

## CHAPTER XXXIV

## LA MAJIOLA, LA MAJIOLA!

AND if he had not stayed those three days in Bordighera he would have been in time!

He cross-questioned Herdjiman.

She had taken her drum—heavens! It was like listening to a thing in a dream, or a story by Hans Andersen, or the story of something remote from real life, yet which had become in some incredible way part of actuality . . .

She had taken her drum and a little parcel. Madame Herdjiman, who had returned to the room chipped in here.

Yes, she had refused any decent luggage such as ordinary folk carried—not even a mat basket, but the Gitanas were all like that.

She seemed prejudiced against the girl. She was. As a matter of fact, she had only known Karan since the death of Cavani, when Karan, leaving Beljazi, had come to live in Ragusa.

Madame Herdjiman had gathered all about her from Herdjiman, knew the hold she exercised on Jean, and summing up the whole matter disapproved. Goodness knows, it was not the conventional side of the thing that displeased her, she was no person to throw stones in a matter like that, but she could not help seeing that Jean and Karan were belonging each to a different walk of life; still, that might have been nothing if——

The fact of the matter was that Karan displeased

her. Had she the evil eye? Madame could not tell, but the dark glance of Karan gave her doubts.

She was a Gitana.

It is difficult to explain all that this term summed up in the mind of Madame Herdjiman. The people of the smoke-stained tents, thieves, fortune-tellers, magicians! Who knows? But the fact remained, Karan had come under its ban. She had nothing useful to say on the subject of Karan, except to warn Jean to beware of her, but she was too wise to do that, so she left the room to attend to her household affairs. And Herdjiman, filling his pipe, lit it and began to smoke.

"Well," he said, "there it is, and there's an end of it. What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know," said Jean. He spoke as though he were consulting some inward oracle that was dumb for the moment. His eyes were fixed on the floor. Then he began to talk, but not a word about Karan.

He was telling Herdjiman of the Legion, and he spoke with the restrained fury of a man who, whilst exposing some great injustice, does so because it is relative to himself.

The good Herdjiman listened.

He had had a hard enough life when he was young, but this Legion business seemed to him outside his experience as to what was hard. It was the pay that hit him most, the rest did not so much matter. After all, a man was a man, and he ought to take knocks without whining; a soldier to be a soldier must accustom himself to all that—but the pay—five centimes a day. Well! well!

He led Jean on, glad to get him away from the subject of Karan and also interested to hear all

about this Legion business. Then he began to talk himself.

"The French are a cunning lot. I've told my wife so often. She's French. She only laughs; but they are. I have nothing to say against them, but they have an eye to profit. All the same, and after all, what's to be done. You can't do anything to a shopkeeper, he always has the law on his side, and the Law was never made for a poor man. The priests are as bad as the lawyers—well, what's to be done."

So he went on, Jean nodding his head, scarcely hearing.

He had been talking about the Legion and inveighing against it, but with only half his mind. The rest was astray.

"Well, now," said Herdjiman at last, "and what are you going to do? There is a little room here you can have for the asking till things straighten themselves, and that would save you the money for an inn. And talking of money, there is the boat."

"What boat?"

"Why, the boat you bought from me for Beljazi, and with the money for which I made a great venture, with enough left over to buy another boat—her twin sister."

"Oh, the boat," said Jean. "I had forgotten it, but you must keep the money, I have money enough. Anyhow, I never can pay you for your kindness and for writing to me. But I would like to look at the new boat all the same."

"Well, she is at the slip," replied the other, "and if you want to look at her there's nothing easier."

He rose, glad to get out in the open air and away from the atmosphere of trouble that seemed to fill the little room, and they went out into the evening light of the street.

They came down to the boat slip, and there, sure enough, moored beside Herdjiman's fishing scow lay a boat, the sister of the *Karan*.

Jean stepped over into her. Then he came back to the slip and stood for a moment with his eyes on the little boat that only wanted the name *Karan* in pencil writing on the prow to be the real thing.

Then he turned away with Herdjiman.

"I have left my luggage at the quay," said he, "and I will stop at an inn in the town for to-night, The Golden Fleece. I will see you later. I want now just to go away and think about things."

"Will you go back to Beljazi?" asked the fisherman.

"I don't know," said Jean.

They parted at the corner of the street of the Winds, and Jean took his way slowly through the quiet ways that never have known the turn of a wheel or the foot of a horse. The pigeons were fighting above the square against an evening sky absolutely cloudless and of a deep, tender misty blue. The perfume of violets and mimosa came from the flower stalls, and a hint of the sea on the breeze setting in from beyond Lagosta.

He left the town, coming up to the broad road that gives a view of the sea and there, like a jewel in the evening light, lay Beljazi. Remote and sunset-washed, the little island showed nothing of the huts or the beach.

Something moving in the air above it disclosed itself as a ring of gulls. The gulls often met there at sunset; he remembered that now; they had done so doubtless from the beginning of time, and doubtless would do so to the end.

He turned, and coming along the road took the way that led towards the Villa Majiola.

It was as though he were forced to retrace his steps through time—forced to look again at the things that had been fatal to him.

The great gates of the villa were closed, evidently Stein was away, but a small side gate was open, and he came through into the garden.

Yes, the windows of the house were shuttered, and the great electric light globes that had swung above the pepper trees at the entrance had been removed.

Yes, Stein was not only away, but likely to remain away.

Apart from the mournfulness of closed windows there was a tragic something about the place, existing perhaps only in the imagination of the intruder.

A something heightened curiously by the song of a sweet-voiced bird in the Judas tree by the entrance. It seemed repeating the name of the place "La Majiola—La Majiola," sang the bird. It seemed rolling the name on its tongue, gloating over it, gathering into its sweetness all the beauty of the garden, the warm evening light and the rose reflections of the sunset on the white walls of the villa.

He came along by the path that led round to the back. It was here that he had escaped that night, coming along this path that he was now retreading. And here, as he rounded the western wall, lay the garden on which he had looked out that morning whilst waiting for his first interview with the Baroness Hauptmarch.

As he stood glancing up and listening to the song of the bird now faint, but not quite cut off by distance, steps drew his attention. Turning, he saw two people coming towards him round the corner of the walk where stood a great arbutus tree. Two

people, a girl slight and fragile leaning on the arm of a woman in the dress of a nurse.

The girl was the Baroness Hauptmarch. He stood rather confused in his mind as to what he should say in this extraordinary interview that he had stumbled upon, so to speak. He could have turned and left the garden, but he was held by some irresistible power and, more, he was led towards the oncomers.

The nurse on whose arm the girl was leaning showed no surprise at the sight of the intruder, took him most likely for some one who had to do with the affairs of the house.

The girl was equally indifferent. She passed Jean without a glance, her eyes were fixed on the gravelled path before her.

She seemed amused, as though following the antics of some gnome or sprite running before her on the path, and her head seemed unable to keep still.

So she passed him, and horrified and without glancing back, he kept on by the path that led him past the arbutus tree and around the eastern side of the villa to the front.

He found the gate and the road.

The bird in the Judas tree was still trilling and warbling, putting almost into words the beauty of the garden and the loveliness of the villa, and the praise of that ease and contentment that wealth alone can bring.

“ La Majiola ! La Majiola ! ” sang the bird.