

GALLIZIER NATHAN

THE HILL OF
VENUS

Nathan Gallizier

The Hill of Venus

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

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

– *JAMES THOMSON.*

Book the First

THE SACRIFICE

CHAPTER I

THE SUMMONS

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

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

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

To eastward the towering promontory of Monte Gargano, with the shrines of St. Michael, patron of the Sea, rose sheer and precipitous from the restless element which laved its base. The milk-white Apulian towns of Foggia, Trani and Bitonto faded into the horizon to southward, and the shadowy outlines of Castel del Monte, rising upon a conical hill in the remote Basilicata, terminated the view to westward.

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

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

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

Reining in his steed with a convulsive start, which caused the startled animal to rear and champ at the bit, he paused and looked across the vale. He had reached a point at which the forest descended into one of those deep ravines from which arise the rocks on which most of the monasteries of Central Italy are built. On the brow of the opposite hill, arising from a grove of cypresses and pines, the airy shafts of the cloisters of San Cataldo pierced the translucent air. The uplifted cross caught the last rays of the sun, whose misty, crimson ball was slowly sinking below the world's dark rim.

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

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

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

A shadowy wilderness encompassed the ascent to the cloisters, whose white walls were sharply outlined against the greenish-blue of the sky. The scene which on all sides met the youth's gaze seemed almost unreal. Laden with perfume was the air, of jessamine, of styrax, of roses heavy in the breathless evening glow. Here and there, under drooping branches, he passed a wooden cross, rudely carved, marking the resting-place of some unknown pilgrim, or early martyr of the faith. Wandering ivy wound its tendrils round the faded or half-effaced inscriptions, and ilex foliage drooped thickly over the Memento Mori on the roadside.

The hour added to the beauty of the scene.

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

At last the summit was reached.

Francesco stopped before the massive gates of San Cataldo.

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

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

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

Then, looking up, he shouted:

"One who would see the Prior without delay."

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

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

With this enigmatical speech the small window above was shut.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My father!" Francesco whispered softly.

Gregorio Villani, Grand Master of the Order of the Knights Hospitallers, who, in the midst of his journey from Rome to Bari, had been stricken down with a deadly fever, opened his eyes. In those gray orbs the old-time fire still lingered and when he spoke, weak though was his voice, the wonted ring of command still dominated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The monks thought he was muttering a prayer.

In reality his thoughts had fled from the present hour to the memory of the scenes he had left at the gay and pleasure-loving Court of Avellino, scenes of a garden and balcony, where he had been

went to whisper his hopes and thoughts into the ears of a proud girl, whose favors, so manifestly bestowed upon himself, were vainly and eagerly sought by youths of nobler birth and unquestioned parentage, when a mysterious something recalled him to the reality of the moment.

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

The latter seemed to feel his presence and looked up.

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

Francesco bowed his head.

The elder Villani raised his thin white hands.

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

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

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

The Knights Hospitallers had long assumed the defence of the Christian world against the ever bolder encroaching hordes of Islam; they had constituted themselves the guardians of the Holy Sepulchre, and Gregorio Villani had not shirked the duties which the fulfillment of his early ambition had imposed upon him. On his way to Rome, to rouse the Pope to the proclamation of another crusade, he had stopped at Avellino in obedience to the voice of his heart, which yearned for the embrace of his own flesh and blood.

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

And his time had come.

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

But ere he reached the port of Bari, whence he was to embark for the Holy Land, he fell prey to a malignant fever, which compelled him to forego his journey and to place himself under the care of the monks of San Cataldo.

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

He could not die in peace with the blot upon his conscience, the blot from the womb of a woman, – the blot called Francesco. Ever since he had again set eyes on the youth, carefree and happy among his companions, the memory of his own sin had been present with him. The fear of punishment in the life to come increased with every day; the dread of damnation everlasting chased the slumber from his eyes, and the man who had defied the combined forces of the Caliph, trembled at the thought of his own last hour on earth. Vainly he had racked his brain for some method of atonement which would dispel the ever present fear of being barred from his seat in the Heaven of the

Blessed, which would assure him immunity from the lake of everlasting fire. At last, like a revelation, it dawned upon him: clearly he saw his course. There was the one way, – there was no choice. A sacrifice must be made to save his soul, a sacrifice by one near and dear, – yet Gregorio Villani had no life claims upon any one, save his son. His son! And, – as according to the Scriptures the sins of the father shall be visited upon the children even unto the third generation and the fourth, – why, according to divine permission, might not the son be requested to take and bear the consequences of his father's sin?

Francesco stood by his father's side, glad that the decisive moment had come at last, trusting that his gloomy forebodings might be dispelled. Gregorio Villani was looking at him in silence, with fearful eyes and slightly parted, expectant lips. Finally, lifting his hand, the old man pointed to a wooden settle. Francesco understood, and, placing it near the bed, seated himself thereon, fixing his eyes on his father's face.

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

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

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

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

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

"It was a grievous sin!" —

Francesco bowed his head.

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

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

He paused and looked searchingly into Francesco's eyes.

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

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

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

"Nor had I, when I was at your age," returned the elder Villani, reverting to the ill-fated theme.

"But I think of it now, – for I needs must. When one stands on the threshold of eternity, face to face with his Creator, then indeed does man begin to bethink himself. Even though a priest might have absolved me of my transgression, my own conscience could not! The vows of the Church are sacred. And now, from the height of time, I look down through the gallery of years. My prayers of anguish and repentance have brought no peace to my heart. Ever and ever remorse returns. Purgatory opens before my inner gaze and Hell yawns to receive my soul!"

Again the Grand Master paused, his strength failing rapidly.

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

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

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

"I am not Arnold of Brescia, to soothe my conscience with idle quibbles," he said after a pause.

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

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

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

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

A sudden rush of pain decided the matter.

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

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

"Become a monk!" —

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

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

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

"A monk!"

The old man regarded him anxiously.

"I did not jest!"

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

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

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

"There is no time!" Francesco exclaimed aghast.

Then all the blood rushed to his heart.

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

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

The youth sprang from his seat.

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

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

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

"Deem you, that I have not thought of it, that I have not weighed in the balance all your objections to the life of the cloister when I asked this thing of you? You say you are of the court! You came for the sunlight, not the shadow! What man does not! But you forget, there is a force that

shapes our ends, – you forget – your origin, – your birth! I am your father and my sin is yours! We are both impure in the sight of God! I have opened a means of salvation for both of us – the Way of the Cross. A glorious way it is, for by it my soul shall belong to you! In the sight of men you are as nothing! The blot of your birth can never be effaced! But you are my son! Therefore, here on my death-bed I command you to leave this world, that you may open the way to another, – a better one, – to both of us, – to both of us, Francesco, – to you and to me!"

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

At last Francesco raised his head.

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

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

Francesco again relapsed into silence.

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

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

The sick man breathed quickly.

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

"The Pontiff!" Francesco uttered with a start. "Pope Clement IV is the mortal enemy of those to whom I have pledged my troth, to whom I owe allegiance. I am a Ghibelline!" he concluded, as if struck by a new thought. "I can never become a monk!"

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

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

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

He covered his face with his hands.

"What say you?" asked his father drearily.

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

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

A moan came from Francesco's lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

THE PLEDGE

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

The minutes dragged. The floating wicks in the quaint stone lamps wavered and flickered restlessly in their sconces, while the uneven light from the cresset-lantern, hung in the centre of the chamber, cast distorted shadows over floor and ceiling. To all present the wait was tedious. To the strange friar whose eyes roamed ever again towards the sick-chamber, it seemed interminable, and ever and anon the monk at his side leaned uneasily towards him. "Gregorio Villani will find the task no easy one. He had better left it to one of us!"

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

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

"My father desires your presence."

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

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

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

"You have consented?" he whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He looked imploringly at the youth, who stood by with pale face and eyes from which every gleam of gladness had faded. When Francesco made no reply, the strange monk stepped to a table on which there were scattered sundry writing utensils, and dipping a pen in a composition serving as ink, brought it to Francesco.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of my going?" he said slowly. "Surely I am not yet to go! Am I not to wait at least until –"

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

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

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

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

Francesco glanced from one to the other: he understood.

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

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

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

Francesco turned silently to leave the room. Presently something, a quiver of feeling, stopped him. He hesitated for a moment, then he returned to the bedside, bending over it and gazing sadly into his father's face.

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

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

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

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

"Was the struggle great?" questioned the monk.

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

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

There was a brief pause, during which the elder Villani seemed to collect his waning energies. The monk's speech had roused in him a spirit of resistance, of defiance. Who were they that would dispose of the life of his own flesh and blood? It was too late, to undo what he had done. But it should not pass without a protest.

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

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

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

He paused with a sob, then he continued:

"Will the repose of my soul, which I have purchased with this immeasurable sacrifice, insure her own in the great beyond? What will she say to me, when we meet in the realm of shadows, when the plaint of her child is wafted to her in the fumes of the incense, while his trembling hands swing the censer and he curses the day when he saw the light of life?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The monk pondered a while, then shook his head.

"It were hardly wise. Francesco has signed the pledge and will not break his oath. He must himself inform the Apulian court of his decision, of his choice."

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

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

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

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

The monk laid stress on the last words.

The elder Villani was startled. Yet he understood.

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

The monk smiled, – a subtle, inward smile.

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

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

Gregorio Villani's prophetic words were to be fulfilled.

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

Before him stood the shrunken form of Fra Girolamo.

With a deep sigh, he returned to reality.

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

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

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

"Conduct me to him!" he then said to the friar, who preceded him in silence to the death-chamber.

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

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

When he rose at last, the watcher saw all the young life go out of his face, which suddenly grew old and cold. Light and color seemed simultaneously to depart from eyes and lips, and his limbs

seemed hardly able to sustain him upright. After a pause he dared not break, for dread of revealing his sudden feeling, the youth's lifeless voice was raised in the dreary monotone of questioning.

"When will they take him away?"

The monk came nearer.

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

A silence fell between them.

Again Francesco spoke.

"The dial points to something like noon?"

The monk nodded.

"When will you ride?"

"At night-fall."

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

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

Then he added:

"I ride alone?"

"Alone!"

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

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

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

He sank down beside the bier.

But try as he might, he could not pray.

Thus the monk left him. —

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

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

CHAPTER III

VISTAS

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

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

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

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

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

A mysterious silence was brooding over the immense expanse, which became more desolate with every step. The wide plains reposed in a melancholy fertility; flowering thistles were swarming with countless butterflies; dry fennel, wild and withered, rioted round the scattered remnants of broken columns, on whose summits wild birds of prey were screaming.

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

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

The knowledge that there lay before him to southward some fifty miles of solitude nevertheless lightened the heavy burden in Francesco's breast. The oppression of the stone walls of San Cataldo had, in a manner, passed away. This day, at least, was his; this day he was to be alone and free. Yet, as he rode, with the slowly diminishing distance his momentary relief went from him again. He seemed to himself to be passing through a mighty sea of desolate thoughts, whose waves swept over him with resistless power, leaving him utterly exhausted when they had passed. The realization of his impending fate, his present position, again took him by storm. By sharp spasms the picture

of his future life and its dreary loneliness rose before his eyes, then departed as suddenly as it had come, leaving behind it a black void. The sensation was almost insufferable. In the periods of mental numbness, when even the desire for struggle seemed to have been swallowed up by the black gulf of his despair, he wondered vaguely if his brain had been turned by the sudden prospect of life's changes. The sunny, care-free days in the Castle of Avellino, the companionship of those of his own age, others whom he loved and esteemed, the hopes and ambitions nurtured and fostered in an untainted heart: – all these he saw slowly vanishing like some Fata Morgana of the desert.

Now, for the first time, discord had come, and the endless vibration of its echoes was to make his life miserable, perhaps unendurable. Created eminently for the life in the sunny sphere of a court, young, handsome of face and form, easily influenced by friendship, easily fascinated by beauty, all environment suited to the qualities and endowments of nature was suddenly to be snatched away. He was standing utterly alone in a strange land, in a new atmosphere, in which at great distances, dim, unknown figures were eyeing him, invisible, yet terrible walls waiting to enclose him and his youth as in a tomb. His world was gone. The new one was filled with shadows. Yet – why rebel, until the light had broken upon the horizon, until the worst and best of it all was known to him? At least, in obeying the commands of his father, he had done what men would call right, – and more than right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

out of the gates of San Cataldo. The endurance of his steed, like his own, was well-nigh spent, and he eagerly accepted the pilgrim's offer.

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

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

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

"Sotto acqua e sotto viento
Alla noce di Benevento,"

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

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

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

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

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

That his guide was no stranger to the Abbey and that his vocation had not been exercised for the first time on the present occasion, soon became apparent to Francesco. For the captain of the Provencals treated him with a familiarity which argued for a closer acquaintance, while the native insolence of a follower of Anjou aired itself in the lurid mirth which the pilgrim seemed to provoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His companion, of stouter build and a trifle taller, seemed more than ten years younger. His downcast visage was now and then lighted or distorted by a forced smile, when by chance he gave way to that impulse at all, which was never the case, save in response to certain secret signs that seemed

to pass between him and the other stranger. This personage was armed with a sword and a dagger, but, underneath their plain habits, Francesco observed that they both wore concealed a Jazeran, or flexible shirt of linked mail.

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

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

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

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

Francesco regarded the speaker curiously.

"If your offer is made in good faith, I thank you," he said. "But I fear I should be altogether unfit for the service of your master!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Perchance you boast a better?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The sight is in no ways strange, fair youth," he drawled, his eyelids narrowing as, from under the shade of his headgear, he ominously glared at Francesco. "When the summer fades into autumn, and the moonlight nights are long, he who then lives may see clusters of ten, even twenty such acorns dangling from the branches. For," he continued, and his voice grew cold and hard as steel, "each rogue that hangs there, is a thief, a traitor to the Church, an excommunicated wretch! These are the tokens of Anjou's justice, and this is the fate which awaits a Ghibelline spy!"

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

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

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

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

Too proud to ask his tormentors for the cause of his treatment, which they would in all probability withhold, Francesco, now on the verge of mental and physical collapse, found himself dragged across a court at the remoteness of which the walls of the Abbey converged into a sort of round tower. While the host of the inn, heaping a million imprecations on the head of his newly arrived guest, and bemoaning his unpaid reckoning, unlocked a strong oaken door at the command of the Provencal leader, Francesco stood by as one too utterly dazed to resent the Calabrian's insults, and scarcely had the grinding sound of the door turning on its rusty hinges fallen on his ears, than he found himself rudely grasped and pushed into a dark, prison-like cell, apparently without any light from without. He stumbled, fell, and his ear caught the rude laughter of those without, a mirth his

own endeavors to scramble to his feet had incited. For they had not released his arms, and his frantic efforts to free them from their bonds exhausted the last remnant of his strength. With a heart-rending moan he dragged himself over the wet and slimy floor to the wall, heard the key turn in the lock, and found himself alone in almost Stygian darkness.

"To be hanged at sunrise!"

The words rang in his ears like the knell of fate. For what crime had he been condemned unheard, without defence? He was too weary to think. All he knew and vaguely felt was, that it was all over, and with the thought there came a numbness almost akin to indifference, a weariness engendered by the double ordeal he had undergone in so short a space of time. What if the spark of life were to be suddenly extinguished, of a life that had become utterly without its own recompense? What if this quick release had been decreed by fate? But to die like a malefactor, the prey of the vulture and the birds of ill-omen, which he had seen coursing above the bodies of those so recently executed; – no, – not this death at least, not this! With a last frantic effort of the faintly returning tide of life he tried to release himself of his shackles. But his efforts served only to drive the bonds deeper into his own flesh, and at last he desisted, his head falling back limply against the cold wet stone of the wall.

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

A strange dream haunted his pillow of anguish.

He was at the Witches' Sabbath at Benevento. The moon shone with a purple lustre on a dreary heather. The meadow-grasses rustled softly in the night wind; will-o'-the-wisps danced round old tree-trunks gleaming with rottenness, while the owl, the bittern, the goat-sucker mourned plaintively among the reeds.

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

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

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

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

The sleeper stirred uneasily, yet deeper grew the dream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another moment, and she sank lifeless into his embrace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the sound of the monk's voice Francesco gave a start, but, as he made no reply, the friar bent over him anew, in an endeavor to scan the features of one so obdurate as to refuse his ministrations.

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

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

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

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

The friar enjoined him to be silent and arose, to fetch a repast, but when he found that Francesco's restlessness was not likely to be assuaged by this method, he slowly and cautiously informed him of the events which had transpired, since he had visited him in his cell, to accompany him, on what was to have been, his last walk on earth.

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

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

The abuse and the insults to which he had been subjected since his arrival at Benevento, and the dire peril from which he had so narrowly escaped, had exasperated Francesco to a degree, that he was trembling in every limb with the memory of the outrage, and he vowed a heavy reckoning against the fiend who, unheard and untried, would have sent him to an ignominious death. Thereupon the friar informed him, that the Provençals had departed shortly after he had been released from his prison, and exhausted, Francesco fell back among the cushions into a deep and dreamless slumber, while the friar resumed his office of watchfulness by his bedside.

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV PROSERPINA

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

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

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

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

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

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

"For his departure?"

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

"You have not heard?"

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

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

Francesco's hand had gone to his head.

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

"I will see the Viceroy on the morrow!"

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

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

If it were true! If the ecstatic dream of his life might be realized! If face to face he might meet Conradino, the imperial youth, the rightful heir and ruler of these enchanting Southlands which smarted under Anjou's insufferable yoke!

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

A cold hand suddenly clutched his heart.

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

Too late – too late!

He arose, and, opening a chest in the wall of his chamber, Francesco took from it a faded flower wrapped in its now dry cloth. The former scarlet glory was gone, the petals were purple and old. He recalled the joy with which he had received it. A week ago he would have proclaimed it to all the world. Now the rose and his life were alike. Now he was conscious only of a sickening, benumbing bitterness of spirit, as he laid the faded flower tenderly into its former place. Then, lighting a cresset lantern in a niche in the wall, he turned away to look through his possessions, to pack what little he might take with him on the morrow. And the first necessity which came to his hand was a small, sharp, jewel-hilted dagger, – Ilaria's gift.

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

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

The garden was flooded with that golden moonlight which creates in the beholder the illusion of unreality; for not in the midnight dark, but where radiance is warmest and intensest, are spirits most naturally expected by the sensitive mind.

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

As he looked up he met the gaze of Francesco.

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

A strange light leaped into Francesco's eyes.

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

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

"And who is Proserpina?"

"Ilaria Caselli."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And your mission?"

"It is accomplished!"

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

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

"Who told you?"

He pointed in the direction where his informant had disappeared.

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

Ilaria pouted.

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

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

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

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

Something clutched at Francesco's throat.

"I may not always be near you!"

She arched her eyebrows.

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

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

"You will not leave me again?"

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

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

All the color had faded from Francesco's lips.

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

"He woos me!" she said low.

A fierce light leaped into Francesco's eyes. She laid a tranquillizing finger on his arm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From his vantage point on the terrace Francesco's burning gaze, riveted on the pageant, followed the graceful swaying form of Proserpina with the pale face and lustrous eyes upturned to him, while the procession circled round the terrace, and a Wan Delusion, following directly in her wake, flung up her shadowy arms and groaned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She swayed towards him timidly.

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

Her tones blended with the murmur of the stream.

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

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

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

"Ilaria!" he called.

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

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

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

She came to him slowly, holding out both hands.

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

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

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

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

Francesco looked at him coldly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Francesco turned to the girl who still clung to him. She knew the look on his face, but there was in it an expression she had never seen before, penetrating, sorrowful, crushed. His breath came and went in gasps, yet he spoke not.

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

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

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

He held up his hand deprecatingly.

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

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

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

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

He broke off and closed his eyes.

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

"It is a simple matter!"

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

"Forgive me! Forgive!"

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

Then slowly they retraced their steps towards the castle.

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

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

CHAPTER V

WAVES OF DESTINY

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

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

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

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

Slowly, with the demeanor of one whose heart is not in what he does, he arrayed himself in his splendid court costume, as if preparing to share the gladness of his companions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

These two seated themselves at the board at once, watching the others as they entered. The women and their escorts, who had entered laughing and chatting among themselves, grew silent as

they beheld the Viceroy already seated. One girl, garbed in a flowing gown of sea-green damask, entered the room alone. As she advanced to her place, after the prescribed courtesy to the Viceroy, her dark eyes searchingly scanned the throng of pages. Apparently she did not find among them the one she sought.

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

"Has not Francesco returned?" queried the Viceroy.

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

"Here are the monks!"

"And there – at the door –"

Conrad Capecé followed the direction of Lancia's gaze.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Count Capecé bade him arise, saying audibly:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Francesco!"

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

"Your father is better of his illness?"

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

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

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

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

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

With an effort Francesco spoke:

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

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

A silent nod from the Viceroy bade him proceed.

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

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

Now, with a quiet gentleness that caused him to start painfully, he felt the latter's hand laid almost tenderly upon his arm. He gave a startled look into the frank, kindly face of the Apulian, and the response that met his eyes forced a swift wave of color into his bloodless cheeks. He would have almost preferred the rude brutality of Anjou's men to this generosity which left him no weapons for defence. He moved uneasily where he stood, and his breath came fast.

He was very near to breaking.

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

Francesco gave an involuntary start.

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

The Viceroy nodded.

"The better so! You ride with us!"

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

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

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

Count Capecé eyed him curiously.

"What business may that be, more cogent than our own? On the hoof-beats of our horses hang the destinies of a kingdom! None may falter, none may turn back! I pry not into the nature of the office you are bidden to perform. Yet all personal interests should be suspended before the one all-absorbing task, that beckons us towards the Po!" —

"This business may not wait!"

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

A shadow flitted across the Viceroy's brow.

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

A choking sensation had seized the youth.

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

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

There was a moment's silence ere Francesco replied:

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

Count Capecé started.

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

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

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

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

"For what purpose?"

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

He spoke the words in a hard and dry tone.

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

"You said, your choice?"

"My choice!"

"Ingrate! Renegade!"

Francesco bowed his head.

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

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

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

The Viceroy pointed silently to the door.

As one dazed, Francesco crept to his chamber.

There with a great sob he sank into a settle.

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

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

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

He arose and stepped to the window.

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

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

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

CHAPTER VI

THE BROKEN TROTH

SPRING triumphed with a vaunting pageant in the park of Avellino, where the gravelled walks were snowy beneath the light of the higher risen moon, and were in shadows transmuted to dim, violet tints. The sombre foliage of yew and box and ilex contrasted strangely with the pale glow of the young grass, sloping in emerald tinted terraces down to where the lake shimmered through the trees.

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

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

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

Francesco who had been waiting, his heart in his throat, rose with a sigh of relief, mingled with a mighty dread. Would she understand? Would she grasp the enormity of the sacrifice he must make on the altar of duty and obedience? Could she guess, could she read the terrible pain that racked his heart and soul at the thought of parting, – a parting for life, – for all eternity? For never, even if by chance they should again cross each other's path in life, could there be aught between them save a look; their lips must be mute forevermore and the voices of their hearts hushed.

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