyes, as he was wont to see them, and in its hand it bore a wan pale flame which was his soul. And, with the fleeting vision, there came to him the realization that he had forever lost that for which all men strive, which all men hold most dear: life and love; and all his being leaped to the fierce desire to break the oath that bound him to that other sphere, —the Church. But fast as his good steed went, with ears laid back and neck outstretched and body flattened to the desperate headlong stride, that great white horse went faster, bearing ever just beyond his reach the slender form veiled in misty moonbeams, the face with the laughing eyes and the marble-cold disdain.

He laughed aloud in answer, caught up in the whirlwind of his furious speed; heaven and earth held nothing for him but the frenzy of desire. Fire of life, the life he had cast from him, coursed through his veins; the chase was life itself, exultant, all-conquering, sublime. He had no eyes for the road ahead. Ahead was the darkness of the great forests. A stride, and he was within their shadows. The moon was blotted out by the blackness of the trees; and with it had faded the vision, gone like a wreath of smoke, or a dream that is lost in darkness. Francesco reeled in his saddle; his steed thundered on, the reins loose upon its neck, through the damp silence of the wood, where night hung heavy, thence out into the open, where again the road gleamed white and desolate beneath the moon.

And at last the moon was gone and the light went out of the world, and he knew himself for a soul cast into outer darkness. His mind was blank. He knew not whether he lived or died, nor did he care. He lived in a nebulous void of gray unconsciousness,

horribly empty of all thought and all sensation.

And thus he rode onward on the road to his destiny.

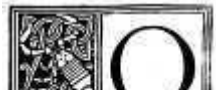
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Book the Second

THE PILGRIMAGE

CHAPTER I

THE VIGIL OF SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA





N the summit of a conical hill, rising above the great amphitheatre of forests that skirt the sunny Apulian plains, upon the ruins of a temple to Apollo and in a grove sacred to Venus here, in the sixth century had arisen the model of western monasticism, the cloisters of Monte Cassino.

From its sun-kissed heights the view extended on one side towards Arpinum where the Prince of Roman orators was born, on the other, towards Aquinum, already famous as the birth-place of Juvenal. Scarcely a pope or emperor of note there was who had not been personally connected with its history. From its mountain crags it had seen Goths, Lombards, Saracens and Normans devastate the land, had witnessed the death struggle between Guelph and Ghibelline, the discomfiture of Rome, and the extinction of imperial dynasties.

Up to the chapter house of the great Order of Benedict of Nursia, enthroned upon that predestined height, Francesco slowly and wearily made his way. After a night, even more restless than the preceding one, he had journeyed all day, wishing, yet dreading, to behold his ultimate goal. And as he slowly rode up the hill his heart sank with the sheer weight of his misery.

It was evening.

An immense silence, full of sadness, had fallen upon the world. The distant mountains were lost in a

dome of roseate fire, which reached almost to the horizon, bordered by a line of pallid gold. Only in the west, like the very Host, the sun, shrouded in golden mists, hung in the heavens over the mystery of the sea. Slowly the light was changing. It was the moment of Benediction. Great tongues of flame stole into the firmament; the hills took fire from the splendor of the skies. Across the world lay the shadow of the Mountain. The earth seemed as a smoking censer.

As one wrapped in a dream, Francesco gazed across the land. Far and away in the Umbrian plains a fire shone like a star fallen to earth; then another and another. Castellazzara flamed on the mountain; Proceno, Aquapendente, Elciola and Paladino in the plains. Torre Alfina high in the mountains lighted her beacon; San Lorenzo in the valley answered it. Every hamlet chanted "Magnificat" and the hills answered: "Salve Regina!"

It was the Vigil of Santa Maria Assunta.

From the cloisters above came the sound of many droning voices. They seemed to intensify the stillness, rather than to disturb it.

At last he paused before the great southern entrance to the cloisters. He pulled rein, but did not dismount. He was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling strong enough to bow his head and to call from his lips a deep, heartbroken groan. After three days of freedom unspeakably blessed he was now to enter the gates which would shut him in away from the world of life, away from the world of men, perhaps for all his remaining existence. Three brief days! That short time had dispelled from his spirit the dull crust of insensibility, with which he had striven to clothe it.

He was once more to be laid bare to the lash of inward rebellion from which he shrank in horror. A pardoned prisoner recondemned to death,—it was easily compared to the life to which he must voluntarily resign himself; that endless existence of religious slavery from whose soul-crushing monotony there was no escape, but death.

Why no escape? Francesco stood there alone in the falling darkness. None in the cloisters had been advised of his coming. He might yet—With a tightening of the lips he leaped from his horse and gave the customary signal.

After a wait of brief duration a lay-brother appeared, opened the gates and Francesco Villani entered the precincts of Monte Cassino.

Without stating the reasons of his presence, he requested to be forthwith conducted into the presence of the Prior, and the monk, after having cared for Francesco's steed, and attended to his behest, returned after a short time and bade him follow. Arrived at the Prior's apartment, his guide knocked for admission. The door swung inward and Francesco entered alone.

The Prior had just finished a special devotion in a small oratory adjoining his chamber and was now seated before a massive oaken table, on which there lay a curiously illuminated parchment, from whose azure and golden initials Francesco's eyes turned shudderingly to the form of Romuald, Prior of Monte Cassino.

His great and powerful frame was so worn with vigils and fasts that it seemed like that of a huge skeleton. He regarded the youth, whose courtly garb and

manners would not have remained unremarked even in the most brilliant assembly, with an air of austerity mingled with apathy, which age and long solitude might well have engendered and, after a few brief words of welcome such as took little from Francesco's sense of forlornness, he bade the youth be seated.

Without attempt at delay or circumlocution the son of the Grand Master placed his father's letter in the Prior's hands, while he turned his face from this living Memento Mori in the garb which henceforth must be evermore his own.

Francesco seated himself upon a settle, while the Prior weighed the letter absently in his hand as one undecided whether or not to acquaint himself with its contents. At last he broke the seal and, with the aid of a torch whose flickering light drew Francesco's attention towards the open door of an oratory, Romuald slowly began to read. While thus engrossed, Francesco's gaze wandered down the dim vistas of corridors revealed beyond Romuald's chamber, which in the half-light presented an exceedingly gloomy aspect, reposing in the uncertain glimmer of stone lamps fixed in niches upon the walls. These corridors were at intervals crossed by archways, marking the termination of many flights of stairs leading by galleries to the upper chambers of the cloisters. A pulpit, supported on a pillar fixed in the wall, was revealed by the light of five or six stone lamps, which seemed to intensify rather than to dispel the gloom beyond.

During the reading of Gregorio Villani's letter a sudden change had come over the Prior's face. Francesco noted it not, engrossed as he was in

scanning his surroundings, silently wondering if he would be able to strip off the gladness of earth, the joy of youth, the yearning of the flesh, to become the image of that spiritualized abnegation which the Prior represented; if his strength would support his resolve.

Suddenly a scowl darkened Romuald's brow, and from the letter in his trembling hands his dimmed eyes flashed upon the youth. Francesco wondered. It was not long before he learned.

Romuald, supporting his right arm on the table, turned to the youth.

"You then are the son of Gregorio Villani! And you think to live here amongst us, to enjoy the peace and the solitude of these cloisters, whose life-long enemy your father has been!"

At the Prior's words Francesco had started.

"I know nothing of my father's quarrels, nothing of the quarrels of the monks," he said.

The Prior nodded absently.

"You were raised at the Court of Avellino?"

"Such was my father's will!"

Romuald looked up at him curiously.

"And now, his will is to make of you a monk, to do penance for his own transgressions!"

Francesco's head sank.

"The burden is mine to bear!"

A strange light shone in the Prior's eyes.

"Then it is not your own desire?"

Every vestige of color had left Francesco's face.

"It is my wish!"—

There was a brief pause.

"You are loyal to the memory of him who gave you life but to destroy it," nodded the Prior, as unconsciously he picked up the letter from the table. Signs of deeper inward emotion were revealed upon his face as, after regarding the youth with a gloomy interest, he said at last:

"For one raised at court you will find the life of the cloister arduous enough."

A flood of memories rushed with these words over Francesco.

They left his countenance paler than before,

"I shall learn to bear it."

A sudden gleam of pity seemed to beam from Romuald's passionless eyes.

"It is a brave beginning of the new life,—for I doubt not you must stay. The word of His Holiness is law. To-night, since collation is over in the refectory, you will sup with me. To-morrow you shall exchange this garb for the simpler one."

Sick at heart, Francesco nodded silent acquiescence.

At this moment a monk entered, carrying a platter which he placed upon a table and, after arranging it according to the Prior's direction, left the latter alone with his guest.

The collation was by no means traditionally meagre. In truth, it seemed to Francesco far above what his fancy about monastic life had led him to expect.

At last when everything upon the trenchers, together with the last flagon of wine, had been done ample justice to, Francesco, after due thanksgiving, arose.

Romuald's gaze had never relinquished the youth during the repast.

"Now to St. Benedict's chapel, wherein already the bell is calling," he said, rising slowly. "After compline you shall be conducted to your cell,—one for yourself within the dormitory overhead. This is the way."

A small door at one side of the Prior's room opened upon a narrow passage, along which they walked side by side in semi-darkness, till the light from the chapter house met their eyes. Through this large room they passed, entering from it the great Church itself, the further end of which opened into a beautiful chapel consecrated many years ago to the founder of the cloister, St. Benedict of Nursia.

When the Prior and his companion entered here, the monks were already assembled. There was many a curious glance cast towards Francesco as he strode along the kneeling company by the side of the Prior.

So occupied was the newcomer with the novelty of the scene, that the old and familiar worship, witnessed among different surroundings, did not pall upon him here.

Mechanically his lips moved, while his eyes wandered over the white carven screen before the altar and the pillar that rose above it out of the range

of candle-light, to mingle with the shadows above.

Then, by a slight turn of the head, he could see the black, well-like entrance to the large church, where one or two distant lamps, lighted by penitent monks before special shrines, flashed like infinitesimal stars through the gloom. As for the long rows of kneeling monks about him, they seemed to Francesco to differ not at all from those he had known and met in the monasteries of Apulia, or those he had seen in the Augustinian monastery of San Cataldo. They were the same unsympathetic forms, the same shorn pates, the same dull faces, for whom the world outside the gates of the cloister was but a country unredeemed. These were part of the hosts that formed the great army of the Church, with the aid of which she had slowly but surely obtained her hold on the heritage of Emperor Frederick the Second; these were the sentinels of the crusading host of Anjou. They knew no will, save that of an irate, fanatical pontiff who looked about in vain for means to rid himself of his dearly beloved son and his rapacious hordes. Of these he was henceforth to be a part, their loves his loves, their hates his hates. In vain did he look about for a face idealized by the life of the cloister, and, as he looked and wondered, the last prayer was concluded.

In irregular groups, amid a low murmur of conversation, the monks left their devotions, now ended for another day. Francesco followed them as they moved down the corridor.

Suddenly a hand was laid upon his shoulder. He turned about and gazed into the face of the Prior.

"Fra Ambrogio will conduct you to your cell," said Romuald, beckoning to a long, lean monk who stared

awkwardly at the newcomer. "The last—in the western wing," was the Prior's laconic order, and Francesco bowed in silence and followed his spectral guide.

He was too weary to care to talk; even to inquire about his horse.

In a short while the son of the Grand Master was alone in his dimly lighted cell. It was larger than he had anticipated and far more worthily furnished.

Upon a table had been placed the bundle which held his belongings. This he unrolled carelessly, intending to take from it only his tunic for the night. With the movement something from the bundle fell out upon the stone floor. He stooped to pick it up. It was the little steel dagger which his hand had gripped on the fatal night of his return from San Cataldo. Thinking nothing of the omen, he slipped the forbidden weapon between the leaves of a Missal which he placed on the table, and there it remained for many a long day.

Then he sat down upon his bed, covering his face with his hands.

Ilaria's name rang in his ears; Ilaria's image filled every atom of his soul. In the paroxysm of grief which convulsed his frame, he shook like a storm-swept reed; it was in vain he tried to compose his mind to the proper attitude for prayer.

The crucifix above his bed swam in a misty cloud before his eyes. It was only after a long litany, mechanically repeated, that Francesco succeeded in recalling his wandering imagination to the mystery of the atonement. At last sheer physical weariness

conquered the feverish agitation of his nerves and he lay down.

The long night passed in unbroken blackness and silence. In the utter void and absence of all external impressions Francesco gradually lost consciousness of time. The blackness of night seemed an illimitable thing with no beginning and no ending; but, when at early dawn he waked, there were tears in his eyes and the name of Ilaria on his lips.

CHAPTER II

THE PASSING OF CONRADINO



AYS and weeks in the cloisters of Monte Cassino sufficed to convince Francesco that he was not destined to find any friendships there. The elder Villani had not seen fit, in an age of implied indulgence, to keep secret the nature of his transgression, and the curious and unfriendly glances that met him on every turn had soon proclaimed this

fact to the newcomer, who writhed inwardly, but endured in silence. The changeless, endless rounds endured by many thousands of human souls for all years of their lives, added new torture; he felt like the stray leaf blown from its stem on the sheltering branch; would his ever be the prayerless peace for evermore?

Thus month passed after month,—in dire, changeless monotony.—

It was a stifling afternoon late in summer.

Few of the monks felt energy enough to go about their usual half-hearted pastimes, and nearly all had retired to their cells in comatose languor. Francesco had gone up with the rest; but the sun streamed brilliantly into his little cell through the western window and from without there came to his ears the myriad droning of ephemeral insect life. His mind was weighted with many thoughts that clamored for analysis.

Gradually he felt immersed in a morbid train of reflections concerning as ever, the utter emptiness of his own existence, now really more exiled in loneliness than ever before. For months now he had been in the cloisters, and not one single word from the outer world concerning his future had come to him. The time was fast approaching when he must take the final vows. Had the Pontiff forgotten him? Had his emissary deceived his father on his death-bed? Or—it was unthinkable—had his father deceived him, to make him pliable to his wishes? Was he doomed to remain here till the end of time, severed from the world,—forgotten?

The very thought was unendurable. These

conjectures were worse than immediate annihilation. No matter which it was to be,—he, the monk, was utterly powerless. It were far better not to yield himself to these unwise fears. The Prior had been invisible to him for days. He alone might, by word or hint, have alleviated his fears; but he had not spoken.

After brooding over these matters till he thought his brain would burst, Francesco determined to shake off the oppression of his cell and to seek solace under the azure vault of Heaven.

Suiting the action to the impulse, he opened the door noiselessly and stepped into the corridor without.

About him there was absolute silence. He stood at the farthest corner of the western wing. Nearly all the cells immediately about him were untenanted. For a moment or two he tarried, undecided. Then, following an irresistible impulse, he stepped on to the trellised walk without and decided to ascend the top of the mountain.

Escaping from the court and the cloisters, all hushed in dream-like stillness, he climbed a green knoll which several ancient pines marked strangely with their shadows. There, leaning against one of the trunks, he raised his eyes to the barrier of encircling mountains, discovered by the quivering sunlight falling directly on the forests which fringed their acclivities.

The vast woods, the steep descents, the precipices and torrents all lay extended beneath, softened by a pale-blue haze that alleviated in a measure the stern prospects of the rocky promontories above. The sky was of the deepest azure. The hoarse roar of torrents,

throwing themselves from distant wildernesses into the gloomy vales below, mingled with the chant from remote convents.

How long he had stood there, endeavoring to fix some purpose in his life, something that would fill out the emptiness of his existence and give him the strength to bear up under the burden of his destiny, Francesco could not have told, when a vague glittering movement on the opposite mountain slopes attracted his gaze, a glitter that told of an armed array marching and riding among the hills. Even the woods seemed peopled with shadowy forms, slowly emerging into the bright light of high-noon, while out of the stillness there leaped the cry of a horn, hawberks glimmered and armor shone. Beyond the armed array the mountains towered solemn and stupendous, fringed as with aureoles of lambent flame. The horsemen came from the North; there was a swirl of thought in Francesco's brain, then his hand went to his heart: Conradino and his iron hosts were marching on Rome!

And he, who had dreamed of espousing at some day the cause of the last of the Hohenstauffen, who had hoped, by some great effort, to win the crown of life and Ilaria's love, stood here on the summit of Monte Cassino, separated by mountains, chasms and torrents from the glistening throng, which wound in one long, sinuous line towards the ravines of Camaldoli, separated by a whole world from the realization of the hopes nurtured in his childhood. He was the bondsman of the Church,—the bondsman of the Pope.

It was an indisputable fact; he was being caught in constantly ever narrowing circles.

Many questions would hourly assail him, questions like the hill-towns of Umbria, built on the brink of precipices, walled round with barriers of unhewn rock, seeming so near from the ravine below, where the wanderer sees every roof, every cypress tree, every pillared balcony, but which he cannot approach by scaling the unscalable, sheer precipice, but must slowly wind round from below, circling up and down endless undulations of vineyard and oakwood, coming forever upon a tantalizing glimpse of towers and walls, forever seemingly close to the heights above him, yet forever equally distant, till, at last, by a sharp unexpected turn of the gradually winding road, he stands before the gates.

Thus was it with his own isolated soul, a soul unaffected by any other, unlinked in any work, or feeling, or suffering with any any other soul,—nay even with any physical thing.

Thus it stood between himself and Ilaria. Thus they would forever remain alone, never move, never change, never cease absorbing through all eternity that which the eye cannot see.

A soul purged perchance, of every human desire or will, isolated from all human affection, raised above the limits of time and space, hovering in a limbo of endless desire, twisting mystical half reasoning away from the peace-hungry soul!

What a fate was his! What a vortex of passions he had been thrust into!

In the streets of Rome, Guelphs and Ghibellines were fighting. To southward the Provencals ravaged the land. All over Italy the free-lance companies lay waste and burned. The coarse religion of the cloister

had no uplifting tendency. It was rather a perpetual smart. The first fervor of the great Franciscan and Dominican movements had long been spent. Nothing, save the ill-regulated enthusiasm of heretical sects, had arisen to take its place. In monasteries and convents scandals were almost the order of the day. It was true, the torch of Franciscan faith still passed privately from hand to hand. Some of the ablest men of the Church were discussing the daring tenets of direct Franciscan inspiration. Representatives of all phases of mediaeval thought mingled with the adherents of a mystic Oriental trend.

Nevertheless, Francesco, in the dead of night, found himself waking to the sense of a dreadful loss and loneliness. He had entered a hushed world, where human and earthly values alike were ignored or forgotten, and the drama of the soul was all in all. The demon of disillusionment which had beset him ever since he had ascended the heights of Monte Cassino began to unfold his gloomy wings over the far horizon of his soul.

No one knew, save himself and perhaps he not fully, how deep a yearning for guidance underlay his sensitive distaste for the control of men. His was a nature that craved to follow, as others craved to lead, but which submitted itself reluctantly, and never at the call of convention.

Devastated Italy rose before his eyes,—nay, the whole world opened to the inner vision, one great battle-field. Unconsciously his eyes followed the direction of the horsemen. Their vanguard had long disappeared in the dusk of distant forest-aisles; still Swabia's iron-serried ranks were pouring from the

sheltering boughs of the oaks above San Geminiano.
—

Evening drew on apace.

A procession, with its gay dresses and colored tapers gleaming like a rainbow against the verdant hills along the curving, climbing road from San Vitale, attracted Francesco's gaze, and with it a sudden dull pain contracted his heart as he strained his eyes towards the valley.

It seemed like a bridal procession in its pomp, its splendor. A woman bestriding a palfrey rode gaily by the side of a man conspicuous in dark velvet. Directly beneath where he stood, she suddenly raised her head, as if she had divined his presence and desired a witness to her glory.

With a low cry of pain Francesco drew back.

At that moment, notwithstanding the height, he had recognized the magically fair features of Ilaria Caselli.

Like an animal hunted to death, that wishes to die in its lair, he was about to withdraw, when he faced what appeared to be a peasant who had come with provisions to the cloister.

As he saw the young monk he paused with a salutation, then, approaching him, he whispered:

"Have you heard the news? Messer Raniero Frangipani and Madonna Ilaria Caselli are passing on their bridal journey to Rome!"

Francesco's face was so pale that no earthly tint seemed to have remained in it. Only the large eyes

gave evidence of life.

"You come to me from her?" he questioned to the peasant.

"She bade me tell you that from no motive of coercion,—but of her own free will and choice, the Frangipani's proposal had been accepted!"

Francesco gave a sudden cry like one who leaps over a precipice, and, falling on his knees, buried his face in his hands.

When he roused himself from the stupor which benumbed his limbs the peasant had disappeared, with him the bridal procession and the Swabian contingents of Conradino.

The full moon gazed down upon him through the great silence of the mountain-world, and a thousand pines thrust up their midnight spears towards the stars.

CHAPTER III

TONSURE AND THORN



**HE** following weeks dragged along in hopeless monotony. The last night of Francesco's novitiate had come. There would not be a loophole of escape for him now. On the morrow, the eternal vows were to pass his lips. This night he was to spend in the chapel of the saint on his knees, supposedly in prayer. It was a solitary vigil, for no companion could be granted him. A dangerous thing for a novice it was, had the monks but realized it:—putting one for ten hours alone at the mercy of his thoughts. And Francesco shuddered as they left him, kneeling upon the stones before the solitary shrine.

Could he have seen himself he would have staggered! How old and emaciated, shrunken and hopeless he looked, as he knelt there in his ungainly garments. The face which had formerly borne an open expression of happiness, was hard now, unreadable and impassive. His hands, once white and well cared for, had become almost transparent. As he held his body straight from the knees upward, it was difficult to perceive how much weaker this body had grown. There was a pathetically haughty poise to the head still; but the skin was colorless.

The love for Ilaria, her witch-like face, her witch-like eyes, had remained with him. He had hoped against hope, that by some human, or divine interposition, the yoke about to be imposed upon him would be shattered, that it would prove but a period of probation, a horrid nightmare forsooth, which would be dispelled by some divine ray, give him back to

earth, to life, to love, for which his heart yearned with a feverish longing that was fast sapping his strength. His prayers had been in vain: the moments were fleeting fast towards the consummation of his destiny.

It suffered him no longer in the incense-saturated gloom of the chapel. Escaping from his solitary vigil he traversed the courtyard and almost unconsciously reached the spot whence on the night of his arrival at the cloisters he had looked down upon the mountain world of Central Italy.

Above, space soared. Glancing below, he was seized as with a sudden dizziness. All idea of limitation seemed to have ceased in this infinity, for he looked down upon a firmament of cloud. And even as he looked, it was vanishing dream-wise, revealing in widening rifts the world, that gave it birth. A world, —how flat for all its serrated mountain ranges, how insignificant for all its far horizons, compared with that immensity of the starry vault above.

As he gazed with wide, longing eyes, slowly the consciousness of physical existence seemed to widen, till it extended to the horizon and in the very extension was transfigured. Francesco tried to summon images of devotion. But the images mocked the vast concave. He only saw the deep eyes of Ilaria Caselli. Was not the universe his prayer? Sharp summits, glistening and far, were better cries of the soul than he could use.

Long he stood there on the moon-steeped height and gazed to southward where the winding road led into the plains of Apulia to Avellino, the cradle of his destiny. And as he gazed, thoughts, or impressions rather, began to float through his spirit Heaven, like

fleecy clouds which, having withdrawn to the horizon begin to return slowly, wandering as it seemed at random, yet shepherded steadily by the wind towards the central upper deeps of the sky.

Faint, clear, a melody, recalling things long left and lost, throbbed through the silence of the night. He listened, then gazed, spellbound. Below him the swift waters of the Liris were smitten to tawny light. Son of the earth once more, he was once more slave of his thoughts.

Far above a world of compromise, conflict and delusion, a world that was soon to be upheaved by mortal strife, his destiny had lifted him into this high sphere of purity and peace. No purity save in isolation. Yet the mass of men were never meant to climb. Should he take his patient place with the slow, ascending throng,—would not the old story repeat itself, the old turmoil, conflict, failure?

Turning suddenly, Francesco gave a start.

By his side stood the Prior.

He was not slow to read the distress in the face of the youth.

"This great peace of the world above and about us—does it not reconcile your soul?" the Prior spoke with a slow sweep of his hand. "Is there anything greater than isolation above the herd?"

A great bitterness welled up in Francesco's heart, and his eyes filled with tears, as he turned to his interlocutor with the protest of his soul.

"You would reject the very affirmations of existence! You cry to the imperious demands of Nature to

create, to propagate, a mere perpetual No! Let those like-minded betake themselves to monasteries and to cells. As for myself—"

He broke off with a sob. Had he not lost the clue to Life?

The Prior regarded him quietly.

"The Church does not discourage the actions of the individual,—as long as they do not conflict with the eternal laws. As for herself—who must subdue men for men's sake,—she does reject them."

And linking his arm in that of Francesco, the Prior drew him back into the dusk of the deserted chapel and pointing to the form of the crucified Christ above the high-altar said:

"Look up! Nails would not have held him on the cross, had Love not held him there!"

And Francesco sank upon his knees in a paroxysm of grief. The Prior watched the scalding tears that streamed down the pale, wan face; then, when Francesco had sobbed himself into a state bordering almost on apathy, the Prior retraced his steps and left him to himself.

The moonlight streamed through the windows, and lay in broad patches upon the marble floor. Francesco staggered at last from his kneeling posture. Keeping in the shadow of the pillars, he crept softly towards the chancel and paused at the altar. There he knelt again. Deep silence reigned. Then came deep, heavy, tearless sobs. He was wringing his hands as one in bodily pain.

The sound of his own voice re-echoing through and

dying away among the arches of the roof filled him with fantastic terror as the phantom of some unknown presence. For a moment he swayed and would have fallen. It seemed to him as if he had seen Ilaria's face in the purple dusk. His heart stood still.

He stared spellbound. But it had vanished. He was conscious of nothing save a sickening pressure of the blood, that seemed as if it would tear his breast asunder, then it surged back, tingling and burning, through his body.

It was on the following day.

The ceremony had been accomplished.

Francesco stood before the high altar among the monks and acolytes and read the Introitus aloud in steady tones. All the cathedral was a blaze of light and color, from the holiday dresses of the peasants to the pillars with their flaming draperies and wreaths of flowers. The religious orders from the adjoining monasteries with their candles and torches, the companies of the parishes, with their crosses and pennons, lighted up the dim side-chapels; in the aisles the silken folds of processional banners drooped their gilded staves and tassels, glinting under the arches. The surplices of the choristers gleamed, rainbow-tinted, beneath the colored windows; the sunlight lay on the chancel floor in checkered stains of orange and purple and green. Behind the altar hung a shimmering veil of silver tissue, and against the veil and the decorations and the altar-light, the Prior's figure stood out in its trailing white robe like a marble statue that had come to life.

The light of a hundred candles shone in the deep still

eyes about him, eyes that had no answering gleam. At the elevation of the Host the Prior descended from his platform and knelt before the altar. There was a strange, even stillness in his movement. The sea of human life and motion seemed to surge around and below him and die away in the stillness. A censer was brought to Francesco, he raised his hand with the action of an automaton and put the incense into the vessel, looking neither to the right nor left. Then he too knelt, swinging the censer slowly to and fro. He took from the Prior the sacred golden sun, while the choristers burst into a peal of triumphal melody:

Pange linqua gloriosi
Corporis mysterium.
Sanguinisque pretiosi
Quem in mundi pretium
Fructus ventris gloriosi
Rex effudit gentium.

Francesco stood above the monks, motionless under the white canopy, holding the Eucharist aloft with steady hands. Two by two passed the monks, with lighted candles held left to right, with banners and torches, with crosses and images and flags, they swept slowly down the broad nave past the garlanded pillars, the sound of their chanting dying into a rolling murmur, drowned in the pealing of new and newer voices, as the unending stream flowed on and yet new footsteps echoed down the incense-laden nave.

One by one the visiting brotherhoods passed with their white shrouds and veiled faces, the brothers of the Misericordia, black from head to foot, their eyes faintly gleaming through the holes in their masks; the mendicant friars with their dusky cowls and bare

brown feet, the russet Benedictines and the white-robed grave Dominicans. They all bore testimony to the irrevocable step the son of the Grand Master had taken. A monk followed, holding up a great cross between two acolytes with gleaming candles. On and on the procession passed, form succeeding to form and color to color. Long white surplices, grave and seemly, gave place to gorgeous vestments and embroidered pluvials. The roses were strewn, the procession filed out.

When the chant had ceased, Francesco passed between the silent rows of the monks, where they knelt, each man in his place, the lighted candles uplifted. And he saw their hungry eyes fixed on the sacred body that he bore. To right and left the white-robed acolytes knelt with their censers, as peal after peal of song rang out, resounding under the arches, echoing along the vaulted roof.

Wearily, mechanically, Francesco went through the remaining part of his consecration, which had no longer any meaning for him, prayer eluding him as a vapor. After the Benediction he covered his face. The voice of the monk reading aloud the indulgences, swelled and sank like a far-off murmur from a world to which he belonged no more.

CHAPTER IV

THE CALL



URING the months that followed, it had become Francesco's habit to spend most of his leisure time in loneliness on the spot whence he had beheld the passing of Conradino's iron-serried hosts and where he had received Ilaria's message. The monks rarely visited the place, and Francesco's solitude was undisturbed. He never prayed, nor even held a religious thought while there; but the place was well chosen for meditation. Situated upon the very summit of the hill, whose slopes were bathed in purest air and sunlight, his gaze could easily traverse the intervening space and follow the shining course of the river down to the blue waters of the lake of Nemi, many miles away. Following the same direction still, till vision was repulsed by the barrier of shadowy hills, one knew that just beyond lay the sunny Apulian land, the spot to which Francesco's eyes ever turned; towards which once in a passion of rebellion, he had strained his arms, then let them drop again, helpless at his sides, acknowledging his defeat.

Autumn and winter had come and gone. Again spring was in the land, and with it at last an evening came; it was Saturday, a night of devotions and special Aves at the cloisters. The holy office was still in progress, and Francesco, kneeling in the last row

of full-vowed brethren, was striving to turn his thoughts from useless unhappiness, watching the play of the candlelight over the high-altar. Thus he failed to hear the opening of the outer door, and the rapid steps that passed and returned by the corridor. It was but a lay brother, and not a monk turned his head. But when a murmured message was delivered in the Vestibulum, when the jingle of chain-armor and the heavy tread of nailed feet came echoing towards them, there was a general lifting of eyes, a craning of necks and a perceptible increase in the speed of the responses.

The services ended, the monks betook themselves to their confessionals. A small number still lingered about the door, waiting the possible arrival of Romuald, the Prior, of whom they might incidentally learn the title and quality of the stranger. Francesco had retired into a dim corner, seemingly indifferent to the advent of the visitor. This appearance was not so much affectation, as a great struggle to crush back the hope that would sometimes slumber, but never die, within his breast.

Presently, however, there was a stir in the arch of the corridor, caused by the advent of one of the Prior's attendants, who stopped still to look about the chapel. Finally, discovering what he sought, he approached Francesco, beckoning to him to follow him.

Francesco rose and came forward, his knees shaking, with wildly beating heart. He followed his guide without looking to right or left, walking very slowly, that he might regain something of his self-possession. Had the summons come at last? Concerning its import he did not speculate, so it sent him into a

sphere of action, away from this self-centred life at the cloisters, the very calm of which offered no haven for the storm-tossed soul.

When he entered the Prior's presence, his manner was impassively expectant. Romuald rose slowly from his place, an overpowering, almost conscience-stricken pity in his heart, which refused to come to his lips, as on the face of the young monk there was unveiled at last all the majesty of the bitter loneliness which he had suffered so long and so silently.

When the Prior turned to Francesco, his words dropped monotonously from his lips.

"A messenger has arrived from His Holiness, Pope Clement, summoning you to Rome! You will depart on the morrow!"

Francesco bowed his head in silence and withdrew. As one in a trance he went out into the empty corridor. At last the call had come: To Rome,—to Rome! He would leave the dreary solitude of these mountain-heights, leave their purity and sanctity and peace for the strife and turmoil of a fevered world. To Rome,—to Rome! His pulses beat faster at the thought. Thither had those preceded him, among whom he had spent the golden days of his youth; thither she had gone whose image filled the dark and desolate chambers of his heart; now lost to him for aye and evermore! And thither Conradino was marching with his iron hosts to claim the dominion of the Southlands, his inheritance, his very own! To Rome,—to Rome! Once it had been the dearest wish of his soul. Now an unspeakable dread seized him with the summons. He was the bondsman of the Church,—her shackles were pitiless. Every feeling

must be stifled, the voice of the heart hushed in her grim service.—

Francesco entered his cell; a moment later the cell was in darkness. But could Francesco's open eyes have served the purpose of a lantern, a dozen monks might have read by their light, unceasingly, till matins.

CHAPTER V

THE DELLS OF VALLOMBROSA



T was a windless morning. Stillness and sunlight lay upon the world, when on the back of his own good steed, which had seen heavy service since last he rode it, Francesco bade farewell to the cloisters of Monte Cassino. Though hampered by his monk's habit, he sat in the saddle with the poise of a nobleman, as he gathered up the reins. With a cut upon his horse's neck and a word in the pointed black ear, he was off at a swinging gallop, out and

away through the open gate, past the walls of his prison, giving never a thought to the gaze from twenty pairs of curious eyes which followed him until he was out of sight.

Free of the cloister! Oh, the rare intoxication of that thought! And quickly upon it came the memory of that other departure, when he had turned his back on the south, had strained his eyes towards the setting sun. Then spring had awakened in the land, everything was promise, save the life upon which he was entering. The spring had gone, and with the spring the happiness of his life. A summer landscape stretched before him; and he rode towards the setting sun.

Francesco rode slowly enough. The fresh, free air came joyously to his nostrils. His eyes, less sunken than they had looked for months, though he knew it not, were seeking out those small tokens of beauty, which friendly nature gladly exhibits to so devoted a seeker. Two shrines had he already passed without a Pater Noster, filled with a quick, delirious happiness, which rose continually from his heart to his lips.

Through the long, strange, secluded days at Monte Cassino, he had become aware of a profound respite from the ferment of thought. On this morning, however, the sense of self, with all its complications, had utterly vanished. The insistent illusions of the past seemed to have left him. In the high solitudes in which he had been moving, living inviolate behind a stillness not of this world, he had wandered alone, yet not alone, through the spiritual landscape of which Fate had opened the portals.

Of the monks he had left he thought without regret. They were not remarkable people, only ordinary

men, for whom the veil that separates the seen from the unseen had become thin and sheer. But if not remarkable themselves, a remarkable force was playing through them. Dreamers, yet carrying in their dream the memory of the world's sorrow, they had gained high victory from long meditation on redemption accomplished, and on the spiritual glory that transcends. Yet the knowledge, that by the way of renunciation one comes to the way of fulfillment, had not yet dawned upon Francesco.

The sun, long clear of the tree-tops, had reached the valleys, and, as he gazed, the light between the great tree-trunks grew from splendor to splendor, and flashed its level glories through the forest, transfiguring the leaves to flame. The dark trees, which crowned the hill, were giving place, as he descended, to woods of fresher green. In the grass below cyclamen hung their heads dew-freighted. The birds were at matins. Through the soft foliage the sky shone, a lustrous amethyst.

His path struck the main road presently. He wound through an enclosed valley, fairly wide. The world was all awake. The summer sun, though young in the heavens, already scorched where it fell. As he passed on, the unfailing peace of the woods received him, that deep tranquillity of verdurous gloom which absolves the wanderer from the faint glare of noon. He saw himself once more a tiny boy, and the years between shrank into a brief bewilderment in his mind. Dreaming dreams long forgotten, he rode on. A wandering sunbeam fell through the branches. For a moment everything seemed withdrawn: fret, fever, confusion not only exiled, but forgotten among the whispering leaves. The purity of a great silence was encompassing a great surrender.

Behind him, straight above, the Castle of San Gemignano cut abruptly into the main curve of the sky. Below, a trifle to the south, a sister castle, beneath which a few affrighted houses closely huddled, rose against the purple mass of Monte Santa Fioré. But Francesco was looking away and out over the desolate sun-lit lands, bordered by sere brown oak woods, and gray olive hills gilded by the sun.

Before him stretched the fields and oak woods and vineyards of Umbria, a wide undulating valley, enclosed by high rounded hills, bleak or dark with ilex, each with its strange terraced white city, Assisi, Spello, Spoleto and Todi. The Tiber wound lazily along their base, pale green, limpid, scarcely rippling over its yellow pebbles, screened by long rows of reeds and tall poplars, reflecting dimly the sky and trees, pointed mediaeval bridges, and crenelated round-towers.

Barracks of mercenary troops, strongholds of bandit-nobles, besieged and sacked and heaped with massacre by rival factions, tangled brushwood of ilex and oak, through which wolves and foxes roamed in quest of their ghastly prey, now gave evidence of a life other than he had dreamed of even on his mountain height. Burned houses and devastated cornfields testified to the late presence here of the Wolf of Anjou. The mutilated corpses along the road offered a ghastly sight, which the scattered branches of the mulberries tried in vain to conceal from the wanderer's gaze.

Grieved by the sight that met his progress through devastated Italy, resignation schooled Francesco's lips to silence. None the less there sang irrepressibly in his heart the song of the open road. There is

exhilaration in any enlargement, however painful the personal experiences of the past months began to appear, a symbol at most in miniature of the turbulent drama of the age. All he saw and heard, confirmed the dark situation he had heard described; yet the fact of decision had soothed his bewilderment. There was hope of action ahead. On all lips there was the same tale of the unbearable tyranny of the Provencals, of their mean extortions, their cold sensuality, their cruelty past belief. Everywhere he found the smouldering fire of a righteous wrath, everywhere the vaulting flames of a high resolve. The appearance on the soil of Italy of Conradino was filling the adherents of the Swabian dynasty with chivalric passion. And Francesco—finding his own spirit swift to respond to the call—was suddenly reminded that he had been sold to the Church, who protected the tyrant, to the Church whose passive servant he was, to do as he was bidden by the Father of Christendom. And, with the thought, a dread crept cold among his heart-strings. His friends were phantoms in the sunshine,—a vast gulf lay between them, now and forevermore.

He was about to be forced into the actual world of practical affairs and ecclesiastical politics. The shock was rude; he could not as yet relate the two worlds in his mind, nor project force from one into the other. What was the Pontiff's desire with regard to himself? Why had he summoned him to Rome, where he must needs meet anew those in whose eyes he had become a traitor, a renegade? Had he not suffered enough? Was the measure of his humiliation still incomplete?—And Ilaria—Ilaria—

Francesco had ridden all day, stopping for refreshments only, when the need was most felt, or

his steed demanded some rest.

It was a golden evening when he rode into the dells of Vallombrosa. Everything seemed golden,—a soft and melting gold. The sky, the air, the motionless holm-oaks, the ground itself, overgrown with short, tawny moss, beat back a brilliant amber light. The sky flamed orange and saffron, and the distant lake of Bolsena rolled as a sea of fire. A company of pilgrims proceeded through the wood, illumined by level, golden rays, that struck under the high branches, turning the beds of fern to pale green flame, and the tree-trunks to unsubstantial light. The fever of the noon-tide had become tranquil in the evening glow. In their wake a confused mass of men and weapons flashed suddenly into the sunlight. Another procession with its gay dresses and colored tapers gleamed like a rainbow among the branches.

To Francesco, always delighting in pageantry, the charm of the scene tingled through consciousness almost as powerfully as the Masque of the Gods he had witnessed on that never-to-be-forgotten night at Avellino. And the same dull particular pain shot through his heart, intensified a thousand times, as they came nearer through the sun-lit forest-aisles,—a dark horseman, superbly clad in white velvet, and beside him the exquisitely moulded, stately form of a woman, both mounted on palfreys magnificently caparisoned, and followed by a company of young cavaliers, giddy and gay in their festal array. But every drop of blood left Francesco's heart, and his cheeks were pale as death, as in the woman who laughed and chatted so gaily he recognized Ilaria Caselli,—in the man by her side Raniero Frangipani. He would have wheeled his steed about and fled, but an ice-cold hand seemed to clutch at his heart,

benumb his senses and paralyze his endeavors. His eyes were riveted on Ilaria's face; the evening air, cool and gentle, had waked a sweet color on her cheeks, and her dusky eyes seemed to reflect the dancing motes of light which permeated the ether. So bewildering, so intoxicating was her beauty, that Francesco fairly devoured her with his gaze, as one doomed to starvation would devour with his eyes the saving morsel which another's hand had snatched from him. A groan of utter misery betrayed his presence to the leaders, unseen, as otherwise he might have hoped to remain. The Frangipani passed him, without taking any notice of the monk, an accustomed sight indeed in these regions, abounding in chapels and sanctuaries and the huts of holy hermits. Whether the woman obeyed the summons of an inner voice, or whether the despairing gaze of the youth compelled her own,—as she was about to pass him, Ilaria suddenly reined in her palfrey and met Francesco's gaze. For a moment she turned white to her very eyes, then a shrill laugh rang like the breaking of a crystal through the sun-lit wood; the cavalcade cantered past, many a curious glance being turned on the monk, who in some unknown way had provoked Ilaria Caselli's sudden mirth.

The sun had set. Filmy rose-clouds brooded in an amethyst mist over the distant levels of the sea. Then, with the swiftness of the south, dusk enveloped the dells of Vallombrosa.

The procession had long vanished from sight. Still Francesco stared in the direction where Ilaria's laughter had died away, as if forced to do so by some terrible spell. When the awful pain of his heart had to a degree subsided, he felt as if something had snapped in two in its dark and desolate chambers.

Could love become so utterly forgetful of its own,—could love be so utterly cruel and blind? Only a miracle could now save his soul from perishing in its own darkness!

The glory of the night had, as it were, deepened and grown richer. The purple sky above was throbbing, beating, palpitating with light, of stars and planets, and a great gold-red moon was climbing slowly over the misty plains of Romagna. Fireflies whirled in burning circles through the perfumed air, and from the convent of Vallombrosa came the chant of the Ave Maris Stella, answered from some distant cloister in the greenwood: "Vale Carissima!—Vale Carissima!"

CHAPTER VI

THE DUKE OF SPOLETO



RANCESCO, having spent the night at a wayside inn, was astir with the breaking of the

dawn. He saddled and bridled his horse for the day's journey, and having paid his reckoning, set his face to the west. The grass was drenched with dew, the woods towered heavenward with a thousand golden peaks, while down in the valley a rivulet echoed back the light, chanting sonorously as it leaped over the moss-grown boulders in its narrow bed.

Francesco was very solemn about the eyes that morning. He looked as one who had aged years in one night, and strove with might and main to forget the past. He watched the sun climb over the leafy hills of Velletri, saw the fleecy morning clouds sail through the heavens, heard the thunder of the streams. There was life in the day and wild love in the woods. Yet from the world of passion and delight he was an exile, rather a pilgrim, therein fettered by a heavy vow. He was to bear the Grail of Love through all these wilds, yet might never look thereon, or quench his thirst.

Through all the heavy morning hours Francesco fought and struggled with his youth. Ilaria's image floated by his side, robed in crimson and gold, her hair dazzled him more than the noon-day brightness of the sun. As for her eyes, he dared not look therein, but the disdainful laughter of her lips still echoed in his heart. The silence of the woods had bewitched his soul.

The towers and turrets of Camaldoli had faded behind him in the steely blue. On the distant horizon Tivoli towered ensconced among her cypress-groves. To northward the woods bristled under the relentless gleam of the sun, a glitter like blackened steel under a summer sky. The road wound under ancient trees. Many a huge ilex cast its gloom over the grass. The

stone pine towered on the hills, above dense woods of beech and chestnut, and the valleys were full of primeval oaks, whose sinewy limbs stretched far over the sun-streaked sward.

As for Francesco, his mood partook of the silence of the hills. As the sun rode higher in the heavens, he came to a wilder region. A desolate valley opened gradually before him, steeped on every side with the black umbrage of the woods. A wind had arisen, brisk and eager as a blithe breath from the sea, and cloud shadows raced athwart the emerald dells.

Lost in reveries of the past, and brooding over what the times to come might hold for him, Francesco trotted on through a grove of birches, whose filmy foliage arabesqued the heavens. A glade opened to the road below. All around him were tall hills deluged with green woods. A stream glittered through the flats under elms and drooping willows.

Suddenly a half-score of mounted men rounded the angle of the road. They sighted the solitary traveller. At once they were at full gallop over the grass, swords agleam, lances pricking the blue, while the hot babel of their tongues echoed from the valley. Francesco, with a grim twist of the mouth, heeled on his horse and took to the woods.

The great trees overarched him, beams of gold came slanting through. The grass was a deep green under the purple shadows. Through the silence came the dull thunder of hoofs as the men cantered on, swerving and blundering through the trees. They rode faster than Francesco upon his tired steed, and the distance dwindled between the pack and the chase.

Onward Francesco fled. The black boughs grazed his head, the tree-trunks seemed to gallop in the gloom. He could see steel flashing through the wood, like meteorites plunging through a cloud.

Yet he hardly so much as turned his head, for his eyes were piercing the shadows before him. As he swayed along, he now heard a great trampling of hoofs in the woods. The nearest galloper swung out from the gloom. He was leaning over the neck of his horse, his lips parted over his teeth, his sword poised from his outstretched arm. The sword circled over Francesco's head, its whistling breath fanning his hair. He cowered; his horse swerved aside. The horse of his assailant stumbled over a projecting tree stump, hurling its rider over its head some six feet away upon the ground, where he lay stunned, dropping his sword in his fall. Like lightning Francesco leaped from his saddle, picked up the weapon, and remounted, just in time to ward off a vicious blow aimed at his head from a second horseman who had plunged from the thickets.

Francesco's early training served him well and proved his foe's undoing. Drawing up his horse on sluthering hoofs he faced the second assailant. Their swords whimpered, screamed and clashed. Francesco's blade struck the man's throat through. Catching his upreared shield as he fell, he tore it from its supporting arm, just as two more horsemen blundered out of the gloom. They sighted the horseless steed, the dead man on the ground; they saw the monk with sword and shield, and paused for a moment staggered at the uncommon sight.

Francesco, profiting by their panic, twisted tighter the strapping of his shield, and with sword circling

over his head pushed his horse to a gathering gallop down the hill. But his assailants had recovered from their sudden paralysis. Swerving right and left, they dashed down the glade in hot pursuit. Gaining on him from all sides, his fate seemed to be sealed, when directly across Francesco's path there rode leisurely out of the gloom of the forest a score or more of individuals, mounted on steeds well suited to the riders, the like of which in point of incongruity of garb and appearance he had never before beheld.

One wore a cuirass of plaited gold, beneath which was visible a shirt of coarsest hemp, and two dirty bare legs. Another had a monk's capote tied about his neck with silver links, like jewels in a swine's snout, while his carcass was encased in a leather jerkin. A third was covered with the skin of a wolf, and a fourth wore that of a mountain lion. Antler's horns protruded from the chain-mail skull-cap of a fifth; a sixth carried a round shield, covered with raw-hide, and a spear. So motley was the array and so fantastic the appearance of the newcomers, that one might have taken them for a band of souls turned out of purgatory, who, on returning to earth, had robbed a pawn shop to cover their nakedness.

But he who in point of portliness and bulk would at once have been acknowledged as the one in authority, a stout and herculean being, swaying upon an antediluvian steed, with a helmet upon his head resembling a huge iron cask, now hove into sight, like some portly Pan bestriding a Centaur. He was of exceeding bulk, with a flaming red beard and small, close-set eyes. His sword-belt would have girdled two common men's loins. His arms had the appearance of two clubs. A great slit of a mouth, under a bristling

mustachio, revealed two rows of teeth, large and strong as a boar's; a double chin flapped to and fro with the motion of the steed, around which his legs curved like the staves of a cask.

Being unable to check the speed of his horse in the steep downward grade of the glen, Francesco was hurled almost bodily into the very midst of this fantastic array, not knowing whether he had escaped one foe but to encounter another, or whether there was salvation for him in the appearance of this strange throng.

The sight of a monk racing at breakneck speed down the glade, swinging aloft a blood-stained sword and riding as one born in the saddle, for a moment staggered even the nondescripts and their leader. But, with eyes blinking under their penthouses of fat, the latter had at a glance taken in the situation. A signal,—and a whirlwind seemed to fill the emerald gloom. The wood grew alive with shouting and the noise of hoofs. Their number compelled Francesco to wheel about and face his pursuers, as those to whom he trusted for his safety completely choked up the gorge.

His assailants had come to a sudden halt, as they found themselves face to face with this fantastic array, outnumbering their own some ten to one. They seemed to wait the command of their leader, who had, in the meantime, come up, bestriding a black stallion, a white plume upon his helmet, and upon his shield and breastplate the armorial bearings of some great feudal house, the emblem of the Broken Loaf.

The giant of the woods reined in his elephantine steed within a few paces of Francesco's pursuers and

waved his chubby arm, as if he bade them welcome.

"What ho, gentles!" he roared with a voice like a mountain cataract, while the fingers of his left hand played with the hilt of his huge sword. "What is the sport? Pray, let us too share in your pastime! Six to one—and he of friar's orders—we take the weaker side!"

"Insolent! Know you to whom you speak?" shouted the leader of the men-at-arms. "The monk is our prisoner! Stand back—at your peril!"

"Your prisoner?" returned he with the iron cask in mocking accents and barbarous Italian, such as characterized the hired mercenaries and adventurers who hailed from beyond the Alps. "Are we at war? Pray, gentles, enlighten our poor understanding, that we too may profit by your wisdom. Or are we to understand that might is right? We shall be governed by the oracle!"

"Know you who I am?" shouted the leader of the men-at-arms, relying rather on the prestige of a dreaded coat-of-arms than on the issue of so doubtful a conflict, to withdraw with honor from an affair of little credit to his name. "I am Giovanni Frangipani, Lord of Astura, Torre del Greco, and Terra di Lavoro! Who are you?"—

The giant bowed slightly in his saddle.

"Sono Rinaldo, Duca di Spoleto," he replied carelessly, squinting his little watery eyes. "I am much beholden to meet you again, my Lord Frangipani. Have you counted your beads to-day, after ravishing a maiden from the Campagna, and are you loving your neighbor as yourself? Pray—relieve

my anxiety!"

At the mention of his name, the name of one of the most renowned free-lances in Italy, at the period of our story, the Frangipani's cheek paled and his followers uttered a cry of dismay.

But the Lord of Astura believed discretion the better part of valor. With a half suppressed oath he wheeled his steed about, and, pursued by the loud gibes and taunts of Rinaldo's men, they trotted off and disappeared in the gorge.

He, whose grandiloquent estate seemed to have impressed even so powerful a baron of the empire as the Lord of Astura, now turned in his saddle and beckoned Francesco to his side.

His followers brought up the rear, and, choosing a winding forest path scarcely wide enough for two to ride abreast, the singular cavalcade cantered into the golden vapor of the wood.

At their feet lay a great valley, a broad bowl touched by the declining rays of the sun. Its depths were checkered with woods and meadows, pools set like lapis lazuli in an emerald throne. A lake lay under the shadow of the hills. Heights girded the valley on every hand, save where a river like a giant's sword clove a deep defilé through the hill.

Francesco rode in silence by the side of the giant, gazing at the valley below. It seemed like a new world to him; the craggy heights, the blown cloud-banners overhead, the dusky woods frowning and smiling alternately under the sun. A stream sang under the boughs, purling and foaming over a broad ledge of stone into a misty pool.

They had come to the run of an abyss, where, the trees receding, the ground broke abruptly into rocky slopes, plunging down perpendicular under thickets of arbutus and pine. Four roads crossed at a spot where a great wooden crucifix stretched out rough arms athwart the sky.

For a time the Duke of Spoleto had maintained a grim silence, and Francesco began to wonder what his captors, if such they were, held in store for him. The gray walls of a ruin encrusted with lichen gold and green, rose towards the azure of the evening sky. A great silence covered the valley, save for the bleating of sheep on remote meadows, or the cry of the lapwing from the marshes. Distance purpled the far horizon. The woods stood wondrous green and silent, as mute guardians of the past.

On the slope of a hill, in the shade of the battered masonry of a feudal castle overlooking to the north Romagna and the hills of Umbria, to southward the sun-steeped plains of Calabria, Francesco at last faced the Duke of Spoleto, his bare, blood-stained sword across his knees. He had partaken of drink and food, while his steed was grazing on the emerald turf, and the men-at-arms were roasting a kid and some chestnuts they had gathered, over a fire kindled with dried branches and decayed leaves.

Then only the Duke of Spoleto addressed the youth, whose air and manner had impressed the captain of free-lances to a degree that confidence challenged confidence, for the duke was not slow to discern the stalwart metal under the friar's garb.

"Honest men are best out of the way when great folk are upon the road," he expounded largely, breaking the long silence. "By what special dispensation have

you incurred the love of the Lord of Astura? Have you perchance confessed his wife?"

And the Duke of Spoleto roared, as if he had given vent to some uncommon witticism.

The degrading nature of his predicament caused Francesco to be more frank than he had intended. Nevertheless he replied tentatively.

"The Lord of Astura is a Ghibelline. No doubt it was the friar's garb which aroused his choler, for I never saw him before."

The Duke of Spoleto nodded grimly.

"A renegade is ever the worst enemy of his kind."

The paradox was lost upon Francesco.

But in the course of their converse the Duke of Spoleto revealed himself to be one Count Rupert of Teck, a bondsman of the Swabian branch of the Hohenstauffen, near whose castle his own was situated. In their cause he had fought Margaret of Flanders and King Ottokar of Bohemia, William of Holland and Charles of Anjou. After the fateful day of Benevento, where Manfred, the poet-king, had lost crown and life against the Provencals, he had withdrawn into the fastnesses of Central Italy, collecting about him a company of malcontents, such as follow from afar the camp-fires of an army, and had founded a mythical dukedom of uncertain territory among the Apennines, to chasten the world with his club and bruise the devil and all his progeny. From his stronghold the Duke of Spoleto, as Rupert of Teck more sonorously styled himself, harassed alike the Pope, the Pope's minion and the Guelphs. But of all whose watch-towers frowned

from inaccessible heights upon the Roman Campagna, he bore a special and indelible grudge to the lords of Astura, the cause and nature of which he did not see fit to disclose.

Francesco listened spellbound to the account of the duke's greatness. He had his own code of laws, and there was no appeal from his decision. In the ravine below, a torrent, thundering over moss-grown boulders, sang a fitting accompaniment to the duke's apotheosis. Far to the south Soracté towered against the gold of the evening sky. By his side a cistus was in bloom, its petals falling upon the long grass and the broken stone.

In the valley the peasantry were returning from Vespers. The silvery chimes of the Angelus, from some convent concealed in the forest deeps, smote the silence of evening. Deep to the confines of the dusky sky glimmered the far Tyrrhenian Sea, washing shores remote with sheets of foam. Black cliffs, craggy and solemn, frowned upon the sea. The far heights bristled with woodland, dark under the setting sun.

Not once did Francesco interrupt the guttural account his host gave of his campaigns, until the Duke of Spoleto referred to the Frangipani. Some evil fate seemed indeed to have predestined his meeting with the Lord of Astura, and while his late encounter with the brother of Raniero lacked the personal element, Francesco's intuition informed him that, sooner or later, the slumbering spark of an enduring hatred would be fanned into a devouring flame.

Francesco's apparently irrelevant question with regard to the origin of his host's acquaintance with the lords of Astura caused the Duke of Spoleto to

utter a great oath.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "and shall I not pluck out the heart of the devil, who—"

He suddenly checked himself.

"Though an avowed Ghibelline," he said, "I trust him not! His brother Latino lords it over Velletri: Archbishop and Grand Inquisitor in one, he deals out blessings and musty corn, while he mutters the prayer of the Fourth Innocent in the Lateran: Perdatis hujus Babylonii nomen et reliquias, progeniem atque germen,—a truly Christian prayer!"

"There is a third!" Francesco interposed with meaning.

"You know him?" shouted the duke. "A twig of the old tree,—a libertine, who would barter his soul for thirty pieces of silver! From yonder hill you may see their lair, suspended on a rock beyond the Cape of Circé."

The speaker suddenly paused and, turning to Francesco, gave a vicious pull at the latter's garb.

"Cast off your tatters," he roared, and the sound of his great voice reechoed through the glen. "Join us in a Devil's Ave! Your limbs were made for something better than to dangle in the noose of a Frangipani. Or,—if the garb is pleasing in your sight you may wear it over a suit of chain-mail and lead us in the fray with lance and shield! It will greatly promote our cause,—above and below!"

And the stout duke grasped Francesco by the shoulders, affectionately, and shook him till his bones creaked.

Francesco repressed the outcry which the pain drove to his lips. A spasm of deepest bitterness passed over his face, as he said:

"It may not be;—at least not now! I have a special mission to perform. The time may come—who knows? Then I will seek you in your forest glades. I have not always been that thing—a monk!"

The word had passed his lips beyond recall.

Rupert of Teck regarded him quizzically.

"Purge your own pasture and let the Devil take care of his own! Why subordinate your soul to chains forged of men?"

The day was waning when Francesco accompanied his host back to the ruin. An arched doorway with broken pillars led to a low room, roofed with rough timber. There was an improvised bed of bracken in one corner, where he was to rest for the night, for the Duke of Spoleto would not hear of his departure before dawn.

"It were perilous even for one familiar with the roads to traverse the forests at night; there are more rogues about than you wot of," he said. "On the morrow I will myself guide you to the road you seek!"

Francesco accepted the offer and hospitality of the Duke of Spoleto gratefully, for he was neither physically nor mentally disposed to continue his journey at once. They entered the ruin together, while the band of the duke chose their resting-place outside on the emerald greensward.

Night came apace with a round moon swimming in a sky of dusky azure, studded with a myriad glistening

stars.

There was a great loneliness upon Francesco's soul.

He lay awake a long time. He heard the night wind in the forest trees and the occasional murmur of a voice, that seemed to be making a long prayer. He was moving in the world of men now. Yet all the love seemed to have left his life and all his struggles to have ended in bitterness. In the hour of his trial Ilaria had failed him, had hid her face from him behind the mask of scorn. He had little hope of sleep, for there were thoughts moving in his brain, tramping like restless sentinels to and fro. The night seemed full of ghostly voices crying to him out of the dark. He heard Ilaria's voice, even as he had heard it when she taunted him at Avellino; her laughter in the dells of Vallombrosa echoed in his heart. He remembered the days when he had heard her sing with the voice he loved so well; for him she would sing no more. He found himself wondering in his heart if she would weep if he died. Perhaps her scorn would melt away when she learned that he had gone from earth forever.

Francesco passed the greater part of the night open-eyed, for the memories of the past drove the sleep from his aching eyes. A soft breeze played in the branches of the giant oaks, and among the roses which clambered about the walls of the ruin. Slim cypresses streaked the misty grass, where a little pool caught the light of the moon.

Soon the dawn came, a silvery haze rising in the east. The cypresses caught the streaming light, gliding from tree to tree; in the meadows fluttered golden mists. The far woods glistened and seemed to tongue forth flame. A trumpet sounded. The duke's

band rose to meet the sun.

After having partaken of a morning repast, such as the duke's stores afforded, Francesco took leave of his host, who assigned to him a guide, to conduct him to the broad highway to Rome. But, at parting, the burly duke admonished Francesco to break the fetters forged in hell and to turn to him in his hour of need.

The world was full of the splendor of the awakened day. The waves of the mountain torrent were touched with opalescent lights, as they swept through the gorge below.

Francesco's guide was a godly little man with a goat's beard and a nose like the snout of a pike. For a goatherd he was amazingly learned in matters of religion and in his knowledge of the names and attributes of the saints. He halted frequently, knelt down, prayed and kissed a little holly-wood cross that he carried. His beard wagged through long processions of the saints, but St. Joseph of Arimathæa was honored with his especial confidence.

Francesco had never seen such an example of secular godliness before, and began to be impatient with the old fellow, who bobbed down so frequently, looking like a goat squatting upon its haunches, and mumbling over a great beard. All this devotion was excellent in its way; but Francesco's religion was running into action, and the old man loitered and told the miles like beads upon his rosary.

He decided to rid himself of the fellow as soon as the goatherd had served his purpose, for this verminous piety was like the drawing of a dirty clout across the

fresh flavor of a May morning.

Where four roads crossed, they parted, and Francesco, cantering along the high-road, little guessed that the wary duke had assigned to him this especial guide to disgust him with his own garb and calling.

CHAPTER VII

ROME!



HE chimes of the Angelus were borne to him on the soft breeze of evening, when, on the third day of his journey, Francesco caught sight of the walls and towers of Rome. As he drew rein on the crest of a low hill, the desolate brown wastes of the Campagna stretched before him, mile upon mile to northward, towards the impenetrable forests of Viterbo.

Before him rose the huge half-ruined wall of

Aurelian, battered by Goth and Saracen and imperial Greek; before him towered the fortress-tomb of the former master of the world, vast and impregnable. Here and there above the broken crenelations of the city's battlements rose dark and massive towers, square and round, marking the fortified mansions of the Roman nobles.

In the evening light the towers seemed encircled as by a halo. The machicolated heights, the encircling ramparts, the stern tomb of the Emperor Hadrian rose proudly impregnable into the golden air of evening, a massive witness to the power of a Church, literally militant here below. Under the broad Aelian bridge, built centuries ago, rolled the turbid waves of the Tiber, and upon the bridge itself a stream of humanity, hardly less intermittent, was moving. Francesco, having buried his sword and shield under a grass-grown ruin beyond the city walls, rode dazed and wondering into the sun-kissed splendors of pontifical Rome.

Gradually the sun sank, the valley of the Tiber filled with golden lights, moving along little by little, travelling slowly up the emerald hillocks, covering the bluish mountains of Alba with a golden flush, crowning the thousand churches and palaces with a rosy sheen, then dying away into the pale, amber horizon, rosy where it touched the distant hills, bluish where it merged imperceptibly with the upper sky. Bluer and bluer became the hills, deeper and deeper that first faint amber. The valleys were filled with gray-blue mist, against which the Seven Hills stood out dark, cold and massive.

There was a sudden stillness, as when the last chords of a great symphony have died away. The yellow

waters of the Tiber eddied sullen and mournful round the ship-shaped island, along by Vesta's temple, beneath the cypressed Aventine.

After having secured temporary lodging at a tavern bearing the sign of the Mermaid, over against the tower of Nona, near the bridge of San Angelo, Francesco wandered out into the streets of Rome.

The inn was old, as the times of Charlemagne, and was a favorite stopping-place for travellers coming from the north. The quarter was at that time in the hands of the powerful house of the Pierleoni, whose first Pope, Anacletus, had been dead a little over a century, and who, though they lorded the castle and many towers and fortresses in Rome, had not succeeded in imposing their anti-pope upon the Roman people against the will of Bernard of Clairvaux.

Francesco wandered through the crooked, unpaved streets, in and out of gloomy courts, over desolate wastes and open places. There was a crisis at hand in the strife of the factions. Every one went armed, and those who knelt to hear mass in a church, knelt with their backs to the wall.

At his inn, too, he had noted every one lived in a state of armed defence, against every one, including the host and other guests. And reasons were not lacking therefor, for Rome was in the throes of political convulsions and its walls resounded the battle-cry of Guelph and Ghibelline.

Howling and singing, a mob filled the streets southward to the Capitol, or even to the distant Lateran, where Marcus Aurelius on his bronze horse

watched the ages go by. Across the ancient Aelian bridge Francesco stalked, under the haunted battlements of Castel San Angelo, where the ghost of Theodora was said to walk on autumn nights, when the south wind blew, and through the long wreck of the fair portico that had once extended from the bridge to the Basilica, till he saw glistening in the distance the broad flight of steps leading to the walled garden court of St. Peter's.

Here he rested among the cypresses, wondering at the vast bronze pine-cone and the great brass peacocks, which Symmachus had brought thither from the ruins of Agrippa's baths, in which the family of the Crescentii had fortified themselves during more than a hundred years.

For a long time Francesco sat there in mournful silence, drinking in the sun-steeped air of evening, and the scent of the flowers that grew here with the profusion of spring-time.

An indescribable sense of desolation came over him, as he thought of his happy childhood with its joys and griefs, as he thought of the spring-time of life, the days of Avellino, and of Ilaria. He sat here an outcast, an exile, one who had no further claim on the joys of the living, guiltless himself, the victim of another's sin. The soul of Rome, the Rome of Innocent and Clement, had taken hold of his soul, and, for a time, he dreamed himself away from the bleak present and the bleaker future. The past, with his father's sins, his own sorrows, the friendship of the Viceroy, the love of Ilaria, were now all infinitely far removed and dim. The future, whose magic mirror had once dazzled his senses, had faded like a departing vision into the blue Roman sky. Only the

present remained, only the hour was his, the dreamy half-narcotic present with its mazy charms which enmeshed him, far from the reality, the Rome as it existed, where the Church was the World, and Rome herself meant some seven or eight thousand ruffians, eager always for a change, because it seemed that no change could be for the worse.

In the ancient Basilica of St. Peter's at least there was peace. The white-haired priests solemnly officiated day by day, morning and noon, and at Vespers more than a hundred voices sang the Vesper psalms in the Gregorian chant. Slim youths in violet and white swung silver censers before the high altar, and the incense floated in spiral clouds upon the sunbeams that fell slanting upon the antique floor.

Here, at least, as in many a cloister of the world, the Church was still herself, as she was and is and always will be; words were spoken and solemn prayers intoned that had been familiar to the lips of the apostles.

But they brought no consolation to Francesco's heart; his soul was not relieved by the solemn ceremony. With the rest of the worshippers he knelt unconsciously in the old cathedral; with the rest of the worshippers he chanted the responses and breathed anew the incense-laden air, which was to encompass him to his life's end.

Refreshed neither in body nor soul, he returned to the inn late at night. But he could not sleep. Opening wide the wooden shutters of his window, he looked out upon the Mausoleum of the Flavian Emperor, at the tide of the Tiber, which gleamed and eddied in the moonlight.

Life rose before him in a mystery, a mystery for him to solve by deeds. For a moment he felt that he must rise above his fate, that he was not idly to dream away his years, and the long dormant instinct of his race bade him defy the yoke which was about to be imposed upon him, not to evade it. Then his heart beat faster; his blood surged to his throat, and his hands hardened one upon the other as he leaned over the stone sill, and drew the night air sharply between his closed teeth.

And as a gentle breeze stirred the branches of the willows by the river brink, in it seemed to float a host of spirit armies, ghostly knights and fairy-maidens and the forecast shadows of things to come. Once before during the evening had this sensation gripped his soul, as with a solitary monk whom he chanced to meet, he had traversed the desolate regions of the Aventine in the sun's afterglow. And then, as now, there had come the rude awakening.

But from the monk he had learned that the Pontiff had fled from Rome before the approaching hosts of Conradino, and had betaken himself to Viterbo, while his champion, Charles of Anjou, had marched to southward, leaving the city to the Ghibellines and the imperial party of the Colonna.

End of Book the Second.

Book the Third

THE BONDAGE

CHAPTER I

THE WHITE LADY



HE Piazza of St. John Lateran was alive with the rush and roar of a vast multitude, which congested the spacious square from the Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme to the distant Esquiline hill, occupying every point of vantage, thronging the adjacent thoroughfares, crowding the long Via Merulana, and filling the ruins of temples, the interstices of fallen walls and roofless porticoes as far as the eye could reach.

All Rome seemed to be astir, all Rome seemed to have assembled to welcome the advent of the Swabian host, and in the keen delight of beholding

Conradino, the fair-haired Hohenstauffen come to claim the fair lands of Constanzia, all petty-strife, contentions and party-rivalry seemed for the nonce to have been forgotten.

In reality, however, such was not the case.

So sudden had been Conradino's descent upon Rome that the Pontiff and his minion, Charles of Anjou, had precipitately fled from the city, ere the first German spear-points gleamed above the heights of Tivoli.

The Roman Ghibellines, at their head the great and powerful house of the Colonna, hated the Vulture of Provence as intensely as did the Pontiff, his one time champion, and welcomed with open arms the grandson of the Emperor Frederick II, their deliverer from an insufferable yoke, which had been as a blight upon Southern Italy.

Yet, notwithstanding the absence of the pontifical court, the absence of the Church militant, the institution which, when Europe was over-run with barbarian hordes, had preserved the ancient civilization, the power of the city was in evidence even though huddled affrighted amidst the majesty of imperial ruins. A memory, a dream, yet the power of a dream outlasting the ages, Rome still remained the mystic centre of civilization.—

With a sickly sense of curiosity not unmingled with awe, Francesco had mingled with the crowds.

The dream of his early youth was about to be realized: face to face he would behold the golden-haired Hohenstauffen,—yet at the thought his heart sank with a sense of dread. Dull misery had him in

its grip. The keen pain of a false life, resentment of a fate imposed upon him by another's will, permeated every fibre of his being. In his dreams he would see the friends of his youth, pointing to him, the renegade; he would see Ilaria, standing off motionless, spiritless, regarding him from afar. If she at least had kept her faith! He felt himself encompassed by the folding wings of a great demon of despair.

This feeling pervaded him with a sickening gloom, in which he walked with drooping head and uncertain footsteps,—yet with the resolve to conquer in the end!

Life was no mere existence with Francesco. He loved light and air and freedom. To be in the great, real world, to feel its joys, its sunshine, to chafe under no conventional, no restraint, to know the fascination of recklessness,—that to him was life!

And about him it surged in blinding iridescence.

Notwithstanding the months of monastic life which lay behind him, he had not in any formal sense severed himself from the world. His renunciation of the joys of the senses had been not primary, as with the Franciscans, but, as always with those under Dominican influence, incidental on a choice of higher interests.

But the conscious choice of a beautiful existence was ever with him, and here, among the thousands giving vent to their joy, restrained by no dogma from voicing their gladness, loneliness crept cold among his heart-strings.

The scenes in which he, half absently, half

resentfully, mingled, afforded a fine opportunity to study sacerdotal types. Now and then a scholarly countenance detached itself with startling effect from the coarser elements; now and then among the keen lines of such a countenance played the hovering, unmistakable light of a personal sanctity. There were men of the noblest, gentlest blood, from whom came the example of courtly manners, of polished speech and refined taste. Through the years of desolation and ruin, which war brought in its wake, they preserved art, literature and religion and infused into civilization the principles of self-sacrifice, charity and chastity. They declared a message that protested against violence and injustice. Francesco saw men among the priests, whose broad shoulders, singularly brilliant dark faces and magnificent poise formed a striking contrast to those upon whose features had settled the beautiful, soft calm of spotless seclusion.

Yet Francesco felt no need of such a refuge.

The espousals of piety and poverty, the inexplicable mysteries, martyrdoms, ascetic faces and haggard figures, which he had encountered upon entering the monastic life, the morbid enthusiasm and spiritual frenzy were repellent to him now, as they had been then. Sad-visaged penitents, men scourging themselves, prostrate in prayer, wrestling with demons, waked no responsive chord in his breast.

A splendid procession, with its gay dresses and colored pennons gleaming like a rainbow among the sombre garbs of monks and artisans, at this moment emerged from under the frowning portals of a sombre palace and swept into the sunlit square of St. John Lateran.

The cavalcade was headed by a cavalier superb in

white velvet, riding abreast of a woman, tall and stately. They were followed by a company of young nobles, arrayed in festal splendor. The piazza resounded with the echo of their shouts and mirth, and the multitudes congested on the steps of the Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme shouted loud acclaim, as they passed on their cantering steeds.

What were those stabbing pangs in Francesco's heart beneath the noonday brightness of the sky? Why did he wish, almost insanely, that he had not set foot in Rome?

The banners of the Frangipani waved proudly in the sun-fraught air, revealing their emblem of "The Broken Loaf," amidst velvet, gilt and tinsel.

As the cavalcade approached, every word, every tone, every accent was ringing perversely in his ears. The piazza with its maelstrom of humanity seemed to whirl and to scintillate about him, and the acclaim of the crowd surged in his ears like the dull roar of distant billows, as the procession came to a sudden stop at the fountain whence he had viewed its approach.

Shrinking beneath his cowl, yet unable to avert his gaze, Francesco stood leaning on the rim of the fountain.

He heard the voice of Ilaria as, dismounting without the aid of her companion, she requested a cup, having taken a sudden fancy to drink of the sparkling water.

The cup having been brought, she put her lips to it, then swiftly tossed the bright drops towards the sky, singing a little melody as she did so.

She had apparently not noted Francesco's presence, though his eyes had been riveted upon her from under the cowl, and his face was deadly pale. Hemmed in as he was by the crowds, he could not have receded, had he wished to;—thus he stood, looking upon the face of the woman he loved better than anything on earth, forgetting heaven and earth in doing so.

Stooping, she filled the cup once more and looked up at her companions with a smile.

"Who shall drink after me?" she laughed merrily.

Many a merry voice called out, as they eagerly crowded about her.

"Who but myself?" exclaimed Raniero Frangipani with a laugh, brushing the others away with perhaps a little more decision than was needed.

But suddenly Ilaria turned and deliberately advanced to the spot where Francesco stood, his cowl drawn deeply over his face.

"All men do my bidding to-day," she said in her low, vibrant voice, offering him the cup, while her eyes flung him a glittering challenge.

It was her most winsome self that looked at him, as she said:

"Drink to me!"

Dazed, he took the cup from her. In doing so, he touched her soft, white skin. The cold draught seemed to burn like fire as he sipped the clear water. Then, surprised by impulse, he flashed the drops upward, as he had seen her do.

Her laughter sounded shrill and high as broken glass, as the dislocated cowl revealed Francesco's features.

But she immediately regained her composure, and, without a hint in her voice of the taunt in the dells of Vallombrosa, she said, nodding, as if well pleased, and as if for his ear alone:

"The White Lady is well pleased. Is not this her altar?" But another had recognized the monk, when for a moment his cowl fell away from his face; and Raniero Frangipani was regarding him with dark malice.

As if to leave a sting in the memory of their meeting, Ilaria, returning to Raniero's side, gave the latter a smile so bewitching that his scowl vanished. Remounting with his help, she signalled for the cavalcade to proceed.

The pain in Francesco's heart rose, suffocating, once more as the procession swept onward.

How he had loved her! How he loved her now!

How shall a man be sure of what is hidden in his heart? He was a monk,—and she the wife of Raniero Frangipani.

How wondrous fair she was, glowing as a rose in the first flush of spring-time! How her sweet eyes had gleamed into his, with their subdued fire, half hidden under the long silken lashes!

For a moment he saw and heard nothing.

All sense of the present seemed to have vanished while the cavalcade faded from sight.

Now, from the gates beyond St. John Lateran, there

burst forth the pomp and panoply of the North, with a flourish of trumpets, a gleaming of chain-mail, a sparkling of pennons.

Two heralds, on snow-white chargers, rode slowly through the gate, sounding their fanfares, their standards and particolored garbs displaying the Sun-Soaring Eagle of Hohenstauffen.

Then, on a black stallion, docile to the hand and impatient of the spur, Conradino of Swabia hove into sight, beside the friend of his youth, Frederick of Austria.

They rode in advance of the élite of the army, some two thousand men in gleaming chain-mail. Conrad and Marino Capecé followed hard on their heels with one thousand heavy infantry and a company of Saracen archers. Then came Galvano Lancia with the heavy armament, men from the North, carrying huge battle-axes in addition to their other weapons.

As they slowly advanced through the great square fronting the ancient Basilica, a great shout arose from the thousands who lined the thoroughfares, a counter-blast to the clangor of the clarions.

Then the whole host shouted, tossed up shield and lance, while trumpets and horns shrieked above the din.

On the steps of houses and churches, in casements, doors and windows, women waved kerchiefs and scarfs, their shrill acclaim mingling with the sounds of horn and bugle.

The tramping of thousands of steeds smote the bright air; shields and surcoats shone and shimmered under

the sun-fraught Roman sky.

All the streets through which the armament passed were hung with garlands and tapestries, blazing with banners, festooned with flowers and gorgeous ornaments, re-echoing with peals of laughter and ribaldry and roaring music.

For the fickle Romans gave free rein to their joy of being rid of Anjou's presence, and the sober and pedantic Northmen viewed with amaze this manifestation of the Southern temperament, the reflex, as it were, of a clime which had lured to perdition so many of their own, who had not withstood the blandishments of the Sorceress.

And the Romans, revelling in their own exuberant gaiety, forgetful of yesterday, unmindful of the morrow, hailed with delight the iron-serried cohorts from beyond the Alps,—till the disappearing menace within their own walls would cause them to turn on their deliverers.

From the summits of his castle on the well-nigh impregnable heights of Viterbo, Pope Clement IV had witnessed the passing of the Swabian host, and his eyes, undimmed by age, had marked the persons and the quality of the leaders. And, turning to one of his attendants, who leaned by his side over the ramparts to scan more minutely the Northern armament, he had spoken the memorable words: "Truly, like two lambs, wreathed for the sacrifice, they are journeying towards their fate."—

To the casual observer,—if, indeed, there was such a one in the Rome of those days,—it must indeed have appeared a strange phenomenon that Conradino was surrounded almost entirely by Italians, with the

exception of one or two leaders whose contingents the narrow and parsimonious policy of Duke Goerz of the Tyrol had not been able to shake in their loyalty, when he recalled his own contingents for want of pay.

But the popular enthusiasm swept everything before it, and Conradino's march to the Capitol, where he was to be tendered the keys of the city by the Senator of Rome, Prince Enrico of Castile, was one continuous triumph.—

As one in a dream, Francesco continued to gaze after the imperial cavalcade as it swept past with its gold and glitter and tinsel and the thunderous hoof-beats of a thousand steeds. As one in a dream, he kept gazing at the gold-embroidered mantles, the flash of dagger-hilts, the gleam of chain-mail, the waving plumes, the prancing steeds.

The procession swept by him, as the phantasmagoria of a dream; but, after it had passed, one apparition continued to stand forth.

He never forgot that face.

To him it was all that was beautiful and regal, framed in its soft, golden hair, with its tender blue eyes, its smiling lips. A slender youth, barely eighteen years of age, with the eyes of a dreamer, Conradino was possessed of an exaltation which blinded him to the perils of the situation, intoxicating his ambition,—a quaint combination of the mystic lore of his tunes, of which Francesco felt himself to be his other Ego.

The crowds had dispersed by degrees, sweeping in the wake of the Swabian host towards the Capitol.

And Francesco stared motionless into space.

Was he indeed cast out from the communion of the world, from the contact of the living?

Had a mocking fate but cast him on the shores of life, that he might stand idly by, watching the waves bounding, leaping over each other?

He felt as one enslaved, his will-power paralyzed.

Yonder, where the setting sun spun golden vapors round the summits of the Capitoline Hill, there was the trend of a high, self-conscious purpose, as revealed in the impending death-struggle for the highest ideals of mankind.

What had he to oppose it?

What great aim atoned for the agony of his transformation?

The restitution of papacy? The glory of the Church? The vindication of a crime? The toleration of a despot?

Francesco's passionate nature might have been guided aright by a controlling affection, such as he could nevermore find in his present estate.

Slowly, as one wrapped in a dream, gazing neither right nor left, he permitted himself to be swept along with the crowds, past monuments, tombs and the desolate grandeur of the Forum, and as one enthralled, began the ascent of the Capitoline Hill.

CHAPTER II

THE FEAST AT THE CAPITOL



HEN darkness had fallen on the Capitoline Hill, the old palace of the Caesars seemed to waken to a semblance of new life. In the gorgeous reception hall a splendid spectacle awaited the guests. The richly dressed crowds buzzed like swarms of bees. Their attires were iridescent, gorgeous in the fashions borrowed from many lands. The enslavement of Italy and the invasion of foreigners could be read in the garbs of the Romans. The robes of the women, a slavish imitation of the Byzantine fashion, hung straight as tapestries, stiff with gold brocades.

Prince Enrico of Castile, the Senator of Rome, had arranged a festival in honor of Conradino, such as the deserted halls of the imperial palace on the Capitoline had not witnessed in centuries.

It was a festival hitherto unequalled in Rome.

The walls of the great reception hall were decorated with garlands and festoons of flowers; the soft lustre of the candelabra was reflected in tall Venetian mirrors, brought from Murano for this occasion. Niches filled with orange-trees, artificial grottoes adorned with shells, in the midst of which fountains sent their iridescent spray into the branches of tall cypress-trees and oleanders, met the gaze on every

turn.

But the central part of the festival was the gigantic hall, over which the girandoles diffused a sea of light. Costly Oriental carpets covered the mosaic floor, and the ceiling represented the thousand-starred arch of heaven. Here, too, as in the garden, niches and grottoes were everywhere to be found, where one, in the midst of the constantly moving crowd, could enjoy quiet and repose.

In the great hall there were assembled the first Ghibelline families in Rome, the Colonna, Cavalli, Gaëtani, the Massimi and Stefaneschi; the Frangipani of Astura, the Pierleoni, the Savelli, and the Annibaldi, whose chief had fallen side by side with Manfred in the fateful battle of Benevento.—

A loud fanfare of trumpets and horns announced at last the arrival of Conradino, and his bearing, as he entered the ancient halls of the Caesars, was indeed that of one coming into his own.

He was surrounded by Giordano and Galvano Lancia, Conrad and Marino Capecé, John de Pietro, John of Procida, who had come expressly from Palermo to offer homage to the son of his emperor; Count Hirnsius, Gerhardt Donoratico of Pisa, Thomas Aquino, Count Meinhardt of Castanea, Frederick of Austria, Prince Raymond of Montferrat, Frederick of Antioch and Dom Pietro Loria, Grand Admiral of King Peter of Aragon. The Viceroy of Apulia and the Apulian barons followed closely in their wake.—

Six senators, headed by Don Enrico of Castile, now advanced, carrying between them on a purple velvet cushion the keys of the city.

In a kneeling position they presented them to Conradino, who in turn gave them in charge of the commander-in-chief of his army, while loud acclaim shook the foundations of the rock, unmoved by the assaults of centuries.

After the banquet had been served and the guests had arisen from the festal board, Prince Enrico of Castile claimed the privilege of conducting the exalted guest through the halls of the Capitoline palace.

They had not advanced very far when the quick eye of the Senator of Rome lighted upon an individual who had been watching their advance from his concealment among the shrubbery.

It was a man, tall, lean, with prominent shoulders, glittering eyes and a thin, straight mouth. The black hair was cropped close to the massive head. The eyes were bead-like, bright as polished steel. The brows met in a straight black line over the nose.

"My Lord Frangipani—"

The Lord of Astura turned. Don Enrico presented him to the King of the Germans. Conradino extended his hand.

"We are well pleased to count you among our loyal friends and adherents, my Lord Frangipani," Conradino said with warmth. "Our illustrious grandsire himself has bestowed upon you the insignia of knighthood; it is a tie which should bind us for aye and ever!"

The Frangipani grasped the proffered hand, bending low as he replied:

"I count it great honor that King Conradino acknowledges the bonds which bind the house of Frangipani to the house of Swabia. May I be afforded the opportunity to prove my devotion towards the grandson of my glorious emperor!"

While Conradino's gaze was resting upon the Lord of Astura, there came to him a sensation, strange as it was fleeting.

He felt singularly repelled by the voice and glance of the baron, notwithstanding the latter having received his schooling at the brilliant court of Emperor Frederick at Castel Fiorentino.

In order to overcome this sensation, Conradino turned to the Roman.

"You are the Lord of Astura," he said. "I have been told your castello defends the coast!"—

"Some fifty leagues to southward, Astura rises sea-washed upon its impregnable rock!" Giovanni Frangipani replied, not without self-conscious pride. "Corsairs and Saracens have dashed themselves in vain against its granite walls. The bulwark of Terra di Lavoro, I hold castello and port as hereditary fief of Emperor Frederick!"

"A port and castello near Rome!" Conradino said with a quick lift of speech. "My imperial grandsire did well to entrust them to so faithful a subject. Who knows but that at some day I too shall embark at Astura?"

He spoke the fateful words and shivered.

It was as if the cold air of a burial vault had fanned his cheeks.—

Impelled hither by a force beyond his control, Francesco instinctively shrank from mingling with the festive crowds. The one desire of his life fulfilled, to see face to face Conradino, the idol of his youthful dreams, he would take his weary feet away and continue upon his journey towards an unknown destiny.

Opposing thoughts were flying towards contrary poles of his horizon.

On the one hand, the old longing for the world, a world of action, had risen strangely from forgotten depths. Was this perchance the goal to which his present life was leading? In the midst of his ruminations he heard the silvery mirth of Ilaria from the depths of the gardens, and the pain itself seemed to guide his steps towards her. He had always thought her the most beautiful of all beautiful women, though with them Italy blossomed as a garden.

He again remembered the night he first saw her, how the exquisite purity of her face distinguished her from the glittering throng among which she moved. He even remembered now in what graceful folds her white robe fell from the square cut neck to her feet, how the over-sleeves hung open from the shoulders, revealing the snowy whiteness of her arms.

He remembered how that night he had refused to go singing carnival songs with the youths of the court; how they, heated with wine, had jeered and taunted him, asking if, perchance, he was turning into a pious monk.

Suddenly in his waking dream he found himself at Monte Cassino in the cell of the Prior. And the Prior

talked and talked about the sins of the world, and the lust of the flesh, and of prayers and penances. How, as he sat there in grim silence, the Prior thought he was listening, instead of thinking of a smile of divine sweetness, and a fairer face than that of the Virgin looking out at him from the mural painting of Masaccio. And how the Prior would have crossed himself and implored protection from the snares of Satan, had he known that Francesco's thoughts were of a woman. How, when he went to his own cell that night, when he lay down on the bare hard boards, that served for bed and pillow, a swift revulsion of feeling had come over him.

At that moment Francesco felt that, wherever he went, he would bear his shadow with him none the less surely, because its presence might be hidden by the general negative of that sunlight, which so inexorably illumined every detail of the road that lay before him.

The shadow!

Was he indeed a living soul created in the image of his Maker, or an echo merely shouted by some fiend in derision, destined to wander forever disconsolate among the waste places, seeking and finding not?—

Now he saw Ilaria come up the moonlit path.

For a moment he wavered, trembling in every limb. Then the memory of their meeting at the fountain swept over him in a mighty wave. He called to mind the sweet smile of long ago, the touch of her hands.

No longer master of his feelings, he took a step forward, his eyes, straining into the night, riveted upon her. There was a hint of melancholy in the

curve about the mouth and the farseeing eyes.

Another moment and he found himself face to face with Ilaria Caselli.

As she noted the shadow across her path, she paused sharply, then, as their eyes met, he saw the flowing motion of her figure stiffening into curves that lent a suggestion of resistance. He caught the momentary impatience of her brow and the start of resentment in her eyes.

His purpose vanquished, he stood mute in the face of the striking chill of her pride.

For a moment they regarded each other in silence, a silence that resembled the settling waters after the plunging of a stone.

Her face was very white, and her eyes, as they met his, shone with an almost supernatural lustre.

Yet this silence was putting the two asunder, contrasting them vividly, balancing them one against the other.

The repose and the self-confidence ran all towards the woman.

Her face waited.

She seemed to look down from above on Francesco the monk.

A moment ago he had had so much to say, and now his own voicelessness begot anger and rebellion.

Ilaria was looking at him, as if she saw something, and nothing, and Francesco felt that her eyes called him a fool. Her air of aloofness, as of standing above

some utterly impersonal matter, put the man under her feet.

She could not have trampled upon him more victoriously than by displaying the utter indifference with which she seemed to rediscover his existence.

For a moment, that seemed interminable, they stood at gaze, as if some hidden hand had been laid upon them, arresting every movement.

Then her lips parted slightly.

"Faithless!"

Then she was gone.—

How long Francesco remained rooted to the spot, he did not know.

He felt as one who has walked into a place, where all the doors were closed, where calm, contemptuous faces were watching him from the windows.

His chief desire now was to get away from Rome as quickly as possible. The Pontiff was at Viterbo. Thither he would travel with the dawn. He was tired of humiliations. Restless and baffled though he felt in his effort to conform his thoughts to the life he was henceforth to lead, he resented even compassion.

The moon had risen higher and the sky was sprinkled with myriads of stars.

Francesco stood leaning against the fountain, and heard the bells on distant Aventine tolling through the night. Their music filled the air. He tried to hush the anxiety of his heart by prayer. It was in vain.

He felt the love for the friends of his youth turning

slowly into hate. Once again he had proved himself, once again he had been crucified on the altar of Duty!

Let the stormy billows of life then sweep him onward to whatever destiny a dark fate had consigned him! Since loyalty had proved his undoing, why cling to outward show?—

How perfect was the night!

The distant hillsides were hushed. The very leaves were still. The olive woods shone silvery in the moonlight!

The splashing of the fountains came clear to him in the intense stillness. In the moonlight the roses were nodding to each other and the perfume of magnolias permeated the balmy night air. Farther in the shade he could see the Lucciola, in whose heart were hidden the love-words caught from lovers' lips,—what a mission for a flower! On the highroad he heard the tramp of horses' feet. They came nearer, stopped, then died away in the distance.

Afraid even to move Francesco peered through the leaves.

But the only sound he could hear was the beating of his own heart.

He stood alone in the garden.

Love seemed to have died out of the eyes of life, and the world seemed to shiver in disillusionment.

A great weariness came to him, a weariness of the heart, spreading with the swiftness of poison in the blood. His head drooped, as if the moonlight had

wilted the strong neck. His eyes lost their lustre of haughtiness and fell into a vague, brooding stare. He was dull and weary; but yesterday he had thought well of the world; there seemed nor valor, nor pity, anywhere.—

Yet Francesco felt that this state could not endure.

Purposeless he had drifted on the waves of destiny, the blind victim of another's will. Prayers and penances had not availed to rouse him to the acceptance of his fate.

There must be something to fill out his life, some great palpable purpose to which he would devote himself, some high mission, in the fulfilment of which the consciousness of a false existence would become gradually blurred, and eventually wiped out.

His whole nature craved for action; the still life of the cloister, far from extinguishing the smouldering fire, had kept it alive with the fuel of dead hopes and broken ambitions.

What mattered it in the end in whose cause he fought and bled, so he came out from under the dreary cloud of passive endurance, a slow paralysis of all that was best of him?

His love for Ilaria had remained with him, had haunted him all these long and weary months. He felt it would remain with him forever, even though he banished her image from his heart. And banish it he must! He must shake off the dreamer, he must look life in the face. Boldly he must enter the arena in the unequal fight.

"Ave Domina, morituri te salutant!"—

The thought seemed to give him back some of his former elasticity. All wavering was at an end. The road seemed dark. Yet there must be a way.

Could he but accomplish some great deed, could he but make a name for himself, but prove himself worthy of the love she bore him once,—that, at least, would be atonement!

A higher light gleamed in Francesco's eyes, and he heaved a great sigh as he was about to step into the clearing, when the sound of approaching footsteps caused him to pause and listen.

They seemed to come in his direction.

In the brilliant moonlight he recognized Conradino and Frederick of Austria, Conrad Capecé and the brothers Lancia. They had been making the rounds of the gardens and were returning to the palace. In the gaunt warrior who followed in their wake he recognized the Count Palatine.

Where the glistening gravel paths branched off, leading into different parts of the blossoming wilderness, they were joined by another group. Francesco recognized among them Raniero Frangipani, and the ground began to burn under his feet.

A thousand invisible eyes seemed to peer at him in his concealment; a thousand invisible fingers seemed to point towards him,—the renegade.

They were coming nearer. Now he could hear the sound of their voices. There was no further doubt; they were coming in his direction.

It was too late to retrace his steps. If he remained

where he stood, they might pass him unheeded, unseen. At this moment Francesco dreaded even the sound of a human voice, the sight of a human face. On the pinnacle of a high resolve he but craved to escape unnoticed, unseen, to be spared further humiliation.

Following a strange, inexplicable impulse, or seized with a sudden irresistible panic, which mocked his intentions to scorn, he started to retreat in an opposite direction, when a treacherous moonbeam revealed him to the eye of Raniero Frangipani.

Two mighty bounds brought him to his side, and ere Francesco knew what was happening, he found himself dragged over the greensward and stood pale and trembling before the assembled company.

Conradino had paused precipitately, as if some bird of evil omen had crossed his path. The others immediately surrounded Francesco, who was writhing in the futile endeavor to release himself from the grip which was upon him. In the struggle the cowl had dropped back, revealing Francesco's features, set and deadly pale, and the cry: "A monk!" was not for the cloth, but him it covered.

Two men had uttered it as with one voice, the Viceroy of Apulia and the Count Palatine, while in the faces of their companions Francesco read only loathing and hatred, such as any traitor would inspire.

The Frangipani released his victim with a reluctant scowl.

Conrad Capecé seized Francesco by the shoulders and looked into his face.

He felt moved despite himself by the expression of petrified grief which he read in the face of the youth, who, unable longer to endure the glances of hatred which he instinctively felt resting upon him, had dropped his gaze.

"What is your purpose here?" the Apulian queried sternly.

Twice, in the thrall of conflicting emotions, Francesco started to reply, a hot wave of shame chasing the pallor from his cheeks.

The words died on his lips.

At last, with a supreme effort, throwing back his head as in mute defiance, he replied:

"My business is with the Pontiff!"

"The business of a traitor,—a spy!"

It was the voice of Raniero Frangipani that had fallen sharply on his ear.

Francesco made no reply. Only he seemed to grow a shade more gray.

In his stead spoke Don Enrico, the Senator of Rome, who had stepped to the Viceroy's side.

"It must have been known to you that the Pontiff has abandoned the city and has fled to Viterbo. Do not try to deceive us! We shall find means to learn the truth!"

The threatening tenor of the Spaniard's voice recalled Francesco to himself. He turned to Capecé who was regarding him gloomily.

"My lord, I have never spoken a falsehood. I arrived

in Rome but yesterday from Monte Cassino. Of the state of the city I knew nothing. My business is with the Pontiff."

"Then why did you not depart on learning that Clement and the Provencals have fled?"

A choking sensation came to Francesco. His hand went to his throat.

The Viceroy saw and understood.

With a sweep of the hand he bade the others stand aside.

"Go!"—The command was tinged with scorn and contempt.

"I vouch for this monk!" Francesco heard him address the Senator of Rome, as with head bowed down he walked slowly away. But with a sharp pang another voice smote his unwittingly listening ear.

"A renegade!"

It was the voice of Raniero Frangipani.—

On that night, when Francesco returned to the inn and had repaired to his chamber, he lay on his bed without moving, without even thinking.

He had passed into a strange, half-apathetic state, in which his own misery was hardly more to him than a dull and mechanical weight, pressing on some wooden thing that had forgotten to be a soul.

In truth, it seemed of little consequence how all ended. The one thing that mattered to any sentient being, was to be spared the unbearable pain.

It seemed to him as if he had left some terrible

shadow of himself, some ghostly trail of his personality, to haunt the room. He sat trembling and cowering, not daring to look up, lest he should see the phantom presence of his other self.

At last the pain worked as its own anaesthetic.

Francesco's eyelids drooped and he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER III

QUAINT WAYFARERS



ARLY on the following morning Francesco left Rome through the ancient Flaminian gate and started upon his journey towards Viterbo.

It was a fair morning, golden and light.

Over the Campagna hung white mists, that hovered longest where the Tiber rolled; but over the green mountains of Rocca Romana the woods were alight with sunbeams and the glancing streams ran sparkling through meadows, starred with dragon-flower and cyclamen, and shaded with heavy boughs of beach and chestnut.

In lieu of following the Via Aurelia, where it wound towards the coast by Santa Marinella and Santa Severa and mediaeval Palo, and the volcanic soil and the steep ravines by Cervetri, where the long avenues of cliff sepulchres are all that remain to show the site of ancient Caeré, Francesco pursued the beaten cattle-tracks, avoiding the Maccarese marshes and following the course of the Aeroné as far as the high cliffs, up by forsaken Galera. And soon the downs and moors, the tumuli and tombs and the heaving expanse of the Roman Campagna lay behind him,

and with them the fear of encountering roving companies of Provencals, which might still remain in these regions.

It was a morning such as is only seen in Southern climes, and on similar elevations; the air so pure and bright that every object appeared translucent.

The valley into which Francesco descended, although partially veiled in mists, began to disclose its variety and richness, contrasting strangely with the undulating monotony of the Campagna, which lay behind him. Little villages appeared, nestling on the craggy bases of the mountains, castles and watch-towers rose on remote pinnacles; forests of oak and pine waved freshly in the morning wind; pastures of brightest emerald bordered the river; every rock displayed in its nooks and crevices wild-flowers of brilliant hues; every breath wafted across the vale brought new intoxicating odors.

The very cataract in the distance, though lost in snowy mists, wore a diadem, a rainbow of palest pink and azure, like a semi-circular spectral bridge.

Francesco chose the wider path, and lost himself in a tangled underbrush of myrtle, stunted vines and high weeds, while the loftier forest-trees continually showered their golden dew upon him, as he passed under their odorous, lightly-swaying branches.

If the life at Monte Cassino had seemed hard and uneventful, these few days in the larger, wider world had crowded experiences upon Francesco with an impetuosity that had left him a little bewildered. Hungry for a heart, his soul, bleeding under the leash of Fate, looked down upon life as from an isolation, and found it as desolate and empty as the most

ascetic soul might have desired.

Heartening himself, he tried to see some reasonable purpose linking all these happenings. He was being tempted and ill-used for the sake of a finer patience and stronger discipline, serving his novitiate in a rougher and more riotous house, meeting winds that had not reached him behind the walls of Monte Cassino.

He had taken his discipline, his schooling and his vows as a matter that was inevitable. But the lure of the outer world, combined with the memories of the past, had thrummed incessantly and insistently against the armor of his cowl.

And as, with the silence of a great resolve, he pushed slowly along his solitary path, he wondered vaguely at the ultimate goal.

He had been taught that a monk should accept all the ordinances and ask no questions, clasping an austere docility like a girdle about his loins.

Nevertheless, his eyes lost their lustre, as he remembered the scenes of the past night, and they fell into a vague brooding stare.

Yet he no longer felt angry with those who had turned from him in disdain. For a time the fire in his heart had sunk too low even for anger. He was dull and weary and a little stunned by the night's bafflings, and the collapse of his resolves.

He was fighting against destiny, and the wave was mightier than the vessel that had ventured upon it.

Francesco had started out before dawn, brushing the dew from the meadow-grass and following the misty

twilight track of a brook that traced its serpentine course through the forest glades. The songs of birds went throbbing through the woodland.

Francesco had come to a place where four ways met, with a stone cross standing on a hillock, when out of the dusk of the forest aisles rode the portly bulk of a man, who was hardly astir so early in order to admire the beauties of the dawn, for he came along the greensward with the gait of one who combines caution with alertness.

No sooner had the Duke of Spoleto laid eyes upon Francesco than he broke out into a glad roar.

"Whither are you bound so lone and so early?" he bellowed after mutual greeting. "Has the soil of Rome ignited under your holy feet?"

"I am bound for Viterbo," Francesco replied, glad to have the monotony of the journey and the trend of his ruminations relieved by one who had, at one time, been of such signal service to him.

"And whither do you travel?" he asked in turn.

"Every road leads to Rome, or the devil," the duke roared sagaciously, "though three days of knight-errantry have brought nothing but petticoats. The world is overburdened with women!"

Francesco nodded, although he was not sure of the fact.

Enlarging on the subject, as they rode side by side, the Duke of Spoleto opined that women were capable of giving a deal of trouble.

Francesco considered the suggestion with due

seriousness without venturing an expression on the subject.

"You come from Rome?" the duke queried at last.

"The Ghibellines are in possession of the town," Francesco replied with heavy heart.

The duke laughed.

"The spirit of chivalry runs counter to the growlings of the fathers," he said, then paused dramatically. "Anjou's name is a great and stinking sore. The whole country holds its nose because of its stench. As for him who succeeded the Cobbler's son in the chair of St. Peter:—he has yet to learn that self-righteousness but needs the devil's kiss on the forehead."

Francesco made no reply.

The Duke of Spoleto struck his fist into his palm.

"Meat, drink and the love of woman,—these things matter more than Heaven and Hell and the solemn ravings of an ascetic though," he added meditatively, "the holy fathers of the Church teach that woman is the seed and core of all evil. Perchance we find therein the reason of their own pitiable estate!"

Francesco remained silent for a space, and the duke gave him a queer puzzled look.

"Look you," he said at last, picturesquely, "you seem not like other monks, fit but to be made a mock of by sluts who are ready to laugh at an ass' hind legs. That gentry I hate,—a mad medley of the devil."

The duke spat with emphasis and rubbed his palms.

Francesco ventured to enlighten the lord of the

forests.

"Yet—may not one be as one standing on the threshold, with a light in one's hand, illumining the path of others, yet remaining himself in the gloom?"

The duke shrugged.

"Sophistry is the devil's pastime," he said dubiously. "Many an old-established ghost there is, who has never seen such a thing as an honest monk. And there is nothing that ghosts love as they do novelties!"

Francesco pondered over the wisdom of his companion, but did not feel called upon to enlarge upon it. He was even now far from convinced of his own sincerity and steadfastness of purpose. He was as a man shipwrecked on a stormy sea, ever rocking with the waves, with no beacon-light beckoning him to shore.

"You have seen Conradino?" the duke said after a pause.

It might have been a statement, it might have been a question.

Francesco nodded.

"Rome is as Ghibelline at this hour as if the Pope had lived forever at Viterbo!"

The Duke of Spoleto shrugged.

"A passing fever! Many a one's soul is in sympathy with one's snout!"

"You do not love the cowl," Francesco ventured, with a sidelong glance at his companion, whose nose was

in the air as if he sniffed countless monasteries and convents.

After a time the Duke of Spoleto growled.

"If the world were so perilous a place, were it not more manly to go out and conquer it than to hide from it like a girl that bars the door of the room? What if Christ and the apostles had shut themselves up in stone cells, the grim silence, the half-starved sanctity of the cloister? What has it done for the world? Men make a patchwork quilt of life and call the patchwork religion and law!"

He threw the challenge into the balance of his discontent.

Knitting his brows, he continued:

"Speak not of the Church to me! We are bidden to perceive therein the body of the Lord Christ! But what is it we see? The most complete mechanism for controlling men, manipulated by human intelligence! You bid me regard the monks in Italy as holy people in the midst of an evil world?"

He paused with a dramatic gesture.

"Rank heresy!" he bellowed, answering his own question. "A Church with no lust of temporal power is unthinkable. The Church requires a statesman for a leader, not a saint! Behold your saintly Clement at Viterbo, invoking the divine wrath upon the heads of the just claimants of these realms! Cast off the garb which disgraces your manhood! Mount a steed, challenge the devil, and slay dragons!"

Francesco felt heavy at heart.

An inner voice had long apprised him that the duke had recognized the man beneath the garb, and that he was addressing his confidences to the ghost of Francesco's self.

Now and then he surprised a sidelong glance, directed towards himself, as if his burly companion were appraising his manhood, his muscles and his strides.

His surmise fell not far short of the mark, for after a brief silence the lord of the woods spat vigorously.

"And howsoever did you happen into the cloth?" he blurted with a blunt directness, as if eager to dispose of the question.

"That is a long story," Francesco replied. "He, however, who suffered the most thereby, was least concerned in the cause!"—

The duke nodded, as if the matter were perfectly clear to him.

"You were promised special rewards and dispensations?"

Francesco's look of surprise informed the duke of the nature of the answer before he spoke.

"He who would sup with the Devil must needs have a long spoon!" the duke roared sententiously, and apparently well pleased with his own penetration.

They now travelled upon a more densely populated tract; they passed wayfarers and pilgrims; great folk on horseback with little folk licking their stirrup.

They passed an old crone at the roadside, eating her

meagre meal out of a basket. Her fingers were like claws; her eyes were half-shut and she had wisps of hair on her chin. When she saw the twain, she scratched her chin with a talon and begged Francesco for a blessing, which the latter gave, while the duke shouted:

"Shave your chin, old fool! Shave your chin!"

Two hairy beggars, brandishing cudgels, emerged from the thicket.

No sooner did they lay eyes on the duke, than they bounded down the road and out of sight.

The Duke of Spoleto smote his thighs and laughed like a woodpecker.

They passed two howl-women, making for a near-by castle and practising their doleful chants.

The duke greeted them with a grotesque bow.

"Why so joyful, fascinating graces?" he bellowed through his auburn bristles. "Is the fiend assembling a chorus in these regions, to lead it in procession to hell? I commend his taste!"

The howl-women gibbered some inarticulate response and blew down the road, to the great delight of the duke.

A fat reeve with heavy saddle-bags and a fiery face whipped a mouse-colored nag right about and departed the way he came, as soon as he spied the duke in the distance.

The duke's mirth increased as the mud-sticker, as he called him, took to flight. He seemed vastly pleased

with the respect he inspired.

At last, at a cross-road, they came upon two women in red cloaks and gaudy tunics, seated on the greensward, with a certain dubious alertness about the eyes, that glimmered between hunger and discontent. By their side in the grass lay a viol; they seemed to have chosen the spot to rest.

As the duke and his companion approached, the twain watched them with a peculiar, hard-eyed intentness, glanced at each other, and smiled.

"Whither away, my dear?" said the taller of the two. "It is fair weather for a journey!"—

The duke bowed profusely.

"Fair weather for a good thirst," he replied, nodding at the stone bottle which reposed in the capacious lap of the speaker.

"You carry a lusty belly," replied the dame, whose eyes had a hungry boldness, while she offered the bottle to her interlocutor.

The duke took a liberal draught. Francesco frowned.

Then the three chaffered with obvious good humor, touching upon many topics, which sounded strange to Francesco's ears.

They touched upon the wonders of the swamps, wild beasts, wolves and bears; they conversed of the outlaws of Arezzo, whose leader was said to be a woman; of the stone that bled on Passion Sunday, of the mysterious almond-tree at Treviso, that bore fruit showing the impress of the face of the Christ.

The duke seemed remarkably well versed in all

matters pertaining to Church or state. When he stopped for a pull at the stone bottle, the two women laughed, taking alternate bites from an apple and munching the pulp with a voracious movement of the jaws.

Francesco thought them queer wayfarers, for they in turn stared at him, then at each other and laughed, looking at Francesco's grave face as if it were the quaintest thing on earth.

"Saints! What a sweet gentleman!" said the taller of the two, "and to see such a one in the spider's web!"

And as she sighed, her eyes discoursed to Francesco something that savored not of the Church.

The fat vagrant offered him the bottle, while her companion's eyes sent him a tentative offer of friendliness, half timid, half bold.

Francesco passed it by with a flash of the eyes to the horizon, and a straight setting of the chin.

After having parted from the two rowdies in the fantastic cloaks, the duke and Francesco continued upon their way.

"There is freedom only on the mountain-heights," the duke said, as they arrived at a crossing, marked by a huge stone cross. "If this truth ever dawns upon you, if ever your soul shrinks from the greed and hypocrisy of the world, if you tire of bloodshed in the name of the Cross and of villainy glorified by the name of Christ—the camp of the Duke of Spoleto will receive you, standing face to face with God alone."

With a hearty hand-shake they parted, and Francesco followed the road pointed out to him by his

companion of the morning hours.

He had taken reluctant leave of the burly champion of a lost cause, whose very presence seemed to breathe the undefiled air of his great northern forests, undefiled by the trend of human feet, the echoes of human strife.

And as Francesco gave a parting look to the high hills with the glitter of their birch-trees, he suddenly experienced an unexplainable melting of his resentment against Ilaria.

Something that he could neither describe nor account for, came into his heart, a subtle emotion, that was like a faint perfume, or the sound of music from afar. He had hated her for her cold pride when he left his home; yet, into this tawny cloud of hate flashed the vivid streak of a sudden recollection.

Every faint zephyr reminded him of her charm; transfused itself into the mellow brilliancy of her beauty, and Francesco suddenly surprised himself by taking her part against himself.

And, what was more, he experienced a curiously pleasing sensation in the act, and in this impulse towards tenderness discovered things that were strange and long forgotten.

It was now the drowsy noon of day, and the wood was full of shadows and of stealthy, creeping sunlight.

He rested for a pace, then, refreshed by the siesta, he rode onward, other thoughts beginning to throng his mind.

He was entering a sphere of action.

Hitherto his life had been as that of a recluse. The peace of the cloister had enveloped him as a mighty cloak of safety. It had dominated him even to the point of total paralysis of his energies. Of the purpose of his journey he was still in ignorance. Yet, an inner voice whispered to him that it was the clarion call of the Church Militant that had called him out of his repose.

There could be no further compromise between the warring factions.

The death-struggle between Guelph and Ghibelline had reached its highest crest. Henceforth he would be the soldier of the Church. A chasm, no eternity could bridge, would gape between himself and the friends of his youth. Thus Fate had willed it. Hurled into a seething vortex, he was swept onward by the resistless tide.

Now and again moments of resonant incredulity beat upon his brain. Why had his guiltless youth been condemned, why had he been sold into bondage?

For a moment he started, retreating precipitately into the shadows.

On the far bank of the river, whose glittering coils wound through the emerald depths of the valley, there, among the aspens, he descried a company of horsemen, waiting, spears erect, helmets glittering, the wind tossing the dark manes of their horses.

After a time they rode onward, and he, too, cautiously pursued his solitary path.

Evening had come.

The rose had faded from the sky; but the horizon was

flooded with pale gold, in which shone the pellucid evening star. The air was filled with the sweet chimes of innumerable bells.

A group of towers rising above the distant hills cut sharply into the glory of the sky.

Yonder lay Viterbo amidst her encircling walls: thence those carolling chimes, that so strangely stirred him, were singing their message of peace.

His eyes were fixed afar.

Would he turn back?—

The west was smoking with golden vapors. The forests receding on either hand revealed the hills and summits of the pontifical city. The old Longobard walls curved away on each hand, for a long distance, high and grim, with battlements and towers, bare and menacing.

For a moment Francesco paused; his eyes in the tracks of the sinking sun, his lips tightly set, the nails of his hands driven into his own flesh.

Then with head high and erect, never a muscle betraying the anguish of his soul, he rode into the gates of Viterbo.

CHAPTER IV

THE PAWN OF THE CHURCH



HEN Francesco arrived on the height it was the hour of the closing of the city-gates and he took lodging at an inn situated near the city walls.

He caught his breath the next morning at the imposing aspect of the place.

In the young sunshine its many towers were no longer phantom intruders on the sky, but a dominant fact. The machicolated heights, the encircling ramparts, the stern outlines of the fortress-palace of the pope, rose proudly impregnable in the air.

On the broad highways from Umbria, Tuscany and Romagna, even at this early hour, an almost endless stream of humanity was moving. Many a clerk and prelate was there, superbly arrayed, mounted on steeds gay with princely trappings. Fair women took in the freshness of the day. Pilgrims with staff and shell trudged merrily or wearily on. Jewish merchants, serious of face, bore packs containing valuable merchandise. For Viterbo lay on the highway, linking Northern and Southern Italy, and Europe, in motion on its way to Rome, moved incessantly through its streets. The image of Rome, in her desolation, recurred, vague as a ghost, to Francesco's mind and vanished before this city of the

present, unhaunted as yet by memories, rising radiant in the morning air.

Treading the streets, the life which he for the past weeks had so eagerly accepted, suddenly seemed alien to the whole old order of thoughts and feelings which Francesco represented.

Mechanically almost he dropped on his knees before an altar, gazing at the pictured face of a kneeling woman whose eyes were filled with pure compassion. Nevertheless, he allowed himself to be diverted by the interest of his surroundings, while moving towards the presence of the head of Christendom.

Pope Clement IV gave audience in a high apartment, overlooking the winding road to Rome. The sunlight, streaming through the window arch, revealed the man with much distinctness.

The Pontiff was slight and delicate of build. His face bore the stamp of a high order of intellect; his features were those of an aristocrat. Disease of body was plainly portrayed by his shadowy cheeks, much lined for his fifty-odd years. Disease of soul showed none the less plainly in a troubled lift of the eyebrows, that imparted to the face a look of search, expecting yet perhaps desiring no answer. The countenance withal was unmistakably of the legal cast, self-contained, alert, studious. On the whole, Francesco's first impression upon being conducted into the presence of the Father of Christendom, was of the unconscious dignity of high place, blended with something too complex for analysis.

Many cardinals and princes of the Church, many

orders of monks, noblemen and foreign ambassadors were assembled in the audience-chamber of the Pontiff. There was a restlessness among them, which immediately impressed itself upon the newcomer.

Surrounding the pontifical dais were Antonio Pignatello, Cardinal of Cosenza and private secretary to His Holiness; Don Stefano, General of the Carthusians, Master Raimondo, General of the Dominicans, and an individual who was incessantly fingering his beads, whose bent countenance, sallow features, sunken eyes, thin lips and claw-like talons revealed a combination of hypocrisy and cunning, such as but one man could lay claim to, and he the champion of Pope Clement IV, Charles of Anjou, brother of King Louis of France.

"Yet—notwithstanding your plea, you have not yet seen the towers of the Holy City established on earth among the children of men," the Pontiff turned to the Provencal.

"I have had no visions," replied the latter with a quick lift of the eyes.

"Nor I, beloved son," said the Pontiff, "save as the spectacle of life is an ever changing vision. Have you any conception, I wonder, of its interest and significance in these latter days?"

"Let me remind you, Holy Father, Benevento lies behind us," snarled the champion of the Church. "Would your black crows have carried the day without the chivalry of Provence?"

The Pontiff ignored the insolence of the speech.

"Truly—Benevento lies behind us," he said. "Nevertheless I may not say, here is the hand of God,

and there it is withheld. The schism has widened; the way of the truth is more obscure than ever; the Church has grown to be the very scorn of men, because of the instruments she employs,—she is forced to employ!"

The Pontiff's tone had grown hard and there was a steely glitter in his gray eyes.

Charles of Anjou fingered his beads more swiftly, while his thin lips stretched into a hard, straight line.

"'The end justifies the means!' has long been the maxim of the princes of the Church," he said, while his eyes seemed to rest on the tips of his buskins, protruding from under the monkish garb he affected.

The Pontiff hastened to explain.

"One may not cleanse a pigsty with a silver fork. Yet —shall the Patrimony of St. Peter be sacked and burned in the name of the Cross? Shall violence, cunning and greed reign unchecked, that the Beast may be glorified?"

"Yet the Beast may not gird its loins without drink or food,—and the Halo makes but a thin mantle!" snarled the Pontiff's crusader.

Clement raised a thin, emaciated hand.

"What a mass of falsehoods and hypocritical phrases have again assailed our ear! Our dearly beloved son in Christ boasts of his love and veneration for the Church, while those under his command are pillaging the sanctuaries!"

The beads passed nervously through Anjou's fingers.

"These reproaches, Holy Father," he said with a

sepulchral voice, "touch me very deeply. The host must be fed, and their zeal for the cause of Holy Church may lead them to mistake the cornfields of the righteous!"

The Pontiff bowed.

"Your crusades against the infidels seem to have blurred your vision, beloved son!"

"You speak of my youthful glories, Holy Father," replied Charles of Anjou with a leer. "Many years have since gone by, and they sleep with my youthful sins!"

"That must be a wide berth that enables them to find place side by side," retorted the Pontiff.

Then, with a nameless shrug, he turned to the Cardinal of Cosenza.

"Has the messenger returned from Astura?"

Instead of the Cardinal, Anjou made reply.

"Wherein would treason benefit the Frangipani? They hold their castle as fief of the Empire, and the coffers of the Church are dolefully empty."

The Pontiff turned to the speaker.

"Treason,—beloved son? A harsh word indeed! Were breaking with a sinful past to be stigmatized in such wise, our indulgences would indeed go begging and St. Peter tire at his watch!"

Charles of Anjou gave a significant shrug.

"Will the Frangipani exchange a distant master for one hovering over their rock?"

The Pontiff waved the question aside.

"The bait were hardly tempting!"

The small eyes of Anjou met those of the Pontiff.

"What is the bribe?" he queried brutally.

Clement raised his hands in abhorrence. A lawyer and a diplomat, the Frenchman's brutal frankness jarred on his nerves.

"What of Astura as his own—to have and to hold?" he said at last with bated breath.

A sudden sinister gleam from Anjou's eyes betokened his understanding.

"The dead are all immortal," he said with a shrug.

A sudden commotion, the sound of voices in the antechamber, produced a momentary lull in the conversation, and at the beck of the Pontiff the Cardinal of Cosenza rose to inquire into the cause of the disturbance.

After a time he returned and whispered some words into Clement's ears.

The Pontiff was seen to start; and to look from one to the other of those present. Then he nodded and, through the door of the audience-chamber, Francesco was ushered into the august presence of the Father of Christendom.

He was received with a courteous quiet, the Pontiff and those about him regarding him curiously.

Francesco advanced at a signal from the Cardinal of Cosenza, who acted as master of ceremonies, knelt and kissed the Pontiff's feet. He felt somewhat dazed

by the unwonted presence and awaited in silence the Pontiff's question. In a fleeting glance he had taken in his surroundings, but as, when he rose from his kneeling position, his gaze encountered that of the Pontiff's minion, there swept over him such a wave of rage, horror and shame, that all the color left his face, and his hands were clenched, as if he would spring at the cowled form by the Pontiff's side and strangle him. He restrained himself with an effort, but the gesture had not passed unremarked by Anjou, who was engaged in sedulously counting his beads and fingering the Leaden Lamb about his neck, while he drew the cowl somewhat deeper over his face.

Francesco, turning to the Pontiff, was struck by the reticent shrewdness in Clement's eyes, the expression of his face, the calm, unmoved poise of body and head.

It crossed his consciousness in a flash that it was possible for this man to impress his will upon a world, no matter if that world rebelled.

"Your name?" the Pontiff spoke at last.

"Francesco Villani," came the reply, given with bated breath.

Clement stared into space as one endeavoring to recall a memory.

"Villani,—Villani—" he muttered to himself with an absent air. "Where have we heard the name before?"

The Cardinal of Cosenza leaned forward, his lips at Clement's ear.

The Pontiff nodded.

"We remember,—we remember,—the illegitimate offspring of Gregorio Villani, Grand Master of the Knights of the Hospital!"

The words had been spoken with intent of being heard by all present.

Francesco straightened himself to his full height.

His eyes blazed as he faced the Pontiff.

"Your Holiness need not proclaim my father's shame to the ears of Christendom! Let it suffice, that I am atoning for his fault,—if fault it was!"

There was a heavy silence, during which the Pontiff and Charles of Anjou exchanged significant glances.

They had not remained unremarked by Francesco, and the spark of rebellion which had slumbered in his soul all these long and weary months was fanned to devouring flame, as with inexpressible loathing his gaze rested upon the man who was the abomination of Christendom, the instrument of the Pontiff.

"What proof have we that you are atoning for the transgressions of one who passed from earth in mortal sin?" the Pontiff queried after a pause, while a fatuous smile played about Anjou's lips.

"The garb I wear," Francesco flashed. "The garb your Holiness has imposed!"

The Pontiff regarded him quizzically.

"You have served your novitiate?"

"At Monte Cassino!"

"How fares the Prior? It is many moons since we

have visited his mountain-heights!"

Francesco gave a brief account of his life at the cloister, up to the time when he had received the summons to Rome.

Clement listened warily, the lawyer in his expression uppermost.

"You come from Rome?"

Francesco shivered at the memory.

"From Rome!" he replied curtly.

"What of the city?"

"King Conradino lords the Capitol!"

"You have seen the Pretender?"

"We have stood face to face."

"What is he like?"

Francesco gazed from Clement to Anjou

"A man!"

The Pontiff nodded, as if he approved the observation.

In the man Francesco had long discovered the judicial mind, and the discreet intelligence of the trained statesman.

From the shadows the Pontiff was warily regarding the sun-steeped features of the young monk.

At last, his voice sinking down to its accustomed calm, he said, as if feeling his ground:

"Does the new life satisfy your soul?"

The restless, ceaseless pain of longing again knocked at Francesco's heart, and with it returned the old spirit of rebellion, which had possessed him in the days of his novitiate at Monte Cassino. And, unconsciously, he repeated the words of the Duke of Spoleto:

"Men make a patchwork quilt of life, and call the patchwork religion and law."

An audible gasp was wafted to his ears.

Clement opened his hand and dropped the little crucifix, which he had been fingering during their talk, with a gesture of rejection, on the floor behind him. The palm of the hand, still stretched and open, bore sharp red marks. The point of the cross had evidently just been pressed into it with convulsive energy.

"Obedience is holiness," the Pontiff said at last, with a sweep of his hand.

Francesco discovered himself unwittingly gazing in the direction of Anjou. The Pontiff intercepted the look. Perhaps there was a reason for his question which Francesco was far from guessing, as he suavely said:

"You do not conceive, my son, that the Church can err in the choice of her instruments?"

"I have heard of some striking instances of the readiness of the servants of the Church," he replied with a straight look at Anjou, "to suppress the spirit when it suited them to do so."

At these words a change, visible even in the shadows, crossed the features of the Provencal leader.

"The spirit is capable of various interpretations," he snarled with a vicious glare at the young monk, whose air of loathing had stung him to the quick.

"But not the instrument," Francesco retorted hotly.

Clement at this point thought fit to interpose, yet not without a sting of rebuke to the brother of Louis of France.

"The Church requires not her subjects to think for her, nor to interpret her spirit. What she exacts, is unfaltering obedience!"

There was something in the Pontiff's tone which startled Francesco. He was conscious that Clement avoided touching on the business of his summons to Rome, as if to force him to betray his own trend of mind. Yet he shrank unwittingly from uttering the words which hovered on his lips. He felt instinctively there was no mercy within these walls, and at the thought he was seized with a secret dread.

The silence at last grew irksome. Francesco felt a cold hand clutching at his heart.

If the sacrifice had been in vain! If he had been tricked into selling his birthright, tricked into bartering his happiness for a shroud! He felt the flood-gates of his memory re-open; he felt the portals of the past, which had been locked and barred, swing back upon their hinges, grating deep down into his soul. The mad longing for the world bounded back into his heart.

Still the Pontiff did not speak.

"I have been summoned from Monte Cassino," Francesco at last spoke with an assumption of courage which he was far from feeling. "I am waiting the commands of your Holiness!"

The Pontiff nodded.

"These are grievous times indeed; the Church must needs summon her faithful about her, to become militant in her service!"

"What would your Holiness have me do?" said Francesco.

"The service that will be demanded of you is to be commensurate with the boon you have come to ask at our hands," Clement replied at last.

For a moment Francesco stared speechless at the Pontiff. Clement had read the very depths of his soul.

"When I entered the monastic life," he said at last, "it was stipulated that at the expiration of a certain period the burden should be lightened."

"Conditions?" replied Clement, with a slight contraction of the brows. "The Church demands unconditional surrender! Are you so very anxious to be relieved of the garb which befits the servant of God?"

"There are various ways to serve the Church," Francesco replied in a hard voice.

Clement bent serious brows upon him.

"We must subdue the mind for the sake of the mind! The boon you are about to ask might be granted—in

return for some signal service to the Church!"

Francesco's eyelids narrowed.

"And this service,—what is it?"

He saw the Pontiff and Charles of Anjou exchange glances.

What new traffic were they about to propose to him?

He looked about the circle of ecclesiastics.

He met but the reflection of the Pontiff's quizzical glances.

"We require a special envoy to Naples, to calm the minds of the disaffected. Our choice has fallen upon you. On the result of your mission depends the granting of the boon."

Francesco made no reply.

What could he urge in his own behalf that was not defeated in the utterance?

He was no match for Clement in subtlety and, though he could not fathom the reasons governing Clement's choice of himself to treat, as he surmised, with the Neapolitans, he recognized therein the desire on the part of the Pontiff to strike his enemies through one of their own.

"What are the commands of your Holiness?" he said at last.

"You will receive your instructions from the Cardinal of Cosenza," the Pontiff replied calmly.

"Your audience is concluded," the latter whispered into Francesco's ear. He approached the pontifical

dais as one in a dream; and, after the customary genuflection and the ceremony of kissing the Pontiff's feet, he passed out of the audience-chamber into the sun-fraught air of noon, the Pontiff's "Go in peace!" still ringing in his ears.

The personality of Clement had not passed from him without a deep impress. Here was a man created in the type of his predecessors, Alexander IV and Urban IV, a man who shrank from nothing that would advance the cause of the Church.

Thinking of the audience which had just come to a close, a heavy sense of defeat weighed Francesco down. His resistance had been utterly swept away; in vain had he waited for a power that did not come to uplift him and release.

The chasm between the life of the present and the life of the past gaped ever wider. By some invincible force he was being hurried onward to a dark and uncertain goal.

In the language of the East, he had his fate bound about his neck. There was no escape for him. Vainly as he might cast about him for an anchor, he saw nothing encompassing him but a great void. From the old life he was barred forevermore. The future appeared as a country bleak and unredeemed.

Towards evening he rode out of the gates of Viterbo. From its mountain height the pontifical palace frowned upon the world below with stern defiance, its architecture expressive of the asceticism, defensive of the soldier, rather, than the asceticism, contemplative of the saint.

Thus he rode out into the deepening dusk.

CHAPTER V

THE RED TOWER



ITH the first pulse of dawn in the East, Francesco was up and astir with the zest of the hour. The woods were full of golden vapor, of dew and the chanting of birds. A stream sang under the boughs, purling and foaming over a broad ledge of stone into a misty pool. A blue sky glimmered above the glistening tree-tops; the dwindling wood-ways quivered with the multitudinous madrigals of the dawn.

A strange calm encompassed him, as he rode down the castle hill into a wood of ilex where the dawn freshness still lingered. The rebellious temper of his mood sank like a sea beneath the benediction of a god. His was not a soul that bartered through carven screens for penitence and peace. His face caught a radiance from the vaultings of the trees.

Around him ran wooded hills, streams and pastures, dusted thick with flowers. The odors of dawn burdened the breeze. In the distance the purple heights of Viterbo faded into the azure of the sky.

Southward he rode, towards Circé's land. The far heights bristled with woodlands, shimmering with magic mystery under the rising sun. The forest spires were smitten with a glamor of gold. Precipice and wooded heights were solitary as the sea itself.

Francesco had left Viterbo exalted, liberated, glad. The prospect of high endeavor had lifted him out of his melancholy. His mind, overawed by the spirit, was for the time set free from that intellectual restlessness and moral incertitude, which against his will had grown up in him in the atmosphere wherein he moved.

He was the messenger of the Church, bound for the Neapolitan court on a mission aiming to restore the Southern Italian cities to the control of him who was the Vicar of Christ on earth. For a moment even the paradox did not distress him. Enough that he was under marching orders, that the walls of Monte Cassino lay far behind him. Surely the time was coming when loyalty to Church and country would be as one! If he might only meet some great outward test, he mused, some great trial, in which, to his own mind, as to the world, his convictions might shine forth!

All he saw and heard confirmed the dark insinuations of the Duca di Spoleto; yet the fact of decision had soothed his bewilderment, and there was hope of action ahead. Meantime he allowed himself to react passively on the impressions of the way. He was entertained with making acquaintances all along the route. Nothing in his graceful aspect betrayed the religious, and people, not suspecting his errand talked to him with the frankness to which excited times give birth. On all lips there was the same tale; the cause of the League of Italian cities against the Pope was filling young and old with chivalric passion. From the lower undulations of Tuscany, through the valleys of the Apennines, in the levels of Emilia, everywhere waved the Florentine banner, blood red, with its flashing motto: "Libertas."

It fanned the fire of a patriotism which he was compelled to recognize as pure, of that proud spirit of independence and hatred of oppression which has created the free cities of Italy. Not for the last time united protest against foreign tyranny was stilling petty strife and evoking the national consciousness, which even Dante was vainly to long for. And Francesco's spirit was swift to respond to the call. How otherwise? Was he not young? Was he not, too, a man, to whom country and race were dear?

But as he continued upon his way, as with his steady advance the forests gradually thinned and he began the descent into the plains of the Campagna, the image of Ilaria was constantly before him. Where was she? What was she doing? The thought brought with it a troubled bewilderment. Possessed like himself of a love of beauty, like himself consumed by a restlessness tremulous for something not quite clearly understood, this fine and beautiful creature would be ill at ease in the rough life of the feudal castle. That in the one case the restlessness might be reaching upwards, in the other, downwards. Francesco was too loyal to surmise. What good days they had known, he and she! Together they had watched the play of light on the mountain slopes, or over the great faint-gleaming lands within the soft curve of whose farthest blue they could divine the sea; together the two dark heads had bent over some vellum roll of Lariella's favorite poet.

And again she stood before him; the perfectly arched eyebrows, the wide forehead, the sweet curves that had dimpled in girlish days beneath a shadowy crown, greeted him from a dusky frame. With the increased perfection of her person went, he soon perceived, a trained and practised instinct for all the

graces of life. As she had appeared to him in Rome, she had been more charming than ever before.

Too charming, alas! to remain unapproached by desire,—and too reckless, perchance, to resist!

With a jerk he reined in his steed.

Of a sudden, the fears that had been squirming below consciousness heaved up their heads and Francesco heard himself cry aloud:

"God! If one's lady of the stars should prove a wanton!"—

The uttered words struck cold upon his ear. He had stopped abruptly, throwing his open palm against the rough bark of a tree. The hurt mixed with the sound of his own voice.

Dismounting, he permitted the disturbed animal to graze in an adjacent meadow-land; then, invaded by the terror of the fact, he flung himself face downward, pressing his cheek into the wet grass, recalling every too significant word and look of the Proserpina of yore, thrilled in his senses by her last glance at him and troubled by a passion he despised. Slowly to the first pain, with which the image of his dream-lady faded, there succeeded another. The friend of his youth, the one woman he loved,—what was befalling her? Was she happy? Had the memory of the past faded from her mind? This pain was sharper than the other, though Francesco knew it not. It healed the pang of fleshly desire.

He called to his steed, mounted, and rode on with a new gravity. According to his curious wont in concrete experience, his relations with Ilaria became

the index to wider questionings.

The old spell had been renewed, with a difference, and Francesco found himself trembling on the verge of a genuine passion. Through the mystic reverence which he sought to cultivate towards his lady flashed the allurement of the senses, and an occasional pang of reproach for his own cowardly surrender. He reproached himself bitterly for it, as he rode down the long hill that stretched in uneven rise and fall from Tivoli to Bracciano. Not that it troubled him, to find in his own love an earthly taint; many he knew who had struggled, had conquered, not without salt-tears. But to distrust the brightness of his lady's image; this surely in the annals of high love was a crime unparalleled. He tried to cast the evil thought aside, to exalt at once his love and his ideal. Breathing the morning air, the thing seemed possible. The situation helped; delicate enough to tickle his sense of honor, dramatic enough to absorb fancy.

The Ilaria of the ilex-wood grew dim as a fading fresco to Francesco's memory. He saw in her stead the little maid of the old castle of Avellino, whose waywardness, whose bright and ready gaiety had seemed to his more despondent temperament a gift of enchanting sweetness. Thinking of these things, dubious traits vanished from her image; she shone before his eyes, the piteous lady of his desire, and the devotion for which he longed rose ardent within him. It brought a fulness to the throat, to the eyes a smart which he coaxed into a tear. Then he rode on in a happier mood. The dark trees, which crowned the hill, were giving way as he descended to a wood of fresher green.

It was now verging towards evening. Francesco had reached the top of a lower ridge, from which the towers of Camaldoli, seen through a gap in the trees, rose shadowy against the fading blue of the horizon. The path, hardly more than a foottrail, had been lonely. Now a priest came ambling up on mule-back, feasting his eyes on the pleasant woodland. At the sight of Francesco he dropped them on his breviary, and passed on without word or sign.

For a moment the action struck him as a smart.

The sight of the Office-book had opened the door of another chamber in the house of Mind, that mysterious dwelling which always numbers rooms which the owner has never entered, and others, closed in long disuse.

At that moment the faint spark of devotion passed into a large indifference. In his early youth Francesco had been in the habit—how acquired he could not have told—of repeating, whenever possible, the canonical hours. He had long abandoned the custom, as far as intention went; yet in some forgotten chapel of the mind, deserted of the conscious powers, the holy rites go on forever, biding the time of their recall. He was as one in the grip of a bitter wrong; for through the jostling images which filled his mind, the Office continued to ring in persistent undertones.

The light between the great tree trunks grew from splendor to splendor; flashing its level glories through the forest, transfiguring the wood into flame. The sun had reached the rim of the horizon. Some far memory of brilliance was stirring and seeking. A pageant, withal, but not that triumph of earthly love, so fair in the false twilight of a night in the past, so wizened gray and lustful red in the light

of recollection. The beams of the sinking sun were seven candle-sticks of gold. What noble elders follow, crowned with fleurs-de-lis? What mystic chariot was this, within which rides a woman olive-garlanded, robed in hues of living fire and of the fresh spring grass? Memory found what it sought: but he who thus looked back into the past was unaware that neither Lethé nor Eunoë might be his, who had not yet climbed the Purgatorial Mound.

The sun was sinking in the west when Francesco came to a ridge in the woodland, which sloped southward from the high rocks. The path seemed to lead into the heart of a wilderness. Pine woods bordered it and dead bracken and whortleberry spread away under the stiff shadows of the silent trees. A thousand spires began to blacken against the sunset, and Francesco was aware that he was carrying a savage hunger. He had hoped for a manor-house or inn, or some woodman's lodge, but the brambles that had rooted their long feelers across the path made it appear that the track had not been used for years. So rough and tangled did it become that Francesco turned in among the trees, where the dense summer foliage of the beeches had kept the ground clear of brush and bramble.

The prospect of a supperless night under the trees, even though he had never been clogged with heavy feeding at the monastery, made Francesco's thoughts hark back to the inn he had left at Viterbo, and he regretted not having supplied himself with a stock of provisions ere he departed. Suddenly a distant sound made him pause and listen. The sound had a human note, and seemed nearer to him than he had at first imagined. He urged his steed on through the on-coming dusk. It was not long before the trees thinned

before him and streams of golden light, slanting into an open space, gave the clearing the appearance of a forest-chapel at sunset.

From the open ground ahead came the incessant babbling of a thin and querulous voice, that faltered between the prattling of a child and the chatter of a mad soul, talking to the empty air. Sometimes there was a croon in the voice, sometimes a touch of decrepit anger.

A long, green bank, brushed by the boughs of the beech-trees, hid from Francesco the open ground that lay ahead of him. But, though it hid what he desired to see, the bank gave him the chance of approaching unobserved. Dismounting, he went up it on hands and knees, and insinuated a cautious head between the turf and the branches of the beeches.

On the other side of the bank lay a stretch of undulating grass, that rose into mounds and ridges, and dipped into shallow dykes, the mounds and ridges catching the fading sunlight, the hollows lying filled with the shadows. The trunks of the forest-trees shut in this open space on every side as with a palisade. On a mound in the centre stood crags of ruined masonry smothered in ivy, a broken squint in the wall looking like a rent in a cloud, through which the sunlight slanted.

A little old woman, with hair as white as snow, and strange black eyes in a strange and wrinkled face, knelt there, polishing something smooth and round that she held in her lap. The strange sight caused Francesco to peer all the more intently, and he drew back with a quick gasp, when in the suddenly revealed white dome of the head, the shadowy eye-sockets, the glistening teeth in the bare jaws, he

recognized the thing for what it was,—the head of a skeleton.

As he sat there, considering the strange picture, Francesco for a time became oblivious of the cravings of his stomach. It was plain that the woman was mad, for as she polished the skull, she chattered incessantly. He asked himself, what was behind this madness. Death had been here at some time, perhaps with violence, wiping out life and reason, leaving white hair and tragic madness in its wake. The furrows deepened above Francesco's eyes. He sat there in the deepening dusk calling up visions of ruffianism and wrong; the vision of this poor soul's madness made him forget the dangers of the woods by night. Picking his way cautiously among the trees, he came within about five paces of her, before she lifted her head and saw him. Then he crossed himself and gave her a "Pax Dei."—

The little old woman stared at him and said nothing, her lower lip drooping, her inert hands resting on the top of the skull.

Her eyes puzzled Francesco, they were so black and bright, like the eyes of a bird. There was a startled wonder in them, as though she had never seen such a creature before. Then she suddenly wrapped the head in a bright-colored scarf which lay by her side, arose, and started through the thicket, putting her arms around the thing as a mother would hold a child.

The sun was now below the hills and the woods were turning black. Francesco felt a vague shudder go through him as, following the woman, he arrived at the fragments of a ruin, that was smothered up in ivy. An arched doorway with broken pillars led into

a vault in which there stood an open coffin. He saw her approach the receptacle for the dead, place the skull in the coffin and close the lid. Then she crooned softly to herself and hobbled away into the dusk.

The thought that there must be a hut close by, struck Francesco with the pang of the returning consciousness of hunger, when suddenly he saw a light gleaming through the night as from a blood-red star. Straining his eyes, he peered through the dusk in the direction whence the light shone.

Under the shadow of a wooded spur that ran down into the valley Francesco saw a tower rising from an island in the centre of one of the great pools, of which the region abounded.

The walls of the tower shone crimson in the light of the rising moon, glowing above the black water as though it had been built of iron at red heat. Thousands of willows and aspens grew about the mere, and in the shallows were sedges and sword-leaved flags.

Remounting his steed, Francesco resolved to ask for food and a night's lodging, rather than to traverse the forests at night. He was spent, and so was his steed, and the region was infested by all manner of outlaws, who made the roads insecure. As he approached the mere, a large boat put out from a water-gate and crawled with long oars, like a beetle on the surface of the water. It disappeared in the night, and Francesco decided to hail it upon its return, in the meanwhile watching the red tower overhanging the pool. The reflection of the walls in the rippling waters was a broken redness wrinkling into black.

Francesco's wait was destined to be brief. The barge soon returned, and hailing the astonished oarsmen, he requested to be rowed across the mere. They seemed to hold silent council, then, seeing it was but one man, they grumblingly ran out planks for Francesco's horse, and he rode into the barge, remaining in the saddle and caressing his steed's black ears.

At the water-gate a lean man in a black tunic stood waiting. He gave the newcomer the blind stare of two watery eyes and, upon learning his request, disappeared inside of the tower. After a wait of brief duration he returned, and, beckoning to Francesco to enter the dark gateway, called to some attendant, who took charge of his horse and then led the guest to a dimly lighted chamber, in which he discovered the forms of a woman and a man. As Francesco appeared on the threshold, the man precipitately arose and, whispering a few words in the woman's ear, retreated by an opposite door. Francesco was so absorbed in the scrutiny of his surroundings, that he paid little heed to the action of the one of the occupants. The castellan ushered him into the chamber, closing the door behind him, and Francesco, making the best of a strange situation, approached the woman, who, reclining upon a dais, was regarding him intently, and preferred his request for a night's hospitality.

"Our guest-table waits for strangers," she replied with a smile, bidding Francesco to take the seat vacated by the former occupant, then regarding him with unconcealed interest.

For a moment Francesco was mute; the suddenness of the transition deprived him of speech. Perhaps it

was also her complete fearlessness of manner, bare of every trace of aloofness, which had a somewhat disconcerting effect upon one who had not known woman's society in a long space of time, which caused the consciously awkward silence, as now and then their eyes met.

Her face had a singular charm. The lips were thin, tinged slightly with scorn, yet tender when she smiled. The eyes were large, of greenish hue, and strange lights seemed to flash from their depths. There was a rich, round beauty upon the face; the rose tints of the skin warm, and sensuous as the bloom upon fruit. She was very slender where the girdle ran, but big of bosom and long of limb.

Unconsciously, as he joined her at the board and partook of food and drink, she drew from him his tale. Her swift comprehension was as a magic mirror, wherein all creatures showed their thoughts. Not being burdened with the reflective sense, he flung his words in the welkin's face, with the candour of one who had no shame or fear.

Between the woman's talking and his hunger, Francesco found little time for reflection. He did not see a dim figure with a white face pass out behind the hangings, turning half furtively to look at the two at the high table, before it disappeared. There were no lights in the hall, save a torch on a bracket by the screens. Francesco saw the smoke wavering up into the gloom of the roof, and the way it vanished into nothingness made him think of the updrift of souls into the night.

He was silent a while, thinking of the little old woman and the skull she cherished. The woman beside him felt his silence like the sudden closing of

a door.

"You are thinking of some one?" she asked. "Or is it that you are tired?"

Francesco held his head high, as one looking into the distance. There seemed no reason why he should conceal the goal of his journey.

He stared at the flaring torchlight as he talked, but had he looked into the woman's eyes, he might have seen a sudden shiver of light leap up into them. She became watchful, studying Francesco as he talked, yet keeping a white calm.

"You journey to Naples," she said at last with a strange smile while she caught his wrist, her tense arm quivering, her eyes looking into his. "Do you not fear the contagion of that Court of Love?"

Her face seemed suddenly to blaze with intense passion, her eyes taking a reddish lustre and shining like points of fire.

"Hot blood and a cold ending," he said, looking past her, and she took her hand from his wrist and sat silent and stiff, her eyes fixed upon his face. Then she clapped her hands. An attendant conducted Francesco to a chamber which had been prepared for him, but as he passed out of her presence, he still felt the burning touch of her fingers and the strange look of her eyes.—

Sleep would not come readily to Francesco that night, as he lay on the couch prepared for him high up in the Red Tower. A full moon had risen and his wakeful mood shared the wonder and the mystery of the night. A dog bayed in the courtyard; the sound had but the effect of intensifying the stillness. The

mere lay like a pavement of black marble, with no wavelets lapping against the base of the tower.

Francesco had lived through many strange moments, since he left Viterbo, and chance had thrown him with a singular suddenness into the life that he sought. Vividly in the midst of his wakefulness he saw the proud beauty of Ilaria as contrasted with the fierce pallor in the face of the lady of the castle, whose name he knew not. It seemed to Francesco that these two confronted one another with a mysterious hatred. And he was conscious of desires that had been awakened within him, the heat of the blood, the simmering of the brain. The woman was beautiful, lithe and limp as a snake and he felt, that once she had set her mind on gratifying a desire, resistance would be utterly in vain.

It was towards midnight when Francesco fell asleep, and his sleep had lasted for about an hour when he started awake in bed with a loud cry and a flinging out of the hands. He sat up with a shiver of fear, awakened from a dream in which torrents of black water had poured down to smother him. A wind had suddenly arisen far off in the valley. Francesco heard it sweeping out of the night, whistling through the aspens and the willows until it struck the tower and moaned about it, like a desperate and dying thing clinging to something that it loved. A cloud passed across the face of the moon. In the court below the watch-dogs set up a fierce howling.

Francesco crossed himself, feeling the presence of evil in the moaning of the wind. The night had sprung from moonbeams and slumber into a tumult of unrest. He heard the water splashing against the base of the tower.

The moon came out again and Francesco rose from the bed and went to the window. The mere was scarred with lines of foam and the aspen boughs glittered and clashed in the moonlight. Francesco, greatly astonished, saw the barge was crossing the water with long, sinuous strokes of the oar. In the barge there stood a figure on horseback, motionless and black as jet, save for a sparkle of moonlight about its head. On the far bank among the aspen trees, a company of horsemen waited, spears erect, helmets glimmering, the wind tossing the dark manes of their steeds.

The nose of the barge turned to the bank, and almost instantly the wind ceased, and a great calm fell. The night grew quiet. The watch-dogs turned into their kennels. The plash of the water against the tower grew less and less.

Francesco saw the black horseman ride up the bank and join those who waited. There was not a sound save the muffled beat of horses' hoofs, as they turned and rode away among the trunks of the aspen trees. The barge had thrust out again and was recrossing the mere, with wrinkles of silver running from its snout. Francesco watched it with a strange misgiving. Who was the man who had disappeared the instant he had entered the presence of the woman? Why were armed men coming and going at this hour of the night? Why should the wind rise so suddenly and die down again when the barge touched the further bank? Reality and dream mingled strangely in the deep of the night, and these happenings made him question his own eyes and ears.

Again he betook himself to his rest, but it was some

time ere sleep would come to his eyes. And then it seemed not sleep, but rather a deep trance, that seemed to hold him enthralled, seemed to benumb his limbs and deprive him of all energy, as if some opiate had been mingled with his draught.

He was suddenly conscious of an arch in the heavy stone, parting. In the opening there stood a woman, tall, lithe, slender. Instinctively he knew it was the lady of the tower. She held a lamp behind the folds of her skirt, and after she had entered his chamber the aperture closed noiselessly behind her.

Francesco stared at her wide-eyed, afraid to speak, afraid to move. Was it indeed the woman at whose side he had partaken of drink and food,—or was it some restless phantom haunting the abode of former days? He saw the strange glitter of her eyes in the midst of the darkness, for the moon was again hidden behind a cloud; he heard the sudden shrill clanging of a bell from some distant cloister or convent.

"You are awake!" she said in a whisper.

And suddenly the intimate dimness of the room was surcharged with faint perfumes, as the woman slowly walked towards him, looking at him steadily with deep, long breath.

He leaped up, sitting on the edge of the couch. Her fine finger tips rested on his shoulders, preventing him from rising. He saw the whiteness of her arms, bare to the shoulders; his eyes rested on the soft curves of the lithe body, under the clinging, transparent texture of a gown vying in whiteness with her skin. He looked up and trembled.

"What did you see, my friend?" she queried, bending over him.

"The wind waked me at midnight," he replied evasively.

The pressure of her fingers increased.

"What did you see?"

He noted the strange glitter in her eyes. The strange perfume which clung to her, crept to his brain.

"I saw armed men waiting among the aspens; a man on a horse ferrying across in the barge."—

His straightforwardness sent a momentary shadow across her face and for a moment she shut her lips tightly. But a strange light played in her eyes, as she said:

"Friends come and go in the night. There may be pain in their passing to and fro. The man you saw was my brother!"

She spoke with a level and unhesitating voice, yet in her eyes there gleamed a vague smouldering of unrest.

"I do not even know your name," he said, longing to clasp those firm white hands which were so close to his eyes.

"What is a name?" she shrugged, then, with a laugh, she added: "Has the night taken away your courage?"

Their eyes met.

"What is there to be afraid of?" he queried tremulously.

Again her eyes thrilled him.

"I have tricked you!"

He started to rise, grasping the white soft hands in his own and relinquishing them the next moment, as if he had touched fire. She held him easily with a glance of her strange eyes.

"What do you want of me?" he stammered. "Why are you here?"

"Come,—let me show you!" she said, taking him by the hand and leading him towards the window which looked out upon the mere.

He followed her resistlessly.

In a flash he felt her arms about him, drawing him close to her. She threw words in his face, with a fierce, intimate whispering.

Francesco recoiled, as if he had been bitten by a snake. But the magic was too strong for his starved senses; ever and ever she caught him towards her, kissing him with moist, hungry lips, while her eyes scintillated in strange lights that made him dizzy, and her arms were coiled about him with a strength he had not guessed.

With a choking outcry he succeeded at last in releasing himself, and turning to the door, tore at it, and found it fastened on the other side.

He stood there, facing her, white with fear, anger, passion. He knew if she willed to make him her own, he was lost, and she came slowly towards him, with the soundless tread of a tigress who has cornered her prey.

She was regarding him with a strange amused smile, then she held out her white arms.

"Are these charms so poor, that they must go begging?" she said with a return of the sardonic glitter in her eyes.

"In the name of mercy—go!" he stammered with blind pleading eyes.

"The halo cannot fail you," she replied with a laugh, as her glance swept him from head to foot. "Fool—fool!" She placed her hands tightly about his throat, looking into his eyes.

"Should you learn at the court of Naples to value the earthly joys more than the heavenly,—return,—and be forgiven!"—She kissed him and sent him reeling against the wall.

For a moment he stood paralyzed, facing her in the darkness, while her laughter, high and shrill, resounded in his ears. He rushed at her, tried to detain her, as she reached the arch. But as the panel parted, a figure suddenly came between him and the woman. The moon had emerged from the cloud, behind which it had been hidden. Francesco recoiled and staggered back into his chamber, as if he had been dealt a sudden blow. For, swift as the shadow had come between them, ere the panel closed behind the woman—he had recognized Raniero Frangipani.

End of Book the Third.

Book the Fourth

THE PASSION

CHAPTER I

SIREN LAND



IT was early on the following morning when Francesco saddled his steed and departed from the Red Tower. He did not trust himself to remain longer under the same roof with the woman whose spell boded evil to soul and body, much less to face Raniero Frangipani and to have his worst fears and suspicions confirmed. He had spent the remainder of the night awake with the shadows, dazed, unable to think, beset by weird, mocking phantoms. The woman's insatiate kisses still burned on his lips; her strange perfume still clung to the air; her passion had seared his soul. If he remained, he was lost. The spark that had slumbered in his soul

had suddenly leaped into a consuming flame; the voice of the body, hushed so long, began to clamor; the long restraint threatened to break down the self-imposed barriers with its own sheer weight. A strange dizziness had seized him; everything seemed to swim in a blood-red haze. It was only by degrees that reason returned; the phantom of desire faded before the memory of Ilaria.

Almost dazed he crossed the mere, expecting every moment to hear the ferryman recalled and resolved to resist to the utmost any attempt to stop his departure.

But nothing happened. An enchanted silence encompassed the castle, unbroken even by the voices of the slowly awakening dawn.

Thousand and one thoughts, desires and fears rushed through Francesco's brain, as he rode down into the picturesque valley, which encompassed the feudal masonry where he had spent the night. And with the memory of the white arms, which had held him in their close embrace, with the memory of the thirstily parted lips, which had well-nigh kissed him to his doom, with the memory of the haunting eyes which had discoursed to him a secret he was never to know, an indescribable longing for happiness stole into his heart, a longing which made him utterly oblivious of time and space and caused him to spur his steed to greater haste in the desire to arrive at his goal.

Little as Francesco had mingled with the world, inexperienced as he was in mundane matters, his instinct had not been slow to inform him that Raniero was leading a double life, that he was deceiving Ilaria, who perchance trusted him utterly. The certainty of the indisputable fact struck him with

quick pang. Was Ilaria awake to the truth? And what had been the effect of the stunning revelation?

In the ban of these conflicting emotions, in which love and doubt alternately held the balance in the scales, Francesco rode towards Circé's land.

On all sides lonely stretches of country expanded before the solitary horseman's eyes. With each onward step the scene changed, and Francesco's abstracted gaze roamed far away to the distant mountain ranges of the Basilicata, revealing reaches of fantastic peaks and stretching away in long aerial lines towards the sun-fraught plains of Calabria.

Though he pushed onward with restless determination, Francesco was compelled to devote the hours of high-noon to rest and refreshments in this cloister or that, which he came upon during his journey. For the glare of the August sun was intense, and though the nights were cool, the roads were infested by all manner of outlaws, making progress slow and hazardous.

While at a Cistercian monastery during the siesta hours on the third day of his journey, the first tidings of a battle between the hosts of Anjou and Conradino reached Francesco's ear. The armies had met at Tagliacozzo in Apulia—so a peasant had informed the monks—but the outcome of the conflict was shrouded in mystery. The monks, chiefly old men, who had long cast the vanities of the world behind them, met Francesco's eager questionings with mute shrugs. The quarrels between pope and emperor meant nothing to them.

Ever southward he rode, until, breasting the moors, he saw the strange, tumultuous magic of the

Maremmas drifting into the vague distance of night.

The summer woods in the valleys were as a rolling sea, carved out of ebony. Hill rose beyond hill, each more dim and misty and alluring. A great silence held. Enchantment brooded over Terra di Lavoro.

The last day of his journey had come.

The torrid plains of Torre del Greco dreamed deserted in the glow of the noonday sun. The leaves of the palms and the branches of the mimosa hung limp and motionless. The sky was as a burning sapphire. The glare of the sun was almost insufferable, as it fell over the arid expanse of the Neapolitan Campagna to the pencilled line of the southern horizon, where a long circle divided the misty shimmering dove-color of the Tyrrhene Sea from the pale, sun-fraught sky.

The region, as far as the eye could reach, was deserted. Almost it seemed as if the spell of a magician had banished at once all life and sound. Mala Terra the inhabitants called the stretches beyond the Cape of Circé, where, grim and impregnable upon its chalk cliffs, rose Astura, the sinister stronghold of the Frangipani, silent, bleached against the background of the restless waves, which laved its base.

With a shudder Francesco skirted the dreary castello, and the name of Ilaria flew to his lips. Was it upon yonder lonely castle height she was waiting Raniero's return; was it up yonder the thread of her destiny was interminably spinning itself out in self-consuming, wasting monotony? Was she, who had been created for happiness, slowly pining away, remote from all she loved and held dear on earth? Or

had the lure of the Siren land drawn her into the vortex of life and the passions of the sun-kissed shores? Francesco shivered despite the noonday heat, and, fondling the ears of his steed, urged it onward over the rocky expanse.

The sun was low in the heavens when Francesco came within sight of Naples. From Castellamare to Posilippo the graceful lines of the gulf rose on the horizon; the blue cone of Vesuvius was wreathed in smoke; Resina and Portici reposed snugly at its base. Eagerly Francesco's eye scanned the outlines of spires and domes as he rode towards the city. The surrounding hillsides were scarlet and purple, gold and bronze, and great masses of green where ilex-trees and acanthus grew. The wine-pressers were shouting gaily. There was so much light and life in the world, and he felt almost as if he had lost them in the shadow of the cloister.

Military rule, he saw, as he drew near, obtained in the place. To the challenge of the sentry at the gate of San Gennaro he gave his name, and "From Viterbo" repeated the soldier, calling the news back over his shoulder.

"From Viterbo!" the word passed on. Through the arched gate, Francesco could see a clustering confusion of people. There was an aspect of reckless merriment about the crowded streets.

A tall horseman, just inside the gate, beckoned, and Francesco rode slowly through the arch.

"From Viterbo?" repeated a big man significantly. "Well, friend, you bear no olive! Hardly the days these for the olive of peace to circulate in Italy!"

A snicker ran through the crowd.

"But, nevertheless, we are free to perceive that you are a messenger, and all the more welcome!"

"I know not for whom you take me!" returned Francesco. "But—"

"Are you not a messenger?" interrupted the large man.

A strange audacity possessed Francesco of a sudden.

"Certainly I am a messenger," he returned fearlessly, —"but not to your rebellious city, Messere!"

The last part of his speech was either not heard, or not heeded, for at the first there was loud applause. In the midst of the clamor, Francesco was endeavoring to make himself understood, but finding his efforts futile, he resigned himself to silence, and was carried onward with the crowd, calm as the atom at the centre of a cyclone, yet noting all the incidents of the way. He watched the streets with their luxuriant picturesqueness, so different in appearance from the severe and heroic style of Viterbo. At last Francesco accosted the big horseman, inquiring the direction of the palace. Thereupon the latter became more civil and offered to accompany the stranger in person. This innuendo Francesco thought best to decline, giving as his reason that he intended putting up at an inn, it being too late to see the Regent.

Having received the desired intelligence, Francesco abandoned himself for the nonce to the charm of the hour, the magic of the place. As he rode leisurely through the streets, crowds came and went from Santa Maria. Now and then the note of a mandolin

was heard. All was life, mirth, happiness! How fair this city,—the city that seemed to be girt only by lilies! The flower-girl, nodding and smiling, distributed her violets, embedded in geraniums. The blind beggar touched his harp; in the distance were heard the rhythmic strains of a Barcarole.

Over the whole gulf a faint, transparent mist had arisen.

The magnolias shone white in the dying light. The soughing of the wind through the leafy boughs sounded like the faint music of Aeolian harps.

The dying light touched the walls of houses and palaces with mellow hues, then faded away before the swift southern night. Here and there torches gleamed; then the city grew silvery in the moonlight which flooded the heavens.

As in a dream Francesco rode in the direction indicated by the horseman. Again he was to enter the sphere of his former life; again he was to move in the sphere of a court, again he was to taste the life of the past. It was the same,—yet not the same. Then he had been happy, care-free, loving and beloved. Now he stood alone, looking from a frosty elevation upon the joys of life! Would the dark phantoms of the past vanish, here in this radiant air, under this cloudless, sun-fraught sky?

The inn, where he took lodging, was built after the manner of the thirteenth century, in a hollow square. It was of white stone, simple, harmonious, with quaint carvings and ornamentations. The Byzantine arches of the cloistered walks were its chief beauty, disclosing a vista of the garden with its orange trees and grape-vines; its waving rose bushes, which

encircled the ancient fountain. A long parapet of dusky tiles left open the beautiful view of the Bay of Naples.

After Francesco's steed had been properly cared for, after he had refreshed himself with a bath and had partaken of food and drink, he felt irresistibly drawn into the vortex of gladsome humanity, which enlivened the streets towards the Vice-regal palace.

What an enchanted land this was, contrasted with the shadowy courts of Viterbo, that hill-encircled city with her dusky shrubbery, her funereal cypresses!

How fair were the flowery fields, the marble villas, encircling the bay! The wonderful glow of color seemed like fairyland enchantment! The gaily dressed crowds that thronged streets and piazzas, the brilliant processions, continuing way into the night, the mass of scarlet, blue and gold, which flashed out from under the torch-light, the music, the tumult, the laughter, the fantastic, the freedom:—here life was indeed but a merry holiday.

The night was radiant. Sky and houses and bay were aglow with her silver beams. Merry groups were passing to and fro. There was music, singing, happiness,—all the gentleness of a perfect night.

Francesco walked more slowly in the moonlight. Suddenly a couple passed him: a man and a woman. The woman wore a crimson cloak, and in passing she looked up into his face. It was only a moment's meeting; but all the color had faded from Francesco's cheeks. He looked back: they had disappeared among the throngs.

For a moment he stood still as one paralyzed. Could

his eyes have deceived him? Impossible! He could never mistake that face, nor was there another like it on earth! He faltered, stopped, recovered himself, then retraced his steps in search of the two. But his efforts were utterly in vain. As one dazed he returned to the inn. The convent bells of Santa Lucia, pealing the midnight hour, found him pacing up and down within the narrow confines of his chamber. Now and then he paused and looked out into the night. Only when the noise and merriment had died to silence he sought his couch, but it was long ere sleep would come to him. For in the woman with the unknown cavalier, who had passed him without recognition, he had recognized Ilaria Caselli.

CHAPTER II

THE LADY OF SHADOWS



T was early on the following day when Francesco took the direction of the palace. The

city appeared gay and bright; the beautiful isles of Ischia and Capri, like twin outposts guarding an earthly paradise. He had arrived at the hour of dusk, which had soon faded into the swift southern night, and much of the magic of the scene had thus been veiled before his gaze. Now he saw and marvelled.

All around stretched the bay in its azure immensity, its sweeping curves bounded on the left by the rocky Sorrentine promontory, with Sorrento, Meta and a cluster of little fishing villages, nestling on the olive-clad precipices, half hidden by orange groves and vineyards and the majestic form of Monte Angelo towering above. Farther along the coast rose Vesuvius, the tutelary genius of the scene, its vine-clad lower slopes presenting a startling contrast to the dark smoke-wreathed cone of the mountain. On the right the graceful undulations of the Camaldoli hills descended to the beautifully indented bay of Putcoli, while Naples herself, with Portici and Torre del Greco, reposed as a marble quarry between the blue waters of the bay. Beyond, in the far background, the view was shut in by a phantom range of snowy peaks, an offshoot of the Abruzzi mountains, faintly discerned in the purple haze of the horizon.

As Francesco strode along his wonder increased step by step. He seemed to have invaded the realms of the sun, who sent his unrelenting light rays down upon glistening pavements composed of lava, reflecting the beams with all the brilliancy of mosaic. Notwithstanding the glare of August, balconies, casements, terraces and galleries were enlivened by a gay and merry crowd. The gloomy fronts of marble and granite had disappeared under silken hangings

and garlands of flowers. Everywhere there was joy and gladness, and the bells from Santa Chiara rang as joyously over the city and gulf as if the papal Inderdict held no terrors for these children of an azure sky.

The situation was nevertheless acute. A Clementine court and a Ghibelline populace, who defied alike the Pontiff and their self-imposed ruler. Excommunication was hanging black over the leaders of this movement; the court was in evil moral repute, and it was difficult to foresee whither matters were drifting under these sun-fraught, cloudless skies.

Francesco requested and obtained immediate audience of the Duke of Lerma, Anjou's representative in the kingdom of Sicily. The interview being terminated, and his duties outlined, he strode out into the palace gardens, which sloped in picturesque terraces down towards the bay.

With fevered pulses he leaned against the parapet of the broad stone wall which encircled the gardens, his eyes resting on the enchanted landscape, the clustered towers of Naples, beyond which rose the smoke-wreathed cone of Vesuvius. Thence his gaze wandered to the sea, which glowed from rose to violet and sapphire, all melting into unity of lapis lazuli, and finally down into the Parthenopean fields, where the atmosphere heaved with the pulsing intensity of high noon.

On all sides the spell of Circé enfolded him triumphantly. Truly, here all painful broodings might be forgotten, where thought and sight were alike suffused with the radiance of sea and sky. It was a place of dawns and sunsets, of lights rising amber in

the East over purple hills and amethystine waters; of magic glows at evening in the west with cypresses and yews carven in ebony against primrose skies, while the terraces blazed with flower-filled urns, and roses overspread the balustrade with crimson flame.

How vivid the life of the past weeks stood out before Francesco's eyes, a life crowned by the memory of his arrival in this Siren City, and his strange meeting with Ilaria. It seemed like a mocking dream; yet, the pain in his heart informed him, it was true!

How long he had stood there, he did not know, when he suddenly gave a start.

An opening door,—a light foot-fall—he stood face to face with Ilaria.

She paused; stately, unsmiling, reserved. A white silence seemed to enfold her as their eyes met.

"There is some error," she said, with a retrograde movement. "I will withdraw—"

"There is no error!" the words leaped from Francesco's lips. "Or perchance there is! Well,—is it true?"

The words were uttered almost brutally.

"I do not understand!" she replied icily.

"Why are you at Naples?"

His face was a mere whiteness amid shadows.

"Why are you here?" she replied, straightening with a sharp lifting of the head.

"Perhaps I am here to spy on you!"

"The office does you honor! First, a traitor—then, a spy—"

Her words were fierce and bitter.

"What are you saying?" he flashed. "Betrayal is not man's prerogative alone!"

She shuddered. His words bit brutally into the truth. For a moment she stood rigid, searching his eyes and the very depths of his soul.

And so, for a brief space, they faced each other in silence. Francesco acknowledged anew, and with a mortal pang, that here was a woman for whom a man might give his life and count it naught. A woman to gain whose love, a man might sell his soul. Ilaria had come into her own, as never in her earlier youth. Like all great beauty, hers was serious. It had acquired a touch of majesty and mystery, a depth of intensity and significance.

"Is Raniero at Naples?" Francesco spoke at last.

She faced him defiantly, as if resenting his attitude.

"I knew not you were concerned in your former rival!"

Her utterance seemed part of the incomprehensible cruelty of life. His face was hard and white as he regarded her.

"Perchance my concern is all for my present one!"

"I do not understand—" she faltered, her hands over her bosom. Yet her tone had lost its defiant ring.

As in mute questioning her eyes were on his face.

"As I passed down the Via Forinara last night, I passed a woman and a man. The woman was garbed in crimson, and there was no sign of recognition in her eyes. The woman I knew. Who was the man?"

Ilaria's face was very pale.

"What is he to you,—the monk?"

He came a step nearer.

"Who was the man?"

She gave a little nervous laugh.

"Stefano Maconi,—one of the nobles of the court!" she said, with a drooping of the head. Then with a quick touch of resentment: "Have you heard the name before?"

Francesco ignored the irony of her tones.

"What is he to you?" he queried sternly. His face looked pale and drawn, his eyes shone with an almost supernatural lustre.

"Really," she squirmed, "I knew not that I stood in need of a confessor. I have one already,—and I do not intend to supplant him with another!"

"You have not answered my question!" he insisted. "To the office of your confessor I do not aspire. I am not suited for that exalted position!"

There was something in his eyes that frightened her.

"And why?"—she faltered.

"I should not prove so passive a listener!"

For a moment she faced him in silence. Then, with a

sudden return of her old hauteur, she flashed:

"Of what do you accuse me?"

He did not speak. But the look he gave her sent the hot blood curdling to her cheeks; ebbing back, it left them paler than before.

"You have not answered my question!" he said at last.

She lifted heavy lids and eyed him wondering, as one waking from a dream.

"What do you want of me?"

"What is Stefano Maconi to you?" he queried more fiercely, grasping her wrists, and compelling her to raise her eyes to his.

"Stefano Maconi is nothing to me!" she replied hoarsely.

Never had he spoken thus to her. As their eyes met, she noted that he had changed. With a quick pang she saw how thin and haggard he had grown.

"Is this the truth?" Gropingly her hands went out to him, her witch-like eyes held his own and like the cry of a tortured soul it came from her lips:

"It is the truth!"

Her voice died in a sob; her whole body was shaken with convulsive tremors, when she found herself caught up in his arms.

For a moment she abandoned herself wholly to his embrace, while terms of endearment fell deliriously from his lips. Again and again he kissed the pale lips, the eyes of the woman he loved better than life.

How long, it seemed to Ilaria, since she had leaned over the parapets of Avellino, had watched the sunset light fade into the night! And one night of all, how slowly the moon had risen! How white the magnolias had shimmered, while the distant Liris sang his slumber song! How the red roses burned in the moonlight, as she stole down the path to meet him!

How long ago was it? Now, she could remember every detail of that night; how she started when a sleeping bird uttered a dream note among the leafy boughs, how she listened to her own heart-beats, how she found herself caught up in Francesco's arms.

All her youth, all her days had been poisoned by the thought of what she had done. Resolutely, day after day, month after month, had she fought against the demon of remorse. She had shut eyes and ears to the haunting spectre of the past. And now, steadily, pitilessly, she went back, step for step, through the hell of her past life, the mockery that was bitterer than death, the horror of loneliness, the slow, grinding, relentless agony of her nights and days.

The crowding phantoms of the past would not release her from their shadowy grip. Why had he again come into her life? Why had he again crossed her path?

Staggering, he released her at last, took a backward step and covered his face with his hands.

"I have tried not to lay hands on a thing that it is not mine to touch."

She pointed to his garb. A wondering look passed into her eyes.

At first he noted it not, in the thrall of his own emotions. Then, as she touched him lightly upon the arm, he understood.

"I am here, the legate of Clement, carrying the Interdict, unless Naples acknowledges the supremacy of the Church! For this I have laid aside the cowl!"

Ilaria shivered. He was still a monk,—after all.

There was nothing she could do to help him. That was the bitterest thing of all!

Silence seemed to bind the world into a golden swoon.

"Francesco," she cried, almost with a sob.

He came nearer and took her hands again.

"Let us go down among the terraces!" she said in a whisper. "Let us forget the loud, insistent clamor of the world. Let us be quite still,—as if we were among the poppy-flowers!"

By some strange echoing of the mind the idyls of past days woke like the songs of birds after a storm of rain. Her whole soul yearned out with a wistfulness borne of infinite regret.

Silently they walked down the flower-bordered path.

The panorama from the spot was enchanting. Far below lay the blue waters of the bay; out to seaward lay ancient Baiae with her thousand palaces and the forest of masts at Puteoli; beyond these Sorento and the shimmering islands, bathed by the boundless sea. The vaporous cloud from Vesuvius hung like a cone of snow in the still blue atmosphere.

The foreground was no less enchanting. All round the pavilion lay a verdant, luxuriant wilderness. The mysterious silence of noon brooded over the whole landscape; only a faint hum of life came up from the city. All else was still. Not a living creature seemed to breathe within ear-shot.

He led her to where a fountain plashed in the sun and stone steps ringed a quiet pool.

In the silence she bent over him, her hand on his dark hair.

The tonsure burned her fingers like living fire.

"Why have you done this thing?"

He felt the scorn in her voice; he felt the swift repellence of her body.

Francesco raised his face to that of the woman. It was very pale from the fierceness of the struggle to keep down even the suspicion of emotional sentimentality.

"You ask why I have done this thing?" he spoke dryly at last. "The hour has come when I must tell you, Ilaria! Not that it can steer the vessel of our lives into different channels,—but that at last I may stand vindicated in your sight. I am the son of Gregorio Villani, Grand Master of the Order of St. John. My mother died at my birth. I was raised at the Court of Avellino. So powerful was the influence of my father, that, notwithstanding the protests of the Holy See, he placed his offspring at a Ghibelline court. There came a day when I was summoned to the bedside of my father at San Cataldo. What passed between us during that interview, neither you nor any one on

earth may know. I went into his room a happy, care-free youth. I came out the shadow of my former self,—a monk. One year I lived among shadows in the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino. There I took the vows which made me a prisoner, far more closely bound than you can know; for death alone shall release me from a life which has grown to be a torture. I became a monk half from pity, half from fear. The pity is almost gone; the fear has left me long ago. After a time I was called to Rome. The Church I love not! I am unfit to remain in her service. The monks are to me a hateful body. Willingly, gladly, would I see my scapular replaced by the tunic for my coffin. Yet death is not for me to hope for, or even to dream of,—and in vain I ask, what holds the future?"

Ilaria's head had drooped over his; her eyes wandered blindly over the ground. Then a warm drop fell to the stone at her feet.

During his recital the very soul in Francesco seemed to have withered with dread, and he seemed to shrivel up bodily and to grow feeble and old and wilted, as a leaf that the frost has touched.

"The memory pains you," she said at last.

He bit his lips.

"Deem you, I forget when I am silent? But it is not the thing itself that haunts me! It is the fact that I have lost the power over myself—"

"You have suffered—"

"It is the fact that I have come to the end of my courage,—to the point where I find myself a coward!"

"Surely there is a limit to what one may bear—"

"And he who has once reached that limit never knows when he may reach it again!"

He looked up with a sudden piteous catching of the breath.

"What will you do?" she spoke after a pause.

He held her hands in a close, passionate clasp. A silence that seemed to have no end had fallen about them.

"My allotted task," he said at last, in a voice more dead than alive.

"No,—no,—no—!" she started up suddenly. "Cannot you see,—will you never understand—oh! the bitterness, the misery of it all!"

She clung to him with all her might.

"Come away with me! What have you to do with this dead world of priests and monks! They are full of the dust of bygone ages! Come out of this plague-ridden Church,—come with me into the sunlight! I love you —I have always loved you,—always—"

She bent blindly towards him.

"Take me away from here,—Francesco,—take me away from here! Since I came here my feet seem to have grown heavy with this lotus-laden air. At times it sweeps over me like desperation,—I lose the faculty of thinking, I lose the power over myself!"

"I thought you were at Astura!" he said tentatively, the affair in the Red Tower flashing through his consciousness.

She gave a quick start.

"I am a woman, and I stand alone! I have lived in hell ever since I set foot in Astura. Almost have I lost the courage to look life in the face. How I have wanted you!" she continued, with a wan, wistful smile. "Ever I see you standing against the background of a great silence, a silence that engulfs, that maddens, that kills! And you will go from me, leave me a prey to this gray, suffocating loneliness, which hovers as a pall over my soul! I am nothing to Raniero! He seeks his pleasures elsewhere! The lure of the body drove him to me,—it has vanished,—thank God even for that! I should die in his embrace. He knows that I loathe him, that my soul spurns him! And he knows that I love you! Yet, though he has forfeited every right, human and divine, he grudges my love to another. For days and days he left me alone within the gray walls of Astura, until in a fit of desperation I left one night, and came here, to forget. His insults began in Rome. He went so far as to bring his mistress to the Frangipani palace. I have heard it whispered there is a curse on Astura. 'Astura—mala terra,—maledetta!' A beggar uttered these words, whom Raniero struck for obstructing his path, on the day when we arrived!"

A sudden blood-red cloud seemed to come before Francesco's eyes. With a voice bare of intonation, he recited his own adventure in the Red Tower, voicing his suspicions and fears.

Ilaria betrayed no surprise.

"He has never forgiven Fonté Gaia," she said, with drooping head. "And yet he was untrue to me even then! From that hour matters began to grow worse. Recklessly he cast the last semblance of decorum to

the winds. When I protested against living under the same roof with his mistress, he smilingly brought me to Astura, leaving me, as he said, in undisturbed possession. My youth destroyed, my soul poisoned, I accepted my fate! I am the lady of the Frangipani! Sold, and bought, and paid for!"

Ilaria had made mere truth of the matter, neither justifying nor embellishing. Her clear, bleak words were the more pathetic for their very simpleness.

With a great cry, he took her in his arms, kissed her dusky tresses, kissed her flower-soft face. The dimmed sunlight, falling in upon them, enveloped them as with a halo.

"And you are happy here?" he spoke at last.

She gave a shrug.

"Here as elsewhere it is a phantom scene," she said, with her wan smile. "But if the fellowship of phantoms be ordained, it is well that they be like those of Naples, radiant."

"Am I too, then, a phantom like the rest?"

Like an echo a voice said:

"A phantom—like the rest."

"And is he—a phantom too?"

She looked up into his eyes.

"Raniero—"

"That other—"

Her face was very pale.

"Why do you dwell on him?"

"Are you not Queen of Phantoms,—Proserpina,—Lady of Shadows, you—as in the masque at Avellino?"

She shivered in his arms. He pressed her more closely to his heart.

"It was a long time ago!"

"And then as now you moved in a masque, in which I have no part."

A long silence enfolded them. She nestled close to him.

"I am tired,—very tired," she crooned, as a child about to fall asleep. "Francesco, help me to forget the years! I am afraid!"

"Afraid?"

"Of myself! Sometimes I dare not be alone at night! No,—no,—it is not that! The inner darkness! There is no weeping there,—only silence,—silence,—and the gathering gloom!"

She held his hands in her own.

"But for this," she cried with passionate pressure, "I should long have cursed God and died—"

Her voice died away in the empty stillness without response.

"It is peace I crave," she said wearily, "a peace, such as broods over a sunset world!"

"The peace of a dying day!" he replied. "The peace I

seek is of a day that stoops not to evening."

"And this peace,—have you found it?"

Her eyes were fixed gravely on his own.

"I am as one who gropes in twilight by a path half seen, towards a goal he does not know. Not for me the peace of the goal! But there is peace also of the quest: a peace I would not forego!"

They had arisen and walked for a time in silence, seeking the remoter regions of the garden. The softened siesta lights gave to the distant hills an aspect of pearl and jasper.

It was drawing towards sunset; red banners streaked the amethyst of the western sky.

A saffron mist enveloped the curves of Vesuvius, shot with gold and crimson, merging in dusky purple. In the plains the fertile fields reclaimed round the base of Castiglioné gleamed russet with vines, gray with olives. Beyond the grim walls of distant Astura stretched the chalk-lands of Torre del Greco.

As they walked side by side, Francesco felt the rhythmic life in Dana's body. The wan, appealing face was close to his. An instant, and the passion of the sky leaped into it. Theirs was the calm of a still pool, which hovers till the wind breaks it into the myriad agitations of life. He drew her towards him; her head resting on his shoulder, as if there she had found a home.

The evening star shone out in the fading sky.

The dusk was travelling towards the night.

Creation shivered towards a deeper dream.

The summer moon had risen, shedding its magic light over the Gulf of Naples.

The very soul of Francesco was thrilled by the harmony around him; the harmony in the moon's golden trail, which fell upon the waters, a blazing path, reaching from Posilippo to the rim of the horizon, harmony in the soft murmur of the sea, and the light breeze which carried, together with the salt freshness of the sea-air, sweet perfumes from the shores of Sorento with their lemon and orange groves; harmony in the silvery curves of Vesuvius, wrapped in luminous mists, its rugged cone emitting a white smoke, which trailed along the upper zones of the air, the summit of the mountain flaring up from time to time, like dying embers consecrated to the gods, the gods who had died, had risen again, and had again expired.

"How wondrous lovely the night!" Francesco at last turned to his silent companion. "All nature seems as one magic blossom—"

"My blossom-season is past," she answered very lightly.

"It is always blossom-season where Proserpina treads," said Francesco, his eyes fixed on the face he loved so well.

"You look almost as you did, when we were both happy."

"Is it so long ago? Yes, I am old, Ilaria. Our youth seems far, far away!"

"Perhaps I too am not old enough, to be young! Our youth—" she paused with a sob.

Francesco gazed at her solicitously.

"Even here?"

She gave him a wan, small smile.

"Just now, one might forget!"

"It is a great art, to forget," said Francesco tenderly. "You need it, Ilaria! What sufferings have been yours!"

She returned his look.

He understood.

Ilaria saw the pain written on his brow, as he looked at her with tenderness undisguised. She felt his spirit lying openly before her, as when they were both at the Court of Avellino.

"From the look on your forehead," she said softly, "you have lived long in your cell, since last we met! So it was meant, I think, from the beginning!"

"Assuredly so it was meant," he replied. "But I am very sorrowful, for I see not what was meant for you!"

She smiled at him, as if to reassure.

"If Fate has guided my life ill, not yours the fault," she said soothingly.

In her, reserve still obtained, yet without a trace of her late perplexing defiance. Asperity had given way to a great gentleness.

"Yet," Francesco hesitated,—"I am tormented by one thought: that for you it had perchance been better, if —"

He paused with drooping eyes, then continued:

"I could not profit by the dispensation of Clement and remain a true man. But you—" and again he paused.

A flash of her old-time perverseness lighted up Ilaria's sad eyes.

"Why pause?" she asked, arching her brow. "You mean that which is moral disaster for one, might be salvation for the other? And that, since my salvation should be dearer to you than your own—"

She broke out into quizzical mirth. But she was swiftly grave again, though tremulous.

"I, too, have lost myself in the quest of happiness," she said, clasping and unclasping her white fingers. "Dread and desire have beaten me hither and thither! Great waves have tossed me! On the very day of your departure from Avellino the Viceroy asked me whom I would wed! Your name leaped to my lips. I told him I would have none other. Even as I spoke the dread seized me! I said to myself: this thing can never be! Then you went away—and I was engulfed in darkness. When we met at Rome I realized what I had done! Yet in the very effort to keep you far, I drew you near! Thus Fate had willed it! When we met at Fonté Gaia, I knew what in one sunset of Avellino I had merely dreamed: my love for you lived—in all my life the one abiding light. Longing and horror racked me! She is cold, and foul, and false, that White Lady—and the gifts she offers turn to poison in the grasp. But it was that other who conquered,—your White Lady,—not mine! She was ever a generous enemy, and in taking you from me,

she has given me back my love!"

She had been looking at him with wide piteous eyes, even as a child might do. On a sudden she covered her face, dropped into a seat among the bays and myrtles, and broke into wild weeping.

The strong sense of bondage came back with a fuller force as though to menace her with the fateful realism of her lot. A hand seemed to sweep down and wave her back with a meaning so sinister that she had the feeling of standing on the brink of a mysterious sea, whose waves sang to her a song of peril, of misery and desire in the dim green twilight of some coral dungeon. The lure of the unknown beat upon her eyes, while love and hate, like attendant spirits, beckoned her onward with a weird, perpetual clamor.

Francesco tried in vain to soothe her, calling her by all the endearing names of the past, and pressing her closely to his heart.

"I do not understand," she cried, sobbing convulsively. "I have wished no one ill! Ever have I desired only fairness and love, and fullness of sweet life. And the beauty I seek is befouled by my seeking, my love has stained my beloved; and when I clutch at life, life crumbles within my grasp. Wherein has my quest been wrong?"

"Not wrong," he said unsteadily—"not wrong,—I trust!"

She looked at him bewildered.

"I, too, would turn from that agonizing God upon the Cross to paths where roses bloom," Francesco replied,

heavy-hearted. "I have been walking amid shadows, and I have lost the way."

She caught at his hand and drew it piteously to her lips, but made no attempt to retain it.

"I am that Proserpina who has lost the spring," she said, raising her haunting eyes to his. "Yet one comfort is left me still,—one stay, that shall not fail!"

"And that?"

There was a strange expression about her face, but she was silent.

A shudder seized him with the swift suspicion of her meaning.

"You shall not!" he cried almost roughly. "You shall not! I, too,—did I give way to that fierce longing,—you shall not yield to that crawling weakness!"

But Ilaria interrupted him.

"Oh! my dear, I meant not that!" she said. "Of weakness I might reck little, of the hurt to you I should reck much. There is that in my heart for you which shall keep me safe henceforth from what would grieve you!"

"What is it then?" he asked relieved. "The comfort,—the stay,—of which you spoke?"

She smiled through her tears; the old-time smile.

"I do not see your life," he said anxiously. "What is it —what shall it be? Till that be known to me, Ilaria, I shall not know rest or peace. You are beautiful,—too beautiful for this licentious court! Here you cannot remain—alone!"

"I fear the twilight," she said, with a shudder. "There is but one goal for me, and, when the hour comes, you shall lead me there. Proserpina will turn Lady of Shadows in very truth, and move veiled through her rose garden."

"But why must this thing be?" he queried with a choking sensation. "I, too, have sinned—"

"Of sin I know nothing," said Ilaria mournfully, "I apprehend neither the word, nor the thing!"

"Then why this last extremity?"

"Will you not understand?" she interposed petulantly. "Your presence here has shown me once for all that I may not continue to walk in the old way; I may not walk in yours, and I would not have you walk in mine! You wavered towards it of late! Once upon a time I should have rejoiced; now my spirit is full of fear."

She crept close to him and looked up at him with tremulous lids.

He caught her to him with all the old-time love in his eyes. All fears, all misgivings, all doubts of the woman he loved, were utterly blotted out in their embrace, and over Ilaria's features there flitted the gleam of a long forgotten happiness.

Her look was far away. Of a sudden she turned to Francesco.

"Will you remain at Naples?"

He gave a shrug.

"Days—weeks—who can tell? A Ghibelline victory may turn the tide."

"I have something to say to you," she said, her face very close to his. "I have long wished to say it: beware of Raniero!"



"He caught her to him with all the old-time love"

"I have done him no wrong!"

She made a gesture as one throwing up a libation.

"Fonté Gaia!"

He felt her breath fanning his cheek.

Seized with a sudden madness he threw his arms about her, and kissed her.

Where the roads branched off they parted, after a long passionate embrace. Ilaria returned to the palace, while Francesco bent his footsteps towards the bay, shimmering in the light of the higher risen moon.

He heard her go singing through the garden, a soft chant d'amour that would have gone wondrously to flute and cithern. It died away slowly amid the trees like an elf's song coming from woodlands in the moonlight.

His soul was sobbing within him. He felt his purpose, his resolutions waver. The crisis of his life had come. Alone with Ilaria at Naples! Raniero away,—indulging his lusts!

He had feared this meeting, feared it above all things in heaven or earth!

Again they were abroad, the gods of yore. They rode the wind; they laughed in the far reaches of the sky; they whispered in his heart.

To love her! To possess her!

The thought had suddenly leaped into his brain, taking its first clearly defined form, recoiling upon him, dazzling his eyes.

For this he had lived; for this he had suffered!

And now?

A deeper question came, like a wind in a fog; a fearsome thing. Why should this love be sin? This love,—the one pure emotion in all his life?

In the spiritual darkness which encompassed Francesco, the fire of his old love for Ilaria had leaped high upon the altar of his sacrifice. For her he had kept himself pure, for her he had starved his soul, while his love smouldered in the dark chambers of his heart.

For hours Francesco was as a man possessed, moving through them drearily, as through crowding phantoms, struggling to suppress an imperious craving that tormented him for release.

It was late when he retraced his steps towards his inn.

Gigantic cypresses bordered the way, ranged like dark torch-bearers at a funeral. Their entwined tips, continually caught by the wind from the sea, remained bent like heads drooped in sorrow. White statues of gods gleamed spectre-like in the dark shades. In the laurel thickets glow-worms flickered like funeral tapers. The heavy scent of the magnolias recalled the odor of balsam used for anointing the dead. The waters of the fountain, trickling from an overhanging rock, fell into the sea, drop by drop, like silent tears, as though a nymph were weeping in the cave above, bewailing her sisters, some dark Elysium, the subterranean groves of shadows, the burial grounds of dead gods.

But even sleep brought only one persistent vision to Francesco: a reach of laughing waters, now turquoise, now sapphire, now upheaving into a mighty translucent wave, that curled swiftly towards

him, and, quivering within, the face of Ilaria, upturned to his own.

CHAPTER III

AN INTERLUDE



EANTIME, the atmosphere of this secular court was not distasteful to Francesco. The love of poetry and the arts which had made Naples in the twelfth century the literary centre of Europe, still lingered; and he found pleasant intercourse on lines along which he had long been lonely.

Of Ilaria he saw little. She carried herself with a strange, new dignity and seemed to avoid him even more sedulously than he had planned to avoid her. He heard her spoken of as among the chief beauties of the court. The Regent, it was said, had shown her marks of especial favor, the more noteworthy as the Frangipani were on the side of the empire, fighting against Clement and Charles of Anjou. But his only

opportunity of seeing her was at the court functions, which it was his duty to attend. To men of Francesco's temperament the absent has a more constraining force than the present; the dream-Ilaria, with her wavering smile, had borne, it would seem, more intimate relations to his life than the woman he watched from afar. But his restlessness increased with the certainty that Ilaria avoided him; a circumstance their meeting had not led him to fear.

Thus a week dragged on.

The African wind, which carries with it clouds of hot sand from the depths of the Sahara, was raging in the upper regions of the air. On earth there was still absolute calm. The leaves of the palm and the branches of the mimosa hung motionless; the sea alone was agitated. Huge, formless ridges swelled up here and there, dashing themselves against the shore. The west was shrouded in dense gloom, and the sun, in the metallic, cloudless haze, was seen dimly, as through a smoked opal.

The Castello of Astura in the distant plains of Torre del Greco shone white against the black smoke that rose from Vesuvius as from some mighty furnace, spreading out in the shape of a long cloud from Castellamaré to Posilippo. For weeks the mountain had displayed a sinister activity, and at night the red fires were visible far away, over land and sea, like the glow of some great subterranean furnace. The peaceful altar of the gods had been transformed into the terrible torch of the Eumenides.

There were dire forebodings of coming disaster in the air and in the winds. At Torre del Greco penitential processions made the rounds of the sun-baked streets, with lighted candles, subdued chanting

and loud sobbing. In Resina and Portici dull terror reigned. And the glare of the August sun had become almost insufferable, as it fell full over the waters to the pencilled line of the southern horizon, where a long circle divided the misty, shimmering dove-color of the Tyrrhene Sea from the hazy skies.

Then, like the knell of doom, the tidings of the fatal battle of Tagliacozzo were wafted to Naples. Conradino's army had been utterly routed. Charles of Anjou was the victor of the day.

The fate of the Swabian youth and that of his companions was still a matter of surmise. They had fled from the battle-field. No one knew the direction of their flight.

And for days Francesco went about as one dazed. The Neapolitans laughed his exhortations to scorn, and seemed to invite the interdict rather than to submit to the Vulture of Provence.

He was ruminating over the situation, wishing for some inspiration, wishing for Ilaria, and noting idly how the soft siesta lights played upon the sea, when Francesco perceived a little pleasure barque skirting the coast, and heading apparently for his favorite spot,—where he had met Ilaria on coming to Naples. As the breeze impelled it nearer, music floated over the waters. A few moments, and he descried within the boat three of the most charming of the younger women of the court, with their attendant cavaliers. He eyed the little boat longingly, as it approached like some swift sprite of the sea. It was at hand now, moored to the tiny wharf, and one of the women called out gaily:

"Messer Eremito, we have found your cell!"

"And like many hermits," laughed Stefano Maconi, "he appears to welcome the intrusion."

"To be welcomed by Messer Francesco," suggested another, "we should be on the barque which Charon is rowing across the Styx."

Francesco found his tongue at last.

"Beauty should always have precedence over departed souls," he said with a smile. "Is it your pleasure to land and to enliven this solitude?"

"No, but to lure you out upon the waters," said the woman who had spoken.

Francesco, carried away by the spirit of the moment, ran down the marble steps of the terrace and leaped lightly into the boat.

"Violetta made a wager that you would not come,—Petronella that you would," said a third. "As for myself—I was neutral. But my fears were with Violetta."

As the sun sank lower, the wind dropped, and the men bent singing to their oars.

"We were playing a game, Messeré," said the Countess Violetta. "We are trying to decide who is the fairest lady of this court, exclusive, of course,—of us three. If we can agree, we shall plan a surprise for that most lovely one!"

"My vote," said Messer Romano Vivaldi, "is for Madonna Ghisola. The dusk of her hair is as soft as that of the thickest smoke of Vesuvius, and, as in the smoke, there are red reflections in it!"

"Beware of the volcano," laughed Petronella. "A merry beauty for me," she improvised, speaking half verse, half prose like the others. "Rose-white as asphodel blossom, and fragrant as the cyclamen of the hills. What say you to the Contessa Leonora? Who can hear her laugh without remembering what some one has said: 'Laughter is the radiance of the soul?'"

"To my mind," said one of the cavaliers, who had not yet spoken, "the Countess Ilaria Frangipani is the fairest woman of the court."

The eyes of Stefano Maconi flashed emphatic assent.

"She is too sad," objected Violetta, who was the youngest of the party.

"So was the sea beneath the clouds of dawn," said the cavalier. "It sighed of sorrows without end. The clouds melted, and the gray waters brightened to turquoise, but whether under clouds or sun, the sea is a mystery."

"She has the grace of the swaying wave," assented Petronella.

"And its light in her eyes," added Camilla.

"The lady is fair," acknowledged Messer Romano, "but too unapproachable for me!"

Startled, Francesco saw, or fancied he saw, a complacent smile flit across the countenance of Stefano Maconi.

"What thinks Messer Francesco of her beauty?" asked

Violetta. "I believe that each new age sees men and

women fairer than the last."

"I think, that cannot be," said the Countess Petronella, naively. "Was never woman so fair as Madama Elena of Troy, and she lived before the coming of our Saviour."

"I agree with Madonna Violetta," said Francesco dreamily. "Gazing at Madonna Ilaria I think there is come into the world something strange and new, revealed to us to our joy and our undoing!"

The sun had set. The boatmen were singing together.

"Non senti mai Achillé,
Per Pulisena bella,
Le cocenti favillé
Quant' io senti per quella.

"Udendo sua favella
Angelica é venozza,
Parlar si amorosa
In su la fresca erbetta."

"The beauty of this coast," said Francesco, speaking low, "is as the beauty of woman. It transcends all I have imagined, yet is it ever alien. I have felt it in Rome, but not so strongly. In Umbria, in Tuscany all is more pure, more distant, yet more clear. The eye is drawn afar to where earth meets sky; here it seeks to draw all to itself. It is a beauty unhallowed: The triumph of the Pagan World!"

"Is there a city in Italy more Catholic than Naples?" protested Violetta, while the others joined in a chorus of protestation.

"Where in Europe shall you find more priests?" asked Stefano Maconi, shrugging his shoulders. "Where

shall you find more churches?"

Francesco had been musing. Now the spirit of contradiction was upon him.

"Even in your churches," he said suddenly, turning to Camilla, "I find something strange. They are sumptuous indeed; yet there steals over me a fearsome feeling, as if the worship were given not to the Deity that is, but to deities long dead,—or worse than dead!"

A slight shudder ran over one or two of the hearers; the boatmen were singing softly.

The stars were out, the boat was nearing the shore. And still the boatmen were singing, as the moon shed her spectral light over the crooning, murmuring waves.

"We are all agreed, are we not, that the Countess Ilaria Frangipani is the fairest?" asked Camilla, as they prepared to land.

"Allow me," said Stefano Maconi, "to be responsible for the proposed surprise. It shall, with your pleasure, take the form of a Festa in the groves of Circé!"

"It will be fair weather to-morrow!" said Violetta. "We shall all be there!"

After they had departed Francesco passed swiftly to and fro along the terrace.

Strange feelings were at work within him. Love, hatred, jealousy were contending for the mastery. He hated the oily cavalier with the smooth, pleasant temper; he hated the man who dared aspire to Ilaria's

love. To Raniero he gave not even a thought. He had never felt jealous of the Frangipani. But now Ilaria's name was on the wind! The sea shouted it; the flowers exhaled it. It floated on the night-air; the moon and the stars seemed to whisper it. Ilaria! Ilaria! He was once more abandoned to the older gods!

"I shall not be there!" he murmured to himself, thinking of the Festa. Yet, when the morning came, he was among the first to arrive.

CHAPTER IV

THE HILL OF VENUS



OME by land, and some by sea, the revellers took their morning way along the coast towards the ruins of ancient Baiae. Francesco was on horseback, a friend having furnished him with an excellent mount. As he cantered on, the road continually revealed the far-sparkling sea. A flock of

brilliant butterflies dipped and poised on the waters, —pleasure boats bound for the tryst. Ilaria! Ilaria! She and he were moving by different ways to the same goal.

Steeds proved swifter than sails that morning; the horsemen arrived half an hour before the boats. The place was a lonely wonder. The sloping hillsides, broken by the green hollows of an ancient amphitheatre, rose gently from the beach. From the turf, strewn with wild hyacinth, cyclamen, Star of Bethlehem and tiny fleurs-de-lys, great columns, half embedded in the ground, raised ivy-mantled shafts, now broken, now crowned with Corinthian capitals, which peered through trailing vines. Choice marbles, their rose or white mellowed to gold, lay scattered here and there, the surfaces, fluted or bevelled, still gleaming with the polish of by-gone centuries. Below and above the amphitheatre mysterious masonry broke the climbing slope. The ruins extended to the very verge of the sea.

Francesco ran down the bank as the first boat drew near. Under an awning of silk, shot with green and blue and gold, sat Ilaria, the Countess Violetta and Stefano Maconi. Violetta was rippling with joyous laughter. Ilaria smiled and the beauty of the day found its meaning. She had thrown aside the misty veil, with which she was wont to envelop herself. Her gown, or so Francesco thought, was the same which Proserpina had worn, in the "Triumph of Amor." At least, the same strange broideries shone among its folds.

She stepped lightly ashore. Her fingers rested on Francesco's hand and her eyes accepted his adoring look with a strange inscrutable expression.

"We have been sailing over marvels," cried Violetta wide-eyed. "Below the clear green waves rise palaces! We saw great white columns and a pavement of mosaics. Did we not, Madonna Ilaria?"

"Yes," said Ilaria, dreamily. "Had they not quivered in the light, we could have traced the pattern!"

"The palaces of the sea ladies," Violetta exclaimed gleefully. "I thought I saw one, but she turned out to be a fish!"

"The home of strange beings, at any rate," mused Ilaria,—"of flowers that are alive! Did you see that long blue ribbon sway and beckon to us?"

Ilaria's gravity and pallor seemed to have vanished with the mists of morning. She was flushed and gay, —almost too gay, Francesco thought. A startled quietude, as of one expectant, was upon her.

"I have bidden you to a land of enchantment," laughed Stefano Maconi as they climbed upwards. "We are still within the power of the sea, as you perceive," he added, when the company paused by the half-buried columns below the amphitheatre.

"It is true," said Francesco, pausing by a half-buried shaft. "The stone is fretted by the waves. See the clustered barnacles and tiny shells clinging half-way up!"

A party of cavaliers and their ladies met them on this spot.

As they exchanged greetings, all studied the strange sight.

"Probably," reflected a young page of the court, "it

was the doing of Messer Vergilio."

"He had great power hereabout," asserted Andrea Ravignano, "and was a mighty clerk of necromancy. Perhaps it was he who built all these marvels!"

"It was the old Roman folk that built them, ages ago," said another. "A city rose here once, a marvel indeed, as these ruins tell. For their pleasure men built it, and here they lived and throve. And evil livers were they all, and slaves to the foul fiends, their gods!"

"But how did the city sink into the sea?" asked Violetta.

"That was the work of Messer Saint Paul," replied the other. "He landed here and preached the Cross of our Saviour, and when men would not heed but spat upon the cross and defied it, he laid the land under a curse, and it sank to the depths of the sea!"

"And when the waves had done their work,"—it was Ilaria, speaking dreamily, "they flowed back, and the ruins rested on a gentle hill. But forever and ever do they remember the sea!"

She sighed a little.

"The slope on which we sit is hollow within," ventured the youthful page. "Behind us is many a love-grotto, tunnelled deep and far. The country folk, when they run the harrow, find great walls. And so none dare come here of nights: strange things are seen!"

"Perhaps the waters will rise again some day and swallow Naples and the court, and we shall turn into sea-folk all," Ilaria said, laughing a little wildly. "Subjects of Lady Venus we should be. She was

Queen of the Sea, I've heard!"

"Though Terce is hardly passed, such talk is not wise," said some one.

And two or three crossed themselves.

But as the light words drifted on, dim vistas of thought, at the end of which immemorial things were gleaming, had opened to Francesco.

Violetta had been deftly weaving a green garland of ivy.

"Dream no more, fairest," she turned smiling to Ilaria. "Tell me rather what flowers to weave into your chaplet. Of no strange blooms of the sea shall it be wrought, but, at your will, of roses or the small fior-da-lisa!"

"He who, as I, loves best the sea, loves best the rose," replied Ilaria smiling. "While he who climbs the height adores the lily!"

She glanced, as she spoke at Francesco, whose gaze had never for a moment abandoned her. Never had she seemed so fair to him, so utterly adorable, stirring in his soul the slumbering fires of desire.

Violetta quickly finished her wreath of eglantine, and dropped it lightly on Ilaria's brow.

"Why fear we ghosts in this radiant air?" laughed she.

"Perhaps we are the ghosts,—ghosts of our former selves," suggested Ilaria.

"No phantom heart beats in my bosom," laughed Stefano Maconi.

And a look of meaning, or so Francesco felt, passed between them.

"Fair phantom, let us tread a measure!" pleaded Violetta. "What was this green level made for, if not for the beating of gentle feet?"

"And when the measure is over," said Francesco in an undertone, as they rose, "perhaps Madonna Ilaria will graciously vouchsafe me a few moments?"

She nodded assent; but he could see her eyelids quiver, and her breath came fast. The measure finished, Stefano Maconi at once proposed a new diversion, from which neither could escape, and time wore on, while the light grew more intense and the sky burned a deeper blue. Ill at ease, Francesco withdrew from the pastimes at last and climbed the hill behind the amphitheatre. He was displeased and nervous. Ilaria, he was sure, shrank from Stefano Maconi; yet was there not some secret bond between them?

Would Ilaria come to him? He trembled, as in Avellino of old, and his heart beat faster at the thought.

The hill was richly draped in ferns and swaying vines. Idly he pushed aside a mass of ivy: a passage opened behind, deep-vaulted, paved with broken fragments of mosaic. Stalactites dripped from the roof, through the verdure of thick maiden-hair fern. The gloom looked grateful. Francesco stepped within and, looking out on the blue day from the waving green frame-work, saw Ilaria and Stefano Maconi approaching, engaged in eager talk. She was flushed and bore herself haughtily.

Francesco stepped quietly out into the light, unnoticed by Ilaria's companion. Ilaria evidently saw him at once. She paused and dismissed the other, regardless of his somewhat insistent protests. With half-ironic salutation she turned down the hill. Whether or no Stefano had caught sight of Francesco, as he went, was difficult to say.

Ilaria came towards the grotto, trailing her draperies, her brow troubled and sad beneath the gay chaplet.

"The sun is hot,—one craves shelter," she said lightly, yet with a tremor in her voice.

Francesco, without replying, lifted the ivy curtain and with a mute gesture invited her to enter.

They stood in the dusky gloom, speechless, hidden from each other, till their gaze became accustomed to the shade.

He was helplessly unable to break the silence. Fear, joy, desire, doubt were tossing him. The breath came fast.

She raised her arms and caught her white throat.

"How cool it is, how sweet!" she said. "At Avellino," and she glanced at him half shyly, "you would never take me to your grotto!"

"Ah! But this grotto," he tried to speak as lightly as she, "we have found together!"

"Together!" she reflected, looking away from him. "It is a word we have not often had occasion to use,—you and I."

"Why might we not in the days to come?"

The words were on his lips; he held them back.

Ilaria waited, her hand pressed to her side, her look full of mingled tenderness and dread.

As he kept silence, she sighed, almost, it would seem, with relief.

"I wish to explore the cave," she said suddenly. "Come with me, if you like!"

And with quick steps she started into the darkness.

"Take care! Take care, Lariella!" cried Francesco, unconsciously using the familiar diminutive, forgotten so long ago.

She took no heed and he hurried after her, terror-stricken, he knew not why. She kept in advance, moving swiftly and lightly over the dark uneven ground. For a short distance the dusk deepened, then a sudden light, shining from a crack in the vaulting, revealed in startling contrast a great blackness by the side of which there gleamed something weird, ghost-like.

Ilaria screamed and stumbled. The passage, widening beneath her feet, broke downwards into a pool of the waters of Styx. A lost stair had betrayed her.

Francesco, speeding forward, caught her garments, drew her back. She staggered and yielded to his arms. They leaned together against the wall of the grotto. The earth had fallen away a little at the shock, revealing in the uncertain light the white figure of a woman.

They both stared at it, holding their breath.

The image stood embedded in the rocky cavity,

whither some force had in past ages carried her from her old position, for she had evidently presided over the Piscina, or the bath of some rich Roman, who rejoiced in her Greek fairness. The face was free, but soil and mould had given it a half-sinister expression. The limbs, so far as visible,—and the earth in falling away had left one white side of the body entirely bare,—were perfect.

Ilaria struggled to free herself from Francesco's embrace and sank, half fainting, at the statue's base.

"The peril is over," said Francesco, and echoes filled the whole cavern with murmuring. "Dearest, be not afraid! Look at me!"

As her head drooped, he knelt beside her, half distraught, and rubbed her wrists and forehead with water from the pool.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him, as a child might.

"Fonté Gaia!" she whispered.

The words had been in his own mind.

Lifting her hand, she touched and stroked the marble, and the awe grew in her eyes.

"Feel!" she said. "This is not marble! It is very flesh, though turned to stone!"

And she shuddered.

"Only a statue, dearest!" he answered soothingly. "Around Naples, they say, the earth is full of such!"

"It is the White Lady!"

She had risen now and regained her self-control, and

she spoke with unwonted dignity and calm.

"It is the White Lady," she repeated, "but you know, you have never consented to her spells. She rules here in the dusk! How you tremble! There is no need! Sunlight for you is but a few paces away! See, I will go with you to the entrance of the grotto!"

In truth a strange tremor had seized him. He stood as if unable to leave the spot. She was looking on his face with anxious eyes.

"Doubtless," he said at last, and despised himself as he spoke, "you would prefer other company than mine in the presence of your White Lady!"

She raised her white hands to her throat again, and laughed, a laugh which the vaults re-echoed as a sob.

"Forgive,—forgive! I am cruel!" cried Francesco. "I know not what I say!"

"You are overheated," she said. "Bathe your brows, as you have bathed mine. It is true, I did not find the touch so cooling."

"The waters of Lethé," said Francesco very slowly. "Shall I bathe my brows in them indeed? Already, simply standing by them, I think I have forgotten many things. I have a better thought. Will you drink of them with me, Ilaria? It would not be the first time we have tasted of the same cup in the presence of Venus!"

Was he mistaken? Or, in the glimmering light, did he see a shadow passing over the flower-soft face?

She did not reply, but softly stroked his hair.

Her touch burned, electrified him. For a moment he

submitted to the sensation, then, as her soft, white hands stole around his throat, he folded her in a close embrace and kissed her passionately on her lips.

From the waters came the swinging rhythm of the Barcarole.

"Non senti mai Achillé
Per Pulisena bella,
Lé cocenti favillé
Quant' io senti per quella.

"Udendo sua favella
Angelica e venozza,
Parlar si amorosa
In su la fresca erbetta."

The time for metaphors had passed. He raised his head.

"I love you, Ilaria," he stammered, drunk with her sweetness, "love you, as I have never loved anything on earth. Ilaria—Ilaria—"

"Are we not free?" she whispered, her lips very close to his.

He kissed them again and again, then tossed back his head.

"Free?" he said. "Who is free? Ghostly powers, fates from ancient days,—drive us, flesh and blood, whither they will!"

She shook her head, and on her lips played the old-time childhood smile.

"Have you forgot?" she whispered into his ear,

holding him very close. "But it is not for me to remind you—"

With a sudden change her restraint had vanished.

"We are among the shades," she continued, "where Proserpina should be at home. The world of sun is far!"

"I love you—" he stammered, gazing at her with wide, hungry eyes.

She bent back his head, till their eyes met.

She gazed at him with all the love she bore him. Then, drawing him close, she whispered a word in his ear.

He closed his eyes in mortal anguish.

"All creation knows it,—all things, animate and inanimate: but not I,—not I!"

"Take me!" Ilaria said calmly, her face very white. "Yes—I will drink with you! But first—a libation to Venus!"

She gathered a little water in her hands and sprinkled it at the feet of the statue.

He stared at her for a moment, speechless, full of wonder at her strange bearing. She was very pale, but in her eyes there gleamed a subtle fire, which kindled the spark in his soul.

"We have no cup," he said trembling.

But she, stooping swiftly, gathered water once more in the hollow of her palms and raised them to his face.

"Drink!" she whispered eagerly. "Drink, while yet we dare!"

He stooped to the soft white hands and held them close to his mouth, kissing them again and again when he had drank.

"Come!" she said softly.

He did not stir. She bent over him.

"Francesco! I love you—come!"

He fell prone at her feet, with a sob that shook his whole frame as with convulsions.

"Oh! That I might,—that I might! I would not sully your white purity for all there is in earth, or heaven!"

For a moment she stood rigid, white, dazed.

Suddenly he felt two arms winding themselves about his neck, two soft lips were pressed upon his own in one long, delirious kiss—then he saw Ilaria precipitately retrace her steps, and Stefano Maconi peer into the grotto.

After a time Francesco emerged into the sunlight, bewildered, dazed. Ilaria had joined the revellers, and he sank down upon a rock and covered his face with his hands.

His heart and his soul were bleeding to death within him; and like his own phantom he at last arose and walked towards the sea. The revellers had lost themselves in the depths of the groves. Again and again the swinging rhythm of their song was borne to him on the soft, fragrant breezes; yet there was but one thought in his heart, one name on his lips, as his feet bore him slowly through the blossoming

wilderness: "Ilaria! Ilaria!"—

CHAPTER V

TWILIGHT WATERS



AZED, in a state of mind bordering on utter bewilderment, such as he had not experienced since the Masque of the Gods in the park of Avellino, Francesco wandered by the shore, trying to bring order into the confused chaos of his thoughts. Ilaria loved him, always had she loved him, and so closely were their fates bound up together that neither could as much as turn without standing accounted to the other. During the last days the certainty had dawned upon him that the sacrifice had been utterly in vain. He had been cheated of his youth and birthright; utterly helpless, he was the blind tool of a power, which, by no human right nor divine, had constituted itself the arbiter of his destiny. The future held nothing for him. His

sympathies were forever with the vanquished. The temporal power of the Church held no allurement. He might climb in her service; the road lay over the broken and shattered ideals of his youth.—

The uncertainty of the fate of the Ghibelline host weighed heavily upon him. Where was Conradino, the fair-haired imperial youth, where were the leaders of the vanquished iron-serried companies, whose march under the proudly floating banners of the Sun-Soaring Eagle of Hohenstauffen he had witnessed from the summits of Monte Cassino? Had they reached the sheltering passes of the Apennines, had they fallen into Anjou's hands?

Fascinated, yet oppressed by dire forebodings, Francesco gazed out over the land. In a flood of crimson and gold, trailing his banners through the western sky, the sun had sunk to rest. The great mass of the castello of Astura was silent and dark in the swiftly descending southern night, save where an errant moonbeam glittered over the gateway and round-towers, shining obliquely over the massive walls, while two great circles of shadows enclosed the stronghold of the Frangipani, like huge Saturnian rings. Brightly, like a silver net flung wide upon the plains below, the moonbeams played upon the surrounding marshes the wild, rock-strewn maremmas, while a stagnant pool below the Groves of Circé reflected an indigo sky, pierced by the blazing constellations of the south.

As in a dream, he turned his steps towards the hostelry, where, despite the protests of the Regent, he had persisted in remaining. It suffered him not in the palace, amid that gay gentry of the court, near Ilaria, whose society he must forego, while others,

less constrained, might bask in the perfume of her presence. Forever he thought of her as of a flower, entrusted by a generous divinity to earth-born men, to tend and to surround with care.

Arrived at the inn, Francesco found the public room occupied by a throng of idlers, who would scarcely take their departure before midnight. Stranger to all, as he was, the guests in the place greeted him civilly, as a possible companion, after having studiously examined the cut of his garments. One individual especially favored him with his close attention, unnoticed by Francesco, who, traversing the room, started upstairs to his chamber.

Ere he had reached the door, this individual swaggered through the crowd and touched him on the shoulder. Francesco looked at him vaguely; something familiar teased him in the man's face.

"Am I addressing Messer Francesco Villani, the papal envoy?" he said awkwardly.

Francesco nodded with an air of vague wonder.

"What is your business with me?"

"I am sent to bring you to one who is dying."—

Francesco, with the custom of his confraternity, turned instantly to go, but on a sudden impulse he lingered.

"Who is your master?" he asked with a quick misgiving.

"Raniero Frangipani," replied the other gruffly, then after a pause:

"He was mortally wounded in the field of Scurcola!"

"Lead the way!" Francesco said with quick resolve.

The man nodded assent, and together they strode out into the street.

"He is in fearsome pain,—about to die," he said. "He is very anxious about his soul's salvation."—

Raniero Frangipani about to die! Raniero Frangipani anxious about his soul! The idea touched Francesco with grim humor. Strange thoughts came to him, as they hastened through the lonely streets. The bright vision of the night shone before his eyes, alluring, beckoning, vanishing.

The vision vanished for good in the chamber of death. No other image could hold its own before the face of Raniero. The brow was damp; the unshaven lips were drawn back from the teeth, giving the countenance a sinister aspect. The eyes not only glared, but searched.

A scared-looking priest was in the room. He hailed Francesco with relief.

"Thank God, you are come," he exclaimed. "I am summoned to hear the confession, but the patient will not make it till he has seen you—Messer Capitano, I withdraw—" he stammered, for the awful eyes had turned in his direction and the lips had uttered a sound.

Raniero turned painfully to Francesco, satisfaction, anxiety and something else in his face.

"Give me the blessing!" he snarled. "Give it quick!"—

Francesco did not at once comply. He was looking at Raniero, pity and horror, repugnance and tenderness at war in his face.

"Must I ask twice?"

Raniero had found his voice, harsh, imperious, in all its weakness.

Francesco could not refuse to execute his commission, though inwardly he wondered why Raniero had been brought to Naples instead of Astura. He spoke slowly, and the Frangipani's face expressed satisfaction.

"That ought to be strong," muttered the wounded man. "A saint's blessing should have great power,—should it not? You ought to know about such things!"

He spoke with an effort, yet with more force than would have been supposed possible.

"It will be of no avail, if one dies unrepentant," said Francesco.

"Well, I shall not die unrepentant," returned Raniero with a curious look. "I shall be honest,—and thorough! Have you the indulgence,—and the last absolution,—and the Host,—and—the oil?" he continued hoarsely. "They make a good showing,—if one is really holy! One takes one's little precautions!"

Something like terror mingled with hatred flared up in his eyes, as he spoke; then, becoming more direct, he turned to Francesco. "And now,—for you and me!"—

White hate blazed suddenly in the eyes, then was quenched beneath the light of cunning.

Francesco was mute. How could he speak to this man of the love of God!

"I am waiting!" growled Raniero, eyeing the other fiercely. "Speak the prayer for the dying!"

Francesco moved not. He looked at the sick man spellbound, as a bird would at a snake. The words he wanted to speak died in the utterance.

"I have never questioned one of the Church's doctrines," said Raniero. "Apparently you are more of a heretic than I."—

"It may well be," said Francesco absently.

The other eyed him coldly, and a silence fell. In the heart of it grew and deepened a significance.

At last Raniero spoke.

"Of all men living, I have hated you the most!"

He was rolling his eyes fearfully; the face was on guard.

"I have never injured you," replied Francesco. "Look within my heart. Naught is there towards you but compassion!"

"Looking in—your heart, I find therein the image—of my wife, Ilaria. As ever,—looking in her heart,—I find therein—your own!"

Raniero hissed the words; the dilated glaring eyes were as a weapon to pierce the heart of which he spoke.

"It is true!" Francesco cried out with bitter shame. "Yet if your eyes can see, they behold in my heart the image of the purest woman, before whom all my thoughts do worship, save rebels still unconquered."

Listening on the stair without, soldier and priest

nodded to each other at the sound of the "De Profundis clamavi ad te." All was going suitably in the death-chamber.

And Raniero listened, as the other knelt. A spasm seemed to pass over his face.

"Do you still hate me?" asked Francesco anxiously, when the invocation was ended. It was painful to him to think that his shadow stood between this man and eternity.

"A little," replied Raniero with that curious smile. "But I am almost sure that I shall hate you less—in a moment. You remember—I have taken from you—Ilaria!"

There was a strange note of triumph in his speech.

"Do you forgive even that?" asked Raniero with some anxiety.

"I have forgiven," said the other with bowed head.

"Come hither then!" cried Raniero. Craving was in his tones and eyes. "Make on my forehead, and on my breast, in token of your forgiveness,—the sign of the holy cross!"

He seemed to grow faint. A strange restlessness had seized him. He had closed his eyes; his lips moved as in prayer. One hand stirred beneath the cover.

Francesco came to his side, and stooping began solemnly to trace the sign.

Concentrated hate, loosed from its leash, snarled, shone in Raniero's face. Francesco saw nothing. A lifted hand,—a glittering flash: the knife struck fierce

and deep. But the hand that guided it, trembled; it missed the heart. With an outcry of pain Francesco staggered and fell backward.

"Gr-r-r-h!" snarled Raniero, like a great cat, growling over its prey, as he leaped from the bed.

At the sound of the fall the two waiting without had rushed in. Seizing the opportune moment, Raniero dashed past them, out into the darkness, leaving them with his unconscious victim.

Removed to the inn, where Raniero's messenger had found him, Francesco's unconscious state slowly gave way to a delirium, which made constant attendance imperative. Terror-stricken by the act and its probable consequences, the two who had been present in Raniero's sick-chamber had summoned a leech, whose efforts to break the delirium of the sufferer seemed at first of little avail.

Now he was at Avellino, in the garden, at dusk. Roses were everywhere, in riotous profusion,—flame roses, every one curled into fiery petal-whorls, dancing in the garden-dusk under a red, red sky. Now the chariot of Amor! The rose chaplet has burned Amor's brow! Oh! Turn away from the tortured face of the poor young God of Love! No matter, we will see the pageant out! But that woman with the Scarlet Robe must not be in the show! She is the Woman of the Red Tower! Lead her away! Francesco must wear the fiery circlet and march with the rest!

Now he is at Viterbo! Clement, most Holy Father, do not caper about so strangely! Take off those striped clothes! At least, if you will wear them, put your tiara aside. Yes,—you juggle excellently well with

those many balls. White! Black! How high you toss them up! How deftly you catch them! Ha! We see the trick. With each toss a white ball turns black. They are all black now, and Messeré, the Cardinals are grinning! Horror! Are those the Cardinals? Hoofs in red stockings? Horns peering out under the cap? The scarlet robes are flames of a burning village, and the Cardinals point long claws and hiss applause, while the mountebank weeps. And Francesco weeps too!

Now the serene peace of the wide-glimmering sea! Golden columns are shining through the water! He turns to the shore,—and as he turns the great sea stirs. It heaves, it writhes, it rises! With onward movement, as of a coiling snake, the whole vast liquid brilliance rushes upon the temple. Mighty billows of beryl curve and break in sheets of whitest foam,—not foam, rather the soft limbs of sea-nymphs. Within the green translucence,—ah! the threatening splendor! Behold the awful, tottering walls!

The crash has come! In the depths of the sea Francesco stands alone! The temple still rises around him, no more a ruin, but perfect in every part! The light is emerald. He stands by an altar,—no, it is Fonté Gaia! Bending down he beholds first a dizzying glimmer, as of sun-rays reflected from wet bright pebbles, set in gay patterns at the bottom. Presently his own reflection clears: the face of Ilaria, lovely beyond all memory or dream, is bending beside it.

The White Lady! She is there in her gown, creeping with brightest broideries. She offers him a golden cup! "Drink, Francesco!" she implores. Strange sea-lights waver about her beauty; in a way she is changed; but it is the voice of the girl he has loved

better than all the world. Suddenly a shadow stands between them. He shivers in the warm air.—

What is there between Ilaria and Stefano Maconi!

Now some one flies past, a cord around his neck.

"Beware!" cries a voice, and on the rainbow brightness of Ilaria falls the shadow of mighty wings. Swooping down from the roof, one of the great demons of Lecceto hovers, poised hawk-like. The face is Raniero's; the body, that of a vulture. Francesco, horror-stricken, watches for the fiend to dart, to fasten his claws in Ilaria's dusky hair, to bear her aloft, away, her shrieks trailing after her. But this does not happen. In a faint light, like a mountain-mist at dawn, the whole scene fades away, and Francesco bursts into wild and violent weeping that seems as if it would drain his soul away.

When, after a few days, Francesco opened his eyes, he found himself in a high-vaulted room of the palace, Ilaria bending over him wide-eyed, pale of face. With a choked outcry he grasped the soft white hands to his lips, his eyes raised to her in long, mute questioning. She bent over him and kissed his lips.

"I love you," she whispered, then looked away.

His questionings at last elicited the response that at the behest of the Regent he had been brought to the palace, where Ilaria herself had been tending to his comfort. The name of his assailant had remained no secret. Yet, beyond vague whisperings, it was not again alluded to.

Sleep, deep and dreamless, blessed the racked body throughout the day; the sleep that leaves one's past

life far behind and from which one wakes in weak expectancy and the helpless peace of a new-born child.

It was at the Vesper hour that this waking came to Francesco. Sunset light filled the gloom of the high-vaulted room. A distant silver gleam had filled him with strange comfort and strange sorrow. Ilaria had left him in care of the leech, a little Greek with restless, ever-shifting eyes. Through the casement the evening star looked in. Beyond Castel del Ovo he divined the far-trembling sea, quieted to a pure colorless memory of the day that had died, yet brighter than the darkening skies.—

Lying peacefully convalescent, Francesco looked back as from a still haven on the storms that had shaken him since his departure from Avellino. Had a great enfranchisement or a great imprisonment befallen him? Life, the master, would show him in good time. Certainly the entrance into fresh intellectual regions which had intoxicated him for the time, seemed less important now. For one thing, he perceived the passion for novelty, as synonymous with progress, to be a mere delusion of the arch-wizard, Time. And, in a flash, he saw that it was but the old uncertainty in a new sphere. Was the Church the visible expression of Life? Must he remain forever under the yoke, to atone for his own existence, hungering after that which other men freely enjoyed? And suddenly, like a flash, a phase of his dream leaped into his wakeful state. He closed his eyes and groaned.

What was there between Ilaria Caselli and Stefano Maconi?

CHAPTER VI

THE CRIMSON NIGHT



T had been a day of driving wind and rain. The sound of the sea beat weirdly through the streets of Naples. The great street of the Provencals leading from Castel del Ovo to Castel Nuovo was covered with spray. Within the palace of the Regent there was singing and feasting. Distant strains of music wandered out towards the night to Francesco's chamber. They seemed to whisper of things that were not for him, and he set his teeth with a smothered groan.

Ilaria was there, and Stefano Maconi! He, the monk, had not been bidden to the feast.

And slowly there came to him a memory, vague and confused, of a weary wandering through endless night, torn by temptation and desire, raging with defiance at his fate, consumed by a fear that ran through his veins like fire and seemed to scorch the very soul within him. Suddenly blind fury at his impotence in the face of a supreme and arrogant power invaded his being. Resist as he would, he was the bondsman of the Church!

At last it suffered Francesco no longer in his chamber.

Entering a dark passage, he crept past silent courts, through narrow galleries. When he heard the sound

of footsteps he dropped back into the shadows. The music allured and repelled him, and hungry-eyed he lurched forward, until he had gained a space above the great hall, whence he might catch a glimpse of the merriment below.

The banqueting hall was a riot of color. On its columns of polished marble, veined in green and rose, light played in sliding gleams from great lamps of wrought bronze, hung by chains around the dome and between the pillars. The floor of glowing mosaic was overlaid with rugs of fantastic color and with tawny skins of beasts. The walls were wide panels of mosaics, set in stucco, vivid with red and blue, green and azure, picturing scenes of hunting and carousal. Perfumes burned in silver jars, set on pedestals of black marble along the walls, sending forth faint spirals of smoke into the heated air. The long table, lined on either side with men and women, was directly beneath the dome. Looking down upon it, Francesco saw a confusion of gold and silver dishes with the ruby glow of Samian plates, and cups gleaming among strewn leaves and blossoms. The garments of the guests were as a fringe of color about the table's edge, purple, saffron and gold, crimson, green and white.

The central figure at the board was Ilaria. She sat between Stefano Maconi and another noble. At times her gaiety bordered on delirium, though her smiling face, proudly upheld as though she scorned to give way before the eyes upon her, was white, but her lips were as scarlet as the flowers she wore. She had changed her attire since she had left him. A Persian gauze, filmy as mist, enveloped her sylph-like form, surmounted by a head-dress of gold, in which two poppies flamed upon either temple. Never had she

looked more beautiful, not even at the parting-feast at Avellino, when alone she had entered the dusky dining-hall and had taken her seat apart from him. Then, as now, she had worn the red rose; the other was long wilted, forgotten perchance. The flowers she wore were of a deep, intense color, almost like blood upon the stainless skin of her exposed throat.

She had not even informed him of the evening's festivities. Was it to save him pain, in not desiring his presence,—was it in order not to subject him to the taunts and insults of the Neapolitans? Francesco noted the smile of her parted lips; he noted the vivaciousness with which she received the adoration of her guests. Yet, while he looked on from the heights of his dreary solitude, could he have seen Ilaria's eyes, they would have taught him different, for they never participated in the smile of her lips. Something like jealousy gripped him at last, he clenched his teeth and the scene below him swam in a blood-red mist.

She was lost to him,—always he had known it, known the hopelessness of his passion, all the sweeter for the bitterness that was in it,—but never until then had the knowledge so come home to him. He would have liked to force his way in among these smirking, soft cavaliers, and tear her from their midst; in his hot eyes there raged hate and love. His thoughts maddened him. This was her life,—and what was his? She would leave him the prey of all the devils of jealousy and fear, which tore his breast. He groaned aloud, and dropped his face in his hands, a strange figure of desperate longing, desperate bewilderment, rebellion and pain. He shook to the primal passions of love and hate that tore him, love

for one,—hate for all that had gone to make the conditions of his life what they must be; according to the measure of his pain he suffered in fierce revolt against the mocking Fates that were stronger than he. His place was by her side, at the festal board,—and while another had purchased and possessed her body, her soul was his,—his,—his, for all time and all eternity. He it was who had waked her heart from its empty sleep, he who taught it first to live and love,—he, her soul's lord, even as the other her body's master,—he, the monk!

"Will the wound in your heart heal, when I shall have gone—perhaps forever?" he muttered, "or will your love fade and die? It may be that it shall be never quite forgotten,—that in after days a word, a song, the fragrance of a flower shall revive a dim memory. But my love must last,—to burn and sear.—Ah, beloved! We had no right to happiness, you and I! But wherefore not? And who decreed it so? Long months have I lain in darkness, for I dreamed of the time when I should come to you! Now the dream has gone from me! On all the earth there is none so lonely, as I am!"—

Again he buried his face in his hands, crouching against the wall. The music of unseen players rose to him like a breath from that scarcely vanished past playing upon him; calloused body and sensitive tortured soul, conjuring forth visions of dead golden hours, weaving its own poignant spell. Voices from the hall mingled with it, in talk and heedless laughter. When life was gay and careless, when wine was red and eyes were bright and faces fair,—who would pause to give thought to another's sorrow? And he—a monk!—

Minutes dropped away, link by link, from the golden chain of Time. A faint gleam of light playing on Francesco's features revealed the scarring passion in his face, signs visible of the chaos of inward tumult which tore him, of the slow forces gathering for the inevitable battle waged somewhere, somehow, by every human soul. And that face, haggard, with haunted shadowy eyes, looked all at once strangely purged of the heat of its passion, for on it was the presage of the fierce, slow travail of spirit rending flesh.

Her white purity had raised her above him; if he had wakened her soul, she had in turn given him a soul within his soul, wakening it to what it never knew before, new dreams, new ambitions, new desires. Through her he had seen the great world which was her world, wherein lay all for which men long and strive. One glimpse he had; and now the gates were closed and the light was gone and he was thrust back into outer darkness.—

A peal of laughter rose to him, a burst of music, a half hundred voices shouting acclaim in response to some unheard toast. He looked down once more into the light and the color of the great hall, seeing one there only, out of all that brilliant throng, one fair and drooping, with scarlet poppies framing her white face. Long and long he looked, as though he would burn her image upon his heart and mind forever: the woman he had lost, and who had never been his.

Suddenly he saw Ilaria start. Some one seemed to have brought a message to her. With a smile to those seated next to her, she arose from the board and, hurrying across the hall, entered a dim, dusky corridor. Almost at the same moment Francesco,

impelled by curiosity and misgivings, quitted his point of vantage, and, turning into the nearest passage, descended by a winding stair into the hall below. In some way the intricate labyrinth of corridors confused his mind, and he found himself in a circular chamber of rough blocks of stone, with two doors. Around the walls hung instruments of war, of torture, of the chase; chains with heavy balls of iron attached, a stand of spears, another of great swords. Here were also great six-foot bows, such as the Saracen archers used, and suits of armor with shields and breast-plates, and crested helmets of brass and iron.

Francesco paused, listened for Ilaria's footsteps, then, failing to hear a sound, traversed the chamber on tiptoe until he came to the opposite door.

Beyond this chamber there opened a spacious court. Blindly Francesco stumbled onward, wondering at the silence, and wondering what direction Ilaria had taken, when, traversing the court, he suddenly paused at the entrance of a dimly lighted hall.

A single cresset burned upon the dais wall, and the fire on the ground hearth under the louvre sent up a drift of smoke into the murk above. The great space was full of shadows and of silence.

Suddenly Francesco gave a start, as if he had seen a spectre.

In an oaken chair by the dais sat Raniero Frangipani. The brutal expression of his countenance seemed even enhanced by the shadows which played upon it, and the expression of his eyes boded little good for whomsoever his presence was intended. His sword

lay beside him on the table; his shield was propped against a carved mazor-bowl. Francesco felt there was mischief brewing, wondered, and held his breath.

Raniero's figure seemed part of the silence and the shadows of the hall. His face was cruel and alert, and the light from the cresset played in red streaks upon his helmet. His attitude seemed to indicate that he was not here by chance, and the furtive glances he cast about him seemed to confirm this supposition.

What was Raniero doing here? From his point of vantage in a niche, Francesco regarded him with a puzzled air, in which there was hardly a trace of resentment of the injury he had so lately suffered at his hand. His fears were all for Ilaria, for he could no longer doubt that Raniero had sent for her, and he was resolved to be present at the meeting.

The Frangipani's eyes were away from Francesco, directed towards the green curtain that covered the dais door. For a while nothing happened. Then Francesco heard a sound like the creaking of hinges. The curtain stirred and bulged, with the pressing against it of some one's body.

Francesco's blood froze as, in the one who came through, he recognized Ilaria.

He was afraid to move, afraid to breathe, lest she should cry out, and she moved so closely by him, that he could have almost touched her, yet he feared to betray his own presence.

Ilaria swept the hall and then came to a point where Raniero sat motionless as some huge beast, ready to spring upon its prey. Her face was tense and

watchful, her lips pressed tight, her eyes steady, though afraid.

In the next moment she and Raniero looked at each other in silence. Raniero was the first to speak.

"Madonna," he sneered, "I have waited for your homecoming."

Ilaria stood by the wall. To Francesco she appeared calm and unflurried; but her knees were trembling and there was fear in her eyes.

Ilaria made no reply to the taunting voice of her lord, and Raniero, after having waited for some time, continued:

"You have no answer, Madonna? Shall I tell you what you already know?"—

Ilaria regarded him out of shadowy eyes, then flashed:

"Speak out, and save me riddles!"

There was a suggestion of scorn in her voice. Raniero, moistening his lips, frowned.

"For your good welcome I give you thanks," he snarled.

"What brought you here?" she queried.

"If it had been your beauty, Madonna—"

With a gesture, she cut him short.

"Your courtesy bribes me to silence!"

"What of obedience?"

She took a backward step.

"To you?"

Her voice, always low, quivered with scorn.

"Are you not the Lady of the Frangipani?" he replied with a brutal laugh, while his eyes grew dull as treacherous water.

"You need not remind me!"

"Your memory will serve us both. Astura awaits you!"

Ilaria shrank against the wall, while, with a swift movement, Raniero stepped between her and the curtain.

"Astura!" she flashed, horror in her eyes. "Never! Never!"

The Frangipani eyed her ominously.

"I knew not the abode was so distasteful to you!" he said with an evil leer. "There are no recreant monks in Astura, it is true! Who shall drink after me?" he cried with the gesture of one throwing up a libation.

"Why are you here?" Ilaria summoned up her courage.

"To take you back!" he hissed brutally.

She raised her hands, as if to ward off a blow.

"Oh, not that,—not that—"

"No?" He took a step towards her, feasting his eyes on the great beauty of his wife. "By San Gennaro! I knew not how beautiful you were!"

Ilaria crept along the wall. He was watching her as a

hawk watches its prey. He made a sudden lurch, and missed her. She uttered a smothered outcry. Raniero, being sure of himself, was playing with his victim. But as he reached out his arms, she flashed a poniard in his face. With a hoarse outcry Raniero seized his sword and rushed upon her. Only the table was between them and, charging straight, the Frangipani overturned it, as a bull might crash through a hurdle of osier twigs. The table struck Ilaria's heel, as she turned to run, and she faltered under the flash of Raniero's upraised sword. Francesco stood still and stared. It was beyond belief that he would strike her. But strike her he did, even though it was with the flat of the blade. She was down under his feet, and it seemed to Francesco that he trampled upon her.

His heart gave a great bound in him, as seizing a club, which was the only weapon within his reach, he charged, though still weak from the effect of his wound, into the hall.

Raniero wheeled round, stood stock-still and stared at Francesco, as one would at a ghost. But the latter's raised club was not a matter inspiring reflection. Francesco spoke not a word, but there was something in his eyes that caused the other to draw a deep breath and to watch him narrowly.

The overturned table lay between them and, close to Raniero's feet, lay Ilaria, a prone and twisted shape, one arm flung out.

Francesco leaped the table, swung a blow, missed and swerved for his life. The whistle of Raniero's sword went through the air a hair's breadth from Francesco's thigh. Francesco sprang away, while Raniero, holding high his shield, came forward step by step, crouching a little and holding his sword with

the blade sloping towards the floor. Francesco gave ground as Raniero pressed him. Instinct told him that to strike at this moment, would bring Raniero's sword stabbing upward. The shield too was to be remembered. It was like a pent-house, reared to break the fall of timber and stones.

Francesco's wits were working as quickly as his feet. He cast swift glances to right and left, but never lost his grip on Raniero's eyes. To break his guard, to close in, so steel should not count! An overturned bench, lying beyond the long table, caught his eyes for a moment. Francesco set his teeth and looked hard at the other, wondering whether that side glance had betrayed the move that was in his mind.

He turned suddenly and ran towards the dais end of the hall, where the bench lay, leaving Raniero crouching under the shelter of his shield. He heard the Frangipani roar at him, spitting out a vile epithet, as he came charging up the hall, his eyes blazing with hate. Dropping his club, Francesco raised the bench above his head. It was heavy, and his own strength hardly equal to the task, but in his frenzy he noted it not. He saw Raniero blunder to a standstill, raise his shield and lower his head like a ram meeting the butting pate of a rival. With all his might Francesco hurled the oaken bench at him. It struck Raniero on the crown of the helmet and sent him sprawling on the ground.

Francesco dashed for his club. Raniero, rising on one elbow, stabbed at him and missed. The club came down upon the back of his head. He fell forward, shooting out shield and sword, and lay still. For a moment Francesco stood over him with raised club. But when he did not move, he rushed towards the

spot where Ilaria lay.

With a moan he sprang over the table and bent over the prostrate form.

She lay with her body twisted, one cheek pressed against the stones, her right arm under her bosom. He touched her brow, her face, her fingers. She was breathing; the transparent lids were closed, and a peaceful expression was on her face, as on that of a slumbering child. He folded her in his arms, pressed his lips upon the lips of the woman and whispered a thousand endearing epithets into her ears. As he did so, she opened her eyes.

Bewildered, she gazed about for a moment, her eyes wandering from Francesco to the apparently lifeless form on the floor of the hall.

"Take me away!" she moaned. "Take me away! Is he dead?"

A great awe had come into her eyes.

"Only stunned!" replied Francesco, inquiring with great misgiving if she was hurt, yet preferring to let her attribute her fall to an accident rather than to reveal the truth.

But she shook her head, as he held it between his hands.

"Take me away," she said with a heart-broken sob. "The hour of which I have so often dreamed has come. Take me to San Nicandro by the Sea."—

With all the love he bore her, he begged her to remain, to be near him, not to leave him thus to darkness and despair.

"Your river has reached the sea!" she said with a heart-broken smile. "As you love me, do as I ask!"

She felt strong enough to walk, only a slight bruise bearing witness to the Frangipani's violence. Leaving him where he lay, they slowly retraced their steps, when wild shouts and cries of alarm were wafted to them from above. The frenzied revellers were rushing to and fro in the palace; from the city came the clangor of bells, and the loud blare of the wardens' horns from the gates.

The cause was not slow revealing itself.

An immense black cloud, palpitating with lightnings, had settled on the cone of Vesuvius. The sky had cleared; and the moon, changed to blood-red hues, hung like a rayless sun midway in the nocturnal heavens. Suddenly the air became hot to suffocation. For a moment deep silence reigned. Then, a sharp report as of a thunder-clap in closest proximity shook the earth. A gigantic stream of lava was belched forth from the smoke-wreathed mountain, the air was obscured by a rain of mud and brimstone, which fell far and wide in Torre del Greco and was carried to Naples. Like a thousand fiery serpents the lava coiled down the sides of the mountain; a stench of sulphur filled the air, and giant tongues of flame, leaping upward through the rugged crater, lighted the landscape to the remotest horizon.

While, fascinated by the awful spectacle, Francesco and Ilaria gazed spellbound towards Vesuvius, another incident added to the terror of the night. Shrill and insistent from the summits of Astura blared the horn of the warden, waking the slumbering echoes of Torre del Greco. And suddenly a fleet of many ships came steering round the Cape

of Circé, heading for the open sea; while Astura's ramparts bristled with spear points.

Francesco turned to the nearest bystander, pointing to the castello.

There was a great fear in the eyes of him who made reply.

"Bribed by the Pontiff the Frangipani have delivered Conradino into the hands of Anjou. Behold yonder—the fleet of Charles' Admiral, Robert of Lavenna, carrying the captive king and his companions to their doom!"—

Wide-eyed, pale as death, Francesco and Ilaria stared at each other, neither trusting themselves to speak. Then a half-smothered sob broke from the woman's lips, as she leaned her head on his shoulder.

A strange calm had settled over Francesco as he gazed from Ilaria towards the ramparts of Astura.

There was a moment's silence between them, then he raised himself to his full height as he turned to her.

"Hitherto I have served God! Now I will serve my own soul!"

End of Book the Fourth.

Book the Fifth

THE APOSTACY

CHAPTER I

A LEGEND



OUT into the open caverns of the night Francesco and Ilaria rode. Their eyes still roved from the fading city to the great ships stealing over the water. Their tall masts rose against the last gleaming cranny of the west. Beyond them the mountains towered solemn and stupendous, fringed with aureoles of transient fire. Even in the half-gloom they could see a vague glittering movement on the slopes behind Astura, a glitter that told of armed men marching from the hills, while shadowy ships seemed striding, solemn and silent, out of the night. A thousand oars seemed to churn the water. Sudden out of the gloom leaped the cry of a horn, its

voice echoing from the hills. A vague clamor came from the shore. In Astura torches were gleaming like red moths in a garden. From the castle the alarm bell boomed and clashed; then like giants' ghosts the ships crept out to sea, sable and strange against the fading west.

As Francesco turned, sick at heart, he met Ilaria's eyes. Her sweet, proud face was near him once again, overtopping his manhood. The moonbeams played upon her dusky hair.

The silence was intense. Only the pounding of their horses' feet beat insistent clamor into the stillness of the night.

The trees and bushes began to mass themselves into denser shadow against the tinge of ghostly starlight.

Now her face was very close to his.

"At times I feel as if we had lived very, very long ago, —ages and ages ago, when the world was young and only the moon and the stars were old. None walked upon the earth save we two and the world and its beauty was for us alone. Dusky forests covered the land, where strange flowers bloomed, where strange birds sang. Beneath the sunken light of a seared moon we walked hand in hand."—

A great wave of misery swept over him.

"I love you,—I love you," he whispered hoarsely. "Heart of my heart, that is the tale, a tale of three words, which is yet larger than any tale that was ever said or sung. Do you know what this must mean to you and me?"

She drew herself away from him.

"You love me," she repeated, not questioningly, but as one stating a fact. "Yet such love is not for you and me! All men, all circumstances would try to part us!"

"But why? But why?" he cried. "Ilaria, I love you with a love that must last through life and death and all that lies beyond. So, since I am what I must be, I place my life into your hands for good or evil."

He kissed her, then looked hungrily into her eyes.

She gave a wan smile.

"Dear, do not grieve!" she said. "I have always loved you, love you now and think it no shame. Had you consented to become my lover, the man I love had died! What I love best in you, is what held you far!"

"Ilaria!" he cried, loosening the horses' reins, "what is there between you and Stefano Maconi?"

She breathed hard, and her face was very pale.

"I too might have found forgetfulness where others find. That path was not for me. Francesco!" She laid her hand upon his own. "Look in my eyes and see!"

That night they stopped at a wayside inn, as brother and sister, Francesco keeping watch outside, while Ilaria occupied the only guest-chamber of the tavern.

Francesco's eyes stayed with her darkly, sadly, after she had gone inside. His tragic face seemed to look out of the night like the face of one dead.

He had tethered their horses some distance away, so that the occasional tramp of their hoofs should fall muffled on the air. The deeply caverned eyes watching through the night seemed dark with a quiet

destiny. The thin, pale face, white in its meditative repose, seemed fit to front the ruins of a stricken land.

It was the face of a man who had watched and striven, who had followed what he held to be truth, like a shadow; who had found the light of life in a woman's eyes, and saw that light slowly go out and vanish in outer darkness.

There was bitterness there, pain, and the ghost of a sad desire that was pleading with death. The face would have seemed stern, but for a certain something that made its shadows kind.

The woods about him seemed to swim in a mist of silver.

Thus he sat through the night. He saw the moon go down in the west. Nothing earthly could come into the sad session of remembrances, the vigil of a dead past.—

The early dawn found them again upon the road.

The evening of another day descended; the green valleys were full of light. Afar on the hills the great trees dreamed, dome on dome, touching the transient crimson of the west. Ilex and cedar stood, sombre giants, in a golden, shimmering sea. The eastern slopes gleamed in the sun, a cataract of leaves, plunging into gloom. The forests were full of shadows and mysterious streams of gold, and a great silence shrouded the wilderness, save for the distant thunder of the streams.

Whenever Ilaria had grown tired, they had stopped in the shelter of the giant oaks, and partaken of the refreshments which Francesco had taken along. At

high-noon they had reached what appeared to be a deserted castle, situated in the midst of a flowery oasis. Here they had dismounted and Ilaria had found great delight in roaming through the enchanted wilderness, calling each flower by its name and, now and then, referring to the old rose-garden at Avellino, those happy days of their guileless youth. Francesco's heart was heavy within him as he watched the girlish figure, over whom sorrow had passed with so loving a hand, idealizing and etherealizing her great beauty, never dimming her sweet eyes. Then he had led their steeds down to the stream, which purled through the underbrush, and while they drank, he had seated himself on the bank and buried his head in his hands.

As he came from watering his horses at the stream, he heard the sound of her footsteps amid the vines and pomegranates, chanting some sorrowful legend of lost love. Francesco had discovered a rough bridge across the stream, where giant boulders seemed to have been set as stepping-stones between the western grass-land and the castle. There was a narrow postern giving entrance through the walls. Francesco stood at the gate and listened. Above the thunder of the foaming streams her voice seemed to rise; even the great golden vault of heaven seemed full of the echoes of her passionate song.

He found Ilaria seated on the terrace-way, where the oleanders bloomed. Under the stone bridge the water foamed and purled, the ferns and the moss green and brilliant above the foam. About her rose the knolls of the gold-fruited trees. Further the forests climbed into the glory of the heavens.

She ceased her chanting as Francesco came to her

and made room for him on the long bench of stone. There was a tinge of petulance about the red mouth, the pathetic perverseness of a heart that loved not by the will of circumstance. Ilaria was as a woman deceived by dreams. She had loved a dream, and since fate bowed not to her desire, she turned her back in anger upon the world.

How Francesco loved her, she knew full well. Yet she could not forget that he had chosen the garb he wore rather than herself. Her very love for him stiffened her perverseness and caused her to delight in torturing him.

Francesco sat on the stone seat and looked up at her with questioning gaze. To Ilaria there was a love therein such as only once comes into a woman's life, yet the look troubled her. She feared its appeal, feared the weakening of her own resolve.

"Francesco," she said at last.

He took her hand, his eyes fixed solemnly upon the face he loved so well.

"You will return to Naples?" she queried with a show of indifference.

"Naples is far from me as yet," he said with bowed head.

"Let me not hinder you,—since go you must."—

"Are you so anxious to be relieved of me?" he said bitterly.

"The fate of Conradino,—the fate of our friends hang in the balance."

"I could not save them single-handed, though I

would!"

"Yet save them you must! You must redeem your past,—for my sake! Why not part here, since part we must? There are other claims upon my soul!"

"Raniero Frangipani still lives—"

"I shall never return to him!"

He did not answer her for a moment. Her eyes were troubled, she looked as one whose thoughts were buffeted by a strong wind. Above them the zenith mellowed to a deeper gold, and they had the noise of the waters in their ears.

"Ilaria," he said at last, "what would you with me? Am I not pledged to guard your life,—your honor?"

"Ah," she said, drooping her lashes, "I shall not clog your years! The springtime of life has passed,—for each of us!"

"But not my love for you!" he cried fiercely, with the tone of a man tortured by suspense.

Ilaria looked at him, and she saw the love upon his face, like a sunset streaming through a cloud. She pitied him for a moment, but hardened her heart the more.

"I am weary of the world," she said.

"Weary, Ilaria? Are you not free?"

She looked at him quizzically.

"The wife of Raniero Frangipani?"

"Have you not broken the chains?"

"Mine the forging—mine the suffering," she said, almost with a moan. "Though I have left him, I am not free. Nor are you! Though you burn your garb—you are forever a monk—the slave of Rome! Who is free in life?" she added, after a brief pause. "I am fearful of the ruffian passions of the world,—the lusts and the terrors,—even love itself! Life seethes with turbulence and the great throes of wrath. I would be at peace,—I have suffered—God, how I have suffered!"

Francesco rose up suddenly, and began to stride to and fro before her. He loved Ilaria, he knew it at this moment, with all the strongest fibres of his heart. He had hoped too much, trusted too much to the power of his own faith. He turned and faced her, there, outwardly calm, miserable within.

"Must this thing be?" he asked her.

There was such deep wistfulness in those words of his that she bent her head and would not look into his face.

"Francesco," she said, "I pray you, plead no further with my heart. I shall turn nun,—there is the truth."

"As you will—" he said, and a cord seemed to snap in his heart. "It is not for me to parley with your soul, not for me to revive a past that had best never been!"

Ilaria's gaze seemed far away. Her eyes, under their dark lashes, seemed like spring violets hiding in shadows.

There was an infinite pride, an infinite tenderness in the wistful face, as she turned to Francesco.

"Ah," she said with a sudden kindling, "why has it

been decreed thus? I think my whole soul was made for beauty, my whole desire born for fair and lovely things. You will smile at me for a dreamer,—dreaming still, after the devastating storms of life have spent themselves over my head,—but often my thoughts seem to fly through forests, marvellous green glooms all drowned in moonlight. I love to hear the wind, to watch the great oaks battling, to see the sea, one laugh of gold. Now, every sunset harrows me into a moan of woe. Yet I can still sing to the stars at night, songs such as the woods weave from the voice of a gentle wind, dew-laden, green and lovely. Sometimes I feel faint for sheer love of this fair earth."

Francesco's eyes were on her with a strange, deep look. Every fibre of his being, every hidden instinct cried out in him to fold her in his arms, to hold her there forevermore, safe from the world, from harm. But, as if she had divined his thoughts, she drew away from him.

He stood motionless, with head thrown back, his eyes gazing upon the darkening windows of the east. The sound of the running waters surged in his ears; the colors and odors of the place seemed to faint into the night. As for Ilaria, she stared immovable into space.

At last she turned to Francesco.

"And are they all,—all lost?"

His lips hardened.

"All, save the lords of Astura."

Her face was pale as death.

Francesco took her hands in his, bent over them and kissed them passionately.

A soft light shone in her eyes; yet underneath there was that inexplicable perverseness in her heart that at certain moments makes a woman treacherous to her own desires.

And Ilaria, as if to inflict a mortal wound on him she loved best, beckoned her own fate on with a bitterness that Francesco could not fathom.

"Listen," she said. "You will go to Naples,—you may be of service to the Swabian cause,—I must not—I will not—detain you,—besides,—I am weary of the world,—I am weary of it all! Take me to San Nicandro by the Sea—there I shall strive to forget!"

Francesco watched her, listening like a man to the reading of his own doom. Ilaria did not look at him. Her head was bowed down. And as he sat there, gazing on the face he so passionately loved, her eyes, her lips, Francesco could hardly restrain himself from putting his arms about her and holding her close, close to his heart. But an icy hand seemed to come between them, seemed to hold them apart.

"I will do as you wish!" he said.

The west was an open gate of gold. The darkening forests were wreathed in veils of mist. The island with the dark foliage of its trees and shrubs, lay like some dusky emerald sewn on the bosom of a sable robe.

CHAPTER II

MEMORIES



OW the birds sang that evening when the saffron afterglow had fainted over the forest spires, and when all was still with the hush of night, how the cry of a nightingale thrilled from a tree near the cottage!

The glamor of the day had passed, and now what mockery and bitterness came with the cold, unimpassioned light of the moon! Ilaria tossed and turned on her couch like one taken with a fever; her brain seemed afire, her hair like so much shadow about her head. As she lay staring with wide, wakeful eyes, the birds' song mocked her to the echo; the scent of rose and honeysuckle floated in like a sad savor of death, and the moonlight seemed to watch her without a quaver of pity. Her heart panted in the darkness; she was torn by the thousand torments of a troubled conscience; wounded to tears, yet her eyes were dry and waterless as a desert. Raniero's face seemed to glare down on her out of the dusky gloom, and she could have cried out with the fear that lay like an icy hand over her bosom.

How her heart wailed for Francesco; how she longed for the touch of his hand. God of heaven, she could not let him go again and starve her soul with the old, cursed life. His lips had touched hers; his arms had held her close; she had felt the warmth of his body,

and the beating of his heart. Was all this nothing,—a dream, a splendid phantasm, to be rent away like a crimson cloud? Was she to be Raniero's wife despite of all, a bitter flower growing up under a gallows?

God of heaven, no! What had the world done for her, that she should obey its edicts, and suffer for its tyrannies? Raniero had cheated her of her youth, her happiness; let him pay the price to the fates! What honor, indeed, had she to preserve for him? If he was a brute piece of lust, a tyrant, a traitor, so much the better! It would ease her conscience. She owed him no fealty, no marriage vow! Her body was no more his than was her soul, and a dozen priests and a dozen masses might as well marry ice to fire! How could a fool in a cape and frock, by gabbling a service, bind an irresponsible woman to the man she hated with a hatred enduring as the stars? It was a stupendous piece of nonsense, to say the least of it. No God calling himself a just God, could hold such a bargain holy.

And then the truth! What a stumbling-block truth was on occasions. She knew Francesco's fine sensibilities, and his very love for her made him the victim of an ethical tyranny. And again! For all her passion and the fire of her rebellious heart she was not a woman who could fling reason to the winds and stifle up her conscience with a kiss. Besides, she loved Francesco to the very zenith of her soul. To have a lie understood upon her lips, to be shamed before the man's eyes, were things that scourged her in fancy even more than the thought of losing him. She trembled when she thought how he might look at her in the days to come, if a passive lie were proven against her with open shame.

And Francesco was a monk! He might break the shackles, defy the powers of the Church,—he was a monk nevertheless! It might be possible that his love proved stronger than his reason; it was possible that he might face the world and frown down the petty judgments of men! Glorious and transcendent sacrifice! She could face calumny beside him, as a rock faces the froth of the waves, she could look Raniero in the eye and know neither pity nor shame.

Her mood that night was like the passage of a blown leaf, tossed up to heaven, whirled over the tree-tops, driven down again into the mire. Strong woman that she was, her very strength made the struggle more indecisive and more racking. She could not renounce Francesco for the great love she bore him; and yet she could not will to play a false part by reason of this same great love! Her soul, like a wanderer in the wilds, halted and wavered between two tracks that led forward into the unknown.

As she tossed and tossed and thought of her life in Astura, her face became hard as stone. Even since they had journeyed from Naples, Ilaria had been conscious of a change. Her face showed melancholy, mingled with a constant scorn that had rarely found expression in the old days, within the walls of Avellino. For a time hope had waited wide-eyed in her heart. She had conjured up love like some Eastern house of magic, only to see its domes faint away into the gloom of night. The past was as a wounded dream to her! Her eyes had hungered for a face, grieving in dark reserve and silence. Her love, once forged, could bend to no new craft.

After the barren months at Astura, the long bondage of hate, Francesco had come into her life again. He

had come to her with a glory of love in his eyes, he had taken her hands and kissed them, as though there were no such divine flesh in the whole wide world. How wonderful it was, to be touched so, to have such eyes pouring out so strong a soul before her face; to know the presence of a great love and to feel the echoing passion of it in her own heart!

Was this faery time but for an hour, a day, and no longer? Was she but to see the man's face, to feel the touch of his hands, the grand calm of his love, before losing him, perhaps for life? Her heart fluttered in her like a smitten bird. Could she but creep to him, where he lay, touch his hands, his lips! Her eyes stared out in the night with a starved frenzy.

"Francesco! Francesco!"—

It was like the wild cry of a woman over her dead love.

A wind had arisen. The thousand voices of the trees seemed to call to her with a weird, perpetual clamor. She saw their spectral hands jerking and clutching against the sky. The wind was crying through the trees, swaying them restlessly against the starry sky, making plaintive moan through all the myriad aisles.

How many a heart trembles with the return of day! What fears rise with the first blush of light in the purple bowl of night! To Ilaria the dawn would come as a message of misery; she dared not think what the coming hours would bring.

At last she closed her weary eyes, and under the sheer weight of her own grief fell into a deep and dreamless slumber, while the gloom was growing less and less, and dawn, like a pale phantom, stalked

out of the east.

CHAPTER III

THE GRAIL OF LOVE



RANCESCO was astir early with the coming of the dawn. The grass was drenched with dew, the woods towered heavenwards with a thousand golden peaks. In the valleys the stream echoed back the light.

Francesco was very solemn about the eyes. He looked as one who took little joy in life, but worked to forget and to ease his heart of its great pain. He watched the sun climb over the leafy hills, saw the clouds trend the heavens, heard the thunder of the streams. There was life in the day and wild love in the woods. Yet from this world of passion and delight he was as an exile, rather a pilgrim, fettered by a heavy vow. He was to bear the Grail of Love through all these wilds, yet might never look

thereon, nor quench his thirst.

He met Ilaria in the garden, took her head between his hands, and kissed her upon the lips. She clung close to him and smiled, yet her looks were distraught; she seemed fearful of looking in his eyes.

"I have saddled the horses," he said laconically.

She read the heroism in his heart; the bitterness of the faith she compelled from him. The truth troubled and shamed her.

Francesco strapped the wallet and water flask to his saddle and lifted Ilaria to her steed. Then they crossed the stream and, riding northwards, plunged into the woods.

All that day Francesco strove and struggled with his youth, his heart beating fast and loud under his steel-hauberk. Love was at his side, robed in crimson and green; Ilaria's hair blinded him more than the noon-brightness of the sun. And as for her eyes, he dared not look therein, lest they should tempt him to deceive his honor. The silence enfolded them as though they were half fearful of each other's thoughts.

Francesco spoke little, keeping his distance, as though mistrusting his own tongue. As for Ilaria, the same passionate perverseness possessed her heart, and, though she pitied Francesco, she pitied him silently and from afar.

The following night they lodged in a beech wood, where dead leaves spread a dry carpet under the boughs. Francesco made a bed of leaves at the foot of a great tree. He spread a cloak underneath for Ilaria's comfort, then started away, as though to increase the

distance between them.

"Francesco!" she cried suddenly, looking slantwise at his face.

He turned and stood waiting.

"You have given me your cloak!"

"It will keep the chill air from you!"

"What of yourself?"

"I shall not need it!" he said. "I shall not sleep to-night. I will keep watch and guard you! Have no fear!"

She sighed and hung her head as she sat down at the foot of the tree. Francesco's deep and unselfish love shamed her more and more. Yet his very patience with her hardened her discontent. Had he rebelled and conquered her against her will, she would have followed him to the ends of the earth.

Francesco, with a last look, left her there and strode away to a point where he might see, though not speak to her. A full moon climbed in the east and the wide lands were smitten with her mystery. The valleys were as lakes of glimmering mist, the hills like icy pinnacles gleaming towards the stars. The forest glades were white under the moon; the trees tall, sculptured obelisks, their trunks as of ebony inlaid with pearl wherever the moonlight splashed the bark. The silence of the wilderness was as the silence of a windless sea.

Francesco wandered in the woods, his heart full of the strange, haunting beauty of the autumnal night. The stars spoke to him of Ilaria; the trees had her name unuttered on their lips. What was this woman

that she should bring such bitterness into his life? Were there not others in the world as fair as she, with lips as red and eyes as deep? Strangeness—mystery! She was one with the moon; a goddess shrined in the gloom of forests dim. White and immaculate, beautifully strange, she seemed as an elf child fated to doom men to despair, to their own undoing.—

Francesco passed back and found her asleep under the trees. He stood beside her and gazed on the sleeping face. There was silent faith in that slumber; trust in the man who guarded her honor. The moonlight streamed on the upturned face, shining like ivory amid the gleam of her dusky hair. How white her throat was, how her bosom rose and fell with the soft white hands folded thereon.

A sudden warmth flooded Francesco's heart; and youth cried in him for youth. Should this beauty be mured in stone, this red rose be hid by convent trees? Was she not flesh and blood, born to love and to be loved in turn,—and what was life but love and desire?

He crept near on his knees, hung over her breathlessly, gazing on her face. God, but to wake her with one long kiss, to feel those white arms steal around his neck! They were alone, the two of them, under the stars. For many minutes Francesco hung there like a man tottering on a crag betwixt sea and sky. Passion whimpered in him; his heart beat fast. Yet even as he crouched over Ilaria asleep, some dream or vision seemed to trouble her soul. Her hands stirred; her lids quivered; the breath came fast betwixt her lips. A shadow as of pain passed over the moonlit face. Francesco, kneeling motionless, heard

her utter a low name, saw tears glistening on her cheeks; she was weeping in her sleep.

Pity, the strong tenderness of his nobler self, his great love for the girl of his youth, rushed back into the deeps as a wave from a cliff. He rose up; the shadows flying from his heart as bats afraid of their own flight. He knelt at the foot of the tree and covered his face with his hands.—

On the following evening they saw the sea, a wild streak of troubled gold under the kindling cressets of the west. Beneath them lay a valley full of tangled shrubs and windworn trees. Westward rose a great rock, thrusting its huge black bastions out into the sea. Upon this rock rose the towers and pinnacles of San Nicandro, smitten with gold, wrapped in mysterious vapor. Into the east stretched a wilderness of woods, dun and desolate, welcoming the night.

Francesco and Ilaria rode out from the woods towards the sea, while in the west the sun sank into a bank of burning clouds. The trees were wondrous green in the slant light; the whole land seemed bathed in strange, ethereal glory. San Nicandro upon its headland stood like black marble above the far glimmerings of the sea.

Francesco rode with his eyes fixed on the burning clouds. Ilaria was watching him with strange unrest. Since that first night in the woods he had held aloof from her, had spoken little, had wrapped himself in his iron pride. Yet at times, when his eyes had unwittingly met hers, she had seen the sudden gleam therein of a strong desire. She had watched the color rise in Francesco's sunburnt face; the deep-drawn sighs that ebbed and flowed under the steel hauberk.

Though his mouth was as granite, though he hid his heart from her, she knew full well that he loved her to the death. The fine temper of his faith had humiliated, even angered her. Though his silent despair defied her vanity with heroic silence, his courage made her miserable from sheer sympathy and shame.

They crossed a small stream and came to a sandy region, where stunted myrtles clambered over the rocks, and tamarisks, tipped as with flame, waved in the wind. Storm-buffeted and dishevelled pines stood gathered upon the hillock. The region was sombre and very desolate; silent, save for the low piping of the wind.

Neither Francesco nor Ilaria had spoken since they had left the woods and sighted San Nicandro upon its rocky height. Suddenly he pointed with his hands towards the cliffs, the light of the setting sun streaming upon his white and solemn face.

"Yonder lies San Nicandro," he said to her.

There was a species of defiance in the cry, as though the man's soul challenged fate. His heart's cords were wrung with misery. Ilaria quailed inwardly, like one ashamed; her lips quivered; her eyes for the nonce were in peril of tears.—

"Yonder lies San Nicandro," she echoed in an undertone. "There I may be at peace. I shall not forget—"

"Nor I," he said, with grim emphasis.

A narrow causeway curled upwards towards the tower on the rock. The sea had sunk behind the cliff, the sky had faded to a misty gray. Ilaria's eyes were

on the walls of San Nicandro and she seemed lost in musings as they rode side by side.

"Francesco," she said suddenly, as they neared the sea, "think not hard of me! Strife and unrest are everywhere. It is better to escape the world!"

"Better perhaps," he said, with his eyes upon the clouds.

"Forget that there is such a woman as Ilaria," she said. "I, too, shall strive to forget the past."—

"Who can forget?" he muttered. "While life lasts, memory lives on!"

They had come to the causeway, where the track wound like a black snake towards the golden heights. Not a sound was there save the distant surging of the sea. The distorted trees thrust out their hands and seemed to cry an eternal "Vale" to the two upon the road.

At the foot of the causeway, Francesco turned his horse.

"Go in peace!" he said, his voice vibrating with inward emotion, her image haunting his heart, like a fell dream at night.

She stretched out a hand.

"Francesco—you will not leave me yet?"

"Ah!" he cried with sudden great bitterness, "is it so easy to say farewell?"

His strong despair swept over her like a wind. She sat mute and motionless upon her horse, gazing at him helplessly as one half dazed. On the cliffs above,

San Nicandro beckoned with the great cross above its topmost pinnacle.

Ilaria shivered, struggled with herself, perverse as of yore.

"What am I, that you should desire me?" she said. "I have but little beauty, and am growing old. Leave me, Francesco, and forget me! Forget and forgive! I have no heart to struggle with the world!"

Francesco was white to the lips, as he stiffened his manhood to meet the wrench.

"God knows how I have loved you,—how I love you still!"

"Francesco," she said, leaning towards him from the saddle.

He gave a hoarse cry and covered his face with his hands.

"For pity's sake," he said, "say no more to me! It is enough!"—

They had reached the gate.

He pricked his horse with his spurs, wheeled from her and dashed down the road without a look. His face was as the face of a man who rode to meet his death.

"Francesco!" she cried to him, as she saw him plunge to a gallop, saw the shield between his shoulders dwindle into the night.

"Francesco!" she cried again, a sudden loneliness seizing on her heart. "Francesco, come back! Francesco—"

The cry was in vain, for he would not listen, deeming her pity more grievous than her scorn. Despair spurred him on; the black night called.

Ilaria watched him vanish into the increasing gloom, while on the cliffs San Nicandro stood, like the great gate of death.

CHAPTER IV

DEAD LEAVES



HROUGH bleak and desolate stretches Francesco spurred his steed, as if to outstrip his mastering agony.

Ilaria had gone from him. Nothing mattered any longer. He had no longer the sense that there could be duty for him. Even in his wish for freedom there was cowardice; his soul cried out for rest, for peace from the enemy; peace, not this endless striving. He was terrified. In the ignominious lament there was

desertion, as if he were too small for the fight. He was demanding happiness, and that his own burden should rest on other shoulders. To his demand Fate had cried its unrelenting No. How silent was the universe about him! He stood in sheer and tremendous eternal isolation.

Ruin was everywhere, black, saturnine, solemn. The flames of Ninfa in the Pontine marshes, of distant Alba dyed the night crimson, while Norba, the papal robber-nest on the ragged crest of the Lepinian mountain, bristled behind her cyclopean walls. The Provencals had been here,—the Pontiff's champion. A strange silence encompassed the world. The wind had passed. The storm blasts moaned no more.

Ever to southward Francesco held his course, towards the mountain fastnesses, which harbored the Duke of Spoleto. To him he would open his heart, enlist his services in the cause of Conradino and his friends. Himself he would join the ranks of the discarded, for, to his life, there was but one purpose now, and that accomplished, he would go whence none might bid him return.

As Francesco rode through the darkening woods, through the desolate stretches, he bowed his head and was heavy of heart. The bleak trees along the storm-swept sea were outlined against the deeper gold of a memory, a melancholy afterglow, weird yet tender. Childhood and youth came back once again; Ilaria's sweet eyes and the dusky sheen of her hair.

Ilaria! Ilaria!

For the nonce he forgot the grim, grinding present, forgot the tens and thousands, who had been here, had laid waste the land, driving clouds of dust from

the ashes under their horses' feet.

As night came on apace, the full moon hung tangled in a knot of pines. The turrets and bastions of Norba stood black against the shimmer of the night.

Drawing rein on the brow of a hill, he saw a river gleaming below in the valley, shining like silver set in ebony, as it coursed through the blackened country. He hardly knew the region, so great was the havoc and desolation wrought by Anjou.

His eyes roved over the desolate stretches, the sepulchral trees, the sun-scorched grass. Francesco seemed as one dizzy, his face the face of a starved ascetic. His eye strained towards the towering crags where the Duke of Spoleto held solitary court. The light of the moon still wavered through the gloom. To the north rose the dome of the great pine-forests, and into the opaque darkness of the giant-firs Francesco spurred his steed.

Onward he rode as a man who has battled at night through a stormy sea. And ever as he rode his heart hungered for Ilaria, for that dusky head bowed down beneath the pathos of the past. He remembered her in a hundred scenes; her deep eyes haunted him, her rich voice pealed through the silent avenues of his thoughts. And while his lips moved in silent prayer that he might again look upon Ilaria's face, a dreary hopelessness bowed him down with the certainty that on earth they should meet no more.

The moon had risen higher, and the forests spread their green canopies against her silver disk.

Francesco shook himself free from the benumbing agony of his heart. A firm resolution was burning in

his eyes; his very soul seemed enhaloed about his face, as he rode at breakneck speed through the silent forest-aisles. He was guided by the shadowy contours of the distant hills, for he had noted their shapes on that summer day, when he journeyed from Viterbo into Terra di Lavoro. To the west gaunt crags rose above the trees, towering pinnacles, huge and grim, natural obelisks cleaving the blue. It was past midnight when he saw water glimmering in a blackened hollow. The moon went down and the light went out of the world. Francesco tethered his steed to one of the giants of the forest and slept till the east was forging a new day in its furnace of gold.

The gray mists of the hour before dawn made the forests gaunt like an abode of the dead. Francesco opened his eyes, heard the birds wake in brake and thicket. He saw the red deer scamper, frightened, into the glooms, and the rabbits scurrying among the bracken.

The face of the sky grew gray with waking light, and the hold of the stars and of night relaxed on wood and meadow. The gaunt trees stood without a rustling leaf in a stupor of silence. A vast hush held, as if the world knelt at orisons. Soon ripple on ripple of light surged from the hymning east. About him rose the slopes of a valley, set tier upon tier with trees, nebulous, silent, in the hurrying light.

His feet weighted with the shackles of an impotent fear, Francesco remounted his steed. About him the flowers were thick as on some rich tapestry; the scent of the dawn was as the incense of many temples. As he rode, his steed shook showers of dew from the feathery turf. Foxgloves rose like purple rods amid the snow webs of the wild daisy. Tangled domes of

dog-rose and honeysuckle lined the blurred track, and there were countless harebells lying like a deep blue haze under the green shadows of the grass.

Francesco had ridden for some hours and a craving for food began to assert itself. He had not touched a morsel since he had left Ilaria, and now he began to look about for some wayside tavern, the hut of a charcoal burner or some other evidence of human life. He began to fear that he had gone astray in the dusk of the forests, for not a sign did he encounter pointing to the camp of the duke.

A voice, coming from somewhere, caused him suddenly to start and rein in his steed with a jerk. The animal snorted, as if it scented danger, and Francesco loosened the sword in the scabbard anticipating an ambush, when he pushed it back with a puzzled look. Before a wayside shrine, almost entirely concealed by weeds, there knelt a grotesque figure at orisons. He either had not heard the tramp of Francesco's steed, or ignored it on purpose, for not until the latter called to him did he turn, and with much relief Francesco recognized his former guide from the camp of the Duke of Spoleto.

"Where is the camp of the duke?" he queried curtly, impatient with the man's exhibition of secular godliness.

"Many miles away," replied he of the goat's-beard, as he arose and kissed a little holly-wood cross that he carried.

"Lead me to it!"

The godly little man flopped again, scraped some dust together with his two hands, spat upon it, then

smeared his forehead with the stuff, uttering the names of sundry saints.

Francesco had come to the end of his patience.

"Get up, my friend," he said, "we have had enough praying for one day!"

The goatherd offered to anoint him with dust and spittle, pointing a stumpy forefinger, but Francesco was filled with disgust. He caught the man by the girdle and lifted him to his feet.

"Enough of this!" he said. "Is the devil so much your master?"

The goatherd blinked red-lidded and pious eyes, while he scanned the horizon. Then he pointed with his holly staff to a blue hill that rose against the eastern sky.

"How far?" queried Francesco.

The goatherd was anointing himself with spittle.

"Each mile in these parts grows more evil," he said, tracing the sign of the cross. "It behooves a Christian to be circumspect!"

Francesco prodded him with his scabbard.

"How far?"

"Some ten leagues," replied the gnome. "The day is clear, and the place looks nearer than it is!"

It occurred to Francesco that there must be some human abode close by, as the goatherd, entirely familiar with the region, would not wander too far from habitations of the living. And upon having

made known his request, the little man preceded him at a lively pace. At a lodge in the forest deeps they halted, and here Francesco and his guide rested during the hot hours of noon, partaking of such food as the liberality of their host, an old anchorite, set before them.

After men and steed had rested, they set out anew.

The goatherd's inclination to invoke untold saints, whenever there seemed occasion and whenever there was not, was curbed by a hard line round Francesco's lips, and they plunged into the great silence. A sense of green mystery encompassed them, as they traversed the green forest-aisles. The sky seemed to have receded to a greater distance. Everywhere the smooth dark trunks converged upon one another, sending up a tangle of boughs that glittered in the soft sheen of the sunlight. Withered bracken stood in thin silence, and here and there a dead bough lay like a snake with its head raised to strike.

The silence was immense, and yet it was a stillness that suggested sounds. It resembled the silence of a huge cavern, out of which came strange whisperings; innumerable crepitations seemed to come from the dead leaves. Francesco fancied he could hear the trees breathing, and from afar he caught the wild note of a bird.

The sun was low when they came at last to the edge of the forest and saw a hill rise steeply against the sky. It was covered with silver birches, whose stems looked like white threads in the level light of the setting sun. And rising against the sky-line from amidst the fretwork of birch-boughs Francesco saw the well-remembered outlines of the ruined tower wherein he had spent a memorable night.

The valley before them was flooded with golden light, and, as they crossed it, Francesco felt a curious desire for physical pain, something fierce and tangible to struggle with, to drown the ever-pulsing memory of the woman who had gone from him.

As the dusk deepened they went scrambling up the hillside amid the birches, whose white stems glimmered upwards into the blue gloom of the twilight. Francesco's thoughts climbed ahead of him, hurrying to deal with the unknown dangers that might be awaiting him. He had to dismount, pull his steed after him; but the scramble upwards gave him the sense of effort and struggle that he needed. It was like scaling a wall to come to grips with an enemy, whose wild eyes and sword-points showed between the crenelations.

At last they had reached the high plateau. A dog barked. The wood suddenly swarmed with bearded and grotesque forms. They did not recognize in Francesco the monk who had spent a night in their midst. The goatherd had maliciously disappeared, as if to revenge himself for his interrupted orisons. With glowering faces they thronged around Francesco, a babel of voices shouting questions and threatening the intruder.

He waved them contemptuously aside, and his demeanor seemed to raise him in their regards.

At his request to be forthwith conducted into the presence of the duke, one pointed to a low building at the edge of the plateau. Wisps of smoke curled out of it and vanished into the night.

"The duke and the Abbot are at orisons," the man

said with a grimace, the meaning of which was lost upon Francesco. "He will not return before midnight."

"I will await him here," said the newcomer, dismounting and leading his steed to a small plot of pasture, where the grass was tall and untrodden. Then, spent as he was, he requested food and drink, and as he joined the band of outlaws, listening to their jokes and banter, he thought he could discern among them many a one whom Fate had, like himself, buffeted into a life, not of his forming, not of his choice.

CHAPTER V

THE ABBEY OF FARFA



HE great vaults of the Abbey of Farfa resounded with glee and merriment.

Before a low, massive stone table, resembling a

druidical altar, surrounded by giant casks filled with the choicest wines of Italy, Greece and Spain, there sat the Duke of Spoleto and the Abbot Hilarius, discoursing largely upon the vanities of the world, and touching incidentally upon questions pertaining to the welfare of Church and State. A single cresset shed an unsteady light over the twain, while a lean, cadaverous friar glided noiselessly in and out the transepts, obsequiously replenishing the beverage as it disappeared with astounding swiftness in the feasters' capacious stomachs. And each time he replenished the vessels, he refilled his own with grim impartiality, watching the Abbot and his guest from a low settle in a dark recess.

The vault was of singular construction and considerable extent. The roof was of solid stone masonry and rose in a wide semicircular arch to the height of about twelve feet, measured from the centre of the ceiling to the ground floor.

The transepts were divided by obtusely pointed arches, resting on slender granite pillars, and the intervening space was filled up with drinking vessels of every conceivable shape and size.

The Abbot of Farfa was a discriminating drinker, boasting of an ancestral thirst of uncommonly high degree, the legacy of a Teutonic ancestor who had served the Church with much credit in his time.

They had been carousing since sunset.

The spectral custodian had refilled the tankards with amber liquid. Thereof the Abbot sipped understandingly.

"Lacrymae Christi," he turned to the duke. "Vestrae

salubritati bibo!"

The duke raised his goblet.

"Waes Hael!" and he drained its contents with a huge gulp.

"I would chant twenty psalms for that beverage," he mused after a while.

The Abbot suggested "Attendite Populi!"—"It is one of the longest," he said, with meaning.

"Don't trifle with a thirsty belly," growled the duke. "In these troublous times it behooves men to be circumspect!"

"Probatum est," said the Abbot. "It is a noble vocation! Jubilate Deo!"

And he raised his goblet.

The Duke of Spoleto laid a heavy hand upon his arm.

"It is a Vigil of the Church!"

The Abbot gave himself absolution on account of the great company.

"There's no fast on the drink!" he said with meaning. "Nor is there better wine between here and Salamanca!"

The duke regarded his host out of half-shut watery eyes.

"My own choice is Chianti!"

"A difference of five years in purgatory!"

Thereupon the duke blew the froth of his wine in the Abbot's face.

"Purgatory!—A mere figure of speech!"

The Abbot emptied his tankard.

"The figures of speech are the pillars of the Church!"

He beckoned to the custodian.

"Poculum alterum imple!"

The lean friar came and disappeared noiselessly.

They drank for a time in heavy silence. After a time the Abbot sneezed, which caused Beelzebub, the Abbot's black he-goat, who had been browsing outside, to peer through the crescent-shaped aperture in the casement and regard him quizzically.

The duke, who chanced to look up at that precise moment, saw the red inflamed eyes of the Abbot's tutelar genius, and, mistaking the goat for another presence, turned to his host.

"Do you not fear," he whispered, "lest Satan may pay you a visit during some of your uncanonical pastimes?"

"Uncanonical!" roared the Abbot. "I scorn the charge! I scorn it with my heels! Two masses daily,—morning and evening—Primes,—Nones,—Vespers,—Aves,—Credos,—Paters—"

"Excepting on moonlight nights," the duke blinked.

"Exceptis excipiendis," replied the Abbot.

"Sheer heresy!" roared the duke. "The devil is apt to keep an eye on such exceptions. Does he not go about like a roaring lion?"

"Let him roar!" shouted the Abbot, bringing his fist down upon the table, and looking about in canonical ire, when the door opened noiselessly and in its dark frame stood Francesco.

He had waited at the camp for the return of the duke until his misery and restlessness had mastered every other sensation. Sleep, he felt, would not come to his eyes, and he craved for action. He should have liked nothing better than to mount his steed on the spot, ride single-handed into Anjou's camp and redeem his honor in the eyes of those who regarded him a bought instrument of the Church. The memory of Ilaria wailed through the dark chambers of his heart. He felt at this moment, more than ever, what she had been to him, and to himself he appeared as a derelict, tossed on a vast and shoreless sea.

For a moment he gazed as one spellbound at the drinkers, then he strode up to the duke and shook him soundly.

"To the rescue, my lord duke!" he shouted, in the excess of his frenzy, till the vaults re-echoed his cry from their farthest recesses. "Conradino has been betrayed by the Frangipani!"

At the sound of the name he hated above all on earth, the duke's nebulous haze fell from him like a mantle.

With a great oath he arose.

"Where is the King?"

"They have taken him to Rome,—or Naples,—or to some fortress near the coast," Francesco replied.

"Into whose hands was he delivered?"

"Anjou's admiral,—Robert of Lavenna!"

The duke paused a moment, as if endeavoring to bring order into the chaos of his thoughts. He scanned Francesco from head to toe, as if there was something about the latter's personality which he could not reconcile with his previous acquaintance.

At last Francesco's worldly habit flashed upon him.

"What of the Cross?" he flashed abruptly.

"There is blood upon it!" retorted Francesco.

"All is blood in these days," the duke said musingly. "Are you with us?"—

"I have broken the rosary!"—

The duke extended his broad hand, in which Francesco's almost disappeared as he closed upon it.

There was a great wrath in his eyes.

"We ride at sun-rise!"

"Our goal?"—

"To Naples!"—

The dawn was streaking the east with faint gold, and transient sunshafts touched the woods, when Francesco stood before the doorway of his lodge of pine boughs. The men of the Duke of Spoleto were gathering in on every side, some girding their swords, others tightening their shield-straps, as they came.

The duke ordered a single horn to sound the rally.

The glade was full of stir and action. Companies

were forming up, shoulder to shoulder; spears danced and swayed; horses steamed in the brisk morning air.

At last the tents sank down, and, as the sun cleared the trees, the armed array rolled out from the woods into a stretch of open land, that sloped towards the bold curves of a river.

On that morning Francesco felt almost happy, as his fingers gripped his sword and he cantered along by the side of the duke. The great heart of the world seemed to beat with his.

"The day of reckoning has come at last!" he said to the leader of the free lances.

The duke's features were hard as steel. Yet he read the other's humor and joined him with the zest of the hour.

"You smile once more!" said the grim lord of the woods, turning to the slender form in the saddle.

"I shall smile in the hour when the Frangipani lies at my feet," Francesco replied with heaving chest. "It is good to be strong!"

The duke's horsemen were scouring ahead, keeping cover, scanning the horizon for the Provencals. By noon they had left the open land, plunged up hills covered thick with woods. The duke's squadrons sifted through, and he halted them in the woods under the brow of the hill.

Below lay a broad valley running north and south, chequered with pine-thickets and patches of brushwood. On a hill in the centre stood a ruined tower. Towards the south a broad loop of the river

closed the valley, while all around on the misty hills shimmered the giants of the forest, mysterious and silent. The duke's outriders had fallen back and taken cover in the thickets. Down the valley could be seen a line of spears, glittering snake-like towards the tower on the hill. Companies of horse were crossing the river, pushing up the slopes, mass on mass. In the midst of the flickering shields and spears blew a great banner with the Fleur-de-Lis.

It was a contingent of Charles of Anjou, which had been on the march since dawn. They had thrown their advance guard across the river and were straggling up the green slopes, while the main host crossed the ford.

The sound of a clarion re-echoed from crag to crag: and down towards the river played the whirlwind, with dust and clangor and the shriek of steel. Spears went down like trampled corn. The battle streamed down the bloody slope, for nothing could stand that furious charge.

The river shut in the broken host, for the ford was narrow, not easy of passage. From the north came the thundering ranks of horse, and on the south the waters were calm and clear. The Provencals, streaming like smoke blown from a fire by a boisterous wind, were hurled in rout upon the water. They were hurled over the banks, slain in the shallows, drowned in struggling to cross at the ford. Some few hundred reached the southern bank, and scattered fast for the sanctuary of the woods.

In less than half an hour from the first charge the duke's men had won the day. They gave no quarter; slew all who stood.

The duke rode back up the hill, Francesco by his side, amid the cheers of his men.

Southwest they rode towards the sea, their hundred lances aslant under the autumnal sky. They were as men challenging a kingdom with their swords, and they tossed their shields in the face of fate. The audacity of the venture set the hot blood spinning in their hearts. To free Conradino from Anjou's clutches; to hurl damnation in the mouth of the Provencals.

As for Francesco, he was as a hound in leash. His sword thirsted in its scabbard; he had tasted blood, and was hot for the conflict.

On the fourth day they came upon the ruins of Ninfa, a town set upon a hill in a wooded valley. Vultures flapped heavenward as they rode into the gate; lean, red-eyed curs snarled and slinked about the streets. Francesco smote one brute through with his spear, as it was feeding in the gutter on the carcass of a child. In the market square the Provencals had made such another massacre as they had perpetrated in Alba. The horrible obscenity of the scene struck the duke's men dumb as the dead. The towns-folk had been stripped, bound face to face, left slain in many a hideous and ribald pose. The vultures' beaks had emulated the sword. The stench from the place was as the breath of a charnel house, and the duke and his men turned back with grim faces from the brutal silence of that ghastly town.

Near one of the gates a wild, tattered figure darted out from a half-wrecked house, stood blinking at them in the sun, then sped away, screaming and whimpering at the sight of the duke, as though possessed with a demon. It was a woman, still

retaining the traces of her former great beauty, gone mad, yet the only live thing they found in the town.

The duke had reined in his steed at the sight, gone white to the roots of his hair. Then he covered his face with his hands, and Francesco heard him utter a heart-rending moan.

When his hands fell, after a lapse of time, he seemed to have aged years in this brief space.

"Forward, my men," he shouted with iron mouth. "The Frangipani shall not complain of our swords!"

They passed out of Ninfa through the opposite gate. At dark they reached the moors, and soon the entire host swept silently into the ebony gloom of the great forests, which seemed sealed up against the moon and stars.

CHAPTER VI

RETRIBUTION





ENEATH the dark cornices of a thicket of wind-stunted pines stood a small company of men, looking out into the hastening night. The half-light of evening lay over the scene, rolling wood and valley into a misty mass, while the horizon stood curbed by a belt of heavy thunder-clouds. In the western vault, a vast rent in the wall of gray shot out a blaze of translucent gold that slanted like a spear shaft to a sullen sea.

The walls of Astura shone white and ghostly athwart the plains. Sea-gulls came screaming to the cliffs. Presently out of the blue bosom of an unearthly twilight a vague wind arose. Gusts came, clamored, and died into nothingness. The world seemed to shudder. A red sword flashed sudden out of the skies and smote the hills. Thunder followed, growling over the world. The lurid crater of Vesuvius poured gold upon the sea, whose hoarse underchant mingled with the fitful wind.

A storm came creeping black out of the west. The sea grew dark. The forests began to weave the twilight into their columned halls. A sudden gust came clamoring through the woods. The myriad boughs tossed and jerked against the sky, while a mysterious gloom of trees rolled back against the oncoming night.

The men upon the hill strained their eyes towards the sea, where the white patch of a sail showed vaguely through the gathering gloom. Their black armor stood out ghostly against the ascetic trunks of

the trees. Grim silence prevailed, and so immobile was their attitude, that they might have been taken for stone images of a dead, gone age.

The wind cried restlessly amid the trees, gusty at intervals, but tuning its mood to a desolate and constant moan. The woods seemed full of a vague woe and of troubled breathings. The trees seemed to sway to one another, to fling strange words with the tossing of hair and outstretched hands. The furze in the valley, swept and harrowed, undulated like a green lagoon.

Between the hills and the cliff lay the marshes, threaded by a meagre stream that quavered through the green. A poison mist hung over them despite the wind. The mournful clangor of a bell came up from the valley, with a vague sound as of voices chanting.

After a time the bell ceased pulsing. In its stead sounded a faint eerie whimper, an occasional shrill cry that startled the moorlands, leaped out of silence like a bubble from a pool where death has been.

The men were shaken from their strained vigilance as by a wind. The utter gray of the hour seemed to stifle them, then a sound stumbled out of the silence and set them listening. It dwindled and grew again, came nearer: it was the smite of hoofs in the woodways. The rider dismounted, tethered his foam-flecked steed to a tree and stumbled up to where the Duke of Spoleto and Francesco stood, their gaze riveted upon the ghostly masonry of Astura.

Panting and exhausted he faced the twain.

"They have all died on the scaffold," he said with a hoarse, rasping voice. "The Swabian dynasty is no

more."

With a cry and a sob that shook his whole being, Francesco covered his face with his hands.

For a moment the duke stared blankly at the speaker.

"And the Frangipani?" he asked, his features ashen-gray and drawn.

The messenger pointed to Astura.

"There is feasting and high glee: the Pontiff's bribe was large."—

Francesco trembled in every limb.

"Such a day was never seen in Naples," the messenger concluded with a shudder. "To a man they died under the axe—the soil was dyed crimson with their blood."

There was a silence.

The messenger pointed to the sea, which had melted into the indefinite background of the night.

Dim and distant, like a pearl over the purple deeps, one sail after another struck out of the vague west. They came heading for the land, the black hulls rising and falling against the tumultuous blackness of the clouds.

A red gleam started suddenly from the waves. A quick flame leaped up like a red finger above the cliff.

The duke ignited a pine-wood torch. The blue resinous light spluttered in the wind.

Three times he circled it above his head, then he flung it into the sea.

"Bernardo Sarriano and the Pisan galleys," he turned to Francesco. "They are heading for the Cape of Circé."

A shout of command rang through the woods.

As with phantom cohorts the forest-aisles teemed with moving shadows.

A ride of some five miles lay between them and the Cape of Circé. Much of that region was wild forest land and moor; bleak rocky wastes let into woods and gloom. Great oaks, gnarled, vast, terrible, held giant sway amid the huddled masses of the underbrush. Here the wild boar lurked and the wolf hunted. But for the most it was dark and calamitous, a ghostly wilderness forsaken by man.

As they rode along they struck the occasional trail of the Crusaders of the Church. A burnt hamlet, a smoking farmhouse with a dun mist hanging over it like a shroud, and once they stumbled upon the body of a dead girl. They halted for a brief space to give her burial. The duke's men dug a shallow grave under an oak and they left her there and went on their way with greater caution.

"There is one man on earth to whom I owe a debt," the duke, leading the van beside Francesco, turned to the latter, "a debt that shall be paid this night, principal and interest."

Francesco looked up into the duke's face, and by the glare of the now more frequent lightnings he saw that it was drawn and gray.

"There lies his lair," the duke pointed to the white masonry of Astura, as it loomed out of the night, menacing and spectral, as a thunderbolt hissed into the sea, and again lapsed into gloom. "Betrayer of God and man,—his hour is at hand!"—

The duke's beard fairly bristled as he uttered these words, and he gripped the hilt of his sword as if he anticipated a conflict with some wild beast of the forest, some mythical monster born of night and crime.

Francesco made no reply. He was bowed down beneath the gloom of the hour, oppressed with unutterable forebodings. He too had an account to settle: yet, whichever way the tongue inclined in the scales, life stretched out from him as a sea at night. He dared not think of Ilaria, far away in the convent of San Nicandro by the sea; yet her memory had haunted him all day, knocked at the gates of his consciousness, dominated the hours. Compared with the ever present sense of her loss, all in life seemed utterly trifling, and he longed for annihilation only.

Yet a kindred note which he sounded in the duke's soul found him in a more receptive mood for the latter's confidences; once life had seemed good to him; he had thought men heroes, the world a faerie place. Thoughts had changed with time, and that for which he once hungered he now despised. Cursed with perversities, baffled and mocked, the eternal trivialities of life made the soul sink within him. Not all are mild earth, to be smitten and make no moan. There are sea spirits that lash and foam, fire spirits that leap and burn,—was he to be cursed because he was born with a soul of fire?

They were now in the midst of the great wilderness.

On all sides myriads of trees, interminably pillared; through their tops the wind sighed and pined like the soft breath of a sleeping world. Away on every hand stretched oblivious vistas, black under multitudinous green spires.

The interminable trees seemed to vex the duke's spirit, as their trunks crowded the winding track and seemed to shut in the twain as with a never ending barrier. And behind them, with the muffled tread of a phantom army, came the duke's armed array striding through the night.

"Have you too suffered a wrong at the hands of the Frangipani?" Francesco at last broke the silence, turning to his companion.

The latter jerked the bridle of his charger so viciously that the terrified animal reared on its haunches and neighed in protest.

"Man, know you whereof you speak?" the duke snarled, as he came closer to Francesco. "He has made the one woman the Duke of Spoleto ever loved —a wanton!"—

They pushed uphill through the solemn shadows of the forest. A sound like the raging of a wind through a wood came down to them faintly from afar. It was a sullen sound, deep and mysterious as the hoarse babel of the sea, smitten through with the shrill scream of trumpets, like the cry of gulls above a storm. Yet in the aisles of the pine forest it was still as death.

Then, like a spark struck from flint and steel falling upon tinder, a red glare blazed out against the background of the night. A horn blared across the

moorlands; the castle bell began to ring, jerkily, wildly, a bell in terror. Yellow gleams streaked the fretted waters, and again the trumpet challenged the dark walls, like the cry of a sea-bird driven by the storm.

The duke and Francesco looked meaningly at each other. The sound needed no words to christen it; they knew that the Pisans had attacked. They heard the roar and the cries from the rampart, the cataractine thunder of a distant battle.

Pushing on more swiftly as the woods thinned, the din grew more definite, more human, more sinister in detail. It stirred the blood, challenged the courage, racked conjecture with the infinite chaos it portended. Victory and despair were trammelled up together in its sullen roar; life and death seemed to swell it with the wind sound of their wings. It was stupendous, chaotic, a tempest cry of steel and passions inflamed.

The duke's face kindled to the sound as he shouted to his men to gallop on. Yet another furlong, and the spectral trunks dwindled, the sombre boughs seemed to mingle with the clouds, while gray, indefinite before them, engulfing the lightnings of heaven, loomed the great swell of the Tyrrhene, dark and restless under the thunderclouds, that came nearer and nearer. Ghostly the plains of Torre del Greco stretched towards the Promontory of Circé, and, solitary and impregnable, the Castello of Astura rose upon its chalk-cliffs, white in the lightnings which hissed around its summit.

The duke's men had come up, forming a wide semicircle around the leaders. At their feet opened a deep ravine, leading into the plain; half a furlong

beyond, although it seemed less than a lance's throw across, rose the castle of the Frangipani, washed by the waves of the Tyrrhene. The Pisans had attacked the southern acclivity, and the defenders, roused from their feast of blood, had poured all their defences towards the point of attack, leaving the northern slope to look to itself.

As they rode down the ravine there came from the bottom of the valley the sharp yelp of a dog. It was instantly answered by a similar bark from the very top of the castello.

"No two dogs ever had the same voice," the duke turned to Francesco. "They must be hell-hounds, whom the fiend has trained to one tune. But what is that yonder? A goat picking its way?"

"A goat walking on its hind legs!"

"Are there horns on its head?"

"No!"—

"Then it is not the Evil One! Forward, my men!"

The pause that preceded the breaking of the storm had been unnaturally long. Save for the gleam of the lightnings, the waters had grown to an inky blackness. There came one long moment, when the atmosphere sank under the weight of a sudden heat. Then the ever increasing thunder rushed upon the silence with a mighty roar and out of the west, driven by the hurricane, came a long line of white waves, that rose as they advanced, till the very Tritons beat their heads and the nymphs scurried down to greener depths.

And now a sudden streak of fire hissed from the

clouds, followed by a crash as if all the bolts of heaven had been let off at once. From the ramparts of Astura came cries of alarm, the din of battle, the blaring of horns, the shouting of commands.

The duke and Francesco had dismounted and were gazing up towards the storm-swept ramparts. Shrieks and curses rolled down upon them like the tumbling of a cascade.

Then they began to scale the ledge, the path dwindling to a goat's highway.

Above them rose a sheer wall on which there appeared not clinging space for a lizard. The abyss below was ready to welcome them to perdition if their feet slipped.

After a brief respite they continued, the duke's men scrambling up behind them, looking like so many ants on the white chalk-cliffs. The air was hot to suffocation; the storm roared, the thunder bellowed in deafening echoes through the skies, and the heavens seemed one blazing cataract of fire, reflected in the throbbing mirror of the sea.

They had reached a seam in the rock, where they paused for a moment to let their brains rest. There was hardly room for the duke and Francesco on the ledge, so narrow was the rocky shelf, and the latter was pushing close against the wall when he was suddenly forced to look up. He heard the din of the encounter above. The Pisans, having attacked the Frangipani from the south, were driving them out at the north. Suddenly two bodies whizzed by him, thrust over the ramparts in the fierceness of the assault. Another came; he seemed to have jumped for life, for he kept feet foremost for a distance through

the air, before he began to whirl. These fell clear of the scaling party, and were impaled on the broken tops of the stunted trees, that bossed the side of the precipice. One came so near the duke that his flight downward almost blew him off his narrow perch. His head struck the ledge, while his body caught in the bushes, hung a moment, then dashed after its comrades below.

Just then the end of a rope fell dangling by their side, let down from the ramparts above. The duke tried to grasp it, but it shifted beyond the gap. Down the rope came a man, then another; they both gained a foothold on the narrow ledge. No sooner were their feet on it, than the duke sent them headlong to the bottom. Then grasping the rope without waiting to see if a third or fourth were coming down, he shouted to Francesco to follow. Perilous as was the task, it was no more so than to follow the steep and narrow goat's trail, and in a brief space of time they swung into a courtyard which was deserted. Anticipating no attack on this side, the defenders of Astura had turned their whole attention to the southern slope, where the Pisans were scaling the walls. The roar of the conflict seemed to grow with the roar of the hurricane, and, as one by one the duke's men leaped into the dark square, and the muster was complete, Count Rupert turned to Francesco.

"I feared lest they might clean out the nest before our arrival," he said, then, pointing to a distant glare of torches, he gave the word. They caught the unwary defenders in the rear. No quarter was to be given; the robber brood of Astura was to be exterminated.

"Conradino!" was the password, and above the taunts

and cries of Frangipani's hirelings it filled the night with its clamor, rode on the wings of the storm, like the war-cry of a thousand demons.

Notwithstanding the fact that a few of the most daring among the Pisan admiral's men had scaled the ramparts and, leaping into the Frangipani's stronghold, had tried to pave a way for those lagging behind, their companions-in-arms were in dire straits. For those of Astura poured boiling pitch upon the heads of the attacking party, hurled rocks of huge dimensions down upon them which crushed into a mangled mass scores of men, unable to retain the vantage they had gained under the avalanche of arrows, rocks and fire.

In a moment's time the situation was changed.

Noiselessly as leopards, the duke's men fell upon their rear, raising their war-cry as they leaped from the shadows. Those on the ramparts, forced to grapple with the nearer enemy, abandoned their tasks. The Pisans, profiting by the lull, swarmed over the walls. Taken between two parties, a deadly hand-to-hand conflict ensued. Above the din and the roar of the hurricane, of the clashing of arms, above the cries of the wounded, the death-rattle of the dying, sounded the voice of the Duke of Spoleto.

"Onward, my men! Kill and slay!"

Side by side the duke and Francesco leaped into the thickest of the fray, both animated by the same desire to come face to face with the lords of Astura, spurning a lesser enemy.

For a time they seemed doomed to disappointment. Had the Frangipani been slain?

The zest of the conflict pointed rather to their directing the defence. Else their mercenaries would have left Astura to its fate.

Suddenly an unearthly voice startled the combatants.

"Guard, devil, guard!"

There was the upflashing of a sword, and a hoarse challenge frightened the night.

Giovanni Frangipani saw a furious face glaring dead white from under the shadow of a shield.

He stopped in his onward rush, blinked at the duke as one gone mad.

"Damnation, what have we here?"

"By the love of God, I have you now!"

"Fool, are you mad?"

The hoarse voice echoed him, the eyes flashed fire.

"Guard, ravisher,—guard!"

"Ten thousand devils! Who are you?"

"Your obedient servant,—the Duke of Spoleto!"

The Frangipani growled like a trapped bear.

He raised his sword, put forward his shield.

"On with you, dog!" he roared. "Join your wanton under the sod!"

"Ha, say you so?" cried the duke, closing in.

Their swords flashed, yelped, twisted in the air. A down cut hewed the dexter cantrel from the Frangipani's shield. His face with a gashed cheek

glared at the duke from under his upreared arm. So close were they that blood spattered in the duke's face as the Frangipani blew the red stream from his mouth and beard.



"'They lied,' he cried. 'Give me but life.'"

The duke broke away, wheeled and came again. He lashed home, split the Frangipani's collar-bone even through the rags of his hauberk. The Frangipani

yelped like a gored hound. Rabid, dazed, he began to make blind rushes that boded ill for him. The swords began to leap and to sing, while blinding flashes of lightning followed each other in quick succession and thunder rolled in deafening echoes through the heavens. Cut and counter-cut rang through the night, like the cry of axes, whirled by woodmen's hands.

Suddenly the Frangipani parried an upper cut and stabbed at the duke. The sword point missed him a hair's breadth. Before he could guard the duke was upon him like a leopard. Both men smote together, both swords met with a sound that seemed to shake the rocks. The Frangipani's blade snapped at the hilt.

He stood still for a moment as one dazed, then plucked out his poniard and made a spring. A merciless down cut beat him back. His courage, his assurance seemed to ebb from him on a sudden, as though the blow had broken his soul. He fell on his knees and held up his hands, with a thick, choking cry.

"Mercy! God's mercy!"

"Curse you! Had you pity on your victims?"

Thunder crashed overhead; the girdles of the sky were loosed. A torrent of rain beat upon the Frangipani's streaming face; he tottered on his knees, but still held his hands to the heavens.

"They lied," he cried. "Give me but life."—

The duke looked at him and heaved up his sword.

Giovanni Frangipani saw the white face above him, gave a great cry and cowered behind his hands. It was all ended in a moment. The rain washed his

gilded harness as he lay with his blood soaking into the crevices of the rocks.—

Francesco had witnessed neither the fight nor the ending. Impelled by an insensate desire to find Raniero, to have a final reckoning for all the baseness and insults he had heaped upon him in the past, for his treachery and cruelty to Ilaria, he had made his way to the great hall.

The door was closed and locked from within.

Francesco dealt it a terrific blow. Its shattered framework heaved inward and toppled against the wall.

In the doorway stood Raniero and looked out at his opponent. He did not recognize Francesco. His face was sullen; the glitter of his little eyes mimicked the ring gleams of his hauberk. He put out the tip of a tongue and moistened his lips.

Francesco's face was as the face of a man who has but one purpose left in life and, that accomplished, cares not what happens. Raising his vizor, he said:

"I wait for you!"

Raniero broke into a boisterous laugh.

"The bastard! The monk! Go home, Francesco, and don your lady's attire! What would you with a sword?"

Francesco's mouth was a hard line. He breathed through hungry nostrils, as he went step by step toward Raniero.

Then with a swift shifting of his sword from right to left he smote him on each cheek, then, lowering his

vizor, he put up his guard.

With an oath Raniero's sword flashed, feinted, turned with a cunning twist, and swept low for Francesco's thigh.

Francesco leaped back, but was slashed by the point a hair's breadth above the knee. It was a mere skin wound, but the pain of it seemed to snap something that had been twisted to a breaking point within him. He gave a great cry and charged down Raniero's second blow.

Their shields met and clashed, and Raniero staggered. Francesco rushed him across the hall as a bull drives a rival about a yard. Raniero crashed against the wall, and Francesco sprang back to use his sword. The blow hewed the top from Raniero's shield and smote him slant-wise across the face.

Raniero gathered himself and struck back, but the blow was caught on Francesco's shield. Francesco thrust at him, before he could recover, and the point slipped under the edge of Raniero's gorget. He twisted free and blundered forward into a fierce exchange of half-arm blows. Once he struck Francesco upon the mouth with the pommel of his sword, and was smitten in turn by the beak of Francesco's shield.

Again Francesco rushed Raniero to the wall, leaped back and got in his blow. Raniero's face was a red blur. He dropped his shield, put both his hands to his sword and swung great blows at Francesco, with the huge rage of a desperate and tiring man. Francesco led him up and down the hall. Raniero's breath came in gasps, and his strength began to wane.

Francesco bided his chance and seized it. He ran in, after Raniero had missed him with one of his savage sweeping blows, and rushed him against the wall. Then he struck and struck again, without uttering a word, playing so fast upon Raniero that he had his man smothered, blundering and dazed. The end came with a blow that cut the crown of Raniero's helmet. He threw up his hands with a spasmodic gesture, lurched forward, fell, rolled over on his back and lay still.

For a moment Francesco stood over him, the point of his sword on Raniero's throat. He seemed to waver; then all the misery the Frangipani had inflicted on Ilaria rushed over him as in a blinding cloud.

His sword went home. A strange cry passed through the hall, then all was still. The torch spluttered once more and went out. Francesco was in the darkness beside the dead body of Raniero.—

Meanwhile the Pisans had succeeded in scaling the walls. The clamor of the fight grew less and less, as one by one the defenders of Astura were relentlessly struck down and hurled over the ramparts. The storm had increased in violence, the heavens were cataracts of fire.—

In the blood-drenched court the duke and the Pisan admiral shook hands. Everything living had been slain. Astura was a castle of the dead.

"God! What work!" exclaimed the Pisan. It was the testimony wrung from him by the stress of sheer hard fighting.

"One of the viper-brood still lives," the duke turned to his companion, kicking with the tip of his steel

boot the lifeless form of Giovanni Frangipani.

The Pisan turned to a man-at-arms.

"Take twenty men! Scour the lair from vault to pinnacle! We must have that other,—dead or alive!"

The rain had ceased for the time. New thunder-clouds came rolling out of the west. Flambeaux flared in the court. Black shadows danced along the ghostly walls. The wind moaned about the crenelated turrets; sentinels of the Pisans stood everywhere, alert for ambush.

The duke and his companions approached the door leading into the great hall. It lay in splinters. Stygian darkness held sway within.

Suddenly the duke paused, as if turned to stone, at the same time plucking his companion back by the sleeve of his surcoat.

Noiselessly as a ghost out of the door came the form of a woman. She was tall, exquisitely proportioned, and young. For a moment she paused on the threshold and looked out into the night. Almost immediately a second form followed, and paused near the first: that of a man. The woman seemed to stare blindly at the duke, with wide, unseeing eyes, as one who walks in a sleep.

With a choked, inarticulate outcry the duke snatched bow and arrow from the nearest sentry, and ere the Pisan could grasp the meaning of what he saw, or prevent, he set and sped the bolt. A moan died on the stillness. A form collapsed, shuddered and lay still.

The duke dropped bow and arrow, staring like a

madman, then rushed towards the prostrate form.

Bending over it, a moan broke from his lips, as he threw his arms about the lifeless clay of her he had loved in the days of yore, ere the honeyed treachery of the Frangipani had sundered and broken their lives. The woman of the Red Tower had expiated her guilt.

He saw at once that no human agency might here avail. Death had been instantaneous. The arrow had pierced the heart.

The duke knelt long by her side, and the strong man's frame heaved with convulsive sobs, as he closed the eyes and muttered an Ave for her untimely departed soul.

When he arose, he looked into the pale face of Francesco, whose blood-stained sword and garments told a tale his lips would not. He understood without a word. Silently he extended his hand to the duke, then, taking off his own mantle, he covered therewith the woman's body.

It was midnight when the Pisans and the duke's men groped their way cautiously down the steep winding path to the shore. The Pisans made for their ships and Spoleto's men for the dusk of their native woods, carrying on a hurriedly constructed bier the body of the woman of the Red Tower.

Not many minutes had passed after their perilous descent when a sphere of fire shot from the clouds, followed by a crash as if the earth had been rent in twain, and the western tower of Astura was seen toppling into the sea.

Bye and bye sea and land reflected a crimson glow, which steadily increased, fanned by the gale, until it shone far out upon the sea.

Astura was in flames, the funeral pyre of the Frangipani.

CHAPTER VII

THE QUEST



S the world grew gray with waking light, Francesco came from the woods and heard the noise of the sea in the hush that breathed in the dawn. The storm had passed over the sea and a vast calm hung upon the lips of the day. In the east a green streak shone above the hills. The sky was still aglitter with sparse stars. An immensity of gloom brooded over the sea.

Gaunt, wounded, triumphant, Francesco rode up beneath the banners of the dawn, eager yet fearful,

inspired and strong of purpose. Wood and hill slept in a haze of mist. The birds were only beginning in the thickets, like the souls of children yet unborn, calling to eternity. Beyond in the cliffs, San Nicandro, wrapped round with night, stood silent and sombre athwart the west.

Francesco climbed from the valley as the day came with splendor, a glow of molten gold streaming from the east. Wood and hillside glimmered in a smoking mist, dew-bespangled, wonderful. As the sun rose, the sea stretched sudden into the arch of the west, a great expanse of liquid gold. A mysterious lustre hovered over the cliffs, waves of light bent like saffron mist upon San Nicandro.

The dawn-light found an echo in Francesco's face. He came that morning the ransomer, the champion, defeated in life and hope and happiness, yet with head erect, as if defying Fate. His manhood smote him like the deep-throated cry of a great bell, majestic and solemn. The towers on the cliff were haloed with magic hues. Life, glory, joy, lay locked in the gray stone walls. His heart sang in him; his eyes were afire.

As he walked his horse with a hollow thunder of hoof over the narrow bridge, he took his horn and blew a blast thereon. There was a sense of desolation, a lifelessness about the place that smote his senses with a strange fear. The walls stared void against the sky. There was no stir, no sound within, no watchful faces at portal or wicket. Only the gulls circled from the cliffs and the sea made its moan along the strand.

Francesco sat in the saddle and looked from wall to belfry, from tower to gate. There was something

tragic about the place, the silence of a sacked town, the ghostliness of a ship sailing the seas with a dead crew upon her decks. Francesco's glance rested on the open postern, an empty gash in the great gate. His face darkened and his eyes lost their sanguine glow. There was something betwixt death and worse than death in all this calm.

He dismounted and left his steed on the bridge. The postern beckoned to him. He went in like a man nerved for peril, with sword drawn and shield in readiness. Again he blew his horn. No living being answered, no voice broke the silence.

The refectory was open, the door standing half ajar. Francesco thrust it full open with the point of his sword and looked in. A gray light filtered through the narrow windows. The nuns lay huddled on benches and on the floor. Some lay fallen across the settles, others sat with their heads fallen forward upon the table; a few had crawled towards the door and had died in the attempt to escape. The shadow of death was over the whole.

Francesco's face was as gray as the faces of the dead. There was something here, a horror, a mystery, that hurled back the warm courage of the heart.

With frantic despair he rushed from one body to the other, turning the dead faces to the light, fearing every one must be that of his own Ilaria. But Ilaria was not among them; the mystery grew deeper, grew more unfathomable. For a moment, Francesco stood among the dead nuns as if every nerve in his body had been suddenly paralyzed, when his eyes fell upon a crystal chalice, half overturned on the floor. It contained the remnants of a clear fluid. He picked it up and held it to his nostrils. It fell from his

nerveless fingers upon the stone and broke into a thousand fragments, a thin stream creeping over the granite towards the fallen dead. It was a preparation of hemlock and bitter almonds. He stared aghast, afraid to move, afraid to call. The nuns had poisoned themselves.

Like a madman he rushed out into the adjoining corridor, hither and thither, in the frantic endeavor to find a trace of Ilaria. Yet not a trace of her did he find. But what he did discover solved the mystery of the grewsome feast of death which he had just witnessed. In a corner where he had dropped it, there lay a silken banderol belonging to a man-at-arms of Anjou's Provencals. They had been here, and the nuns, to escape the violation of their bodies, had died, thus cheating the fiends out of the gratification of their lusts.

The terrible discovery unnerved Francesco so completely that for a time he stood as if turned to stone, looking about him like a traveller who has stumbled blindly into a charnel house. Urged by manifold forebodings, he then rushed from room to room, from cell to cell. The same silence met him everywhere. Of Ilaria he found not a trace. Had the fiends of Anjou carried her away, or had she, in endeavoring to escape, found her death outside of the walls of San Nicandro?

He dared not think out the thought.

The shadows of the place, the staring faces, the stiff hands clawing at things inanimate, were like the phantasms of the night. Francesco took the sea-air into his nostrils and looked up into the blue radiance of the sky. All about him the garden glistened in the dawn; the cypresses shimmered with dew. The late

roses made very death more apparent to his soul.

As he stood in deep thought, half dreading what he but half knew, a voice called to him, breaking suddenly the ponderous silence of the place. Guided by its sound, Francesco unlatched the door and found himself face to face with the Duke of Spoleto.

For a moment they faced each other in silence.

Then he gave a great cry.

"Ever, ever night!" he said, stretching out his hands despairingly as to an eternal void.

The duke's eyes seemed to look leagues away over moor and valley and hill, where the blackened ruins of Astura rose beneath a dun smoke against the calm of the morning sky.

A strange tenderness played upon his lips, as if with the extinction of the Frangipani brood peace had entered his soul.

"A man is a mystery to himself," he said.

"But to God?"

"I know no God, save the God, my own soul! Let me live and die,—nothing more! Why curse one's life with a 'to be?'"

Francesco sighed heavily.

"It is a kind of Fate to me!" he said, "inevitable as the setting of the sun, natural as sleep. Not for myself do I fear it alone,—but I should not like to think that I should never see her again."

The duke's eyes had caught life on the distant

hillside, life surging from the valleys, life and the glory of it. Harness, helm and shield shone in the sun. Gold, azure, silver, scarlet were creeping from the bronzed green of the wilds. Silent and solemn the host rolled slowly into the full splendor of the day.

The duke's face had kindled.

"Grapple the days to come!" he said. "Let Scripture and ethics rot! My men are at your command! Let them ride by stream and forest, moor and mere! Let them ride in quest of your lost one, ride like the wind!"

Francesco looked at the duke through a mist of tears.

"You know?" he faltered.

"For this I came!" replied the duke, extending his hand. "You will find her whom your heart seeks. Like a golden dawn shall she rise out of the past. Blow your horn! Let us not tarry!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE ANCHORESS OF NARNI





IX days had passed. Once more the sun had tossed night from the sky and kindled hope in the hymning east. The bleak wilderness barriered by sea and crag had mellowed into the golden silence of the autumnal woods. The very trees seemed tongued with prophetic flame. The world leaped radiant out of the dawn.

Through the reddened woods rode Francesco, the Duke of Spoleto silent by his side. Gloom still reigned on the pale, haggard face and there was no lustre in the eyes that challenged ever the lurking shade of Death. Six nights and six days had the quest been baffled. Near and far armor glimmered in the reddened sanctuaries of the woods. Not a trumpet brayed, though a host had scattered in search of a woman's face.

On the seventh day, the trees drew back before Francesco where the shimmering waters of the Nera streaked the meads. Peace dwelled there and calm eternal, as of the Spirit that heals the throes of men. Rare and golden lay the dawn-light on the valleys. The songs of the birds came glad and multitudinous as in the burgeoning dawn of a glorious day.

Francesco had halted under a great oak. His head was bare in the sun-steeped shadows, his face was the face of one weary with long watching under the voiceless stars. Great dread possessed him. He dared not question his own soul.

A horn sounded in the woods, wild, clamorous and

exultant. It was as the voice of a prophet, clearing the despair of a godless world. Even the trees stood listening. Far below, in the green shadows of the valley, a horseman spurred his steed.

Francesco's eyes were upon him. Yet he dared not hope, gripped by a great fear.

"I am even as a child," he said.

The duke's lips quivered.

"The dawn breaks,—the night is past. Tidings come to us. Let us ride out!"

Francesco seemed lost in thought. He bowed his head and looked long into the valley.

"Am I he who slew Raniero Frangipani?"

"Courage!" said the duke.

"My blood is as water, my heart as wax. Death and destiny are over my head!"

"Speak not to me of destiny and look not to the skies! I have closed my account with Heaven! In himself is man's power! You have broken the crucifix! Now trust your own soul. So long as you did serve a superstition had you lost your true heaven!"

"And yet—"

"You have played the god, and the Father in Heaven must love you for your strength! God does not love a coward! He will let you rule your destiny—not destiny your soul!"

"Strange words—"

"But true! Were I God, should I love the monk puling

prayers in a den? Nay—that man should I choose who dared to follow the dictates of his own soul and strangle Fate with the grip of truth. Great deeds are better than mumbled prayers!"

The horseman in the valley had swept at a gallop through a sea of sun-bronzed fern. His eyes were full of a restless glitter, as the eyes of a man, whose heart is troubled. He sprang from the saddle, and, leading his horse by the bridle, bent low before the twain.

"Tidings, my lord!"

"I listen!"—

The horseman looked for a moment in Francesco's face but, hardened as he was, he dared not abide the trial. There was such a stare of desperate calm in the dark eyes, that his courage failed and quailed from the truth. He hung his head and stood mute.

"I listen—"

"My lord—"

"For God's sake, speak out!"

"My lord—"

"The truth!"—

"She lives—"

A great silence fell within the hearts of the three, an ecstasy of silence, such as comes after the wail of a storm. The duke's lips were compressed, as if he feared to give expression to his feelings. Francesco's face was as the face of one who thrusts back hope out of his soul. He sat rigid on his horse, a stone image fronting Fate, grim-eyed and steadfast. All his

life had been one long sacrifice, one long denial,—had it all been in vain?

There were tears in the eyes of the man-at-arms.

"What more?"

The horseman leaned against his horse, his arm hooked over its neck.

He pointed to the valley.

"Yonder lies Narni. Beyond the Campanile of St. Juvenal is a sanctuary. You can see it yonder by the ford. Two holy women dwell therein. To them, my lord, I commend you!"

"You know more!"

The voice that spoke was terrible.

"Spare me, my lord! The words are for women's lips, not for mine!"

"So be it!"

The three rode in silence, Francesco and the duke together, looking mutely into each other's face. Francesco's head was bowed to his breast. The reins lay loose on his horse's neck.

A gray cell of roughly hewn stone showed amidst the green boughs beyond the water. At its door stood a woman in a black mantle. A cross hung from her neck and a white kerchief bound her hair. She stood motionless, half in the shadow, watching the horsemen as they rode down to the rippling fords.

Autumn had touched the sanctuary garden, and Francesco's eyes beheld ruin as he climbed the slope.

The woman had come from the cell, and now stood at the wicket-gate with her hands folded as if in prayer.

The horseman took Francesco's bridle. The latter went on foot alone to speak with the anchoress.

"My lord," she said, kneeling at his feet, "God save and comfort you!"—

The man's brow was twisted into furrows. His right hand clasped his left wrist. He looked over the woman's head into the woods, and breathed fast through clenched teeth.

"Speak!" he said.

"My lord, the woman lives!"

"I can bear the truth!"

The anchoress made the sign of the cross.

"She came to us here in the valley, my lord, tall and white as a lily, her hair loose upon her neck. Her feet were bare and bleeding, her soles rent with thorns. And as she came, she sang wild snatches of a song, such as tells of love, and of Proserpina, Goddess of Shades. We took her, my lord, gave her meat and drink, bathed her torn feet, and gave her raiment. She abode with us, ever gentle and lovely, yet speaking like one who had suffered, even to the death. And yet,—even as we slept, she stole away from us last night, and now is gone!"—

The woman had never so much as raised her eyes to the man's face. Her hands held her crucifix, and she was ashen pale, even as new-hewn stone.

"And is this all?"

The man's voice trembled in his throat. His face was terrible to behold in the sun.

"Not all, my lord!"

"Say on!"

The anchoress had buried her face in her black mantle. Her voice was husky with tears.

"My lord, you seek one bereft of reason!"

"Mad!"

"Alas!"

A great cry came from Francesco's lips.

"My God! This, then, is the end!"

CHAPTER IX

THE DAWN





N undefined melancholy overshadowed the world. Autumn breathed in the wind. The year, red-bosomed, was rushing to its doom.

On the summit of a wood-crowned hill, rising like a pyramid above moor and forest, stood two men silent under the shadows of an oak. In the distance glimmered the sea, and by a rock upon the hillside, armed men, a knot of spears, shone like spirit sentinels athwart the west. Mists were creeping up the valleys, as the sun went down into the sea. A few sparse stars gleamed out like souls still tortured by the mysteries of life. An inevitable pessimism seemed to challenge the universe, taking for its parable the weird afterglow of the west.

Deep in the woods a voice sang wild and solitary in the gathering gloom. Like the cry of a ghost, it seemed to set the silence quivering, the leaves quaking with windless awe. The men who looked towards the sea heard it, a song that echoed in the heart like woe.

The duke pointed into the darkening wood.

"Trust your own heart: self is the man! Through a mistaken sense of duty have you been brought nigh unto death and despair! Trust not in sophistry: the laws of men are carven upon stone, the laws of Heaven upon the heart! Be strong! From henceforth, scorn mere words! Trample tradition in the dust! Trust yourself, and the God in your heart!"

The distant voice had sunk into silence. Francesco listened for it with hands aloft.

"I must go," he said.

"Go!"—

"I must be near her through the night!"

"The moon stands full upon the hills! I will await you here!"

Dim were the woods that autumn evening, dim and deep with an ecstasy of gloom. Stars flickered in the heavens; the moon came and enveloped the trees with silver flame. A primeval calm lay heavy upon the bosom of the night. The spectral branches of the trees pointed rigid and motionless towards the sky.

Francesco had left the duke gazing out upon the shimmering sea. The voice called to him from the woods with plaintive peals of song. The man followed it, holding to a grass-grown track that curled at random into the gloom. Moonlight and shadow lay alternate upon his armor. Hope and despair battled in his face. His soul leaped voiceless and inarticulate into the darkened shrine of prayer.

The voice came to him clearer in the forest calm. The gulf had narrowed, the words flew as over the waters of Death. They were pure, yet meaningless, passionate, yet void; words barbed with an utter pathos, that silenced desire.

For an hour Francesco roamed in the woods, drawing ever nearer, the fear in him increasing with every step. Anon the voice failed him by a little stream that quivered dimly through the grass. A stillness that was ghostly held the woods. The moonlight seemed

to shudder on the trees. A stupendous silence weighed upon the world.

A hollow glade opened suddenly in the woods, a white gulf in a forest gloom. Water shone there, a mere rush-ringed and full of mysterious shadows, girded by the bronzed foliage of a thousand oaks. Moss grew thick about the roots, dead leaves covered the grass.

And ever and anon a dead leaf dropped silently to earth, like a hope that has died on the Tree of Life.

Francesco knelt in a patch of bracken and looked out over the glades. A figure went to and fro by the water's brim, a figure pale in the moonlight, as the form of the restless dead. The man kneeling in the bracken pressed his hands over his breast; his face seemed to start out of the gloom as the face of one who struggles in the sea, submerged, yet desperate.

Francesco saw the woman halt beside the mere. He saw her bend, take water in her palms and dash it in her face. Standing in the moonlight, she smoothed her hair between her fingers, her hands shining white as ivory against the dark bosom of her dress. She seemed to murmur to herself the while, words wistful and full of woe. Once she thrust her hands to the sky and cried: "Francesco! Francesco!" The man kneeling in the shadows quivered like a wind-shaken reed.

The moon climbed higher and the woman by the mere spread her cloak upon a patch of heather and laid herself thereon. Not a sound broke the silence; the woods were mute, the air lifeless as the steely water. An hour passed. The figure on the heather lay still as an effigy on a tomb. The man in the bracken

cast one look at the stars, then crossed himself and crept out into the moonlight.

Holding the scabbard of his sword, he skirted the mere with shimmering armor, went down upon his knees and crawled slowly over the grass. Hours seemed to elapse before the black patch of heather spread crisp and dry beneath his hands. Breathing through dilated nostrils, he trembled like one who creeps to stab a sleeping friend. The moonlight seemed to shower sparks upon him, as with supernatural glory. Tense anguish seemed to fill the night with sound.

Two more paces and he was close at the woman's side. The heather crackled beneath his knees. He held his breath, crept nearer, and knelt so near that he could have kissed Ilaria's face. Her head lay pillowed on her arm. Her hair spread as in a dusky halo beneath it. Her bosom moved with the rhythmic calm of dreamless sleep. Her lips were parted in a smile. One hand was hid in the dark folds of her robe.

Francesco knelt with upturned face, his eyes shut to the sky. He seemed like one faint with pain; his lips moved as in prayer. A hundred inarticulate pleadings surged heavenward from his heart.

Again he bent over her and watched the pure girlish face as she slept. A strange calm fell for a time upon him; his eyes never wavered from the white arm and the glimmering hair. Vast awe held him in thrall. He was as one who broods tearless and amazed over the dead, calm face of one beloved above all on earth.

Hours passed and Francesco found no sustenance, save in prayer. The unuttered yearnings of a world

seemed molten in his soul. The moon waned. The stars grew dim. Strange sounds stirred in the forest-deeps; the mysterious breathing of a thousand trees. Life ebbed and flowed with the sigh of a moon-stupored sea. Visions blazed in the night-sky and faded away.

Hours passed. Neither sleeper nor watcher stirred. The night grew faint. The water flickered in the mere. The very stars seemed to gaze upon the destinies of two wearied souls.

Far and faint came the quaver of a bird's note. Gray and mysterious stood the forest spires. Light! Light at last! Spears of amber darting in the east. A shudder seemed to shake the universe. The great vault kindled. The sky grew luminous with gold.

It was the dawn.

Ilaria stirred in her sleep. Her mouth quivered, her hair stirred sudden under the heather, like tendrils of gold shivering in the sun.

Even as the light increased, Francesco knelt and looked down upon her. Hope and life, glorious, sudden, seemed to fall out of the east, a radiant faith begotten of spirit-power. Banners of gold were streaming in the sky. The gloom fled. A vast expectancy hung solemn, breathless, upon the red lips of the day.

A sigh, and the long, silken lashes quivered. The lips moved, the eyes opened.

"Ilaria! Ilaria!"

Sudden silence followed, a vast hush as of undreamed hope. The woman's eyes were silently

searching the man's face. He bent and cowered over her as one who weeps. His hands touched her body, yet she did not stir.

"Ilaria! Ilaria!"

It was a hoarse, passionate outcry that broke the golden stupor of the dawn. A sudden light leaped lustrous into the woman's eyes, her face shone radiant in its etherealized beauty.

"Francesco!"

"Ah! At last!"

A great shudder passed through her body. Her eyes grew big with fear.

"Speak to me!"

"Ilaria!"

"Raniero?"

"Dead!"

A great silence held for a moment. The woman's head sank upon the man's shoulder. Madness had passed. Her eyes were fixed upon his with a wonderful earnestness, a splendid calm.

"Is this a dream?"

"It is the truth!"

Through the forest aisles rode the Duke of Spoleto.

He saw and paused.

"I return beyond the Alps to join the forces of Rudolf of Hapsburg. My men are at your disposal. I shall wait for you on yonder hillock."

He wheeled about and was gone.

Again silence held for a pace.

Presently Ilaria gave a great sigh and looked strangely at the sun.

"I have dreamed a dream," she crooned, "and all was dark and fearful. Death seemed near; lurid phantoms,—things from hell! I knew not what I did, nor where I wandered, nor what strange stupor held my soul. All my being cried out to you—yet all was dark about me, horrible midnight, peopled with foul forms! Oh, that night,—that night—"

Shivering, she covered her eyes as if trying to banish the memory.

"It has passed," she breathed after a pause, during which Francesco had taken her in his arms, kissing her eyes, her lips, and the sylph-like, flower-soft face. "I see the dawn!"

"Our dawn!"—Francesco replied, pointing to the hillock beyond.

For a time there was a great silence, as if the fates of two souls were being weighed in the scales of destiny.

It was Francesco who spoke.

"How you have suffered!"

She crept very close to him, smiling up at him with the old-time smile through tear-dimmed eyes.

"It counts for naught now! Are not you with me?"

The sky burned azure above the tree-tops. Transient

sunshafts quivered through the vaulted dome of breathless leaves, as slowly Francesco and Ilaria strode towards the camp of the Duke of Spoleto on the sun-bathed hillock above the Nera.

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