

GALLIZIER

NATHAN

THE

SORCERESS OF

ROME

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

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

THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH.

INTRODUCTION

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

Centuries of struggles with the hosts of foreign invaders had in time lowered the state of civilization to such a degree, that in point of literature and art the Rome of the tenth century could not boast of a single name worthy of being transmitted to posterity. Even the memory of the men whose achievements in the days of its glory constituted the pride and boast of the Roman world, had become almost extinct. A great lethargy benumbed the Italian mind, engendered by the reaction from the incessant feuds and broils among the petty tyrants and oppressors of the country.

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

From the day of Christmas in the year 800, when at the hands of Pope Leo III, Charlemagne received the imperial crown of the West, the German Kings dated their right as rulers of Rome and the Roman world, a right, feebly and ineffectually contested by the emperors of the East. It was the dream of every German King immediately upon his election to cross the Alps to receive at the hand of the Pope the crown of a country which resisted and resented and never formally recognized a superiority forced upon it. Thus from time to time we find Rome alternately in revolt against German rule, punished, subdued and again imploring the aid of the detested foreigners against the misrule of her own princes, to settle the disputes arising from pontifical elections, or as protection against foreign invaders and the violence of contending factions.

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

Every ancient prejudice, every recollection whether of Augustus or Charlemagne, had led the Romans to annex the notion of sovereignty to the name of Roman emperor, nor were Otto and his two immediate descendants inclined to waive these supposed prerogatives, which they were well able to enforce. But no sooner had they returned to Germany than the old habit of revolt seized the Italians, and especially the Romans who were ill disposed to resume habits of obedience even to the sovereign whose aid they had implored and received. The flames of rebellion swept again over the seven hilled city during the rule of Otto II, whose aid the Romans had invoked against the invading hordes of Islam, and the same republican spirit broke out during the brief, but fantastic reign of his son, the third Otto, directing itself in the latter instance chiefly against the person of the youthful pontiff, Bruno of Carinthia, the friend of the King, whose purity stands out in marked contrast against the depravity of the monsters, who, to the number of ten, had during the past five decades defiled the throne of the Apostle. Gregory V is said to have been assassinated during Otto's absence from Rome.

The third rebellion of Johannes Crescentius, Senator of Rome, enacted after the death of the pontiff and the election of Sylvester II, forms but the prelude to the great drama whose final

curtain was to fall upon the doom of the third Otto, of whose love for Stephania, the beautiful wife of Crescentius, innumerable legends are told in the old monkish chronicles and whose tragic death caused a lament to go throughout the world of the Millennium.

Book the First

The Truce of God

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

CHAPTER I

THE GRAND CHAMBERLAIN

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

Judging from his appearance he had scarcely passed his thirtieth year. His bearing combined a marked grace and intellectuality. The finely shaped head poised on splendid shoulders denoted power and intellect. The pale, olive tints of the face seemed to intensify the brilliancy of the black eyes whose penetrating gaze revealed a singular compound of mockery and cynicism. The mouth, small but firm, was not devoid of disdain, and even cruelty, and the smile of the thin, compressed lips held something more subtle than any passion that can be named. His ears, hands and feet were of that delicacy and smallness, which is held to denote aristocracy of birth. And there was in his manner that indescribable combination of unobtrusive dignity and affected elegance which, in all ages and countries, through all changes of manners and customs has rendered the demeanour of its few chosen possessors the instantaneous interpreter of their social rank. He was dressed in a crimson tunic, fastened with a clasp of mother-of-pearl. Tight fitting hose of black and crimson terminating in saffron-coloured shoes covered his legs, and a red cap, pointed at the top and rolled up behind brought the head into harmony with the rest of the costume.

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

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

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

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

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

"You are the bearer of a message?"

The monk nodded.

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

"The worst may be told quickly enough," said the monk with a voice which caused the Chamberlain to start.

"The Saxon dynasty is resting on two eyes."

Benilo nodded.

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

"They will soon be closed for ever!"

The Chamberlain started from his seat.

"I do not understand."

"The fever does not temporize."

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

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

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

A gesture of the monk interrupted the speaker.

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

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

"Your heart is tenderer than I had guessed."

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

The monk raised his hand.

"Nay, – I am not holy enough."

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

"That is for Rome to say."

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

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

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

The Grand Chamberlain's visitor nodded.

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

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

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

Again the Chamberlain started.

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

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

The monk nodded.

"A country without a king is bad! But to carry the matter just a trifle farther, – to dream of Christendom without a Pope – "

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

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

Benilo shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

"Ay! And the feudal barons stick in his palate like the hook in the mouth of the dog fish."

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

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

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

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

"Gerbert of Cluny – "

"The monk of Aurillac!"

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

"He is competent to convert a brimstone lake."

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

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

"In the Ghetto at sunset."

"And the reward?"

"The halo of a Saint."

"What of your conscience's peace?"

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

"They kill by the decalogue at San Zeno."

"Exitus acta probat!" returned the monk solemnly.

Benilo raised his hand warningly.

"Let him disappear quietly – ecclesiastically."

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

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

The Chamberlain's visitor betrayed impatience.

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

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

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

At last the Grand Chamberlain paused directly before him.

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

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

With a nod of satisfaction Benilo continued his perambulation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Grand-Chamberlain paused, stared and shuddered.

"And who knows," continued the monk after a pause, "but that by some divine dispensation all the refractory cardinals of the Sacred College may contract some incurable disease? Have you secured the names, – just to ascertain if their households are well ordered?"

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

"Give it to me."

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

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

"The Cardinal of Gregorio."

The Chamberlain betokened his understanding with a nod.

"He claims kinship with the stars."

"The Cardinal of San Pietro in Montorio."

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

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

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

"I had no hand in my own christening."

The monk nodded.

"The Cardinal of San Silvestro."

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

"He would have made a stalwart mendicant. All the women would have confessed to him."

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

"Obedience is holiness," replied the other.

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

When the Chamberlain spoke again, his voice trembled strangely.

"What of the Golden Chalice?"

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

The Chamberlain pondered.

"Perhaps a degree or two of headiness?"

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

"The Season claims its mercies."

"Can one quench a furnace with a parable?"

"The Holy Host may work a miracle."

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

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

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

"Sic itur ad astra!"

"We understand each other," Benilo spoke after a pause, arising from his chair. "But remember," he added with a look, which seemed to pierce his interlocutor through and through. "What thou dost, monk, thou dost. If thy hand fail, I know thee not!"

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

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

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

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

A strange light gleamed in the monk's eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

No glaring lights marred the pervading softness of the atmosphere; all objects animate and inanimate seemed in complete harmony with each other. The entrance to the great hall of audience was flanked with two great pillars of Numidian marble, toned by time to hues of richest orange. The hall itself was surrounded by a colonnade of the Corinthian order, whereon had been lavished exquisite carvings; in niches behind the columns stood statues in basalt, thrice the size of life. Enormous pillars of rose-coloured marble supported the roof, decorated in the fantastic Byzantine style; the floor, composed of serpentine, porphyry and Numidian marble, was a superb work of art. In the centre a fountain threw up sprays of perfumed water, its basin bordered with glistening shells from India and the Archipelago.

Passing slowly down the hall, Benilo paused here and there to exchange greetings with some individual among the numerous groups, who were conversing in hushed whispers on the event at this hour closest to their heart, the illness of King Otto III, in the cloisters of Monte Gargano in Apulia

whither he had journeyed on a pilgrimage to the grottoes of the Archangel. Conflicting rumours were rife as to the course of the illness, and each seemed fearful of venturing a surmise, which might precipitate a crisis, fraught with direst consequences. The times and the Roman temper were uncertain.

The countenance of Archbishop Heribert of Cologne, Chancellor of the Empire, reflected grave apprehension, which was amply shared by his companions, Archbishop Willigis of Mentz, and Luitprand, Archbishop of Cremona, the Patriarch of Christendom, whose snow-white hair formed a striking contrast to the dark and bronzed countenance of Count Benedict of Palestrina, and Pandulph of Capua, Lord of Spoleto and Beneventum, the lay-members of the group. The conversation, though held in whispered tones and inaudible to those moving on the edge of their circle, was yet animated and it would seem, that hope had but a small share in the surmises they ventured on what the days to come held in store for the Saxon dynasty.

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

"What does the courtier in the parrot-frock?" Duke Bernhardt of Saxony, stout, burly, asthmatic, addressed a tall, sallow individual, in a rose-coloured frock, who strutted by his side with the air of an inflated peacock.

John of Calabria gave a sigh.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

THE PAGEANT IN THE NAVONA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eckhardt knelt and kissed Luitprand's proffered hand.

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

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

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

"If the God to whom you pray or your patron-saint, has endowed you with the divine gift of persuasion, – use it now to prompt your king to leave this accursed land and to return beyond the Alps. Roman wiles and Roman fever had well-nigh claimed another victim. My resignation lies in

the hands of the King. My mission here is ended. I place your sovereign in your hands. Keep him safe. I return to the Eastern March."

Exclamations of surprise, chiefly from the German element, the Romans listening in sullen silence, rose round the commander, like a sullen squall.

Eckhardt waved them back with uplifted arm.

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

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

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

Evening was falling. A solemn hush held enthralled the pulses of the universe. A dazzling glow of gold swept the western heavens, and the chimes of the Angelus rang out from untold cloisters and convents. To southward, the towering summits of Soracté glowed in sunset gold. The dazzling sheen reflected from the marble city on the Palatine proved almost too blinding for Eckhardt's gaze, and with quick, determined step, he began his descent towards the city.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here he fell into meditation.

Three years had elapsed since the death of a young and beloved wife, who had gone from him after a brief but mysterious illness, baffling the skill of the physicians. In the ensuing solitude he had acquired grave habits of reflection. This day he was in a more thoughtful mood than common. This day more than ever, he felt the void which nothing on earth could fill. What availed his toils, his love of country, his endurance of hardships? What was he the better now, in that he had marched and watched and bled and twice conquered Rome for the empire? What was this ambition, leading him up the steepest paths, by the brinks of fatal precipices? He scarcely knew now, it was so long ago. Had Ginevra lived, he would indeed have prized honour and renown and a name, that was on all men's lips. And Eckhardt fell to thinking of the bright days, when the very skies seemed fairer for her presence. Time, who heals all sorrows, had not alleviated his grief. At his urgent request he had been relieved of his Roman command. The very name of the city was odious to him since her death. Appointed to the office of Great Warden of the East and entrusted with the defence of the Eastern border lands against the ever-recurring invasions of Bulgarians and Magyars, the formidable name of the conqueror of Rome had in time faded to a mere memory.

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

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

Meanwhile increasing rumours of the impending End of Time began to upheave and disturb the minds. A mystical trend of thought pervaded the world, and as the Millennium drew nearer and nearer pilgrims of all ages and all stages began to journey Rome-ward, to obtain forgiveness for their sins, and to die within the pale of the Church. At first he resisted the strange malady of the age,

which slowly but irresistibly attacked every order of society. But its morbid influences, seconded by the memory of his past happiness, revived during his last journey to Rome, at last threw Eckhardt headlong into the dark waves of monasticism.

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

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

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

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

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

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

While slowly and aimlessly Eckhardt pursued his way through the shifting crowds, a sudden shout arose in the Navona. After a brief interval it was repeated, and soon a strange procession came into sight, which, as the German leader perceived, had caused the acclamation on the part of the people. In order to avoid the unwelcome stare of the Roman rabble, Eckhardt lowered his vizor, choosing his point of observation upon some crumbled fragment of antiquity, whence he might not

only view the approaching pageant, but at the same time survey his surroundings. On one side were the thronged and thickly built piles of the ancient city. On the opposite towered the Janiculan hill with its solitary palaces and immense gardens. The westerling sun illumined the distant magnificence of the Vatican and suffered the gaze to expand even to the remote swell of the Apennines.

The procession, which slowly wound its way towards the point where Eckhardt had taken his station, consisted of some twelve chariots, drawn by snow-white steeds, which chafed at the bit, reared on their haunches, and otherwise betrayed their reluctance to obey the hands which gripped the rein – the hands of giant Africans in gaudy, fantastic livery. The inmates of these chariots consisted of groups of young women in the flower of beauty and youth, whose scant airy garments gave them the appearance of wood-nymphs, playing on quaintly shaped lyres. While renewed shouts of applause greeted the procession of the New Vestals, as they styled themselves in defiance of the trade they plied, and the gaze of the thousands was riveted upon them, – a new commotion arose in the Navona. A shout of terror went up, the crowds swayed backward, spread out and then were seen to scatter on both sides, revealing a chariot, harnessed to a couple of fiery Berber steeds, which, having taken fright, refused to obey the driver's grip and dashed down the populous thoroughfare. With every moment the speed of the frightened animals increased, and no hand was stretched forth from all those thousands to check their mad career. The driver, a Nubian in fantastic livery, had in the frantic effort to stop their onward rush, been thrown from his seat, striking his head against a curb-stone, where he lay dazed. Here some were fleeing, others stood gaping on the steps of houses. Still others, with a cry of warning followed in the wake of the fleeting steeds. Adding to the dismay of the lonely occupant of the chariot, a woman, magnificently arrayed in a transparent garb of black gossamer-web, embroidered with silver stars, the reins were dragging on the ground. Certain death seemed to stare her in the face. Though apprehensive of immediate destruction she disdained to appeal for assistance, courting death rather than owe her life to the despised mongrel-rabble of Rome. Despite the terrific speed of the animals she managed to retain over her face the veil of black gauze, which completely enshrouded her, though it revealed rather than concealed the magnificent lines of her body. Eckhardt fixed his straining gaze upon the chariot, as it approached, but the sun, whose flaming disk just then touched the horizon, blinded him to a degree which made it impossible for him to discern the features of a face supremely fair.

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

Breathless and spellbound the thousands stared, yet there was none to risk his life in the hazardous effort of stopping the blind onrush of the maddened steeds. Suddenly they changed their course towards the point where, hemmed in by the densely congested throngs, Eckhardt stood. Snatching the cloak from his shoulders, the Margrave dashed through the living wall of humanity and leaped fearlessly in the very path of the snorting, onrushing steeds. With a dexterous movement he flung the dark cover over their heads, escaping instantaneous death only by leaping quickly to one side. Then dashing at the bits he succeeded, alone and unaided, in stopping the terrified animals, though dragged along for a considerable space. A great shout of applause went up from the throats of those who had not moved a hand to prevent the impending disaster. Unmindful of this popular outburst, Eckhardt held the frightened steeds, which trembled in every muscle and gave forth ominous snorts, until the driver staggered along. Half dazed from his fall and bleeding profusely from a gash in the forehead, the Nubian, almost frightened out of his wits, seized the lines and resumed his seat. The steeds, knowing the accustomed hand, gradually quieted down.

At the moment, when Eckhardt turned, to gain a glimpse of the occupant of the chariot, a shriek close by caused him to turn his head. The procession of the New Vestals had come to a sudden stand-still, owing to the blocking of the thoroughfare, through which the runaway steeds had dashed, the clearing behind them having been quickly filled up with a human wall. During this brief pause some individual, the heraldry of whose armour denoted him a Roman baron, had pounced upon one of the

chariots and seized one of its scantily clad occupants. The girl had uttered a shriek of dismay and was struggling to free herself from the ruffian's clutches, while her companions vainly remonstrated with her assailant. To hear the shriek, to turn, to recognize the cause, and to pounce upon the Roman, were acts almost of the same moment to Eckhardt. Clutching the girl's assailant by the throat, without knowing in whose defence he was entering the contest, he thundered in accents of such unmistakable authority, as to give him little doubt of the alternative: "Let her go!"

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III ON THE PALATINE

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

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

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

What a stupendous desolation time had wrought!

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

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

There was an inexpressible charm in the sadness of this desolation which chimed strangely with Eckhardt's own life, now but a memory of its former self.

It was a wonderful night. Scarce a breath of air stirred the dying leaves. The vault of the sky was unobscured, arching deep-blue over the higher rising moon. To southward the beacon fires from the Tor di Vergera blazed like a red star low down in the horizon. Wrapt in deep thought, Eckhardt

followed the narrow road, winding his way through a wilderness of broken arches and fallen porticoes, through a region studded with convents, cloisters and the ruins of antiquity. Gray mists began to rise over housetops and vineyards, through which at intervals the Tiber gleamed like a yellow serpent in the moonlight. Near the Ripetta long spirals of dark smoke curled up to the azure night-sky and the moon cast a glory on the colossal statue of the Archangel Michael, where it stood on the gloomy keep of Castel San Angelo. The rising night-wind rustled in organ-tones among the cypress trees; the fountains murmured, and in a silvery haze the moon hung over the slumbering city.

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

"By St. Peter and St. Paul and all the saints I can remember!" exclaimed the latter, "is it Eckhardt, the Margrave, or his ghost? But no matter which, – no man more welcome!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eckhardt had listened attentively, then he remarked drily:

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

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

Eckhardt extended his hand.

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

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

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

There was a brief silence.

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

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

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

The Chamberlain stared aghast at his companion.

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

Eckhardt nodded.

"The past is known to you!" he replied with a heavy sigh. "Since she has gone from me to the dark beyond, I have striven for peace and oblivion in every form, – in the turmoil of battle, before the shrines of the Saints. – In vain! I have striven to tame this wild passion for one dead and in her grave. But this love cannot be strangled as a lion is strangled, and the skill of the mightiest athlete avails nothing in such a struggle. The point of the arrow has remained in the wound. Madness, to wander for ever about a grave, to think eternally, fatefully of one who cannot see you, cannot hear you, one who has left earth in all the beauty and splendour of youth."

A pause ensued, during which neither spoke.

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

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

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

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

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

Eckhardt listened with a strange sensation.

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

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

"Regarding that matter there is considerable speculation," replied Benilo.

"Have you any theory of your own?"

The Chamberlain shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Theodora!"

"You know her?"

Benilo met Eckhardt's gaze unflinchingly.

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

Eckhardt nodded. He understood.

Dexterously changing the subject Benilo continued after a pause.

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

Eckhardt bowed his head.

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

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

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

"There is much about Ginevra's sudden death that puzzles me, a mystery which I have in vain endeavoured to fathom. The facts are known to you, I can pass them over, dark as everything seems to me at this very moment. So quickly, so mysteriously did she pass out of my life, that I could not, would not trust the testimony of my senses. I left the house on the Caelian hill on that fateful night, and though I felt as if my eyes were bursting from my head, they did not shed a single tear. Where I went, or what I did, I could not tell. I walked about, as one benumbed, dazed, as it sometimes happens, when the cleaving stroke of an iron mace falls upon one's helmet, deafening and blinding. This I remember – I passed the bridge near the tower of Nona and, ascending the Borgo, made for the gate of San Sebastian. The monks of Della Regola soon appeared, walking two by two, accompanied by a train of acolytes, chanting the Miserere, and bearing the coffin covered with a large pall of black velvet."

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

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

There was another pause, Benilo listening intently.

"The body placed in the chapel, prior to the performance of the last rites," Eckhardt continued, "I hurried away from the place and wandered all night round the streets like a madman, ready to seek my own destruction. But the hand of Providence withheld me from the crime. I cannot describe what I suffered; the agony, the despair, that wrung my inmost heart. I could no longer support a life that seemed blighted with the curse of heaven, and I formed the wildest plans, the maddest resolutions in my whirling brain. For a strange, terrible thought had suddenly come over me. I could not believe that Ginevra was dead. And the longer I pondered, the greater became my anxiety and fear. Late in the night I returned to the chapel. I knelt in the shadow of the vaulted arches, leaning against the wall, while the monks chanted the Requiem. I heard the 'Requiescat in Pace,' I saw them leave the chapel, but I remained alone in the darkness, for there was no lamp save the lamp of the Virgin. At this moment a bell tolled. The sacristan who was making the rounds through the church, preparatory

to closing, passed by me. He saw me, without recognizing who I was, and said: 'I close the doors.' 'I shall remain,' I answered. He regarded me fixedly, then said: 'You are bold! I will leave the door ajar – stay, if you will!' And without speaking another word he was out. I paid little heed to him, though his words had strangely stirred me. What did he mean? After a few moments my reasoning subsided, but my determination grew with my fear. Everything being still as the grave, I approached the coffin, cold sweat upon my brow. Removing the pall which covered it, I drew my dagger which was strong and sharp, intending to force open the lid, when suddenly I felt a stinging, benumbing pain on my head, as from the blow of a cudgel. How long I lay unconscious, I know not. When after some days I woke from the swoon, the monks had raised a heavy stone over Ginevra's grave, during the night of my delirium. I left Rome, as I thought, for ever. But strange misgivings began to haunt my sleep and my waking hours. Why had they not permitted me to see once more the face I had so dearly loved, ere they fastened down for ever the lid of the coffin? 'Tis true, they contended that the ravages of the fever to which she had succumbed had precipitated the decomposition of her body. Still – the more I ponder over her death, the more restless grows my soul. Thus I returned to Rome, even against my own wish and will. I will not tarry long. Perchance some light may beam on the mystery which has terrified my dreams, from a source, least expected, though so far I have in vain sought for the monk who conducted the last rites, and whose eyes saw what was denied to mine."

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

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

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

"But whence the blow?"

"The masons had wrenched away an iron bar, in walling up the old entrance. Had the height been greater, I would not be here to tell the tale."

Benilo drew a deep breath. He was ghastly pale.

"But your purpose in Rome?"

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

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

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

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

"Whither?"

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV

THE WANTON COURT OF THEODORA

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

As he hurried along the slopes of the hill, Benilo fancied at times that he beheld vague forms, lurking in the shadows; but they seemed to vanish the moment he approached. Low whisperings, an undefined hum, floated through the silence. First he attributed the noises to a fluttering in his ears, to the sighing of the night-wind or to the flight of some snake or lizard through the nettles. In nature all things live, even death; all things make themselves heard, even silence. Never before had Benilo felt such an involuntary terror. Once or twice he precipitately changed his course, hurrying down some narrow lane, between desolate looking rows of houses, low and ill-favoured, whose inmates recruited themselves from the lowest types of the mongrel population of Rome.

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

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

As the Chamberlain made his way through the wilderness of fallen columns, shattered porticoes, and tangles of myrrh and acanthus, the faint clash of cymbals, like the echo of some distant bacchanalia, fell upon his ear. A strange fitful melody, rising and falling with weird thrilling cadence, was borne upon the perfumed breezes.

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

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

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

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

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

And here, in the drowsy warmth, lounging on divans of velvet, their feet sunk in costly Indian and Persian carpets, drinking, gossiping, and occasionally bursting into fitful snatches of song, revelled a company of distinguished men, richly clad, representatives of the most exclusive Roman society of the time. They seemed bent upon no other purpose save to enjoy the pleasure of the immediate hour. Africans in fantastic attire carried aloft flagons and goblets, whose crystalline sheen reflected the crimson glow of the spicy Cyprian.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oliverotto uttered a coarse laugh.

Then he added with a meaning glance:

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

Roffredo shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

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

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

The girl pouted and raised the goblet to her lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bembo regarded him contemptuously.

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

At this stage an intermezzo interrupted the light, bantering tone of conversation. A curtain in the background parted. A bevy of black haired girls entered the hall, dressed in airy gowns, which revealed every line, every motion of their bodies. They encircled the guests in a mad whirl, inclining themselves first to one, then to the other. They were led by one, garbed as Diana, with the crescent moon upon her forehead, her black hair streaming about the whiteness of her statuesque body like dark sea-waves caressing marble cliffs. Taking advantage of this stage of the entertainment Benilo crossed the vast hall unnoticed and sat apart from the revellers in gloomy silence, listening with ill-concealed annoyance to the shouts of laughter and the clatter of irritating tongues. The characteristic wantonness of his features had at this moment given place to a look of weariness and suffering, a seemingly unaccustomed expression; it was a look of longing, the craving of a passion unsatisfied, a hope beyond his hope. Many envied him for his fame and profligacy, others read in his face the stamp of sullen cruelty, which vented itself wherever resistance seemed useless; but there was none to sound his present mood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hezilo shook his head. "What of it?"

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

Hezilo regarded the Chamberlain strangely.

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

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

Benilo shook his head and pushed away the proffered wine.

"Your advice comes too late!"

For a moment neither spoke. Benilo, busied with his own thoughts, sat listening to the boisterous clamour of the revellers, while the harper's gaze rested unseen upon him.

After a pause he broke the silence.

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

Benilo turned fiercely upon his interlocutor.

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

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

"She is a devil, a heartless beautiful devil who grinds the hearts of men beneath her feet and laughs. Sometimes she taunts me till I could strangle her – ah! But I placed myself in the demon's power and having myself broken the compact which bound me to her, body and soul – from the lord I was, I have sunk to the slave I am, – you see, I speak free from the heart, what little she has left of it."

The harper nodded.

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

Benilo looked up like an infuriated tiger.

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

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

The Chamberlain relaxed.

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

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

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

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

Benilo nodded.

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

"And you waver?"

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

Their discourse at this point was rudely interrupted by the clamour of the guests, bent upon silencing Bembo's exuberance, whose tongue, like a ribbon in the wind, fluttered incessantly. He bore himself with the airs of some orator of antiquity, rolling his eyes until they showed the whites beneath, and beating the air with his short, chubby arms.

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

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

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

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

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

Roffredo laughed boisterously.

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

The girl laughed nervously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stop! On your life be silent!"

But Roffredo paid no heed.

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

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

He came no further.

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

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

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

While he did so the poor dancing girl breathed her last.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V THE WAGER

At the moment when Benilo had raised his poniard, to drive it through his opponent's heart, the diaphanous curtains dividing the great hall from the rest of the buildings were flung aside and in the entrance there appeared a woman like some fierce and majestic fury, who at a moment's glance took in the whole scene and its import. Her manner was that of a queen, of a queen who was wont to bend all men to her slightest caprice. Every eye in the large hall was bent upon her and every soul felt a thrill of wonder and admiration. The ivory pallor of her face was enhanced by the dark gloss of her raven hair. The slumbrous starry eyes were meant to hold the memories of a thousand love-thoughts. A dim suffused radiance seemed to hover like an aureole above her dazzling white brow, crowning the perfect oval of her face, adorned with a clustering wealth of raven-black tresses. She was arrayed in a black, silk-embroidered diaphanous robe, the most sumptuous the art of the Orient could supply. Of softest texture, it revealed the matchless contours of her form and arms, of her regal throat, heightening by the contrast the ivory sheen of her satin-skin.

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

The rest of the company had instinctively turned their faces towards the Queen of the Groves, endeavouring at the same time to hide the sight of the dead girl from her eyes by closely surrounding the couch, with their backs to the victim. But their consternation as well as the very act betrayed them. From the struggling men on the floor, Theodora's gaze turned to the affrighted company and she half guessed the truth. Advancing towards her guests, she pushed their unresisting forms aside, raised the cover from the dead girl with the bloody bandage over the still white face, bent over it quickly to kiss the dark, silken hair, then she demanded an account of the deed. One of the women reported in brief and concise terms what had happened before she arrived. At the sight of this flower, broken and destroyed, Theodora's anger seemed for a moment to subside, like a trampled spark, before a great pity that rose in her heart. In an instant the whole company rushed upon her with excited gestures and before the Babel of jabbering tongues, each striving to tell his or her story in a voice above the rest, the Fury returned.

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

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

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

And Benilo pointed to the shrinking form of Roffredo.

"What had he done?"

"He had insulted you!"

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

Then she beckoned to the attendants.

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

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

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

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

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

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

An ominous smile curved Theodora's crimson lips.

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

Her low voice was soft and purring, yet laden with the poison sting of irony, as through half-closed lids she glanced towards the Chamberlain, who sat apart in moody silence like a spectre at the feast.

Benilo scented danger in her tone and answered cautiously:

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

Theodora bowed with mock courtesy.

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

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

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

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

She flung back her head and their eyes met.

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

There was a deep hush in the hall, as if the spirit of the dead girl was haunting the guests. The harps played a plaintive melody, which might indeed have stolen from some hearth of ashes, when stirred by the breath of its smouldering spark, like phantom-memories from another world, that seemed to call to Theodora's inner consciousness, each note a foot-step, leading her away beyond the glint and glitter of the world that surrounded her, to a garden of purity and peace in the dim, long-forgotten past. Theodora sat in a reverie, her strange eyes fixed on nothingness, her red lips parted, disclosing two rows of teeth, small, even, pearly, while her full, white bosom rose and fell with quickened respiration.

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

Theodora sighed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

At last she raised her head.

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

"I have seen in Rome to-day – a man!"

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

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

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

"Or a cloven hoof?" cried Oliverotto.

"What was he like?" sneered a third.

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

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

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

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

The company gazed at each other in mute bewilderment.

Theodora was indeed in a most singular mood.

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

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

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

Roxané alone turned to the speaker.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roffredo looked up with a smile of indolence.

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

She measured him with undisguised scorn and contempt.

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

In a strange voice, melodious as the sound of Æolian harps when the night wind passes over their strings, amid profound silence Theodora related to her assembled guests the incident of the runaway steeds in which she had so prominently figured, the chariot having been her own, – the occupant herself. She omitted not a detail of the stranger's heroic deed, passing from her own thrilling experience to Vitellozzo's assault upon one of the New Vestals, and his discomfiture at the hand of him who had saved her life.

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

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

"Who is he?" queried one.

"What is he like?" shouted another.

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

Suddenly she turned to the last questioner, a woman.

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

The woman sighed amorously. The men nodded to each other with meaning glances. The danger of the convent seemed passed.

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

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

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

Theodora's gaze was sharp as steel.

"What is it to you?" she hissed.

Benilo shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Nothing whatever! I also know him!"

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

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

He waved back the eager questioners.

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

Theodora seemed to have grown nervous.

"Are you serious?"

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

"Is he a Roman?" cried a voice.

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

Theodora nodded.

"Even so," she replied coldly.

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

Theodora winced.

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

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

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

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

Acting on a sudden impulse, he raised his head and looked at her with a fearlessness which for the moment appeared to startle her self-possession, for a deep flush coloured the fairness of her face and, fading, left it pale as marble. Still Theodora did not speak and the breathless silence which had succeeded Benilo's last taunt resembled the ominous hush of the heated atmosphere before a thunder-clap. No one dared speak and the Chamberlain, apparently struck by the sudden stillness, looked round from the tumbled cushions where he reclined.

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

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

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

A sardonic laugh broke from Benilo's lips.

"And by what means?"

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

"What then?"

For a moment she hesitated.

"Name the wager yourself!"

An ominous smile curved Benilo's lips.

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

She laughed scornfully and shuddered, but did not reply.

"Are you afraid?" he cried, tauntingly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The champion is to be my choice and to be accepted unconditionally?" he questioned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I appeal to the company assembled, who has witnessed the wager between the Queen of Love and her faithful and obedient lover," Benilo sneered, looking round among the guests. "How know we, what is concealed under a vizor, beneath a rusty suit of armour? Security lies but in the name of the unconscious victim of Theodora's magic, is it not so?"

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

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

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

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

There was the silence of death in the hall.

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

"You lie! You lie!"

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

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

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

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

When he saw the deadly pallor which covered the woman's face, and the terror reflected in her eyes, Benilo continued:

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

Theodora turned upon her tormenter like an animal at bay.

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

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

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

"Stay!" Benilo cried to Theodora as she grasped the curtain in the act of pushing it aside. He knew if she passed beyond it, he had lost beyond retrieve. But she paused and turned, mute inquiry and defiance in her look.

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

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

She regarded him with her icy stare.

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

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

"Benilo – beware!"

Shrill, sharp like breaking glass, like the cry of a wounded animal maddened with rage and agony, the outcry seemed wrenched from Theodora's white, drawn lips. Her large, splendid eyes flashed unutterable scorn upon the Chamberlain and her lithe form swayed and crouched as that of a tigress about to spring.

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

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

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

She did not finish the sentence.

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

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

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

"And what if I would?" flashed Roxané.

Two white hands slowly but firmly encircled her throat.

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

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

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

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

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

She whirled upon him.

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

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

"Let the hunter beware!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His word had decided the question.

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

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

For a moment she glanced at Benilo and the blood froze in his veins. Heaven and earth would he have given now to have recalled the fateful challenge. But it was too late. For a time he trembled like an aspen. No one knew what he had read in Theodora's Medusa-like face.

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

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

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

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

"I accept your wager," she said, "and I warn you that I will win! Win, with all the world, with all your villainy, with the Devil himself against me. Eckhardt shall come to the Groves! But," she continued with terrible distinctness, "if aught befall him, ere we have stood face to face, I shall know the hand that struck the blow, were it covered by the deepest midnight that ever blushed at your foulness, and by the devil, – I will avenge it!"

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

For a time deep silence succeeded.

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

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

Benilo alone had retreated to its extreme end, where he allowed himself to drop into a divan, which had just been deserted by a couple, who had been swept away by the whirling Bacchanale. Here he sat for some time, his face buried in his hands, when looking up suddenly he found himself face to face with Hezilo.

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

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

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

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

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

Benilo pressed his hands against his burning temples.

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

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

So absorbed was Benilo in his own thoughts, that the biting irony of the other's speech was lost upon him.

He extended his hand to his strange counsellor.

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

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

At last the Chamberlain rose to leave the hall.

The sounds of lutes and harps quivered through the Groves of Theodora; flutes and cymbals, sistrum and tympani mingled their harmonies with the tempest of sound that hovered over the great

orgy, which was now at its height. The banquet-hall whirled round him like a vast architectural nightmare. Through the dizzy glare he beheld perspectives and seemingly endless colonnades. Everything sparkled, glittered, and beamed in the light of prismatic irises, that crossed and shattered each other in the air. Viewed through that burning haze even the inanimate objects seemed to have waked to some fantastic representation of life. – But through it all he saw one face, supremely fair in its marble cold disdain, – and unable to endure the sight longer Benilo the Chamberlain rushed out into the open.

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

CHAPTER VI

JOHN OF THE CATACOMBS

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

While bearing himself ostensibly in the character of a mere man of pleasure, Benilo the Chamberlain lost no opportunity of ingratiating himself with the many desperate spirits who were to be found in the city ready and willing to assist at any enterprise, which should tend to complicate the machine of government. While he rushed into every extravagance and pleasure, surpassing the companions of his own rank in his orgies, he suffered no symptoms of a deeper feeling to escape him, than that of excellence in trifling, the wine cup, the pageant, the passing show. It may have been a strain of mongrel blood, filtering through his veins, which tempered his endurance with the pliancy essential to intrigue, a strain that was apparent in the sculptured regularity of his features. His movements had the pliant ease, the stealthy freedom of the tiger. Had he been caught like Milo, he would have writhed himself out of the trap with the sinuous persistency of the snake. There was something snake-like in the small, glittering eyes, the clear smoothness of the skin. With all its brightness no woman worthy of the name but would have winced with womanly instincts of aversion and repugnance from his glances. With all its beauty, none, save Otto alone, had ever looked confidingly into his face. Men turned indeed to scan him approvingly as he passed, but they owned no sympathy with the smooth, set brow, the ever present smile in the lips of Benilo the Chamberlain.

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

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

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

Suddenly the Chamberlain paused and for a moment even his stout heart stopped beating, and his face turned a ghastly pallor. For directly before him there arose out of the underbrush, with back apparently turned towards him, some formless apparition in the dark habit of a monk, the cowl drawn over his head. But when he attained his natural height, he faced Benilo, although the latter would have sworn that he did not see him turn.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Benilo started as if the bravo had read his thoughts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why not?" demanded the Chamberlain curtly.

"I am bound in another's service!"

"You are an over-punctilious rogue, Don Giovan. To-morrow then!"

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

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

"Are we alone?"

The bravo nodded.

"Is my presence here not proof enough?"

The argument prevailed.

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

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

There was a brief pause during which their eyes met.

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

"Being given to roaming at random round the city," Benilo continued, speaking very slowly as if to aid the bravo's comprehension, "for such is their wont in their own wildernesses, – I am fearful he might go astray, – and the Roman temper is uncertain. Yet is Eckhardt so fearless, that he would scorn alike warning or precaution. Therefore I would have you dog his footsteps from afar, – but let him not suspect your presence, if you wish to see the light of another morning. Wear your monk's habit, it becomes you! You look as lean and hungry and wolfish as a hermit of twelve years' halo, who feeds on wild roots and snails. But to me you will each day report the points of interest, which the German leader has visited, that I too may become familiar with their attraction. Do I speak plainly?"

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

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

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

"When shall it be?" queried the bravo.

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

The bravo seemed to ponder.

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

Benilo nodded.

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

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

The hour was not far from midnight. The moon had passed her zenith and was declining in the horizon. Her pale spectral rays cast an uncertain light over the region and gave the shadows a weird and almost threatening prominence. In this gorge there dwelt one Dom Sabbat, half sorcerer, half madman, towards whose habitation Benilo now directed his steps. He was not long reaching a low structure, half concealed between tall weeds and high boulders. Swiftly approaching, Benilo knocked at the door. After a wait of some duration shuffling foot steps were to be heard within. A door was being unbarred, then the Chamberlain could distinguish the unfastening of chains, accompanied by a low dry cough. At last the low door was cautiously opened and he found himself face to face with an almost shapeless form in the long loose habit of the cloister, ending in a peaked cowl, cut as it seemed out of one cloth, and covering the face as well as the back of the head, barring only two holes for the eyes and a slit for the mouth. After the uncanny host had, by the light of a lantern, which he could shade at will, peered closely into his visitor's face, he silently nodded, beckoning the other to enter and carefully barred the door behind him. Through a low, narrow corridor, Dom Sabbat led the way to a sort of kitchen, such as an alchemist might use for his experiments and with many grotesque bends bade his visitor be seated, but Benilo declined curtly, for he was ill at ease.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the thought of the humiliation he had received at her hands, Benilo gnashed his teeth in impotent rage. His pride, his vanity, his self-love, had been cruelly stabbed. He might retaliate by rousing her fear. But if she had passed beyond the point of caring?

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

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

CHAPTER VII

THE VISION OF SAN PANCRAZIO

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

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

Feeling that sleep would not come to him in his present wrought up state of mind, Eckhardt resolved to revisit the spot which held the dearest he had possessed on earth. Perhaps, that prayer at the grave of Ginevra would bring peace to his soul and rest to his wearied heart. His feet bore him onward unawares through winding lanes and deserted streets until he reached the gate of San Sebastiano. There, he left the road for a turfy hollow, where groups of black cypress trees stretched out their branches like spectral arms, uplifted to warn back intruders. He stood before the churchyard of San Pancrazio.

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

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

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

And as he mused upon his dream his heart grew heavy in his breast. He had grown cowardly of pity and renewed grief.

Following a winding path, so overgrown with moss that his footsteps made no sound upon it, which he believed would lead him out of the churchyard, Eckhardt was staggered by the discovery that he had walked in a circle, for almost directly before him rose the grassy knoll tufted with palms, between which shone the granite monument over Ginevra's grave. Believing at this moment more than ever in his life in signs and portents, Eckhardt slowly ascended the sloping ground, now oblivious alike to sight and sound, and lost in the depths of his own thoughts. Bitter thoughts they were and dreamily vague, such as fever and nightmare bring to us. Relentlessly all the long-fought misery swept over him again, burying him beneath waves so vast, that time and space seemed alike to vanish. He knelt at the grave and with a fervour such as is born of a mind completely lost in the depths of mysticism, he prayed that he might once more behold Ginevra, as her image lived in his memory. The vague deep-rooted misery in his heart was concentrated in this greatest desire of his life, the desire to look once more upon her, who had gone from him for ever.

After having exhausted all the pent-up fervour of his soul Eckhardt was about to rise, little strengthened and less convinced of the efficacy of his prayer, when his eyes were fixed upon the tall apparition of a woman, who stood in the shadow of the cypress trees and seemed to regard him with a strange mixture of awe and mournfulness. With parted lips and rigid features, the life's blood frozen in his veins, Eckhardt stared at the apparition, his face covered with a pallor more deadly than that of the phantom, if phantom indeed it was. A long white shroud fell in straight folds from her head to her feet, but the face was exposed, and as he gazed upon it, at once so calm and so passionate, so cold and yet so replete with life, – he knew it was Ginevra who stood before him. Her eyes, strangely undimmed by death, burnt into his very soul, and his heart began to palpitate with a mad longing. Spreading out his arms in voiceless entreaty, the half-choked outcry: "Ginevra! Ginevra!" came from his lips, a cry in which was mingled at once the most supreme anguish and the most supreme love.

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

Dazed, half-mad, his brow bathed in cold dew, Eckhardt staggered to his feet and glanced round like one waking from a dream. The churchyard of San Pancrazio was deserted. Not another human being was to be seen. Surely his senses, strangely overwrought though they were, had not deceived him. Here, – close beside him, – the apparition had stood but a moment ago; with his own eyes he had seen her, yet no human foot had trampled the fantastic tangle of creepers, that lay in straggling length upon the emerald turf. He lingered no longer to reason. His brain was in a fiery whirl. Like one demented, Eckhardt rushed from the church-yard. There was at this moment in his heart such a pitiful tumult of broken passions, hopelessness and despair, that the acute, unendurable pain came later.

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

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

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

In the climax of wonderment Eckhardt had questioned himself, whether he might not actually be walking in a dream; he even seriously asked himself whether madness was not parading its phantoms before his eyes. But he soon felt constrained to admit, that he was neither asleep nor mad. Thus he began gradually to accept the fact of Ginevra's presence, as in a dream we never question the intervention of persons actually long dead, but who nevertheless seem to act like living people.

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

There were still some belated worshippers within, and as Eckhardt ascended the stone steps, he was seized with an incontrollable desire to have speech with Nilus, the hermit of Gaëta, who, he had been told, was holding forth in the Church of the Hermits. To him he would confess all, that sorely troubled his mind, seeking his counsel and advice. The immense blackness within the Basilica stretched vastly upward into its great arching roof, giving to him who stood pigmy-like within it, an oppression of enormity. Black was the centre of the Nave and unutterably still. A few torches in remote shrines threw their lugubrious light down the aisles. The pale faces of kneeling monks came now and then into full relief, when the scant illumination shifted, stirred by ever so faint a breath of air, heavy with the scent of flowers and incense.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you not speak to her?"

"My lips but uttered her name!"

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

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

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

Then he turned to the monk.

"Have you no solace to give to me, no light upon the dark path, I am about to enter upon, – the life of the cloister, where I shall end my days?"

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

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

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

His last words died in a groan.

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

A long silence ensued.

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

For a few moments the monk meditated in silence.

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

"Father, you know not all!" Eckhardt replied after a brief pause, during which he lay prostrate, writhing in agony and despair. "From youth up have I lived as a man of war. – To this I was bred by my sire and grandsire of sainted memory. I have always hoped to die on some glorious field. But it is all changed. I, who never feared mortal man, am trembling before a shadow. My love for her, who is no more, has made me a coward. I tremble to think that I may not find her in the darkness, whither soon I may be going. To this end alone I would purchase the peace, which has departed. The thought of her has haunted me night and day, ever since her death! How often in the watches of the night, on the tented field, have I lain awake in silent prayer, once more to behold her face, that I can never more forget!"

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

"Then you still believe yourself thus favoured?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The monk shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VIII

CASTEL SAN ANGELO

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

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

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

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

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

Left as widow by the premature death of the Count of Tusculum and married to Guido, Prince of Tuscany, Marozia, after the demise of her second husband, was united by a third marriage to Hugo of Provence, brother of Guido. Successively she placed on the pontifical throne Leo VI and Stephen VIII, then she gave the tiara to John XI, her younger son. One of her numerous offspring imprisoned in the same dungeon both his mother and his brother, the Pope, and then destroyed them. Rumour hath it, however, that a remote descendant, who had inherited Marozia's fatal beauty, had been mysteriously abducted at an early age and concealed in a convent, to save her from the

contamination and licentiousness, which ran riot in the blood of the women of her house. She had been heard of no more and forgotten long ago.

After the changes and vicissitudes of half a century the family of the Crescentii had taken possession of Castel San Angelo, keeping their state in the almost impregnable stronghold, without which the possession of Rome availed but little to any conqueror. It was a period marked by brutal passions and feudal anarchy. The Romans had degenerated to the low estate of the barbarian hordes, which had during the great upheaval extinguished the light of the Western empire. The Crescentii traced their origin even to that Theodora of evil fame, who had perished in the dungeons of the formidable keep, and Johannes Crescentius, the present Senator and Patricius, seemed wrapt in dark ruminations, as from the window of a chamber in the third gallery he looked out into the night, gazing upon the eddying Tiber below, bordered by dreary huts, thinly interspersed with ilex, and the barren wastes, from which rose massive watch-towers. Far away to Southward sloped the Alban hills. From the dark waving greens of Monte Pincio the eye, wandering along the ridge of the Quirinal, reached to the mammoth arches of Constantine's Basilica, to the cypress bluffs of Aventine. Almost black they looked at the base, so deep was their shade, contrasted with the spectral moon-light, which flooded their eminences.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On a couch, her head resting on her bare, white arms reclined Stephania, the consort of the Senator of Rome. Tenderly the night wind caressed the soft dark curls, which stole down her brow. Her right hand supported a head exquisitely beautiful, while the fingers of the left played mechanically with the folds of her robe. Zoë, her favourite maiden, sat in silence on the floor, holding in her lap a red and blue bird, which now and then flapped its wings and gave forth a strange cry. All else was silent within and without.

Stephania's thoughts dwelt in bygone days.

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

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

But did Crescentius himself wish to break the shackles which were forever to destroy the prestige of a noble house, that had for more than a century ruled the city of Rome? Was he content to be the lackey of that boy, before whom a mighty empire bowed, a youth truly, imbued with the beauty of body and soul which fall but rarely to one mortal's lot – but yet a youth, a barbarian, the descendant of the Nomad tribes of the great upheaval? Was there no one, worthy of the name of a great Roman, who would cement the disintegrated states of Italy, plant his standards upon the Capitol and proclaim himself lord of new Roman world? And he, her husband, from whom at one time she had expected such great things, was he not content with his lot? Was he not at this very moment offering homage to the despised foreigners, kissing the sandals of a heretical pope, whom a bribed Conclave had placed in the chair of St. Peter through the armed manifestation of an emperor's will?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A musing glance broke from the Senator's eyes.

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

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

He ignored the veiled reproach.

"Margrave Eckhardt of Meissen, the German commander-in-chief, is bent upon taking holy orders. I thought it was an idle rumour, some gossip of the taverns, but within the hour it has been confirmed to me by a source whose authenticity is above doubt."

"And your informant?"

"Benilo, the Chamberlain."

"And whence this sudden world weariness?"

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

Stephania fell to musing.

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

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

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

Stephania gazed absently into space.

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

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

"Can the living derive force and energy from a past, that is forgotten? Rome does not want tragedies! It wants to be danced to, sung to and amused. Anything to make the rabble forget their own abasement. 'Panem et Circenses' has been for ever their cry."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The world cannot endure forever."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Benilo is fast supplanting Eckhardt in Otto's favour. Benilo wishes what Otto wishes. Benilo sees what Otto sees. Benilo speaks what Otto thinks. Rome is pacified; Rome is content; Rome is happy; what need of heavy armament? Eckhardt reviles the Romans, – he reviles Benilo, he reviles the new state, – he insists upon keeping his iron hosts in the Neronian field, – within sight of Castel San Angelo. It was to be Benilo or Eckhardt – you know the result."

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

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

Crescentius' tone grew gloomy as he continued.

"I bear the youth no grudge, nor ill-will. – But Rome cannot share. He has a power of which he is himself unconscious; it is the inheritance from his Hellenic mother. Were he conscious of its use, hardly the grave would be a safe refuge for us. Once Rome triumphed over Hellas. Shall Hellas

trample Rome in the dust in the person of this boy, whose unspoken word will sweep our old traditions from the soil?"

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

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

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

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

"Is there a remedy?"

"We lack but the skilful physician."

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

"Surely – you would not resort to – "

She paused, her lips refusing to utter the words.

Crescentius shook his head.

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

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