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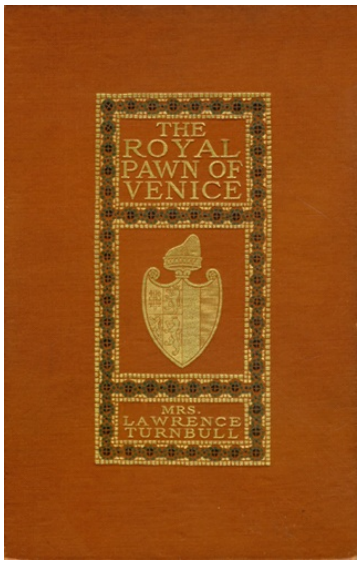

THE ROYAL PAWN

OF VENICE

CATERINA CORNADO, QUEEN OF CYPRUS FROM THE PAINTING BY TITIAN

THE ROYAL PAWN OF VENICE

A Romance of Cyprus

By

MRS. LAWRENCE TURNBULL

Author of

"*The Golden Book of Venice*"

PHILADELPHIA & LONDON

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DEDICATED

BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION OF

HER MAJESTY

TO

MARGHERITA OF SAVOY

THE BELOVED FIRST QUEEN OF UNITED ITALY

Contents

Time:

The latter half of the XV. Century.

THE ROYAL PAWN

OF VENICE

I

Among the day-dreams of the Rulers of Venice the island of Cyprus had long loomed large and fair—Cyprus, the happy isle of romance, *l'isola fortunata*, sea-girdled, clothed with dense forests of precious woods, veined with inexhaustible mines of rich metals; a very garden of luscious fruits, garlanded with ever-blooming flowers—a land flowing with milk and honey and steeped in the fragrance of wines that a god might covet.

Kypros—Paphos—a theme for poets, where Aphrodite rose from the foam of the sea, and the fabled groves of the mysteries of Venus gave place to primitive shrines of Christian worship, while innumerable Grecian legends were merged in early Christian traditions, imparting some of their own tint of fable, yet baptizing anew the groves and hillsides to sanctity. Beautiful hillsides, rippling down to the sea-coasts; and plains, nestling among the mountain slopes, littered with remnants of vast temples of superb pagan workmanship and with priceless pre-historic remains: [Pg 2] wonderful, ancient marbles, time-mellowed and crumbling, inwrought rather with barbaric symbols of splendor than with the tender grace of poetic suggestion.

And this land of many races and dynasties, of conflicting ideals and religions, as of many tongues—where domination was largely a matter of the stronger hand—still held among the nations her ancient soubriquet of *the happy isle*.

But less for her romance and beauty than because this *notissima famæ insulæ* was a possession to be envied by a diplomatic nation, since its position lent it importance, the Republic had looked upon it with longing eyes—and because of its commerce, which equalled that of Venice, long ago the far-seeing Senate had sought to purchase it from the Greek Emperor, but the agreement had come to naught by treachery of the Emperor's son.

Nevertheless, Cyprus had not been forgotten; and the time for Venice to make good this remembrance had now come uppermost on the calendar of the years.

So they were ready to give rapt attention to the flattering proposals of the young Cyprian Monarch, as presented by his dignified ambassador, the Signor Filippo Mastachelli, when he appeared before the Signoria with the retinue and splendor of an Eastern Prince, bearing gifts of jewels meet for a royal bride, to claim the hand of a patrician maid of Venice, to make her Queen of Cyprus.

Janus the Second was young and brave, the idol of a party of his people—and where was the kingdom in which there were known to be no discontents? He was upheld by the great Sultan of [Pg 3] Egypt to whom he owed suzerainty and, if in disfavor of the Holy Father for this allegiance, Venice had always permitted Rome to question her own supremacy and was not disconcerted thereby. He was beautiful as a young god, with a face full of laughing appeal, and not less charming than the miniature set in crystals which Mastachelli bore among the wedding gifts; and the grace of him could not be matched, for his power of winning, when he had set his heart to the task. In whatever deed of skill and daring his prowess went before his knights and nobles—as, from childhood up, in whatever teaching from books or men, he had distanced all his comrades—with that strange facility and fascination with which the Genius of Cyprus might have endowed her favorite in that lavish land, beloved of the gods, where her great sea-bound plains were billows of flowers under a long summer sky, and Nature's gifts came crowding, each upon each, in bewildering redundancy.

Laughter-loving, born to conquer, quick to reward, Janus was tender and generous to a fault; for it was whispered that he could take what lay nearest to give to those who offered him adoring service on his triumphal march, and that the murmur of the wronged belonged to the more serious side of life for which his full-flowing Greek blood had small patience. Such strange, unlikely tales one's enemy may tell!

And for his religion—be it Greek, or Latin, or whatever else—had he not been named Archbishop of Nikosia at the responsible age of fifteen, before he had exchanged the Episcopal [Pg 4] Mitre for the Royal Crown?

These things were told, in all truth, of Janus II, King of Cyprus: and if some others were known, they were not discussed. For the monarch had lost his heart to the rare charm of the youthful Caterina, niece to a Venetian noble who had become his friend in Cyprus, and had more than once stood his helper with good Venetian gold; and who, in innocence or wile, had one day given him sight of the girl's fair face with its tender flush like a flower in spring, painted with rare skill by the greatest artist of Venice. The breeze might have toyed with that mist of golden hair, and the great dark eyes—softly luminous—had the expectancy of a gazelle awaiting the joy of the daydawn. She was daughter to one of the most ancient and noble of the patrician houses, in direct descent, so the Cornari claimed, of the Cornelii of Rome.

"There need be no haste," the Signor Andrea had said lightly, as he returned the miniature to its case blazoned in pearls with the arms of the Cornari, "for the child is but fourteen, though she hath the loveliness of twenty. But it is the way with our patricians of Venice, and Messer Marco of the Cornari, father to Caterina, is already planning with an ancient noble house of the elder branch with estates of unknown wealth, for the marriage of his daughter. Thus the fancy of the King must pass—there will be another—in Venice or Cyprus—the world is large."

"Nay, none so beautiful," the King made answer; "and for me none other. And for the matter of birth——"

"Naught hindereth that she might be Queen," Messer Andrea replied with nonchalance, having a scheme somewhat more deeply laid than the casual dropping of the miniature would seem to imply. "For the matter of birth—it is a trifle—and doubtless the Republic would make her, by adoption, Daughter to Venice—if there were aught in a created title to enhance her princely name with semblance of royalty. But there are already quarterings enough to match with the arms of Cyprus, and the Lusignans are a house far less ancient than the Cornelii." [Pg 5]

Messer Andrea could say things with a certain facile grace that kept them from rankling, and at the moment the utterance of this truth was of consequence.

The King threw him a quick glance, half in amusement, half in admiration of his easy insolence, while Messer Andrea placidly explained that the Casa Cornaro was one of the twelve original families which composed the ancient ruling class of the Republic.

"And if the matter hath an interest for your Majesty," he continued, "our great-grandfather on our father's side, was that Marco Cornaro who was Doge of Venice; and the most noble Lady Fiorenza, mother to the child Caterina and wife to my brother Marco, was grand-daughter to Comnene, Emperor of Trebizonde. But that counteth little," he added magnanimously; "since the Empire of Trebizonde hath ceased to be."

"For the matter of birth—verily, as thou hast said, 'it is a trifle,'" the King admitted with a laugh: "but I must create thee Master to the Pedigree of the House of Lusignan—a right royal post—and at thy discretion thou mayest find or *make* it of a color noble enough to mate with thy fair maid of Venice." [Pg 6]

"It pleaseth your Majesty to be of a merry mood. And for the dowry——"

Thence followed this embassy to Venice, for Janus was of those who would bear no thwarting nor delay. The princely dowry was forthcoming, for it had been offered by Messer Andrea Cornaro himself, and the condition of adoption by the Republic, "that the bride might be of a station befitting the royal alliance," well became the pleasure of the dignified Signoria.

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II

They had just told her a thing most strange—a secret that made her childish heart stand still with wonder, then beat with a sort of frightened excitement, all unbefitting the new dignity to which she was called; for she was still enough a child to feel the glamour of it through all the strangeness, and she had stolen out upon the balcony, high over the Canal, to say over to herself the words that had been confided to her—the little maid Caterina.

She dropped the title softly down to the water below, and started at the echo of her own trembling voice.

Caterina Queen of Cyprus: Caterina—Regina!

A swaying figure in a passing gondola glanced up to the balcony of the old Palazzo Cornaro and the young girl hastily fled, not pausing until she had reached her own little chamber, looking on an inner court—the only sanctuary that she could call her own, in all this great ancestral palace, she, the future Queen of Cyprus.

Had any one heard her murmur those words? Would the Senate know that some one in a gondola had caught the new title from her own lips? And so—perchance—to punish the indiscretion—for the Senate was masterful, never-to-be-disobeyed, and the matter was not to be known until it should be declared by that solemn body of world-rulers. And if the gondoliero had carried her word to the Palazzo San Marco——? What if he had been sent there by the Senate itself to watch and see if she were already woman enough to be trusted? Then there would be an end to the golden dream—no coronation—no splendid ceremony of adoption. For there was more. Before she should be made queen of that distant island she was to be formally acknowledged "The Daughter of the Republic——" She was to be made a real Princess of Venice! [Pg 8]

What wonder that the heart of this young Venetian maid quivered with the excitement of these visions of splendor, for by all the traditions of her ancestors she measured the unwonted honor that was being decreed for her—no one had yet been adopted "Daughter to the Republic"—the title was to be created that she might wear a crown, to the further honor of Venice! For her, who had never worn a jewel, nor a robe of state, nor taken part in any but the simplest fête, who had never left the walls of her ancestral palace, save under closest veil and guard—this sudden vision of freedom and empire was intoxicating.

If she had known of those wonderful tales of the "Arabian Nights" these things that were happening to her would have seemed more wonderful still: but her young mind was free of similes—a sensitive blank whereon the Senate might duly inscribe whatever tendencies seemed judicious; and after the Betrothal there would be much time.

Caterina had taken courage again and stolen back to the balcony that opened upon the Canal

Grande from the vast upper salon, impelled by her longing for freedom and light. The ripple of the water to the plash of passing gondolas took on the note of distance and soothed her like a [Pg 9] lullaby, as the charming maid yielded herself to the golden daydream—the soft breezes lifting the bright rings of hair that clustered about her dainty head, while the wonderful light of the skies of Venice smiled down upon her like a caress. The strangeness slipped away from the new facts she had been repeating to herself, for she had already begun to take pride in them; and the other questions that had troubled her for a moment, were forgotten. All kings were to her youthful imagination great and noble when they were the friends of the Republic, and Janus was the close ally of Venice. In this stately patrician household she had suddenly risen to be first—not only as all maids are wont to be on the eve of their betrothal, with much circumstance of laces and brocade and gifts and jewels—but she was to bring new honor to their ancient house—honor even upon Venice, for her father had declared that the Senators, the Councillors, all the great men of the Republic—the Serenissimo himself—would bring her homage. It was a dizzying dream of glory—beautiful, child-hearted and fancy-free, she could dream of no more golden vision than the Signoria were preparing for her.

So many generations of Cornari had gone forth from their palaces scattered through the great places of Venice, as ambassadors on momentous missions, or as Senators or Savii, had instilled the lesson of the glory of service to Venice; and more than once the mighty Lion of San Marco had set his imperial seal above their portal, and she, Caterina, was to lead them all in the honor she was bringing upon her country! If her own estimate of the part she was to play was a foolish [Pg 10] one, only a Venetian patrician maid could comprehend the glamour that overlay this vision of Caterina's—the royal delivery from bondage—the unknown delights it must open to her!

"Thou art sent for, *carina*, to the crimson salon; thy Father would speak with thee."

It was the Lady Fiorenza, who seemed always a little sad to Caterina—too sad for all the state that surrounded her; too grave to suit the splendor of her silken robes and gleaming jewels; too weak to cope with the masterful ways of her lord, the Senator Marco Cornaro. Her mother's hand almost crushed hers in the strenuous clasp which, strangely to Caterina, seemed to convey a passionate message of sympathy; yet surely, at this radiant moment, there was nothing to regret! She met the love in her mother's eyes with the smile of a satisfied child, though she would have liked them all to rejoice with her.

The curtain that hung before the door of the crimson salon was raised by the page who stood in waiting. Her stately father rose to greet her—which he had never done before in all her little life. She felt with a sudden vague discomfort, that the world was changing for her.

"My daughter," he said, with a gravity of demeanor that befitted the importance of his message, "thou bringest honor, not alone to the Casa Cornaro, but also to the Republic. I have this day received from the island of Cyprus—of which thou shalt be Queen—" and he bent his knee, in courtly fashion before his child, as though he would be first to bring her homage, "by the hand of the ambassador Mastachelli, this portrait of thy Lord, Janus, the King; and these Eastern pearls— [Pg 11] a royal gift."

He kissed the little hand which Caterina eagerly stretched out for the casket; but her mother covered her face with her hands, almost in an attitude of prayer.

The miniature was blazing with diamonds, and the pearls were more lustrous than any that had ever been seen in Venice—for Cyprus was even beyond Venetia in luxury; and Caterina called to her mother, with a note of triumph, to clasp them about her childish throat.

"I must learn to *look* a Queen!" she said with a little, playful, regal air: and then she dropped her eyes upon the beautiful, laughing face of the royal lover who was to open paradise to her. Her father watched her furtively; while her mother, over her child's shoulder, studied the picture closely, feeling that it was too beautiful to trust.

"He is charming!" the girl cried in pleased surprise. She had not known what his face would be like; she had scarcely had time to think of it since the strange news had been brought her, a few hours before.

"He will be kind to thee," the mother said at length with conviction, yet with a sigh, as if dissatisfied.

Caterina meanwhile, in the simple straight blue robe of a young Venetian maiden, her dimpled throat encircled with the pearls that had been the ransom of a kingdom, stood turning her miniature from side to side, catching the sunlight on the jewels and the face, with the pleasure of a child in a new and splendid toy—for it was all beautiful together. "He is charming—charming, [Pg 12] my King!" she repeated.

But a shadow had crept into her mother's eyes. "It is a face that an artist might paint for his pleasure," she said with hesitation, as if seeking expression for some vague fear that haunted her; "I pray that he may make thee happy, *carina*; that he may be good and—and—noble."

"'Noble!'" cried Marco Cornaro, scornfully; "what seekest more? Is Cyprus not enough for thy nobility? Is there another mother in Venice who doth not envy thee thy fortune! Go to thy tire-women and consult with them, for the Betrothal will be soon, by order of the Senate, and there is small time to waste in regrets that somewhat more to thy liking hath not befallen thee. See to it that the robing of Caterina be fit for that other kingdom thou wouldst, perchance, have chosen for her."

"If he be noble—truly noble," the Lady Fiorenza said with unwonted persistence—for something moved her to assert herself, "I ask no more."

But the Senator permitted her the questionable honor of unanswered speech, as he turned with a scowl and left her. For her word had rankled: since it was known, in the innermost circle of the Council and there discussed in strictest secrecy, that had Janus been born in Venice, the law would have excluded him from its *Libro d'Oro*, and no patrician father would have sought him for his daughter. But Cyprus lay far away beyond the sea which washed the borders of Venetia, and many of Oriental race had peopled its shores—the ideals of Venice might be no law for Cyprus.

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III

These things took place in the spring of 1468; nor was it long before the ceremonial had been prescribed and the pageant had been made ready for the betrothal of the youthful Caterina; for the Senate could be as prompt in action as far-seeing in judgment when haste seemed wise; and other rulers were looking with no disfavor on the King of Cyprus in this matter of an alliance, for it was known that overtures had already been offered by the Court of Naples and by His Holiness of Rome for one of his own family who had claim to his protection.

While Venice was plunged in a turmoil of preparation, the Casa Cornaro gathered from all its palaces and surged up and down the grand stairway of the Marco Cornari, bringing counsel, gifts and glorification; the dowagers to the remotest branches, were much in evidence, refurbished, and coming in solemn state to testify their approval of an alliance so honorable to their house, with many wise worldly maxims and pious thanks to the Madonna.

There was no quiet anywhere within the palazzo, save deep down in the heart of the Lady Fiorenza, who had never been one with her family in worldly ambitions; and far below the giddy current of the day's happenings ran the ceaseless flow of the mother's wordless prayer, enfolding her child—pleading that that which was to come to her should make and keep her noble.

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Resistance would have been vain, if only because she stood alone in her family circle; but the decision of the Senate was supreme—unquestionable and irrevocable; she stood alone indeed with only prayer to help her, and a great faith that because of it her child would be saved in the path of danger from which her love might not hold her feet. And so the day of the Betrothal dawned.

Ah, how the bells were ringing—Madre Beata! For such a *festa* as never had been in Venice! The hearts of the happy people throbbed to their rhythm, while each gave something to the splendor of the day—were it but the color of a mantle, or the grace of a jubilant motion, or the radiance of a beaming face—there was no *festa* in Venice of which the people had not its part.

They had been gathering since earliest dawn in the Piazza San Marco, arriving breathlessly in gondolas from the nearer points, in fishing boats with painted sails from the distant islands—hastening from their unsold wares in the market stalls near the wooden bridge of the Rialto to wait long hours for the pageant that no Venetian might miss. For never had there been such another, and there was not too much space where one might stand to see the glory and the beauty of it! *Dio!* but it was good to be born in Venice, where life was a *festa*!

Along the Riva their radiant, dark faces gleamed in the sunshine, where they stood in serried ranks, picturesque in all the brilliant coloring that their rustic wardrobes held in store for these days of *festa*; silken shawls that were heirlooms—strings of coral and amber and great Venetian beads of every tint, or an edge of old lace on the gala *fazzuolo* that many a noble lady might be proud to wear; everywhere there was color against the background of festive garlands and brilliant rugs decking the balconies of the palaces—a dazzling picture in the sunshine, under the blue of the Venetian sky.

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Every window in the Piazza and the Piazzetta was thronged with spectators in gala robes, while under the arcades that stretched from San Marco to the ancient church of San Giminiano across the square, the people surged crowding and jubilant; climbing to the roofs and ledges of every building, the campanile, the churches, the columned palaces, leaving not a space where a man might stand save the avenue through the crowd which the soldiers kept free for the procession.

The bells were beginning to ring—Santa Maria! all the bells—a true jubilee!

Messer San Marco and San Tadoro were good to them to-day; how their golden images flashed in the sunshine on the columns! and the four great golden horses, in the dancing sunlight, seemed to quiver and prance among the frost-work of the arches of San Marco, while the gold and blue and scarlet of frieze and archivolt made a picture of delight.

The little ones shouted and babbled, were lifted high on their fathers' shoulders, or clamored with disappointed half-sobs down in the crowd which shut out all vision, beside the weary, expostulating mothers whose arms were filled with wee things who could not stand, and who had come early in the day—so early—in hope of a treat for the *bambini*.

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They had carried them around the Piazza when they came in the early morning before the

crowd—"Santa Vergine—wasn't that enough for them! to get a sight of all the grand balconies where the nobili were to be, with the garlands and the tapestries and the curtains of velvet and brocade, and the beautiful paintings, and the banners of San Marco, and the great golden horses in the Piazza—the wonderful golden horses—up so high, thou knowest, eh, Battista? What dost thou want more? Pazienza!"

There was a commotion on the Piazzetta; the first barge, heading the long procession from the Palazzo Cornaro in San Cassiano far up the Canal Grande, was coming in sight, bearing the brilliant *Compagnia della Calza*, the noble youths of the Company of the Hose, whose gilded duty it was to appear at State Ceremonials in all the extravagance of fantastic elegance with which Venice had decreed their costumes. A laughing, dainty company, they sprang ashore at the landing of the Piazzetta, doffing their jewelled caps to the admiring crowd with capricious grace and whimsical motions, like a flock of birds of paradise, in doublets of velvet and cloth of gold, with hair floating loose about their throats; with devices of fabulous birds—of stars flashing light—of mystic arabesques and hieroglyphs embroidered on their silken hose, in pearls and gold and precious stones:—truly a gay and frivolous company to be under the grave control of the Ten!

The people shouted with delight as they took their stand at the steps of the Piazzetta to receive the oncoming barges, for the "Calza" were the very darlings of their eyes, and never had they been more brilliant. With true Venetian comradery the crowd tossed them light banter on the names of their divisions, with pantomimic interpretation, in response to their sweeping salutations. [Pg 17]

"*Cortesi*! saw one ever such courtesy!"

"San Marco keep you *Immortali*, for the grace of you!"

"*Sempiterni*!—everlasting—ay, to be young like that, with so much pleasure in life—*Cielo*!"

"And the gondolieri of the *Sempiterni*—do they live also forever? Signori Nobili, have you need of gondolieri?"

But it needed only a whimsical motion of the Calza to fasten all eyes on the Canal Grande, where to the gracious rhythm of countless strings and flutes, the barges of State were nearing the steps of the Piazzetta, bearing the standards of Venice and Cyprus—their prows garlanded with roses, their rowers wreathed with myrtle—banners and draperies of snow and silver floating in the breeze.

Far up the Canal Grande the gondolas of the nobles, waiting before their palaces, had glided into position as the procession swept down toward the Piazza—each gondola showing the colors of its *casa*, each fluttering a silken streamer in honor of Cyprus, each bearing its freight of crimson-garbed Senators and ladies in festal array.

A murmur of intense satisfaction broke from the excited crowd along the Riva, as the barges which bore the youthful bride and her newly-appointed suite floated nearer; the great festal barges carved with bas-reliefs from classic story, were all of white and silver, their sails of satin, plumed with roses, and from each prow the figure of a glorified swan flashed rosy light from eyes of ruby: and every rower in white and silver plying his silver oar, wore the arms of Cornaro blazoned on his sleeve, with a sash of the colors of Cyprus. [Pg 18]

An opal light played over the group of the dainty maids of honor, yet each showed, for her only color, the arms of her ancient Venetian house wrought large upon the creamy fabric of her tunic, the threads of gold and gleam of jewels half lost within its folds as she walked: but the people looked for the heraldic devices and named them eagerly as, two by two, the maidens stepped on shore—Mocenigo—Giustiniani—Morosini— Dandolo—Contarini—a new name for every sweet young face—the King of Cyprus could add none fairer, nor no more noble arms to the court of his youthful Queen. The Senate had outdone itself in luxury of imagination.

"Ecco!" The low long-drawn sound of delight swept through the expectant throng like the rustle of the wind among the rushes, for here, at last, was La Caterina! and a very child she seemed as she stood surrounded by the escort of noble Matrons of Honor most sumptuously clad, whom Venice had appointed to act as sponsors in the ceremonial of the Adoption. She was like a snow-drop in a garden of exotics—so pale and fair and young, in her robes of filmy lace from the cushions of Burano—the great pearls of Janus rising and falling with the frightened throbbing of her breast. Her mother only stood beside her under the canopy—her hand clasping that of her child with a pressure which gradually steadied her to forget herself and to do her part mechanically, as she might be instructed: for, deep in the heart of the Lady Fiorenza that ceaseless prayer upheld her with a rare and noble dignity—it brought her calm for the drama she had not willed, and faith that for her child all would be well. She had pleaded with the Senate that on this day of deep import the barge of Caterina should not be without the benediction of its tutelary saint, since every gondola was wont to have its shrine; and behind them under the canopy, from a mass of roses on an altar of alabaster, rose a noble Madonna by Bellini, painted with exquisite grace—the votive picture which later kept within the Chapel of the Lady Fiorenza in the Palazzo Cornaro, the memory of this day. [Pg 19]

The little ones cried and struggled down among the crowd, seeing nothing, and conscious from the chorus of ecstatic exclamations that they were missing a golden moment.

"*Pace!* Yes, they are coming: she is there—the Regina. Every one of you shall see—every one. *Pazienza!* Some one will hold the *bimbo* who sleeps? Then I could lift Tonino and Maria. *Mille Grazie!*"

A dozen sympathetic arms had instantly offered in response to this appeal, for the good-natured

Venetian crowd adored *festas*—they also—and it would be a pity of pities that the bambini should miss it, and this one was like heaven!

"Ah, but she is beautiful, the bride—beautiful as an angel: and young—young like my Teresina! [Pg 20] And to be a queen—Santa Maria!—she who was like the other daughters of the nobili on the Canal Grande! Ah, but life is wonderful for them—the nobili—but Messer San Marco is gentile to make this *festa* for Venice!" The recollection of their own little part in the festa came with a patient sigh.

"It is our Caro Maestro Giovanni Bellini who hath fashioned it all they say—the garlands, the barges—the costumes—he talked with their Excellencies, the Signoria."

The rumor went round, for the Maestro was the honest pride of Venice.

"It is he, verily, who hath painted our Blessed Lady for the barca of the Lady Caterina; for Madonna Fiorenza is almost a saint—and *devote*——! She hath the heart of a *carità* within her."

"They come now from the palazzo of the Cornaro," cried the little peasant-mother eagerly. "Hearest thou, my *bimbo*?" She moved the restless hands to and fro, the round eyes following the motion. "Clap thy hands for the Regina—thou too, give thy greeting; thou wilt remember it when thou art old. May the holy Madonna bless her!"

The shouts to which Caterina landed were deafening: the children screamed for very ecstasy.

The lagoon, from the Riva far out toward the islands was a dense mass of floating craft of the poorer sort, for below the Piazza there had been no restriction, and the waters were crowded with islanders—old people grateful for this nearness to the pageant, with a chance of separation from the standing, jostling crowd, and proud of lending the color of their pennons and painted [Pg 21] sails for their share of the glory of the day. If one could see nothing, it was good to be there to hear the shouting—one would understand the better when Tonio should be taking his bit of supper and free to talk—for he was no good to his old mother now, with watching the tacking and the people. And one might as well be dead as to stay far off in Burano on a day like this! *Cielo*, but the bells and the shouting were divine! It made one young again.

"A *king*, thou sayest? Who is the king that the child is going to marry? What is he like, Tonio? I cannot see so far."

"*Not there?* Holy Mother, but it is a strange wedding! There would have been the gossip of all the islands to answer if there hadn't been two to a wedding when I was young. But the Signori Nobili must have everything after their own new fashions. And to miss his own *sposalizio*! San Marco is not good to him—he'll never see another half so fine. Is she so young as they say—like Maria, there?"

"Ah, to be Signori just for to-day!" sighed the little peasant-mother in the crowd, as the dazzling cortège passed out of sight into the golden glooms of San Marco. "To go with the nobili into the Duomo where one may behold the Pala d'Oro and the wonderful golden candlesticks which the Serenissimo hath given—to see the Serenissimo take her for the Daughter of the Republic—wonder of wonders! And then to the Palazzo Ducale for the Betrothal—*Pazienza*, one must wait; they will come again later, my *bambini*. Ah, but the beauty of it!" For the brave little woman was [Pg 22] weary, and there was nothing like enthusiasm for keeping up one's courage, "and Heaven alone knew where Zorzi was with the *barca*!"

The crowd relaxed and grew restless, losing some of the gaiety of its temper when a weary neighbor settled back a little too roughly on a fellow-shoulder, or the babies who had been put down on the ground to rest lost the last sweet morsels they had been munching and clamored in vain for more—too much excited by the unusual noises and happenings to deign to notice the brothers of the next size who were busily turning somersaults in their behalf.

But it would not be long before the procession came again; for the last of the sumptuous nobles who made this holiday for the people had disappeared under the portico of San Marco.

The bells were chiming now in soft low undertones, a very ripple of sound—like the breath of the summer-breeze upon the sea—stilling the shrill voices of the people in the Piazza, calming the exuberance of their motions. For it was a signal. They knew that within the Duomo, before the great altar where slept their patron-saint, ablaze now with lights and the marvel of the Pala d'Oro which was not for the sight of the eyes save on days of a *festa* like this, the child of the Cornaro was waiting to be made the Daughter of Venice.

And now—for the bells were silent—in the magnificent storied chamber of the Gran Consiglio, where so many momentous questions of state had been discussed, in the presence of the [Pg 23] Serenissimo, the Signoria, the Senate and the Forty Noble Matrons, a new leaf was to be added to the story of the Republic, and thither the feeble old Doge led the Daughter of Venice with the brilliant assemblage who had witnessed the ceremony of the Adoption in the Duomo.

Caterina had moved through the splendid pageant of the morning as in a dream, still too much a child to comprehend the responsibilities it portended—too much in awe of the distinguished company assembled to do her honor to be conscious of any feeling but unwonted timidity. But the tottering footsteps of the old man who held her hand as he led her through the Porta della Carta into the Ducal Palace, awoke her inborn sense of pity, and it was she who upheld him with her strong, young, vital clasp, recovering her own perfect poise in the act of giving help.

The Ambassador Mastachelli was waiting with his suite, and the signing of the parchment

which bore the seals of Venice and of Cyprus was the trifle of a moment. A circlet of rubies—the sign of the promise—had been consecrated by the saintly Patriarch, Lorenzo Giustiniani, and the Lady Fiorenza took comfort from the look in his noble face as he bent over Caterina to give the benediction. She would seek his aid in the training of the young betrothed for her life on that distant island.

But now—at last—the hour was the people's once more, for the Serenissimo stood on the balcony above the portal of San Marco, between the great golden horses, with the Daughter of Venice beside him—the sunlight irradiating her white robes and beautiful, girlish face. [Pg 24]

"Caterina—Regina—*Figlia di Venezia—Nostra Venezia*!" A great cry rent the air; it came from thousands of hearts and thrilled her own to its core, and the first, great emotion of her young life swept through her, transforming and wholly possessing her.

A mist swam before her and her heart throbbed as if it would break: she dimly saw innumerable faces leaning to her from roofs and balconies and windows, and below in the great Piazza, the dense mass of the people with faces offering love and homage, lifting their children to clap their tiny hands for her—it was wonderful—beautiful—had the Madonna, indeed, given her so much!

The mist cleared before her eyes and each face, to the remotest corners of the Piazza stood out individualized, while a sudden great love of humanity was born within her. "She would pray to make her people happy—she would be something to the poor and suffering ones of her distant land of Cyprus—the Holy Mother would teach her——"

It was the supreme moment that does not come to all, yet when it comes holds the making or the marring of a life—as the lightning gleams for an instant only through a rift of cloud, awe-inspiring and too luminous to be forgotten. To Caterina, on the verge of womanhood, it came with the force of a prophetic vision, giving her sight of the tie between a queen and her people—it was like the strong mother-love of a great woman—all-embracing; the splendor of the pageant, the personal homage had no longer part in the exaltation of that great moment—it was the *real* [Pg 25] beneath it all that stirred her soul. She lost herself in the emotion, seeking only for expression; she opened her arms wide to them as if she would embrace them all, turning on every side to smile her heart out to them—tossing kisses to the children who clapped their eager hands for her—scattering sunshine with that rare magnetic power which is the most wondrous gift that Heaven can bestow.

"*Simpatica!*" the responsive people cried with glowing faces. "*Angiola!—Tanto Simpatica!*"

The Lady Fiorenza standing where she could see the face of her child gave thanks for the vision, with joyful tears.

"This hast thou granted her, *Madonna mia Beatissima*, for a wedding gift!"

[Pg 26]

IV

Now that the brilliant pageant of the Betrothal had taken place, life went on serenely in the Palazzo Cornaro in San Cassan, while the seasons came and went and Caterina developed into a charming maiden of seventeen—expanding in the gracious atmosphere and the wonderful new joys that it brought her, as a rose matures to its most radiant perfection in the sunshine. Her eager mind which had hitherto known only the meagre culture bestowed upon young Venetian maids of her time and estate, awoke with ardent response, growing with leaps and bounds to meet the new demands—yet always deepening because the spring of her will had its impulse in noble emotions.

Her thin, restricted life had suddenly overflowed with interests: the boundaries of her vision had opened far beyond the narrow confines of the lagoons of Venice and the Euganean hills, as the consciousness dawned upon her of a world that had been rich in beauty and vital memories before Venice began to be. Life was beginning to pulsate tumultuously in her veins; her heart was awaking. All the fulness and delight of this germinal spring-time she owed to the lord and lover who was waiting for her across the shimmering, beckoning sea. What wonder that her maiden heart should cling to him with a passionate trust, while all her sweet self grew in shy loveliness out of the dream that she was fashioning, and the deepening currents of her being flowed purely [Pg 27] about this vision of her betrothed, enthroning her love with her religion in one centre.

The mimic court in the Palazzo Cornaro, under the supervision of her monitors of Venice, was already attracting distinguished strangers—for the element of romance in her position made the salon of the future Queen of Cyprus the feature of Venetian social life; and long hours of eager study with masters of the many tongues spoken in the Cyprian court—alternating with the teachings of her mother's noble friend, the Patriarch, as he sought to familiarize her with the early Christian story of her distant island, proved the quick grasp of her mind—giving dangerous hints of strength which, if disregarded, might thwart the moulding purpose of the Signoria. So it seemed wise to forestall her questionings with such historic glimpses as should fascinate her

with her realm to be, while Venice was silently smoothing out the crumples of that distant Cyprian shore; and it was fitting that the bride of Janus should make acquaintance with the literary and legendary treasures of this fabled isle of poets, for the house of Lusignan had been known for its taste in literature. But of a certain proverb current in Cyprus in the days of the Lusignans, the watchful Senate took care that she should be left in ignorance, *Ce n'est pas Minerve qui est née en Chypre*! and that Chief of the Ten whose difficult duty it had become to supervise the education of Caterina was giving peremptory instruction to the newly-created Historical Secretary to the Queen-elect:

"Begin with thy narration far back in the days of the Greek myths—she hath much poetry in her soul. Take her carefully over the early Christian traditions—she doth most seriously incline to venerate the Church:—there is food in these matters to consume much time." [Pg 28]

"And then, Eccellentissimo, one may venture to tell the story of the House of Lusignan?"

The research of the learned Secretary had brought him in contact with Cyprus, but it had not inclined him to make fancy pictures of its kings.

"Of Guy—the founder—and of the Crusades; it is a tale a maid may hear," the Capo responded grimly. "Of gleanings, now and again, through the pages of the chronicle, as it may be wise. She hath not the judgment to endure it all, being yet scarce more than a child—and with leanings rather toward Church than State, being over-much under the influence of the Lady Fiorenza —*over-much*."

The words came with pauses which lent them force, and the new Secretary, being Senate-trained, lost none of their significance.

"Thine office doth demand discretion," the Chief continued, fixing the other with his piercing gaze. "One should choose the tale that may best please—that she may go glad-hearted and with a maiden's fancy."

"Aye, your Excellency—for maids and women are not as men; and facts not over-gentle may be best untold."

"Nay—not that—not that: but there is time—much time—and for the present the care shall be to delight."

"It is the office of a courtier, Eccellentissimo; it befools a scholar," the Historical Secretary exclaimed with indignation. "There be poets and romancers who would do it honor, rather than I —who have spent long years among the records searching for truth, that I may leave a chronicle to trust." [Pg 29]

"And most unworthily, Signor Segretario, if thou hast found no least trace of the great philosopher Zeno in the ancient city of Cition that was his birthplace; nor of Homer, that maker of literature, who hath, perchance, won space enough in the estimate of mankind to be worthy the brief thought of a child—even of thine—a scholar seeking for truth—he being the pride of Salamis.

"But the Signoria have never learned the backward step that they should withdraw an appointment which conferreth unwilling honor," the Chief concluded coldly. "Thou shalt find some beauty in the legends of the Cinyradæ, or the myths of Aphrodite, in this land of Cyprus where the goddess rose from the foam of the sea!"

"Were not substance better than froth to train a maid to rule, your Excellency?"

"Nay, but to *obey*; to *rule* needeth not teaching."

"But—your Excellency——"

"Signore, foam shall suffice to teach obedience—thou hast heard the most gracious will of the Senate."

The eyes of the scholar who loved truth better than fortune dropped baffled; for he could not afford to surrender the favor of the Senate which promised him means to achieve in his own special field; and he groaned in spirit while the wide halls of the Frari, with their treasure of ancient MSS. rose before his mental vision as the most tempting spot on earth, with his own *magnum opus* lying there unfinished, yet far toward completion. And for one who had meant to chronicle the complete history of a *movement*, who had sought ever to weigh and sift in the interests of truth alone, to surrender the freedom of his mind to the Senate—to come down to the teaching of a child—to be commanded what he should speak—it was maddening! [Pg 30]

"My own work," he murmured in a last appeal:—"I have so little time."

"The time of a Venetian is his best gift to the State," the Capo made answer icily.

There was a pause during which the unwilling Secretary *felt* the eyes of the Capo upon him, forcing him to lift his own. For an instant he met the strange fixed gaze which conveyed to him without words that what had passed between them was to be held inviolate; then, with a courteous salute, the man of power spoke:

"The interview is dismissed." And the Segretario Reale went out from the presence, his soul revolting at the absolutism that forced him to accept; and he despised himself.

Meanwhile the soul of the maiden was thrilling to the Patriarch's tales of early Christian conquests in her islands—at Paphos—at Salamis—of the miracles of the great Paulus, saint and

bishop and leader—as her eyes followed along the red-lettered parchment page of the rare volume which the holy man had brought from the treasures of the "Marciana" for her teaching— translating the story from the Greek, which was yet hard for her, into her own softer tongue. [Pg 31]

Cyprus had indeed been a favored land in those early days; for the Holy Spirit had commanded by a revelation that Barnabas and Paulus should set sail for Cyprus to preach the new faith at Salamis; and they had taken with them Marcus—their own San Marco!—it was so written in this strange, old book.

"Tell me about him!" Caterina cried, clasping her hands eagerly: "what did he do in my land?"

Every Venetian was familiar with the Patron-Saint of Venice in his symbolic guise, with his terrible, flashing jewelled eyes—as a power who would guard them and confound their enemies, rather than as an Evangelist—although the paw of the fierce Venetian lion rested always on the open gospel-page. But to hear of him as a man, before he was known as saint—young—'sister's son to Barnabas,' setting forth on this mission to Cyprus, made him strangely real to the young Venetian girl; it even brought Cyprus nearer with a tender home claim, to hear of the wanderings of San Marco among those temples of Aphrodite; and his scorn of the unholy worship kindled her soul as the Patriarch told how the young Evangelist had not feared to curse the godless Cyprian city for its idolatry—of the tumult that had been raised by his followers, as they hurled the images of the Pagan gods from their pedestals, ruining portions of the huge, unholy structure as they fell and killing some of those who were taking part in the games. She would visit these vast ruins in the ancient grove of Aphrodite, where giant-trees had grown among the fallen columns, and wonderful vases of gold and silver and alabaster, wrought like finest cameos, had been disinterred from mounds of rubbish to decorate the palaces of patricians. [Pg 32]

Of these, antique goblets, some flashing with an indescribable rainbow lustre, delicate as an opal, had already been sent her among the rich gifts of Janus. And so life took on new color for her—historic memories and trifles of the day crossing each other at many points, linking the old to the new, in unsuspected continuity.

"Our San Marco was a hero even then!" she cried; "an early Crusader fighting for his faith!"

"Aye, daughter—as thou and I must fight," the Patriarch answered her with tender approval in his eyes, a shadow of apprehension dimming them before he withdrew his gaze—for of such tender stuff had martyrs been made. "The story of those early days is for our guidance. If trials should come," he added, "cleave but to thy faith and Heaven shall show thee a way."

"I never thought before that one might *love* San Marco!" Caterina said, as she turned her glowing face frankly to the old man; "he was never a person, but just a grotesque image to me."

"Symbols are for our race in its childhood, for with primitive peoples imagination dominates reason," he answered her; "later we weave a more enduring fabric out of the truth of history—still cherishing the myth—the earlier impulse."

But it was Barnabas who was the true hero-saint of Cyprus; for he had owned estates in his native island and had sold them and given all for the propagation of the new faith; and when, after his cruel martyrdom the fierce spirit of persecution had cooled, and his remains were found interred in a grotto near the city—the divine revelation of St. Peter clasped to his breast—the possession of so sacred a relic sufficed to win great privileges among the hierarchy for the island of Cyprus, in perpetuity—the proud title of Archbishop of Salamis—the imperial staff with the golden apple at top—the cap with the red cross, and many other honors and immunities. It was a long way from the primitive simplicity of the fruitful ministration of José Barnabas, the Son of Consolation, as he had fought for souls in the splendid vigor of his youth and consecration! [Pg 33]

"I am glad of these sacred bonds between my two homes!" the young girl exclaimed with a little wistful sigh.

"There are yet other links in the history of our Church; for Sant'Elenà, the Mother of Constantine—whose tomb thou knowest on our fair island of Sant'Elenà—hath enriched thy favored land of Cyprus with its most sacred relic, bestowing there the portions of the Holy Cross which she had brought from Orient, and thou shalt find them still revered in the Chapel of Santa Croce on the Mountain of the Troödos."

"Thou perchance, most Reverend Father, wilt come some day in pilgrimage to this blessed shrine in my new land!" Caterina cried hopefully.

"Nay, dear daughter; for my work lieth in Venice. But thou seest that where our Holy Church hath planted her banner, one may call no land strange." [Pg 34]

It was partly with this thought that the Patriarch had striven to interest Caterina in these incidents of early Christianity; and partly from his undefined dread as to what the future might hold for her, with the wish to keep the Church and its teachings uppermost in her mind, that she might lean upon them in need. She had been deeply interested and again and again had turned the talk upon this theme—a docile pupil, growing in grace and strength from the teachings he gathered for her from that quaint old volume so little known by the women of her time. It was his gift to fit her for the unknown life to which she was going, and it gave him an opportunity for many helpful words which if scarcely understood at the time came back to her later; yet he darkened her bright visions with no fears, thinking that hope and joy and faith would suffice for strength in trial.

The Senate, meanwhile, had matter less placid touching Cyprus and the betrothed bride wherewith to fill this period of waiting: and more than once the Senator Marco Cornaro had

returned from lengthy sessions at the Ducal Palace in no gentle humor, yet mute to all questioning. For it had been learned in that innermost Council, and told no farther than was needful, that Ferdinand of Naples was intriguing to draw Janus into an alliance with a princess of his house; it was also known, by that singular penetration in which Venice had no equal, that the new Archbishop of Nicosia, Alvise Fabrici, was an agent for Ferdinand, secretly working to [Pg 35] further his ends in Cyprus; and finally in sign of the willingness of Janus to break faith with Venice, came the rumor of some coldness toward Andrea Cornaro, who had hitherto been his fast friend.

It was enough to bring gloom to the brow of the Senator Marco Cornaro, whose heart was set upon this royal marriage.

But nothing of this transpired beyond the walls of the Council Chamber, from whence at last, to make an end of the pitiful waverings of this fickle King, an ambassador was sent to the court of Cyprus to state in terms that could not be misunderstood, that if Janus were to disgrace his royal word, solemnly pledged by his Ambassador Mastachelli in presence of the Serenissimo and the Signoria, the insult to a Queen already betrothed to him would be a slight the Republic would not suffer, and that Venice would become the enemy instead of the ally of Cyprus.

But no misgivings troubled the heart of the betrothed in the Palazzo Cornaro, where she waited in happy confidence, being taught through the ceaseless vigilance of the Senate, that in royal marriages haste was ever unseemly, and full time would be allowed for the fashioning of the wedding trousseau, the weaving of wedding damasks and the complete preparation of a household outfit consistent with the dignity of a queen.

The prospect of further enemies was not an enviable one for Janus, who already counted Genoa, Savoy and Portugal and his Holiness of Rome among them; for he had won the wrath of the Genoese by recapturing their important holding of Famagosta in the very heart of his own [Pg 36] island, as he had most heartily gained the disfavor of his Holiness by his alliance with the infidel Sultan of Egypt; and through his sister Carlotta, the enmity of Savoy and of Portugal was assured to him.

So the galleys and favor of Venice were not to be disregarded, and it was not long before the Cyprian fleet appeared in the waters of the Adriatic, bearing in response to the secret embassy of Venice, the Ambassador sent by Janus to bring his young Queen to Cyprus.

V

[Pg 37]

Sér Gobbo Di Rialto bore on his broad breast announcements of intense interest concerning the ceremonies which would make the day of the departure of the Daughter of the Republic among the most splendid in the annals of Venice. A crowd of citizens who had not been advised by special invitation of the various banquetings and happenings, came and went about the grotesque figure with much lively comment of delighted anticipation, intermingled with benedictions upon San Marco that it was not long to wait, since to-morrow would be there after the next Ave Maria! For whatever of revelry was prepared for the nobles, brought always in Venice a corresponding pageant to delight the eyes of the people.

Here and there some gondolier from the islands, sheepishly conscious of the brilliant *fazzoletto*, or the string of beads he had just bought in the tempting booths of the old, wooden Rialto, hung on the outskirts of the crowd before Sér Gobbo, to catch from the gossip of the more lettered ones about him the details of the morrow's *festa* which he might not read for himself; for the knowledge would make him the oracle of his little circle in Burano—or at least with Giovanna, when he should bestow his silken trifle for the morrow's splendor. For, of course all Venice would be there to see the queen set forth.

"Santa Maria!—the Serenissimo himself upon the Bucentoro will escort the Regina. Heard one [Pg 38] ever such splendor!"

"And at the Lido—hast heard, Tonio?—by favor of San Marco and San Nicolò, the gondolieri with their barchette may float in line to make our part of the *festa*. Oh, the beautiful day!"

"And the Signoria, and all the nobili! and the court of the young Regina—and all the banners and the *barca*—most beautiful to behold—one might die of the splendor of it, Santissima Maria!"

"Aye, Giuseppe, and the music of all the fleets!—it will be like heaven, if Messer San Marco doth but send the sunshine and the breeze."

"Nay, he could not fail his Venice for a *festa* that doth him such honor; *Messer San Marco è galant uomo!* But how then, Tonio, thou hast a *sposalizio* of thine own—with thy string of coral and thy *fazzoletto* fit for a Signorina: the bells will be chiming for thee to-morrow?"

"*Basta, basta!*" Tonio responded with commendable gruffness, considering his contentment at heart, as he hastily retreated to his gondola under the Rialto for needed shelter from the banter which followed him, until some other unwary victim became the centre of the well-meant pleasantry.

"Wait then for a day, Tonio mio, and the Bucentoro will be ready for thee," cries one of the more daring as he vanishes; "hast thou already bespoken thy groomsman? I also am a Castellan."

Across the Piazza San Giacomo, under the famous colonnade of San Giacomo di Rialto, the talk turned chiefly on the great event which was to culminate on the morrow, and which for three years had consumed much time in Senate and State, as the patricians strolled to and fro in lively discussion. [Pg 39]

It was here that for generations everything that affected the commerce of Venice was held up in the light of expression as free and candid as it was possible for opinion to be in this highly organized oligarchy; and here as elsewhere, Venice, like a faithful mother, watched over the welfare of her sons, though they were grown to man's estate; and since her commerce was, in fact, the mainspring of her wealth and prestige—a very vital part of her—she kept before their eyes on the exterior of this ancient church in the market-place where her merchant-princes daily met, her admonition to uphold them in righteous dealing. One might decipher it wrought into the wall of the apse under the stones of the frieze, in quaint lettering that tempted to the perusal and endowed the mastered motto with the impressiveness of a rite—for the legend assumed a quality of mystery, being much defaced from time.

"*Hoc circa templum sit jus mercatoribus æqum, pondera ne vergant nec sit conventio prava.*"

(Around the Temple let the merchant's law be just, his weights true, and his covenant faithful.)

Among the frescoes on the walls under the colonnade was the famous *mappa mondo*, upon which were indicated the various routes of Venetian commerce throughout the world.

Two dignified elderly men wearing the black silk robe of the merchant with chains of heavy gold links were strolling to and fro in eager conversation—their comrades showing signs of deference as they passed. [Pg 40]

"Cyprus will seem nearer now," said one of them, pausing for a moment before the map to point out a speck in the Mediterranean with his gold-topped staff.

"A century nearer than it was in the days of Comnenus," the other answered him, with a recollection of the attempted purchase and occupancy of the island in those earlier times. "But now—praise be to San Marco, the time is ripe."

"And Venice hath never ceased to covet that 'Island of Delights!' But now her fleets may lie at anchor in the splendid port of Famagosta while she taketh her leisure in dealing with the merchants of the East; for the King of Cyprus must aye keep faith with the Republic."

"Yet let Venice beware," the other answered, lowering his voice to a confidential tone. "It is not over-easy to hold His Majesty to any faith or compact, by what one may guess from the talk of the Senate: but the favor of Venice is needful to him."

"And none the less that there be those who favor him not. Genoa is wroth at him for having chased them from Famagosta—the most marvellous stronghold in the world, if one may credit Messer Andrea Cornaro, the friend of the King."

"He spake truly, from what I myself should have guessed thereof—getting no closer to the Fortress than any Cyprian might have done six years ago, when I had gone with my fleet to the Syrian Coast for a marvellous cargo of spices, and Cyprus tempted me to a voyage of pleasure, being not so far—the sail of a day with a fair galley. The Genoese held the great Fortress and the splendid city of Famagosta and the country for miles around; an enemy entrenched in the very heart of a kingdom! Small wonder that King Janus, being of a most laudable prowess, should claim his own again—which won him laurels, for the Cyprians had been sore over the matter. Aye; Cyprus is good for the commerce of Venice, and it would be a hard day when the ships of the Republic might not harbor in her waters. And if the good of Venice be the good of Cyprus,—the amity is the more like to last!" [Pg 41]

"Aye, for the commerce it is well—most truly well. But there will be too many of our patrician daughters in the suite of the young queen when she shall sail on the morrow. I could more easily have spared fewer."

"They are but charming childish faces; and they have left their sisters behind them—they and the little Caterina; it is well that the bride should make a brave showing at the court of Cyprus—which is held for a marvel of splendor."

"Thou knowest it, Messer Querini, having been there?"

"Nay—not at court—it is Messer Andrea Cornaro who will tell of it. But I passed some days at Nikosia, on my way back from Alexandria, and verily the cities were twins for richness. The beauty of the churches—one for each day of the year through,—we of Venice may not at all equal, save in our Basilica of San Marco;—the precious altars inlaid with gold and jewels,—like our Pala d'Oro that cometh not forth of our treasury save on days of *festa*; finest statues of ivory and silver; great carven columns wrought like our columns of Acre—but vaster and of that same fineness of workmanship: and such broideries of golden thread and great pearls for draperies and altar-cloths, as one may scarce dream of! And in their market-places, strewn with the spoils of the East are faces and voices of every clime and a very babel of tongues; more—far more than on our own Rialto; with schools for every language. And I saw a thing in Nikosia that in all my journeyings I have not met with before." [Pg 42]

"Thy tales are more piquant than the tales of Marco Polo," his friend said rallying him.

"All is marvellous of which thou hast not hitherto known, though it be simpler than thou art wont to behold. So I found strange and noble, a great building already a century and a half old, in the heart of this sumptuous city, whereon it was signified by a writing cut into the stone, that all

men of every clime who but confess the name of Christus, being ill or needy, should receive therein, freely given, rest and entertainment."

"If the entertainment were of the wines of Cyprus it would be verily a gift: for these one may even taste who hath not been in her great cities."

"Truth is truth." the other assented. "And that wine of the Commanderie"—the dignified speaker interrupted himself with slow unmistakable signs of approval—"I will make it known to thee to-morrow at the banquet. And her ortolans!—It is a rich land: the Senate hath done well."

"How sayest thou, 'the Senate hath done well?' Is it not that we are losing too many of our own patricians, rather than coming into favor of Cyprus?" [Pg 43]

"How 'losing them'—to win relations that be wise for Venice? Andrea Cornaro hath never been one to keep himself at rest in his palace at San Cassiano, and through his wandering hath come this royal alliance for Venice; and to-morrow he goeth again to Cyprus as auditor to the young queen, his niece. The Contarini, the Giustiniani—as thou knowest well—have already vast holdings on those Mediterranean shores."

"What sayest thou of the Senator Aluisi Bernardini—that *he* is no loss to Venice?"

"Nay, nay: he is one that Venice may not too well spare: a man after her best traditions—one for an embassy or any place of power—a man to do us honor—overgrave and quiet, perchance, for his youth, yet of a courtesy and judgment!—and never leaving the thing undone! It is his father again."

"Might not some other man, less finely tempered, have served in Cyprus?"

"Aye—if the Bernardini himself were not so finely-tempered! I was in the Senate the day they put the choice before him—it was no secret, and it proved the man. To do him honor the Senate gave him choice—and the Senate doth more easily command. And this they laid before him. An Embassy to France, of which he should be chief—his father held it before him, and the Lady of the Bernardini hath been eager that her son should bear his father's honors: that, measured with this mission to Cyprus—to attend the charming little cousin, as private Chamberlain to the Queen, forsooth,—a man twice her years and already of an acknowledged dignity!" [Pg 44]

"It seemeth not easy to translate his choice. What sayeth the proud Lady of the Bernardini? For it is less honor."

"One knoweth not; she being of Casa Cornaro, of the elder branch, and, like her son, of few words and great discretion. But she had lately spoken with me of this embassy to France, wishing that her son might hold it, thinking him well fitted for the place. Ah, well—she giveth no sign; and to-morrow she also setteth sail for Cyprus,—being created chief lady in waiting to her fair, young cousin."

"The Lady of the Bernardini in the court of the Caterina! Impossible! She, in whose salons one might not think one's own thoughts!"

"By San Tadoro! one might think them, at one's ease, so only they were of a quality to please her."

"And the Lady of the Bernardini to leave her splendid palace! Venice without the Lady of the Bernardini!"

"Where hast thou been that thou knowest it not? It is even so!"

"Thou dost verily flatter the vanity of a man, Querini, to forget that I am but two days returned with my cargoes from Flanders."

"Nay—thy pardon, friend. I mind it well enough and shall mind it better when thou hast a chance to make us envious of the wares thou wilt unburden from thy cumbrous, carven chests, for there is much talk of their richness. But the ear of Venice is so attuned to these wedding-chimes that it hath no chance to vibrate to another theme until the rejoicings of the morrow be past." [Pg 45]

"And the great estates of the Bernardini? I remember some rumor in the Broglio, before this matter of Cyprus came uppermost, that the houses would have been allied—a marriage between the little Caterina and the cousin Aluisi—a dispensation to be gotten from His Holiness. It would have been well for the estates and the Casa Cornaro."

"Aye, it would have been well for the Casa Cornaro: better perchance than this dazzling foreign marriage, and more fortune in it for the Cornari. For the estates of the Bernardini are princely; and it is well known in the Senate, though it be uttered in decorous whispers, that the dower of the charming bride hath left small remainder to her noble uncle. And Messer Andrea also, is large lender to a king—for war-debts and the like—Janus having nothing until he had regained his kingdom. But as well buy a King as a vast estate for one's toy, if one hath the *zecchini*."

"Thou art verily more a merchant than I had esteemed thee, Messer Querini, if thou hast no thought in this marriage but for the *zecchini*—as well those of her uncle Andrea for the maid Caterina, as those of the Bernardini."

The Signor Querini gave a long, contemptuous sniffle.

"May gold buy a man like our young Senator Bernardini! Nay:—but it is the fuss and manner of this marriage that turneth me somewhat against it: and because the father of the Bernardini was in truth my friend. But Caterina was still a child when a king appeared as suitor, and the question of the Bernardini was never made; and Marco Cornaro—Marco is a delighted *magnifico*. *Ebbene* [Pg 46]

—San Marco might see many of us wise, old fools choosing a king for a son-in-law, if one came our way to beg the favor. And Messer Andrea hath it that King Janus is full winsome. One should not be hard upon Marco Cornaro—it is not the first alliance that his noble house hath made with royalty. May happy fortune befall the maid—who is verily charming and of a consummate dignity."

"The King hath sent an embassy, that doeth honor to any royal house, to bring his bride to Cyprus. His Excellency the Ambassador, Messer Filippo Podacatharo, is a princely escort; and yesterday when he gave banquet to the merchants of Venice, all were in admiration at the sumptuousness of the fleet of Cyprus."

"I would have been there, but some matters of moment for the Bernardini held me. It is not easy for him to leave Venice, with his vast holdings. And his father was my friend. I command his galleys to-morrow, which follow the Bucentoro to the fleet of Cyprus, outside our harbor—San Marco favor the day!"

[Pg 47]

VI

When the Senator Bernardini had first made known to his stately patrician Mother his acceptance of the appointment to Cyprus, she had met him with surprise and keen disappointment.

"There is surely some great error," she said; "for I had it in confidence that the Embassy to France hath been offered thee by the Senate."

He confessed as much.

"Thou wilt revise thy decision: I would gladly see thee wear thy Father's honors. Thou hast the gift of statesmanship."

He waited to choose his words, for her tone betrayed more than her speech, and he grieved to thwart her ambitions for him.

"So may it fit me the better for the Cyprian post," he answered with an attempt at playfulness.

"Thou wilt verily give up this Embassy to France to go with the Caterina to her new land! There is some reason of which thou sayest naught—else were it hard to comprehend thy choice. We are but two, Aluisi; may not thy mother hold thy confidence?"

For answer he raised her hand to his lips, smiling upon her. Her brow cleared.

"It is not that the little cousin hath touched thy heart?" she questioned half seriously—"thou who art known as gracious for all and tender for none! I have not this to bear for thee—now that the marriage which thy Father would have favored is no longer possible? Then France were surely wiser for thee—the Fates are kind." [Pg 48]

"Nay, nay," he answered frankly—"have no fear. When I set sail from Venetia for my long voyage, the Caterina was still a child. And when, returning, I found her grown a charming maid, she was already set apart from all such dreaming for any honorable knight of Venice. Thou dost not guess the spell that holdeth me?"

"It is not one of her fair maids of honor who go with her to her court of Cyprus?"

"Nay, Madre carissima; thou art still before all others with thy wayward son."

"Yet my wish for thee—of France—thou dost pass by," she interrupted eagerly.

"It is but for duty to the Casa Cornaro,—in which thou wouldst be last to see me fail, dear Lady of Venice!"

She laid her hand upon his arm as if she would constrain him.

"Tell me," she urged.

"Mother, when thy name and mine shall have been forgotten, *one* name of the Casa Cornaro shall stand out never to be lost—since Fortune doth weave it into history. For honor to our house, we will not fail our Caterina."

"And thou?"

"As thou wouldst have me—thou, my Mother—than whom among the Cornari are none found prouder—I have sworn as solemnly as any knight may take his vow,—were it even in Crusade—to spend myself in service of the little Queen, my cousin—as in that far land there may be need."

But for the Lady of the Bernardini—Venetian to her heart's core—the island of Cyprus had little charm; she had dreamed of a brilliant career for her only son which should open to him the best that Venice could give—and she was not satisfied. [Pg 49]

"There is no fault with that dear child," she said; "and as thy bride—if this had been—I could have loved her well. But if thy fortunes need be bound with hers—and all thine honors for which

thou art so meet, and with which thy Venice would fain endow thee, must be surrendered for her sake,—'twere pity that this marriage which thy Father willed, went not forward."

"Sweet Mother—the 'might-have-beens' make faincants of men. It is not love—but duty that calleth me. *There is no choice.* Where is thine honorable teaching?"

"Bethink thee, Aluisi, of this post of dignity in France—a place of power—of service to thy country. How sayest thou 'there is no choice'?"

"Mother—when our stars have ordered otherwise—there is no more to it than that—why then—if men lack strength to bend their wills to meet their destiny,—it is not as they will,—it is not as their honor wills—but far otherwise. And theirs the fault."

She looked up into his noble face as he bent over her—a face not often yielded so fully to her gaze—dear as this widowed mother and her son were to each other, and intimate in friendship; and as she looked a calm fell upon her and she saw strength, truth, valor, judgment—the soul of the man like a rock beneath the light play of his speech.

She no longer willed to oppose his choice. She put up her hand and drew him down beside her on the couch. [Pg 50]

"There will be much to think of," she said after a long silence; "thine interests in Venice will be hard to leave. Why—if some of Caterina's house must escort her and abide with her—why not her brother Zorzi? Who should be fitter in her defense?"

"Zorzi is but a youth—less in years than her own. How should she lean on such a boy?"

"Aluisi—thou hast some fear which thou hast not spoken."

He was silent though she waited. How might he declare the bitter need of watchfulness, yet not betray the knowledge gotten in those secret councils of the Republic!

"*Madre mia*," he said at last, when she had reminded him of her question. "Without cause I had made no vow. Canst thou not trust thy knight? And of my fealty, so solemnly sworn, Caterina knoweth naught. It is for me and thee alone—*and least of all for the ear of Venice*. But thou knowest—if it were no more than that the way of a crown be not easy for a young and guileless maid—some one of her own should be with her in that strange land; and he should be wise in counsel."

"As thou?—who dost so qualify thyself?" she asked with a pitiful attempt to rally him—for her heart was sore. "What shall I do without thee—Aluisi!" Her voice had suddenly broken in yearning. It was not often that such emotion escaped her. He folded her hand more closely as they sat on in the silence, in the falling twilight, and his eyes wandered down the length of the splendid ancestral hall, while his resolve strengthened within him—the knights and ladies of the house of Cornaro for centuries back leaning to him out of the quaint carving of their time-dimmed frames—fading from him, like ghosts, into the gloom of the distant corners, yet holding him with a strange, vital fascination—for it was much to leave. The very tapestries rustled with the legends of the Cornelii of long, long ago, on the shores of the Rivo Alto, before the story of Venice had won its honored place in the chronicles of nations—yet not the less for their indistinguishable outlines and mythical color were they woven into the proud consciousness of the duty the Cornari owed their own. [Pg 51]

Memories of the state his Mother had held here rose to meet him—memories of his Father, who had been a power in Venice. How could he ask the Lady of the Bernardini, with her whitening hair, to leave it all for Cyprus? Yet that was in his thought. He could not frame the words; it was too much to ask—he must leave it to come from her.

"Is thy fear not to be spoken?" she asked at last. "And must we accept it for the Caterina—who is very fair and tender?"

"It is the ways of Cyprus that I fear," he answered quickly; "and of that strange people—a blending of half-pagan races with the blood of France and Greece. But, Madre mia—there must be no echoes from the Council-Chamber—none of our talk beyond thine own discreet hearing—it would but harm her. And for *acceptance*—'must we *accept* it for the Caterina?'—thou dost ask—it is an empty word! The will of Venice is *set* to do this thing." [Pg 52]

"Yet our cousin Marco—the child's own father—goeth not heavily; he hath no fear."

"He is mad with the glory of it—after Venice's own temper."

There had been some further talk—not over-much dwelling on vain regrets—and then the Lady of the Bernardini had asked, half-reluctantly:

"How if some Lady of the Cornari went with her?—I—having no daughter of my own—and loving her well? And—thou and I need not be parted."

"I dared not ask it of thee," he cried fervently—"for it is much. I dared not tell thee of the Senate's wish to name thee chief Lady of Caterina's Court."

"The court of the child! The little Caterina!" she exclaimed impetuously, rising and taking a few steps away from him with the irresistible impulse of offended dignity.

"I was bidden to lay their desire before thee—if it should be also of thy will, my Mother; it was not a command," he hastened to assure her.

But she had already conquered herself—being strong as proud, and prompt in decision, but ruled above all by her deep affections, and she came back to his side before he had found words

with which to propitiate her.

"It was strange to me," she said, "but Venice would be more strange without my boy. Let us go together."

"Thou canst verily bear to leave it all?" he asked when he could trust himself to speak. [Pg 53]

Her eyes followed the direction of his motion around the vast hall, then came back to rest upon his face.

"The past is ours," she said, "but not to make us weak. Thy 'might-have-beens' are not less wise for women than for men. I have only thee."

"San Marco atone to thee for thy sacrifice," he cried devoutly.

[Pg 54]

VII

Never was a more brilliant pageant imagined to do honor to the symbolic rite of the *Wedding of the Adriatic* than the triumphant Signoria had called forth to speed the young Queen to her distant island.

Never did father more solemnly promise his protection to the child from whom he was parting, than did Cristoforo Moro, the Serenissimo, pledge the faith and support of Venetia to the Daughter of the Republic, as with slow majesty, to the rhythm of an ancient wedding canticle, the Bucentoro, escorted by all the galleys of the arsenal of Venice, the mighty galléasses of her patrician merchants and the gondolas of her nobles, moved forward, beyond the Lido, where the Ambassador Filippo Podacatharo waited with the fleet of Cyprus—most sumptuously outfitted—to receive the bride of Janus.

And never sailed fairer maiden, more fearlessly, into the far sea of her unknown future, flooded with dreams, as with sunshine. Was it only a glamour, tissued of myth and of legend, that lay on the face of the waters, dazzling her eyes?

The rejoicings of the people speeded her; the bells of all the campanili of Venice came echoing to the shores of the Lido; a tumult of voices—the voices of the *popolazzo*, shrill and jubilant, called down the blessings of all the saints upon her—of Santa Caterina—her own name-saint, fair patron of Betrothals; of charming San Luigi—the blessed guardian of love; of San Nicolò, Saint of [Pg 55] the Sea; of Messer San Marco and San Tadoro; and shrilly, above them all, rose the babel of women's voices, invoking the Madonna, "Star of the Sea, Sancta Maria!"

But most of all, deep within her girlish soul, love speeded her—love, grown strong through these years of waiting on the image she had fashioned for herself as the portrait of her lord—painted with all the glowing lights of a true and gracious heart that knew no shadows.

As the galleys passed beyond the Lido into the wider water and the Daughter of Venice stood in her royal wedding-robes beside the Doge, under the golden canopy of the Bucentoro, a rosy light flashing from the circlet of rubies which, like the espousal ring of the Serenissimo, had been consecrated with solemn mass and benediction by the Patriarch of Venice,—did the words of the ancient rite occur to some among that throng of nobles, perchance, as an omen?

"*Sea, we wed thee, in token of our true and perpetual dominion over thee.*"

But now, with a memory of the gracious legend of San Francisco del Deserto—that where the birds should light the favor of Heaven would follow, as they passed the convent on their outward way, a multitude of birds set free from their golden cages burst upon the air with a flood of song, inspired by their sudden liberty, then came throbbing and overwrought, to seek shelter among the silken sails of the Cyprian galleys—mere specks of iridescence, flashing like jewels in a chance ray of sunlight.

The people saw and shouted, "*Benedizion della Madonna! Viva Messer San Marco! Viva la Regina!*" [Pg 56]

When the chimes of the campanili had dimmed to a faint cadence, like some unuttered rhythm of thought, as the distance grew between the outsailing fleet and all that pageantry of Venice, two faces stood forth like visions from the bewildering pictures of the morning and dwelt with Caterina forever.

The pleading face of the Mother deep with tenderness, yet shadowed by an unspoken dread of the unknown that lay beyond:

And the gaze of the saintly Patriarch, Lorenzo Giustiniani, full of strength and inspiration.

It was early summer, when the mere living was a joy; and there was much time for gracious dreaming as the galleys of Cyprus floated down the length of the Adriatic and past the fair coasts of the Mediterranean, before the coming of that wonderful day of days when the bridal fleet was

nearing the shores of the *Isola Fortunata* which had been for long the Mecca of the young Queen's girlish visions.

It lay before her radiant under the Cyprian sky—palaces and ramparts stretching in long lines a-down the coast, against the background of mountain ranges, densely wooded and crowned with the sparkling snows of Troödos; there were gardens rainbow-dyed in bloom, cool with the spray of fountains and the shadows of waving palms; and between the cities were wonderful, fertile plains flowing down to the foam of the sea—a vision of tangled blossoms wreathing with beauty [Pg 57] the shattered splendor of temples of outworn divinities, or rippling with tasselled corn and vines and all manner of fruit-bloom, in luxuriant promise of present good.

What could there be but happiness in such a home! Already the spell of the fabled Cyprian isle was upon her,—could she ever forget this first vision of her land of dreams—fairer than even her hope had limned it!

As she stood with beating heart, waiting with impatience that she scarce could bear for the first touch of her new, strange shore, for the first glimpse of her lover's face—all her pulses tuned to this harmonious rhythm of sky and sea and romance, it was told her that a messenger waited to speak with her.

"Let him approach," she said, turning half-unwilling to watch a knight who advanced, unattended, bearing a missive with the pendant royal seal of Cyprus that she knew so well. He knelt before her, vizor down, yet with the customary homage; then, rising—

"I am sent by his Majesty the King," he said, "to bear his greeting to his most gracious Sovereign Lady, or ever her foot shall touch the shore which blossoms for her alone."

She drew a little pace away from him, fearing to utter her thought until she had seen his face.

"Doth it become one so to speak the message of his King, with *visor down*, Sir Knight, to the bride whom his Majesty would honor?" she answered half-playfully—yet a little bashful in her first speech in the Grecian tongue which she had striven to make her own.

"Our Sovereign Lady doth answer right royally," he said, as he bowed his acquiescence in her [Pg 58] command, passing his helmet to one of the knights who came thronging behind him, and stood confronting her—very courteous and deferent in his bearing, though the breeze was tossing his waving hair about his throat with a hint of comradery, and there was a world of love and mastery in his charming face.

Her own—very fair and true and radiant with girlish beauty—flushed, then paled again, with the quickened beating of her heart, and her eyes, eloquent in confession, were fixed on his, which deepened to a glow of pride and pleasure; yet he was loth to make an end of her charming confusion.

"Hath this missive from his Majesty no meaning for his bride of Venice?" he asked, coming nearer.

"Janus!" she cried—all her soul shining in her eyes; and then, in her own soft, Italian tongue:

"How should my heart *not* know thee!"

[Pg 59]

VIII

Caterina Veneta, Queen of Cyprus, stood on a high balcony of the summer palace in the Casal of Potamia, one beautiful June morning at early dawn, waving farewell to the cavalcade of nobles who were winding up the pass that led to the great forests where the patricians of the island were wont to pursue their favorite pastime. Janus was among them, leading in the chase as in every art that demanded agility and prowess—lithe, strong and beautiful in her eyes as in the first days of their short romance.

It was the one hour of the torrid day when the air was fragrant with the breath of flowers and tingling with the freshness of the sea; and in the sparkle of the morning, with sunshine in her heart and love-light in her eyes, she was very fair to look upon.

The scene had been exhilarating, full of color and motion—laughter and repartee mingling with the adieux of the knights and seigneurs to their ladies, the notes of the hunting-horns, the snorts of impatient steeds, the short expectant bark of the dogs, as the Master of the hounds, the young Count of Jaffa, with his great army of hunters and attendants, moved before the cavalcade into the heart of the forest. A fantastic train it was, with the picturesque costumes of the riders, the tinted tails of their horses and dogs flashing an orange trail in the sunshine, a touch of coquetry [Pg 60] much in vogue among the young Cyprian nobles of the day.

Caterina had watched the start with pride in her husband's grace and courtly bearing, his beautiful strong youth and the devotion of his chosen group of friends: and the winning charm of his manner, as he looked back with a parting act of homage, brought a flush of pleasure to her cheek. She stood for a moment, her eyes growing deep with delicious memories, as she recalled

the romance of their first meeting.

But she was conscious of a little pain at her heart, as she waited, following him with her eyes until the cavalcade was lost to view under the plumy shadows of the distant cypress-trees. Was it thus that kings should spend long summer days when there were rumors of discontent in the air—rumors definite enough to have reached the palace circle in mysterious undertones, quickly repressed when she turned to ask their meaning? Should Janus not have given up his pleasure to stay and examine into the cause which he had laughed away as a mere nothing—a jest of some discontented courtier of one of the old Greek families who had been in Cyprus before the days of the Lusignans; and all the more if they were always alert for fancied slights?

"If he is discontented and it is a mere nothing, why should he not be summoned to state his grievance?" she had persisted, with a trace of pleading in her attitude that fretted the King. She was not to concern herself with questions of state or popular discontent suggesting unpleasantly the ruling spirit of Helenà Paléologue, his father's wife; and he had not brought a girl-bride from [Pg 61] Venice to watch his method of holding the reins!

His annoyance had been very real under his laughing exterior, as he kissed the tips of her slender fingers in knightly fashion and assured her that there was nothing to trouble her dainty head about: she should keep her rose-leaf beauty dewy fresh for him, without brooding over the possible meaning of ancient discontented nobles who belonged to an earlier régime.

A passing thought came over him while he made his laughing protest, of the four conspirators who had just been put to the cruel death which Cyprus reserved for her traitors; but their little game was happily over, and he dismissed the memory with a slight shrug of his graceful shoulders. "Was there ever a kingdom without malcontents?" he had asked, turning to his wife. "Was everyone satisfied throughout the length and breadth of Venetia?"

She did not know, for she had been a mere child in her Venetian home, without thought for the things of state which few Venetian women dreamed of discussing—still less of influencing. But now, that she was left alone for a few days, she let her thought dwell upon the question. Was life more strenuous in Venice, or better ordered? As she recalled the ways of her father, the Senator Marco Cornaro, and of the other statesmen of his circle, she could not but recognize the fact that the nobles of Venice made the work of the Government their first concern. She would ask her Secretary-Cousin, Aluisi Bernardini; she felt sure that his knowledge and judgment were to be trusted on Venetian matters, although Janus had already told her with unconcealed disdain that [Pg 62] Bernardini's opinion was valueless on Cyprian questions, which were new to him—and far too complicated.

It was not until recently that some dim perception of this complexity had begun to dawn upon her, athwart the sunshine of her life as bride and queen. When she had first landed on this fabled island she had been too much under the influence of the glamour with which her dreams had invested Cyprus during the years of her betrothal for any serious study of conditions, or questions of right and wrong. She had been taught that kings rule by Divine Right, and no question of succession troubled her confidence of the people's choice of Janus as their sovereign. For her there were no disputes to consider, for the troubled state of Cyprus, but too well known in the Council Chambers of the Republic, had never been revealed to her. Janus was the only son of the late King, his father, tenderly beloved by him, supported by the Sultan who was Suzerain of Cyprus, and eagerly welcomed by the people of his realm. These were truths it had been considered wise for her to know, and they had been duly declared to her by her monitors of Venice.

But there were others—conflicting truths—among them the facts of his birth and of his contest with Carlotta—with which they had diplomatically left her to come in contact when there could be no withdrawal, but which time must unerringly reveal to her, and with no gentle hand.

The period of rejoicings for the Royal Marriage had been long and brilliant, as was the custom of the time, and the Coronation-fêtes, the journeyings from city to city of the realm, that she [Pg 63] might make acquaintance with her land and people, had brought them far into the early spring. But when the excitement of these days was over, she slowly grew aware of something sinister beneath the smiling surface, and the studied brilliancy of the atmosphere about her made her fear a conspiracy to keep her in childish ignorance of what was passing within the kingdom. But surely, if she were not equal to comprehending these things, she must bend herself to the task and try to grow!

It was of this that the young Queen was thinking as her husband rode forth with his suite of gay, young nobles to the chase, and she summoned Aluisi to her presence.

Already a blast of heat was rising over the land and the rasping cries of the cicala fretted their talk; and Caterina bade him follow her down into the *voto*—the vast, cool, underground chambers which, for the patricians of Cyprus, made life possible during this heated term, between the freshness of the morning and the comfort of the evening shadows.

The talk was long and serious.

"There was never a court without some discontent," he answered lightly to her questioning; "fair Madame, my cousin and Queen."

The mingling of protection and affection in his attitude towards her was so natural in the older man who had known her as the petted child and cousin of their house through the years of intimacy in Venice, that she had never allowed him to change it when they talked alone together, and it was only in the presence of the court that he taught himself to remember her queenly

estate.

"Nay, Aluisi," she answered, earnestly, "thou art in league with the King—it was his very answer." [Pg 64]

"It is but truth, in league with truth, most gracious Majesty," he retorted playfully. "Nay—but no league at all; only two liege men speaking truth; therefore the oneness of speech."

He had employed the stilted fooling of the period to cover his confusion and to gain time; for the matter was of moment and it had taken him unaware—he did not know how to answer her.

"Nay, nay, Aluisi—I am distressed; there is some great trouble; I command thy knowledge."

He had never heard her use the word before, and it became her well.

"Fair cousin, it is not new," he answered deferentially, but pausing to choose his words, for it was no time to fill her soul with alarms. "It is, I hear them say, some question of a mutiny in Cerines."

"It will mean an uprising?—danger for the King?"

"Nay, have no fear; it was quelled at once."

"How quelled?"

"So soon as discovery of the plot was made—before any steps had been taken to carry out their plans."

"*How* quelled?" she asked again, dissatisfied.

"The manner of it was not reported to me," he answered truthfully enough; "I knew not that the question would be put to me," he added with an attempt to turn easily from a subject on which he dared not speak freely to matter more nearly touching his office—of her commands for Venice for the galley that was to sail on the morrow. But meanwhile the vision of horror rose before him of that which he had seen with his own eyes; and lest, watching him so closely she should learn too [Pg 65] much, he dropped his gaze, feigning to seek for some items on the tablet he held in his hand. How should he tell her the story of this plot to influence an uprising, to wrest the stronghold of Cerines for Carlotta, the rival claimant and heir? How explain this conspiracy against her husband when she probably knew nothing of what lay beneath it? How could he speak of the staunch loyalty to Carlotta of the leader of this conspiracy, of whom the disaffected were making a hero, and who had preferred any fate to the necessity of swearing fealty to Janus! He had shuddered at the barbarism which could decree such a fate for the conspirators; nor could he forget the horror of those bodies cut in bits, and swung on high, in the four quarters of the town—a ghastly warning for all men to see—as they walked to and fro in the marvellous great city of Nikosia—the city of luxury and of churches.

But if the treatment of traitors in Venice was scarcely less barbarous, yet the State seemed to each son of the Republic a more awe-inspiring and less personal entity than a kingly head of any other government, justifying severer punishment when betrayed; Venetians had been brought up to feel that a traitor could ask for no milder fate than to swing high upon the Piazzetta between the columns—those who thought otherwise might avoid looking up as they passed.

He would not start her questions when it was not for him to answer them. He caught helplessly at some court trifles, trying to evade her mood; but she silenced him with an impatient exclamation.

When he raised his eyes he found her still watching him, with a pathetic, questioning look. [Pg 66]

"They keep things from me, as if I were a child!" she cried indignantly. "Can I be a friend to our people if I do not understand them? There are many things that I would know—the fiefs—the ancient nobles—Carlotta. They told me little in Venice of the things I need to know."

"What things?" the Chamberlain asked helplessly.

She looked at him searchingly. "To whom shall I go if not to thee, Aluisi? Art thou not enough my friend to help me?"

"Messer Andrea, our cousin, being high in favor with his Majesty, hath a more intimate knowledge of Cyprian matters—I being new in the land—why not appeal to him? Was it not by him that our sweet Lady came hither?"

She thought of the King's favorite, her Uncle Andrea Cornaro, as Bernardini spoke—debonair, charming—yet with a power of scorn and haughtiness beneath his facile exterior which won him the hatred of those who were not his friends. He had not found time for any serious talk with his niece, who had already appealed to him; indeed he had no time for anything but the brilliant surface life of the court, where he was a ruling spirit. After his own fashion he had been more than kind and generous to Caterina, showering her with princely gifts, eager that his niece should keep such estate as befitted the bride of Janus, and proud of his own part in securing so great an honor for the Casa Cornaro.

But among the ancient nobles of Cyprus, there were some who resented the knowledge of their King's great indebtedness to this Venetian nobleman. [Pg 67]

The cousins Cornaro and Bernardini were of the same generation, and no less anxious for the honor of their house, but they represented opposite poles of Venetian character; Bernardini's gravity and dignity of demeanor concealed a depth of tenderness and consideration which he rarely confessed, yet, a true Venetian statesman, he could observe in silence, nor use his

knowledge until it might be of some avail. The King disliked him, fearing his silent judgment, and was already considering how he might get him out of the Queen's household without offense to Venice, whose favor was important for him. Of the Cornaro, although he owed him much, he was less in fear; for Andrea Cornaro was one whom he might meet with his own weapons. The bearing and deference of Bernardini were unimpeachable, but Janus was impatient of his impenetrable reserve.

Caterina laid her hand affectionately on her cousin's arm, in response to his question. "Aluisi," she said gravely, "my Uncle Andrea hath been more than kind—as to a child who asketh only baubles: but, truly, he will not see that one may not rest content to be always a child: he thinketh, perchance, that for women there is no duty but to move regally in the midst of a splendor where he would verily pour out his fortune. A question fretteth his mood, which persistence maketh not more serious. But in a kingdom where discontent hath a share, one must study the heart of the people and win it, if one may. And this is *my* way to help my husband. The look of the peasants [Pg 68] maketh me weary—as if the sunshine of their beautiful land were not for them. I miss the happy faces of our people of Venice!"

"It is a queen-like task," he answered her, a little wondering at her gravity and purpose. "Meanwhile I will talk with the King's Chamberlain about the fiefs and about the old nobility," he continued, eagerly seizing the least tangled thread to draw this uncomfortable conversation to a close; "would not the Lady Margherita de Iblin know far better than I? Shall I ask my mother to send her hither?"

The Lady Margherita—the one of all her Cyprian maids of honor who had most warmly won her friendship—there was no older nor more noble family in the island than the De Iblin; why had she not thought of her before!

"Aye, bid her come hither," she answered, well-pleased; "we will rest together in the heat of the day and she shall tell me many things of Cyprus."

But the Chamberlain felt some uneasiness as he went in search of the Cyprian lady who was to be the Queen's companion in more than one long, frank talk. If she were to presume too much upon Caterina's knowledge and speak too freely, what might happen when the King returned? Might he not vent his displeasure on Aluisi himself? And if he were to be dismissed to Venice, who would watch for her as he could do—protect and help her?

But it was true that she ought not to be kept in ignorance of Cyprian affairs, and she herself had made the demand.

In the days that followed, Cyprus began to unfold strange problems for the Queen, as its story [Pg 69] fell from the lips of the young Cyprian woman whose confidence she had so freely invited.

"Tell me I pray thee of Carlotta—Sister to the King—all that thou knowest," she said.

"It is a long tale, your Majesty."

"And these summer-days will be long, while the King is at the chase; we must seek wherewith to give them some new interest, for the Court is dull without him," she flushed like a shy, young girl, adding as if to cover her show of feeling: "it is dull with so many absent."

The Lady Margherita was some years older than Caterina, and she felt the gravity of the task that the Queen had imposed upon her—to tell of the contest between her husband and his sister: she was silent in her perplexity.

"It is a matter of history," she said slowly. "Doubtless your Majesty knew that many of us in Cyprus had taken oath of fealty to Carlotta before the Sultan sent us Janus and upheld him for our King. It is a difficult tale to speak of before our Sovereign lady—whom we love."

She looked up, a smile transforming her grave, dark face and deep, sad eyes; the rare sweetness and directness of the young Queen's nature had already won her reverent love: but suddenly, as the Lady Margherita looked at her she grew aware of the unsuspected fund of strength beneath the gracious girlish exterior, realizing that the spring of her actions would be in true nobility—not in selfish pleasure. Might not some good for her dear land come from the enlightened love of its youthful Queen? Yet she hesitated to bring any shadow into the life which [Pg 70] had seemed all sunshine during these few months of bridal festivity, and the Queen was young to look at life through such serious eyes. But she had asked, and the King, who was still a lover, might be steadied by his wife's influence.

Caterina put out her hand in response to the smile and clasped that of Margherita.

"It is for your Majesty to command silence or speech," the Cyprian maid-of-honor said tentatively, as Caterina still held silence. "Yet, if it be speech, I pray your Majesty to remember that it is not I, who am the cause, if my page of history should offend. If I must speak, it can only be what I believe to be truth."

"It is only those who speak truth, my Margherita, of whom one may trust the friendship," Caterina answered gravely. "And I have chosen thee for my friend."

A deep flush colored the Cyprian's ivory cheek as she knelt and kissed the queen's hand in acknowledgment; for the reticent maid had opened her heart, with unwonted warmth, to the appeal of the rare simplicity and force of her liege lady's gentle nature.

"I would rather *know*, than fear I know not what," Caterina pursued. "Our most Reverend and beloved Patriarch of Venice hath given me this talisman to help me in my new land," there was a little pathetic lingering on the words, which touched her listener, "'Seek to know the truth

concerning *all* thy people. And tell thy perplexity, if there be any, to Christ and the Madonna.' I would know that I may help the King," the young wife pleaded.

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IX

And now, by the Queen's command which might not be denied, the talk flowed through the days of leisure during the absence of the King, while Caterina strolled with her Cyprian maid of honor through the terraced gardens in the cool of the evening, or rested in the heat of the day, in the shaded apartments of the *voto*. The girl-queen listened with breathless eagerness to the strange revelations, often interrupting with passionate exclamations, for her short taste of Cyprian life had been so colored with the glamour of love and happiness and the excitement of her novel surroundings that the vague forebodings which were beginning to temper the brilliancy had suggested no serious shadows.

In vain Donna Margherita pleaded that she might be allowed to put the theme aside, as she told of the disaffection of some of the ancient nobles of Cyprus who had been despoiled of vast estates because of their sympathy with Queen Carlotta. "But Janus was ever generous," said Margherita, "and none of their riches went into the King's treasury, but always into the hands of those nobles who were loyal to the new Government."

The new Government! Queen Carlotta! The young Venetian's hot resentment rose fiercely against the Republic which had left her in such ignorance of Cyprian matters while she turned her proud young head away that Margherita might not guess how little the name of Carlotta had meant for her.

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"Tell me more of Carlotta—tell me everything," she commanded, steadied by her quick resolve to know and endure whatever the past might hold for her; and Margherita, who had been watching her with strange intuition, knew that she might hold nothing back, as she also knew that the young Queen had been kept in absolute ignorance of the complications preceding the accession of Janus. But it was impossible for Caterina to conceal the play of her angry emotions as the tale progressed, and she frankly gave up the attempt. Janus—her beautiful Janus—the idol of the old King—*not* the legal heir to the throne! Janus, in his boyhood, hated, thwarted, intrigued against—living in very fear of his life!

"Nay!" Margherita assured her with glowing eyes, "he knew not the color of fear, for he had the heart of a King!"

Then Caterina drew her close and gave her a passionate kiss, in seal of a friendship that was never to be broken.

"He had need to be brave," Margherita went on when she could command her voice, for the Queen's great eyes were beseeching, "for Queen Elenà cared not how he should be put out of the way so that he might not interfere with her absolute sway nor with the holding of the Crown by her daughter Carlotta, when old King Janus should die."

So this was why, by Queen Elenà's command, the dashing, masterful boy of fifteen had been created Archbishop of Cyprus—in the hope that the honors of the Church might absorb his powers and keep the wish for his succession out of the thoughts of the people who idolized him! This holding of the Primacy had been a mystery to Caterina, who, dearly as she loved her hero, knew him to be no saint. But, whatever the rights of Carlotta—who had been left Queen by her father's will (and insistent questions thrust themselves into the thoughts of Caterina while she listened, zealous to escape no detail)—it was evident that Margherita's sympathies went out to Janus.

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"He hath more the quality of the Lusignans—to whom the De Iblin were ever loyal," she explained to Caterina, "and Carlotta is like her mother. Janus was first to offer his homage to his sister, pleading that as children of one father there might be truce and loving intercourse between them; but he was refused admittance to the Royal Palace; denied his right, as Primate of Cyprus, to preside at the coronation and commanded to remain within his palace during the ceremony, *lest the love of the people should acclaim him King*. But the crown of Carlotta fell from her head as she returned in stately procession to the palace," Margherita exclaimed, crossing herself devoutly—"so one might know that her reign should not be happy!"

"And then?" Caterina questioned, impatiently.

"Ah, yes, your Majesty, there was more; for our brave Janus had been gentle withal, but for ceaseless outrage that forced him to forswear his oath of loyalty. His revenues were withheld: he was beguiled to a banquet in the palace of a high officer of the crown where poisoned meats were set before him, but here, as in many another intrigue, the watchful love of the beautiful Maria da Patras—his unhappy mother—saved his life. Poor lady! she watched and prayed for him, and had no other thought.

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"One knows not how—but she always knew—as if some spirit had told her!" Margherita

continued in a tone of awe, after a moment's silence. "For none but she had dreamed the great Sir Tristan traitor to his trust, he who came of the noble house of De Giblet and was keeper of the Episcopal Palace and on guard at night! Yet once it befell that Sir Tristan came stealthily into the sleeping chamber of the prince, and the pages of the night who stand at arms beside the couch had fallen to the pavement, heavy with some strange sleep. But Donna Maria had watched and warned and our Janus was already stealing far on his way to Alexandria, when Sir Tristan drew aside the curtains and plunged his dagger deep into the mass of pillows which in the darkness wore some semblance of a sleeping form. It was told that he howled with rage at such childish thwarting, for Donna Maria had men at hand who came running at the outcry and took Sir Tristan into safe keeping."

"Madre Sanctissima!" Caterina exclaimed in her excitement, and urging the recital with a quick motion of her hand.

"It was the last time, sweet Lady, that our Janus might feel Carlotta's power; for soon he returned from Alexandria to take possession of Cyprus by order of the Sultan, our Suzerain, upheld by his armies and his treasure. For the charm of the Prince had won their hearts; the [Pg 75] circumstance of his birth and a woman's rights were of small account in the estimation of the Sultan, and the march of our young King from his landing to his capital was a victory—the people kneeling in his pathway—wild with the joy of welcome."

Margherita had told the tale with eloquence, her breath coming quickly, her color rising, but Caterina was fairly startled by the dramatic ring in her voice as she told how Carlotta, at the last moment, finding further resistance impossible, had sent an envoy to Janus to promise him the revenues of his See, once more, if he would but lay down his arms and renew his allegiance. But the magnificent ambassador from Alexandria, whom the Sultan had sent with Janus to see his will enforced, made reply:

"It is the will of my master—the Sultan of Sultans, the Lord of lords, the King of kings—that Janus, prince of Cyprus, should reign as King; and my master, the Sultan of sultans, will acknowledge no other sovereign."

Then, suddenly, Caterina felt that she could bear no more; she must be alone to think, and she held up her hand to entreat silence. How tender she would be to him on whom such cruelty had been wreaked—how loving—to make amends for all the hatred of the past! How brave he was, her true knight—how forgiving—to have told her nothing of all this tragedy! It was not strange that his people loved him so—his people who had thronged upon his pathway with acclamation and greeting! Her heart beat high with adoring love and her eyes filled with happy tears.

"My Janus!" she cried, and then again, "my Janus," she whispered softly, filling the syllables [Pg 76] with a wealth of tenderness and sympathy. She felt that she could not wait until he should come again; these few days had seemed so long!

But her elation passed and a sense of overwhelming disaster possessed her. "The Senate had known it all—the Senate had told her nothing—*nothing about Carlotta*. Why had they not named her—was it because—because——?"

And then the questionings that had come to her hastily and been lost in the recital of the perils and escapes of one so beloved came back with renewed force and would not be quieted, but called out for an answer. When Janus came she would ask him—in her staunch fair soul, she knew that she *must* ask him, though he might be angry and the bare thought of this made her shrink and quail—it even shadowed a little the pleasure of his longed-for coming—for he had always been so knightly to her. But yet, she could not wait! A great horror came over her of the old Queen, who had been painted as without principle and of wild passions—shrinking from nothing so that she might gain her will, and she was glad in her soul that Elenà was not the mother of her Janus, while she struggled with her Venetian pride and promised herself to be the truer to him for his wrongs. And so the night wore on; and between her longing and her trouble there was no sleep for her while the day delayed.

A vague shape of terror seemed to hover between her and her vision of the future that had been so golden. Where was Carlotta? Might she not come again and strive to win back her [Pg 77] crown? Were the nobles many who would uphold her?

Nay; but it was Janus whom the people loved—Janus! who had been crowned their king, with all solemn ceremony in Alexandria, by order of the Suzerain of Cyprus—to oppose him was rebellion! Janus—her beloved—so winsome, so masterful! Then, slowly out of the darkness rose the noble face of Lorenzo the Giustinian, full of quiet and strength—her mother's face, loving, comforting—both asking her best of her; and the Question grew in her soul. "Perhaps Carlotta's right was greater—*could it be greater* than her husband's?"

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X

All day the queen had been restless and depressed, starting at the sound of a footfall only to

drop her eyes again in disappointment and relapse into unquiet revery; the weight of empire hung heavily upon her girlish spirit and she was unutterably lonely in the absence of Janus which seemed so unduly prolonged. It was the latest day that he had named for his possible absence, and still no courier had come to announce his return.

The noon had been unusually sultry, the stifling heat of the upper chambers oppressed her and the ceaseless, rasping whir of the cicala smote her with weariness, but she resisted the attempt of her ladies to detain her in the cooler atmosphere of the *voto*, for in these underground chambers she could have no sight of the great plain beyond the boundaries of the palace-gardens —and she preferred remaining in the halls that overlooked the terraces—turning her eyes often in the direction of the forest.

It was like a pall upon them all to see their young mistress, usually so gracious and responsive, wholly absorbed in her troubled revery; but to-day her maidens played their sweetest strains upon their silvery lutes, without her answering smile; the gentlemen of her court sought in vain for some diversion to distract her; even the Lady Margherita could do nothing for her pleasure, while she watched in unobtrusive tenderness, feeling that quiet, however unsatisfying, was more welcome than speech. [Pg 79]

The pages, at a sign from the Lady Margherita, had dipped their fronds of feather in the great vases of mountain-snow that stood between the columns, and waved them about the chamber; the queen followed their movements with a fleeting smile as this breath of coolness reached her, then fixed her eyes again, with a despairing look, upon the distant forest.

"She wearieth for the King," her maidens said low to each other, "and verily he may come to-night, for the days have already numbered more than he giveth of wont to the chase."

"She is not like herself," the Lady Ecciva de Montferrat whispered to her young Venetian companion, Eloisà Contarini, as the company strolled out upon the terraces at a sign from the Lady Beata Bernardini whose loving motherly eyes saw that Caterina needed rest and solitude. "She is strange and pale to-day—like one who hath seen a vision." Lady Ecciva spoke with deep seriousness, for superstition was a vital part of the Cyprian nature, belonging alike to peasant and noble.

"How meanest thou—*a vision*?" Eloisà questioned, startled.

The other turned to see that they were not followed and answered in an awe-struck tone: "*The vision of the Melusina—the fate of the Lusignans!* Didst thou not hear her shriek from the Castle of Lusignan in the dead of night?"

"*The Melusina?* Ecciva, who is *the* '*Melusina*?'"

"She is the evil genius of the House of Lusignan," Ecciva explained to her excited companion, "all Cyprus knoweth that when the Melusina crieth three times from the towers of the ancient Château of Lusignan, in far France, it meaneth death, or some great misfortune to a ruler of this house." [Pg 80]

"And thou—didst hear this lamentation verily, Ecciva? I should have died from fear!"

"Yea, thou being from Venice—not knowing that it bodeth not harm for thee—it is misfortune only for some ruler of their house of Lusignan."

"And that is naught to thee!" the Venetian girl exclaimed in astonishment. "Thy King—is he nothing to thee?"

"One knoweth not," the other answered nonchalantly. "There is Carlotta—both of the house of Lusignan; and she might be kinder than King Janus who seized the fiefs of my father because he came not forth to do him homage when he landed with his army from Alexandria."

Eloisà drew herself impetuously away from her companion who was watching her through long, half-closed eyes.

"Thou then—why art thou here?" she exclaimed indignantly, "in service of my beloved Lady, who is so good and fair, if thou lovest her not—nor the King!"

The youthful Dama Ecciva laughed lightly:

"Thou art a veritable *turco* for fierceness, Eloisà! I have naught against her Majesty, who truly is most fair and gracious—quite other than Carlotta—whom I love not at all! And if I held some grudge against the King for seizing of my father's lands (which broke his heart before he died) one cannot long be churlish in presence of our Janus, who hath a matchless fashion of grace with him, so that all think to have won his favor. Verily, that is a King for Cyprus!—he mindeth one of Cinyras. I must tell thee the tale of our hero of Cyprus some day, Eloisà." [Pg 81]

"Aye: but tell me now—how camest thou at Court if the King hath wronged thy house?"

"Such eyes thou hast!—like a frightened child! I know not if I shall reach thy comprehension, were I to answer thee—but I, being only daughter to my father, Gualtier of Montferrat, who had no son—plead with my mother to send me hither when I came of age, to do homage loyally to King Janus, and claim our fiefs of him again—I being his vassal by right of long generations past —there was no other way."

"A vassal so loyal doth honor to him and thee!" the warm-blooded Venetian maid cried scornfully, with a toss of her dainty head.

Again the Lady Ecciva laughed lightly, but no shadow of discomposure marred the exquisite outlines of the beautiful, cold face: the skin, delicate and fine as ivory, showed no flush of color:

her eyes and tresses were dark as night—the eye-brows slender, yet marking a perfect arc—the eyes beneath them tantalizing, inscrutable—the mouth rosy as that of a child—the fingers long, sinuous, emphasizing her speech with movements so unconscious that sometimes they betrayed what her words left unguessed.

"I do not understand thy vassalship," the Lady Eloisà said with hesitation—yet eager to know more of her companion's attitude toward the Queen; they had wandered far down the terrace to [Pg 82] the basin where the swans were floating, opalescent in the sunset light.

Dama Ecciva broke off some oleander blossoms and flung them at the royal birds with teasing motion, watching them contentedly as, one by one, they floated away with ruffled plumage and sounds of protest.

"It is a right of our house for many generations," she explained; "being allied with royalty through the elder branch of the Montferrats, I am a *dama di maridaggio* by birth, and since there is no son of our house to offer homage in return for our fiefs, the duty was mine to do service to our King and claim our lands of him again. It was a simple ceremony—to bend the knee and kiss his hand, and make some empty vows—to see my mother Lady of her lands once more."

"Aye, it were well—if thy vows were not so 'empty,'" Eloisà protested. "How shouldst thou speak so coldly of thy vision, if thou hadst one spark of loyalty?"

"It was not *my* vision," her companion answered nonchalantly; "I slept the night through, the better to enjoy the day, which, verily, was not worth taking such trouble for,—so stupid hath it been!"

"But the vision?" Eloisà questioned impatiently—"there was no vision! Thou hast said it but to frighten me!"

"It is her Majesty who hath had the vision—one can tell it but to look at her: and for the three fatal shrieks—the shrieks to curdle one's blood—Josefa told of them but now. *Some* one hath [Pg 83] heard them; but they hush it in the court for it meaneth disaster."

"I may not stay with thee!" Eloisà cried turning away in hot displeasure; "not for fear—for I do not believe thy vision: but because I hate thy mocking spirit and thy so strange loyalty—*dama di maridaggio*!"

The Lady Ecciva calmly resumed her pastime of swan-teasing as her impulsive companion, flushed and panting, began to climb the long flight of marble steps that led back to the palace-plateau.

"I think I am better companioned this heavenly night without thy preaching," she said serenely, as Eloisà, half repenting her quickness, turned back to wave her a farewell, "for the breezes are comforting after the day, and fret me not with questions. And for my *loyalty*"—she lingered mockingly on the word—"my loyalty will serve King Janus well enough, unless he seeketh to enforce his rights to my displeasure."

"How to thy 'displeasure'? What 'rights'?"

"His right of Lord of the fiefs—for our lands are gifts of the Crown—to choose a husband for his *dama di maridaggio* who suiteth not her fancy."

"Nay, verily, Ecciva, he is a noble gentleman—he would not press thee too hard, thou wouldst protest."

"Aye, I should protest—I *would* protest. And so he hath no scheme to marry me with the miserable Neapolitan noble who held our lands while we were dispossessed, I care not! But it were good to know what fancy might seize him—our charming Janus! For he is a man of many [Pg 84] moods and some favorite of the Soldan may next be friend to him!"

The evening breezes were slowly waking over the torrid land, bringing needed refreshment after the long sultriness of the day: the air was laden with delicious odors—fragrance of rose and jessamine and orange blooms; birds of brilliant plumage called to each other in jubilant notes as they flitted hither and thither among the pomegranate blossoms which burned, like tongues of flame, among the thickets of green.

Back through the long alleys of wonderful trees where many a clinging vine trailed masses of riotous color, it was pleasant to hear mirthful voices ringing freely after the dull day's repression, or echoing back more faintly from adventurous wanderers in the farther shrubberies. This garden of delights which Janus had made for his bride, environing this palace of Potamia, was alive with charm—rippling with stolen streams, more costly than molten silver at the summer's height, which kept it in such vesture of luxuriant bloom as only a monarch might command.

But Eloisà sped quickly up from terrace to terrace, scarcely pausing to answer the persiflage with which her companion sought to detain her; she was overwrought and unhappy, in spite of herself; she had no faith in the vision of Ecciva; she felt hurt and outraged by her coldness, and she was hastening back for one look in the true and noble face of the Lady of the Bernardini, who mothered all these young Venetian maids of honor in the court of Caterina, craving to express her deep loyalty to the Queen herself by some immediate act of silent homage. [Pg 85]

Only the Lady of the Bernardini and Margherita de Iblin were with Caterina in the loggia, just without the palace, as Eloisà came flying up the steps and falling on her knees covered the young Queen's hand with passionate kisses.

"What is it, *carina mia*?" Caterina asked in alarm; "thou bringest news? There is a courier?"

"*Niente—niente, Serenissima*—only to be near the one I love!" the girl cried fervently; and then grew suddenly quiet, in full content after this needed avowal.

"Poverina, thou art lonely for thy Venice, and thy people," the Queen murmured in her own soft Italian tongue, while her fingers strayed caressingly through the glory of red-gold hair which fell unbound about the maid, in the fashion of those days for one of noble birth and tender age.

But presently she withdrew her hand and motioned Eloisà to a corner among the cushions on the curving marble slab, grotesquely wrought with talismanic symbols, which outlined the end of the loggia where they sat. "Thou art come à-propos: for the Lady Margherita hath promised us a tale of ancient Cyprus, and we of Venice wish to know these legends of our beautiful island."

"Nay, beloved Sovereign Lady;—it is not legend but simple historic truth, which your Majesty hath granted me permission to narrate—a tale of love and loyalty of the annals of our house; and out of it hath come this Cyprian proverb: '*Quel che Iblin è non si può trovar.*' 'Such an one as Iblin may no man find!'" Dama Margherita, usually so pale and grave, was flushed and eager; her [Pg 86] deep eyes sparkled; her breath came fast.

The name of Joan of Iblin was revered in Cyprus and the Queen turned towards Margherita with some comprehension of her pride in the nobility of this ancestor who had spent himself in loyal service for the early Kings of Cyprus, touching her hand with a light pressure, smiling her approbation.

No feast at any court in those days was complete without this diversion of recitation, when the nation's heroes, or some passage from its greater classics, furnished the theme; or when some improvisator wove a tissue of myth and legend, embroidered with fact, which won its way through confiding ages as historic truth, till the time, growing sophisticated, laid it heroically aside for a curio. And Cyprus stood high among the Eastern nations in literary reputation. Was not its poet Enclos earliest among the Greek prophetic singers? Was not the "Cypria" celebrated among the epics of antiquity, a precursor to the Iliad itself? Was any land more fertile than Cyprus in food for poets?

The Cypriotes no longer knew whether Cinyras were god, or man, or myth; whether he were the son of Apollo, or of Pygmalion and the bewitching ivory image of the sculptor's dead wife; or, in very truth, that splendid prince of Agamemnon's time, as sung by Homer in the Iliad, winning laurels at the siege of Troy. This hero of the "*Cypria*," was he, in verity the great High Priest of the island and chief of the stately race of the *Cinyradæ* who had ruled the people long in State and Sanctuary, and filled their realm with stately temples? The Cypriotes drew breath in an [Pg 87] atmosphere of myth and poetry and felt the recital of the feats of their heroes to be no less a duty than a delight.

The improvisatorial faculty so often bestowed upon this imaginative people was greatly prized, and not infrequently it descended from father to son, as an inheritance, winning for its possessor something of the reverence granted to a prophet.

Dama Margherita de Iblin possessed this gift, though only in moments of deep feeling was she willing to exercise it: but to-night she was strangely moved out of sympathy for the Queen, whose evident anxiety filled her with foreboding and whom she eagerly longed to divert.

"Since your Majesty hath graciously commanded the story of Joan of Iblin, Lord of Beirut and Governor of Jerusalem—a tale of our dear land when it was young—I will tell it after the fashion of my people," she said, rising with her sudden resolve, her strong, dark face grown beautiful from the play of noble emotions.

She stood for a moment, her tall figure in its sweeping folds swaying in slow rhythmic cadence —her attitude and gesture full of grace and dignity—irresistibly compelling—as in low, penetrating monotone she began her chant.

The music-maidens stole noiselessly forth upon the loggia, accompanying the noble improvisatrice with lute and rhythmic posture; the night deepened and the stars came out, and still her hearers listened breathlessly, as in moments of emotion the chant leaped wildly to meet the urgency of her thought, or deepened in melting tenderness to its pathos; for such was the [Pg 88] intensity of Margherita's emotion and dramatic quality that she endued each character with an almost startling vitality—or had she put her auditors under some magic spell with the compelling gaze of her deep eyes? They felt as if living in that past time, partakers in its very action, and they surrendered themselves to her power.

It was the tale of an infant heir of Cyprus, when the realm was young and the Emperor Frederick was her Suzerain, and with a sweep of her magnetic fingers Margherita showed the babe lying helpless and appealing before his uncle the noble Lord of Iblin, to whom the widowed Queen had confided him during his tutelage. The guardian's faith and devotion were sketched in rapid strokes; and when the tiny King had been crowned and his knights and barons of Cyprus and Jerusalem had sworn him fealty, the souls of her listeners swelled indignant within them as Dama Margherita thrilled forth the challenge of the Emperor to the Lord of Iblin to lay down his trust and surrender the child with the customs of Cyprus to him—their Suzerain—until the boy should be of age.

"*Not so—most gracious Lord and Emperor!*" Joan of Iblin had made dauntless answer; "*for my tutelage is by order of the Queen, his mother, who holdeth the regency justly, and by the laws of Cyprus and of Jerusalem—which, with all courtesy, I will defend. I make appeal unto the courts for this our right!*"

Her sympathetic auditors verily *heard* the tramp of armies in the wild chant of Margherita

when the Emperor had replied with scorn and insult, trampling on the rights of Cyprus; they could have sworn that they saw the Emperor's hosts gathering on the plains as they watched the impetuous motions of all those beckoning maiden hands; and then, advancing in quiet dignity, sure of their right, the old-time knights and barons of Cyprus and Jerusalem, moving to the measure of a quaint, Christian psalm: and so fully had her listeners yielded themselves to her potent spell, that but hearkening to her recital, they quailed and trembled when she told that the enemies of the Lord of Iblin came by night and sought to whisper treachery to his staunch soul, while in tones that scarcely broke the hush, the false words of the tempter reached their consciousness, quivering through them, as if they themselves were guilty of this treachery: [Pg 89]

"*Ye are more in number than the hosts of the Emperor—kill him while he sleepeth! For we will see that his guards wake not.*"

Then fell a deep, throbbing silence, tingling with a sense of shame, broken by a sudden discord of the lutes and the wild burst of ringing scorn.

"*Shall we, Christian men of Cyprus, do this iniquity!*"

Again, the whispered voice of the tempter: "*Aye! for the Emperor is false; he hath taken thine own sons for hostages and keepeth not his promise but in his camp entreateth them shamefully; and in the courts, which shall judge of this thy cause, doth seek to malign thee.*"

Once more came the voice of Joan of Iblin, invincible:

"*We have sworn fealty to the Emperor—we are true men—be others untrue.*" [Pg 90]

And then in unison—swift, sure, triumphant—the words vibrated on the air: "*We have sworn fealty to the Emperor—we are true men—be others untrue.*"

The voices in the garden had long since ceased, and one by one the wanderers had gathered on the terrace, waiting in responsive silence the conclusion of the tale they loved. Among them the Bernardini stood entranced. He had been strolling alone, filled with anxious thoughts which had brought him to a mood easily wrought upon, and from the silence of the garden to come suddenly upon this scene of picturesque action was a surprise that gave it added power.

He stood as if fascinated, never moving his gaze from the lithe figure of Margherita, whose every motion revealed new grace and unsuspected depths of feeling. Margherita, whom he had thought so grave and cold! So intently was he watching her that he realized no others in the vivid pantomime until the music maidens had gathered closely about her with hushed lutes and a mysterious silence fell—as of night upon the plain—spreading with the slow movement of the down-turned palms of all that girlish throng—the graceful, swaying figures scarce advancing, yet seeming to encompass the plain.

Between these interludes of dramatic rendering, the thread of the story was held in a quick, clear monotone easily followed. The hushed tramp of a great army withdrawing in the night—not from fear, but to honor their vows—the words of Iblin: "*We will not fight our Emperor, for our men are more than his: which having seen, it will now perchance please him to accept our terms of honorable peace.*" [Pg 91] The Emperor's acceptance of the terms from fear or wile, or because of new wars pressing in his own lands: his promise to leave the customs of the realm to Cyprus: and then, as Suzerain, his swift summons to the Lord of Iblin to join him in Crusade with men and arms. But the friends of the faithful guardian close round him and the chant of Margherita grows fierce and ominous:

"*Beware! He meaneth treachery. It is no summons—save to entrap thee.*"

But the answer rings out loyally in the knightly faith of those early days, while the deep, contralto tones electrify her audience: "*Shall we show fear of our Emperor, or fail to bring him aid in holy warfare of Crusade—we, who are Christian knights? Faith begetteth Faith!*"

Then the Cypriotes fare them forth to do the bidding of their dauntless leader,—all the knights and nobles of Cyprus and Jerusalem, the youthful King and the sons of the Lord of Iblin—with interchange of gifts and feasting and homage as of leal men to their Suzerain: with much pledging of faith, from each to each, after the manner of those days—against the background of that noble chorus following from afar in massive, chanted solemn tones—

"*Faith begetteth Faith.*"

But now, to the cities of Cyprus, left destitute of defense while their nobles were gone to honor the Emperor's command, came a band of mercenaries of the Emperor's sending, who stole the customs and by their lawless acts frightened the people who fled for safety to the convents, [Pg 92] denouncing Frederick as false and craven; while the governors sent by him, in despite of his solemn treaty, made havoc in the land, proclaiming in every city:

"*Let not the Lord of Iblin set foot in this land of Cyprus—by order of the Emperor!*"

Suddenly the indignant cries of the whole listening company mingled in confusion with the inspired voice of the improvisatrice and the descriptive music of the lutes.

Caterina sprang to her feet, not knowing what she did: "Bring back the Lord of Iblin!" she cried. "Bring the noble Joan back! Save this people of Cyprus!"

At the sound of her voice the lords and ladies of her court came crowding up the steps of the loggia from the terrace, clinging around her, kissing her hands with fervent words of loyalty and pleasure, before she realized that she was in the *Now*, or that she had cried out in her excitement. But this was the Cypriotes' story of stories, and her unconscious action had bound them to her.

But Dama Margherita, still in her trance of song, waved them to quiet again as they stood grouped about the Queen, in the very mood of the closing scene, creating an atmosphere of restrained passion, through which the voice of the improvisatrice throbbed and pulsated like their own hear-beats.

But now the tones of the improvisatrice are low and quiet, and her motions assert the dignity of a life nobly lived. For Joan of Iblin has returned from Crusade, has conquered the intruders and [Pg 93] restored quiet to the realm. But, thereafter, siege is laid to his own castle and fief of Beirut, and now, gray-haired and full of honors, his time of service drawing to a close, his trust fulfilled and the young monarch come to his majority, he implores his royal ward to assemble his full court, and kneeling in their presence before the youth whom he had served from tenderest infancy, he prays:

"*If I have served thee well, my nephew and my monarch—now come to thine own—because I loved thee well, yet loving honor more:*

"*If I have fought for thee in keeping of my trust, and dared the enmity of the Emperor our Suzerain,—and for thy sake:*

"*Now, by my love for thee—for I am old and the cities of my fiefs are doomed;*

"*Send, if it seemeth good to thee and to these, the knights and barons of thy realm, and save my lands—that they be not wrested from me when my strength is spent!*"

The true-hearted Prince threw loving arms about him, with words of comfort and with promises, and would have raised him. But the Lord of Iblin would bring his speech to its conclusion and have his say before them all, thus kneeling—as if it were a rendering of his trust, a fitting close to a so loyal life.

The words of his Swan-Song had been chanted in full, rare, solemn harmony—the lutes in gracious melody accompanying, like an undertone of love—slow tears down dropping from the eyes of Margherita.

And one by one, as the chant proceeded, through her strange magnetic power, her listeners [Pg 94] *saw* a knight step forth from the circle and drop to his knees, swearing fealty to the King and the Lord of Iblin, until all were kneeling. Then the chanting voices hushed and the rapid motions ceased: and under that spell they saw, as in a vision, luminous in the darkness, the kneeling knights of that early court of Cyprus, and in their midst, the gray-haired Joan of Iblin and the boyish monarch, in his young, rosy strength—a vision of love and loyalty!

Aluisi Bernardini breathed a sigh of content as he moved quickly away with a sense of his responsibility being shared; for it was only now that he felt that he knew Margherita, and she would be ever near the Queen, a Cypriote of the Cypriotes, but loyal to her heart's core. He could have kissed the hem of her trailing robe as it floated towards him, stirred by the motion of his passing—for in the maiden's tale she had revealed herself to him: it was not of her grace and talent, nor of the poem that he thought—but on the surety of her staunchness of soul—of her consecration: he heard her voice again ringing in the words:

"*We are true men: be others untrue!*"

[Pg 95]

XI

A Little page who had been leaning on the marble parapet beyond the terrace, came stealthily and beckoned to a comrade on the steps of the loggia.

"A troop of horse were coming across the plain," he explained in low, agitated tones, as the other reached his side, and followed him back to the post where he had been watching. "I saw them all the time Dama Margherita was reciting—Holy Mother, but it was long!—I thought the King was coming, and it was I that should carry the news to her Majesty—I came near crying out! But I could not see his orange plume, and I waited. They came slowly—*Santissima Vergine! He was not there!*"

He clutched his comrade's doublet with a trembling hand and turned an ashen face towards him.

"What ailest thee, Tristan?—thou who art already a damoiseau and shalt be a true knight? Thou art verily dreaming—I see nothing."

"They are gone within—in the first great court of the palace—those who came. They were the King's gentlemen—*all* the King's gentlemen—Messer Andrea among them. I thought the champing would have roused the Queen who hath been watching all the day. I am not afraid——" he gasped; "but it was so horrible!—Thou knowest, Guido, Messer Andrea never leaveth the King."

The boy's eyes were dark with fear. [Pg 96]

"He will come with the others—he will surely, surely come," Guido asseverated.

They clasped each other close and pressed their fresh cheeks together, trembling so that they could scarcely speak, yet struggling to be brave, as became little pages that should be knights.

"They were so long," poor Tristan said in a choking whisper, "and it was so still—*so still*—no music, and they returning from the chase! And—when they came nearer, I thought I saw his horse, but I could not see a rider—and I thought, I thought—perhaps because it *was* dark—and I ran down the front of the palace to get nearer when they crossed the bridge. Ah, but the tramp was dreadful! And—and—it was his horse, and a squire leading him—and—behind them—oh Guido!—*Then I knew*."

"We will be knights, Tristan mio," Guido whispered, wiping away his comrade's tears while his own were falling; and then, straining each other convulsively, they broke down in sobs together.

Dama Ecciva stole up the steps from the terrace, and catching Eloisà's hand, dragged her forcibly away.

"Come quickly," she whispered, with chattering teeth, "*Santa Maria Vergine!* I am so frightened. Oh, the poor, poor Queen! That was why she hath been so strange—she hath truly seen the vision. Poverina, it breaks one's heart! And he but a week away! So gay and debonair, and beautiful as a god!"

There was no mistaking her wild eyes.

"Tell me!" Eloisà gasped. [Pg 97]

"I was there in the pergola, and I saw them come—the *frati* from the Troödos in the midst of the troop of horse—with—with IT.—Oh Eloisà, *it was true!*—They are telling her now."

There was a stir in the great audience-chamber back of the loggia where Caterina sat—a sound of hesitant feet, as of many who came unwillingly, unutterably weary from the dull weight of evil tidings.

The muffled footsteps roused her from her revery and she turned her head and saw them coming. Her heart stood still for fear.

Messer Andrea came before the others, falteringly—as if youth had died out of him: he was pale and strange and no words fell from his blanched lips during that long instant while he crossed the interminable stretch between them, and Caterina waited, with all her tortured soul crying out for Janus.

Then the King's favorite, with the cruel story written in his anguished eyes, turned them full upon hers for one moment, that she might *know*—then bowed his head upon his breast and opened his arms, as if he fain would shelter her—

"Caterina——" he said—"Child——"

[Pg 98]

XII

In the first dazed days that followed, between the necessary adjustment of matters of state, and the many ceremonies incident upon the King's sudden death, there was scant time to discuss the rapid happenings; even in the court-circle they scarcely knew what was passing—still less how it had come about. It was said that Janus had died of malignant fever, due to the terrible malaria of the coasts where he had been hunting. Yet some hinted that there were natural poisons, as of the marshes, and others—more fatal: but this was with bated breath and kept well without the innermost circle of the court, for no one really *knew*. It was easy to talk of poison, but far less easy to make assertions implicating those who might be innocent; and, meanwhile, the complications surrounding the throne of Cyprus demanded infinite wisdom and despatch.

Almost before the Queen could lift her head after the shock of her husband's death, the nobles and barons of the realm had penetrated to her private boudoir and sworn her fealty, with a tenderness and reverence that deeply touched her. By the will which the King had left, Caterina Veneta was now Queen of Cyprus, with a Council of Seven appointed to assist her; and every Venetian who held a post in the Government was restless until the young widow of Janus, who had been crowned with all due ceremony in the Cathedral of Nikosia at the time of her marriage, [Pg 99] had publicly received the full seal of her authority.

So quickly death had fallen upon the brilliant, pleasure-loving young monarch—so without warning—that it seemed to those of his court like some dread nightmare from which they might presently awake to a new morning, fair and gay as those they had known so little time ago, before the music and the mirth, the jewels and the festal robes that befit a court had given place to the gloom and mourning of these horrible days. As in a dream they had taken part in the

sumptuous funeral ceremonies, feeling still that it could not be true—he was too young, too brave, too gay, too gracious, to have come so soon to this! And if to some of those young nobles it was rather the shock of the loss of a boon companion than a serious grief, there were many among them who, for the few bright words that cost him little—a smile—the grasp of his ready hand—permission to come and shine about him—now brought their tribute of adoring tears.

Meanwhile, in the halls of the palace, time moved with slow and halting footsteps: the stricken Queen came rarely among her circle of ladies, and only for short intervals, and the talk, however varied, was but upon one absorbing theme.

It was known that soon after the funeral, the Queen seeking how she might do highest honor in preparing the permanent tomb, had been told of the priceless sarcophagus of oriental jasper—the gift in early ages of the Emperor of the East to Santa Soffia in Nikosia, and she had sent an envoy to the brothers of the convent to ask that it be surrendered for the tomb of Janus, their king, promising whatever compensation they should ask. [Pg 100]

"Ah, but it will be magnificent, that tomb under the dome of our own San Nicolò! It will stand on the precious mosaic pavement from Alexandria, on columns of ivory chased with gold. Dama Margherita hath seen the design which hath been made for her Majesty by the curator of our library of art."

"I also," said the little Contarini, timidly, for she was proud of the favor of the Queen whom she devotedly loved: "It was most beautiful; and the Serenissima la Regina held it long, as if she could not put it away."

But a hand was raised to hush the topic:

"Speak no more thereof; for word hath come but now that the request of her Majesty hath been denied."

There was a chorus of indignant protest:

"It could not be, when she so grieveth! They have no hearts—those *frati* of Santa Soffia!"

"The Queen will not endure this refusal without reason!"

"There was no reason that should be told," their informer whispered low to one of them. "For love of the Queen, hush the topic."

But an elderly member of the Queen's Council who had been passing through the great Hall and had paused near them, taking no part in the conversation, now came forward, after a moment's hesitation.

"*I* speak that you may forget it," he said: "for it seemeth to be a pleasing theme of discussion among you—yet should be so no more—a mere extravaganza of fancy that our girl-queen might wisely abandon." [Pg 101]

"Signore!" exclaimed the Lady of the Bernardini, rising indignantly, "I maintain the dignity of our Sovereign Lady's Court, while she perforce, from sore affliction, must be absent. All speech must be as in her presence."

The Councillor, resenting the reproof, gave a slight cold bow, studying her curiously, and pondering whether he dared go further.

"The matter is of interest," he pursued, after a moment's pause, "for they *gave* their reason, these monks of Santa Soffia, and scrupled not—being willing to keep their treasure."

"Signore Consiglière——!" Dama Margherita exclaimed beseechingly.

But if the monks of Santa Soffia had a reason for their conduct, he also had for his, and would not be stayed.

"They gave their reason; that the precious gift should not be desecrated to *hold relics that were subject to excommunication*," he said with painful distinctness, and would not linger for any explanation.

"It is shameful—such a reason so calmly told by a member of our Queen's Council! He should unsay the words!" one of the maids of honor cried hotly. "There could be no color for it: the Signor Fabrici hath proven that he loveth not the Regina!"

"It was unholy speech," said Dama Margherita crossing herself, "which had not been, save for the Consiglière: it hath no shade of truth; may the Holy Madonna forgive him—and us, who have listened to slander."

"Cara Dama Margherita," said the little Contarini consolingly, "if we have listened—it is not with our hearts!" [Pg 102]

"Thou art wise, carina: and we who love her will see that the ill word goeth not beyond."

But the speech of the Consiglière had caused such consternation that it could not be immediately dismissed; and one of the elder ladies of the Court was obliged to explain it, for "excommunication" was a word of evil omen.

"The word is a slander," she said. "But it is known that the Holy Father hath had small friendship for King Janus since he declined alliance with the niece of His Holiness, who was not one to please our young King's delicate fancy, though His Holiness strove to have his will—first by promises and then by threats."

They pressed closely about her, with exclamations of interest and astonishment, for this gray-

haired noble woman, Madama de Thénouris, had not been one of those to retail gossip and they might not question her strange tale; they knew that she had some serious purpose in this unwonted freedom of speech.

"This was known by some of us in Cyprus before the marriage of our King—yet was kept hushed, lest trouble should grow from mention of the displeasure of the Holy Father; but no threat of excommunication hath reached this court. My children, I am trusting you with confidences—for it is a time of trouble for our most gracious Lady and we of her court must know truth from slander that we may stand for her."

Each one came and laid her hand, in silent pledge, in that of the gray-haired speaker. [Pg 103]

"Later, not long since," she continued, "there came from Rome a tale—maliciously whispered about by Fabrici—not to be believed—that by some act of renunciation of the Christian Faith, Janus won the favor of the Sultan when he sent him hither to regain his throne. The Consiglière Fabrici went with others to the monks of Santa Soffia, and if he told this matter there, so as he hath whispered it in the court of Cyprus, it may well be that the *frati* reasoned thus."

"Is it true, Madama, that an ambassador is already come from the Sultan to acknowledge Caterina as Queen of Cyprus, and that there shall be some gathering of the court to-night to receive his homage?"

"Aye; such a gathering as one may have in these sad days, my children."

"And Carlotta?" another asked eagerly—"Ecciva—tell them what thou hast spoken of Carlotta."

"That she, in very person, hath sailed from Rhodes to meet the Admiral of Venice on his fleet—to throw herself on his mercy, as *heir of Cyprus*, to ask his help, to place her on the throne, *from the long friendship between the islands*." She told it with a little note of triumph, for it was strange news.

"Carlotta! To seek aid from Venice!—It cannot be true!"

"Aye; it is verily true," Madama de Thénouris said quietly—"as Ecciva hath told it; for a report hath come from Messer Mocenigo, himself. But that is like Carlotta, who leaveth no imagining of [Pg 104] her brain untried. She hath even the courage to urge her near connection with Venice *through her brother Janus the King, by his marriage with Caterina Veneta!*"

"She hath lost her reason, one would say: there can be no more to fear from Carlotta!"

"No more to *hope* from Carlotta," some one corrected in an undertone; but the voice sounded unfamiliar in the group and when they looked to see who might have spoken, there was no one to whom they could assign it.

Eloisà Contarini turned to the young Dama Ecciva de Montferrat with her impulsive question:

"Who was it, Ecciva?"

"Nay, I was about to ask—I also."

Dama Margherita turned and looked at her steadily; the girl gazed back at her with narrowing eyelids, slightly shrugging her shoulders as she finally dropped her eyes.

"But Carlotta?" one of the Venetian maids of honor questioned, impatient for the tale: "she knew not of the will of his Majesty the King?"

"Nay; and she had hope of being first to carry news of his death to the Admiral of Venice;—a most strange hope of any favor from such a quarter!"

"The answer of the Mocenigo was a marvel of courtesy, as it hath been reported, and worthy of a diplomat," Madama de Thénouris continued. "Most graciously he assured the Princess that Venice held her friendship gladly and would not fail of anything that she might do to prove her [Pg 105] loyalty to this Crown of Cyprus. Yet now, the Daughter of the Republic, Caterina Veneta, being left by the Will of Janus Queen of Cyprus, Venice must first uphold the rights of Caterina, and might show her Eccellenza, the Princess Carlotta, no favor that could prejudice the sovereignty of the Queen."

"And then?"

"And then came further pleading from Carlotta, with a new tissue of reasons. But finally the Mocenigo told her plainly: 'The reasons which avail in kingdoms are arms—not questions of legality.'"

"It is a theme for a comedy! And Carlotta——?"

"Hath sailed again with new wisdom for Rhodes; or, perchance to plan some enterprise that bespeaketh her less mad."

"She is not mad—but brave!" cried the Dama Ecciva boldly.

"It is enough of Carlotta," said the Lady of the Bernardini, rising to break up the talk.

But she beckoned to Dama Margherita to remain, as the others were leaving the hall, and gave her a charge in a low tone.

"See to it that these tales add not to the weariness of our beloved Lady who hath already enough of grief to bear; and the time is full of dangers for her. I count much upon thine influence with the younger maids to keep her from breaking her heart," she added with hesitation, but with a smile which conveyed her confidence in the Lady Margherita, "and to hold them loyal."

She laid a detaining hand upon the younger woman's shoulder as she spoke the last words, uncertain whether to confide in her further, and Margherita, having given her assurance, still waited. [Pg 106]

"For this question of excommunication," the Lady of the Bernardini said at last—"lest it should be bruited about by the enemies of the Queen—*it hath no color of truth*. My Son, the Lord Chamberlain, hath confided to me—(I am trusting thee, Dama Margherita, that thou mayest *know* it to be so, for the peace of mind of our poor, young Queen, and so mayest lead others to thy belief—yet speak no hint of this my confidence). My Son, the Chamberlain, hath seen in the most revered chronicle of State of this kingdom, the *Libro delle Rimembranze*, the copy of a letter sent by King Janus to His Holiness, to accredit his Reverence the Archbishop of Nikosia, brother to this same Signor Jean Perez Fabrici the Consiglière, who spoke with us but now—as Ambassador to His Holiness: and the manner of this letter leaveth no room for doubt that he wrote as a son of the Church, in all confidence of favor. He calleth His Holiness '*Santissimo e Beatissimo Padre!*' and the signature of this letter (which it is noted that he wrote with his own hand) was *'Devotus vester Filius, Rex Jacobus Cipri*.'"

[Pg 107]

XIII

"Madre Mia!" he said with deep tenderness, "I think it is not possible to hold the knowledge from her longer. It must be told to-night."

They were in the loggia overlooking the splendid stretch of terraced gardens, now flooded with moonlight; they had been standing there, quite silent, for a long time, each feeling that there was something to be spoken and suffered—each praying to defer the moment.

"Oh, Aluisi—no!"

Her tone was an entreaty: but he only put out his hand and laid it tenderly upon hers: the beautiful, tapering fingers trembled under his touch, then slowly quieted, for there was a rare sympathy between them.

"I have done everything," he continued in a low voice, without looking at her, "but they will not wait—matters of State, they say, to be passed upon—a Queen must give her signature when it is needed."

He came closer, suddenly turning upon her a gaze which compelled her startled comprehension. "They would be quite willing to pass the measure *without* her signature," he added, in a still lower tone. "It has come to that—we must think of her rights and protect her *against her Councillors*!"

"She has had so much to bear, poor child—so young—and her heart is broken already with sorrow for her husband. For she had faith in him. And now!—Have they no feeling for her?" [Pg 108]

"Madre, carissima, thou knowest not Rizzo; he is the most powerful among them, and the most ill-disposed. 'Let her take the Prince of Naples,' he hath said openly before the Councillors, 'and give us a man to reign over us.'"

"And Janus but two weeks dead!" The Lady Beata gave an involuntary cry of horror. "But Fabrici, the Archbishop?" she asked after a moment, "may he not influence them to be more gentle with her—having a brother in the Council?"

Aluisi shook his head sorrowfully. "Nay, Mother—I know not which is worse. Venice, at his election, would have prevented it, but could not, because he represented this intriguing power of Naples which hath not ceased from effort to have its will of Cyprus, since the betrothal of Caterina—which also it sought to overthrow."

"How knowest thou?"

He laid his finger on his lips—"If we were yet in Venice, I might not answer thee; but here—and it is for me and thee alone—it was I upon whom the Signoria laid the task of drawing up their monitory letter to Janus to hold him to his contract."

"Oh, if thou hadst not done it! I would rather thou hadst not written it!" she said with a low moan.

"Aye—Mother: and I—even then I knew that it must be happier for the child if that contract might be broken. Though if I had dreamed of *this* I could not have doomed one of our Casa Cornaro to such suffering and dishonor. But thou knowest the pride of Venice: if not *my* hand, another's would have written it: and I then—we should not have been here to shield her." [Pg 109]

"But the Archbishop Fabrici cannot hold malice against Caterina. He hath all the church of Cyprus in his command; he *must* be friendly to the Queen."

But Aluisi's face gave her no hope, as she turned to him.

"Fabrici, for another cause, holdeth the queen in deep disfavor," he said, "for that he, having

been sent by Janus on some embassy of marriage for the child Zarla, came into the Chamber of Counts of the Kingdom—not many days since—and with much grossness of speech would have discussed the matter at length in that presence; which we, of her household—she being in the first grief of her young widowhood—prevented, through members of the Queen's Council, better disposed."

"It was well, Aluisi: it seemeth even now too soon—too cruel—to add this shadow to her grief: and but for thee, she must have known thereof that day. For she seeketh already to take up the burden of the State and questioneth daily of the Secretary of the King of that which passeth in the Council. 'That I may rule my people,' she sayeth sadly, 'and those who loved the King will help me!' With what a tender grace she sayeth '*my people*!'"

"Madre mia, thou who lovest her and art so wise—shall I leave this parchment with thee? Thou best canst spare her in what must be told. I have had made this copy of certain clauses of the Will of Janus, which may not longer wait official reading before the Council in the Chamber of the Counts and in presence of the Queen. Thinkest thou not it would be too hard for her to learn first of its provisions before them all?" [Pg 110]

"Thou art right, Aluisi—always right. But her faith in him is deep; how shall I make her believe it?"

"I know not," he answered with a groan, and crushing the parchment in his hand. Then he smoothed it out remorsefully and gave it to her. "It is a faithful copy; there is no other argument. Thou wilt go to her now—for it *must* be."

With bowed head he led her to the door of the Queen's ante-chamber. "I am here," he said, "if need should be."

She still hesitated. "It may be long, for I know not how to tell her."

"Thank Heaven that she hath one like thee to care for her," he answered, gently forcing her through the doorway as he held her hand. "For I do think the Council would willingly have her away."

In the ante-chamber scattered groups of court-ladies in deepest mourning, were talking in low tones. They all rose as the Lady Beata entered: but she, with only an inclination of her head passed on hastily into the inner chamber which was the private boudoir of the Queen.

Caterina was quite alone, lying back on a low couch near an open window, through which the moonlight streamed in long pale rays; while many soft lights of perfumed oils, burning low in lamps of ivory, made only moonlight within the chamber. She held the miniature of Janus pressed against her cheek, and as the Lady Beata came towards her she tried to welcome her with a quivering smile. [Pg 111]

"I sent them all away, Zia mia: sometimes it seems less hard to bear when I am quite alone."

The Lady Beata bent over her, stroking her hair caressingly, striving for courage to break the silence.

"Caterina mia," she said at last, "it is needful to give some thought to matters of government—the Council will not wait. Hast thou the strength?"

"I *must* have strength," she answered with instant resolution, rising and laying aside the miniature with a lingering look. "Wilt thou call Aluisi? He ever maketh me understand. It is so new to me," she pleaded feebly, as the Lady Beata did not move.

"Carina, it will be best alone; Aluisi hath asked me to speak with thee. If—if thou wilt read this parchment"—the Lady Beata held it out to her—"it is the Will of the late King, Aluisi hath bidden me give it thee."

"There is no need," Caterina answered listlessly, as the Lady Beata opened it and put it into her hand, "the provisions have been told me."

But the other persisted. "To-morrow—for the Council say that they will not longer wait; it will be read before the Counts of the Chamber, and they would have the Queen take oath of fealty to Cyprus."

"I shall have the strength when to-morrow cometh," Caterina answered wearily, and making a motion to return the parchment.

"There are other clauses; Aluisi thought it might be better to read them here—alone—before—before——" Her face was blanched and pained, and her words came with difficulty. [Pg 112]

The young Queen looked at her in surprise, then, after a moment's indecision, dropped her eyes upon the page and read the short clauses through; then once more—as if she did not understand—then again, a scarlet flush growing as she read.

The parchment contained but three short clauses: King Janus left his kingdom to his wife Caterina, who was to reign, with their child, if there should be one; or alone, if the child should die.

He provided a Council of seven to assist her with the Government:

In case of her death and the death of the child, the kingdom should descend to each of the three other children of Janus, in the order named. The unwedded mother of these children was not mentioned and Caterina had never dreamed of their existence.

She stood trembling—her face slowly paling to a marble whiteness. "*Mater Dolorosa!*" she

gasped, with a moan of pain, instantly repressed.

The Lady Beata put her arm around her to steady her; but Caterina drew herself away, standing upright.

"Call back the Chamberlain!" she cried, imperiously; and stood waiting—panting—until he entered the room.

Then she drew up her slight figure in defiance, her eyes flashing in her white, white face—her voice ringing scorn as she pointed to the document which had dropped from her hand.

"How should I believe this—this *baseness* of my husband—your King?" she cried. "Who hath *dared* to fashion it?" [Pg 113]

"Beloved Sovereign Lady"—he answered her, and for very pity could say no more.

She turned from one to the other with an impatient, questioning, imperious gesture.

They came nearer—slowly—silently turning upon her such faces of love and sorrow and comprehension that the fire in her eyes died in anguish.

A quiver shot through her, but she struggled to stand, motioning them away again when they would have helped her—she must drink this cup of bitterness alone. "How should I believe it?" she repeated brokenly, still studying their faces.—"How *should* I believe it—ye are not faithless to him—to me——?"

There was no need to answer her: again they looked their unspeakable compassion.

But as Caterina's eyes rested upon the parchment once more, a sudden hope came to her. "The will of the King was written in his own hand," she cried eagerly. "Thou hast said it, Aluisi; this is not the writing of the king!"

"Nay, beloved Sovereign Lady," the Chamberlain made answer, as he picked it up, and held it before her; "this is but a memorandum made for your Majesty's convenience, but attested under the seal of the kingdom. The original Will is in the keeping of the Lord of the Privy Seals, awaiting your command. It was thought that your Majesty would wish to see it before the Council should be assembled."

She understood and bowed her head in silence, while all hope died out of her face. [Pg 114]

Aluisi advisedly used the ceremonious form by which he was accustomed to address the Queen in public, hoping to hint to her of some necessary preparation to control the meeting of the Council that could not, in any event, be long deferred.

They lingered wistfully, seeking vainly for words that might not hurt her; but Caterina looked at them beseechingly, with dim eyes—her lips moving without sound.

The Lady Beata understood.

"I go now to pray the dear Christ for thee—the Man of Sorrows," she said with inexpressible tenderness. "And later—Carinissima—I will come again, and thou wilt rest."

So young—so sorely stricken—she knelt in the cold moonlight alone—her hands clasped in passionate repression on her throbbing heart—"Mater Dei!" she moaned: "Death—and then *this*! —If but it need not have been told me! If I might but have kept the *memory* of my happiness!"

Only the stars and the pitying angels looked down on the fierce conflict of grief and love and disillusion with which her desolate young soul wrestled alone through the long, midnight vigil. How should she separate these two beautiful faiths which had been enthroned as one in the happy depths of her guileless heart, without perilling her very trust in God!

Yet, as the sad day dawned over the hills and sea, she knew that God was still in His Heaven, behind the clouds—while she clung as a drowning mariner—the more desperately for her weakness—to the spar of this faith in the wreck of her happiness, though the love to which her whole being had moved in rhythmic content was as a lost star, glimmering uncertainly behind the mists. [Pg 115]

But through the desolate night-watches the Lady of the Bernardini in the ante-chamber of the Queen had been agonizing in prayer for her until thought was spent; and now she had moved out upon the loggia and stood there waiting for the dawn that seemed long-deferred, in a half-conscious wonder that there were no sorrows great enough to stay Nature's punctual recurrences—that to-day and to-morrow there would still be dawns and sunsets, whatever happened to the souls of men.

In the silver line that etched the dark mountain crests against the pale monotone of the sky, single firs stood forth saliently, while dim in the distance, vast shapes, clothed in perpetual snows, held wraith-like watch over the smiling plains below, where life and bloom were possible.

Athwart the low, confused twittering of bird-notes which had infused the solemn silence with a vague hint of life, strident sounds grew dominant—a crow calling to his mate from tree to tree—a short, sharp symphony of swallows—a cock announcing the coming of the dawn.

Then motion broke in upon the majesty; hurried rushes of flight across the sky—beatings of wings—pulsings and ecstasies and triumphs of bird-life—and the Day was new.

Faint twitterings in the copses deepened to melody—to canticles of rejoicing; tints of turquoise and opal crept into the shadows and gold into the greens: the night-dews gleamed upon the firs and grasses, while a luminous haze dimmed the dark glint of the waters to pearly gray, softened [Pg 116]

the grimness of the mountain-faces and wrapped them—sea and mountains, as soul and body in a vision of mystery, a prelude to the blaze of golden glory that was suddenly outpoured on land and sea.

Yet the heavenly splendor was but for a moment; it faded in sudden gloom, as a bell from the inner chamber called the Lady of the Bernardini to attend the Queen.

When at early morning, the Chamberlain was summoned to the Queen's presence, the change in her beautiful face smote him to the heart: every line had been chiselled by pain—ennobled by a high resolve—by a strong new-born will, rendered selfless; and in her eyes a soul—tried by fire and suddenly grown to a great height—looked forth, luminous.

Instinctively, he dropped his eyes and fell upon his knees, as if in the presence of some heavenly spirit, his hot tears falling upon the fragile hand she held out to him, which he clasped, unconsciously, in both his own, with a grasp so like a vise that it would have smitten her with sharp pain had she been capable at that moment of any physical emotion.

"Beloved Cousin and Queen!" he cried, when he could find his voice, "we love and revere you; we would give our *lives* to help you!"

She made an effort to speak, but no words came; she could only bow her head to accept his homage, while his asseverations of loyalty and love and impotent help came crowding upon his [Pg 117] first utterance—the immoderate outpouring of a deep, knightly soul, unused to confess itself—the barriers of reserve once overcome by the stinging sense of the irreparable wrong of which the revelation to this guileless, confiding girlish nature had suddenly wrenched every memory that once had been happiness, out of her young life—yet, in the very immensity of her anguish, had searched to the inmost truth of her woman's fibre and, in the fierce unfolding, had found it wholly noble.

As he knelt, still protesting, yet out of his great reverence, using no word to wound her—the more compassionate because he might not denounce the one who had wronged her—it was as if he were looking up to a beloved daughter, immeasurably above him, who yet had need of his knightly protection. He did not know that he was speaking—he did not know what passed—only that deep in his soul he prayed to comfort her.

Slowly, with expression, the hot passion melted into a softer mood; his grasp relaxed and she withdrew her hand, seamed and marred with red lines where he had unconsciously tortured it; yet in her misery she was grateful to be reached across the awful gulf of loneliness that separated her from the world by a sense that such loyalty yet remained to her.

She laid her hand lightly on his head, the fingers moving for a moment—half in caress—half in benediction, while he felt her almost imperceptible gesture dismissing this unusual audience where soul had faced soul on the brink of a great catastrophe; and he rose to meet the strange, [Pg 118] luminous, unsmiling gaze of the great dark eyes which yesterday had been almost the eyes of a child.

She pointed to the loggia, where the morning breeze came freshly laden with the fragrance of myriad blossoms that were just opening to the gladness of the sunrise—a sunrise over the beautiful, fabled slopes of Cyprus—while shadows still lay on the flower-gemmed plains that stretched between them and the sea. Ah, yes, the cool, blue, restless sea stretched far between her island realm and the proud Venetian home from whence she had sailed a happy girl—one little year before—to meet her radiant visions of the future; and now, in all the splendor of the morning, for her the light of life had died forever on the hills of hope.

It was to this loggia that Janus had first led her when he brought her to this summer palace of Potamia, that she might see what a vision of beauty he had prepared for his bride—the far-reaching terraced gardens with their brilliancy of exotics, rivalling the plumage of the peacocks that proudly flaunted their jewelled eyes among them—the pergolas of precious marbles from which the vines flung out a wealth of bloom, luring the birds to a perpetual feast of song; and behind them, spreading up to the deep groves of varied greens upon the hillsides, the snow of countless blossoms lay whiter than the wings of the swans, floating at leisure in silver pools among the beds of color. It was here that Janus had spoken words she had dreamed eternally and sacredly her own: Mother of Consolation, she must remember them no more!

She had not thought of this when the sense of suffocation had impelled her to seek the air, to [Pg 119] rush where it might blow over her and through her, lift her hair about her throbbing temples and help her to forget. Oh God—Omnipotent and Merciful—can one never forget!

A sob broke in her throat, but she made no sound, as she turned to re-enter her audience-chamber—the sumptuous audience-chamber where she might feel herself less a woman and more a queen.

But Aluisi, obeying her slight motion, had already passed between the marble columns of the portico, out into the sunshine, and stood confronting her—her friend, her cousin, and a Councillor of her realm.

The thought gave her courage, and after a moment's struggle, she grew calm again, listening gravely to the question of State he had wished to open to her before it should be discussed in full Council.

He spoke at first with averted gaze, feigning to be attracted by the beauty of the morning, that he might give her time to recover herself: but as he turned his face to hers for her reply, she put

the matter aside with an imperious gesture.

"To-day, Aluisi, I have graver matter to command my thought: the Council shall *wait* until I give orders for its assembling—thou, meanwhile, using all courtesy in its delay and the enforcement of—of my command—the Queen's command—so only that it be enforced. These methods are new to me," she added, with a sudden softened appeal in her tone; "thou wilt know the way to compass it—for my sake—for it must be done."

[Pg 120]

"It shall be done," he assented uncompromisingly; but in surprise, knowing only too well the imperious methods of the Council appointed to assist her in her government and the temper of the men who composed that body—for Janus had not been great in his knowledge of men; and possibly the only one of the seven who had been strictly devoted to the King, had died shortly after his appointment, and the place had been filled with one less favorable to the present rule of Cyprus. Fabrici was known to be in sympathy with Naples; Rizzo, Chief of Council, strong, domineering, unscrupulous, was perhaps the creature of Ferdinand, King of Naples. "It shall be done," he said again, having vowed to help her.

"For, until I have had speech with the holiest man among the priests that may be found in all this kingdom of Cyprus," she said with a decision that amazed him, "I will treat of no matter of State, however urgent. Nay, Aluisi—my cousin"—as she noted his start of surprise—"to thee alone—who must be my counsellor in days of desolation—pray Heaven more dark than thou shalt ever dream of—I will confide that out of this night of vigil hath come this resolution which I dare not break. Seek thou the man."

He had already turned to fulfil her quest which might be long in the doing—and these impatient Councillors would be hard to hold; yet he had no thought of parleying with this girl-queen, so suddenly grown to a full stature.

But her voice, even and low, arrested him. "He must be Greek in birth," she said, "and of the Greek Church, which my people love. But above all—*he must be a man to trust*."

[Pg 121]

He turned when he had crossed the great audience-chamber, under the entrance colonnade of huge porphyry columns, wrought with barbaric symbols of earlier dynasties and guarded by colossal Assyrian bulls—she seemed so young and tender to leave, even for a day, in those surroundings unguarded, at the mercy of that Council of Seven whom he had reason to distrust—in her kingdom seamed with dissensions of which she had, as yet, small comprehension; of which, perhaps, she did not even dream—with her shattered happiness behind her and loneliness before, and this great responsibility pressing its leaden weight upon her fair young head.

He longed to throw her a last reassuring glance—to leave with her the absolute faith that with every power of his being he would uphold and steady her in the rough and desolate way.

For since he came from Venice he had not ceased his vigilant study of the complications of Cyprus, that when her need came he might be ready.

He never forgot the vision of the girl-queen in her sweeping widow's robes, across the great space between them, in the sunshine of the loggia—her hand extended as if to hasten or to bless him—a wonderful, unearthly light and strength in her face; and, for one moment as she met his gaze and understood the full depth of his devotion, the ghost of a smile—as if it had been granted him to bring her in this hour of martyrdom one little ray of human comfort.

[Pg 122]

XIV

Hagios Johannes, the holiest man in Cyprus, stood waiting in the vast, empty presence-chamber of the young Queen; for, since the sudden death of Janus, there had been no court-life in this palace of Potamia, and the gloom hung most heavily over the more sumptuous halls of ceremony.

Hagios Johannes—*the holy John*—they called this prior of the House of Priests from Troödos—the Mountain of the Holy Cross—after the name of the earlier Saint who had made the spot famous for the holiness of his living, for his boundless charity and the wisdom of his judgments, so that the people had gone to him in ceaseless procession with their sins and woes in the days of primitive Christianity in Cyprus, and had returned to their peasant homes the stronger to endure and to renounce. Johannes the Lesser, this one called himself—being truly great and devout of heart, so that his vision was wise and true as that of Hagios Johannes the Greater.

A curtain at the further end of the audience-chamber parted to admit a stately figure in mourning-robes, as the Lady Beata of the Bernardini advanced to meet him, bringing the message that the Queen would receive him in an inner cabinet.

"She is very worn and tired, most Reverend Father, and in years so near to childhood that the nobility and strength of her resolve are marvellous. And the comfort that she seeketh of thee she doth most sorely need."

[Pg 123]

The eyes of this strong and faithful friend gleamed with unshed tears as she turned them upon

the prior, in tender appeal.

But to Hagios Johannes all courts were strange; the life of his mountain overflowed with possibilities of ministration which busied all his powers, and it was the first time that he had ever entered any of the palaces of the luxurious Kings of Cyprus—of which, perhaps, this summer palace of Potamia was the most sumptuous. The long corridors of precious marbles, with intricate carvings and gleamings of gold and mosaic displeased him, though he had no knowledge of their worth or beauty; but he stood aghast at the magnificence of the audience-chamber, and the huge Assyrian bulls which guarded the entrance gave a hint of pagan power and oppression which instantly angered him.

The appeal of the gracious Lady Beata but roused his indignation.

He was a stern, wild figure with his flowing beard, his long hair falling straight and unkempt about his brown throat; and his sombre monk's garment was wrought on breast and shoulders with a salient cross of natural thorns—the symbol of those monks of Troödos—the Mountain of the Holy Cross; and the Lady Beata trembled for the interview that was to be, as he answered her rudely:

"The dwellers in palaces of ivory have naught to do with wild men of the mountains who live close to nature and care only for suffering humanity. I have Christ's work to do; let others bring her rose-leaves and honeyed words."

She laid a gentle, detaining hand upon him as he thrust aside the curtain of the inner chamber. [Pg 124]

"Most Reverend Father, are not the words of our Lord and Saviour, as well for those who suffer in palaces, as for the wanderers and poor upon the earth?

"Are not the wounds of the spirit as deep in anguish as those of the physical man?

"May not the burdens of rulers be greater than those of the ruled?—Have compassion upon our Queen!"

"Christ knoweth not kings," he answered her, as he shook off her light touch—"save only those who bow to Him: and the mighty among men—aye—even he who calleth himself His Vicar upon earth—are puffed up with pride and know in their hearts no virtue in this—His sacred symbol." He pressed his rough hand hard against the thorns upon his breast as he spoke. "Hath not he—this false and sumptuous Vicar—but now asserted that we, of the Holy Greek Church have no part in the Communion of the Holy Catholic Church on earth? Did Christ call the Latins only?" he ended fiercely.

It was a grievance that rankled; and Hagios Johannes had not learned the gracious art of self-control, being accustomed to feel that whatever he thought or wished was good—his hatred as well as that which appealed to him—since he honestly sought nothing for himself, despising riches and station from the depths of his soul, with an open scorn for the great ones of earth and an imperious assertion of his own methods and judgments which he would have denounced in any earthly ruler, however wise. He never dreamed himself an autocrat over that continuous stream [Pg 125] of pilgrims who made their way into the House of Priests on Troödos: they were chiefly peasants, rude in ways and understanding, whose accustomedness to absolute methods and short words made their obedience the swifter; and the few more learned ones who came to consult him knew that in his heart he was faithful and seldom treasured the offense against him—though they may have decried his wisdom. But these came more rarely as his absolutism grew upon him, and the prophet of the mountains came down to the cities of the plains only to see the luxury of them—the sin and godliness of them, and to denounce them, in unmeasured words.

Within his soul, although he did not confess it to himself, the generations of men were separated by a wide impassable gulf—the rich and ruling class, the godless, on one side; the poor, the suffering and lowly—the to-be-saved,—on the other, and none ever passed across the deep abyss. He would have challenged any man who counted *him, Father Johannes*, in his hempen garment studded with thorns, among the rulers of men!

The youthful Queen, weary and worn indeed from the perplexities and struggle of the two long nights and days that had elapsed since she had sent her Councillor on his quest of "the holiest man in Cyprus," rose from her couch as the prior entered and advanced to meet him with a gracious reverence.

But he, unconscious of any rudeness, spoke at once, without turning his eyes upon her, and offering no homage.

"I am a plain man from the Mountain of the Holy Cross, your Majesty; I know naught of the [Pg 126] ways of Courts. The matter should be great that calleth me from my work. Let it be presented, that I may be dismissed."

She was almost too weak to stand, and the rebuff smote her to the quick; her lip trembled slightly, but she only stretched out her hand to her beloved friend, drawing her close and leaning lightly upon her shoulder, that she might feel the support of loving companionship in her great need.

Father Johannes had been vaguely conscious of some movement in the chamber and involuntarily he turned towards this royal lady whom, as yet, he had never seen, but whose urgent summons had roused his indignation.

She looked so young and fair and simple in her heavy folds of mourning—so worn from vigil, with the lines of anguish and of a strange strength written in her white girl-face—that she might

have been the vision of some youthful saint, wearing the rough cross of Troödos upon her breast, beneath her robe: and for a moment, the holy man was startled—did such heavenly visions, in truth, visit the palaces of the great?

There was a moment of stillness in which his wonder grew.

The breeze blew faintly in through the great arched openings, behind which rose the mountain chain that led to his own Troödos; there were the groves of pine, darkly green, below the hills, with their deep solitudes for prayer and meditation between the vast gnarled trunks; and the group of the two noble women before him—severely simple—was a vision of love and womanly [Pg 127] grace and spiritual need; the younger one, all pleading and pain, clinging to the elder who closely enfolded her, her face strong in the strength of love. It was not like any life that he had ever seen—this holy man, whose personal life had been solitary and whose knowledge of human love, as it is known in happy homes, had died long years ago with the passing of the mother who had borne him in her heart. It might be that he needed such a vision to redeem his spirit from the harshness which sin and pride in high places, and want and crime and poverty of spirit among ignoble ones, had made him grow to think the whole of life!

He was very weary and his vision was not clear; for the previous day had been a solemn fast, and he had walked far and long since the early morning, that he might be the less delayed. He felt like kneeling where he stood—if perchance it should be a vision!—But he only bowed his head and waited—and his weakness passed.

The younger one—the maiden with that strange mystery of pain and strength in her white face, was coming towards him.

"Father," she said, "hath none offered thee refreshment? Thou must indeed be weary, for the way is long. Zia, let us be served here—in sight of the great forest that will seem like home to our good Padre."

"Nay, nay," he interposed quickly, with an effort to shake off this incomprehensible spell and return to his wonted mood of protest, "for I have never banqueted in the palace of a Queen—your [Pg 128] Majesty."

"Let it be brought," Caterina said, turning to the Lady Beata, "a simple meal; for I myself have need, having tasted nothing since the long vigil of the night—being too sore from my great perplexity." For she divined that she must be alone with the prior to melt his mood, which grieved her; but she had not the less faith in his judgment for his hatred of royalty, and at all costs she had the grace to crave for truth in the questions she would ask of him.

"My Father," she said with winning gentleness when they were alone, "we will speak together as father and daughter—it will be better so, for I was not born to Majesty, and I have sent to ask of thee thy counsel, for life is difficult. And for my hospitality—is it not offered to the pilgrim in thy House of Priests of the Troödista? Hath not our Lord Himself commanded the giving of the cup of water?"

He was startled at her learning: surely it was rare that women out of holy orders had such knowledge of Christian traditions. He looked at her reverently, still wondering, and would have spoken to excuse his rough speech, but that he knew not how to frame a thought so strange and new.

She motioned him to a seat where a table had been spread under the deep arches that looked toward the forest. There were wines and fruits in tempting chalices of rainbow glass and low baskets of ivory and chiselled silver, cooling with snow from the mountain; figs from Lefcara; *caistas*, golden and delicious, emitting a fragrance of glorified nectarine that rivalled the perfume [Pg 129] of the wine itself; pomegranates—the gift of a goddess to the thirsty Cyprian land, planted, as was well known, by the royal hand of Aphrodite herself, each fruit holding a fair refreshment for a torrid Cyprian day in its sparkling, semilucent, ruby pulp: ortolans from the sea-coast, steeped in wine.

The table was a slab of oriental alabaster, polished like a jewel, upheld by griffins with outthrust tongues curiously contorted and entwined. But beyond the silken curtains of the palace-windows the forest and the hills, with a wandering breath of coolness from the mountain-breeze, drew and welcomed him, with some faint, new perception of the oneness of God's earth.

She had banished with a glance the maiden who stood waiting with her lute to give the customary accompaniment to the meal, and they were quite alone.

He crumbled his bread and swallowed his wine like a hungry man, drawing the wild, purple figs nearer, unconscious of the dainties which she did not press upon him, while he tasted the familiar food—the food which his Lord Christ had blessed to man's uses. So, also, the luxury of the service passed unnoticed, as he fixed his eyes on the distant darks of his own forest, with the "Troödista" rising on a peak far, far away—that haven of distressed souls to whom he was a father of consolation. Her fingers toyed with the fruit that lay untasted before her, while the difficulty of speech struggled within her. Yet he felt, subtly, as he kept his eyes upon the hills, that he was in [Pg 130] sight of the shadow of a soul in pain, and he waited—for once, oblivious of the distance between a palace and a convent.

"Thou art born a Greek, my Father?" she questioned. "Thou art a priest of the Greek Church—which my people love?"

The commanding habit of a lifetime was strong upon him and again his resentment rose to quench the softer mood which was possessing him, and of which he was afraid.

"I knew not that I had been summoned from my work for Christ to answer of myself," he said sternly. "If thou hast need of counsel, tell it quickly."

Again her lip quivered at the hurt, but she put it aside bravely, as she rose and moved backward for a pace further into the shadow. "I ask it for my people's sake—I being their Queen," she said, "and knowing that my people are rather Greek in feeling, I would do naught to hurt them."

How tenderly the words "my people" fell from the lips of this young, Venetian woman, who seemed almost a child—had their imperious Grecian Queen, Elenà Paléologue ever so uttered them? Had she not named a boy to the highest See in the gift of their church—with no thought of fitness—but solely that he might be put aside lest he come between her and her greed of domination? Had she not plotted murder and whatever else might lie between her and the accomplishment of her will? His heart melted within him, and he rose and followed Caterina into the chamber.

"The most Holy Father of Rome hath of late been prejudiced against the King—my husband— [Pg 131]
and I sought for one who might give me counsel, unprejudiced."

If she had been a wily diplomat she could not better have wielded the prior's mood than by this unconscious utterance.

"So help me God, I will strive to help thee in counsel," he answered fervently. "But are there not men, set apart as Councillors for the realm, to aid one so young in the ruling of her kingdom?"

"Aye, Father," she admitted sadly, "but it is to steady mine own judgment *to judge of theirs*—that I have sent for thee. The question is not for Court Councillors, but for one who hath no part nor lot in this matter—who is often in meditation on holy matters, and hath won wisdom."

He made a motion of deprecation, but she went on speaking in her clear, even voice, still questioning: "Thou knowest well the history of the kings of Lusignan?"

He bowed his head in assent.

"And the history of the life of the King—my husband?" She dwelt on the word with inexpressible tenderness—the slight pause that followed it was like unuttered music.

Did she know? Was it possible that she knew? he asked himself.

But the question came again.

"And the provisions of his will—for myself and for—for others?" A wave of color had flushed her cheek and brow.

He looked at her searchingly, seeking for words that might best comfort. "I know them," he
said, "the provisions of the will having been told me by your Majesty's messenger: and I, being a [Pg 132]
Greek, and the friend of the people, that which toucheth them, toucheth me. My daughter, the sins of the race descend from father to son, and are in the blood; and there hath been no loving care of holy women about his childhood—which should be remembered and win forgiveness."

"It is no question of forgiveness," she answered proudly, "of which I would speak with thee —*that* lieth between our Holy Mother in Heaven and the souls of those who suffer." She seemed to dismiss the subject with an imperious wave of her slight hand. "It is a question of human judgment in which that of a holy man may avail, but in which this knowledge is necessary—else had it not been spoken of."

She paused for a moment to gather strength, while the old man watched her in growing wonder —so young—so wronged—so tender—so brave—so strong to endure!

Hagios Johannes the elder had been known through the long years of his canonization as *Lampadisti*, the *illumined*: and as the prior listened, he prayed with fervor that the wisdom of his sainted predecessor might descend upon his soul.

"My Father," she resumed with a great effort, "I knew not of this history of the last of our Kings of Cyprus, until my marriage had been made.... I knew not of any right of Carlotta, being *own* daughter to the King, the father of my husband"—again that tremulous pause of unuttered music —"to contest the crown with him, until I learned it in Cyprus, these few weeks past."

Her head drooped lower, but she went on resolutely. "I knew not, until I came to Cyprus—for [Pg 133]
they who knew and should have told me, held the knowledge from me—that any might question the right of Janus—my husband—to this kingdom of Cyprus—he being only son to the King. For I knew not that his mother was *not* the Queen, until I came hither."

She paused again to gather strength, lifting her guileless great eyes to his, in agonized appeal, while he watched her dumbly.

"And now, my Father," she said, throwing back her head with sudden vigor, and with the dignity of a great resolve, "this is my question, which hath come to me in the watches of the night and will not be denied, and for which I have summoned thee. I—being wife to Janus, who hath been crowned King of this people—and I, with him, crowned Queen; and by his will left Queen of Cyprus—with Council, appointed by him, to help me rule; shall I, a Christian woman—a Venetian and *not* a Cyprian—his widow—*hold this kingdom against Carlotta*, who is daughter to the King, the father of my husband—and to the rightful Queen, Elenà—his father's lawful wife?"

He was dumbfounded and could not answer her at once; but while he sought for words he bowed his head in mute reverence.

"My daughter," he said at length, "hath this question been put to thee by any men of Cyprus?"

"Nay, Father; but it hath come to me in these sad nights, because I fain would do the *right*—that which is well for my people: and life is very difficult."

"My people," again, uttered with the accent of a mother who folds her child to her heart—it was a revelation; but he must probe more deeply before he could answer her. [Pg 134]

"And this palace—and all the palaces of this estate?" he asked slowly, as if he could not comprehend her. "Thou wouldst renounce this splendor when none hath asked it of thee?"

"I would even bear the weight of it, if it be *right*," she said, "though rest were sweeter."

"Thou wouldst be free, perchance, to seek thy home in Venice?"

"Nay, nay!" she exclaimed, shrinking from him—"never Venice again—since she hath sent me hither, knowing all, and told me not. I cannot go back to Venice!"

He pondered gravely.

"Then what is thy will, my daughter?"

"To do the right!" she cried vehemently; "out of my own great sorrow to expiate the wrong! May it not be, my Father, if I shrink not from the right at any cost?"

"I will consider," he said, "since thy will is strong for this sacrifice."

"Sacrifice!" she cried, in her amazement breaking all reserve. "Oh, Father! To call *this* 'sacrifice,' when the very light of life is gone from me! He was so beautiful and gracious—with such a light in his eyes—and I thought—oh, I *thought* we were so happy! And now—oh, God, it breaks my heart—I *loved* him!"

"Daughter——"

"May not the suffering of one atone for another's sin?" she questioned feverishly.

"Nay—leave that thought, it is too heavy for thee: and not revealed to men, that they may declare it." [Pg 135]

"Pray for him, Father! Thou wilt pray for him—thou and all those who come to thee. There will be many, many prayers and God will hear. For his people loved him—none could stay from loving him, he was so winsome. Mother of Mercies, thou wilt take my anguish for his atonement!—*Oh I suffer!*"

The words came in a low moan, wrung from her unaware. Father Johannes caught the small hands which she had flung out before her clenched, in her passionate struggle for control, and with faltering motions of unaccustomed gentleness, he soothed her until she had grown quieter and he could unclasp them. Then he spoke strange words, out of a great compassion:

"Christ knoweth; for He is Love—and He will save!"

"There is more," she gasped with her spent voice—"but I dare not name it—the thought of it is torture. But it is not true; Madonna mia! it *is not* true!"

The strong man could bear no more; he groaned in spirit and ground his hands against his breast—his lip curling with scorn at the pain of his own torn flesh. "Tell it!" he commanded; "it *cannot* be true."

She looked at him, hope dawning in her stricken face. "The words they speak—they who are his enemies—that he had forsworn his faith: it is not true."

"It is the very machination of the Evil One!" he thundered. "I know the slander and the man who fathered it, for spite. And may Heaven forgive its maker—for he hath need—standing high in the holy place of Earth. I *know* it is not true!" [Pg 136]

He looked his faith into her eyes until he had banished her terror, and she put out her wan hand, grateful, for his assurance.

Then he turned from her abruptly and wandered away to weigh her question, looking into the depths of the great forest while he pondered and prayed to be enlightened. He must have sight of his own solitudes if he would keep his judgment free, and though she called to him, timidly, thinking he had forgotten her, he made no answer, being not yet ready. Surely, it could not be God's will that so fine a spirit should resign her claim to their uneasy crown!

It was long before he returned to her side, for the shadows were lengthening and a crimson light flamed in the West.

"Daughter," he said with deep solemnity, "it hath come to me with full light in answer to thy question, that thou, being crowned Queen and consecrated in the Duomo of Nikosia, together with King Janus, thy husband—whom this people loved—and decreed by him to hold this realm, which—for the first time in many years, and by his hand, is now united under one sovereign, that thy duty biddeth thee hold and rule it against all other claimants—were it even Carlotta who hath once been called its Queen.

"Rule thou this people with the fear of Heaven in thy true heart—so God shall make thee wise!"

She came slowly, as to a heavy task, and knelt before him, with clasped hands, kissing the crucifix which he held out to her; the red light streamed through the arches with a fierce illumination. [Pg 137]

"Father—and Janus!" she cried—"hear my vow!

"To do for my people as Heaven and the Madonna shall teach me: to bear them in my heart and seek their happiness; to live for them alone! And if harm hath been—oh God, if harm hath been done—to nerve me to the more strenuous duty, that wrong may be forgiven!"

[Pg 138]

XV

It was a moonless night in June, with lowering clouds and a threat of distant thunder echoing from the far mountains.

A crowd was gathering, low-voiced and eager, in the Piazza San Nicolò: a crowd chiefly of the people, and the faces and costumes of many races came out grotesquely under the spasmodic glare of the torches which flared about the standard of Cyprus, in the centre of the square—the standard was tied with mourning and wreathed with cypress. There were many women—here and there a peasant with a child slumbering in her arms, or clinging sleepily to the tawny silk scarf woven under her own mulberry trees. Here and there, with the fitful motion of the wind, the light touched the fair hair of a chance peasant from the province of *La Kythrea* into gleams of gold that a Venetian patrician might envy, or brought into sudden relief the smothered passion of some beautiful, dark Greek face. But the women were chiefly of the lower Cypriote peasant-type, heavy-featured and unemotional. There was a sprinkling of monkish cowls and of the red fez from the Turkish village of Afdimou which lay in seeming friendliness of relation close to the village of Ormodos, whose population was wholly Greek.

In front of the long façade of the palace of Famagosta a cordon of soldiers stood motionless, while before them the mounted guard paced slowly to and fro; and across the Piazza, with that [Pg 139] impatient, surging crowd between, was faintly heard the steady footfall of the sentinels, measuring and remeasuring with unemotional precision their narrow beat before the entrance to the world-famed fortress of Famagosta.

A group of nobles in eager, low-voiced converse crossed the square, pressed through the cordon of soldiers and gave the password and the great door was opened to admit them and closed again.

Two burghers picked out a face among them, as the torches of their escorts flared.

"That was Marin Rizzo, Counsellor to the Queen; a man of power—unscrupulous."

"And more a friend—I have heard it whispered in Nikosia—to Naples than to Cyprus."

"Hast evidence for thy speech?" the other questioned eagerly in a lower tone.

"It is for that we must watch; the time is threatening."

"But Messer Andrea Cornaro was with him: he will know how to guard the interests of the Queen, having been so great a favorite with our Janus, and one for management, despite his courtly ways! Without our Messer Andrea, his niece had never been our Queen."

"Nay—nor if His Holiness had had his will. I had the tale from a source to trust, though the story was kept hushed. It would take one like our Janus, with his royal ways, to scorn the flattering offers of His Holiness! There were also threats!"

"Nay; threats would never move him, except to see the comedy thereof and make his mood the [Pg 140] pleasanter! But I had not dreamed him saint enough for the Holy Father to sue to him for an alliance."

"Ah, friend, the ways of those above us be strange! But it was for this, I take it, that His Holiness—who hath a temper most uncommon earthly—sent none to represent him at the Coronation of the King."

The other shrugged his shoulders. "It lacked for naught in splendor; it was a day for Cyprus and for Nikosia."

"*Vanitas Vanitatum*," droned a friar of the Latin Church who had been standing near enough to catch echoes of their speech.

Both men glanced towards him and instinctively moved away.

"Aye; little it matters now—coronation honors or splendors for him! But he had a way with him!"

"And he was one for daring!"

They crossed themselves and lapsed into silence, as their eyes sought the banners drooping, shrouded, before the palace-gates, near the statue of their dead King—a very Apollo for beauty—the pedestal heaped high with withered tokens of loyalty and mourning.

But the mass of the waiting crowd were silent, scarcely exchanging a whispered confidence;—so still that the long, low boom of the surf upon the shore reached them distinctly, like a responsive heart-throb. They could hear the storm-waves outside the port dashing wildly against [Pg 141]

the rock-bound coast, with fierce suggestions of strife. But they knew that within their sheltered harbor their waiting galleys rode at anchor, ready to sail at a moment's notice—for Venice, for Rome, for Egypt—though the flags they bore were still at half-mast, with their King but a month dead.

There was a sense of suppressed excitement in the hush of the throng; almost, one might have said, an atmosphere of prayer. For the great bell of San Nicolò—the bell with that wonderful voice of melody—was ringing softly, as for vespers; continuously, as if the people had not answered to the call. Yet many a low-voiced "Ave" responded to the chime as now and again some toil-worn hand lifted the rosary that hung from a girdle, or clasped a rude cross closer.

Restless under the chiming, some simple mother who had fought for her place in the crowd before the palace, deep in her heart besought the blessed Madonna to forgive her because she would not yield it to kneel at the altar in the Duomo; while leaning over the little one slumbering on her breast, she kissed it with a meaning holy as prayer, and did not dream that the angels were watching.

The only steady light in all the square was the soft gleam, as of moonlight, streaming through the windows of the Duomo out into the mist, and here and there among the crowd some face turned towards it and was heartened.

For back of the splendid marble columns of the peristyle, when the light from some torch flashed suddenly upon their polished surfaces, the long lines of palace-windows lay dark; and it was growing late. [Pg 142]

"They say that the holy sisters keep vigil this night in the Convent of the Blessed Santa Croce," murmured a woman's voice.

"Aye," another answered her reverently, "for the love of Santa Elenà and the Holy Relic, they will bless our beautiful Lady!"

The theme unsealed their peasant tongues, for this relic brought from the East by the Mother of Constantine, was the glory of Cyprus, and their speech flowed more freely.

"The most Reverend our Archbishop should send for that Santa Croce in procession, to bring it hither—for truly it can do anything!" another woman cried eagerly. She crossed herself and bowed devoutly as she spoke. "For all the world knoweth that once, when it had been lost and the good pater would prove if he had really found it, he held it in the heart of the fire until it glowed like the very flame itself. But when he drew it forth, it was burned not at all—*Santissima Vergine!* —but wood as before—being too holy to burn. A miracle! And then——"

"I also know the miracle about Queen Alixe," another woman interposed, eager to show her knowledge of the marvel of the Relic, "for my sister dwelleth by the gate of the Convent of the Troödos, and she hath much learning of the most blessed Relic;—how that Queen Alixe laid the bit on her tongue—she who could never speak fairly—more like a blockhead of a stammering peasant than a Royal lady—may Heaven forgive me! And how for ever after, her speech flowed freely, so that all might understand her. It must be good to be in Cyprus." [Pg 143]

"Holy Mother! but it should be lonely in the great palace," a young peasant-mother confided to her nearest neighbor, as she shifted the baby to her other arm and arranged her wrappings tenderly, with hands that looked too rough for such loving ministration. She was thinking of her Gioan who would be waiting for her with a gruff greeting when she returned, but who was good to her, if he often scolded when the porridge was burned. But men were that way about women's work, and never knew that an angel would forget when the baby cried. "*But* she was growing heavy, blessed be the Madonna! Why wasn't there a light?—It would be good if one might sleep!"

A mounted messenger came out from the fort and dashed across the square; the crowd holding breath, parting silently before him, but surging tumultuously back, to wait—though they were very weary and the shifting clouds were dropping rain. But there were yet no lights in the palace windows.

It was growing darker and the wind was rising; a quick flurry of drops extinguished some of the torches, and in the greater gloom the voice of the wind wailed like an evil omen. But still the women would not go—waiting for that sign of *the light in the palace windows*.

Only they pressed closer to each other and crossed themselves in terror, with smothered ejaculations and adjurations, shuddering from the superstitions that enthralled their simple natures; for at this season, in Cyprus rain was most unwonted, surely a sign of Heaven's displeasure! Still they waited in the darkness of the night, with shivering hearts, with the wind growling like angry fiends out beyond the harbor and down from the environing hills—upheld to this costly tribute of devotion by the dumb, dog-like loyalty which their beautiful young Queen had roused within them, by a smile on her wedding-day and the sorrow that had quenched it. [Pg 144]

"It is good, *va*, to see the light in the Duomo! There is many a good candle burning for her at the shrine of Our Lady of Mercy, this night."

"An' there were none for ourselves, we should find one for her!"

"Not a woman of our *casal* but held a candle in her hand as we came in at the gate of the city; for the silkworms have given us silk and enough to spin this year; and if they had not, we would not grudge it to her. For she hath a smile like an angel. May our Holy Mother bless her for them both."

"And beautiful—beautiful so that it warms the heart! Dost thou remember the day when she

came out of the Duomo, beautiful as the Madonna herself—may our Blessed Lady in Heaven forgive me!—with a necklace and a crown flashing fire, that our Holy Mother of Jesus might wear on the Feast of the Annunciation?—and the smile on her face?—and the King beside her——? Ah, but it was a wedding—Holy Saints!—and they ought to be happy—the great ones!"

"Hush then!—But surely 'tis a sin that they left the mourning upon the banner to-night, one should have more respect! If I could get into the Duomo for a drop of Holy water—Sancta Maria!" [Pg 145]

But the crowd had swelled to hopeless density, and both women threw out their hands with the magical gesture that never failed to exorcise the evil spirits brought near by such an omen. Then they touched each other reassuringly, and crossed themselves and were silent again.

For a beautiful Greek, not of their own class, stepped out from her group of attendants, and knelt on the pavement, stretching out her hands towards the dark palace with a prayer—they could hear her murmuring,—"For *her* sake—for the sake of the innocent one who hath been wronged—Holy Mother of Angels, grant us one of her blood to rule this land!"

Her heavy veil of mourning fell aside as she hastily rose and joined her attendants, disappearing in the crowd.

"Madama da Patras! Could it be Madama da Patras, mother to the King, kneeling on the pavement in the night!"

"Her heart is broken with grief, and she thought not to be seen, poor lady."

Two nobles were wending their way with difficulty across the Piazza, they lingered a moment, arrested by the words of the prayer.

"This night may make the difference between anarchy and peace for Cyprus," one of them said to his companion, as they resumed their struggle.

"Aye—Cyprus for the Cypriotes,—instead of Genoa, or Venice, or Naples."

"Or Queen Carlotta?"

"*Maledetto!—Who spoke?*" [Pg 146]

But the challenge was unanswered. The noble who had dared to name aloud the daughter of their last Queen—the sister of their late King—had been lost in the darkness before the trusty guard, *sent from Venice*, could make sure of him.

"The fellow should be thrust through for his insolence. A Cyprian master is good enough for Cyprus," they confided to each other, as they made pause again, emerging from the crowd at the other end of the piazza, before the gate of the fortress.

"What matters it?" his comrade answered him nonchalantly, "for canst thou tell me the color of a Cypriote now? and his native tongue may be liker that of Spain or Venice than of France or Greece. My Lord of Piscopia hath the color of Venice."

"But of the very household of our Queen:—speak soft! Our Queen?—Perchance this night may be her undoing—how runs King Giacomo's will? Yea, for the matter of the fiefs, she hath been royal with her gifts—a matter not so lordly when confiscation cometh thus easily."

"But she hath a royal way with her, as of one born to the throne, and for that matter it were not strange for one of the house of Cornelii—they held their heads proudly enough in Venice, I am told; and her mother was of the blood of a Comnenus—more royal than a Lusignan, if not so well tempered."

"Aye; she is well enough."

"And she hath a grace that hath verily won the people; never was there such a crowd in the time of any other Queen. See how they throng before her gates to-night—poor simple souls— [Pg 147] conquered by a smile that costeth naught."

"Nay; it is not strange; for the people entered little into the thought of Queen Carlotta, or Queen Elenà. There is no harm in her; she is a good child, and beautiful enough to be a saint; with too little understanding of the ways of our court: too great a saint for Janus—by every blessed saint of Cyprus! But I had rather she had more earthliness and wile than be the pawn of Venice. A Cyprian for the Cypriotes! Our Janus were better;—a Lusignan—not too much a saint—not a child nor a woman neither—but masterful: less the pawn of Venice."

"As well of Venice with her fleets and commerce, as of Naples—if it be not a Cyprian. How sayest thou? And it was King Janus himself who gave Pelendria—that most royal and bountiful fief of a prince of Lusignan—into the hands of that parvenu of Naples, *Rizzo*! The King verily guessed not his quality when he named him to such estate! He would outrule monarchs."

"*Pace!*"

Close to them, in the crowd, they heard the sound of a soldier's lance rasping the pavement as he stood at rest. One not far off seemed to answer his signal.

The storm was growing fiercer; the sullen mutterings of the wind broke into a shriek, with a terrible downpour of rain; but the rushing crowd was stayed by a cry of joy that rose above the tumult—a cry of love from the heart of the people—

"Mater Beatissima! *A light in the palace window!*"

A candle flamed in a dark window—two—more—a light in every casement! [Pg 148]

The gates of the palace were thrown wide and a splendid mounted corps rode forth amidst a

flare of torches—white plumes of rejoicing waving from their casques—white banners raised high on the points of their lances—while the herald, in full armor with vizor up, bore proudly before the people the silken banner with the arms of Cyprus blazoned upon it—the white, royal banner of a Prince of Galilee.

The waiting people went wild with joy, for the bells of all the churches of Famagosta were pealing a jubilee, and the night rang with shouts of homage for the Prince of Galilee, the heir to the crown of Cyprus:

For an infant prince had just opened his unconscious eyes upon his troubled earthly heritage.

[Pg 149]

XVI

White banners of rejoicing floated from every stronghold and palace throughout Cyprus, to publish the birth of the infant prince; but a hush had lain for many days over the city of Famagosta.

In the Cathedral of San Nicolò, the Archbishop of Nikosia, primate of all Cyprus, ministered in solemn state among a throng of lesser dignitaries, priests, and acolytes. His sumptuous robes of office, of cloth of gold broidered with costly pearls, flashed forth a marvellous radiance from the light of countless candles bought with the precious copper bits of the peasants who came from the provinces far and near. As they gathered about the steps of the altar they carefully drew their dingy work-worn garments back, lest their touch should sully the splendid Persian carpet spread for the Reverendissimo, little dreaming that the hint of sorrowing love in their stolid faces robed them with nobility and turned their hard-earned copper *carcie* into a golden gift.

In the many churches throughout the kingdom the humble people were kneeling, praying their unlettered prayers for the beautiful young Queen, with the more faith that the Holy Mother would listen because one so great as the Archbishop of Nikosia ministered in person before their sacred image of San Nicolò. For had it not been the booty of a slaughtered Eastern city, won by Peter the Valiant in most holy warfare of Crusade, which His Holiness of Rome would fain have counted among the treasures of the One True Church within the Eternal City? [Pg 150]

In the grim stone corridors of the impregnable fortress of Famagosta, a crowd of humble pilgrims from the Troödos knelt, breathlessly fingering their rosaries, while the monks of the Holy House upon the Mountain moved among the scattered groups, holding each one his Cross of Thorns, and reciting his low "Ave," that the people might follow in hushed whispers.

But within the little Chapel of the Fortress, Hagios Johannes wrestled alone in prayer; it leaped from his heart with groans and sobs that might not be restrained.

Surely the merciful Father in Heaven would leave this pure spirit to rule the distressed people of Cyprus:—"Were they found too sinful to win so great a boon?—'*Let the priests, the ministers of the people, weep between the porch and the altar!*'—My God, it is Thy word, spoken by Thy prophet of old!" He pressed his hands against the crosses on his breast and shoulders, lashing himself in a sort of frenzy from the passion of his thought, not knowing that his blood trickled in slow drops upon the very steps of the altar—the blood of man, defiling the purity of that slab of onyx brought from the Temple at Jerusalem by the first of the Kings of Lusignan.

The fortress, not the Palace of Famagosta, had been the birthplace of the little Prince of Galilee; a wise precaution, possibly, in view of the diversities of sympathy to be found among the nobles of Cyprus. In the innermost of the apartments set apart for the Royal use, a grave [Pg 151] assemblage of learned men had gathered—men of many races and tongues, of various schools of science, diverse in doctrines and ideals—all, with the exception of Maestro Gentile, the court physician, strangers to the patient whom they were called to treat in a critical moment. As a matter of science the case had a certain value for them, which was not lessened by the fact of the patient's quality; but to Maestro Gentile alone was the hopeless condition of the young Queen a matter of deep personal concern. They came from France, from Greece, from the famous University of Bologna; the Sultan of Egypt had sent a sage learned in all the lore of that ancient civilization; and a wise Arab had brought to this consultation the secrets of every herb that grew; while a holy man from Persia, steeped in the wisdom of the Zend Avestar and in the doctrines of Zarathrustra, stood ready to use his mystic comfort in behalf of the sufferer. The consultation had dragged its slow length through the hot August afternoon, while the strange faces came and went about the couch where the young Queen lay moaning and tossing; the single being under that roof who loved her as her own soul and would have given her life for hers, was waiting alone in the great ante-chamber, listening for every footfall, every motion within—filling each moment with an intensity of prayer.

The great men had barred her from the sick-room while they made their diagnosis, lest the intricacies of the symptoms should declare themselves less positively in the presence of a nature without learning in any method of their art. "There was fever," they said; "it would excite the [Pg 152] patient to have one of her own household so near her in this extremity; her strength must be

carefully treasured."

But all wore faces of gloom, speaking with hushed voices, as, one by one, they came forth from the darkened chamber, yet with a sense of relief that all had been done that could be done and the weakness might now be left to run its course, "For there is no hope," they said.

The Lady Beata had questioned each face silently; but when the last one passed, bringing the same sense of doom, "Can *nothing* more be done?" she asked with clasped hands.

They shook their heads, gravely, with decorous looks of sympathy, repeating their short refrain, like a knell.

"Then I will go to her," she answered, "that she may see a face of love when she passes," and pushing them all aside, she resolutely entered the sick-chamber, signing to Maestro Gentile to follow her; but the protest from the group of learned men was less than she had feared, since the Queen was now so ill that nothing could cure or harm.

The fair young mother, fever flushed, with wandering eyes, lay tossing on the silken cushions of her low couch—broken words feebly struggling from the parted lips in pathetic tones, "Madonna —I am so tired—*so* tired—take me——"

There was no recognition in her eyes, as the Lady Beata leaned over her, startled at the words, her soul wrung with sympathy.

"Why can they do nothing?" she asked in low authoritative tones of the physician.

"The will is gone," he answered sorrowfully; "she hath lost all desire of life; she will not rally, [Pg 153] being too weak for the effort, and having no consciousness to help herself."

There was a hunted, frightened look in Caterina's face; the words came again, more faintly —"tired—take me——"

"She shall *not* die until she hath known this joy which Heaven hath sent her!" the Lady Beata cried with conviction and a sudden sense of power. "We will save her—thou, Maestro Gentile—and I—who love her. Give her only some potion for her strengthening, I beseech thee, caro Maestro;—life is flickering—she *must* not die yet."

"There is no hope," he answered her again; but he gave the strengthening draught, for he could not resist her imploring eyes.

The Lady Beata had been moving noiselessly, throwing wide the curtains; a faint, pitying evening breeze stole into the chamber. She came now and knelt beside the couch.

"Bring the little Prince hither with all possible haste, from his chamber," she said without lifting her eyes from Caterina's face. "We must rouse her!"

And now the Maestro went without further question, to do her bidding, although the child, and all that belonged to him had been kept out of sight and sound of the invalid, through these days of danger, lest an emotion should snap the slender thread of life.

"Bring none with thee," she said, "save only the peasant-nurse; for we must be alone."

Quite alone, with death so near, out of the marvellous great strength in her heart, the Lady [Pg 154] Beata laid her firm, cool touch on the restless hands, scarcely restraining them—yet the spasmodic movements grew quieter; she smiled into her eyes, until the strain of the frightened gaze relaxed; she folded her close in the arms of her deep tenderness and *willed* her back to life with the strenuousness of a great purpose—for was there not the little wailing child to live for, to give her sight of the love and happiness for which she was starving!

Closer and closer yet she folded her, with light caressing motions on hair and brow, calling to her with all sweet names that deep-hearted women know, in tones so like a dream that they caught the wandering consciousness and lighted it with a faint, far hope.

Time is not when such momentous issues are pending. Whether the moments passed into hours, or whether each instant were so fraught with its intensity of hope and fear that every heart-throb seemed an eternity, the yearning watchers never knew. Slowly—or was it swiftly?—Just as hope was dying in despair—a breath of peace, like the wafting of the wings of some heavenly messenger, stirred softly among them, dropping balm on the face of the sleeper.

They bent above her breathlessly; the pale eyelids fluttered and unclosed.

Her breath came gently and broke in a restful sigh; she lay quietly within the shielding arms that had held her back from the dread abyss; the light of recognition was dawning in her eyes.

The Lady Beata trembled for joy; but she scarce dared move or speak; she kept her eyes fixed [Pg 155] on the dear, fragile face,—deep in her heart that ceaseless prayer for life.

Maestro Gentile was dumb with awe:—it was a miracle! He stood watching, intent to help—holding his breath lest he should work some harm, while he kept guard over the nurse who held the sleeping child; he was so completely under the spell of that wonder-working will that he needed scarce a sign to work with her.

But the Lady Beata was no thaumaturgist; only a loving woman, standing where science had failed, translating another's desperate need from her own depths of sympathy—arresting the oncoming shadow because of her faith and her great love.

"Now!" she exclaimed under her breath.

She laid the infant on its mother's breast; its dainty breath came and went upon her face with

the fragrance of a violet. She uncurled a little crumpled, rose-leaf palm and pressed it close upon the mother's cheek—never moving her gaze, with the will of life strong within it, from the eyes in which recognition had dawned with a strange, sweet surprise. A smile was brooding on lips and eyes. One baby-hand lay clasped in Caterina's—the wee pink fingers closed on hers like the tendrils of a vine.

The Lady Beata's heart throbbed to breaking, but her voice came low and calm—stilled with the passion of her gladness, as Caterina's eyes smiled into hers:

"It is thine own little son, who hath need of thy love:—God's wonderful gift of joy that only mothers know!"

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XVII

With whatever magnificence of pageantry the ceremonies of the Baptism and Coronation of the infant Prince of Galilee were surrounded—and under the tutelage of Venice and the auspices of Cyprus which aspired to the splendor of an Eastern Empire, there could be nothing lacking—there were nobler aspects of that brilliant festival which those who witnessed never forgot.

The Embassies which had been despatched to all friendly courts had returned with deputations of rejoicing; a fleet from Venice and ships from the East had brought costly gifts of welcome and men, high in dignity, charged to represent their governments: and the Admiral Morenigo, with two Provveditori had arrived to stand sponsors for the Grandson of the Republic. In the vast banquet-hall of the palace, decorated with all its ancient heraldic devices and trophies of Crusades and Eastern victories, the Coronation Feast was spread, where presently the knights of the noblest families of the kingdom would count it an honor to serve: and the splendid city of Famagosta was gay with the suites and banners of foreign guests.

But, for all that, it was the *People's Day*—for the young Queen had willed it so.

"Let proclamation be made throughout the land," she had said, "that all, of every degree, may share the festivities, and come to pay their homage to the infant King. And bid the mothers bring their little ones."

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The people thronged from far and near until Famagosta could hold no more; from Nikosia, from Larnaca and Limasol and Kerynea and other cities and districts of Cyprus, came great deputations of burghers, with those peasants from the nearer *casals* and hamlets whom the invitation of their gracious Sovereign Lady had reached and who were not restrained by the unwillingness of their nobles: for there were still some among the ancient families of the island who looked with disfavor upon Janus and his successors.

The Queen had not shown herself to the people since the birth of her little son; and they knelt along her pathway as she passed across the Piazza San Nicolò, from the palace to the Duomo, holding their children up that she might bless them—for it was a miracle! She had come back from Death's door to rule and bless their land!

"Sancta Maria!"

Before her on the golden cushion of state were borne the sceptre and the quaint Royal Crown of Cyprus of the time of their first king, Guy de Lusignan—heavy and far too rough for her delicate brows to endure; and the Councillors and Counts of the kingdom, the knights and nobles and ladies of the court made a brave array. But the people,—the peasants,—half-dazed by their unaccustomed nearness to such magnificence, not feeling as did the people of Venice that the fêtes of the kingdom were meant for them, had looked on stolidly at all the bravery of the passing procession and at the glitter of the insignia,—showing no sign of greeting until a white, girlish figure stood under the palace portal.

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"*Panagia mou!* Holy Virgin!" The familiar ejaculation came, half-suppressed, in a whisper of awe, from hundreds of voices. For the words of the Cyprian peasant were few, and this appeal to their most revered image of the Virgin sufficed for the expression of their deepest emotions. Was it, in truth their Queen—or the blessed Madonna herself, who came forth from the palace arches in her sweeping robes, white and gleaming, her royal mantle of cloth of gold and her jewelled crown—like the beautiful ivory image in the Duomo of Santa Croce?—Very pale and fair and sad she was, yet with a smile in her eyes, as she turned from side to side to answer their greetings, which now broke forth rapturously.

The color flushed her pale face when their cries of loyalty arose, and she turned and took the little Prince of Galilee from her Eccellenza, the Royal Governess the Dama Margherita de Iblin, holding him high, close-pressed to her cheek for all the people to see, with a great glory of mother-love in her shining eyes. They rent the air with their sobs and shouts.

The child lay smiling on his mother's arm—serene and very beautiful; it was in truth a holy picture.

The populace forgot that it was their Queen; as never before, that any distance of caste lay between them—they forgot their native awkwardness and dread of the great ones—they thronged nearer, unafraid—only to touch her—to kiss some hem of her floating garments—to look in the face of the little child who was to be their King!

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And when the mother and the child were gone into the shadows of the Duomo, so thronged with noble guests and with all the splendid Hierarchy of Cyprus that there was scarce room for the royal procession to pass to the High-Altar beyond the tomb of Janus, the hearts of the people in the Piazza joined in the chorus of love and benediction of the choirs within, as, with new hints of devotion in their patient faces, they folded their own little ones closer with some vague, struggling, incomprehensible sense of aspiration—they were one with their Royal Lady and the Blessed Madonna, in the sacred mystery of Motherhood.

In the spacious apse the Hierarchy and the Royal Court were ranged for the ceremonial, and back of them a low three-arched opening at one side of the apse, supported on columns of polished porphyry clasped with grotesquely hammered copper, gave glimpses of palms waving in the great Court of the Tombs; gave glimpses also of the Monks of Troödos who had come hither with all their numbers, to witness the solemn services of the dedication of their infant king to his high trust.

And just within the portal, in strange contrast to the pomp of his surroundings, stood Hagios Johannes Lampadisti, "the Illumined"—a wild, stern figure, in his sombre robes—unchanged for any highest festival—with the symbol of solemn sacrifice on his breast, beyond all thought of admiration or of reproach for the splendor about him, his prophetic gaze fastened on the face of the Queen with imperious intensity—one hand slightly extended towards her, holding out his cross of thorns.

When the solemn rites were over and the Queen had received her child again from the arms of the Archbishop of Nikosia, Hagios Johannes, never moving his eyes from her face came forward with slow movements, and Caterina, with a sudden, uncontrollable impulse, lifting her eyes beheld the mystic gaze of Hagios Johannes and knelt down before the altar, straining her baby close to her breast.

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"Dear Christ in Heaven!" she cried, in the dialect of the people. "I give him to Thee!—I give *my All* to Thee! He and I, we will live for Thee; and for this People of Cyprus!—so Thou and the Blessed Mother be our helpers."

The Queen's Councillors in their splendid robes of office, looked in amazement to see their Queen forget her state in such a presence, and outrage every precedent by crying out in the unlearned language of the people, before this stately company; and the face of the dignified Primate flamed with wrath at this unseemliness. But Caterina, noting nothing, turned to receive their homage for the infant King, for whom as by an inspiration, she had publicly offered these vows, from the depths of her heart.

As the procession moved out into the sunshine of the Piazza, she held the child up again to the eager, waiting throng—the light gleaming on the tiny coronet above his baby-cap as she spread out his dimpled hands with a motion of welcome, saying quite simply:

"This is your King. Love him, dear people of Cyprus!"

And she would not give the infant back to the Royal Governess, but carried him herself in her own arms across the Piazza, held up for the people to see—which never before had a queen of Cyprus been known to do. But there was a light in her face which silenced those who would have spoken of ways more seemly, and it was a triumphal procession to the palace. But she paused before the peristyle, turning to face the people again.

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"There is welcome for every Cypriote," she said, "men, women and little children, who come this day to pay homage to their infant King; and good cheer in the palace for all," and signing to the attendants that they should be made to enter she passed in, smiling, before them.

The child lay in his cradle in the splendid *Sala Regia*, under the canopy blazoned with the arms of Cyprus—a little, helpless, smiling child—guarded by the Councillors and Counts of the kingdom; and near him stood the Queen with all her court, who for this day only had put off their mourning that no suggestion of gloom nor any hint of evil omen might shadow the royal baptismal and coronation fêtes. The ladies were dazzling in gems and heirlooms of broideries and brocades; the knights and barons of the realm were glittering with orders—here and there, above his costly armor, one showed the red cross of the Crusade, or wore the emblem of the Knights of San Giovanni. But the people, who never before had entered those palace doors, came surging—not afraid—nor shrinking from the novelty and splendor nor curious for it; they came to pledge their fealty to the baby-prince—a little child like their own—whose gentle mother asked their love—than which no monarch may bring a gift more royal.

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XVIII

"Is there aught to fear, Aluisi?—Thou seemest overgrave," the Lady Beata asked anxiously as her son came late, one evening into her private boudoir in their suite in the palace; he looked unusually weary and depressed.

"There is always much to fear," he answered, with no brightening of his anxious face in response to his mother's smile.

"But not now—surely not now! She hath won the heart of the people—these fêtes were a triumph—they almost gladdened her. And now, poor child, she hath the little one to bring her comfort."

"Aye, Madre mia; she hath perchance won the love of the simple folk; but it is a powerless love."

"Aluisi!—thou art not like thyself to scorn it."

"I may well be not like myself in so strange a land," he answered bitterly. "But I know not scorn; nor hopeless trust, neither."

His mother watched him wondering, as he, who was usually so self-contained, strode impatiently about the chamber, as if its limits fretted him.

"A few cries of loyalty—a group of peasants kneeling—make a pretty showing—a tribute to bring her comfort—but it is the chaff before the wind, when danger cometh. And she hath never spoken of the many fiefs from which they came not—withheld by command of their jealous nobles. This peasantry hath no initiative—no aggressiveness. How wouldst thou that they should save her when danger cometh?"

"What danger, Aluisi?" [Pg 163]

"The ever-present danger from without and within," he answered despondently. "One knoweth not from whence the first blow shall come."

She was silent for a moment, seeking how she might pursue the theme without further irritating him.

"If the peasants are powerless," she said, "the burghers are strong. And they came in throngs to the coronation."

"Aye, Mother; they are our hope: I thank thee for thy word."

A silence fell again between them, and his face grew less anxious.

"The burden is heavy for thee," she said, as he came and stood near her low couch. "It will ease thee to speak of it, if thou mayest not dismiss it. It is not this last attempt of Carlotta that troubles thee? *That* hath been crushed?—without renewal?"

He gave a short laugh.

"One knoweth not," he answered, with an attempt at playfulness that showed no color of mirth. "These two hours have I been within. Cornaro was with me. Another *mahona* may have chanced to land, coming from Africa with some other Valentine to do Carlotta's bidding and assert her claim to this uneasy crown of Cyprus; *this* Valentine of Montolipho, poor youth, having no longer a brain to work her schemes.—But danger from within is less easy to quell."

She had never seen him so uneasy: but she tried to control her apprehension since he needed all her strength. [Pg 164]

"What saith Andrea Cornaro? Doth he share thy fear?" she asked in a low even tone.

"We spoke together but now of his Grace, the Archbishop, who verily wore a face that boded no good to the child nor his mother—even as he held him in baptism that day—sealing him with the sign of the Holy Cross!—And to-day, in Council—verily Cyprus hath need of a new Council——" he broke off suddenly.

"The Archbishop is not of the Council, Aluisi!"

"But his brother, the Count Carpasso, is more to fear," he cried wrathfully. "They are men of one mind and both creatures of that treacherous King of Naples. If Janus had had more wit, he would have left Gioan Peres Fabrici to this day, bargaining for his cargoes of grain, instead of naming him to the Council of the Realm and lavishing the honors of the kingdom upon this faithless favorite."

"Faithless—my son? It is an evil word."

The quiet interruption arrested the angry flow of his speech.

"I pray that he be not found faithless," he said more quietly, "when he hath a chance to prove his quality. But one would think a man so favored of the King would seek, at every turn, to prove his loyalty before the Queen—in which I find him not overanxious."

"It is thou, perchance, who art overanxious, from the greatness of thine own loyalty, and the burden it hath brought thee."

"Aye—am I!—Where there is cause for mistrust it maketh cowards of us, when faith were better. Thou knowest, gentle Mother, that this Valentine confessed, before his death, that he but heralded a larger craft sent from Rhodes, with knights and gentlemen and letters favoring *Carlotta*! And Gioan Peres Fabrici, Captain of our galley, sent with speed by prayer of us of Venice to bring them hither to confess themselves, *found them not*. He returned, *with speed*—and *found them not*. What thinkest thou, my Mother? Is it my judgment that is gone from too great [Pg 165]

anxiety?—Or may a valiant captain not see a brigantine armed upon the water?—a ship—a brig, scarce smaller than his own, perchance—that he should let them slip?"

"Why should he let them slip?—And Valentine may not have spoken truth."

"One speaketh truth, or naught—with death so near. And for thy question—I know not why——" He seemed to be evolving knotty reasons, as he sat, with stern brows, deep in thought. With an effort he roused himself and went on with his tale.

"But yesterday, in Council—for Cornaro and I, we had discussed the matter of the royal residence together, thinking it suited not with the Queen's dignity to remain longer in the fortress—a most mournful palace for one so young and who hath need of some distraction about her to keep her from oversadness. But Rizzo, being Chief of Council, would hear naught of the Queen's return to the Palace. Fabrici also spoke against it."

"It is strange:—but they gave no reason?"

"They gave a reason—one of their own making: that there was a matter of more moment before the Council; that the Queen's pleasure might wait." [Pg 166]

"Aluisi! What saidst thou?"

"Cornaro lost patience and answered roundly: that he, being by his late Majesty created Auditor of the realm, and by him greatly trusted—it behooved him as much to uphold the Queen's dignity as to have his word in the choice of the residence and aught else pertaining to the costs of the royal household. And that the Chamberlain of the Queen—I having upheld the demand made by him—was like to know what best might suit her Majesty."

"And then?" the Lady Beata questioned, much agitated.

"'Ye are like to know what best might suit Her Majesty—*both being of Venice*,' Rizzo made answer; and *dismissed the Council*."

Neither of them spoke for a few moments.

"How will Andrea accept this insolence?" the Lady Beata questioned.

"There *is* more—far more than that for anxiety," Aluisi said, dismissing her question with an impatient gesture. "I would that the Queen and the child were here—in their own palace—or that we were there. The question hath turned to one of larger import than the good pleasure of the Queen; or the wisdom of holding the Queen and the Prince Royal in a fortress, when the land is not at war—as if her own people might not be trusted with her life. But the argument did not touch the Council—not more than the whim of us—*of Venice*"—he spoke bitterly. "Before, it was expedient. *Now*——"

"Now?" his Mother urged. [Pg 167]

"There may be some scheme behind it, and I would we were there. She hath none of her own beside her, if trouble should come."

"She hath Dama Margherita—who loveth her well."

"Dama Margherita," Bernardini echoed, and a feeling of peace came over him.

But the Lady Beata sat pondering, in troubled silence. What could it mean? Caterina had taken up her residence in the fortress before her illness; it had been thought wise, although it had not been publicly declared. A few of her maids of honor and Lady Beata, Chief Lady of her Court, had gone with her. But before the baptism, her suite had returned to the palace, that all might be as usual for the reception of the royal guests; the Queen had lingered from day to day, partly that she might escape the crowd and keep more quiet until the festivities were over. But now—was it of her own choice? Why did she not return?

"And now—what wilt thou do?" the Lady of the Bernardini asked at length, turning towards her son, failing to see what course of action might be wisest. "May we not go to her to-night?"

"It is too late: the gates are closed; it could do but harm to rouse them for us to pass, with no cause but our anxieties to offer. But to-morrow, we will compass it.

"Meanwhile I have done what may be done to bring hither more who are of our ways of thinking; for who should care for her, if not we '*of Venice*?'" It was evident that the thrust rankled. "I saw our Consul yesterday, who seemed not overanxious from what I told him— [Pg 168] therefore *I told him not all*—I trust he hath not been tampered with by this most wily 'Council to the Queen!' but before the night had fallen, I sent a letter of warning to Mocenigo who, with his fleet, will be at anchor off the coast of Rhodes—to pray that he will come, or will send our Provveditore Vettore Soranzo to await the need."

His Mother grasped his wrist—her eyes dilating. "It must be long before they can come," she said, in a whisper.

"Not many days," he answered reassuringly; "and I have sent by a trusty Cypriote who will make full speed to bring me back the message that meaneth large reward for him. My warning must reach Mocenigo before any message sent from Cyprus to Venice might get to him again."

"Is there aught else that may be done?"

"I have given command to put my fastest brig in trim, and to-morrow she will sail with merchandise for Venice; all day she hath been lading in the port. The message in my special cypher, known only to the Secretary of the Ten, is ready here." He drew the missive from his

breast, as he spoke, replacing it instantly. "Marco Bembo will sail with it on the morrow, which he may well do without suspicion, having come hither for the ceremonies now over. The brig will leave the port with all due tranquillity; and afterward will make all possible speed."

"There could be nothing more," she said rising; "thou hast thought of all."

"I thought also to have some one watching—ready to appeal to the burghers, if need should be: and I have sent but now a most secret message by my own trusty squire to his Eccellenza, Mutio di Costanzo, to tell him what hath chanced. He being Governor and Admiral of Cyprus, hath so great power that it should not be left for the Queen's Council to reach him first—if there should be scheming. Being Vice-Roy of Nikosia, he will have the will of the citizens for his following—if need should be. And his loyalty is sure: it was he, who with our *bailò* of Venice received Caterina's oath of allegiance, after the death of Janus; and he will not fail her." [Pg 169]

"Thou hast a right to thy weariness," his Mother said, laying her firm white hand with a weight of tenderness for a moment on his head. "Thou mindest me of thy father—so full of carefulness to be before in any cause that he held dear. I would thou wert not lost to Venice—it was my hope for thee—thou wouldst have been a power in her Councils."

"We would not be false to our own for any fancied glory that might be possible for us," he answered more lightly than he had yet spoken: but he knew that his Mother's ambitions for him were not fulfilled in this mission to Cyprus—that she had sacrificed her heart's desire for him.

He caught her beautiful white hand and spread it tenderly out upon his own—a hand that it had taken generations to fashion—made to command, yet knowing when to yield—modelled with exquisite lines of grace, goodness, courtesy, power—a hand of character, yet with delicate flushes of pink in finger tip and palm, with a touch as tender as strong. [Pg 170]

"It is too hard for thee, Madre mia, away from thine old home," he said tenderly. "There is room in the brig for thee to-morrow, if thou wilt: and Marco for thine escort."

She shook her head: "It would be harder to live without my boy," she said resolutely. "Now think on sleep, of which thou hast need—and——" She half-framed the name of Margherita, yet would not utter it.

He smiled at the wistful look in her face; for he understood. "Nay, Madre mia; such thoughts are not for me. I am a general in an alien camp, with scarce wit enough for my tangled duty."

Then he bent his knee, and kissed her hand, in knightly fashion of the time, as doing her reverence, whom in his heart he loved, and left her—a little comforted by his long confidential talk.

But the Lady Beata stood for a while motionless where her son had left her, before the long window that faced the splendid peristyle of the palace. Between the great spaces of the columns she saw the Piazza beyond them flooded with moonlight—white and still and absolutely deserted. There were no human sounds save the monotonous tread of the sentinels pacing to and fro before the palace; and across the Piazza, those of the guard before the closed entrance of the Fortress of Famagosta where their Queen and the infant Prince were in residence, echoed them back. From the Duomo San Nicolò shone the faint twilight glimmer of the tall candles that were ceaselessly burning about the tomb of Janus—each pale flame wafting a prayer for absolution from the broken heart of the Queen, who before her illness had brought them daily with her own hands: and far down upon the shore was dimly heard the ceaseless flow of the waves, keeping rhythmic beat to the passing moments in the mystery of the night. [Pg 171]

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XIX

The moon had waned and the night was starless when the chimes of San Nicolò told three of the morning in low melodious tones like a voice from dreamland, breaking no slumber.

Suddenly the sharp wild clangor of the great alarum-bell of Famagosta crashed through the silence.

The citizens sprang from their sleep with cries of terror and rushed to the windows; but, alas, they had *not* dreamed that dreaded danger signal which kept up its fateful toll. Already men, fully armed, were hurrying through the streets that led to the Piazza; whence came echoes of voices talking in quick, awe-struck tones—the flash of torches—a horseman dashing down from the castle to the walls at the port—sounds of excited action ringing back from the ramparts—the quick gallop of a cavalier rushing to join his command.

What might it mean!

Commander Saplana moved calmly out among his mounted suite, fully equipped, from the Castle into the Piazza; yet there had not been many moments in which to make ready since the first notes of that wild alarum had sounded!

Those among the citizens entitled to bear arms were quickly accoutred and dashed out to

mingle with the throng.

"What is it?" men questioned of each other—but no one knew.

Had the Genoese returned to storm by night this post of vantage so long their own—and still so coveted? [Pg 173]

Were the Turks upon them?

Was it some intrigue of Ferdinand of Naples?

Was it treason?

Was it Carlotta come from Rhodes, with men-at-arms, to surprise them?

There was stealthy talk of a foreign galley in the port.

Some one had noted strange sailors in the throng: one might not be sure of the letters on their caps, because of the darkness: but they were Christians—not Turks—thanks be to the Madonna!

"But the Queen is safe, *Sanctissima Vergine*! The Queen is in the Castle."

"There is His Excellency, Maestro Gentle, physician to Her Majesty, he passeth but now, the glimmer of his mail beneath his cloak! Holy saints! A gray-haired man, rushing out into the night—thinking first of the Queen and of her safety! The Madonna will be good to her!"

The old court physician gave the password at the castle-gate and entered.

The Signor Andrea Cornaro rode forth from his palace, fully armed, and with him Marco Bembo, cousin to the Queen—surely, they would know! The citizens called to them urgently for some explanation of the tumult, but they passed swiftly by to the palace of the Bailò, the Venetian Resident.

But the Bailò gave them no comfort.

"I know naught of the trouble," he answered them, "save that warning hath been sent me by His Excellency, the Count of Tripoli, that it were wiser that I keep within." [Pg 174]

"Then art thou the more needed!" burst from the lips of Cornaro, made desperate by this coolness; "for it well may be that the Count of Tripoli is a traitor set high in trust!"

But the Bailò listened to their importunate pleadings as if it were a trifle.

"Come with us swiftly to the Queen! By all the saints in heaven!—she should have her own about her in this danger—whate'er it be!"

"Nay," he said, and would not move. "This is a place of intrigue—and warning hath been sent me. It is, perchance, some one who seeketh my life."

There was no time to parley.

"Haste thee to the royal palace," the elder man said to his nephew, as they galloped away, "and bring from thence, with all speed, the Queen's Chamberlain, the Bernardini—there is none more loyal. Let none hinder thee."

"I serve our house and our honor!" young Marco called back to him, as he put his horse to the spur.

"I go at once to Caterina," his uncle answered reassuringly, turning the head of his good steed towards the castle—a place of security indeed—a fortress famed as impregnable.

The Royal Palace was doubly guarded—as never before, and Marco when he reached it, plead in vain for admission.

"By order of the Council of the Realm, no man might enter."

"Then take, I pray thee, this message to His Excellency, the Chamberlain of the Queen, and bid him come hither—it is for life or death." [Pg 175]

A golden coin, with the head of Janus stamped upon it, glittered in his palm. The valiant guard received the gift and refused the message.

"No man shall enter, nor leave this palace to-night: by order of the Council of the Realm."

"I bring an order from His Excellency, Andrea Cornaro, Auditor of Her Majesty, and member of the Council of the Realm," Marco pleaded desperately.

"*Our* orders are of the *Chief of Council*, the Signor Marin Rizzo—whom to disobey this night *is death*."

The foremost guard of the line had led the defense: and among them all there was no motion to favor this young cousin of their Queen. He was a knight, and brave at arms—but to have fought that band meant certain death; and at the castle, one might, perchance, help the Queen!

"There are some with Caterina to help her," he thought in his loyal heart, as baffled at the palace, he pushed his way across the Piazza and reached the entrance to the castle, "and here she is surely safe."

The Count of Zaffo, her aged Councillor and friend, had risen from a sick-bed to go to her; he had been first to enter the castle-court. "So ill, that he scarce could hold himself upon his palfrey," some one told the young knight in the crowd, in answer to his question.

"The old Councillor scarce could strike a blow for her," thought Marco; "but it is good that he should be within: for his devotion to Caterina is known. And Messer Andrea is there!" [Pg 176]

He drew breath more freely for this gleam of comfort, as he gave the usual password.

But the guard was obdurate.

"It is not the password for this night, my Lord."

"I pray thee—I am cousin to Her Majesty, and *must* have speech with her."

"Eccellenza; by order of the castellan, none may pass, save those who give the word."

"Then call me hither the castellan."

"The password hath been given by the Chief of the Council of the Realm; and without it, the gates may not be opened," the castellan answered without preamble, when he appeared for an instant before the slide in the great gate—as quickly closed, though he had recognized a member of the Queen's family.

"Had his uncle known the password and forgotten to give it to him?" Marco questioned in some anxiety, as he made his way, baffled again, through the crowd in the Piazza, which was growing denser and more excited. "And if he had not known it——?"

He quickened his pace—his horse alert to obey his will, fretting with dilated nostril and pawing hoof at their frequent interruptions.

The citizens had gathered in force, but no one of them knew the cause of the commotion, and they were not immediately formidable in the midst of this armed body of knights and soldiers who kept secret council and obeyed the slightest word of their commanders. Marco searched their [Pg 177] faces, as well as he might for the uncertain glare of the torches, but in vain. If he could but find General Visconti and his men, they might cut their way into the fortress—they, being Venetians, were surely loyal to the Queen!

His brain was in a whirl—he could think of nothing that was best, every moment might count—yet he crossed and recrossed his steps, turning down dark streets and back again into the Piazza; he was no longer sure of the safety of the castle; he was growing desperate.

But Visconti's men did not reveal themselves, and Marco worked his way out of the Piazza—since they surely were *not* there, and since no hint of what was passing within the fortress came from behind the porte-cullis—the single opening upon the square.

Little did he dream that Visconti's men, *because they were Venetians and known to be in sympathy with the Queen* were kept that night, by order of the Council of the Realm, in close detention.

The troop of horse stood impassible before the entrance and the sentry as tranquilly kept guard upon the turrets, as Marco passed them on his way to a small gate upon the seaward side which he had once noticed and now hoped had been forgotten, and where, in truth he entered when he reached it; for it had not been thought important by the planners of this night's strange revel—possibly because few knew of it, or perhaps, because there were none from the port who would not be welcome, for the fleets of Venice were known to be at anchor off the coasts of Turkey, having sailed thither in glad and unsuspecting temper after the courtesies of the baptismal and [Pg 178] coronation fêtes.

It chanced that it was through this same small, unguarded doorway that Andrea Cornaro had passed when—unaware of the new password for the night and zealously kept in ignorance thereof by his colleagues in office—he had been denied admission at the great gate upon the Piazza. As all persuasion brought him the more strenuous denial, he felt sure of some perfidy and the more bent upon reaching his niece at all hazards—for he was not one to be easily overcome by obstacles.

Meanwhile, Messer Andrea, Auditor to the Queen and Member of the Council of the Realm, had meant to scale the walls by the seaside and fight his way, hand to hand if need be, to the Queen's side, when he had chanced upon this little gate upon the moat so long unused that its rusty bolt yielded without over-much persuasion to his pressure from without. The first court upon which it gave entrance—being the farthest from the Piazza—was dark and deserted, and he passed, without resistance into the second court, finding it also empty, except for the sentry passing to and fro on his monotonous duty.

The man saluted as he offered the usual password, then, recognizing one of the Queen's Council, presented arms.

Here, at least, all was tranquil—possibly his fears had been too great.

But from the third court—the one first entered from the Piazza, there came as he neared the arched passage that led from court to court through the thickness of the massive walls, hints of [Pg 179] commotion that made him pause to consider whether he might not more surely reach the Queen by some other stairway.

As he drew back into the shadow to make some farther plan, the Count of Tripoli, with Rizzo di Marin, Chief of Council, came through, from the first court, followed by one or two mounted nobles, questioning the sentry as to whether anyone had passed that way, and he heard the man give his name.

"Sua Eccellenza, Messer Andrea Cornaro."

The Count of Tripoli repeated this answer, with an accent of surprise.

"He gave the password?" he questioned, sternly.

"*Eccellenza, si—come sempre.*"

Andrea Cornaro, to whom fear was unknown, thinking himself called, immediately responded, coming forward into the light.

"I have somewhat to discuss with thee," Rizzo said nonchalantly. "Wilt have a mount? We will go forth upon the ramparts and see whether all be in order."

"I have but left my horse," Cornaro answered, calling the animal to him with a motion of his hand, "but I would first know of this tumult." He kept his hand upon the bridle and remained standing, while he looked searchingly from Rizzo to Tripoli, the Governor of Famagosta.

"What is this tumult?" he repeated angrily, seeing them not quick to answer.

"Nay, Friend, how knowest thou not? being of the Council—as we:" Rizzo answered with a hint of provocation in his tone. "It is but some difference of the soldiers as to rations and pay: it threatened mutiny and had to be met. It will be put down. Mount then, your Excellency." [Pg 180]

"'Rations,' and 'pay,'" Cornaro answered scornfully, "to rouse the city and 'put it down'—at dead of night!"

"Aye: since they chose this time for their own deed of darkness, we men-at-arms may not be dainty about the hour of retribution."

"The Queen—my niece," said Andrea, taking a sudden resolution and throwing the reins across his horse's neck; "I will first go to her. Later I wait thy pleasure, Signor Rizzo; on the ramparts, or where thou wilt.—This is no lightsome night for a woman—a mere girl."

"'A woman'—'a mere girl'!"—the Chief of Council began tauntingly.

Cornaro's hand was upon his sword.

"*Scusi!*" Rizzo said, suavely, being not yet ready for the break. "I meant no disrespect—but she is young to rule. If thou wilt take thy horse, we will first seek the Queen, who would speak with thee. Nay—not by that court—the winding mount is quieter."

The Count of Tripoli and his companions had already left them and passed into the first court, in eager converse; but Cornaro was scarcely in the saddle before a sudden great uproar in the streets of the city beyond the fort arrested them. Cries, as of many men in concert, proclaiming Alfonso, son of Ferdinand of Naples, Prince of Galilee and Heir to the Crown of Cyprus—"by order of the *Council of the Realm*:" deafening shouts and threats of the citizens, protesting:—sounds of clashes of arms, terrorizing the people:—the sudden crash of the alarum bell, bursting forth anew to drown their protests:— [Pg 181]

Then again the traitorous cries, passing off through the more distant streets of the city:

"*Viva Alfonso—Prince of Galilee and Heir to the Crown of Cyprus!*"

"What meaneth this insolence!" Cornaro cried, white with passion and instantly drawing his sword.

The Neapolitan was not braver than the Venetian—but with an infinitely cooler brain, well-skilled in villany and intrigue and troubled by no sense of honor, he seized his opportunity, and when his victim's arm was raised, he dealt him a desperate blow on the head which hurled him, with stunning force from his horse. And then, upon the pavement of the castle-court, having him at disadvantage and senseless from the blow, the valiant Chief of Council, cruelly and like no loyal knight, summoned his mercenaries to his aid and dispatched his enemy with quick sword-thrusts, bidding them toss the lifeless body into the moat that circled the castle walls.

The faithful horse was the solitary mourner who watched his unconscious master while life was ebbing and sought to comfort him with mournful whinnies of almost human affection.

Had the young knight Marco Bembo but known of his uncle's barbarous murder, and that the white-haired Councillor Zaffo lay foully slaughtered in the first court of the castle because of his great crime of loyalty to the Queen, he might have paused before he attempted to force an entrance to the fortress. And yet he would not—being loyal as the venerable Councillor himself, and as full of bravery as Andrea Cornaro; the thought of the Queen's greater need would but have spurred his courage. [Pg 182]

The young Venetian had reached the second court without molestation, when he turned to silence the cry that came from a swaggering band of sailors who had followed him and were shouting for "Alfonso—Prince of Galilee!" They fell upon him at the signal from Rizzo which marked him guilty—for was he not a Venetian?

"*E tu, traditor!*"

The words rang out unanswered, save by his desperate sword.

They were but six, and he was standing against treason, for the Queen and the honor of his house!

He fought them all, without a groan, until his strength was spent; and they, eager to do the will of this ruffianly king-maker, who was winning a fresh coronet for their Prince of Naples—this man of force who would make much booty possible—fought six to one, and spared not.

And then, by bidding of their Chief, they flung the palpitating, tortured, lifeless remnant of what—one little hour before—had been a loyal, noble, winsome man, dreaming of duty and high achievement—into the horror of the moat by the pitiful wreck of Andrea Cornaro—the two murdered for the double crimes of relationship and loyalty to the trembling girl-Queen.

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XX

His Grace, the Archbishop, was among the first to respond to the summons of the alarum, having his mind filled with weighty matters of life and death which had rendered him sleepless—some of which he had discussed confidentially with General Saplana, who had been one of those most distinguished and trusted by the late King.

With Saplana the Commander of Famagosta, and with his own brother Gioan Peres Fabrici, as with some other members of the Queen's Council, many details of the conspiracy which was now being brought to so satisfactory a conclusion, had been arranged. They knew that the Neapolitan galley would be in port that night to support the uprising and the proclamation that should be made, if fortune favored. They knew of Ferdinand's untiring machinations to win a hold upon this much contested Crown of Cyprus; and none knew better how from the moment that the coveted alliance between Janus and a Princess of Naples had been frustrated by the Venetian marriage, Ferdinand had not ceased from intrigues to that end, secretly and zealously supported by certain men who were holding important positions of trust in the Government of Cyprus.

Andrea Cornaro, by whose means his niece had come to her throne, would be the most formidable individual opponent in any scheme for the benefit of Naples, and it became important to remove him; yet it could not be done without some apparent excuse—because of his relationship to the Queen, and because unless success were complete, they might have cause to [Pg 184] dread the strong galleys of Venice. So the wily Primate—keeping perhaps his own counsel as to the fabricator of the plot—invented a scheme which he asserted that the unconscious Cornaro intended to carry into effect that night by which, *when the great bell of the Castle should sound the call to arms, the Venetians in Famagosta, under Visconti and his band of Italian soldiers were to rise up and murder every Cyprian member of the Council of the Realm*. "Therefore let every man be armed and ready for the defense of Cyprus when the call shall be heard. And spare not the traitors!" he urged upon the Commander of the fortress.

"And if Visconti's men could be under restraint this night," the Archbishop suggested casually, "and if that Chamberlain of the Queen's could be under trusty guard within the palace—not to make suggestions in a matter more to your understanding than mine, your Excellency—but I know the man—a troublesome one and proud and silent—my brother liketh him little. After the Cornaro he is most to fear."

Thus Aluisi Bernardini found himself with his mother, close prisoner in the Royal palace, on the night when his Queen most sorely needed the help he would have perilled his life to give.

The Queen had been restless and could not sleep, being greatly troubled by a missive which the Archbishop had that morning delivered into her hands and which contained a reprimand of no gentle nature, purporting to come from His Holiness of Rome, who charged the Queen and [Pg 185] certain gentlemen of her kingdom with being 'wicked and ungrateful,' and assuring her that they were everywhere so regarded, for 'certain reasons well known to the writer,' which were not named.

She had put the letter aside, meaning to discuss it with her Chamberlain in the morning; but in the darkness and solitariness of her chamber, it assumed new proportions, and she finally sent to pray the Lady Margherita to come to her, and they sat far into the night—Dama Margherita trying in vain to comfort her with her assurance that she did not believe the letter to be genuine.

"His Holiness could not speak without reason," she asserted; "and having reasons, why should he not give them—that the fault might be confessed and atoned for?—*There are no reasons.* It is the work of some one who seeketh to annoy."

Dama Margherita had a positive way of seeing things, which was often helpful to Caterina's more gracious nature.

"Cara Margherita—it was His Grace himself who gave the letter into my hand."

But Dama Margherita had no reverence for the Archbishop of Nikosia.

"I think, your Majesty, that letter is not genuine," she repeated, uncompromisingly.

"But—Margherita—the most reverend, the Archbishop would not——"

Caterina broke off with a vivid flush and left the sentence unfinished, remembering that there had been a previous Archbishop of Nikosia whose code had not been fashioned by her ideals.

Dama Margherita had but just withdrawn when the uproar in the streets began and she rushed back at once to her Lady's side. The sounds came muffled through the massive walls of the castle for there was no outlook on the Piazza; it was the low muttering of a storm, none the less terrible because undeclared. But there could be no mistaking the dread clangor of the bell, and the two young, helpless women clung to each other in trembling silence. [Pg 186]

Caterina was the first to recover her composure; she made a pathetic effort to steady her voice as she spoke.

"Margherita, I must know at once what this meaneth. If one of the Council would come to me—there is always one in the Castle—my Uncle Andrea—or the Councillor Zaffo—I would they had not sent Aluisi and the Zia back to the palace!—and—and—*I will go to the Boy*."

"Dear Lady," Margherita besought her. "Let me rather bring him hither. The Council will be coming at once—they would rather find you here. I will come with the Prince and his *aya*, so soon as I shall have found one of the Council. Your Majesty will not fear to be left alone?"

"No: *No!*" Caterina hastened her with a motion of her hand. "The others will be here; thou wilt hasten with the child—and then thou wilt leave me no more!"

But Dama Margherita was already far down the narrow stone corridor, beyond hearing the confession of failing courage which would have brought her instantly back, when a tapestry was thrust hastily aside, and Maestro Gentile, the old white-haired physician, fully armed, but with the air of a hunted man, tottered into the room. [Pg 187]

"They seek my life," he gasped, "I know not why. I came through the terror lest your Majesty should need me—for it is a night!—San Nicolò save us!"

"Madonna mia!" the Queen cried piteously with clasped hands, "I do not understand!"

"It is the time for reckoning, fair Majesty; and those who have the power shall rule."

The Archbishop of Nikosia had entered the Queen's apartment unperceived and stood watching her with eyes of triumph.

She shrank from him with a sudden comprehension of his false nature, while he offered his explanation in a voice that struck her sensitive soul like a blow.

Instinctively she drew nearer to the old physician as if craving some stay, and laid her hand affectionately on his arm; then she pointed to the door: "Leave us at least the courtesy of our apartment!" she exclaimed indignantly to the Archbishop; "your Grace came unannounced."

"I came to bring your Majesty news of import," he began, taking no notice of her command. "His Majesty of Naples——"

Was he indeed about to confess his connection with the intriguing King of Naples, of which there had been more than one rumor? Aluisi had bidden her weigh the Primate's counsels before accepting them.

"We will hear your news in presence of the Councillors of the Realm, whom I have already summoned," the Queen interrupted, raising her fragile hand with a motion of silence—her slight trembling figure held erect by force of will, her head thrown back—her eyes flashing scorn—her voice steadied by a supreme effort. [Pg 188]

He paused, half in admiration, half in triumph, gloating over the success of the conspiracy of which he had been the master-mind, while he picked the words in which he would announce it to his victim, as one might choose the pebbles for a sling—the smoothest and the sharpest.

"It is scarce fitting that your Majesty should be last to hear what is already proclaimed throughout Famagosta," he said, "that Alfonso of Naples hath been created Prince of Galilee and Heir to Cyprus."

She looked at him with a scorn that burned. "Is your Grace a *man*," she said, "to use this speech? Or do I not hear aright—from the horror of this night?"

Then she turned to Maestro Gentile, compassionate and protecting.

"It cannot be that any should seek thy life," she said. "Thou art my friend:—I will shield thee here—*Madonna Sanctissima*! I cannot think—let us pray that this horror pass!"

She put her hands over her eyes and sank upon her knees, and Maestro Gentile knelt beside her.

There was a rush of footsteps, as of pursuers coming swiftly up the secret passage by which the physician had entered the royal apartments; in another second the hanging was torn aside and Rizzo, dark and ferocious, panting like some savage with the madness of the deeds already done —his eyes glaring upon his prey—with an oath at finding them so engaged, thrust the young Queen violently away, and sprang at the physician crying out in a voice of frenzy, as he dealt him two desperate blows with his iron gauntleted fists. [Pg 189]

"*E tu traditor!*"

It was the inglorious watchword—the signal of the brutal captain of this unequal fight; and the mercenaries following his lead, fell upon the old man and held him down while Rizzo stripped him of his sword, which, despite his years, he might have wielded too deftly.

There was a second's reaction from the exhaustion of the rapid chase, and while they drew breath, the physician who had been protected from serious harm by the corslet worn under his long mantle, had watched his opportunity, and with the agility of a hunted man, he started to his feet and escaped into the corridor, running for his life, on and up to the ramparts.

The Queen threw herself before the doorway, in agonized pleading for the life of her friend. But the clinging hands and streaming tears, the heroism of the girl facing all those frenzied men alone, were as nothing to their wrath at the delay—and in a moment they had passed her in hot pursuit.

She listened, every faculty tense to detach the sounds of this tragedy from that other, jangling from without. She heard the footsteps of the ruffians overtaking him; she heard their demoniacal cries, echoing back;—his faint words—"*What have I done that ye seek my life*,"—but the voice came no more—only sounds of struggle, growing dimmer, as they dragged him farther away upon [Pg 190] the ramparts—then silence—and the misery of it burning in her brain.

She staggered back against the doorway where she stood.

Then suddenly, came a flash of agonized revelation—the consciousness that this was but one link in the dark scheme of revolt, and with it came the acute revival of all her powers—the sharpening of every faculty of heart and brain.

"My Boy!" she cried—her voice thrilled through the castle—"*Madonna Dolorosa—My Child!*" and with the fleetness of a deer she turned and sped with flying feet, down the corridor to the chamber of the little Prince.

So lithe—so brave—so beautiful—so tortured—so resolute—she was a thing to curb and hold! Alvigi Fabrici, the tool of Ferdinand, would have liked to follow her and see the panting vision of her face, when she reached the cradle of her child—*and found him gone*.

But there was already silence in the corridor: no faintest echo of flying feet—no vaguest rustle of fluttering robes—a moment had sufficed for the mother's startled quest.

[Pg 191]

XXI

It was dawn after that night of tragedy.

From sheer exhaustion of passion the turmoil in the streets had subsided; the cries of indignant protest had ceased and the populace accepted their fate in sullen acquiescence, knowing themselves not strong enough to contest without aid those intriguing Councillors of the Realm who were entrenched behind the impregnable fortress of Famagosta where they held close captive the Sovereign they had sworn to defend and obey.

The Piazza was deserted: the malcontents who had gathered to mutter at the horror of the moat where the victims of the night had been tossed unburied, had been dispersed by threat of arms; the sentinels nodded at their posts—scarce knowing whose power they were upholding, nor by what name men called their masters. Here and there throughout the city, a little knot of the graver burghers might be found lingering to discuss the situation in attitudes of helpless dejection, and scattering with their problems all unsolved. They were too insignificant to dread, and for the moment the triumphant conspirators were content to leave the city without further imposition or molestation to such rest as a merciful nature might vouchsafe.

They were content to yield this lull in the storm, because it gave them needful quiet in which to mature fresh intrigues, to insure their triumph. Those men of Venice of the Queen's household, who would most strenuously have resisted them, had been quieted forever, it was true; but, as [Pg 192] dawn lightened over the ghastly faces upturned beneath the windows of the poor young Queen, an unconfessed tremor stole into the doughty breasts of Rizzo and Fabrici, in the place where most men wear their hearts, and they got them together, in friendly converse, to ponder what should come next.

For Venice was mightier than Naples—and the password they had so successfully wielded for a night—"*à bas Venezia*"—might not suffice to hold for the young Alfonso the dignity of *Prince of Galilee*, which they had proclaimed for him throughout the protesting city; it might even have a baneful ring, when news of the night's murders should reach the Republic. A plausible reason for the death must be contrived and sent forward with letters signed by the Queen's own hand, under the Royal Seal of Cyprus, accompanied with decorous lamentations and condolences on the part of her Councillors—such as one Government is wont to offer to another at the death of any distinguished patrician.

For the Chief of Council, Rizzo di Marin and his Grace the Archbishop of Nikosia, no rest was needful: the consciousness of triumph stirred the blood in their veins like strong wine, and with a sense of exhilaration sharpening all their intellectual faculties, they prepared, in a few hours, work that might ordinarily have required the consideration of days. When they closed their conference they had contrived a sheaf of pretty documents which did more honor to their

astuteness than to their loyalty, and which, with the signature of the Queen, would put them in possession of all the strongholds on the coast and many positions of vantage throughout the island, including the splendid city of Nikosia—which had shown much dangerous friendliness for Queen Caterina. It was a marvellous bold scheme—a bloodless victory for Alfonso, Prince of Naples; and Rizzo grew grimly merry as he discussed it with His Grace. [Pg 193]

His malignant eyes rested fondly on this order for the surrender of the famous stronghold of Cerines to a nephew of General Saplana, the treacherous Commander of Famagosta; with two such fortresses they should command the coast, and their empire in Cyprus was assured. It was a work of genius, this little parchment—he could scarcely bear to fold it out of his sight in the pouch that he wore next to his heart of stone.

And this—to the magnificent Lord Admiral Mutio di Costanzo, Vice-Roy of Nikosia and friend to Caterina, who had received her oath of allegiance after the death of Janus—so high he stood among the nobles of Cyprus—Rizzo's eyes fairly gleamed as he gloated over it—this order commanding him to yield up the splendid city of Nikosia, with his fortress of Costanza and the fleets of the island, to those who should present this parchment with the little signature of *Caterina Regina*. He, Rizzo, would take the governorship of this city of Nikosia—or, perhaps, the command of the fleets—he knew not which—that was a trifle to decide since all would be in his power: and of course he should instantly re-man the galleys. He allowed himself a moment's vision of this stately Knight Mutio de Costanzo, with his escort of cavaliers—the forty of his noble house entitled to wear the Golden Spurs—surrendering his holdings at the Queen's command, to those whom Rizzo should elect—*Rizzo*, who had heard himself called "that parvenu of Naples"—and the vision filled him with delight. [Pg 194]

Then he folded the other orders without a glance, they touched upon minor points of vantage and entered properly into his scheme—the cities of Limisso and, perhaps, of Costanzo—but that might be requiring too much of the noble Lord of Costanzo, this could wait; he crumpled it in his hand. As for this *Castel Dio d'Amore*, it was well.

Still another paper he folded in his pouch. That one must go first beneath her signature lest the pretty little Queen should rebel.—But she should not rebel!—By all the saints and devils, it was a good night's work!

And for that session he wrote no more.

When the pouch, compact and hard, lay closely over the place of his heart, it stirred a thought, and he laughed a short wild laugh, with no melody in it. He did not know his own laugh, and it startled him.

"Perhaps," he thought, "when he should have presided over the investiture of these cities and strongholds of Cyprus in the interests of Naples and Alfonso, 'Prince of Galilee'—installing his own creatures in all those places of power—if Naples were not properly subservient and grateful—he, *holding the key to the land*—perhaps——"

It was a vision that pleased him even better than that of the noble Lord Mutio di Costanzo, surrounded by his escort of cavaliers, golden-spurred, delivering the keys of the city of Nikosia. But he forgot to confide this last tantalizing, supremest vision to His Grace the Archbishop. [Pg 195]

These documents had been prepared in the underground Chamber of Conference of the Fortress, where secrets might be freely uttered because of the double walls of massive masonry: where flaring torches fastened high in the chamber, scattered the ghostly shadows, and ample potations of the fine wine of the "Commanderie" sustained their courage.

Meanwhile, a slender figure with vizor down, showing a tunic of mail between the folds of a dark mantle, came out from the Fortress, and stepping forth into the gray of the dawn, crossed to the Palazzo Reale, with slow, uncertain footsteps.

"Open!—In the name of the Queen's Council!"

The words came in muffled tones from behind the vizor—uncertain, like the footsteps, yet impossible to disregard.

"The password for this night?" the guard demanded.

It was given at once, but with visible repugnance—"*à bas Venezia!*"

"Are ye many?"

"But one."

The bars were instantly drawn back and the young knight entered the first court of the palace.

"Halt! Declare for whom thou standest. That password is already outworn: for they of the Queen's Council be of two minds."

As if from a sense of suffocation the cloak was torn off showing a suit of armor too heavy for the slight limbs; and the helmet was loosened with supple, nervous fingers, disclosing a face pale, strong and soulful. The face might have been that of a man—an artist, or a poet; but the hair, lying in loose, dusky waves about the brows, and low, in rich clinging coils at the back of the shapely head, could only belong to a woman. [Pg 196]

A sudden wrath flamed in her deep eyes.

"If they of the Queen's Council be of two minds they are craven, though I, a woman say it! But

the Queen's guard, in the Queen's palace, can have but one mind—*to uphold her cause!*"

There was no other voice in all Cyprus so tender, so compelling, so magnetic, so all-convincing; the voice revealed her.

"Dama Margherita de Iblin!" was echoed about the court in surprise. The news spread. The men-at-arms came thronging about her with reiterated assurances of loyalty; it was good to confess their faith to her.

"We hold this palace for our Queen," they said, "and for no traitorous Council. May the holy Saints in Heaven curse them roundly who forced us to do their bidding, when we thought ourselves serving Her Majesty!"

"How came ye so many here?" she asked in astonishment, as they still gathered from the farther courts—a number far greater than the usual Palace-guard—chiefly a company of knights and men entitled to bear arms, but among them many of the more peaceful citizens.

"Whom serve ye all?" She looked keenly from face to face: her words seemed a challenge.

"Caterina Regina!" they cried in concert, with every man's right hand upraised, calling Heaven to witness. [Pg 197]

One, with signs of authority stepped forward to explain.

"Eccellenza, we are in command of the Lord Chamberlain Bernardini, who, since he fought his way through the false guard placed before this palace to serve the treachery of the Council, hath not ceased to gather men of metal throughout the city, till enough shall come to claim the Queen's release. For the cries of the women and unarmed weaklings clamoring under the walls of the fortress for her release, are but impotent wails to tickle the pride of those fiends of Naples."

"Bring me to the Bernardini, for I must speak with him on matter, it may be, of life, or death."

"Eccellentissima, the Lord Chamberlain hath not stayed his foot since this horror began—nor may we see his face until he hath done the possible to gather strength for an uprising to chase these devils of Naples."

"Dear men!" she cried, "it is a task!—I speak, not to stay your loyal hands, but to open your eyes that ye be prepared and fail not. The Commander of Famagosta hath men and arms behind those impregnable walls, and all the wicked strength of his cunning Council to direct them,—Rizzo and Fabrici—masters in intrigue—and the men of the galleys of Naples at the tower in the port, commanding land and sea. Without more force it is impossible!"

"Dear Lady, the Bernardini lacketh no courage, and he commandeth. He hath sworn that we shall save the Queen. The Admiral will come from Nikosia; and the galleys of Venice will haste to the rescue, *Pazienza!* We are bidden to keep the peace and secrecy until the moment shall be ripe; but to die in defense of this palace, which we hold for Her Majesty as a place of refuge." [Pg 198]

"Dost bring us news of her. How fares it with Her Majesty?"

"For that I came!" cried Dama Margherita, her voice ringing through the hall like a leader's call to arms; "to bring news of her to her own! How should it fare with a Queen made captive in her own stronghold?—With a mother whose child hath been stolen from her?—With a woman struggling with such anguish?"

"The Prince!—Our King! *Sanctissima Maria!* San Marco confound the knaves!"

Every man's hand sought his sword with a murmured oath of loyalty and vengeance. Questions stormed upon her: but she commanded silence with a gesture.

It was news indeed; no hint of it had passed beyond the walls of the Fortress.

"Of where he may be hidden, naught is known. Yet the galley of Naples lieth in our port, and one may reach it at low tide over the shallows—a few feet away from the tower of the Fort. It were easy to carry the child there unseen."

"Aye; it were easy—and not so hard to find him—if he were there."

"Nay, but to hold him when found! Do it not rashly, lest harm come to him. The Bernardini will plan the emprise. Tell him the Lady Margherita came at risk of life—in this disguise—to put his true men on the quest. Tell him——" [Pg 199]

She was interrupted by an exclamation.

"Margherita!—the Lady de Iblin—*thus!*"

The Bernardini had just entered the court of the Palace.

A vivid flush rose to her cheek, but she stood quite still in the place where he had found her, and he came and bent his knee and kissed her hand with the customary homage.

"Else might I not have crossed the Piazza," she said, "nor left the gate of the Castle. It is easy to forfeit one's head at a moment of wrath where Rizzo commandeth! And one—a guard within the Fortress, friend to our cause unguessed of the Council—hath lent me this disguise that I might bring thee my so weighty tidings of woe."

"'So weighty tidings of woe?'" he echoed startled.

"These will tell it thee," she went on hurriedly, "for I must be returned to my chamber ere the change of guard—lest he be called on duty and fail to respond with this full toggery of steel, because he hath shown me this favor."

"The Queen?" he gasped.

"The Queen still liveth; but—oh, my Lord, Aluisi!"—her voice broke and her lips quivered, she stretched out her hands to him, the nervous fingers interlaced in a passion of pleading—"they have stolen the baby-Prince: she will go mad if they keep him from her!"

"They shall not!" he thundered with a terrible oath: he—whose speech was fair as a woman's. "Tell her we pledge our lives to find him—to save them both—*all these and many more*." [Pg 200]

With a gesture he included all the company.

"Heaven hear us!" they swore in deep, angry, concert.

She turned her face to them, a great light shining in her eyes.

"I carry Her Majesty the strength of your loyalty, dear friends," she said. "The Madonna be praised—for her need is sore!"

Then, quite silently, and as with a solemn act of consecration, she made the sign of the Cross before the Leader who was to save the Queen, and with quick footsteps passed under the peristyle.

"Margherita!"

She motioned him back as he would have followed her, and he stood and watched her—his heart in his throat—until she had crossed the moat and been admitted to the Fort—the Lady Margherita—alone—in such a guise—fearless and direct as ever.

Sunrise was just gilding the sea: it flashed and sparkled as if there were no woe.

[Pg 201]

XXII

The horror of the night still lay over Caterina like a dense pall, clouding her understanding, when the Chief of Council and the Archbishop passed between the guards whom Rizzo had placed to watch within the doors of the Queen's chambers, where, prostrated by anguish and anxiety, one scheme after another for the recovery of her child absorbed her to the exclusion of all other grief. She looked up dumbly as Rizzo and Fabrici drew near her couch—her eyes deep with unspeakable misery.

The Lady Margherita, watching near her, was indignant at the intrusion; she rose and stood before the Queen.

"My Lords, you forget yourselves—Her Majesty hath not summoned you."

"There are moments, my Lady of Iblin, when Majesty is but a farce—and Power need not do it reverence!"

The Queen heard without heeding the words: but the insolent smile on the face of the speaker displeased her. She closed her eyes and turned her head away, imploring them by a gesture to leave her. She had exhausted every argument to induce them to restore her child or even to disclose his whereabouts—she had pleaded as only a mother may, but in vain; and worn by the unequal contest and all unnerved, she now feared to anger them further with impotent protests lest she should tempt them to cruelty towards her child.

The Archbishop took a step towards her, pausing for a moment, irresolute, before attempting further coercion. But the cold glitter in the eyes of his companion urged him to conclude his task, and he spread a paper open on the table beside her. [Pg 202]

From pity, or from wile, if not from shame, he assumed a tone of deference as he explained:

"Your Majesty, it will be needful at once to send advices to Venice, bearing our condolences for the sad fate of our noble Messrs Andrea Cornaro, and the young Seigneur Marco Bembo."

The names roused her: she had been told of their fate, but everything had been forgotten in the later anguish. Now she remembered with a sharp sting of pain, and she turned her face toward the speaker, waiting to hear why they stayed to torment her.

"It will be well for your Majesty to sign this writing, which we have prepared to explain to the Signoria the tragic ending of the quarrel of their Excellencies with a band of laborers whom they had refused to pay."

Caterina had been gazing fixedly at the Archbishop while he spoke, trying to understand. Now she made a supreme effort to shake off her lethargy, seeming for the moment so like her usual self that the two conspirators trembled for their schemes.

"The Council hath not found our signature needful for their extraordinary action of the night," she said. "This letter is of less consequence. We pray you to leave us."

Rizzo strove to hearten his colleague with a glance, as the Archbishop produced the casket which held the Royal Signet and placed it open on the table beside the letter which the Queen had thrust aside, and which lacked only the royal signature to be complete. It had been folded and superscribed with all due formality and homage. [Pg 203]

"*Serenissimo Principe et Domine excellentissimo, Domine Nicolò Marcello, Dei gratia inclito duci Venetiarum, etc., Domine colendissimo.*"

The broad band of white-dressed skin by which it was to be closed was already fastened to the letter, though it hung loose with the silken fillets of blue and white which were to attach the great Seal of Janus the III—the helpless infant king whom his wily ministers had stolen from his mother's arms.

Rizzo, opening the casket, stood for a moment gloating over the mastery he was to achieve with this little instrument of the Great Seal of the Kingdom—his triumphant gaze fastened on his scarlet treasure—a pretty toy of wax for such a ruffian to find of consequence, bearing the escutcheons of Jerusalem, of Cyprus, of Armenia and Lusignan, with the naked sword of Peter the Valiant for a crest; and for *border, encircling* the Seal, the legend punctuated by heraldic roses—

"*Jacobus, Dei Gratia, 22 us Rex Jherusalem, Cipri et Armenia.*"

"*Rizzo, Rex!*"

The Chief of Council syllabled the sweet morsel of his outrageous thought without utterance. There was no further need for any keeper of the Privy Seals; there was no longer any need for anyone but Rizzo in this Council of the Realm!

But Dama Margherita, closely watching and fearing treachery, stole nearer to the table, standing over the open letter which she had read from end to end before the Chief of Council, in his absorption, had perceived her action. Now he felt her condemnatory eyes upon him, like the merciless gaze of a fate, and he would not look towards her while he rudely seized the letter and pushed it nearer to the Queen. [Pg 204]

"It is well for your Majesty to understand," he said imperatively, "that this matter is not one for choice—but of necessity."

"We do not understand," the Queen answered haughtily, but already her voice showed failing strength.

"Guards!" cried the Lady Margherita with tingling cheeks, to the men who stood just within the doorway, "arrest these intruders!—They trouble the Queen's peace."

Unconsciously the men took a step forward—the words had rung out like a command: but Rizzo, with a face of insolent mastery, made a motion which arrested them, and they knew that their impulse had been a momentary madness.

"The Child——" Rizzo began in icy tones, speaking with slow emphasis, his eyes fixed upon the Queen.

The mother sprang to her feet, alert on the instant, her strength surging back tumultuously—every faculty tense.

"The child is safe—*while your Majesty is careful to fulfil our pleasure*."

"My Lords," cried Dama Margherita, fearlessly, "the writing on this parchment is not true."

The hand of the Chief of Council fell to his sword, as if he would have struck her down—then—remembering that she was but a woman, in spite of her splendid courage, he withdrew it with a shower of muttered oaths. [Pg 205]

"It is the writing which Her Majesty will sign to insure the safety of her child," he asserted, in uncompromising tones.

The Queen turned from one pitiless face to the other and knew that there was no hope for her.

"My God, I shall go mad!" she moaned, as she seized the pen with trembling fingers, unconscious that she had spoken: then in a last, desperate appeal, she cried to Fabrici:

"Most Reverend Father, by your hopes of Heaven, I implore you—give me my boy again! *il mio dilettissimo figlio!* See, I sign the parchment!" and with feverish strokes she wrote her name; then with hands strained tightly together, awaited her answer.

Fabrici moved uncomfortably, turning his gaze away from the stricken, overwrought face: his cruel triumph began to seem unworthy.

But Rizzo calmly affixed the Royal Seal, covering it with the small wooden case prepared for its protection and knotting it firmly in place with the silken fillets—so careful lest a bruise should show upon the fair, waxen surface—he who could crush a woman's heart to breaking, or watch the life-blood dripping from some cruel wound that he had made, as lightly as he would drop the red wax for his stolen signet—it was all one to his deadly purpose.

"Thanks, your Majesty," he said, "there are yet other documents to be signed," and he laid them before her. [Pg 206]

"My child!" she cried in extremity; "have mercy—restore him to me—I have fulfilled your pleasure!"

"Your Majesty hath forgotten these," said Rizzo, "and the penalty—if they are left unsigned."

Again she seized the pen and wrote her name as with her life-blood—great veins starting out on her white forehead, her eyes dim and blurred, her heart beating so that she scarce could trace the words that seemed an irony:

"*Caterina, Regina!*"

"At last!" she gasped, as the pen fell from her hand—"*Madre Sanctissima*—they will bring my boy!"

"It is enough that he is safe," the Chief of Council answered her. "We did not promise more."

The Archbishop, stout-hearted though he was, felt his soul quail within him, as he glanced at the figure of this young mother agonizing for her child—his Sovereign to whom he had sworn fealty. He turned away from her to strengthen his resolve, taking a few paces forward, thinking perhaps of that "*act of homage*," over his own signature, duly witnessed, sealed and recorded in the Libro delle Rimembranze, "*Homagio et fideltà che è obligato a fare a la Magiestà sua, segondo le lege et usanze di questo regno.*"

("Homage and faith, which he is obliged to swear to Her Majesty, according to the laws and customs of this realm.")

Margherita turned to Fabrici, who seemed to her less inhuman than Rizzo, for she had noticed [Pg 207] the slight weakening in his attitude. "Pardon me, your Grace," she said in a tone of quiet deference; "hath the learned body of the Queen's Council no knowledge of the crime of lese-majesty?"

Fabrici made no answer, being conscious-stricken; but Rizzo turned upon her with blazing eyes.

"Beware!" he stormed, "a man, for less, hath paid the forfeit of his life."

"Life were worth little," she answered undaunted, "if one must forfeit it for speaking truth—or for so poor attempt as mine to spare our Queen in such extremity."

He had looked to see her cower and shrink as men had often done under the glare of his angry gaze; but she stood before him tall, straight and calm—so near that he might have felled her to the ground; there was no fear in her deep eyes while she gave him back his look of hatred, unflinching; dimly he realized that this woman had measured the manhood in him and found it beneath her scorn.

Then—as if he had not been—she turned her gaze from him.

"Your Grace," she said proudly, "it is for the last time,—your Queen—whom you have sworn to uphold—and I—Margherita, of the most ancient noble house of the de Iblin, who have ever served their Sovereigns with their life—we *demand* our Prince of you; and all Cyprus is with us!"

But if these dastardly usurpers were inexorable, heaven, more merciful, sent the respite of unconsciousness to quiet the mother's anguish just as she could bear no more. Rizzo was [Pg 208] speaking when she tottered and fell into the shielding arms of Margherita.

"We may need the infant," he was explaining pitilessly, "to force a deed of renunciation in favor of Alfonso, *Prince of Galilee*."

"A sword thrust were more merciful," cried Margherita, now roused to a passion of scorn. "How may a man dare perjure his soul to bring her to this!"

Rizzo having nothing further to gain from the interview left the chamber precipitately, muttering oaths; but the Archbishop lingered, from a dim, dawning sense of compunction, watching helplessly while Dama Margherita ministered to the victim of these Councillors who had been created to assist their youthful Queen in her weary task of ruling.

"More air!" Dama Margherita ordered of the guards, pointing to the closely barred windows. "Strong wine—and one of Her Majesty's ladies to aid me—I may not leave her for an instant. The Lady of the Bernardini were best—will your Grace give the order? We must needs save her life while she hath yet a favor to grant."

[Pg 209]

XXIII

It was the *festa* of San Triphilio, patron-saint of the city of Nikosia; the great church on the bluff beside the castle was filled with the sickly flames of paltry candles brought by the peasants from far and near. From the quaint tower on the castle-wall one might see them coming in little processions, winding through the forest that clothed the plains below—pausing on the banks of the stream Pedea, to gather water-bloom and rushes to scatter before the shrine of San Triphilio, in memory of the early days when the city had sprung from the marshes to stand—fair and firm upon the hillside above them, beautiful to behold—girt about with impregnable walls and gateways, guarded by its famous citadel, and fortified within by churches dedicated to many saints.

To-day the gates stood hospitably open, to welcome the people who came and went unchallenged through them, wearing their holiday faces and bearing their burden of bloom and green—lotus flowers for the altars, and rushes to scatter on the steps before them—pausing before they entered the sacred precincts to lave their hands in the 'Fountain of Ablution.'

It was truly a *festa* of the people, and the Cyprian peasants who were a gentle, superstitious, ignorant race, devoutly subject to their priests and trained to the letter of their religious rites, came in from the mountains and the neighboring villages in numbers but rarely seen in the city: a [Pg 210] motley throng—yet no shepherd among them was too poor to wear the boot of dark-green leather reaching to the knee—the *bodine* roughly fashioned and tough enough to protect them from the bites of the serpents which infested the island.

Here and there some shepherd was leading with pardonable pride a sheep who gave a more than usual promise of fine wool, its extraordinary tail, bushy with soft long fleece, carefully spread out on the tiny cart to which it was harnessed for its own protection. It came, meek-eyed and wondering, if a little weary, to this *festa* of San Triphilio, to whom its first shearing would be vowed, as a special tribute to the saint and a talisman to shield the flocks upon the mountains.

The shepherd might draw himself away, perchance, with a mingling of caste-feeling and of superstition, from some poorer villager of the sect of the "Linobambaki"—a dark, unkempt figure, with his scarlet fez, his string of undressed poultry hanging from his shoulder, even on this day of *festa* when the saints give all good Christians holiday! But he, poor man, was neither Christian nor pagan—a wonder that the good Lord made him so!—(expressed with devout crossing and genuflexion)—and he would sell a fowl on a holiday for the asking and the few copper *carcie* that it would bring him, as though he were quite all Mussulman and not half Christian, as his contemptuous nickname signified—a mixture of royal linen and plebeian cotton! His touch might well defile the sacred sheep!

Here was a picturesque peasant-priest from the province of Ormidia, who had left his work in [Pg 211] the fields and was moving among the crowd with a slow dignity of motion and the mien of some antique statue—with sheep-skin garments of no shape, nor fashion, nor color, to mark his date—his hair flowing in loose waves to the throat, from under the high, conical hat, his full curling beard and moustache obscuring the lines of the face and intensifying its impassiveness—only in the eyes, without curiosity, a mild look of question at the strangeness of the ways and sights of cities—such as some shepherd-god might wear,—reserving judgment.

To-day, also, some stray brother of the lower order of the Knights Hospitallers might be seen among the throng,—a white star, eight pointed on the breast of the black gown with which in early ages he had been invested by the Patriarch of Jerusalem: and near him some Crusader, with the red cross on his silver mail.

The burghers, too, were abroad in the arcades of the streets of Nikosia, gathering in groups before the Palazzo Reale which had been the residence of the kings of the island until Janus had removed his capital to Famagosta.

But Nikosia had always been a cradle of loyalty in spite of a floating population of strangers who came thronging to visit her monuments and palaces—to see the wonder of her merchandise gathered from the riches of her own fertile land—fruits and wines and silks and jewels, broideries of gold and silver wrought by her peasant women among their vines—exquisite vessels of beaten copper from the famous mines which had baptised this island of Cyprus. But there were carpets [Pg 212] also from Persia, and fabulous Eastern stuffs—linens from Egypt, gossamer-fine; and carvings of ivory and gold, and drugs and spices from Arabia. There were slaves too—most fair to look upon—everything that might minister to the luxury of a great city, as there were churches, of many religions, and altars to many saints.

Suddenly a troop of horsemen dashed rapidly through the open gates and into the heart of the city among all the loitering holiday-wanderers, rousing them to instant strenuousness.

"There is news!" some one cried startled. "They have come to pause at the palace of the Vice-Roy. The leader is already within—he hath not waited for his gentlemen to announce him!"

"Aye, there is news:—may the Saints have mercy!" one of the burghers answered to the quick questions of the visitors from the hamlets. "And it is strange news, I wot—Heaven help us! For that was our own Seigneur, Pietro Davilla, new created a Knight of St. John, and gone but this morning, with all the gentlemen and squires of his household, to pay his homage—a leal Knight to Her Majesty. It must be some dread matter that hath chanced to turn him from such duty and purpose ere he could reach Famagosta."

"That was the Seigneur Davilla, on the black champing steed? one of the Councillors of the Realm?" a stranger asked.

"Aye, man; thou art in luck to see our Seigneur with all his bravery of men and horse! That was [Pg 213] he who entered the palace of the Vice-Roy."

"And that other—all armed, with vizor down—the steed that bore him foaming with haste, as if his hoof had scarce touched ground?"

"I know not: but he weareth the colors of the Royal House. He hath the look of some spent herald. See, they summon him from within! It must be that he bringeth tidings from Famagosta. Pray Heaven it is well with Her Majesty!"

"And with our Prince!"

"*Viva la Regina!*"

"Heaven save the Queen and the Infant King!"

A tumult of *vivas* broke from the excited throng who were on edge with unquiet expectation.

And while they still waited watching the signs of commotion through the palace portals, they beguiled their impatience with bits of broken talk—strange surmises—asseverations of loyalty—distrust of the foreigners who filled important offices in the Government, especially of the Council of the Realm, which they looked upon with unconcealed displeasure. For they of Nikosia were desperately loyal and somewhat sore, withal, that King Janus had seen fit to remove the capital from their splendid city of Nikosia, which from the beginning of the Lusignan dynasty, had held this supremacy.

"For that Janus had captured Famagosta from Genoa, a feat of prowess for his youth—and so would make his boast on it—keeping it ever in mind," an elderly citizen explained to the crowd with a singular mingling of admiration and disapproval. "And mayhap he might have lived to learn more wisdom—may God have mercy on his soul!—if it had pleased His Majesty to dwell in [Pg 214] our Palazzo Reale of Nikosia, where one may breathe the air of Heaven, instead of a pestiferous malaria from the marshes of Famagosta."

"It would be well that Her Majesty came hither to dwell," said one of the burghers eagerly; "and the Prince—because of the noisome air and water of Famagosta."

"Aye; and because of other things," interposed a stalwart man who had just issued from the palace of the Vice-Roy and joined the waiting throng. "That she may dwell among a loyal people and away from the Council of the Realm *which one may not trust*."

He spoke in tones of bitter wrath, startling the others by his hint of danger.

"How 'the Council of the Realm'?" another citizen questioned, astonished and half indignant. "Is not our Seigneur Pietro Davilla one of them?"

"Aye—he is one—but a noble of Nikosia—our loyal city. And because of his loyalty—lest he be thought one with their foul purposes—he hath returned in haste. I spoke with one of his gentlemen but now. Nay, bide your time." For the crowd turned upon him with an avalanche of ejaculations and questions: "it will be proclaimed from the Palazzo Reale."

"But, Stefano—the *Council of the Realm?*" one of his listeners persisted.

"There are too many foreigners in the Council: and that black-browed fiend of Naples is the worst of them!"

"Be not so daring, man! Hast thou no fear?" a stranger in the crowd exclaimed warningly; "we [Pg 215] shall all be arrested for rebels."

"Fear!" a citizen echoed—"*Santa Vergine!* That was our Stefano!—thou knowest him not."

But Stefano was one who spoke when it pleased him: he deigned no reply, but fixed an intent gaze on the balcony of the palace, while the crowd fell to talk among themselves, still waiting eagerly for news.

Stefano Caduna, this man of the people, was, in truth an idol in Nikosia: rugged, commanding, with an air and tone of authority, the people looked to him for leadership. While they were speaking he moved quickly forward, the crowd making way for him at his quiet gesture—the strong hand, slightly raised.

"*Pace!*" he commanded, with a motion toward the palace of the Vice-Roy, and an instant hush fell upon the throng.

A band of knights, fully armed, came forth and stood before the palace portal, while their banner-bearers unrolled the standards of the Queen and the Prince—a challenge to the eager cries of loyalty which greeted them. Mounted messengers were dashing with orders up to the citadel and down to the city-gates. The Vice-Roy himself had come to the balcony above the portal and stood watching the messengers anxiously, as if he would speed them beyond their possible. Then he turned to the crowd of eager, upturned faces, now quieted once more, by an imperative motion from Stefano.

Mutio di Costanzo, Admiral of Cyprus and Vice-Roy of Nikosia, Lord of the city and fortress of [Pg 216] Costanza, one of a long line of knights, was a gentleman of honor devoted to the Crown and a loyal friend to the Queen: he held the confidence of the people and deserved it well.

An inarticulate murmur of devotion stirred the crowd as he stood for a moment quite silent before them, too overcome by emotion to trust himself to speech. When he spoke, his voice was calm, far-reaching and authoritative.

"Citizens of Nikosia," he said, "I bring you black news of perfidy to our Queen and infant King."

He was interrupted by deafening cries of anger and alarm; but Stefano commanded silence.

"I know," the Admiral continued, his noble face a shade less stern, "that every heart and arm in Nikosia is hot for her defense."

And now Stefano let the passion of loyalty have sway. But the Admiral had more to say.

"The gates of the city will be instantly closed and closely guarded; no man will be allowed to enter who doth not declare for the Queen—*who is captive* in the *Fortress of Famagosta*."

The shock of the news held them dumb while they listened. "The Council of Nikosia will sit at

once to discuss measures for her release; the forces of Nikosia and of the citadel will immediately report, fully armed. The traitors are *Rizzo di Marin and others of the Council of the Realm who have insolently proclaimed Alfonso of Naples as Prince of Galilee and Heir to the Crown of Cyprus*."

But now their voices came back to them, sputtering, uncontrolled; a babel of sounds arose, [Pg 217] cries of loyalty—of fear—of indignation and wrath and fervor of affection—of hatred for the Council. Questionings, denunciations, curses that made one's hair stand on end—

Only for a moment.

Then the voice of the Admiral was heard again, stilling the chaos as by magic.

"Every man to his post. Let order prevail, for love of our Queen! We have stern work before us."

And below, among the people, Stefano Caduna boiling with suppressed anger, which deepened his voice to an ominous calm—as of the lull before an earthquake—saw that the orders of the Vice-Roy were instantly obeyed.

Stefano was in the very heart of the action in Nikosia during the days that followed; the people furious at the outrage to their Queen, swore that it should be people against nobles, if there were need, in her defense; and assembling in great numbers, at the house of Stefano, they chose a 'Council of the People' and made him its chief.

And well it was for the peace of Nikosia that Stefano was gifted with that rare power which marks some men for mediators in time of storm. He stood between the nobles and the people, trusted by both parties—a man of force and judgment—reticent, comprehending, swift to see his way and scorning subterfuge.

He it was who headed a delegation of the people to urge their petition that the Queen should be rescued with all speed and brought for safety within their walled and loyal city, and who [Pg 218] rested not until the Vice-Roy with all his knights and all the forces that could be spared from the defense of Nikosia and of the citadel which they were holding for Her Majesty, had ridden forth to Famagosta.

Stefano commanded the guard at the gates of Nikosia—as also the force of the entire city, during the absence of the Vice-Roy: and he could be swerved nor fooled by no entreaties nor orders from any noble in the land. "No man entereth," he explained in that terrible cold iron voice of his, "save only he who sweareth to live and die in defense of Her Majesty."

He it was, also, who, waiting for no parleying, thundered a refusal to surrender the city to those who brought the demand from the Fortress of Famagosta, signed in trembling letters by the Queen's own hand, "*Caterina Regina*."

"Nay, but Her Majesty shall write the letters from her own palace—freely—that we, her loyal, servitors may know her will,—or ever we surrender her city of Nikosia." And so, sent back the envoys of Rizzo—foiled.

And when some days later, yet others came—a company of mounted noblemen, demanding entrance in the Queen's name to deliver her answer to the letter sent by the Council of the People from Nikosia and to take their oath of loyalty—Stefano, still unbelieving, not knowing how it fared in Famagosta, gave his unvarying answer:

"No man entereth, save only he who sweareth to live and die in the Queen's defense."

"We are content to swear," they answered him. [Pg 219]

But still he gave no order to open the gates, but rode forth himself with the captains of the Council of the People, fully armed, to meet them, dismounting as they approached and offering all courteous salutations of the time—yet with reluctant speech—fearing to grant unwise credence, lest this should be some new perfidy.

"Think not to deceive us with fair words," said Stefano, "who hold this city for our Queen; but if with most solemn oath ye swear to live and die in her defense, we make you welcome."

"On most fair honor of a Knight," they answered him, "in the name of San Giovanni!"

"Call hither the Chaplain with the Holy Book!" said Stefano.

And so without the city, Stefano Caduna, man of the people, received the most solemn oath of these knights and nobles, envoys of the Queen, bareheaded and on bended knee before him, ere he would consent to unbar the gates of Nikosia to receive Her Majesty's own messengers.

[Pg 220]

XXIV

The immediate liberation of the Queen had seemed a well-nigh hopeless quest to the body of brave men who were on their way to Famagosta, to pledge the loyalty of their city of Nikosia, so

soon as news of the conspiracy had been proclaimed, and they had deemed it rather to be won by strategy than prowess. For the Cyprian forces were few and were chiefly intrenched in the fortress of Famagosta—the most formidable of all the strongholds of Cyprus—leaving no trained men at arms in the city itself, which thus lay unprotected, close under the vigilance of the now hostile Citadel, whose commander, Saplana, had been a favorite of the King but was now among the traitors. The Count of Tripoli was foremost among the leaders of this intrigue and he was Governor of the city of Famagosta! And scattered among this Cyprian corps to see the orders enforced, was a band of mercenaries *brought from Naples by Rizzo*!

The situation in Famagosta had been briefly indicated in the despatch which the courier of Bernardini had urged his spent and panting steed to deliver in Nikosia; there were also certain dark hints of rumors current among the outraged populace, that Rizzo, Chief-of-the-Council appointed to help the Queen, might soon be master of all the strongholds of the island, having forced letters from the Queen commanding their surrender to the envoys of the Chief-of-Council.

Outside the cities news travels slowly, as all men know. For along the highways there are no [Pg 221]
marke-places whence it may be proclaimed—there is no eager populace to tell it from mouth to mouth, and these treacherous orders might even reach the forts and be obeyed in all good faith, by their Commanders before they could have any suspicion of the revolt of the Council.

Of the wisdom and foresight of the Queen's Venetian Chamberlain the Admiral had ample proof; since the Bernardini's message of alarm, sent the night before the mutiny, had arrived only a few hours before it had been followed by his second despatch, in swift and terrible justification.

Because of these rumors Mutio di Costanzo, Admiral of Cyprus, had ordered messages of warning sent to the chief citadels, as he had been able, before he left Nikosia; and also because of them, he rode to-day with a so scanty following not having dared to leave any points of vantage without sufficient guard.

He turned and surveyed his little band of Knights with frowning brows—his invincible Knights of the Golden Spurs—they seemed so few in the face of the perplexities of his problem.

Not that any thought of personal danger for himself or for them, in the few against the many, entered into his difficulties; but that the facts made failure a possibility; and there must be no failure.

He raised his visor and each man saw his leader's face as the face of a conqueror.

"*Coraggio*, Signori!" he cried; "our cause is just! God and San Giovanni make strong our arms!" [Pg 222]

Well might he be proud of this noble company pressing forward silently, but with quickening pace, at sight of the urgency in their leader's face.

No noble house of Cyprus could boast more ancient lineage, nor so many knights entitled to wear the golden spurs, nor more honorable trophies of the valor dear to knightly hearts. They rode all in full armor, some bearing their famous shields of crimson with the quaint heraldic lion rampant on his golden bar—the device which all men knew had been granted them for extraordinary proof of prowess centuries before.

For this noble family the ancient city of Costanza had been named; and the quaint church of Santa Maria di Costanza, rich in relics and in decoration, had been the private chapel of their historic Castle.

To the assuring rhythm of their strenuous tramp the Admiral turned again to his unsolved problems. For the galleys of Cyprus had hitherto been kept armed by force, but recently their crews had been disbanded, in obedience to a strange clause in the will of King Janus. Now, as Mutio di Costanzo went on his way, wrapped in meditations that were not cheering, the question came to him—"*Why?*"

Janus, whatever his gifts, had been no judge of men—possibly from too strong reliance in his own power to conquer them by his personal charm. Had this disbanding been deftly suggested to the facile King by his friend, the arch-schemer of Naples?

Was the wily Rizzo, even in those days, planning to leave Cyprus defenceless? [Pg 223]

The Admiral gnashed his teeth and sent up a smothered cry to all the saints that his wrath might not unnerve him to the point of losing his iron grip upon himself.

But the situation was not rendered less galling by the reflection that the port of Famagosta—the sole harbor of importance in the island—was covered by the citadel commanded by a traitor; that just within the port a galley flaunting the colors of Naples, rode complacently; and that there were no longer any Cyprian ships-of-war ready for attack.

But retribution must be near; for he knew that Bernardini had sent warning followed by immediate details of the revolt, by secret messengers, concealed in trading-ships to the Venetian fleet off the African coast, and strong help must be at hand. To risk failure by a premature attack, for want of patience to endure a temporary disgrace, would be unmanly weakness. The Madonna be praised, the Chamberlain of the Queen was a man of resource; the people of the cities were devoted to her, and the end might be nearer than seemed possible.

The Admiral was impatient for the conference with Bernardini who had implored him to come without delay.

"At all hazards we shall hold the city-gate," the Chamberlain had written in the first hours of that dark dawn. "With citadel and port in command of the traitors and the Queen in their keeping, this post may have no importance in their eyes. *But our help must come from without.*"

And now the little band of faithful knights were coming in sight of the city-walls—massive and splendid—a monument to the Lusignans. [Pg 224]

"For our Queen and Cyprus!" the Admiral said solemnly, his hand upon his sword.

The tone of the utterance made it a command.

"So help us God our Seigneur, and San Giovanni!" the knights answered him in a breath, nerving themselves to attack and success: but they came silently and with no sounds of battle—by order of their chief—not knowing whether to expect welcome or conflict, or whether secrecy might be well.

At the tramp of their horses' feet the warden had advanced to the grille of reconnoitre and withdrawn the small stone shutter for inspection; his head appeared behind the bars, but he wore no tell-tale colors:

"Open! in the name of the Queen! to Her Majesty's faithful vassals!"

The Admiral spoke low—for secrecy might be the very discretion of valor: but fearlessly, for the words were a signal, and every knight stood ready.

"Who challengeth? Speak low."

Was it the word of caution, or a ruse de guerre?

"One of Nikosia."

The Admiral gave the password which Bernardini had sent in that hasty note, and listened, trembling as a brave man may with impatience to be within and at his post of duty, while one by one the bolts were withdrawn, the portcullises were raised, and the signal to advance was given—quite silently: the finger of the guard who had been detailed to accompany them, was upon his lips.

Not until he had conducted them beyond, into the city, did he speak: "We know not what echoes there may be within those walls," he said, pointing back to the ponderous gateway with its many vaulted passages. [Pg 225]

Then impatient, the Admiral asked for news.

"Your Excellencies are expected: the citizens await you:" it was said in a tone that meant more than courtesy: Mutio di Costanzo scanned him narrowly.

"From whom dost hold thy orders?" he asked.

"From the Signor Bernardini, commander of the city," the man answered readily.

"Then speak."

"The Signor Bernardini hath this night rescued our infant Prince from the galley of Naples——" He supplemented the statement with an angry oath coupled with Rizzo's name. "We know not where our Signor hath hidden him."

"And the Queen?"

The guard shook his head.

"The Signor hath waited for help to come: it is said that her rescue will be this day. In the Palazzo Reale the guard hath been trebled for her defense, and every man would give his life for the Queen."

"Is there more?"

"Aye, your Excellency: rumor hath it that that devil of a Rizzo hath forced Her Majesty to give him letters of surrender for every fortress of Cyprus, and that to-day he is gone, with other traitors, to receive the keys of all our citadels. *Panagia mou!* he is capable of every treachery! If he were not within——" He indicated the fortress with a scowl of hatred, then made a motion which seemed to include the entire city and plant the people, resolute, before the windows of the Queen. [Pg 226]

"And the Governor of Famagosta?"

"That traitor Tripoli is in the train of the scoundrel Rizzo, both faring forth for other treacheries, thinking us safe enough to leave, with those spies of Naples on guard." His sputtering curses choked further speech.

"It shall be *now*," said Mutio di Costanzo: "conduct us to the Signor Bernardini"—yet wondering at the silence of the streets as he passed.

"Your Excellency," said the guard once more, in answer to his question, "it is the order of the Bernardini who hath commanded quiet and hath promised, on his life, to restore the Queen to her people."

The hasty conference in the Palazzo Reale, developed the fact that the citizens of Famagosta, too furious for any considerations of expediency, had been with difficulty restrained from storming the Citadel and demanding the Queen's instant release: and now that any trained force, however small, was upon their side, the critical moment had come. Men, women and children flocked into the deserted streets and eagerly followed the cavalcade of Knights to the Piazza San Nicolò, where the crowd was increasing every moment; and when Bernardini and Mutio di Costanzo appeared among them, they were greeted with cheers and vivas.

"Regina!"

"Madonna Nostra Reale!"

"Regina!" [Pg 227]

"*Subito! Subito!*"

The cries startled the silence of the streets, and further restraint was impossible.

"*Regina! Madonna Nostra Reale! Subito!*"

The city rang with their shouts—the voice of a multitude magnificent in righteous emotion—from the gruff tones of the men of the populace hoarse with anger, to the strident cries and sobs of the women and the high treble of little children; and clear and calm throughout the chorus, the clarion-notes of command.

The mighty sound penetrated to the depths of the Citadel, waking the Cyprian force from its stupor of despondency, rousing the dormant manhood within them.

It reached the chamber of the captive Queen, who had known no thrill of hope since that night of horror.

"My God! my God!" she cried, with streaming eyes. "I thank thee!—*Madonna mia Sanctissima!* My people are calling for me!"

"In the name of Her Majesty!"

"Surrender command to the Admiral of Cyprus!"

To no mighty force could those strong bars have been more swiftly withdrawn; nor was there need of contest to displace the trembling guards of Naples, as the men of Cyprus within the fort hastened to obey the mandate from without, saluting as the massive gates creaked upon their [Pg 228] hinges and protesting that further haste had been impossible.

"Let every traitor crave mercy!" the Admiral thundered as he crossed the drawbridge with his cavalcade: "and on your knees crave pardon of your outraged Queen as we descend."

"Signori!"—to the Knights of the Golden Spurs—"await us here—none less loyal may stand on guard."

To-day the entire armament of the fortress was less than of wont; for Rizzo and Tripoli, secure in their victory and confident that there would be no uprising since none had yet been attempted, had not hesitated to take a considerable following with them to secure the surrender of the other citadels of Cyprus "*by order of the Queen*." For was not Rizzo the happy holder of many pretty bits of parchment signed by the hand of "Caterina Regina" herself and attested by the royal signet of Cyprus—which to disobey was treason? It would be a pretty farce to insist upon the potency of that trembling signature wrested from the captive Queen when she had worn no semblance of power—a farce to which the Neapolitan schemer was fully equal.

None but a man who knew the famous stronghold of Famagosta so intimately as did the Admiral of Cyprus could thus quickly have made sure that the surrender was complete and that no secret reserves of men and arms were kept back for further intrigues. To swear in those who would stand for Cyprus—to banish the mercenaries of Naples and all who were in sympathy with [Pg 229] them to the dungeons below—to make sure of the color of the guards at port and passage—was not so much longer in the doing than in the telling.

And yet, to the young Queen and Margherita the moments had seemed hours: they stood close together; straining every faculty to interpret the meaning of the commotion below, within the fortress, alternating between hope and fear as, at intervals, the cries of the people reached them from the piazza, indistinct and broken by the thickness of the walls; now and again a fierce imprecation rising above the tumult—yet surely there were tones of loyalty—voices calling for "Caterina Regina!"

Caterina's strength was well-nigh spent—she had suffered so much; she caught the hand of Margherita in agitation as the tramp of footsteps echoed through the corridor nearing the door of her chamber, and Margherita laid her other hand on Caterina's with an almost maternal tenderness, from the great pity within her.

"Beloved Lady!" she cried reassuringly; "they bring us glad tidings."

For she read it in their faces as the Bernardini and Mutio di Costanzo knelt in the low doorway to offer their homage.

But the young Queen seemed to tremble between life and death as she stretched forth her arms to them with a low wail that almost unnerved those strong faithful men.

"My Boy! My Boy!—your Prince!"

How may joy immeasurable be told in an instant's space, and one schooled to agony not die [Pg 230] from the swift change to such rapture of content!

For the Bernardini had answered her: "Safe in the Palazzo Reale: and the people are clamoring for their Queen!"

And because the Dama Margherita had seen the great shining light in his eyes her heart went

out to him, and she knew that the safety of the Royal infant meant a tale of loyalty and danger that Aluisi Bernardini would never tell.

But at last the Admiral and the Bernardini led Caterina forth into the piazza, pale and calm—the glory of a great gladness in her eyes—the suffering which had left deep traces in her face disguised by the exaltation of the moment so that she scarcely seemed less radiant than when she had last stood there on the day of the coronation fête with her child in her arms—as any woman of the people might have done, the tender, baby-cheek pressed close to hers.

Some of them remembered it as they fell on their knees around her, kissing her hands, offering her homage—reparation—sobbing out their devotion:

"Regina! Madonna Nostra Reale! Regina! Regina! May the Holy Mother bless her and our little King!"

She was not a thing of State and jewels, cold and distant like the proud Queen Elenà, but a tender human mother, fair and young, and her heart had been all but broken when that wicked Chief of Council had stolen away the child!—the people might gather close about her and weep and rejoice with her.

"*Madonna Nostra Reale!*" [Pg 231]

The air was still ringing with the loyal shouts of the multitude when Vettore Soranzo with that eagerly expected Venetian fleet, weighed anchor in the port of Famagosta and with his men streamed through the unresisting gates of the Fortress into the Piazza San Nicolò, where the young Queen still stood radiant.

With the holy calm of night peace brooded over the distracted city and the Cyprian stars looked down on the old, sweet story of mother and child—as closely clasped beneath the gilded roof of the royal palace as under the thatch of a peasant shed—smiling, forgetful of the days of anguish that had parted them.

[Pg 232]

XXV

The Venetian Admiral Mocenigo, god-father to the little prince, had followed close upon the coming of Vettore Soranzo, and they had lost no time in examining into the causes of the difficulties and in fixing the responsibility for the treachery where it belonged: disloyal officers were replaced by men in sympathy with the government, men of weight and character were sought for to fill the vacancies in the Council of the Realm, and it seemed that days of sunshine were dawning for Caterina, guarded by the affection of her people and the invincible arm of Venice.

These Venetian nobles would have made short work in meting out justice to those chiefs who had been the instigators of the conspiracy, but as yet they had eluded the search; though it was rumored that Saplana, the Turkish commander of the Fortress of Famagosta, with his nephew Almerico to whom the conspirators would assign control of the castle of Cerines,—had been in hiding in the palace of the Archbishop. And a tale was brought to Bernardini by a group of agitated peasants from the hamlet of Varoschia, that at early dawn a man fully armed, with the semblance of Rizzo—"not an apparition, *Signore sa*—but how could one know the face of him with his vizor down?—was riding like the wind to Famagosta, and with him a multitude of horsemen, coming very silently. We saw them from the vineyards high up on the hillside. And then—quite suddenly—we looked and they were gone—they came no more—by San Nicolò and the Holy Madonna, it is true!" [Pg 233]

Significant gestures gave a certain mysterious color to the peasant's tale; but whatever its truth, it was actually known that Rizzo and other of the conspirators had been seen in the neighborhood of Nikosia; and the whereabouts of these intriguers was a topic of absorbing interest, for it was felt that the sunshine would be clearer when Rizzo with his accomplices should have been found and made to suffer the full penalty of their crime.

Rizzo and Fabrici had been absent at the time of the uprising of the citizens of Famagosta, and the wolf-like courage of the Chief-of-Council was on the wane: for the letters of the Queen had not proved the passport he had expected toward the surrender of the Cyprian strongholds to a traitor: since more than one of the Commanders had been found so staunch in loyalty as to question the validity of the royal signature.

When all had gone so well at first, these failures were exasperating to a man of Rizzo's temper—the more so that the little Queen had refused to prepare another letter of dismissal required of her; and Rizzo, the stronger in wrath and insolence because his faith in his star was somewhat less, had set forth himself to enforce the investiture of Almerico as Commander of Cerines—the castle to which he had been refused admittance on the morning of the uprising in Famagosta.

Venice, meanwhile, with her faculty for establishing confidence and settling all things in order, having brought back the smiles of the Court, had suggested the wisdom of relieving the strain and tickling the fancy of the people by some pageant. There was to be a grand review of the troops in the Piazza on the esplanade, in the presence of the Queen and the infant Prince, at which the presentation by Her Majesty to the Admiral Mocenigo of a golden shield, magnificently wrought with the arms of Cyprus, would diplomatically suggest the important röle that Venice had played in the re-establishment of the Government. [Pg 234]

Dama Ecciva was in her element again, now that something had happened to scatter the unendurable dulness, and each day brought some new matter for discussion.

"Hast heard, Eloisà, how that this new Council to Her Majesty hath captured the Secretary of His Reverence the Archbishop? and they thought to hang him for his master's treachery and his own; and then, because he promised to confess to save his life, he is in the Castle instead. And there were revelations!—and intrigues!—verily a Reverendissimo!"

"Name him not to me; I have no patience!"

"Thou hast never patience when I bring thee news: and it is tiresome of thee, for one must talk, or die of ennui in this court!"

"Then let it be of something better." Eloisà answered in a tone which showed her distaste of the subject.

"Choose thou—since one can never know thy whim. Shall it be of that famous Saplana who runneth away to put himself in hiding;—for fear—*verily for fear*—the Commander of Famagosta! afraid to die like a man! A comedy!—one might laugh if it were less craven." [Pg 235]

"One knoweth not if he be in hiding, since he is not found; he may be a traitor, yet not a coward too."

"Yes, one knoweth, bella Contarini mia: did I not promise thee news? And thou wilt never guess it."

"It was our Admiral Mocenigo who found him?" Eloisà asked eagerly.

"Nay; not 'our Admiral Mocenigo';" the other answered lingering on the name with a fine mimicry of her tone; "not thine nor mine. Thou hast a foolish way with thee of mine and thine, as if all that came from Venice were held close to thy little heart.—How goes it with thy handsome Signor Bernardini?"

"Oh, Ecciva! The Chamberlain of the Queen! how darest thou? Thou art over free with thy foolish speech."

"Nay, little timid maid; it is thou who art foolish not to see—not to see——. Ah, well, he is but a man for all he is Venetian; and thou—thou art a child and hast no eyes."

"What meanest thou, Ecciva? Nay, thou *shalt* tell me." She caught her companion's hand as Ecciva made a feint of turning away.

"So——; now there is something found that doth not tax thy fickle patience, since we speak of the splendid Bernardini! Thou hast ever thine adoration ready for a Venetian."

Eloisà flushed indignantly, but she answered staunchly: "Not only I—but every one who loveth what is noble. Thou knowest, Ecciva, the Court is full of his praises." [Pg 236]

"Aye, is it, my little one? As well it may be! Then what harm that I should sing them too? Verily, I think he is noble beyond all others;" her taunting tone became suddenly earnest. "And this I came to tell thee."

"This is not news," the other answered coldly, having found it difficult to keep the pace of Ecciva's changing admirations, for the Cyprian maiden was easily captured by any demonstration of power; "and thou camest to bring me news."

"Hast ever thought that the Chamberlain of the Queen would woo a bride?" Dama Ecciva asked lightly, but unconsciously opening and closing her slender henna-stained fingers, straining them into the soft palms with strenuous motions, while she waited for her companion's reply.

"If I knew his secrets or dreamed them, I would not tell thee—being his friend," Eloisà exclaimed indignantly, "such talk ill befitteth the dignity of Her Majesty's maids of honor. What is thy news?"

Ecciva came closer and laid one hand on Eloisà's wrist, tightening her clasp while she spoke in low, slow, insinuating tones—holding her with her strange gaze.

"This is no news to thee—that I—that I——? Tell me Eloisà, dost thou not see?"

The Venetian turned from her uneasily.

"Thou hast shewn me nothing with all thy talk of the Bernardini;" she spoke the name unwillingly, Ecciva seemed to force her to continue the theme, and it was with difficulty that she could withdraw her hand from the Grecian maiden's sinuous clasp. "Let us talk no more; for thou hast no news of real matter." [Pg 237]

"Not of the Bernardini, since thou wilt not hear it. But how if I knew of a bride for him?"

"I think he would not ask of whom thou speakest!" Eloisà tried to laugh and shake off the spell. "I will listen no more, Ecciva."

But the other paid no heed. "How if I knew of a bride for him?" she repeated; "of a most ancient house of Cyprus; noble enough to mate with him—for out of it came one of the queens of the land ——. And if—and if she would not say him nay!—How then, Carina? For thou, 'being his friend,' wouldst wish to see him win such favor——?"

"It is not the Dama Margherita de Iblin," Eloisà asked with sudden eager interest.

"The Lady Margherita!" Ecciva echoed with a scornful toss of her head. "Doth one seek a bride no longer young when one is a man like that? Nor—nor beautiful?—She is not beautiful!"

"She is more rare than beautiful," Eloisà retorted, piqued. "For she is noble, like the Signor Bernardini: and her face is like her soul."

"They should not trust their secrets to so young a maid!" the Lady Ecciva cried tauntingly.

She had suddenly flushed and grown pale again. Then a new thought came to her. "But she also is a Dama di Maridaggio—*she also*. Thou mightest tell that for a bit of gossip to the Queen, who, perchance, hath influence with the Signor Bernardini." She had laid her hand again on Eloisà's, with an insistent touch. [Pg 238]

"Why dost thou say, *she also?*"

"That is for thy puzzle—to amuse thee, carinissima; for verily thy brain is dull. It is no wonder with the gravity of this court! But happily to-morrow—thou shalt see to-morrow how the people shout to him, for Cyprus doth owe him honor—and Her Majesty more than life. It is the Bernardini who hath done it all—more than the Soranzo, or the Mocenigo—more even than our great Admiral of Cyprus. Thou shalt see!"

Eloisà fell easily into praises of her hero, and her tongue was unsealed. "To go at night, with only a poor fishing-skiff and a handful of men, to steal back the little king from the galley of Naples—it was not easy! But how should one think of peril when the Prince was in danger?—They are both like that—he and she."

"All knights are like that, or they would be craven: that was no honor to him. But what woman went with him from the palace? I watched them going; it was a night like some great poem!"

"That was our dear Lady of the Bernardini; lest the Prince should be strange without some loving face about him, and none can smile him into quiet, as she with her gracious ways; and they feared a sound, for the galley lay close under the fortress. So quietly they went, along the shore, lingering where the nets are thrown by the shallows, to take the galley by surprise—the Lady of the Bernardini shrouded in the mantle of a fisher-woman."

"And after?—When they had found him? For it was not told where they hid the child—or I heard it not." [Pg 239]

"Yes—now it may be known; thanks be to our Mater Sanctissima!" Eloisà answered devoutly. "They floated about in the fishing skiff until they reached the private galley of the Signor Bernardini—so far around the coast that it would be safe for the Prince. And of the peril, the Lady of the Bernardini had no thought. The galley of His Excellency was dark and with no sign of action, yet it had been manned for a cruise the night before the treason—the poor Signor Bembo was to have gone therein"—her voice faltered and they both crossed themselves, the horror of that night was still so new.

"The crew were hidden within it," she continued after a moment's pause, "and if there had been pursuit, it would have started swiftly for Venice, to put the Prince in safety."

"How came this tale to thee?" Dama Ecciva asked with a sudden twinge of jealousy—"we both being of the court?"

"Nay, nay, Ecciva," Eloisà pleaded; "we both are here to do our duty, and in time of peril—thou knowest well—one may not ask counsel on the house-tops; and this was for life or death. How might they hope to surprise the galley of Naples, if it has been told to all the Court?"

"Thou, then?"

"Listen, Ecciva! Since it is past, thou shalt see how they are noble, this Mother and her son! They left with me that night a message for the dear Queen whom they might not reach with speech, to spare her greater anguish, if they came not back. For, oh my God, how she hath suffered!" [Pg 240]

"It is yet more a poem," Ecciva exclaimed, stirred by the hope of further romance, and already half ashamed that she had shown her momentary feeling of jealousy. "The message—tell it!"

"'If we come not back, thou wilt tell our beloved Lady that we have sought to wrest the child from the galley of Naples; for rumor hath it that he is hidden there. And if he be there, we will bring him, or give our lives to save him. Tell her our galley waiteth far, to take the Prince to Venice if, from pursuit, there should be need to fly.'

"But—listen Ecciva—they said, '*if we come not again, and our galley should be found waiting on the coast, then tell her that our lives were little to express our love; and she shall not mourn that we have given them for her and for her child.*'—Oh, Ecciva!" she ended with a long sigh of adoring appreciation.

Ecciva broke the tension with her exclamation: "No, Contarini mia, all knights are *not* like that: I said it but to tease thee. Tell it to the Dama Margherita with a face like that, and she will make it a second 'Kypria,' for she hath, verily the gift. I have not such a tale of knighthood to tell thee: yet, if thou carest for my tidings they would make a canto for the new Kypria of the Dama

Margherita, in contrast to thine. And first of the traitor Saplana—*of whom there is news*."

Eloisà greeted the tidings with an exclamation of relief.

"He—and the precious group of noble villains—or of villain nobles—one's tongue takes twist in talking trash—the more when it is true; a precious group of traitors, all on the wild seashore—how the Dama Margherita would bring out the booming of the waves! These doughty villains fleeing because, forsooth, they feared the fleet of Venice!—tossing their reins on the necks of the steeds that brought them, and leaving them to wander at their will. A little gold and their arms and bucklers in the fishing skiff that brought them to the galley of the noble Ferdinand—the goodly King of Naples,—his well-beloved son, Alfonso, wore not for long the title of the 'Prince of Galilee!'—Is it a pretty tale for the poem of the Margherita? The tale of the fleeing villains!" [Pg 241]

"But who went with the Commander?—Which others?"

"There was the nephew, Almerico—much in temper because thy noble uncle the Contarini would not yield up to his traitorous care the Castle of Cerines for the signature forced from the Queen. There was Fabrici—the very Reverend, the Primate of Cyprus. And then—and then—not last, but first, and deepest and darkest traitor of them all—the very darkest villain of them all—there was Rizzo!"

"Ecciva! Not Rizzo!—the land is free of him!"

"Aye, *Rizzo*, child. Did I tell thee I had news? And for their absences may Heaven be praised!—though, truly, they have deserved worse."

"They have deserved *death*," said Eloisà solemnly: "death between the columns of the Piazzetta—death and confiscation." [Pg 242]

"So, my Venetian, thou never wilt remember that we are Cyprians! The drama of confiscation will surely follow upon their deserts, and there will be fiefs the more for their Cyprian betters. But as for death—'death between the columns'—I could almost be glad that Rizzo hath escaped. How shall one not admire the masterful scheming of the man, and the insolence and power of him?—he is fairly great in wile.—Have I not told thee news enough, and of a quality to make thy hair stand on end—the comely hair of a most decorous young Venetian maid?—and thou hast never a word of admiration. Verily, thou art tiresome!"

"It is so terrible, Ecciva: I cannot jest, nor gloat on it for news."

"There, there, sweet child!" Ecciva had slipped easily back into her old, mocking, taunting way—"go look out thy tire for the morrow and try on thy jewels, for the pageant will be fine: and, do thy best, I shall outshine thee—thee and the Dama Margherita! One pageant in six months of woe—it is not over much."

[Pg 243]

XXVI

The pageant had been brilliant, as one may read in the chronicles of the time.

Even the Queen of the Adriatic, in all her pride, could offer little to surpass the splendor of this great esplanade by the sea where the review had been held. The pavement of costly mosaic stretched along the coast, guarded by the lofty tower which jutted out upon the sea; while the other side of this unusual piazza was dominated by the famous Citadel which climbed the steep acclivity with intricate windings of crenellated walls, dotted with sentry towers where banners were floating. In that clear atmosphere distance was not appreciable, and the castellated slopes seemed to lead up to the highest peak of the Troödos, whose snow-crowned summit flashed its crystal against the deep blue of the Cyprian sky.

The massive walls of modern Famagosta skirted the esplanade, and above their mighty bulwark rose the domes and pinnacles of her palaces and churches—a city of delight. There were strange monuments breaking the sky-line; there were statues and fountains gleaming in the sunlight; there were hedges of rose and myrtle outlining the terraced gardens on the hill-slopes, where rioted all manner of fruits and bloom: back of them the vineyards of Varoschia—lemons, burning like topaz against the dark thatch of their glossy leaves, and near them the thin gray of the olive-trees, outlining with pale shadow the forests that spread to the mountains.

Vast vases of stone looked down from the heights in grotesque shapes—serpents coiled, thrusting out their tongues tipped with rubies, with glaring emeralds for eyes: and below them, deep cut in the living rock and blazoned so that one might read them from afar, the arms of the kingdom—as if sacred pythons, terrible and fierce, kept watch above the harbor for the honor of the realm. [Pg 244]

And far off, against that wonderful mountain background, a colossal marble lion stood guard over the ruins of the city that slept upon the coast below—with demoniac, fiery eyes of flashing jewels, striking terror to the souls of mariners who might have wandered with sacrilegious feet among those crumbling tombs and temples in search of buried treasure.

For this buried city on the coast was the ancient city of Salamis, and famed for her magnificence—the *Famagosta Vecchia* which had furnished many a stately column and intricately wrought carving to enrich the modern city to which Janus had transferred the capital of his kingdom. Half-buried fragments of palaces and tombs and temples reached far along the coast, giving the touch of pathos and historic interest: and about them swept the broken circles of the splendid aqueduct which, in the days long past, had gathered the waters of the mountain streams to furnish the countless fountains and cisterns of Salamis. Great palms had sprung up in the fissures of the massive, grass-grown arches, and vines trailed draperies of beauty over their decay—and so they stood, a monument to the past, challenging the dwellers of the modern city to a labor so needful for the public weal.

The port was gay with trading ships and colors of many lands; but Mutio di Costanzo studied it [Pg 245] with frowning brows, noting only the absence of his own galleys of Cyprus, which lay, unmanned in the dock-yards by order of King Janus the Second! And before them, where he turned his gaze, still frowning, on the silver of the sea rode the galleys of the fleet of Venice—decked with the banners of San Marco and of Cyprus.

Caterina, under her canopy, with all her court about her in fullest state, had received the homage of the people, as she passed her forces in review, her cheek tingling with honest pleasure at their enthusiastic greeting. The little Prince had been beside her, crowing his delight at the music, the motion, the noise, the color, in most unkingly fashion, quite unconscious that the storied jewel of his realm—the great ruby that Peter the Valiant had received as the tribute of a conquered Eastern city, glittering in the lace of his infant-cap, by way of royal insignia—demanded a regal bearing.

The presentation to the Mocenigo of the golden shield, richly inlaid with the arms of Cyprus, had made a pretty scenic episode, quite worthy of dramatic Venice.

For Mutio di Costanzo also, and for the Bernardini, there had been demonstrations, as Dama Ecciva had foretold: but the Lady Margherita de Iblin had noticed with uneasiness, that whereas it was a time when the people, high and low, should have assembled to testify their loyalty and affection, the crowd was chiefly composed of burghers and peasants from the hamlets in city neighborhoods, and that many of the old Cyprian nobles with their tenantry were conspicuously [Pg 246] absent. And since the death of Janus, some of those who had formerly been in attendance at court, had rarely shown themselves there.

Dama Margherita spoke of this afterwards to the Admiral, for he had asked for some private conversation with her in her boudoir, when the ceremonies should be over.

"What mean these absences?" she asked, when they had bemoaned the situation.

"Venice is feared, not loved," he answered her.

But she was unwilling to confess that she understood him, having a pride in her land and love for her Queen.

"Pardon, your Excellency," she said, "we were speaking of Cyprus."

He passed the interruption by as unworthy, being greatly in earnest.

"And the Queen—a very lovely young woman—is a mere figurehead—a pawn to be moved at the discretion of the higher powers."

"Then, my Lord, it should be seen to that she hath a Council competent to advise," the Lady Margherita retorted with ready indignation, "instead of a horde of traitors."

Her voice took on a higher key in her excitement, and the Admiral laid his hand lightly on her arm to quiet her.

"Dear Dama Margherita," he said, "we have been in conference with His Excellency the Signor Mocenigo—a very remarkable mind—and the Provveditore Vettore Soranzo; and the vacancies in Her Majesty's Council have been filled with men, whom may Heaven keep more loyal!—But *why* [Pg 247] did not the Counts of the Chamber rise up in eager demonstration of interest to put their best men in those vacant seats? And why—are we quite safe to discuss it here?—*why* did we—having her interests at heart—not dare to ask the great nobles whom we wished to reach, to take those places?"

"It is because of Janus, who hath been heedless and unfair?" she asked reflecting. "For verily the people love the Queen."

"Let us not deceive ourselves out of our very loyalty. The citizens and the nearer peasants hold her in love and reverence: but those of the larger *casals* and fiefs—the ancient nobles, have the power; and few of these are in her court. I would it were otherwise."

"It is something, your Excellency, to have won the love of the simpler folk as no Queen of this land hath ever done before," the Lady Margherita said staunchly.

"It is something, but not all," he answered; "the nobles are as much to be taken into consideration as the poorer classes. It is not all," he repeated with emphasis. "One may win from sympathy—but one must rule a kingdom by power. And the Queen—God help her!—is a charming child."

"My Lord!"

"A charming child—with a heart developed and matured like a saint; but with a mind untrained to intrigue, unsuspicious of jealousies, unconscious of any injustice wrought by her husband, not

apt to comprehend, perhaps, any grievance of the nobles——"

"May we not help her?" Dama Margherita interrupted eagerly. "She would give back the fiefs if she knew that they had been misplaced—that any right had been violated. And now—after these confiscations——" [Pg 248]

"Aye, there are more lands to satisfy their demands, it is true. But in their pride they might refuse—let her not wonder at it, nor cease from her courtesies. The nobles are rather sullen than overt in their discontent. They do not want Venetian galleys in their waters—though they must welcome them—nor to do homage to a Venetian for the gift of their own lands. And the restoration is less simple than was the confiscation. For temporary lords have been created and these remain to be reckoned with—even if the will were there."

"I am sure, your Excellency, that the will would not be lacking if this matter were understood; for Her Majesty is fair and generous, and eager to do all her duty by her people. It is of them, and never of herself, that her heart is full."

The old Knight looked at her with kindling eyes as he raised her hand to his lips with the gallantry of the time; yet retaining it in his own and petting it in fatherly fashion, for she had been his daughter's friend from childhood.

"Dear Margherita," he said with emotion, "it is well for our dear Queen that thou art so loyal; and well for our distraught land that thou shouldst be near her." He kissed her hand again as he released it. "I spoke but to try thee, my child. If there are those near her whom we may not trust —it is not thou: I know that a de Iblin could not be disloyal." [Pg 249]

"To try me—my Lord——! *Me!*"

She had drawn away from him, wounded and disdainful, her voice thrilling with anger.

But he answered her quietly and sorrowfully. "Could I risk any hurt to thee, cara Dama Margherita, if duty of plainest speech were not imperative? I trust thee wholly—how else could I speak thus with thee? I have never for a moment doubted thee; yet one might doubt one's own loyalty in this court of Cyprus—where, it is told me, there is a most subtle intriguer who seeketh to do thee harm."

"So it be not those whose esteem is dear to me," she answered wearily, still smarting from the hurt, "what matters it?"

"My child," he pleaded, "if it had not been needful, I should not have told thee; nor told thee *thus*, but that I wished to see if any suspicion of this had dawned upon thee. But thou, like the Queen, art too noble to soil thy soul with distrust. Yet, bethink thee, for her sake, if there be any within this circle—however fairly spoken—who may be intriguing against thee, yet seeking in secret to disaffect the court in favor of some other claimant."

"Who brought your Excellency this tale?" she asked; "since all may not be trusted?" Her tone was a challenge, and she moved towards the door to close the interview, but the Admiral would not follow.

"Put by thine indignation, Margherita," he answered patiently, "for I have told thee as I would tell my own Alicia, if danger threatened—if somewhat overclumsily it seemeth to a maiden's fancy. It was told me, in confidence, by one of judgment and most loyal honor, whose name I may not reveal, and who besought me that I should warn thee—*thee, Margherita*—who knew thy loyalty staunch as his own." [Pg 250]

A slow, pale flush grew on the girl's proud cheek as she listened and her eyes took on a strange light.

"What matters it, my Lord," she said again, "to me, if I have thy trust and—and—that of all men of honor! Forgive the temper of my house!" She stretched out her hand to him.

"So thou but know when to curb it," he answered smiling, "it is thy strength and our pride. And now—as to this other?"

"My Lord, I do not know"—but she paused suddenly.

"It is well," he said watching her, "for I may name no names—but thou art on thy guard. She was named to me as very fair—subtle—charming—of an ancient house of Cyprus—*we have named no names*. Let no confidences escape thee in her presence: but we have no knowledge yet of any traitorous intent that might excuse her dismissal from Court; and if it be but petty, personal jealousy"—again Margherita had flushed unwontedly—"for a mere jealousy, one may not insult a noble, ancient house. It is not known if her sympathy be with Naples, or with Carlotta."

"Your Excellency shall know if aught be discovered that should be told," Margherita promised. "But the matter is difficult."

"As to Her Majesty," the Admiral continued lowering his voice still further, "it hath been found needful to guard her interests, and the Signor Bernardini hath been named to the Council—a most excellent gentleman—if he were not of Venice. I would have had another of our Cyprian nobles, because of this jealousy of Venice. But they have kept themselves so much from court that we have not seen their color; and we dare not trifle with them, for the time is critical." [Pg 251]

"Why not thou—Eccellentissimo?"

"Nay; I may keep a wider outlook on the interests of the kingdom without the Council. The city of Nikosia shall stand for her; the trading interests are to watch; the fleets must be re-manned; these intrigues must be thwarted. I outside the court, and thou within, very closely within—as

near to the heart of the Queen as she will let thee—we shall work and help her, for her task is not light. She swore her oath of office to me, and I to her gave mine, as solemnly—to help her with my life. It is a heavy load for such tender hands to lift:—a question if one may conquer wile with innocency—yet the strife is noble."

"What may be done to help her?" Dama Margherita questioned, heavy-hearted. "What is my part? It is not only the scandal of watching against intrigue."

"That is no scandal to loyal service: and such her very trust and goodness do demand. But there is more: out of thy fuller knowledge of the Cyprian temper—thy comprehension of their grievances—thy loyal Cyprian pride—thy staunchness to the House of Lusignan—make thyself charming to these great Cyprian nobles; help the Queen to see the need of their conciliation, and [Pg 252] stoop a little from thy loftiness to win it for them. To two such women, the impossible is easy. I leave thee now."

"Is there no more?" she asked.

"Nay:—or it is a trifle. If they have found the court a little over-dull, of late, blame them not over-much: the need for gayety and splendor is in their blood—more than in ours of Sicily—more even than in that of Venice—which hath greater gravity. I have spoken with Madama di Thénouris and the Lady of the Bernardini; but Madama di Thénouris hath better understanding of the Cyprian temper, its need of excitement—half barbaric—its impatience with a tone of gloom; the tourneys, the tennis, the hunt, all that bringeth life—let the court be charming again with jewels and color. Too great gravity is not wise."

"Yet to-day, your Excellency, if there were no lack of brilliancy—how many were not there to see!"

"It is the beginning only," he said; "let it not be the end. Great issues have been changed by such trifles."

"Must there be no more than trifles?" she asked, detaining him, dissatisfied.

He looked at her, uncertain whether it were wise to speak further.

"Tell no one that they are trifles: but listen," he said. "It will take *strength*, and *patience*, and *wisdom* and *cunning* and *grace* to rule this people. Shall we ask all this of any woman?" He dwelt upon the words with weighty enunciation.

"Or of any *man*?" she answered, half-mocking at the demand. "And if he were really a man, and [Pg 253] not a god—and if one might choose one's King——"

He shook his head slowly in response. "Our paragon might not be found in the House of Lusignan, perchance. But surely he would not be a Louis of Savoy—nor a Ferdinand of Naples—no more than a Carlotta. *Nor any Cyprian noble who hath eyes upon the Crown.*"

"Not this, also!" she cried, startled; "*not this!*"

"So rumor hath it; but none is strong enough. It frets me not. I have but told thee since thou art on guard."

"Is there a remedy?" she asked despondent.

"It is not hopeless. The Ministers must rule the land. We must choose our men and bide our time. Our Queen, by her grace, shall win the people's hearts: and all may be well."

"And the little Prince—under her training?—For she will teach him love and justice. She hath vowed him to the service of his land."

"Aye, he is our hope. We must guard her kingdom for him."

Then suddenly his face flamed with wrath. "This Council of the Realm were arch-traitors!" he said fiercely, "and to think that they escaped death!—Wresting power for their own ends—taking no concern for Cyprian interests—they 'forget' the tribute which assures to Cyprus the support of our Suzerain, and wait for Venice to come with careful inquiry to set such failures right! But what cared they whether the provisions of a solemn treaty were kept or broken? They had no thought [Pg 254] of honor—they wanted power to overturn the throne—not to uphold it.—The masterful meanness of such creatures is beyond comprehension!"

"It doth unman me!" he said apologetically to Margherita, after this unusual outburst, for Mutio di Costanzo was a man of few words; then,

"Madama di Thénouris is of our private council," he added, to her immense relief, as he left her.

[Pg 255]

XXVII

It was the Bernardini whose swift thought had sent the first faithful account of the revolt of the Council of the Realm to the Signoria—his ingenuity which had secured the delivery of this true

statement before the false story under the signature forced from Caterina had reached Venice—his prowess that had generaled the uprising of the citizens for the Queen's release—his devotion that had rescued the infant Prince from captivity—his foresight that had sent warning to the Admiral Mocenigo before he could be summoned from Venice to the rescue. Such honors as might be decreed to a fidelity beyond reward had come upon Aluisi Bernardini from the Republic, apt in recognition: and the undying gratitude of the Queen was already his.

"What shall I give thee, beloved Cousin?" the Queen had asked him. "Wilt thou be a noble of Cyprus?"

"Dear Lady," he answered, "I want but thy favor. Doth it not suffice me that I am a noble of Venice?"

"Nay—but to prove how thou art in my grace—with rich fiefs and holdings in this land for which thou hast spent thy service right royally."

"He doth not spend 'right royally' who seeketh reward," he answered, smiling down upon her, as he stood before her.

Caterina answered him by quoting the Cyprian proverb, "*Assai dimanda che fidelmente serve*." (Who hath faithfully served hath made a large demand.) [Pg 256]

But he shook his head, still smiling.

"Other than I have done, what true knight would do?" he protested. "There could be no question of reward between us—thou being royal Lady of our Casa Cornaro, and I sworn to thy faithful service—my cousin and Queen. But, if thou wilt grant thy favor——"

He had grown suddenly grave.

"Nay, Aluisi, how may I grant what thou already hast?"

"I thank thee, fair Cousin. See how I trust thy favor to bring thee warning—being so much thine elder—dealing so much more with men than thou—being now of thy Council of the Realm——"

"Doth it need so many words from thee to me to excuse a counsel?—from *thee*, who gavest me back my child!"

She held out both hands to him impulsively, as a daughter to a father, her beautiful face radiant with gratitude and affection.

He closed the fair hands for a moment in his own, very tenderly. "I should have envied any," he said, "whose fortune it had been to do this thing for thee. My star hath favored me. Heaven keep our little Prince to bless his realm of Cyprus!"

After a moment's silence, Caterina spoke playfully, to recall him to his theme. "Was it for this fervent vow of loyalty that thou didst crave my grace?"

His face deepened to a seriousness that was almost compassionate.

"Thou knowest that I would fain help thee: thy people would verily spend themselves for thee—thou hast won their hearts. But, among the ancient nobles—it were wise to tell thee frankly—there is some discontent." [Pg 257]

"Is it new matter?" she asked, frowning a little. She had motioned him to a seat, for she saw that he had much to say.

"It hath been spoken of before, but since—since the treachery of the Council and—other things—and the most unbounded confidence by the Signoria reposed in me to uphold the Queen—I have sought more nearly to sift the causes of this disaffection. They seem to me to be not beyond conciliation."

"'*Not beyond conciliation,*'" she echoed, "it *seems* to thee! It is a sad word to bring me of my people, Aluisi, since I would give my life for them." Her eyes had filled with tears.

"It is sad, beloved Lady: but nothing is hopeless that is not finished. Is it not better to see wisely than to ignore?—Let us be brave."

She folded her hands very tightly for a moment, as if struggling with herself; then she lifted her eyes to his.

"Teach me," she said. "What wouldst thou?—Thou shalt verily be made one of the Counts of the Chamber, that I may know *one* loyal among my Cyprian nobles."

"Nay, nay"—he made an effort to assume a lighter tone—"there is no need; else would it be wise to sail for Venice with the fleet of the Mocenigo! But, pardon me, fair Cousin; there is no need to bind *my* loyalty with Cyprian titles and Cyprian lands. Let the Sovereign of Cyprus seek *her own nobles* for such favors." [Pg 258]

"Shall I stoop to *buy* the people of my kingdom?" she asked, a little bitterly. "Is this thy honorable counsel?"

He rose at once. "My Cousin," he said, "thou art not thyself—thine anger doth color thy speech. I crave thy promise to listen fairly to my honest thinking—which it is not over-easy to bring thee." He spoke compassionately.

"Forgive me, Aluisi; I listen."

"Out of thy generous heart, thou wouldst have covered me—who am a Venetian—with Cyprian honors. I thank thee. But I will translate thee to thyself. Was it 'to buy my loyalty?'"

"Nay, nay—but of appreciation—to show thee grace. Thou knowest it, Aluisi!" Her repentance came swift and warm as that of a child.

"I know it well," he answered heartily. "Show but this thy grace to thy Cyprian nobles and win them to thy court. They should come *first* in favor of their Queen."

"Have I been found lacking?" she asked, slowly; "and if—and if there seemeth little to reward?"

"Reward that little openly, and there shall be more. Bethink thee: there hath been great honor shown the Mocenigo."

"It was so ordered by the Republic," she began in a tone of self-justification; then stopped with a sudden perception of his point.

"Was it for this, perchance, that the Cyprian nobles came less heartily?" he pursued. "Is there no honor that might yet be granted to that most noble knight, the Admiral Costanzo?" [Pg 259]

"Whatever favor he would have is already his:—he was the friend of Janus and my own," she answered in a tone of surprise that was almost indignant. And then, with a lingering on the words that was indescribably pathetic, she added:

"Janus hath written of him, '*Nostro caro, fedel a ben amato Sieur Mutio di Costanzo*' (our dear, faithful and well-beloved seigneur) thou mayest read it in our '*Libro delle Rimembranze*.' Could I do aught to add thereto?"

For answer he bowed his head, in tender reverence for her thought: for the loyalty with which she sought and treasured every token of nobility that had been chronicled of her husband—for the proud discretion with which she taught herself such utter silence on her wrongs—for the great love which, growing to a *culte* through those years of girlish dreams and of fair anticipation, had made this attitude possible for her,—who was all truth.

"His Excellency the Admiral is verily the champion of Cyprus," the Bernardini resumed after a little silence; "and methinks he would hold dear the royal order to re-man the galleys which have been disbanded—as it is now thought, by advice of the traitor Rizzo, or of some other Councillor *in favor of Ferdinand of Naples*. I would fain bring this matter for consideration before the Council, if it hath your Majesty's favor."

"It is well," she said, in a tone of perplexity, "if it seemeth so to the Council of the Realm. But our counsellors of Venice who brought us aid, spoke not of this." [Pg 260]

She lifted her liquid dark eyes to his face, as she spoke—a girl of nineteen, bewildered with the intricate jealousies and strifes of her island kingdom—no wonder that she felt her hands weak to hold the sceptre so disputed!

"It may be that *Venice* hath not so closely at heart the interests of Cyprus as the Queen herself might hold them," he answered slowly and watching her as he spoke. "We must win the Cyprian nobles to our councils and consult their needs and bring them before the people as in the grace of your Majesty. *Let us not always think the thoughts of Venice.*" She started and flushed slightly at his last words, but how could he help her else?—"We must do this to bind the hearts of the nobles to our Prince," he added, to give her courage.

"Let us not always think the thoughts of Venice!" The meaning was new to her, and for a few moments she struggled with it silently; then she lifted her eyes to his face and searched it artlessly, as a child might have done, to see if she had fully comprehended his strange speech—most strange from her Venetian Councillor.

But he met her gaze as frankly, having nothing to add to the simple statement wherewith he had sought to arouse this new consciousness within her, and which he wished her to ponder.

"Thou art more Cyprian, my cousin, than any member of the Council hath ever shown himself," she said at length, "and it heartens me—for thou art right. But now—just now—what may be done?" She spoke eagerly, as if from a new standpoint. [Pg 261]

"There is Stefano Caduna, a man of the people—most worthy of your Majesty's grace. And there is Pietro Davilla, Seigneur and Knight, who hath proven his loyalty—how if he were to be named Grand Constable of Cyprus? Shall these be spoken of to the Council which will meet to-morrow, that some favor may be decreed them?"

"It is well; it should be done, thou art strength to me, Aluisi."

"Is there aught else that should be brought before the Council?" he asked.

She hesitated a moment, and then added with visible timidity and reluctance, flushing a vivid scarlet:

"There are other things that seem too petty—but since the death of the Auditor, our Uncle Andrea, thou hast perchance noted much scantiness of our treasury, though when it is a question of pageantry, the Council hath ever found enough and to spare. But the land is a rich land; yet there are no moneys in my hand wherewith to reward a favor or grant a dole of charity. If this be a symbol of power——"

"I will replace the voice of Messer Andrea in the Council," he hastened to assure her. "And, meanwhile—we are of one house, my Cousin——"

"Because thou art generous, shall the Council do less than its duty?" she asked proudly. "Or shall I be content to know that measures wise for the ruling of the realm may be frowned upon by those who hold the keys of my treasury—*yet render no account*? The knowledge of this added [Pg 262]

treachery hath come to me but recently; and this also was of Rizzo's malfeasance. Dost think that moneys shall be found for the manning of our fleet? Or that I have any voice in the spending of them?"

"The Madonna be praised that Rizzo and that Minister of Satan are fled!" he exclaimed devoutly.

"While Rizzo held office, I might ask *no* question," she said, turning towards him a face of pathetic appeal; for she had never before dared to speak freely of her grievances even to him—in so comprehensive a manner had the Chief of Council known how to assert himself: "and now, that I would fain have knowledge, that I may rule my people wisely, so much there is to set in order, that my heart doth fail me. I have written to the Serenissimo to tell him my perplexities—to pray that he might make it lighter for me to rule."

The Bernardini knew that she had cause for her failing courage, while yet he keenly felt that the remedy should not lie in an appeal to Venice, whose power was the unacknowledged core of bitterness in the growing disaffection among the Cyprian nobles. It might not yet be too late to save the kingdom for Cyprus; and what it lay within his power to do, Venetian though he was, he would do, rather than see this '*isola fortunata*' slip without a struggle, into a mere Venetian province. The knowledge had been painfully growing within him that Venice was playing her hand skilfully—that Caterina would find herself simply a pawn to be moved at will of the Republic, and that "check" would be called whenever that masterful will should elect: there had been signs, too many to ignore, of splendor of movement and expenditure whenever the prestige [Pg 263] of the Republic might be concerned—of indifference when the grievances of the Queen were confessed, or the autonomy of the island was in question—of slowly increasing assertion of Venetian power and rights.

He had accepted his mission, at the hands of his Government, to protect the rights of the Queen—not to enslave Cyprus; and his duty stood forth to him in firm, unwavering lines. Yet how should he dismay Caterina further in the attempt to force her fuller comprehension? He hesitated for a moment, but there seemed no other way. For very pity of her he spoke decidedly, with slow insistence holding her attention.

"The Queen of Cyprus *holdeth her kingdom by no favor of Venice*; but of inheritance, through her husband, the King. The failures in the Government should be righted by Cyprian wisdom; we must fill the vacancies with Cypriotes. I will take counsel with His Excellency the Lord Admiral of Cyprus."

[Pg 264]

XXVIII

It was the birthday of the little Prince:—only one year since he had opened his baby-eyes on life—and the day of his anniversary dawned radiantly.

Then, suddenly, athwart the sunshine and the promise, like the cloud in a perfect sky in a day of June, the shadows gathered and darkened.

The child was stricken.

"There is no hope," they said; and before the day had closed the little dimpled hands were folded over his marble breast, the long dark lashes peacefully swept the violet eyes that would never again unclose; and the tiny restless feet were still—oh, God, how still!—while, on the baby-brows that would never know the weight of the crown he was born to bear, the smile of a cherub crowned him with the promise of fairer Life.

The nobles, the soldiers, the courtiers, the people, they came and looked, often with silent tears, as he lay in state, in the light of countless tapers, on his mound of flowers—offerings not only from royal terraces—for his mother had willed it so—but the gifts which his people had brought, lay there together, rare exotics and the flowers of the field and forest, crushed and mangled, perchance, in some toil-worn hand when they came from far.

How little he seemed to have carried the hope of a kingdom!—how strong, to have swept it away with the mere folding of his baby-hand!—how mighty, to have crushed all dreams of [Pg 265] happiness, forever, within his mother's breast!

GOD HAVE MERCY!

When the first days of the shock of the child's death had passed, and the Queen had roused herself to notice those who were anxiously watching her, she asked to be left alone with Dama Margherita: but of the child she would not speak.

"Tell me," she said, "of the saintly Margherita of thine house, the Abbess of San Lazzaro; why left she the world?"

"Dear Lady—beloved Lady"—Dama Margherita pleaded, and would have soothed her; but the

Queen would have the story. She laid a hot, tremulous hand on that of her friend and urged her with dry, imploring eyes, as she listened to the tale of the founding of the Abbey of San Lazzaro, while for pity, the tears of Margherita were dropping fast.

"We must turn her from this thought," said Dama Margherita earnestly to the Lady of the Bernardini, as she left the Queen's presence, sorrowfully. "She will not speak of the child; she hath wept no tears; and the fever of her grief, locked within herself, will drive her to madness. She hath asked that Father Johannes be sent for, without delay. Doubtless it is for this scheme. Doth it seem wise to your Excellency now—while she is in this state?"

"Cara Margherita, should we be slow to obey the will of a suffering soul, for fear of what might chance? The reverend Father is wise for her: if any might bring her comfort, it is he." [Pg 266]

Father Johannes Lampadisti had been often with the Queen in the past year, and had become her trusted counsellor, and almoner in many matters relating to the people, so that the guards and servants of the palace knew that when the wild prior of the convent from the mountain of the Troödos appeared in the palace court-yard asking audience of the Queen, he was never to be denied.

"Most reverend Father," she said, stretching out her hand to greet him, yet with no hint of welcome in her wan face, "they have stripped me of every joy; I had thought the Holy Christus and the Blessed Mother of Sorrows had been more kind!"

"Daughter!" he exclaimed, startled at her mood; "cry not out against the will of Heaven, lest thou sin because of thine unendurable anguish."

The words had escaped him, involuntarily, but already he was chiding himself that he could bring her, at such a time, even the shadow of a reproach.

But Caterina was beyond any perception of minor shades of feeling. She answered him in the same passionless tone in which she had greeted him, with no suggestion of self-pity, nor any claim for sympathy in her manner, as she motioned him to a seat near her.

"Nay, Father," she said, "in this hath Heaven been merciful: I feel nothing; my heart is a stone. For this I thank the Holy Mother; she knew that I could not bear it, else."

She made the statement simply, as if it implied nothing unusual, and waited for him to speak. [Pg 267]

But for once Father Johannes had no words; his eyes grew dim as he looked at the young, passive face of the Queen, "stripped of every joy," alone on the threshold of life. "Daughter," he said, stumblingly, "I fain would comfort thee."

"Nay, Father," she answered, still without emotion, "there is no comfort. Let us speak of other things."

"Nay, *of this*," he said, with an awkward wave of his rough brown hand, as if he would have put everything else away: and then relapsed into silence, for in the presence of the grief which had mastered her, words seemed to have lost their meaning.

She also waited—as a gray stone might wait by the wayside, unconscious of the lapse of time: for him the moments were quick with thought—for her it was as if they had not been, because life had ended.

"There must be comfort for all sorrow that Heaven permitteth," he protested at last.

She looked at him wondering.

"But not for mine," she said in the same colorless tone. "Thou knowest naught of such sorrow, for thou livest apart from men. Thou canst not know the pain, when thou hast not known the joy."

"Yet from sympathy one may know," he began feebly. But she took no notice of the interruption, and as he looked at her he realized that he had never known life in its poignancy—that he stood outside the depths of human suffering, though he had dwelt forever in its shadow, nor had his stern life measured the height of holy, human joy. [Pg 268]

"I left my people and my land," she said, "and came hither for a great love, and that—that"—there was the sound of a sob in her throat as she paused for a moment, then caught her breath and went on in the same even tone,—"and that was taken from me. And now—oh, God!—my child!"

She strained her arms tightly to her breast and laid her cheek, with a great tenderness upon her thin, white hands, as if her little one were resting there and she sought the comfort of his caress.

Father Johannes turned away his eyes: the low murmur of cooing tones of mother-ecstasy came to him as in a dream. Was the child's angel really there?—He did not know.

"Now, oh holy *Mater Dolorosa*, *Mater Sanctissima*," he prayed within himself.—"I know what thou hast suffered; have mercy!"

There was no longer any sound in the room. She had dropped her arms at her side and had come nearer to him.

"Thou canst not know the depth of human suffering, Father Johannes, for these things enter not into thy holy life—else couldst thou not pass thy days in prayer and passionless meditation."

"Passionless!" he cried, and was silent, pressing his hand, unconsciously, against the thorny cross on his breast.

"I have sent for thee again, Father, to ask a question which thou alone canst answer."

She lifted her troubled eyes to his, deep with her question that seemed the more terrible because her quiet voice still showed no trace of emotion. [Pg 269]

"Thou, who knowest the ways of God——"

(He groaned aloud.)

"Hath He stricken me for any sin?"

Then suddenly the passion of her question flamed in her white face—she searched his, as if life or death lay in his answer.

From the hand upon his breast the blood trickled in slow drops, while he laid the other upon her head in benediction:

"No—child—no," he gasped; "God help thee—no!"

"If—if it were for sin of mine," she said slowly, and watching him as if she had not known whether she might trust his words—"might I not leave the world, and take the veil in the Convent of the Holy Cross?"

"Thou?" he cried. "*Thou!*"

"Am I not fit?" she asked. "Is it not for those who suffer and would leave the world?"

He shook his head. "No; thou art beloved of the Holy Mother. The world is thy cross. It is there that thou shalt do thy penance. The Convent is not for thee."

"Father, I have no tears to offer in penance."

"God asketh not tears if He hath denied them," he answered—his own choking his speech, "but the gift of what He hath given thee—to stand where He hath placed thee and take up thy burden of life."

"Father, I have no strength, nor will."

"They will be sent thee," he answered her.

"God is not angry with me?" she asked again with sudden passion. "Then why—*why* did He take my child away—my little, little child?—and —*thus?*" [Pg 270]

He looked at her startled. Had the terrible rumor reached her which they were striving to keep from her, that the little, royal, innocent life had been the victim of some intrigue—that the sudden, fatal illness had not been sent by Heaven? The rumor had been sifted, and no clue had been found, while yet it might not be wholly dismissed. Yet was the fear of this horror added to the mother's anguish? Nothing but action would save her from madness.

Then suddenly his weakness left him, because of her need; he felt that he must hold her in her place at all costs. He rose and looked down upon her, steadying her by the magnetic strength in his face,—his eyes wild with the intensity of his belief.

"Whom He loveth, He chasteneth," he said. "It is granted thee to know the depth of the meaning of those holy words. The blessed Christus, with great drops of anguish falling from His sacred brows, cried out, 'Can any sorrow be like my sorrow?' God is not angry with thee, my daughter; but so He fashioneth a soul for His great work. Life is thy cross, my child. Lift it and clasp it—Heaven's peace shall be thine."

"Why not the Convent, Father?" she asked, still irresolute. "I am so weary."

Then his voice took on a note of authority—she shrank before it as the tones rang out like the cry of a prophet:

"It is not for thee; for thy place is here.

"If suffering is sent thee, thou must bear it here. [Pg 271]

"If loneliness hath come to thee, thou shalt meet it here.

"If thou art desolate, the children of thy people are thine.

"If thy dream of love is broken, the love of thy people is about thee.

"If thy heart and hands are empty, the duties of thy realm shall fill them.

"*Thou shalt keep thy vow!*

"Thou shalt make none other; none other may be so holy for thee.

"Thou hast tasted joy and found it bitter; in duty shalt thou find sweetness and strength.

"And the Lord thy God, and the Madonna and the Holy Christus shall bless thee. Amen.

"I have the revelation!"

The crisp sentences crashed upon each other like a rushing torrent, hot with inspiration, challenging acceptance. She had risen to her feet and stood quivering before him, her eyes held to his by a strange fascination—the wild glow within his giving her sight of her dormant self and will.

He raised his crucifix above her and she slowly fell on her knees; and so he left her.

[Pg 272]

XXIX

For days after the visit of Hagios Johannes, Caterina scarcely spoke, or noticed what was passing around her; and the Lady of the Bernardini and Dama Margherita, with hearts aching from the burden of their pity, were helpless before such desolation.

But at last the young Queen turned to them with mournful eyes of comprehension, holding out her hands to clasp theirs in a convulsive pressure, rousing herself heroically from her absorption and nerving her dormant will to meet the unwelcome stress of life again.

"The Holy Mother hath left you for me to love," she said in a tremulous voice. "Life is not all a blank."

They could not answer her for tears; but her own eyes were dry.

"I thought," she said, "if it might but have been the will of Christ that death should come to me —also"—she paused a moment to steady her voice, "it would have been sweet—I was so weary. And when it did not come to lift me out of the shadow, I longed to carry my broken heart into some holy Sisterhood and be at rest—I felt no strength to live. I thought it might have been the will of the Madre Sanctissima, for she hath suffered; and I know not how to live without my *figlio dilettissimo*."

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Then suddenly she clasped her hands crying out with the passion of prayer:

"My God! I would have trained him for thee! He should have been a noble man and a Christian King. Why hast Thou stricken me!"

She turned to them wide-eyed with her question but the Lady Beata, for answer, could only fold compassionate arms about her—soothing her silently; so young and so bereft.

But Caterina struggled into quiet speech again, as in a confessional—sorely needing some comfort of human sympathy after her long, silent conflict.

"I thought it might have been the will of the Blessed Mother that I should rest; but Hagios Johannes hath shown me that it might not be; I have taken my vows again to serve my people—to live for them; the padre hath promised me that strength shall come."

Her lip quivered, but she bore herself bravely. "Thou wilt help me, Zia," she continued, in pathetic appeal, "and thou, my Margherita; for life is difficult. And Aluisi—he will think what must be done for the people until my strength returneth—for I have forgotten how to think." She pressed her hands tightly against her forehead as if to compel the resistant brain-power.

Then suddenly she laid her hot, trembling hand on that of her compassionate, motherly friend, her voice rising into a wail—"Father Johannes hath said that I must give the people all the love I gave my baby—but not yet—I cannot do it yet!—Mother of Sorrows forgive me!—*he doth not know*."

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She fell back on her pillows exhausted by her emotion, while in a low, crooning voice the name she loved to utter broke from her longing lips again, like a threnody:

"*Figlio dilettissimo!*"

The Lady Beata's heart was wrung with pity.

"Nay, nay, Carinissima," she said, stooping over the couch and speaking with tender decision, "Hagios Johannes could not know what mothers feel! This holy love for thy little one shall bide ever with thee and grow with thy life. It is thy breath of Heaven! It shall nerve thee to do the work of thy child—to live for the people he would have ruled. Him thou shalt love forever—it is the will of the Madre Beatissima:—but after thy child shall come his people."

A change passed over the strained, worn face of the young Queen, like a faint breath of comfort.

"Zia mia," she murmured, laying her thin white hand in the warm, restful clasp: and so passed into the first quiet sleep that she had known for days.

While the unhappy Queen was bravely struggling to recover her poise, many things were happening; for the death of the infant King had been the signal for further manifestations of discontent from a party of Cyprian nobles whose dread of the "Lion of the velvet paw" increased as the need for some firm governing hand became more evident. They would have liked to anger Venice to the point of withdrawing all protection and leaving them to their own devices—yet they dared not attempt it openly, appreciating the futility of any armed resistance that unassisted Cypriotes might offer.

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For the Turk was watching from his near point of vantage; and if he had hitherto been content with sending his private ships to ravage and terrorize the towns along the coast, this might but

be the prelude to more ambitious projects. Naples was still eagerly awaiting some favorable moment to lay hands upon the coveted island, and rumors of waning favor had been wafted from Alexandria, since Cyprus had allowed the tribute due to the Sultan to fall in arrears.

Carlotta, upon hearing of the death of the little Janus III, had at once renewed her claim to the throne; some of the ancient nobles had declared for her, and it was felt, rather than known, that her partisans were secretly gathering strength. There was evidently some hostile influence at work in the innermost circle of the Court.

And now, when Cyprus was at extremity, Venice alone—alert, powerful, resourceful—could be relied upon for aid: her protection of the island in the time of Rizzo's conspiracy, had given her the right to a voice in the government—or so she claimed, and there were none to gainsay it. Her *Provveditori* were armed with the plenary power that was not invariably used to the advantage of Cyprus, yet the vigilant Signoria were ever ready with fresh instructions—if the paw were of velvet, it was no longer sheathed!

Letters of condolence were duly sent from the Serenissimo; so, also, came without delay the declaration that the Queen had inherited the full rights vested in her son, and should reign alone; [Pg 276] with the further announcement, so simply stated that it might well seem beyond refutation—*that Venice was heir to her beloved daughter, Caterina Veneta*.

No wonder that the Cypriotes gnashed their teeth in their powerlessness to dispute this insolent assertion, while their indignation effervesced in petty intrigues!

But Dama Ecciva's spirits had revived.

"It is more like the olden days," she said, well content; "for if there is no splendor of court-life such as our good Janus loved, at least there is matter for gossip to brighten the mortal dulness of a court in mourning! The Ambassador hath returned from the Court of Alexandria, and hath made relation of his mission and declared the favor of the Sultan, which, to the surprise of some"—she paused and glanced about her to make sure that all were listening—"hath been granted to Her Majesty the Queen Caterina—and *not* to Queen Carlotta."

"There is no Queen Carlotta!" a chorus of indignant young voices answered her. "If the Lady of the Bernardini were here——"

"Aye—but she is not." Ecciva returned placidly: "The Madonna be praised for a moment's liberty to utter one's thought! She and the Dama Margherita who knoweth more surely to tie one's honest speech than even the great Lady of the Bernardini, are gone to the Sala Regia to represent Her Majesty and receive the splendid gifts which His Excellency the Ambassador hath brought from Alexandria. And this am I sent to tell you, by the Lady of the Bernardini—who is a [Pg 277] gracious tyrant and would save a bit of pleasure for our childish souls out of the dulness of the days. And when we hear the champing of horses in the great court of the palace—but there is already a tumult below—fly then!"

She had dashed out under the arcades and was leaning between the columns, making her quick eager comments to the bevy of maidens who had followed her, as the little train of slaves bearing the royal gifts passed through the court-yard of the palace.

"A regal mantle of cloth of gold, with its gleam of jewels for her lorn Majesty—who will never again wear aught but trappings of woe, if she might have her will—it is a waste of treasure!"

"For shame, Ecciva!"

"Nay; for we are only *we*—not the Dama Margherita; nor the Lady of the Bernardini.—Will the mourning bring back the child?—One may weep one's life away in vain."

"Thou hast no heart, Ecciva: how should we not grieve with her!"

"So it pleaseth one to grieve, I am well content. But the way of weeping is strange to me. Methinks it would be kinder to cheer her soul with some revelry—or a race on that splendid Arab steed, stepping so daintily, with its great dark eyes and quivering nostrils, where the red color comes! The Sultan himself hath chosen this beauty for Her Majesty—she who perchance will never mount him, scorning to do aught that would make the blood flow warmer through the veins;—going daily to San Nicolò with her taper and knowing naught of pleasure in life; unless it [Pg 278] verily pleaseth her to grieve! What availeth it to her that she is Queen!"

"What availeth it to her to win the love of the people as none hath ever done before!" Eloisà cried hotly, moved from her timidity by her indignation. "That wilt thou never know, Ecciva, who dost so belie thy heart with thy unkind speech. But verily"—she pursued, relenting—"thou art far gentler than thy speech—not untrue, as thou wouldst have us believe!"

"What is '*untrue*'?" Dama Ecciva asked, undisturbed. "How may one know? Shall one ask Carlotta?—Or Queen Caterina? Or—if he might but answer us now—the charming Janus?—My brain is too little to unravel the mystery."

XXX

Naples also found the moment propitious for re-asserting her baseless claims to this much-disputed crown; since the death of the infant King had left the Queen without a successor in her own line, and might dispose her to look with favor on the proffer of the hand of Don Alfonso of Naples who would graciously consent to accept the position of King-consort—instead of that of "Prince of Galilee," which had not proved to be the imposing, permanent honor his partisans had fondly hoped.

Meanwhile, with the persistence worthy of a better cause, his supporters had ingeniously thrust him forward—a compliant puppet—from one scheme into another—all tending toward this same noble end. Immediately after the failure of Rizzo's conspiracy, he had been betrothed to the illegitimate daughter of King Janus—one of the three children mentioned in his will—who with her two brothers, had been sent to Venice to avert possible disastrous consequences; a small following in Cyprus upheld this match—so eager were they that some descendant of their charmer King Janus, should keep the crown of their realm, that they granted the Neapolitan Prince Alfonso the shadowy title of "Prince of Galilee."

But after the death of his young betrothed, Alfonso had followed Carlotta to Alexandria, where Rizzo now held the honorable post of Ambassador to the Sultan from the Court of Naples; and here, while Venice was still playing her game, sub-rosa without the overt confession of power [Pg 280] that came later—Rizzo, the arch-schemer, first sought to bring about the adoption of the prince of Naples by Carlotta—as heir-presumptive to her rights; and later, as her following among the Cyprian nobility increased, proposed Alfonso for *husband* to Carlotta.

But now, since the strength of Venice could be no longer doubted, Rizzo, holding ever in view the ascendancy of his chief and with an astounding faith in his own magnificent insolence, rose to the occasion, and sailed on a secret embassy for Cyprus to propose the hand of Alfonso to Queen Caterina herself!

The details of this romantic intrigue were not known until long afterward in the court-circle, except by the few who had intercepted and frustrated the carefully-laid plans; but there were many hints of some concealed happening of deep interest which made delightful themes for romantic conjecture whenever the younger maids of honor found themselves happily without the dignified supervision of the Lady of the Bernardini and Madama di Thénouris, or the equally-to-be-evaded younger maid-of-honor, Margherita de Iblin.

"Something has happened, and no one tells us anything," one of them declared discontentedly when curiosity had reached an unbearable pitch, and the rumors of which they had caught echoes were growing in interest. "There was a fire high upon the hills one morning; some say it was a beacon fire."

"There are always rumors that mean nothing," said Eloisà quietly. [Pg 281]

Dama Margherita had been kept in close attendance upon the Queen, who had been often in counsel with the Counts of the Chamber of late, and Eloisà had an uneasy sense that it devolved upon her to uphold the quietness of discussion for which Dama Margherita always strove.

"Nay, Eloisà—that strange craft, hiding back of the great rock on the coast—without lights or colors—why was it anchored there, in sight of the signal-fire, instead of in the port where it had been safer?"

"Thou wilt have it a beacon-fire," Eloisà interposed again; "it is in truth more romantic than a blaze some wanderer may have lighted to do duty for his camp."

But no one answered her, they were all humming about Dama Ecciva, interrupting each other with excited questions; for Dama Ecciva had been, if possible, more mysterious and tantalizing than ever since these rumors had been afloat—which was a sign that she could tell something if she would. "So, my pretty friends!" she answered with a silvery laugh, "for once it entereth your thought that there be matters about which we—the Maids of honor of Her Majesty—are not worthy to hear!"

"I make exception of the Dama Margherita, to whom Her Majesty is honey-sweet!" she added, as her glance rested on Eloisà; and growing hot as she dwelt upon the thought, she went on —"she hath a manner quite insufferable—she, who hath not more right than I to rule this court. If one were to put the question to our knights—'an Iblin or a de Montferrat?' would it make a pretty [Pg 282] tourney for a Cyprian holiday?"

She laughed a mocking, malicious laugh; then suddenly stretched out one slender hand and made a descriptive motion as of tossing her glove into the centre of a distant circle—her eyelids narrowing until they seemed almost to close—a strange light escaping from them—her breath coming with slow pants, as if from suffocation—the hand dropped at her side betraying her passion by convulsive movements trembling through the tinted finger-tips.

In the bizarre Cyprian costume which many of the ancient Greek patricians still retained, she seemed of a different mold from the young Venetian gentlewomen of the court of Caterina—like some fantastic fury, half-elf, half-woman.

"*The Melusina!*" Eloisà whispered, shuddering: "thou mindest me of her. I like thee not in this strange mood!" while the others drew away from her with a faint cry of protest.

But Ecciva's momentary mood of passion passed as quickly as it came; and she answered her companions with a tantalizing, sparkling smile, rallying them on their seriousness, and flashing whimsicalities around the circle like some splendid, inconsequent fire-fly.

Her dark hair, woven with coins and trinkets, fell in innumerable long slender braids behind, from under a coronet of jessamine blossoms strung together upon strips of palm, which clasped the clustering waves of hair closer about her face—pure and colorless as old ivory. Her robe, of green brocade, richly embroidered with gold, fell over full pantaloons of scarlet satin which were [Pg 283] tightly bound about the slender ankles by jewelled bands, displaying to advantage the tiny feet, clad in boots of soft, yellow kid, fantastically wrought with gold threads; the robe parted over a bodice of yellow, open at the throat, around which chains of gold and jewels were wound in undue profusion.

"It is thou, perchance, Ecciva, who knowest not how to win the favor of Dama Margherita," ventured one maiden, bolder than the rest; "for with us hath she ever been most gracious. And for Her Majesty, the Queen——"

But a sudden impulse had come to Ecciva to cover herself with glory by making her companions sharers in the news of which she had gotten knowledge by a fashion peculiarly her own.

"Nay: leave the Queen to the Dama Margherita for this one blissful morning," she interrupted without ceremony: "for I have news—verily; and they may return ere it be told. Which of you knoweth aught of the Holy Sister Violante—she of the down-held lids and silent ways—who slipped into the court the night of that *great signal fire* upon the mountain, behind the citadel?"

She scanned the eager faces triumphantly, but no one had anything to tell.

"For verily the Sister Violante maketh part of this strange mystery," she proceeded after a moment of impressive silence. "She and the great signal fire—of which no one knew aught!—so innocent were all the gentlemen of the court—and the Bernardini most of all! But they are parts of one romance; and the Violante came to influence Her Majesty; the Violante, with her devout [Pg 284] ways, wearing the habit of a holy sisterhood to which her gracious Majesty is wont to give undue reverence—being not apt to penetrate an intrigue—too fair a saint, by far!—The Sister Violante came to win Her Majesty to acquiesce in some strange bidding from Rhodes; or perchance from the Sultan himself."

"How knowest thou, Ecciva?" They crowded around her thrilling with pleasant excitement—the craving for which was unduly whetted by the splendor and aimlessness of the life of this Eastern court—for a romance with such a beginning might have an indefinitely delightful termination; and Dama Ecciva had some strange knack of always knowing more than others of any savory morsel of gossip of which there might be hints in the air.

She looked at them nonchalantly, well-pleased at any sort of dominance, but never confessing it by her attitude.

"Have I not eyes?" she questioned, with tantalizing slowness; "and ears?—Are they to grow dull for lack of usage?"

"Nay; tell us, Ecciva."

She drew nearer and lowered her voice mysteriously. "That Tristan de Giblet—he who would have killed the King the night that he climbed the city-walls and fled to Rhodes—we know the tale ——"

"Aye, aye; we know it. And then?"—they pleaded impatiently.

But Dama Ecciva was not to be swerved from the irritating composure which pleased her mood [Pg 285] for the moment:

"And one of us—hath any one seen Alicia de Giblet? She hath not been among us since that night of the *signal fire*."

"She hath been ill, in the Château de Giblet this month past," several voices responded at once.

"Perchance, sweet maids;—or in some other less splendid castle where dungeons are of more account than the fine banquet hall of the de Giblet! And because Alicia is sister to this Messer Tristan—I have done much thinking of late—it is time for the Bernardini to return. Let us give over talk."

"Alicia de Giblet was sister to that traitor!" one of them exclaimed indignantly; "and we never dreamed it! But she was *gentilissima*; *poverina*! Ah, the pity of it!"

"But how came she ill, 'because of it,' as thou sayest, Ecciva?" Eloisà questioned, wishing ever to have a reason for her beliefs; "it was long since!"

"The night of the King's flight was long since—verily—before his coronation. Carlotta was Queen, then;—there have been wars and death and woe enough since then! But this night of the signal fire is but a month agone—and *that night came Tristan de Giblet to talk with his sister*, who let him into the Palazzo Reale. The daring of the man! We are not cowards—we Cyprians!"

"Ecciva!—how canst thou verily be sure!"

She touched her eyes again, mysteriously.

"I knew him," she said, "when he was talking with his sister, and I heard her promise him to bring him into the private audience chamber of the Queen."

"And thou, also, wert there?" [Pg 286]

"Am I the Margherita to be shown such favor? Nay, but I have an audience-chamber of my own from the window of my turret when there is no light within: and all that day I knew by the face of Alicia that there was some intrigue—which I was not one to miss through heedlessness! Alicia was watching for him that night; and I knew his face when I saw them together on the terrace. And with them was another man—wrapped in a cloak—the feather of his hat drooping low over his face.—And his face—I never turned my eyes away from him and I saw it for a moment when the wind swept his feather aside—his face was the face of—*Rizzo!*" she whispered the name.

"Nay, nay, Ecciva—not he! It could not be *he*!"

"Nay, my trusting children; believe your betters, if you will! As for me—I trust these eyes, rather than the uncertain speech of those who teach us what we *may* believe. These eyes are good eyes! They have not failed me yet!"

She laughed lightly, satisfied with the impression her tale had made, as she turned away indifferently; but they were eager for the rest.

"There is more, Ecciva!—that which cometh after?—*subito*—for the Lady of the Bernardini might return!" They were all clamoring about her. "And Alicia verily brought him to the Queen's audience-chamber?"

"Nay—bide my time, chatterers, if you would hear the tale—for it hath a sequel—we do not often get one good enough to be spoiled by a too hasty telling.—Rizzo, for it was verily he—can [Pg 287] any one forget Rizzo!—he turned from them and began to climb the mountain, there, where the signal fire glowed later. And Tristan, the handsome knight, came into the palace with his sister; and after them come following the holy sister Violante—she who came hither from Rhodes some days before."

"Go on!" they cried eagerly, crowding closer. She waved them away from her.

"There is no more," she answered provokingly—"save that which we all know; *the signal-fire*, and the *galley floating below by the coast, half hidden by the great rock*—for that also I saw from my turret—thanks be to the Madonna for lifting the mortal dulness! And I left sleep for better things that night; for it was well-nigh the hour of matins when the galley set sail for Venice."

"But the audience with the Queen?"

"There was no audience. For I bethought me of somewhat I had *forgotten* in the ante-chamber —not to miss the knowledge of what was passing—and I sped me thither. And then there was naught left to do but to hide me, somewhat weak of heart, in the tapestry of the ante-chamber; for the door was wide into the Queen's salon, and there was His Excellency the Bernardini, flashing scorn in his speech, so that one thought the air would break into flames—he, the while, standing still enough for an image of a wrathful Kinyras; the Queen's guard was around him, all in full armor—a doughty corps of men to meet those three!—Alicia, white as a spirit, weeping against Tristan; and Violante, shaken out of her holy calm, kneeling to pray His Excellency's [Pg 288] grace!"

"And then——?"

"And then they left the Queen's chamber and I dared not creep forth until all was quiet again. But I heard His Excellency's speech as he stood bowing in the doorway when the guards led Tristan forth—a model of courtesy one would have said—for I could see him through a parting in the arras though I risked my life in standing there—'Her Majesty' said the Bernardini—very fair of speech—'doth surely owe such escort to the Illustrissimo, the Seigneur de Giblet, for the attention he would fain have offered in his own person to King Janus, in his Episcopal Palace before he wore the crown of the realm.' And the Seigneur de Giblet, not to be outdone—being Cyprian—answers him—very proud and cold—'Is your Excellency ever so faithful to reward a service *contemplated, but not achieved*?' For he had meant to smother the King in his sleep that night, if Janus had not escaped to Egypt."

They were all silent until Ecciva, less overcome by these tragic memories, resumed her story.

"And after that, Tristan came no more; nor his sister, the fair Alicia; nor Rizzo, the dark-browed. Nor was it many days ere Violante, the most holy sister, had left the court.—Ask the Provveditori!"

"But what message did they bring Her Majesty?"

"Am I a noble of *Venice* that I should know this mystery which toucheth our realm of Cyprus?" she answered scornfully. "Ask the Bernardini, or the Dama Margherita—to whom he confesseth [Pg 289] all his soul!"

"But Rizzo?" Eloisà asked, bewildered.

"And Rizzo—when he had lighted the signal fire on the mountain—thinking perchance, there had been time for the meeting with the Queen which Alicia had promised Tristan—and the galley had come to shore beneath and waited for him,—went on board, nothing doubting, thinking to return to Rhodes—who knoweth?—To Carlotta perchance;—but he found the galley *manned with mariners from the arsenal of Venice*; and Tristan coming to set sail for Venice, with the Queen's guard, all in full armor, to speed him on his way: *and a Venetian General in command, in lieu of the African Captain of the galley who brought him hither*. For one may seek in vain to outwit a Venetian; one must admire them for that, though it work us woe!"

"It is thine own tale, verily, Ecciva; thou speakest to mock us!"

"Nay—faith of Sant'Elenà, it is true and sad enough—if there were not sadder to come. For Tristan, the gallant, handsome knight, being in chains, and fearing worse awaited him when he should reach Venice, wrenched the diamond from a ring he wore and kneaded it into the bread they served him for his breakfast, and swallowed it—and so there was an end."

They still looked at her incredulously—"How shouldst thou know this tale of horror more than others—if it were true?"

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently. "If one maketh wise use of opportunity, one need not always wait the telling. But to-morrow the court will be ringing with the tale; it cometh but now from Venice." [Pg 290]

"But Rizzo?"

"He is there in Venice in the *pozzi*; and the end will not be easy like that of Tristan. For he is the greatest traitor of them all—verily a traitor almost sublime. It were not so difficult to admire the nerve of the man!—Rizzo——"

But her further speech was lost in the babel of expostulation and question that broke forth, and which would have lasted long but for the return of Madama di Thénouris and Dama Margherita.

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XXXI

The court had been recently thrown into consternation by the discovery of a plot to seize the various citadels of the island and hold them for Carlotta. It was evidently well supported and far advanced, as disclosed by the intercepted letters addressed to some unknown person, which had been laid before the Council; all who were mentioned as partisans or confidants in this intrigue were designated under assumed names, but the knowledge which these papers gave the Council was of immense value, enabling them to provide that all the garrisons of Cyprus should be commanded by men of known loyalty to the Queen. Meanwhile vigorous efforts were being made to discover the identity of the person addressed as

"*L'Illustrissima,*
Madama di Niuna."

But no light had been thrown upon the matter, although it had been openly discussed in the court-circle.

Dama Margherita had noticed with uneasiness that Ecciva de Montferrat, who was usually on the alert for any excitement, had seemed singularly apathetic when this subject had been broached, and she felt that the trust reposed in her by the Admiral required her to mention her suspicions to Madama di Thénouris, although she shrank from this duty the more because she knew that Dama Ecciva was supposed to be exerting some secret influence against herself. [Pg 292]

"Dear Madama di Thénouris," she said appealingly, "it seems so much the more ungracious on my part. Yet it is treachery to our Queen. And if it should be that Dama Ecciva hath been receiving these letters and holding such part in these intrigues—to leave her where she hath free access to the court-circle.—But it cannot be true; she is too young to be so faithless! And if she need not know that I have hinted of my fears? It would seem like some petty revenge—yet I cannot be false to my trust!"

"Thank heaven thou canst not, Margherita, since others find it easy! Yet we must watch for our own assurance, and may thy fears prove naught! Comfort thy soul, for *some* one is guilty, and the finding of the culprit will clear all others of suspicion."

"It is most strange about these letters," Madama di Thénouris said later, as the young maids of honor sat around her with their embroidery frames. "Tell me, Ecciva——"

There was a sudden convulsive movement of the girl's arm and she gave an exclamation of annoyance as the golden thread snapped in her needle; but she did not look up.

Madama di Thénouris, closely watching, saw that her fingers trembled so that she could scarcely hold her needle.

"Tell me," she pursued in her leisurely fashion, after a slight pause, while Ecciva's needle still remained unthreaded, "what method shall we take to discover the identity of this unknown 'illustrissima'—this *Madama di Niuna*?" [Pg 293]

The girl's alarm grew evidently less; but it was a moment more before she answered:

"Why doth your Excellency thus honor me, in calling me in counsel? There are others whose opinion would carry more weight."

"Nevertheless, since I have asked thee, give me thy thought."

"*Madama di Niuna*," the young maid of honor exclaimed petulantly, forgetting her deference,

"there is no Madama di Niuna!—How should I know?" The silk was hopelessly knotted and twisted about the tiny pearl she had just threaded, requiring close attention; Madama di Thénouris also seemed to watch her work with interest.

"Thou art right, my child, thou art over-young to have any knowledge of so despicable an intrigue. But the matter is naturally of deep concern for us all," she added, as Ecciva, having recovered her perfect self-control lifted her eyes to Madama di Thénouris with a smile that was intended to thank her for her trust, while assuring her that there was no possible ground for supposing that she had any knowledge of this intrigue.

But the gray-haired court-lady met her gaze searchingly and with no answering smile—she who could be so gracious.

"The Council will follow a clue upon which they have just chanced, and which may lead to the discovery. If Madama di Niuna would come forward to confess," she pursued with quiet emphasis, "it might lessen the penalty for participation in this intrigue—which some among the [Pg 294] Council tell us can be nothing less than death."

There was a murmur of abhorrence from the young voices about her, but Dama Ecciva was quite silent, although there had been a motion of her blanched lips as if to speak, and Madama di Thénouris still held her fascinated gaze. Her eyes had suddenly dilated with a look of terror, yet almost instantly reassumed their long oval shape—the lids closing to more than their narrow wont: her embroidery had slipped to the floor, as she rose, and she was treading it under her feet—bruising and grinding it passionately, as if it were some safe, unnoticed outlet to the fear and anger that might smother her. She had flung out her hands desperately, the dainty tapering fingers working with strenuous, nervous motions—but now they were tightly clenched in the rose-leaf palms, and she stood bracing herself, like a statue of defiance. There was an added pallor on the beautiful ivory face—so still she was she scarcely seemed to breathe—yet all at tension—like some wild thing of the tropical forest, suddenly brought to bay, summoning all her strength for the leap that was to free her.

But she might rage in vain against the invisible meshes that held her, although it was but for a brief moment that Madama di Thénouris had searched her soul in silent confession.

[Pg 295]

XXXII

The times were perilous, and it behooved those whose duty it was to keep the wheels of the machine sufficiently lubricated to run without over-much creaking, to see that not only were all possible precautions taken to secure the Queen's safety, but that everything that might promote the loyalty of the uncertain Cyprian nobility should be encouraged.

Some of the older Greek families lived like petty rulers within their own estates, holding absolute sway over their vassals and enforcing their allegiance at least to the point of not daring to act in opposition to whatever political views their lords might choose to adopt. Yet the fact that an old patrician was not in sympathy with the Crown was by no means an assurance of loyalty to Carlotta; it might simply mean that he was waiting to select one from among the many banners that were eager to float over his happy island of Cyprus—or that a more fervent hope possessed him of gathering to his own standard the various malcontents and of wearing, with true Cyprian magnificence, the royal honors that he craved;—as why should he not? since more than one of those ancient Cyprian families claimed kinship by marriage with the royal house of Lusignan.

Thus it had been decreed by the powers behind the throne that the seat of government should be removed to Nikosia,—the most loyal of all the cities of the realm, whose jealousy at her loss of prestige in being supplanted in this dignity by the less important city of Famagosta should be [Pg 296] wisely taken into account; and great preparations were being made for the royal progress about to take place, by which it was hoped to stimulate an increased pride in the Government among the populace and the citizens.

Great hopes were also entertained by the Admiral Mutio di Costanzo, the Bernardini, Dama Margherita and Madama di Thénouris that the *High Court*—an institution distinctively Cyprian, which had not been held since the death of Janus, but of which a session had now been proclaimed throughout the island—would assemble a throng of nobles with their vassals and would prove a strong appeal to their loyalty.

The old Cyprian gentlewoman, Madama di Thénouris, under advice of the Admiral and the Council, had held long frank talks with the Lady of the Bernardini.

"We love our gentle Queen," she said with feeling; "and we do our possible to uphold her. But she also—she must show herself among the nobles—she must claim their loyalty. Hath she the strength to rise above her grief and try to rule? There hath been enough of mourning for the temper of this people; we must have action. We are like children—half-barbaric—more easily swayed by trifles that please us—not of such sober poise as the people of Venice; but the good Lord hath made us thus."

But Caterina was ready to do her part. "Whatever the customs of the country doth require," she answered without hesitation, "I shall have the strength, since it is for my people. Only, cara [Pg 297] Madama di Thénouris, thou and the Zia will provide what is best—I cannot think about these things—they seem like trifles; till I grow stronger," she added timidly, in a tone of appeal.

"Nay, beloved Lady; they are but trifles; we will spare you thought of them, that the real matters may help the sooner to win your interest. But it will not be displeasing to your Majesty to see your maidens about you in robes of white—to hold a fairer memory of the infant King, in his innocence and charm, than these robes of woe?" She touched the heavy mourning folds of the Queen's garments, as she spoke.

Caterina started in surprise; but she answered in a moment, with a little effort, "Aye—it will be sweeter—mine also, cara Madama; since never can the grief be less. The Holy Mother, and my *figlio dilettissimo*—it is enough that they know. And it is for his people!"

Yet in the loneliness of the night, after she had made her last prayer at the tomb of Janus, and lighted the last taper with her own hands for him in the Duomo San Nicolò, and wept her last tears before the altar where, but a few short months ago her little son had been baptized and crowned—kneeling on the slab that bore her baby's name—the sense of desolation overpowered her.

"Even this little comfort I must lose," she cried; "Madonna mia—Janus and my boy seemed nearer here! They leave me nothing—nothing!"

But later in her own chamber, alone in the solemn stillness, deep in her heart an appeal that [Pg 298] could not be uttered because of its intensity, her strained gaze fastened on the brilliant, star-lit skies as if she would pierce the mysteries of life and death and surprise some effluence of spirit-love—some smile of tenderness from the angel of her little child—a strange calm came to her—a dim perception of eternal values—of the nothingness of time and place—of the everlastingness of any love that has been true.—Then slowly she sank upon her knees, still looking upward, and the anguish lessened and peace and strength descended upon her soul—a gift from the holiness of the night.

It was in such vigils, since her great sorrows had come to her, that the desolate girl-queen had learned her life-lessons—and she was no longer afraid of their solemnity, coming thus into closer friendship with her own soul and a more implicit faith.

"Dear Father in Heaven!" she cried. "Thou knowest it is because I love them that I leave them, to do their life-work! and Thou wilt grant me wisdom! If but I knew—if but I knew my people's need!"

At that most perfect hour of early evening when the sun was sinking rapidly behind the mountains in a flood of gold and crimson glory, and the air was filled with a delicious wandering breeze, soft and refreshing after the heat of the day and laden with the perfumes of a thousand flowers, the Queen set forth upon her journey.

She was accompanied by her full court of knights and maidens, a guard of infantry and escort of cavalry, with many mounted nobles besides, to do her honor,—a sumptuous cavalcade of at [Pg 299] least two hundred horse; with such state had the Council of the Realm thought fit to decree the royal progress. With them came forth the dignitaries of Famagosta and other nobles, as was the custom of those days in bidding a ceremonious farewell—to journey with the royal train a league beyond the city which the Queen was leaving to take up her residence in Nikosia.

And thus the cavalcade proceeded on its way, pausing anon, for the greetings of the villagers who came forth to meet them and offer homage—Caterina slow-pacing on her snow-white palfrey—six knights from among the noblest in the land in constant attendance at her bridle, giving place continually to the new group pressing forward to claim their part of this so honorable service.

They had journeyed thus for an evening and a long day, with but the needful pauses for rest and refreshment, when they saw before them in the distance, embowered in delicious gardens of palms and cypresses and rich masses of bloom, the domes and minarets of the city of Nikosia—slender and white and lace-like against the deep blue sky—and climbing the hillside, high above the city, the turrets and crenellated walls of its far-famed citadel.

The chances of travel had often brought the Signor Bernardini and Dama Margherita together, and there had been much friendly talk between them of things which both held dear and in which their hopes for the quieting of the kingdom had a large share. She was flushed and eager beyond her wont, when they first came in sight of the distant city of Nikosia, and he laid his hand upon [Pg 300] her bridle and lowered his voice. "Let us not hasten," he said entreatingly; "the journey hath been so beautiful; and our bourne is all too near."

"Nay—not too near—for Her Majesty may well be weary."

"The Dama Margherita hath ever a thought for others," he answered her. "*And for me?*—will she not grant me to reach the bourne I covet?"

"How may I help to that of which I know nothing?" she asked inadvertently, her thoughts being full of the problems they had discussed touching the Queen: then suddenly lifting her eyes and meeting his, she turned her head away in confusion.

"Then I will make confession——" he began eagerly.

"Nay; I am no priest," she answered, touching her horse with her whip.

He followed, disconcerted; but she, repenting, soon quieted her pace and turned her face to him again, serene as of wont.

"I would fain tell thee my secret, Margherita," he pleaded.

She lacked the courage to reprove him while he lingered on her name with an accent that turned it to music.

"Nay—if it be a secret, tell it not: for women have tongues."

"Have they also hearts?" he asked.

"Not those who yield them," she said; "but only those who hold them fast."

"*Is* my secret a secret, Margherita?"

"Your Excellency—a member of the Council of the Realm hath so reported it," she answered, [Pg 301] laughing frankly. "Who am I, that I should question his judgment?"

"Thou art thyself," he said half banteringly—half seriously, and watching to see how she would take it. "To none other would I so defer."

"Not to the Queen?" she asked, still playfully.

But he was serious at once. "Aye—ever to the Queen, in duty bound—by kinsman's ties—by knighthood's vows—by my honor, by her sorrows, and by my will—yet this hindereth not that there should be one——"

"Methinks my stirrup is caught fast in the housing!" she interrupted with an exclamation of dismay: and there was naught to do for the Bernardini but to dismount and readjust it,—she—talking brightly the while, of many things for which at that moment he cared naught; and less, because it was she who spoke.

But when they were riding side by side again, and the city was coming nearer, he would not be put off for any whim of hers.

"If thou hast discovered my secret—which I would fain know—most worshipful Dama Margherita,—I would that thou shouldst proclaim it wherever thy tongue listeth. '*Quel che Iblin è, non si può trovar!*'"

He knew that the old Cyprian proverb, "Such another as Iblin is, may not be found," was the pride of her house, and would reach the tenderest spot in her loyal heart.

She turned to him gravely: "Dear Signor Bernardini, let it not be spoken between us," she said. [Pg 302] "For the Queen hath sore need of us—of our every thought and care."

"Might we not serve her better so?" he pleaded.

But she shook her head. "Thou who hast been all faith and service, counting thy life naught—thou knowest. She in her trouble should see that we think but of her."

"Is this thy answer—most worshipful Margherita?"

Again she turned her eyes to his—serene and deep—no hint of trouble in them.

"There hath been no question," she said; "there can be no answer, where there hath been no question."

And although he would fain have spoken further, he could not: for that brief moment in which her eyes held his—half-commanding—wholly trusting—was like the sealing of a vow to do her bidding.

Then as she turned away, the echo of a name floated towards him—"Aluisi!" so spoken as no one had ever uttered it before.—Or had he surprised it, written on her soul, in that deep gaze, which she had permitted?

But now the sudden sunset glory of that Eastern clime flamed in the skies, touching the domes and pinnacles of this city of delights with flecks of crimson and purple and molten gold, illuminating the lovely Cyprian landscape with a never-to-be-forgotten light—and Nikosia stood forth radiant against the background of dark environing hills, clothed to their summits with kingly cedars—while in the far distance the sea flashed its silver setting, melting into the opal of [Pg 303] the clouds which seemed to rise from its breast.

Was it this fleeting radiance of color that always stirred the birds to sudden, joyous song at the charmed hour of sunset?—that outpoured upon the heavenly breeze, for which the long day often panted, this flood of perfume of a thousand odors? Or was it only because it was Cyprus and for her magic beauty she had indeed been named of all the isles of Greece, "L'Isola Fortunata," beloved of the gods?

But now from the splendid city came sounds of rejoicing—music and vivas—through the gates thrown wide, the tramp of a multitude issuing forth to welcome their Queen, with the homage of loyal hearts,—and her own throbbed almost to breaking. The Vice-Roy and Admiral, Mutio di Costanzo, with his escort of Knights of the Golden Spurs came bringing the keys of the city which had stood for the Queen against the mandates of the Council of the Realm; Stefano Caduna, Leader of the people, stalwart and faithful, brave as a lion, with his devoted guild about him—the judges of the courts and the chief men of the municipality; a chapter of the Knights of St. John, in

their white mantles and eight-pointed crosses of red—the new primate of Nikosia, with all the hierarchy of his province of diverse creeds—the burghers—the nobles of the city—they made a welcome that stirred the soul of Caterina and filled it with a hope warm as the presage of the glowing skies.

"*Viva la Regina—La ben-venuta!*"

[Pg 304] The people shouted her name; they thronged to swell the royal procession as she rode through the garlanded streets, in regal state, under the golden canopy which they had brought to do her honor, upheld over her fair young head by four mounted knights of the most ancient houses of Nikosia. Before the portico of the Duomo Santa Soffia the cavalcade came to pause, while Caterina dismounted—the people clinging about her to kiss her hand, to prove their loyalty—until pale from emotion she left them, and passed with all her noble company under the fretted arches of the vast portal, to offer up her orisons—her first act in this city of her adoption, a service of faith and adoration—her first resting-place in her new home, the altar of the church which was one in all lands.

[Pg 305]

XXXIII

For the first time since the death of Janus, the magnificent hall of the Upper Court in the Palace of the Assizes was filled with a noble assembly of Cyprian patricians who came in state, each with his train of vassals, who were also privileged to enter the great judgment hall and witness the imposing ceremony of the opening of the Court. Each baron wore at the point of his lance the small square banner with the device and color of his ancestral house and the motto, "*Cour, Coin, Justice*," which was the privilege of his class, signifying that he was entitled to receive homage and tribute from his vassals—his *hommes liges* and his serfs, and to render judgment upon their minor causes.

The long arcaded corridors leading out to the court-yards of the palace were thronged with serfs in attendance upon the knights and barons, and with citizens who had no seat of right in the assembly; and beyond, from the court-yards, came the sound of the champing of steeds impatient for the voice of their masters and chafing under the unwelcome restraint of their attendants, who kept up a ceaseless babel of adjuration and coaxing.

Every noble of Cyprus in sympathy with the present Government was waiting with his vassals and suites in splendid array to pay his homage to the young Queen, who now first since the death of her child was to appear among them at a high function; there were others who, uncertain or careless of their sentiments had responded to the urgent invitation of the Council of the Realm, [Pg 306] from no stronger motive than a mild curiosity; and possibly a few had come with a wrathful determination to find something to condemn in the bearing of the Queen that might stimulate an organized opposition.

Between the splendid shafts of the monoliths that rose like a Cyprian forest from the polished marble pavement, a vast company of the hierarchy of Cyprus—Greek, Latin, and Armenian, in rich sacerdotal vestments—were waiting to take part in the solemn ceremonial; for the royal white-robed procession had already ascended the steps of the dias where the newly appointed Archbishop of Nikosia would offer his prayer of consecration and receive the pledge of the Queen faithfully to uphold the laws of the Realm.

The majestic martial music to which the procession had moved had diminished to a dim, melodic undertone, over which the prayer of the Primate rose and fell in swift, rhythmic periods—a litany of ascription and petition, to which the people, standing with faces towards the East and with outstretched hands, responded full-voiced.

O Thou, God over all, great in Majesty and power, to Thee we ascribe all praise!

To Thee we ascribe all praise!

O Thou, Lord of lords and King of kings, grant to Caterina, Sovereign of this Realm, grace and wisdom to rule her people.

Grace and wisdom to rule her people!

And grant to her, O Giver of all good, Thy benediction, with gladness! [Pg 307]

Thy benediction, with gladness!

O Thou, Creator of Life and Immortality, Lord of the living and of the dead, grant that the soul of thy servant Janus may rest in peace!

May rest in peace!

O Thou, Holy and Ineffable, around whose throne the pure souls of sinless little ones float as an effluence of Thy love, grant to the soul of our infant King, Thy joy perpetual.

Thy joy perpetual!

O Thou, supreme in justice, Ruler of all rulers and Judge of all men, grant to the rulers of this Court wisdom, that they may judge righteously!

That they may judge righteously!

Yet, O Eternal Father, Thou who art merciful, grant us to temper judgment with mercy.

Judgment with mercy!

Thou, who art Everlasting Truth, grant us to be true.

Grant us to be true!

And then, while the Archbishop was standing with hands outspread in benediction over the kneeling throng, the music of a wonderful, rhythmic *Amen*, oft repeated, thrilled and throbbed from arch to arch.

How cruel the changes that had swept the island-kingdom since the last High Court had assembled in this Council-Chamber! Their young and charming monarch, in the very exuberance of life, had been summoned without warning to lay it down. His little child, the hope of the realm, had come and passed as swiftly as some fair vision of the night, leaving scarcely a trace of his short earthly career save in the heart of the mother where its every memory would be cherished deathlessly. And for their fair young Queen, who stood among them widowed and childless—in lieu of the fulfilment of the radiant hopes which had brought her hither, there had been a pitiful record of conspiracy, betrayal and captivity. [Pg 308]

These memories smote upon the nobler souls in the throng, moving them to compassion and admiration; for what knight among them could more bravely have borne such suffering and thwarting?

But Caterina, in trailing garments glistening like the snows of Troödos, stood like a queenly lily among her white-robed maids of honor, exalted by the solemnity of the service and looking deep into the heart of her life-problems—ignoring self and contests—dreaming only of duty and the achievement that her people's love might render possible.

They had feared to see her in mourning robes, with a woful court about her,—trembling, sorrow-weighted, pitiful and unimpressive; and a low murmur of admiration just stirred the hush of the chamber as she took her place under the royal canopy and turned to confront the great assembly—the strength of suffering and resolve in the beautiful unsmiling face, which yet seemed to promise and crave for love—to plead with them for their allegiance.

She stood so for a moment, quite still; then she stretched out both arms to them with a sudden impulse. [Pg 309]

"*My people!*" she said brokenly.

Her voice thrilled them, and they answered with a burst of loyalty warm enough to screen the silence of those who took no part in the grateful chorus.

She only bowed her head in acknowledgment, struggling with her emotion: then moving a little aside, she laid her hand upon the arm of the alabaster seat that Janus had been wont to use,—it was filled with lilies in memory of the infant King and guarded by the group of white-clad pages who should have been his knights. And now, as if the touch gave her courage, her voice came clear and unwavering.

"*My people!*" she said again, lingering on the words as if the claim were inexpressibly dear to her; "because ye were *his* people—my husband's—the King's: because ye should have been *his*—my little, little son's;—*because they have left me their work to do*."

She paused for a moment to steady her voice, for a sudden desperate sense of loneliness and self-pity had overpowered her as she looked into the sea of faces turned to hers and saw—with the intense spiritual insight granted to the few in crucial moments—the conflicting emotions with which they regarded her.

Then, as swiftly, there flashed into her recollection the memory of the scene in Venice, on the day of her betrothal, when there had been revealed to her the sacredness of the tie possible between a Queen and her people—a vision of the holy, surging, passionate mother-love, adequate to all sacrifice. Surely for these days of her desolation that early vision had been granted; and with the force of a heavenly message its memory now brought her strength. [Pg 310]

The appeal in her eyes deepened, and the lines of her mouth grew more tender, while she held herself firmly erect,—as one accustomed to rule,—and the tones of her voice took on the accent of unquestioned authority.

"Dear people of Cyprus," she said quite calmly, "I *need* your love—that together we may rule wisely."

She had not dreamed that ever again she should taste so dear a joy as came with the sound of this tumultuous response to her appeal; for the hearts of the nobles had warmed to her, and a wave of compunction and loyalty swept the assembly.

As she took her seat upon the throne and gave the signal to open the court, the light in her face was a radiance beautiful to behold.

"Bow down before the Majesty of the Law!" His Grace the Archbishop, solemnly proclaimed,

while two priests from Santa Soffia stepped forth from under the arcades, reverently carrying the illuminated MS. of the Evangel which had been the treasure of their monastery from earliest ages; and behind them came others of their brotherhood bearing the quaint, copper casket in which were enshrined those revered Books of the Law known as the "*Assizes of Jerusalem*," and esteemed among all the codes of the nations for their wisdom and justice.

The ancient volumes which bore this title had long since disappeared, in the destruction of [Pg 311] Jerusalem; and tradition, prone to assign to well-known authors of illustrious deeds many good feats accomplished by those who remain nameless, had ascribed the compilation of this early masterpiece of judicial wisdom to Godfrey de Bouillon. It had been sacredly kept in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and guarded by a decree ordaining that it should not be opened except in the presence of certain high officials.

Upon the maxims of this ancient work, faithfully digested in the famous law-schools of Nikosia by their greatest scholars, the present volume of Assizes had been founded; and among those most largely concerned in its authorship was Joan of Iblin—the distinguished ancestor of Dama Margherita.

Dama Margherita had never been present when the volume was opened, for like the famous code which had preceded it, it was hedged about with solemn formalities and might not be unsealed save in the presence of the Sovereign and four barons of the realm; and she leaned eagerly forward as the herald, who parted the crowd before the bearers of the sacred chest reiterated again and again the command:

"Bow down before the Majesty of the Law!"

The little procession proceeded slowly through the intricacies of the throng, all heads bowing as they passed, until they brought it under the dome that was raised over the dias where the thrones were set for the Sovereigns, and where, looking upward, one might read in great golden characters, wrought above the frieze, this admonition from the Book of the Law: [Pg 312]

Whoever shall appear in this Court and bear false witness, be he the noblest in the land, he shall lose his head.

The Queen, to show her reverence, had risen from her throne as they paused before her, and descending the steps she laid her hand upon the Evangel, where His Grace the Archbishop held open the page for her, and kneeling to kiss the venerated Book of the Assizes, she solemnly swore to uphold the laws and statutes of Cyprus.

But this day was destined to become memorable in the annals of the courts.

There had been some disputes and decrees of minor interest to be passed upon before the matter of the recent conspiracy had been brought forward. This had absorbed the attention of the most learned Cyprian men at law for some time past, and at this first session of the Court of Assizes, the summing up of evidence and the closing arguments were to be laid before the tribunal and sentence would be declared. The revelations of the trial had thus far been kept secret—but it was known from other sources that the identity of many of those implicated had been discovered, and an important prisoner, who was supposed to have had a large share in shaping the plot, was to be brought into court to close her trial.

It was she, they said, who, trusted near the person of Her Majesty, having full opportunity of access to those highest in authority and of friendly intercourse with all the ancient Cyprian [Pg 313] nobility, had been chosen by the chiefs of the conspiracy to receive and transmit their orders covertly; to win converts for the scheme, wherever there might be hope of partisans, and to protect their plans from suspicion. The charge was "High Treason," for it was whispered that the seizure of the strongholds was but to have been a step toward the seizure of the Crown, and this leader came of an ambitious race, than which no family of Cyprus could boast a more ancient lineage.

In the innermost circle about the Queen, whatever the suspicions of the maids and knights might have been, the name of this arch-offender was not even whispered: for their dear Queen herself, with eyes that were dark with emotion, had pleaded with them.

"For love of me, seek not to know until her innocence or guilt shall be declared. If she should be innocent—which may our Blessed Lady grant!—let us save her from dishonor in thought and name."

But one of their number had been long absent, on a visit, it had been declared, to her distant estates; and if some who came less frequently to court, named the name of "Madama di Niuna" over-curiously, the courtiers turned their faces from each other, lest their eyes should betray the request of their beloved Sovereign Lady—for so had her misfortunes and her graces and high demeanor won their loyalty.

The prisoner stood before her judges, when they led her into the Hall of the Assizes, mercifully swathed from head to foot in the filmy silken veil usually worn by the women of Nikosia; but [Pg 314] through the snowy folds which concealed the features, there came the gleam of the fantastic jewelled garb, and the lines of the pose—proudly defiant—were plainly discernible—it could be none other than the young and beautiful and high-born Dama Ecciva de Montferrat.

The young maids of honor turned sad eyes upon each other, each seeking to touch the hand of her nearest companion, by way of assurance, while all waited, in a stress of suspense that was near despair.

Throughout the trial, the splendid assembly followed every phase with breathless attention, yet with conflicting emotions,—for the prisoner was one of their peers and all felt the case to be momentous; while, as the masterly arguments proceeded, and the evidence seemed irrefutable, perhaps few among them could have determined how it should be most wisely decided, in view of the waverings and discontent which had threatened to undermine the Government.

And now the judges and the learned men had withdrawn for private consultation, and the assembly waited for the verdict in a hush through which one might have counted the heart-beats sounding in tumultuous rhythm; but the girlish prisoner still kept her defiant attitude—tapping the pavement impatiently with her tiny booted foot—as making light of any crime that might be imputed to Dama Ecciva de Montferrat.

Then, more swiftly than one might tell it, a blaze of irrepressible human passion broke upon the decorous quiet of the Chamber; the nobles sprang to their feet, struggling for expression; for the [Pg 315] awful announcement "*Guilty*," although they had awaited it, brought a sudden desperate realization of the fearful consequences, as, almost without pause, the penalty was declared and a piercing shriek rent the air.

"Not *death!*—Holy Saints—NOT DEATH!"

They could see the sinuous figure writhing and panting convulsively under her wrappings, then tearing her veil like a frenzied woman, as she sank fainting upon the pavement; and the crowd made way in awe-struck silence for the Lady Beata with the maidens of the court who closed about the tortured figure in shielding ministration.

A stately patrician robed in black, fought her way through the excited throng to the steps of the throne, and threw herself at the feet of the Queen.

"Have mercy!" she cried; "she is too young to die! Take my life for hers—*she is my child!*"

A messenger was crossing the chamber from the judge's throne, bearing a parchment tied in black, a portentous seal depending from the ribbon. It was the first time that a death-warrant had been presented for the Queen's signature, and she was visibly agitated.

The agonized mother at her feet kept up her passionate entreaties.

Caterina started up pale and trembling, holding out her hand to the kneeling figure and drawing her forward:

"Counts and Barons of the Realm, Judges of the Court and all ye people who look to us for protection! We have sworn before you all to uphold the laws of Cyprus—we will not fail you!" she [Pg 316] protested. "Yet, oh I beg you to remember that together in this Chamber we have prayed to-day that we might temper judgment with mercy!—*Let us not sign it!*"

A low murmur of sympathy echoed through the assembly, half-assenting, and Caterina, perceiving it hurried on.

"Let us rule together wisely," she besought them, "and for the honor of Cyprus! Let it not be told that our first meeting in this noble assembly hath been darkened by a sentence of death upon one of our own nobles! Madonna mia! Grant us to be merciful—spare the noble house of Montferrat; let the penalty be exile!"

There was a confused murmur in the Hall of the Assizes: disjointed words punctuated the low babel of sounds: "Exile!" "Exile with confiscation!" "Death!" "Mercy!" "Death and Confiscation."

They scarcely knew whether they prayed for death or mercy, or whether in their souls they wished for justice or pardon, for the question was too weighty to be solved by law, since a nation's peace might hang upon it. They knew not if they saw distinctly, for the mist that seemed to cloud their vision—a mist enfolding two women like a halo—the one tall, black-robed, superb in anguish, with pathetic lines of age upon her hair and brow, and in her eyes, darker than night, such frenzy of supplication as one may only offer for a dearer than self: the other young, tender, fair—all compassion, divine in forgiveness and comprehension—for were they not both mothers, [Pg 317] and had she not suffered the irreparable loss that she might learn to shield grieving mother-hearts? She held the Countess of Montferrat closely clasped as if she would sustain her in her trouble.

"*Not* confiscation!" she pleaded. "Hath not this mother enough to suffer in knowing that her child hath missed the highest trust? Shall we add this also to her pain, and take from her the estates which have been the home of her people for long ages? Shall she not take the vow of fealty to the State, instead of her child? And for the Dama Ecciva—we grieve that it must be exile—yet the safety of the Crown demandeth it. Be merciful—dear people!"

It was a woman's reason—but a woman's heart, stronger than law or precedent, had won the day.

[Pg 318]

XXXIV

"A confidential communication of deep import to Cyprus—so thou come at once, and alone. 'The Prisoner in the Castle.'"

The Signor Aluisi Bernardini read the note a second time with frowning brows, for there was more than one prisoner, even of this recent conspiracy, in the castle, and the hand was disguised or unknown to him, and he could but guess at the identity of the sender of this mysterious message, which had been brought him, quite openly, by one of the castle guards.

The man stood waiting at the door of his study, until he called to him:

"Thou hast a message for me from——?"

"The Dama Ecciva de Montferrat, Eccellentissimo," the messenger answered, readily.

"Deliver it."

"I was to remind your Excellency that the galley will sail to-morrow for Venice—if your Excellency should have despatches—the Dama de Montferrat feared that it might not be known beyond the castle."

"Is this known within the castle and by order of the Castellan?" Bernardini asked quickly, in surprise.

"Eccellentissimo, the word came to me by the Dama de Montferrat, in confidence. I have no other message."

The Bernardini pondered a moment. She had meant him to feel that the case was urgent, for no hint of the immediate sailing of the prisoner's galley for Venetian waters had yet reached him, [Pg 319] who was usually foremost in any information that touched upon Venetian interests. It might be a ruse, or a mere plausible excuse to her messenger.

"Is there aught else in which I may serve the Dama de Montferrat?" the Bernardini asked with assumed nonchalance, partly to gain time to decide upon his own course of action, yet hoping to throw some little light upon the mystery.

"It is written in the note. Doth your Excellency bid me return alone?"

The man's manner was insistent: he had been shown a jewel of value that should be his if he brought the Bernardini back with him, and such fidelity as might thus be purchased, Dama Ecciva could count upon.

"Nay: I follow," the Bernardini answered, waving him on before,—"yet not too closely. At the castle wait for me."

"Of deep import to Cyprus," he repeated to himself, as he made his way across the breadth of the city to the citadel: he was alone save for his horse, who often brought him a sense of almost human companionship, and to-day the responsive quiver of the animal, as his master laid a caressing touch upon his arched neck, gave him an assurance of fidelity that was helpful. For the matter of this conspiracy had sorely wrought upon him and he might not ignore such a message, though it came from one so unreliable as Dama Ecciva, for she was surely in touch with the disaffected nobles. It might be a new conspiracy—yet it was more likely a mere whim, or an [Pg 320] attempt to get her sentence remitted—poor girl!

But he felt no emotion of compassion towards her, save for her duplicity, as he was conducted to the apartment which the Queen had had prepared in the castle for her young prisoner of State. By the Queen's grace, also, the Countess of Montferrat occupied the royal apartment under the same roof and was permitted at certain hours, to visit her daughter, though never without surveillance. But for one so high in authority as the Bernardini there were no restrictions and he soon stood confronting the Dama Ecciva in a small cabinet, which by the Queen's mercy had little the aspect of a prison; for she had thought of the mother, as she gave her orders for the prisoner's comfort, and of the last days that she and her daughter might spend together in their native land, and her tender heart had overflowed to them; there were even flowers from the royal gardens, and the air was fragrant; but in Dama Ecciva's manner there was no softening change.

"So your Excellency hath even deigned to respond to the request of a *prisoner*?" she exclaimed by way of greeting, and lingering with a little mocking pretense on the last word.

"If it be within my power——" he began tentatively.

"Promise not too rashly, my Lord Chamberlain, lest I hold thee to thy word," she answered lightly. "For I shall ask naught of thee that is not within thy sole power to grant. If I ask thee aught—yet I know not if I will:—methinks my mood hath changed." [Pg 321]

He was dumb as he looked at her—within a few hours of perpetual banishment she stood before him, brilliant, inconsequent, carefully dressed in her usual fanciful garb—the very jessamines in her hair lusciously over-sweet—with no hint of regret in face or manner—her old fire-fly self.

"Our time is short, Dama Ecciva," he reminded her at length, when she had chosen a cushioned corner and sat toying with a bunch of wild orchids—seemingly forgetful of his presence, as of her summons. "We are alone: and if thou hast a confidence to make—'of import to the State'——"

"The time is long enough for our needs, Eccellentissimo," she retorted, with a rippling laugh. "Verily, I like these wild blooms better than Her Majesty's choice favorites—this orchid hath a face well-nigh human—but overwise; I scarce need tell it—as to thee—that the sailing of the galley was my device to bring thee quickly."

He bit his lip to hold back his impatient speech, for she might not be dealt with as other women, by any appeal to trust or reason.

"Wherefore 'quickly'," he answered her, "since there is time?"

She looked up in surprise at having missed the expected reproof for which she was already fashioning a saucy reply, and her mood changed suddenly.

"Nay, nay, there is not time," she cried passionately, stretching out her hands to him. "There is *not* time! Though it be not to-night, it may be to-morrow—who knoweth? And it is forever— [Pg 322] forever and ever! Caro Signore, art thou not a little sorry for me?"

She looked like a child as she made this appeal, and his heart smote him for his coldness, for she was truly suffering. His sudden sympathy brought a new note of tenderness to his voice.

"So sorry," he said, as he took her hand in a compassionate clasp. "So sorry—that only duty to our land of Cyprus stayeth me from seeking that thy weary penance be lightened. If I might, I would help thee."

"*Our land of Cyprus!* and thou a Venetian!" she cried triumphantly, her rainbow face flashing smiles, "and how, caro Signore—*carissimo Signore*—if 'duty to our land of Cyprus' should bid thee help me?"

"It is some new intrigue of which thou hast knowledge?" he questioned, striving to hold her thoughts in one direction.

"Is not the one for which I stand here, and which will send me hence, enough," she answered tantalizingly, "that thou wouldst have more?"

"If it be but for whim of speech that thou hast summoned me," he said rising, knowing well that she would yield nothing to persuasion, "I may not linger longer. If there be a way in which I may serve thy mother, the Countess—ere I take my leave——?"

She shook her head for answer, pulling impatiently at the orchids which she had gathered up again; they seemed akin to her—half elfin flowers.

"Or if there be some message of farewell for Her Majesty?"

Again she shook her head, in emphatic denial; but she was conscious that the Bernardini still [Pg 323] lingered, although he had taken a few steps away from her: and looking up she saw that he was watching her in keen disappointment. Suddenly her cheek flamed, for his look was both compassionate and reproachful, yet despite her anger, she thought him more than ever noble while she struggled to repress the half-conscious feeling within her that dumbly answered to his appeal.

"She hath been merciful and forgiven much," he urged, in a tone that was still compassionate toward Ecciva herself; "she hath suffered much because of the grief for thy mother and thyself—and because she might not lighten the penance. Is there no little word of farewell for her?"

Dama Ecciva tossed away her flowers, and rose indignantly:

"I *have* a message for Her Majesty," she said in quick, hard tones. "Tell her I thank her for"—she glanced about the chamber as if summing up its comforts and elegance—"for her flowers. Tell her that the de Montferrats come of a noble house, well nigh as old as the Lusignans; that of our elder branch came a queen of Cyprus. Tell her that if I know not how to thank her for that she hath decreed banishment for a noble of our ancient house—she who hath lived in our land of Cyprus these *few years of her little life*—if I lack the grace to be so good a courtier—yet I humbly thank her for—these orchids—which might have sprung from some mouldering trunk in a forgotten corner of my estates. They mind me of the days before *she* came to Cyprus." [Pg 324]

She crushed them angrily beneath her foot as she spoke, and her words stormed upon him.

As he would have answered her, she broke in with more hot words.

"Tell her that I shall not lose my color in exile; it will not cure me of my *crime of loyalty* to my people—I cannot change my faith—tell her——"

But he interrupted gravely:

"Thou dost wrong thyself and her: knowing well that thy 'crime' is not 'of loyalty to thy people'; but that thou couldst *profess* a loyalty which was but pretence to the Queen who held thy vows of fealty."

She was quivering still with anger and she did not answer him.

"Speech is useless," he said, "if it be not reasonable: and none grieveth more than our gentle Lady that the welfare of the State demandeth the exile of one who hath conspired against it. She, of her grace, will have it that others have misled thee;—that of thine own heart thou wouldst not have sought this treachery."

"*Treachery!*" her eyes flamed. "If that be treachery——Listen! I thought to send thee away without my confidence and leave thee to thy blind struggle to rule our people of Cyprus—thou and the fair little Queen! Yet I *will* tell thee, for I cannot leave thee so."

She had come nearer. "Will the nobles in their far lands bow at *her* bidding? *Never!* They need a *man* to sway them, for the good of Cyprus—one who knoweth how to rule—of strength and [Pg 325] constancy to shape their kingdom and make it great. For *such* a man the nobles would rise in their might."

"There is none such," he answered coldly, "and talk of treason—except it were a maid's wild dreaming—must be brought before the Council of the Realm. Unless thou hast confession of some real import to the State—or names that we should know—and for the telling much might be forgiven thee—I bid thee farewell. Truly it is hard for thee, my poor Dama Ecciva; but in thy heart thou knowest that the penalty could not be less.—May thy reason and the years soften it to thee."

She had not listened to his last words, but stood irresolute as he took his ceremonious farewell: then suddenly she sprang towards him and caught his hand to detain him. Her face had grown soft and eager.

"It *is* 'confession'!" she cried, "'of import to the State'—and 'names' that thou shouldst know. There are many nobles whom I could reach—I will name thee all their names when we have spoken together: those who suffer banishment with me are but a few. At word of mine they would kindle into fire and make a glory of Cyprus!" She had drawn herself up proudly, her eyes were flashing; she had clenched her small hands so tightly over his that he could not withdraw it.

"Poor child!" he said compassionately; "shall one woman rule them, and not another!—It is the madness of imprisonment and exile; it shall be forgiven thee."

He tried to make his escape, but she clung to his hand yet more closely, so that he could not move without dragging her with him. [Pg 326]

"It is not forgiveness that I want," she cried furiously, "but comprehension. Canst thou not see! Have I not said that Cyprus hath need of a man to rule? *Who* led the people to storm the Fortress of Famagosta? *Who* ruled the city in quiet through those days of stress?—*Thou* art the man! *Through me, who hold the key, thou shalt rule them well.*"

"I am a Venetian," he answered coldly; and no longer hesitating to use the needful force to unclasp the clinging, importunate hands. "From compassion have I shown too great patience with thy mad dreaming. I will direct that the Countess of Montferrat be permitted to come to thee now: for the galley must soon sail for Venice.—May the Madonna help thee!"

But as he reached the door a mocking laugh rang out and made him turn in surprise, for it was but a moment since he had instinctively averted his gaze, lest he should read too easily in her mobile face the emotion which she made no effort to conceal.

"Let us at least part with due ceremony, your Excellency," she said, "since we shall both have travelled to other worlds before we meet again: I—who might have been a Queen, hadst thou but believed my 'mad dreaming' and accepted my aid to make thee—that which should have made me thy Queen indeed, and thee a Sovereign of Cyprus!—had I but condescended so far!"

She swept him her most courtly reverence. "Adieu! Thou art a man indeed—like many another —to let a woman outwit thee and befool thee—so that even now thou knowest not within thy soul if she hath spoken truth,—or flattery to beguile thee; or 'mad dreaming'—for which, perforce, she 'may be forgiven,' and render thanks! Thou knowest not whether she hath, in truth, spoken *to mislead thee* that which should have brought the pride of thy superb Venice low—hadst thou but listened!—So much hath my 'confession' availed thee. O, most astute Venetian!" [Pg 327]

She flung the words at him in triumphant tones, while he, in noble pity, stood speechless—having seen her face when she thought he had not seen; and she stood thus—radiant—defiant—until there was no longer an echo of footsteps back through the long vaulted corridor of the castle. Then the mocking smile died on her lips and eyes and she threw herself on her couch in a bitter paroxysm of passion.

"One may dare all, for a man of stone," she cried, "and yet not win! And I would have made him great—*great* beyond his dreams! O fool!—FOOL!"

[Pg 328]

XXXV

With the removal of the Court to Nikosia days of peace and sunshine had at last dawned for the distracted island kingdom—whether compassed by the wisdom of the astute and vigilant counsellors who sat close under the ear of the youthful Queen—by the superior force of the Venetian galleys, or by the winning charm of the Queen herself. The echoes of conspiracy had been stilled and the cities of Cyprus were taking new pride in their commerce, while they were growing richer in measures of philanthropy and education and that blossoming of arts and culture which only may adorn a court at leisure from petty wars and intrigues.

Early in these days of quiet Caterina had turned once more to her cousin the Bernardini, bidding him ask some favor at her hand—"For verily I owe thee more than I may repay."

"There could be never a debt between us, my cousin," he answered smiling: then with the ceremonious bow of a courtier, he added, with a singular mixture of gravity and playfulness: "I would remind your Majesty of a function of this Court which it hath never pleased my fair cousin to exercise. There is one among the maids of honor—most rare and noble—bounden by special

vows of fealty, as a *Dama di Maridaggio*, to marry at the command of her Sovereign."

He stood before her quite unabashed and smiling, while she scanned him in surprise.

"Margherita de Iblin?" she questioned, half unbelieving. [Pg 329]

"Margherita!" he answered, radiantly; "there is no other."

"And how—if when I name the other two which custom doth demand for this ceremonial, she shall find a knight more to her liking?" Caterina asked teasingly.

"Name one; and name him thrice," he answered boldly.

"Little I dreamed thee, Aluisi, so poor a knight that thou shouldst lack the courage to plead thine own cause," she exclaimed in amusement. "And of what avail a gift that is not free?"

He joined frankly in her laugh.

"Nay," he said; "the case is quite otherwise. For she will not say me nay, fair Cousin, because—in sooth some day she shall tell me why; and I count myself too leal a knight to tell it—if I knew—before she shall bid me speak. For the cause hath been pleaded and *not* rejected; and the gift hath been given, but *not* confessed; which, were it not thus, I should seek no aid—having no mind to steal, were it even the heart of a maid. But now it is rather wit than 'courage' that I lack, to outwit my lady—may those forgive me who hold her favor!"

"I will right heartily forgive thee, so but thou win it," Caterina assured him. "Yet if she hath not said thee nay—what lackest thou of favor?"

He was suddenly grave. "She will not say me '*yea*,'" he answered her, "lest the speaking of the word which she foldeth close in her heart until she giveth her rare self leave to utter it, should make her somewhat less to her Sovereign Lady—who, she hath most solemnly assured me—hath [Pg 330] need of us both—and *thus*—with no bond between her two loyal servitors but their loyalty to their Queen."

"Shall mine be less because of their happiness?" Caterina questioned indignantly. "Nay, but much less—*much* less, without it!—Where is the Dama Margherita?"

"Nay, fair Cousin," he protested, "let discretion rule the command, I beseech you. For she herself is more proud than any Queen and of a temper to which surrender cometh not easily; and the wooing hath been long. Yet the truth of her deep eyes betrayeth her,—and so I trust my happiness in your gracious hands."

But Caterina would not rest until she had found the occasion for speech: and so soon as she chanced to be alone with Dama Margherita, she announced, without preamble, that she would presently command a right royal festival to please the nobles but lately come to court, with jousts of song and floral games, "and I myself will give the prize, and thou—Cara Margherita, being my faithful *Dama di Maridaggio*, shall be the Queen thereof."

But the Margherita drew herself haughtily away from the Queen's outstretched hand.

"I do not understand," she said, in a tone that was half resentful. "I am ever at your Majesty's command for loyalty and service: but this custom displeaseth me—I pray your Majesty, let it be dismissed."

"Nay, Margherita, it is my right;" the Queen persisted. "I would have thee choose one of three [Pg 331] noble knights whom I will present to thee."

"Three!" she echoed with a sensation of relief: then, after all, her secret had not been guessed: it was truly some freak of the Queen's, and she turned more willingly to listen.

"The first is of rare nobility, whom I fain would honor in bestowing upon him the hand of one so dear—because he hath spent himself for me, and hath held his life little when it might serve me."

Margherita half opened her lips to speak, then closed them resolutely and held silence—a faint flush growing in her cheek.

"The next is one of a most ancient house, of vast estates, it hath been told me, which he himself nameth not, save for some generous use when there is need: of whom all men speak well, because of a certain strength he hath; but women rarely, for the scorn he showeth for heartless trifling. If he should love a woman, she need not fear to trust him."

"And if he loveth not though he were a prince among men," Margherita answered with an effort at playful speech, "it were folly to trust his vows."

"Truly it were folly," the Queen replied, growing suddenly pensive, "and it were not easy to know wisdom from folly in such a matter, perchance. Let us speak no more of it—though I had a third to bring before thee."

"Then," said Margherita with unexpected docility, "an' it please your Majesty I will listen."

"Thou art so gracious that I scarce do know thee!" the Queen retorted playfully, "thou who art wont to hold me with a wholesome fear! But for the third—now I bethink me—it were scarce worth the telling, since it was but a word that he left with me—no more—that I would that thou [Pg 332] hadst seen him utter it, a simple vow—yet I know that none shall move him from it! Listen, Margherita: '*For me there is none other.*'"

"Said he no more, when he asked so much?" Dama Margherita questioned with a desperate attempt to defer the moment of yielding.

Caterina turned and looked at her seriously.

"If he hath not the gift, already," she said, "it is much to ask. Yet, if he holdeth it, by no constraint—but *because it is for him alone and may not be withheld*—however one may struggle, —need one ask further assurance of happiness? Choose thou from these, my Margherita. They are good knights."

"All three—or one?" Margherita asked, with deepening color and shining eyes that were her confession and surrender. "These three are one—my Lady giveth me no choice."

"How one?" the Queen answered promptly, willing to grant her a little more time, for she saw that it was not easy for this proud maid to yield. "For one is lofty and masterful, and of a great prowess—so that men fear him. And one is knightly and worshipful, with a trick of speech when it pleaseth him, so that a woman might love him if he plead with her for favor. And one—nay, of him we will speak no more. For he hath a will that may not be denied when he hath said, '*For me* there is none other.'"

"My beloved Lady doth trifle with me," Margherita exclaimed in confusion. "She will not lay this command upon me!"

"My Margherita—most solemnly I bid thee choose that which shall bring thee happiness. For [Pg 333] thy lover hath confessed himself to me."

"Is it happiness to love,—or is it pain?" the girl questioned very low.

"If sometimes it may be pain," the young Queen answered, a shadow crossing her brow; "yet even then, methinks, one would not have missed it—so only one hath held one's own heart true: for it discovereth depths and heights one might not know without it, and bringeth dreams that make one's soul the fairer. But for thee, *cara* Margherita—it shall be all happiness—for thy knight is true and noble like thyself; and my heart is glad that I may give thee to him."

"Since I have not chosen him—and there are three!" Margherita interposed faintly—"but if it is of your Majesty's command——?"

"Tell me but this one thing—dost love him, Margherita?"

"If there must be confession, should not the high-priest of this sacrament be first to hear it?" the proud maid whispered, as she knelt and kissed her Lady's hand with a sudden grace: but the Queen knew that she might neither tease nor trifle more.

"My Margherita," she said, folding her closely; "I could dream no sweeter dream than to know my two very dearest ones worthy of each other and happy together."

So it was not long before the Court of Nikosia was gladdened with a festival of old-time splendor, lasting for many days—with tournaments of knights and jousts of song, and recitals of quaint Cyprian legends and classic story, and all that their most punctilious custom might decree [Pg 334] for a noble's marriage feast in the days of the *cinque cento*.

But as time slipped by in apparent tranquillity and growing prosperity, with constant evidences of judicious thought bestowed by the Queen upon the well-being of her subjects—with the coming and going of artists and men of letters to her court, and the resuming of all those ancient Cyprian customs that might minister to the content of the nobles—whom it was ever most needful to satisfy with a sufficient show of gaiety—there had nevertheless been an imperceptibly increasing tightening of the threads of government which stretched far across the waters to Venice's own blue Adriatic, into the very Council-Chambers of the Palazzo San Marco.

Even the moneys of Cyprus were flowing somewhat overfreely into the coffers of the Venetian Provveditori who kept vigilant watch over the island kingdom—which was, in truth, no longer anything but a Venetian province, except in name. Yet Caterina, while she chafed at many hampering restrictions which she was powerless to overcome, loved her people and her work with the strength of desperation, and struggled bravely on.

It was a relief that the petty warfare of conflicting claimants without and within her kingdom had ceased; even the importunity from aspiring suitors came no more—since the same cold answer was ever ready for all, alike: and to Caterina this also was a relief. For, although of her own will she could have given but one reply, she had bitterly resented the imperative command of the Signoria forbidding her second marriage, as an indignity assuring her that she was not free [Pg 335] —and each fresh importunity was a reminder of her bondage.

If the Cyprian members of the Council of the Realm also saw that the meshes of Venice were steadily gathering more closely about them, they had no longer power of resistance against that craftiness of the Republic which had known how to divert the moneys that should have gone to the making of a Cyprian Marine, while tickling their love of splendor with some outward show—yet had kept the island kingdom from appreciating this great need, by the readiness with which full-manned Venetian galleys protected the Cyprian coasts whenever they were threatened with devastation.

More than one letter of resistance and impotent pleading in Caterina's own hand, had gone from this Daughter of the Republic to the Doge himself, and passed from the Serenissimo into the secret archives of San Marco; but the very fact of the appeal was an acknowledgment of Venetian right, and the evils steadily increased. While Caterina tried to forget that the clasp of a velvet paw may fatally crush, when the force of an angry lion is behind it: or—if she remembered it too cruelly in the hours of her desolate midnight vigils, what could she do but ignore the insult, with a woman's power of endurance, that she might defer the day that should separate her from her

work and her people with whom her last dim hopes of happiness were inextricably bound up: for to them she knew that she was still the Mother Queen—"Nostra Madonna," and the dear title was a cure for much heart-anguish.

More than once the good Father Johannes—his hair and beard now falling in thin gray locks about his throat and breast, but the spirit within him still gleaming fiercely from his deep eyes—had come with painful steps down the long way from his distant Troödos to help and comfort her. [Pg 336]

"Daughter," he said, "for thy brave wrestling I absolve thee from thy vow. Christ and the Holy Mother are merciful. They ask no more than man may do. If thou hast not the strength——"

"Father, without my work I have naught to live for. I have not the strength to leave it."

"Then God help thee! and the prayers of all the pilgrims to the Troödista help thee! And of all who have tasted of thy bounty; and of all who have known thy care!"

"Unless, my Father," she interrupted painfully, "there should be one who might better hold this trust, to whom I may yield it? If Carlotta——"

"Is she not like her Mother, the Paléologue?" the Lampadisti answered angrily. "Hath she not plotted murder and treachery to compass her ends? Aye—even a fratricide—because forsooth of the crime of the grace that her brother possessed? Is there a record of good deeds, that the people should wish her back?—Did *she* strive to uphold the laws, or to know them?—To have her people taught and comforted?"—his eyes blazed.

"Thou dost verily comfort me, my Father."

"For that I am sent. The Holy Relic on the altar of the Troödista seemed to point me hither, with every Sacred Thorn. I could pray no prayers but for thee; I could hearken to no other tales of woe. My feet turned ever thither without my will: and thus I knew that thou hadst need of me!"

But once when he came, and she knew not that it was the last time, she said: [Pg 337]

"I have somewhat to ask of thee, my Father."

"Say on."

"That thou wilt receive me into the Holy Sisterhood of St. Francis—as a lay sister; that if I find the world more weary than I can bear, I may be sure of a retreat which thou my faithful friend and spiritual Father will have prepared for me. So that the act of my admission may be known only to thee and me and the directors of the Chapter of St. Francis, and to the Holy Sisterhood, of which I shall be one—yet living in the world, so long as my duty shall call me."

"Thou hast deserved it by thy constancy," he said. "And may the Holy Madonna be gracious to thee: and our blessed St. Francis sing to thy sorrowing soul sweet measures of content, by the voices of 'his brothers, the birds of the air.'"

It was evening, and the Queen had bidden him to her summer terrace over the gardens, where in the luxuriant shrubberies below them the birds were vying with each other in the loud-voiced evening orisons for which the brief flame of the Cyprian sunset was ever a signal.

"The years will make of thee a poet, my Father," Caterina said, smiling at the turn of phrase so unusual from his lips.

"It is not the years but thou, my Daughter, who hast taught me that beauty may be holy and lift the soul."

[Pg 338]

XXXVI

An Embassy from Venice was expected upon important affairs of State, and there was an unusual radiance in the face of the Queen, for it had been announced that the Illustrissimo, the Signor Zorzi Cornaro, brother to Caterina, was chief of the Commission, and it was long since one of her very own had been with her.

"*Zia mia*," she said eagerly to the elder Lady of the Bernardini. "Thou wilt see that no courtesy of reception shall be omitted—it is to welcome one of my very own!"

She dwelt on the phrase with a pathetic accent of delight, returning to it again as she discussed some details of the welcome that should be offered to her brother, whom, for years she had not seen.

Never had an ambassador been received with higher honors in the Court of Nikosia, or with such glad faces by all the attendant circle—for was not His Excellency of the Queen's own household?—and it had been rare to see such a light of happiness in her beloved eyes.

And well did the Cornaro seem to carry the honors due to his house—being very noble in bearing, as befitted the brother of the Queen; and so eloquent in speech that already before the first day had passed, the scholarly men of the Court were exchanging glances of admiration at

the skill with which he parried their compliments; while Caterina, noting their courtesy and the deftness with which he had won them, grew more than ever radiant, with a certain look of [Pg 339] restfulness and of heart-satisfaction which, since the death of the child, those who loved her had scarcely seen her wear.

But Aluisi Bernardini grew somewhat graver than his wont, as the banquet proceeded, while he watched his cousin, the newly-arrived Ambassador, less graciously, his lady thought, than he need have done on this first evening when all were hastening to shower honors upon him.

"Whatever cometh," he said to his wife, as they rose at last from the brilliant tables and passed out upon the terraces at the invitation of the Queen; "whatever cometh, leave her not alone with him, though she should urge thee; use thy sweet insistance—as thou knowest how—to keep others about them for this first evening."

"What meanest thou, Aluisi?" she asked in alarm, and moving quickly aside, as the gay company swept by, that he might explain himself. "Surely she might wish to speak with him alone; she is more happy in his presence than she hath been for years. Seest thou not?"

"Aye, my very dear one, I see it well. It is that I would hold this rare happiness for her so long as may be; and there is that in the manner of my cousin, the Cornaro, which pleaseth me not. I would not have him unfold to her the matter of his Embassy, if it may be a little deferred."

"It hath been told thee, already?"

"Not more than to thee. But in all the grace of him I see his head above his heart—a certain quality of his father, the 'Magnifico, Marco Cornaro'—as he was known in Venice. Yet one who [Pg 340] standeth watching, somewhat apart, may note a hint of displeasure at the splendor of his welcome and the loyalty of the court for the Queen: and the ready wit with which he answereth concealeth under its sparkle a certain persistent measuring of some purpose which he hath much at heart—as if he were studying meanwhile how best to compass his end."

She laid her hand entreatingly on his arm. "For once, my Aluisi, it may be thou dost o'er-reach thyself. Is he not her brother?"

He smiled at her, unconvinced.

"I have watched so long," he said, "and the life of our Queen-Cousin hath been so sadly thwarted that it may well be my fear for her taketh flame too lightly. But she hath set such store upon his coming, and with such gracious scheming for his pleasure, that if he leave her time she may soften any hard intent. San Marco grant that I have misjudged him, for he is of our house."

"Thou hast much weight with her," the Dama Margherita answered very low. "Stay near me, that we may guard her."

But scarcely had they reached the terraces where all the Court were scattered, than they found the Queen pleading with her brother.

"Not to-night, Zorzi mio! For this one night let us take the pleasure of thy coming as a brother to my home. Thou must know our customs and our people and let them offer thee glad welcome. I have music and song planned for thee:—and our Cyprian gardens—with their delights!—Let us stroll awhile."

He made a gesture of dissent. [Pg 341]

"The banquet hath been long enough," he said, "nor lacking for sweets. There is meat of stronger quality to digest. Not for feasting I came, but upon an embassy the matter of which we must discuss."

"And *now*?" she asked, still unwilling.

"Said I not 'now'?" he answered resolutely, advancing toward the arches which admitted to the palace.

But Bernardini stood in his way, arresting his quick pace.

"My cousin, thy 'now' must wait upon the Queen's good pleasure," he said, with due deference. Then, more lightly, "It is the way of our Court in Cyprus—which would do thee honor. Her Majesty hath ordered some festive trifle of music, or other entertainment, which our music-maidens, skilled upon the lute, would fain begin."

At a signal from the Lady Margherita, they came floating out upon the terrace: but the Cornaro turned frowning from them and signed with his hand that his cousin, the Bernardini, should let him pass.

At a glance from the Queen, Bernardini moved courteously aside, but Caterina did not follow: she waited for a moment before she spoke—as if to weigh her speech.

"If it be for matter of the Embassy which may not be delayed," she said, "I will bid our Chamberlain advise our Council of the Realm, that we may receive it with all honor befitting the Court of Venice, so soon as they shall be gathered in the Audience-Chamber. Though the hour be [Pg 342] strange, it is of thy choosing; and thou art our dear guest—as, also, our honored Ambassador from the Republic."

The Cornaro stood for a moment as if uncertain what part to play; then, making light of it all, he dismissed his frown and with a whimsical laugh and graceful deprecatory motions, he turned to his sister and offered his hand to lead her in.

"Nay, nay, my sister; I spoke of no formal session of State to receive my Embassy; rather of a

friendly talk between us two, touching the matter upon which the Republic hath sent me hither—that we may better understand each other before it be laid before the Council. With thy leave, my cousin."

He passed with a friendly nod and some jesting word, which the Bernardini returned more gravely:

"Thou dost verily surround thyself with state, Caterina!" her brother exclaimed in a tone of stern displeasure, when she had indicated a chamber where they might be alone, and he had carefully assured himself that the quaint Eastern draperies concealed no guards—the while she watched him in amazement.

"It is better for thee that there be no listeners," he said, as he placed a seat before her and sat down, fixing her with his gaze.

"Hearken without speech until I have spoken." His tone was threatening.

She turned white and red, half starting up, but cowed by his manner, fell back into her seat again.

"Is this my brother," she asked, "or is it the Ambassador?" [Pg 343]

"Nay; leave tragedy, Caterina; I am come to bring thee word of a great opportunity."

"For my people?—For Cyprus?" she responded with instant interest.

He laughed, a curious, unmirthful laugh.

"Aye—for 'thy people'—'for Cyprus,' verily. Listen! Thou hast it in thy power, at this moment, to bestow a gift upon the Republic—thou who art the Daughter of Venice—that shall make thee memorable throughout the ages."

She was taken unaware; yet suddenly the happenings of all the past years seemed to converge in her, as their central point, binding her hand and foot so that she might not free herself: an icy bolt shot through her: "I—I fail to understand," she answered faintly, for there was somewhat in his look that interpreted the meaning she would fain have missed.

"Aye: it *is* hard to understand—that thou, who art one of our Casa Cornaro—a woman—upon whom Venice hath bestowed such fatherly and unceasing care—should have it in thy power so to reward the Republic, who might have seized the throne of Cyprus, without waiting for thy gift! Yet, of her grace, the Serenissima Repubblica doth verily ask it of thee, as a favor—thou who art Daughter to Venice. Thou mayest well find it hard to understand!"

She rose, indignantly.

"Hath the Signoria of Venice broken faith with her ally of Cyprus? Is she not content to wait for [Pg 344] the sovereignty of this realm until my death—knowing that by my will Venice hath been created heir to this throne—that she should wish to deprive me now of that which hath come to me through so great sorrow, by the will of my husband, the King?"

He watched her curiously, while the color came and went with her tumultuous emotions, and her troubled breathing; and he changed his tone—being subtle.

"I said that the Signoria would have thanked thee for thy gift of the realm; and that the ages should have decreed thee great honor for thy queenly giving: but it would have been more of their courtesy than of thine. For thou dost verily hold too great a matter this little kingdom of Cyprus—forgetting the nets that have many times been spread for thee; and the disfavor of those Cyprian nobles who would have a man to rule over them and not a woman—young and without power—unless Venice be her ally and defender! Even now, thou mightest have been a slave in the land of the Turk, were it not for thy faithful upholding by the galleys of Venice, which came between thee and the devastators. Where is the generous response of a woman who, without them, were nothing?—I thought thee more noble!"

She was bewildered, and he had cut her to the quick.

"Nay, Zorzi: thou dost not comprehend. A Queen must first be faithful to her people."

"Aye—'to her people!'" he retorted scornfully. "And are thy people of Venice, or of Cyprus?— [Pg 345] that thou mayest be faithful neither to one nor to the other! Wilt thou show thy faith to Cyprus by turning thine only helpers and defenders from thee, that thine enemies of the coasts may have free entrance to thine unprotected harbors, while the galleys of Venice no longer waste upon thine ingratitude their unrequited care?"

"It is not true!" she cried; "they would not thus desert me."

"It is like a woman to build a belief without foundation," he answered her—calmly, as one who makes a study at his ease.

"And this is verily thy mission from Venice—*and to me?*"

"I have spoken," he said, "but the time is short: thou mayest not delay to reply—Venice hath so decreed."

"My people love me," she pleaded, with a gasp. "I have only them to live for!"

"Thou hast only them, if thou wilt perforce give up thine own," he answered readily; "it is of thine own choice."

"What meanest thou?" she questioned, grasping his arm in terror: "Zorzi!"

He shook off her touch and answered her unmoved. "The choice will be thine, between thy people of Cyprus—who love thee, thou sayest—and thy people of Venice—we of the Casa Cornaro and the Signoria, whom thou wilt offend and who have spent themselves upon thee. *They will leave thee to thine own devices, withdrawing every galley from thy Cyprian coasts.*"

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She gave a low moan, pressing her trembling hands to her brow, as if brain-weary from perplexity; then she turned to her brother again with the exclamation:

"How shouldst thou so utterly desert me, Zorzi—*thou*, and my people whom I love!"

"The mercy of the Republic is at an end," he assured her uncompromisingly, "and for the Casa Cornaro—thou dost mistake, which seemeth easy for thee; it is rather thou who wilt disgrace me—thy brother, with his honorable pride in his house and his most noble country. For him and his children there will no longer be honors, nor any favor of the Senate: upon thy brother, who doth so faithfully counsel thee and from his heart, will fall the enmity of the Republic who hath *forbidden him to fail* in his mission. And what is left for a patrician who hath suffered exile and confiscation, but death and the extinction of his house? This will be thy doing."

She sprang up, attempting to reach a silken cord that swung upon the wall near her; but Cornaro raised his hand above her and lightly tossed it aside.

"No one shall come between us until I have thy promise: it lieth between me and thee."

"I need some one to help me," she implored; "and Aluisi is of our Casa Cornaro,—he would understand."

"Two are enough," he said,—"nay, too much; for where the matter is urgent, one sufficeth."

She sat on mutely, wrestling with her problem.

From the time that she had first known of her royal destiny, problems of rights of governments had never been put before her in unpartisan, clear-cut lines of white and black—as right and wrong: her judgment had been intentionally befogged by those who should have been her teachers, until she found herself Queen by coronation and inheritance, consecrated in her right by the awful seal of the great High-Priest Death—before whose inviolable silence questions cease, and the scroll of the closed life is no longer searched, save with eyes that blur the lines through overflowing mercy.

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It had been easy for Venice to retain her ascendency over Caterina by intensifying her dependence, by fostering the distinctively feminine and predominant side of her nature—by insisting upon abnormal claims to her duty, her obedience, her love, her gratitude.

When the eyes of the Queen had finally been opened to see the danger of these claims of Venice, it was already too late, for the freedom of her realm had been inextricably tangled in the toils of Venice. Since then she had struggled with all her soul to govern her recalcitrant people by the only power that she believed in or possessed—the power of love. But it was love with little knowledge of the problems of nations or the measures needful to cope with the disaffected nobles who were numerous enough to create an influence and who cared rather for their own pleasure, than for any duty that they owed to enhance the unity or moral splendor of their land.

"My Husband left me Queen," she said at last, raising her troubled eyes to his. "It was by his Will that I rule. Have I the right to yield this power?"

"POWER!"

She recoiled from the irony of the tone.

"They are my people—they love me," she persisted, "and thou canst not know how the care for them doth fill my life. Have I the right to give them to any other?"

[Pg 348]

He laughed again. "Thou hast a veritable talent for creating problems wherewith to vex thyself, my sister, conscience-tossed! Hath one a right to give that which he can no longer hold? Art thou the first who could not rule, to *abdicate* in favor of a stronger sceptre?"

"We must ask these questions," she said struggling to be firm, "for duty is not easy to find."

"Nor fortune," he answered coldly. "And one must be wise indeed to know when 'one may grasp it by the hair'—as thou hast the chance with this most gracious proffer of the Signoria before thee to reject."

She turned her head away that he might not read her thoughts, while she dwelt upon the full meaning of the cruel word he had spoken so easily—*to abdicate*: it meant the disgrace of rulers, the acknowledgment of supreme weakness—unless to the greater power belonged the supreme right.

Was this supreme Right vested with Venice, that she might bow without question? The word smote upon her like a touch of ice and her heart quailed.

Meanwhile Cornaro was watching, urging her decision with further arguments. The Signoria would provide for her; she should retain her title; she should still be styled '*Caterina, Regina*;' she should live in royal state.—But—*if she did not yield*—our Lord himself in heaven would be displeased with her, hating no sin so much for any Christian as base ingratitude;—with much more, to which she made no answer.

And thus the night wore on.

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At last she rose, weary and heart-broken.

"My brother," she said in trembling tones, "none of thine arguments move me: yet thou knowest I should grieve if thou, because of me, shouldst suffer exile and disgrace, or thy children be held from any honor they might win. But even for this I could not yield. Thy happiness and mine must be as naught in this great crisis, against the welfare of my people. Them only I must consider."

A torrent of imprecation rose to his lips, but he left it unuttered. For as he turned his angry glance upon her and saw her face pallid and distraught by the anguish of her struggle, with the strange gleam of unearthly strength in her sorrowing eyes—it would have seemed like cursing a spirit. He crossed himself unconsciously, drawing a little apart from her, and waited impatiently.

There was a motion of her lips, as if she had more to say: but her strength was spent, so that her voice would not come with her first effort. Cornaro was conscious as he watched her of his fear lest it should fail her utterly before she found her speech. He knew what he had to expect if he did not succeed in his mission, and for him the moment was crucial; others, for a far less bitter thwarting of the will of the Signoria, had suffered death—which had been hinted to him. He had meant to offer this as his supreme argument when all others had failed to coerce her: but instinctively he held it back, fearing to anger her to the point of stubborn refusal, for there was some unexpected power of resistance within the soul of this slight woman.

Just as he was beginning to assure himself that, at all costs he must use further persuasion, her [Pg 350] voice came—far away and colorless:

"And if I yield——?"

He went nearer, almost abject in the joy of this sudden reaction, promising her with glowing visions, state, glory, luxury, honor, favor of the Senate, ease, everything that his vivid imagination could seize upon to tempt the fancy of a woman; but she waved her hand impatiently to arrest his quick flow of words.

"Not for myself—but for my people—what for them?"

"Everything!" he answered undaunted; "security, prosperity; they shall be ruled as Venice rules her provinces—ever more wisely than the people rule themselves. Thou knowest that, because of this, foreign States have come to plead that Venice would accept their submission."

She knew that this was true; but her heart was like lead within her as she raised her impotent clasped hands with a sudden, sharp cry of pain. "My God! my God! I am not faithless to my vow—Thou knowest. I must choose their welfare, though my heart should break!"

As the Cornaro gave his hand to lead her to her chamber in the light of the early dawn, she turned to him pitifully imploring his comprehension of her motive: "The Holy Mother knoweth that I am not faithless to my people—since with the favor of the Republic turned from me, I might neither serve nor guard them.—My lot is bitter!"

But the day had dawned for him, if not for her. "Nay; trust me, sweet Sister and Queen, thou [Pg 351] hast chosen wisely," he answered with easy gallantry, as he kissed her hand and would have left her where the Lady Margherita stood waiting with troubled eyes and heightened color to receive her—scarcely condescending to notice the Cornaro's homage or his gay, parting words—"your fair Queen hath done this night an act that shall send her name down through coming ages, wreathed with glory."

For words came easily to him, and he had been too well content with his own triumph and escape to weigh the effect of its cost upon Caterina. But now, after the mockery of his conventional salutation—which none knew better than he to make an expression of profound deference—as he turned his bright gaze upon her, the strained pallor of her face with its deep lines of suffering smote upon him, and he addressed Dama Margherita again with some assumption of concern for his sister's welfare.

"I fear she is overwearied; but the long discussion upon business of the Senate hath been needful. Yet now there is only rest before her, and I may leave her, in confidence, in your gracious care."

But the Lady Margherita had turned impatiently from him to busy herself with the Queen before he had finished his speech; then she flashed him a glance which he found it hard to meet.

"We who love her need not your counsel, my Lord, to strive to undo your 'doing of this night. These are the apartments of Her Majesty. We need to be alone."

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XXXVII

Was Venice insatiable in requirement?

"It is enough," Caterina pleaded impotently. "Venice cannot ask more!"

"Nay, it is little," the Cornaro answered, "and only that which shall bring thee further honor. The Provveditori will charge themselves with the details of the Royal progress—as the Signoria hath directed."

"Let me but sign the parchment, as it may please them," she urged, "for the last time with the Royal Seal of Cyprus—but spare me more! I would fain withdraw into the Holy House of St. Francis and be at rest."

But this might by no means be permitted; and the Ambassador of the Republic was ready with his threadbare argument of ingratitude, with much other reasoning of which he was scarcely less proud.

"One giveth not a regal gift with the downcast air of compulsion—else were it base in him who receiveth. Bethink thee ever of thine honor and of that of Venice," he admonished his sister many times during the weeks of preparation that followed upon the Queen's decision; whatever the detail under consideration—and few escaped his vigilance—he was inflexible, and her opposition could not go beyond his announcement: "*It is the will of Venice.*"

[Pg 353] Where were the nobles of this country tossed hither and thither like a shuttle-cock at the will of the strongest, that they would not arm for resistance—nay—wrapped themselves in sullen silence in the seclusion of their estates, or gathered in great companies to plunge into the forests and forget their vexations in the comradery and excitement of the chase, while for Caterina the slow days passed in agonized entreaty that some miracle might yet chance to save the realm for Cyprus?

Sometimes a wild hope came to her that this extremity might stimulate them to an uprising to save the integrity of their land: but a few words with those of the Council most devoted to Cyprus convinced her that the hope was futile. The days of national ambition were over for this people of many races: their luxuries sufficed for their content and lulled them into a lethargy which had so deadened their perceptions that the gradual encroachments of Venetian power could reach this climax without arousing them to action.

Even the burghers who had so valiantly defended their Queen in earlier days looked on in mournful inertia while preparations for the royal progress went forward, knowing that if Venice thus joyfully accepted the 'resignation' of their Queen—for thus had the act been freely translated to the Cyprian people—they were themselves powerless; and the day of farewell dawned at last, when the royal cortège passed out from the palace-gates to the grand Piazza of Nikosia, where the formal act of renunciation was to be made.

[Pg 354] It was a long and ceremonious procession—the high officials of the realm were there in splendid vestments, with many Venetian functionaries in crimson dignity among them—with a numerous escort of guards in full armor—with companies of cavalry and men-at-arms, while, in their midst the Queen, in regal velvet and pearls, rode surrounded by the knights and ladies of her court. But the color of her robe was black, as were also the garments of her maids of honor—of satin, soft and lustrous, reflecting the lights from their jewels as they gleamed in the sunshine,—yet, to the Embassy of Venice the sombre choice was displeasing, as an unpermissible expression of the Queen's sentiments.

"Hath Venice also concerned herself with sumptuary laws for the ladies of my household?" Caterina asked with ineffable disdain, when remonstrance had been made. And they, having gained so much, feared to press her further.

After the solemn mass in the Duomo, the magnificent chords of a jubilant Te-Deum filled the Piazza with harmonies—it was the music of a Triumph indeed:—the soldiers, the knights, the high functionaries of State, the priests and chanting choirs were all there; but the central figure under the golden baldachino, upheld by the barons of the realm and surrounded with royal honors, was not the Conqueror—but the victim—the prey—the sacrifice. It was rather they—the leaders of this pageant, in their crimson robes of office with the shadow of the banner of San Marco above them, who rode proudly, sure of the honors and emoluments that awaited them when Venice should echo to them the Roman cry of victory—"*Io Triumphe!*"

[Pg 355] And now the Queen pronounced the speech that Venice had decreed, wherein she claimed the love that her simple people had lavished upon her—

"*For Venice—to whom we have freely yielded our right.*"

The words were strange upon her lips, and she spoke them stonily, as if she knew not that they had a meaning; and thus tortured from her, it may well be questioned whether the Recording Angel ever noted them in his book—yet they were her answer to the *popolo* who thronged about her with tears and blessings, as she journeyed from city to city to repeat the mournful ceremony of farewell; and the people heard them with sobs and groans.

In every city, as one for whom life had died and speech had lost its soul—she uttered these words which Venice had decreed; in every city she looked on mutely from under her royal canopy—she who was so powerless—while the flag of the island of Cyprus was supplanted by the banner of San Marco, and the sculptured marble tablet with the winged lions guarding its triumphant inscription, was placed as a record of a kingdom too weak to rule.

FRAN. DE PRIULI VENETAE CLASS.
IMPER. DIVI MARCI VESS.
CYPRI FELICITER ERECTUM EST.
NO. MCCCCLXXXVIII. 28 FEBRU.

How dreary the passage across those wide waters to the shores of the smiling Adriatic for the desolate woman who had left them in the first flush of her youth, with hopes as brilliant as the skies of Venice, and with a promise as fair—to return to them lonely, despoiled, heart-broken, [Pg 356] craving rest! The gray light of the storm-clouds by the banks of the Lido and the moan of the rising winds which threatened to engulf the Bucentoro and the fleet of attendant barges coming in state to meet the deposed Queen, were typical of the change.

Not caring for the splendor of her equipage, though the Doge himself was her escort—not deceived by the pageant of welcome that Venice offered, Caterina—very beautiful and pale and still, with the sense of the motive power broken within her—passed up the long length of the Canal Grande by the side of the Serenissimo, receiving the glad homage of the people of Venice.

"Caterina Veneta! Caterina Regina!"

Venice was outdoing herself in triumph, showering regal honors upon her: the bells of all the Campanili were ringing a jubilee: music greeted her from the shores as they glided by—the portals wreathed with festal garlands, the beautiful city a glory of light and color; for the storm of the evening had passed and the morning had dawned in sunshine, and along the Riva the people were thronging to welcome her—the Queen who had bestowed the gift of her kingdom upon Venice!

Yet how had the Republic kept faith with Cyprus? Step by step, through the years, drawing the velvet clasp closer—closer—until there was scarce life left—smiling the while: gathering in the revenues of the rich land amply, with no care to spend them on the welfare of the island, or for its increase: slowly, strenuously, with deft insinuations of filial duty, striving to dominate the young Queen's moral judgments and press the claims which were of Venice's own creation— [Pg 357] jealously watching lest she become too popular, and hampering her action through the very officers sent in guise of help—lest through freedom she should in truth grow strong to rule: Year by year—stealthily—smiling under a cloak of splendor which the Cyprians loved, Venice had grasped at power—a little more, and a little more—until resistance was impossible.

Was it meet to receive her thus? Could she find smiles for the people to-day with the memories of her bridal pageant greeting her at every turn—a woman despoiled of hope—a widowed wife—a childless mother—a queen without kingdom or power?

Before the Palazzo Corner Regina, the long procession came to pause, and with the ceremonies that were meet, Zorzi Cornaro, brother to Caterina, knelt down bareheaded before the Doge and was knighted for his prowess in persuasion—since without his eloquence it might well have been that the Queen of Cyprus would not have given that complete and absolute surrender which was so graciously announced to all the allies of Venice as "*of the full and free determination* of our most serene and most beloved daughter, Caterina Cornaro."

For the grace of Venice—when her smiling mood was on her, as for the fear of her life-crushing frown, men did her bidding without question, and never *dared* to fail.

But Venice still claimed a final act of gift and of submission, where the Venetian people might be her witnesses: and when the domes of San Marco flashed in the sunset light, the procession entered in solemn state—the Senate and Signoria and all the Ducal Court, in full attendance—and [Pg 358] once more Caterina knelt before the altar and repeated her hard lesson, taught by that imperious ruler who knew how to hold the sea "in true and perpetual dominion," and who would not suffer 'his beloved daughter' to fail in one jot or tittle of her act of renunciation.

The homecoming of the Daughter of Venice was over.

Then, at last, came rest, and the sylvan-shades of Asolo—vine-crowned among the hills, with the sea spreading far below—blue, shimmering, laughing—as if she laved but shores of content, under happy skies.

Whatever of good there remained for Caterina to do in this petty domain which the munificence of the Signoria had bestowed in exchange for Cyprus, she did with a gracious and queenly hand, so that her realm was wider than her territory, for she had won the love of the people wherever she had passed, and in the years of her tried and chequered life, no evil was ever spoken of her. Yet often the gentle Queen slipped away from the modest festivities she had devised for the pleasure of her slender mimic court—the music tourneys—the recitations—the fanciful quibbles in words—which could have had for her great weariness of empty hands but a pale moonlight charm—to the lovely gardens of her hillside castle, to woo sad memories—and sweet as sad—of the far-off terraces of Potamia which Janus had prepared for his girl-bride.

Then once again Venice decreed a pageant for the gentle Lady of Asolo. [Pg 359]

It was night, and the skies had clothed themselves in gloom; out on the lagoon the lights in the shipping scarce pierced the mists, and the rain fell in flurries, drifting in gusts under the arcades of the Ducal Palace, and lifting the cloaks of the Senators and Councillors who sought shelter there while the procession was forming. But none turned back for the wildness of the night, for the order of the Senate was imperative that all the State officials and all the embassies must do her honor; and the time had been appointed by a King who bows to no mortal will and brooks no delay. Across the Piazza, down through the Palace Court-yards and through the *calle* the people were flocking—dark groups over which the lights of the torches flared fitfully: the nobles were waiting in their gondolas—each at his palace portal, to take his place—there were no sounds but the wind and the rain—footsteps plashing over the wet pavements—a whispered order.

And now to strange, solemn music,—the sobbing of the 'cellos, the tenderer melancholy of the flute—the long procession was moving up the Canal Grande—the ducal barge and the gondola of the Patriarch not keeping decorous line, for the roughness of the waters. From the portals of the Palazzo Corner Regina a bridge of boats had been thrown across the Canal Grande to the mouth of the Rio of San Cassan, and out of the blackness of the great Cornaro Palace the bearers met them, bringing in reverent state the form of the gracious Queen for whom all earthly problems were solved—who might never again answer their devotion with smiles or benediction. [Pg 360]

Silently each noble stepped up from his gondola, crossing himself devoutly and bowing his head as he joined the long, never-ending procession: like a phantom vision it swept through the mists—each dark figure bearing its torch—*as if it were the soul of him above his head*, casting a ghostly reflection, in lessening rays, down through the blackness—gliding in air across the water, over the arch of the bridge which was all but invisible in the darkness—and down through the narrow rio to the Church of the Sant'Apostolli—the weird harmonies of the songs of the dead echoing faintly back through the windings of the rio, like half-heard whispers from the spirit land.

When the solemn music of the midnight mass had been chanted over the noble company in the Church of the Sant'Apostolli, they left her lying in state before the altar of the Cappella Cornaro, while in the church, outside the chapel, the Ducal guards kept watch. Very still and pale she was in the light of the tall wax candles burning about her and the torches flaring from the funeral pyre, and strange to look upon in the coarse brown cape and cowl of the habit of St. Francis, with a hempen cord for girdle. But the Lady Margherita had tenderly folded the hood away from the beautiful face and head, and in the pale patrician hands a rose lay lightly clasped, and a wealth of floral tributes heaped her bier—which was crowned with the royal crown of Cyprus.

Now that the gentle Sovereign had put aside forever her robes of royalty and donned for her last vestment the symbol of service and humility, how should Venice fear the unconfessed rivalry of her rare spirit,—a mere woman—conquered by the power of the State and stricken by death? [Pg 361]

Now that the slight hands, folded nerveless over the quiet breast, might never more thrill to her emotions of large motherliness, and scatter gladness with gracious flutterings, in swift response to a too-adoring populace—now that the sleeping eyes might never again unclose to smile her loving soul out to her people—the Signoria could be magnanimous in homage: and through the days that the proud city mourned for her, the sable hatchments on church and palace bore the arms of Venice and of Cyprus.

Transcriber's Note:

Inconsistent hyphenation and spelling in the original document have been preserved.

Typographical errors corrected in the text:

Page 21 spozalizio changed to sposalizio
Page 26 tumuluously changed to tumultuously
Page 168 Prooveditore changed to Provveditore
Page 169 bailo changed to bailò
Page 178 unusued changed to unused
Page 180 Conaro changed to Cornaro
Page 180 Conaro's changed to Cornaro's
Page 199 Benardini changed to Bernardini
Page 205 dillettissimo changed to dilettissimo
Page 234 Revenendissimo changed to Reverendissimo
Page 306 dias changed to dais
Page 311 dias changed to dais
Page 343 Republica changed to Repubblica
Page 356 Bucintoro changed to Bucentoro

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