

PART II

CHAPTER XI

BELJAZI

THERE is no city quite like Ragusa, tiny, sunlit, contained within its great walls, sea-scented and broad-streeted, flown about with pigeons. When ships were small, Ragusa was a seaport. It is still for fishing boats and little yachts, leaving the deep harbour a mile to the north to deal with the great ships that come down from Spalato and Fiume, and the great ships that bring the tourists and the traffic from the south. From there you can sail to far-off lands, but for the near islands you must come to the little dream harbour of Ragusa to take your boat.

The islands run all along the Dalmatian and Croatian coasts, great and little, purple and grey and spaced by sapphire sea, gull flown and wind blown, teased by sirocco or tormented by the Bora, but always lovely and filled with the charm of the remote.

When from the zig-zag road leading down to the coast town Jean saw them first, saw Ginpanna and Mezzo and tiny Beljazi, that spot on the deep tranquil blue, it was as though he saw his fantastic dream realised and made manifest and practical.

It was Beljazi that held his eyes. He did not know its name. It was not till standing with a boatman on the mole at Ragusa and in answer to his question that it came to him.

"Ah, that is Beljazi," said the man. "There is

nothing there worth seeing. People do not go to Beljazi, but if monsieur likes I will take him to Mezzo."

"I wish to go to Beljazi," said Jean.

Herdjiman, the boatman who owned a little blue boat with a lugsail which was rocking by the mole steps, seemed inclined to resent a stranger laying down the law like this. The ordinary tourist went where he was told, reposing confidence in the opinion of the people who ought to know. He was a grizzled and heavy specimen, true type of the Adriatic longshoreman and he had spent his early days in the tunny fishing industry. Beljazi had been connected with it, but in the last few years the fishermen who had lived and worked there had moved to Curzola, and for some obscure reason this fact had made the place more undesirable in the eyes of Herdjiman.

He surveyed Jean up and down.

"I am an artist," said Jean. And that explained it, he belonged to that mad lot.

"Why," said Herdjiman, "there is one like you living on Beljazi—no, but I believe he is gone. He and his family—well, well, it is not for me to say—four children he had, not much higher than that, and Tomasso, the Italian, used to fetch them their food across and their wine. He drank did that artist, but so they say they all do."

Jean laughed.

"Some don't," said he. "Or only water."

Well, that might be—anyhow, if monsieur was set on going to Beljazi there was the boat.

Jean got in and they started, rowing out of the harbour and then putting up the sail.

Beljazi lies four miles away to the west, from the boat as you leave Ragusa it is almost indiscernible,

behind you lies the coast with its treeless mountains facing invisible Italy, to the north the islands, to the south and the west the sea unbroken but for a sail or that spot half-invisible in the blinding sparkle—Beljazi.

Then, as the distance lessens to the creak of the mast bending to the pressure of the sail, the spot ahead increases and the three screw pines that are the only trees show against the sky.

The highest part of the island is perhaps not more than twenty feet above the sea level, and as Jean looked ahead he could see now the little waves falling on a beach of sand.

The sandy beach is not common on the Adriatic, and Beljazi might be a bathing resort only for its fortunate distance from the coast and its microscopic size.

Jean laughed as he stepped from the boat on to the beach, and glanced round at this tiny kingdom and the three weary-looking old screw pines whose black-green branches cut the diamond blue sky. Of the huts of the fishermen only two remained, one-roomed shacks built of pine and roofed with shingles, facing north and backed by a rise of the ground spread with the fragrant maquis.

Beljazi has a voice, the voice of the sea on its beach, and a perfume of its own, the perfume of the thyme and sweet-smelling plants, making a carpet whose pile nearly reaches to the knee—or a couch to lie on.

The artist and his family had left their traces in the huts ; bottles, tin cans, old newspapers, cracked crockery ware and—bottles.

Truly he must have been a brave drinker this Knight of the Brush, who had left his name on the wall beneath the charcoal sketch of a dancing skeleton.

Caradoc, fecit.

A Frenchman. The old newspapers were all French. *La Gaudriole*, the *Echo de Paris* and a few torn art journals; cigarette ends everywhere.

Jean had already struck up a friendship with the boatman.

"Herdjiman," said he, "who owns this place?"

"Beljazi?"

"Yes."

"Oh, it owns itself," said Herdjiman, "it is like the beach. People may come or go. The tunny fishers came here, but they paid nothing for putting up their huts, and they left and the Frenchman came. Did you, by chance, want to come?"

"Yes," said Jean; "look, there is a couch and an old table, and all that bedding—did those belong to the artist?"

"Maybe," said Herdjiman, "or some may have belonged to the fishers, he would have bought them. Tomasso would know, for it was he who used to bring the things, but there they are for any one to take—with the bottles."

"Well, I don't want the bottles," said Jean, laughing; "but I will take the rest and pay for them if he turns up. I will also want other things, I am not coming here alone, and there is food to be thought of. I also want to buy a boat, for one cannot live here without a boat; can you get me one cheap?"

"Cheap enough, but can you handle her?"

"I have been used to boat work on the Brittany coast, which is a worse coast than this."

"I do not know anything of that place or where it is," said Herdjiman; "but if it is worse than this when the Bora is blowing it must be a bad coast. Are you then married?"

"No, but I have a family."

"And you would bring them here—well, I have always said artists are a mad lot."

Jean burst into a laugh.

He was thinking what Herdjiman would say when he saw the family. Cavani and Karan!

"Herdjiman," he said, "my family consists of an old man, he is over a hundred, and a young girl, but they are no relations of mine, I picked them up on the road. They are tired and they want to rest. You have heard of the great Napoleon?"

"He who built the Maria Theresa road over the mountains away north there?"

"Yes, he was always building roads for his armies to march on. Well, the old man was a soldier of Napoleon's and he wears the uniform still. You will see him to-morrow."

Herdjiman expressed no surprise. His knowledge of history was limited, and whether Napoleon lived fifty years ago or a hundred was all the same to him.

He liked Jean, for Jean, unlike the ordinary tourist, treated him as a man not a boatman, also he scented in Jean a liberal customer. He fell into a musing fit.

"Tomasso is a robber," said he at last. "There, I've said it and the rest aren't much better. If you will leave it to me I will do all you want and take your old man over here, he and the girl. There is a spring over there by the trees that will do you for water, though the artist never used much of that, and you will want the second hut if there are three of you. There is no bed, but I could swing you a hammock; also, there is only one bed in the first hut, but I could swing you a hammock there for your old man. I was in the *Trentino-Lloyd* for a year as a young man and slept in a hammock, it is

the easiest bed in the world. You will want a coffee pot, you will want also cups and plates, and knives. In your money—oh, yes, I can think in your money fast. I can talk in your tongue since my wife is a Frenchwoman out of Toulouse and not only talks, but reckons in francs. As I was saying, in your money the boat would be five hundred francs, and for another five hundred francs I will engage to set you up with the things you want should you choose to leave everything to me. That would be including the work, for I would have to get my son, who has a boat of his own, to help."

"And I could come here to-morrow?"

"Why not. You and the girl, if she would lend her hand, could help."

"Could we start at sunrise?"

"As you please. Time is all the same to me. Where is your old man?"

"I left them at the little inn where the road comes down from the hills, it is only a few kilometres from Ragusa."

"Well, let them be on the mole with you at sunrise, and I will be there."

"Very well," said Jean, "and I will pay you a thousand francs and, if you like, something now in advance."

"Your word is enough," said Herdjiman.

Jean looked at the other. It seemed to him that he had found something more precious than a helper—a friend. He held out his hand.

"And here is my hand on my word," said he.

The rough hand of Herdjiman seemed to bring them together into a new world of understanding.

"We artists aren't all so mad as you think," said Jean; "but maybe we do things sometimes that other folk don't do. Herdjiman, I met this old man

and the girl away over there beyond the hills; they are quite simple folk, honest but begging their bread, but I am not as they are, and people would point at me if they saw me with them as friends."

"All honest folk are the same people," said Herdjiman.

"No," said Jean, suddenly speaking beyond his years and his mental training, as though a window had been opened giving him a view of the world; "not in the cities, Herdjiman, where the people at the top are often rogues. I have heard a man say that no honest man can ever succeed in Paris. I don't know if he spoke the truth, but I do know that many of the men there who have good names—well, no matter, it is not good to speak of one's country like that, but I dare say it is the same here and, anyhow, to be poor is to meet with disdain everywhere. These friends of mine are poor, but there will be no one to look down on them here, should they stay whilst I think of what is to be done in the future." He paused for a moment, his eyes fixed on the little waves falling on the sands. He wanted to tell about Karan. There were moments when he could scarcely believe that Karan was a reality and the whole fantastic story true. The bizarre figure of Cavani; his story, her story; the tombs on the desolate plain; the road journey from Serajevo with those ghosts who were yet real on the road with him, invisible most of the time; the road journey from the tombs to Ragusa with them still as invisible companions, only materialising at night or at noon when he had sometimes waited for them to pick up with him. The whole thing had to be spoken of to another, and there was little speech necessary, for he found that the whole thing could be expressed in one word—Karan.

"I have come to care for the girl," said he suddenly and simply; "and that is the truth."

"For every man there is a girl," said the boatman. "If the girl wants the man. Look you, it was at Toulon. I was part owner of a smack in the sardine fishing and on the quay in Toulon I saw a girl, she saw me, and the thing was done. I said, come with me, and she came. Came with me, leaving the folk she had always known. She's with me still. She is my wife. No priest has ever mumbled over us, but that did not stop us from having five strong sons—and I used to drink before I met her, but she drove the drink away. Well, if your girl is an honest girl and if she cares for you—what matters?"

"Thanks," said Jean.

He had found understanding and sympathy. He rested on the word for a moment. Then:

"Well, then, it is all settled. Let us go back to Ragusa. I did not tell you, but when I spoke of the boat, I had in mind that I would require it mostly to go to Ragusa perhaps every day for a picture which I have to paint. Do you know anything of Baron Stein?"

"The Baron," said Herdjiman, with respect in his voice. "He who lives at the big villa—oh, yes, he is very well known—and his lady——"

"He is not married."

"No; at least so they say, but it is not his wife that lives at the villa, anyhow, but the lady with golden hair, so she is called—she is the Baron's friend."

Jean understood. Well, it did not matter to him whether the woman to be painted was Stein's mistress or not so long as she was worth painting.

He turned to the boat and, pushing off, they raised the sail and made back to Ragusa.