

GALLIZIER NATHAN

UNDER THE WITCHES'
MOON: A ROMANTIC
TALE OF MEDIAEVAL
ROME

Nathan Gallizier

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Romantic Tale of Mediaeval Rome**

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"To some Love comes so splendid and so soon,
With such wide wings and steps so royally,
That they, like sleepers wakened suddenly,
Expecting dawn, are blinded by his noon.

"To some Love comes so silently and late,
That all unheard he is, and passes by,
Leaving no gift but a remembered sigh,
While they stand watching at another gate.

"But some know Love at the enchanted hour,
They hear him singing like a bird afar,
They see him coming like a falling star,
They meet his eyes – and all their world's in flower."

ETHEL CLIFFORD

BOOK THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

THE FIRES OF ST. JOHN

It was the eve of St. John in the year of our Lord Nine Hundred Thirty-Five.

High on the cypress-clad hills of the Eternal City the evening sun had flamed valediction, and the last lights of the dying day were fading away on the waves of the Tiber whose changeless tide has rolled down through centuries of victory and defeat, of pride and shame, of glory and disgrace.

The purple dusk began to weave its phantom veil over the ancient capital of the Cæsars and a round blood-red moon was climbing slowly above the misty crests of the Alban Hills, draining the sky of its crimson sunset hues.

The silvery chimes of the Angelus, pealing from churches and convents, from Santa Maria in Trastevere to Santa Maria of the Aventine, began to sing their message of peace into the heart of nature and of man.

As the hours of the night advanced and the moon rose higher in the star-embroidered canopy of the heavens, a vast concourse of people began to pour from shadowy lanes and thoroughfares, from sanctuaries and hostelries, into the Piazza Navona. Romans and peasants from the Campagna, folk from Tivoli, Velletri, Corneto and Terracina, pilgrims from every land of the then known world, Africans and Greeks, Lombards and Franks, Sicilians, Neapolitans, Syrians and Kopts, Spaniards and Saxons, men from the frozen coast of Thulé and the burning sands of Arabia, traders from the Levant, sorcerers from the banks of the Nile, conjurers from the mythical shores of the Ganges, adventurers from the Barbary coast, gypsies from the plains of Sarmatia, monks from the Thebaide, Normans, Gascons and folk from Aquitaine.

In the Piazza Navona booths and stalls had been erected for the sale of figs and honey, and the fragrant products of the Roman osterié.

Strings of colored lanterns danced and quivered in the air. The fitful light from the torches, sending spiral columns of resinous smoke into the night-blue ether, shed a lurid glow over the motley, fantastic crowd that increased with every moment, recruited from fishermen, flower girls, water-carriers and herdsmen from the Roman Campagna.

Ensnconced in the shadow of a roofless portico, a relic of the ancient Circus Agonalis, which at one time occupied the site of the Piazza Navona, and regarding the bewildering spectacle which presented itself to his gaze, with the air of one unaccustomed to such scenes, stood a stranger whose countenance revealed little of the joy of life that should be the heritage of early manhood.

His sombre and austere bearing, the abstracted mood and far-away look of the eyes would have marked him a dreamer in a society of men who had long been strangers to dreams. For stern reality ruled the world and the lives of a race untouched alike by the glories of the past and the dawn of the Pre-Renaissance.

He wore the customary pilgrim's habit, almost colorless from the effects of wind and weather. Now and then a chance passer-by would cast shy glances at the lone stranger, endeavoring to reconcile his age and his garb, and wondering at the nature of the transgression that weighed so heavily upon one apparently so young in years.

And well might his countenance give rise to speculation, were it but for the determined and stolid air of aloofness which seemed to render futile every endeavor to entice him into the seething maelstrom of humanity on the part of those who took note of his dark and austere form as they crossed the Piazza.

Tristan of Avalon was in his thirtieth year, though the hardships of a long and tedious journey, consummated entirely afoot, made him appear of maturer age. The face, long exposed to the relentless rays of the sun, had taken on the darker tints of the Southland. The nose was straight, the grey eyes tinged with melancholy, the hair was of chestnut brown, the forehead high and lofty. The ensemble was that of one who, unaccustomed to the pilgrim's garb, moves uneasily among his kind. Yet the atmosphere of frivolity, while irritating and jarring upon his senses, did not permit him to avert his gaze from the orgy of color, the pandemonium of jollity, that whirled and piped and roared about him as the flow of mighty waters.

One of many strange wayfarers bound upon business of one sort or another to the ancient seat of empire, whose worldly sceptre had long passed from her palsied grip to the distant shores of the Bosphorus, Tristan had arrived during the early hours of the day in the feudal and turbulent witches' cauldron of the Rome of the Millennium.

And with him constituents of many peoples, from far and near, had reached the Leonine quarter from the Tiburtine road, after months of tedious travel, to worship at the holy shrines, to do penance and to obtain absolution for real or imaginary transgressions.

From Bosnia, from Servia and Hungary, from Negropont and the islands of the Greek Archipelago, from Trebizond and the Crimea it came endlessly floating to the former capital of the Cæsars, a waste drift of palaces and temples and antique civilizations, for the End of Time was said to be nigh, and the dread of impending judgment lay heavily upon the tottering world of the Millennium.

A grotesque and motley crowd it was, that sought and found a temporary haven in the lowly taverns, erected for the accommodation of perennial pilgrims, chiefly mean ill-favored dwellings of clay and timber, divided into racial colonies, so that pilgrims of the same land and creed might dwell together.

A very Babel of voices assailed Tristan's ear, for the ancient sonorous tongue had long degenerated into the lingua Franca of bad Latin, though there were some who could still, though in a broken and barbarous fashion, make themselves understood, when all other modes of expression failed them.

All about him throbbed the strange, weird music of zitherns and lutes and the thrumming of the Egyptian Sistrum. The air of the summer night was heavy with the odor of incense, garlic and roses. The higher risen moon gleamed pale as an alabaster lamp in the dark azure of the heavens, trembling luminously on the waters of a fountain which occupied the centre of the Piazza Navona.

Here lolled some scattered groups of the populace, discussing the events of the day, jesting, gesticulating, drinking or love-making. Others roamed about, engaged in conversation or enjoying the antics of two Smyrniote tumblers, whose contortions elicited storms of applause from an appreciative audience.

A crowd of maskers had invaded the Piazza Navona, and the uncommon spectacle at last drew Tristan from his point of vantage and caused him to mingle with the crowds, which increased with every moment, their shouts and gibes and the clatter of their tongues becoming quite deafening to his ears. Richly decorated chariots, drawn by spirited steeds, rolled past in a continuous procession. The cries of the wine-venders and fruit-sellers mingled with the acclaim of the multitudes. Now and then was heard the fanfare of a company of horsemen who clattered past, bound upon some feudal adventure.

Weary of walking, distracted by the ever increasing clamor, oppressed with a sense of loneliness amidst the surging crowds, whose festal spirit he did not share, Tristan made his way towards the fountain and, seating himself on the margin, regardless of the chattering groups, which intermittently clustered about it, he felt his mood gradually calm in the monotony of the gurgling flow of the water, which spurted from the grotesque mouths of lions and dolphins.

The stars sparkled in subdued lustre above the dark, towering cypresses which crowned the adjacent eminence of Monte Testaccio, and the distant palaces and ruins stood forth in distinctness

of splendor and desolation beneath the luminous brightness of the moonlit heavens. White shreds of mist, like sorrowing spirits, floated above the winding course of the Tiber, and enveloped in a diaphanous haze the cloisters upon St. Bartholomew's Island at the base of Mount Aventine.

For a time Tristan's eyes roamed over the kaleidoscopic confusion which met his gaze on every turn. His ear was assailed by the droning sound of many voices that filled the air about him, when he was startled by the approach of two men, who, but for their halting gait, might have passed unheeded in the rolling sea of humanity that ebbed and flowed over the Piazza.

Basil, the Grand Chamberlain, was endowed with the elegance of the effeminate Roman noble of his time. Supple as an eel, he nevertheless suggested great physical strength. The skin was of a deep olive tinge. The black, beady eyes were a marked feature of the countenance. Inscrutable and steadfast in regard, with a hint of mockery and cynicism, coupled with an abiding alertness, they seemed to penetrate the very core of matter.

He wore a black mantle reaching almost to his feet. Of his features, shaded by a hood, little was to be seen, save his glittering minx-eyes. These he kept alternately fixed upon the crowds that surged around him and on his companion, a hunchback garbed entirely in black, from the Spanish hat, which he wore slouched over his face, to the black hose and sandals that encased his feet. A large red scar across the low forehead heightened the repulsiveness of his countenance. There was something strangely sinister in his sunken, cadaverous cheeks, the low brow, the inflamed eyelids, and his limping gait.

Without perceiving or heeding the presence of Tristan they paused as by some preconcerted signal.

As the taller of the two pushed back the hood of his pilgrim garb, as if to cool his brow in the night breeze, Tristan peered into a face not lacking in sensuous refinement. Dark supercilious eyes roved from one object to another, without dwelling long on any particular one. There was somewhat of a cynical look in the downward curve of the eyebrows, the thin straight lips and the slightly aquiline nose, which seemed to imbue him with an air of recklessness and daring, that ill consorted with his monkish garb.

Their discourse was at first almost unintelligible to Tristan. The language of the common people had, at this period of the history of Rome, not only lost its form, but almost the very echo of the Latin tongue.

After a time, however, Tristan distinguished a name, and, upon listening more attentively, the burden of the message began to unfold itself.

"Why then have you ventured out of your hell-hole of iniquity, when discovery means death or worse?" said Basil, the Grand Chamberlain. "Do the keeps and dungeons of the Emperor's Tomb so allure you? Or do you trust in some miraculous delivery from its vermin-haunted vaults?"

At these words Rome's most dreaded bravo, Il Gobbo of the Catacombs, snarled contemptuously.

"You are needlessly alarmed, my lord. They will not look for Il Gobbo in this company, though even a mole may walk in the shadow of a saint."

Basil regarded the speaker with mingled pity and contempt.

"There is room for all the world in Rome and the devil to boot."

Il Gobbo chuckled unpleasantly.

"Besides – folk about here show a great reverence for a holy garb – "

"Always with fitting reservations," interposed the Grand Chamberlain sardonically. "I have had it in mind at some time or other to relieve the Grand Penitentiary. The good man's lungs must be well nigh bursting with the foul air down there by the Tomb of the Apostle. He will welcome a rest!"

"Requiescat," chanted the bravo, imitating the nasal tone of the clergy.

Basil nodded approval.

"He at one time did me the honor of showing some concern in my spiritual welfare. Know you what I replied?" —

The bravo gave a shrug.

"Father," I said, when he urged me to confess, 'pray shrive some one worthier than myself. But – if you must needs have a confession – I shall whisper into your holy ear so many interesting little episodes, so many spicy peccadillos, and – to enhance their interest – mention some names so high in the grace of God – "'

"And the reverend father?"

"Looked anathema and vanished" —

Basil paused for a moment, after which he continued with a sigh:

"It is too late! The Church is to be purified. Not even the pale shade of Marozia will henceforth be permitted to haunt the crypts of Castel San Angelo – merely for the sake of decorum. There is nothing less well bred than memory!"

For a moment they relapsed into silence, watching the shifting crowds, then Basil continued:

"Compared with this virtuous boredom the last days of Ugo of Tuscany were a carnival. One could at least speed the travails of some one who required swift absolution."

"Can you contrive to bring about this happy state?" queried Il Gobbo.

"It is always the unexpurgated that happens," Basil replied sardonically.

"I hope to advance in your school," Il Gobbo interposed with a smile.

"I have long had you in mind. If you are in favor with yourself you will become an apt pupil. Remember! He who is dead is dead and long live the survivor."

"In very truth, my lord, breath is the first and last thing we draw – " rejoined the bravo, evidently not relishing the thought that death might be standing unseen at his elbow.

"Who would end one's days in odious immaculacy," Basil interposed grandiloquently, "even though you will not incur that reproach from those who know you from report, or who have visited your haunts? But to the point. There are certain forces at work in Rome which make breathing in this fetid air a rather cumbersome process."

"I doubt me if they could teach your lordship any new tricks," Il Gobbo replied, somewhat dubiously.

The Grand Chamberlain smiled darkly.

"Good Il Gobbo, the darkest of my tricks you have not yet fathomed."

"Perchance then the gust of rumor blows true about my lord's palace on the Pincian Hill?"

"What say they about my palatial abode?" Basil turned suavely to the speaker.

There was something in the gleam of his interrogator's eyes that caused Il Gobbo to hesitate. But his native insolence came to the rescue of his failing courage.

"Ask rather, what do they not say of it, my lord! It would require less time to recite – "

"Nevertheless, I am just now in a frame of mind to shudder soundly. These Roman nights, with their garlic and incense, are apt to befuddle the brain, – rob it of its power to plot. Perchance the recital of these mysteries would bring to mind something I have omitted."

The bravo regarded the speaker with a look of awe.

"They whisper of torture chambers, where knife and screw and pulley never rest – of horrors that make the blood freeze in the veins – of phantoms of fair women that haunt the silent galleries – strange wails of anguish that sound nightly from the subterranean vaults – "

"A goodly account that ought vastly to interest the Grand Penitentiary – were it – with proper decorum – whispered in his ear. It would make him forget – for the time at least – the dirty Roman gossip. Deem you not, good Il Gobbo?"

"I am not versed in such matters, my lord," replied the bravo, ill at ease. "Perhaps your lordship will now tell me why this fondness for my society?"

"To confess truth, good Il Gobbo, I did not join you merely to meditate upon the pleasant things of life. Rather to be inspired to some extraordinary adventure such as my hungry soul yearns for. As for the nature thereof, I shall leave that to the notoriously wicked fertility of your imagination."

The lurid tone of the speaker startled the bravo.

"My lord, you would not lay hands on the Lord's anointed?"

Il Gobbo met a glance that made the blood freeze in his veins.

"Is it the thing you call your conscience that ails you, or some sudden indigestion? Or is the bribe not large enough?"

The bravo doggedly shook his head.

"Courage lieth not always in bulk," he growled. "May my soul burn to a crisp in the everlasting flames if I draw steel against the Lord's anointed."

"Silence, fool! What you do in my service shall not burden your soul! Have you forgotten our compact?"

"That I have not, my lord! But since the Senator of Rome has favored me with his especial attention, I too have something to lose, which some folk hereabout call their honor."

"Your honor!" sneered the Grand Chamberlain. "It is like the skin of an onion. Peel off one, there's another beneath."

"My skin then – " the bravo growled doggedly. "However – if the lord Basil will confide in me – "

"Pray lustily to your patron saint and frequent the chapel of the Grand Penitentiary," replied Basil suavely, beckoning to Il Gobbo to follow him. "But beware, lest in your zeal to confess you mistake my peccadillos for your own."

With these words the two worthies slowly retraced their steps in the direction of Mount Aventine and were soon lost to sight.

CHAPTER II

THE WEAVING OF THE SPELL

After they had disappeared Tristan stood at gaze, puzzled where to turn, for the spectacle had suddenly changed.

New bands of revellers had invaded the Piazza Navona, and it seemed indeed as if the Eve of St. John were assuming the character of the ancient Lupercalia, for the endless variety of costumes displayed by a multitude assembled from every corner of Italy, Spain, Greece, Africa, and the countries of the North, was now exaggerated by a wild fancifulness and grotesque variety of design.

Tristan himself did not escape the merry intruders. He was immediately beset by importunate revellers, and not being able to make himself understood, they questioned and lured him on, imploring his good offices with the Enemy of Mankind.

Satyrs, fauns and other sylvan creatures accosted him, diverting their antics, when they found themselves but ill repaid for their efforts, and leaving the solitary stranger pondering the expediency of remaining, or wending his steps toward the Inn of the Golden Shield, where he had taken lodging upon his arrival.

These doubts were to be speedily dispelled by a spectacle which attracted the crowds that thronged the Piazza, causing them to give way before a splendid procession that had entered the Navona from the region of Mount Aventine.

Down the Navona came a train of chariots, preceded by a throng of persons, clad in rich and fantastic Oriental costumes, leaping, dancing and making the air resound with tambourines, bells, cymbals and gongs. They kept up an incessant jingle, which sounded weirdly above the droning chant of distant processions of pilgrims, hermits and monks, traversing the city from sanctuary to sanctuary.

The occupants of these chariots consisted of a number of young women in the flower of youth and beauty, whose scant apparel left little to the imagination either as regarded their person or the trade they plied. The charioteers were youths, scarcely arrived at the age of puberty, but skilled in their profession in the highest degree.

The first chariot, drawn by two milk-white steeds of the Berber breed, was inlaid with mother-of-pearl, with gilded spokes and trappings that glistened in the light of a thousand colored lanterns and torches, like a vehicle from fairyland. The reins were in the hands of a youth hardly over sixteen years of age, garbed in a snow white tunic, but the skill with which he drove the shell-shaped car through the surging crowds argued for uncommon dexterity.

Tristan, from his station by the fountain, was enabled to take in every detail of the strange pageant which moved swiftly towards him, a glittering, fantastic procession, as if drawn out of dreamland; and so enthralled were his senses that he did not note the terrible silence which had suddenly fallen upon the multitude.

As a half-slumbering man may note a sudden brilliant gleam of sunshine flashing on the walls of his chamber, Tristan gazed in confused bewilderment, when suddenly his stupefied senses were aroused to hot life and pulsation, as he fixed his straining gaze on the supreme fair form of the woman in the first car, standing erect like a queen, surveying her subjects.

In the silence of a great multitude there is always something ominous. But Tristan noted it not. Indeed he was deaf and blind to everything, save the apparition in the shell-shaped car, as it bounded lightly over the unevenly laid tufa of the Navona.

Was it a woman, or a goddess? A rainbow flame in mortal shape, a spirit of earth, air, water or fire?

He saw before him a woman combining the charm of the girl with the maturity of the thirties, dark-haired, exquisitely proportioned, with clear-cut features and dark slumbrous eyes.

She wore a diaphanous robe of pale silk gauze. Her wonderful arms, white as the fallen snow, were encircled by triple serpentine coils of gold. Else, she was unadorned, save for a circlet of rubies which crowned the dusky head.

Her sombre eyes rested drowsily on the swarming crowds, while a smile of disdain curved the small red mouth, as her chariot proceeded through the frozen silence.

Suddenly her eye caught the admiring gaze of Tristan, who had indeed forgotten heaven and earth in the contemplation of this supremest handiwork of the Creator. A word to the charioteer and the chariot came to a stop.

Tristan and the woman faced each other in silence, the man with an ill-concealed air of uneasiness, such as one may experience who finds himself face to face with some unknown danger.

With utter disregard for the gaping crowds which had gathered around the fountain she bent her gaze upon him, surveying him from head to foot.

"Who are you?" she spoke at last, and he, confused, bewildered, trembling, gazed into the woman's supremely fair face and stammered:

"A pilgrim!"

Her lips parted in a smile that revealed two rows of small white, even teeth. There was something unutterable in that smile which brought the color to Tristan's brow.

"A Roman?"

"From the North!"

"Why are you here?"

"For the salvation of my soul!"

He blushed as he spoke.

Again the strange smile curved the woman's lips, again the inscrutable look shone in her eyes.

"For the salvation of your soul!" she repeated slowly after him. "And you so young and fair. Ah! You have done some little wickedness, no doubt?"

He started to reply, but she checked him with a wave of her hand.

"I do not wish to be told. Do you repent?"

Tristan's throat was dry. His lips refused utterance. He nodded awkwardly.

"So much the worse! These little peccadillos are the spice of life! What is your name?"

She repeated it lingeringly after him.

"From the North – you say – to do penance in Rome!"

She watched him with an expression of amusement. When he started back from her, a strange fear in his heart, a wave of her hand checked him.

"Let me whisper a secret to you!" she said with a smile.

He felt her perfumed breath upon his cheek.

Inclining his ear he staggered away from her dizzy, bewildered.

Presently, with a dazzling smile, she extended one white hand and Tristan, trembling as one under a spell, bent over and kissed it. He felt the soft pressure of her fingers and his pulse throbbed with a strange, insidious fire, as reluctantly he released it at last.

Raising his eyes, he now met her gaze, absorbing into his innermost soul the mesmeric spell of her beauty, drinking in the warmth of those dark, sleepy orbs that flashed on him half resentfully, half mockingly. Then the charioteer jerked up the reins, the chariot began to move. Like a dream the pageant vanished – and slowly, like far-away thunder, the voice of the multitudes began to return, as they regarded the lone pilgrim with mingled doubt, fear and disdain.

With a start Tristan looked about. He was as one bewitched. He felt he must follow her at all risks, ascertain her name, her abode.

Dashing through the crowds that gave way before him, wondering and commenting upon the unseemly haste of one wearing so austere a garb, Tristan caught a last glimpse of the procession as it entered the narrow gorge that lies between Mount Testaccio and Mount Aventine.

With a sense of great disappointment he slowly retraced his steps, walking as in the thrall of a strange dream, and, after inquiring the direction of his inn of some wayfarers he chanced to meet, he at last reached the Inn of the Golden Shield, situated near the Flaminian Gate, and entered the great guest-chamber.

The troubled light of a melancholy dusk was enhanced by the glimmer of stone lamps suspended from the low and dirty ceiling.

Notwithstanding the late hour, the smoky precincts were crowded with guests from many lands, who were discussing the events of the day. If Tristan's wakeful ear had been alive to the gossip of the tavern he might have heard the incident in the Navona, in which he played so prominent a part, discussed in varied terms of wonder and condemnation.

Tristan took his seat near an alcove usually reserved for guests of state. The unaccustomed scene began to exercise a singular fascination upon him, stranger as he was among strangers from all the earth, their faces dark against the darker background of the room. Brooding over a tankard of Falernian of the hue of bronze, which his oily host had placed before him, he continued to absorb every detail of the animated picture, while the memory of his strange adventure dominated his mind.

Tristan's meagre fund of information was to be enriched by tidings of an ominous nature. He learned that the Pontiff, John XI, was imprisoned in the Lateran Palace, by his step-brother Alberic, the Senator of Rome.

While this information came to him, a loyal son of the Church, as a distinct shock, Tristan felt, nevertheless, strangely impressed with the atmosphere of the place. Even in the period of her greatest decay, Rome seemed still the centre of the universe.

Thus he sat brooding for hours.

When, with a start, he roused himself at last, he found the vast guest-chamber well-nigh deserted. The pilgrims had retired to their respective quarters, small, dingy cells, teeming with evil odors, heat and mosquitoes, and the oily Calabrian host was making ready for the morrow.

The warmth of the Roman night and the fatigue engendered after many leagues of tedious travel on a dusty road, under the scorching rays of an Italian sky, at last asserted itself and, wishing a fair rest to his host, who was far from displeased to see his guest-chamber cleared for the night, Tristan climbed the crooked and creaking stairs leading to the chamber assigned to him, which looked out upon the gate of Castello and the Tiber, where it is spanned by the Bridge of San Angelo.

The window stood open to the night air, on which floated the perfumes from oleander and almond groves. The roofs of the Eternal City formed a dark, shadowy mass in the deep blue dusk, and the cylindrical masonry of the Flavian Emperor's Tomb rose ominously against the deep turquoise of the night sky.

Soon the events of the day and the scenes of the evening began to melt into faint and indistinct memories.

Sleep, deep and tranquil, encompassed Tristan's weary limbs, but in his dreams the events of the evening were obliterated before scenes of the past.

CHAPTER III

THE DREAM LADY OF AVALON

Like a disk of glowing gold the sun had set upon hill and dale. The gardens of Avalon lay wrapt in the mists of evening. Like flowers seemed the fair women who thronged the winding paths. From fragrant bosquets, borne on the wings of the night wind came the faint sounds of zitherns and lutes.

He, too, was there, mingling joyous, carefree, with the rest, gathering the white roses for the one he loved. Dimly he recalled his delight, as he saw her approach in the waning light through the dim ilex avenue, an apparition wondrous fair in the crimson haze of slowly departing day, entering his garden of dreams. With strangely aching heart he saw them throng about her in homage and admiration.

At last he knelt before her, kissing the white hand that lay passive within his own.

How wonderful she was! Never had he seen anything like her, not even in this land of flowers and of beautiful women. Her hair was warm as if the sun had entered into it. Her skin had the tints of ivory. The violet eyes with the long drooping lashes seemed to hold the memories of a thousand love thoughts. And the small, crimson mouth, so witch-like, so alluring, seemed to hold out promise of fulfilment of dizzy hopes and desires.

"It is our golden hour," she smiled down at him, and the white fingers twined the rose in her hair, wove a girdle of blossoms round her exquisite, girlish form.

To Tristan she seemed an enchantment, an embodied rose. Never had he seen her so fair, so beautiful. On her lips quivered a smile, yet there was a strange light in her eyes, that gave him pause, a light he had never seen therein before.

She beckoned him away from the throng. "Come where the moonlight dreams."

Her smile and her wonderful eyes were his beacon light. He rose to his feet and took her hand. And away they strayed from the rest of the crowd, far away over green lawns, emerald in the moonlight, with, here and there, the dark shadow of a cypress falling across the silvery brightness of their path. Little by little the gardens were deserted. Fainter and fainter came the sounds of lutes and harps. The shadows of the grove now encompassed them, as silently they strode side by side.

"This is my Buen Retiro," she spoke at last. "Here we may rest – for awhile – far from the world."

They entered the rose-bower, a wilderness, blossoming with roses and hyacinths and fragrant shrubs – a very paradise for lovers. —

The bells of a remote convent began to chime. They smote the silence with their silvery peals. The castle of Avalon lay dark in the distance, shadowy against the deep azure of the night sky.

When the chimes of the Angelus had died away, she spoke.

"How wonderful is this peace!"

Her tone brought a sudden chill to his heart.

As she moved forward, he dropped his wealth of flowers and held out his hands entreatingly.

"Dearest Hellyayne," he said, "tarry but a little longer – "

She seemed to start at his words, and leaned over the back of the stone bench, which was covered with climbing roses. And suddenly under this new light, sad and silent, she seemed no longer his fair companion of the afternoon, all youth, all beauty, all light. Motionless, as if shadowed by some dire foreboding, she stood there and he dared not approach. Once he raised his hand to take her own. But something in her eyes caused the hand to fall as with its own weight.

He could not understand what stayed him, what stayed the one supreme impulse of his heart. He did not understand what checked the words that hovered on his lips. Was it the clear pure light of the eyes he loved so well? Was it some dark power he wot not of?

At last he broke through his restraint.

"Hellyayne – " he whispered low. "Hellyayne – I love you!"

She did not move.

There was a deep silence.

Then she answered.

"Oh, why have you said the word!"

What did she mean? He cried, trembling, within himself. And now he was no longer in the moonlit rose-bower in the gardens of Avalon, but in a dense forest. The trees meeting overhead made a night so black, that he saw nothing, not even their gnarled trunks.

Hellayne was standing beside him. A pale moonbeam flickered through the interwoven branches.

She pointed to the castle of Avalon, dim in the distance. He made a quick forward step to see her face. Her eyes were very calm.

"Let us go, Tristan!" she said.

"My answer first," he insisted, gazing longingly, wistfully into the eyes that held a night of mystery.

"You have it," she said calmly.

"It was no answer," he pleaded, "from lover to lover – "

"Ah!" she replied, in her voice a great weariness which he had never noted before. "But here are neither loves nor lovers. – Look!"

And he looked.

Before them lay a colorless and lifeless sea, under the arch of a threatening sky. Across that sky dark clouds, with ever-changing shapes, rolled slowly, and presently condensed into a vague shadowy form, while the torpid waves droned a muffled and unearthly dirge.

He covered his eyes, overcome by a mastering fear of that dread shape which he knew, yet knew not.

He knelt before her, took the hands he loved so well into his own and pressed upon them his fevered lips.

"I do not understand – " he moaned.

She regarded him fixedly.

"I am another's wife – "

His head drooped.

"When my eyes first met yours they begged that my love for you might find response in your heart," he said, still holding on to those marvellous white hands. "Did you not accept my worship?"

She neither encouraged nor repulsed him by word or gesture. And he covered her hands with burning kisses. After his passionate outburst had died to silence she spoke quietly, tremulously.

"Tristan," she began, and paused as if she were summoning courage to do that which she must. "Tristan, this may not be."

"I love you," he sobbed. "I love you! This is all I know! All I shall ever know. How can I support life without you? heart of my heart – soul of my soul? – What must I do, to win you for my own – to give you happiness?"

A negative gesture came in response.

"Is sin ever happiness?"

"The priests say not! And yet – our love is not sinful – "

"The priests say truth." Hellayne interposed calmly.

He felt as if an immense darkness, the chaos of a thousand spheres, suddenly encompassed him, threatening to plunge him into a bottomless abyss of despair.

Then he made a quick forward step. Her face was close to his. Wide eyes fastened upon him in a compelling gaze.

"Tell me!" he urged, his own eyes lost in those unfathomable wells of dreams. "When love is with you – does aught matter? Does sin – discovery – God himself – matter?"

With a frightened cry she drew back.

But those steady, questioning eyes, sombre, yet aflame, compelled the shifting violet orbs.

"Tell me!" he urged again, his face very close to her face.

"Naught matters," she whispered faintly, as if under a spell.

Then her gaze relinquished his, as she looked dreamily out upon the woods. There was absolute silence, lasting apace. It was the stillness of a forest where no birds sing, no breezes stir. Then a twig snapped beneath Helayne's foot. He had taken her to his heart and, his strong arms about her, kissed her eyes, her mouth, her hair. She suffered his caresses dreamily, passively, her white arms encircling his neck.

Suddenly he stiffened. His form was as that of one turned to stone.

In the shadow of the forest beneath a great oak, hooded, motionless, stood a man. His eyes seemed like glowing coals, as they stared at them. Helayne did not see them, but she felt the tremor that passed through Tristan's frame. The mantle's hood was pulled far down over the man's face. No features were visible.

And yet Tristan knew that cowed and muffled form. He knew the eyes that had surprised their trust.

It was Count Roger de Laval.

The muffled shadow was gone as quickly as it had come.

It was growing ever darker in the forest, and when he looked up again he saw that Helayne's white roses were scattered on the ground. Her scarf of blue samite had fallen heedlessly beside them. He lifted it and pressed it to his lips.

"Will you give it to me?" he said tremulously. "That it may be with me always – "

There was no immediate response.

At last she said slowly:

"You shall have it – a parting gift – "

He seized her hands. They lay passively within his own.

There was a great fear in his eyes.

"I do not understand – "

She loosened the roses from her hair and garb before she made reply. Silently, like dead leaves in autumn, the fragrant petals dropped one by one to earth. Helayne watched them with weary eyes as they drifted to their sleep, then, as she held the last spray in her hand, gazing upon it she said:

"When you gave them to me, Tristan, they were sweet and fresh, the fairest you could find. Now they have faded, perished, died – "

He started to plead, to protest, to silence her, but she continued:

"Ah! Can you not see? Can you not understand? Perchance," she added bitterly, "I was created to adorn the fleeting June afternoon of your life, and when this scarf is torn and faded as these flowers, let the wind carry it away, – like these dead petals at our feet – "

She let fall the withered spray, but he snatched it ere it touched the ground.

"I love you," he stammered passionately. "I love you! Love you as no woman was ever loved. You are my world – my fate – Helayne! Helayne! Know you what you say?" —

She gazed at him, with eyes from which all life had fled.

"I am another's," she said slowly. "I have sinned in loving you, in giving to you my soul. And even as you stood there and held me in your arms, it flashed upon me, like lightning in a dark stormy night – I saw the abyss, at the brink of which we stand, both, you and I." —

"But we have done no wrong – we have not sinned," he protested wildly.

She silenced him with a gesture of her beautiful hands.

"Who may command the waters of the cataract, go here, – or go there? Who may tell them to return to their lawful bed? I have neither power nor strength, to resist your pleading. You have been

life and love to me, all, – all, – and all this you are to-day. And therefore must we part, – part, ere it be too late – " she concluded with a wild cry of anguish, "ere we are both engulfed in the darkness." —
And he fell at her feet as if stunned by a thunderbolt.

"Do not send me away – " he pleaded, his voice choked with anguish. "Do not send me from you."

"You will go," she said softly, deaf to his prayers. "It is the supreme test of your love, great as I know it is."

"But I cannot leave you, I cannot go, never to see you more – " and he grasped the cool white hands of the woman as a drowning man will grasp a straw.

She did not attempt, for the time, to take them from him. She looked down upon him wistfully.

"Would you make me the mock of Avalon?" she said. "Once my lord suspects we are lost. And, I fear, he does even now. For his gaze has been dark and troubled. And I cannot, will not, expose you to his cruelty. You know him not as I do – "

"Even therefore will I not leave you," he interposed, looking into the sweet face. "He has not been kind to you. His pride was flattered by your ready surrender, and your great beauty is but one of the many dishes that go to satiate his varied appetites. Of the others you know naught – "

She gave a shrug.

"If it be so," she said wearily, "so let it be. Nevertheless, I know whereof I speak. This thing has stolen over us like a madness. And, like a madness, it will hurl us to our doom."

Though he had seen the dark, glowering face among the branches, he said nothing, not to alarm her, not to cause her fear and misgiving. He loved her spotless purity as dearly as herself. To him they were inseparable.

His head fell forward on her hands. Her fingers played in his soft brown hair.

"What would you have me do?" he said, his voice choked by his anguish.

"Go on a pilgrimage to Rome, to obtain forgiveness, as I shall visit the holy shrines of Mont Beliard and do likewise," she said, steadying her voice with an effort. "Let us forget that we have ever met – that we have ever loved, – or remember that we loved – a dream." —

"Can love forget so readily?" he said, bitter anguish and reproach in his tones.

She shook her head.

"It is my fate, – for better – or worse – no matter what befall. As for you – life lies before you. Love another, happier woman, one that is free to give – and to receive. As for me – "

She paused and covered her face with her hands.

"What will you do?" he cried in his overmastering anguish.

A faint, far-off voice made reply.

"I shall do that which I must!"

He staggered away from her. She should not see the scalding tears that coursed down his cheeks. But, as he turned, he again saw the dark and glowering face, the brow gloomy as a thunder-cloud, of the Count de Laval. But again it was not he. It was the black-garbed, lithe stranger, the companion of the hunchback, who was regarding Hellaïne with evil, leering eyes.

He wanted to cry out, warn her, entreat her to fly. —

But it was too late.

Like a bird that watches spellbound the approach of the snake, Hellaïne stood pale and trembling – her cheeks white as death – her eyes riveted on the evil shape that seemed the fiend. But he, Tristan, also was encompassed by the same spell. He could not move – he could not cry out. With a bound, swift and noiseless as the panther's, he saw the sinewy stranger hurl himself upon Hellaïne, picking her up like a feather and disappear in the gloom of the forest.

With a cry of horror, bathed from head to foot in perspiration, Tristan started from his slumber.

The moonbeams flooded the chamber. The soft breeze of the summer night stole through the open casement.

With a moan as of mortal pain he sat up and looked about.

Was he indeed in Rome?

Had it been but a dream, this echo of the past, this visualized parting from the woman he had loved better than life?

Was he indeed in Rome, to do as she had bid him do, not in the misty, flower-scented rose-gardens of Avalon in far Provence? —

And she – Helayne – where was she at this hour?

Tristan stroked his clammy brow with a hot, dry hand. For a moment the memories evoked by the magic wand of the God of Sleep seemed to banish all consciousness of the present. He cast a fleeting, bewildered glance at the dim, distant housetops, then fell back among his cushions, his lips muttering the name of her who had filled his dream with her never-to-be-forgotten presence, wondering and questioning if they would ever meet again. Thus he tossed and tossed.

After a time he became still.

Once again consciousness was blotted out and the dream realm reigned supreme.

CHAPTER IV

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

It was late on the following morning when Tristan waked. The sun was high in the heavens and the perfumes from a thousand gardens were wafted to his nostrils. He looked about bewildered. The dream phantoms of the night still held his senses captive, and it was some time ere he came to a realization of the present. In the dream of the night he had lived over a scene in the past, conjuring back the memory of one who had sent him on the Way of the Cross. The pitiless rays of the Roman sun, which began to envelop the white houses and walls, brought with them the realization of the present hour. He had come to Rome to do penance, to start life anew and to forget. So she had bade him do on that never-to-be forgotten eve of their parting. So she had willed it, and he had obeyed.

How it all flooded back to him again in waves of anguish, the memory of those days when the turrets of Avalon had faded from his aching sight, when, together with a motley pilgrims' throng, he had tramped the dusty sun-baked road, dead to all about him save the love that was cushioned in his heart. How that parting from Helayne still dominated all other events, even though life and the world had fallen away from him and he had only prayer for oblivion, for obliteration.

Yet even Helayne's inexorable decree would not have availed to speed him on a pilgrimage so fraught with hopelessness, that during all that long journey Tristan hardly exchanged word or greeting with his fellow pilgrims. It was her resolve, unflinchingly avowed, to leave the world and enter a convent, if he refused to obey, which had eventually compelled. Her own self-imposed penance should henceforth be to live, lonely and heartbroken, by the side of an unbeloved consort, while Tristan atoned far away, in the city of the popes, at the shrines of the saints.

At night, when Tristan retired, at dawn, when he awoke, Helayne's memory was with him, and every league that increased the distance between them seemed to heighten his love and his anguish. But human endurance has its limits, and at last he was seized by a great torpor, a chill indifference that swept away and deadened every other feeling. There was no longer a To-day, no longer a Yesterday, no longer a To-morrow.

Such was Tristan's state of mind, when from the Tiburtine road he first sighted the walls and towers of Rome, without definite purpose or aim, drawn along, as it were, towards an uncertain goal by Fate's invisible hand. Utterly indifferent as to what might befall among the Seven Hills, he was at times dimly conscious of a presentiment that ultimately he would end up his own days in one of those silent places where all earthly hopes and desires are forever stilled. So much was clear to him. Like the rest of the pilgrims who had wended their way to St. Peter's seat, he would complete the circuit of the holy shrines, kiss the feet of the Father of Christendom, do such penance as the Pontiff should impose, and then attach himself to one party or another in the pontifical city which held out hope for action, since the return to his own native land was barred to him for evermore.

How he would bear up under the ordeal he did not know. How he would support life away from Helayne, without a word, a message, without the assurance that all was well with her, whether now, his own fate accomplished, others thronged about her in love and adulation, – he knew not.

For the nonce he was resolved to let new scenes, new impressions sweep away the great void of an aching heart, lighten the despair that filled his soul.

In approaching the Eternal City he had felt scarcely any of the elevation of spirit which has affected so many devout pilgrims. He knew it was the seat of God's earthly Vice-regent, the capital of the universal kingdom of the Church. He reminded himself of this and of the priceless relics it contained, the tombs of the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, the tombs of so many other martyrs, pontiffs and saints.

But in spite of all these memories he drew near the place with a sinking dread, as if, by some instinct of premonition, he felt himself dragged to the Cross on which at last he was to be crucified.

Many a pilgrim may have seen Rome for the first time with an involuntary recollection of her past, with the hope that for him, too, the future might hold the highest greatness.

Certainly no ambitious fancy cast a halo of romantic hope over the great city as Tristan first saw her ancient walls. He felt safe enough from any danger of greatness. He had nothing to recommend him. On the contrary, something in his character would only serve to isolate him, creating neither admiration nor sympathy.

All the weary road to Rome, the Rome he dreaded, had he prayed for courage to cast himself at the feet of the Vicar of Christ. He did not think then of the Pope, as of one of the great of the earth, but simply as of one who stood in the world in God's place. So he would have courage to seek him, confess to him and ask him what it was it behooved him to do.

Thus he had walked on – with stammering steps, bruising his feet against stones, tearing himself through briars – heeding nothing by the way.

And now, the journey accomplished, he was here in supreme loneliness, without guidance, human or divine, thrown upon himself, not knowing how to still the pain, how to fill the void of an aching heart.

Would the light of Truth come to him out of the encompassing realms of Doubt?

When Tristan descended into the great guest-chamber he found it almost deserted. The pilgrims had set out early in the day to begin their devotions before the shrines. The host of the Golden Shield placed before his sombre and silent guest such viands as the latter found most palatable, consisting of goat's milk, stewed lamb, barley bread and figs, and Tristan did ample justice to the savory repast.

The heat of the day being intense, he resolved to wait until the sun should be fairly on his downward course before he started out upon his own business, a resolution which was strengthened by a suggestion from the host, that few ventured abroad in Rome during the Siesta hours, the Roman fever respecting neither rank nor garb.

Thus Tristan composed himself to patience, watching the host upon his duties, and permitting his gaze to roam now and then through the narrow windows upon the object he had first encountered upon his arrival: the brown citadel, drowsing unresponsive in the noon-tide glow, a monument of mystery and dark deeds, the Mausoleum of the Flavian Emperor – or, as it was styled at the period of our story, the Castle of the Archangel.

From this stronghold, less than a decade ago, a woman had lorded it over the city of Rome, as renowned for her evil beauty as for the profligacy and licentiousness of her court. In time her regime had been swept away, yet there were rumors, dark and sinister, of one who had succeeded to her evil estate. None dared openly avow it, but Tristan had surprised guarded whispers during his long journey. Some accounted her a sorceress, some a thing wholly evil, some the precursor of the Anti-Christ. And he had never ceased to wonder at the tales which enlivened the camp-fires, the reports of her beauty, her daring, her unscrupulous ambition.

On the whole, Tristan's prospects in Rome seemed barren enough. Service might perchance be obtained with the Senator, who would doubtlessly welcome a stout arm and a true heart. This alternative failing, Tristan was utterly at sea as to what he would do, the prescribed rounds of obediences before the shrines and the penances accomplished. He felt as one who has lost his purpose in life, even before he had been conscious of his goal.

The strange incidents of his first night in Rome had gradually faded from Tristan's mind with the re-awakening memory of Hellyne, never once forgotten, but for the moment drowned in the deluge of strange events that had almost swept him off his feet.

As the sun was veering towards the west and the lengthening shadows, presaging dusk, began to roll down from the hills it suffered Tristan no longer in the Inn of the Golden Shield. He strode out and made for the heart of Rome.

The desolate aspect of high-noon had changed materially. Tristan began to note the evidences of life in the Pontifical City. Merchants, beggars, monks, men-at-arms, condottieri, sbirri, – the

followers of the great feudal houses, hurried to and fro, bent upon their respective pursuits, and above them, silent and fateful in the evening glow, towered the Archangel's Castle, the tomb of a former Master of the World. It reared its massive honey-colored bulk on the edge of the yellow Tiber and beyond rose the dark green cypresses of the Pincian Hill. Innumerable spires, domes, pinnacles and towers rose, red-litten by the sunset, into the stilly evening air. Bells were softly tolling and a distant hum like the bourdon note of a great organ, rose up from the other side of the Tiber, where the multitudes of the Eternal City trod the dust of the Cæsars into the churches of the Cross.

Interminable processions traversed the city amidst anthems and chants, for, on this day, masses were being sung and services offered up in the Lateran Basilica, the Mother Church of Rome, in honor of Him who cried in the wilderness.

In silent awe and wonder Tristan pursued his way towards the heart of the city. And, as he did so, the spectacle which had unfolded itself to his gaze became more varied and manifold on every turn.

The lone pilgrim could not but admit that the shadows of worldly empire, which had deserted her, still clung to Rome in her ruins, even though to him the desolation which dominated all sides had but a vague and dreamlike meaning.

Even at this period of deepest darkness and humiliation the world still converged upon Rome, and in the very centre of the web sat the successor of St. Peter, the appointed guardian of Heaven and Earth.

The chief pagan monuments still existed: the Pantheon of Agrippa and the Septizonium of Alexander Severus; the mighty remains of the ancient fanes about the Forum and the stupendous ruins of the Colosseum. But among them rose the fortress towers of the Roman nobles. Right there, before him, dominating the narrow thoroughfare, rose the great fortress pile of the Frangipani, behind the Arch of the Seven Candles. Farther on the Tomb of Cæcilia Metella presented an aspect at once sinister and menacing, transformed as it now was into the stronghold of the Cenci, while the Cætani castle on the opposite side attracted a sort of wondering attention from him.

This then was the Rome of which he had heard such marvelous tales! The city of palaces, basilicas and shrines had sunk to this! Her magnificent thoroughfares had become squalid streets, her monuments were crumbled and forgotten, or worse, they were abused by every lawless wretch who cared to seize upon them and build thereon his fortress or palace. A dismal fate indeed to have fallen to the former mistress of the world! Far better, he thought, to be deserted and forgotten utterly, like many a former seat of empire, far better to be overgrown with grass and dock and nettle, to be left to dream and oblivion than to survive in low estate as had this city on the banks of the Tiber.

With these reflections, engendered no less by the air of desolation than by the occasional appearance of armed bands of feudal soldiery who hurled defiance at each other, Tristan found himself drawn deeper and deeper into the heart of Rome, a hotbed of open and silent rebellion against the rule of any one who dared to lord it over the degenerate descendants of the former masters of the world. Here representatives of the nations of all the earth jostled one another and the poor dregs of Romulus; or peoples of wilder aspect from Persia or Egypt, within whose mind floated mysterious Oriental wisdom, bequeathed from the dawn of Time. And as the scope of Tristan's observation widened, the demon of disillusion unfolded gloomy wings over the far horizon of his soul. And the Tiber rolled calmly on below, catching in its turbid waves the golden sunset glow.

Now and then he encountered the armed retinue of some feudal baron clattering along the narrow ill-paved streets, chasing pedestrians into adjacent doorways and porticoes and pursuing their precipitate retreat with outbursts of banter and mirth.

Unfamiliar as Tristan was with the factions that usurped the dominion of the Seven Hills, the escutcheons and coats-of-arms of these marauding parties meant little to him. Now and then however it would chance that two rival factions clashed, each disputing the other's passage. Then, only, did he become alive to the dangers that beset the unwary in the city of the Pontiff, and a sudden spirit of

recklessness and daring, born of the moment, prompted the desire to plunge into this seething vortex, if but to purchase temporary oblivion and relief.

He faced the many dangers of the streets, loitering here and there and curiously eyeing all things, and would eventually have lost himself, when the mantle of night began to fall on the Seven Hills, had he not instinctively remarked that the ascending road removed him from the river.

CHAPTER V ON THE AVENTINE

When Tristan at last regained his bearings, he found himself among the convents and cloisters on Mount Aventine. His eyes rested wearily on the eddying gleam of the Tiber as it wound its coils round the base of the Mount of Cloisters, thence they roamed among the grass and weed-grown ruins of ancient temples and crumbling porticoes, which rose on all sides in the silent desolation.

Just then a last gleam of the disappearing sun touched the bronze figure of the Archangel on the summit of Castel San Angelo, imbuing it for an instant with a weird effect, as though the ghost of some departed watchman were waving a lighted torch aloft in the heavens. Then the glow faded before a dead grey twilight, which settled solemnly over the melancholy landscape.

The full moon was rising slowly. Round and large she hung, like a yellow shield, on the dark, dense wall of the heavens. In the distance the faint outlines of the Alban Hills and the snow-capped summit of Monte Soracté were faintly discernible in the night mists. In the background the ill-famed ruins of the ancient temple of Isis rose into the purple dusk. The Tiber, in the light of the higher rising moon, gleamed like a golden ribbon. The gaunt masonry of the Septizonium of Alexander Severus was dimly rimmed with light, and streaks of amber radiance were wandering up and down the shadowy slopes of the Mount of Cloisters, like sorrowing ghosts bound upon some sorrowful errand.

All sense of weariness had suddenly left Tristan. A compelling influence, stronger than himself, seemed to urge him on as to the fulfillment of some hidden purpose.

Once or twice he paused. As he did so, he became aware of the extraordinary, almost terrible stillness, that encompassed him. He felt it enclosing him like a thick wall on all sides. Earth and the air seemed breathless, as if in the throes of some mysterious excitement. The stars, flashing out with the brilliant lustre of the south, were as so many living eyes eagerly gazing down on the solitary human being whose steps led him into these deserted places. The moon herself seemed to stare at him in open wonderment.

At last he found himself before the open portals of the great Church of Santa Maria of the Aventine. From the gloom within floated the scent of incense and the sound of chanting. He could see tapers gleaming on the high altar in the choir. Women were passing in and out, and a blind beggar sat at the gate.

Moved more by curiosity than the desire for worship, Tristan entered and uncovered his head. The Byzantine cupola was painted in vermilion and gold. The slender pillars of white marble were banded with silver and inlaid with many colored stones. The basins for holy water were of black marble, their dark pools gleaming with the colors of the vault. Side chapels opened on either hand, dim sanctuaries steeped in mystery of incense-saturated dusk.

The saints and martyrs in their stiff, golden Byzantine dalmaticas seemed to endow each relic with an air of mystery. The beauty and the mystery of the place touched Tristan's soul. As in a haze he seemed again to see the pomp and splendor of the sanctuaries of far-away, dream-lost Avalon.

Tristan took his stand by one of the great pillars, and, setting his back to it, looked round the place. There were some women in the sanctuary, engaged in prayer. Tristan watched them with vacant eyes.

Suddenly he became conscious that one of these worshippers was not wholly absorbed in prayer under her hood. Two watchful eyes seemed to consider him with a suggestiveness that no man could mistake, and her thoughts seemed to be very far from heaven.

Once or twice Tristan started to leave the sanctuary, but some invisible hand seemed to detain him as with a magic hold.

In due season the woman finished her devotions and stood with her hood turned back, looking at Tristan across the church. Her women had gathered about her and outside the gates Tristan saw

the spear points of her guard. Turning, with a glance cast at him over her shoulder, she swept in state out of the church, her women following her, all save one tall girl, who loitered at the door.

Suddenly it flashed upon Tristan, as he stood there with his back leaning against the pillar. Was not this the woman he had met by the fountain, the woman who had spoken strange words to him in the Navona?

Had she recognized him? Her eyes had challenged him unmistakably when first they had met his own, and now again, as she left the church. They puzzled Tristan, these same eyes. Far in their depths lurked secrets he dreaded to fathom. Her scented garments perfumed the very aisles.

Tristan was roused from his reverie by a woman's hand plucking at his sleeve. By his side stood a tall girl. She was very beautiful, but her eyes were evil. She looked boldly at Tristan and gave her message.

"Follow my mistress," were her words.

Tristan looked at her, his face almost invisible in the gloom. Only the moonlight touched his hair.

"Whom do you serve?" he replied.

"The Lady Theodora!" came the answer.

Tristan's heart froze within him. Theodora – the woman who had succeeded to Marozia's dread estate!

In order to conceal his emotions he brought his face closer to the fair messenger, forcing his voice to appear calm as he spoke.

"What would your mistress with me?"

The girl glanced up at him, as if she regarded the question strangely superfluous.

"You are to come with me!" she persisted, touching his arm.

Tristan's mouth hardened as he considered the message, without relinquishing his station by the pillar.

What was he to Theodora – Theodora to him? She was a woman, evil, despite her ravishing beauty, so he had gathered during the days of his journey. The spell she had cast over him on the previous evening had vanished before the memory of Hellayne. Her sudden appearance, her witch-like beauty had, for the time, unmanned him. The hardships and privations of a long journey had, for the moment, caused his senses to run rampant, and almost hurled him into the arms of perdition. Yet he had not then known. And now he remembered how they all had fallen away from him, as from one bearing on his person the germs of some dread disease. The terrible silence in the Navona seemed visualized once again in the silence which encompassed him here. Yet she was all powerful, so he had heard. She ruled the men and the factions. In some vague way, he thought, she might be of service to him.

Tossed between two conflicting impulses, Tristan slowly followed the girl from the church and, crossing the great, moonlit court that lay without, entered the gardens which seemed to divide the sanctuary from some hidden palace. Mulberry trees towered above the lawns, studded with thick, ripening fruit. Weeping ashes glittered in the moonlight. Cedars and oaks cast their shade over broad beds of mint and thyme.

The girl watched Tristan closely, as she walked beside him, making no effort to conceal her own charms before eyes which she deemed endowed with the power of judgment in matters of this kind. Her mistress had not put her trust in her in vain. She studied Tristan's face in order to determine, whether or not he would waver in his resolve and – she began to speak to him as they crossed the gardens with a simplicity, an interest that was well assumed.

"A good beginning indeed!" she said. "You are in favor, my lord! To have seen her fair face is no small boast, but to be summoned to her presence – I cannot remember her so gracious to any one, since –" she paused suddenly, deliberately.

Tristan regarded her slantwise over his shoulder, without making response. At last, irritated, he knew not why, he asked curtly: "What is your mistress?"

The girl's glance wandered over the great trees and flowers that overshadowed the plaisance.

"She bears her mother's name," she replied with a shrug, "and, like her mother, the blood that flows in her veins is mingled with the fire that glitters in the stars in heaven, a fire affording neither light nor heat, but serving to dazzle, to bewilder. – I am but a woman, but – had I your chance of fortune, my lord, I should think twice, ere I bartered it for a vow, an empty dream."

He gave her a swift glance, wondering at her woman's wit, yet resenting her speech.

"You would prosper?" she queried tentatively at last, casting about in her mind, how she might win his confidence.

"I have business of my own," he replied, evading her question.

She looked up at him, her eyes trembling into his.

"How tall and strong you are! I could almost find it in my heart to love you myself!"

The flattery seemed so spontaneous that it would have puzzled one possessed of greater guile than Tristan to have uncovered her cunning. Nor was Tristan unwilling to seem strong to her; for the moment he was almost tempted to continue questioning her regarding her mistress.

"You may make your fortune in Rome," the girl said with a meaning smile.

"How so?"

"Are you blind? Do you not know a woman's ways? My mistress loves a strong arm. You may serve her."

"That is not possible!"

The girl stared at him and for the moment dropped the mask of innocence.

"What was possible once, is possible again," she said.

Then she added:

"Are you not ambitious?"

"I have a task to perform that may not permit of two masters! Why are you so concerned?"

The question came almost abruptly.

"I serve my lady!" she said, edging towards him. "Is it so strange a thing to serve a woman?"

They had left the garden and had arrived before a high stone wall that skirted the precincts of Theodora's palace. Cypresses and bays raised their tops above the stones. Great cedars cast deep shadows. In the wall there was a door studded with heavy iron nails. The girl took a key that dangled from her girdle, unlocked the door and beckoned to Tristan to enter.

Tristan stood and gazed. In the light of the moon which drenched all things he saw a garden in which emerald grass plots alternated with beds of strange-tinted orchids, flowers purple and red. At the end of the plaisance there opened an orange thicket and under the trees stood a woman clad in crimson, her white arms bare. She wore sandals of silver, and her dusky hair was confined in a net of gold.

As Tristan was about to yield to the overmastering temptation the memory of Hellaene conquered all other emotions. He turned back from the door and looked full into the girl's dark eyes.

"You will speak to your mistress for me," he said to her, casting a swift glance into the moonlit garden.

The girl looked at him with a puzzled air, but did not stir.

"What am I to say to her?" she said.

"That I will not enter these gates!"

"You will not?"

"No!" He snapped curtly.

"Fool! How you will regret your speech!"

Her face changed suddenly like a fickle sky, and there was something in her eyes too wicked for words.

Without vouchsafing a reply, Tristan turned and lost himself in the desolation of Mount Aventine.

The night marched on majestically.

The moon and her sister planets passed through their appointed spheres of harmonious light and law, and from all cloisters and convents prayers went up to heaven for pity, pardon and blessing on sinful humanity that had neither pity, pardon nor blessing for itself, till, with magic suddenness, the dense purple skies changed to a pearly grey, the moon sank pallidly beneath the earth's dark rim and the stars were extinguished one by one.

Morning began to herald its approach in the freshening air.

Tristan still slept on his improvised couch, a marble slab he had chosen when he discovered that he had lost his way in the wilderness of the Aventine. His head on his arm he lay quite still among the flowers, wrapt in a sort of dizzy delirium in which the forms of Theodora and Helayne strangely intermingled, until the riddles of life were blotted out together with the riddles of Fate.

CHAPTER VI

THE COUP

Tristan spent the greater part of the day visiting the churches and sanctuaries, offering up prayers for oblivion and peace. His heart was heavy within him. Like the stray leaf that has been torn from its native branch and flutters resistlessly, aimlessly hither and thither, at the mercy of the chance breeze, nevermore to return to its sheltering bough, so the lone wanderer felt himself tossed about by the waves of destiny, a human derelict without a haven where he might escape the storms of life. Guiltless in his own conscience of an imputed sin, in that his love for Hellyayne had been pure and holy, Tristan could find little comfort in the enforced penance, while his hungry heart cried out for her who had so willed it. And, as with weary feet he dragged himself through the streets of the pontifical city, he vaguely wondered, if his would ever be the peace of the goal. In the darkness in which he walked, in the perturbation of his mind, he longed more than ever to open his heart to some one who would understand and counsel and guide his steps.

The Pontiff being a prisoner in the Lateran, Tristan's ardent wish to confide in the successor of St. Peter had suffered a sudden and a keen disappointment. There were but Odo of Cluny, Benedict of Soracté or the Grand Penitentiary, holding forth in the subterranean chapel at St. Peter's, to whom he might turn for ease of mind, and a natural reluctance to lay bare the holiest thoughts man may give to woman, restrained him for the nonce from seeking these channels.

Thus three days had sped, yet naught had happened to indicate that events would shape the course so ardently desired by Tristan.

It was there, on one of the terraces crowning the splendid heights of immortal Rome, with a view of the distant Sabine and Alban hills, fading into the evening dusk, that the memory of the golden days of Avalon returned to him in waves of anguish that almost mastered his resolve to begin life anew under conditions that seemed insupportable.

Again Hellyayne was by his side, as in dream-forgotten Avalon. Again side by side they wandered where the shattered columns of old grey temples, all that remained of a sunny Greek civilization of which they knew nothing, crowned the heights above the lazy lapping waves of the tideless Tyrrhenian sea. There, for whole hours would they sit, the air full of the scent of orange and myrtle; under almond trees, covered with blossoms that sprinkled the emerald ground like rosy snowflakes, and watch the white sails of the far feluccas that trailed the waves in monotonous rhythm to or from the sunlit shores of Africa. The distant headlands looked faint and dreamy, and the sparkling sea broke, gurgling, foaming among the rocks at their feet, as it had broken at the feet of other lovers who had sat there centuries ago, when those shattered columns had been white in their freshness and the temples had been wreathed with the garlands of youth. And the eternal waves said to them what they had said to the dead and forgotten; and the fickle winds sang to them what they had sung to the fair and the nameless, and they stretched forth their hands, and saw but the sea and the sun.

And they knew not the deity to whom those temple columns had been raised, just as he knew not to whose worship those fallen columns had been erected, nor guessed they who had knelt at the holy shrines. And as they sat there, the man and the woman, their eyes probing the depths of living sapphire, they would watch the restless sea-weed that seemed to coil and uncoil like innumerable blue snakes upon a bed of bright blue flames, and the luminous mosses that trembled like blue stars ceaselessly towards the surface that they never, never reached. And down there in the crystal palaces they would fancy that they saw faces as of glancing mermen, even as the lovers of older days had seen passing Tritons and the scaly children of Poseidon.

And again she would croon those sad melancholy songs that came from her lips like faint echoes of Aeolian harps. Now she flung them upon the air in bursts of weird music, to the accompaniment of a breaking wave, songs so passionate and elemental that they seemed the cry of these same

radiant waters when churned by the storm into fury. Or they might have been such wailings as spirits imprisoned in old sea caves would utter to the hollow walls, or which the ghosts of ship-wrecked crews might send forth from the rocks where they had perished. Or again they might suggest some earthly passion, love, jealousy, the cry of a longing heart, till the dirge seemed to wear itself out and the soul of the listener seemed to sail out of the tempest into bright and peaceful waters like those that skirted dream-lost Avalon, scarcely rippled by the faint breeze of summer, breaking in long unfurling waves among the rocks at their feet. Thus they used to sit long hours, heart listening to heart, soul clinging to soul, while she bared her throat to the scent-laden breezes that fanned her and looked out on the dazzling horizon – till a lightning flash from the clear azure splintered the dream and broke two lives.

For a long time Tristan gazed about, vainly trying to order his thoughts. Could he but forget! Would but the present engulf the past! —

His adventure at the Church of Santa Maria of the Aventine and his chance meeting with Theodora recurred to him at intervals throughout the day, and he could not but admit that the reports of the woman's beauty were far from exaggerated. Perchance, if the memory of Helayne had been less firmly rooted in his soul, he, too, might, like many another, have sought solace at the forbidden fount. However, he was resolved to avoid her, for he had seen something in the swift glance she had bestowed upon him that discoursed of matters it behooved him to beware of. And yet he wondered how she had received his denial, she, whom no man had denied before. Then this memory also faded before the exigencies of the hour.

The sun had sunk to rest in a sky of turquoise, crimson and gold, when Tristan found himself standing on the eminence where seven decades later Crescentius, the Senator of Rome, was to build the Church of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli.

Leaning on a broken pillar, Tristan watched the evening light as it spread a veil of ethereal splendor over the Seven Hills and there came to him a strange feeling of remoteness as to one standing upon some hill-set shrine.

Far beneath him lay the Forum. White columns shone roseate in the dying light of day.

Wrapt in deep thoughts and meditations, Tristan descended the stairs leading from the summit whence in after time the name of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli – Holy Mother at the Altar of Heaven – was to ring in the ears of thousands like a beautiful rhythmic chant, and after a time he found himself in the Piazza fronting the Lateran.

Seized with a sudden impulse he entered the church.

Slowly the worshippers began to assemble. Their numbers increased to almost a hundred, though they seemed but as so many shadows in the vast nave. There was something in their faces, touched by the uncertain glimmer of the tapers and lamps, that filled him with awe, as if he were standing among the ghosts of the past.

At last the holy office commenced.

A very old priest, whose features Tristan could not distinguish, began to chant the Introitus, in deep long drawn notes. Through the narrow windows filtered the light of the rising moon. It did little more than stain the dusk. Over the sombre high altar hung the white ivory figure of the Christ, bowed, sagged, in the last agony. A few blood-red poppies were the only flowers upon the altar. The fumes of incense rose in spiral columns to the vaulted ceiling.

The Kyrie had been chanted, the Gloria in Excelsis Deo. Later the Host was consecrated and the cup before the kneeling worshippers, and the priest was turning to those near him who, as was still the custom in those days, were present to communicate in both kinds.

To each came from his lips the solemn words:

"Corpus Domini Nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam ad Vitam aeternam!"

He dipped his fingers in the cup, cleansing them with a little wine. He consumed the cleansings and turned to read the antiphony with resonant voice.

"I saw the heavens opened and Jesus at the right hand of God. Lord Jesus receive their spirit and lay not this sin to their charge!"

Then, with hands folded over his breast, he moved towards the altar in the centre, touched it with his lips, and, turning once more to the people, said:

"Dominus Vobiscum!"

"Et cum spiritu tuo," was not answered.

For at that moment rough shouts were heard and through a side door, near a chapel, a body of ruffians rushed into the Basilica, their faces vizored and masked.

With shouts and oaths they made their way towards the altar. The worshippers scattered, the mail-clad ruffians smiting their way through their kneeling ranks up to the altar where stood the form of a youth clad in pontifical vestments, pale but calm in the face of the impending storm.

It was Pope John XI., held prisoner in the Lateran by Alberic, the Senator of Rome. Tristan had not noted his presence during the ceremony. Now, like a revelation, the import of the scene flashed upon his mind.

Bearing Tristan down by the sheer weight of their numbers, they rushed upon the Pontiff, stripped him of his pallium and chasuble, leaving him but one sacred vestment, the white albe.

Unable to reach the Pontiff's side, unable to aid him, Tristan stood rooted to the spot, an impotent witness of the most heinous sacrilege his mind could picture, almost turned to stone.

Before Tristan's very eyes, before the eyes of the worshippers, who outnumbered the ruffians ten to one, an outrage was being committed at which the fiends themselves would shudder. Violence was being done to the Father of Christendom in his own city, and the craven cowards had but their own safety in mind.

Just what happened Tristan could not immediately remember. For, as he rushed towards the spot where he saw the Pontiff struggling helplessly against his assailants, he was violently thrust back and the ruffians made their way towards a side chapel with their captive. Thus he found himself helplessly borne along in the darkness, and thrust out into the night. Tristan fell beneath their feet and was for a moment so utterly stunned that he could not rise.

As in a dream he heard the leader of the band give a command to his followers. They mounted their steeds which were tethered outside and tramped away into the night.

The sudden appearance of an armed band in the sacred precincts of the Lateran had so terrified and cowed the crowd of worshippers that even when the doors of the Basilica were left unguarded, not one ventured to give assistance. Like shadows they fled into the night.

When Tristan regained some sort of consciousness he looked about in vain for aid.

Dimly he remembered that the ruffians were mounted, and by the time he summoned succor they would have stowed their captive safely away in one of their castellated fortresses, where one might search for him in vain forever more.

The Piazza in front of the Lateran was deserted. Not a human being was to be seen. Tristan pursued his way through waste spaces that offered no clue. He rushed through narrow and deserted streets, abandoned of the living. He felt like shouting at the top of his voice: "Romans awake! They have abducted the Pontiff." But, stranger as he was, and dreading lest he might share John's fate or worse, he withstood the impulse and at last found himself upon the Bridge of San Angelo before the fortress tomb of the former master of the world, dreaming in the surrounding desolation. Before the massive bronze gate cowered a man-at-arms, drowsing over his pike.

Without a moment's hesitation, Tristan shook the drowsy guardian of the Angel's Castle into blaspheming alertness.

"They have abducted the Pontiff!" he shouted, without releasing his clutch on the gaping Burgundian. "Sound the alarums! Even now it may be too late!"

The man in the brown leather jerkin and steel casque stared open-mouthed at the speaker.

"The Lord Alberic is within – " he stammered at last, with an effort to shake off the drowsiness that held his senses captive.

"Then rouse him in the devil's name," shouted Tristan.

The last words had their effect upon the stolid Northman. After the elapse of some precious moments Alberic himself emerged from the Emperor's Tomb and Tristan repeated his account of the outrage, little guessing the rank of him with whom he was standing face to face.

But now they were confronted with a dilemma which it seemed would put all Tristan's efforts to naught.

Who were the leaders of the party that had abducted the Pontiff? For thereon hinged their success of intercepting the outlaws.

Tristan's description of the leader did not seem to make any marked impression on the Senator of Rome.

He questioned Tristan with regard to their coat-of-arms or other heraldic emblems. But the author of the outrage had shown sufficient foresight to avoid a hazardous display. There seemed but one alternative; to scour the city of Rome in the uncertain hope of intercepting the outlaws, if they were still within the walls.

Tristan attached himself to the senatorial party, joining in the pursuit. At first their task seemed hopeless indeed. Those they met and questioned had seen no armed band, or, if they had, denied all knowledge thereof. The frowning masonry of the Cenci, Savelli, Frangipani, and Odescalchi, which they passed in turn, returned but an inscrutable reply to their questioning glances.

For a time they continued their fruitless quest. But as if an outrage so horrible had ignited the very air about them, they soon found people stirring, shutters opening and shadowy figures issuing from dark doorways, while folk were running and shouting to one another:

"The Pontiff has been abducted!"

Between cries of rage and shouts of command and indecision on the part of the leader, who knew not in which direction to pursue, an hour had elapsed, when they suddenly heard the clatter of hoofs. A company of horsemen came galloping down the street. Alberic's suspicions that the ruffians would prefer carrying their victim by devious byways to one or the other of their Roman lairs, rather than attempt to leave the city in the teeth of the Senator's guard, seemed realized. Oaths and sharp orders broke the silence of the night.

It was amongst a gigantic pile of ruins, apart from all habitations of the living, that they came to a halt. To a gaunt brick-built tower they drew close, knocking against the iron-studded door, but ere those within could open, they were surrounded, outnumbered ten to one.

Tristan was the first to bound in amongst them.

His eyes quivered upon the steel-clad form of the leader of the band.

At the next moment a blow from Tristan's fist struck him down and, ere he could recover himself, he had been bound, hand and foot, and turned over to the Senator's guards.

His followers, despairing of success, made a sudden dash through the ranks of the people who had been attracted by the melee, riding down a number, injuring and maiming many.

The Senator of Rome ranged his men, now re-inforced by the Prefect's guard, round the drooping form of John, while a howling and shouting mob, ready to wreak vengeance on the first object it encountered in its path, followed in their wake as they made their way towards the Lateran.

An hour later, in a high vaulted, dimly lighted chamber of the Archangel's Castle, Tristan, the pilgrim, and Alberic, the Senator of Rome, faced each other for the second time.

In the course of the pursuit of the ruffians in which he participated, Tristan had been casually informed of the rank of him who led the Senatorial guard in person and when, their object accomplished, he started to detach himself from the men-at-arms, Alberic had foiled his intention by commanding him to accompany him to the fortress-tomb where he himself held forth.

Seated opposite each other, each seemed to scan the other's countenance before a word was spoken between them.

Alberic's regard of the man who seemed utterly unconscious of the importance of the service he had rendered the Senator betokened approval, and his eyes dwelt for some moments on the frank and open countenance of this stranger, perchance contrasting it inwardly with the complex nature of those about his person in whom he could trust but so long as he could tempt them with earthly dross, and who would turn against him should a higher bidder for their favor appear.

Tristan's first impression of the son of Marozia was that of one born to command. Dark piercing eyes were set in a face, stern, haughty, yet strangely beautiful. Alberic's tall, slender figure, dressed in black velvet, relieved by slashes of red satin, added to the impressiveness of his personality. Upon closer scrutiny Tristan could discover a marked resemblance between the man before him and his half-brother, the ill-fated Pontiff, whom, for political reasons, or considerations of his personal safety, he kept prisoner in the pontifical palace.

But there was yet another present, who apparently took little heed of the stranger, engaged as he seemed in the perusal of a parchment, spread out upon a table before him, – Basil, the Grand Chamberlain.

A whispered conversation had taken place between the Senator and his confidential adviser, for this was Basil's true station in the senatorial household. In the evil days of Marozia's regime he had occupied the same favored position at the Roman court, and, when Alberic's revolt had swept the regime of Ugo of Tuscany and Marozia from Roman soil, the son had attached to himself the man who had shown a marked sagacity and ability in the days that had come to a close.

Basil's complex countenance proved somewhat more of an enigma to the silent on-looker than did the Senator's stern, though frank face.

He was garbed in black, a color to which he seemed partial. A flat cap of black velvet with a feather curled round the brim, above a doublet of black velvet, close fitting, the sleeves slashed, to show the crimson tunic underneath. The trunk hose round the muscular legs were of black silk and gold thread, woven together and lined with sarsenet. His feet were encased in black buskins with silver buckles, and puffed silk inserted in the slashings of the leather.

The whole suggestion of the dark, sable figure was odd. It was exotic, and the absence of a beard greatly intensified the impression. The face, as Tristan saw it by the light of the taper, was expressionless – a physical mask.

At last Alberic broke the silence, turning his eyes full upon the man who met his gaze without flinching.

"You have – at your own risk – saved Rome and Holy Church from a calamity the whole extent of which we may not even surmise, had the Pontiff been carried away by the lawless band of Tebaldo Savello. We owe you thanks – and we shall not shirk our duty. You are a stranger. Who are you and why are you here?"

To the same questions that another had put to him on the memorable eve of his arrival, in the Piazza Navona, Tristan replied with equal frankness. His words bore the stamp of truth, and Alberic listened to a tale passing strange to Roman ears.

And, unseen by Tristan, something began to stir in the dark, unfathomable eyes of Basil, as some unknown thing stirs in deep waters, and the hidden thing therein, to him who saw, was hidden no longer. Some nameless being was looking out of these windows of the soul. One looking at him now would have shrank away, cold fear gripping his heart.

For a moment, after Tristan had finished his tale, there was silence. Alberic had risen and, seemingly unconscious of the presences in his chamber, was perambulating its narrow confines until, of a sudden, he stopped directly before Tristan.

"These penances completed, whereof you speak – do you intend returning to the land of your birth?"

A blank dismay shone in Tristan's eyes. Not having referred to the nature of the transgression, for which he was to do penance, and obtain absolution, he found it somewhat difficult to answer Alberic's question.

"This is a matter I had not considered," he replied with some hesitancy, which remained not unremarked by the Senator.

Alberic was a man of few words, and he possessed a discernment far beyond his years. At the first glance at this stranger whom fate had led across his path, he had known that here was one he might trust, could he but induce him to become his man.

He held out his hand.

"I am going to be your friend and I mean to requite the service you have done the Senator, ere the dawn of another day breaks in the sky. There is a vacancy in the Senator's guard. I appoint you captain of Castel San Angelo."

Ere Tristan could sufficiently recover from his surprise to make reply, another voice was audible, a voice, soft and insinuating – the voice of Basil, the Grand Chamberlain.

"My lord – the chain of evidence against Gamba is not completed. In fact, later developments seem to point to an intrigue of which he is but the unwitting victim – "

Alberic turned to the speaker.

"The proofs, my Lord Basil, are conclusive. Gamba is a traitor convicted of having conspired with an emissary of Ugo of Tuscany, to deliver the Archangel's Castle into his hands. He is sentenced – he shall die – as soon as we discover his abode – "

Basil's face had turned to ashen hues.

"What mean you, my lord? Gamba is awaiting sentence in the dungeon where he has been confined, ever since his trial – "

"The cage is still there," Alberic interposed sardonically. "The bird has flown."

"Escaped?" stammered the Grand Chamberlain, rising from his seat and raising his furtive eyes to those of the Senator. "Then he has confederates in our very midst – "

"We shall know more of this anon," came the laconic reply. "Will you accept the trust which the Senator of Rome offers you?" Alberic turned from the Grand Chamberlain to Tristan.

The latter found his voice at last.

"How shall I thank you, my lord!" he said, grasping the Senator's hand. "Grant me but a week, wherein to absolve the business upon which I came – and I shall prove myself worthy of the lord Alberic's trust!"

"So be it," the son of Marozia replied. "A long deferred pilgrimage to the shrines of the Archangel at Monte Gargano will take me from Rome for the space of a month or more. I should like to be assured that this keep is in the hands of one who will not fail me in the hour of need! My Lord Basil – greet the new captain of Castel San Angelo – "

Approaching almost soundlessly over the tiled floor, the Grand Chamberlain extended his hand to Tristan, offering his congratulations upon his sudden advancement.

Whatever it was that flashed in Basil's eyes, it was gone as quickly as it had come. His thin lips parted in an inscrutable smile as Tristan, with a bend of the head, acknowledged the courtesy.

For a moment, following his acceptance, Tristan was startled at his own decision. Another would have felt it to be an amazing streak of luck. Tristan was frightened, though his misgivings vanished after a time.

Owing to the lateness of the hour and the insecurity of the streets Alberic offered Tristan the hospitality of his future abode for the night and the latter gladly accepted.

After Basil had departed, he remained closeted with the Senator for the space of an hour or more. What transpired between these two remained guarded from the outer world, and it was late ere the sentinel on the ramparts saw the light in the Senator's chamber extinguished, wondering at the nature of the business which detained the lord Alberic and the tall stranger in the pilgrim's garb.

CHAPTER VII

MASKS AND MUMMERS

Amid the ruin of cities and the din of strife during the tenth century darkness closed in upon the Romans, while the figures of strange despots emerged from obscurity only to disappear as quickly into the night of oblivion. Little of them is known, save that they ruled the people and the pope with merciless severity, and that the first one of them was a woman.

The beautiful Theodora the older was the wife of Theophylactus, Consul and Patricius of Rome, but the permanence of her power seemed to have been due entirely to her own charm and personality.

Her daughter Marozia, with even greater beauty, greater fascination and greater gift of daring, played even a more conspicuous part in the history of her time. She married Alberic, Count of Spoleto, whose descendants, the Counts of Tusculum, gave popes and mighty citizens to Rome. One of their palaces is said to have adjoined the Church of S. S. Apostoli, and came later into the possession of the powerful house of Colonna.

Alberic of Spoleto soon died and Marozia, as the chronicles tell us, continued as the temporal ruler of the city and the arbitress of pontifical elections. She held forth in Castel San Angelo, the indomitable stronghold of mediaeval Rome.

In John X. who, in the year 914, had gained the tiara through Theodora, she found a man of character, whose aim and ambition were the dominion of Rome, the supremacy of the Church.

By the promise of an imperial crown, the pope gained Count Ugo of Tuscany to his party, but Marozia outwitted him, by giving her hand to his more powerful half-brother Guido, then Margrave of Tuscany.

John X., after trying for two years, in spite of his enemies, to maintain his regime from the Lateran, at last fell into their hands and was either strangled or starved to death in the dungeons of Castel San Angelo.

After the death of Guido, Marozia married his half-brother Ugo. The strange wedding took place in the Mausoleum of the Emperor Hadrian, where a bridal hall and nuptial chamber had been arranged and adorned for them.

From the fortress tomb of the Flavian Emperor, Ugo lorded it over the city of Rome, earning thereby the hatred of the people and especially of young Alberic, his ambitious step-son, the son of Marozia and Count Alberic of Spoleto.

The proud youth, forced one day to serve him as a page, with intentional awkwardness, splashed some water over him and in return received a blow. Mad with fury, Alberic rushed from Castel San Angelo and summoned the people to arms. The clarions sounded and the fortress tomb was surrounded by a blood-thirsty mob. In no time the actors changed places. Ugo escaped by means of a rope from a window in the castello and returned to Tuscany, leaving behind him his honor, his wife and his imperial crown, while the youth Alberic became master of Rome, cast Marozia into a prison in Castel San Angelo and kept his half-brother, John XI., a close prisoner in the Lateran.

But the imprisonment of Marozia, and her mysterious disappearance from the scenes of her former triumphs and baleful activity did not end the story of the woman regime in Rome.

There lived in a palace, built upon the ruins of nameless temples and sanctuaries, and embellished with all the barbarous splendor of Byzantine and Moorish arts, in the remote wilderness of Mount Aventine, a woman, who, in point of physical charms, ambition and daring had not her equal in Rome since the death of Marozia. Theodora the younger, as she is distinguished from her mother, the wife of Theophylactus, by contemporary chroniclers, was the younger sister of Marozia.

The boundless ambition of the latter had left nothing to achieve for the woman who had reached her thirtieth year when Alberic's revolution consigned her sister to a nameless doom.

Strange rumors concerning her were afloat in Rome. Strange things were whispered of her palace on Mount Aventine, where she assembled about her the nobility of the city and the surrounding castelli, and soon her court vied in point of sumptuousness and splendor with the most splendid and profligate of her time.

Her admirers numbered by thousands, and her exotic beauty caused new lovers to swell the ranks of the old with every day that passed down the never returning tide of time.

Some came openly and some came under the cover of night, heavily muffled and cloaked: spendthrifts, gamblers, gallants, men of fashion, officers of the Senator's Court, poets, philosophers, and the feudal lords of the Campagna.

Wealthy debauchees from the provinces, princes from the shores of the Euxine, Lombard and Tuscan chiefs, Northmen from Scandinavia and Iceland, wearing over their gnarled limbs the soft silken tunics of Rome, Greeks, sleek, furtive-eyed, rulers from far-off Cathay, wearing coats of crimson with strange embroidery from the scented East, men from the isles of Venetia and the stormy plains of Thessaly, men with narrow slanting eyes from the limitless steppes of Sarmatia, blond warriors from the amber coasts of the Baltic, Persian princes who worshipped the Sun, and Moors from the Spanish Caliphate of Cordova; chieftains from the Lybian desert, as restive as their fiery steeds; black despots from the hidden heart of Africa, with thick lips and teeth like ivory, effete youths from Sicily and the Ionian isles, possessed of the insidious beauty of the Lesbian women, adventurers from Samarkand and Bokhara, trading in strange wares and steeped in odor of musk and spices; Hyperboreans from the sea-skirt shores of an ever frozen unimaginable ocean; – from every land under the sun they came to Rome, for the sinister fame of Theodora's beauty, the baleful mystery that surrounded her, and her dark repute proved powerful incentives to curiosity, which soon gave way to overmastering passion, once the senses had been steeped in the intoxicating atmosphere of the woman's presence.

And, indeed, her physical charms were such as no mortal had yet resisted whom she had willed to make her own. Her body, tall as a column, was lustrous, incomparable. The arms and hands seemed to have been chiselled of ivory by a master creator who might point with pride to the perfection of his handiwork – the perfection of Aphrodité, Lais and Phryne melted into one. The features were of such rare mould and faultless type that even Marozia had to concede to her younger sister the palm of beauty. The wonderful, deep set eyes, with their ever changing lights, now emerald, now purple, now black; the straight, pencilled brows, the broad smooth forehead and the tiny ears, hidden in the wealth of her raven hair, tied into a Grecian knot and surmounted by a circlet of emeralds, skillfully worked into the twining bodies of snakes with ruby eyes; the satin sheen of the milk-white skin whose ivory pallor was tinted with the faintest rose-light that never changed either in heat or in cold, in anger or in joy: such was the woman whose long slumbering, long suppressed ambition, coupled with a daring that had not its equal, was to be fanned into a raging holocaust after Marozia's untimely demise.

Concealing her most secret hopes and ambitions so utterly that even Alberic became her dupe, Theodora threw herself into the whirl of life with a keen appreciation of all its thrilling excitement. Vitaly alive with the pride of her sex and the sense of its power, she found in her existence all the zest of some breathlessly fascinating game. Men to her were mere pawns. She regarded them almost impersonally, as creatures to taunt, to tempt, to excite, to play upon. Deliberately and unstintingly she applied her arts. She delighted to see them at her feet, but to repel them as the mood changed, with exasperating disdain. Love to her was a word she knew but from report, – or, from what she had read. She knew not its meaning, nor had she ever fathomed its depths.

To revel through delirious nights with some newly-chosen favorite of the moment, who would soon thereafter mysteriously disappear, to be tossed from the embrace of one into the arms of another; in the restless, fruitless endeavor to kill the pain of life, the memory of consciousness, to fill the void of a heart, that, alive to the shallowness of existence, clutches at the saving hope of power, to

rule and to crush the universe beneath her feet, a dream, vague, vain, unattainable: this desire filled Theodora's soul.

Her soul was burning itself to cinders in its own fires, – those baleful fires that had proven the undoing of her equally beautiful sister.

Alone she would pace her gilded chambers, feverishly, unable to think, driven hither and thither by the demons of unrest, by the disquietude of her heart. Desperately she threw herself into whatever excitement offered.

But it was always in vain.

She found no respite. Ever and ever a reiterant, restless craving gnawed, like a worm, at her heart.

As she approached the thirtieth year of her life, Theodora had grown more dazzling in beauty. Her body had assumed the wonderful plasticity of marble. Her eyes had become more unfathomable, more wondrously changeable in hues, like the iridescent waters of the sea.

Living as she did in an age where a morbid trend pervaded the world, where the approach of the Millennium, though no one of the present generation would see the day, was heralded as the End of Time; living as she did in the darkest epoch of Roman history, Theodora felt the utter inadequacy of her life, a hunger which nothing but power could assuage.

Slowly this desire began to grow and expand. She wished to wield her will, not only on men's emotions, but upon their lives as well. Perhaps even the death of Marozia, with its paralyzing influence over her soul, the captivity in the Lateran of her sister's son, and the hateful rule of Alberic, would not have brought matters to a focus, had not the appearance upon the stage of a woman, who, in point of beauty, spirit and daring bade fair to constitute a terrible rival, roused all the dormant passions in Theodora's soul and when Roxana openly boasted that she would wrest the power from the hands of her rival and rule in the Emperor's Tomb in spite of the Pontiff, of Alberic and Marozia's blood-kin, the soul of Theodora leaped to the challenge of the other woman and she craved for the conflict as she had never longed for anything in her life, save perchance, a love of which she had but possessed the base counterfeit.

No one knew whence Roxana had come, nor how long she had been in Rome, when an incident at San Lorenzo in Lucina had brought the two women face to face. Both, with their trains, had simultaneously arrived before the portals of the sanctuary when Roxana barred Theodora's way. Some mysterious instinct seemed to have informed each of the person and ambition of the other. For a moment they faced each other white to the lips. Then Roxana and her train had entered the church, and as she passed the other woman, a deadly challenge had flashed from her blue eyes into Theodora's dark orbs. The populace applauded Roxana's daring, and, in order to taunt her rival, she had established her court on desert Aventine, assembling about her the disgruntled lovers of Theodora and others, whom her disdain had driven to seek oblivion and revenge.

The land of Roxana's birth was shrouded in mystery. Some reported her from the icy regions of the North, others credited her with being the fugitive odalisque of some Eastern despot, a native of Kurdistan, the beauty and fire of whose women she possessed to a high degree.

Such was Roxana, who had challenged Theodora for the possession of the Emperor's Tomb.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SHRINE OF HEKATÉ

Athwart the gleaming balconies of the east the morning sun shone golden and the shadows of the white marble cornices and capitals and jutting friezes were blue with the reflection of the cloudless sky. Far below Mount Aventine the soft mists of dawn still hovered over the seven-hilled city, whence the distant cries of the water carriers and fruit venders came echoing up from the waking streets.

A fugitive sunbeam stole through a carelessly closed lattice of a chamber in the palace of Theodora, and danced now on the walls, bright with many a painted scene, now on the marble inlaid mosaic of the floor. Now and then a bright blade or the jewelled rim of a wine cup of eastern design would flash back the wayward ray, until its shaft rested on a curtained recess wherein lay a faintly outlined form. Tenderly the sunbeams stole over the white limbs that veiled their chiselled roundness under the blue shot webs of their wrappings, which, at the capricious tossing of the sleeper, bared two arms, white as ivory and wonderful in their statuesque moulding.

The face of the sleeper showed creamy white under a cloud of dark, silken hair, held back in a net of gold from the broad smooth forehead. Dark, exquisitely pencilled eyebrows arched over the closed, transparent lids, fringed with lashes that now and then seemed to flicker on the marble pallor of the cheeks, and the proudly poised head lay back, half buried in the cushions, supported by the gleaming white arms that were clasped beneath it.

Then, as if fearful of intruding on the charms that his ray had revealed, the sunbeam turned and, kissing the bosom that swelled and sank with the sleeper's gentle breathing, descended till it rested on an overhanging foot, from which a carelessly fastened sandal hung by one vermilion strap.

Of a sudden a light footfall was audible without and in an instant the sleeper had heard and awakened, her dark eyes heavy with drowsiness, the red lips parted, revealing two rows of small, pearly teeth, with the first deep breath of returning consciousness.

At the sound one white hand drew the silken wrappings over the limbs, that a troubled slumber and the warmth of the Roman summer night had bared, while the other was endeavoring to adjust the disordered folds of the saffron gossamer web that clung like a veil to her matchless form.

"Ah! It is but you! Persephoné," she said with a little sigh, as a curtain was drawn aside, revealing the form of a girl about twenty-two years old, whose office as first attendant to Theodora had been firmly established by her deep cunning, a thorough understanding of her mistress' most hidden moods and desires, her utter fearlessness and a native fierceness, that recoiled from no consideration of danger.

Persephoné was tall, straight as an arrow, lithe and sinuous as a snake. Her face was beautiful, but there was something in the gleam of those slightly slanting eyes that gave pause to him who chanced to cross her path.

She claimed descent from some mythical eastern potentate and was a native of Circassia, the land of beautiful women. No one knew how she had found her way to Rome. The fame of Marozia's evil beauty and her sinister repute had in time attracted Persephoné, and she had been immediately received in Marozia's service, where she remained till the revolt of Alberic swept her mistress into the dungeons of Castel San Angelo. Thereupon she had attached herself to Theodora who loved the wild and beautiful creature and confided in her utterly.

"Evil and troubled have been my dreams," Theodora continued, as the morning light fell in through the parted curtains. "At the sound of your footfall I started up – fearing – I knew not what –"

"For a long time have I held out against his pleadings and commands," Persephoné replied in a subdued voice, "knowing that my lady slept. But he will not be denied, – and his insistence had begun to frighten me. So at last I dared brave my lady's anger and disturb her –"

"Frighten you, Persephoné?" Theodora's musical laughter resounded through the chamber. "You – who braved death at these white hands of mine without flinching?"

She extended her hands as if to impress Persephoné with their beauty and strength.

Whatever the circumstance referred to, Persephoné made no reply. Only her face turned a shade more pale.

The draped figure had meanwhile arisen to her full height, as she stretched the sleep from her limbs, then, her question remaining unanswered, she continued:

"But – of whom do you speak? A new defiance from Roxana? A new insult from the Senator of Rome? I would have it understood," this with a slight lift of the voice, "that even were the end of the world at hand, of which they prate so much of late, and heaven and earth to crumble into chaos, I would not be disturbed to listen to shallow complaints and mock heroics."

"It is neither the one nor the other," replied Persephoné with an apprehensive glance of her slanting eyes over her shoulder, "but my Lord Basil, the Grand Chamberlain. He waits without where the eunuchs guard your slumber, and his eyes are aflame with something more than impatience – "

At the mention of the name a subtle change passed over the listener's face, and a sombre look crept into her eyes as she muttered:

"What can he be bringing now?"

Then, with a sudden flash, she added, tossing back her beautiful head:

"Let the Lord Basil wait! And now, Persephoné, remove from me the traces of sleep and set the couches in better order."

Silently and quickly the Circassian sprang forward and rolled back the curtains from the lattices, letting a stronger but still subdued light enter the chamber, revealing, as it did, many a chased casket, and mirrors of polished steel and bronze, and lighting up exquisite rainbow hued fabrics, thrown carelessly over lion-armed chairs, with here and there an onyx table wonderfully carved.

The chamber itself looked out upon a terrace and garden, a garden filled with such a marvellous profusion of foliage and flowers, that, looking at it from between the glistening marble columns surrounding the palace, it seemed as though the very sky above rested edgewise on towering pyramids of red and white bloom. Awnings of softest pale blue stretched across the entire width of the spacious outer colonnade, where a superb peacock strutted majestically to and fro, with boastfully spreading tail and glittering crest, as brilliant as the gleam of the hot sun on the silver fringe of the azure canopies, amidst the gorgeousness of waving blossoms that seemed to surge up like a sea to the very windows of the chamber.

Filling an embossed bowl with perfumed water, Persephoné bathed the hands of her mistress, who had sunk down upon a low, tapestried couch. Then, combing out her luxuriant hair, she bound it in a jewelled netting that looked like a constellation of stars against the dusky masses it confined. Taking a long, sleeveless robe of amber, Persephoné flung it about her subtle form and bound it over breast and shoulders with a jewelled band. But Theodora's glance informed her that something was still wanting and, following the direction of her gaze, Persephoné's eye rested on a life-size statue of Hekaté that stood with deadly calm on its inexorable face and slightly raised hands, from one of which hung something that glittered strangely in the subdued light of the recess.

Obeying Theodora's silent gesture, Persephoné advanced to the image and took from its raised arm a circlet fashioned of two golden snakes with brightly enamelled scales, bearing in their mouths a single diamond, brilliant as summer lightning. This she gently placed on her mistress' head, so that the jewel flamed in the centre of the coronet, then, kneeling down, she drew together the unlatched sandals.

Persephoné's touch roused her mistress from a day dream that had set her features as rigid as ivory, as she surveyed herself for a moment intently in a great bronze disk whose burnished surface gave back her flawless beauty line for line.

In Persephoné's gaze she read her unstinted admiration, for, beautiful as the Circassian was, she loved beauty in her own sex, wherever she found it.

Theodora seemed to have utterly forgotten the presence of the Grand Chamberlain in the anteroom, yet, in an impersonal way, her thoughts occupied themselves with the impending tete-a-tete.

Her life had been one constant round of pleasure and amusement, yet she was not happy, nor even contented.

Day by day she felt the want of some fresh interest, some fresh excitement, and it was this craving probably, more than innate depravity, which plunged her into those disgraceful and licentious excesses that were nightly enacted in the sunken gardens behind her palace. Lovers she had had by the scores. Yet each new face possessed for her but the attraction of novelty. The favorite of the hour had small cause to plume himself on his position. No sooner did he believe himself to be secure in the possession of Theodora's love, than he found himself hurled into the night of oblivion.

A strange pagan wave held Rome enthralled. Italy was in the throes of a dark revulsion. A woman, beautiful as she was evil, had exercised within the past decade her baleful influence from Castel San Angelo. Theodora had taken up Marozia's tainted inheritance. Members of a family of courtesans, they looked upon their trade as a hereditary privilege and, like the ancient Aspasia, these Roman women of the tenth century triumphed primarily by means of their feminine beauty and charms over masculine barbarism and grossness. It was an age of feudalism, when brutal force and murderous fury were the only divinities whom the barbarian conqueror was compelled to respect. Lombards and Huns, Franks and Ostrogoths, Greeks and Africans, the savage giants issuing from the deep Teutonic forests, invading the classic soil of Rome, became so many Herculeses sitting at the feet of Omphalé, and the atmosphere of the city by the Tiber – the atmosphere that had nourished the Messalinas of Imperial Rome – poured the flame of ambition into the soul of a woman whose beauty released the strongest passions in the hearts of those with whom she surrounded herself, in order to attain her soul's desire. To rule Rome from the fortress tomb of the Flavian emperor was the dream of Theodora's life. It had happened once. It would happen again, as long as men were ready to sacrifice at the shrines of Hekaté.

Unbridled in her passions as she was strong in her physical organization, an unbending pride and an intensity of will came to her aid when she had determined to win the object of her desire. In Theodora's bosom beat a heart that could dare, endure and defy the worst. She was a woman whom none but a very bold or ignorant suitor would have taken to his heart. Perchance the right man, had he appeared on the stage in time, might have made her gentle and quelled the wild passions that tossed her resistlessly about, like a barque in a hurricane.

Suddenly something seemed to tell her that she had found such a one. Tristan's manly beauty had made a strong appeal upon her senses. The anomaly of his position had captivated her imagination. There was something strangely fascinating in the mystery that surrounded him, there was even a wild thrill of pleasure in the seeming shame of loving one whose garb stamped him as one claimed by the Church. He had braved her anger in refusing to accompany Persephoné. He had closed his eyes to Theodora's beauty, had sealed his ears to the song of the siren.

"A man at last!" she said half aloud, and Persephoné, looking up from her occupation, gave her an inquisitive glance.

The splash of hidden fountains diffused a pleasant coolness in the chamber. Spiral wreaths of incense curled from a bronze tripod into the flower-scented ether. The throbbing of muted strings from harps and lutes, mingling with the sombre chants of distant processions, vibrated through the sun-kissed haze, producing a weird and almost startling effect.

After a pause of some duration, apparently oblivious of the fact that the announced caller was waiting without, Theodora turned to Persephoné, brushing with one white hand a stray raven lock from the alabaster forehead.

"Can it be the heat or the poison miasma that presages our Roman fever? Never has my spirit been so oppressed as it is to-day, as if the gloomy messengers from Lethé's shore were enfolding me in their shadowy pinions. I saw his face in the dream of the night" – she spoke as if soliloquizing – "it was as the face of one long dead – "

She paused with a shudder.

"Of whom does my lady speak?" Persephoné interposed with a swift glance at her mistress.

"The pilgrim who crossed my path to his own or my undoing. Has he been heard from again?"

A negative gesture came in response.

"His garb is responsible for much," replied the Circassian. "The city fairly swarms with his kind – "

The intentional contemptuous sting met its immediate rebuke.

"Not his kind," Theodora flashed back. "He has nothing in common with those others save the garb – and there is more beneath it than we wot of – "

"The Lady Theodora's judgment is not to be gainsaid," the Circassian replied, without meeting her mistress' gaze. "Do they not throng to her bowers by the legion – "

"A pilgrimage of the animals to Circé's sty – each eager to be transformed into his own native state," Theodora interposed contemptuously.

"Perchance this holy man is in reality a prince from some mythical, fabled land – come to Rome to resist temptation and be forthwith canonized – "

Persephoné's mirth suffered a check by Theodora's reply.

"Stranger things have happened. All the world comes to Rome on one business or another. This one, however, has not his mind set on the Beatitudes – "

"Nevertheless he dared not enter the forbidden gates," the Circassian ventured to object.

"It was not fear. On that I vouch. Perchance he has a vow. Whatever it be – he shall tell me – face to face – and here!"

"But if the holy man refuse to come?"

Theodora's trained ear did not miss the note of irony in the Circassian's question.

"He will come!" she replied laconically.

"A task worthy the Lady Theodora's renown."

"You deem it wonderful?"

"If I have read the pilgrim's eyes aright – "

"Perchance your own sweet eyes, my beautiful Persephoné, discoursed to him something on that night that caused misgivings in his holy heart, and made him doubt your errand?" Theodora purred, extending her white arms and regarding the Circassian intently.

Persephoné flushed and paled in quick succession.

"On that matter I left no doubt in his mind," she said enigmatically.

There was a brief pause, during which an inscrutable gaze passed between Theodora and the Circassian.

"Were you not as beautiful as you are evil, my Persephoné, I should strangle you," Theodora at last said very quietly.

The Circassian's face turned very pale and there was a strange light in her eyes. Her memory went back to an hour when, during one of the periodical feuds between Marozia and her younger sister, the former had imprisoned Theodora in one of the chambers of Castel San Angelo, setting over her as companion and gaoler in one Persephoné, then in Marozia's service.

The terrible encounter between Theodora and the Circassian in the locked chamber, when only the timely appearance of the guard saved each from destruction at the hands of the other, as Theodora tried to take the keys of her prison from Persephoné, had never left the latter's mind. Brave as she was, she had nevertheless, after Marozia's fall, entered Theodora's service, and the latter, admiring the spirit of fearlessness in the girl, had welcomed her in her household.

"I am ever at the Lady Theodora's service," Persephoné replied, with drooping lids, but Theodora caught a gleam of tigerish ferocity beneath those silken lashes that fired her own blood.

"Beware – lest in some evil hour I may be tempted to finish what I left undone in the Emperor's Tomb!" she flashed with a sudden access of passion.

"The Lady Theodora is very brave," Persephoné replied, as, stirred by the memory, her eyes sank into those of her mistress.

For a moment they held each other's gaze, then, with a generosity that was part of her complex nature, Theodora extended her hand to Persephoné.

"Forgive the mood – I am strangely wrought up," she said. "Cannot you help me in this dilemma, where I can trust in none?"

"There dwells in Rome one who can help my lady," Persephoné replied with hesitation; "one deeply versed in the lore and mysteries of the East."

"Who is this man?" Theodora queried eagerly.

"His name is Hormazd. By his spells he can change the natural event of things, and make Fate subservient to his decrees."

"Why have you never told me of him before?"

"Because the Lady Theodora's will seemed to do as much for her as could, to my belief, the sorcerer's art!"

The implied compliment pleased Theodora.

"Where does he abide?"

"In the Trastevere."

"What does he for those who seek him?"

"He reads the stars – foretells the future – and, with the aid of strange spells of which he is master, can bring about that which otherwise would be unattainable – "

"You rouse my curiosity! Tell me more of him."

An inscrutable expression passed over Persephoné's face.

"He was Marozia's trusted friend."

A frozen silence reigned apace.

"Did he foretell that which was to happen?" Theodora spoke at last.

"To the hour!"

"And yet – forewarned – "

"Marozia, grown desperate in the hatred of her lord, derided his warnings."

"It was her Fate. Tell me more!"

"He has visited every land under the sun. From Thulé to Cathay his fame is known. Strange tales are told of him. No one knows his age. He seems to have lived always. As he appears now he hath ever been. They say he has been seen in places thousand leagues apart at the same time. Sometimes he disappears and is not heard of for months. But – whoever he may be – whatever he may be engaged in – at the stroke of midnight that he must suspend. Then his body turns rigid as a corpse, bereft of animation, and his spirit is withdrawn into realms we dare not even dream of. At the first hour of the morning life will slowly return. But no one has yet dared to question him, where he has spent those dread hours."

Theodora had listened to Persephoné's tale with a strange new interest.

"How long has this Hormazd – or whatever his name – resided in Rome?" she turned to the Circassian.

"I met him first on the night on which the lady Marozia summoned him to the summit of the Emperor's Tomb. There he abode with her for hours, engaged in some unholy incantation and at last conjured up such a tempest over the Seven Hills, as the city of Rome had not experienced since it was founded by the man from Troy – "

Persephoné's historical deficiency went hand in hand with a superstition characteristic of the age, and evoked no comment from one perchance hardly better informed with regard to the past.

"I well remember the night," Theodora interposed.

"We crept down into the crypts, where the dog-headed Egyptian god keeps watch over the dead Emperor," Persephoné continued. "The lady Marozia alone remained on the summit with the wizard – amidst such lightnings and crashing peals of thunder and a hurricane the like of which the oldest inhabitants do not remember – "

"I shall test his skill," Theodora spoke after a pause. "Perchance he may give me that which I have never known – "

"My lady would consult the wizard?" Persephoné interposed eagerly.

"Such is my intent."

"Shall I summon him to your presence?"

"I shall go to him!"

In Persephoné's countenance surprise and fear struggled for mastery.

"Then I shall accompany my lady – "

"I shall go alone and unattended – "

"It is an ill-favored region, where the sorcerer dwells – "

An inscrutable look passed into Theodora's eyes.

"Can he but give me that which I desire I shall brave the hazard, be it ever so great."

The last words were uttered in an undertone. Then she added imperiously:

"Go and summon the lord Basil and bid two eunuchs attend him hither! And do you wait with them within call behind those curtains."

Then, as Persephoné silently piled cushions behind her in the lion-armed chair and withdrew bowing, Theodora murmured to herself:

"Hardly can I trust even him in an hour so fraught with darkness and peril. Yet strive as he will, he may not break the chains his passion has woven around his senses."

CHAPTER IX

THE GAME OF LOVE

The pattering of footsteps resounded on the marble floor of the corridor and the hangings once more parted, revealing the form of a man sombre even in the shadows which seemed part of the darkness that framed his white face.

With eyes that never left the woman's graceful form the visitor slowly advanced and, concealing his chagrin at having been kept waiting like a slave in the anteroom, bent low over Theodora's hand and raised it to his lips.

She had seated herself on a divan which somewhat shaded her face and invited him with a mute gesture to take his seat beside her. Persephoné and the eunuchs had left the chamber.

"Fain would I have departed, Lady Theodora, when the maid Persephoné, who has the devil in her eyes, told me that the Lady Theodora slept," Basil spoke as, with the light of a fierce passion in his eyes, he sank down beside the wondrous form, and his hot breath fanned her shoulder. "But my tidings brook no delay. Closer, fairest lady, that your ear alone may hear this new perplexity that does beset us, for it concerns that which lies closest to our heart, and the time is brief – "

"I cannot even guess your tidings," replied Theodora, withdrawing herself a little from his burning gaze. "For days mischance has emptied all her quivers at me, leaving me not a dart wherewith to strike."

"It is as a bolt from the clear blue," interposed the Grand Chamberlain. "Yet – how were we to reckon with that which did happen? Every detail had been carefully planned. In the excitement and turmoil which roared and surged over the Navona the task could not fail of its accomplishment and he who was to speed the holy man to his doom had but to plunge into that seething vortex of humanity to make his escape. Surely the foul fiend was abroad on that night and stalked about visibly to our undoing. For not a word have I been able to get out of Il Gobbo who raves that at the very moment when he was about to strike, St. John himself towered over him, paralyzed his efforts, and gave him such a blow as sent him reeling upon the turf. Some say," – the speaker added meditatively, "it was a pilgrim – "

"A pilgrim?" Theodora interposed, a sudden gleam in her eyes. "A pilgrim? What was he like?"

"To Il Gobbo he appeared no doubt of superhuman height, else had he not affrighted him. For the bravo is no coward – "

"A pilgrim, you say," Theodora repeated, meditatively.

"Whosoever he is," Basil continued after a pause, "he seems to scent ample entertainment in this godly city. For, no doubt it was the same who thwarted by his timely appearance the abduction of the Pontiff by certain ruffians, earning thereby much distinction in the eyes of the Senator of Rome who has appointed him captain of Castel San Angelo – and Gamba in whom we placed our trust has fled. If he is captured – if he should confess – "

The color had died out of Theodora's cheeks and she sat bolt upright as a statue of marble, gazing into the shadows with great wide eyes, as in a low voice, hardly audible even to her visitor, she said:

"God! Will this uncertainty never cease? What is to be done? Speak! – For I confess, I am not myself to-day." —

Basil hesitated, and a sudden flame leaped into his eyes as they devoured the beauty of the woman beside him, and raising to his lips the hand that lay inert on the saffron-hued cushion, he replied:

"The lady Theodora has many who do her bidding, yet is the heart of none as true as his, who is even now sitting beside her. Therefore ask of me whatever you will and, if a blade be needed, your slightest favor will fire me to any deed, – however unnameable." —

Lower the man bent, until his hot breath scorched her pale cheeks. But neither by word nor gesture did she betray that she was conscious of his nearer approach as, in a calm voice, she replied:

"Full well do I know your zeal and devotion, my lord Basil. Yet there hangs in the balance the keen and timely stroke that shall secure for me the dominion of the Seven Hills and the Emperor's Tomb. For failure would bring in its wake that which would be harder to endure than death itself. Therefore," she added slowly, "I would choose one whose devotion is only equalled by his blind indifference to that which I am minded to bring about; not one only fired with a passion, which when cooled might leave nothing but fear and hesitation behind." —

"Has all that has passed between us left you with so ill an opinion of me?" Basil replied, drawing back somewhat ostentatiously. "There are few that can be trusted with that which must be done — and trusted blades are scarce."

"The more reason that we choose wisely and well," came the reply in deliberate tones. "How much longer must I suffer the indignity which this stripling dares to put upon his own flesh and blood, — upon myself, who has striven for this dominion with all the fire of this restless soul? How much longer must I sit idly by, pondering over the mystery that enshrouds Marozia's untimely end? How much longer must I tremble in abject fear of him whom the Tuscan's churlishness has set up in yonder castello and who conspires with my rival to gain his sinister ends?"

"By what sorcery she holds him captive, I cannot tell," Basil interposed. "Yet, if we are not on our guard, we shall awaken one day to the realization that even the faint chance which remains to us now has passed from our hands. I doubt not but that Roxana will enlist the services of the stranger who in the space of a week, during the lord Alberic's absence, will lord it over the city of Rome!"

With a smothered cry of hate, that drove from Theodora's face every trace of her former mood, she bounded upright.

"What demon of madness possesses you, my lord Basil, to taunt me with your suspicions?" she flashed.

Basil had sped his shaft at random, but he had hit the mark.

In suave and insinuating tones, without relinquishing his gaze upon the woman, he replied:

"I voice but my fears, Lady Theodora, and the urgency of assembling your friends under the banners of your house. What is more natural," he continued with slow and sinister emphasis, "than for a beautiful woman to harbor the desire for conquest, and to profit from so auspicious a throw of fate as the stranger's espousing her part against an equally beautiful, hated rival? Is not the inference justified, that, ignorant of the merits of the feud, which has been raging these many months, he will take the part of the one whose beauty had compelled the Senator's unwitting tribute — as it were?"

He paused for a moment, watching the woman before him from under half-shut lids, then continued slowly:

"Roxana is consumed with the desire to stake soul and body upon attaining her ends, humbling her rival in the dust and set her foot upon her neck. Time and again has she defied you! At the banquet she gave in honor of the Senator of Rome, when one of the guests lamented the Lady Theodora's absence from the festal board, she openly boasted, that in youth as well as in beauty, in strength as in love, she would vanquish Marozia's sister utterly — and when one of the guests, commenting upon her boast, suggested with a smile that in the time of the Emperor Gallus women fought in the arena, she bared her arms and replied: 'Are there no chambers in this demesne where a woman may strangle her rival?'"

Theodora had listened to Basil's recital, white to the lips. Her bosom heaved and a strange fire burnt in her eyes as she replied:

"Dares she utter this boast, woman to woman?" —

Basil, checking himself, gave a shrug.

"Misinterpret not my words, dearest lady," he said solicitously. "It is to warn you that I came. Alberic's attitude is no longer a secret. Roxana is leaving no stone unturned to drive you from the

city, to encompass your death – and Alberic is swayed by strange moods. Roxana is growing bolder each day and the woman who dares challenge the Lady Theodora is no coward."

A strange look passed into Theodora's eyes.

"Three days hence," she said, "I mean to give a feast to my friends, if," she continued with lurid mockery, "I can still number such among those who flock to my bowers. I shall ask the Lady Roxana to grace the feast with her presence – "

A puzzled look passed into Basil's eyes.

"Deem you she will come?"

Theodora's lips curved in a smile.

"You said but just now, my lord, the woman who dares challenge Theodora is no coward – "

"Yet – as your guest – suspecting – knowing – "

"I doubt not, my lord, she is well informed," Theodora interposed with the same inscrutable smile. "Yet – if she is as brave as she is beautiful – she will come – doubt not, my lord – she will come – "

"Nevertheless, I question the wisdom," Basil ventured to interpose. "A sudden spark – from nowhere – who will quench the holocaust?"

"When Roxana and Theodora meet, – woman to woman – ah, trust me, my lord, it will be a festive occasion – one long to be remembered. Perchance you, my lord, who boast of a large circle know young Fabio of the Cavalli – a comely youth with the air and manners of a girl. Persephoné, my Circassian, could strangle him."

"I know the youth, Lady Theodora," Basil interposed with a puzzled air. "What of him?"

"He once did me the honor to imagine himself in love with me. Did he not pursue me with amorous sighs and burning glances and oaths – my lord – such oaths! Cerberus would wince in Tartarus could he hear but one of them – "

Basil's lips straightened and his eyelids narrowed.

"Pardon, Lady Theodora, if I do not quite follow the trend of your reminiscent mood – "

Theodora smiled.

"You will presently, my lord – believe me – you will presently. When I became satiated with him I sent him on his way and straightway he sought my beautiful rival. I am told she is very fond of him – "

A strange nervousness had seized Basil.

"I shall bid him to the feast," Theodora continued. "'Twere scant courtesy to request the Lady Roxaná's presence without that of her lover. And more, my lord. Since you boast your devotion to me in such unequivocal terms – your task it shall be to bring as your honored guest the valiant stranger who took so brave a part in aiding the Lord Alberic to regain his prisoner, and who, within a week, is to be the new captain of Castel San Angelo." —

Basil was twitching nervously.

"Lady Theodora, without attempting to fathom the mood which prompts the request, am I to traverse the city in quest of a churl who has hypnotized the Lord Alberic and has destroyed our fondest hopes?" —

"That it shall be for myself to decide, my Lord Basil," Theodora replied with her inscrutable smile. "I do not desire you to fathom my mood, but to bring to me this man. And believe me, my Lord Basil – as you value my favor – you will find and bring him to me!"

Half turning she flung a light vesture from off her bosom and the faint light showed not the set Medusa face that meditated unnameable things, but eyes alight with desire and a mouth quivering for kisses.

As he gazed, Basil was suddenly caught in the throes of his passion. He clutched at the ottoman's carved arms, striving to resist the tide of emotion that tossed him like a helpless bark in its clutches and, suddenly bearing down every restraint, his arms went round the supple form as he crushed her

to him with a wild uncontrolled passion, bending her back, and his eyes blazed with a baleful fire into her own, while his hot kisses scorched her lips.

She struggled violently, desperately in his embrace, and at last succeeded, bruised and crushed, in releasing herself.

"Beast! Coward!" she flashed, "Can you not bridle the animal within you? I have it in mind to kill you here and now."

Basil's face was ashen. His eyes were bloodshot. The touch of her lips, of her hands, had maddened him. He groaned, and his arms fell limply by his side. Presently he raised his head and, his eyes aflame with the madness of jealousy, he snarled:

"So I did not go amiss, when I long suspected another in the bower of roses. Who is he? Tell me quickly, that I may at least assuage this hatred of mine, for its measure overflows."

His hand closed on his dagger's hilt that was hidden by his tunic, but Theodora rose and her own eyes flashed like naked swords as with set face she said:

"Have you not yet learned, my lord, how vain it is to probe the clouds of my mind for the unseen wind that stirs behind its curtains? Aye – crouch at my feet, you miserable slave, gone mad with the dream of my favor possessed and wake to learn, that, as Theodora's enchantments compel all living men, nevertheless she gives herself unto him she pleases. I tell you, you jealous fool, that, although I serve the goddess of night yonder, never till yesterday was my heart touched by the divine enchantments of Venus, nor have the lips ever closed on mine, that could kindle the spark to set my breast afire with longing."

"Ah me!" she continued, speaking as though she thought aloud. "Will Hekaté ever grant me to find amongst these husks of passion and plotting that great love whereof once I dreamed, that love which I am seeking and which ever flits before me, disembodied and unattainable, like a ghost in the purple twilight? Or, must I wander, ever loved yet unloving, until I am gathered to the realms of shadows, robbed of my desire by Death's cold hand?"

She paused, her lips a-quiver, the while Basil watched her with half-closed eyes, filled with sudden and ominous brooding.

"Who is the favored one?" he queried darkly, "who came and saw and conquered, while others of long-tried loyalty are starving at the fount?"

She gave him an inscrutable glance, then answered quickly:

"A man willing to risk life and honor and all to serve me as I would be served."

Basil gave her a baffled look.

"Can he achieve the impossible?"

Theodora gave a shrug.

"To him who truly loves nothing is impossible. You are the trusted friend of the Senator who encompasses my undoing – need I say more?"

"Were I not, Lady Theodora, in seeming, – who knows, but that your blood would long have dyed this Roman soil, or some dark crypt contained your wonderful beauty? Bide but the time – "

An impatient wave of Theodora's hand interrupted the speaker.

"Time has me now! Will there ever be an end to this uncertainty?"

"You have not yet told me the name of him whose sudden advent on the stage has brought about so marvellous a transformation," Basil said with an air of baffled passion and rage.

"What matters the name, my lord?" Theodora interposed with a sardonic smile.

"A nameless stranger then," he flashed with a swiftness that staggered even the woman, astute as she was.

"I said not so – "

"A circumstance that should recommend him to our consideration," he muttered darkly. "I shall find him – and bring him to the feast – "

There was something in his voice that roused the tigress in the woman.

"By the powers of hell," she turned on the man whose fatal guess had betrayed her secret, "if you but dare touch one hair of his head – "

Basil raised his hand disdainfully.

"Be calm, Lady Theodora! The Grand Chamberlain soils not his steel with such carrion," he said with a tone of contempt that struck home. "And now I will be plain with you, Lady Theodora. All things have their price. Will you grant to me what I most desire in return for that which is ever closest to your heart?"

Theodora gave a tantalizing shrug.

"Like the Fata Morgana of the desert, I am all things to all men," she said. "Remember, my lord, I must look for that which I desire wherever I may find it, since life and the future are uncertain."

There was a silence during which each seemed intent upon fathoming the secret thoughts of the other.

It was Basil who spoke.

"What of that other?"

Theodora had arisen.

"Bring him to me – three days hence – as my guest. Thrice has he crossed my path. – Thrice has he defied me! – I have that in store for him at which men shall marvel for all time to come!"

Basil bent over the white hand and kissed it. Then he took his leave. Had he seen the expression in the woman's eyes as the heavy curtains closed behind him, it would have made the Grand Chamberlain pause.

Theodora passed to where the bronze mirror hung and stood long before it, with hands clasped behind her shapely head, wrapt in deepest thought.

And while she gazed on her mirrored loveliness, an evil light sprang up in her eyes and all her mouth's soft lines froze to a mould of dreaming evil, as she turned to where the image of Hekaté gazed down upon her with inhuman calm upon its face, and, holding out shimmering, imploring arms, she cried:

"Help me now, dread goddess of darkness, if ever you looked with love upon her whose prayers have been directed to you for good and for evil. Fire the soul of him I desire, as he stands before me, that he lose reason, honor, and manhood, as the price of my burning kisses – that he become my utter slave."

She clapped her hands and Persephoné appeared from behind the curtains.

"For once Fate is my friend," she turned with flashing eyes to the Circassian. "Before his departure to the shrines of the Archangel, Alberic has appointed this nameless stranger captain of Castel San Angelo. Go – find him and bring him to me! Now we shall see," she added, "if all this beauty of mine shall prevail against his manhood. Your eyes express doubt, my sweet Persephoné?"

Theodora had raised herself to her full height. She looked regal indeed – a wonderful apparition. What man lived there to resist such loveliness of face and form?

Persephoné, too, seemed to feel the woman's magic, for her tone was less confident when she replied:

"Such beauty as the Lady Theodora's surely the world has never seen."

"I shall conquer – by dread Hekaté," Theodora flashed, flushed by Persephoné's unwitting tribute. "He shall open for me the portals of the Emperor's Tomb, he shall sue at my feet for my love – and obtain his guerdon. Not a word of this to anyone, my Persephoné – least of all, the Lord Basil. Bring the stranger to me by the postern – "

"But – if he refuse?"

There was something in Persephoné's tone that stung Theodora's soul to the quick.

"He will not refuse."

Persephoné bowed and departed, and for some time Theodora's dark inscrutable eyes brooded on the equally inscrutable face of the goddess of the Underworld, which was just then touched by a fugitive beam of sunlight and seemed to nod mysteriously.

CHAPTER X

A SPIRIT PAGEANT

When, on the day succeeding his appointment Tristan returned to the Inn of the Golden Shield he felt as one in a trance. Like a puppet of Fate he had been plunged into the seething maelstrom of feudal Rome. He hardly realized the import of the scene in which he had played so prominent a part. He had acted upon impulse, hardly knowing what it was all about. Dimly at intervals it flashed through his consciousness, dimly he remembered facing two youths, the one the Senator of Rome – the other the High Priest of Christendom, even though a prisoner in the Lateran. Vaguely he recalled the words that had been spoken between them, vaguely he recalled the fact that the Senator of Rome had commended him for having saved the city, offering him appointment, holding out honor and preferment, if he would enter his service. Vaguely he remembered bending his knee before the proud son of Marozia and accepting his good offices.

In the guest-chamber Tristan found pilgrims from every land assembled round the tables discoursing upon the wonders and perils hidden in the strange and shifting corridors of Rome. Not a few had witnessed the scene in which he had so conspicuously figured and, upon recognizing him, regarded him with shy glances, while commenting upon the prevailing state of unrest, the periodical seditions and outbreaks of the Romans.

Tristan listened to the buzz and clamor of their voices, gleaning here and there some scattered bits of knowledge regarding Roman affairs.

He could now review more calmly the events of the preceding day. Fortune seemed to have favored him indeed, in that she had led him across the path of the Senator of Rome.

Thus Tristan set out once again, to make the rounds of worship and obedience. These absolved, he wandered aimlessly about the great city, losing himself in her ruins and gardens, while he strove in vain to take an interest in what he beheld, rather distracted than amused by the Babel-like confusion which surrounded him on all sides.

Nevertheless, once more upon the piazzas and tortuous streets of Rome, his pace quickened. His pulses beat faster. At times he did not feel his feet upon those stony ways which Peter and Paul had trod, and many another who, like himself, had come to Rome to be crucified. People stared at his dark and sombre form as he passed. Now and then he was retarded by chanting processions, that wound their interminable coils through the tortuous streets, pilgrims from all the world, the various orders of monks in the habits peculiar to their orders, wine-venders, water-carriers, men-at-arms, sbirri, and men of doubtful calling. Sacred banners floated in the sunlit air and incense curled its graceful spiral wreaths into the cloudless Roman ether.

Surely Rome offered a wide field for ambition. A man might raise himself to a certain degree by subservience to some powerful prince, but he must continue to serve that prince, or he fell and would never aspire to independent domination, where hereditary power was recognized by the people and lay at the foundation of all acknowledged authority. It was only in Central Italy, and especially in Romagna and the States of the Church, where a principle antagonistic to all hereditary claims existed in the very nature of the Papal power, so that any adventurer might hope, either by his individual genius or courage, or by services rendered to those in authority, to raise himself to independent rule or to that station which was only attached to a superior by the thin and worn-out thread of feudal tenure.

Rome was the field still open to the bold spirit, the keen and clear-seeing mind. Rome was the table on which the boldest player was sure to win the most. With every change of the papacy new combinations, and, consequently, new opportunities must arise. Here a man may, as elsewhere, be required to serve, in order at length to command. But, if he did not obtain power at length, it was his fault or Fortune's, and in either event he must abide the consequences.

Revolving in his mind these matters, and wondering what the days to come would hold, Tristan permitted himself to wander aimlessly through the desolation which arose on all sides about him.

Passing by the Forum and the Colosseum, ruins piled upon ruins, he wandered past San Gregorio, where, in the garden, lie the remains of the Servian Porta Capena, by which St. Paul first entered Rome. The Via Appia, lined with vineyards and fruit-trees, shedding their blossoms on many an ancient tomb, led the solitary pilgrim from the memories of the present to the days, when the light of the early Christian Church burned like a flickering taper hidden low in Roman soil.

The ground sweeping down on either side in gentle, but well-defined curves, led the vision over the hills of Rome and into her valleys. Beneath a cloudless, translucent sky the city was caught in bold shafts of crystal light, revealing her in so strong a relief that it seemed like a piece of exquisite sculpture.

Fronting the Coelian, crowned with the temple church of San Stefano in Rotondo, fringed round with tall and graceful poplars, rose the immeasurable ruins of Caracalla's Baths, seeming more than ever the work of titans, as Tristan saw them, shrouded in deep shadows above the old churches of San Nereo and San Basilio, shining like white huts, a stone's throw from the mighty walls. Beyond, as a beacon of the Christian world in ages to come, on the site of the ancient Circus of Nero, arose the Basilica of Constantine, still in its pristine simplicity, ere the genius of Michel Angelo, Bramanté and Sangallo transformed it into the magnificence of the present St. Peter's.

For miles around stretched the Aurelian walls, here fallen in low ruins, there still rising in their proud strength. Weathered to every shade of red, orange, and palest lemon, they still showed much of their ancient beauty near the closed Latin gate. High towers, arched galleries and battlements cast a broad band of shade upon a line of peach trees whose blossoms had opened out to the touch of the summer breeze.

Beneath Tristan's feet, unknown to him, lay the sepulchral chambers of pagan patricians, and the winding passage tombs of the Scipios. Out of the sunshine of the vineyard Tristan's curiosity led him into the dusk of the Columbaria of Pomponius Hylas, full of stucco altar tombs. He descended into the lower chambers with arched corridors and vaulted roofs where, in the loculi, stood terra-cotta jars holding the ashes of the freedmen and musicians of Tiberius with their servants, even to their cook.

Returning full of wonder to the golden light of day, Tristan retraced his steps once again over the Appian Way. Passing the ruined Circus of Maxentius, across smooth fields of grass, he saw the fortress tomb of Cæcilia Metella, set grandly upon the hill. It appeared to break through the sunshine, its marble surface of a soft cream color, looking more like the shrine of some immortal goddess of the Campagna than the tomb of a Roman matron.

And, as he wandered along the Appian Way, past the site of lava pools from Mount Alba, remains of ancient monuments lay thicker by the roadside. Prostrate statues appeared in a setting of wild flowers. Sculptured heads gazed out from half-hidden tombs, while one watch-tower after another rose out of the undulating expanse of the Campagna.

To Tristan the memories of an ancient empire which clung to the place held but little significance.

Here emperors had been carried by in their litters to Albano. Victorious generals returning in their chariots from the south, drove between these avenues of cypress-guarded tombs to Rome. The body of the dead Augustus had been brought with great following from Bovilæ to the Palatine, as before him Sulla had been borne along to Rome amid the sound of trumpets and tramp of horsemen. Near the fourth milestone stood Seneca's villa, where he received his death warrant from an emissary of Nero, and nearby was that of his wife who, by her own desire, bravely shared his fate.

And, last to haunt the Appian Way in the spirit pageant of the Golden Age, a memory destined to lie dormant till the dawn of the Renaissance, was Paul the Apostle, the tent-maker from Tarsus,

who entered Rome while Nero reigned in the white marble city of Augustus and suffered martyrdom for the Faith.

It was verging towards evening when Tristan's feet again bore him past the stupendous ruins of the Colosseum, through the roofless upper galleries of which streamed the light of the sinking sun.

After reaching the Forum, almost deserted by this hour, save for a few belated rambles, he seated himself on a marble block and tried to collect his thoughts, at the same time drinking in the picture which unrolled itself before his gaze.

If Rome was indeed, as the chroniclers of the Middle Ages styled her, "Caput Mundi," the Forum was the centre of Rome. From this centre Rome threw out and informed her various feelers, farther and farther radiating in all directions, as she swelled out with greatness, drawing her sustenance first from her sacred hills and groves, then from the very marbles and granites of the mountains of Asia and Africa, from the lives of all sorts of peoples, races and nations. And like the Emperor Constantine, as we are told by Ammianus Marcellinus, on beholding the Forum from the Rostra of Domitian, stood wonder-stricken, so Tristan, even at this period of decay, was amazed at the grandeur of the ruins which bore witness to Rome's former greatness.

The sound of the Angelus, whose silvery chimes permeated the tomb-like stillness, roused Tristan from his reveries.

He arose and continued upon his way, until he found himself in the square fronting the ancient Basilica of Constantine.

Notwithstanding the fact that it was a Vigil of the Church, popular exhibitions of all sorts were set upon the broad flagstones before St. Peter's. Street dancing girls indulged on every available spot in those gliding gyrations, so eloquently condemned by the worthy Ammianus Marcellinus of orderly and historical memory. Booths crammed with relics of doubtful authenticity, baskets filled with fruits or flowers, pictorial representations of certain martyrs of the Church, basking in haloes of celestial light, tempted in every direction the worldly and unworldly spectators. Cooks perambulated, their shops upon their backs, merchants shouted their wares, wine-sellers taught Bacchanalian philosophy from the tops of their casks; poets recited spurious compositions which they offered for sale; philosophers indulged in argumentations destined to convert the wavering, or to perplex the ignorant. Incessant motion and noise seemed to be the sole aim and purpose of the crowd which thronged the square.

Nothing could be more picturesque than the distant view of the joyous scene, this Carnival in Midsummer, as it were.

The deep red rays of the westering sun cast their radiance, partly from behind the Basilica, over the vast multitude in the piazza. In unrivalled splendor the crimson light tinted the water that purred from the fountain of Bishop Symmachus. Its roof of gilded bronze, supported by six porphyry columns, was enclosed by small marble screens on which griffins were carved, its corners ornamented by gilded dolphins and peacocks in bronze. The water flowed into a square basin from out of a bronze pine cone which may have come from Hadrian's Mausoleum. Bathed in the brilliant glow the smooth porphyry colonnades reflected, chameleon-like, ethereal and varying hues. The white marble statues became suffused with delicate rose, and the trees gleamed in the innermost of their leafy depths as if steeped in the exhalations of a golden mist.

Contrasting strangely with the wondrous radiance around it, the bronze pine-tree in the centre of the piazza rose up in gloomy shadow, indefinite and exaggerated. The wide facade of the Basilica cast its great depth of shade into the midst of the light which dominated the scene.

Tristan stood for a time gazing into the glowing sky, then he slowly made his way towards the Basilica, the edifice which commemorated the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of Rome, as in its changes it has reflected every change wrought in the spirit of the new worship up to the present hour.

CHAPTER XI

THE DENUNCIATION

The Basilica of Constantine no longer retained its pristine splendor, its pristine purity as in the days, ere the revival of paganism by the Emperor Julian the Apostate had put a sudden and impressive check upon the meretricious defilement of the glory, for which it was built.

The exterior began to show signs of decay. The interior, too, had changed with the inexorable trend of the times. The solemn recesses were filled with precious relics. Many hued tapers surrounded the glorious pillars, and eastern tapestries wreathed their fringes round the massive altars.

As Tristan entered the incense-saturated dusk of St. Peter's, the first part of the service had just been concluded. The last faint echoes from the voices in the choir still hovered upon the air, and the silent crowds of worshippers were still grouped in their listening attitudes and absorbed in their devotions.

The only light was bestowed by the evening sun, duskily illuminating the emblazoned windows, or by the glimmer of lamps in distant shrines, hung with sable velvet and attended each by its own group of ministering priests.

Struck with an indefinable awe Tristan looked about. At first he only realized the great space, the four long rows of closely set columns, and the great triumphal arch which framed the mosaics of the apse, where Constantine stood in the clouds offering his Basilica to the Saviour and St. Peter. Then he looked towards the sacred shrines above the Apostle's grave, where lamps burned incessantly and cast a dazzling halo above the high altar, reflected in the silver paving of the presbytery and on the golden gates and images of the Confessio. Immediately behind the altar was revealed a long panel of gold, studded with gems and ornaments, with figures of Christ and the Apostles, a native offering from the Emperor Valentinian III. The high altar and its brilliant surroundings were seen from the nave between a double row of twisted marble columns, white as snow. A beam covered with plates of silver united them and supported great silver images of the Saviour, the Virgin and the Apostles with lilies and candelabra.

To their shrines, to do homage, had in time come the Kings from all the earth: Oswy, King of the Northumbrians, Cædwalla, King of the West Saxons, Coenred, King of the Mercians, and with him his son Sigher, King of the East Saxons. Even Macbeth is said to have made the pilgrimage. Ethelwulf came in the middle of the ninth century, and with him came his son Alfred. In the arcades beneath the columned vestibule of the Basilica, tomb succeeded tomb. Here the popes were buried, Leo I, the Great, being first in line, the Saxon Pilgrim Kings, the Emperors Honorius III and Theodosius II, regarding whom St. John Chrysostomus has written: "Emperors were proud to stand in the hall keeping guard at the fisherman's door."

During the interval between the divisions of the service, Tristan, like many of those present, found his interest directed towards the relics, which were inclosed in a silver cabinet with crystal doors and placed above the high altar. Although it was impossible to obtain a satisfactory view of these ecclesiastical treasures, they nevertheless occupied his attention till it was diverted by the appearance of a monk in the habit of the Benedictines, who had mounted the richly carved pulpit fixed between two pillars.

As far as Tristan was enabled to follow the trend of the sermon it teemed with allusions to the state of society and religion as it prevailed throughout the Christian world, and especially in the city of the Pontiff. By degrees the monk's eloquence took on darker and more terrible tints, as he seemed slowly to pass from generalities to personal allusions, which increased the fear and mortification of the great assembly with every moment.

From the shadows of the shrine, where he had chosen his station, Tristan was enabled to mark every shade of the emotions which swayed the multitudes and, as his eyes roamed inadvertently

towards the chapel of the Father Confessor, he saw a continuous stream of penitents enter the dark passage leading towards the crypts, many of whom were masked.

Turning his head by chance, Tristan's glance fell upon two men who had apparently just entered the Basilica and paused a few paces away, to listen to the words which the monk hurled like thunderbolts across the heads of his listeners. Despite their precaution to wear masks, Tristan recognized the Grand Chamberlain in the one, while his companion, the hunchback, appeared rather uncomfortable in the sanctified air of the Basilica.

Hitherto Odo of Cluny's attacks on the existing state had been general. Now he glanced over the crowd, as if in quest of some special object, as with strident voice he declaimed:

"Repent! Death stands behind you! The flag of your glory shall cease to wave on the towers of your strong citadel. Destruction clamors at your palace gates, and the enemy that cometh upon you unaware is an enemy that none shall vanquish or subdue, not even they who are the mightiest among the mighty. Blood stains the earth and the sky. Its red waves swallow up the land! The heavens grow pale and tremble! The silver stars blacken and decay, and the winds of the desert make lament for that which shall come to pass, ere ever the grapes be pressed or the harvest gathered. It is a scarlet sea wherein, like a broken and deserted ship, Rome flounders, never to rise again – "

He paused for a moment and caught his breath hard.

"The Scarlet Woman of Babylon is among us!" he cried. "Hence! accursed tempter. Thou poisoner of peace, thou quivering sting in the flesh, destroyer of the strength of manhood! Theodora! – thou abomination – thou tyrannous treachery! What shall be done unto thee in the hour of darkness? Put off the ornaments of gold, the jewels, wherewith thou adornest thy beauty, and crown thyself with the crown of endless affliction. For thou shalt be girdled about with flame and fire shall be thy garment. Thy lips that have drunk sweet wine shall be steeped in bitterness! Vainly shalt thou make thyself fair and call upon thy legion of lovers. They shall be as dead men, deaf to thine entreaties, and none shall respond to thy call! None shall hide thee from shame and offer thee comfort! In the midst of thy lascivious delights shalt thou suddenly perish, and my soul shall be avenged on thy sins, queen-courtesan of the earth!"

Scarcely had the last word died to silence when a blinding flash of lightning rent the gloom followed by a tremendous crash of thunder that shook the great edifice to its foundation. The bronze portals opened as of their own accord and a terrific gust of wind extinguished every light in the thousand-jetted candelabrum. Impenetrable darkness reigned – thick, suffocating darkness, as the thunder rolled away in grand, sullen echoes.

There was a momentary lull, then, piercing the profound gloom, came the cries and shrieks of frightened women, the horrible, selfish scrambling, struggling and pushing of a bewildered multitude. A veritable frenzy of fear seemed to possess every one. Groans and sobs, entreaties and curses from those, who, intent on saving themselves, were brutally trying to force a passage to the door, the heart-rending, frantic appeals of the women – all these sounds increased the horror of the situation, and Tristan, blind, giddy and confused, listened to the uproar about him with somewhat of the affrighted, panic-stricken compassion that a stranger in hell might feel, while hearkening to the ceaseless plaints of the self-tortured damned.

Lost in a dim stupefaction of wonderment, Tristan remained where he stood, while the crowds rushed from the Basilica. As he was about to follow in their wake, his gaze was attracted towards the chapel of the Grand Penitentiary, from which came a number of masked personages while he, to whose keeping were confided crimes of a magnitude that seemed beyond the extensive powers of absolution, was barely visible under the cowl, which was drawn deeply over his forehead.

The thought occurred to Tristan to seek the ear of the Confessor, in as much as the Pontiff to whom he had hoped to lay bare his heart could not grant him an audience.

The lateness of the hour and the uncertainty of the fate of the Monk of Cluny prevented him from following the prompting of the moment and, staggering rather than walking, Tristan made for the portals of St. Peter's and walked unseeing into the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER XII

THE CONFESSION

The storm had abated, but the sheen of white lightnings to southward and the menacing growl of distant thunder that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth held out promise of renewed upheavals of disturbed nature.

The streets of Rome were comparatively deserted with the swiftly approaching dusk, and it occurred to Tristan to seek the Monk of Cluny in his abode on Mount Aventine whither he had doubtlessly betaken himself after his sermon in the Basilica of St. Peter's. For ever and ever the memory of lost Helayne dominated his thoughts, and, while he poured out prayers for peace at the shrines of the saints, with the eyes of the soul he saw not the image of the Virgin, but of the woman for the sake of whom he had come hither and, having come, knew not where to find that which he sought.

From a passing friar Tristan learned the direction of Mount Aventine, where, among the ruins near the newly erected Church of Santa Maria of the Aventine, Odo of Cluny abode. Tristan could not but marvel at the courage of the man whose life was in hourly jeopardy and who, in the face of an ever present menace could put his trust so completely in Heaven as to brave the danger without even a guard. —

Taking the road indicated by the friar, Tristan pursued his solitary path. In seeking the Monk of Cluny his purpose was a twofold one, certainty with regard to his own guilt, in having loved where love was a crime, and counsel with regard to the woman who, he instinctively felt, would not stop at her first innuendos.

As Tristan proceeded on his way his feelings and motives became more and more perplexed, and so lost was he in thought that, without heeding his way or noting the scattered arches and porticoes, he lost himself in the wilderness of the Mount of Cloisters. The hush was intensified rather than broken by the ever louder peals of thunder, which reverberated through the valleys, and the Stygian darkness, broken at intervals by vivid flashes of lightning, seemed to hem him in, as a wall of basalt.

Gradually all traces of a road vanished. On both sides rose woody acclivities, covered with ruins and melancholy cypresses, whose spectral outlines seemed to stretch into gaunt immensity, in the sheen of the lightnings which grew more and more frequent. The wind rose sobbingly among the trees, and a few scattered rain-drops began to warn Tristan that a shelter of any sort would be preferable to exposing himself to the onslaught of the elements.

Entering the first group of ruins he came to, he penetrated through a series of roofless corridors and chambers into what seemed a dark cylindrical well at the farther extremity of which there gleamed an infinitesimal light. Even through the clamor of the storm that raged outside there came to him the sound of voices from the interior.

Impelled as much by curiosity as by the consideration of his own safety Tristan crept slowly towards the aperture. As he did so, the light vanished, but a crimson glow, as of smouldering embers, succeeded, and heavy fumes of incense, wafted to his nostrils, informed him that his fears regarding the character of the abode were but too well founded. He cowered motionless in the gloom until the storm had abated, determined to return at some time to discover what mysteries the place concealed.

A fresher breeze had sprung up, driving the thunderclouds to northward, and from a clear azure the stars shone in undimmed lustre upon the dreaming world beneath.

For a moment Tristan stood gazing at the immense desolation, the wilderness of arches, shattered columns and ivy-covered porticoes. The hopelessness of finding among these relics of antiquity the monk's hermitage impressed itself at once upon him. Pausing irresolutely, he would probably have retraced his steps, had he not chanced to see some one emerge from the adjacent ruins, apparently bound in the same direction.

Whether it was a presentiment of evil, or whether the fear bred of the region and the hour of the night prompted the precaution, Tristan receded into the shadows and watched the approaching form, in whom he recognized Basil, the Grand Chamberlain. He at once resolved to follow him and the soft ground aided the execution of his design.

The way wound through a veritable labyrinth of ruins, nevertheless he kept his eyes on the tall dark form, stalking through the night before him. At times an owl or bat whirled over his head. With these exceptions he encountered no living thing among the ruins to break the hush of the sepulchral desolation.

The distance between them gradually diminished. Tristan saw the other turn to the right into a wilderness of grottoes, the tortuous corridors of which were at times almost choked up with weeds and wild flowers, but when he reached the spot, there was no vestige of a human presence. Basil had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him.

Possessed by a sudden fear that some harm might be intended the monk and remembering certain veiled threats he had overheard against his life, he proceeded more slowly and cautiously by the dim light of the stars.

Before long he found himself before a flight of grass grown steps that led up to a series of desolate chambers which, although roofless and choked with rank vegetation, still bore traces of their ancient splendor. These corridors led to a clumsy door, standing half ajar, from beyond which shone the faint glimmer of a light.

After having reached the threshold Tristan paused.

High, oval-shaped apertures admitted light and air at once, and the dying embers of a charcoal fire revealed a chamber, singularly void of all the comforts of existence. Almost in the centre of this chamber, before a massive stone table, upon which was spread a huge tome, sat the Monk of Cluny, shading his eyes with his right hand and reading half aloud.

For a few moments Tristan regarded the recluse breathlessly, as if he dreaded disturbing his meditations, when Odo suddenly raised his eyes and saw the dark form standing in the frame of the door.

The look which he bestowed upon Tristan convinced the latter immediately of the doubt which the monk harbored regarding the quality of his belated caller, a doubt which he deemed well to disperse before venturing into the monk's retreat.

Therefore, without abandoning his position, he addressed the inmate of the chamber and, as he spoke, the tone of his voice seemed to carry conviction, that the speaker was sincere.

"Your pardon, father," Tristan stammered, "for one who is seeking you in an hour of grave doubt and misgiving."

The monk's ear had caught the accent of a foreign tongue. He beckoned to Tristan to enter, rising from the bench on which he had been seated.

"You come at a strange hour," he said, not without a note of suspicion, which did not escape Tristan. "Your business must be weighty indeed to embolden one, a stranger on Roman soil, to penetrate the desolate Aventine when the world sleeps and murder stalks abroad."

"I am here for a singular purpose, father, – having obeyed the impulse of the moment, after listening to your sermon at St. Peter's."

"But that was hours ago," interposed the monk, resting his hand on the stone table, as he faced his visitor.

"I lost my way – nor did I meet any one to point it," Tristan replied, as he advanced and kissed the monk's hand reverently.

"What is your business, my son?" asked the monk.

Tristan hesitated a moment. At last he spoke.

"I came to Rome not of my own desire, – but obeying the will of another that imposed the pilgrimage. I have sinned, father – and yet there are moments, when I would almost glory in that

which I have done. It was my purpose, while at St. Peter's to confess to the Grand Penitentiary. But – I know not why – I chose you instead, knowing that you would give truth for truth."

The monk regarded his visitor, wondering what one so young and possessed of so frank a countenance might have done amiss.

"You are a pilgrim?" he queried at last.

"For my sins – "

"Of French descent, yet not a Frenchman – "

Tristan started at the monk's penetration.

"From Provence, father," he stammered, "the land of songs and flowers – "

"And women – " the monk interposed gravely.

"There are women everywhere, father."

"There are women and women. Perchance I should say 'Woman.'"

Tristan bowed his head in silence.

The monk cast a penetrating glance at his visitor. He understood the gesture and the silence with that quick comprehension that came to him who was to reform Holy Catholic Church from the abuse of decades – as an intuition.

"But now, my son, speak of yourself," said the monk after a pause.

"I lived at the court of Avalon, the home of Love and Troubadours."

"Of Troubadours?" the monk interposed dreamily. "A worldly lot – given to extolling free love and what not – "

"They may sing of love and passion, father, but their lives are pure and chaste," Tristan ventured to remonstrate.

"You are a Troubadour?" came the swift query.

"In my humble way." Tristan replied with bowed head.

The monk nodded.

"Go on – go on!"

"At the court of Avalon I met the consort of Count Roger de Laval. He was much absent, on one business or another, – the chase – feuds with neighboring barons. – He chose me to help the Lady Hellayne to while away the long hours during his absence – "

"His wife! What folly!"

"The Count de Laval is one of those men who would tempt the heavens themselves to fall upon him rather than to air himself beneath them. That his fair young wife, doing his will among men given to the chase and drinking bouts, and the society of tainted damsels, should long for something higher, she, whom he regarded with the high air of the lord of creation – that she should dare dream of some intangible something, for which she hungered, and craved and starved – "

"If you are about to confess, as I conceive, to a wrong you have done to this same lord," interposed the monk, "your sin is not less black if you paint him you have wronged in odious tints."

"Nevertheless I am most sorry to do so, father," Tristan interposed, "else could I not make you understand to its full extent his folly and conceit by placing me, a creature of emotion, day by day beside so fair a being as his young wife. Therefore I would explain."

"It needs some explanation truly!" the monk said sternly.

"The Count de Laval is a man whose conceit is so colossal, father, that he would never think it possible that any one could fail in love and admiration at the shrine which he built for himself. A man of supreme arrogance and self-righteousness."

"Sad, indeed – " mused the monk.

"Our thoughts were pagan, drifting back to the days when the world was peopled with sylvan creatures – with the deities of field and stream – "

"Mere heathen dreams," interposed the monk. "Go on! Go on!"

"I then felt within myself the impulse to throw forth a minstrelsy prophetic of a new world resembling that old which had vanished. It was not to be a mere chant of wrath or exultation – it was to sound the joy of the earth, of the air, of the sun, of the moon and the stars, – the song of the birds, the perfume of the flowers – "

"Words that have but little meaning left in this stern world wherein we dwell – "

"They had meaning for me, father. Also for her. They were to both of us a bright and mystical ideal, in the fumes of which we steeped our souls, – our very selves, till our natures seemed to know no hurt, seemed incapable of evil – "

"Alas – the greater the pity!"

"I was sure of myself. She was sure of me. I loved her. Her presence was to me as some intoxication of the soul – some rare perfume that captivates the senses, raising the spirit to heights too rarefied for breath – "

"And you fell?"

The words came from the monk's lips, slowly, inexorably, as the knell of fate.

"I – all, but fell!" stammered Tristan. "One day in a chamber far removed from the inhabited part of the castle we sat and read. And suddenly she laid her face close to mine and with eyes in whose mystic depths lurked something more than I had ever seen in them before asked why, through Fate's high necessity, two should forever wander side by side, longing for each other – their longing unsatisfied – when the hour was theirs – "

Again Tristan paused.

The monk regarded him in silence.

"You fell?" the question came again.

"In that moment, father, I was no more myself, no more the one whose art is sacred and alone upon the mountain summit of his soul. Its freedom and aspirations were no more. I was undone, a tumbled, wingless thing. My pride had fled. Long, long I looked into her eyes, and when she put her wonderful white arms about me, I, in a dizzy moment of desire, dropped my face to hers. Then was love all uttered. Straightway I arose. I clasped her in my arms. I kissed – I kissed her – "

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