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1878 Vol.

THE CARDINAL'S PAWN

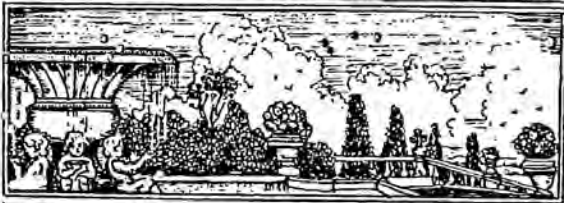


Page 10.

"Crouched by the font lay a woman, tall and young."

*The
Cardinals
Pawn*

H. L. Montgomery



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CHAPTER I.

THE WHETSTONE OF OPPORTUNITY.

"*SATAN! Satan! Satan!*"

The words cut like a whip through the still air, drowsy with afternoon silence; lingering echoes of their insistence seemed to beat to and fro between the brown walls of the narrow streets, up which Cardinal Medici's coach (gilded and with painted medallions of rosy Loves on the panels) was at that instant rocking on its leathern springs.

"*Satan! Satan! Satan!*"

The sound jarred on the atmosphere of siesta prevailing within the carriage, in which his Eminence and his Eminence's secretary and confessor (the latter office might or might not be a sinecure), with his Eminence's pet page, and Messer Babuino the monk, were returning from a fraternal visit to the Pitti. Yet, if such an idea could be entertained near an august sorcerer of the Church, the outcry did not seem wholly to clash on his Eminence's mood; at the first start the thin eyelids had flickered, as though a secret thought had leapt out in clangour on the hush of the Florentine afternoon.

"Some one invokes his patron saint," he observed dryly.

"Your Eminence's pardon, but 'tis a woman," thrust in the page-boy. "A man in stress is more like to speak with the tongue he wears in his scabbard."

Cardinal Ferdinando's black eyes narrowed in a smile.

"Thou art yet in the region where the rapier is a man's weapon and the tongue a woman's," he said

mockingly. "When thou hast turned a leaf in the romance, thou wilt find that sometimes the one borrows from the other and yet ruffles it well, and that at times the shrewdest blow of all is dealt by one lying as low as the Rambino of the Ara Cœli."

"And how may such a blow be best parried?" demanded the lad with the freedom of a favourite.

Cardinal Ferdinando smiled again.

"Best with the blade sharpened on the whetstone of opportunity," he returned. "But come, let us play proxy to that lady's summons; he whom she calls seemingly carries."

"At the Palazzo Strozzi," muttered the boy meaningly, letting down the steps for his master's descent. The monkey, unnoticed, sprang after.

"*Satan!*"

The cries, fainter but instinct with a dogged ferocity, still pealed on. Guided by them, the Cardinal stepped forward to the crumbling doorway of a small brown church, over against which the coach had brought itself to anchor. As he pushed aside the leathern curtain a slanting ray of sunlight fell within, illuminating a group of blue-veiled nuns and a priest in a torn cassock, centring about the stone font near the entrance. Crouched by the font, her hands locked about its pillar, lay a woman, tall and young. A mass of black hair scattered some yards farther back on the pavement had seemingly been shorn from her head, but the locks remaining to her were tangled in a natural crown of curls, giving something of a boyish beauty to the olive face. As a rustle in the knot about her told of another attempt to force her from the stone, the passionate cry rang out once more, the sunlight striking full on the convulsed face, flung back in a frenzy of protest.

Then the clamour stopped, frozen on the girl's lips, her eyes staring at the scarlet figure in the doorway, the ape mowing on his shoulder. Yet the tension on

the brown wrists did not slacken, though a fierce gleam of exultation fused into the glance with which the woman swept the adversaries, motionless around her as though struck into stone. For an instant the Cardinal enjoyed the situation.

"At the risk of trespassing on the privileges of prior acquaintanceship, madonna, permit me to offer my services," he drawled, moving forward negligently. "Such chanting as penetrated to my ears without is not like to redound to the credit of your convent, father" he went on more sternly, turning to the priest, whose bewildered gaze appeared still scarcely capable of distinguishing between eminent scarlet and diabolic red.

The girl sprang to her feet.

"By the woman who bore you, I demand protection!" she panted. "They would force me away from the sunshine, vault me living into the tomb, a charnel-house full of the festering spites of women rotting on their feet!" She flung the words venomously over her shoulder at the cluster of shuddering nuns. "Twenty to one, and they dared not touch me while I called on their master!" she finished with a short laugh, throwing herself back against the font.

"Eminence, the girl is mad!" quavered the old priest. "Mad, for the claims of an ancient friendship have outweighed solid *scudi* with the holy mother here, that the maiden might enter her honourable house though she brings no dowry. But for the death of the father with whom she came hither tamely enough a couple of months since, we should have heard no word from her to-day that would not have been full of gratitude for the refuge afforded to the child of poverty, though of an honest name."

"And that name, good father?" asked the Cardinal.

"Bonaventuri Eminence," babbled the other; "an honest name, though truly one who bears it has

thrown her cap over the roofs; yet the old people will touch no *grossi* of Madonna Bianca's——"

"Peace, fool!" interrupted his bearer sharply. "What have I to do with your old wives' *gossip*? Make every Florentine fly-by-night, as well as every beggar, into a holy sister, if you will, but first find gags for their mouths, that they do not plague passers-by with their outcries."

He turned sharply on his heel, to recoil, however, with a shudder of disgust. In the pauses of his speech the fitful tinkle of a bell had sounded now, through the stillness of the sleeping street without, the steps of sandalled feet fell rhythmically, as black-shrouded figures, supporting an oblong burden, were transiently silhouetted in the doorway.

At the first sound of the bell the girl by the font had straightened herself; now she leapt forward.

"He whom I called upon has sent me a .. of escape!" she cried, with a reckless laugh. "Let me but clasp yon plague-stricken wretch to this bosom, and the sweet sisterhood will scantily seek to hold me."

She drew back with a breath of anger, as the Cardinal, lissomely enough, barred her way. The next instant, with a lightning-like movement, she had snatched at the rapier of the page, pressing on the scarlet figure with the fury of a practised fencer.

In the face of the sudden onslaught Cardinal Ferdinando started, but it was forward, and not back. At the same instant, the monkey, attracted by the flickering steel, had leapt from his master's shoulder, paralysing the assailant's arm by its unexpected clutch.

"That plunging thrust in tierce is good, madonna," the Cardinal observed, coolly mastering his unexpected ally, even though his attitude had not relaxed its effect of startled tension. Yet a hawk in a dove-cote would scarce be more out of place than a member of the Church Militant such as you in this peaceful sisterhood; it is possible that at Rome a more fitting

niche might exist for you. Reverend father," he went on, turning to the priest, "this holy house should be situate near my lodging in the palace of the Riccardi; does no snug way of access exist thereto?"

The priest nodded, moving forward with the alacrity of one ridden by the nightmare responding to an awakening touch. With a beckoning glance, he passed behind the high altar, unlocking a small door scarcely noticeable in the shadow of the gilded Renaissance flutings. The Cardinal stretched out his hand to the girl, who, half ashamed and half defiant, had nevertheless mechanically followed him. His fingers closed on the brown wrist as the couple, the page in curious attendance, felt their way downwards in the priest's wake, turning at the end into a narrow passage.

"It leads into the Riccardi chapel," the priest communicated below his breath.

The Cardinal nodded, releasing his companion's wrist.

"Cosmo, bestow madonna with all secrecy in my lodging," he said briefly, setting foot again upon the stair.

He went on, with an impressive intonation under his careless tone: "The caged birds up above will no doubt twitter among themselves, but you, father, take care that you act not the part of Solomon, in giving the key to their chatter. Pretty women are contraband in our profession, and as such need deft smuggling."

The words were lost on the ears of the two groping along the rough masonry of the walls. For the first moment Cosmo kept aloof from his charge, inwardly regretting the carrier lying on the chapel floor above, but the girl moved beside him quietly.

"Who is your master?" she demanded.

"Cardinal Ferdinando Medici," responded the page,

"brother to your Florentine Grand Duke, as you most likely know; but the pumpkin on Duke Cecco's shoulders cannot match with our Cardinal's head, though Cecco can make him gnaw off his fingers with vexation."

Cosmo felt, with a stirring of pique, that his audience was not interested.

"Florence is our chess-board," he went on importantly. "Madonna Bianca, for all the gold curls which she steeps the day long in the sunshine on the balconies in her Venetian fashion, will hear *checkmate* cried to her before she captures Cecco."

He stopped, his shoulder grasped by an impulsive hand.

"Slower! I have a stitch in my side." The interruption, after all, merely expressed petulance. "Is it the custom at Rome to share secrets of State with boys of your stature?"

"Holy Virgin!" burst out the lad affrontedly. "I was sixteen last John Baptist, and I tell you I know how many fingers go to a hand. All folk know that our Cardinal tarries from Rome till Duke Francesco recalls the pledge given one fine night in the Palazzo Strozzi, where the lily-white witch—a swelling under the arms to her!—led him before the Virgin's image, and cajoled an oath from him that she should prank it as Grand Duchess when the knots of former madlocks, tied by their tongues, should have been loosed by their teeth in the saints' and the sorceress's good time. It was after that that the saints made room in Paradise for Duchess Juana, and pretty Bianca thinks it a thousand years till she also may share the benediction promised to them that mourn. But Signore Pietro Bonaventuri——"

"What of him?" This time the eagerness was unmistakable.

"Jupiter! he is courting another hare. Hast never heard of Madonna Cassandra?"

The girl jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

"Till I came yonder, a brace of months since, I lived in a castello beyond the mountains, and know nought of Florence. Who is Madonna Cassandra?"

The boy glanced about him fearfully.

"Many tongues, many tales," he whispered. "Some say she is the nend to whom Bianca has sold herself, and that she reads the stars for her, and prepares philtres and charms; and some say that she is mistress of the Capelli's husband, and that her spells for Bianca read but the one word—ruin! And folk say that she keeps a wax image of Pietro in a closet, and anoints it with the heart's blood of a new-born babe at the full of the moon, that no shot or steel may have power to harm him."

"Has he no care that his wife should be *cosa* of a Duke?" his hearer asked harshly.

Cosmo shrugged his shoulders.

"Some chestnuts must fall out of a full handful. Doubtless Madonna Cassandra has comfort for him, though Madonna Bianca sits in a fine palace in which he has never set foot. It is a twelve-month and more since the Capelli's bright eyes have lighted on him, and Pietro is no dog in the manger to grudge another the bone which she has thrown aside. For all that, though, I will wager a capful of gold pieces that the little arrangement over which the Holy Virgin presided that night makes the air of Florence unhealthy to Messer Pietro."

"Ah!" A swift sigh had burst out, then the girl raised herself from the wall against which they had been leaning, to traverse the remainder of the passage with quick, light steps. A draught of cold air mingling with the earthy smell about them, brought the page suddenly to her side.

"The door which the old fellow spoke of must be hereabouts," he whispered. "Best let me forward, since the Cardinal spoke of secrecy, and his orders

have a trick of recoiling on the fingers of those clumsy to execute them."

The door, betrayed by the current of air, yielded to his vigorous push, though with the protesting creak of rusted hinges. An odour of incense struck the sense sharply as the pair crept forward, the crimson glimmer of lamps swinging from silver chains falling soothingly across eyes strained by the twilight of the secret passage. An iris shimmer from the plumes of glorious winged creatures, frescoed on the walls above them, came indistinctly to the girl's sight, as she leant in the shadow of a pillar while her companion reconnoitred the premises.

Seen thus, her face no longer marred with the flush of passion, the rosy light revealed her as of no common beauty. She was tall, with something, in her youthful lack of the curves of rounded womanhood, of the upright grace and vigour of the birch-tree stem; and the square shoulders and well-knit limbs matched well with the resolute cast of features above them. For the small head of tangled curls, long hazel eyes, and red lips set in a normal gravity that yet hinted at a latent sweetness, were points that, in the virginal coldness pervading the entire creature, might equally well have belonged to a handsome boy as to a beautiful woman. The breadth of the low forehead, the keen glitter of the eyes under their black fringes, spoke as clearly in their way of masculine energy and foresight as the aspect of the brown supple hands gave promise, even in the idle pressure of the long fingers, of an unwomanish tenacity of grip.

"The place is empty as a blown egg-shell," Cosmo reported, coming back to the silent figure. "We lodge in the wing at right angles to this portion of the palace."

The girl and boy passed swiftly down the galleries, gaining an anteroom hung with gilded leather, a

corner of which Cosmo pushed aside, signing his charge to follow up steps fashioned in the thickness of the wall. The setting sun bathed the two in a golden glory as they entered a spacious chamber, bare enough, except for the carved woodwork of its panels, where the story of Cupid and Psyche ran along the walls.

"*Evviva!*" exclaimed the boy triumphantly. "Here are we in the Cardinal's own chamber, and no soul the wiser. Ferdinando will see I know comfits from *confetti*, I promise you!"

The girl, standing in the deep window—the thick lozenges of which cast a greenish radiance, like that struck up from a sleeping water, over the view of the ruddy curve of the Cathedral dome and springing stem of the bell-tower—threw a questioning glance over her shoulder.

"Of your wit," said she, "what is the next scene in the play like to be?"

The boy shook his head shrewdly.

"My wit is no ell-wand to measure our Cardinal's mind. If he want aught of you—and Ferdinando is not one to pull chestnuts out of the fire without he has a stomach for them—at least, I will wager it is not a pretty lady he sees in you, but a pawn that will help him somewhere in his game. *Madonna*," his voice took a pleading note, "I will stand your friend, if you will but show me the trick of that thrust in tierce you practised but now. See, here are foils, and the light is good for one assault at least."

A smile, irradiating as a burst of sunshine on a chill spring day, broke over the grave face turned to him.

"As you will, though I fear my wrist is stiffened in yonder owl-hole. Ah, it is good to feel steel that is not a broidery-needle in my hand once more!"

She threw herself into position. every line of her tall figure poising compactly for its evolution. For a couple of passes Cosmo found her thus at the guard;

then her mood changed; with a swift turn of the wrist the foil dropped, the quick foot lunged forward, driving home a palpable hit. The page broke ground involuntarily.

"By Bacchus, *madonna*, it is a miracle!" he panted. "Your wrist hardly moves."

The girl shrugged her shoulders carelessly. "*Cio!* 'tis as easy as Columbus' egg. Try you—that hand a thought higher."

"The sunlight streaming in at the window sideways to the fencers threw an illumination on the scene, the boy breathless and eager, wearying himself against a parade which answered, with the certainty of a magnet, every flicker of his foil. A faint awe of the iron wrist with such imperceptible play was heightened to the lad by the immutability of the quiet face and watchful eyes opposite him. Yet, as he shot a momentary glance at it now and again, he felt a growing conviction that, for all the mechanical promptness of half-circles and returns, his adversary was not wholly occupied with nim, a certain consciousness in her manner suggesting some point of concentration beyond the best feat ever taught in Agrippa's school of fence.

Suddenly the blade in his hand snapped off short, broken by a rapid flanking movement of the wrist opposite, strong and sheer as the downward switch of a riding-wand.

"Madonna!" the boy gasped.

The girl, darting an intent glance past him, smiled quietly, moving a few steps away to pick up the broken feeble of Cosmo's blade from where it lay, a little pool of light on the polished boards. As she raised herself from her stooping position something of rigidity seemed to pass into the lines of her body, suggesting a thrill instantaneously suppressed at sight of the scarlet figure of the Cardinal standing on the spot whence the page had vanished.

For a brace of seconds the two confronted each other, the girl supporting the man's appraising stare, intent with the absorption of calculation. No vestige of self-consciousness disturbed the poise of complete seeming indifference in the light young figure; it gained, however, an added tinge of alertness as the Cardinal opened his thin lips.

"Why did you conclude your lesson so abruptly, daughter?"

The hazel eyes dwelt on him for an instant longer.

"I wished to take a lesson myself, Eminence."

The self-possession of the reply seemed disconcerting.

"In what?"

"In the colour of Cupid's eyes, Eminence. The schoolmen teach that he is blind, but my lesson has shown me differently."

"And you maintain——"

Something of the quellist's steadiness of gaze had passed into the two faces.

"They are black, Eminence, with a tawny rim circling the pupils."

A gleam, not of displeasure, kindled in the eyes fixed on her, the tawny rims seeming to lighten through their blackness. The Cardinal signed to a painted chest, and seated himself on a carved chair opposite.

"St. Lucy keep your eyesight, daughter! What name is it that your suitors rhyme to, when they frame a *canzone* about the wit keen as the rapier on which you were for spitting me a while back?"

"My name is Fiamma Bonaventuri; but I have no suitors."

She repelled the insinuation with the scorn of adolescence.

"Florentine youth must be as blind as, till now, we conceived Cupid."

"I know nothing of Florence. My home was with

my foster-father beyond the mountains. Eminence, let me return there! It is true old Fosco Balducci is dead, but every soul in the village is my friend; I can herd goats, gather maize, spin wool!"

A cool glance chastised her eagerness. "And how, in this pastoral, was the finished fencer whom I watched but now, bred up?"

"My foster-father was an old *condottiere*, and it pleased him to treat me as the son whom the saints had denied him. And after Monna Silvia, his wife, died, it was more than ever his pastime to bestow on me in all points the training of a young esquire."

"A strange novitiate for the convent!"

The knuckles of the girl's clenched hand glimmered ivory white.

"No convent for me!" she said passionately. "When, two years ago, tales came to the village of the fine Venetian bride who had fled with her brother Pietro to the old roof in Florence, to bring another mouth to eat up the polenta—the saints know it was scanty enough there already!—Balducci swore there should be no talk of mewing his falcon to save her keep within a convent; nor, though he is dead, shall there be! They made haste to shear my hair this morning, because I was for strangling myself with it, but my fingers will choke life from me before a convent holds me!"

Weighted with desperation, her words fell lead-like. Through the twilight the tawny gleam of the Cardinal's eyes shone like points of fire.

"Have you not appealed to Madonna Bianca, who, high in the Grand Duke's favour as she sits, would doubtless serve a husband's sister?" drawled the fine sneering voice.

"I have never so much as seen her. Indeed, though Pietro and I were born at a birth, and my father jests that we are like as two peas in a pod, I have not seen him since we were scarcely out of swaddling-bands."

"But you would render him service?"

"Assuredly."

"And would save yourself from a convent?"

"If the road lay through Purgatory."

Cardinal Ferdinando rose, standing over her in the gloaming.

"Listen, then," he said in a low, imperative tone.

"When I watched you but now beyond yon peephole in the panelling, I read what I had guessed at in the chapel, that your boy's face hid a cool head and a keen wit behind it. Think you that you could masquerade to the woman's self for once as her husband, and work upon her to withdraw for a season to Rome?" He paused, while a gleam of white teeth showed faintly.

"A husband unseen for a twelvemonth is the easier to personate, the more so as the fair Venetian's wits are none of the quickest, in especial if the interview were caught at an unforeseen moment."

Under the low, smooth voice the hearer sat, her head and shoulders reined back, as though opposing the rush of a wave of astonishment.

"It is scarce likely that the wish of a husband unseen for a twelvemonth would prevail against the splendours which Madonna Bianca enjoys in her Strozzi Palace, Eminence." The words fell slowly.

"Well thought of! But the husband's wish would have perhaps weight if the wife knew that disobedience would lead to her falling into the hands of her family, who would know how to receive a child who disgraced the name she bore, when she stole from her home to her lover's arms—if, in short, Messer Pietro should cease for a time to play the part of complaisant husband which he now affects."

"What pretext should I have to give for my desire for her journey?"

"The withholding of his toy from the Grand Duke, that he may the more readily accede to your terms of bargain."

"And how in this do I benefit my brother, Eminence?"

"By rendering him no longer a fit sheath for the daggers of the Pitti, daughter. The Capelli once set out for Rome, the rest will be my affair, and Duke Francesco will be delivered from the crime of coveting an honest citizen's wife."

For so long as one could say a paternoster, Fiamma sat silent. Then she sprang to her feet, with an impatient hand unlatching the casement, as though stifling for free breath.

"Say that I do not fancy courting the stray dagger-thrust or worse, that this matter seems to promise to myself?"

"Through the peaceful years in the convent, daughter, you can offer aves for the prudence that has preserved you to the blessed life of contemplation."

The song of some revellers roistering through the streets below floated up in the May twilight to the dim chamber. The refrain had become but a chiming echo before the girl unclasped her hands from her heaving breast.

"Swear to me that I am not trapping another woman to suffer death or torture at your hands, and I will serve you."

The Cardinal took the oath with an inscrutable face. Possibly at the village in the mountains an obsolete reverence was still paid to truth and honour, matters from which the better disciplined conscience of an ecclesiastic could dispense.

"For good and evil, my daughter, we Medici are good paymasters," he observed, for the present dismissing the instrument which fate had brought within his hand.

CHAPTER II.

IN DIABOLIC LIVERY.

THE smell of garlic, pervading a low-browed dwell'ing half-way down the Via Delle Belle Donne, rose up towards the garret, where a youth, absently toying with a mandoline on his knee, sat on the bed, in the absence of further plenisning.

Over and over went a little tune, faster or slower 'n apparent cadence to the musician's thoughts; then the lithe figure in tight-fitting hose and crimson doublet rose, pushing aside the mandoline with a sudden movement. One hand mechanically sweeping the thick curls from her forehead, Fiamma stood frowning at the dusty boards, the bare walls that for two weeks had shut in much fruitless brain-cudgelling. For the Cardinal's commission seemed to lead into a blind alley. The moon, which on the evening of the encounter, in the Riccardi Palace had glimmered as a slender sickle in the rose-tinted twilight, had hung last night as a golden disc over against the garret window in the Way of the Beautiful Ladies, and his Eminence yet remained unserved. The clothes which Fiamma had assumed for her part already moulded themselves to her shapely limbs, and no steps of the road to be trodden had been taken by the wearer. How long would this apprenticeship of patience continue, and how long would Cardinal Ferdinando's patience endure?

Stung into movement by the thought, Fiamma flung a cap on the black-brown curls of her hair, drifting purposely into the sunny street below. The retirement usually practised by her in the long daylights suited the story with which her landlady might season a dish of gossip with the neighbours, of a student of Padua biding from the results of a duel provoked by him;

but to-day a restlessness in the blood drove the girl beyond the path of daily routine. A group of women in the narrow doorway made way for her, but they were too much absorbed in chaffling with a brown-skinned urchin over the struggling contents of a pail of beetles, to pay any heed to the passing figure.

"A *grosso* for four! All the saints in Paradise know that's too much! I can buy them as cheap again in the meadows of Cascine farm."

"Not with such cages as mine, madonna," protested the boy, his white teeth showing in his brown face like almonds gleaming through ripe husks. He held up a bunch of tiny grass-woven cages. "Besides, my beetles are very prophets for telling a true fortune; whose *sposo* will marry her, and whose will escape her by death—perhaps not the worst lot for him, if all was known."

His eye rested with a roguish challenge on a tall girl, who shook back her dark plaits coquettishly, as she bent over the pail, selecting the largest beetle to perch on her finger.

"Gemma's lover is as big as the David at the Palazzo Vecchio," laughed the others. "Is he the tall captain, Gemma, who last even stretched up from his saddle to snatch a kiss from you at your window? You saw him fairly, for, as he reined his horse back, he let his blue cloak slip aside from his face."

"Well for Gemma if that's the only slip in the matter!" cried the boy impudently, breaking off to join in the laugh that hailed the beetle's unexpected flight from Gemma's finger.

"Is it not true my beetles are prophets? So fine a wooer was sure to fly out of reach," laughed the beetle-merchant, the chorus of merry voices growing faint in Fiamma's ear as she passed round a neighbouring corner. Her steps, guided by mechanical habit, turned towards the rough-hewn mass of the

Strozzi Palace, as though the girl's thought, daily and nightly beating about its walls, should by some magic fashion a way through those huge cubes of stone for the eager feet.

Yet, as Fiamma fronted the massive building, an air of unusua^l life prevailing stirred through the absorption of her mood. The wrought iron gates thrown on their hinges afforded a view into an arcaded court in which servants crossed and recrossed each other's paths in a continuous bustle. A figure, with the cook's baton of a wooden spoon in his hand, moved across her vision, screening his eyes from the sunlight.

"*Sanctissima!* Andrea, Michele, Gian! a Duke is not one to be feasted on polenta!" he cried to his jostling satellites. "The pest to your lazy limbs, though, for all I can hear tell, our guest loves best to feed on raw eggs filled with Spanish pepper, and washes down his meal of leeks and capsicums with fiery Falernian, yet our mistress will be scantily pleased if daintier cater than those are not ready anon under the arcades of Orti Oricellari."

Fiamma was already turning indifferently away as the last words were spoken, but the careless steps quickened into resolution as they carried her through the gate.

"At last!" her thoughts fluted the words exultantly, as she hastened towards the gardens indicated by the cook's chatter. "My wit must be blunter than I ever thought it, that I should never have dreamed of such a meeting-place for myself and my fair sister-in-law as the shady groves belonging to the Strozzi. The convent no longer threatens me! Before a summer night is gone, I sha'll have fulfilled my pledge to the Cardinal; by to-morrow's sundown I sha'll be on the road to the castle—safe!"

Her eyes dilated as she fixed them on the green screen of foliage rising in front motionless as though

painted on the background of the blue afternoon. Insensibly her steps slackened, as half a dozen forms of the hoped-for interview were revolved and rejected in turn; she would have passed through the gateway in the gold-lichened wall, half dreamily, but for a sudden challenge.

"Hold, messer! None go through here but in the colours of the loushold."

Fiamma paused negligently.

"May not an honest Florentine stray an hour in yon glades?"

"Such are not our orders." The porter's eyes, directed on the face muffled in a fold of her mantle, had an intelligence in them. "Such a strange-feathered bird might hap to disturb our Bianca's feast. Take an old man's word, youngster; a pilgrimage beyond the gates of Florence would be apt to lengthen your years."

Fiamma adjusted her cap with the instantaneous poise of nerve natural to her at a thrill of impending danger.

"I'll weigh your advice," she retorted, tossing some small coin with the words over her shoulder. A shadow blocking the sunshine made her raise her eyes in the act; a tall old man, clad to the feet in a black robe, with a mitre-like cap set upon his head, swept by her, raising his fingers in salutation as he passed the porter.

"The household colours seem none of the gayest," Fiamma remarked casually, looking after the sombre figure as it vanished among the trees.

The servant again measured her with a quick glance.

"*Ebbene*, messer, he is in Madonna Cassandra's service, and her taste is not like to tally with our Bianca's, as your penetration has doubtless divined ere this. For all that, yon graybeard bears under that diabolic cope of his much of the gaiety which

to-night is to banish the scowl for once from Duke Cecco's writhen countenance."

The feeling of a shattered hope, oddly mingled with a sense of success, stirred in the girl as she walked away, a perception of the porter's implied recognition strengthening her self-consciousness to support the part for which she had been cast. For a yard or so she walked blindly.

A small roll of paper on the ground caught her eye; she stooped towards it. A design in red ink, relating apparently to some mechanical contrivance, was sketched upon it; Fiamma, turning it idly in her hands, had made out so much, when a black figure passed her from behind, the old man whom she had seen before, brushing by with the bent head of a seeker.

With a swift intuition of the object of his quest, Fiamma slipped the paper into the purse at her belt, setting herself to follow with no appearance of purpose. On went the two, the man turning his head from side to side in anxious glances, as he took his course into the network of narrow streets lying behind the Baptistery. When he came to a halt under the shadow of a dark old house, seemingly overweighted by its heavy Florentine cornice, Fiamma quickened her pace.

"You have lost something?"

Her eyes, keen in interpreting faces, saw that here no dangerous start of insight was to be feared. Upward-tending eyebrows and a close-shut mouth imparted a certain air of subtlety to a countenance in which the weakness of one believing in his own mystifications and credulous of those of others might be read. Fiamma divined a nature apt to yield to the pressure of an imperious will. Retaining the mantle about her face, she entered the courtyard in front of them, the old man keeping step with her.

"A paper, messer, a paper," he responded to the question; "of no great import, save that the hand

that traced it has little liking to perform the same piece of work twice. Ah!" as Fiamma drew her trove from the purse, "a thousand thanks truly! If at any time Giacomo Carpaccio can serve you——"

"Certainly you can serve me," Fiamma interpolated promptly. "I am keen to witness the doings in your garden to-night, but the churl of a porter refused me entrance. Your perchance could, if you would, make him alter his tune."

The old man shook his head.

"Nay, my son, that is to crave for a slice of the moon," he responded. "The Grand Duke loves not to see strange faces, and this is a *festa* for the Court alone. I but go to and fro to carry out a subtlety planned for the merriment of the company."

"Were it not possible to pass me in as your assistant?" Fiamma suggested coolly. Her figure lost nothing in the confidence of its attitude.

The other started.

"By the little Albert, my son, the harvest of impudence had not failed the season that you were born! I am no person of authority such as you seem to think, being myself but a tool in others' hands." He beckoned with a quick gesture into the darkest shadow of the gateway under which they were standing. "Look up at yonder window, and judge if she whom you see is likely to brook her puppets dancing to any tune of their own fancy."

Thus adjured, Fiamma raised her eyes with a flash of curiosity in them, kindling as she looked into an eager scrutiny. A casement in the dark wall fronting them framed, as it were, the vignette of a woman stretched upon an ebony couch, and covered to the knees in waves of amber-coloured hair. From this glittering aureole a face gleamed, monumental in its waxen pallor, fascinating the beholder with the fixity of gaze in the clear gray eyes, beautiful, yet with something of the snake in their rigidity.

Drawing farther into the shadow, Fiamma was about to turn to her companion, when a movement among the masses of hair scattered over the couch caught her attention. The woman's face expressed but a languid notice as what Fiamma in the gateway opposite took for a large monkey scrambled within the curve of its mistress's arm, squatting there to gaze into the sunlit court. A shudder of disgust shook the girl's shoulders as she perceived the creature to be a dwarf scarcely three feet high, and of a diabolical grotesqueness of countenance.

"Ha! no wonder that she yonder, Madonna Cassandra, knows all things without stirring from her couch, with that imp of Satan at her ear," the old man muttered in a cautious whisper. "*Ecco*, messer, see you that one had better cross a black hare's path than the will of such a woman as her I serve?"

For a moment longer Fiamma looked steadily at the casement. Under the dusky carnation of her cheek her features hardened, the spark of fire in her eyes smouldered into flame, a dilation of nostril told of resolution crystallising into action.

She turned sharply on the tall figure at her side.

"Listen!" she commanded shortly. "Go to your mistress, and tell her that the one whom she sees under this gateway makes suit for a place in her masque to-night. Bid her, if she will ever see that face again, to seek to know nothing further in this matter, and do you meet me with all things necessary in the Baptistery an hour hence."

A pulse in her neck throbbed hard as the old man shuffled from her side, the white teeth crushed the red lip beneath them; herself unseen, her unwavering glance fastened upon the window, marking when a turn of the woman's head told of Carpaccio's entrance, and noting greedily the change of expression.

Cardinal Ferdinando had chosen his pawn well.

As the first amazement dawned in Cassandra's face, Fiamma moved to the edge of the shadow, letting the masking cloak fall to her shoulders. With a bold confidence she smiled towards the woman, over whose pallor a thrill of colour as may at first stir have pulsed through Galatea's marble, had crept in an awakening dawn, the gray eyes glowing into a passionate hunger of gaze as the seemingly maimed creature painfully attempted to raise herself higher on her cushions.

Before the look could change into contemplation, Fiamma had stepped back, taking her way to the Baptistery. The excitement with which one throws for a heavy main still tingled in her, but her thought strayed in a side-alley.

"What bewitchment is this mood called love?" she questioned herself impatiently. "Why should a woman tremble and blush at the aspect of a man's face? Is it not flesh and blood like hers?" She pulled her cap nearer her ear with a gay arrogance. "Is it in the future that the glimpse of any one doublet will set me a-flashing and waiting on the turn of my lord's finger, or is Fiamma Bonaventuri to escape the taint of submission that runs in her woman's blood? Praise the saints! at the castello deaf Maso the wine-herd is the bravest *cavaliere*; once there, I shall scarce be put to it to outrun my wooers."

The sight of the brown walls of the Baptistery interrupted her reflections. At aspect of the many loiterers in the piazza, she passed quickly through the carved bronze doors to the twilight of the interior, awaiting her tryst in the shadow of a marble column.

Gradually the twilight deepened, and lamps began to sparkle out like rubies on the background of the dusk. The smell of incense grew cloying in Fiamma's nostrils, the marble, pitted with the footsteps of generations, numbed her limbs. Again and again a crash of bells leaped out on the summer air, telling the strained ears within the church that another and another hour, like

some weary-winged bird of passage, had sunk into the sea of Time. The sickness of expectation possessed the girl, before through the opening door the strange figure of the old man slid, bowing to Fiamma with an air of anxious reverence.

"Messer will pardon that I delayed," he whispered. "She would have it so, for by the witch-hazel, you are the one soul in human skin for whom Cassandra would lift a finger to avert a falling evil! Well, well, love makes all alike; the sorceress is but a woman when all's said and done, and though she cannot guess your purpose from your pleasure, she prays you, by the last time when the pair of you watched the moon rise from her casement, to carry this cove of mail under the trappings which I have the honour to bring you." He peered warily about the darkening space. "Hasten and don you, messer, lest some screech-owl of a watchman challenge us on our way to the gardens, where the shrewd rogue of a porter must not see a thread of the garments in which you showed yourself to him to-day."

The girl took the bundle which he held towards her in some perplexity; but her glance, roving through the church as though to detect an unwelcome sacrilegious leaper in relief towards the outlines of a deserted confessional.

"Keep you guard, then," she said, slipping into the friendly refuge.

She stripped off doublet and hose swiftly, a half-smile curving her lips as she noticed the steadiness of her own fingers. Her deft movements only slackened when with a tiny clash of metal she shook out the shirt of chain-armor, contemplating it for a moment before, with an involuntary shiver of the soft woman-flesh, she laid it over her shoulders and watched it adjust itself to her sinuous figure. At the actual disguise she hardly glanced, though a difficulty of getting into it cost her a moment's inspection, before

the tight-fitting black cloth suit with its occasional slashes of scarlet was satisfactorily assumed.

"The mantle closer about you, messer, if one may counsel," her companion advised, as she stepped back to his side. "The Devil and all his angels know that you rub elbows close enough with death already by neighbouring with Duke Cecco, without taking toll of attention from every passer-by."

The two passed rapidly along the darkening streets. For the second time that day Fiamma approached the bosky woodlands of the Cricellari gardens, this time sauntering by the porter unchecked. Her eyes turned eagerly to the leafy masses before her, but her conductor hurried unheeding through glades, purpled even in the blue dusk with violets, towards a patch of greensward lying on the skirts of the denser wooding.

Carpaccio surveyed the scene with a satisfied expression. Advancing to the centre of the lawn, he knelt down, plunging his hands among the lush grasses and, to his companion's astonishment, drawing aside a cleverly constructed circular platform covered with fresh turfs. The platform, supported underneath by something in the nature of a pivot, revealed upon displacement a large pit some seven or eight feet deep, lined with loose earth.

"By the wych-hazel! the rogues of workmen have for once earned their polenta," muttered the old man, raising himself from his stooping attitude. "Your pardon, messer, but if we are both to escape the cells of the Bargello, you must condescend to assist me in the night's trick, at the close of which the confusion certain to arise might, my mistress held, be favourable to whatever designs you foster. Your hood, if it please you, more over your face. So, and now to work, if the gallant company are not to find us all unready as the five foolish virgins."

The blast of a whistle at his girdle finished his sentence, answered almost simultaneously by the

apparition of four slender figures clad like Fiamma in black and scarlet, with close-fitting round hoods concealing most of the face except nose and eyes. Each couple carried between them a brazier filled with live coals, in the wake of which wavered an acrid odour, overpowering the scents of the sleeping earth.

"In with you! Hey presto! vanish!" was Caraccio's salutation, obeyed by the platform's sliding so promptly back over the cavity, that, in spite of the winking coals in the braziers left above ground, Fiamma could scarcely credit her eyes. The necromancer, as his proceedings announced him, was moving about busily, forming a large circle with a rope, to which black and yellow threads curiously interwoven gave the appearance of some gigantic serpent. As lights like wandering fire-flies began to flash through the green aisles of tree-stems, he spoke to Fiamma in a hurried whisper.

"Lay aside your shoes and take your stand between the braziers, messer," he ordered. "Brandish this filbert wand as though to defend yourself from those whom I summon, and at each name cast on the coals a handful of the drugs from this vase. Fear nought, the more folk gape the less they are like to see; I will wager my crystal in its silver zone to a fool's bauble, that your person goes unobserved this night."

A surf of voices and light laughter broke on his speech, giving Fiamma scarcely time to take up the required position before a company, heralded by the glimmering torch-light, straggled by twos and threes into the open space. At sight of the sombre figures, illumined by the fire-glow, most of the revellers gave back a pace, gay cries and protests ringing confusedly through each other; then one lady came forward, approaching the circle alone.

As she drew near, trailing her silver-powdered green draperies over the grass in slow, languid movements,

Fiamma's pulses tingled in an instinctive antipathy. Her eyes ran over the carnation tinting, the white bosom heaving under transparent laces, the vermilion lips set in their perpetual pout. With the rapidity of thought the Cardinal's agent knew and estimated the woman whose ambition she, in sheer self-protection, was pledged to undermine, recognising, with an involuntary breath of relief, that the oval face set in ash-blonde hair, while offering no dangerous hint of opposing intellect, expressed the insolent challenge of the successful adventures.

The tinkle of a silver bell startled Fiamma from her contemplation. Carpaccio, standing in the opening of his circle, appeared indifferent to the presence of a Duke's favourite; he swung the bell in his hand slowly to and fro, till the woman's voice, rippling in suppressed laughter, was raised at his side.

"Is it for mortals such as we to tread this enchanted space, good wizard?" Bianca Capelli demanded.

Fiamma startled unconsciously at the solemnity of Carpaccio's altered voice.

"For such as this fair company, madonna, has this circle been drawn," he replied in a sonorous tone. "Enter all who will, all who finger lute more readily than a pair of beads, all who patter vows at holy shrines as lightly as songs at ladies' windows. Enter one, enter all, and see what lies beyond the path ye tread so gaily."

The page's story of the oath extorted from the Grand Duke flashed upon Fiamma's mind, as she fancied she detected a covert glance shot from beneath Bianca's eyelids at a personage standing some steps in advance of the rest of the revellers. That the display of necromancy might serve some other purpose than merely amusing a morose sovereign suddenly occurred to the girl, thrilling her with the conviction that the opportunity so unexpectedly

presented of making the move appointed for her, might in great probability be the only one of its kind. She watched the green-robed lady glide towards the solitary, sinking before him in a graceful reverence.

"Is your conscience clear enough to enter, Highness?" she drawled laughingly.

The peal of the silver bell drowned the reply of the man in his turn approaching the circle, followed at more or less respectful distances by laughing, whispering courtiers. The blonde beauty of the woman whose hand he kept locked in his, emphasised his livid swarthy complexion and coal-black hair, as much as the contrast of her complacent serenity enhanced the fierce wandering fires of the man's eyes burning in their hollow caverns. In spite of herself, Fiamma shrank a trifle as the Duke negligently threw himself upon a black velvet cushion provided by an attendant.

A look from Carpaccio, shot over the crowd of laughing faces, pressing pell-mell within the line of rope, recalled her to her part, reminding her to plunge a hand into the aromatic contents of the vase of spices. A third time the bell sounded, its sudden petulance hushing the merrymakers' laughter.

The necromancer, turning to the east, whistled sharply north, south, and west. As the elfin blasts died away, they were succeeded by his voice, which sounded hollow, like a wind awakening in the tree-tops.

"Come hither, come hither, all spirits who owe me obedience—Bardieul, Solsibec, Graffaril, Zamper!"

A delicious shudder of sensation pervaded the group, on whose excited nerves the fumes of the spices cast on the fires operated soothingly. The bell dropped single notes through the silence, in which Bianca's draperies rustled like fallen leaves, as with steps slow enough to forbid any appearance of design, she moved to the outer edge of the circle, turning her

fair head hither and thither in, it would appear, some stealthy search for an expected apparition. Fiamma's glance followed her, noting that the apparently aimless wanderings directed themselves suddenly to a goal hidden behind a knot of spectators, their swaying eagerness in the magic before them effectually blocking Fiamma's vision. With an effort she withdrew her eyes, to find those of Duke Francesco riveted piercingly on her own face.

Confused by the burning scrutiny, the disguised girl stooped, hastily flinging a double handful of medicated drugs into the braziers. The narcotic odours streamed forth overpoweringly, mingled with dense blue smoke from the smothered coals: the Duke started, clumsily to his feet. The bell fell with a jangle at Carpaccio's side as he perceived the hitch, and, clapping his hands thrice, made a furtive signal to Fiamma. As the platform slid from the pit, whence a pandemonium of cries and groans had suddenly broken forth, she had flung herself over the rope behind her, while the rest of the company disappeared, amid a lurid glow of light beneath their feet, into the concealed cavity.

Even as Fiamma gained firm standing-ground, her eyes sought for the mistress of the feast, with a quick perception of the importance of the moment. The flickering glare above the pit turned the twilight beyond into velvety blackness, and, impatient of her straining sight, she had skirted the circle half-way before she fancied she could detect the object of her quest. A couple of paces nearer made her certain of so much. A dark figure hastened from the Capelli's side at the moment when a troop of girls, linked to one another by a garland of roses, and with their rounded limbs gleaming through transparent draperies, broke from the thickets, directing themselves upon the pit to rescue the shrieking, struggling victims.

Bianca still stood in her place, her scarlet lips

curving into a smile that, slight as it was, reminded Fiamma of the snarl of a cat at the moment of its spring upon a victim. Before Fiamma could cover the distance between them, the figure of the Grand Duke appeared, his discomposure apparently but half charmed away by the alluring haste with which Bianca moved towards him, and the malicious humour with which she pointed out the plight of the sufferers for whom it was evident that no means of breaking the fall, such as had been provided for their sovereign, had existed in the Capelli's practical joke. Pale, insensible forms were lifted from among the gesticulating throng, but the Duke, intent on a whisper of the woman beside him, no longer vouchsafed them a glance. His eyes hovered uncertainly over the fair face close to him, on whose dewy mouth the small cruel smile still rested. To the girl dogging their footsteps, pausing in the shadows when they paused, it seemed as though Bianca was urging something upon a half-reluctant hearer, weighting her arrows of speech with grave remonstrance, winging them with cajoling looks and gestures.

Herself like a shadow, Fiamma slipped from one mighty tree-bole to another, cautiously nearing the couple. No word of the woman's whispers was to be distinguished, but Francesco's voice rose louder. "As well look for a needle in a truss of hay as for a man in these groves! 'Tis not the stiletto-stroke that I cavil at, but I have a squeamishness at luring the wretch here to his death. Had Judas been a woman, he would never have known a twinge of repentance!"

He quickened his pace, crushing the rosy knops of anemones under his heel. Following Bianca's slower movements, Fiamma paused before a belt of yews, through which, in a flood of silver light, she could see the arcades of a pavilion, white against its wooded background as though wrought in snow.

The green-robed woman passed languidly up the steps in the rear of the moody figure, at sight of whom a burst of music had already pulsed out upon the night.

A distant clamour of voices, of which during her progress Fiamma had been vaguely conscious, heralded the advent of the rose-crowned nymphs, escorting the rescued courtiers to the banquet spread for them under the gleaming arcades. In the stream flowing up the broad steps, Fiamma mingled fearlessly enough.

A blast of silver trumpets announced that the Duke, striking a knife against a cup of purple spar, had given the signal for the feast to begin. Edging from column to column, as safe among the crowd of revellers as in the blackness of the wood, Fiamma had gradually gained a position not ten paces from the Capelli, lounging beside the sovereign on cushions embroidered with the Florentine lily, its crimson showing on the creamy satin like goutts of blood. A sombre fire seemed to have consured the sullenness of Francesco's mood. At intervals he turned from the heavy-lidded beauty at his elbow to plunge his hand into a silver dish of snow, emptying his purple chalice thereafter with an avidity that, to the Cardinal's agent, seemed to promise well for a drowsiness in which might lurk the moment waited for through a moon.

Standing thus, her face in shadow, her back against the mosaic inlaying of the wall, Fiamma heard a whisper breathing apparently above her head.

"Daggers are sharp," it said; "beware!"

Startled at the unexpected voice the girl turned, but the movement revealed nothing. The moon, hanging low in the night blue as an alabaster lamp, brooded over the gardens in blanching radiance, against which the surrounding trees were relieved in inky depths of shade. Fiamma's keen eyes swept

the open space before she turned them again on the revel, seeking a stealthy movement, a furtive glance, that might justify the mysterious warning, and everywhere finding nothing out of which even her sharpened senses might set a fang of suspicion.

The unrest in her blood was ebbing when a second time the voice sounded by her.

"Go, fool!" it whispered.

Fiamma imagined that a shadow flitted behind the spring of the arch above her. She felt impatient at her own fancy. "My brain is fevered in this perfumed air," she reflected. "Still, snugly hidden as I deemed myself, 'tis plain some one has spied me, and by his not nicking me with his stiletto I may conclude him no enemy. What if I were to try by a ring from my form if the hounds are indeed on my scent? The revel will last till cock-crow."

She left her place, gaining an alcove opening upon a low balcony. Even as she dropped on the grass below, a glance shot backwards assured her that two figures had detached themselves from the crowd and were hastening towards the entrance. The sight winged her steps across the lawn, but as she plunged among the trees the thud of running feet upon the turf behind her became distinct to her ears.

Her elbows tucked to her sides, Fiamma fled forward at the speed with which she had often on the slopes above the castello run in frolic with her goats, turning and winding desperately in the glades like the hunted hare to which she had compared herself. Her breath struggled painfully, her heart beat against her ribs, its weight, she fancied, clogging her flying feet. Yet if she paused for an instant, the rustle of leaves and crackle of twigs spurred her again into flight, the conviction that the sounds were drawing nearer numbing her efforts like the constricting folds of a serpent.

A pang, shooting knife-like through her side,

signalled her defeat. Behind her the pursuers' trampling sounded close through the dense thicket that still screened her. One chance remained. With a last supreme effort she sprang forward, catching at a bough of a gigantic ilex, and swung herself up into its darkest recesses.

As Fiamma crouched in her sanctuary, a man appeared, hot upon her track. A hurried glance over his shoulder as he ran revealed his face, and the girl above him remained tense on her branch, totally heedless now of the pain that made each breath she drew a stab of agony. For the figure that fled by—hunted instead of hunter—was, to the straining gaze peering down upon him—*herself!*

Paralysed beyond thought by her vision, she was yet held, as it were, in consciousness, by the sight of another runner flashing into the moonlight. His gaze, instinct with the lust of the chase, seeming to Fiamma to penetrate her hiding-place. Cautiously, her whole body strung to movement, she shifted to the other side of the tree.

She looked down now into a circular space hedged by an ilex grove, against which statues lifted themselves in a mouldering protest against their doom of decay. Opposite the friendly ilex, a Hercules seemed to oppose his knotted club to the encroachments of the lichens and damp mosses clinging as a Nessus-shirt to the mighty limbs; as Fiamma looked, the chill fear in her blood benumbed her heart, for behind the pedestal she saw for a single instant her own face! Her eyes misted with horror, a roaring cataract seemed to fill her ears. Half swooning, she glanced aside towards the opening of the clearing, and saw her pursuers—the pursuers who, as she knew now, had through the night run down, not herself, but her brother Pietro to his death. A scream rose on the still air as a second man leaped from behind the Hercules and clutched the fugitive

by the throat. The sounds sank gurgling on the beauty of the night, and the thud of blows, struck with the mere wantonness of cruelty into dead flesh, beat a dull response.

Sick with terror, Fiamma crouched wide-eyed against the roughened bark. Silence sank down once more upon the wood; the scent of violets rose up like incense from the trampled grasses where, with the moonbeams for death-candles, a dead man lay staring with blind eyes beyond time and space. And above him, while the night skies thinned into the tender gray pulsating into pearly dawn, a living sister sat desolate, and the air and the night seemed resonant with the one word—failure!

CHAPTER III.

CAVALIERE PADINO.

A COCK, somewhere without the Oricellari, crowed discordantly, as though wakening the world to the burden of sin forgotten during sleep.

The sound fell sharply on the ear of the girl, chafing the limbs stiffened during her vigil. A pale hope, blowing out of the new day, stirred in her, and she breathed the freshness of the morning air with awakening vigour. It was early enough still to escape, to withdraw, if it might be, out of the reach of the powerful employer, who, Fiamma shrewdly suspected, would be apt to spell failure with the letters of crime.

Slipping from the ilex-tree, she plunged into the opposite side of the grove, only to stop short with a suddenness that held the intensity of an outcry. Like a blow on branched flesh, the sight of a rust-red stain upon the grasses woke the last night in her quivering brain. She stared dully at the damp patch

of turf that told of a ghastly burden lying there the night through, but now vanished. Somewhere in Florence living eyes were even now satiating themselves on a dead face, proving the assassins' work before their night's wages should be paid down to them. A spasm that this girl with her nerves of steel scarcely knew to be a sob, contracted her throat: as there flashed before her the face of the fair woman who had lured a husband to his death, that his corpse might be a stepping-stone to her ambition, Fiamma clenched the hands hanging at her sides. "By the Five Wounds," she murmured, with stiffening lips, "the cost of this night's revel shall be paid to the last *grosso*!"

She plunged on through the undergrowth, rapidly formulating her changed plans. Once, when her fingers went to the place at her belt where a dagger should have hung, her level brows drew together as she remembered that she was still in the diabolic livery with which Cassandra's agent had invested her yesterday. At every step her face hardened, the lips setting in the smile with which a man springs to a forlorn hope. The moss-covered stones of a wall, rising through the trees in front of her, gave footing enough for her active limbs to scramble to the top; as she dropped safely on the other side, her quick eyes perceived the white campanile to the left of the vineyards in which she found herself. Furnished with this landmark, she stepped lightly through the low-growing vines, on which tiny earthen masks, here and there twisting in the morning wind, told of precaution, ripe before the fruit, against thieving birds.

The hood of her mantle shielding her eyes from the level sunbeams, Fiamma became conscious of a presence in her path, her downcast glance telling her of a Franciscan's brown frock above sandalled feet, while low notes from the bell of a whitewashed chapel, close to the road along which the friar had come, sounded in shallow reiteration.

As the sandalled feet shuffled past the girl, the gloom in her eyes kindled with the illumination of a sudden thought. She turned, confronting the friar with an imperious, good-humoured gesture.

"Say, Friar, wouldst do me a good turn, and thy convent another?"

"Assuredly, my son." The friar surveyed her curiously.

Fiamma leaned back against a stake garlanded with the vividness of the vine young leafage. "My errand needs the speed of the four chariots of St. John's Eve, and yet, as thou seest, I am tired." She fixed her eyes meaningly on her hearer. "A Cardinal is not one to brook a limping messenger."

The Franciscan's face changed into interest. "What Cardinal do you speak of, young sir?"

"One who may yet cast aside the red hat for the three crowns. Is it with your will to do him service?"

"In these evil days the followers of the blessed Francis need to stand firmly in high places, that the Dominican dogs may not hound them from Florence."

"Carry a message, then, for me to the Riccardi Palace."

"To Cardinal Medici?"

"The same. Ask for Messer Cosmo, his page, and bid him tell his Eminence that the falcon which he loosed a month ago behind the church of St. Apollonia, stooped and missed yesterday, but she will yet bring down her game. Say, Frate, I pray"—he paused—"that the Cavaliere Padino waits his Eminence's messenger in yonder chapel."

The friar nodded. "Let me help you there, messer; you seem in truth as weak as water. I think it a thousand years till I serve you and his Eminence; there is like to be a small sheaf to bind from the grass that grows under Brother Battista's feet, I warrant you."

A quick relief heaved Fiamma's breast, as, leaning a hand on either door of the little chapel, she watched the figure hurrying along the narrowing perspective of the high-road. "It would have been pulling Death by the moustachios to venture this tell-tale face into Florence to-day, when *Boaventuri* is a name in every gaper's mouth," she reflected. "The saints grant that yon brother will deliver my message, and the Cardinal unravel it rightly. 'Twill be some hours of daylight saved."

The weariness which had served her truly enough for her pretext crept overmasteringly upon her in the lull into which the excitement of twenty hours had fallen, as boiling waters cast themselves into the quiet pool beneath, before streaming into the current beyond. Curling herself upon the sun-warmed bricks beside the altar, she was asleep before Brother Battista's brow outlines had melted into the blue distance.

The metallic creak of a cicala broke her slumber at last. She leaned on a drowsy elbow, and looked about her, wondering at the scent of warm earth and growing plants that floated to her in odorous contrast to the domestic incense pervading her late quarters in the Way of the Beautiful Ladies. The next instant a dart of recollection pricked her: she stumbled to her feet, disregarding the stiffness of her muscles; but as she reached the doorway a keen sense of disappointment overcame her physical weariness at the sight of the steadily approaching form of her own messenger. Fiamma stood still, unable for a thought that would ward off the disappointment descending upon her. That the simple cypher of her message could have been misunderstood by the Cardinal was impossible; the only alternatives were that her pledge of future service had been tossed aside like a broken tool, or that Brother Battista had fallen in with some pragmatical underling, and been forthwith dismissed.

Passively she watched the brown form nearing her, till the face under the pent-house of cowl became visible. With a quick straightening of her drooping shoulders the girl stood erect in the presence of Cardinal Ferdinando himself.

A slight grayness overspread the Cardinal's features, due perhaps to the dust of the road lying like me. l in the ruts furrowed by the wheels of the wine-carts. The woman's eyes fell baffled before the absolute impassiveness of countenance with which the man stepped past her into the little chapel, raising his fingers in a slight gesture between salutation and benediction. He seated himself on the brick ledge leading into the apse, Fiamma standing before him like a culprit before a judge.

"You have acted well, daughter." The words, falling in a monotonous tone through the silence, startled her into fixing an eager glance on his face. "Well, for all Florence is fermenting over the news of the death of the Capelli's husband; and the widow, sable as cloth of Cyprus can make her, only carries his obsequies before she sets out for Venice, to entreat the protection of the Republic for a mourning daughter of St. Mark."

Fiamma started, a pale anger in her face. "Your Eminence, I swear——"

The Cardinal lifted his hand commandingly. "But Madonna Cassandra vows that he who met his death last night may be whom he and the Devil please, but no husband of Bianca. She speaks of a coat of mail, proof against any dagger, which she sent to Pietro by a sure hand no later than yesterday. This she did, knowing that the Capelli had bidden him to a feast among the woods of the Oricellari, hinting that she repented of their late coldness. And Piccolo, Cassandra's dwarf, tells a tale of how, concealed in the banquet-room, he contrived to round a whisper of warning into Pietro's ears."

Fiamma's hands clenched themselves in a gesture less of despair than of impotent rage against the evil fate that surely signed its ominous cross on the door of her house. That she herself should have been the one to snatch the last chance of safety out of her brother's hand struck her as an injustice of circumstance; the vengeance on which she was already pledged to spend herself appeared as an expiation.

"You see that the cards are not all upon the table yet," pursued the man. "Hearken! There are yet some weeks before the Capelli's influence can work on the Grand Duke to submit to a formal marriage, for the Venetian aims no lower. Is it in you to dog her to Venice and, trading on the likeness which has already juggled one so keen-eyed as Cassandra, persuade the fair widow that she has yet a living husband, and conjure her to betake herself for a space to Rome?" For once his Eminence's voice had lost something of its smoothness, the grayness on the clear-cut face had chilled into absolute pallor. "Should this plan succeed—and surely the chance that threw you with that face in my way is an omen of success—the shame that taints the Medici's name may be averted, without scandal, if it may be. But if not—"

The rattle of the cicalò without thrilled wearisomely as the man's voice fell lower. The fresco daubed walls, the altar with its gilded semicircle above, representing a Madonna and Child with necks apparently grown awry under the burden of their aureoles, had shifted from the girl's eyes. She beheld, in memory's crystal, a lovely green-robed woman kindling a man's hatred into murder with the careless smile with which one might light a taper to singe a troublesome moth. The young softly-tinted face of Fiamma had grown rigid before her bent head was raised, but then a sentence struck the silence like a clash of cymbals.

"When shall I set forth?"

Cardinal Ferdinando rose as though stirred by the question.

"The path I have shown you is slippery walking, daughter. Are you strong to face the danger, the Ten who have ears for the silence and eyes for the darkness, and by whom Pietro Bonaventuri is doomed to the scaffold behind the Piazzetta pillars?"

A slight, contemptuous smile came on the girl's lips.

"It is scarce good coursing, Eminence, to leash the hound back after laying it on a trail! When is it your pleasure that I set forth?"

"At nightfall." The Cardinal's glance appraised the resolution in her face. "You will do well at least to reckon with the twin peril of letting Madonna Cassandra—already hot-foot to Venice too, her master best knows for what purpose—come to close quarters with thee, a love-sick woman's eyes being hard to pull the wool over. It may seem to your doughtiness no great task to avoid the vigilance of one paralysed from the waist downwards, but Piccolo the dwarf is feet and hands to his mistress, as well as ears and eyes. Being less than the least of men, he can hide where they cannot, and no wall is too steep for him to scale, no cranny too small for him to lurk in. You will do well, I say again, to tread warily, my damsel-errant, remembering on the one hand that too open flouting might cause such a woman as Cassandra to denounce you to the Ten, and on the other, that a quarter of an hour in her presence may spell defeat for us."

Fiamma's fingers moved again involuntarily to the place at her belt where a dagger should have hung. As though the touch brought recollection, she glanced at the strange dress visible within the displaced folds of her mantle. "I can scarce travel in this garb, Eminence."

Cardinal Ferdinando nodded. The usually scornfully tolerant smile was on his lips again, as his hand slid into the bosom of the brown frock, producing a tolerably heavy purse and a wooden crucifix.

"All things needful for your purpose may be obtained on the road." Here is gold enough for your wants during the space of time which we may reckon on; a coy mistress makes an ardent lover, and the Grand Duke's wooing is apt to be short." He surrendered the purse to the outstretched fingers, and raised the crucifix with a peculiar look. "Should a time come when the arm of flesh fails you, daughter, and your wit is in the straits, your best resource will lie in this. Hang it about your neck, and part not from it night or day."

His satirical smile was reflected in the girl's eyes as she took the crucifix from him, a oddly-fashioned Christ fastened on the wood with strong nails. Without another word the Cardinal passed from her, setting his face towards the towers glowing like red lilies against the sky. He had hardly, however, taken two steps before he wheeled. "What name was that, daughter, which your messenger named to Cosmo a while ago?"

The careless, contemptuous trait curved the red lips anew. "Cavaliere Padino, Eminence, is a fit name for the poor pawn who risks nothing but itself in a bold move of the game."

"It is well," responded the Cardinal curtly, moving away again with the heavy plodding gait of the mendicant friar of his disguise. The little trail of dust raised by the heavy serge swirled behind him with the sinuous effect of some serpent unwinding upon his track. Piamma turned her eyes impatiently from the retreating figure to the heavy dun clouds tarnishing the purple blue of the horizon.

"Three or four hours to wait for the darkness," she reflected, "unless I journey with the storm."

'Twill be no such ill fe'low, at the least keeping prying eyes from me."

A silence, dulling the small life that chirped and basked among the sun-warmed clods of the vineyards, weighted the air, the sunshine fading beneath it. A sudden flicker of lightning ran through the twilight of the chapel. "Best go ere my slot grows too plain in the mud," Fiamma concluded, stepping through the down-pouring rain with bent head and hurrying footsteps. The way she struck into lay towards the mountains, looming behind the sweeping curtain of storm. Mile after mile was conquered by the light feet. With the steepening road the girl slackened pace now and again, peering through the growth of beech and chestnut on each hand, and trying to clear her ears from the rattle and patter of the rain.

"The bleat of a goat would point to where I could ask the road of some fellow-creature," she said half aloud. "Even if I do not stray from the track into the lap of one of those waterfalls I hear foaming about me, the loss of every hour keeps me from my purpose."

She pressed onwards again, but slower, a sense of depression and sickness reminding her that for hours she had not tasted food. The torrents of rain were lessening, but the darkness had grown almost tangible. A sweet odour on the rain-freshened air made her stoop, mechanically gathering a handful of yellow lilies blossoming on the short grass.

"These grow on pasture-lands," she said, as she felt the serrated chalices with her fingers; "and pastures argue a flock, and a flock a shepherd, so I need but to cry courage to myself."

But in spite of her brave words, her heart sank persistently, as the ground grew increasingly broken, once or twice wiry clumps of heath causing her an unexpected fall. A wind, too, had awakened in fitful

moanings, herding the clouds across the sky in a bewildering flight, and blotting out the stars by which she might have steered as a retreating army might trample out the fires of its camp. The girl stood still at last, driven to own defeat.

"I will wander no more in this gloom," she muttered resolutely. "Before this I have taken a night's lodging under an arbutus bush—so, to find one now."

She raised the eyes which for the last half-hour had been anxiously bent on her steps, to strain them once more through the darkness. For an instant she stood aghast. About half a mile or so away, its red glow consuming the night, a pyramid of flame rose through the dark, now lessening and now waxing as Fiamma looked. With the leap of a hunted thing she turned to run wildly into the dense shadows. Setting her breast against the sheer hill, she panted on, till even the stimulus of fear failed to nerve her limbs, and she reeled and fell on the sodden grass.

"There was truth, then," she reflected, "in those convent tales of an inlet to Purgatory somewhere in these mountains, by which one in Florence once descended, and wrote strange rhymes thereafter on the journey that had left his visage all besmirched and swarthy with the fumes of the fire; yet why should the fires blaze for me, who seek but justice for a brother's death, and not for her who takes her turn even out of hell itself to compass a husband's murder?"

Lulled by a certain sense of physical shelter in the nook where she had fallen, she yielded to the sleep stealing over her; and there she lay motionless hour after hour till the morning sun rays darted insistently at her veiled eyes. The scene on which the fringed eyelids opened was sufficiently strange: a green hollow way between grassy mounds furrowed into lines of chambered recesses, the tombs, it would appear,

of some bygone race. Yet Fiamma, lying at the entrance of such a mysterious grave-place, took no note of her surroundings, her eyes in the first instance falling on the figure of a sleeping man not ten paces from her shoulder.

The girl drew herself upright, gazing at the fellow-traveller whose hostelry she had unconsciously invaded. His suit of dark-blue cloth revealed nothing to her, but the long limbs tossed in the negligence of sleep, the white skin, and curling fair hair of the head pillowed on the man's arm, betrayed a foreigner, even before a pair of sea-blue eyes slowly opened, returning Fiamma's intent stare.

"Welcome to the hospitality of these mountains," the stranger remarked, without stirring from his careless attitude. "Open house kept here, but had I been awake on your arrival, I could have pointed you to quarters somewhat more to leeward of the storm."

The carefully-lipped Italian went by Fiamma unheeded, conscious of the fierce hunger which would no longer be denied. "Food! bread!" she whispered hoarsely.

The young man vented a long whistle, instantaneously answered by a round-jerked serving-man.

"Here, Giles, the saddle-bags with what means we have of spreading a table in the wilderness," his master ordained briefly in English. "I fear, signore," relapsing into his laborious Italian, "the basket of fragments is like to begin as well as to end the feast, of which nothing is of the best save the welcome."

The blue eyes scanned the girl curiously, as Giles marshalled the resources of the saddle-bags. The Englishman's glance passed carelessly over the unusual garb, only half hidden by the mantle, but lingered the more insistently on the face above. With her first mouthful Fiamma felt herself answering again to her will; a colour brought by the fresh

wind glowed in her rounded cheeks, her eyes under their long fringes glistened like wave-washed agates. Impatient of the quiet scrutiny, she glanced up at last.

"You are for Florence, messer?"

The sudden question failed to bring an immediate answer. Fiamma felt disconcerted by the pause.

"I am just from thence," she went on, lifting her head boldly to meet the stranger's stare. For a moment she fancied a flicker of interest glanced in the eyes watching her, but with the next they were as keenly hard as before.

"Then I wager your news-wallet is better worth emptying than my saddle-bags," was the rejoinder. "What of the Capelli? Has Duke Francesco found a Grand Duchess who will look on the fair Veletian with her husband's eyes?"

A warmth sprung up under Fiamma's live skin, startling her into unpremeditated speech. "The Capelli is the fairest widow in Florence to-day," she said. "When I passed the gates yesterday, the murder of Bonaventuri was in all men's mouths."

The traitorous colour glowed under his gaze, but for a moment both were silent. The stranger spoke first, folding his arms lazily under his head. "Bonaventuri dead?" he said. "That's news indeed; and yourself, sir, if a fellow-traveller may ask, where are you making towards?"

A quick fear pressed Fiamma to evasion. "To Bologna," she flung back hastily, feeling, the moment the word had passed her lips, that somehow a card for which the other had been waiting had been played.

"Why, then, we may travel in company," he responded. "As a beginning of good fellowship let us exchange names. Mine is Mark Talbot, of Lincolnshire, England, heir to a younger son's portion of a pedigree longer than his purse, and what wit his elders may have left for him."

"The Cavaliere Padino, at your service," Fiamma returned, resenting vaguely the good-humoured, half-mocking bow with which the name was received.

Talbot rose, displaying his tall, well-knit figure in a stretch. The girl imitated his movements slowly, feeling herself caught in a spring of a hasty word, but rapidly deciding that safety, no less than appearances, demanded that she should resign herself to the loss of a day which the turning aside to Bologna would involve.

"We had best be jogging," Talbot remarked, glancing at the sun. "Do me the favour, sir, to mount my horse for the first stage at least. One can scarce be benighted and half starved without paying the penalty in stiffened limbs. Giles can walk; 'twill do him good, for he has well-nigh turned goose or angel in the Venetian water-ways, so little call was there for legs among them."

"You are from Venice, then?" Fiamma ventured, clambering, awkwardly she knew, on to the horse the servant held ready for her. Her eyes lingered involuntarily on the Englishman's athletic six feet of manhood, as he vaulted into his saddle.

"Why, yes; but Venice is not healthy for all men." In a time the blue eyes swept her face with unmistakable significance. "You know it, messer?"

"I? no." Fiamma parried the thrust with a counter-question. "You were forced to leave it?"

Talbot shrugged his shoulders laughingly. "The streets are too damp; that's all my quarrel with Venice."

Fiamma fell silent, revolving the situation. The track wound through the mountains, now plunging into lush ravines, where fern-grown rocks, laced with waterfalls, narrowed above their heads into vaulted arches sealed with a streak of sulphur blue, and again widening into meadow-patches shady with chestnuts. Various short cuts, seemingly well known to Talbot,

though involving scrambling where the horses must climb like mules, considerably discounted the distance spanned by the trodden path. Already peasant-girls, scarcely visible under their green faggots of fodder, and flocks of goats herded by old women with flax-filled distaffs, told of approach to Bologna in its plain fringing the skirts of the mountains. Yet even as the girl meditated on the best way to elude an unwelcome companionship and continue her journey without leaving any tell-tale traces, she was fretted at finding her thread of thought continually broken by her own involuntary sidelong observation of the man at her elbow.

A laughing interrogation in his glance prompted her to break a silence which she had felt awkward. "You travel long in Italy, messer?"

"One bound to Fortune's wheel as I am has no means of telling the duration of a turn," Falbot returned carelessly. "If ducats were as plentiful with me as time is, I should be a fatter prey than I am like to prove to the brigands who, they tell me, lurk in these mountains."

"There's worse than such in the mountains." Fiamma spoke on the breath of a remembered fear. "My encounter with you was caused by the haste with which I sped last night from purgatorial flames leaping and twisting in the darkness like anguished souls.

Talbot laughed. "You, I dare say, were near enough to hear shrieks and vows of amendment proceeding from the dismal pit?"

"Nay, I heard no shrieks," said Fiamma shortly, vexed by his evident raillery.

Whether or not the Englishman divined her displeasure, he continued speaking. "I had heard of such fires before I came here. It's a certain flame engendered by the soil, which, breaking the solid crust of earth, blazes on a hillside—the Mount of Fire, as they call it hereabouts."

Fiamma made no reply, a sullenness of mingled annoyance and fatigue chilling her into a resolve to prove no entertaining companion. Chafing at the hitch in her plans, which, for fear of causing a suspicion that might ruin everything, she had dared do nothing to avoid, she rode silently beside Talbot, brusquely refusing to share his noonday meal, and repulsing his attempts at conversation.

But as the lines of the Leaning Towers of Bologna came in sight, Talbot turned deliberately towards her. "You lodge, doubtless, with friends in the town, sir," he observed. "If it were otherwise, I should propose that we should still keep in fellowship, for I have heard that these Italian mountains spare a robber or two for the inns."

"I thank you; but I frequent too mean a lodging to be recommended to a stranger," Fiamma returned. "My foster-mother was of Bologna."

Talbot shrugged his shoulders with his usual gesture of careless assent, and made no further effort to alter his companion's purpose. As the group of three stopped at a canvas-covered booth outside the massive masonry of the city gateway, to receive on their thumbs the tiny speck of red wax that signified the receipt of the gate-money (and without which no man could dare to enter the town), Fiamma was relieved to find that no attempt was made to follow her, the slightest farewell token being vouchsafed her as the Englishman in his turn threw down his crown on the tax-gatherer's counter.

The brown of the arcaded streets was fusing into orange-tawny in the evening light as the girl passed along them, reluctantly conscious that it was too late for leaving the city, and scanning the signs for an inn sufficiently frequented by travellers for her advent to excite no suspicion. A huge gilded sausage, swinging half-way across a narrow alley, seemed at last to preside over the establishment of her quest, with the

satisfactory additions of a purblind landlord and a wife absent on pilgrimage.

Flinging herself on the straw pallet of the chamber allotted to her, Fiamma almost instantly fell asleep, even before her portion of the steaming bowl of macaroni served for supper had been brought to her by a white-toothed serving-lass, hoping perhaps for a kiss and a *quattrino* from a handsome stranger. Scuffling and laughter from the common room below passed unheard by her; but at last a firm, light step, intermingled with heavier footfalls, sounded through her dreams insistently enough to make the girl's heavy eyelids unclose. They rested unconsciously for the instant, before they flashed fully open, upon the cool, light smile of her acquaintance of the day.

Talbot, stripped to his hose and holland shirt, stood beside the bed, looking down in apparent half-mocking expectation on Fiamma's start into an upright posture, but at the colour rushing to the edges of the hair, a faint surprise showed in his eyes.

"Your pardon, sir, but the landlord could find no other spot in which to bestow Giles and me," he remarked, with a glance over his shoulder at the man already snoring at the foot of another pallet. "Accept my apologies for waking you, but as this inn has not hung out the signs of Peter's keys, it deserves no blame that its lodging-space for saints and sinners alike should have limits."

A vague suspicion, having nothing but fear to feed upon, stirred in his hearer uneasily. She lay down again, throwing her arm with the movement of a pettish speaker across the face burning with its hot flushes. The impracticability of the situation oppressed Fiamma like a nightmare. "Keep your apologies with your speech till needed," she murmured, the anger of a terrified woman chiding naturally enough with the peevishness of a tired traveller but half awakened. "To-morrow will bring weariness enough;

the night is given to owls to screech in, but to men to sleep."

To her relief, Talbot turned away unconcernedly, though to her startled senses the time seemed endless before a second regular breathing mingled with Giles's snores. The lines of the shutter serving for window were outlined in ashen light before the girl was able to grasp at the satisfaction of the thought that the city gates would soon be opened, and, once stolen unobserved from the chamber, she would be free to follow the white road beyond, the road to Venice.

While steadying her still shaking hands upon the Cardinal's gift, Fiamma waited for the dawn. A sound fainter than a gnawing mouse struck on her ear. Her eyes, roving about the room, fastened a startled glance on the flat wooden bar securing the door. It was no fancy that it was moving, slipping backwards by hair-breadths, under pressure of a dagger point introduced between door and lintel. Another second, and the woman's keen sight caught the glitter of a human eye, peering at the opening.

Her hands twisted the crucifix in their steel-like grip, as, with the insight quicker than thought, the Cardinal's agent grasped the fact of thieves lurking outside the opening door. Even as she sprang up it yielded with feminine instinct of defence she flung herself forward, parrying with uplifted crucifix a blow struck in a cat-like spring at Talbot, sleeping nearest. To her own astonishment, the thief reeled back, blood streaming from the arm into which she saw, bewildered, that she had struck a deadly-looking blade, the handle of which was formed by the upper portion of the crucifix.

Already the Englishmen were on their feet, the discharge of a horse-pistol filling the place with smoke, through which the robbers, breaking under Talbot's fury of charge, tumbled to the stairway. Giles, bawling alternate invocations to the saints and shouts

to the watch (prudently deaf to all such scenes); clattered after them, but in vain. As he returned, cursing the outer stair which had baulked him of his quarry, his master turned to Fiamma with outstretched hand.

CHAPTER IV.

BEHIND THE MOUNTAINS.

“You pay good interest on a debt!”

The slender bones of the girl's hand almost cracked in the Englishman's grasp, but the blue eyes seeking the hazel were clouded by what seemed a regret. Fiamma, still, bewildered by the sudden scene, gazed from the dagger she held to the sheathing wood which had dropped from it to the floor.

“St. George, that's a neat bit of work!” remarked Talbot. “A harmless-seeming crucifix as ever monk pattered prayers to, and a grim blade leaps to work on touching that nail in the Christ's palm! The cowed saint who hid that in the bosom of his frock had a charm against bodily enemies, warranted to turn 'em into ghostly ones.” He paused, looking frankly at Fiamma. “Religion and women! they should be the sweetest and best things on this trundling bowl of a world, and yet they are the causes of all the bloodshed that makes men ready to forswear one and the other.”

A man could scarce wish better causes to fight for,” Fiamma returned, beginning, as she spoke, to rearrange the dress disordered as much by the night's vigil as by the recent scuffle.

Talbot took a step forward, laying a hand on her shoulder. “No better,” he agreed. “And I think that's why their cozening doubles are abroad, and seldom miss finding a strong arm and honest heart to strike a blow for a cause which deserves to fail.”

His hand leaned a thought more heavily on Fiamma's shoulder. "Such a rotten cause has a trick of breaking under the feet of those who have ventured upon it, sinking them into destruction."

"Your wit smells of the cloister, messer," Fiamma retorted, sheathing the dagger in the crucifix once more. "Your soul will doubtless profit, but women, I dare swear, will scarce savour a sermon in place of a song from the lips of so perfect a *cavaliere* as yourself."

An impatient flush rose to Talbot's forehead.

"Take your own road, then, in Heaven's name," he said. "An hour ago I would have sworn that the track was nearly at an end since it had crossed mine, but you snatched my life in the nick from yon thieving cut-throats, and one good turn deserves another, as they say with us overseers. Soon enough, it is like, the cards will be dealt for another round, and then a winning hand in the last serves the player little in the next, except that his stakes may be the heavier." He held out his hand with a quick smile. "Be it as it may, you've saved my life, and I would help you, if I might, to lengthen yours. Be warned by a friend, youngster, and journey to Prester John's country, if you will, but not to Venice."

Fiamma stealthily repressed a startled movement at the divination of an intention which she had fancied hidden, and looked her adviser squarely in the eyes.

"All men do not journey towards Venice as surely as towards Purgatory," she said mockingly. "You put me in mind of a quack-doctor I once saw in a market-place. On the chance of finding an ailing man in the crowd, he pressed his drugs on those sound in wind and limb, as you would fain ram your bolus of good advice down my throat." She hesitated, with a quick change of mood at the hardening of the blue eyes looking back into hers. "Your pardon if I seem churlish," she went on impulsively, feeling inexplicably

driven beyond caution, and brushing the curls from her brow in her accustomed gesture. "Indeed, the sight of a brother's blood dims my eyes to the distorting of even kindly faces——"

She stopped, in the face of an unspoken question dawning in the other's look, lingering there during his strong grasp of farewell. It was with an odd feeling of depression that she passed down the unclean stairway, and, somewhat languidly setting to work as she went on a piece of bread with the peculiar close grain of unleavened flour, made her way along the rounded arcades already growing warm in the morning sun.

The varying excitements and fatigues that would have maimed any health and vigour less splendid than hers exercised sufficient mastery during the day's journey to at least numb any other thought in her than a sense of satisfaction at the miles left behind under her steadily plodding feet. Purposely avoiding the highway, she had struck away from Ferrara, and the low flats, left in desolate widowhood by the retreat of the sea-line, proved heavy going. A chance muleteer (the red-tasselled panniers of whose mules were, Fiamma guessed, filled with illicit loads of salt) afforded her an unexpected lift, and, no doubt going as he would be done by, betrayed no inconvenient curiosity on any detail of her journey. Under escort of his string of mules, Fiamma turned at nightfall into the single inn that disposed its withered bush to the brackish wind; her supper of calves' ears and beans relishing as well to her as the night's sleep in the vast kitchen sparsely lit by the fire of driftwood and seaweed on the hearth. The simple companionship left the girl the lonelier when, on the noon of the next day, their roads parted, the muleteer turning aside to fetch another load less innocent than the wicker-covered wine-flasks, each stoppered with its vine-leaf, that ostentatiously topped his packs.

The district grew kinder to the traveller's eyes, as with fresh breath she stepped on bravely. With every league the newness of the spring-time crept caressingly nearer in the alien marshes, taking seisin by the clasp of low-growing, tendrilled green, elfin heralds raising their blossom-trumpets in a summons of surrender to the waste. Fiamma, treading the tangle of paths twisting through emerald patches of rice-fields with pools sleeping here and there among the green growth, felt the soothing of monotony descend upon her, disturbed only at times when, through breaks in the waving spears, the purple bloom on distant hills showed faintly, the rampart of white Venice sleeping at the lip of the sea.

But the drifting content was merely the mood of the hour. To the wayfaring feet a blank stretch of water suddenly opposed itself, in length and breadth an actual lagoon, a right of way set by the distant sea on the half-reclaimed lands. The water lay in stagnant resentment of exile from the tumbling waves without. Fiamma's eyes searched the sullen grayness for some sign of a ferry; her feet sank in the mud before she impatiently roused herself to the knowledge that she must accept the creek's refusal, and set her face inland.

The wide sky was broadening in the evening light, as the pools began to grow slowly crimson, a suggestion of some shaft from the sunset smiting the world into smouldering flame. The rice-fields had resumed their sway, the pools were no longer brackish, and the thought of the progress achieved spurred Fiamma faster. She sped on, lifting her eyes to the jagged mountain-chain, when a sudden beating of a bird's wings among the rice-blades brought her to a stand.

A kite swung heavily into the air, joining a mate circling near. As Fiamma's glance followed the direction of its stoop, she perceived a woman with coarse garments draggled in the lurid water, rocking

herself to and fro over a dead child on her knees. She looked up vacantly as Fiamma came nearer, cringing away with the movement of a cowed thing; but as with a rush of swift woman's pity the girl knelt down, in a vague impulse of help chafing the tiny limp limbs, the other ceased to tremble.

"You are for Venice?" she said, with the babbling utterance of mental weakness. "Oh, be careful; their shadow broods over it! the shadow of Death!"

Fiamma's hand slid gently from the cold softness of the dead baby to the hand drooping inertly at the mother's side.

"Come with me," she urged. "Night is falling, and foul things," with a shuddering glance at the kites poised watchfully on the air, "are already on the wing. Come, we will carry the child between us, and find shelter among those hills."

The woman gazed dully at the child on her lap. "It fumbled my breast to the last with little craving lips," she murmured. "My husband's blood, my baby's milk, my woman's tears—they have taken them all, and left me nothing! Nothing, nothing!" she repeated in moaning cadences.

Fiamma knelt by her in sad perplexity.

"Go not to Venice!" the woman whispered. "It was but a jest that my Nino uttered, and with the morning I found him washing up and down in the green water of our landing-stage, the stiletto between his shoulders! It was a heavy price for a poor gadolier to pay for his jest—his life, signore, but *they* have no pity."

A shiver crept over Fiamma's shoulders, as the meaning of the speaker's impersonalities dawned upon her.

"Come," she said again, drawing the child away with tender force. "Come, the dark is upon us, and we must leave these swamps behind us before we rest."

The woman sprang to her feet, flinging her arms

wide. "The Ten! the Ten! the Ten!" she shrieked. "When I had my baby, I was silent, for the vengeance might still strike, but now I am free—free to call curses on them! Curse them!" she howled leaping up and down on the narrow pathway. "May I live to call the curses home to them, as I used to call Nino's gondola home in the evening to the Piazzetta!"

Exhausted by her passion, she turned passively to Fiamma, and the two moved forward, the girl belying her masculine attire oddly by carrying the baby's limp weight in the instinctive maternal clasp which some women possess. Clusters of lights glimmering through the dusk told of a village under the lee of the hills towards which the ground beneath the wayfarers' feet was already rising.

"You have kin in Venice?" the Florentine asked at last, more for the sake of interrupting the pitiful moaning at her side than from curiosity. The question had to be repeated before it penetrated to the other's dulled brain.

"My father," she answered then. "He is a snail-gatherer, but he was proud of his only daughter's snug lodging in the street of the Black Hat, just opposite the Madonna with the seven swords in her heart. She has no swords now; she gave them all to me when I found Nino dead there by the landing-stage, with the water lapping in his curls. Such curls! I combed them out every Sabbath, and on all the *festas*—"

The heartrending moans began again, and Fiamma could only gently hurry her along the grass-bordered street of the village they had now reached. That day, after the muleteer's departure, the girl had profited by solitude to exchange the black and red suit, of Cassandra's providing, for garments bought from a second-hand booth before she left Bologna, and which, being those of an ordinary Venetian gentleman, she had concluded were the least likely to court observation. The mail-shirt, fashioned for

one as slender as herself, still hung about her shoulders, but the diabolic livery, weighted by a large stone, lay securely in the dark depths of a marshy water. Meanwhile, the furred black mantle, affording glimpses of the green brocaded gown underneath, was sufficiently worn to excite no attention from keener observers than the folk of the cottages perched on the Euganean slopes.

Curiosity easy to parry was indeed provoked by the appearance of the wanderers with their piteous burden, and Fiamma felt it convenient that the Venetian accent puzzled the mountaineers, so that the business of framing judiciously vague answers developed on herself. The old priest, through whose medium most of the conversation was conducted, consented—after a cautious search for plague-spots, incomprehensible enough to Fiamma's ignorance of the scourge which had as yet spared the mountain-pastures—to the dead infant being placed for the night on the bier before the altar of the tiny chapel. The mother, crouched beside it, had sunk into a tearless vigil before the salt sweetness of crushed fern floated in a soothing narcotic about Fiamma's curling head, nestled to sleep on a soft pile of green.

Before she slept, she had convinced herself from the villagers that, in spite of the poor widow's crazed wanderings of a week past, Venice lay, by certain passes over the hills, within a day's journey. She was awake and ready for the road again before even the goats, rattling their horns sleepily against the walls of the hut which had received her, had begun to low for their pasture. A smile creased a long dimple in the brown cheek as Fiamma reflected that Cardinal Ferdinando's well-poised mind would see only a flaw of sentimental womanishness in the passage of one of his gold pieces from her hand to the priest, in trust for her unfortunate companion of the previous night.

Munching a handful of chestnuts pressed on her by her hospitable entertainers, she passed beyond the village outskirts, towards the pass indicated to her as her road. The altar which earth dedicates to Spring was odorous in the hills with the incense of lily-of-the-valley, constellations of myrtle, and flowering sprays of heath. The beauty of grass blossoming into a radiance of celandine, periwinkles, and waxen rosy chalices of a low-growing pasture-plant, woke in the absorbed traveller a vague recollection of the pride of her late convent, the picture where the painter, among the shades of the ilex thickets of his cloister, had apparently dipped his brush in such very flower-cups, staining the garments of his folk in Paradise to the delicate unshadowed brightness of the blossoms.

But Fiamma, crushing the petals with quick, light steps, pressed on too fast for any fancy to follow. Splintered peaks and ridges, veiled at the outset in blue haze, in the full sunshine lifted their fantastic outlines at times like beckoning fingers and again like forbidding lances to the wanderer hurrying through the defiles they guarded. The thought of the day lost through the encounter with the Englishman beat in vexing reiteration through Fiamma's brain, and through her speed she tried to calculate how soon the Capelli might be expected in Venice, with a satirical suspicion that the ambitious lady's movements were not likely to be hampered by an overstrict conformity to the regulations of widowhood.

The wind of the heights blew coldly about her as she climbed higher, the occasional note of a cow-bell dropping on the silence that held the mountain. Fiamma had crested the pass, springing down its descent with the alacrity and seeming carelessness of the inbred mountaineer. She swung sharply round a corner of rock, clinging herself back so promptly as to measure her length on the shale-strewn track.

In front of her, its flakes of spume wetting her face as she lay, dashed a mountain torrent, setting a silver bar to her further progress. Fiamma's white teeth caught her lip in vexation as she realised that the leaping waters wiped out her day's toil, that she must turn back to recover the road missed, it must have been, earlier in her way. But turning back in a path once struck into was foreign to Fiamma's blood. Even as she lay, her eye was caught by a birch-tree, pluming a mossy boulder, and shaking its green spray of young leaves out over the restless spray of white. In an instant Fiamma was on her feet, measuring with her thought the slender column of silver-rinded stem, and the chasm through which the cascade hurled itself, the opposite wall of rock of which lay some feet below. With scarcely more delay than a bird would make in the instant between spreading its wings and leaving the twig vibrating under the impetus of its flight, the girl had clasped the birch-bole, swinging herself with it towards a crag jutting on the other side.

But the winter work of the woman, curled in the green pillar under the silver rind, was not to go for nothing. As the birch-stem curved it snapped with a sudden rending of wood and flaky outer tissue; under the green spray of the branches swirled along the torrent a face, white as the hungry waters, showed for a second's glimpse. Yet Fiamma, bruised and buffeted, fought for her life, catching, with hands sore notwithstanding the danger, at a mass of bracken past which she was swept, the cord-like fibre of stem offering sufficient resistance to her grasp for a desperate twist and strain upwards over shelves of rock worn by the fierce waterfall into giant stairs.

Panting bleeding, trembling, she struggled to her feet, to fall back with an intolerable stab of pain. A cry burst from the lips which had grown white. To climb with a strained side down mountain gorges

seemed impossible; equally so the alternative, to crouch in the grasses beside the incessant resonance of the waterfall, through which a cry would fall dumb as the shriek with which a sleeper struggles to pierce the terror of his dream.

Fiamma sat above the tumult of waters and cursed the recklessness that so often tripped up her prudence; but a curse launched after lost game retrieves but poorly. Beads of pain broke out on her forehead, as she resolutely set herself to crawl on hands and knees down the steep hill-path, never slackening her onward efforts, though with each movement the pallor under the clear brown skin showed more livid.

The child of the castello had set a nearer goal than Venice before her. More than once she had pushed aside the bushes overhanging her, listening with ears trained by the mountain for bell-music shaken out on the hillside by a feeding flock. At each pause the mellow ripple sounded nearer. At the last listening interval the girl detected a plaintive piping mingling with the chiming, and crept on with a new courage, to emerge with unexpected suddenness on an island of meadow set about with chestnuts, in the shadows of which a shepherd sat fluting on his reed-pipe.

Fiamma called to him imperatively. "I have fallen and lamed myself in these accursed mountains," she said, recognising in the face, lined with the pressing petty cares of a life lived in limited perspective, immunity to indulge in frankness; "yet I must on to Venice to-day if possible." She glanced calculatingly at the sun, blazing in the molten blue above the chestnuts. "If you have a mule I will pay you well for it."

"No mule, signore." The shepherd's glance strayed in simple curiosity over the garments steaming in the palpitating sunshine, and at the white, resolute face above them. "No mule, since ours which used to carry the cheeses to the marshes was set on by the

wolves, when it broke its leg in a ravine last winter." He paused. "If the signore must journey to Venice, there's nothing for it but a shepherd's chair."

"I will give you good *scudi* if you can indeed get me forward," Fiamma interrupted stimulatingly.

The man nodded, sending out his pipe in a shrill scale, answered at intervals by running goats. The clustering of the silent-footed creatures about the bare-armed man, clad in a sheepskin girt to his waist, seemed curiously dream-like to Fiamma wavering in the mists of pain and fatigue in the debatable land betwixt sleeping and waking. Suddenly raising the long lashes fallen unawares, she found herself alone in the sunny patch of pasture, the last note of the bell fading from her ears like music beating out of sleep heard still in the first moment of waking.

The solitude of the pasture was something. The small head, with its locks curling more closely for their recent bath, drooped again on the sunny turf, sweet with a hundred spices of leaf and blossom. Drifting into sleep, the girl lay; pressing her face against the warm earth, she seemed to herself to move, to be swept into some dim dance of figures, circling now fast, now slow, to the weird toll of a bell. She herself held a partner's hand and tried to see the shadowy face—ah! it was that of the Capelli. Another figure was winding its way to them, a skeleton King Death, as she had seen it once in some *campo santo*, but instead of an hour-glass the bony hand held a bell, and one after another broke out of the dance to follow the summons. Fiamma's heart throbbed to bursting; must she place the warm living hand she held in that ghostly one? Oh, she must break the circle; but at the thought the dancers whirled fast, barring her way, and Death caught her to him, bearing her shrinking on his fleshless shoulder away from them all, and bade her look at him. And, because she must, she raised her head to the face

above her, and it was bronzed, blue-eyed, and it was the Englishman's voice that whispered, "Journey not now to Venice but——"

The grasp of a human hand brought her pantingly erect, striving in the first struggle out of the surges of sleep to dash aside the withholding touch, before she recognised the uncouth figure of the shepherd. The satyr-like form had twisted hay-hands over his sheepskin garment, thus supporting a small board or seat strapped firmly on his shoulders. With an encouraging grin, displaying his sharp yellow teeth, he knelt close beside Fiamma.

"I warrant the signore has never seen a shepherd's chair before," he said. "It's sate for all its looks, if a great gentleman will condescend to trust himself to the conveyance which bears our women, too old or too sick to tré up it with a stout staff, well enough up and down these hills." His rustic simplicity withstood Fiamma's glance, suspicious of mockery. "Courage, signore," he went on kindly. "Seat yourself on the wood, and bind our bodies together with this rope. Pity," he went on, at the flush and pallor overspreading Fiamma's face at her first movement, "that my wife was piped to Paradise last Martinmas; she had a plaster of lily-leaves that wiled soreness from a man's bones faster than salt brings the sheep about one. Madonna! I have scarce seen mortal to speak to till the clouds husked you down, signore," he added, steadying himself on his long staff and plunging into the shadows of the chestnut wood.

The relief of the lily-plaster could scarcely have equalled the relief to the girl of the knowledge that each swinging step, tormentingly painful though it was to her strained side, nevertheless set her forward. Already her mind began to turn with curiosity, too vague at first for uneasiness, towards the question of how her entrance into Venice was to be effected. As the hills drew back their green skirts from the dun

expanse of marshes that began to set a darker rim to the horizon, she pressed an imperative hand on her bearer's shoulder.

"Boats with cheeses, fuel, and the like, ply through those marsh-channels to Venice?" she said tentatively. "Is a strict watch kept on them by the customs?"

"Strict enough, signore," the shepherd returned. "'Tis hard for an honest man to make a profit. *Sanctissima*, if St. Peter has a keen eye at the gate of Paradise as the Ten have for a spoonful of salt that has not paid its tax, no hope of a poor soul smuggling itself before its time out of Purgatory."

Fiamma did not answer. The two had paused for a brief rest, sitting side by side on a thinly-grassed stretch, the rim of the marsh on which the guide had at last entered, following with the careless precision of habit the windings of a brackish water-channel. A sky, in which rosy fleeces of cloud swam like a fairy argosy in a flood of blue, glowed in front of her into fusing tints of smoky gold, from which flames of light darted like swords of the cherubim into the evening peace.

Against the orange massed on the horizon a vision of towers and domes showed blackly an iris sea misting about their bases—Venice! The sight struck on Fiamma's heart as a challenge reverberates through the champion's pavilion. Yet as the shadow of night raps the sunset glory, a sinister thought crept into the moment's jubilancy. Venice! When and how should she leave it?

Striving to see no omen in the natural prompting of a physical depression, Fiamma resumed her narrow seat, watching with unseeing eyes the water spurting wide under the bare legs that stode the channels cheerily.

"*Ecco!*" exclaimed her conductor, stopping before a reed-thatched shed. "I can bear your excellency

no longer, but there will be little difficulty in finding a boat to bring the signore yonder."

He pointed vaguely over the lagoon widening before them, the mist that moved upon it imparting the effect of a ghostly procession gliding across the waste of water. Fiamma leant against the liatel of the empty hut, trying through her weariness to seize on the best course of action, ready one moment to dare all, with the next distrusting the rashness—the inevitable warp in feminine courage.

A single black speck on the water, no bigger than a cormorant, caught her eye. It sailed at unawares on the surface of her thought, as the deeper current surged against her perplexity.

"A disguise of some wandering friar; but there's no way of procuring a disguise quickly, and time hatches evil" she reflected. "The best is to bribe one of these barges to bring me hidden under a load of its cargo, and that sets one or more tongues wagging." With a disheartened sigh, she turned towards her guide, to address him tersely. "Speech is silver and silence golden, and you'll find it golden if you keep it about bestowing me on one of those barges we spoke of but now." She hesitated. "A lady's in the case," she finished bluntly.

A look of simple sagacity twinkled under the puckered eyelids. "Ay, ay, one end of the cord which pulls up-hill and down-dale is most times in a woman's fingers," chuckled the shepherd. "My sister Nanni's husband is on one of those boats yonder; he should find it no hard matter to stow a slim youth like yourself under a pile of nets—for a price, that is to say, signore, for, to say truth, his wife has taught him that to help any man to matrimony is not like 'o be a work of charity. But he will be silent, signore; seventeen years of Nanni's tongue have taught him to hold his own."

Fiamma's eyes followed his gesticulating fingers

towards a group of tall-sailed fishing-boats, beyond the bare flats arteried by lines of blackish water such as flowed sluggishly at her feet. The shepherd unfastened a rough raft moored to one of the stakes, indicators in reed-like clusters of the navigable channels between groups of submerged sand-islands. "Twill be well to strike the bargain and enter Venice before the dawn blows out the stars," he remarked. "The folk of the *calli* like their milk and cheese in good time o' mornings."

He paddled into the low water with an ease which made Fiamma suspect that smuggling was not the lost art that he had implied it. As her arms slung about her knees, she crouched upon the raft, the black speck of her former notice began to take shape as a gondola. Under the pole it floated hither and thither, seemingly, questing upon the waters like a hound at fault. The fishing-sails were showing amber in the evening light as Fiamma turned her gaze on them, idly noticing the huge figure of St. Christopher embroidered upon the nearest. Her swerving glance again fell upon the gondola, as with a hawk's swoop it bore down upon the raft, the bright steel of its prow seeming to cleave the dark water into which it glimmered. As it came, the sweep of the long oar ceased; the boat lay in the wash of the ripples.

The tarnished splendour of the west glittered on the steel prow, and fell in a quivering line of light downwards from the rower's outstretched hand, as he held toward Fiamma a tress of amber hair that hung from his fingers, to the black poop on which he stood. The woman at the window in Florence had such hair.

Fiamma followed her adventure, and stepped into the gondola. The thickening mist drew about it like a shroud.

CHAPTER V.

THE PAWN MAKES A KNIGHT'S MOVE.

"You have been beating these marshes a long time till the game rose, good fellow?"

Fiamma stood upright in the gondola, and rested a hand on the low black roof of the cabin. The sense of oneness with her part which is the inspiration of successful acting had come to her, curling her lip with a slight, insolent smile, not out of character as she purposely emphasised the Florentine accent.

The gondolier, driving his craft forward in its undulating sweep, answered with a respectful gesture. "By the wych-hazel, messer, ever since the Vulcans in the Mer...ia hammered out yester-even from the clock-tower! Beating the marshes it was truly, for it was not known at what point of the lagoons your excellency would break cover."

At the familiar adjuration, Fiamma turned sharply, recognising old Carpaccio by word and gesture. Attired in the tight-fitting garments of a gondolier, the astrologer showed a still vigorous figure, but the furtive glance which he sent along the panorama of looming sandshoals recalled his characteristic of normal deprecation.

"Best stoop to enter the *felse*, messer," he said in a low tone. "We shall soon leave these dead lagoons behind, and there are eyes that never sleep in Venice."

Fiamma still leaned negligently on the cabin-roof. "You've journeyed fast to come so far, my friend," she said lightly. "Faster, I dare swear, than any lady's litter."

"A lady's litter can go fast when driven by a woman's will. My mistress was bent on outstripping you, messer, for she guessed shrewdly (by the sign that the coat of mail was proved workmanship of

Milan) that after receiving the latest love-token from the Palazzo Strozzi, you would take wing for Venice to witness the grand doings that are like to be, as you once swore to her whom I serve, to do in such a case, —to dash them to the ground when at their height by crying in the face of all men, 'There stands wife, harlot, traitress but no widow!'" The astrologer's voice had sunk to the lowest whisper. "But one who loves your thinnest nail-paring more than her own soul conjures you not to risk yourself needlessly, signore; she swears by the Trinity that the vengeance you seek will fall ripe at your feet without your needing to move a hand. Be warned, signore; Venice for you is as a pest-house for a sound man; a thousand chances to one that its breath is death!"

"And what curtain has your mistress for me to lurk behind, while she feasts the eyes of Venice on her puppet-show of vengeance?" Fiamma asked, breathless with amazement that her brother should have been liable to such flaws of passion as often shook her own mood, that a boundary should have existed somewhere in the complaisance of the adventurer, who to all eyes had taken his separate road with never a resentful glance for that cre into which his wife had struck.

"A curtain thick as it needs to be," returned Carpaccio. "Venice, like many another old wife, has her secrets, which those who know her best can wile from her at times. And she whom I serve knows Venice, none better, since the years which brought a lithe, light-footed woman to consume her youth over the crucible's glow, and to glean wisdom from the alchemist who found no man or them all like Cassandra, his sister's child, for a daring treading in his steps. But she trod too fast, the scholar with the man's brain under the girl's gold curls; and the price of her quickness was the long years which have chained her to her couch, blasted by the poison

from which all her cool wit barely kept her life. Yet she makes her puppets dance for her, as you said but now, messer." The astrologer's voice took a subtly satirical intonation. "The past is an old story, like all old stories good for nothing but a waymark, and known to you as to all men; but what you, and all men, hunger and thirst to know is the future. Madonna Bianca has trusted Cassandra to Venice, since through my reading of the stars my mistress foretells her Widowship of a great change to befall her here."

The figure to whom he spoke threw itself with a gasp of excitement on the soft cushions. The sunset had faded from the air that now began to be slightly resonant with the hum of men's business and pleasure, the throb of life beating through the veins of a town. Low cries drifted across the ripples, the warning notes of the gondola that flitted past in the dusk, sowing the water with wavering crimson gleams from the lanterns swung on the rowers' poles. Across the water Venice was stealing on them.

"So far, so good, but I have no mind to be trusted by Madonna Cassandra yet," Fiamma reflected. "The reckoning called by an angry woman is apt to be heavy; better that she should think me a careless lover for the present."

A jar running through the boat's length roused her to reality; and, as she looked up, she saw that the gondola was caught on the edges of a shoal of others, lying to before a palace-front encrusted with coloured marbles. Lights streaming through the doorways framed in exquisitely twisted pillars, threw a cloth of gold on the water heaving against the porphyry stairway. Up the stairway pressed a crowd of figures, dotted here and there by masks and dominoes.

Carpaccio was intent on his steering. As his raft lay for an instant along the wet-gleaming stones, his passenger threw the end of her mantle about her face and boldly stepped out on the palace stairs.

"Should he even, here and now, turn his head and miss me, he will not cut my throat and his own with his tongue," she guessed shrewdly.

Among the groups ceaselessly swirling through each other, the unbidden guest mingled unnoticed, though with a certain instinct she avoided a lofty presence-chamber which for light and colour might have been the heart of the rainbow, prismatic splendours of Venetian mirrors shimmering in the light of countless candles like dewdrops among a field of daffodils. Under the scintillating candelabra the host of the night entertained a few specially favoured guests on a dais hung with purple and green. Fiamma's quick eyes soon perceived a scarcity of ladies in the scene, those present being apparently matrons of long standing, their charms scarcely needing the protection of the glittering yellow veils which they arranged incessantly over their bare shoulders.

"The daughters of St. Mark seem to have reached years of discretion," squeaked a mask in her ear, with a laugh that the conventional falsetto could not hinder from sounding startlingly familiar. The black domino told no tales, but a sudden vision of the bare parlor-room of the inn at Bologna blotted out the Venetian candlelight from Fiamma's sight, a strange leap of her pulses choking the speech from her lips.

"The damsels who sun their curls on the balconies are better worth eyeing," the mask went on; "but they are invisible, save at Ascension-tide, when they go to see the new fashions set out on the puppet in the Merceria. Will you wait till Ascension to choose a fair lady, or are you suited already?" he added, with an insistence that made Fiamma sure that her tardiness in reply had been wise. She drifted with the crowd, but the tall mask kept his place. "Perhaps the palace door will shut out a Venetian beauty into your arms," he continued, the eyes within his mask

fixing themselves intently on Fiamma's muffled face. The illusion was obvious to the wind-blown door, which, folks said, had barred the Capelli Palace to Bianca's return on the night when she had dared all to snatch an interview with her Florentine lover, but Fiamma was sufficiently on her guard to maintain a careless silence as of one wearied by an importunate talker. She turned towards the outer vestibule, taking advantage of the increasing crowd to slip from her companion's side, the multitude of dark figures around rendering pursuit difficult.

"Could I but procure me a gondola, it would be easy enough to play hide with him," she thought, moving with those about her into a balcony opening on the water. "That Englishman haunts me like a ghost; I would I might lay him with the charm of the crucifix!"

A shrill cry interrupted her meditations. Framed in the twisted pillars of one of the balcony arches, an extraordinary figure stood at bay—a woman dressed in a rose-coloured doublet and puffed hose slashed with silver, a train of darker crimson falling from her shoulders. Fair hair frizzled into two horns above her forehead, added to a supernatural height that bewitched Fiamma, till she perceived the woman to be mounted on huge silver pattens, raising her above the heads of the men thronging about her, but rendering her incapable of moving a step without support. Hemmed in by a host of gondoliers (most of them the worse of wine), she turned her head here and there with the gesture of some hunted animal searching for a way of escape from the gibes and rough caresses of her tormentors.

With instinctive woman chivalry, Fiamma had shouldered her way to the front, before she reflected that the move might render her dangerously conspicuous. The aspect of a gentleman was sufficient to rout most of the aggressors, the rest lounging away

with rude jests, as their victim stretched out imploring hands to the new-comer.

"I pray you, *cavaliere*, lend me your shoulder till I reach my gondola. A couple of minutes in the company of Carnation of the Calle will do you no harm, even though you are as good as your face promises; or if, as is more like, you are a sinner instead of saint, why, then, they won't hurt you either."

The face, pale to the colour of the lace ruff about the woman's neck, appealed to Fiamma more than the mocking words. Still the auster glances of the guests filled her with apprehension, as the strange figure, steadying herself upon her chopines by a grip of Fiamma's shoulder, steered herself and her companion towards the gondolas moored to stakes in the Canal. As the pair passed over the mosaic pavements the woman glanced about her resentfully.

"Before now the Capelli has thought it worth his while to bid me to a gayer masquerade than this," she said angrily. "How should I know that to-night's was a statelier affair than scores of others, when these noble ladies airing their ropes of pearls in the candle-light made room by their absence for fairer faces, while they moped like caged birds in the dull rooms looking out on the *rio*? No doubt the Capelli wishes to dazzle Venice with his splendour, before bird Bianca—she who fluttered out for a space from the dovecote—turns home to have her plumes whitened—a pretty pigeon of St. Mark's, truly!"

The bitter words went by Fiamma unheeded, her mind piecing the startling fact of her having stumbled on the Capelli Palace with that of the Englishman's presence in it. She questioned the possibility of some capacity connecting him with the house, and her heart leaped in her side as she remembered that, in their first meeting among the Apennines, he had spoken of leaving Venice. Absorbed in a suspicion that her track had drawn him back, which his recent almost

verbal identification of herself with Pietro Bonaventuri seemed to confirm, Fiamma stood motionless on the marble steps, watching the outlines of Carnation's gondola merge into the night's indigo, before she roused herself to the conviction that she had rushed into the jaws of a danger from which it would not be easy to escape.

Already her act of knight-errantry had drawn an ominous attention to her, and as an eddy in the shifting groups showed a mask taller than the others steadily working his way towards her, the girl felt that the passing minute held her last chance of safety. For an instant she stood irresolute. The hour for discarding the masks had struck; some of the soberer guests were already departing. Fiamma saw the one possibility of escape opened to her.

An ecclesiastic, presumably of high office, to judge from his embroidered robes, had just passed by; he was about to step into his gondola when Fiamma touched his arm. "Father," she whispered hurriedly, "I have a secret touching a great house in Venice. Would it please you to hear it in confession?"

The priest nodded, adroitly screening by his spreading robes her descent into the gondola. The boat glided into the darkness, Fiamma palpitating over the success of her daring impulse as much as at the new difficulty of escaping from her companion. The *stanz* of the gondolier beat musically through the tangle of her thought, as the craft turned into a side-canal, across which the breath of clematis floated on, a freshening wind which told of an open space of water near at hand. Gondolas still flitted past theirs, but a certain terror lest some lonely lagoon encircling a solitary monastery might lie ahead, urged her to another desperate expedient.

A boat, with a lady on the side nearest to Fiamma, was for an instant next them, the figures outlined in the starlight. With a reckless laugh, Fiamma shot

her hand forward, clutching at the woman's veil as though in insolent gallantry. The man beyond sprang up, a zig-zag of light darting from the rapier in his hand; but the Churchman had already given a swift order, and his gondola flew ahead like a sea-swallow, darting from one narrow water-lane into another, till the shouts of the pursuit were dulled by distance.

"What madness has bitten you, young man?" exclaimed the priest in a fierce whisper. "That *cavaliere* whose lady you so wantonly insulted is nephew to one of the Ten; you had better at once have dropped your name into the Lion's Mouth! Even if he does not denounce you, in all likelihood we have not yet shaken off the foes roused by your hot-blooded folly, and by the skin flayed from the blessed Bartolommeo I refuse to be an instant longer in the company of one against whom so much as a dog of the Ten bears a grudge, if your confession concerned Pope Paul himself! You had best take shelter quickly at the Black Hat yonder, where, if you are wary in dropping no hint of the power of the enmity you have aroused, I make no doubt you will be initiated into some hiding-hole framed for mad lads like yourself to escape the consequences of their drinking-bouts."

The gondola slackened as he spoke at a cavernous doorway, pushing off again into the shadow before Fiamma, triumphant over her shrewd guess as to the pacific prudence of Churchmen, had fairly sprung on the stone slab of the threshold. The innkeeper proved alert, at her first hurried sentences conducting her to a chamber which communicated with the roof, furnishing at need a way of escape.

Left alone, the girl unlatched the casement that bowed above a narrow street. A red spark of light glimmered in the corner, casting a dim glow over a Virgin with seven swords in her heart. The sight recalled the crazed wanderer in the rice-swamps to the girl's mind; a shudder checked her breath as she

realised that the past day had brought herself within reach of the terrible silent power before whom she, by the part she had undertaken to play, was already a sentenced criminal.

"Faith, the odds are heavy," she thought, stretching limbs stiff and bruised by her wan erings; "one girl against all Verice! Heigho, if that Englishman were for me, I should not fear his keen eyes and cool smile as I do now! I think sooner than face them I would pluck the beards of all the Ten!" She writhed in the blackness of the canopied bed with a sudden causeless impatience. "The plague catch him! Why am I pitted against him of all men? He will baulk me if he can; the hardness of the eyes within his mask told me as much. I seem to him like a clumsy country lad, and I must continue to seem so if I would not hear a convent grate fall behind me as dull as earth on a coffin-lid! He must wonder at the Capelli's taste, yet she found Fietro handsome enough to follow him over marsh and mountain—until she murdered him, that she might step on his dead body to a throne." The soft young face, still rosy in its womanly flushings, grew set and stern. "What are a man's blue eyes to me in the scales against a brother's blood? I will revenge dead Pietro in spite of him." Her thoughts grew misty with coming sleep. "Yet I wish they had not cut my hair at the convent; perhaps he would have thought me fairer if he had seen it rippling to my knees."

CHAPTER VI.

CARNATION OF THE CALLE.

SHE slept long and heavily, waking for the first time in many days to a leisure to think and plan at ease. The effect of her late hardships had not entirely vanished, and she decided on hiring a gondola by

way of gaining a knowledge of the town likely to prove useful to her plans.

Tolerably confident in the certainty that previous to the elopement with the Capelli which had stirred all Venice, Pietro Bonaventuri, the merchant's clerk, had been unlikely to attract the smallest notice, so that her person, except to Cassandra's agents, was probably unknown to any chance passer-by, she sallied forth at last, to drift in an amazement that dulled thought.

Through the shadowed street on which she had looked last night she passed, from under a tower with a blue-stained clock-face into a sun-steeped square, breaking at the farthest end into a dazzle of blue water, and ramparted on its other three sides with marbles dazzling as drifted snows, or mellowed into dusky tints of yellow as though translucent with bygone sunlight. Silken banners, streaming from poles stained with Venetian red, called the eye in an imperious summons to the gilded domes of St. Mark, burnished into suns under the blue vault of sky. Beneath the statted horses of the portico, in the shadow of the triple-arched doorway, jugglers tossed golden balls. brown-skinned loungers gambled with quick movements of supple fingers, women, with copper water-vessels hung from the yokes on their shoulders, paused to listen to the *improvisatore* leaning against a pillar with its mosaic peacocks and lions. Farther away, white colonnades seemed to float on a hazy vista of water as though the clouds had marshalled themselves in a mirage of king's palaces.

Keeping her mantle carefully about her face, Fiamma passed beneath the sheer height of the Campanile, cutting its tawny outlines against the blue air of its solitude, from which the buildings around fell back as though in homage to its springing stateliness. The blackness of gondolas heaving on green ripples struck

recallingly on the stranger to Venice, and she stepped with no foreboding shiver through the slender columns where death, the Ten had decreed, waited for Pietro Bonaventuri should he again set foot in Venice.

Yet the keen glitter was absent from the girl's eyes as the gondola on which her choice had fallen oared its length along sleeping waterways, sliding by marble stairs leading up into the shadow of palaces, or beneath balconies where gay-feathered birds rocked on gilded hoops. The winding of the canals which diapered the narrow streets in a green network were impressed on a watchful brain; yet at times, when the sweetness of some patch of flower-garden flung itself over a jealous wall, or a fair face gleamed for an instant through the fretted balustrades of a balcony, an unrest stirred in the young blood at a thought of the blue-eyed Englishman loitering perhaps in some such flower-sweet garden-ground, with some such flower-fair face beside him.

"Mary Mother," she cried, twisting the slender fingers laced on her knee, "why should my heart flutter like a bird's that fears the fowler's grasp? I scarce owe his blue eyes a passing hate, and yet he seems to move beside me, as though he, and not the Capelli, were the one in Venice for me! Ah! I hate that woman with her slow smile and sunny hair! No doubt her white loveliness will fool him, and she will have a stiletto for him too, unless I end her plots. But I will end them, if only for the sake of the woman of his country who doubtless waits his coming, a woman pale as a corpse, with fog and not sun in her blood; they are all like that in England, old Marco used to say! *Cio!* the sun beats on this floating blackness like hammer on anvil! I will seek the twilight of yonder church and vow a candle long and white as the Englishwoman herself, to St. John Baptist if he will help a Florentine."

The gondola had turned into an alley-like canal on

which the side-door of a church, frescoed in dim faded colours, opened almost to the water's level. Fiamma signed to the gondola to await her, and pushing the leathern curtain aside, passed into the shadow of the church.

Her first steps revealed a spacious interior apparently undergoing restoration, for a space on the wall opposite was occupied by an artist's scaffold, on which a female figure in a dress of white linen falling in straight folds to its feet, lay extended, the head pillowed on its arm. At sight of the sleeping face against its background of fair curling hair, Fiamma recognised at once the woman whom she had befriended the night before in the Capelli Palace.

Not caring to be noticed, Fiamma knelt down indifferently at an altar in the shadow of a massive column not far from the rough woodwork deserted at present except for the sleeping model. A drowsiness, induced by the coolness spiced with lingering breaths of bygone incense, was stealing over her, when she was roused by a voice sounding distinct though far away.

"By the gondola, he has entered here! The *poppe* who rows it swears it; slender, dark curls, bright keen eyes, as I noted him last night when he insulted my wife. No scandal, things go smoother without it—cast the cloak over him as he comes out!"

With the acute perceptions of the hunter that instinct, even more than education, had planted in her nature, Fiamma remained on her knees, venturing only by gradual stealthy movements to slide beyond the pillar with the strange acoustic properties either in itself or in the adjoining portion of wall. Assuring herself by furtive glances that the side-chapel, in which she was, screened her from observation, she crouched at last by the model's side, pressing her hand firmly on her mouth.

"Hist!" she breathed, leaning her face almost on

the other's. "An enemy waits for me at yonder doorway. By the service I rendered you last night, show me, if you can, how I can give him the slip."

The sleepy brown eyes she looked into kindled with intelligence.

"If you can cross the pavement to that image of the Madonna, you are safe," whispered the woman hurriedly. "Twist the third blossom from the top of the lily-bud in her hand, and then follow the stairway fearlessly; the third is key to the whole." She paused, frowning in an effort of thought. "Aha! I'll screen your passage; go quickly, and trust Carnation!"

She stepped off the platform, giving Fiamma an imperative thrust towards a life-size image of the Virgin, which stood against a fluted column at some distance. Fiamma was about to trust all to a desperate dash, when, with a jangling scream, Carnation rushed forward, pointing as she ran to the farthest entrance.

"Thieves! thieves!" she cried. "He has stolen the colours from the master's store and a kiss from me! Quick! He cannot have gained the *campo* yet."

At her cry a couple of men appeared at the door giving on the Canal, and dashed at right angles to her towards the main entrance. Carnation in her rush adroitly fouled one of them, the two rolling ignominiously on the threshold.

Like a lapwing, Fiamma had flown across the pavement in the confusion created by the model's stratagem. She wrenched the ivory lily-bud in the Virgin's hand. At the clutch the blue robe of the figure opened aside from the waist downwards, disclosing a spiral staircase in the interior. The panel closed behind her, leaving Fiamma on the brink of a chasm of inky blackness.

Voices within the church penetrated to her ear

spurring her to stretch out a foot to the stair below. Once started, the descent lost its terrors, though it led through a blackness that might be felt, at times the wash of water coming to the girl's watchful ears, with a dark suggestion of a sliding canal without. A narrow passage suddenly superseded the stairs; the way now tended upwards. Fiamma hurried on, leaving the lapping water behind her, till her groping hands came smartly in contact with a blank wall barring further progress. A gasp of anger burst from her, as she stood helpless in the musty air of the blind alley. As her fingers felt the outlines of the stones, she dragged her hands inch by inch over the masonry in painful examination, hoping that some crack might tell of a door artfully concealed. The smooth brown skin was torn and bleeding from the harsh stonework when at last she cast herself down, panting and sullen as a wild beast in a trap, likely to be as dangerous in a last stand for life.

The void eternity of the darkness seemed to annihilate time. Fiamma could not tell how long she had sat crouched together, the hand at her breast grasping the charm by which she would foil her enemies' malice, when with electric suddenness a ray of light fell about her. She was on her feet in an instant with a lift of poised muscles, the blade of the crucifix in her hand, only to perceive, outlined against the dusty sunshine, the face of the woman whom in her purgatory of waiting she had cursed between her teeth for tricking her into the snare.

"My bird is fairly caged," the moor called down through the open trap-door. "Come, sir, borrow a trick from my popinjay and climb up the wall of your cage to your mistress. Nay," as Fiamma maintained silence, "Carnation means well by you, and if you possessed even the wit of a popinjay you might by now have been free to flutter where you will. Did I not tell you the threes were key to the whole? and you did

but twist the third lily-bud and thought no more of my words. Truly I don't wonder that she of Sheba came from afar to see the wisdom of a man; the sight would be worth a journey!"

Fiamma's level brows knitted in bewilderment.

"Press on the third stone on the middle of the wall," Carnation went on, checking her mocking laugh. "Not as if you were touching a lute, my hero; lend your strong wrist to it. There, it moves; put the toe of your dainty shoe in the space it discloses, and spring, as more than once I have had to do on a stirrup, that the *cavaliere* riding to the tournament might take good-luck from my lips."

Fiamma had already obeyed, feeling with anxious hand for the third stone from her foot. Carnation laughed provokingly.

"The lad, who waits you o' nights on her balcony will have time to grow old before you climb up to her, my son! Lift yourself by your hands; so, that's well—help yourself with your knee."

"I faint, I fall!" Fiamma gasped. The strained muscles of her side, wrenched again by the wide distances between the stones revolving on secret pivots, spoke to her with sharp pain. For an instant longer her clutching fingers maintained her painfully in position; then, as the woman above flung herself flat, catching with a strong grasp at the hands almost wavering out of reach, with a last brave stretch she responded to the aid, and succeeded in bracing her knee on the sill of the trap.

Unable to speak or move for deadly faintness, she felt as in a dream Carnation's movements, as with an effort the model dragged the limp body into the chamber and closed the trap-door. The Venetian's eyes rested approvingly on the slim young figure, with the pale face framed in its clustering curls, and Fiamma felt the warmth of the full red lips pressed to hers in a sudden kiss of womanly pity.

Carnation knelt down by her, rubbing her temples with essences, and fumbling at the fastenings of the doublet. In a frenzy of resistance the girl tried to summon her heavy limbs to their obedience, but the swoon on her crept upwards to its flood. The tinkle of the silver essence-flask falling to the ground came distinctly to her ears, as suddenly the other woman leaped back to the opposite wall, staring thence with wide amazed eyes at the prostrate figure.

A great terror beat in upon Fiamma, drifting her farther out on a misty sea; but when Carnation moved again it was not to summon servants to remove the woman whose masquerade had won its way into her dwelling. Gently she covered the brown graceful neck, and with effort that tasked her whole strength, lifted the unconscious girl upon the canopied bed near, drawing a coverlet stiff with worn and faded gold tenderly over her.

The swooning stupor held its captive through the summer hours of afternoon, but Carnation kept patient ward, lying negligently across a couch drawn underneath the window with a square of painted glass in the centre of its thick greenish quarrels. With the lengthening shadows, the chiming of bells made themselves heard, as though the hours of the long day were some silent-footed flock wandering homewards at the bidding of their shepherdess Night. The swing of the bells seemed to send a cooler air stealing over the water, refreshing Fiamma as her senses came back to her once more. She sat up, sweeping the locks from her forehead with a brown hand.

"You hold my secret," she said faintly, but with her boyish directness.

"I have held weightier handfuls in my time," the model retorted, without stirring from her careless attitude. "Truly you play your part well, sweet one, and it's a feather in your cap to have cheated Carnation of the Calle. But what has brought this

pretty ship sailing under false colours into Venetian waters? As we in the lagoon challenge strange vessels, 'What do you bring for St. Mark?' A cargo of love with a rosy Cupid speeding a dart after the handsome gallant who has kissed and ridden away, I wager my silver-guilt chopines!"

"Then lose your chopines," Fiamma made answer shortly.

The clever eyes of the elder woman questioned her face. "There is another tune which we women dance to," she said in a lower tone. "Maybe the handsome gallant will find that she whom he has kissed and cast, has a last gift for him. Women hate best where they have loved best. Trust Carnation; does the pretty ship come with death under its sails?"

"My business is with a woman," Fiamma said slowly, driven to speech by the necessity of conciliating one who already knew so much. "By carrying my masquerade too far last night, I have won the enmity of one of the houses of the Ten."

"That was worse luck than if you had handled a quail on a Friday," commented the Venetian parenthetically.

"And but for you I should have been in my death-room, sealed by the water of the Canal, and with slimy eels for my hosts." Fiamma ended with a shudder. She rose impulsively, though weakly enough still, to bend over and kiss her cheek.

Carnation turned her back.

"Bring your kisses to another market, my blessed virgin!" she said, with a short laugh. "In her time Carnation of the Calle was fair enough for half the palaces from the Delle Salute to the Rialto to show their teeth to the other half, to win a smile from her, but not one of the dainty ladies—whose husbands would not trust them abroad without ell-long chopines clogging their heels, that they may not walk a step

without the spying of the old hags on whose heads they must lean their hands when they would totter to Mass round the corner—not one of them all, I say, would let so much as the shadow of their gondolas fall on mine! If I served you this morning, it was but the small change for what your knighthood did for me last night, and so, *“basta,”* with your secret for a love-token!”

Fiamma stood uncertain. “I do not think with those ladies who keep one measure for their own sins, and another for their neighbours,” she said. “You have shown yourself kind to me when one such Venetian lady has injured me and mine, past all praying for.”

The model rose quickly from her lounging attitude.

“Why, here’s a pearl!” she cried. “A woman who does not try to whiten herself by blackening another!” She caught Fiamma in a straight, passionate embrace. “Nay, ladybird, you have won Carnation for your servant, and perhaps her wit may be as keen as the Ten’s arm is strong and long, and the pearl as safe in this house as in any oyster-shell of the Adriatic.” She signed to the casement at their backs. “This window faces a deserted palace across the *rio*, but there are few in Venice who care to neighbour with me. Twenty years back one, who has long paid his fair in the death-gondola, won on me by the coinage of honey-sweet words and ways to roost in this old house, and contrived that it should be marked without with the red signs that warn of a dwelling infected with the plague, and therefore left to owls and spiders. A sword to guard the Paradise, he said.” She laughed harshly, but the laugh hid a sigh. “Paradise has long since turned to Purgatory, but I dwell here, well pleased that few in Venice know where Carnation houses.”

The girl, standing within the circle of her arm, did not answer. Through the open window a gleam from

a lamp in the palace, which Carnation had spoken of as deserted, shone like a lambent ruby through the dusk; the moon, hanging like a disc of' ornished copper on the slant of sky struck, the edges of a great silver mirror, suspended from the window behind which the lamp burned, in such a manner as to reflect the stars powdering the night blue. Gazing down into the mirror with eyes that seemed eager to tear a secret from its heart, a woman leaned on a white bare arm, and as the moon rose higher, the face of Cassandra, the Florentine, showed wan on the night.

CHAPTER VII.

THE POISONED BERYL.

AT the vision towards which the crowding events of the last four-and-twenty hours had led her, as the turns of a mountain-path may at last cast a traveller face to face with the surprise it guards—a white sheer leap of water, a green piece of meadowland, or gorged jungle-beast crouched in the rocky rigour of his lair—Fiamma started back from the window. Carnation, whose eyes had been curiously fastened on the new tenant of the palace, turned at the abrupt movement.

“What charm does the mirror hold?” she asked in her usual mocking tone. “Is it to study her fair face—even I, woman, and at the first glance, must say it's fair in spite of wanness—that she leans over it, or is it to tell by the stars how soon the path of the lover who has crossed hers once will turn towards her again?” Her full glance challenged Fiamma. “Is that she with whom you have business, my little puppy? for by that start of yours, this has not been your first glimpse of her.”

“My business with her lies in keeping out of her

sight," Fiamma whispered hastily. "Hush! for sound carries well across the water, and the spice which you golden-haired star-gazer could throw into my broth would spoil the boiling."

Carnation shook her fingers slowly from side to side. "Well, well, secrets are as plenty with you as eggs on Shrove Tuesday. I will meddle by no finger with the flax on your distaff; perhaps some day will put the right end into my hand without getting me into the tangle that's like to be the web you'll spin." Her huff evaporated in a careless laugh. "Nay, little one, never look pale on my prophecies; small harm will come to you in this world if you'll but take advice warranted to keep you safe from the two mortals who can hurt you the most surely."

"And their names, and your advice?" questioned Fiamma, with a deepening of her long dimple.

"The woman who hates you and the man whom you love," Carnation returned tersely. She leaned her full pliant figure forward, in caricature of some fortune-telling crone, raising her forefinger with an affectation of mystery. "And the spell by which you'll go unscathed for all of them is, if you have the ill-luck to have a heart by you, that you put it up for sale in the Broglio, our street of bargains. But if no one will bid you an empty snail-shell for it—and it's like they won't, for hearts go cheap enough for the asking—row out beyond the Lido, and drop it into the deepest part of the sea. 'Twill be safe there, among the golden rings with which our Doges wed the Adriatic and the bones of dead men whom the fair bride has chilled in her embrace."

She straightened herself with a whimsical smile and turned to latch the casement, starting back, however, in her turn with a gesture of disgust.

"*Jesu Maria!* what spawn of the pit does that woman keep beside her?"

Standing well back within the darkening room,

Fiamma peered over her shoulder. As the pair looked, the silver mirror was withdrawn into the opposite chamber, the moonlight revealing the hairy arms and muscular hands of its remover, before a flash of white eyeballs set in a shrivelled brown countenance reminded Fiamma of the uncanny being she had caught a glimpse of in the shadow of the Florentine gateway.

"'Tis Piccolo, her dwarf," she whispered, drawing her companion farther back into the friendly dusk. "In his three feet of shrivelled manhood lies the strength which his mistress has lost from the dead limbs that fetter her to that ebony couch, and the cunning that lurks under her golden hair is the spring of his doings. I have been warned of him, and I own that I have less fear of two men such as struck on my trail to-day in yonder church, than of a thing like that."

The model shuddered suddenly in the evening chill.

"His looks are warning enough," she said, breaking a moment's silence. "Were I the wise woman I played but now, I should believe that a whisper in my blood tells me that such a shrunken mannikin will be the rock on which my boat, that has braved up and down stormy seas, will be rent and shattered. Well, the boat has sailed, and the morning sunshine in which it set forth has long since faded."

The sentence was finished in a slow sigh, and the women stood silent, each busy with the problem which had been set for each upon Life's slate. Carnation was the first to rouse herself, fastening and curtaining the window through which the red lamp light could no more be seen.

"Madonna had gone to her supper before it gets as cold as the stars" she said, kindling a lamp swinging from chains of fine brasswork from the ceiling. "Who she is and how she came to dispute their lodging with bats and spiders, is a question which,

it seems, I must ask of you, my *cavaliere*, for I have never seen man or mouse in the old palace till this hour; but our teeth before our tongues! Wait for me; I must play cook and sewer, scullion and housewife, like the jugglers in the Piazza who keep five golden balls a-dance in the air at once."

The sweep of her white draperies vanished through a doorway as she spoke, and Fiamma employed her solitude in an inspection of her new quarters. The room, tolerably large, was comfortless as a cell, the gauntness of the fourpost bed hidden by no hangings, the graceful lines of an ivory-inlaid couch only relieved by some cushions of faded purple. One corner alone, occupied by a huge alabaster shell supported on the head and shoulders of a tarnished kneeling angel, was as oddly discordant with the rest of the chamber, as the shell's present function of washing-basin was with its evident ecclesiastical character as receptacle for holy water in some lapsed church.

Still weak from her long swoon, the girl sank upon the couch, abandoning herself to the languors of coming sleep with a confidence strange to the self-reliant nature, too weary to analyse the instinct of trust placed in a stranger's faith. In the silent room the tall Englishman seemed to stand before her, the careless laugh in his blue eyes softening into a smile before which the colour drew rosily into the sleeping girl's face. His breath came warm upon her cheek as he bent lower, till caressing, lingering lips brushed her forehead in a kiss. The keen sweetness of the dream stirred through Fiamma's sleep; she started with outstretched fluttering hands towards the figure that gave back at her movement.

Carnation, standing over her, laughed.

"La, la, the right one borrowed my mouth for the chance in your dream!" she said. "Never blush, or rather keep your roses till the market morning when such wares are sold for kisses in the Campo of

Love. Come, let us eat four grains of rice, and then to bed—for such another dream," she added, drawing the girl forward to the table where platters of minestra (soup thickened with rice and vegetables), minnows, and fried cakes were set out with a certain daintiness of arrangement. "You think the plenishing of my chamber something scanty," she continued, as she motioned her guest to one of the two claw-footed chairs. "Once it was a fit casket for the jewel it held; but since those days its treasures have one by one been offered up at the shrine of the Holy Hill, with the *palle* of the Medici for its shield."

The child of the mountain village, ignorant of the existence of Monti di Pietà, cast a glance askance at her companion.

"Ah! you thought like the rest of the world!" cried the other, with the bitterness of one confronted by an old unjust suspicion. "Gold and Carnation—you put them together in the scales of your thought, and of course the woman would sink. But you are wrong, my sheep in wolf's clothing! Any dauber of paints on a palette in Venice can for a gold piece buy the face that once won Paradise for itself, and no noble, with his eight cloaks for the seasons and the *festas*, can buy more! It's true that the plumage you saw me in last night is that of the night-birds, but you should best know that the feathers do not always make the bird. No other garments in Venice give freedom to a woman to come and go, to sit in a gondola loosed from the painted stake of some great house, or to gather the men who make the time in her chamber. All things have their price, and if Carnation of the Calle could, in days gone by, hold men's hearts and secrets in her hand without robbing one who had called her his, yet the price of such power is the being flouted by such as you saved me from last night. in being called *sister* by women who have slipped off the narrow causeway, which runs

above the world's slime, in being whispered *pestilence* at, by women who, keeping the causeway, would fain jostle others to get it. Yet 'tis the price, and those who think to make Carnation pay but a *gross* beyond, find their mistake. And the power was worth it while it lasted, though now 'tis fading, like the face that was once the fairest in Venice!"

She broke off with a sob which closed a subject never again revived between them. In later times Fiamma was glad to remember that she had laid her hand caressingly on the cheek of the woman who, in a misery of desolation, had snatched recklessly at the reins of secret intrigue, careless that the wheels which she aspired to drive should spatter her good name with slander. Now, the gesture, inspired by that sympathy which in its strongest current is apt to sweep speech away, was nevertheless executed with the awkwardness of the young creature startled by the stirrings of the soul moving to life within itself.

"You will not try these snails stewed in chicken's blood?" asked Carnation, after some minutes' pause. "Perhaps none but Venetian palates can find sauce for them, and the odour of Signore Tiziano's paints hangs cloyingly in my nostrils, so that I cannot savour them to-night. I shall be glad when that St. Barbara of his is finished; the master Benvenuto Cellini was better company to sit to, though I lacked the wit to see how so ardent a fingerer of his beads could be so glib with his dagger. Come, pretty one, if you will eat no more, lay yourself to rest in yonder bed; I am neighbour with you in my chamber."

But though Fiamma obeyed her readily, oases of sleep chequering at long distances the desert of a wakeful night, hardly refreshed her; and the pain in her strained side added to her sense of weariness as on the next day she rose, pale-cheeked and heavy-eyed, to begin the unseen vigil on Cassandra's windows that she guessed would, sooner or later,

afford some indication of the Capelli's advent in Venice; a slender chance, which, however, in her present plight seemed to promise the only opportunity for her mission. The better to hide their secret, Carnation continued as usual to spend her days abroad, and the long hours of loneliness, in their maddening monotony, wore the Florentine's stock of patience threadbare.

Some days had passed thus, and the long dusty shafts of light were threading the half-woven web of another day with gold, when one afternoon the rapid splashing of an oar from the Canal without throbbed through the drowsiness of the watcher crouched beneath the window. The green opaqueness of the Canal was seldom disturbed by oars, and widening ripples drew Fiamma's eyes to them as she stealthily raised herself to obtain a view of the occupants. Beneath the doorway of Cassandra's lodging the gondola pulled up with the suddenness peculiar to Venetian rowers, the jar of its pause seeming to send the torrent of the spectator's blood over cheek and brow and chin staining even the round young throat with angry crimson. For, her fair beauty enhanced by the straight lines of the long black silk cloak that formed the everyday dress of Venetian ladies abroad, stood Bianca Capelli, her scarlet lips positing into a smile as she surrendered her dimpled hand for support to Mark Talbot, the careless laugh for once absent from his eyes.

Trembling under the leap of her pulses, Fiamma leaned against the casement, her breath coming hard through the storm of anger that swept down upon her, as a flaw of wind lashes a mountain lake into sudden foam. The pair landed from the gondola and passed from her sight. Impatient of the curtains that shortened her view by the tenth of a second, the girl pushed it aside—to meet a gaze of sudden exultancy and wild beseeching love flashed on herself by the paralysed Cassandra.

At the same instant Fiamma dropped the curtain, lulling her but half-stirring alarm with the assurance that the momentary glimpse which was all that Cassandra could have had, was not sufficient to settle any question of identity. The encounter of eyes was indeed immediately blotted from her mind by the anger that continued to shake her in every fibre, as with the stern patience of some forest creature waiting on its prey, she crouched afresh beneath the window, with eyes and ears only for the moment in which Bianca should emerge again into the sunlight with Talbot.

More than an hour had passed, and the girl's limbs were stiffening in their cramped position, when the light laughter which Fiamma had heard in the gardens of the Oricellari broke again on her ear. With the evening sunlight setting an aureole on her golden hair, the Capelli came forward, her languishing eyes reflecting the smile with which she was whispering to Talbot, though the usual careless trait was in the glance that the Englishman turned on the fair face inclined temptingly towards him.

Bianca had been handed to her place on the cushions, before she turned with a sudden recollection towards the second couple standing on the sea-stained steps of the house.

"Good Master Carpaccio," she said, "come not till the stars begin to shine. Should the beryl fail—though Madonna vows that it will not—perhaps, it will be given you to spell out from the glittering scroll above when I shall be made known to the world as the daughter of St. Mark."

The tall figure of the old astrologer bent assentingly, though with a quick gesture of silence, as he handed an elderly waiting-woman to the place opposite her mistress. The space beside the Capelli was reserved for Talbot, and Fiamma set her white teeth hard, noticing, as the boat shot forward, the alluringly careless movement with which the woman let her

hand fall on the brown well-shaped fingers lying on her companion's knee.

"Daughter of St. Mark! Daughter of Judas rather!" she muttered, stumbling to her feet. "Perhaps by now she has made that blue-eyed squire of hers into a father-confessor; so fair a penitent will be believed though she counted a sin for every bead of her rosary. The worse the woman, the more cleverly she can blind the men, as though the rank breath of a rotten soul were a mist to dim the keenest eyes."

She seated herself on the edge of the bed, the curbed anger dying from her face as she stared unseeingly in front of her. Gradually her head took its old confident poise, the fine nostrils dilated under the pressure of some exciting thought. When a gleam of lamplight fell at last through the opening door, the girl rose to confront Carnation with a vigour of resolution in every line of her face.

"Has Carnation of the Calle charm enough to draw a gondolier from his boat and his passenger?" she demanded gaily.

The model shrugged her shoulders. "Scarce as much charm as lurks in a flask of red wine after the vintage," she answered, with deft hands beginning to lay the table for supper. "What plan is hatching under those brown curls of yours, my knight? Have you seen a fair damsel whom you would fain relieve her family from the care of for a week or so?" she added in her reckless way.

"Nay, my fair damsel is a graybeard whose gondola I would fain row for him," Fiamma returned. "A gondola will wait at sunset under this window, and could you but tempt the rower from his post, I will stand ready to replace him."

Carnation patted her cheek rallyingly. "You were surely born on the Day of the Innocents, my chicken! How would you, who have scarce snuffed the stink of the lagoons for a week, handle a gondolier's pole

without drawing on yourself half a dozen quarrels from your brotherhood of the *poppa*, whose warning hails have gone by you disregarded, and whose keel water you have taken?" she exclaimed laughingly.

The daring fell from Fiamma's face, but the resolution underlying it did not weaken. "I forgot to look at my standing-ground in my haste to take the leap," she said frankly, beginning to pace up and down the room. "Yet I must not miss the opportunity that a chance has given, though I set my life upon the stake."

"My wits have no fancy to play blind-man's buff," Carnation responded somewhat shortly. "If you cannot trust me to peep into your mysteries, you had best not lean on my advice."

Fiamma stopped in front of her, laying both hands on hers. "I have trusted you with my life," she said warmly, "and it was more for your sake than ought else that I have kept back the nature of my errand in Venice. Yet to one who has already balked the Ten for me——"

The day died slowly in the dusky room as the women whispered, the younger face growing ever sterner and more resolved, the elder expressing ever more sympathy and amazement. As the girl who was daring all Venice rose to her feet, Carnation rose also, with the look of one who had enlisted the strength that was in her to lessen the odds, if the thing might be, on the weaker side.

"She meted out death, and to a husband, without a moment's shrift," Fiamma concluded. "I will but bind white hands to which the stain of blood is a jest, and the strands of my rope must be haste and secrecy. If I cannot—and I cannot—play the gondolier, what plan can you frame to carry me unobserved into the palace?"

"One simple as a first confession," returned Carnation promptly. "The fair lady who is to be whited

by a miracle of St. Mark will hardly let it be set abroad in Venice that she has dealings with aught that smells of magic; master star-g'zer is a ware that needs deft smuggling. 'Twill be the easier, to bid him seek his pretty patron on foot, instead of taking boat for her."

She paused reflectively.

"Come, you shall stand on a *poopa* after all!" she cried. "Had we time, I would send for one who has acted the part of gondolier in many a mystery-play of mine, but it's drawing on to sunset already. If we die to-day we shall pass easier through Purgatory than if we lived till to-morrow!"

She muffled her white garments under a black cloak, and twisted a gay scarf round Fiamma's waist.

"There, you're a proper young steersman for a lady!" she laughed. "Now take your stand, so, when you step on a gondolier's deck, throwing your weight forward on your pole as though about to row a good stroke."

With a hasty glance at the empty windows opposite, Fiamma obeyed her beckoning gesture, following with light feet down stairs and through passages that since her coming she neither had the physical nor mental vigour to explore. More than once indeed Carnation stopped before seemingly blank pavements or solid pauellings, till a touch on secret springs laid bare cunningly hidden openings, which sometimes closed so noiselessly behind them that Fiamma, looking back, was at a loss to imagine their existence. Somewhere on a ground floor her companion stood still at last, signing for her help in sliding back the heavy bolts of a door set into the wall.

Under the women's hands the bars creaked into motion, admitting a radiance of hazy sunlight through the door opening upon a narrow waterway, across which a flight of steps led diagonally up into a labyrinth of alleys overhung by crumbling walls.

Within the doorway, beached in a niche in the wall apparently destined for the purpose, lay a gondola on which Carnatic was already laying impatient hands.

"I did not know there was a landing-place so near," said Fiamma, stooping to second Carnation's efforts to launch the boat over the threshold into the Canal.

"Near enough and far enough," returned the other, panting a little under her strenuous attempts. "More than one house and covered gallery lies between you and the roof under which you've slept these nights past. Such paths are by no means rare in old buildings like this nest of warehouse on the water-side, and I will swear that whoever borrowed the tricks of a spider's web in planning them, thought as much of a secret way for pretty feet to enter as for smuggled bales of merchandise. But trade has languished in Venice since the Portuguese have held the highways of the seas to the Indies, and these warehouses, like many another, have been left to crumble on their piles. The Jew from whom one bought the house that's your ark of refuge, my dove, revealed its secrets, some of them devised in a dead past, he said, by a prior of the church into which your luck led you the other morning."

She interrupted herself with a petulant movement.

"I chatter worse than the apes tethered for sale on the ledges of the Rialto," she exclaimed, again bending over the gondola. With a soft splash, it slipped into the water, Carnation bringing it alongside the threshold by a dexterous snatch at the silk rope fastened to the brass sea-horses at each side of the boat.

"Quick, step on to the deck behind the *felse*, and when he you want comes by—come he must to gain the main channels—drop your pole into the water that I may know him for the right bird to lime," she said, glancing at the rists beginning to float like bees' wings on the rosy evening air.

Upon Fiamma's ear, as she obeyed, the swish of an oar plying down-stream came faint but distinctly. Another moment brought the sound to Carnation; with the satisfied nou of one whose calculations have harboured no hitch in them, she swung the gondola with the prow pointing for the landing-stairs, stepping in herself with a deft kick that sent it across the narrow stream. The warning *gia è* of an approaching boat rang out through the sunset, as Carnation threw herself half over the side of her craft, dragging it up to the steps by grasping an iron ring in the stonework.

"Next time I'll borrow the puppet from the Merceria to pair with my young gondolier," she whispered mischievously, leaning back in her seat as quietly as the gondola lay on the sluggish water.

Half dazzled by the flood of roseate light that filled the sky, Fiamma stood, gazing up-stream through her lashes at the boat which had skimmed round the corner of the Canal. The black cabin hid the passenger from her till, in the moment in which the boats lay alongside, the outlines of Carpaccio's gaunt figure became visible, and quick as thought she dropped her pole into the water, turning her back squarely on the new arrival as she stooped to recover it. With a good-natured laugh, the other gondolier used his pole as a boat-hook, while Carnation leaned boldly towards the astrologer.

"She who keeps the eyes of Venice busy in these days, fears the tragues," she whispered. "A gondola with you for freight had best not be seen on the water flowing by the door that once shut out another secret on the world. By the token of the beryl, *on foot!*"

She pointed imperatively up the alleys already black in shadow, and threw herself back, shrouding her face in her cloak. Carpaccio bent forward, endeavouring to scrutinise the person of the mysterious messenger, but the attempt failed. The women waited in breathless tension as, after a gesture of pause to the rowers,

he still evidently hesitated, then, glancing at the stars beginning to show in points of light through the evening's dun, he signed again, his gondolier accidentally sending the other boat in the mid-stream as he worked his craft up to the steps.

Carnation moved restlessly on her cushions. Already their boat was drifting towards the wider Canal below, where the woman's dexterity of push and swing, which had served in this mere water-line, would avail for nothing. Carpaccio had landed and was mounting the steps, preparing to shape his course by the stars at which he still gazed thoughtfully. His gondolier, busy over the moorings of the boat, raised his head at an ejaculation, in time to see Fiamma's once-recovered pole floated now out of reach.

"*Cio!* art poling your boat with an eel, brother?" he cried good-humouredly. "I'll pull your lady in," he added, laying a muscular hand on the gondola.

Carnation tossed him some coins, bursting at the same time into shrill scolding, effectually covering the silence which seemed to Fiamma wise in face of her total ignorance of the brotherhood's lingo. With masculine cowardice under a feminine tongue, Carpaccio's rower made haste to secure his craft, and strolled up the alley. The bent figure of the tall old man could still be seen faintly through the gloom ahead.

"Quickly after him, and remember I await you at the stairs of the Madonna of the S-vords," whispered Carnation, wrapping the girl in a dark mantle.

The words stirred some germ of memory in Fiamma's brain, but her thought did not brood over it to warm it into life. The zest of the hunter tingled in her, as, keeping in the shadow of the high houses, she slipped forward on the astrologer's track, concentrated, in the invariable habit of her cast of mind, on the immediate present. On went the two, the tracker now and then swerving aside from the tongues of flame darting into

the night from the doorway of some metal-worker's shop, within which bronze figures moved about the furnaces or twisted lengths of glowing iron with great pincers. Smells of frying fish and the strong savours of garlic and leeks hung on the air oppressed by the bygone day, and the rough scent of wine rushed out through the open wooden shutters behind which sturdy gondoliers watched their portion of cooking with an anticipatory relish, while the cadences of some storyteller droned through the rattle of dice or the grunts of the *moro-player*. Deep-bosomed, heavy-lidded women lounged on the door-sills, soaking a companion's long hair in milk, preparatory to weaving it into plaits, or again teasing with sly touches some handsome fellow sleeping on their knees, the morning's carnation or dahlia still drooping on the crisp black curls behind his ear. The daily revolution of a world had brought the lower strata of humanity in their turn uppermost; but these denizens of a city where a man's safety was best warded by sealing ears, eyes, and tongues, took no apparent heed of the figures thrown at intervals out against the velvety blackness of a Venetian night by the glimmer of tapers burning beneath the little shrines fastened at almost every corner.

The walk was long. Once and again Fiamma, crouching in some deep-moulded doorway, or on steps leading to some wine-cellar, watched Carpaccio doubling back upon the way already taken, his simply-subtle face showing at such times the bewilderment of an habitually absent man, accustomed to walk blinded by the mists of his thought through daily life.

The starlight was striking like lance-points upon the shield-like surface of dark water, when the old man, in a species of exhausted patience, finally came to a stand. It was the moment for which Fiamma through the last half-hour had waited; she daringly stepped to his side and touched his elbow.

"How soon did you miss the passenger from your gondola the other evening?" she asked coolly. "With your help to-night I shall not fail, as I failed then, to snatch five minutes' secret speech with the woman awaiting you. Help me to this, and I warrant that she whom you serve will forgive you the basket which you brought home that night, empty of the goods that should have been smuggled in from the marshes."

The unexpected voice seemed to penetrate but slowly through antechambers crowded with jostling thoughts to the astrologer's brain.

"By the wych-hazel, Old Carpaccio will for once speak naked truth, instead of the juggleries for which he's hired to be the mouthpiece," he said then earnestly. "If you continue to go and come thus like a wandering star, it were more merciful to fashion you a waxen image of my mistress and set it to peak and pine before a fire fed with dead men's bones, rather than to consume the living woman's soul in the furnace of love fed with dead hopes. Since Cassandra caught sight of you at your window to-day, she has writhed like a spirit in torment on the couch that's a coffin to her, biting her long tresses that she may stifle the moaning of your name—a moaning that, as the sailor-men of the lagoons without would say, is like to foretell storm!" He swayed his head slowly from side to side, bending over Fiamma with furtive abruptness. "Look you, excellency, by long obedience to the will of her I serve, a fear has grown on me till I would sooner cross the crater of Vesuvius than her pleasure; but I am an old man, and the sins of another, which I have lifted no finger to hinder, have come to gnaw corrodingly into my own soul. If you do not wish the fair-haired woman whose lodging you share to pay for your passing fancy with her heart's blood, you will leave her with short farewells."

The stirrings of pity for the maimed ardent creature

on whom she had indirectly and unconsciously brought misery with which Fiamma had hitherto listened, were changed by the last words into an angry fear.

"Tell your mistress that if the butterfly is driven from one blossom it will but settle on another!" she retorted arrogantly. "If but the hem of my pretty Venetian's *capota* is ruffled, Madonna Cassandra may make sure of having seen me for the last time."

The insolent masterfulness of the tone failed to divert Carpaccio from his mood of warning. He came a step nearer, laying his slender old hand on the other's shoulder.

"Give the old man an ounce of patience, messer," he pleaded. "Since Cassandra found that, but for an anxious woman's gift of a coat of mail, your dead body would have been carried in good truth out of the Oricellari gardens—instead of Florence being tricked by blood-stained grasses, an empty coffin, and the Capelli's mourning weeds—Cassandra has sworn by the soul of her bargain-coin, that she will no longer set her heart in the scale to be overthrown by the breath of such a one as the woman whom she has fooled long enough." The hand on Fiamma's wrist grew strangely chill. "By Bianca's reading of the beryl to-night, she will learn that which will leave the path clear between Cassandra and yourself; but if at the eleventh hour you are false to the vows which you have told a glib score of times on love's rosary, I bid you *look to yourself!*"

He threw out his ten fingers with an odd menacing gesture, once, twice, thrice, turning on his heel with an abruptness that contrasted ludicrously enough with his sudden bewilderment at the recollection of having lost his way.

"Old stories tell that the prating of geese saved Rome from a change, and so you would fain have it with me," Fiamma returned mockingly. "But if the geese had but dreamed of a danger, and

thereupon wearied the ears of those about them with their clacking, they had been like to find their necks wrung by some impatient hand. Prate no more, good Carpaccio; but let us seek the house which we must enter to-night."

Her senses, trained through a lifetime by the slight indications of hill and woodland paths, had already, through the narrowing lines of various side-alleys, recognised the broad waters which blocked the vistas for the Great Canal up which Carpaccio himself had steered her on the night of her entrance into Venice. The astrologer accommodated his steps to her rapid movements, as, casting a keen look or two around, she plunged confidently down a street. Her guess was laurelled with unexpected success. From the farther end of the street, against which the furrows ploughed by passing keels lapped slowly, a narrower path branched to the right; with a guttural exclamation of relief, Carpaccio moved from her side, stooping to pick up a blossoming branch apparently broken from the Judas tree swaying over a wall hard by.

"The Capelli told us that this token would show the road by which I could enter from the Canal unobserved," he whispered exultantly. "Now, messer, since you seem to stick to your will like wax, follow me."

The girl's excitement was growing on her as Carpaccio paused before a small door in the walled crested by the Judas tree. "To heel, messer, and silence, if we would not sleep on the bed of the Canal to-night with sacks for our bedclothes!" he breathed.

The door left on the latch swung easily, to Fiamma's dissatisfaction, her conductor pausing to secure it with a key which he took from his purse. The almond fragrance of the tree overhead filled the tiny garden which Carpaccio crossed, bending his tall old head to enter a second doorway obscured by a flying buttress of the grim wall of the actual palace.

As the breath of the purple blossoms died away, some strange electricity of memory set Fiamma standing once more in the white-gleaming pavilions of the Florentine gardens. The fair face of Bianca Capelli dawned with maddening distinctness on her thought, bringing the tremor of fierce, quick anger upon her, till she came to an instant's panting pause in the dark passage, along which the astrologer was pressing with steps suddenly grown confident.

But the vision which thrilled her to such passion did not pass away. On the darkness through which her eyes had been peering as her longing for revenge might strain through the near future, the hated face smote suddenly luminous on a background of light. With one white hand holding back a curtain, the Capelli stood bending eagerly forward, a frown lining the smooth forehead over which tendrils of the golden hair strayed seductively.

"Good Master Carpaccio, you are late!" she cried in a pettish remonstrance, perceiving the astrologer advancing upon her. The instant's check alone had saved Fiamma from being swept into the rapid searching glance of the unexpected apparition.

"Excellency, the stars were not favourable till this hour," Carpaccio returned gravely. He passed with Bianca into the room beyond, the curtain, as it fell, blotting out the candle-light.

Noiselessly as a thought, Fiamma stole forward. To crouch beside the curtain, and gauge the right moment for appearing in the chamber beyond, was her first idea; but as she stretched a cautious hand to the heavy velvet, the snuffle of a lapdog on the other side struck as alarmingly on her ear as a lion's roar might have done. Hastily she gathered herself up, becoming aware, as she did so, of a draught of air which a further groping progress revealed as blowing down a narrow stair some three feet beyond the doorway. A faint glimmer of light summoned

Fiamma to the ascent, step after step being achieved with that absolute poise of muscle which ensures noiseless movement. As she mounted, the light resolved itself into gleams falling through a pierced screen of carved wood into a small gallery on which the stairs gave entrance.

Quietly the girl crept onward, pressing her face at last against the grating forming the front of the little space. She found herself looking down into a small chapel hung with embroidered silks and bright with candles burning in brazen holders. But the details of the scene, where apparently for better secrecy the Capelli had given tryst to the astrologer, went by the watcher unheeded, as her eyes fastened on the figure which, in a white woollen garment, knelt with unbound golden hair upon the altar-step.

The swimming blue eyes were turned raptly on the great Christ above the altar, the dimpled hands clasped in an attitude of completest submission; but the instincts implanted in pure natures, which vibrate surely as a divining-rod in the presence of what is unsuspected by the passing crowd, thrilled Fiamma to a loathing of such devotion. As she looked, her glance was distracted by the hangings being pushed aside from a window opening on the night, from whence Carpaccio turned back into the chapel. The old man's wandering hazel eyes shone almost black in the paleness of his face. A white woollen garment, similar to that clothing the kneeling woman at the altar, seemed to increase the height of his spare figure, to which a mantle of purple and a tall cap blazoned with strange signs gave an appearance of priestly dignity.

"Excellency," he whispered, with an odd trembling eagerness, "I read strange things in the stars to-night. As I looked, my star rushed down the heavens and disappeared, and yours, though it mounts, advances towards danger. Excellency, there is anger

in the stars! Forgo your purpose of looking into the beryl; it is a great sin to take upon us."

His warning, feigned or not, woke the Capelli's cruel smile on lips seemingly parted by just-breathed prayers.

"The anger of the stars is like themselves, at a safe distance," she said. "Since Cassandra sent me word that to-light is the night in seven years on which the spirit of the beryl must bear himself submissive to her will, I have scarce had patience to bear with the moments crawling towards this hour slowly as snails up a gondola-stake. What is it to me if your star, with a score of farthing rush-lights like it is quenched by some wandering wind? Mine rises, and will rise, till the moon itself is shamed by its splendour."

Her light, tinkling laughter filled the pause which fell on her arrogant speech, till the astrologer ended it by a sudden imperative sign. As though in obedience to a signal from that law of circumstance which marshals the puppets on Life's stage, he seemed to have merged his personality in the part for which he had been cast.

"Bathe naked feet and hands, then, in this holy-water from the well of Bethlehem, which alone can cleanse the stains of sin at touch of which the blessed beryl would spring into a thousand atoms," he commanded.

Fiamma, from the gallery above, could not tell whether the flicker of the candles shifted lights and shadows over the old face, seeming to writhe the features into a mocking play.

A coquettish gasp followed on his words, as Bianca shook the slippers wrought with seed-pearls from arched rosy-white feet, which touched the water in the silver basin daintily as small fluttering birds might do. Once, twice, seven times, in obedience to Carpaccio's finger, she dipped them, then knelt again upon the altar-step.

Carpaccio turned to the altar, taking thence a sphere of pale-green beryl set within a silver zone.

"With pure hands take, with pure eyes read, with pure heart learn the lesson which the beryl holds for you," he said slowly.

A shower of drops flew from Bianca's wet hands as she extended them in an eager gesture. Hardly, however, had the translucent globe been surrendered to her hands than the golden head was thrown back in a shuddering aversion. "Ah! what a stifling odour!" she murmured petulantly, with all a Venetian woman's morbid sensibility to even the most subtle perfumes.

"Haste, the spirit of the beryl strives already against the yoke!" ejaculated the astrologer.

The Capelli fastened her gaze upon the globe which, obviously to escape its obnoxious perfume, she held as far from her as possible. Pricked by the rowel of curiosity, the watcher in the gallery raised her head above the parapet. Carpaccio had moved back beside the altar.

As the three looked, the beryl began to fade, chilling in the warm hands on which it rested to a clouded whiteness. Then the livid colour was suddenly branded by lurid letters leaping to life within the stone: *Harlot and murderess!*

Startled beyond prudence, Fiamma bent breathlessly over the carved rail, which cracked a remonstrance to the added weight. The sound seemed to pierce through the Capelli's stupefaction; she glanced upwards, and at sight of the face glimmering whitely through the shadows, she sprang with a shriek of fear and anger to her feet, flinging the globe from her full into Carpaccio's face. The old man staggered, swayed, and fell among the fragments of the beryl.

As Bianca rushed from the chapel, Fiamma had taken the staircase almost at a bound, in the hope of cutting off her flight. She was too late: the

Capelli had vanished. With her foot on the last step, the sharp howl of the lapdog, whose snuffle had started her before, struck her ear. As she raised the chapel-curtain, the little beast dashed past her, its whimper swelling again in its outstretched throat. Fearful lest it should sound an alarm to the household, Fiamma stooped to lay hold of it, but at the instant it staggered over on its side, its little body twitching in a convulsion.

Shivering under some vague fear, Fiamma stood in the doorway, sending a whisper hissing into the darkness. "Are you in love with the *strappado*, master wizard, that you tally here?"

There was no movement of the silent figure, face downward on the altar-step. The limp hands lay upon the fragments of the beryl, as though the astrologer kept seisin of his magic to the last.

With a low sound that was half prayer, half cry, Fiamma was about to rush across the intervening space, when a hand was laid upon her shoulder. She turned, to look straight into the eyes of Mark Talbot.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE CAMPO OF LOVE.

AT the first flash of their meeting eyes Talbot's grasp tightened on his prisoner's shoulder, but for a couple of moments the pair stood, as though engaged in some strange duel of silence. To Fiamma the candle-lit chapel, the dead man below, and the great dead Christ above, seemed only the painted background to the reality of the warm hand resting on her, the keen look fastened on her face. Under the blue gaze her eyelids drooped, the colour crept up in an awakening dawn over the clear brown skin, the red lips quivered as though about to tremble into a half-shamed smile.

A curious scrutiny kindled in the Englishman's glance, his voice jarred through the girl's absorption, as a shock on shoal night jar through a drifting boat.

"You seem to have a fancy for 'haunting the Capelli Palace, sir."

Fiamma roused herself with an effort to play her part.

"Faith, messer, and you seem to have a fancy for acting one of those barnacles that lodge themselves on the basement of some such great palace as this," she retorted bitingly, with an inconsequent feminine satisfaction perceiving the mockery in Talbot's eyes fade in a quick flash of anger.

He removed his hand from her arm with a slight ceremonious gesture.

"No barnacle, sir, but an accredited agent of the Capelli House, invested a few weeks back with the mission of discovering one Pietro Bonaventuri in Florence, or where else, that the Republic might formally claim him from the Grand Duke. And, though before a commission from the Holy Father himself comes an Englishman's honour, yet St. Thomas could not doubt that the House that I serve will be satisfied that I should bind their quarrel in the same faggot with mine own, if the snake on my toledo keeps its sting." The last sentences had been muttered half to himself; then he bowed to Fiamma with a dignity which well became him. "Your misconception set straight, may I hope not to be found unworthy of the honour of crossing swords with the cast-off husband of Bianca Capelli?"

The polished insolence of his tone made Fiamma's throat ache with passion. "As you will," she returned brusquely.

"Then the Lido at sunrise." As Talbot spoke, he crossed to the window whence the dead Carpaccio had seen his omen of the falling star; plucking the

curtain aside, he looked out on the muffling night. "'Tis some hours till then," he said, turning back. "As you, sir, are contraband goods in Venice, and as I myself, in spite of the Capelli's protection, by virtue of my British blood, am dogged wherever occasion serves by the four spies——"

"The four spies?" Fiamma interrupted anxiously.

"Those whom the Republic culls from the people to prevent its nobles and worthier citizens trafficking with the foreign Ambassador. To prevent any intermeddling of strangers, 'twould be as well to think how we can come together at the trysting-place unobserved.

The anger had died away from his face, and the blue eyes turned with a pleasant frankness on the girl, as she confronted him, her lips wavering between smouldering resentment and the fascination of his smile.

"The key of the garden gate is in the belt of him who lies there," she returned. Her brain, weary with the thronging incidents of the day, had hardly formulated any distinct idea as to how Carpaccio had come by his death; but as Talbot turned with a start to the dead figure and stooped low to raise it, the woman's eyes fell on the lapdog behind her. The little animal was dead. "Foison! The beryl was poisoned!"

The words rushed over Fiamma's lips even as Talbot straightened himself, pressing his hand on his forehead with a dazed gesture. "'Tis a dizziness on me," he murmured, staggering towards the entrance. "My head whirls, my body grows cold! The key is like to unlock death's——"

The broken words trailed off as his blind rush ended in Fiamma's outflung arms. The spur of necessity roused her from the apathy which had nailed her in the doorway; with set teeth and straining muscles, she dragged her charge towards the fresh air, with a

glance over her shoulder to satisfy herself that the fragments of the beryl still lay under the dead man, and so that hope remained that Talbot could not have been exposed to its full effect. On herself, impregnated from infancy with pure mountain air, any breath of the poison that might have reached her from a comparative distance, only operated by fevering her brain and pulses. But for such excitement even her will could scarcely have strengthened her for the task of half carrying, half dragging Mark Talbot's dead weight along the way which she had trodden at Carpaccio's heels. Once or twice a moan breathed from the young man at his rough progress down the stairs leading to the garden without; but every sign of life had ceased as Fiamma pantingly laid her burden down in the shadow of the buttress, leaning her face almost on the chill livid one resting in the maternal curve of her elbow. "Oh for water, to dash on his temples!" she murmured. A recollection of the silver basin left in the chapel made her half rise; but the movement was checked at the conviction that the water of Bethlehem had been medicated to hasten the action of the poison, of which the fumes, rising from the prepared beryl, had been destined to kill the Capelli as surely as, though more slowly than, bursting from the shattered globe they had killed the necromancer.

The weight in Fiamma's arms grew greater, a cold seeming to strike from it to her. An impatience of her helplessness increased upon her, as she drew the long well-shaped hands into her own, trying to chase the stiffness from them. Suddenly her lips parted. A ray of hope glimmered through the despair of her mood, as the dawn began to glimmer through the night about them. A faint struggling sigh had burst from the form lying across her knees.

With a reckless hand, Fiamma tore open the breast of her robe, laying the hand she held against the

curve of her neck, as a mother might guide an ailing infant's fingers. A wind of the coming day had wakened, moving through the myrtles of the walled garden, and stirring the thick curls on Talbot's forehead. The girl leaned over him, rubbing the temples from which the icy chill was surely lessening under the vigorous warmth of her touch. The lips were livid still, but as she looked they parted, drinking, in swift straining gasps, the wind with the hint of life-giving salt in its morning freshness. All thought of time and place had passed from Fiamma as she brooded over him, noting the struggling chest, the frown that came to trouble the whiteness of the forehead above the line of bronze.

Ah! a swift triumph ran through her veins. The face on her arm had grown living; the keen eyes had opened, plunging as it were, into the agate depths of her own. As magnet draws steel, her look leaped to his.

"By the eleventh thousand Virgins, you're another of them!"

Before his first quick movement, Fiamma had drooped her head, veiling the face brilliant with sudden colour.

"Hush! ears are not shut by the darkness," she whispered hurriedly at the words, incautiously loud for the Capelli garden, though faint enough in themselves. "Rouse yourself, if indeed the poison has not maimed your limbs; we will not be caught here like weasels in a trap!"

The colour surged again to the curling edges of her hair, as she rose with difficulty from her stiffened attitude. With some effort, the Englishman dragged himself to his feet.

"Faith, I feel as weak as if water instead of the stout Talbot blood ran in my veins!" he muttered. "Are you sure"—a flash of sunny lightness creased his gravity—"that we are not in a trap already? 'Tis

strange that Madonna Bianca's shrieks should have been so soon silenced, instead of setting a score of servants on our heels."

"Doubtless Madonna Bianca reflected that, once set on, they might end in pulling down higher game than ourselves," answered the girl, recollecting Carnation's shrewd calculations as to the secrecy in which the Capelli would find it expedient to mask her dealings with Cassandra's agents. "If she met you, I'll wager a measure that she had framed some legend of a dream of a dead face that startled her awake from the sleep which long since had weighted her white eyelids."

"Pah! the sweetest things turn the sourest," exclaimed Talbot impatiently. "Faith, I could wish that you were not a woman, since that lithe, sleek-skinned thing—whom the Republic will in a week or two give as dear daughter of hers to the Florentine Grand Duke—calls herself woman too!" He broke into an uncontrollable laugh. "Is it because you will not call kindred with her and her like, that you go a-masquing through the world to seek your torture?"

The rose-flushing which an indefinite ring in his words thrilled into Fiamma's face was checked by a sudden pallor, a chill recollection of her mission rising like a wall before the sunny haze of perspective at the edge of which her thoughts, unconsciously even to herself, were flitting. She moved forward, making the barred gate with a faint hope that the astrologer's hand might have failed to send the lock home.

"Plague! 'tis fast!" she exclaimed. She glanced at the light broadening about them, bringing back the purple to the blossoms spangling the boughs of the Judas tree. "Well, there's out one thing for it: I must turn pickpocket to the dead before some trusty servant of the Capelli has hailed the death gondola

to bear him over the threshold as silently as he crossed it last night."

She had already swung lightly on her heel, when a hand, strong in its actual grip though tremulous with coming fever, fell for the second time that night upon her shoulder.

"Are you mad, child?" Talbot demanded sharply. "The chapel yonder is scarce likely to be as healthy as the meadow where girls may gather May dew, and yet you would run into it."

Fiamma strained impatiently against his grasp.

"Let me go!" she cried, with smothered fierceness. "Loose me, fool! Will you make a gift of our lives to the Capelli?"

"No, nor yet ease their souls of the guilt of a murder, by letting you snuff up the poison hanging in the air yonder," returned the Englishman, not loosening her arm. "Wildcat!" he laughed provokingly, as Fiamma, finding her utmost effort powerless against his easy-seeming grip, bent her head, biting sharply into the detaining hand. "Your teeth are as sharp as your tongue," he went on in the mocking tone that never failed to irritate his hearer; "and by token that that proves you woman to the core, I must claim my man's right of a kiss from your lips."

"Take the kiss I have to give!" cried the girl, snatching with her free hand at the crucifix in her bosom.

Talbot's other hand came on her wrist, fettering it like its fellow. Both her hands held firmly, he drew her slowly nearer, till the fair flushed face almost touched his, while he gazed steadily into the stormy eyes.

"Some madness must be in this Italian air of yours, that we should fall a-quarreling like lovers, instead of thinking of our lives," he said then, pushing his prisoner gently away. "After all, stolen kisses have not the right flavour; I'll wait till they are ripe for

me. And that we may live to see such harvest, let us leave this garden."

"If you would but let me fetch the key; I fear no danger," Fiamma began persuasively, her voice purged of its late anger, though her look lingered on the green-mossed path at her feet.

A flash came and went unnoticed in her companion's face. "But I do--one!" he returned gaily. "And that that one may not befall, you must curb your courage. See; what hinders us making these boughs a Jacob's ladder on which an angel may ascend and descend at her pleasure?"

He stretched his tall figure upwards as he spoke, catching at a swaying branch. Wondering over her own mood of submission to another's will, the girl seconded him deftly, swinging herself upon the trunk. Talbot followed with more difficulty, the vigour having passed from both his words and movements. "That devil's brew still works mischief in my blood," he muttered. "Beshrew it, how it babies a man!" he added impatiently, as he swayed against Fiamma's shoulder, to be steadied by her firm young arm.

The girl drew breath sharply. The broadening day had laid bare the length of the street, the sunshine that fell through the mouth of the passage leading to the Canal was ominously blotted out by the outlines of a moving figure. Fiamma cast a swift glance back into the quiet garden, to plumb the chances of safety.

"Go! go quickly!" she whispered, pushing Talbot farther under cover of a bloom-laden bough. "No one knows of your encounter with me, but you must not be seen here in my company for another instant."

The young man beside her opened his eyes with an effort. "Leave you--to save my skin!" he said, with a faint return of his old smile. "That would be a harder bargain than any that will be driven to-day on the Exchange."

The pair watched the figure moving towards them, its shoulders weighted under a curiously shaped osier-creel. Talbot smiled reassuringly at his companion.

"No formidable enemy," he said. "'Tis a snail-gatherer, busied filling his creel with the succulent tit-bits to sell to Venetian housewives. We will but wait till he tax this lane for his prey, before setting out to seek our own fortunes."

Fiamma nodded, angry with an odd breathlessness that was not due to any sense of fear. The colour that had surged into her face at Talbot's refusal to save himself, still crimsoned the oval line of her cheek, where a half-smile betrayed her dimple.

Talbot's eyes, lingering on the downcast face, were suddenly caught from it, at the sound of shuffling footsteps, coming to a stand beneath them.

"So, strange birds roost on this tree," said the snail-gatherer, in a tone that struck his hearers as a meaning one. "But daylight is not always safe for birds of your feather, nor are the kindest mistresses always to be found in palaces. You, my popinjay, by that gay scarf about your waist, have doubtless been trusted before now by some fair face at the stairs of the Madonna of the Swords."

The last sentence recalled to Fiamma Carnation's parting words. With an effort to resume the part which during the last hour had been utterly forgotten the girl fell into a careless attitude upon her bough.

"Ay, you have other wares than those in your basket to find purchasers for, good fellow?" she drawled.

"Good wine needs no bush, signore," retorted the snail-gatherer. "You must be a stranger in Venice, if you think so fair a face as Carnation's of the Calle needs to be cried up in the markets."

His words cleared Fiamma's mind of any doubt that his presence there was accident. Carnation, she

guessed, had provided means of escape from a situation where daylight could scarcely fail to prove as destructive as to those chemicals in which a ray of sunshine generates an explosion. Yet she felt herself suddenly tired of inaction; a sudden determination urged her to speech.

"Listen," she whispered low in Talbot's ear. "Your mission to track down Pietro Bonaventuri has led you once or twice to thwart me in the purpose that brings me to Venice, and now that you have found out my secret, I claim your help as amends. My mission is no deadly one; 'tis but to get ten minutes' private speech with the white-skinned widow in yonder palace."

Talbot shook his head. "The privacy in which your purpose seems wrapped promises no good to the House that I serve at present," he answered. "Only a minute or two ago I was picking a quarrel with Fortune because she would give me no chance of serving you that that kiss might ripen the sooner; now the vixen puts what I asked for into my hand, and 'twould have been better if she had stinted me. I cannot help you, sweeting, though to do so I would give a pint of my best blood. I cannot be false to the salt I've eaten, as the heathen Saracens say, and it were surely a shame to both of us if we needed a lesson in good faith from those black-vised gentry."

Fiamma struck her foot passionately against the trunk.

"I ask you only to help me enter the palace; I swear I mean no bodily hurt to the Venetian," she said sullenly. With an impulse, she slipped her arm about Talbot's neck, bending her glowing beauty near his. "Help me in this, and——" she murmured, her warm breath straying over his cheek like a caress.

The excitement, that was one effect of the drug seething in Talbot's veins, was already passing into its alternation of languor, but he forced a smile.

"Faith, the bribe's one to buy me body and soul, but not high enough to purchase a shred of my honour, the salt in a man that alone makes him worth the saving! I were no Englishman if I would let the pleasure or the prayers of ever her who's fast becoming the lady of all to me, rob me of that! Right's right, and wrong's wrong, and the lover's no true lover who will spell the one into the other with any letter of Love's hornbook."

His head slipped into an easier position on the girl's shoulder as he finished speaking, the sleep so long kept at bay stealing over him. Fiamma's perplexed gaze accidentally encountered the eyes of the snail-gatherer.

"Carnation of the Calle must wait for her gallant," he remarked, pointing to the birds, with harvest-haunting eyes, diving through the gray morning. "Swallows bring the day, we in Venice here say, and day is apt to make the track of a gallant as plain to all eyes as that of the snail which thinks itself safe under the jessamine where it has crept tardily."

Fiamma surveyed the speaker more attentively, noticing with curiosity the tall yellow cap and badge of a web-foot on the sleeve, which stamped the wearer to all eyes more sophisticated than those of the mountain-girl as a Jew of the Ghetto. A restless movement of Talbot's recalled her eyes to his face, on which the snail-gatherer's look had been fastened too for the last moment.

"Can the gentleman find no softer pillow in Venice?" he asked dryly. "But there, no doubt he has pleasant dreams, or he would scarcely choose to prolong them to this hour, when the bakers have already called on the thrifty housewives to rise to prepare their bread for the evening."

"This is no sleep of a slug-a-bed," returned Fiamma. "The fumes of some noxious drug have been at work, and they cast him into these starts of slumber."

"How long since?" demanded the Jew with interest.

"About the fourth hour of the morning," Fiamma replied.

Her questioner fell back a step with a gesture of satisfaction. "If he has lasted so long, a dose of Venice treacle will rid him of the effects of what must have been but a whiff," he said, with an air of professional authority.

As though flint had struck steel his words kindled a light in Fiamma's face. She wept back the dark gold-threaded locks from her forehead in the action that with her invariably implied the dawn of a new idea. Roused by the movement, Talbot opened his eyes.

"What! you're for taking wing?" he said half reproachfully. "Are you sure that yon old man is a safe guide, not a jack-o'-lantern to lead your steps into slippery places?"

"He has given a token by which I may trust him," answered Fiamma; "but I pray you, think of yourself. Make your way back into the palace, and lose no time in procuring from the poticary a dose of Venice treacle to foil this poison in you."

The sea-blue eyes came to her with a laugh that the weariness in them could not quench.

"Sweetheart, who else is in the crowd that hides under this doublet of yours?" he whispered. "First, the bold fellow who will snatch a wife from under the noses of the Ten, and for whom the scaffold between Marco and Todaro has no terrors. Then, the knight-errant who champions a Venetian courtesan in a noble's palace. Next, a neophyte in juggling tricks, if not for white magic and black murder. Then a poticary with glib recipes, 'So please you master, follow this poor counsel against yon lurking humour.' And to crown all, a woman after the sweetest pattern of kirtle-wearers, hot of speech and tender of heart,

with a man's courage and a woman's wilfulness, and a pair of soft lips to set a seal on what she has made prize of."

He drew her to him as he spoke, and this time Fiamma made no resistance. In the green gloom of the flowering branches the two handsome young faces neared each other, meeting in that first long clinging kiss for which Love bartereth itself, two souls fusing henceforth into one. Each feeling the warm leaping of the other's heart, the man and the woman sat in the pause of Love's content, islanded in each other, ringed by their passion from the waves of the world outside.

A sunbeam striking through the leaves like a dart from an enemy's hand roused them. Talbot pushed the girl from him and held her back in the same gesture. "Now I thank my mother for my birthday!" he said whimsically. "If I were to die to-night, I have lived!"

Fiamma thrust out her fingers as though to avert an omen in his words. She clung to him, tracing a cross on his forehead with her lips.

"No, no, you must never die!" she murmured. "Or if you must, die hand in hand and cheek to cheek with me, so that death will be but to fall asleep and a hope of sweet dreams!"

"They are scarce like to prove as sweet as life," returned Talbot. "And that we may live to enjoy life properly," he added, smiling, "I would have you safely out of Venice. That face with its insolent tuck of lip and its boy's tangle of curls may gull others as it gulled me. This day I will withdraw myself from the Capelli's service. Indeed, since the Grand Duke and his Florentines have sworn belief in Bonaventuri's death, nothing but suspicion of you and your conduct, pretty one, have kept me on the scent. Madonna Bianca and her kin begin their *credo* daily with a 'I believe that Pietro is dead.'"

Her cheek leaning on her lover's hair, Fiamma, drinking in the cadences of his voice, yet hardly heard his words. The ecstasy of love possessed her; her thoughts brooded on the scene which the Judas tree had witnessed; she told over love's paternoster of words and looks, even while her brain was debating another subject. In the ears intoxicated with Talbot's voice her pledges to Cardinal Ferdinando repeated themselves inexorably, a vision of the font in the convent church where she had clung with cold despair flooding her soul, contrasted with the exquisite reality of the present. To the Medici's commission she owed it that Mark Talbot knew of her; but for that she must have been caged in the dismal sisterhood, dead in everything but the body capable of proving the most terrible prison of all. The gratitude which is the divine spark in all natures not wholly of common clay, kindling the ashes of the past into a glowing memory, leaped up in the girl's veins, determining her that a benefactor's purpose should not be wrecked against any fickleness in herself. Bianca Capelli should, if it lay in human means, be threatened or cajoled to Rome, and the chance suggestion of the snail-gatherer held the germ of a plan which promised success.

But enough precious time had slipped away already, and the girl disengaged herself from the clasp of Talbot's arms.

"Day is fairly on us, more dangerous than the miasma at the sunset hour," she whispered. "We can hold no safe conference here and now; meet me on the morrow at the sunrise——" She broke off to question her fragmentary knowledge for a safe tryst. "The Campanile in the Piazza," she went on swiftly. "Ay, at its summit we need fear no eavesdroppers, nor will any two figures be likely to be observed making their way through the swarming anthill at its base as the day wears on."

"To-morrow!" Talbot echoed, pressing a quick kiss on her lips. By the Stump of Boston, sweetheart, you have as little compassion in you as the parish beadle when he sets some poor wretch in the stocks with 'Twelve hours to cool thy heels, krave, and thou wilt be free to shake them again!' How am I to let you go till to-morrow's sunrise?"

"The lame sheep must run when the sheep-dog barks," quoted Fiamma lightly. "We must do necessity's bidding, and pray you remember the Venice treacle." The crimson stole up in her face as she hesitated. "If the poticary tarries with his cures, do me a favour and hang a kerchief from the window of your lodging, that I may speed him thither."

Her throat throbbed under the effort with which she had kept her voice indifferently light, but Talbot's was not a suspicious nature. In his confused state he had already half forgotten Fiamma's attempt to enlist his help in her mysterious purpose, but at her words he turned quickly.

"Heart of mine," he whispered, "art making my aches and pains thine already? Well, the kerchief shal' not be forgotten, sweeting, though better than any drug in the poticary's pouch is the thought that from now out I must guard my life that I may guard the true wife and loyal comrade who will take stand at my side."

He gathered up his long limbs for a spring downward, but an impulsive motion on Fiamma's part held him back.

"No, no!" she stammered, her eyes sinking under his; "you make me seem a Judas to myself, a thief who would cheat you out of your honour! Let be the kerchief; I would rather face the Ten than the thought that I had baited a snare for you with love of mine. Only forget not the Campanile—and Fiamma Bonaventuri!"

She slipped down without a backward look, the snail-gatherer hastening with alacrity from his waiting-place. After an instant's wistful gaze, Talbot dropped in his turn into the lush, tree-shaded space, and vanished from sight, before Fiamma and her companion had reached a roughly built canoe rocking on the thick green water. Almost before the Jew had stepped in, Fiamma was at his side, manipulating the folds of Carnation's cloak so as to impart an air of professional sobriety to her whole figure.

"Good friend," she said half abstractedly, bestowing various feminine pats and pulls on the garment, each one of which heightened the effect of the whole, "row out into mid-stream and steer boldly for the main entrance of the palace we have just left behind us."

The snail-gatherer, bending to his oars, held them for a second above the water.

"Is that the signore's earnest?" he asked gravely, "'Tis true I've been bidden to serve him in all things, but bethink you, that one is likely to get more stings than honey by thrusting his hand into the wild bees' nest! And for the talent of pure gold out of which the son of Uri wrought the great holy candlestick, I would not that harm came to one on whom Carnation sets store, though I cannot now, as she charged me, house him before the sun is up."

"Therefore let us delay no longer," Fiamma interrupted. "Steer where I bid you, and await me near by for an hour, but no longer. If ill-luck should grip me, there is no reason that she should bind two in her leash."

The Jew dipped his oars into the water, convinced of the uselessness of argument by the determination of the figure upright in the bows, as she munched coolly at the provisions which Carnation's thought had provided for any unforeseen chance. In Fiamma, conscious though she was of the strange sweetness

which life had suddenly assumed for her, the imminence of the moment of action, so long and anxiously expected, had strung every nerve with vitality. The porphyries of the Trevisani Palace rose before her in the sunlight as the boat turned alongside and she stepped so promptly on to the jasper stairs that the keel-water rippled over her scarlet ankle-boots. Pressing on up the white-veined steps, she addressed the group of lackeys gathered in the vestibule. "Lead me to her who is ill," she commanded. The arrow, drawn at a venture though it was, hit the white.

"What! does not that hideous headsman of a leech think Madonna's waiting-woman good enough for him to visit?" burst out a servant in true Venetian abuse. "Son of an executioner that he is, to think that any pounder of his simples may be sent to a noble house."

"Peace!" interrupted Fiamma. "If your tongue is long enough to lash an honourable stranger, it will yet scarce match in length or sharpness with the major-domo's waip, thou saucy fellow; and thou wilt learn that that's truth if thou ledest me not on the instant to the women's rooms. My fellow-poticary will be here in an ave; when he comes, let him be brought to the Englishman who lodges here."

The servant, cowed and muttering apologies, preceded her through the magnificence of rooms which she had scarce seen on the night of the masquerade towards the rear of the palace, set apart in jealous Venetian fashion for the ladies of the family. Fiamma glanced sharply around, imprinting on her memory every step of the way; but her keenest glance could catch no hint of an outlet to the chapel where Carpaccio still lay, perhaps, before the great dead Christ. She smiled grimly as she reflected that, if Bianca thought it necessary to ascribe her own indisposition to her waiting-woman, she would scarcely

be likely to entrust her servants with so dangerous a secret as the presence of the astrologer's corpse, relying perhaps on the expected apothecary, whom Fiamma had guessed so shrewdly she would send for, to furnish, for a heavy bribe, ways and means of disposing of it.

As she reached this point in her meditations, the servant stepped back to her side, signing with a cringe towards a small anteroom. "Be pleased to enter, signore physician," he said. "Madama's strict command is that none of the household cross the threshold of her apartments to-day, lest the sick woman should be disturbed through a footfall. Madama sets store by Giulia, as the only one who can powder her long curls with gold-dust in the right fashion for her."

He bowed himself away, leaving Fiamma within the chamber. Without hesitation she crossed the floor, and knocked with steady fingers at the inner doorway.

CHAPTER IX.

"IT IS PIETRO!"

ONCE, twice, she knocked and waited. The anteroom was very still. Fiamma laid her hand on the iron latch wrought into a seraph with long folded wings, and entered the chamber beyond.

Disappointment waited her on the threshold; the room was empty. The dusky sunlight fell upon rich hangings and cushions, and shivered its lances upon a mirror framed in Venetian glass blown into fantasies of sea-nymphs sporting with dolphins: gold and silver toilet-trinkets were ranged on a cabinet embossed with lapis-lazuli and amber; but only a small, sad-eyed monkey, tethered to a perch in a corner, saluted the new-comer with an inquisitive

glance. Yet, as the girl stood there alone, the sense of a living presence magnetised her; the perfume, which had on the previous night acted as a danger-signal, thrilled her sharply. Her impatient glance beat round the room. One of the curtains billowed faintly inwards, as though stirred by a vagrant breeze. Carelessly enough, Fiamma drew it aside, to stand framed in the rich red velvet, a straight figure in man's tunic and tight-fitting hose, the small head with its crown of curls drawn back with something imperial in its proud poise.

An alcove, with the seeming of a shrine in its twilight, opened before her, the variegated brilliance of the diapered walls subdued by the faint rays of light falling through the fretted ceiling. A shallow marble tank, covered with fresh rose-leaves, brimmed at the intruder's foot. Beneath the fragrant layer, her head supported on a floating rest, lay a sleeping woman. Only her head and the white wonder of her shoulders rose above the cool water, tiny ripples now and again running over the leaves as they stirred under her softly heaving breast.

Kill!

As though some devil lurked in the quiet chamber, the words whispered themselves to the watcher. Her fingers clasped the Cardinal's crucifix.

As she looked, motionless as the hunter who has at last tracked down his prey, the face with its sleeping eyes grew distorted, the dewy lips writhed as the lips of the victim of the Oricellari had writhed in their death-scream, to fancy the rose-leaves took the semblance of a sea of blood.

A ray of light, falling from one of the star-shaped orifices of the ceiling, flickered on something in the girl's fingers; a blade stole out beneath the limbs of the Christ.

The loveliness of the face on the floating pillow was magnified tenfold by the passion of jealousy that

shook the watching woman from head to heel. Surely Mark Talbot must be more than mortal man if in the end such beauty would not lay its spells on him. The eyes of hate gloated over each charm, the fingers of hate itched for them.

Kill!

Was there indeed a sin in the word, a sin in a swift downward stroke, more than in the blow to free the wood from some poisonous coiling serpent? Blood for blood, the blood of slaughtered Pietro!

Fiamma crouched lower. The woman slept on, as she would sleep till the angel's trumpet struck life into the white wicked body.

Fiamma raised her arm.

No sin?

Right's right, and wrong's wrong, and the lover is no true lover who will spell the one into the other

Had a voice pealed across the scented chamber, shattering the silence? Between the hungry eyes and the sleeping beauty memory flashed the honest face of Mark Talbot.

With a sob that grated on the stillness, Fiamma leaped erect driving the dagger home to its sheath in the crucifix, which she clasped to her breast in a swift thanksgiving that no act of hers had damned her unworthy of a good man's love. Her impetuous movement broke the slumber in the alcove; the sleeping eyelids quivered; life drew into Bianca's face; the eyes opened. Slowly the spell of terror worked. The water lapped over the petals, drifting this way and that under the convulsive shivering of the limbs beneath. Shrinkingly, heavily, the woman rose upwards, like some hopeless soul at the dreadful summons rising from the grave.

"It is Pietro!" The words hissed through the silence.

"Harlot! Murderess!" The doom of the beryl

leaped to Fiamma's lips, as with the sternness of an avenging angel she towered over the naked creature quivering in the farthest corner of the bath. "What hindered it, vile thing, that while you slept I did not plunge this dagger into the foul heart in that white side, and fling you weighted with your sin into the hell yawning for your life, as you in cold blood thought to send a husband?"

"Pietro! It is Pietro!" shuddered the other. "Pietro come to haunt me, as when his face smote upon the air last night, when the spirits of the beryl showed themselves angry with me. Oh, have mercy! Take those terrible eyes off me: they burn, they burn, I say."

"No ghost, woman, but living flesh and blood!" returned Fiamma, with the scorn she felt for the other's frenzy of fear vibrating in her voice.

Biarca gasped. Yet, as though the avowal brought with it some hint of a vulnerable enemy, she slid with a seductive suggestion of flight farther beneath the rose-leaves, her brilliant eyes fixed upon Fiamma still. "No ghost?" she whispered. "Was there truth, then, in the story of a charmed coat of mail"—she broke off panting. "Yet I myself saw you lying dead when"—her voice sank with awe—"you bled at my touch!"

"You saw not me," returned Fiamma firmly, a reckless gleam kindling in the hazel eyes. She made a swift step forward, her brown fingers grasping roughly at the fair rounded arm flung upwards. Under the relentless pressure Bianca shuddered, gazing with pouting pity at the reddened dints left in the soft flesh.

"No ghost's grip that!" she murmured. "Ah, Pietro, you used to press kisses on that arm." She stole a furtive glance upwards. "By what miracle did the grave give up its tenant?"

"That matters little to you," interrupted Fiamma.

"Not a whit less black is the guilt of the wife who sought to trample a murdered husband under foot, to climb by his body to a throne!"

"Ah, sweet Pietro, no, no!" sobbed the Capelli, stretching out her arms cajolingly: "none wept as I when Cesso's daggers had wrought——"

"Liar!" again broke in Fiamma. "Was I not by you in the Oricellari when the Florentine himself twitted you with the treachery of Judas, as you hounded your hirelings on my slot?"

Maimed by fear, the Capelli stretched out her hands as though to ward off the judgment of Fiamma's eyes. For the present at least she was no more dangerous than the snake with the poison fangs powerless under the charmer's grip.

"Mercy!" she sobbed. "It must be through Cassandra's sorceries that you can thus walk invisible, and that your double blown out of the breath of fiends can gull all witnesses. Oh, I am ruined! Yet I swear to the Virgin I deemed myself as honestly widow——"

"As you were an honest wife! Yet, since the Grand Duke was generous enough to forgive you the crime of having a husband, perhaps even now, when he knows that Pietro Bonaventuri——"

"Mercy! mercy!" cried the other, flinging herself towards her tormentor. "I repent! I repent! Betray me not! Have mercy!"

Fiamma surveyed the lovely kneeling figure veiled in its falling fair hair.

"Mercy? There is none even in the Cross for such as you, whose repentance is but a trick to cheat God as you cheat man! If indeed you were capable of repentance, you would make it manifest by deeds, not by empty words!"

"I will! I will do anything. Only tell me what, what?"

"Tear up the root of the sin which has borne such

deadly fruit," Fiamma answered unflinchingly. "For-sake your paramour!"

Into the turquois eyes, clouded with fear as they were, crept a deprecating smile.

"Sweet friend, bethink you. Bones of holy Mark, you drive too hard a bargain! What of yourself, little husband? is there no little story you could whisper through the lattice of a confessional, that the saints would cry *Fie!* to?"

The insufferable insinuating smile, smirching a dead brother, kindled a flame in Fiamma's blood.

"Bones of holy Mark, the bargain's worth something!" she jeered. "Tongue of holy Mark, if you do not close with it, to-morrow Duke Francesco will learn that the pretty Duchess—who is not Duchess yet—had a second string to her bow in the shape of a living husband, with whom she thought to live merrily on her widow's dowry, when one of Cassandra's phials had taught the Grand Duke the trick of turning into a ghost!"

"No, no, no!" almost shrieked the Capelli, clutching at the drifting rose-leaves. "Betray me not! Oh, betray me not, good Pietro! betray me not to such vengeance as Cecco would take if he thought me false! 'Twas but the night before I journeyed from Florence that he forced me to swear, with God's body between my palms, that I myself had seen you dead! he would trust in no oaths of hired bravoës, quoth he." She plucked with relentless fingers at her own soft skin, thinking with gnawing rage of that morning's orders by which she herself had banished all human presence from her. "I will do your pleasure when I know it," she promised, softening her voice to a cooing murmur which sent a shudder of aversion over her hearer; "all your pleasure, Pietro, all!"

A lovely gesture of white arms completed the sentence. Bewitching as Aphrodite she lay in the

dim chamber, half revealed and half concealed under the fragrant leaves, her eyes languishing on the stern young face. Fiamma's hands clenched in a longing to strike the fairness that dared to look innocence, the lips that were the portals of evil thoughts, the eyes that could smile on midnight murder.

Into those blue shallow eyes had crept a certain puzzle. This Pietro Bonaventuri, with the coldness of a Saint Anthony, came as a stranger; the Pietro of old was not one to forget a fair woman in an enemy. For a moment the time when her first lover's arms had held Paradise for the gold-curled Venetian girl drifted a last wave out of its ebb over Bianca.

"Pietro mine!" she whispered, "my lips are sweet still!"

The sweetness of the roses seemed to flood the chamber, sweet and crimson as the roses' lips pouted to receive a kiss that should plunge like the bee into the heart of the blossom. No change came to the lips as the seconds passed, but when a crimson petal rested like a blood stain on the outflung hand, the hatred of a mortified woman had sprung into poisonous life.

Fiamma's voice jarred suddenly on the silence.

"Listen, then, to my pleasure!" she said. "If you have no fancy to share our secret with the Grand Duke, you will leave Venice secretly and in haste."

"Leave Venice? To what purpose?"

"That the Florentine may taste the world as a wilderness," sneered Fiamma. "In the winter good money is often paid down for a rose, because it may no longer be had for the gathering."

A smirk of vanity came to the Capelli's lips.

"Good Pietro, it would be wasted trouble. Cecco would pull down every house in the town I harboured in, rather than that I should escape him. This poor face is more to him than his stately city with its towers——"

"Yet there are moments when Duke Cecco thinks that the raising a wanton to reign at his side is a heavy price to pay for a fair face," Fiamma interrupted, seeing by the Canelli's instant pallor that the words had told. "Think you that you would ever prank it as Grand Duchess, if he could prove, *prove*, look you, to the Ten, that you were no white innocence for St. Mark to champion, but a damaged piece of goods that must go cheap to the bidder?"

Bianca shrank.

"Denouncement to the Ten while I am in their power would mean *death*!" she whispered despairingly to herself. "My father would be the first to drop my name into the Lion's Mouth, if there was no chance of covering the scandal to his house with the mantle of a Grand Duchess."

"And to win such a mantle is worth a journey to Rome," Fiamma went on, speaking the words with entire steadiness, though it seemed to her that even the unobservant Bianca must notice her madly heaving breast.

"To Rome?"

"Ay; only in Rome will you be in safety from the Grand Duke's pursuit while trusty agents drive my bargain with him."

The listening woman started up on her elbow.

"Death's claws! You would betray me after all!"

"No betrayal! When you and I are both behind his vengeance, and he learns that only by acceding to my terms can he so much as hear of your whereabouts, I wager he will prove an eager purchaser, and make it worth while to lose a wife! The game henceforth lies with yourself: my ends once gained, you'll have your own fortune to make or mar. I am ready to swear by my manhood that Duke Cecco will wink at a false oath—which, after all, but himself will know of—rather than lose sight of his Venetian for ever. By withholding yourself, you will heat his passion

sevenfold. In Rome you will be in the one place that the Duke would not dare to threaten with his *condottiere*; and once beyond the clutch of the Ten you can afford to play him as you would play a trout. In two words, he has you on these terms of mine, or on no others!" Heaping her arguments together, Fiamma spoke with growing fire, conscious of a terrible fear lest the flimsiness of the decoy should be apparent to the Capelli! Something of the terror had faded out of Bianca's face, and passing thoughts like drifting keels were tracing furrows between the pencilled brows; she must be hurried, driven to instant resolution.

"You've played and lost, little wifed" cried Fiamma. "By the token that the bronze Vulcans in the Procurazie are hammering the already half-forged day out on their anvil, you've not many more moments to lose before crying *Dime!*"

A half-insolent smile wavered in the other's eyes.

"You are ever one to boast, Pietro!" she murmured petulantly. "Do you remember with what tales you lured me from Venice, to find out too late that rats and mice were the only retainers that scampered over your floors, and that the stars alone were the wax-lights in silver sconces that lit up the chambers? Were I to cry as many defiancees as there are rose-leaves in this bath, you could have no means of chastising me till you leave this palace behind you."

An involuntary listening turn of the fair head suggested to Fiamma's strained perceptions that the Capelli was talking against time. "Art waiting on the apothecary, Madonna?" she gibed suddenly. "Think you that you and he are likely to prove as strong a team as Pietro and—Cassandra?"

With a sudden scream, Bianca flung herself forward, catching wildly at Fiamma's feet.

"Pietro! Pietro! Set not Cassandra on me!" she implored. "I will obey, will start Romewards

to-morrow! Ah! now indeed I begin to read last night correctly; the crooked faggot of a witch wished my death as Cecco wished for yours. May Jews spit on her grave! At this very instant this chamber may be reflected in her great silver mirror; even now at your secret pleasure she may be speeding some familiar of her to round all, all, into the Duke's ears! Recall the wish, Pietro! I swear by my soul that to-morrow shall find me on the road to Rome!"

Fiamma had won! The pawn moved by fate, chance, rather than skill, had checked the queen in her successful march across the board of circumstance. Yet almost in the moment of triumph the thought of the tryst she had given Talbot leaped awake.

"Listen," she said, contemptuously stirring the grovelling woman with her foot. "You, my beauty, have learned the trick of a palace door unlatched and a noiseless toe on the stair; before now Venice has seen you vanish like a ghost at cock-crow. Till Bologna you had best travel alone; Bologna shall be the first stage of your journey."

She thought rapidly. The tryst once snatched, an evasion from Venice by means of one of the salt-barges plying over the lagoons would be easily accomplished; the night would find her among the mountains, and this time not forced to turn aside, she could reach Florence in ample time to give an account of herself to the Cardinal. Fate might do as she would then with the perjured murderess; Fiamma would have fulfilled her pledge, would have freed herself to go with her love towards happiness in the far-away island throned on the cold gray sea. Her heart moved with longing towards the days that were still in the bud, towards the kisses that were yet un-kissed towards the laughter and tears that sparkled dimly for her through the mists of the future. Friends with veiled faces seemed to hold out beckoning hands; children's footfalls seemed to patter through the home

somewhere already awaiting its lady; the intoxication of the unknown stirred among the possibilities of her soul with a lovely promise, like spring sap in burgeoning branches—a promise, with Mark Talbot's love for pledge!

“Bologna then!” The Capelli's voice broke the dream. “Old Pafaella will meet you by San Petronio, to guide you to my lodging there, though the crone will give you a backward blessing for delaying her nursing in the path to fortune.”

“Dainty steps, dainty shoes!” Fiamma retorted. “Better to pick one's steps slowly than to fall into the mire. See that you loiter not on your travel,” she finished, with a mocking gesture of farewell, “for awe of the Ten, for fear of mad Cecco, and for love of your own skin!”

As her steps ceased to sound across the anteroom, the Capelli sprang to her feet, shaking clenched fists above a face contorted with fury. With feverish haste, she darted from the alcove, wrapping herself in a loose robe of saffron-dyed silk, over which her curly hair fell like tangled sunbeams. The palace, turned by the spell of the siesta into that of the Sleeping Beauty, offered no inconvenient ear or eye to its mistress's wanderings. She sped noiselessly upstairs till, scarcely pausing to knock at a closed door, she stole, with a finger pressed on her scarlet lip, into the room behind it.

Mark Talbot, kneeling over a valise which he was rapidly filling with articles strewing the floor about him, turned his head carelessly, to spring to his feet at the unexpected apparition. Notwithstanding her mortal haste, the Capelli's eyes dwelt approvingly on the upright, stalwart figure, with the man's grace of trained muscle in every limb. Involuntarily she shook the shining curls about her face, even as she grasped his arm with her dimpled fingers.

“Good signore Englishman, you are bound by your

country's patron saint to help a woman at her need!" Too astonished to find words, Talbot gazed at her in silence, as Bianca went on, in growing eagerness, which gave her cautious whispers the effect of a snake's hisses. "You are the one soul in this palace I dare trust in! You know what lives we Venetian women lead—with a spy and a suspicion in every moment—that the breath of scandal is surer death to us than that of the pestilence! Therefore I come to you to help me; one is even now leaving the palace whom to-morrow's sunshine must find cold!"

With a gliding haste still in her movements, she drew Talbot to the door, hurrying along over the way which she had come. Passive with bewilderment, the Englishman followed, over the threshold of her own apartments, with their dainty toilet-litter and the fragrance of rose-leaves. Pushing the hangings aside, the woman revealed a small window, set in the thickness of the wall overlooking the broad silver streak of the Great Canal.

"To pleasure me, only child and spoilt daughter, my father long since let this window be made, that I might at least look on the gay life of the world outside, in which we poor pretty ones, jailed in our greatness, must take no part. I will show you the form of him of whom you must rid me; he will scarcely have left the palace yet."

With a deep breath and a half laugh, Talbot gently pushed the small insistent hand from his shoulder. "Faith, Madonna, I am no physician to kill men with whom I have no quarrel."

The cruel eagerness in the face beside him lost nothing at his words. "I tell you he must die, that I may live," the Capelli breathed, her eyes searching the stream. Kneeling on one knee, she crouched, the fair head leaning against an arm from the whiteness of which the sleeve had fallen like a sheath from some long lily-bud, her attitude supple as some

sleek-skinned creature scenting its prey. A shudder of aversion ran over the young man, as the pretty head bent sideways, brushing his hand with its curls.

"Some lonely waterway—a gondola wrecked under blind walls—a woman—and a reward!"

Involuntarily Mark Talbot drew back as the purring voice melted into a pause. For the second time that day the Capelli must experience her charms foiled by indifference.

The plaintive mewling of the sea-gulls swelled into a harsh scream as the birds rose in flight before the ripples which told of some advancing prow troubling the still water. A sudden thrill stirred Mark Talbot's veins, as into the sunshine shot Fiamma, oated by the snail-gatherer. The strong white light threw up her upright pose, the brave pure profile, the dignity which Talbot now recognised as virginal, pervading the whole lithe creature.

For an instant thus—then a gondola, beaked like a bird of prey, sprang out upon the Canal, the glance of the man within leaping in recognition upon Fiamma. An evil satisfaction lit the dark face turned in swift order to his gondolier, who with a skilful sweep of his pole altered the craft's course, sending it crashing forward upon the little shallop. But the prey was not snared yet. Swifter and lighter than the gondola, the canoe sped forward, shivering like a race-horse under the lash. With the wheel of a heron baffling its prey, it doubled, vanished into a handy side stream, the ripple of its wake cleaving into the arrowhead of the pursuer's rush.

The woman kneeling beside Mark Talbot struck her hands together in a gesture of childlike glee.

"Lost and won! won and lost!" she cried, with her soft, cruel laugh. "Tommaso Mocenigo is one to pay a stray grudge of his liberally enough to wipe off other scores also! That my enemy should be his as well is good fortune, for which I will give my

wedding-robcs to the Virgin of the New Salvation for a dress for her *jestas*!"

"Such a dress will transform the Virgin of Venice in the sight of all men," observed Talbot, with a fine sneer. He had stood like iron through the brief scene flashed before him as in a magic mirror, the steely glint in his eyes telling nothing of the fear which loosened his knees and seemed to turn the life in him into water. Now, even while the peril of the girl he loved gripped his throat, waking a resolve that in case of the worst her murderer should learn how a Talbot mastiff turns to bay, he swung on his heel with a light smile for the blue eyes beside him.

"Your friend is like to be the gallant who once before skipped through Mocenigo's fingers, itching as they were to avenge an insult offered to his wife's *cappa*. Mocenigo has scarce patience to think of the saucy model who made a Carnival mock at him for letting the enemy whom he had run to earth, entering some old church, escape with so little hurry as to take toll of the same model's lips. What think you, Madonna? if Mocenigo do not end the chase to-day with his stiletto, will he hound the Ten on the "ack?"

"The Ten!" Bianca repeated in a whisper. The colour ebbed from her face as she stood, pressing her hands on her temples. "Now St. Marco help the daughter he is about to own in the face of Venice, for the dogs are on her!" She paused before the cabinet, shaking into her pink palm powder from a small tortoise-shell casket, and swallowed it greedily.

"There, my head clears!" she said. "There has been a mist on my senses all the morning, and still the poticary tarries as though riding hither on a snail. If it had not been for yon electuary which a Jew-man long since furnished me with, the priests might by now have fallen to work on my Misereres!" She laid a burning hand on Talbot's arm. "Let one refusal to serve me be enough for a morning," she

whispered, this time in too deadly earnest to remember her feminine coquetries. "In truth I am between Marco and Todaro"—the Venetian cant for rival perplexities sounded oddly in the Tuscan which the future Grand Duchess studiously affected. "I am lost if the Ten come to speech with him whom we have seen but now!"

A comprehension of Fiamma's strange masquerade germinated in Talbot's brain, affording the clue to Capelli's agitation.

"Count on me for what a man can do who, being neither Moses nor Italian, fears to break all or any of the Commandments," he responded quickly, with an eagerness born of his need to be gone to Fiamma's championship.

A satisfied glitter came to the eyes fastened on his, the greeting of an insatiable vanity to a fancied success.

"Follow up his track—watch how he fares with Mocenigo!" the woman panted. "Swear to me, by whatever you hold most sacred, that you will bring me back the truth!"

"I swear, by the soul of her I love!" Talbot answered. Heedless of her detaining gesture, he was already half-way down the marble staircase; in a twinkling he was in a gondola, plugging up the stream into which the chase had vanished.

And it had vanished! Erratic and intent as the sea-gulls, Talbot's boat beat up and down the waters, darting this way and that on the smallest floating indication of what the water might have to bring. As the day wore on, a foreboding came to him, blighting the hopes that had unfolded that morning, as the blast of the *tramontana* blights the young promise of leaf and blossom. His brave heart sickened at the sliding canals, the blue silence of the sky; the whole golden day seemed to him sated with a hideous deed.

But to Fiamma the remembrance of the morning came as an elixir, vivifying her beyond any thought of danger. Such a morning had been a fit prelude to her victorious noon; the day could die in no dismal close, she had thought, even when the enemy whom she recognised at the first glimpse, crashed on her like a thunderbolt from a quiet sky. The stimulus of excitement lifted her still further above the peril, as she perceived her little craft to be nimbler on the water than the longer gondola, the oars in the Jew's hands winging their course. From the stream into which it had first sped the boat swung into another, then into a third, paring the corners so sharply as to shake off the pursuer. A sign from the oarsman made Fiamma crouch hastily, the boat darting across the stream, to leap into the blackness of water brooding amid a forest of piles, supporting a block of buildings, with the ghostly effect of rotting downwards into its fleshless skeleton, while the carved galleries and pointed arches leaned towards their watery reflections as a consumptive might in a mirror trace the stages of decay. With an anxious glance at the tell-tale ripples, the snail-gatherer stepped on to one of the beams, and beckoned Fiamma with impatient fingers. The girl sprang up beside him, aiding in the vigorous push which sent the boat floating through the piles to the canal opposite that through which they had entered. Not a moment too soon; already the splash of a gondolier's pole struck on the throbbing hearts; the dumb ripples had told a traitor's story!

Shortening his gaberdine, the Jew crept upwards towards the mass of warehouse above, challenging the slimy foothold of the beams with the skill of practice. More than once the smooth brown wrist of the mountain-bred Fiamma was debtor to the knotty grip that caught at it, steadying the upward-straining girl when knee and fingers had slipped. They among the piles they climbed, things bred of darkness

and decay moving at their approach, the water below heaving for the prey that a careless step would send into its sluggish depths.

A beam laced with green weed was under the stealthy feet, when the snail-gatherer stopped short, by slow inches laying his body along its length. Fiamma, instinctively imitating, felt the fabric of the piles vibrate through the whole like a spider's web, under the concussion of a boat below with one of the outlying timbers. The gondola had read the story of the ripples. Steering carefully, the pursuers had glided under the mouldering buildings; a curse of triumph escaped on the stillness; the boat drifting ahead had been sighted.

But the beam on which two human bodies cowered would fain pay its teind to the water whose livery it wore. Fiamma, dizzy with long hunger and sleeplessness, felt her position precarious on the slimy wood; she pressed her hands tighter on its edges, till, loosed by the touch, a barnacle fell, straight into the gondola at that instant directly underneath.

At the tiny plop Mocenigo glanced up. White against the darkness, he saw the face which he sought.

Quick as he, the Jew had grasped the situation. Regaining his feet, he almost dragged Fiamma to hers, signing upwards. Onwards, upwards again, the girl began to perceive that the timbers formed a rough stairway, not trodden, it was evident, by her conductor for the first time. And beneath them, their gondola made fast, their hunters were climbing too.

Slow, difficult as the breaths of the dying, the steps crept forward, to Fiamma's excitement each one taken by the men below falling like drops of molten lead on her brain. But the Jew and she had had too much start for their track to guide their enemies, who again and again were forced to turn back upon their toilsome path. Only the gondolier was persisting

now; his master, shuddering at the patience of the waiting water, had returned to the boat.

A small black square showed itself suddenly upon the dun twilight of the beams above them. The snail-gatherer climbed straight for it, Fiamma close on his heels, before she had made it out to be a trap-door, giving entrance to the solid flooring above. A ravelled rope dangled over the edge, which the Jew tested by a vigorous pull before swinging himself up by it, Fiamma the next instant clambering after him. The Cardinal's crucifix flashed unsheathed in her hand as she bent over the rope, to rapidly sever it.

The Jew smiled grimly. "'Tis but seldom Jesus Ben Joseph lends himself to help the weak against the strong," he muttered in his beard. "The want of the rope will keep the uncircumcised from our throats for some moments longer."

Breathlessly the fugitives hurried on, their footsteps muffled on the dust, Time's shroud of the dead past that had once lived in the silent dwellings. As a dreamer in his dream flies through unfamiliar chambers, striving to bar entrance to the unknown horror hounding on his track, so the flight appeared to Fiamma, feverishly helping her companion to close doors with their long unused bars at intervals.

The Jew spoke at last, venturing to pause for breath.

"Though the plan of these warehouses is as subtle as the Wilderness of Ziph, yet Carnation will see that not a jot of their windings has escaped from my memory since the days when I used to guide my master, as you to-day, to the low-born wife to whom his proud house would have sent Azrael, Angel of Death, as welcomer from them. Thanks to Father Abraham," he added, "that once more I have outwitted the Christian dog!"

"How, art not I a Christian dog?" Fiamma interrupted, smiling.

"Truly there are Christians and Christians," the Jew answered. "Both tribes speak the shibboleth and worship the symbol on your breast, but there is a difference. Is it not Christians who chain us, like dogs within their kennel, into our Ghetto at sunset, who strip us like ewes that our gold may run into their caskets, who force us to blazon the badge of ignominy on our garments as a hound must bear the murdered chick about his neck in token of his trespass? By Him who is nameless, the God whom such Christians worship is well figured by that here on your breast—a merciless dagger lurking under the love and meekness flaunted in the eyes of men."

Fiamma knelt down suddenly, interrupting his last words. She laid her ear to the dusty flooring.

"They come!" she whispered.

"It will be but to smoke out an empty hive," the Jew finished reassuringly. Under his heel a board slid back; Fiamma dropping after him into the narrow passage thus revealed, unexpectedly recognised it as one of those which Carnation had laid bare on the previous evening.

"Best that we part here," said the snail-gatherer, closing the spring. "You cannot go astray if you bear in mind to take the left at the turnings; a few moments will bring you into Carnation's lodging, and the way is already open to you. As for me, it will be for the safety of both of us, that the barges which spy on the Ghetto night and day should see me return from my trade at the usual hour, for which the pass that permits me to go to and fro in Venice, within certain limits of time, is made out."

"I fear you have risked yourself for a Christian," Fiamma began impulsively.

The Jew's eyes rested on her with a certain kindness, as though appreciating the human sympathy of her tone. The education of the girl had lagged behind its times; caste-prejudice, the self-worship

recognised by culture as due to humanity, the reverence which would remove the teaching of the Gospels from the defilement of daily life, were things unknown to its ignorance. The Christianity of the mountain village smelt of Galilee.

"No risk," replied the snail-gatherer at last. "On the Grand Canal my back was turned to your assailants, and to look for an unknown Jew in the Ghetto would be to search for any one bean in the bean-field. As for the boat, a thousand like it swim in the lagoons daily."

"Then buy yourself another," returned Fiamma, plunging her hand into the purse at her belt.

The Jew took the gold piece which she held out.

"Gold's not needed between us two," he remarked. "As I look on you, slender and rounded as a birch-tree's column, dark curls, dark bright eyes, I think I see the young gallant of the mountains who squired a crazed woman and a dead babe to a place of safety. All in my power I would do, and gladly, for one whom my mistress Carnation bids me serve, but the last drop of my blood I would shed for one who showed kindness to the daughter maddened by men's cruelty."

"Your daughter? How did you hear what you say?"

"The world is small and our people go to the four corners thereof," the snail-gatherer replied, his voice fading from its fervid tone. "Bear in mind, to the left," he added, as he turned from her. "Fear nothing; by now the stomach of our pursuers is full to loathing of the emptiness of these warehouses. I will descend to the church where Carnation sits to the painter; are not men and women of my race driven even by blows of the whip to frequent such places?"

Fiamma turned dreamily in the direction indicated. Alone at last, her thought strayed in a happy reverie on Love's mountains, whence the wo kaday world is

seen, dwarfed to insignificance, the air of the country blowing fresh and strong about brows heated in Life's highways. Slowly, with bent head, she passed onwards, only partially roused at last by her foot striking against a latched doorway.

With lips still softly smiling, the girl pushed it open, to find a curtain of purple velvet shrouding the entrance. Under her hand it slid with a little jangle back upon its rings, and as she entered a chamber with a large window, a woman, half shrouded in a mantle of golden hair, turned her passionate gaze towards her.

"It is Pietro!"

The words thrilled yearningly through the silence.

CHAPTER X.

FATE WEAVES.

"PIETRO! Ah, love Pietro! come to me!"

Cassandra struggled to raise herself from the cushions heaped about her, and failed. The waxen face was even whiter than when Fiamma had last seen it; the purple shadows of wakeful nights lay under the gray eyes; the mysterious aloofness and cold scorn, that had against her will awed Fiamma at the first look in Florence, were gone, consumed in the love that glowed like flame through the mask of flesh worn thin by the spirit within.

"Pietro!" she besought again, stretching out her small, transparent hands. "Oh, I have tried to read this hour in the stars—know you that your star is lost? The glittering skies are blank to me, but I will look to-night with no fear. The strange star that has trespassed on your orbit since the revelry of the Oricellari, must be a token of the new guise Life had in store for you. As the husband of Cassandra,

what may we two not accomplish!" The last words were uttered in a burning whisper, as she broke off to glance restlessly into the silver mirror, to-day placed to command the canal. "Piccolo carries," she muttered. "'Tis strange; he must by now have found where Carpaccio loiters. Can the doited graybeard have turned coward in the face of our triumph? Pietro!" she cried, a burst of jubilation interrupting her thought, "come to me! let our lips crush the sweetness of this hour! We are free! free at last to love without needing to take thought of that fair-faced fool, who would fain have struck at both of us, if she had had the wit!"

Frozen with fear, Fiamma had kept her station by the curtain, incapable of moving in the presence of the woman who appeared to her more terrible than the terrible Ten. Yet with her own terror a keen pity asserted itself for the passionate, helpless creature, ignorant that the man she called on lay deaf to every human voice in the consuming grave.

"Pietro, why do you look so strangely on me? You are not angry? These weeks of waiting for my king have not fretted my beauty from me. She leant with pathetic eagerness over the mirror, not now to study a world outside, which the brain under the wonderful golden hair had made her puppet-show. "Nay, I am fair yet. You never knew me in the days before I was chained to this couch, before the poison of the alchemist, who feared his pupil for his rival, had struck these limbs into stone. O ye gods! it cannot be that yon Venetian doll has stolen you from me——"

A deadly silence finished the sentence. Fiamma's heart leapt in a quick, generous dread.

"I am not Pietro!"

The words rushed from her unawares, as though she had leapt forward on the spears to turn the threatening points from a friend's breast.

Cassandra's eyes glowed upon her.

"Not Pietro!" she cried. "Pietro's voice speaks to tell me it is not Pietro! Pietro's face would mask Pietro as a stranger!"

Yet as she lay there a certain doubt seemed to creep into the gray eyes, and she turned restlessly on her elbow.

"Look deep into your mirror," Fiamma said sternly, moving farther within the chamber. "Perhaps it will show you dead Carpaccio, prone on the shards of the poisoned beryl!" She lurled the tidings at the other, as if in the stupefaction born of them she herself must gain breathing-space for reflection as to whether this last strangest chance of all Fate had offered her, might not prove a rivet to the whole.

The cast told: the burning eyes swerved sharply to her face.

"Carpaccio dead? And the Capelli?"

"A little languid, dizzied, it may be, from a slight whiff of poison before she flung the beryl from her, as the words within it stirred to waking. Look to yourself, woman!"

Cassandra dashed her clenched hand on the ebony scroll-work of her couch.

"Ah, fool!" she whispered. "Fool! to give rein to the woman's spite which would spite my revenge on my enemy by blaring her sin in her fair false face! Fool! as though my hate were no more than the scold of some toothless hag in the *calli*, when the wood-lan's faggots from the barge are green or crooked!"

The mysterious creature was withing on her cushions like some wounded serpent, an effect heightened by the robe she wore, shimmering with each movement into metallic bronze or green. Forgetful of self, Fiamma gazed down in pity, till a sudden recollection seemed to dam the torrent of the other's daulted fury.

"And Carpa cio," she burst out, "Carpaccio dead!"

"Ay, in the moment when the beryl, flung from its victim, broke at his feet."

"Ay, there was no fault in the success-on-powder! The fault lay in the thrice-cursed womanishness that clogged the good powder's action with the phosphor shaping the words. But Carpaccio—well, feather to another's breath as he was at all other times, no will could rein his rashness with his alchemics. How often have I gasped to see him dash the glass mask from him at the crucible, lest it should film his sight at the crisis, though death was the price should he draw full breath! I can fancy how he stooped to gather the fragments of the beryl, as though they were no more than shells on Lido's strand."

Fiamma scarcely heard the slow-dropping murmurs. The surge of fear that had chilled her blood had passed; she was only conscious now that a few bold words might secure her a hitherto undreamed-of ally, that of all others the woman before her was the one to hound Bianca on in her wavering resolution to leave Venice.

"Listen," she said abruptly, "and obey! You have failed in your way to bring the Capelli to the justice she deserves; now try mine. Send word to her, wrap the message in any bolus of speech that you like, that she must—*must*, I tell you—set out for Rome to-morrow."

"For Rome? You are dreaming!"

Fiamma turned on her heel. "Refuse me, and you have looked your last on me!"

A wild note of laughter crept out from the woman on the couch.

"Mayhap refusal would please you better than obedience! Ah, Pietro, I have not held you as my lover for these months past, without learning that your heart, like most men's, is a bird of passage, restless of brooding long in one place. In these days and nights since you gave Carpaccio the slip, I have had

time to think thoughts like these. Sooner or later, that's the burden of the tune, and Fate's no saint to be bribed by a hoop of lighted candles." The dull sadness of the voice swelled into a sudden clangour. "If it *were* Fate! But a woman—yonder Venetian! Not if the King of Hell willed it!"

Fiamma stamped her foot.

"One word of sense instead of this folly! Will you lend yourself to my wishes?"

Cassandra laughed again.

"The more a woman spends herself in a man's service the more right has he in the end of it to cast her aside as a worn-out tool. What is my lord's will? That the Capelli should leave Venice?"

"Should set out to-morrow, and by stealth, for Rome. Urge it upon her, and, sooner than you think, that which the moon looked down upon in the Oricellari gardens will be paid! There is a red hat in Rome that will bar the way to the Medici's throne as well as your beryl could have done."

As a sob of excitement broke in Fiamma's throat, altering the tone of her voice, a cry burst from Cassandra.

"By the soul that's my pawn to Fiuto, that's not Pietro's voice!"

The words rang out challengingly, piercingly, as the burning eyes scorched Fiamma's face. A great pity rushed over the girl, the thought of her own love making the deception put upon the woman before her suddenly hideous.

"No, it is not Pietro," she cried, "not Pietro, but one who weeps for him as you weep, one who knows that a woman's love is the key to this world's store-chamber of sorrow!"

Cassandra's eyes were fixed with the unseeing gaze of a trance.

"The strange star!" she muttered. "Was it for nothing that his scowl at the door left my heart

quiet, that in my dreams Pietro comes to me in disordered feast-clothes and damp earth among his curls, that instead of the gay songs he used to sing to his caged bird the notes of the Miserere fall as heavily as drops of blood from his pale lip? Piet' o! Ah God! it cannot be!—the coat of mail, no dagger could suck life from you!”

A throb of fear stifled the confession on Fiamma's lips.

“If that were true, should I be here?” she cried. “What should take a sister to Venice, think you, but to bring vengeance on Pietro's murderess?”

“A sister? Pietro, Pietro, your wits are not fledged enough to fly against Cassandra's yet! A sister is scarce like to linger in the house of a Venetian courtesan; better the story by a brother, my light-o'-love! Pietro had never a sister.”

“Ah! could you but see me on the Campanile at the morrow's dawn with the man I love!” Fiamma exclaimed unheeding, and clasped her hands.

The obstinacy that had grasped at the improbability in the girl's story as a ground for believing what Cassandra hungered to believe, was shaken by the impulsive cry. A shriek—the shriek of a woman in the hour of her trouble—tore from the convulsed throat; then the frail body reeled under the burden of despair, and the great gray eyes closed in unconsciousness.

With fear-shod feet, Fiamma stole from the chamber, not caring to risk further wanderings in the maze of secret passages. A stairway of worn marble steps led her into a vestibule deserted as the rest of the house seemed to be. A grating, stencilled with rust over the elaborate curves of its ironwork, filled up the pointed doorway; with unutterable relief the fugitive looked through its bars on to a broad, silent waterway. The gate yielded to her touch; she stepped quickly outside, beckoning as she moved to a

boat that was labouring heavily towards her up the Canal.

"*Ohè, signore, are you for being set across?*" its steerer hailed. "No fear but my boat will take you swiftly, though, as your lordship sees, 'tis but a *gobbo*, as we say here, for which the furnaces at Murano are crying themselves hoarse." His tones changed as he came near enough to see the scarf about Fiamma's waist. "*Cio!* jump in; you will serve for my Madonna fare this morning; her lamp will soon cease to burn if my luck to-day has followed the rest of the school."

"To the church of San Zanipolo," said Fiamma, sinking on one of the rough benches. The tide of reaction was sweeping in upon her, even her splendid vitality weakening under hunger, excitement, and want of sleep.

"*Cio!* brother, wert awake with the owls that thou'rt napping in the sunshine?"

The girl raised her heavy lids. There was a blessed relief in the thought that the church where Carnation posed daily must be close at hand; once within reach of her warm heart and quick wits, Fiamma need struggle no longer with the great weariness that had leaped upon her suddenly as a tropical night leaps out upon the day. But as the drowsy eyes opened, Fiamma sprang into instant wakefulness. The canal into which the boat had turned was flowing towards the wide water, and the buildings on the edge wore something of the air of stragglers from the serried army holding the waterways of the town.

"Where are you taking me?" she said. "You have dropped down too far."

"The sea is calling," replied the gondolier coolly, pointing to the racing tide.

"But I am no driftwood to be swept out to it. I have business at the church I named but now, and

your Madonna may burn daylight in her lamp for me, if you waste it any longer here."

For an answer, her conductor, with his hands on his hips, began to sway himself from side to side, rocking the boat perilously. Fiamma glanced round, uncertain whether to hail any of the rough passing craft weighted to the water with loads of logs or fish.

"Land me, and I will give you double fare to be rid of you and your scarecrow of a boat," she cried, after an instant's silence.

"All in good time, brother! Your fine excellency must be a count from Torcello, used to have servants scrambling hither and thither for you like a herd of pigs for the trough that feeds them," grinned her tormentor, to tumble backwards the next moment under the cuff which Fiamma, losing all patience, sprang up to administer.

"*Ari!* your arm's as strong as I thought it," cried the lad. "I want no double or single fares from you, my fighting-cock. only the loan of those long limbs or yours for the morrow."

"Are you moonstruck?"

"Never a whit! Come, that gay red sash about your waist is not much for one Venetian to ask of another; it is no fault of yours that you should live to the east of the Piazza. No doubt you Castellani were as triumphant as St. Michael when you won the bridges from us last Ascension, but you would have danced to another tune if we had not been a mere short. Come, you cannot help yourself any more than a crab in the pot. We want such a stripling as you to-morrow, that the Nicolotti tower may out-top that of the Castellani by a good five feet."

"I know nothing of your Nicolotti or of your Castellani either," Fiamma answered curtly. "Your ears are not good for much if they don't tell you that I am a stranger in Venice."

"You are not a Jew-boy?" interrupted the other hurriedly. "No, or you would be kennelled in the Ghetto at this time of day; and besides, though you chop Venetian like a stranger, it is not like the speech in which those figures of pigs spit their venom abroad. Well, then, if you are not of Venice and not of the Castellani—though 'tis pity you should wear their vile colours—you will make no to-do about helping the best men in Venice to beat the worst."

"I would not give a melon-rind to help any half of you Venetians from sweeping the other half, and yourselves after it, into the seas! How can you compel me to meddle with your street-brawls?"

"Street-brawls?" echoed the gondolier indignantly. "That's no name to give to our feasts, where, though since the Castellani, finger in eye, went whining to the palace, it's forbidden to do bodily harm to the little pigeons, still, if we may not fight, it is left to us to out-wrestle, out-row, out-leap them. And this season every one of our school has made oath that, at the great three-days' *fiesta* proclaimed to do honour to the Capelli, our pyramid of Nicolotti, each of them his six feet tall, shall rise on each other's shoulders to kick down on the Castellani shrimps. Madonna must have sent you—cut to the pattern of what was wanted for the top, long and lithe and lean in the flank—to us, and not to the Castellani. Our Lady, as a woman, can be trusted for knowing the prettiest men!"

"Then, like a woman, she had best change her mind and send another, with a wish to join your crew of fools, for I have none," returned Fiamma, the more irritably for the chance mention of the Capelli.

The boy stared at her angrily. "Presence of the Devil! you must be a traitor of a Castellani after all," he cried; "and if so, I swear that your pack of mongrels shall be none the better of a thew of yours! There are sand-shoals enough on the lagoons

to put you off on, where you can spend a night and a day high and dry, as a sunfish washed up on the shore."

He seized on his oar again, turning the boat skilfully aside from the current into another canal. With a scornful shrug, Fiamma resigned herself for the present to her fate, and sat warily observant.

The gondola was regaining the populous parts of the town, and the canals were growing narrower, evil sights and sounds revolting the girl's mountain-bred senses. A confused din of voices sounded hoarsely from the huge blocks of buildings rising sheer from the water, and once or twice groups of men in black caps and sashes scanned the pair curiously, before, at a landing-stage at last, one such laid hands on the boat, vigorously pulling it in.

"*Cio!*" he shouted, "kidnapped from the Castellani curs! Ah, baptized son of dogs, strip the vile red from thee! Body of Bacchus, that's the pig-faced one who left the print of his claws on my throat last Ascension-tide. We Nicolotti will make him a present of better manners."

"Pigs with bladders for heads!" retorted Fiamma's captor, shouldering a road through the gesticulating mob. "The little fellow has not a hair of the Castellani in his hide, or if he has, a drop of the *popa's* holy water will wash it the right colour! Quick to the *gastaldo*, that we may baptize our recruit into our honourable guild. Go, fetch him, I say; we must practise our tower before dusk."

Fiamma offered no resistance to being hustled along in the crowd, confident that submission would prove the shortest cut out of the vexatious adventure. A few steps led them to a house frescoed on the outside with strange life-size figures—a cook slicing a baby into a cauldron, or being dragged at the neck of a galloping horse. Into the doorway, cut around a painted gondolier apparently protesting against the

presence of a human finger in his broth, the van of the escort had already hurled themselves, a scale of voices calling on the *gastaldo*.

"Well, well, little puppies, have the witches turned you into geese that you clack so loud?" boomed a good-humoured bass voice. "What! a recruit is as welcome as a fish to the net, but till he is baptized the Castellani would be right glad to cast a hook in our waters; no need to split your throats to call their spies to the spot. Todaro, was it, who laid hold on him? Then let him stand by his trove as *compare*—and now, children, away!"

The lad who held Fiamma's arm, tightened his grasp. In obedience to its leader's orders, the faction-party streamed towards a small enclosure, with a growth of ragged grasses on it, at the edge of which a little black and white church seemed stranded, a stunted white campanile, a few paces nearer a stagnant ditch, giving the impression of an adventurous gosling deserting a foster-mother. In a twinkling the crowd had vanished within the church, leaving Fiamma and her companion alone in the sudden silence.

Still keeping hold of the girl's arm, Todaro walked up to the church door and began to hammer on it lustily. "*Gia è!*" he hailed, in the gondolier's cry.

"Who passes?" cried a voice from within.

"One who would fain be made into an honest man, and sail under the black cap and sash."

"What does the craft who hoists such colours for the first time give to the school?"

"All fares till the next full of the moon, a strong arm for the school's quarrels, and heart's blood at need," answered Todaro.

The door swung upon its hinges, revealing the disorderly mob of a few minutes before drawn up in two rows against the walls. The *gastaldo*, a stalwart middle-aged man, stood in the centre of

the church, with an immense tub of salt water at his feet.

"Bring the suckling of the school here," he commanded.

A black cap moved out from the ranks and gripping Fiamma's free arm, the pair between them forced her down, plunging her head and shoulders into the tub.

Writhing and struggling in vain, she was restored, spluttering and angry, to an upright position. The head of the guild laughed good-naturedly.

"Thou, Todaro, shouldst have told thy godson how to bear himself in a gondolier's baptism," he said. "'Tis but to fill thy chest deep—so—young one, and all the Adriatic will not drive the wind thus garnered from thee, so that thou couldst lie under water for a good minute, and not wait for the Resurrection to rise up a living man." He paused to regard the lithe form shaking the dripping curls out of its eyes. "Body o' me! you're as pretty a boy as ever filled Madonna's lamp for her o' mornings," he said approvingly. Now, my son, thou hast turned Nicolotti, and must learn Nicolotti secrets. The wafers here! Swear, to begin with, that the passwords will never be betrayed by thee."

He held out a box shaped like a little silver dove, as he spoke, his good-humoured eye winning Fiamma to touch it complaisantly.

"I am scarce like to remember them long enough to betray them," she protested, half smiling. "I have business in Venice, and it is not furthered by my having fallen in with your company."

"When business and the Brotherhood are shuffled together, the Brotherhood comes on top," was the *gastaldo's* reply. "Swear, I say."

"Truly, you make me feel to do it with a good will," retorted the girl, taking the oath dictated to her

The *gastaldo* laid aside the wafer with a nod.

"Give th^e password of Brotherhood, Todaro."

"My blood is red,
My scarf is black,
And one's at your service,
For one's on your back,"

recited Fiamma's captor.

"Now, the cry to gather the school to a brother in need."

The lad sent out a harsh, cawing cry three times repeated, the last prolonged to an eldritch wail.

"The chough's cry," observed the *gastaldo*. "Let's hear if thy pipe has got the trick of it."

Fiamma's impatience had yielded to the novelty of the situation, and she complied almost gaily. At her repeated effort, the *gastaldo* surveyed her keenly.

"The sea-fog will soon roughen thy voice for thee, my son. Hast a note like a lark rising from the hollies of the Lido. Now for the grip." He clasped the girl's slender hand in his, pressing his middle finger strongly on her palm. "There, hast them all!" he announced, taking the wafer in his hand again. "I, Nicolotto, salute thee, Nicolotto——"

He was interrupted by a loud knocking at the farther end of the church. The gondoliers turned eagerly to the sound.

"The Castellani! They have nosed us out!"

The knocking redoubled, with cries of "Open! open!" As a man opens a flood-gate, the *gastaldo* walked down the church, his men falling in behind him. The next instant Fiamma shrank from the roar which saluted her ears. Within and without the wave had surged together, but the *gastaldi* of both parties were not picked men for nothing; with voice and gesture they reined their men back in a short-lived pause.

"Are you infidel Jews, that no place but the church is good for you to show your teeth in?" demanded

the Nicolotto captain. "Cio! Castella n, are you come for the leavings of our supper?"

"We have come for what is ours," answered the Castellani leader. "You have a lad here who wore our colours when he was an hour younger."

The Nicolotto shrugged his shoulders. "One black feather does not make the bird a crow, brother. Besides, he has been baptized a good Nicolotto, if he was a rogue before."

"Sausage-maker! Kidnapper! Dare not your rats face us unless you are two to our one?"

The Nicolotto faced them undauntedly.

"Sa, sa, sa, dogs, yell to the moon! You have the stomach of heroes for a contest like the morrow's, where's nothing to do but to climb on each other's shoulders with the Piazza between you and us. A fine victory, truly, if you get it, to show that the Castellani are better mounabanks than we Nicolotti. But if you dogs are good for anything but to show your teeth, set any twelve of your men to twelve of us, and get the beating that your unruliness has earned."

"To the *campo*!" rose the yell; but the other *gastaldo* checked it for an instant. "And the winners claim the man?" he said.

"With a blessing!" agreed the Nicolotto, no longer able to restrain the crowd behind him. Like a torrent it leapt forward, storming the *campo*, yet giving back sullenly to the efforts of the *gastaldi* to clear an arena for the fight.

"Little Bebbio—crooked-nosed Pamfilio—Blasio—Antonio loved of women."

The names dropped from the leaders like alternating hails. One by one the champions stepped forward, stripped to the waist, the muscles showing in sinuous play under the smooth olive skin. Each to each the two rows stood at gaze, defiant. The flash in the meeting eyes was as fire to snow; the wrestle began.

Up and down strained the struggling feet, to and fro swayed the bodies, like trees lashed by the tempest. Here a fellow was bending his back till the sinews almost cracked in his efforts to heave over his shoulder an adversary who wrapped pliant limbs about his foe in the passive endurance that saps violence. There a couple reeled together, hugging like bears, but even as Fiamma looked, a stream of blood rushed from one gasping mouth over the rival's shoulder, and the locked hands fell heavily apart. Men were down, biting, tearing one another; one black-curved athlete, who would never again stand sound on a *poppe*, had clasped an enemy's ankle-bone, bringing him with a dull thud on an upraised dagger point; the tide of fight crept on, till men were turning on each other in the crowd. Each patch of standing-ground held its duel.

The tinkle of a bell cut sharply through the dull roar that rose from a hundred throats. Fiamma, lifting her eyes that had hung fascinated on the sight of men putting out the strength in them, saw to right and left the crowd give way before a wedge of purple; the sunshine struck on the tall golden pyx borne by a train of advancing priests, the road being cleared for them by the imperious bell.

"O generation of vipers!" exclaimed the foremost Churchman, as the shadow of the great pyx stretched itself like a dumb warning towards the combatants. "Must you be kept like dogs of Jews under lock in your kennels before there is an end to these venomous ractions? Truly the names of Nicolotti and Castellani are a curse to Venice, and the Ten will need to pare your claws closer than has yet been done, though they have ruled that the *festas* shall be spared the shame of seeing you contest the bridges like curs fighting for bones."

"The reverend father's pardon, but this quarrel was a work of necessity," quoth the *gastaldo* of the

Castellani, with haughty respect. He strove forward over the bare beaten ground, pointing with forefinger at Fiamma where she stood gripped, as she had been throughout, by the zealous Todaro. "We Castellani went to speak with those three"—he spat at the words—"in the San Trovaso yonder, being, as the excellency knows, the one spot in Venice where Nicolotto and Castellano can meet in peace together, its doors opening to the east and west. Excellency, they had stolen a man from us and baptized him to their side, and blows were the only price they would take for him."

The crowd had melted silently, as though the darkness of the *calle* were a whirlpool, sucking at its edges. Fiamma, linked to Todaro, stood in the cleared space. As the priest's eyes fell on hers, he started slightly. "Let me hear no more of thy blasphemous muzzing of holy rites," he said sternly to the Nicolotto. "Hence with ye! I know this youth; he has nothing in you."

From the *calle* behind them rose a long wail, the voice of a wife greeting her widowhood. The pyx had done its errand of dispersion.

At a sign Todaro released the arm he had guarded, vanishing in the wake of various crestfallen Nicolotti as they streamed towards their colony in the western quarter; the priest's hand replaced his on Fiamma's shoulder.

"So Venice has not yet offered a draught chill enough to ice your hot blood, young man?" he observed mechanically as it would seem, drawing her into a place in the procession. "I have looked for you here and there, but scarce in a gondolier's brawl."

"You had not found me there with my goodwill," Fiamma retorted curtly, making a motion to step aside. "Take my thanks for having cut the knot that held me; brief leave-taking seems to be the rule set for us."

The hand on her shoulder leaned with an ounce more weight.

"My son on the night that held our brief leave-taking, you spoke of a confessor murdering you.

"It died in the birth, father," Fiamma responded, with a quick thrill of uneasiness.

"Before now the dead have been raised, son."

"Sooth, the day of miracles is past, father," Fiamma returned again.

The procession, purple and white, had by this time broken up, boats poled by lay brothers pushing off with their freight of priests; from one of the great golden pyx flashed broken splendours into the dark waters, like some celestial tower of the city which the exile of Patmos saw in vision floating over the sea of his prison.

"And it would be a miracle indeed should the weal of Holy Church be baulked by a harebrained stripling's caprice," answered the priest smoothly, as the delicate hand impelled Fiamma towards the gondola that held the pyx. "It is for such weal that I, unworthiest minister though I am, defile my ear with any droppings which you may have gleaned from the eaves of great palaces. Confession is good for the soul, my son, and I have reproached myself that I refused yours that night."

"The melon was cut and the juice flowed away," Fiamma quoted mockingly. "Why did you not suck the melon, father? Now 'twill be but dry work for your lips."

She twisted herself lightly from his hold, but recoiled at finding her rear blocked by a group of demure priests. A faint smile touched the Churchman's lips.

"A shout of yours will summon the inquisitors of the Ten to your aid, my son, if you need assistance," he suggested.

Fate weaves her nets of circumstance to hold.

CHAPTER XI.

“IN THE NAME OF THE TEN!

THE boat with the golden pyx slid off.

Out into the lagoon it floated, turning and winding as though in delicate dance among islands where the hay-harvest was ripening in its swathes, and the acacia trees shook out their scented garlands. Drifts of the white-winged blossoms surged like fragments of ivory pavements round the keel pointed for the sunset; but Fiamma, gazing sullenly towards the Campanile, knew nothing of the sweetness of the young summer brooding over the lagoons. Her thought was with the sunrise, with the lover whose pulses like her own were throbbing towards the tryst, which, like the sunrise itself, should, must dawn out of the darkness that seemed impenetrable enough.

A mass of gray buildings rose at her back, its air of monastic austerity gainsaid, like a merry eye under a cowl, by a suggestion of oleander-fringed walk and blossoming orchard. One, two, and three, the boats had reached the turf shelved into landing-steps, the pyx was throned on its bearer's shoulders, the procession reformed. Fiamma's hope fell as she realised the fact that the lagoon lay between her and Venice. Half-way to the monastery, the priest, whose pace kept step, fast or slow, with hers, drew her aside into a vine-trellised walk. Here and there the green traceries of the walls were cut into great arches, through one of which the Campanile, etched against an opal sky, drew Fiamma's eyes like a beckoning gesture.

“This *pergoia* is as lonely and less stifling than a confession box,” began the priest blandly. “Now, my son, let us understand each other. In these days, when Holy Church is indeed as a lamb among wolves, it behoves us shepherds to arm ourselves with all

weapons that Providence or chance may offer. Of these there are none surer than such secrets of great houses as you spoke to me of knowing. My son, I must hear that this night."

The lips beside him lost nothing of their resolute curve. Fiamma Bonaventuri had heard enough of Carnation's skrewd chatter to be aware that Venetians, Churchmen and all, owned no aim higher than the aggrandisement of Venice; the girl was too honest to view the Cardinal's trust as coin of hers to help herself at a pinch.

"My father, the confession I spoke of was a pretext to escape from a house too hot to hold me," she said desperately. "Your excellency has seen that my humour is something gallant."

"Ay, as was that of Pietro Bonaventuri," said the priest smoothly.

They had walked the length of the *pergola* and turned again. Through the arch the Campanile shone on the startled Fiamma's eyes.

"Bonaventuri?" she said. "The husband of the fair Capelli?"

The Churchman answered with the air of one whose bowl had trundled awry. "You are withholding something from me, my son. What is your errand in our city? Show me, if you have it, your passport of voyage. Why did you enter Venice secretly as a thief in the night?"

"Let me pair your catechism with a fellow," Fiamma retorted readily. "Does your youth lie so far behind you, that you have forgotten that a frolic loses its tang if it is not carried on under the rose? Must a gallant on the track of a pretty woman proclaim himself with a flourish of trumpets to startle her from her couch?"

"The name of the pretty woman, son?"

Struck by the peculiar tone, Fiamma glanced up. The Churchman smiled, not unkindly.

"My son, to be round with you, your answer confirms my suspicions. We in Venice know little of hunting, but I have heard it is treason to run down king's game. Wherefore I deem it good for your own skin that you should remain in safe keeping till the crown of a Grand Duchesse shall bring wisdom to the fair head whose eye for handsome faces has already cost her house dear."

Fiamma turned on him fiercely.

"Do you take me for a lover of the harlot Cappelletti?"

The priest's hand came gently on her mouth.

"Those two words said in Venice would cost you a life, young man. You are the blossom of a mystery of which I cannot as yet trace the roots; but here you will at least do yourself and Venice no harm."

As though conjured up by his signal, two cowed figures sprang forward at the end of the *pergola* on Fiamma's track in her rush to the waterside. Spent as she was, they overhauled her without difficulty, dragging her back on her steps.

"A taste of the novice-master's scourge would do this springald's shoulders no harm, father," declared one of her captors, breathless in the silent struggle.

The priest's eyes were fixed on a boat with a red flag at the prow which was swiftly approaching across the lagoon.

"The Inquisitor's boat," he muttered. "Take the youth to one of the novices' cells, and let none have access to him till I return," he commanded hastily, moving towards the boat as it made straight for the landing-terrace. Fiamma saw him, with a foot on the gunwale, bend to listen to a whisper from the steersman, then he stepped in as the skiff curved from shore.

"Summoned again to their councils," whispered one of her jailers mysteriously to the other. "Our Father Basilio is a great man; even the Ten need him

to hatch the egg of their thought under that tonsure of his."

"That's a kind of egg you'll never lay," returned his mate. "Come, let's put this youngster in ward, where fasting and solitude will soon drive the devil out of him; is not the first wild slip of great houses whom Father Basilio has had the pruning of."

The moon was riding high above the clouds when Fiamma awoke that night. For some moments she lay gazing at the high grated window, before the torrent of her misery broke the dam of sleep which for a few hours had forced it back. The locked cell, the frantic struggler that had left her bruised and bleeding, all rushed in upon her, as a pitiful wail shuddered out. The meeting on the Campanile! She must fail there; Mark Talbot must look for her in vain, while she was caged here by the lagoon!

The strokes of a bell fell in a mocking knell on her despair, making her lift her head in a sullen impatience, in time to see a dark figure glide through her stealthily opened door.

"Brother Angelo, your rosary!" The moonlight showed a boyish face under the cowl bending over her. "Lend it me, I say! I knew not which of the punishment-cells you were fast in, though when you were not at supper I guessed you were in penitence again. Quick, the beads; you know our master said I should be whipped with nettles the next time I lost mine. May he burst asunder! but I've steeped a fat spider in his saucer of vermilion and set it to dance the tarantella over his fine page of the Gospels that he's illuminating for our convent's gift to the Capelli."

With a fierce, silent writhe, Fiamma was uppermost, snatching the boy's throat with one hand while she stripped his novice's garment from him with the other. So sudden had been the assault that she was outside the cell, securing the door with its heavy bar, before the astonished victim had time to cry out; and Fiamma

smiled as she reflected that similar shouts from herself had gone wholly unheeded in the first part of the night.

Huddling on her stolen plumage, she stood for one perplexed instant. Down a corridor intersecting that in which she was, figures were flitting, hastening as the heavy bell beat out its final strokes. Fiamma saw the last straggler disappear before she crept on cautiously, looking this way and that for a means of exit. The corridor gave no hint as to the goal of the vanished company. The right end was sealed by tall battants; the left merely branched into another passage pitted with cells.

"A monk in one of these holes is like a toad in a stone," muttered the girl, shaking her head over the trap in which she was caught. "The wonder is the getting in, and the question is the getting out!"

The shuffle of a sandal made her turn her head sharply. A belated brother hurried past in unseeing haste, straight for the great doors. As he flung them back, a flood of golden light rushed out, showing Fiamma to the gaze of countless cowls occupying the stalls of a chapel.

Upon the instant the girl stepped forward, slipping into the shadow of a pillar, with the shinking from notice natural to a delinquent. Sleep was the atmosphere around her, the monks intoning the chants with half-shut eyes and notes continually gulped in yawns. The interest at the entrance of the two defaulters had been the merest ripple; the service had dragged itself to an end before Fiamma had succeeded in planning her escape.

Throwing the cowl well over her face, she fell in as the rest trooped out of chapel. In complete silence she had advanced among the soft-footed brothers half-way down the main passage, when an unexpected signal to halt came to her by a smart cut from a whip on her shoulders.

"Child of Beelzebub, where's the penance for thy lateness?" harshly demanded a monk whom, from his unpleasant whip, Fiamma guessed to be the redoubtable novice-master. "Back into the chapel—we will see if I cannot beat time into that skin of thine!"

Another cuff from his scourge of office convinced Fiamma of the policy of following in the steps of a brace of victims already sulkily headed back. Angry enough, she re-entered the chapel, half inclined to risk everything by declaring herself, and taking the chance of the story being hushed up for the convent's sake.

"And now howl, dumb dogs that ye are!" the novice-master's raucous voice broke in on her self-debate. "Let not one, Rafael, Leo, or Paul"—the whip picked out the owner of each name—"leave off chanting the seven penitential psalms till matins, unless he has a taste for being stretched out and soundly flogged before the brotherhood."

As the chapel door closed with a bang on the last words; shutting out the figure of the disciplinarian, the companions kneeling beside her struck in a doleful chant, which, however, in a moment or two came to an abrupt end.

"There, the old traitor is safe in his bed by now!" they laughed, scrambling to their feet. "Pity that he could not have Sta. Rosa to make it for him with the broken glass she fancied for her own! Come, let's seek ours; and you, Paul, forget not to rouse us in time to slip in before the bells go for matins."

They raised the altar-frontal as they spoke, displaying a flight of steps leading presumably to the crypts. Fiamma stooped to enter, involuntarily bringing her face close to that of the lad who had preceded her. He started back.

"Presence of saints! You are not Paul!"

"Betray me not!" Fiamma whispered breathlessly. "I was dragged here last night, and have yet to seek a way out."

"But how—how?" A boyish mischief gleamed in the novice's face.

"'Tis not as easy as for a chestnut to burst its husk," Fiamma returned, following on his heels.

The foremost Loy was ahead, barely visible in the moonlight straggling through the narrow stone arches of a small cloister into which the steps ran. With the ease of custom, he slipped through one of the apertures and disappeared. To Fiamma's stiff weariness, the evasion was harder; more than one moment was wasted before she could worm her way through the unfriendly straightness of the stonework, and stand panting out under the free night. The wind from off the lagoon came as a draught of wine; it stimulated her to turn coolly to the boy at her side.

"Who keeps guard over the boats in this monkery of yours?" she asked.

The lad, who had helped her through the archway, was standing uncertain, his eyes on a small door ajar on the other side of the quadrangle. At the question he looked frankly up.

"The Devil sent soot down the chimney to spoil the soup," he said. "You're soot for us; when our master sees to-morrow only two of us where he left three, he will find out the secret of a peccance-night in the chapel."

"But supposing the three are there?" returned Fiamma. "Show me the boats, and I'll show you how your novice-master will find three where he left three, though I shall be about my business in Venice."

"The boats are there," said the boy, pointing towards a clump of acacias. "They are to be had for the asking, for the brothers whose turn it is to take the milk to the city will be snoring till daybreak."

Fiamma glanced up at the sky; its sombre blueness was almost black, the blackness of the turn of the night.

The novice watched her anxiously

"You are soot for us," he repeated. "If it were but my turn and Angelo's to take the milk, we could hide you under the sail, but brothers Peter and John are as sour as red wine that's been kept too long. And if a boat be missing, the truth will leak out, and bring warm skins to us novices."

"Not if you yourself put me across," said Fiamma. "I must be in Venice with the dawn, and you and your boat will be back in time to release Paul from the punishment-cell where he was trapped instead of me."

The lad stared at her for an instant.

"I'll do it!" he cried then, with a boy's laugh. "'Twill be a frolic, something to chuckle over as I sit by the master crooking my back over the parchment I must copy till my fingers grow stiff as his. I'll do it; 'tis the only way to save us all a flogging, though the fun is worth even what I got for putting live mice in the paste, and that was sharper than Christmas mustard."

They had reached the acacia trees, and the novice was unfastening the smallest boat of the flotilla moored to the slender stems. Silently Fiamma took her place fronting the eastern sky. Was it fancy that the cementations of night were being loosened off the world, the sleepers stirring in their sleep at the half-heard summons of the day?

The liquid dip of the oars told the story of their progress. Slowly, like the memory of an old sin, the figure of the tower took shape on the twilight, each moment adding its line.

The lagoon was broad. The dip of the oars shook Fiamma like pulse-beats. The cocks had begun to crow.

Fiamma shut her eyes in a dumb prayer.

Out in the east the darkness was yielding; a faint green light—the green of great oceans—had stolen into it.

"Yonder is the landing-stage," the novice's voice sounded in her ears. "You must leap nimbler than a flea on it; though the boat will be lightened of you, I shall need to row as if for the red banner of the regatta to get safe home."

The radiance in the east had overflowed; the sky was dappled with colour. The new day was beating up the world.

Hardly pausing for the thanks that the boy was impatient of, Fiamma leaped on the stage which the boat scarcely touched. She had left the cowl in the boat, and her dark figure was unnoticeable enough in the streets through which she hurried towards the Piazza with the desperate haste of a dreamer striving through the obstacles of his dream. But the bewildering labyrinth of Venetian streets clogged her speed; she strayed here and there, again and again catching a glimpse of the Campanile, again and again foiled in reaching it.

The sun was more than an hour high when she drifted out under the archway of the Clock Tower. As she did so, a woman started forward from the doorway of the great church. It was Carnation.

"Praises to St. Anthony that he has found you at last, though he took as long over it as a blind beggar groping for a coin in the mud! What has befallen you? You are pale and wild-eyed as though the witches had stolen you for a trip to Alexandria in Egypt in the gondolas they borrow between midnight and cockcrow!"

Fiamma scarcely heard her. A blindness had come over her; the figures in the square before her loomed gigantic and shapeless; the Campanile seemed a cliff that she was powerless to scale.

"Go, go, go!" she gasped, pointing towards it with a wavering hand. "Tell him who is waiting there to come to me here, by the token of the garden and the Judas tree!"

'She had sunk down in the sculptured porch, leaning her honey-pale face against the carved alabaster amber with the sunshine sucked from a century of summers. A whimsical smile touched Carnation's lips.

"In the mid sea there is a fountain welling,
And whoso drinks thereof is made Love's prey!"

she hummed musically. "It seems to me, my damsel-errant, that you've tasted of its waters, and if so, the saltness of all the seas through which you may have to buffet your way to harbour won't wash its flavour from your lips."

She stood for a moment longer, noting the lines of a new softness which had come to the scaled face. Fiamma sat motionless, impassive as the sceptred and crowned angel towering against the golden background of the mosaics like the warden of a radiant paradise from which the crouching woman underneath had been thrust out. The silence fell healingly on her jangled nerves; her face looked more lifelike for the interval of rest, when Carnation's voice was heard again beside her.

"What like is the hero?" the model demanded. "The Campanile is a last year's nest for emptiness, and hangs as high. I climbed to the top, like the sister-in-law of one Bluebeard, and like her again, saw Count Nobody—he with the castle in Torcello—for my pains."

"Good Carnation, look again," urged Fiamma faintly. "An Englishman, tall and fair, with a laugh lurking in his blue eyes, and a moustache like ripe maize. Look again, as you would look to be beckoned from Purgatory."

"He was tall and stalwart enough for a St. Christopher, though I had no chance to learn aught of his moustache," cried Carnation quickly. "Such an one was here before sunrise, but there was no laugh in his blue eyes, little sister. Could I have

dreamed that he was waiting for you, as he strode over the Piazza, and again when he came down from the Campanile, where he had roosted for two good hours!"

A moan broke from the lips that had grown deadly white.

"Gone! Is he gone? Ah! what must he deem me and my love? A cheat to enable me to escape from him, lest, agent to the Capelli as he is, he should spoil my plans! Gone, lost to me!"

In a paroxysm of dumb misery, she rocked to and fro; but Carnation bent over her, drawing her to her feet.

"It's as much my trade to read men's faces as for a priest to thumb his missal-book," she said. "And what I saw in that stranger's was a fear that grew on him, and an impatience fit to shoe the clouds and gallop in search of something, but not a spark of the anger that, by my troth, that gallant would feel if he thought he had been fooled! And what else I spelt was, that he is one as little like to quit a purpose once taken up, as the mastiff-dog, whose badge fastens the heron's plume in his cap, will loosen its jaws from a prey." She paused, to meet Lialama's devouring eyes. "Come," she went on, with a change of tone, "you have told me what makes me tearful. If thoughts of you were haunting the Piazza this morning, it seems an omen of little good that the star-gazer's hideous dwarf should too, since sunrise, have been circling about the Campanile, ay, and eyeing me as if I were a honey-cake on a street-seller's booth. Come, heart of mine, I have stared the night out of countenance on this Piazza, and am stiff and tired enough. Truly, waiting will bring everything, even the Day of Judgment to the wicked. And in Venice all streets lead to the Piazza; it was a good guess of mine to perch here, while Ben Levi and some other sharp eyes from the Ghetto had gone to Sior Antonio to look for you!"

"Sior Antonio?" Fiamma echoed with a note of alarm.

Carnation laughed. "He has no tongue to betray you with, my sparrow! 'Tis our humour to lend simp'etons—wandering German 'prentices and their like—to Sior Antonio painted on a wall near the Ghetto; asking Sior Antonio is good Venetian for an empty errand. Come, I say, the sun is hot enough to roast chestnuts; 'twill be going to Sior Antonio in good earnest to look here or elsewhere for your Englishman a moment before sunset, the time when lovers and bats flitter abroad, to lure their prey with doleful squeakings!"

Chatting thus, she had guided Fiamma through the Merceria into a web of lanes beyond. The way was short, but Carnation's arm was necessary for the weary girl mounting the stairs that landed her at last in the room whence, not two days ago, she had spied upon Bianca's visit to the fortune-teller.

Too utterly tired for food or for loosening a thread she wore, she sank upon the bed and slept, at first fitfully, later, a deep dreamless sleep. Hour after hour, till Carnation, seeing the weariness fade out of the young face, ventured forth on an unavoidable errand, leaving the sleeper to the guardianship of the plague-cross marked on the crumbling walls of the old house.

Fiamma awoke suddenly to a sense of danger in the air. Yet a glance round the chamber reassured her; the scrolls of the couch, the spindle-legged chairs, hid nothing; with a breath of relief, the girl sank back upon the bed, courting the luxury of a second sleep.

Ah!

The alabaster washing-basin, supported by the kneeling angel!—The face was in shadow!

Fiamma had seen the eyeballs move!

She was upon it in an instant, fierce, determined,

her brave fighting blood in flame ; but quick as she was, ill-luck outran her—she had to deal with Piccolo the dwarf.

As she sprang from the bed, he had flung the basin from him, a mere ninepin to his uncanny strength ; crashing through the window, it broke a way to freedom. Piccolo was upon the sill ; as he leaped, his pursuer was not a foot behind him, the gallant, handsome young figure betraying nothing of the girl's trembling limbs. The next instant she was at the casement, with half her body thrown across the sill, in time to see the monstrous creature swimming with strong, sinewy arms to the opposite steps.

A man's curse grated through Fiamma's teeth. As she raised herself, her feet crunching the broken glass beneath them, a pair of eyes struck on hers, holding her for a second motionless. The magnet of the snake's gaze was in them—the snake bracing itself to strike. Cassandra's eyes !

"She has guessed that it was I who took the coat of mail," Fiamma muttered. "Has she a dagger for me, that her missnapen imp should steal thus upon me?" she wondered, vaguely shivering under the cold fury she had read in the look bent on her. "To-night ! Let but to-night come and go, and I leave Venice and her behind me for ever !"

A remorse pricked her with the remembrance of Carnation, whose foot just then sounded at the threshold. Chary of caresses though her nature was, the girl turned to her with eager arms.

"We love each other, and yet to-night must see our parting !" she cried, with a quiver in her voice. "My work in Venice is done, and well for me that it is. To-morrow's daylight must see Venice at my back."

She clung round Carnation's neck, her breath choked with unshed tears. For a moment the model held her close, then she laughed, patting Fiamma's cheek.

"But you take your treasure in your pack, sweet hypocrite you!" she said. "Come, we must out to this knave of hearts, who was not to be cheated out of a sweetheart by a doublet and a pair of nose. The bridal garland should be of the *potentilla*—ladies' deceit, as the fisher-children of the Lido christen it."

Once in the street, Fiamma's excitement grew apace. The women had made a cautious exit on the landward side of the house, Carnation reconnoitring stealthily before she beckoned her companion into the deserted street.

The evening tide of Venetian life had set into the Piazza as they passed towards the Merceria. Fiamma was very silent; under her hood the colour went and came in her face, her lips had much ado to keep from trembling into smiles. In the deep archway of the Clock Tower she paused, pressing her hand on the side where the heart was leaping gladly.

A juggler with a large ape, who had come up from behind, bade them a rough good-evening. The ape began to dance in uncouth bounds, and the passers-by stopped to watch it, to the irritation of Fiamma, whose restless gaze was blocked by them. As with an impatient gesture she moved to get clear of the crowd, she felt Carnation's hand, resting in her own, *witch suddenly and strangely.

The model spoke in a whisper, looking neither to right nor left.

"Two men are making straight for us, turning as we turn. By the Blood of Christ, I think them to be officers of the Ten!"

Through the press she had shifted their direction, working back towards the Merceria. The hunted terror in their faces appealed to the quick Venetian sympathies, and as if by chance a way was made for the fugitives' escape.

With a wild, unearthly cry, the great ape broke from the cord fastened round its loins. It sprang upon

Fiamma bodily. Under the creature's weight, the girl staggered to her knees. The grinning face leered horribly close to her; eyes, human eyes, rolled in the ape's mask—the eyes of Piccolo the dwarf!

She wrenched her head aside, in time to see Carnation shouldered from her. As the dwarf dropped on the ground, she felt a hand on her arm.

“In the Name of the Ten!”

The voice of the summons was very quiet, the hands on her shoulders were very strong.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE STRONG NET.

STUNNED by the magnitude of the disaster, Carnation stood, watching the slender, defiant figure marshalled by her captors towards the Ponte della Paglia. The awe brooding over Venice, as the shadow of a volcano broods even through its slumber over the villages at its foot, had generated in the crowd the panic which the first tremulous pulse of flame from the awakening volcano breeds. The Piazza had grown empty; the pigeons, fluttering down from the jaspers and porphyries of the great porch, were mincing self-consciously over the rare space, tame as courtesans, with calculating, seeking eyes.

With hasty steps, Carnation turned aside, plunging with the instinct of a wounded creature into the fathomless shadows of the five-vaulted porches of the church. The lathern curtains fell “like a blow” behind her, as, her face hidden, she pressed into the darkness of the interior, the darkness moulded into the form of a cross. In the recess shrouded in gloom the woman cast herself in abasement beneath the radiant risen Christ in the vaulting, stretching pitiful healing hands in blessing over the blackness below.

"Dear Christ!" she sobbed, "Thou hast conquered! Long years ago I vowed in my wickedness that, since my prayer had not kept the man I loved better than my soul with me, prayer of mine should never again knock at Heaven's gates. But Thou art the stronger wrestler, Thou hast forced me to my knees! Be merciful, oh, be merciful! save my darling from the Lion's Mouth!" The words, echoes of a half-heard, half-forgotten chant of some *fiesta* of girlhood, dropped with a terrible significance from a Venetian's lips. "Born of woman, save her! Let the wail of a woman's misery pierce through the sweetness of the lutes and citherns in Thy Paradise! Save the girl who has thrilled the old wound in my heart with the old pain—the pain of love! Thou who died a rough death for others, let me ransom her life with mine! If one must die, let it be me, me, me!"

Exhausted by her vehemence, she lay still, the tempest in her sinking into a strange peace. The image of the Christ in the mosaic above looked down upon her in grave, unchanging sweetness, the serenity of conquered self; but the anguished woman saw another vision, a Man by the chisim of Gethsemane King of the world's suffering, standing at her side. A certain sensation of fellowship grew upon her in a few moments before she lifted herself up, freeing her from the maddening fancy of Life as a cage barred with world's injustice, which had driven her into the church. That the prayer of her ignorance would be moulded to the prayer of her need was the hope that cordialled her.

Crossing the vast "twilight cave," Carnation stepped out once more into the night, her eyes blinking involuntarily at the flood of colour on which, like a city of cloud, the Piazza, with its white vista of palaces, seemed to swim—the blue of the wide lagoon stretching out into the distance like the sky itself. Few of the frightened crowd had straggled

back even yet, and the pigeons flaunted unmolested over the ground. As Carnation looked, however, they towered up in startled flight, the abruptness of their movement irritated by the model.

"Is it to learn a secret trick of fence that you trust a handsome lal to the top of the Campanile?" she whispered very softly.

Mark Talbot, pale and haggard-eyed, swerved distastefully aside, flinging off the hand Carnation had laid on his sieve. One or two bystanders raised a jeer. Carnation laughed unsteadily.

"La! I've interrupted the gallant," she said, looking over her shoulder as she moved off. "Lovelorn poet he, spinning out of the cobwebs of his brain a song to the mistress that neither sunset nor sunrise have brought him. La! and songs are so hard to write nowadays, when the women have such names to rhyme to, Bradamante or—Fiamma! Yet Fiamma might be made to chime with *amò*, if the gentleman has wit to follow up a hint!"

She jounced off, humming the syllables of Fiamma as she left the Piazza behind. She went slowly conscious of footsteps that gained speed with the narrowing streets, till at last they shot forward, bringing the Englishman shoulder to shoulder with her.

"You come from her?"

Carnation paused before she answered. The shrewd eyes that found faces as legible as dial-plates, questioned the one before her with anxious jealousy, the jealousy of a forest-mother watching a stranger approaching her cub. The survey was short; then the woman spoke as to a comrade.

"True man, true friend, true lover!" she said. "That's the trefoil of love, but, by my chopines, the man's the one that's wanted to pull the lover out of the mud to-night! Yes, I come from your Fiamma, and yet she has gone from me."

"Where, in God's name?"

Carnation nodded at the fierce question. "He rings true as the Doge's medals," she muttered, diving with a quick gesture into the featureless alley leading to her house. Inside the doorway, she turned again. "The Ten is the stronger name in Venice," she murmured; "ask your question of them!"

Through the gloom a hard panting came to her ears, as a dog in the leash pants to be on the prey. "When?"

"To-night, in the sunset. We had come to the Piazza to seek tidings of you, guessing that you would quest yet awhile round the trysting-place she had named to you—there the messengers stole upon us." Carnation sprang forward, as though to shake the man before her into action. "To work!" she gasped. "To-morrow they will judge and no one will be made prophet in Venice for telling the end of one judged by the Ten!"

Talbot shook himself like a man casting off the horror of a nightmare.

"But will not the Ten find they have flown their hawk at the wrong game?" he said. "You who know so much must know for whom the damsel is working in Venice; even I, with nothing but my wits to help me, have made my guess. When the Ten find no more of a man than the breeches about the prisoner they've trapped to-night, will they not let her go?"

Something like, yet terribly unlike, a smile, flitted over Carnation's pale face.

"The Ten, who have a poor gondolier done to death for a rough jest on their majesty, forgive being fooled by a disguise! The Ten, who watch against intrigues with Spain as a spider watches in its web, see nothing in a mysterious stranger moving in disguise, through Venice! The Ten, who have proclaimed it death for Pietro Bonaventuri and Bonaventuri's kin to the seventh generation to set foot on their boundaries, let his sister go free!"

"Faith, I'll swear on my sword, then, that the Ten won't be asked to judge this case," returned Talbot. The gaiety of a man about to lead a forlorn hope rang in his hushed tone, moving like a fresh wind through the chill fog of Carnation's despair. "There is one in a fine palace on the Grand Canal, who would not for all her hopes in this world and the next—though, fegs, the last promise no great harvest!—that the Ten should see hide or hair of the prisoner they've made to-night. To accomplish that will be my share in this mystery-play that's staged in Venice; but your part bids fair to be harder. You must devise ways and means of getting this Fiamma of ours out of Venice: since the great lady I spoke of is set upon her death, and her conscience is tender to nothing but scandal."

Carnation shook her head. "Now God grant there be no hitch in the play!" she said. "To me, Venetian, and knowing the power of the arm of the Ten as a baker knows his weights, your part seems to be hardest, but about it for love—not of the saints but of your lady bird. Give me but half an hour to summon one whose wit is needed for such a pinch as this."

"Meet me, then, at the Stone of Banishment," interrupted Talbot. "Wait for me there; I will not fail."

He was gone, striding through the dusk and shaping straight for the landward side of the Trevisani Palace. A gleam came into the blue eyes glancing towards the narrow waterways arched, beyond view, by the covered bridge already christened by the ready-witted Venetians the Bridge of Sighs, but the buoyant footsteps did not slacken, as Talbot mentally rehearsed the announcement of his news to the Capelli, whom he had not seen since she sent him forth the day before to learn her enemy's fate.

An unusual air was apparent in the palace that the Englishman entered. Preparations for a feast were evidently on foot in the lower regions; servants in the

haste of a sudden emergency were hurrying here and there, the Venetian accent mingling with the more liquid Tuscan of guests seemingly enjoying the entertainment of the servants' hall. Guests seemed to be the order of the day, for the great saloons of reception appeared to be the core of the excitement prevailing, lackeys and pages fitting ceaselessly through the anterooms. Talbot passed on quickly, plunging boldly into the corridor leading to Bianca's rooms, now light with many torches.

As he had already guessed, the apartment was deserted. Through the anteroom he caught sight of the bedchamber, bed and couch, seats and presses, strewn with the litter of a fastidious though hasty toilet. Candles of myrtle-wax flickered in branches of amber, the facets of their cutting responding to each golden flame with a swift riposte. From a cabinet a necklace of great emeralds gleamed like watching eyes, fascinating the young man as he stood in the angle of a screen of painted leather, seeming to mock him of his long vigil. For the vigil was long, long as the night must seem to the prisoner trapped somewhere in those dungeons not many yards away. At the thought of the vivid, gallant creature caged at last, Talbot's teeth grated on the silence. Nothing but the dogged English patience could have fought the lover's fever, as hour after hour dragged by, and the woman who in all the length and breadth of Venice alone could help, delayed.

Delayed but came, sooner after all than he had dared to hope. Talbot drew himself sharply to attention, as a woman's laugh stole out of the distance, a soft rush of footsteps came along the passage. Fearing the curious eyes of a waiting-woman, the man moved further behind the tall screen.

But the figure which flung the door behind her was no waiting-woman's. Almost bewildered, Talbot found it hard to recognise the young widow whom,

except when she had stolen upon him in their last interview, he had always seen in the black decorum of the *cappa*. The Capelli's fair hair was unbound, streaming in crisped ringlets over the exquisite neck, showing the whiter for the transparent golden veil that professed to hide it. Ropes of pearls, matched to a miracle, hung in coil after coil over the short-waisted bodice to the hooped skirts of cloth of silver-seamed with diamonds, their colours at play like Northern Lights, as Bianca whirled in a sudden mad pirouette, tossing her beautiful arms, bare under their wide sleeves, above her head.

"Triumph!" she laughed soft'y. "Ah! I queened it royally to-night! No wonder those Florentines whispered to each other that no statelier Grand Duchess would ever set foot in the Pitti presence-chambers!"

She swept her hands together, sinking in a curtsy to her reflection in a huge mirror.

"Hail, Altezza!" she cried.

The superb figure, bending in the triumphal arch of the curve of its white arms, seemed frozen in its attitude. The secret had given up its secret.

"If you wish never to be Grand Duchess, scream!"

Talbot slipped the bolt of the anteroom and beckoned the woman into the inner chamber. With the instinctive self-command bred of long hypocrisy, Bianca followed him, the stare of terror still in her wide eyes.

"The worst is upon us," the man said curdy. "Your enemy lies to-night in the Wells of the Ten."

The beautiful woman in her shining robes visibly shrank, bending, cowering, till she sank on the knees that seemed no longer able to support her.

"To-night?" she whispered. "To-night, as I listened to the compliments of the Grand Duke's Ambassadors!"

She set up a low, whimpering moaning, broken by Talbot's lifting her unceremoniously to her feet.

"Hush!" he said. "You told me yesterday you were lost if the Ten came to speech with——" He hesitated, but the Capelli filled up the pause with a shivering breath.

"Lost!" she repeated dully, 'lost! when three days more and I could have snapped my fingers in his face! Three days more, and the Ten, ay, even the Doge himself would have gone too far for turning back; the shame that would fall on the freshly-made daughter of the Republic would be shame of theirs, as such to be cleverly hushed up. Ah! had I but taken flight yesterday as I was minded to do, as I would have done but for Cassandra's message, warning me to let neither hope nor fear lure me from Venice!' The sorceress——"

She withdrew herself from Talbot's arm, her malignant smile curving the still quivering lips.

"Crippled Cassandra the sorceress! The Lion's Mouth will not disdain such a dainty tit-bit, even from the hand of the disgraced Capelli!"

She flung up her arms at the last words, reeling back with a wild, low laugh. As if the golden network staid her, she tore with frantic hands at her bosom, flinging the pearls by handfuls on the floor. The rounded cheeks, about which the disordered ringlets hung like the snakes of a Medusa, twitched painfully; the blue eyes reddened; the mouth, grown livid and distorted, gasped for air.

Talbot, standing keenly observant, saw that the eger of her fear was upon her, sweeping all considerations before it. He had waited for that moment.

"Without courage, you are lost past praying for," he said. "Yet the crown of a Grand Duchess, your own dainty life, are worth a bold stroke."

His strong hand held the writhing creature, his steady eyes compelled her look. The clocks over the Canal without struck midnight.

"The day of your doom dawns," he said slowly.

"What must I do?" The shivering lips had twice formed the words without the power of sound.

Talbot bent his head to whisper.

"Do you dare to steal your father's seal?"

She stared at him, bewilderment replacing the terror in her eyes. Talbot's voice had the steadiness with which a player nerves his hand to stake his all on a throw.

"Do you dare it?"

"When?"

"Now, if ever! The moments are freighted with your life." A contempt, intensified by the thought of Fiamma's courage against all odds for the crouching cowardice at his feet, mastered his impatience. "Better send for a priest, that Death, when he comes, may see you keep good company, Madonna," he said, with a biting sneer; but Bianca had risen to her feet.

"I dare!"

Almost in the saying it, she had glided from the room, leaving the young man satisfied with his play. The seconds were laden. Talbot wondered at the absence of servants, but guessed at a fear to intrude on a capricious mistress's whim for solitude. He had not heard a footfall when he started at a hand laid on his arm. Bianca had stolen on him with catlike stealthiness; she was silently holding out the gold signet of the Capelli.

Talbot grasped it before he spoke.

"We are playing a dangerous game, Madonna," he said, "nothing less than the forging of an order from the Capelli's self for your prisoner's secret release to-night!"

Into the pale, disordered face at his shoulder crept a strange light, the smile of an enemy shortening a dagger for the death-stroke.

"His release *through the sack!*" whispered the Venetian.

The man gave back a sudden step. A thought of gagging and binding the creature planning midnight

murder, of escaping with the signet that wielded a power in Venice only second to that of the Doge, of making a dash for it with the released prisoner, sang through his brain; but the impossibility in his English blood of lifting a hand against a woman stayed him. Yet Fiamma must be saved.

"Ink and parchment are here," whispered Bianca, misinterpreting his momentary hesitation.

"Dead men tell no tales, but written words do, Madonna," Talbot objected quickly. "Best let me whisper a message into the jailer's ear, with the sight of the signet to back me."

The Capelli stood thinking.

"A signet might be a stolen one," she said at last. "And we cannot risk a jailer with a conscience sending to ask if the matter was thus and thus. Whereas with a slip of parchment signed and sealed, though his conscience were a hair-sieve, he could not cavil."

She stretched out a white hand to him, bending a look subtle with suggestion on his face. "You said just now that we are playing a daring game," she whispered, "and you told me my stakes with brutal truth. What are yours?"

"I play the game for love, Madonna," answered Talbot, with an odd pleasure in the truth of the vowal, startled by the sinking of the blue eyes under his.

The Capelli leaned nearer. "The game may fall to a bold player yet," she said softly, with a gesture faintly indicative of surrender. "Play boldly now!"

Talbot dared waste no further time. His face was set and stern as he bent over the blank parchment, signed in square slanting letters CAPPELLI.

"Its whiteness will bear another message than the passport which I designed when I procured it yesterday," murmured Bianca, with an exultant ring in the words. "Write!" she leant familiarly on his shoulder, breathing into his ear as the serpent must have breathed his

suggestion of the first sin. "*Drown secretly, and before sunrise, the prisoner denounced to-night.*"

Five minutes later, Talbot was out under the sky diapered with stars. He looked towards them with a certain curiosity.

"I suppose that when dawn blows those candles out, I myself shall have been snuffed into darkness," he thought, keeping on with swift, firm steps towards the Piazza, where he had appointed to meet Carnation. As he approached the block of porphyry known as the Stone of Banishment, two figures detached themselves from the shadow that lay about the church like trailing draperies.

"By my chopines, you would be a good messenger to send for Death, safe not to fetch him in a hurry!"

"At least I have brought him, Madonna," returned Talbot.

"What's your meaning?"

"A life for a life. It is the rule of the gospel, and should be good enough for us surely." Talbot tried to speak lightly. "The Capelli deems that secrets are safest with dead men; I bear in my bosom an order to let the prisoner yonder pass in a sack to the keeping of the Canal."

"Ah!"

At the moan so full of agony, Talbot laid a firm, warm hand on her shoulder.

"Not a hair of her head shall be touched! This parchment will bring me to speech with the jailer, and if a purse of gold does not have full weight with him—pardon the plainness of a desperate man—he will be the first Italian of that feather I shall have clapped eyes on in my travels."

"Not a boat-load of gold would hearten a Venetian to beard the Ten!" his herrer broke in despairingly. "If it were but one man—but you have to lay your account with a half-dozen of underlings——"

"Who have tongues long enough to hang the

jailer who fails to carry out an order, but happily not eyes keen enough to see the face of a prisoner over whose head the sack has been drawn. My plan is this. The sack must have its victim, but even before it has passed out to the depths of the Canal, Fiamma shall be standing free under the stars. I know you will carry out your undertaking of conjuring her out of Venice into safety, and as for me—why, 'tis but giving the sweet soul in a lump the life vowed to her, instead of living it out day by day in her service, as I had thought to do."

The model caught his hands with a quick sob.

"Blessings on the bedchamber where you first saw the light!" she cried in a wavering between tears and a tender smile. "Yet what a zany is man to think that bare life is such a blessing to a woman that she would be glad to make a bargain of it at the price of her lover's blood! Our Fiamma is at least not cut from that cloth, and if you make a jump out of life in the way you've planned so snugly to yourself, she will follow on your heels as swift and as sure as night follows day. No, no, you will live happy years with your sweetheart yet, while here's a lodger for the sack to your hand, and one who for long enough has found life too heavy a pack not to welcome a chance of shaking it off."

Before Talbot could speak, the second figure in the shadow had stepped forward, showing the tall cap and gaberdine of the snail-gatherer.

"Angel Azrael has not beckoned yet," he said, with a half-reproachful tone to Carnation. "If the maiden has not lost her courage in the prison, she can save herself alive."

"What is your plan, old man?"

"I was born in Venice," said the Jew, with apparent irrelevance. "From my youth up I have learned to swim and dive in its waters like the wild ducks of Murano; more than once, in the daring

custom of the swimmers of our Ghetto, have I dived for the gold ring thrown in the idolatrous Spousals of the Sea, and brought it up in my teeth."

"Prate not thus, a'God's sake!" broke in the Englishman.

The snail-gatherer drew nearer, and three figures held a whispered conference in the shadow. The Jew was the first to move, making for the streets at the back of the Merceria, but Talbot and his companion remained where they were, staring out over the lagoon, as it heaved through the darkness like some giant kraker circling the world with its coils. Carnation shivered once.

"Night is mask and domino for the Earth, and under that domino strange pranks are played," she said.

"Talbot felt for her hand, and held it in a warm grasp of comradeship.

"It's not the only domino that cheats us from seeing things as they are," he said, with a remorseful memory of his uncharitable judgment on Carnation herself in the strange dress affected by her. "Some times the Devil himself masks as a saint, till a false step reveals his cloven hoof, and sometimes a true heart goes unguessed at under a rough hide."

Carnation rose hastily; through the darkness she had descried the tall figure of the Jew approaching them.

"The order, and then quick to your post with Ben Levi!" she whispered, grasping at the parcel the messenger held out to her.

With incredible swiftness, she had adjusted black robes over her own with their licence for nightly wanderings, a black veil and some feminine touches completed the assumption of the unquestioned respectability of a waiting-woman. She had grasped the parchment from Talbot, and flitted away before he had mastered an amazed impression of a new-comer on the stage.

The snail-gatherer gave his faint, weary smile. "To fool others, one must fool oneself first," he observed, moving towards the Piazza with Talbot, alert at his first step. "Never a hypocrite juggles the people into taking black for white and white for black, until he has trained his own eyes to see things, not as they are, but as he chooses to think they are. My mistress has learned the trick of a good actor, and for the moment she thinks herself the waiting-woman she would have the jailer think her."

Talbot chafed at his companion's philosophies, as he chafed at his measured pace. His brain seemed on fire as the two traversed a few yards of the ground, soft still with recent floods, towards the bridge commanding the walls of the dungeons—the Wells in the popular speech. In the shadow of the bridge was moored a boat, in which the men took their places.

But to Talbot's mood his body alone seemed to be seated in the formless darkness. His spirit had recrossed the Piazza, had caught up the demure figure advancing upon the arcades of the Doge's palace, till the two—the man in spirit, the woman in flesh—stood before the grating in a low-browed doorway.

"Now Carnation, now !

Carnation raised her hand and knocked, waited and knocked again.

A wicket, level with her eyes, was slid open. The model's face was veiled, her Venetian accent told nothing.

"A message for the master-jailer !"

"The master-jailer is in bed with his wife, like an honest man."

"Wake him, then."

"Morning is the time for waking."

"And night the time for secret messages."

"Secret messages ? What token do you bring ?"

"The shepherd made a lock for the fold, and taught the wolf the trick of it," retorted Carnation. "When secrets are sold in the market-place, I'll give you the first bid for mine."

The janitor retired, muttering. Like earth on a coffin-lid the minutes fell, till there came a fresh voice at the grating.

"What's your business with me, Madonna?"

Carnation looked quickly up. The face, chequered by the wicket-bars in the light of a cresset burning somewhere behind them, was haloed in every Venetian's eyes, by the sinister fame of the Keeper of the Prisons.

"You are alone?" she asked.

"But for God and you, Madonna, and to tell truth, willing enough to be rid of the last at this time of night."

Silently the woman drew from her bosom the little scroll. She held it close to the grating, outlining with her finger the word *Capelli*.

The jailer stooped his head forward, and read it twice or thrice.

"It seems that the First I named in our Timty a moment ago is the one to be got rid of," he muttered, obeying Carnation's sign to unbar the door with a hand that seemed to shake.

The lamp flickered with the wind that entered with the model. It baffled the man's scrutiny.

"Who are you, in the Fiend's name?"

"One enough in the confidence of the House to bear a message like that," said Carnation coolly. "But a carrier-pigeon might be that, you'll say, and speak truth, if there were not two halves to every whole. The half of my errand was for your ear, and that you've had; but the other half is for the ear of him spoken off in yonder parchment!"

The jailer stared at her incredulously. "Which of us is mad?"

"The one who will not do the bidding of that name." Carnation pointed again to the signature of the slip which she still held. "What! is it such a great matter to take a heavy purse, and give me five minutes' speech with one of your caged birds?"

"'Tis against the laws," the man protested obdurately.

"They who make the laws can treat themselves now and then to the breaking of one," insinuated Carnation, drawing nearer. "Are you sure none can play eavesdropper to us here?"

The jailer raised the cresset above his head, darting its light on all sides into the darkness.

"No one."

The woman came closer still.

"No need to ask you to guard my secret, friend, unless you have no more use for your own life," she said very softly. "Understand, sometimes a woman thinks twice before dooming a husband to death."

"A husband? What woman?"

"Pietro Bonaventuri—Bianca Capelli."

The man leaped back as though a chasm had opened at his feet.

"Those names must not lie together in any mouth nowadays, friend. They would be a spell to work mischief, work—hey, presto! the vanishing of the great Duke who is coming a-courting to our Venice. The Ten must not hear those names."

Lower and lower dropped the cautious voice.

And a father will do all things for a fair daughter whom a Grand Duke fancies, even to setting seal on such an order as you saw just now. But—a wife will do something for a husband too; that is why I am here to-night."

"Why?"

"To bring such an order safe home again, if I can but wring from the prisoner an oath not to

blare in the beards of the Ten to-morrow a confession more deadly than the seven deadly sins."

"And if you cannot?"

Carnation held out the parchment scroll. Her hand did not shake as the jailer took it, turning it in minutest examination. The sign-manual of the Cape!!i answered all doubts dumbly.

"'Tis not once or twice that the gossips have whispered that men die not so handily in the nick as Bonaventuri," he said at last in a hushed voice. "But are not halters to be bought out of Venice, that he must journey here to run his head into one?"

"Sometimes a man will barter his life, ay, and his soul, for revenge," answered Carnation laconically, hailing with a wild heart-leap the warder's selection of a key from the bunch at his belt. He moved off, Carnation with him.

The wash of the tide filled up the pause before the next words were spoken. In the darkness, shattered in one spot, by the flame of their lamp, the man's hand, palm upward, was visible.

"The purse, mistress!" he whispered. "It should be heavy, to match the penalty of so much as chipping the laws of the Republic."

"Of being caught chipping," the model corrected, as Talbot's gold changed hands.

The jailer weighed it, and fitted the key into a lock.

"The length of a pater is all I can give you, Madonna," he said, as Carnation stumbled through door turning on a swivel and down a couple of steps into blackness.

"No noise, little heart!" she whispered to the void. "Carnation is here!"

Passionate arms were flung round her in the darkness, sobs like a frightened child's heaved the breast pressed to hers.

"You have seen him? Oh, tell him my last breath shall be a whisper of his name! Tell him to let a thought at times drift out of his past of the Italian girl he loved through a summer night! Tell him that—not that his love made me turn coward at the last; I would not have wept but for the dreadful darkness; I will be brave when to-morrow they bring me out to die."

"Be brave to-night!" Carnation whispered. "For his sake, be brave to-night!"

"To-night?"

"Hush! I must go in an instant. Listen! they will come, the jailers, when I am gone, to cast you into the Canal without. For the sake of the man you love, waste not a moment in struggling, but before the sack closes draw a deep breath and hold it while they thrust you through the slide. You will touch the water only to find yourself in your lover's arms." Carnation's hands gripped like steel. "Obey me! Obey! for I swear on my dead husband's soul, if you drown, your lover shall follow you, I myself will denounce——"

The creak of a rusty swivel! Carnation vanished through the door, thrusting the parchment into the jailer's hand.

"Water to-night and fire hereafter!" she cried wildly, pushing past the jailer. "The dog is contumacious, master; the order stays with you!"

Confounded and amazed, Fiamma stood on her dungeon floor. What mocking dream had visited her?

Had she indeed strength to do as Carnation said? Must she not shriek as the gurgling water closed above her?

That shriek might cost Mark his life!

Carnation had thought well before uttering her threat—a threat to brace the ardent heart's courage when thought of self might have merely palsied it.

And Fiamma knew the reckless Venetian well enough to be sure she would keep her oath.

The door creaked again upon its hinges. Fiamma stepped to meet the summons with head erect, a young paladin facing defeat like victory

Steps behind her in the darkness, springing on her, taken off her guard. A deeper depth of darkness enveloping her struggling head. It was then that the Nicolotto *gastaldo's* words of advice at her baptism, darted into her mind.

She was swung from the ground on rough shoulders, she was slipping—ah God!—slipping downwards out of the world!

For Mark!

The blood seethed in her temples; her eyes threatened to burst from their sockets. On a long breath she locked her teeth together—for an eternity!

Then a plunge, below the roots of the world!

CHAPTER XIII.

LOVE THE SMITH.

THE boat lay in the black shadows of the bridge.

Talbot had scarcely stirred a muscle in the half-hour. He sat bending forwards, his eyes fixed on the broad facets of palace-wall beetling above the water. The Jew, equally silent, was less rigid. He had loosened his gaberdine during the interval, but the spell had fallen on him, his very breath seeming absorbed in a passion of listening. As a small pebble hissed on the water from the bridge above, it was the Englishman who quivered from head to heel; the snail-gatherer merely lifted his harsh, aquiline face to the pale skies for an instant, as though at the crisis of some solemn act of worship.

"You heard, signore!" he whispered in Talbot's ear. "Carnation's signal! She has played, and the secret order lies in the jailer's hands."

Without a word, Talbot dipped his oars, slewing the boat noiselessly round till her nose pointed for the palace. The Jew stood at the prow, one hand holding his garment about him.

"We may give them some moments yet," he muttered.

Had time died in the world? A rag of cloud, torn from the night by the wind, drifted over the moon, Talbot prayed it might pass. It passed, but the moment of its passage had brought forth nothing. No sound at all! Still the curved figure at the idle oars, still the straight, intent one in the prow, and no sound at all!

Yes! A sullen splash, sounding to the watchers' ears like a salvo of cannon!

As it sounded, before it sounded, Talbot had flashed the oars into the water, and the boat was flung forward. For the length of a second, the figure at the prow kept its place, then it leaped, diving where bubbles were rising on the surface, diving to rise with a formless mass on his arm, freeing even as he rose a white face and closed eyes from the ceremonies of sack.

White face and closed eyes, the lover had sprung on them, the Jew clambering in over the gunwale.

"To the oars, signore! We are racing death to-night!" he panted, as he pushed Talbot unceremoniously back. "The maid will have taken no harm; I had her the second after she was launched through the slide."

The boat tore the night. Talbot rowed with clenched teeth and bursting muscles, jealously subduing the dash of oars, obeying the Jew's slightest signal of direction, though conscious of nothing but the long painful grips of the wrestle with Death being fought out before him. The swoon had yielded to the Jew's cordials, but the struggle for breath was agonising, the wind of the boat's speed adding to the effort of the labouring lungs. Yet the night streamed past them, and the Jew paused in his attempts at easing the convulsed chest, to sign imperatively to the rower. Over Talbot's shoulder a faint red gleam on dark water showed the half-open water-door of the plague-marked house; as the boat slid to it, Carnation, lamp in hand, bent eagerly from within, dragging her garments waist-deep in her straining effort of gaze.

"I was brave!"

The words, faint, gasping, thrilled the nearers. With a sob, like an act of thanksgiving, Talbot

uncovered in the starlight, kneeling for a moment with the simplicity of a brave man, before he sprang for the dear burden, smiling as she smiled a wan greeting in the meeting of their eyes. Leaving the snail-gatherer to secure the boat, Talbot followed in Carnation's wake, kissing the face on his shoulder as though to kiss back the colour into it.

But as he tenderly and unwillingly laid her on the bed prepared for her, Fiamma's smile and gesture were not for him.

"Sister," she whispered, with weak hands drawing Carnation down, "I owe him—I owe myself to you!"

Carnation's lips lingered on hers.

"That debt has been long collected, heart of mine," she said. "Like the veriest miser, I have locked my treasure—you and all belonging to you—in the strong box of my heart, empty of all else. Now to sleep, to sleep and to sail over the sea of sweet dreams to the countries of sweet realities where your waking must find you."

She finished removing Fiamma's drenched garments, and dried the damp curls with tender touches. With the innocent faith of a child, the worn-out girl closed her eyes, to pass almost at once into the child's sleep. Carnation stood by, clenching the hands against her bosom as though to press back the sobs that struggled for a way.

"What a smith is Love!" she murmured in her usual whimsical philosophy. "Hooks to catch and rings to hold, he can fashion them, but his chief trade is in swords, blades to drain one's heart's blood! Lover and mother, friend or disciple, Love has a blade for each, warranted to bite sharply and drink deeply! Ay, whoso loiters at his booth must pay the price of learning to handle his weapons, and he can thank his luck, when it is no more than cut fingers."

She stooped to cover the sleeper more warmly. "So Love's not to blame if so wise a hand as I came meddling, heedless of the scars of old wounds that should have taught me that to love is to bleed," she went on, turning to seek the men in the outer room.

The dawn was breaking, the flame of the lamp showed as wan against it as the two faces that looked mutely to her.

"Asleep and safe, though in Venice," she answered the look. "Safer out of Venice, though out of reach of the enemy who commended their quarrel to the Ten instead of to God to execute, thinking it a vengeance as sure and not as slow."

Talbot looked up quickly. "His name, if you know it!"

"Her name, my son," the model corrected dryly.

The young man shook his head.

"If you had stood as I, face to face with her craven terror this night; if you had seen her willing to load her soul with forgery and murder rather than that the Ten should hear what their prisoner might have to say to them——"

"If, and if, and if!" retorted Carnation mockingly. "If you had heard the tale which she, sleeping within there, had to tell yesterday—of Cassandra the sorceress's dwarf set spying in the chamber there; if you had seen the man's eyes above the brute's muzzle as it leaped on her, holding her for the *sbirri* to catch their prisoner—by this and by that, sir lover, you would know that there are more than one or maybe two women in Venice to concern your lover-ship!"

"Faith, since one woman was enough to spoil Paradise, Venice, to say nothing of the lover, must be in a bad way!" returned Talbot, with a gleam of sunny humour. "Who may this Cassandra be? 'Tis the second time this night I've heard her

name with the style and title of sorceress tacked on to it."

"To Bianca Capelli, the name of Bonaventuri means husband," said Carnation slowly. "To Cassandra the sorceress, the name spells lover."

"You think, then——"

"I know—that she has divined our Fiamma's presence here. I know—that a jealous woman and a mad dog are apt to turn on their dearest in their causeless rage. I think—that Cassandra has denounced the lover she holds faithless to the Ten."

"Would one with the ill-fame of sorceress, tied like a kettle to the mad dog's tail, dare to draw attention on herself?"

"Does your innocence dream that the morsels dropped into the Lion's Mouth are signed and sealed with the giver's name and arms, or that the reverend judges know what prisoners will be brought before them from day to day? The Keeper of the Prisons, in virtue of his office as clerk of the Ten, issues the order for arrest."

"And him you have cheated once!"

"As we will cheat the rest of Venice next time." Carnation laid her hand on his shoulder, scanning his face with the shrewd brown eyes where a shadow always lurked. "You are an Englishman, free to go where you like, with only a matter of passport to be furnished by your Ambassador."

Talbot nodded, conscious of the woman's enjoyment of his perplexity.

"With none to make a to-do if you wish to carry back to your England an Italian wife," Carnation added softly.

The blue eyes flashed into deeper blue. "You mean——"

"That from to-day a man vanishes from the eyes of Venice." Carnation broke into a laugh at the rapture

in the lover's eyes. "What! you think you have worn out enough shoe-leather coming and courting already, do you?"

"You mean I should bear her away as my wife?" The question was breathless.

"If you and she have love, your wife in God's name!" Carnation had grown grave again, the mobile lips were straightened in pain. "When the child passes out of my life, she will leave me lonely; I would at least know her sheltered from that curse."

In a natural selfishness, Talbot hardly heard the quiver in her voice. His breath came short; he started as if from a dream, as the model went on.

"There will be no difficulty in buckling you together, but you must have your papers in order for the Ambassador. We'll let you off the hand-shaking under the arcades of the palace, and a good little curate whom I know, will not stickle for putting the bride through her catechism, but will marry you as fast as if you had chosen a wife out of the bride-fair of San Pietro. Under cover of the wedding feast, bride and groom can steal away unnoticed, leaving Ber T'evi as *romare* to baffle any prying curiosity."

Talbot reflected rapidly. With all the despatch common to Venetian marriages among the people, the scheme had nothing to arouse suspicion in it. The contemplated flight of the bridal pair held a promise of success in its daring.

Carnation, watching him, laughed suddenly.

"Leave those blushes for the bride, master bridegroom," she said, "though they are becoming too, to that bronzing of yours. See, the daylight is on us, and it brings its tasks. Go to your Embassy and tell your story of the pretty Italian who has bartered her land for love. The tale will hold water, too, with the Capelli; daughter as well as father had best hear it from your lips."

A recollection of the white figure in her cloth of silver, facing him in the candle-lit chamber of the night before, flashed into Talbot's mind. The man's thoroughbred nature repelled that suggestion of love conveyed by the downcast eyes, but a precipitate of fear remained from it.

Carnation watched him still.

"Are you afraid of hearing your bride sing the song with which we Venetians turn unwelcome lovers from our doors?" she said. "Ah! I can tell you, eyes that shine and eyes that smile at the thought of some one, do not sit above lip that would sing to him—

"You pass by here, you pass in vain,
You wear your shoes and take no gain."

She came close to him, the gaiety falling from her face like a mask.

"Swear to me, or never see the girl again!" she said. "Swear by the anguish by which your mother bought you to her arms, never to lose the lover in the husband; to remember in rough weather or smooth that you have cast your anchor in a woman's heart, and that you can't drag it thence without leaving in its place a mortal wound. Swear to me lover, father, mother, to her who brings you pure body and true heart; for only he whose goodwill does not give back a jot at such an oath is fit to call true heart and pure body his!"

With a sudden movement, the young man passed her, making straight for the inner room. As Carnation followed, he turned to face her standing by the sleeping girl.

"I am ready for your oath, Madonna," he said quietly, "and the relic I swear it on is this."

He brushed back the curls from the girl's forehead, laying his sinewy right hand upon it with the reverence shown to a sacrament.

"I swear!"

Fiamma did not wake under the tender touch. Sleep held her through the day, while her lover set forward his affairs and Carnation went to and fro in the quiet house. It was not till the shadows which had held their own through the blue day, like memories of past sorrows, were stretching themselves out as though in foreboding of darkness closing in once more, that the model stepped to the girl's bedside, kissing her awake.

"What day's best for a wedding, heart of mine?" she cried. "Monday brings madness, Tuesday gives suffering, Thursday the witches are loose and comb their hair, Friday the shrouds are sewed, Saturday souls weep in Purgatory. That leaves Wednesday and Sunday for us, sweetheart of mine, and because Sunday's too far off for a waiting bridegroom, Wednesday's the best!"

Fiamma, raised on her elbow, gazed at her in amazement.

"Is not this Wednesday?"

"And is not this the bride?" returned Carnation, with another kiss. "If No is the answer that fits that riddle, you must tell it yourself to the waiting bridegroom, for by my chopines I will not be the one to face the storm. Blue lightning, say the weather-wise, is the kind that kills."

Blushing—how she blushed!—the slim creature leaping to her feet, her hands at her throat with the action of one striving for a free breath.

"Marriage!" she whispered to herself. "I thought only of love—I had not thought it would come so soon. Even the creatures of wood and field have their courting-time; must I, so soon, too soon clog my liberty with a man's will, graft myself on a strange stem to grow henceforth after his fashion, not mine at all? So soon! Too soon!"

"Too soon or too late, sweet bird," returned

Carnation, with a wise little smile. "Yet if you cannot bring your mind to him, 'tis but the saying so, and he will make his way alone to his England—inches, blue eyes and all. Shall I bid him go?"

With a lovely gesture, Fiamma half turned from her, drooping her head from its pose of virginal defiance, though the bosom still heaved quickly.

"Ah! the hand that had grasped is the hand to smooth those fluttering plumes, birdling," smiled the model, opening a chest, carved with the hunting of Diana and her maids. "*Too soon* is a music easier to fit one's steps to than *Too late*."

The girl made no answer, her breath still coming and going in soft pants, but submitted to Carnation's ministrations, as though unconscious of them. The elder woman, too, fell silent, her deft fingers lingering over the garments she was arranging with a caress in every touch.

"These clothes ought to bring you happiness, for I lost it the day I laid them aside," she said at last.

Fiamma flung her arms about her neck.

"More than sister!" she whispered, "all my happiness comes from you! I cannot thank you, I cannot even show you the love I feel for you! I have nothing to deserve love from you, or from him. A month past I loved nothing but my goats, my mountain, and my word. I did not know that there was more to love, and it hurts me——" She broke off with a sob.

"Ay, it hurts, sweet, as a woman's breasts hurt in the growing! But a worse hurt comes when the breasts are full, and little fumbling lips are stiff and dead; and the worst hurt of all is when the heart is full of love that no one needs! I have known all three, and the third anguish had gnawed for many a year, till you came to charm it away, my heart, with

the hazel eyes I loved from the first moment, for the dead's sake!"

Close and closer the two clung, Fiamma kissing and kissing again with a passion bursting her sheath of reserve. Carnation pushed her gently off.

"Whose step is that on the stairs?" she questioned mischievously.

Fiamma sprang towards the door, leaning a hand on either lintel as she gazed through the dusk.

"Mark!" she said, without knowing she had spoken.

The other woman shuddered.

"She calls Death in," she murmured in her Venetian superstition, looking at the long slender hands pressed on each side of the door. "Death! For which of us?"

Against the background of the brightly lighted room Talbot saw a woman standing tall and straight. A mantle of white shot with rosy lights swept from her shoulders to the floor, the severe folds suiting well with the young dignity of attitude. A veil, fine as frostwork, lay on the curls of the dark head, set on the column of the round neck as a lily on its stem, but the straight clear-cut features needed no softening from the delicate tracery. As the lover looked, the brave eyes sank, sweet flushes came and went; at the first quiver of the red lips, the hands were lifted to the drooping face in a gesture that gave an indescribable touch of charm to the stately creature.

A stride, and he had mastered her in his arms, pressing kisses on the shielding hands, the cheek that curved into the neck with its graceful, lovely line. Fiamma had yielded as to the lover of a dream, the sweetness of which would be shattered by a too sure waking. Her heart on his, she lay, and she was willing that the dream should last for ever.

As in a dream, she took Talbot's hand and went with him down the stairs. Her foot was on the street, when she hung back, holding her other hand to Carnation, clad for the first time, as she noticed, in the dress of an ordinary citizen.

"The other will get no more wearing from me," she said, in answer to Fiamma's looks. "I have lived out enough of my life in Venice; I am sick of its pleasures and its intrigues, and the terror coiling round it all. After to-morrow, I will try if a Venetian cannot live happy out of smell of the salt."

Fiamma stretched a hand that had grown timid to Talbot's sleeve.

"Mark," she said softly, "tell her that where we go, is her place and her welcome."

Talbot grasped the hand.

"Tell her that the sun's in his heaven, sweeting! The one should be as much news to her as the other. Comrade Carnation knows."

A colour came on the model's face, making it eloquent. The dream was still on Fiamma as she met at a street-corner the Jew, dressed for his part of bridegroom's friend in Venetian clothes. The little procession took its way towards the tinted bricks of a desolate, sleepy little church. The dream was very sweet as she and Mark Talbot knelt before the torn cassock of the priest, who, staled with custom, had no eyes for the stately young pair, and who only noticed the unusual richness of the bride's mantle and veil as gage of a good fee.

The sacrament, rhymed slovenly through, had reached its end. Talbot had kissed his bride on the lips, and led her over the threshold as a wife.

The smile and colour had gone from Carnation's face. She walked wearily, her eyes on the ground, her breath catching now and again, as though an old

wound thrilled. As the train of four reached the door blotched by the plague-mark, she lingered in the entrance.

"How long? how long?" she whispered to herself. "Leaving Venice will not leave my pain behind. Nothing but a plaister of graveyard earth will heal that smart."

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CHAPTER XIV

CASSANDRA'S MESSENGER.

FIAMMA, as she sat by her husband at the meal which was at once wedding-fast and parting-supper, knew of nothing to trouble the sweetness of the dream. She ate at Talbot's bidding, but the dishes had no taste for her. In an hour or less, Talbot and she would have set their faces towards the life which they would live out together.

"A health to the bride, and away!" said Carnation, at last interrupting the happy silence. "The boat chartered for you was bidden to look for your coming when the moon should clear the top of the Campanile."

Fiamma leaned her head on her lover's shoulder. With closed eyes, she tasted the poignant, passionate sweetness of the dream. The healths of the bride brimmed the cups, when—a knocking came through the bolted door.

"Open, in the Name of the Ten!"

The waking had come.

As Talbot caught his bride to him, Carnation was at their side. She pushed down their hands vehemently.

"Ben Levi is the pilot for this strait!" she said in a burning whisper. "The one thing to be done is for her to vanish with him, while you and I remain to fool them. For her sake!—for his sake!" she urged, stripping mantle and veil from the girl, and substituting the *cappa* torn from her own shoulders. "Those without must find a bride, in case word of a wedding should have reached them," she went on, as

she huddled the bridal trappings on herself. "With Ben Levi, child! I'll borrow your bridegroom for an hour."

A moment had swept all traces of a third guest from the table. There had been no need of a second knock, when Carnation boldly drew back the bar.

"Have the Ten sent Carnation of the Calle greetings for her marriage-supper?" she demanded coolly.

The man at the door pressed past her to Talbot.

"You are the prisoner of the Ten, on a charge of forging the Capelli's name."

He was facing them with his six-feet of manhood, and the weapon it was unlawful to wear in Venetian streets absent from his side. A laugh was on his lips as he grasped at the great iron candlestick with its five branches knopped and flowered in good Venetian work. Swinging it above his head, he sprang towards the door, where three more dark forms started up.

"The odds are heavy, gentlemen; best lessen them a bit," Talbot said, bracing his back against the wall. "First come, first served, is the rule, I take it."

The candles had fallen sputtering to the ground. In a protest of fear against the darkness, the curtain from the window was plucked back, and the moonlight laid bare the chamber to the night. It tried conclusions with the whiteness of Carnation's figure shrinking up against the casement in terror, the wedding-veil pushed aside from her pale face by the arm she had raised to summon light. Beyond her: the disordered table, the men huddling in swift consultation, the form of the bridegroom standing in a shadowed corner; behind her, a jealous woman's eyes!

In a mad rush, the council of five broke, sudden and swift. The man they came at bent to meet them, a deft nick of the candlestick snapped two of the blades

held against him. Its next blow was deadlier, through cap and hair and skull.

Four against one still, and the fighting was splendid. To and fro they dogged him like curs hanging on a bull, but the terrible weapon and the English arm held their own. Two men had reeled back, cursing the Englishmen by their broken sword-arms, but two more were left, fresh where Talbot was winded, whole where he was bleeding.

Eye and foot adroit, as in some grim dance of death, he fought them, parrying, guarding, hewing in the Viking battle-lust that is in the blood of his race, the men who never fight their best till odds are heavy against them. The candlestick was twisted now, and Talbot held his hand.

"Our carnival has *confetti*!" he smiled, and hurled it like a quoit at the nearest assailant. The fellow crashed to the ground; as he fell, Talbot swooped in and pounced on one of the fallen blades.

"A good steel, gentlemen," he said gaily, springing back once more; "so far as the hilt goes at least 'tis for you to pass opinion on the other end."

The three clustered like beated mongrels at the farther end of the room, eyeing him evilly. Then, with the mongrel courage of numbers, they made in once more—right, left, and centre.

But the wine from the overturned marriage-cups lay in a pool, red as those other pools soaking into the wooden floor. The man in the middle trod in it, slipped, lay prone, shrieking the coward's prayer for mercy. Down at the same moment went his fellow on the right, tripped wrestling-fashion by the Englishman. The third assailant paused, like a cat balked in her leap.

Mark Talbot, bending his sword almost into a bow, smiled at them.

"I don't fight with wounded men, gentlemen," he panted. "But in case the humour comes on me to

crack your heads together like rotten eggs, I advise you not to keep your wives any later out of their beds. Take your comrades with you; the gulls may have more pleasure in their company than we."

Sullenly the man, still standing upright, turned towards the window, as his companions rose groaning to their feet.

"The canal must serve for bier and gravedigger" he muttered, dragging one of the dead men roughly to the casement. "He who fails to obey the Ten may be glad of so good an end."

"'Twill be his last chance of grumbling at damp quarters," put in Talbot carelessly, though he still stood on guard. The second corpse lay nearer him; the others raised it slowly, then with a confluent flash of eyes, they sprang forward, driving the dead man straight on to the naked sword. Dead and living, they went down together, writhing and striving in the wine and blood and moonlight on the floor. Stiletti struck viciously at Talbot, pinioned by the weight of the dead man, but he was shielded by it too, and the dead took the blows meant for the living.

Over and over they rolled, the Italians stabbing, biting, tearing in the passion that wakes the beast in the man. The blue eyes had never been brighter than when Talbot writhed one arm free, grasping at the throat of one of his enemies. The wretch's eyeballs started, his tongue lolled, but the relentless hand gripped like the mastiff of the Talbots. The dead man on the floor had found a mate.

The agony of broken bones had overmastered another of the attackers; even in the instant of his comrade's death, he had dragged his length away, like a wounded snake. With a fierce, inarticulate growl, Talbot dashed his dead jailer from him, staggering to his feet, a weaponless man; as he rose, the last man recovered himself also, aiming a venomous stroke upward.

The sight of Talbot standing defenceless seemed to nerve Carnation to action; at the enemy's movement, she sprang forward, casting the mantle from her shoulders over him.

"Fling him into the Canal!" she cried fiercely.

Mark Talbot raised his arm, tossing the dagger aimed at him through the casement.

"Let the wildcat go free with cut claws," he said contemptuously, as he dragged the muffling folds off his prisoner. "Pity to pollute clean water with such vermin! Your trade seems to be that of guardian angel, Madonna."

Talbot's breath came in quick parts, like the mastiff's after fight; the blood beat in his ears, drowning the steps of the men in flight upon the stairs. Carnation held a cup of wine to him with a hand that shook.

"If we would not hatch into full-fledged angels, we must be gone from here," she said. "Hasten—this morning you saw the windings of our secret passages—hasten and see if Ben Levi and our bride are still awaiting us there. If not, there is nothing to be done but to follow to the Ghetto, making excuse to the bargees of an errand to the marriage-broker, the likeliest man in New Egypt to know if a stranger-maiden has entered. Ben Levi will have brought her straight to him, for in the dance-house under his rule is the one spot where our girl will be safe alike from Jew or Gentile, till the hour when we all can take wing together. Go you and seek for the two; I will but take a thing or two from my chest, and follow instantly."

The lover, too eager for the delay of a moment, darted through the door by which the Jew had hurried his ward away. Carnation looked around the chamber, lighted by the dead daylight of the moonshine, at the stains on the floor, the corpses lying with gaping wounds and tossed limbs. She

stooped for the mantle, huddled where Talbot had cast it, and wrapped it about her again.

"Death came to the call sure enough," she murmured. "And his coming has left me cold."

The chest, whence the wedding garments had been taken, held other treasures. The woman knelt above them, making a swift selection—a few jewels, a baby's shoe, a dagger discoloured through half its length. Carnation pressed it to her lips with the passion of a relic-worshipper.

"That shall go where I go," she whispered, "for the sake of the blood upon it; the life of the heart that beat for none but me!"

Laying it by her side, she sought again in the chest, her back turned to the passage stretching to the stairs in the blackness of some great cavern. Eyes, with the passionless malignity of the goblin of the cavern, were peering at her from it with evil curiosity. Cassandra's misshapen spy had cleared the threshold, had gained the shelter of the table with its cloth trailing awry.

Carnation had found what she sought—a tiny gilt crown, one of those laid on the coffins of dead Venetian babies, in sign of the triumph of innocence.

The woman knelt upright, with it in her hands. The moonlight fell white on her face, whiter still above the marriage-braveries.

From beneath the table, a sinewy arm was stretched out towards the dagger on the floor. The fingers grasped at it.

Carnation was caressing the crown with slow, soft touches, as a mother might lay her dead child to its sleep. On the spot where the dagger had lain crawled the dwarf Piccolo.

"I must go—the day is breaking!"

At her movement to rise, the dagger flashed downward, striking between the shoulders. The woman shivered slightly, sinking forward with a

gurgling sob. The old wound was healed at last.

Piccolo surveyed her with satisfaction.

"My mistress will sleep now," he croaked aloud. "The mirror did not show her what her poor dwarf would do for her. Piccolo's luck, to find place and weapon!"

He scuttled out into the darkness at a noise. The instant after, Mark Talbot entered.

CHAPTER XV.

NEW EGYPT.

FOR more minutes than lay in prudence's debt, the Englishman stood with folded arms, looking down on the dead woman lying on the bed where he had laid her. The first moment had shown him that the cruel wound was past praying for; but he had drawn out the dagger on which the blood of husband and wife had met by the grim chance, and wiped off the blood oozing over the rosy lights of the marriage-mantle that had turned to a shroud. His search for the murderer had been in vain, though, as he trampled in hot haste up and down the stairs, he passed and repassed eyes glimmering from a niche in the wall originally designed for some statue. The dwarf harbouring there looked down in perplexity on the stranger who was not Bonaventura, but he laid by the puzzle for his mistress's keener wits.

Talbot bent at last to draw the straight folds of the wedding-veil over the face with its closed eyes, and the hands crossed below the little crown left on her bosom. He straightened himself with a sigh.

"I can serve you best by bringing my sweetheart to happiness," he muttered, "though I would keep even her waiting for an hour, if I could send your murderer to his account."

The niche was empty when he passed it again on his way into the street. He had taken precautions to wash his scratches and arrange his dress, and the morning-cry of the bakers calling on the women to knead their bread told him that the streets were deserted by midnight frolickers and that the tide of daily occupation had not turned from its ebb. On the

palette of the east the sun was but beginning to mass the colours out of which would be evolved the glory of the day, as Talbot lay, feeling his exhaustion, in a gondola, whose oarsman showed little surprise at the bidding to row for the Ghetto. In the licence of decadent Venice, Jewish girls were as popular ornaments on Christian balconies as parrots or Barbary apes.

"Your purse should be heavy enough to sink the gondola, *signore*," he ventured, poling swiftly along the opaline ripples. "Or have you a pass for a sop to the barges watching the Ghetto night and day?"

"The Jews can turn lead into gold, I hear," returned Talbot dryly. "Perhaps their jailers may have been so far infected with their wisdom as to be able to turn gold into the parchment that passes are written on."

"The things to be done," nodded the other. "My cousin has a wife's brother on the barges, and he says—of course it's 'secret as confession, *signore*—'tis as fat a place as beneath the spit turning a larded goose! But the heavy purse must travel on with his excellency within the Ghetto, whether he has an eye for any one damsel, or his mouth merely made up for any pair of gazelle eyes and slender brown ankles."

"What would you advise in the case?"

"I, *signore*? I should steer for the marriage-broker; he has girls good and cheap; cheap, that is, for the Hebrews, who would drive a bargain for a gnawed bone with a starving man. The Jews say the price of their women is above rubies, and by San Todaro and his crocodile's snout, they make the Christians pay the price! But the broker, men say, buys up orphan girls with no families to hold them dear."

Talbot was silent, relieved by the experience of the gondolier's cousin's brother-in-law as to the difficulty he had imagined in entering the Ghetto. A faint

sickening odour tailing the fresh wind had hung about him for some moments before; with an impatient exclamation, he changed his seat to avoid it.

"The curse of the first nail, signore," observed his guide sympathetically. "The Jew-women are free from it, for the sake of Mary Mother."

"The first nail?"

"*Sì*, signore. When the Paynim hounds struck the first nail into the Blessed Hand, they were cursed with a smell that should make them good hunting for all Christians. When they hammered the second one, they were cursed with tails that only drop off at the touch of holy water. When they drove the spike into the Feet, they were cursed with the hate of good Christians for ever. And when they planted the Holy Cross in the ground, they were cursed with the doom of wandering over the earth till the Day of Judgment."

The gondola was nearing two high-pooped barges, moored square across an opening in high gloomy walls bristling above the edges of a long low island. Talbot drew up his cloak mask-fashion, and beckoned the sentinel of the foremost with a significant gesture. The conference was short, and, as the two palms fell apart, Talbot signed the gondola onwards.

The sea-wind stirring outside was left behind as the boat ran in under the barges to the gate of the Ghetto. A reek of human creatures, crowded in insufficient space, filled the air, not a breath of which moreover was free from floating filaments, the down of countless fowls preparing for some feast. The canal up which Talbot was rowed was stagnant as a duck-pond, topped by a thick green film wrinkling under the on-coming pole; but frowsy-locked women leaned from the windows of the grim houses on either side, to add fresh offerings of garbage to the decay hidden under its waters.

In spite of such unsavoury dangers, the gondola stood on stoutly, curving suddenly into the entrance

of a square where the wildes. misrule seemed to prevail. A band of half-grown maidens, their long hair plaited with strings of pearls, were in the act of entering the square from the other side, each carrying on her head a jar of pottery which, as the troop in turn marched past a certain spot, was dashed down and broken into shards. The shrill singing of the girls jangled into cries and laughter as the procession broke at a corner under the onslaught of a number of young men riding on donkeys and waving burning fir-branches above their heads. The acrid smell of the wood streamed out on the fetid atmosphere as the donkeys, encumbered by their gay housings of striped silk, charged hither and thither, each rider, as his branch burned to a stump, leaping off, intent on unseating a more fortunate fellow. Children, pelting each other with nuts, swarmed everywhere, making factions out of the cause of one and another rider, whose fate was generally the desertion of his regiment at the hottest of the scuffle. Over and through all squeaked, droned, and hummed an unearthly orchestra of every possible conglomeration of parchment and catgut, cut through now and then by the resonant clash of cymbals, or a long-drawn wail which set Talbot looking around for its possible cause.

An eddy in the human whirlpool drew his eyes to one side of the square, from which the peculiar noise sounded. Talbot had landed, and he pushed his way nearer in time to see a rabble escorting a life-size figure dressed in a caftan, and heralded by twelve men blowing rams' horns. Their lugubrious wails continued as the effigy was carried twice round the square, before being deposited on a butcher's chopping-block, round which the crowd clustered with yells of derision.

"'Tis the Haman, signore," observed the gondolier at Talbot's elbow; "a poor little fellow who did a Jew a bad turn a hundred years ago, they say, and the dogs make a bonfire of him thus every year,

instead of serving him out at the time and forgiving him afterwards, like all good Christians."

"How is this marriage-broker you tell of to be found?" Talbot responded, raising his voice above the din.

"I will guide you to him in the breaking of an egg, signore. He lives by the water-side, for the better coming and going of his merchandise."

The young men shouldered their way forward at a pace set by Talbot's impatience. His eyes strayed anxiously during the walk in a hope of at least spying out Ben Levi's wise, slow smile, but as his companion scratched lightly at a doorway overhung by a projecting window, he gathered all faculties to one point.

The door, opened by a bobbin and cord, drew back softly at the signal, the departing guide giving his employer a friendly push that sent him stumbling down a couple of steps into twilight. Talbot could with difficulty make out the outlines of a man seated cross-legged, fixing his visitor with unwinking eyes set in innumerable wrinkles.

"Does the gentleman seek one, or any?" he demanded, without stirring.

"I seek one," Talbot replied; "one more than common tall, with dark bright curls clustering over a small head held proudly, with a glow of red on a brown young cheek, and eyes that are mossea like agates and dark and clear like them."

"And how much will a great gentleman give for such a one?" inquired the marriage-broker.

"A gold piece for the sight of her."

"Be it as the gentleman says—six gold pieces," the Jew returned gravely.

"Jew's money breeds fast, I've heard," retorted Talbot. "Come, I will mate the gold piece to another, and leave the begetting of more to you; but if I add my blessing on the increase, 'twill be all you'll get from me."

"Be it as the gentleman says—eight gold pieces," said the Jew.

"Why, you old shrew, it was six but now! What hinders it that I help myself for love to the goods you've got, and the Ghetto guard called in to see the bargain struck?"

"Nothing," replied the broker stolidly, "except a mere trifle, the *jod* in the word importance surely—the gentleman does not care to set those of Venice to find his bride."

Talbot started involuntarily. "Then lead me to her, and earn your gold pieces."

"Be it as the gentleman says—ten gold pieces," observed the Jew monotonously.

"Ten, then, and may the Devil cheat you in the bargain he drives for your soul!" cried Talbot, flinging the price at the broker's head.

The latter, without stirring from his carpet, caught them one by one, with the quickness of a juggler's eye and hand.

"The gentleman commands," he said then, rising from his seat; "it is for dogs to obey. We shall find what you seek in the dance-house; it is the apple of the Ghetto's eye."

"What's your meaning?"

"The safest place in this New Egypt of ours, *signore*, and to-day, when we are celebrating the Feast of Purim, the quietest. But at all times in the dance-house our maidens may appear without the blue-striped veils which elsewhere they must wear, to mark them out to the Gentile eye as good bargains."

"Not so good if you have the chaffering," returned Talbot, answering his odd, satirical smile.

The Jew plunged into a dark, low passage, at the end of which a pale green light glimmered feebly, the goal to the young man as he groped after his conductor. Discs of colour floating before eyes suddenly brought into darkness, dazzled them into

bewilderment as Tribot finally emerged into the sunlight of a courtyard set about with pomegranate hedges. Women, with blue-black hair gathered under golden nets, stared with wistful glances at the comely fellow, or trailed silken trains painted with quaint Eastern birds and flowers, in stately ignoring of the marriage-broker's appearance. Beyond, a colonnaded space gave a vignette of figures swinging in tune to a melody clashed out on the timbrels the dancers shook above their heads, their ardour spurred into inspiration by a crescent of staring spectators.

The broker's twinkling eyes were on Talbot's face. "How many stones of the Ghetto would be left on one another if the Gentiles knew it held such a garden as this?" he said.

The question woke Talbot from his temporary astonishment. "Have not the Ghetto folk a right to live in the Ghetto as they will?" he asked in his turn.

"Has the Jew a right to aught?" returned the other dryly. "Is it not due to the bounty of the Christian that he may live and breathe on the same earth under the same sky? Does not the Gentile permit us to remember the brotherhood of all men but in the one way—by taking our moneys at his need? But ingratitude is a curse, signore; as our people cried out long ago against the Egyptians when they rated the laziness in which the sons of Jacob made pretence that they could not be in two places at once, so now they grumble that, having had the earning of their money they should not have the spending of it as well; that to live, to take a wife, to beget children, should each carry its own tax with it. An ungrateful race, and these silly popinjays, preening their feathers before us, are tarred with the same brush. They grow tired of being mewed in this Ghetto of ours, heavily though every Hebrew must purchase his right to dwell here, and some of the people would murmur against that too, signore, when

it is forbidden by law to dwell anywhere else in Venice. So, our women come here at seasons, to smell the growing flowers, and to air the fine clothes which their women's hearts take pleasure in, but which elsewhere must be covered with the blue-striped veils to make the wearers known to all men—as in old time the leper was made known—for the unclean thing!”

The acute bitterness edging the satire, touched Talbot even through his anxiety for tidings of his wife.

“Yet you let me, a Gentile, in at the first blush.”

The broker made an obeisance.

“One answered for by our Chacham has the freedom of the Ghetto. I have guided you here to him at his desire; he has sworn that our enemies are yours also.”

Talbot followed the direction of his look, in time to see a tall figure coming towards them. A second glance sent him forward to greet Ben Levi.

The snail-gatherer, oddly altered by the Chacham's robe and phylacteries, met him with his usual slight smile.

“She is safe,” he said. “Come, she will begin to believe it herself when she sees you before her.”

Talbot stepped forward through the sunny patch of garden-ground, unconscious of the languorous-lidded girls clustered on the edge of the stone well with its canopy of vines in young leaf. The absorption of the lover who bears for device, *We, and the world*, was on him as he sprang up the stairs to a gallery curtained with trails of blossom, at the entrance to which Ben Levi merely waved him on, discreetly withdrawing himself.

With a cooing sound of laughter, Diamma sprang to meet him, yielding to his arms before the lovely shyness that had held her through her wedding came again upon her, making her shrink like a fluttered

bird, and stand passive in his hold. The water-clock had dripped through more minutes than one when a certain relaxing of Talbot's clasp made Fiamma care a fugitive full look at him, starting as she saw the pale mastering his bronzing.

"You are ill!"

"Nothing but what a meal and a wet rag with a touch of those brown fingers of yours, dainty, will put right."

Talbot spoke carelessly, but the maternal instinct in woman's love kindled in the girl's face, wiping out the shyness that was the last thought of self. Hands that trembled as never in personal danger helped to rid him of his doublet, revealing a blood-stained sleeve and a gash beneath it from wrist to elbow.

"No worse than that from the barber's fleam in the spring-time," Talbot said, as she darted to summon Ben Levi, but the shadow on her face did not lighten even at the Jew's echo of his words.

"That my first gift to you should have been a wound!"

"And one that I shall carry the marks of longer than this, sweet! The first was dealt me when I opened my eyes on you lying in the mouth of that grassed burying-place among the hills. Your face at first sight stamped itself burning as any branding-iron on my heart; and the worst of it was that your boy's tunic cried *Fool* to your haunting of me."

They were alone in the garden again, the Jew's salves cool upon Talbot's scratch. Once or twice Fiamma had questioned about Carnation and the flight to come, but he had parried her questions, and the two basked in each other's presence, amidst sweetness of the flowers rising up about them in spicy incense. The noise of the street sounded faintly as the buzz of the bees in the almond-scented garlands of the balconies; once, as Fiamma leaned upon the rail, a girl, with sweet eyes in a serious, childish face,

flung up from the garden a blossoming orange-branch, and smiled as Fiamma caught it. Through the stillness of the summer morning the fountain tossed and tinkled like a joy without end.

Talbot slept. Fiamma was soothing the thick curls from his forehead with light fingers, ready to start back at the first waking movement, when a hand grasped her. Ben Levi's face, gray with fear, appeared over her shoulder.

"The Philistines are upon us!"

Without moving, the girl heard his acute whisper, but her eyes turned from him, gazing at the blossoming garden, the branches traced against the blue air, as one dying might look a farewell to the green growing earth. Talbot had sprung to his feet, speaking with Ben Levi in swift whispers, his features sharpening under the pressure of his impotence. The women had vanished, leaving the garden desolate as a sunny patch of heather deserted by its furry wild-life at the shadow of the hawk balancing above it. Only the marriage-broker stood a few paces distant, with an odd smile, as if he saw fugitives groping for life in a blind alley.

The desperate council was only for a moment. Talbot slipped his arm about Fiamma's waist and drew her against his shoulder.

"The officers are in the Ghetto already, you say, searching from house to house for this bold Bonaventuri of ours who has been tracked here by the Four Spies on Mocenigo's behalf. And the Jews one and all have been bidden resort each to his dwelling, with the parchments of his household's right to dwell there, that they who are running so briskly this morning may read! Faith, my girl, in this game of Puss i' th' Corner, it seems that you and I are the pussies in the middle!" He caught his breath, looking tenderly at the girl on his breast. "If there was a road to be tried," he began—"and, by

God, there is!" His eyes were ablaze with excitement. "What's to hinder the Haman in the *campo* lending you that caftan of his?"

"A Gibeonite for guile!" It was the marriage-broker who spoke, his face kindling at the daring words. "If the girl has courage for it, she may ransom her life."

"She has courage," her husband answered for her. "I'll have a try to lead the chase away from you, and by the obedience you vowed to me last night I charge you not to baulk me!"

With only a brave smile, Fiamma turned from him, hurrying with the broker toward the lower rooms of the dance-house. At his sign, she tore off her upper garments, while the snail-gatherer threw a tattered red and yellow caftan over her. The two men worked with swiftness, covering her face and hands with some dark stain, daubing her cheeks with blood from a cat's tail, finally fastening on her head the huge wig of horsehair taken from the Haman itself, lying where its supporters had cast it, as they rested in the dance-house in their last interrupted round.

The search was sweeping towards the dance-house now, the immortal sanctity of which would be violated to-day. Some of the Haman escort were straggling back, marked on back and breast with the Republic's seal that their deeds of right in the Ghetto had passed muster. Wonderingly enough, they obeyed their Chacham's signal, to resume the interrupted festivity, supported now by his own presence.

"Courage!" he whispered, under cover of the blaring horns, as the broker and he cautiously raised Fiamma on their shoulders.

The childer, doubtly excited by the advent of the body of searchers, ran together, pelting the Haman with nuts smeared with honey or with handfuls of mud. Fiamma's head was dizzied with the motion

and the eldritch screams of the horns; her body trembled with the effort to keep it upright; her eyes, closed by dark clots of paint, ached to bursting; she almost obeyed an insane desire to open them as the leaping, hooting, spectators came to a stand, and she realised that the contemptuous interest of the searchers had been tickled by the quaint ceremony.

Closed eyes which could not see the figure with all its grace of young manhood striding up the street.

"Do the errands of the Republic wait, while her servants stand gaping at every street-corner?"

The gay, careless voice, to which every pulse in Fiamma's body seemed tuned, struck on her ears, her heart, almost holding it still. The voice had never sounded more careless, as Talbot stood negligently, reading a suspicion in every face turned to him.

"What ails you all?" he demanded smoothly. "Have you lost your tongues as little Bo-Peep lost her cheep in the song my aunt in England used to sing to me? They brought their tails home after their wandering, and I have a tale too of my own, if you would spare one of your men to set me across this lagoon to the palace of the Capelli."

The daring request set each man looking in his neighbour's face. The Capelli agent—of whom two men, bruised and bleeding, had that morning in the palace guardroom told a grim story—stood before them, asking for what, if a word of the story were true, would be his death.

"Come!" Talbot repeated impatiently. "How long do ten men take to nose out what one with his wits about him knows already? A boat, I say; I warrant you there are those at the Palace Trevisani with ears for what I could tell them!"

"Take them to the boats," the captain of the search commanded, ending another doubtful pause.

"Innocent or guilty, he will be sure either way of a welcome from the old Capelli, and we have received no order concerning him as yet from the Ten."

"The Ten have other fish to fry to-day," put in a soldier, before he was peremptorily checked by the captain for the disrespect of his allusion. His laugh drowned to the agonised ears above Talbot's firm departing footsteps. Fiamma seemed to lose touch with her body in the numb despair beating in upon her as she perceived Talbot's generous, reckless design, to draw off suspicion from the Ghetto and its secret. Already the attempt had so far succeeded that the Venetians allowed the procession to pass on without bestowing any further attention upon it.

The girl set her teeth and endured, as she felt the men under her move again, and the unearthly Babel woke once more.

"Courage!" reiterated Ben Levi, as he helped to lower her to the wooden pedestal in the centre of the square. The trumpeters formed a guard, for the Haman must be protected till nightfall, when the bonfire would blaze best. The spectators ebbed and flowed, new ones taking the place of those with their fill of leaping and shouting. The girl standing like a statue, cursed them in her heart, even the children, who shook their tiny fists in her direction, and lisped maledictions as a part of the game. The afternoon seemed to weave itself into a cope of lead dragging down the weary limbs.

All at once the shut eyelids quivered. Through the thick nasal intonations she heard the guttural Venetian voices once more, as the search-party were returning across the square to their boats. One of the men, out of humour at their foiled mission, spat right and left into the crowd about the Haman.

"Take that for your hideous Beggana!" he jeered, snatching a knife from a boy near. The weapon flew straight, and struck into Fiamma's shoulder.

Blood! The blood that would betray all!

A single voice rose up shrilly, the cracked tones of the marriage-broker.

"What's to show for a wound if there's not blood?" he cried. "Let his black blood flow!"

On the instant he had caught up a bladder filled with blood from the butcher's stall at hand, flinging it dexterously at the castaned figure. It burst under the blow; the dark, viscous stream gushed out over the drops oozing from the girl's arm.

Drenched from neck to knee in the crimson torrent, Fiamma stood gallantly passive, the brave will holding at bay the ghastly fœtness besieging her. The hot pain of her wound was almost welcome as an ally, but when hands came about her, lifting her from her pillory, she was unable to ask whether the dice had fallen for success or failure. The relief from the strained position so long persisted in, was soothing as a lullaby, as she lay blissfully conscious of kind hands removing her drenched, bespattered disguise; but even when warm scented water refreshed her burning skin and set the sealed eyelids free, minutes passed before the long hazel eyes opened with a question in them.

"Is he safe?"

The question had found a voice, weak and trembling, but distinct in the blessed silence that was purging her ears from the din of the streets. The women, moving about the matted upper chamber, greeted the faint voice with smiles; the girl who had tossed her the orange-blossom that morning was bending over her.

"One of our young men has gone forth to bring us the first news," she said, but her eyes had already told how sweet her voice must be. "You must sleep and be strong for his coming, after I have put 'his sword on your shoulder, where the Gentile's knife struck."

The room grew fragrant with spices, and the charm of the cool perfumed stillness worked, lulling Fiamma to a state between sleeping and waking. The wash of the sea below came pleasantly on her drifting sense, till a dream drew Mark Talbot's face so vividly upon her sleeping eyelids that, with a smile in her eyes to match the smile in his, she woke.

The women had left the chamber, gone out perhaps, while she slept, to hear news, which concerned her alone of all the Ghetto. Fiamma gathered the loose wrapping-robe of white silk about her, and crossed the chamber. The door opened upon the gallery where, that morning, Talbot had come to her. A man stood now in front of her, plucking at the purple blossoms. She grasped his arm with imperative fingers.

"Ben Levi, you have news?"

"Scanty as the gleanings after the olive-gatherers. He was seen to enter the Capelli Palace."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing—of him." The Jew turned, showing his dishevelled hair and beard, and the gaberdine rent from neck-piece to hem. "Ah, my mistress, ah, the child I fostered! Had not life sinned sorely enough against thee that death need add a bitterness of violence to thy cup! Whom didst thou ever wrong that they should lie in wait for thee?"

At the low, wailing tone, Fiamma fell back, putting her hand to her throat, as though to free herself from a strangling fear.

"Quick, old man! Of whom do you speak?"

But she knew already, and the question ended in a moaning cry. She cowered against the balcony-rail, cringing as under bodily pain.

"Where—when—who?"

"She lies on her own bed," Ben Levi answered dully, "the knife that slew her on the floor by her. The slayer must have fallen on her at daybreak, for

she was cold when they found her, dead in the wedding-garments she had snatched from you."

With a sharp breath, Fiamma drew herself up.

"This is the work of Cassandra the sorceress!"

The Jew, grief-stricken as he was, raised his head at the deadly quiet of the voice. The white, weary face was rigid, the eyes in it burned like coals.

"Get me clothes"—Fiamma broke the silence that had seemed to hold a vow—"quickly!"

"What do you purpose?"

"To stand face to face with the murderer who, in her frantic jealousy, has destroyed a woman whose like we shall never see again. Stop me not, for I alone can deal the punishment that will burn hotter than hell's coals."

"Madness!" the Jew responded to the quivering words. "Now the Nameless One be my witness that Carnation's death is to me as that of a first-born to a mother's soul but the dead herself would sooner go down quick into Gehenna, rather than that your safety should again be set in jeopardy! Hist!" at the girl's gesture, "if you are willing to pour out your life on the sand as David Ben Jesse the water of Bethlehem, you cannot bring destruction on the nation that has sheltered you! Know you not the vengeance that would be wreaked if you were tracked from the Ghetto that has hour-long defied the searchers? Have you not ears to hear the weeping of Rachel for the little ones dashed against the stone when the spoilers ravined the spot given over to their fury?"

With a heart-rending cry, Fiamma cast herself down, clasping his knees.

"Let me go, only go!" she gasped. "To blight Cassandra with the truth, then to die with him! What torture can they give him half so bitter as the being parted from me? Besides," she added, as a hope steadied the wild voice, "I will seek the Capelli,

tell her all, on condition of his pardon; I will give her the warning for which she must be grateful. Curses on me, that I had not the thought sooner!

"What is the nation to a love-sick girl?" unexpectedly interrupted the marriage-broker's voice. "Less than a broken shoe-latchet, if she could make her bargain through it, man woman, and child!" He looked askance at his Chacham. "But we, who are not in love, rate ourselves higher, and it may be when you are cured of the madness you will not be sorry that you were hindered from throwing your life away like an onion-skin. Till midnight it is, whatever you may think, for the happiness of the greater number that you should abide with us here in New Egypt; after midnight, ways and means of bringing you forth to the mainland will be provided, and that's for the happiness of the greater number too."

"Has the young man sent word he will meet her in the marshes, Annas?" inquired Ben Levi in an eager undertone.

"We will not wait for his messenger," returned the broker. "His present whereabouts is knowledge enough for a wise man, without his Cabba'a, to read the future! The Capelli will set her guest a riddle harder than that of Samson to expound. By the dawn—for he is a proper man—but by the dawn, they will have got the answer to their *question*, and she whom they seek must be vanished then in good earnest from the Ghetto."

The snail-gatherer gave the sigh of a man faced with an inexorable conclusion. He laid his hand on Fiamma, crouched where she had ceased to speak, but with the fierce light still in her eyes.

"We would do the best we can for thee, daughter," he said; "but there are women and children within these walls, who also must have thought taken for them. This good day of Purim is not ended yet, perchance its cause of birth holds an omen for us,

that the plots of the wicked shall be confounded by the weak they make ready their mouths to swallow up!"

Like a frozen woman, Fiamma kept her place, neither eye nor ear granted to the marriage-broker's sneers or Ben Levi's futile sympathy. She yielded stiffly to the latter's effort to raise her, moving with the wide unseeing eyes of a sleep-walker towards the room before assigned to her.

She was thankful for the silence, the solitude, those two things that are the heriot of sorrow. With arms flung over the window-sill she crouched, her misery beating in upon the brain vainly shuffling *what was* into *what might have been*. The summer-tide before her, with its wash of weeds trailing hither and thither over its thinly-covered reach of purple mud, changed in her mind's eye to grassy mountains, such as those among which she and her blue-eyed lover had ridden the day long and felt a vague spite of Fate, incomprehensible to themselves. Fiamma smiled to think of the edged sayings which once and again she had drawn upon him, in defiance of the heart-beating that acknowledged every glance of those keen eyes. The young red lips parted softly, as though in their faint response to that first firm kiss from the lips of a man.

A shadow hooded the lagoon with gray, and Fiamma's mood changed. Carnation's blind dead face rose in her mind; Talbot's image, too, stood far out on the sad sea; it also had grown ghastly and the tide of death flowed inexorably between the dead and the living, washing out footprints that had walked in company, baffling clutching hands, leaving nothing but the tide-mark of remembrance, that only seemed a sign of how much the sea had spoiled.

Fiamma rose up with a gasping sob, and a fierce light in her eyes. "If I have to fight my way foot

by foot to the Ghetto gate, I will leave it!" she said through her shut teeth.

Her bare feet carried her noiselessly through the gallery, on which several doors opened. She cast a hurried look round each chamber. The first two or three were blank; the fourth, a storehouse apparently for clothes in every variety, gave her what she needed.

Her old steadiness of nerve had come back to her, as she rapidly selected some man's garments and put them on once more. Her plan, so far as the fierce, wild thoughts in the curly head could be called so, was in her new dress to walk boldly through the carnival. The Cardinal's crucifix had been left on her neck, and she was resolved at need to use it.

A boat passed, far out on the summer sea. Far out, yet the idle eyes of a girl at the window could distinguish the black caps and sashes of its rowers, the Nicolotti badge.

The chough's cry!

At the thought she had given it, sending the plaintive call out steadily over the water. The boat paused, over a patch of purple, telling of a shoal below.

Again, with a leaping thought of thankfulness that this seaward side of the Ghetto afforded no spies, again rose the chough's call, louder, harsher. The great yellow sail of the boat was hauled upon, the *St. Theodore* dashed upon it in madder, trampled his crocodile bravely as the boat swung broadside to the afternoon light. With her prow high out of water, as a good hound lifts his nose, the boat was responding, dancing nearer and nearer to the Jews' Island with the light breeze for a spur.

A man in the boat stood up to hail.

"Who calls?"

"A Nicolotto to Nicolotti!"

The boat lurtsied on the ripples. Thus far and no farther, and a stretch of olive-coloured mud between.

"Give the password, if indeed a Nicolotto sticks in that skin o' thine."

She tried once or twice, before she spoke it out, loud and clear--

"My blood is red,
My scarf is black,
And one's at your service,
For one's on your back!"

"*Cio!* what do you want of us?"

"A passage in your boat from this cursed island."

As she said it, she claimed it. For one second the straight figure was framed in the lines of the casement, the next she had leaped down into the mud. Like the folds of a cuttle-fish it held, drawing her downwards by the feet. The men in the boat swore strange oaths and bestirred themselves; a good-natured fellow swung himself overboard, a boat-hook between his teeth.

The mud sucked slowly. Water, in which a boat could not draw, gave a swimmer many yards to swim.

The mud sucked. The Nicolotto swam on. It was a race between them.

The mud had risen between knee and waist before the swimmer, keeping himself skilfully afloat, was near enough to push the pole towards Fiamma. The girl had stood resolutely still, since she found her struggles only sank her deeper, but now she grasped the wood till the muscle stood out on the slender arms.

The men in the boat drew upon the cord they had tied about their swimmer. With all his strength, he held to the pole as Fiamma held to it, till the elastic cypress-wood curved and creaked, but it did not break. With blood starting under the finger-nails,

they held to it, till the claspings mud resigned what it could not keep, and smoothed itself sullenly once more.

"Body o' Bacchus, brother, does Death owe you money, that you must be in such haste to run after him?" expostulated the boatman, as the dripping figure was lifted into the boat by half a dozen hands. "I knew not that we numbered a madman in our school."

Fiamma offered no explanation.

With a last effort of quivering muscles, she gave the grip to the man who had rescued her, then with closed eyes emphasising her real exhaustion, she sank down on a pile of nets, turning her face to Venice. Already another object of interest seemed to loom upon the horizon, for after a few sentences of rough banter, the sailors ceased to notice her, they too looking out eagerly towards the city.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DEATH-GONDOLA.

THE boat sailed over the sea. The sailors, clustering about the prow, look'd shorewards, sinewy hands shading black intent eyes. The purple sail flapped lazily on its ropes, and the water slid under the bows with its murmuring sea-song, lullaby or dirge.

Out of the blue silence of sea and sky, as the boat sailed on, crept a music of flutes and 'cellos, thrilling and throbbing over the lagoon. It strung the eagerness of the crew afresh; the weariness of the night and day's toil on the open sea passed from them as they stood at gaze.

"Here they come, noses pointed straight for home! Good-luck has steered us; we sha'l see all the splendours where we stand," they cried to each other.

The thrush-notes of the flutes, the mellow string-tones, swelled keener and sweeter winning even Fiamma's careless ears. She rose, and found a place for herself among the brown-skinned sailor-men.

Down the wind, between her and the open sea, came the music, two boatfuls, heralds to the flotilla which spread behind them, right and left, in two great wings of colour, centring in the tall golden barge riding high on the water, plumed by the crimson silken banner of St. Mark.

A great burst of music seemed to cleave a way for the proud ship as she swept onwards, answered by the fanfares of the silver trumpets on her deck. The golden figure of Justice on her bows was scarcely more radiant than the company grouped on the carved and gilded gallery measuring its hundred feet

from stem to stern, the crimson of its velvet canopy sobered by the scarlet robes of the nobles, superb sons of the sea, who by virtue of their order sat on their ninety seats near the throne.

Red, blue, white and purple, the colours of the Republic, streamed gallantly on the wind, but the banner with the winged and aureoled lion blazoned in gold seemed to carry the more majesty for the sullenness of its heavy folds. And under the drooping crimson silk the majesty seemed to concentrate in the somewhat lean, spare man sat on the Bucintoro as a chieftain sits his war-horse, and who wore the brocaded bonnet over his plain white linen cap as a monarch wears his crown. All the pomp and arrogance of Venice were symbolised by the bearing of the figure under the trailing mantle of gold and ermine over its cassock of blue; but all the far-seeing policy and indomitable spirit were expressed too in the worn face of this king of the sea, with the eyes that seemed weary of gazing into tortuous state-intrigues—the look of seeing into illimitable distances, such a look as the sea herself lends to her followers.

A sweet smell of incense rose above the sea-salt, as the Bucintoro moved on out of the middle distance. The decorous brilliance of the Churchmen, chastened by fine lace and embroidered white linen, came in the wake of the golden keel, the white-mitred Patriarch scarcely a less impressive figure than the Doge, the incense from the silver censers swung by acolytes rolling about him in mists, and lighted candles glittering like topazes on the sunny air. But now the faces of the watching Nicolotti darkened, and more than one muttered a prayer for his patron saint's ear; for the boats that held men in sombre violet, with sphinx-faced servants with black staves, were floating past, and Fiamma needed no telling that she was looking upon the Ten.

And now boats, long and narrow like sea-birds, began

to dart to and fro over the water, while richly dressed youths, kneeling on gay cushions in the prows, shot plaster pellets from crossbows at the heaving fringe of watching craft that by this time had drifted neighbours with the Nicolotti vessel. Under the brisk peppering, they gave back, huddling together at either side of a cleared space of green water swept by the stately progress of the great golden barge.

Half the fleet were gone by, and half were yet to come, but the rowers held them in leash. Down the broad green pathway only one boat was floating, attached by a line that looked like a single sunbeam to a skiff shaped like a swan which sailed immediately after the barge of the Ten, a white boat with a silver angel for *ferro* at each end towering high over the green water. Cloth of silver trailed overboard as though paving the boat's path with moonshine, and an arch of white lilies rose on the deck, sending out a greeting of innocence to the world. And within the arch, framed by all that purity and sweetness, stood the one whom all Venice had come abroad to honour to-day, Bianca Capelli, from to-day by style and title fosterling of the Republic, the adopted daughter of St. Mark.

White as her lilies, she stood there, her fair curls loose over the bare beautiful arms. Not a jewel broke the sweep of the white draperies down to the slender foot which, the whiter for its silver sandal, was pressed on the tawny shoulder of a lion that, tame with narcotics, crouched like a dog before his mistress. Motionless as the beast the woman stood, delicate brilliant carnation on each cheek, life only in the blue eyes turning restlessly from point to point, as though challenging the spectators for their homage.

The challenge was answered. With a roar that roused the drowsy lion to quiver under the arched shining foot, it was answered, bursting out again and again like a resistless fire, flinging itself sky high.

Women tossed their shawls in the air, men floated kisses from brown fingers, a thousand throats shouted like one, to do homage to the white daughter of St. Mark.

A cry, long and shrill, cleft the silence when the spent voices could no longer strive against it. From some distance behind, a boat broke through the procession, a small boat, a swift boat, containing also a single standing woman, clad only in a coarse red chemise. The boat hurried as in stress down the green pathway, where the woman in white and silver had gone before. In the wind of its speed the woman's long black hair streamed like some pirate's flag of destruction.

"A gift to the daughter of Venice!" she cried. "A gift—I bring a gift to Venice to-day!"

The gift she had to bring showed in all its hideousness as she cried and tossed her arms above her head. The face was distorted, livid spots blotching it here and there, and the black hollow eyes were those of a madwoman. And as Fiamma looked, she knew the crazed Jewess of the marshes.

Like dust before the on-coming wind, boats broke from her path, and the voices that had shouted before perked again, hoarse and trembling: "Jesus, Mary! The Pesilence!"

As the awful cry rang out, Bianca turned, and saw the terror on her track. The blue eyes gazed for a moment before the slow-witted Venetian grasped the danger, but then she too screamed aloud, and flung herself cowering on the lion, hiding her eyes in his mane.

Like dust before the hurricane, the stately procession had scattered, gemming the wide lagoon with facets of broken colour. The golden cord attaching the Barge of Innocence to her rowing-boat broke with a snap, and the white boat lay still upon the water.

The madwoman lashed her pole through the ripples on the prey that must fall to her. Far away on the

Bucintoro, the Doge had started up from under the shell-like canopy of the throne, but the golden Caryatides supporting it were not deaf to his commands than the rowers tugging for dear life. Priests and people, nobles and seamen, had joined the mad rout; even the Tenda had ceased to offer rewards and threats to deaf ears.

"A gift—I bring a gift to Venice!"

The mad shriek broke into the snarl of a beast robbed of its prey. The swan-boat had disentangled itself from the press and was flying back on its track, the old Capelli erect within it, brandishing a stiletto over the rower. Straight for the white boat it swept; and straight for the white boat swept the Pestilence.

The lion roused by the tumult, had risen, switching his tail sullenly from side to side. His change of position had dragged Bianca to her knees; her face hidden, she knelt, with her white hands buried in the mane beginning to bristle along the beast's back.

The plague-tainted woman had ceased to row, the way on the boat carrying her down on the barge. As a rider riding for life spurs his horse to the leap, so old Capelli savagely pricked the gasping rower with the naked dagger, till the swan shuddered forward like a living thing. It swerved to the left of the Barge of Innocence, it fouled full and fair the boat that brought the Pestilence.

The crash of rending timbers chafed the lion's restlessness further. Already he had sent a deep-chested roar over the water; now he crouched and sprang, full on old Capelli climbing in over the barge's side. The two went down together, but as they struggled among the floating fragments of the smaller boats the man was grappled by arms that clasped and held like the memory of a great wrong. The red and violet figures slid downwards through the translucence of green water, the lion's piteous

cries coming on the hush like some strange death-knell.

More fortunate than his master, the Capelli's oarsman had succeeded in clambering into the barge. A few boats were venturing nearer, now that the plague-stricken woman had vanished; the white daughter of the Capelli had taken courage to rise, straightening her dishevelled robes, while she gazed unmovedly towards the drowning lion.

"Sorrow, madness, pestilence, death, on the innocent, while that one escapes by a miracle!" Fiamma muttered fiercely. "Truly yet, masquerade though this world seems often enough, 'the Great Unmasking will finish it in its own time, though that time is not ours."

The Nicolotti, well to leeward at the onslaught of the Jewess, had not had need to alter their position materially, though drifting with the tide setting in towards Venice. Fiamma, at her old post among the nets, observed an alacrity in handling the sailing-tackle which made her suspect her companions of a wish to mingle with the mass of craft making shorewards, lest their supine neighbourhood to the Barge of Innocence should hereafter be reckoned against them by any ill-disposed onlooker with a measure of authority. Anxiety also was possibly shown in a lack of the curiosity which Fiamma had dreaded, lest, parry it as she might, she should arouse a blaze of fury against the Jews. She breathed more freely when the crew landed at an unfrequented stage lying behind the golden domes of St. Mark.

Without hindrance, she separated from them, making for the deserted palace with the sense of locality that her mountains had bred in her. Scarcely a bald-headed, wrinkled hag was in the street to look after her as she passed; the ears and eyes and tongues of Venice were on the Piazzetta, strained to the utmost to do justice to the passing of "the

Doge from the water-side to the ducal palace. The glittering vanguard of ambassadors and officials had re-formed as though the pale terror had never broken their ranks, the train of city signores moved between the human walls of gazer, as though one of their number had not been left behind in those shining waters, with his state-ropes of purple for sheet and shroud. At the heart of the gorgeous pageant the Doge under the golden umbrella took his stately way, leading by the hand the white-clothed woman, who smiled and looked round upon the people as though the shining garments of innocence were not to be replaced by mourning weeds, as though the death of a father was a light price to pay for the glory of becoming the adopted daughter of St. Mark. Yet above the colour and glitter the joyful music of the voyage had passed into the sobbing of *celli* and the wailing of flutes, and the flags of the Republic dropped against their painted staves, while far out at sea a moaning water and sad mourning purple on a bastion of cloud spoke of unrest and coming storm.

Without a thought to the deserted streets, Fiamma hurried through them. She was possessed by a fixed purpose as her feet climbed the stair over which she had last passed as bride, and entered the chamber where she had last seen Carnation.

But with her first step over the threshold, she stopped short, as though she had interrupted one to whom King Death was giving audience.

Slowly she moved at last, creeping forward to the form laid straightly on the bed. The repellent conventionalities of shroud and winding-sheet were not here; Carnation lay folded in the faint rosiness of the wedding-mantle, her fair hair like an aureole of pale sunshine about her face. Something of a smile seemed shut within the pale closed lips, as of a dreamer whose dream is pleasant, the haunting

of haggard unrest for ever laid to rest under the quiet eyelids.

Through the chamber crept a low moaning, the pulse of dreary pain. To stand and moan, till herself listened with dull pity to herself, was all Fiamma could do; the heavy moaning went on even when she knelt at last, laying hot lips on the hands folded over the little crown lying on the dead mother's breast as it had lain on her dead baby.

To moan like some soft wounded thing of the wood, too weak for teeth and claws. No, there was one thing more for her to do.

"Thank God, I can bring His justice!"

The girl rose to her feet, her shaking limbs steadied at the thought. She set her face straight for the secret passages, the numbness in which grief had plunged her falling from her at every step. Swift, stern as a Fate come to her hour, she sped along, stumbling, straying in the dark ways, till at length her determination triumphed, and she stood before a door. With a clash, the purple velvet curtain slid back upon its rings, and, too breathless for speech, the girl, entering behind the heavy folds as she had done once before, stood and confronted the woman on the ebony couch. A pale flash of joy lit Cassandra's face for a moment; then it passed, the hands, transparent as fading lily-leaves, beginning to twine restlessly in the glory of her hair.

"You have come—at last!" she muttered.

"From dead Carnation!" Fiamma returned, her words ringing like steel. "I have come—from her to you—the saints forgive me for coupling you in a breath—because a weapon remains to me keener than that with which you drained the life of her who had never wronged you even in a thought."

With a single gesture, Cassandra swept aside her flowing hair and the silken tunic beneath it. Her eyes turned with a little scornful smile to Fiamma.

"Strike, at your pleasure!"

An imperious finger answered her, pointing to the silver mirror at her side. The great gray eyes swerved almost involuntarily.

Within the polished silver a tall young figure dawned, lips and eyes stern with justice. As though drawing upon a foe, the slender hand moved suddenly, swiftly; woman from throat to waist stood confessed in the mirror's depths.

Steadily Cassandra lay, looking on what the mirror had to show. As steadily Fiamma stood, hardening her heart for the judgment which she could not trust God to deal.

"The other woman's husband whom you loved, lies since a month in Florence earth, stabbed by the daggers whetted on Capelli gold. If he had had your coat of mail, you might have boasted of your lover till—who knows? another moon, but your messenger gave it to me. If he had caught Piccolo's whisper, he might have been living yet, to carry his handsome face into some other fair lady's bower, when your love had become an old story to him; but your misshapen imp warned me."

Shaken in every nerve by her fury of grief, Fiamma flung out the cutting words; but the woman on the couch listened without stirring a finger. A silence sultry as storm followed, broken at last by a quick sentence, like the lightning-play among the clouds.

"The stars never lie!"—Cassandra's face, white as a corpse, had grown almost as still, the motion of the ashen lips alone showing life. "As little as a woman's heart! But hope lies, and I believed what I choose to believe, though in my heart I knew the truth. Child, why did you not keep the tryst you spoke to me of? It was by that I swore to my soul to believe your tale, true or false."

"The tryst? No fault of mine! I told you fair and full I was no Pietro"

"You, my heart, and the stars, and a lying hope to downface all three!" Cassandra tossed her hands above her head with a gesture that recalled to Fiamma the crazed woman on the lagoon. "Rather say it was Fate who has played with us—and won. And Bianca saved from vengeance by my hand!"

"Yours?"

The small hands idly twisted the hair they strayed among into a gleaming rope. "It was I who bid her not to budge from Venice."

"Now may God forgive you!" said Fiamma very low. She turned unsteadily towards the entrance, walking with one hand outstretched, groping, the other curved about something in her bosom.

Cassandra watched her curiously. "You are going—where?"

"To the Capelli Palace, to find my love and my revenge."

Even as the girl turned and spoke, Cassandra's look leapt beyond her.

"Hush!" she whispered—"a strange foot!"

"I must be gone."

"Fool!" Cassandra's hand forbade Fiamma's impetuous step towards the secret passage. "It comes that way."

"Then the other." Fiamma struggled to shake off the hand shut like a fetter on her wrist. "Loose me; this time I will not be baulked. Will you keep a bride from her bridegroom?"

"That's no step of our Italians," murmured Cassandra. "Firm and light and quick, yet 'tis a stranger's by the blundering; we have time yet. You at least may be saved."

"Saved? I'll not be saved!" panted Fiamma on her knees, striving with the iron hand. "Let me go—to the Capelli—to die with my husband—my husband who had thrown away his life to guard mine, as though without him it would be worth the living!"

Her passionate voice, broken into sobs, rose above the quickening footsteps. Writhing this way and that, the kneeling girl wrested herself from the iron grip and reeled backwards in the shock of parting, to be caught close by the arms of a man in the instant of his headlong entrance. Caught and clasped and kissed, Mark Talbot did all three.

"You are safe, safe!"

"With no slit in my skin to let out the life," Talbot answered gaily. "But you, whom I left in the Ghetto, how came you here? But for a word dropped by the Jew, I should have been running the street like a madman, if not asking your whereabouts from the Capelli herself."

"The Capelli! You threw yourself once already to the wolves for me!"

Talbot laughed, looking into her brimming hazel eyes. "Faith, sweeting, Luck must have stood gossip when they christed me! When I bade the search-party in the Jew-quarter take me to the Trevisani, I had no thought but the trick of the mother-curlew on the noors at home to lead the chase away from what I cherished by fooling them on to my track. And when I was clapped into a chamber of the palace, I could not for the life of me tell whether the history of my coming by a pretty wife would make up to the old Capelli for the borrowing of his signet ring or whether, if I loosed my tongue to him on his daughter's secrets, 'twere more likely to cut my bonds or my throat for me. But lo you, just as I fell to hoping they would not send me on the road to Paradise before supper-time, a chink in the wail let through to me Mistress Bianca herself! She told me nought but that I was to leave Venice at cockcrow and journey hence to Florence, where I might look to be taken into her service as Grand Duchess. For, quoth she, Bianca pays her scores!"

"And Death carries the bag for her."

The lovers, intent on each other's faces, started to the remembrance of the pale woman on the couch. Cassandra met their eyes with her inscrutable gaze, her hands still moving restlessly over the wonderful gold hair.

"Pietro Bonaventuri, husband! The Englishman who knows enough secrets of the future Grand Duchess to make the slaying of him unsafe in Venice! Cassandra sorceress, whom St. Mark's adopted daughter, guessing herself Cassandra's dupe, may at last venture to denounce to the Ten! Death must set out betimes if Bianca pays her scores to-night!"

"In this house we could hold him at bay," Talbot suggested.

Cassandra moved her head with a swift denial.

"The kiss of a single torch would suffice to set these old walls in flame. Yet the maimed cripple can escape the Ten—have no fear on that score. And you yourself will be safe enough—till Venice lies at your back. 'Tis that one who, as proxy for the dead, will be paid a heavy reckoning."

Fiamma, head and hand on Talbot's shoulder, seemed content to thus await Fate's next move. Cassandra glanced at her, wincing slightly as she looked away.

"Prox, for the dead," she whispered, and minutes passed before she spoke again. "As a dead man you came to Venice, girl, and as a dead man you must leave it. Proxy for the dead—this time no gay young gallant, but a graybeard furrowed with Time's ploughshare. Carpaccio! dead Carpaccio! 'tis in his guise you must pass from thence."

"Carpaccio? He lies in the chapel of the Capelli."

"Does he so? Then Bianca must have more faithful servants than she thought, when she pleaded with Piccolo to have him borne thence. The three days which must elapse before the poison dried in his veins were longer than any Lent to her; 'he

prying priest who met the shrivelled corpse being carried forth at last, had no thanks of hers for casting a covetous eye on the fees of burial on behalf of his Brotherhood." She paused for breath, glancing again at the lovers. "But Carpaccio shall once more serve his mistress. The death-gondola will be here before another hour has passed, on it you shall float out from Venice!"

With a gasp, Fiamma raised her head.

"Why should you save my life? If it had not been for me—for the cursed likeness which has cost two lives——"

Cassandra threw up her hand in an imperious gesture for silence. Her ashen lip caught between her teeth, she clapped her palms together, a signal which caused her mannikin to start apparently out of nothingness, disappearing almost as instantly in obedience to an order which his mistress gave him in an unknown tongue.

The strange woman met Talbot's look full.

"If your eyes lie not, master stranger, your wit seems to have an edge to it as well as your sword. Once on dry land, the two together should buy safety for you and your bride; till there, however, your safety lies in parting. Go you to Mestre, and there await the wife Piccolo shall pledge his hide to bring to you."

Talbot shook his head.

"Good advice, Madonna, is a hard pill to swallow. My wife and I have played hide-and-seek with each other long enough; from now out we live and die together."

"Fool, play the comedy as you will!" Cassandra's look turned on him with less scorn than her harsh words threatened. "'Tis easy enough to die together—there's few in Venice will baulk you there—but to live together will only be done by the aid you seem to hold so cheap." She interrupted herself, to speak

some rapid words to the returned Piccolo. "There, go with him; since you will play guardian-angel to your bride, there's but one way for it. Go, man yourself for ten minutes' separation—no longer, on my faith!"

A keen look at her, and Talbot obeyed, following the dwarf. The women were left alone.

Fiamma could not repress a shudder as Cassandra began to busy herself with what her imp had brought her, the mask of a dead old man in wax, the growing moonlight giving the features a weird life. The swift fingers moulding the wax into the likeness of the dead astrologer alone moved. An occasional breath drawn hard was the only sound in the chamber, till the woman on the couch raised her head all suddenly.

"Flutes, drums!" she muttered. "The death-gondola has begun its voyage. Nearer, girl; let's see how my handiwork sits on that of your Maker."

Silently Fiamma obeyed, bending within reach of the other's hands. Cassandra raised the mask, but withheld it still, her fierce eyes fixed on the glowing young face.

"Pietro's face hidden by death!" she said. "False face, dear face, dead face, good-bye!"

As she spoke, she proceeded to adjust the mask, moulding it skilfully over the living countenance. "Fear nothing; you can breathe through these parted lips; the beard will conceal them. Fear not; in this world, fearing or loving, striving, or mourning, are labour wasted; Fate sets the board and moves us as her will. No forgiveness this; Fate, not you and I, has to answer for what is past between us."

The low voice sank inaudibly, rising only into directions to the dwarf, whose hands Fiamma shuddered to feel about her, clothing her in various garments at his mistress's directions. Music, seeming the thin echo of what she had heard that day,

began to rise to her ears, mingling with the cynical tones of Cassandra's voice.

"Give Piccolo your hand; let him guide you to the bier. Shrink not, little fool! Does not your religion teach that the grave is the gate of life? Piccolo will guard you to your life; he too must to Florence, charged with Cassandra's last message to the Capelli."

"Piccolo—but you?"

"I shall journey also—my place is prepared for me. There, get you gone; what art groping for?"

Fiamma advanced an uncertain step. "Let Pietro's sister part from you in peace."

"Peace, fool?" The burning hands touched hers, outstretched, pleading. "I have no grudge against you; nay, the truth from your lips has sucked the poison that soaked to my heart when I deemed Pietro false to me——"

She stopped abruptly, as a muscular hairy hand grasped Fiamma.

"The feet of the Brotherhood are on the stairs!"

The moment was for swift action, not for speech. Swiftly, dextrously they worked in the twilight chamber, putting the last touches to their handiwork till, as a sandalled footfall was heard without, all was ready. The shuffle approached the doorway, one black-shrouded form after another stealing through. One by one to the number of eight they came, gathered in the centre of the floor, turning their hooded faces in decorously-veiled curious scrutiny of the golden-haired woman on the couch, the swarthy dwarf at her side, the black-draped catafalque farther back, with the stately figure of the dead astrologer stretched upon it, the silver hair and beard flowing over the tightly-wound graveclothes. Under the stare of the great gray eyes the men shivered vaguely, glad enough when the brother-in-charge received from the strange woman's white hand the parchment

representing certain burial-fees and they were free to bend their backs to the burden.

The funeral-music wailed out again as the brothers, bearing the bier, shuffled down the stairs. It drowned the dog-like, inarticulate howling with which the dwarf suddenly dashed himself on the ground beside his mistress, mouthing her hand with tears and kisses. Twice the misshapen creature turned towards the door, and twice, dog-like, ran back to the woman whose cold face expressed no emotion. Not till a sentence in the strange tongue used between them had been spoken, did he rise, with a sharp cry and hidden face, and rush from the chamber, flinging to the door behind him.

The white face set in the flowing golden hair did not change a muscle at the forlorn cry. But with all her strength Cassandra pushed the silver mirror beside her, so that it might reflect the dark Canal below. As she watched, the wavering reflections of the stars were blotted out by the slow shadow of a black-draped barge. On the prow the hired mourners sent a wailing music out on the night, and the candles of the acolytes in the priests' boat in the rear, twinkled in the mirror to the shaming of the stars.

Slowly in the mirror it passed, the lights, the dumb piping and drumming, and the priests pattering their beads. To the last Cassandra's eyes gazed on the bier high in the centre of the barge, seeing nothing of the written anguish of the dwarf crouched beside it, for looking at the form of the old dead man, stark, with the stars for death-candles and black night for mourner.

The barge creaked slowly to the mirror's edge; the group on the prow vanished. And somewhere—was it within the mirror or without that shut door?—a tramp of feet rose up shatteringly, and a blow, heavy and sudden as a death-stroke, fell.

"Open, in the Name of the Ten!"

The paralysed woman turned her eyes quickly. In her strange loyalty to the Bonaventuri blood, she had forgotten to secure to herself the means of escape from the Capelli's vengeance which she had spoken of. Not one of her subtle poisons, with its dower of swift, painless death, was within reach.

And "Open, open, open, in the Name of the Ten!"

She was trapped, Cassandra the star-gazer, sorceress, poisoner, trapped like the wild beast doomed to be torn limb from limb. Would the Capelli delay her wedding-journey to witness her victim's punishment?

At the thought, Cassandra's low laughter stole out. The frail hands were at play again in the golden hair, twisting it into a gleaming rope.

The futile panels of the door crashed beneath the blows; twenty to one against the witch, the officers of the Ten stepped gingerly over the broken woodwork. They came to a stand as the monks had done, their eyes on the woman leaning above the silver mirror.

"In the Name of the Ten!"

Their hands were on her shoulder as they spoke the words; the woman yielded to their strength.

But the great gray eyes still stared into the silver mirror that, slanted awry, gave back nothing but a dead distorted face and a rope of golden hair twisted about the strangled throat.

And without, the death-gondola slid on through the night.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HOUSE OF THE NIGHTSHADE.

A WIND out of the dying night blew over the death-gondola. The brother poling it—brown gown tucked ungracefully above stout legs—stopped his labours with a jerk. Fiamma, straight and stark under her cerements, felt the quiver with which the boat acknowledged the curb, but she could not see the figure on the poop, gazing under his level hand at some object in the rear.

“The red flag!” The rower spoke to himself.

Fiamma, straight and stark, thrilled slightly. The last time she had heard those words had been in the vine-roofed walk on the convent-island; and the red flag then had flown from a boat bearing a message from the Council, a message which somehow appeared to her as connected with the suddenness of the Cape’li’s State-adoption at the last. Did the boat now overhauling them bear for passenger some grim power that would set her and her lover apart, separate perhaps beyond the hope of reunion?

Voices were by this time bandying over the water, but the leaping of the girl’s own heart in her ears muffled the sounds to her. Only at the jar running beneath did she perceive that the new-comer had pulled alongside.

“Nay, all’s in order. Carpaccio, servant to one Cassandra of Florence, and right of burial in our vaults purchased by money paid to the Brotherhood,” the brother-in-charge called from his own boat.

“In the name o’ the Ten!” The sinister words

sounded close to Fiamma's ear. "Since the appearance of the plague-stricken woman in our midst yesterday, the order has gone forth that for thirty days no dead shall be buried elsewhere than on the pest-isle, there to be laid in the earth, with no delay of prayers or chanting, that danger of the pestilence may thereby be averted from Venice. Our officer will come aboard you, as his duty to the State demands."

"Fate is no saint to be bribed with lighted candles."

Cassandra's words, heavy with despair, set themselves to the rap of the waves over which the death-gondola was once more slipping. They beat in duly on Fiamma's brain, as she lay there, swathed in the graveclothes, the death-mask set upon the face suddenly grown cold and stiff as the face of a corpse. To tear the disguise of death from her, to proclaim herself living flesh and blood, would doom her to a real death as sure and more cruel than that towards which the lapping water was bearing her, in earth tainted with the horror of the plague. The plan which had promised so well in Cassandra's mouth, of an escape during the time the corpse would lie in the convent mortuary, was shattered by the wanton hand of misfortune.

Smoothly the death-gondola slid on, till the grazing of the prow on a shoal told of the landing-place.

"What! a coffin! When it comes to you burying-brothers to count corpses by the score, you'll not be so fainty in casketing them!"

The officer's laugh swelled to a roaring wave in the girl's ear. She felt herself raised once more on men's shoulders, and she could neither speak nor move, though she thought she tore desperately at her bandages, and shrieked the truth about herself. The sensation of falling over the brink of the world that had come to her when she had been thrust through the slide of the dungeons was rising over her again, dragging at her, it seemed, as the water

had clung and dragged. It dragged her into darkness, and her weight lay heavier upon the bearers.

Presently the darkness began to lighten. The lap of the waves had ceased; the gondola must lie moored somewhere on a sunny sea. Perhaps it was the siesta-hour that had hushed the world to sleep in its lap. The girl ached with lying in one position, and tried to move, but her arms bound straightly to her sides prevented her. The thought of the graveclothes, the death-mask, rushed back upon her. She was weak with her swoon, but her helplessness could no longer be borne; she writhed till her hands were free and she could snatch the mask from her face.

She was free, but she still lay straight and stark. Her eyes were open, but darkness still lay about her; her struggling hands beat against enclosing wood. She was in her coffin, in her grave.

And Mark!

The thought recalled the girl to life, oddly mingling with the memory of the dream in the Euganean hills, when Death, that seemed to threaten her, had showed her lover's face.

Her breath struggled in anguish at the pressure on her bosom; she clasped her hands on it and touched the key of her prison-house!

The Cardinal's crucifix was in her hand, and she struck at the coffin with it, feeling splinters of the rough wood falling on her at every cut. Her breathing was torture, but she fought on, widening the track the dagger had made, till at last she could thrust her strong brown hands through it, and tear the frail planks apart. A blinding shower of sand fell upon her, and the fine grains dropping on her face gave her more courage. Here were no clods of earth to free herself from; the air, sifting through the sand and the cracks of the rough coffin, explained the reason of even the feeble breaths that she had been able to draw. She scrambled to her knees, to her feet; shaking

the sand from head and shoulders, she stood upright, panting, dizzy, but a living woman in a living world.

Gasping still, she sank down again, deafened by her quick breaths to a cry wakened by her resurrection. The dwarf, shovelling furiously with bare hairy hands, had paused on his knees, staring at the figure breaking free a couple of feet distant as though he could not believe that his task had been done for him. Fiamma had sat for more than a moment when he ventured to creep to her side, pointing with a mute suggestion of departure to the breaking daylight.

The island about them offered no invitation to linger. The strip of loose sand which had preserved a life was merely the hem of a patch of dun-coloured waste cast on a wide water, which faltered, as it were, here and there into pools oozing up through the roots of the harvest of salt-frosted grass. A ragged fringe of shoals and sand banks, veiled by trickling threads of water, disputed the approach of the lagoon, just breaking into colour and sparkle, in the foreground, with nackerel shading of blues and greens, but in the distance faintly purple, as the mountains marking the line of mainland at the edge of the world, purple mists that wavered into wan flashes of white, as though a troop of ghosts was in flight before the coming of the sun.

But Fiamma had no eyes for those far blue hills and these farther snows. In front of her, where the mist, shattered into the soft colours of a pigeon's breast, was rising, a stately array of towers pierced the clouds which still hovered over them, as though a magic of some fair city was dissolving again into vapours. Tallest of all, the great Campanile flung itself, fearless, as a challenge, its springing grace in contrast to the square mass of the grim palace still in the shadow of its foot, and to the bubbled domes that glinted through the mist slowly dissolving below them about the

prancing golden horses, as though setting them free from their cloud-stables to draw the chariot of the sun into the sleeping city.

Myrtle-gardens and white summer-houses nesting among green, floated on the summer sea; like the fretting of the great enamelled chain of Canal, its windings set with palaces as a chain is set with jewels. The porphyries and jaspers of their sea-fronts seemed to rise from a pavement of mother-of-pearl, the bases still lapped in iridescent mist, till the balconies and sculptured arches above showed poised in the air like veritable mirage-palaces. The impression of lightness and motion which belongs to sail and winged creatures was the atmosphere of this town, where every vista opened on a sunny water, the wide lagoon stretching like a park from the great square itself, where the winged lion and St. Theodore treading his crocodile underfoot, stood sentinels, from their pillars, of the City on the Sea.

Grave and intent, Fiamma sat looking at the scene of the last few weeks, thinking sad thoughts of dead and living. Her eyes roamed over the slender spire of St. George, with the low-lying Island of the Redeemer behind it, the lines of its new church scarcely yet indicated among the sea-pinks of its dune, till the unseeing look came at last on the outermost bulwark of island that kept Venice from the open sea. Other dangers—the Spaniard, or swift-sailing corsairs—had been thought of in building the forts bristling on these spits of sand, and Fiamma felt a fresh chill in the morning sunshine at the recollection that boats going out from Venice must pass under their ominous shadows.

Shivering a little, she rose slowly, her indomitable courage crystallising afresh. The movement was eagerly hailed by Piccolo. With a thought of the blood on his hands, Fiamma shrank inwardly from his companionship, and was thankful that he made no

attempt at speech, preserving a watchful gaze out on the sea.

For herself, she walked blindly where her guide led her, too weak to question the whereabouts of the lover who had so utterly disappeared. Wearily the oddly-matched pair plodded through the sand, Fiamma sick at heart, with drooping head. It was with a start she felt the dwarf clutch at her hand, dragging her to crouch behind a blue-moulded trunk of alder, grown awry as though beaten to its knees in its quarrel with the sea-wind.

The mists were all gone now. Venice, lying in the blue curves of sea and sky, seemed two Venices, the city moored on the shining water appearing hardly more real than the one enclosed in the crystal below. Fiamma, peeping cautiously round the lichened wood, saw a single boat making for their shore.

It was no great sight in this world of boats, yet as the little craft drew nearer, something in the tower's attitude set her heart leaping wildly. So she gazed for a moment; then she darted past Piccolo, running knee-deep into the warm summer sea before she stopped, tears and laughter making April in her face, as she held out greeting arms to her husband.

"How—how came you to guess my whereabouts?"

"I left you here, child." Talbot's face was graver than usual as he caught her in a long straight embrace, in which already the lover's rapture seemed to have given place to the husband's deeper tenderness. "And you—let's look! You are unhurt, praise the saints! or is it the ill-favoured goblin yonder that we must give the wax to?"

"That's saved me." Fiamma touched the crucifix. "But you—you are here, and I was faithless and doubted you!"

"Sweet chuck, didst think you had a will-o'-the-wisp for sweetheart, with a trick of vanishing when your steps were in miry places? I had scarce made

up my mouth to trust you with the witch and that lob-lie-by-the-fire of hers, if I had not thought little harm could befall while I took post on the priests' barge as one of Cassandra's household, and set sail in the wake of the death-gondola."

"Ah! you were there!"

The hold of Talbot's arms tightened on her.

"And learnt that purgatory comes before the resurrection," he said, but the gay tone failed. "Sweeting, may we never again know torture like the seeing you shovelled in that cursed coffin into the sand, and I knowing that all I could do would be to save you for a worse fate. Had I not seen that imp there had hidden himself in the few moments that the monks stopped on the shore, I should have dared all to do what I did later."

"And that——"

Talbot kissed her again.

"Faith, 'tis a rough story for pretty pink ears, but most men would think the wife I have excuse enough for doing my deed. I know not whether the guard set by the men had a suspicion of me, but when he was stepping down into his shallop, and the brothers were steering for their convent, he bade me bear him company to Venice. His skiff was swift, said he; and so it needs to be, if we're to reach the mountains to-night!"

They were floating out to sea already, the dwarf curled in the bows, the oars bending like whips under Talbot's splendid strength.

"You killed him?"

Not till I found his life must pay for yours. At first, being mar. to man, I offered civilly to abort ship, telling him I would buy his boat at his own price, and that the worst that would befall him would be the being left to kick his hee's on the pest-island till a passing sail should make in to the rescue. But he, in spite of his Italian blood, had no

nose for a good bargain, and leapt on me like a wild-cat, so that to save his soul from the sin of murder I must needs toss the flesh of him overboard."

Fiamma shuddered, but she said no more. In Talbot's whole aspect, the glitter of the blue eyes and the set of the usually smiling lips, she recognised that the man in him had turned to bay, the quivering muscles on his arms telling of the fierce haste put out to come to her. A strange delight flooded her as the boat raced on, leaving the northern fort on its left, as it made for the mainland straight as a sea-gull outstripping the storm.

Sandshoals on the right checked the sweep of the boat's curve, herding it as it came within reach of the fort's guns. Talbot, not hanging on his oars for a moment, threw a quick look over his shoulder.

"Those gentry will ask for our passports, if we haven't luck," he said.

As he spoke they asked, the culverin's heavy roar startling the fugitives' faces towards the quarter whence the warning to stand had come. The boat's pace did not slacken; held for the shore, she ran on, and Talbot set his teeth.

"Flat on the boards, girl, they'll aim next time," he commanded, as the guns spoke again, the water foaming under the bows showing by how little the balls had missed their mark.

Fiamma, flat on her face, heard the grim orders to halt, the hissing splashes of the shot dropping astern. The few moments spent thus seemed an eternity before her husband drew in his breath sharply.

"Ha! their water-dogs give chase! 'Tis the best rick to them."

Peering cautiously over the thwarts, Fiamma caught a glimpse of the long black boat, fringed with oars. She had hardly seen it before a violent lurch threw her back on the bottom-boards; the dwarf had leapt up in the bows. Naked to the hips,

he stood waving his black shirt above his head—a black flag streaming out to the pursuer.

The men from the fort seemed to read the riddle almost as soon as shown. Talbot, rowing for the dear life could not interpret the slackening of the enemy's speed, but a hoarse cry from the dwarf made him luff half a point with his oar as a man in the pursuing boat aimed with an arquebuse straight and steadily on them. The shot was a near one, and Talbot flung a mocking smile towards the marksman, confounded enough to see the pursuer swing round deliberately, returning to the fort.

"Now what a plague lies in that shirt of his?" he panted, meeting Fiamma's puzzled gaze. "Had it been the flag of Merry England, it could not have cleared the seas better."

Looking still at the shirt dabbling in the water, Fiamma had a sudden inspiration.

"The black flag! The sign of the plague! No wonder they hung back and dared to come no nearer, after the long shot to sink us had failed."

Her husband whistled in comprehension.

"Ay, 'twas a shrewd thought of the goblin, with plague panic already in Venice. Truly these Veretians have a double fear of Death, to make up for their not fearing his twin, Sin, at all."

The edges of dry land were gathering themselves up now in front of the boat, scarcely more at first than a film on the black water, but with every yard pushing the water more definitely back. The drowned world of the marshes lay before the fugitives, life and colour washed from it, as in the hour when the first Flood heard the recall sounded. The sea crept on and up, spreading octopus arms out over the land; into the broadest of these Talbot struck, making for the cluster of red fences that marked a village brooding under its brick campanile.

"Food and a change of clothes will make us now

men to ourselves and to our friends over there," he remarked, with a nod towards the north, where the domes of Venice still showed faintly in the distance. "If men are to be trusted, we shall find Ben Levi before us with both."

Fiamma raised her head eagerly. Through all the last crowded hours a reproach had remained with her, for her cavalier parting with the snail-gatherer, stricken as he must have been by the news of his daughter's death in the lagoon the previous day.

"He has escaped from the Ghetto?"

"I found him making all things ready for the sepulture of his dear mistress when I came straight as a homing dove to the old house last night, meaning to tarry there till the darkness made it safe to fetch you from that New Egypt of the Hebrews. Save for him, I might have searched for you long enough; but he told me you had broken bounds and, by token of the secret panel left open, had gone to try conclusions with the witch. Wild mistress mine, how will it be with that untamed will of yours now that you have set a master over you?"

One of Fiamma's shy, lovely bridling answered his teasing glance.

"Wife's love were weak indeed if 'twas not strong enough to bind a woman's will," she whispered, turning to hide her rosy cheeks by gazing at the village close on them, the canal now threading its way through the yellow-stained cottages on its banks, like a green ribbon run through amber beads. Women in red bodices sat here and there in the low-browed doorways, scarcely looking up from their lace-cushions to glance with scant curiosity at these strangers, now trying to find a landing-space between the tubs of fresh water, hillocks of gourds, and heaps of shellfish that littered every foot of the narrow sea-board.

Talbot glanced impatiently around him.

"It will be a bad jest if we have to set forth on the

track of the Wandering Jew," he said, "thrusting the boat in at last between two barges. "He promised to wait us here with certain money, for my pockets are as bare as barns in June till an honest merchant-man in Florence hands over a sum in charge for me."

Even as he spoke, a girl, plying her bobbins deftly as she walked, came towards them, sending coquettish sidelong glances at the brown black-curled youth in the garments of foreign cut which Fiamma had retained even under Carpaccio's shroud. The air of weariness in the lithe figure seemed to appeal to the little peasant; she bit a corner of her white headkerchief as she sidled nearer, holding out a slice of flame-tinged melon to Fiamma.

"Rest you, pretty youth," she said. "The old hook-beaked Jew can wait. 'Twill be good for his soul to do so within the sound of Christian church-bells."

"A Jew! Where, chuck?" demanded Talbot.

The girl turned from him with a pout.

"Rest, little puppy," she reiterated to Fiamma. "Sit here with me in the shade while I do tiny aves or so of my lace; that strapping *cavaliere* with you can go forward to chaffer with Father Abraham."

With a smiling glance Fiamma complied, glad of the pretext of stretching herself in the cool shade till the details of their further journey should be arranged. The little lace-maker looked pitifully at the pale face with the faint blue markings of fatigue about mouth and eyes.

"He has journeyed you beyond your strength, that tow-haired giant," she said indignantly. "If I had seen that in time, I would have sent him a pretty dance to find the old Jew-man who has been nosing about here, waiting your coming since the first cock crew this morning."

A stir among the fishermen moving lazily on the bank stemmed her prattle, her bobbins still flying briskly as she followed the direction of the faces

turned seawards. Baulked by her position on the ground, she jumped up, with an impatient exclamation.

"Now don't take wing, pretty boy," she said, threatening Fiamma with a finger. "I will but see what those rogues there are gaping at; perhaps it is such a great whale as was washed into our canal last Lady Day. If a mass was said for him for every lamp he furnished to the village here, he would be a blessed saint in heaven by now; but as Father Girolamo says there's no sea there, and no need of candles either, perhaps he's better off as he is."

She ran off as she spoke to a tall fellow with his green jacket slung sailor-wise from his shoulder. In an instant she was back again, her mouth agape with importance.

"What do you think?" she panted. "'Tis a boat-load of men from Venice heading for the village, with the great winged lion on the flag at the mast-head! What do you think they want with us? Can it be to take Father Girolamo to make him Pope and Holy Father? My mother says he's half a saint already, and all Popes are not as such!"

Fiamma grasped her striped petticoat, pulling her down to whisper.

"Listen! They want *me*!"

"*Sanctissima!*"

Fiamma's hand stilled the outcry. The quick whisper went on for a moment, then the girl jumped up, pulling Fiamma by the hand. Chuckles of girlish laughter broke from her as the two disappeared in the direction of one of the yellow cottages.

Five minutes later, Talbot came sharply round a corner, his face grave enough now. He checked his quick steps scarcely in time to avoid running against two girls seated in the shadow where he had left Fiamma, their heads close together over the intricacies of the lace-stitches, called "aves" and "paters" by the devout marsh-folk.

"Where is the youth who was here but now?" he demanded.

"Vanished, signore, and may it please you," responded Fiamma's admirer, lifting a dimpled face to him.

Talbot's eyes flashed blue lightnings. "Vanished? Where? How long ago? Here!" he snatched at the gold chain and medal about his neck; "that for you, if you point me to him!"

The little peasant's mouth and eyes lengthened with merriment as she caught at the bribe, pointing the brown finger of the other hand to the girl sitting beside her, bent over the lace-cushion.

Talbot wheeled, breaking into laughter, as he met the long hazel eyes under the white kerchief that hid the brown curls. The next moment his face was grave again.

"Those who seek us have keen eyes. Has no one noted you? Will the wench keep faith?" he whispered.

"A risk is all that remains to us in the way of safety," replied Fiamma. "The trick Carnation once taught us of letting those who seek a man find a woman may yet serve another turn."

The boat by this time was in plain sight, rowing steadily towards the spot on the quay where the weather-beaten *podestà* was standing gravely to receive it. Talbot instinctively touched the spring that held his sword in its scabbard as he stood carelessly before the girls, apparently bantering them in his foreign Italian, but taking in every word that passed with ears sharpened with anxiety.

"My children, you hear their excellencies! Have any of you aught to tell us of a black-curled youth of tall, slender stature who has fled Venice to escape from justice?"

The bobbins in Fiamma's fingers flew at large through the lace, as with sick heart she bent over

it. That the messengers were direct from Venice, and not from the forts, was an unexpected stroke of good fortune, since in that case they could not know that not only Talbot but the dwarf had shared her flight, and moreover could drop no hint of the dreaded plague to turn the present friendliness of the villagers against her.

For not a man would own to having seen a hair of the fugitives whom the report of being in hiding from justice had haloed in their eyes. Yet, the next instant, the bobbin all but dropped from Fiamma's fingers, as she saw one of the pursuers strolling towards them, to clap Mark upon the back.

"*Hold*, sir Englishman, are you everywhere at once, like Messer Domeneddio? Only yesterday you were in the Ghetto."

"And but last night with the pretty Capelli," retorted Talbot coolly. "And by her bidding on the road to Florence row."

"Off it, rather," returned the man, with a laugh. "Well, since I myself was one of them who saw you safe as a lobster in the cage in the Capelli Palace, it's not hard guessing that our Bianca has her own little reasons for setting you free to fly again. You seem lucky with our women, signore," he went on, stooping to touch Fiamma's chin—a movement she resented with a rush of burning colour, as the marsh-girl threw herself coquettishly in front of her.

"What! two of them, and as pretty a brace as the Doge's ducks from Murano! Luck's yours," laughed the officer, as he turned to take his place in the boat again with the rest of his companions. In another moment the oars were creaking in the rowlocks, as the searchers bore away towards another village on their quest. Fiamma sat with bowed head over the lace-cushion, and as Talbot stooped to lay a hand on her shoulder, with a fond whisper, she burst into a storm of tears under the caressing touch.

"What, dainty, tears for the list of your 'scapes?" Talbot remonstrated. "'Tis a mu'h a miracle to see you weep as any wonder-working Madonna; but we must be on our travels before any other embassy can come hot-foot from the forts over there, to tell tales to these good folk of the black flag with which master hop-o'-my-thumb scared the chase."

At this recollection of Piccolo, they turned to look for him but the dwarf had vanished. It was a relief to be free of his uncanny company, but Cassandra's words of a last message to the Capelli lingered in Fiamma's memory, making her guess they would overtake him on the road.

"And to tell truth, I shan't turn chief mourner if we do not," said Talbot, as, with his arm round her waist, the pair walked through the village, at the further end of which, under a *pergola* latticed with hops and flowering bells, the figure of the snail-gatherer stood in its characteristic pose of patience, beside the mules provided for the travellers. The strange new tears rose again to Fiamma's eyes at the stricken aspect of the old man, making her falter in her eager words of gratitude.

"It is naught," he said, "it is naught. In any case, I was leaving Venice, trying, if the thing might be, to bury a broken heart in the dust of strange roads; yet of what avail? since grief is like the plague of leprosy, making part even of the garments of him on whom the curse has fallen."

Fiamma turned to look back wistfully as her mule began the journey. The old figure stood under the green little shrine, to the last gazing after the gay peasant-dress which they had agreed was the safest for the girl to retain for the present. Not till the village on the marshes had been blurred by distance out of sight did Fiamma discover at her saddle-bow a casket of oddly-scented foreign woods, full to the brim of strings of seed-pearls, bracelets and anklets

of gold and silver, and necklaces of golden coins. The ornaments which the sea-woods and shells of the lagoon replaced on the body of the dead Jewess would make a dowry worth counting for Fiamma Bonaventuri.

Yet, in spite of tender thoughts of the bent, gray figure moving handfasted to his sorrow, over alien paths, in spite of beautiful, evil Bianca flaunting southwards in her triumph, in spite even of dead Carnation white and still somewhere in those opaline hazes to the north, it was impossible that, in the journeyings of these days the young husband and wife should not seem to themselves to be straying in a golden age. Hot summer had come to the land, and the horses' feet trod upon the pavement of gold mosaic as the pair rode league after league in groves where sunlight checkered the moving shadows and blackened the mulberries to ripeness. Once or twice the golden days were surrendered to delicious idleness, when the travellers would camp in some glade strewn with the sun-dried catkins of sweet chestnuts husked on the grass below. The journey then was taken up in the short, moon-white nights, when the air grew cool with the earth's swing away from the sun, and fireflies streaked the dust with light, as the owls and bats sailed a-haunting on great silent wings. Days and nights, Fiamma ripened and mellowed in their sweetness like her own mountain-fruits, and Mark Talbot rode well content with the wife he had won in his strange wooing.

But the days ran on. The groves of chestnut and mulberry drew back behind and the road plunged into sunless pine forests, aisled like some vast cathedral where sacrilege had been done in a far-back age. Hour after hour the horses' hoofs moved noiselessly over dry stretches of pine-needles, and the tawny tree-stems slipped away behind the riders like some spectral army on the march. The young

voices and laughter grew involuntarily silent, the coo of the doves above their heads filling them with vague uneasiness, the flight of a lizard under the advancing hoods seemed to tell of a curse steadily coming nearer. In their travel they had avoided men's dwelling-places for prudence' sake, but now they ventured to speak with the peasants who made a livelihood by scaling and drying the great pine-cones that, garnered into heaps, sent an aromatic incense through the forest. The nights were, strangely enough, less ghostly than the days. Then, camped beside their fire of cones, Fiamma would lay her head on her husband's shoulder, hearing the stealthy tread of the wild oxen coming to sniff the air about the strangers, as she dreamily watched the stars which, Talbot told her, would sail with her overseas to that England which he had made home to her.

It was after the long dreamless sleep of such a night that the girl woke one morning by the ashes of their fire. She was alone, but she rubbed sleep from her eyes with no fear, since her husband had spoken the night before of going to renew their stock of food at one of the villages midway between the forest and the line of sand-hills forming outworks to the sea. That evening would, the pine-gleaners had told them, see them out of the wood, and Fiamma sat and waited with good patience. The forest was growing more gracious in its advance to touch hands with the open country; flowering thickets of whitehorn and acacia had broken ground among the pines, and wild roses climbed and clung to the old trunks, like nymphs fooling satyrs bronzed with sun and wind. Fiamma stretched out a hand to a honeysuckle bush near, weaving the red and white sprays into a garland to set on her curls, the curls that Talbot liked to twine about his fingers.

The forest offered a mirror at a few yards distance, where a stream slid under brown-seeded rushes down

to the sea, of which he wind whispered perpetually in the tree-tops.

Fiamma started as she stooped over the water. A snake, with a dry hard eye, uncoiled itself from the lily-leaves where it had been basking, striking at the girl's face with a forked tongue. It had not touched her, but Fiamma instinctively gave back, conscious of an unfriendliness in the wood which set her to straining her eyes on every side for her husband.

"Cavaliere Padino has a stake of his own now, and turns coward at risking himself for the game's sake," she thought, throwing herself full-length on the pine-needles.

Arms under head, she lay thinking. The hurrying events of the last days had made the present all-important to her, and till now she had hardly grasped the lie of matters. The move that she had played so gallantly had failed, counter-mate by Cassandra's consuming jealousy, which had prevented the Capelli's flight from Venice, in the fear that Pietro Bonaventuri should have planned this way to repossess himself of a beautiful wife. That the suddenness in the adoption of St. Mark had been owing to the representations of the Florentine embassy, was of course not known to Fiamma; but she guessed well enough that, her innocence once formally established, the Venetian adventuress would be likely to lose no time in snatching at the crown of her successful scheming. Thus far Fiamma's brain had strayed half indifferently, when suddenly a new idea roused her unpleasantly.

"Should I keep faith with the Cardinal, and warn him that the thing is about to take road for Florence?"

The problem was one of those shuttlecocks of thought that can be bandied endlessly to and fro. Fiamma lay following its flights, unable to decide whether a distaste for hunting another woman to the death was merely a mask to her unwillingness

to confront the Cardinal, or whether loyalty to the latter involved the risk of her new-found happiness. To escape from the maze at last, she rose to her feet, becoming conscious as she did so that the sun was three-quarters towards his noon, and that a healthy hunger spoke insistently of Falbot's protracted delay. The intangible dread that haunted the forest seemed an omen as she strayed here and there, hailing the sight of a cone-gatherer descending a pine tree by the notches he had cut in its bark as he climbed.

"I pray you, have you seen from up there a man, tall and fair-haired, coming towards us?"

The man shifted his pole for beating the branches.

"Tall and fair?" he repeated. "I saw such an one this morning, when I was in a tree over there"—he pointed where the forest thinned towards the marshes. "A brave train of horsemen had pulled up to greet him coming out of the wood, and the sun was on his fair hair as he stood beside the litter hung with purple, and talked to the pretty lady within."

The fear that haunted the wood had taken shape.

"Which road did he take thereafter, good fellow?"

"By the Body of Moses, he looked no fool, wench, so the path of the pretty lady's was his. For they brought him a horse black as the longest night in the year, and he sprang on its back without ever putting toe in stirrup, and rode off beside the litter, with all the bridle-chains ringing like mass-bells."

"Where? Blood of Christ, where?"

"Towards the House of the Nightshade. But what's your hurry? Your brown face would fly light in the scale beside a wainty lady's, white as toadstools and red as thorn-berries, and golden curls to net a man's heart."

But Fiamma had already fled from him, crashing through the undergrowth in the direction pointed out.

with every step she trod underfoot she thought of Talbot's faithlessness, keeping faith in him with a dogged loyalty that somehow increased her hatred of Bianca. To meet her, to grip the white throat with those wild brown hands, till from the livid lips the truth of what had befallen the captive should be wrung, was all her purpose, and she strove towards it through the furnace of an Italian noon with the endurance of the mastiff of her husband's badge.

She had burst from the forest now, and the marshes lay open to her sight. It was with a dull surprise that she saw the castle that the man had spoken of rear itself before her; no towered mass of cornered masonry, such as those with which her short stay in Florence had made her familiar, but a gracious summer villa frescoed on its outer walls, with vine-roofed walks and perspectives of blue mountains, with the marsh in front of it subdued into water-channels and fountained ponds, yellow with flowering flags, while a green tangle of blossoming shrubs threw a cool shade into the wide piazzas and summer parlours.

Gleams of colour and snatches of gay voices came through the green wilderness, and at the sight and sound Fiamma quickened her pace, resolutely holding in abeyance the thought of what she might see. The path which she had struck into as the most direct, curved away from the gay company; it opened on the end of a colonnade, the white pillars of which were latticed by purple-fruited branches of nightshade. Various rooms lay in cool twilight along the colonnaded length; from one of them Mark Talbot's laugh rang out suddenly.

Fiamma's wild haste fell from her. Slowly, with seeming coolness, she stepped forward, walking straight to the room whence the laugh had come.

Her husband was leaning against the open casement, his face flushed above his wont. One hand

hung by his side, in the clasp of a woman kneeling beside him, the flaxen curls concealing her face. The lithe grace of the attitude, the wonderful white arms and hands that held the brown fingers prisoner, were not needed to tell Fiamma that the Capelli and she had met once more. In the second that she stood uncertain, Talbot had seen her, his eyes using the hard glitter as they looked.

"Verily, Madama, there stands the reason yonder why a lady's wishes cannot be law to me," he said, the ring of a sudden resolution in his studiously careless tone.

Bianca raised her eyes slowly. She met Fiamma's gaze full.

That they saw more than the disordered peasant-dress and honeysuckle garland fading on the dark bright curls, was apparent by the woman's instant pallor. She still held Talbot's hand, dragging herself by it to her feet, as she gazed at the figure standing as once before in the Venetian bathroom, between dark and light, the curious crucifix which she had held then in her hand now hanging on her neck. And then suddenly, unexpectedly, the Capelli clapped her hands above her head—a signal answered instantly by the sound of running feet.

Talbot had stepped to his wife's side, holding her hands in a strong grasp, as he looked at the attendants entering the parlour, and from them back again to their mistress's face. Bianca stood a few paces from the couple, one hand pressed on the white bosom under its laces, her eyes still steadily fastened on Fiamma's face.

"Wait without," she commanded the servants, without looking towards them; but she seemed to count the withdrawing footsteps before she spoke again, in a breathless, hissing whisper. "Who or what are you?"

"My wife, Madonna," Talbot returned, not losing the hand he held.

Bianca waved him aside with an impatient gesture.

"You are the one I saw in the bath! You who have played with death and won, not once but twice! You who have juggled even the Ten, and escaped from Venice in spite of the price upon your head—you are all of that!"

"And my wife to the back of it, Madonna," repeated Talbot.

Bianca glanced at him distastefully.

"Your wife who dwelt with Carnation the courtesan?"

"No courtesan, but a woman pure as all the water in the churches will never make you!" Fiamma broke silence in hot defence of her dead friend. "The wife of one dead by Capelli sword and Capelli feud, and I the sister of the husband murdered by you, that you might try with a new mate to live an honest woman once more! That was the bond that held us two together, the debt of vengeance we shared to your House!"

Talbot bit his lip. The Capelli's face was still white as wax, but the fear that had fixed the turquoise eyes had vanished under Fiamma's hasty speech, and a touch of scorn seemed to have relaxed the tension about the mouth.

"One of the debtors at least is dead without paying her share of the score."

"None the less will it be paid for the sin that was sinned against God as against her," retorted Fiamma. "And a long reckoning makes a heavy payment!"

"Faith, the same might be said of a tongue," Talbot muttered, as Bianca turned from them, beginning to pace up and down the room with all her supple grace. She had taken half a dozen turns before she wheeled again on them.

"Whither are you journeying?" she demanded nastily.

"Like yourself, to the City of Lilies, Madonna,"

Talbot returned, startled the next instant by the woman's change of countenance

"You! you to Florence!" she ejaculated, falling back a pace. The blue eyes had reddened, the face, grown ashy, was twitching as once before he had seen it in extremity of fear and anger. "What to do there?" she whispered after a pause; the words seemed pressed out under the hands clutched convulsively on her bosom.

"Take ship for England, and farewell of murders and mysteries, with the shores of Italy," answered Talbot, further puzzled by the scornful gesture with which Bianca put aside his words.

"You could take ship at Leghorn or Pisa."

"Hardly, without passage-moneys, and those wait us at Florence."

"I will give you money!" cried the other. The white throat was panting like a dog's as she almost threw herself upon Talbot, offering with both hands a purse that had hung at her girdle. "Take it, 'tis a knight's ransom, and swear to me to turn aside from Florence!"

Fiamma impulsively pressed her husband's hand in swift wordless protest, even as Talbot thrust back the bag. The two hands touched each other, as the lovers' eyes met in a flash of comprehension.

The eyes of the woman opposite had dwelt on the caressing fingers. Her face grew stiller, save for a slight lifting of the lip that showed the eye-tooth as a snarl might have done. She stretched out her hand, touching Talbot on the breast with dainty familiarity.

"What! the bride will not be denied the sight of the great wedding that's to be?" she said, and her voice had grown suddenly steadier. "Well, master Englishman, young husband though you are, I'll wager a falcon you have learnt already that the ropes are not yet twisted that will hold a wilful woman from her way. What! we're kinsfolk after a fashion at

least, and you shall ride to Florence after all in my company; that is, if you're willing to cheat the siesta-time of an hour or so, since I must make no more loitering, if I am to take Cecco by surprise."

"Fair thanks to you, Madonna, but our honeymoon is too new to us to share its lustre with any third person," replied Talbot lightly, squeezing his wife's arm in significant repression of the start with which she had saluted Bianca's mention of her journey. The words chimed in strangely with the thoughts that had come to Fiamma in the forest earlier in the day—a hurried headlong flight to warn the Cardinal that his enemy was almost at the gates.

A curious gleam in the Capelli's eyes at Talbot's refusal was hidden by the white down-dropped lids. She paused for an instant, but her voice expressed nothing but frank friendliness when she spoke again.

"Your courtship is a novel fit to tell or to be told by those seven young gentlewomen who fell in with their true loves that Tuesday at Santa Maria Novella, as Messer Boccaccio relates," she cried. "Ah, sir, now I see why you played that game for love in forging my father's signet and the rest of it, and why just now you would not hear of a Grand Duchess carving your fortunes in Florence for you! Too proud, master lover, to owe aught but love to any, not man but woman; but at least you must spend a wedding-night under kinswoman Bianca's roof, if for no other reason than in token you have forgiven her her share in the game of cross-purposes she, you, and your bride have played so long."

An idea struck Talbot that the inexplicable veerings of the woman's mood were prompted by fear lest their journey had been undertaken with the object of stirring up the inflammable Florentines against the Venetian with a sinister past for the dowry of a Grand Duchess. To outstrip them at any price, to be securely wife and sovereign before the vengeance that Bonaventuri

blood might devise, seemed a plausible motive. Fully aware of the impolicy of offering the rulers of the city which they were under the necessity of entering, he was hesitating for words, when Fiamma burst in with stornly speech.

"Forgiveness between us there can be none, Bianca Capelli!" she cried. "You are false, for all your smooth words and frank looks, rotten as a week-old corpse, and always and everywhere it's war, war, war between us! War, and all's fair in war, Madonna, so, on guard!"

"All's fair," repeated the Capelli in a whisper, her hands at her bosom once more. "And do you think, wild-cat, to bear down Bianca Capelli? I tell you that proud will of yours *shall* be bent; you and your husband *shall not* flout my roof—" She stopped abruptly, the muscles of her throat rippling with the force she put on herself. "Nay, this is sin," she went on gently. "Poor Bianca needs yet to learn patience. Child," the blue eyes were fixed unflinchingly on Fiamma, "woman is hard on woman. I will not affront your blood by telling you of wrongs inflicted by a husband on the Venetian girl who for him had left home and friends; keep, as you will, a lifelong belief that the death in the Orti was murder rather than just expiation." She held out white hands entreatingly. "Yet cannot you believe that I, on the threshold of my new life, would fain part in peace with the old?"

The truth instinctive in Fiamma stirred her into fierce contempt of this woman, with the frank good-fellowship of words that scarcely seemed to match with the hard challenge in her eyes.

"My words are not so sweet as yours, Madonna, but they are better worth believing," she said curtly. "Now and always, we are enemies."

A jingle of bridle-chains and stamping of horse-hoofs without rose upon her words, but Bianca, though she

fingering her black velvet riding mask for departure, stood still, looking straight before her. Fiamma's pose of defiance accentuated the girl's vigorous grace; the handsome, rich-tinted face could hold its own even with the fair beauty opposite it. As though unconsciously, the woman stretched out a hand to Talbot's arm, walking him to the end of the loggia.

"Tell me truth: you love that gipsy-faced termagant?"

"Your mirror can give you but little pleasure, Madonna, if your eyes see no better than your words make out," returned Talbot bluntly.

The Capelli sighed. "You love her, then?"

Talbot moved sharply from the beautiful face so near his own. He strode back to Fiamma, putting his arm about her waist.

"Madonna asks, do I love you, dainty? How shall we answer her?"

One of Fiamma's flushes and the movement with which she hid it on his shoulder, answered. Talbot's smile challenged the watching woman.

"True as my sword, pure as my mother, and sweet as herself should I not love her. Madonna?" he demanded.

Bianca made no answer in words. She flung out her hands towards Talbot, wringing them in each other with a curious movement, as though ridding their whiteness of a stain. Then, still in silence, she wheeled from them, hastening towards the sounds of departure beyond the green growth without.

Fiamma still in his arm, Talbot moved in the same direction, emerging from the colonnade on an open space where the cavalcade had apparently only awaited their mistress to put themselves in motion. The Capelli was already in the litter, hung in orthodox fashion with mourning purple; at the appearance of the lovers, she caught the amethyst button securing her riding-mask in her teeth, as though to guard

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herself from the temptation of speech. The face, inscrutable for the mask, was turned on Trilbot to the last, as her train clattered over the causeway winding through the marsh.

The husband and wife were left standing in the long shadow of the house, ringed about by the water-land. The silence of the summer afternoon closed in on it and them like a pall.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BIANCA'S HOSPITALITY.

"Up and hence!"

Fiamma took a step from her husband's side as her impatient lips shaped the words. Her eyes were tawny-gold, her cheeks carnation, her whole slender body a-quick with the excitement of a mettled racer that sees the course.

"Up, up, and hence!" she repeated urgently. "We must race to-night and win."

"Win an ounce of brains and divide them fairly between us; for, faith, I feel to need some," answered Talbot. "What's your hurry, and to race whom and to win what? That's the riddle that I'm cracking my old wits upon."

"To Florence, and before the Capelli! Trust me, you shall hear afterwards," answered Fiamma, dragging in an agony at the strength opposed good-humouredly to her.

"Why, chuck, never talk of dividing the brains; for, by Boston Stump, you'll need all you get!" Talbot laughed, drawing her back into the cool loggia. "Will you, after all, ride with your sister-in-law to the Florence where she was so keen that we should not go, that you are hot-foot to overtake her party? Troth, if we did, your haste would not have made many yards before the robin redbreasts could set to work burying us in leaves."

"'Tis true, but the delay tortures me!" groaned Fiamma, sinking on the couch in the room where the Capelli had been. "We must watch them out of

sight, and then—— But what chance brought you together?"

"Fegs! she was the early bird who got the worm. When I found myself in the thick of all the company as I left the forest, I thought the birdling I had left behind would be the safer for giving no hint of her. So it was I fell in with Madonna's hospitality, and learnt how she had set out in a hurry from Venice, lest the talk of the plague should knock at the gates of Florence before her, and how a freak of hers had forbidden news of her coming, since Cassandra once prophesied to her that she should be met in her State entry by Death."

Fiamma had drawn his arm about her, turning her face away from his eyes as he went on. Womanly pride and wifely loyalty forbade her asking an explanation of her having found the Capelli at her husband's feet, but the recollection balked. Talbot pressed her closer.

"But with your coming the fat fell in the fire, and the devil said *Amen*. For I had fought off Mistress Bianca's invitation that I would hoist sails for Florence with her——"

"Though she asked you on her knees!" The words rushed of themselves from Fiamma's lips.

Talbot bent down to look straight in her eyes.

"I can tell you no more, dainty," he said quietly. "Fly-blown piece of goods though she be, she's a woman still, and no man worth the name would make a boast of what a woman, were she Queen of Sheba or Doll Groat-o'-Nights, though of him."

Fiamma yielded to his kiss, and smiled into the eyes holding hers so strongly. The two kept silence, each busy in thought with the strange interview, a growing puzzle knitting Talbot's brows.

"Ric d'es roost in your company," he said, stroking the tangled curls where the wildwood crown still drooped. "The matter was plain sailing enough till

you came into it, but with you came the mysteries. Why should the Capelli wish to turn us aside from Florence now, and why should she press a night's hospitality here upon us?"

Fiamma glanced cautiously around before she answered. The monotonous croaking of the frogs in their kingdom of the water-land, and the buzz of a wasp visiting the figs blackening against the wall, overrode the whisper, which she dared make no louder, of what still must be done in the Cardinal's service.

Talbot whistled and nodded as he listened.

"I'll wager the first hawk I unhood over the fens again, that Madonna has her guess of something of all this," he said. "Italian that she is, she does not find it in her heart to believe that you would lay aside your scheme of vengeance, even if she does not guess that a strong hand at your back is moving to checkmate her. Well, sweetheart, I do not fairly stomach the notion of setting the dogs on a woman whose sins, as she says, are past and done with, but since you made yourself a pawn for this Cardinal in his game, I suppose you must play your move."

He rose, as if the movement were distasteful to him, keeping his arm, however, about the girl as they walked down the loggia towards the courtyard opening on the causeway.

"They must have entered the forest by now, unless their horses cry cousins with snails," he was saying, as they stepped out from the screen of climbing plants and lush growth of bushes to the open beyond.

Then he stopped abruptly, rubbing a hand over his eyes as though clearing them from a dream. Around the house, among the roots of green growing things, a broad water was dimpling in the sunshine, stretching from their feet to the ombre wall of forest that set a black boundary to its ripples. A single dragonfly, like a bared stiletto, flickered hither and thither

over the sunny lake, as though seeking the white and gold lily-cups that lay below the blue shining surface.

"She has cut the dykes!" the Lincolnshire man cried sharply.

Fiamma, hardly able to free her mind from fancies of enchantment and magic, looked questioningly at the face bent on the ripples. Here and there swirls of turbid water, or a green branch rising to the surface, told of the recent inrush of the flood, but the water washing quietly a foot below the terrace had reached its height. As the fact dawned upon Talbot, the fear that had leapt into his face gave place to bewilderment.

"It's why and wherefore with a vengeance," he said, turning to the girl. "The water can rise no farther—I see the flood-mark—so Mistress Bianca could not have hoped to drown us like otters in our hole. I thought there was mischief in our pretty hostess's look when she spoke of our not flouting her roof; but what's her object in forcing us in this fashion to lodge under it?"

"'Tis a more evil one than the delaying us in our journey, for she had a qualm at the last in leaving you in the trap she had set," cried Fiamma, with a swift intuition of the meaning in the Capelli's gesture of hand-washing. "If it had been possible to have brought the doom, be it what it may, that threatens us, on me alone, she would have done it."

"I owe her no thanks for that," returned Talbot, holding her closer, as he drew a pistol from his belt. "Perhaps, though, when she could strike at her ease in the forest, it's not likely she would set her mind on having us done to death here; but perhaps she has left a dagger behind her; let's play *I spy* for such a one while daylight lasts."

Over the pavilion they went, clasped like lovers, but kept as hunters, passing through room after room with its ceiling of ivory plaste, wrought into

tournament or banquet-feast, or painted with rosy Cupids or large-limbed women with little of the goddess about them except the scantiness of their draperies--room after room, with tall cabinets and cushioned divans and buffets with their load of quaint drinking-vessels of horn and glass, graceful but scarcely valuable enough to tempt a covetous eye or hand. Cards and dice were scattered on one or two tables, half hiding the marbles inlaid with dead birds or a heap of shells and jewels; a fan of scarlet feathers seemed thrown down by a dainty hand on a sofa just quitted; but the searchers noticed with surprise that while every one of the apartments, linked to each other by curtained arches, spoke of delectable shade from the Italian sunshine, not one of them offered accommodation for the night. The revels held in this summer palace must, it would seem, set the summer night at defiance, or be shattered, like feasts of faery, at the coming of the dark.

The search had ended in a blank. As though impatient of the green gloom cast by the shrubs on the rooms opening on the colonnade, the solitary inhabitants of the villa seated themselves on the steps above the water, their faces towards the west, whence in an hour or so the dying day would pass, like an Eastern king, in a great burning. Fiamma looked anxiously towards it.

"Can we be trapped here to starve?"

"No," returned the fen-man, "since Madonna has watched me, from her Venetian balconies, swim and dive like a wild duck. If you have no fear of an hour or so alone in this sleeping palace, I can cross the lake and beg, borrow, or steal a boat from the fisher-folk of the sandhills yonder, and so we shall be quit of Bianca's hospitality before midnight."

Fiamma shuddered slightly.

"What must be, must, but it will be dreary waiting

in this House of the Nightshade." Then she stopped, clutching Talbot's hand. "*Miasma!* 'Tis the answer to the riddle!"

"Her soul to Hell!"

The words came slowly through the man's shut teeth. He had grown white with the anger which sucks the blood from the heart to send it seething through the brain; his careless eyes had turned to a cold gray. When he was fighting for his life, Mark Talbot had not lost his smile, but he looked dangerous now.

Fiamma's eyes were lifted anxiously to the west, where the blue seemed already deepening and fusing into the sunset flame. She turned to him and laughed, her head going up and back in its brave, pretty defiance.

"Bianca has baited her trap cunningly," she said. "This pavilion, built for hawking parties to lounge away a hot noon in, must be a cave of death when the miasma from the marshes is set free like other ghosts at nightfall. Caged here by the rising of the water, after all it would seem no great hardship to wait here a summer night till some woodman, going to work in the forest, should see our signal for a boat. So that fair-faced Judas calculated on our thinking, knowing us to be strangers to the ways of these marshes."

She paused to look inquiringly at Talbot's actions. He had turned back into the loggia, striding with stern, set face through the deserted rooms, sending a swift glance over each. Room after room failed to yield what he sought, and with a muttered oath he came back again into the colonnade, sending his look now along its green lattice-work. Suddenly his face lit up with satisfaction. He had drawn his sword, slashing into an alder bush till the long slender branches were strewn about him on the marble at his feet.

At his first stroke Fiamma had copied him. Running into one of the rooms occupied by Bianca's suite, she had possessed herself of a keen three-edged blade, lying where it had been dropped from some belt; with it in her hand, she threw herself on the cushions, cutting with the same headlong haste as her husband, though she could only guess at his purpose. Talbot had thrown himself on the pavement, beginning some odd weaving work before either spoke.

"This rush of fresh water should lessen the force of the miasma, but for all that we have no time to lose," he said. "There's nothing in all this accursed house to make a raft of, neither doot nor planking; but in the fens I used to push my little sister on such a thing of osier-work as this to the islands where the white swan was on her nest or the reaches where the lilies were moored in their armadas. It looks frail enough, but for all that it's safe, dainty, and the rod that at hours warmed us after a sousing, has taught me skill in ferrying my passenger."

"I have no fear with you, but could I not hold to your shoulder while you swim?"

"I will not have you ride the night through in soaked garments," returned Talbot shortly. "And the night through must be ridden at our hardest, if we are to bring justice on Bianca Capelli."

The night had almost gone as Talbot knelt at last to launch his raft on the water. A bar of smoky gold seemed laid along the skyline; above it, pansy purples from pale to dark fused into each other, only melting at edge into the faint green underlying their stormy splendours as eternity underlies time. Fiamma was pale, but the anxiety in her look was for the sun-sinking out of the sky, as she crouched on the little woven platform, the interstices ingeniously filled up with bunches of wiry roots.

"Out into the sunset on the water the tiny raft floated, steered and propelled by the swimmer

behind it. The sword, placed for safe keeping across Fiamma's knees, glinted like the dangerous blue eyes that were set on their goal of the forest, in the miasmatic depths of which the miasma could not penetrate. The sun sank, and the swimmer swam on.

The breath of the forest came across the water like a greeting as the fugitives neared it. Fiamma lifted up her head and smelt the scent of pine and moss with a rush of glad tears, but the sternness did not fade from Talbot's face as, waist-deep in the water, he stood at last, to carry his wife dry-shod through the thin ripples fretting up and down against the denying land. As he placed her gently on a bank of moss, she clung for a moment, pointing through the trees to the sky, out of which the last gleam was fading.

"But for you?" she whispered.

"No time for lip-service now, sweet chuck, either talk or kisses," returned her husband, drawing her on quickly. "If my memory serves, yonder is the camp on the edge of which our mules were hobbled; let us push for it, for the beasts must latner to-night."

The peasants camped in the little forest-clearing, busied through the daylight in drying in the sun their harvest of gathered pine-cones, turned disappointed faces on the owners of the mules which no doubt had been allotted to themselves, but they answered readily to the inquiries of roads and bridle-paths. The aftermath of colour had not faded from the air before the riders were in motion, riding at the steady, set pace that means going.

The scent of the herbs crushed under the dogged hoofs rose to Fiamma's brain like some strange narcotic, making all things dreamlike to her. On and on and on; their going cleft the night, till the fore fell back behind them and the mules splashed to their fetlocks in running water as they went down

to the fords, and tall sunflowers stood like sentinels with shields of brass over patches of maize or flax. The day had leapt up again into the sky as they rode, but Fiamma could never clearly recall the stages of their journey, nor the sun-steeped square and little brick arcades of Forli, where she had procured swifter beasts than those that had hitherto carried them.

One incident only remained clear to her. The sky was a-shake again with stars, and the travellers were riding through a desert of rocks, splintered, it would seem, from the limestone crags around. The stones leaping from under the climbing hoofs were the only sound in the silence of the mountain, when suddenly a wild figure strode from behind a boulder, laying a sudden hand on Talbot's rein.

"Riding! why ride you so late, brother?"

"I ride on an enemy's heels," returned Talbot, the sternness of his face showing even in the night. "And that I may not lose the race, let me pass."

Fiamma, bewildered in the starlight, looked at the strange apparition, a man in the prime of life, in tattered, weather-beaten scarlet, from head to heel, his matted hair loose about his shoulders.

"Revenge!" he cried at Talbot's words. "It must be sweet to shake a hatred with revenge, rather than let it burn your heart. If revenge is left you, brother, the world's not empty for you."

"Time's walking while we're talking," retorted Talbot. "Let us pass. If the bells of Florence should fall a-chiming wedding-peals before we are in the city, they will be the knells to our revenge."

The other grasped the bridle more firmly.

"Yes, you must have your revenge!" he shouted. "And I can help you to it, for I know these mountains as a damned soul knows the bar of his gridiron. Come, there are paths trodden only by the wild goats and me that will give your enemy into your hands, no matter what start she has had."

He had turned the horses aside, setting them to clamber like the goats themselves, before Fiamma had realised the turn in their affairs. Talbot, close beside her, with an arm always ready to steady her in the saddle, pointed to the stars, at her whispered remonstrance.

"The fellow is steering straight on Florence," he said. "Such a pass as this cuts off leagues of distance."

The horses strained and sweated in the darkness. The air about the riders grew colder, telling of snows stronger than the summer. The naked limestone was about them on all sides, and the streams, leaping from rock to rock, seemed escaping in haste from the desolation. Yet daylight, when it came, was worse than the darkness. Fiamma trembled as she looked over her saddle down a sheer mountain wall, the roots of which were below sight. Afraid of lifting a hand to shut out the danger, she rode with closed eyes, till startled by breathing at her ear. The mysterious guide had dropped back beside her, walking with a half-foot over the precipice, that he might force her horse to keep the inside.

"No danger for me, wench," he answered her protest. "Know you not that an executioner has the lives of all the folk he has done to death?"

The grim avowal, pregnant with possibilities, was broken by a sudden shout from Talbot. The horses had come to a breathless halt on the saddle of a cleft slashed in the side of a springing cone that overtopped the rock-wall it crested. Far below, enamelled on the blue distance, a green valley lay in the sunshine, the silver links of a river glittering through its windings. Like knights marshalled for tournament on a green meadowland rose a cluster of towers, some massive with battlement and cornice, some arched with springing grace, but all surmounted by the great jasper-tinted dome that gleamed through

the blue distance, a very red lily such as Florence carries for her badge. Lily and lily-stem, the long-drawn tawny mass of building and the bell-tower, slender as an actual spire of blossom beside it. The eager eyes on the mountain looked down upon them, but could not see the happenings in the city that lay so plainly there within its brown walls before them—their goal.

Talbot set spurs to his horse, and held it up with a strong hand down the slithering pass. For a brace of minutes Fiamma followed in his tracks, mindful of nothing except their errand and their haste. Then the strange words she had heard stirred again in her, making her sharp-set for the mystery that must lie hid in them, before they made her pitiful for the misery that was not hidden at all. Exile and expiation, so much was plain to her, and a woman's prayer went up for the pain of which she knew no more than that it needed healing, before she opened her eyes again upon the outside world. Gray-misted olive groves and processions of black-sheeted cypresses were in her foreground; the man in whose company they had travelled through the night fell behind, looking back along the high-road itself at a half-mile distance.

"By a whirlwind of dust, the enemy you have outstripped is not far behind," he said suddenly. He pushed the money aside which Talbot offered. "Payment enough to have spoken to a human creature once more," he said, setting his face to the mountains with a long swinging stride.

Fiamma dragged at her horse's rein, wheeling him suddenly.

"From now and for ever you have a woman's prayers," she said, with abrupt earnestness, then swung round at her husband's call, as the villain figure plunged on and from them.

"We must ride it, girl, for all we know!"

The wind streamed against her face as the horses

sprang forward ; like a strong current setting in against their speed, it flowed past them. The beasts, road-worn though they were, answered gamely to the push, the one carrying Fiamma taking the pace set by his stable-companion under Talbot's handling. The black brotherhood of the cypress trees went by at the gallop ; peasants, with a history of blight in the oliveyards or cankerworms in the vines in every wrinkle of their brown faces, stood to stare at the race ; the bells of the nearing city started into voice, as though jeering the snail's-pace. Up from the ground, down from the sky, beat the fierce summer heat, till Fiamma grew dizzy as she rode.

A shudder of the beast under her loosened her in the saddle. His pace had fallen like an expiring flame, and as she became conscious of it, he tripped on to his knees, recovered, fell again, shaking her from him as he rolled sideways with a pitiful groan. Fiamma raised herself giddily, gazing about her at the vineyards on each side of the road stretching their green lines towards the groves through which glimpses of white walls showed here and there.

"Luck's against us ! The nag's dead !"

Fiamma scarcely heard Talbot's words. The dizziness was increasing, and her limbs were trembling beyond her power of control. Her husband looked at her for a moment, then Fiamma felt herself snatched up and carried by him among the vines.

"We've not come so far to be beaten at the finish," he said, panting a little under her weight. "You can go no farther, but now that you're in Florence and a petticoat, you're in no danger save from Bianca herself. You may safely await me under these trees while I'll go to your Cardinal with his crucifix as token from you, and tell him that if he does not covet to make your sister-in-law his, now is his chance." He bent to unfasten the crucifix from Fiamma's neck as he laid her in the shadows, and

kissed her pale face. "Sweetheart. I grudge leaving you, but all honest men pay their debts, and mine for her hospitality of the marshes has not been paid yet to Madonna Bianca."

The tenderness that had softened the sea-blue eyes had vanished before he for the second time brushed the morning's dew from the vines, and made his way back to the high-road. With a look to stamp the bearings of the place on his memory, he put his tired horse again to a trot, never drawing rein until he stood to shout for admission at the frescoed gateway of St. Gallo that opened from Florence towards the north.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BOARD IS SWEEPED.

THE beehive activity of a town was already at its fullest, but the Englishman could not discern any special excitement afoot in the streets through which he rode his jaded, sweat-lastered horse as quickly as might be towards the Riccardi Palace. No bells were clashing news of a prince's wedding over the land, and the commonplace of the streets was not being marshalled by a Duke's guard to receive a fair bride riding out of the north for him. Talbot blessed the chance that had drifted him across the path of the exile of the mountain who had guided him so well, as he came in sudden sight of the *palli* of the Medici crowning the dark gateway of the Riccardi Palace.

Entrance to a *salotto* of the Medici was a work of more minutes than an entrance within the walls of Florence. Talbot chafed at the scrutiny of the porter, the insolence of the lackey's demanding his style and title, but answered all with the good-humoured assurance that never fails to carry weight.

"A gentleman of England with tidings for my lord Cardinal."

The simple announcement won him way beneath the towering gateway and over the double courtyard with the throng of pages and squires round the low rimmed fountain. It was a passport up the broad staircase that led from the inner court to the upper floors but with the first step into the antechambers, where half Florence seemed to need to see his Eminence, its power failed. Talbot was beckoned here and there on inlaid floorings, was catechised by a

half-score of underlings, was advised to wait for this or that one, encouraged that five minutes' patience was all which was needed, and bidden to come again to-morrow, till at last he spoke out, with the laugh that usually hid his earnest.

"If I were a pack of card-shy friends, you could shuffle and deal me here and there no more than you've done. Let me collect my scattered five wits in this closet, and do you, one of you, try to earn this gold rook by bringing me in the length of it to his Eminence."

The covetous Italian eyes glittered at the jewel Talbot displayed as he spoke. That the bribe would prove a spur to his business he had little doubt; meanwhile he was left to himself in a small ante-room, overlooking a square of garden-ground with tall cypresses at the angles. Half absently, he moved to the window, looking down on a rose-bush that had climbed one of the funeral-trees, spangling its close growth with blossoms. A shadow that was not the cypress's stretched from it on to the sunny path beyond, the shadow of some unseen person standing against the sombre green obelisk.

The shadow advanced slowly. Some of the rose-leaves dropped downwards, marking the ground where it had lain as if with a little trail of blood.

Marl Talbot, looking from the window, raised his eyebrows quickly. The shadow's owner had stepped into full sight, sweeping the rose-leaves up with the hem of the red skirts that fell about him. He walked slowly, and the companion of his walk was Piccolo the dwarf.

The spectator in the closet above unlatched the casement, throwing it open with a tinkling sound. At the noise, the Cardinal looked up. Talbot in the window above bent forward, his outstretched hand holding Fiamma's crucifix.

Cardinal Ferdinando shaded his eyes with a well-

shaped hand, and looked long—longer apparently than suited with Piccolo's impatience, for he plucked at the red skirts, speaking eagerly to the wearer, who dropped his hand, sauntering on with him in the sunny path. Yet Talbot leant back against the window-frame with a slow suspicion that the dwarf's audience boded little good to Bianca Capelli. He was content to wait for his own turn.

Yet every moment that passed took with it something of his content. The moments were so many that they overmatched the content. Talbot fell to striding up and down the closet, now thinking of Fiamma as he had left her under the trees, now of the purple-hung litter bringing a queen to Florence.

"Damn the Cardinal!"

"Have you come to see to the thing being done, friend?"

Talbot stopped short in his stride. A panel had slid back, revealing the scarlet figure of the Cardinal in the light bare chamber beyond carved with the story of Cupid and Psyche.

They were alone. So much Mark Talbot saw as, in obedience to the Cardinal's gesture, he stepped through the aperture and faced his Eminence's smile squarely.

"If it interests your Eminence, Madonna Bianca Capelli is somewhere not far from Florence at this moment," he said, and held out the crucifix.

Cardinal Medici surveyed it tranquilly.

"A rough piece of workmanship enough, my son. Scarcely what a Churchman with some poor reputation for taste would wish to present to a fair lady as a token of welcome or her coming."

"That's as may be, Eminence," returned Talbot bluntly. "Yet such a token, a blade hidden under the symbol of peace and goodwill, might come fitly enough from the hand from whom Cavaliere Piccolo received this same crucifix a while back."

"But the blade is broken, son," said the Churchman softly, as he touched the spring in the crucifix.

Through Talbot's perplexed silence the roar of a cannon shattered the air without. The Cardinal stretched the hand holding the crucifix towards the window.

"The cannon of the Piti," he remarked. "Some guest, worthy of honour, must be at the palace gates." He rose, regarding Talbot with a smile that scarcely hid the keenness of his scrutiny. "A gentleman owes it to himself to play the losing game gracefully," he said. "And you, who come from Cavaliere Padino, know doubtless how the Board was set, nay, it would seem that you yourself have some small stake on the game. What is it?—a place in my household, or a troop of such golden angels as are likely to belong to the service of this crucifix?"

"My stake was heavier, and I have lost it," replied Talbot. "To sweep, not a pawn that threatened her, but a woman she hated, from the board, Bianca Capelli tried to murder the girl I love, even then on her way to report to you how she had played the move appointed by you."

Cardinal Ferdinando shrugged his shoulders.

"It seems my pawn in playing came to her woman's kingdom and was crowned," he said. "She has the less to complain of, though I counsel her to keep out of sight of the White Queen who has reached the King. As for you, my son, I would advise you to forgive even as I forgive, and that you may have grace granted you so to do, it will be well you should tarry for a space in the household of one vowed to the service of God and Holy Church."

The tinkling of a hand-bell, in the shape of a tiny tortoise with a golden head, was answered instantly by Cosmo, with three or four footmen in the rear. Their master pointed coolly towards the Englishman.

"Bestow this gentleman in an apartment, and treat

him in all ways as a guest ; but as he is an unwilling one, place a guard without," he commanded. "And you, Cosmo, order all things instantly to ride to the Palazzo Pitti, that I may bring my humble greeting to the sister and the sovereign whom to-morrow will bestow upon me."

Talbot sprang fiercely forward. "As an Englishman, I appeal against his injustice! My wife is defenceless; she is even now waiting my return. Eminence, I resist—for the sake of your office, you cannot thus trap an innocent man, who came hither trusting in you!"

"Your wife took care of herself before she was your wife, my son," the Cardinal returned smilingly. "If my people can find her, she shall be lodged with you; meanwhile the affair is not so serious as you picture it. Two or three days at most will doubtless convince you that you can afford to forgive your enemy."

The desperate rush Talbot meditated was balked by the guard closing in about him, while the opening folding-doors revealed a crowd waiting in the gallery beyond. He was trapped, and he knew it, as he walked sullenly towards his prison, his one faint hope being the possibility that suggested itself of sending word to his servant at the inn to which, on the wedding-day that now seemed so long back he had despatched him with his papers and few valuables, bidding him wait there for further orders. The fact of his having a higher opinion of Giles's loyalty than of his wits was the drawback, and Talbot felt it insurmountable enough to wreck the plan he had for an instant entertained of sending him to Fiamma, doubtless waiting patiently for her husband on the spot where they had parted in the wood.

But at the moment when Talbot's guard settled themselves to cards with shoulders set against the door behind which they had left their prisoner to

his thoughts, Fiamma was no longer in the wood. Some minutes before, a couple of foresters had lighted upon a handsome young woman, in a peasant's dress, of some fashion beyond the mountains, lying underneath a great sycamore, and her evident exhaustion appeared to the vicarious hospitality which is part of the domestic creed. Fiamma indeed was hardly conscious when the good-natured fellows supported her towards the pavilion that shimmered wholly through the trees hard by, invoking on her behalf the kindness of a *padrona*, whose fat neck wreathed with gold chains bore witness to her prosperity in office.

In a chamber overlooking the sunny courtyard of various kitchen-offices, Fiamma and the fever on her wrestled together through long days and nights. The splendid health had given way at last; there were hours when the kindly strangers who had harboured her whispered that there was no need to send her to the hospital of St. Matthew in the Piazza, since it would be only making a round to the dead-house. There were days when the fever burnt her, and nights when she worried herself in struggles to rise and go to her husband, whose name never ceased from her lips except when she pleaded with Ben Levi to release her from New Egypt, or shrieked that the *mal'uma* was rising round the House of the Nightshade. The hoarse, rapid voice grew daily weaker, and the brave young life flickered low, while Talbot raged against his imprisonment, and Cardinal Medici himself more than once revolved the riddle of his agent's strange disappearance. And through all these days and nights Florence was vibrant with bell-ringing; and the streets were gay with banners, in welcome to the bride at the Pitti, the lovely Capelli whom Duke Francesco had made his at last.

The clucking of fowls in the courtyard below shut out those distant peals on the afternoon when Fiamma

awoke from her long fever-dream. She was alone, scanning passively in her weakness the unfamiliar room, and wondering idly at the farmyard noises unheard by her for so long.

A wooden gallery ran outside her window. She could hear feet moving on it, but the upper panes, to which her eyes wandered involuntarily, remained blank. Vaguely puzzled, her gaze fell lower—to see a shaggy head, and two intent eyes fixed on hers: a human face, at the height of a three-years' old child.

With a faint shudder of disgust, the girl let her eyelids fall, sliding into sleep even in the effort of recalling when or where she had seen such an apparition before. The goblin-like creature without entered the room unheard by her, touching her hands, and examining the cup of drink left by her mattress, before he vanished, and the crazy gallery ceased to report his footsteps. In the silence the bells sent a surge of triumph through the afternoon.

The clamour of the bells had driven Merrick Talbot to his feet, sending him up and down his room in the fierce protest of the caged beast against captivity. The young man had grown haggard in these last days, and his blue eyes were not good to meet as he stared into the walled garden in which, on his unlucky coming, he had seen Cardinal Medici talking with Piccolo.

As though bred of the thought, the two appeared before him again. The Cardinal's head was bent over a tiny packet which the dwarf had just drawn from his breast, turning his grotesque face in swift scrutiny as he did so. At sight of the prisoner in the window above, he pointed, and Cardinal Ferdinando looked up hastily. Before Talbot could decide whether to appeal or to threaten, the couple had disappeared, and the cypress trees were abandoned to the cajoleries of the roses.

"You are summoned to his Eminence."

The welcome words had fallen at last on Talbot's ear, piercing through his abstraction as lightning pierces through clouds. Page Cosmo gave back a little at the impetuosity of the prisoner's movement, and seemed to breathe more freely when he left him on the threshold of the Cardinal's private chamber.

Messer Babuino the monkey was not well. The Cardinal, seated in his elbow-chair, held this pet of his on his knees, looking gravely into his filmed eyes. He nodded slightly to Talbot on his entrance.

"I have news for you, my son. Your wife is safe and sound; to-morrow you shall rejoin her."

"Why not to-night?"

Cardinal Ferdinando leant over the table, pouring some light wine into a cup. The monkey's yellow-hazel eyes followed the action.

"Because to-night is not to-morrow, my son," he answered, with a certain abstraction in his tone. "Look you, your natica has a skill in medicining sick beasts; think you this ape here has more than a passing sickness on him?"

"He has what every day will make worse—old age, Eminence," Talbot replied coolly, glancing at the creature's gray muzzle and the worn fangs it was showing to the stranger.

The Cardinal's impassive face altered slightly at the words.

"It is true," he murmured, stroking his favourite's head; "he is very old. He was my mother's pet at the villa-home before he came to me, when her blessed soul went from us. And now he cannot eat, only drink," he added, drawing the cup to him.

"Where is my wife, Eminence? I implore you, let me go to her."

The Cardinal did not answer for a moment. The little packet which Talbot had seen him receive from Piccolo was in his hand; with the point of a quill,

he had separated a grain or two of the powder which it enclosed, shaking them into the straw-coloured wine before him. He held up the goblet to the light, smelling at it delicately.

"I am little used to pray to any but God, Eminence, but I pray now to you."

"Shall I do better than God, my son, and push Fate out of her road for prayers the most passionate?" retorted the Cardinal. "Perhaps, as the preachers tell us, you will find the denial of your request its surest fulfilment. To-morrow you will understand the ways of my Providence."

The cold little hand of the monkey came on his, in attempted possession of the cup. The Cardinal looked up at Talbot.

"You are sure he has not long to live?"

"I wish you were as near your last hour as the brute is," responded Talbot harshly.

The Cardinal smiled slightly, touching the bell before him.

"Serve your master to the last, then, Babuino," he said.

As the Englishman, driven by circumstance, departed with his guards he glanced back to see the animal drinking greedily from the cup that his Eminence held for him.

The short, strange interview had lashed Talbot's mood into storm. For the first time it occurred to him that it was possible the Cardinal had not given up the game so completely as he had seemed to do; an explanation of his arbitrary imprisonment dawned faintly on him, in the light of the friendliness his jailer had manifested in relieving his gnawing anxiety as to his wife's fate. If Cardinal Ferdinando were indeed slowly moving towards a subtly planned checkmate for the adversary who so long had maintained the board against him, it was conceivable that he would not let one who could tell so much as Talbot of what

would put the Capelli on her guard, go abroad in Florence. The idea explained, too, the anxiety which he had displayed over Fiamma's disappearance; the agent sent by him to Venice could tell a dangerous story.

Such thoughts kept Talbot on his feet through the short summer night. The piping of the quails came up sharply from the olive slopes, seeming to whistle Night down the sky, as the Earth slowly stripped off its mantle of hoary gray, showing itself in festal trim of blues and greens and gold. With quick, impatient steps, Talbot walked his prison as he walked the night away, wheeling at the opening door as though the new day must have brought Fiamma to him. A curse broke from him as he saw only Cosmo.

"It's his Eminence's pleasure you should ride with us this morning to the banquet he gives Duke Cecco and his Venetian," said that youth pertly. "The barber is here to clip that thatch of yours, and the sooner you put yourself inside the feast-clothes that my master has provided for you the better for yourself."

"Your wit is better grown than your manners, youngster," returned Talbot, his pulses acknowledging the summons with a glad leap.

Cosmo lingered, perhaps to hinder any communication with the hairdresser.

"Hasten, or the Cardinal's humour will be blacker than it is already," he said, as the Englishman, his fair curls and moustache duly trimmed and scented, began to throw himself into the garments which Cosmo had brought, the long tunic of rich purple and hose of a paler shade of the same colour setting him off to advantage, besides fulfilling the Cardinal's possible ulterior motive of obviating attention to an English cut of garments in one of his train. "Madonna! the brute Babuino died not five minutes

after you left his presence last night, and one would think it had been the Holy Father! The livelong night has my master had that misshapen manikin closed with him, in order that the ape may be stuffed, not as he was in life with sweetmeats enough to turn any Christian's stomach at seeing, but with drugs over which, by the evidence of the keyhole, his Eminence himself condescended to soil his hands with at the crucible."

"You'll never be at a loss for a rope to hang yourself by, as long as your tongue's left you," remarked Talbot, catching up the cap with the Medici crest on it.

With a glad step he crossed the threshold forbidden to him for so many weary days, and as under the page's guardianship he descended to the great courtyard, Cardinal Medici appeared on the central staircase. With a wave of his hand, he invited the Englishman into the huge gilded coach, harnessed to the eight gay horses that awaited him.

It was evident that the Cardinal would do honour to his brother's bride. Not an outrider, not a wedding-favour—the colours of the Medici and Capelli interwoven—had been omitted from the procession, while the Cardinal himself was in fullest festive array, lace and jewels relieving the scarlet of his robes.

The banners were still abroad in the streets through which the magnificent train took its way. The pale blue Tuscan sky was shaded by the blue awnings overhead, gay with embroidered inscriptions which seemed to make the very streets vocal with welcome to their Grand Duke and his Duchess Bianca. Banners of flowers, faded but still fragrant, crossed and recrossed each other twelve feet from the ground in the open spaces of the square, as the coach lumbered into the great Piazza of the Duomo, and the wheels went heavily on the drifts of rose-leaves, yellow and

white, pink and crimson, that had carpeted the great space for the bridal. Here and there, in a narrow street, a stray white dove beat up and down under the blue roofing, a belated straggler from the flock that had been loosed to flutter over the chariot yoked to men in mor-skirts, in which the fair Capelli had been drawn to her triumph. The air round the Pitti was still faintly sweet with the perfumes that the fountains had played in the festivities; a woman, leaning on the balcony still hung with gay draperies, hummed a fragment of one of the odes of welcome which the choirs of the churches had chanted in the wedding procession. As she looked down on the Cardinal's coach.

"The Venetian has had nothing to fault in her greeting from the people of Florence," said Cardinal Ferdinando. It was the first time he had spoken since he had entered the coach, but in spite of the page's declaration, his humour seemed of the best. The pallor that had, at first, spoken silently of the vigil spent over the crucible, had given place to a faint colour; his eyes inscrutable as ever, lost nothing of what the streets had to show, as he rested comfortably on his scented cushions, glancing negligently from side to side.

The coach was passing by a wall, its stones set in filigree of green and golden lichens, when Cosimo, who throughout had ridden a slender Arabian close by the carriage-door, fell out of line with a vexed ejaculation. A second later, he appeared on foot.

"Griselda, Eminence, has gone lame. A sugar-plum from some of the showers of *confetti* has lodged in her foot, and the frog is bruised."

The Cardinal straightened himself stiffly on his cushions. Out of the distance a sound of silver trumpets had drifted, and as he raised his hand for silence it came again, shrill and sweet and fuller. He nodded.

"The bride makes gracious haste to our festivity," he remarked, himself opening the coach door. "You, Master Talbot, do me the favour of bringing Cosino's beast to the stables to which the porter at yonder gate will direct you; you will be serving yourself at the same time."

The hint was sufficient to bring Talbot to his feet in a bound. Grasping the mare's bridle, he led her towards tall iron gates which he saw a few paces ahead.

"Wilt not wait to see the Duchesse pass, friend?" expostulated the porter, as he gave him admission. "Well, no doubt you've suckerd' wisdom in with your mother's milk; better at your years not to see so pretty a bit of red and white, when nothing but the seeing can come of it. And the Grand Duchess of Florence is not likely to be so friendly even to handsome faces like yours, as was Mauonna Bianca in these very groves of the Oricellari."

The name of the groves he was entering struck Mark Talbot with surprise, wondering in, as from the Cardinal's hint had seemed likely, some strange chance had drifted Fiamma into the scene of her brother's murder. Scarcely pausing for the porter's directions, he hastened on over the springy turf, till the clud of hoofs behind warned him that the wedding-party had availed themselves of a short cut to the pavilion he saw white through the trees in front.

Binding the mare's nostrils with his handkerchief, lest her whinny should betray him, he stepped behind a thick hedge along the other side of which the riders were already advancing. As he stood, he could see the whole brilliant cavalcade, led by the pages with the silver trumpets which the Grand Duchess had ordained should form part of her daily escort. The plainness of the ladies-in-waiting drew a scornful smile from the Englishman's lips as, marshalled by

handsome and supercilious young Florentines, they passed the unseen spectator; but a sudden light sweet laughter banished the smile. Talbot's eyes fell for a moment upon Cosmo, pouting over that unheard-of condescension of his master that obliged him also to proceed on foot before they passed to the heart of the company, the woman whom he had last seen when she had ridden forth from the House of the Nightshade, leaving him and his wife to the death her treachery had planned.

The Capelli looked her part of Grand Duchess well. Seated on a white palfrey, the curves of her rounded figure showed as though moulded into the habit of white satin sprinkled with the red Florence lily, and cut low on the neck to display the collar of great rubies on the white column of the throat. The fair curls were gathered to-day into a golden net studded with diamonds, and the face, thus deprived of any softening shadow, might have been the masque of some beautiful Lamia, so hard were the brilliant eyes and so cruel the immobility of the red mouth. A mantle, with the ermine of her new dignity, flowed backwards from her shoulders, touching on one side Duke Francesco, swarthy and gloomy-eyed as ever, in his bridegroom's trim of gold and white, on the other Cardinal Ferdinando, walking at Bianca's bridle-hand like a captive at his conqueror's side. Behind them, the gay train poured on into the green ride.

In front a sudden jar had come to the procession. The trumpets had broken off in the midst of a fanfare, maids of honour and attendant courtiers had scattered amid exclamations to right and left, leaving a green path clear to the bride. Talbot caught his breath in astonishment as down that green path stepped Piccolo the dwarf.

The uncouth creature was dressed in a herald's tabard but of a blazon strange to any herald there.

A black tabard blazoned horribly with skulls and crossbones, a pipe fashioned out of the bone of a human leg, carried in his hand.

"Bianca, Grand Duchess of Florence, dead Cassandra the sorceress summons you to meet her in hell within the hour!" he cried, after a thin blast on his ghastly instrument.

"By your harlotry with Francesco of Medici, she summons you!"

"By your murder of Pietro Bonaventuri, she summons you!"

"By the soul you have lost, she summons you!"

Talbot, behind his leafy screen, rubbed his eyes. With his last words Piccolo had vanished, sinking into the earth in the instant that the Grand Duke, his eyes flaming in his ashen face, rushed with drawn sword upon him. Shrieking like a madwoman, Bianca cast herself from her saddle bodily upon her husband, flinging the ermined mantle over both their heads, cowering under its shelter. Cardinal Ferdinando moved swiftly forward, planting the oriflamme on his scarlet precisely over the spot where the dwarf had disappeared.

"Some pleasantry of my ducal brotner, whose brain runs willingly on such gruesome conceits," he whispered to those nearest his scornful, tolerant smile.

'Tis but fair repayment for the fright Madonna Bianca meted out to him when they last met in these groves, and the tumbling of him quick into Purgatory. On with you, in Heaven's name! The Grand Duchess will recover herself the sooner for this dismal choir of screams being hushed, and meats and drink will be sweeter in all our mouths than groans and cries."

Talbot did not wait to see the effect of his Eminence's cheerful scepticism. Regardless of the bruised hoof, he had swung himself on Griselda's back, urging her with heel and hand over the mossy

turf in advance of the company still halted in confusion on the opposite side of the tall yew hedge. A sense of evil was strong upon him; he rode to snatch his wife from some unknown danger.

Ski-ting the farther end of the plantation, he rode, guided by cheery farmyard noises, into the stable courtyard. The underlings he had hoped to question were absent; sunshine and the pigeons had the space to themselves; the latter towering up under his horse's feet, carried the rider's eyes involuntarily after them. The lock rested where the birds had done—on the gallery in which, white and smiling, stood Fiamma's self.

Her cry of warning against the crazy woodwork had scarcely been uttered before Falbot was at her side. Kisses, broken words, tender touches, then a coherent question from the Englishman.

"Do you know whose is the roof that has sheltered you?"

The girl shook her head. "To-day and yesterday, when my fever left me, I have seen none save the old crone who brings me food, and she is deaf as a blue-eyed cat. In another day I should have had strength enough to make my way to the Riccardi, and demand news of you from the Cardinal himself."

"Ah! if you wish for a farewell benediction, now's your chance! The Cardinal is under the same roof with you at this moment; the Orti Oricellari witnesses to-day his reconciliation with the Capelli!"

"The Orti Oricellari? Blood of Christ! it cannot be that this is *her* house!—that I have eaten *her* bread in these days!"

"The miracle is that you *have* eaten it and live. Quick, we must make the best of our way to Florence, before our pretty Duchess finds out that her sister-in-law after all has accepted her hospitality, and has no stomach to pay the bill! Quick! for my mind

misgives me that a storm is brewing; that Cardinal of yours strikes me as one whose forgiveness is likely to wipe off all scores once for all."

He drew Fiamma to the edge of the balcony, but recoiled instantly as voices and footsteps announced the approach of various grooms and horse-boys.

"We must not be seen here. Come, let's try if a way out cannot be found through the lofts beyond."

Almost carried by him, Fiamma yielded to his guidance, passing over floors thickly laid with ears of maize drying in the sunshine and pumpkin-seeds gathered into heaps. A rough flight of wooden stairs led them into a lower story, but affording no hint of exit from its shaded rooms.

Fiamma stopped abruptly. A laugh reached her ears, every fibre of her shaking in a vibration of hatred at the thin, silvery tone.

Talbot had heard it too. In a stride, he had reached an oriel, clinging like a swallow's nest to the wall and looking down at right angles on a small luxurious loggia some thirty feet below, belonging to the main building of the pavilion. The occupants of the loggia were four—page Cosmo, scared but observant, behind Cardinal Medici's chair, placed on the left hand of Duchess Bianca and her bridegroom, the Grand Duke.

The weird herald of the gardens had evidently wrecked the preconcerted order of the feast, the bride's hysterical terror making imperative excuse for her withdrawal into privacy with the husband and his brother. That ecclesiastical brother, indeed, seemed her reliance as, pale and wild-eyed, she crouched rather than sat under the ducal canopy, one white hand clinging to the scarlet sleeve at her left as to a scapular. The cool, mocking voice was obviously reassuring to her superstitious agony; as

it whispered to her, her forced laughter answered with lavish readiness.

A half of the predicted hour had gone by.

The couple looking down on the silent group, noticed that one precaution at least was practised by the Venetian. She ate nothing, even the snow-topped sherbet before her remaining untouched. The Cardinal seemed to understand her abstinence, waving aside the page's proffers of delicate dainties, but Duke Francesco made up for his bride's refusals; he ate voraciously, holding out at last the purple chalice affected by him for drink. As he did so, the Cardinal turned in his seat, taking a bowl of peculiar shape from Cosmo's Lands.

The square-tipped fingers, hidden in the shadow of the scarlet sleeve, hovered over the goblet's edge. Talbot, looking down, could not be sure that he had seen such a powder, as yesterday had been mingled by those fingers in Messer Babuino's wine, shaken stealthily out into the cup.

"Brother," said the Cardinal, "you, as well as I, have heard with sorrow and shame the vile slander infecting your city of Florence—that this sweet daughter of St. Mark was not widow when she became your wife. To public disproof of such a tale, as well as for the easing of your private mind, I hold in these hands the skull of Messer Pietro Bonaventura which I have had wrought into a drinking-cup, and I pray your acceptance of this trifling token of a brother's regard for the honour of the House of Medici."

The dark Duke flung out a hand, almost snatching the ghastly white bowl in its gold setting. Lifting it to his mouth, he drank fiercely, thrusting it, as he finished, against his wife's lips.

"Drink, thou!" he commanded.

The fair head drawn back stiffly on the white neck, the woman shrank silently, turning her blue eyes on

the Cardinal in agonised appeal. The Churchman touched the hand that clung to him with cool, light fingers.

"Madonna is not minded to pledge you, Cecco," he intervened. "What! man, a woman does not lose her memory though she marries again! 'Tis not reason to expect her to press her dainty lips to a husband's skull as though, curled and comely, it had never lain on her bosom!"

"She shall drink!" muttered the Duke savagely. "She has always had a hankering for the fellow; if she has not, she shall prove it by drinking now. Drink, wench, I say!"

The hand was withdrawn from the red sleeve now. Her white fingers locked round the hairy wrist, Bianca was pushing the cup aside, her eyes fixed in a stare on the smouldering fire in Francesco's. For a moment or so, the Cardinal looked on idly at her resistance, then, with the gesture of one who wearies of a spectacle, he drew out a jewelled timepiece, holding it in his hand as the silent struggle went on.

The Grand Duke started up suddenly in his place. His dark face had become convulsed, "unmistakable madness glowed in the blackness of his eyes. He grasped his wife's neck above the rubies, clutching it. The pale mouth opened in a grasp at the rim of the cup held to it.

With a smile, Cardinal Ferdinando raised his eyes from his watch.

"The hour is over, Madonna; drink and fear nothing," he said.

A light of incredible relief shot over Bianca's face as, taking the cup in both hands, she drank what was left of the wine in it.

"It has been an hour of Purgatory!" she cried, letting the empty skull fall and roll on the marble mosaics of the floor.

As it fell, the Cardinal rose, leaning against one

of the pillars of the loggia. In his attitude was a silent suggestion of some passionless Fate, who looks on with weary indifference at the fulfilment of a tragedy which it has planned. From the falling of the cup, his part seemed to have exchanged from actor to spectator.

Fiamma, in the oriel above, clung with a quick grasp to her husband's shoulder. The Duke was by stealthy inches sliding back in his gilded chair, the hand that hung slack at his side holding a knife filched from the table, his hungry eyes fixed on the woman beside him.

"Let us get out of this house of blood!"

Shuddering with prevision of evil, the couple rushed from the oriel, flying through empty room after empty room in search of an outlet from the pavilion that seemed to them an anteroom of hell.

A door flung in the lock behind them, slammed jarringly through the quiet house. The noise seemed to rouse Bianca from the torpor into which she had fallen.

"I come, Pietro, I come!" she cried, a long thrill of laughter through her words. Again and again she laughed, peal on peal of jangled sweetness, as with catlike swiftness she pounced on the skull lying where she had cast it. Tossing it from palm to palm, she made an unseeing step forward, thus baulking the Grand Duke's sudden stealthy spring.

"Cassandra's vengeance!"

A hoarse, beast-like yell mingled with the awful merriment rippling down the walls, as Piccolo shot across the Capelli's path, bringing her to her knees in his wild spring.

She did not struggle against the clutch. On her knees, with a long shriek of terrible silver laughter, she flung her white arms above her head.

"Pietro, the door is shut!" she cried, and thereafter lay very still.

The rattle on her lips seemed to lash the Grand Duke into frenzy. Growling, slavering, like a beast over its prey, he had leapt on her, stabbing the dead white bosom with savage strokes.

"Help! The Duke is ill!"

The Cardinal broke his long silence with the call. At the sound the madman on the floor rose suddenly; while one could count ten he stood upright, looking from his brother to the woman with wide eyes and open mouth at his feet. Then he too fell heavily, across his dead Duchess, and the world went out for him.

"A madness came upon the Duke, and the Grand Duchess is slain by his hand."

The Cardinal muttered it as though in rehearsal for the revellers now rushing together at Cosmo's repeated cries. But he still maintained his negligent attitude, looking with wholly steady eyes at dead Bianca lying in her blood, the blood which welled out over her dead bridegroom's satyr, over the dead dwarf in whose body one of those mad strokes had been sheathed as he lay grasping his enemy, lest, at the last, she should slip through Death's fingers.

The Medici pinched his lips together with a slight expression of disgust.

"Why could not Cecco have left well alone?" he murmured. "Babruino, by the sacrifice of the hours remaining to him, had shown me how to make things sure. Blood is always an execrable taste."

The coming night brought an awakening wind through the gardens. The Cardinal moved to greet it; his eyes turned from the blood-stained marbles to the green park without, across which two figures had just struck into view.

His Eminence looked a; though the sight of living figures in a living world brought some refreshment with it. A tolerant smile came to his lips as he

recognised the tall figure of the Englishman supporting the drooping form of the girl at his side, their faces turned to the west, where the brightening gold showed as an augury of good days to come. The smile deepened, and it was not an unkindly one.

"The board is swept!" muttered Cardinal Ferdinando.

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