

THE PROUD PRINCE

JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY





Romaine

Madelina Watts.

1911.





Maddens White



" ' I LOVE THE MAN ' "

[See p. 276

THE
PROUD PRINCE

BY
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AUTHOR OF
"MARJORIE" "IF I WERE KING"
ETC.



NEW YORK
R. H. RUSSELL
1903

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Published October, 1903.

DEDICATED
TO
E. H. SOTHERN

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THE PROUD PRINCE

I

FAIR MAID AND FOUL FOOL

THE girl stood on the summit of the hill looking down the white highway that stretched to Syracuse. The morning sun shone hotly; sky and sea and earth seemed to kindle and quicken in the ecstasy of heat, setting free spirits of air and earth and water, towards whom the girl's spirit stirred in sympathy. All about her beauty flamed luxuriant. At her feet the secrets of the world were written in wild flowers, the wild flowers of Sicily, which redeem the honor of the wellnigh flowerless land of Greece. All about her the ground flushed with such color as never yet was woven on a Persian loom or blended in a wizard's

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diadem. The gold and silver of great daisies gleamed in the grass; pimpernel blue and red, mallow red and white, yellow spurge and green mignonette, blue borage and pink asphodel and parti-colored convolvulus, snap-dragon and marigold, violet and dandelion, and that crimson flower which shepherds call Pig's Face and poets call Beard of Jove for its golden change in autumn—all these and a thousand other children of the spring lay at the girl's feet and carpeted her kingdom. But the girl was more beautiful than all the flowers.

The spot where the girl stood was as fair a spot as any in Sicily. Behind her on the fringe of the thick mountain pine-wood the blue tiled dome of a Saracenic mosque glowed like a great turquoise in the midst of the amber-tinted pillars of a ruined Grecian temple. In front of her, on a little hill, stood the beautiful Norman church that Robert the King had erected there on the highest point of his kingdom in gratitude for his son's recovery from sickness, a miracle of austere strength and comeliness, with its great bronze image in a niche by the door of the

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Archangel Michael, all armored, with his hands resting on the hilt of his drawn sword. Below her lay all the splendor of Syracuse, the island town, the smiling bay where the Athenian galleys had been snared more than fifteen hundred years before, the quarries where the flower of Athenian chivalry had died its dreadful death, the sapphire sea that sang its secrets to Theocritus. In all Sicily there was no lovelier spot, no fairer prospect. But the girl was more beautiful than the place whereon she stood or the sights on which she gazed.

If the spirit of Theocritus, coming from the fields where Virgil lingered unaware of Dante, could have revisited his much-loved Syracuse, the poet of Berenice would have found that the island of Aphrodite still bore women worthy of the goddess. The girl was tall and straight and slim; health and youth gave their warm color to her cheeks; the old Greek beauty reigned in her face, but her blue eyes shone with the brightness of Oriental stars. Her red hair, wine red, blood red, framed her face with amazing color. Something of the composition of the woodland

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entered into the hues of the garments she wore, the simple garments of a country girl, but shaped of stuffs that were dyed warm reds and browns, the red of forest fires, the brown of forest trees. It seemed as if the child, conscious of the strange loveliness of her red hair, sought to harmonize her very habit to its fierce assertion. Yet there was no fierceness in the face that the red hair crowned so radiantly. If it carried the Grecian beauty, it carried also the Grecian calm, the noble repose of the Grecian image that once had stood in the splendid temple whose ruined pillars now girdled ironically the ruined Moslem mosque. Two civilizations had withered in Sicily to afford a shelter for Perpetua, the daughter of Theron, the executioner of Syracuse.

Perpetua, daughter of Theron the executioner of Syracuse, waiting for the coming of Theron the executioner, looked with calm eyes upon Syracuse, upon the distant city of which she knew no more in all her eighteen years of life than that same distant vision, a jewel city lying in orchards at her feet. She had no desire to know more of it; her father wished that she should know no

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more of it, and she was content, for Theron the executioner was the wisest man in the world, wiser than the few priests who tended the chapel on the hill, wiser than the few country folk who sometimes climbed to those heights and seemed to fear the executioner and the executioner's hut and the executioner's daughter, the white girl with the hair that was red as blood. These were all the men she knew; these made the world, the outer world, for her. Her real world was where her father was with his tales of gods and heroes, and his ancient songs and his great sword. It was her task, self-chosen and rich in pride, to tend the great sword, to keep it stainless, to sharpen its edge on the grindstone while she sang the Song of the Sword, and the sparks flew and the great sword seemed to gleam with an answering fervor. But never in all the days of her young life had blood to be washed from the sword. For Sicily smiled under the sway of King Robert the Good, who had no need for executioners.

But the father went sometimes into the city, where the girl never went, and then the hours

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seemed long to the girl, and she often came to the edge of the mountain and gazed down the white ribbon of winding road for the earliest glimpse of the dear, familiar figure, toilsomely ascending. To-day the hours seemed longer than ever, for there was the shadow of a secret over the child's soul, and she sighed for her father's presence, that she might tell him the secret and be free of it, though she knew very well in her heart that when her father was by her side she would still stifle her secret. A little secret, indeed, a laughable secret, for those down there in Syracuse, at the foot of the mountain, who took the world for what it was, but a great one to the soul of a girl who had lived all her life on the top of a mountain in a dwelling whose roof was the crest of a Moslem mosque, and whose garden palings were the pillars of a temple of Aphrodite; a girl who took the world for what it was not and for what it could never be.

The white road was as empty as a noon-day dream; its whiteness only troubled by one moving object, as noon-day dreams are often troubled by one persistent, inappreciable idea. But the girl

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had eyes as keen as a mountain-eagle, and she knew that, whoever the climber was, the climber was not her father. Then she sighed a little sigh and turned and entered her dwelling and drew the door behind her, and the mountain-top was lonely for a time. Only for a time. Up the hill came a fantastical fellow, alternately singing and sighing, for it seemed that the fierce heat vexed him despite of his melody. He was a strange ape, tall and lean and withered, with a wry shoulder like a gibbous moon and a wry leg like a stricken tree, and his face was as the face of a goblin, with a long, peaked nose, and loose, protruding lips, traitors to the few and evil teeth that interwalled his livid gums, and his ears stood out like bats' wings from his yellow, wrinkled cheeks. He was visibly punished by his journey; the sweat streamed from his leather and under his puckered eyelids his eyes flamed imprecations. His grotesque body was enveloped in yet more grotesque apparel—the piebald of the buffoon, the mottled livery of the chartered mountebank. There was a slender collar of gold about his neck, on which those that were near enough to him

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and had quick sight might read in plain terms that he was a royal fool, one of those jesters whom the great loved to tend to their beck, that they might ply them with mirth in hours that were mirthless. When the fantastical fellow had reached the summit he flung himself at once onto the nearest seat that one of the fallen columns afforded, and sat for a space gasping and puffing and spitting out blasphemies between every gasp and puff of his staggered anatomy.

When his wind came to him it took shape in a furious soliloquy, addressed to the vacant space about. "Devil take the day!" he grunted, pressing his hands to his lean sides as if he were trying to squeeze back the breath into his jaded body. "The sun rides as sky-high as the King's pride, and the air blazes as dog-hot as the King's choler. I have climbed the hill-side to spite him, and now am like to die of thirst to spite myself, unless I can find friends and flagons."

So he chattered to himself as if he were conversing with some familiar spirit or demon, and as he babbled his dull eyes stared around him stupidly, taking slow stock of unfamiliar objects.

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He grinned spitefully at the church and its great archangel and mouthed a lewd objurgation. Turning his back on the church, he leered at the pillars and the mosque contemptuously until it dimly dawned upon him that the ruin was now a place of human habitation. He rose with a groan of fatigue and hobbled towards it. "A church is no good," he muttered, "but hospitality may hide in that hovel. Knock and know." And having by this time arrived at the door of the dwelling, he proceeded to rain a succession of blows on it with his clinched fists, as if he were determined not to be denied, and, at worst, to force an entrance.

The fury of his call was soon answered. Perpetua flung back the door and faced the insistent fool.

"Is doom-crack at hand," she asked, quietly, as she eyed the strange figure before her, "that you hammer so hotly?"

The misshapen petitioner surrendered something of his malevolence to the beauty of the girl. He swept her a salutation that exaggerated courtliness, and there was a quality of apology in his voice as he spoke.

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“I am sand dry as the ancient desert, and to be thirsty roughens my temper. Ply me tongue-high with wine and I will pipe for you blithely.”

Perpetua shook her head, and her red locks gleamed and quivered with the motion like an aureole of flame.

“I have no wine,” she said, gravely, “for my father denies its virtues. But there is a pitcher of milk within at your pleasure.”

At the mention of the word milk the face of the petitioning fool, ugly enough when untroubled by crosses, took upon itself an expression so hideous that if the girl’s spirit had ever permitted her to recoil from any terror she might have recoiled from that.

“Milk!” he yelped, and the sound of his voice was as ugly as the show of his face. “Milk! Gods of the Greeks! Milk! Your father is no less than a fool to favor such liquor.”

The girl’s red eyebrows knitted. “Unless you mend your manners,” she said, decisively, “you shall go as thirsty as you came. You dare not speak so to my father’s face.”

The fool answered with a little crackling laugh,

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while the wide sweep of his withered fingers seemed at once to plead for forgiveness and to justify impertinence.

“Fair virgin of the heights and of the hollows,” he cackled, “I would speak so to his face or to his foot or to any part of his honorable anatomy, for, you see, I am a fool myself, and may pass the crazy name without cuffing. Come, I will sip your white syrup to please you.”

The girl shrugged her shoulders at the sudden condescension. “Please yourself. There is water, if you disdain milk.”

The hunchback twisted his pliant features into a new and peculiarly repulsive form of protest.

“Even as there is the devil if you escape from the deep sea,” he sneered. “I begin to lust after milk now.”

The maiden looked at him for a moment, with a curious pity for his changing moods and his changeless deformity. Then she turned and entered her home, from which she emerged a moment later with a vessel of milk in one hand and a silver cup in the other. She filled the cup with milk and handed it to the fool, who took it from

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her fingers with an ill grace. His spiteful eyes grinned at the white fluid malignly, as if whatever it emblemed of purity, of simplicity, exasperated him. He leered up again at the girl with the same visible rage at her purity, her simplicity, and he made a little tilting motion with his fingers, as if the devil in him were minded to dash the milk in the maid's face. But her indifference defied him and the thirst tugged at his throat.

"Water is the drink of the wise," the girl said, steadily. "But milk is the wine of the gods."

She was saying words that her father often said, and for his sake they seemed very fair and very true, and she uttered them lovingly. To the fool they seemed the last frenzy of folly. But there was nothing better to drink, and his dryness yearned furiously. He lifted the cup to his lips and sipped with a wry face. Then he glanced up at the girl slyly.

"It were but courteous to drink my hostess's health, but I will not pledge your ripeness in so thin-spirited a tippie. Yet a malediction may cream on it, so here's damnation to the King."

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And as he spoke he drank again, and seemed to drink with more gusto, but the girl frowned at his malevolence.

“The milk should be sour that is supped so sourly,” she said.

The grimace on the twisted face deepened into a sneer as the fool handed back the empty cup, to be filled again.

“Mistress Red-head,” he said, “if you knew the King as well as I know him you would damn him as deeply.”

Perpetua’s wide eyes watched the deformed thing with wonder. She thought he must, indeed, be mad to rail at the good King, so she answered him gently as she gave him back the full cup.

“I have lived on this hill-top all my life, and know little of the world of cities at the foot of the mountain. But whenever my father speaks of the King he calls him Robert the Good.”

The fool shrugged his shoulders—an action that accentuated their deformity; and he chuckled awhile to himself, like a choking hen, while he peered maliciously at the maiden through narrowed slits of eyelids. When he had savored suffi-

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ciently whatever jest so moved him to ugly mirth he spoke again.

“Oh, ay—Robert the Good! But virtue is no medicine for mortality, so Robert the Good is dead and buried these six weeks, and Robert the Bad reigns in his stead, and again I drink to his happy damnation.”

And again he drank the cool fluid, sucking it greedily from the cup ere he returned it to Perpetua.

The girl took it unconsciously. She had forgotten the fool in his phrase, in the name he gave to the King. Her springs had been sweetened by hearing of Robert the Good, of his gentleness, his justice, his mercy, of how men loved him in Sicily. She had taken it for granted that his golden reign would endure forever, and now she learned from these mocking lips that gentleness and justice and mercy were in the dust. “Robert the Bad,” she murmured to herself, and the words made her shudder in the sun.

The fool leered at her as if he read her thoughts, and he laughed briskly.

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“Angel of Arcady,” he piped, “shall I tell you tales of the King to admonish your innocency?”

Perpetua’s eyes and mind came back from the sky into which she had been staring. There might be a new king in Sicily, but she had her old work to do.

“I have my task to do,” she answered. “But you can talk to me at my work, if you choose.”

“What is your task?” questioned the fool, and the girl answered, simply:

“To serve my father’s sword!”

She turned from her interrogator and entered her dwelling, passing between its fringe of columns, as slim and erect as they, while the fool gaped at her. In another moment she reappeared, carrying with her that which contrasted strangely enough with her sex, her beauty, and her youth. She bore in her strong hands, and bore with ease, a great two-handed sword—the two-handed sword of the executioner, her father—the two-handed sword that was the symbol of the stroke of justice in the eyes of all the world. With an air of pride the girl carried the great weapon, the

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pride of a child with its doll, of a mother with her infant, of a soldier with his flag.

At the sight of her the fool flung up his arms and emitted a queer, ropy gust of laughter.

"Oh, ho!" he gurgled, "oh, ho! I think I know you now. You are the daughter of Theron the executioner."

The girl looked straightly at him, her eyes shining under levelled brows. She let the point of the great sword rest on the grass, and she leaned upon its mighty cross-piece, resting her cheek against its handle. Her red hair ran in ripples over her shoulders and over the hilt of the blade, red as ever the blood the blade had caused to flow of old.

"I am the daughter of Theron the executioner," she said, gravely.

The monster flung a sneer from thrust-out lips, emphasizing it with thrust-out hands.

"A pretty trade!" he cried, derisively. The girl answered him as calmly and proudly as if she were the very divinity of justice rebuking some obscene brawler.

"I have no horror of my father's trade. This

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sword is but the red weapon of law, as law is the red weapon of life.”

“I have heard of you,” the man retorted, yelping at her serenity. “The wild, shy country people believe the blood that sword has shed flushes in your hair, and that the life it has taken rekindles in your eyes.”

Perpetua shook her head.

“This sword has shed no blood since I was born. King Robert the Good had no need of it.”

The deformed clasped his lean fingers across his knees and rocked to and fro in an ecstasy of pleasure.

“King Robert the Bad will have great need of it. Your father’s arms shall ache with swinging. Why, my own head would drop to-morrow like a wind-fallen apple if I had not taken fool’s leave to the heights and the hollows.”

The girl drew back a little, still clinging to the sword.

“Are you blood-guilty?” she asked, sternly.

The fool laughed shrilly to see the executioner’s daughter shrink from blood-guiltiness.

“Not I. I am but Diogenes, the Court Fool.

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I have been Prince Robert's plaything over yonder in Naples since the dawn of his evil spring. When his father's death brought him over-seas to Sicily, I must needs come too, for my wry wit diverts him and my wry body sets off his comeliness. I plumed myself on my favor, but I was bottle-brave last night, and I blundered. In my cups I aped the King's airs and graces to a covey of court strumpets till their sleek sides creaked with laughter. 'Thus does King Robert carry himself,' jiggered I, 'and thus does he kiss a lady's hand—fa, la, la!' Oh, it was rare."

Even as he spoke Diogenes renewed his antics, skipping on the grass to mimic how the King skipped on the palace floor, and with his lean claws he blew kisses. Perpetua thought him more repulsive in his mirth than in his rage. But suddenly his mirth dropped and his voice fell to a whisper.

"And then the King caught me at my capers and his heart swelled like a wet sponge. He swore a great oath that my fool's head should be the first to fall under his tyranny."

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The girl crossed herself in horror as she questioned.

“Surely, he would not kill a fool for his folly?”

The fool shrugged his shoulders; fear and malignity tugged at the muscles of his cheeks and made them twitch.

“The King’s soul is as red as hell; sin scarlet through and through; warp and woof, there is no white thread of heaven in him. Shall I number you the beads in his chaplet of vices? The seven deadly devils wanton in his heart; his spirit is of an incredible lewdness; he is prouder than the Pope, more cruel than a mousing cat—all which I complacently forgave him till he touched at my top-knot, but now I hate him.”

Again the girl crossed herself swiftly, while she looked at the puckered face with curiosity, with pity.

“Can you hate in God’s sunshine?” she asked, and as she spoke she looked about her at the trees and the mountains and the sea and the grass and the flowers, ennobled and ennobling in the sunlight, and her heart ached at the new thoughts that had thrust themselves into her life. But

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the fool sneered at her surprise and did not heed her pity.

“My hate is a cold snake, and the sun will not thaw me.” He struck himself fiercely on the breast and stared at her. “Look at me, humped and hideous. How could this rugged hull prove an argosy of ineffabilities?”

The pity deepened on the girl’s face, scattering the curiosity, and she spoke gently, hopefully:

“I have sometimes picked a wrinkled, twisted pear and found it honey-sweet at the heart.”

Even the callous fool felt the tenderness in Perpetua’s voice, the tender pity of the strong spirit for the weak, the evil, the unhappy. He shook his head less angrily than before.

“I am no such bird-of-paradise,” he sighed. “My mind is a crooked knife in a crooked sheath. When I was a child in my Italian village, trimly built, children laughed at me for my ugliness, for my hump, for my peaked chin and my limp, and I learned to curse other children as I learned to speak. Every hand, every tongue was against the hunchback, yet my shame saved me. For my gibbosities tickled the taste of a travelling

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mountebank. He bought me of my parents, who were willing enough to part with their monster; he trained me to his trade, taught me to sing foul songs and to dance foul dances. I have grinned and whistled through evil days and ways. My wit was gray with iniquities when Hildebrand, the King's minion, saw me one day at a fair in Naples and picked me out for jester to Prince Robert."

The head of Diogenes drooped upon his breast. He had not talked, he had not thought, of the past for long enough, and the memory vexed him. Perpetua propped the sword against the wall of her dwelling and stood with linked hands for a little while in silence, looking out over the sea. Then she turned again to where the fool crouched, and spoke to him softly.

"Are all court folk like you?"

Diogenes lifted his head, and the old malignity glittered in his eyes.

"Ay, in the souls; but for the most part they have smooth bodies."

He watched the girl closely while her eyes again sought the sea and came back and met the fool's gaze.

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“Is the King like you?” she questioned.

The fool unshuddered himself and leaped to his feet, snapping his fingers in fantastic imprecation.

“My soul is as the soul of a sucking babe by his wicked soul; but, as for his body, the imperious gods who mock us have given him a most exquisite outside, the case of an angel masking a devil.”

He raged into silence, but his mouth still worked hideously, as if his hate were fumbling for words it could not find. The girl gave a great sigh.

“I did not know there were such men in the world,” she said. The fool stared at her in amaze.

“Then you must have seen few men,” he grunted.

“I have seen few men,” the girl answered, sadly—“my father, who is old, and the timid country folk, and the holy brothers of the church. Of men from the valley, from the city, I have seen but two—you and one other.” She paused for a moment, thoughtfully, and then went on with a swell of exultation in her voice—“and that other was not like you.”

The fool drew nearer to her, eagerly, apish

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curiosity goading him. "Who was my fellow?" he asked of the girl, who, with averted head, seemed as one who dreams waking. Dreamily she answered:

"One dewy morning a week ago I met a hunter in these happy woods." She closed her eyes for a moment as if the memory was sweet to her and she wished to shut it away from the staring fool.

"Humph!" said Diogenes. "In the days of Robert the Good men might not hunt in these forests."

Perpetua looked at Diogenes again with bright eyes of scorn.

"King Robert was gentle with beast as with man. But this hunter did not seem cruel. Like you, he was tired; like you, he was thirsty. I showed him where a spring of sweet water bubbled."

"What was his outer seeming?" Diogenes asked. Somewhat of a warmer color touched the girl's cheeks.

"My father has told me tales of the ancient heroes. I think he was blessed with all the comeliness and goodliness of the Golden Age."

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Diogenes jeered at her enthusiasm with his voice, with his eyes, with every curve and angle of his misshapen frame—protesting against praise of beauty.

“Did he pilfer your silly heart from your soft body?” he asked. Perpetua answered him mildly, heedless of the sneering speech.

“He spoke me fair. He was grave and courteous. I know he was brave and good.” She moved a little away, with her hands clasped, speaking rather to herself, but indifferent to the presence of the fool. “When God wishes me to mate, God grant that I love such a man.”

The frankness, the simplicity, the purity of this prayer seemed to sting Diogenes to a fierce irritation. Leering and lolling, he advanced upon the girl.

“Did he kiss you upon the mouth?” he whispered, mean insinuation lighting his face with an ignoble joy.

The girl turned upon him swiftly, and there was a sternness in her face that made the fool recoil involuntarily and wince as if at a coming blow. But there was little anger in the girl’s

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clear speech as she condemned the unclean thing.

“You have a vile mind,” she said, quietly. “And if I did not pity you very greatly I should change no words with you.”

Diogenes, nothing dashed by her reproof, neared her in a dancing manner, smiling as some ancient satyr may have smiled at the sight of some shy, snared nymph.

“How if I chose to kiss you?” he asked, and his loose lips mouthed caressingly. To his surprise the girl met his advances as no shy nymph ever met satyr, with a hearty peal of laughter, that brought the tears into her eyes and red rage into his. She thrust towards him her stroug, smooth arms.

“I have a man’s strength to prop my woman’s pity,” she said, as she broke off her laughter, “and, believe me, you would fare ill.”

Diogenes eyed her with a dubiousness that soon became certainty. That well-fashioned, finely poised creature, with the firm flesh and the clean lines of an athlete, was of very different composition from the court minions who swam in the

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sunshine of Robert's favor, of late at Naples and now in Sicily. He had strength enough to tease them and hurt them sometimes when it pleased Robert to suffer him to maltreat them; but here was a different matter. He gave ground sullenly, the girl still laughing, with her strong arms lying by her sides.

"You seem a stalwart morsel," he grunted. "I will leave you in peace if you will tell me where to hide from the King's anger. Indeed, I do not greatly grieve to leave the city, for they say a seaman died of the plague there last night, one of those that came with us out of Naples." He shivered as he spoke, and his bird-like claws fumbled at his breast in an attempt to make the unfamiliar sign of the cross. But the face of the girl showed no answering alarm.

"Neither the plague nor the King's rage need be feared in these forests," she said. "The pure breezes here bear balsam. As for the King's rage, there are caves in these woods where a man might hide, snug and warm, for a century. Bush and tree yield fruits and nuts in plenty, for a simple stomach."

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“I will keep myself alive, I warrant you,” Diogenes responded, “and to pay for your favor I will sing you a song.” So he began to sing, or rather to croak, to a Neapolitan air, the words of the Venus-song of the light women of Naples:

“Venus stretched her arms, and said,
‘Cool Adonis, fool Adonis,
Hasten to my golden bed—’”

Perpetua’s face flamed, and she put her fingers in her ears. “Away with you! away with you!” she commanded.

The fool stopped in his measure; it was no use piping to deaf ears. “Farewell, fair prudery,” he chuckled, and in a series of fantastic hops and bounds he reached the edge of the pine wood and soon was lost to sight within its sheltering depths.

II

THE COMING OF THE KING

WHEN the last gleam of the fool's parti-colored habit had disappeared in the sanctuary of the wood, Perpetua took her hands from her ears and seated herself on a fragment of a fallen column that had formerly made part of the colonnade of the Temple of Venus. Here she sat for a while with her hands listlessly clasped, trying to disentangle the puzzling web of her thoughts. Her most immediate sensation was delight at the departure of Diogenes. The warm, fair day seemed to have grown old and cold with his world wisdom, a wisdom so different from all that she had ever been taught to venerate as wise.

"If I were a bird," she sighed aloud, "I could not sing while he was near. If I were a flower, I should fade at his coming."

She rose from her throne and blew kisses on her

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finger-tips to the birds that sang about her, to the flowers that flamed beneath her feet. "Be happy, birds," she whispered; "be happy, flowers, for the withered fool has gone."

She spoke to the birds, she spoke to the flowers as she would have spoken to human friends if she had any; they were her friends, and she loved them dearly, and she believed with all her heart that they understood her speech. She bent tenderly over one tall plant and touched its golden crest. Diogenes had passed from her thoughts as she stooped and made the flower her confidant. "I wonder when the hunter will come again."

She turned and stretched out her hands in pretty appeal towards the woodland.

"Dear forest beasts," she whispered, "forgive me, for I think I shall rejoice at his coming."

She drew her hand across her forehead, as if she sought to banish distracting thoughts, thoughts that had no place before in the simple order of her life. Then, as one who seeks distraction in the fulfilment of an appointed task, she moved to take the great sword and dedicate herself to its service. Holding it surely and

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firmly in her strong grasp, she carried it to where the grindstone stood, and carefully laid the edge of the blade to the shoulder of the stone wheel, while she worked the treadle with her foot. As the wheel spun and the sword hissed on the stone, she sang to herself the old, old sword-song that her father had taught her, the song that men who made swords had sung in some form or other from the dawn of war:

“Out of the red earth
The sword of sharpness;
Blue as the moonlight,
Bright as the lightning.”

The song wavered on her lips to the merest thread of music and then faded into silence. Her body was still busy with the sword, but her mind had drifted away from the place where she was to the place where she had been a week ago, to that cool, green hollow in the wood where she had met the tired hunter. He came upon her through the cracking brush, through the parting leaves; he stood before her, the sunlight touching him through the branches, with a smile on his young,

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fair face; he saluted her with simplicity and grace, and as she gazed at him dim legends of Greek heroes crowded upon her and she could well have believed that she beheld Perseus the dragon-slayer or Theseus the redresser of mortal wrongs. Their speech had been scanty, but it still sounded sweet to her ears. He had said he was thirsty, and she gave him to drink from a familiar spring; he had asked for guidance, and she had shown him the way out of the forest.

That was all, or almost all. He had said he would come again; and, of course, he would come again. In her simple philosophy a given word was given, a promise ever redeemed. There was no trouble in her thought of him; she had been glad to meet this wonderful, joyous being; she would be glad to see him again; in the mean time there was pleasure in meditation. How bright his hair was and how kind his smile! and his eyes were like a mountain lake.

Perpetua was so absorbed by her thoughts and her task that she did not hear the soft sound of quiet footsteps on the grass as a man crested the hill, an old man, tall and gray and sturdy, dressed

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in a jerkin and leggings of faded scarlet leather, who stood upon the open space, silently watching her.

Once again the clear voice of Perpetua floated into the air:

“ Arising, falling,
The sword of sharpness,
Weapon of Godhead,
Baffles the Devil.”

The song ended; the sword lay motionless upon the motionless stone; the girl's thoughts were in the green heart of the wood.

“ I wonder what sweet name he carries. I wonder who was his mother. She must have been a happy woman. I wonder who will be his happy wife.”

A tear fell upon the bright blade and startled Perpetua.

“ I am too big a girl,” she said to herself, “ to be such a baby—and tears will rust on a sword.”

As she wiped the sword clean with her sleeve, the new-comer advanced and touched her gently on the shoulder. The girl swung round with a cry of joy. She leaned the sword against a tree,

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and, running to the man, clasped him in her arms, the strong young girl clinging to the strong elder like some beautiful creeper encircling an ancient, stalwart tree.

"Oh, father!" she cried. "I am so glad you have come! I have been so lonely."

Theron's brown hand rested gently on the girl's head, and his brown face smiled love. There was trouble in his eyes, there was trouble in the lines of his forehead, but the sight of his daughter softened them, and she read nothing but greeting.

"Lonely, little eagle?" he asked, with surprise in his voice. The girl noted the surprise and laughed a little as she answered.

"I never knew what it was to be lonely before. You and I and the sword, and our songs, and the holy men, and the trees and the flowers and the furred and feathered woodlanders"—she ran through the sum of her companionships—"they seemed to make a perfect world of peace."

Theron heard the change in the child's voice, Theron saw the change in the child's eyes.

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“Who has disturbed this world of peace?” he asked, and a frown grew on his face.

“Strangers,” the girl answered, turning a little away, while the old man caught at the word and echoed it in fear and anger, while his hand went to the hilt of his knife.

“Strangers?”

“There was one here but now,” Perpetua answered, “a fugitive from the city, whose coming troubled me. He said the world was as wicked as a sick dream, and my heart grew cold in the sunshine.”

The lines on Theron’s face deepened dangerously. “Had I been by I would have twitched his tongue out,” he said, fiercely. Perpetua pressed her hand upon his lips.

“No, father, you could not have touched him, for he was deformed and twisted—a hideous, helpless thing.”

Theron stamped his foot upon the ground. “I set my heel upon a scorpion!” he cried. Perpetua shook her head.

“I am sorry for the things that are made to bite and sting. Let us think no more of it. Tell

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me of the Golden Age, father, when heroes roamed through the world, beautiful youths with eyes like mountain lakes."

Theron turned moodily from his daughter, and, going to the edge of the hill, looked down upon the distant city.

"The Golden Age is over long ago," he said, gloomily, "and we have come to the end of time."

Perpetua saw that her father was agitated, and wondered why the passing of Diogenes should move him so much. She yearned to tell him her sweet secret of the other comer, the beautiful hunter with the bright eyes and the bright hair, yet when she strove to speak words seemed to be denied her. In all the years of her young life, in all the years of love for her father, and of a friendship, a comradeship wellnigh more wonderful than love, there had been no secret shut in her heart from him. Now there was, and it seemed as if she could not set it free. While she hesitated, Theron turned to her again, and asked, abruptly, "Was this the only intruder to-day?"

Perpetua felt her cheeks burn as she answered, "Ay," but Theron did not notice her confusion,

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for he was again gazing down upon the city, and, though he questioned anew, his voice was listless.

“I thought you said strangers?”

“There has been no one else to-day,” Perpetua answered. She purposely set some stress on the last word, that her father might, if he chose, make further question, but he seemed to be absorbed in heavy thoughts. He turned from his view of the city and came to her with a grave face.

“There will be others,” he said. “The new King—”

“Robert the Bad?” Perpetua interrupted.

Theron stared at her. “Where did you learn that?”

“The withered fool called the King so.”

“The fool yelped wisdom,” Theron said, bitterly.

Perpetua came up to him and touched him on the arm. “Father,” she said. “You did not tell me that there was a new king in Sicily.”

The executioner looked down upon his daughter's face with a smile of grim pity. Putting his arm around her shoulders, he led her to the fallen column, and they sat there side by side.



PERPETUA

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“Ill news comes too soon, whenever it comes,” he said. “I had hoped against hope for so long. I never told you that our good King had a son, the pride and anguish of his life, the beautiful youth for whose restoration to health yonder church was set on the highest pinnacle of these mountains. Sometimes we get our wish and find it a weapon that wounds our flesh. ‘Any price,’ King Robert prayed—‘any price for my son’s life.’ And life came back to the dying child, but it seemed like a new life, selfish and vain and cruel. Weary of his father’s simple rule and quiet court, he went oversea to his duchy of Naples and lived there an evil life. The King’s ministers tried to keep knowledge of this from the good King’s ears, but such news flies in through the chinks of palace doors. Still he did not know the worst, and to the day of his sudden death he hoped that his heir might yet prove worthy to wear the crown of Sicily. How vain that hope was Sicily now knows.”

Theron was silent, staring sullenly at the ground. Perpetua plucked softly at his sleeve.

“Why did you never tell me this?” she whispered.

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Theron shook his head.

“Dear child, for the sake of your mother’s memory, who died to give you life, you have lived here in the holy woods away from an unholy world. As a man shelters a little, flickering flame, hollowing his hands around it to keep it from the wind, as a man screens a flower from the cold, so I have striven to shelter and to screen your life, so that you might come to womanhood in such a fashion—so simple, so pure, so holy—as that in which girls grew to womanhood in the Golden Age. Therefore I did not tell you that Robert the Good was dead; therefore I did not tell you that this Italianate Prince of Naples reigned in his stead. So much you have learned from a stranger, but you shall learn no more. Men seldom come to these windy pinnacles; the King and the King’s men and the King’s women never, in all likelihood, again.”

The girl listened lovingly to the well-loved voice. “Father,” she asked, “why does the King come to these heights? His father never came here.”

“Robert the Good never came here in your life-

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time, child," Theron answered, "for his heart was sad within him at the thought of all the hope and joy that had gone to the building of this temple and all the disappointment that came after. But his son comes in ostentation. Since his accession, he has visited in turn every church in his kingdom, and given to every altar some glorious gift, that Heaven, so he boasts, impiously, may be in debt to him. He comes to-day to this, the least and last."

Perpetua crossed herself as her father spoke of the King's impious boast.

"Then I shall see the King?" she said.

Theron shook his head.

"No, Perpetua, you will not see the King. You and I will keep close in-doors to-day, talking of the old gods and the old heroes, till the King has come and gone, and then we will try to forget that there is such a king in Sicily."

Perpetua sat silently for a few moments, with her hands clasped across her knees, gazing with wide eyes at the golden air, quivering with heat. Then she turned to Theron.

"Father," she said, "if the world be not all

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peace and sweetness, are we wise to shut our eyes to the worse part of God's handiwork? Are we wise to hide from life, like a lizard in a cranny of a wall? You say the Golden Age is dead and gone. Can we bring it back by make-believe? Can we hold the summer back by saying it is still summer while the snow is on the ground?"

Theron turned and looked at her thoughtful face with some wonder. Never before had it happened that she had questioned his judgment. They had been happy together in their mountain nest; he had shut out the world for so long; he hated to think that he could not shut it out forever. And now some knowledge had come to the so jealously guarded girl, creeping into the unreal world he had created for her, and the thought of it vexed him. But there was no vexation in his voice as he answered her, smiling.

"You talk as glibly as the Seven Sages, little eagle, but I will not argue with you. We must make the best of a bad world, and the best way is to shut it out."

Perpetua leaned forward and kissed him. "Dear father," she said, with infinite reverence and

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affection in her voice. From far below there came to her ears a sound of distant music. She read in Theron's face that he heard it, too, and, hearing, he shuddered.

"Hark!" he said. "Do you hear that music?"

He rose and moved to the brow of the hill, and Perpetua, rising, followed him. Standing by his side she looked down the slope of the mountain, and saw, far away, on the long, white road, a moving mass and the gleam of gold and steel.

"It is the King's company," Theron said, sadly. "In-doors with you, sword and singer."

Instantly obedient, Perpetua turned, took the sword from the tree against which she had propped it when Theron arrived, and entered the dwelling, murmuring as she went another verse of the sword-song:

"The gods of Hellas
Blessed it with beauty;
The gods of Norland
Filled it with fury."

As she passed, singing, out of sight beneath the turquoise-tinted dome, Theron looked after her sadly. Then he went again to the brow of the

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hill and looked down the green slope, clothed thickly with venerable trees, cypress and pine and pepper tree, tamarisk and prickly pear, to the fair city beyond, nestling amid her groves of gray-leaved olive and green-leaved almond, her vineyards, her orchards of peach and apple and fig.

“Unhappy Syracuse!” he sighed. “Evil hours are gathering about you as the vultures gather around the dead body that is cast into the Barathron. It was whispered within your walls this morning that one had died of the plague, but this proud prince is worse than any plague.”

He sighed again as he watched the distant procession moving slowly onward. His keen sight could distinguish horsemen and litters, golden trappings, many-colored banners; his keen ears caught, with no pleasure, the triumphant swell of the royal music. It would be a long while yet before the new King and his people could reach the shrine of the archangel. There was a point on the steep hill-side where horseman must dismount, where lady must leave litter and continue the ascent on foot.

Theron still seemed to gaze at the slowly ad-

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vancing cortège, but his mind was far away from the glittering, tinkling company. He was turning in fancy the pages of his past, as he might have turned the pages of some painted manuscript, and reading therein the record of his strange life. He saw himself in his boyhood, the son of the hereditary executioner, aiding his father's task, learning his father's trade, patient and unashamed. He saw himself in his young manhood loving beyond his star, and his heart quickened as he thought of youth and beauty. He saw himself in his prime, and his eyes filled as he thought of youth and beauty wronged, betrayed, and abandoned. He saw himself clasping in his arms the injured idol of his youth; he saw again the strange scene in the forest, the captured wronger, the rude, lawless trial, and the stroke of the great sword which avenged dishonor. He saw again his sad, sweet nuptials; he lived anew through that brief spring and summer and autumn of belated happiness; he saw again the dead woman and the living child. He recalled his vow that the girl Heaven had given him should live apart from the world, sequestered in the holy solitude of the

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hills, cloistered in the pine woods. Year by year he seemed to see again the growth of the girl's life, the patient care, the mutual love—saw at the last the fairest flower of Sicilian maidenhood, Perpetua. All these memories belonged to the reign of the good king Robert, the days when the executioner's sword never swung in the sunlight over a victim, when it was almost possible for the executioner to credit the ancient tales that he told to his beautiful child, and to believe that the Golden Age, indeed, had come again. And now King Robert the Good was dead and the Golden Age was as far off as those little, golden clouds above the sea.

The executioner clasped his hands together in a despairing prayer for Syracuse. For himself he must ply his trade, for that was his duty as it had been that of his father before him, and his father before him. As for Perpetua, he would make a home for her still deeper in the heart of the mountain woods, and still tell her marvellous stories of the Age of Gold.

He turned away from the prospect of the city and walked slowly towards his dwelling. Clearer

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and clearer now came the sound of the advancing music. He paused for a moment on his threshold.

“I shall be brighter when the King has come and gone,” he said. Then he entered his dwelling and drew the door to after him.

And for a while there was quiet on the summit of the mountain.

III

ROBERT OF SICILY

THE bronze archangel, resting on his sword, in the niche hollowed in the side of the gray Norman church, had never looked before upon so great or so brave a concourse of people. When the statue had been put in its place, setting thus the seal upon the pious founder's purpose, King Robert the Good came simply clad and with little state, as was his custom, to attend the consecration of the church. Since that day, twenty years had come and gone, tempering the bronze figure with the changes of the seasons and the drift of time; but the changing years brought few visitors to the shrine. King Robert himself never came again, for with that day had begun the bitter disappointment which shadowed the rest of the good King's life. And if the King did not visit the temple himself had erected, the rest of Syra-

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cuse was ready enough to follow his example. For the way was long, the road only in part possible for horse travel, and the rest of the ascent steep and arduous. The few appointed priests did their daily offices in the lonely building to a scanty congregation consisting of Theron and his child, with now and then such of the country folk as chose rather to climb to the lonely church upon the height than to descend to the more populous places of worship that lay along the valley.

But to-day the condition of things was strangely changed. In the mellow light of the late afternoon the grassy platform below the rock on which the church stood was thronged with a brilliant assemblage of men and women, as unfamiliar to the bronze archangel as the bronze archangel was unfamiliar to them. Within a circle of men-at-arms in shining shirts of mail and pointed helmets, and of knights more heavily armored and appointed with fantastically painted shields, stood at one side the lords and ladies who made up the flower of the new King's court, and on the other all the principal ecclesiastics

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of Syracuse. Court and Church vied with each other in splendor of apparel. The jewels that gleamed on the hands and in the hair and round the neck of beautiful women and comely men stiffened with no lesser splendor the vestments of the princes of the Church, whose robes, as rich as the gorgeous garments of the court, answered color with color and texture with texture. A Sicilian nurtured in the school of Robert the Good would have frowned at the effrontery with which the women audaciously intensified the clinging fit of the garments, which moulded the form so precisely, and would have deplored the elegance, the effeminate foppery, which the comrades of the new King had imported with them as part and parcel of the Neapolitan inheritance. But the new-comers cared nothing for the opinion of the old-fashioned adherents of a dead king and a dead day; their desire was, as their master's, to renew the delights of Naples under a Sicilian sky and to enrich life to the limit with all the luxury that could add a grace to grace and give a sharper zest to pleasure.

This splendid brotherhood, this shining sister-

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hood, stood, as it were, poised in an attitude of expectation more eager than ever was shown for the passing of Ramazan by any of those Saracens who at one time were lords of the lovely island. The sun that means so much to the Saracen was sinking down the sky, but the sun for which those fair faces of men and women watched with so much real or assumed impatience had not yet risen upon their horizon. They were waiting for the coming of the King. At the point where the road to the church had become impracticable for horse or litter, courtiers and ladies, priests and knights had to climb as best they could the stubborn slope to the summit. But the fatigue which was thus imposed upon the tender limbs of women, upon the ancient frames of ecclesiastics, was not to be borne by the new King of Sicily. He was carried up the incline in a chair by two herculean Moorish slaves, so strong and surefooted that the stubborn ascent could be made with the least possible discomfort to his royal body. While the others had groaned and sweated as they scuffled up the hill—that they might reach the goal in time to receive their royal master—that royal

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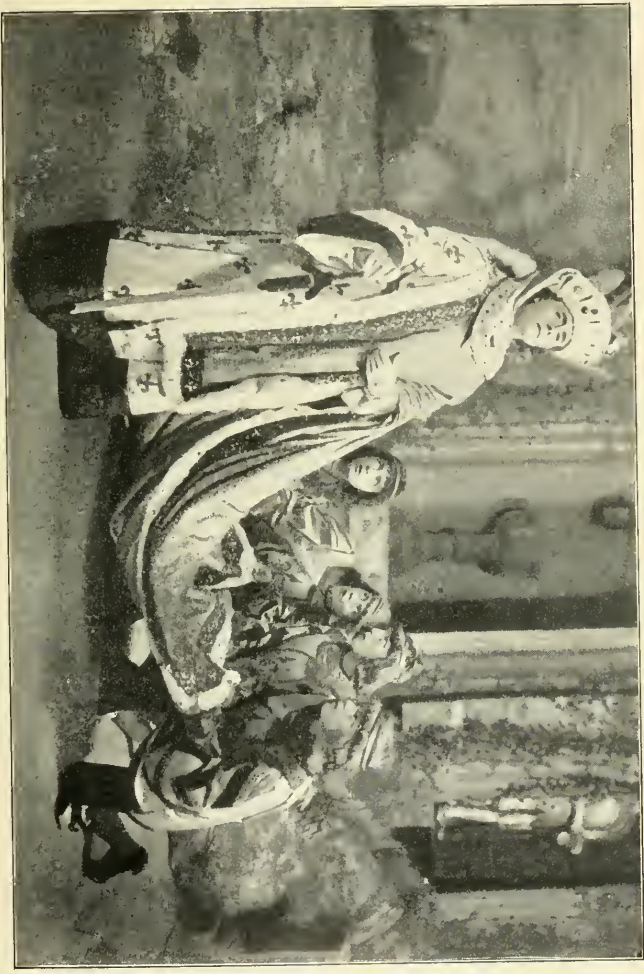
master made his progress with all the ease and leisure possible, accompanied by his closest friend, his dearest favorite, the Count Hildebrand.

A little stir in the courtly circle intimated that the awaited moment had arrived. Men bent the knee in homage, women bowed in reverence, as the young King, lightly resting his hand on Hildebrand's shoulder, leaped from his chair and advanced in smiles upon his worshippers.

It is the privilege of an older world to learn with something like intimate accuracy the appearance of the King, for though the few pictures that exist of him in certain illuminated manuscripts in the libraries of Sicilian monasteries are, in the first place, but indifferent specimens of the indifferent portraiture of the period, and, in the second place, are almost all taken at a later period of his life, the records, both monastic and civil, of the age furnish descriptions, evidently faithful and always in agreement, which allow of some attempt to appreciate his form and features.

The young Prince, whom the fool Diogenes had nicknamed Robert the Bad, was still in the flower of his age, the pride of his health, the triumph of

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his beauty. Of middle height, his slender form made him always seem taller than he really was, an effect further heightened by the erect grace of his carriage. His body was nimble and alert—the words are the words of an ancient chronicler—his limbs were finely shaped; his hands and feet were the theme and the despair of his parasites. But no quality with which it had pleased Heaven to endow his body was ever noted by an observer who was not at first taken captive by the enchantment of the young King's face. His countenance was cast in the mould of antique beauty. So might Alcibiades have looked when he reeled into the banquet-hall, with roses on his forehead, to reason and to jest with Socrates; so might Antinous have seemed when he drifted with Hadrian upon the Nile. The passion for pleasure, which had characterized him from the moment of his recovery from the illness that threatened his youth, had laid no stain upon his visage; his cheeks were as smooth, his lips as red, his hair as bright as those of a child, and the limpid clearness of his eyes met the beholder's gaze with the unblemished frankness of a boy. Most of those who

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praised Prince Robert for his physical beauty would, no doubt, have so praised him if he had been as ugly as a monkey, but for once in a way the tongue of flattery could scarcely overcrowd the truth.

The young King, heedless of the fashion of the day, clothed his comely body so as to display it to the best advantage; he eschewed the long and cumbrous garments that were associated with dignity, with royalty, and wore, instead, the tunic and long hose that gave his shapely limbs the greatest freedom and the most liberal display. But any simplicity in the form of his habit was splendidly atoned for by the costliness of the material. The revenues of a rich merchant for a year might have been spent upon the woven and embroidered stuffs that garbed the King's person, yet little of these noble stuffs was visible, so richly were they embellished with gold and adorned with jewels.

Behind the King came the Count Hildebrand, who might have passed for the handsomest man in Sicily if Sicily had no King Robert. Dressed almost as richly as the monarch, he would have

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dazzled many if Robert himself had not been by. He was of a more powerful make than the King, though he affected with success the same almost feminine daintiness of carriage and habit; but the beauty of his face was of a coarser pattern than the King's, and his dark eyes had no gleam of the almost infantile candor which was the charm of the King's regard.

Robert greeted his adorers with a salutation that was in itself an act of grace, and made an amiable gesture with his hand which immediately summoned to him those of the court ladies who for the moment were warmed by his more immediate favor.

They fluttered about him in an instant, tremulous as brilliant butterflies hovering around a royal rose: Faustina, with the proud face of a Roman marble; Messalinda, with the fair hair of some witch-woman of the North; Yolande, the exquisite French girl with the brown hair and the brown eyes—Yolande so envied of all the others, as being, as it seemed, the latest in the King's favor, the nearest in the King's grace. Robert caught Faustina and Messalinda round the waist

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and drew them for a moment tenderly to him, serenely indifferent to the presence of spectators, many of whom were ministers of the Church, while he shot a mocking smile at Yolande, who modestly lowered her lids. Then he released his laughing, delighted captives, and snatched a fan from Yolande's fingers, with which he fanned himself languishingly.

"Surely this hill is as high as heaven," he complained. "Of a truth, we should wear the wings of angels for these adventures into cloud-land."

Messalinda gave him an extravagant bow and a yet more extravagant simper.

"Your Majesty has all the other attributes of angelhood," she averred.

Faustina hastened to offer her own tribute of flattery to the pleased Prince.

"Would you leave nothing to the celestials, sire?"

The bright face of the King smiled infinite approval of her speech.

"In truth," he said, "if they were like me at all points they might become too vain for the courts of heaven."

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It was now Yolande's turn to weave her flower of praise into the royal garland.

"The celestials had better abide in the courts of heaven, for if they came to earth they could never hope to rival Sicily."

Her brown eyes glowed more adoration than her words. Robert, advancing towards her and taking her by the chin, peered into their depths with a perverse smile that made the girl quiver.

"Your lips drop honey," he said, lightly. "But you must linger for your reward. I kiss out of court to-night."

At this insolent announcement the favorites exchanged rapid glances. Faustina spoke first and swiftly.

"One smile from the King's eyes is sufficing payment for his poor servants."

Messalinda came quickly at her heels with no less flagrant humility.

"To be honored with one thought of the great King's mind is to be honored above the need of women."

French Yolande was less politic. Perhaps she had hoped to hold the King's fancy more surely

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than her fellows. She, too, winged her compliment, but she barbed it with a question.

“Who is the happiest she in all the world?” she asked. “Whom does the King’s pleasure consecrate to-night?”

Robert smiled enigmatically, teasing her with his eyes, teasing her with his fan. All the women leaned forward their heads, hoping for an answer. Robert let his gaze travel over their eager faces and laughed aloud, mockingly.

“Sweet creatures of prey, I will not tell you this secret, for if you knew you would make an end of her between you, and very surely I would have her live to see another sunrise. To-morrow, who knows, I may care no more, and then you may make common cause against her.”

He yawned slightly behind the fan, and then made a little gesture of dismissal, which sent the three women scurrying back from his immediate presence to the places they had quitted in the courtly ranks. His eyes, quietly indifferent, travelled over the body of Church dignitaries, waiting patiently till he should be pleased to tire of women’s talk and turn to them; his gaze rested with

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no show of interest upon the gray church and the great effigy of the archangel. He beckoned Hildebrand to his side.

"Is this the goal of our generosity?" he asked, pointing disdainfully with the fan to the sacred house. Hildebrand answered with deferential familiarity.

"This is the church of St. Michael, sire. Your amiable father set it here in the tenth year of your life."

"Yes, yes, I have heard the story," Robert said, again checking a desire to yawn. "My excellent parent, fretting over some childish sickness that presumed upon our person, vowed to build this shrine to his patron saint if I recovered. As if such men as I ever died in childhood!"

Hildebrand agreed, obsequiously. "May the King live forever," he murmured. Robert surveyed the church again with cold disfavor.

"Whoever wrought that image, wrought it well," he said. "It is pity to think of so much skill and so much good metal going to the composition of a mere saint that might have moulded me a Venus."

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Hildebrand raised his hands in pitying protestation against the folly of the late King.

“Your royal father was something weak of wit,” he sneered. Robert sighed commiseratingly.

“Poor man, he meant well,” he condescended. “Measured by our standard he must needs seem puny—as, indeed, what king of them all, Christian or Pagan, would not?” His manner so far had been in agreement with his supple companion, but suddenly a change came over his temper, and he turned on Hildebrand a frown so coldly menacing that the favorite recoiled in surprise and alarm.

“Still, he had the honor to beget me,” he added. “So you will do well not to speak lightly of him, my good Hildebrand.”

The embarrassed favorite tried to recover his ground and his composure.

“Sire, you are always right,” he stammered. “The tree from which so royal a rose sprang—”

Robert, having enjoyed his friend’s discomfiture, was now weary of it, and interrupted his apologies with a raised hand.

“Enough,” he said, and, turning from Hilde-

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brand in the direction of the group of ecclesiastics, he deigned for the first time to regard them as if they really existed and were not mere gorgeous puppets set up there as portion of the pageant of his pride. The archbishop of Syracuse and his fellows had waited in their splendid vestments as patiently for any sign of the King's favor as any light lady of the court, and this slight show of it served to stir them into delighted animation.

Few in that synod of slaves had served the Church in the days of Robert the Good. In his six-weeks' reign, Robert the Bad had worked wonders, and now his armies, civil and ecclesiastic, were generalled by his servants imported from Naples. Such soldiers, such churchmen as had offered opposition to his imperious humors had been either banished or imprisoned, or at the best flung from their offices without reward or appeal, and the young Prince had both sword and crozier at his absolute command, for it pleased Robert's fancy to proclaim himself religious as well as military head of the state, to whom the proudest of prelates was no more and no less a pawn than a captain of the guard.

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Contempt smiled in the eyes of the King and on his lips as he saw the new-made archbishop of Syracuse move eagerly forward in response to the disdainful gesture which told him that the King remembered his existence. He was followed by two priests who bore between them on a stand of ebony a magnificent reliquary, a masterpiece of Byzantine handicraft, its gold and jewels glowing like the fires of fairyland in the mellow evening sunlight.

“Sire,” said the archbishop, “this is your princely gift to this poor temple; this is the reliquary, fashioned by the most cunning artificers of your realms, rich in outward seeming, richer still in holding in its core the precious relics of a saint.”

Robert looked at the reliquary with sufficient attention to assure himself that it was as magnificent an offering as his pride could desire.

“It is a pleasing piece of work,” he said. “Look at it, ladies fair; there be jewels here as bright as your eyes, as red as your lips. Truly, I shall be famous for my piety.”

He turned with a little shrill laugh of satisfaction to the three women, who in obedience to

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the invitation of his speech had come near him and were gazing in greedy admiration at the precious vessel.

"It would have made me a rare jewel-box," Messalinda sighed.

"I would have made it a casket for love-songs," Faustina muttered.

Yolande, eager to be quickest in saying something that should please the King, looked up reverentially at Robert.

"Some day, sire," she said, "your precious bones will be so shrined and worshipped."

In a second the summer of the King's face lowered to storm darkness, and he turned on Yolande with so much fury, stretching out his hands as if he would take her by the throat, that the girl fell back in a panic fear. For a second the King could not speak with rage; his lips mouthed ineffective; at last words came to him.

"How dare you speak to me of death?" he screamed at her. "You she-devil, do you wish to die of scourging?"

The fury in his eyes, the fury in his fury, the fury in his gestures, transforming him so swiftly

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from his regal civility to a raging animal, palsied the fair girl's limbs, palsied her tongue.

"Sire," she stammered, piteously, "forgive—"

She could say no more, for her fear choked her, and tears raced from her eyes. Her companions shrank from her as from an unclean thing, one blighted by this fierce show of the King's disfavor. Robert, by a violent effort, controlled himself to composure. His arms dropped by his side, his face smoothed again.

"You shall weep red tears for this, minion!" he said to the unhappy girl, and turned from her again to regard the reliquary. Yolande slunk back to hide herself in the courtly company, and Faustina and Messalinda regained their places.

"The fool!" whispered Faustina to Messalinda, with a glance in the direction where Yolande sought to efface herself—"to hint at death to a king who would like to believe himself immortal as a god."

"Ay," retorted Messalinda, "and to hint it now when they say that the plague creeps abroad."

Robert now addressed the obsequious prelate: "My lord archbishop, escort this coffer into the

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chapel and give your ceremonial rein. Attend him, lords and ladies," he continued, turning to his retinue; "for ourselves we will linger awhile in this sunlight, having some thoughts of weight to change with the Lord Hildebrand. We will bless you with our presence by-and-by."

Obedient to the King's somewhat contemptuous dismissal, all those that had accompanied Robert to the summit of the mountain now made haste to leave him alone with his favorite. Priests and courtiers, ladies and soldiers, a glittering line, ascended the stone steps that led to the chapel and disappeared within its doors. The rear of the procession was brought up by the King's Varangian body-guard, under the captain, Sigurd Olafson, a young Norseman, whose yellow hair and bright blue eyes made him a conspicuous figure in the thick of so many Southern forms and faces.

When the church doors had closed upon the last of the company, Robert turned a smiling face upon his friend.

"Do you think, Hildebrand," he questioned, "that I came here for this mummery in my father's monument?"

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"I never question your Majesty's thoughts or deeds," Hildebrand answered, deferentially. "They are oracles and miracles to your slave."

The King's face yielded a ready brightness to a flattery that never staled.

"I will tell you my true purpose instantly," he said. "But first I have a task for you."

He took Hildebrand by the arm and drew him through the first fringe of the pine wood to the space where Theron's home stood, the mosque with its circle of pillars.

"What do you see?" he asked.

Hildebrand eyed the two beautiful ruins with frank indifference.

"Some pagan pillars," he answered, "and the praying-place of the followers of Mahomet."

"It is to my mind a lovelier shrine than the gaudy box we have just been gaping at," Robert said; and then went on, answering the surprise in his companion's face: "You shall learn why by-and-by. In the mean time know that it is the dwelling of Theron the executioner."

"Theron the executioner?" said Hildebrand.

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"I thought your honest father had no use for such shedders of blood."

"In the very madness of truth, he had not," Robert answered. "So this rogue has rusted here idly through a generation of eating and sleeping. Very likely his sword is grown with ivy. But now he must stretch his sinews, now he must scour his scimitar, now he begins to be briskly busy."

Robert drew from his thumb his massive gold signet-ring and handed it to Hildebrand.

"Knock at his door. Show him my signet-ring and tell him to speed at once to Syracuse, to my palace, for the beheading of my court-fool."

Hildebrand, weighing the great ring in the cup of his hand, stared at his master.

"Have you caught the runagate?" he questioned, "and do you, indeed, mean to divide him so dismally?"

"I have not caught him yet," said the King, with a frown; "but when I do I will halve him and set up his head on a spear in Syracuse market-place, as a warning to all who cross my pleasure."

Robert emphasized the word "all" so un-

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pleasantly that Hildebrand hastened to excuse himself from any suspicion of sympathy with the offending jester.

“You may carve him into cutlets, for all I care,” he said. “He was a ribald thing, and deserves no pity.”

He advanced towards the mosque as he spoke, while Robert screened himself from view behind one of the pillars of the ruined temple.

As the fist of Hildebrand beat upon the door of the dwelling, the voice of Theron answered from within: “Who knocks?”

“Open in the King’s name!” Hildebrand cried, imperiously. He could hear the voice of Theron inside repeat his words: ““In the King’s name!””

In another moment Theron opened the door and came out, closing it carefully behind him.

“Who calls me in the King’s name?” he asked, gazing in astonishment at the brilliant youth who had summoned him.

“I am the Lord Hildebrand, the King’s friend,” Hildebrand answered, impatiently, holding out the ring. “Here is the King’s signet. He bids you by my lips that you gather up your great

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sword and go to Syracuse with what speed you may, for he has work for you."

Theron gave a heavy groan.

"Work for me?" he echoed.

"Ay, work for you!" Hildebrand retorted. "You have been idle a great while, gaffer, but your age-long holiday dies to-day. We are no longer in the reign of King Robert the Foolish."

Theron shook his head in protest.

"King Robert the Good," he murmured.

Hildebrand reiterated his nickname with a sneer:

"King Robert the Foolish! King Robert the Wise means to begin his reign by beheading his court-fool as an example to all other fools and courtiers. So bustle, man; bring out your blade and be off."

Theron turned away with a gesture of sorrow.

"King Robert the Bad!" he said, beneath his breath. Then he entered his hut again and passed to an inner room, where Perpetua sat spinning. As she looked up he laid his finger on his lip.

"I am called to Syracuse," he said. "Bolt doors and bar windows. Make all fast and firm. Open to none till I return."

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“Why, who should come?” Perpetua asked, pausing in her work. Her clear eyes saw the trouble in her father’s face, but she did not seek its cause, for he had laid finger on lip.

Theron shivered as if cold. “I do not know,” he said. “Open to none.”

Perpetua rose and rested her hands on his shoulders and looked into his eyes.

“You speak as if you feared something,” she whispered.

And Theron whispered back, “Perhaps I do.”

Perpetua shook her head, and the flame of her hair rippled over her shoulders.

“God’s will rules the world. There is nothing to fear. Farewell, dear father.”

Theron took her face in his two brown, wrinkled hands and kissed it tenderly.

“Farewell, eaglet,” he sighed. Then he left her and went into the open, bearing the great sword, that seemed to gleam crimson with the sunlight. He closed the door behind him carefully, and was making for the mountain-path, when Hildebrand caught him by the arm.

“Is that the headsman’s weapon? ’Tis a pretty

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piece of steel. Can your withered sinews still wield it?"

Theron looked at his interrogator with a frown of disdain for his foppery.

"I doubt if you could do as much, younker," he growled.

Hildebrand only laughed.

"Do you think because I am feathered like a bird-of-paradise that I have no sap in me? Let me handle your chin-chopper."

Still smiling, he took the sword from Theron, who watched him contemptuously. Hildebrand, to his surprise, lifted the sword easily with one hand, played with it as if it were no heavier than a staff of wood, threw it lightly from his right hand to his left hand and back again, and then returned it to Theron, from whose face contempt had vanished.

"'Tis finely poised," Hildebrand commented, "but something light for its purpose; yet it will serve its turn. Away!"

"Do you accompany me?" Theron asked, with more respect than he had yet shown to the King's man.

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Hildebrand shook his head.

“Not I, old man. I say a prayer or two in the chapel by the side of my liege lord that I may return with a smooth soul to Syracuse. Farewell.” He turned away and walked towards the chapel.

Shouldering his sword, the old man tramped down the mountain towards the city.

IV

THE HUNTER

WHEN he was well on his way the King came quietly out of the wood and approached his favorite.

“Was there ever a greater king than I, Hildebrand?” he asked.

“Never since sun-birth,” Hildebrand responded, with glib emphasis. “The glory of Solomon, the sword of Cæsar, the beauty of Adonis, the lyre of Orpheus, the strength of Hercules, the grace of Apollo, the sum of all possibilities—God-man, or man-God, what shall our poor lips call you?” He made the monarch a profound obeisance, too profound to permit Robert to see the mockery shining in his eyes.

The monarch drank the delicious draught with more than royal gravity as he answered:

“You are a wise man. But if I have immortal

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merits, I have very mortal desires. This is not the first time that I have climbed to these summits."

Hildebrand had raised his head, and mockery had given ground to surprise.

"Indeed, sire?" he asked. The King was silent for a moment, musing on sweet memories, and when he spoke it was with smiling lips.

"My honest father, worthy man, forbade hunting in these happy hills, which gave me an itch to beat their coverts. Last week, while you were away at Naples, I rode in these hills till I could ride no longer, left my horse, lost my way, till in the very heart of the forest I met a girl—indeed, at first my joy mistook her for a goddess."

"Was she so fair?" Hildebrand asked, questioning rather the delight on Robert's face than the weight of Robert's words.

And Robert answered him eagerly, hotly:

"I tell you, Hildebrand, the loveliest I ever saw. No wonder that the antique world called Venus Erycina, if in the island where Eryx rears its crest such wonderful women still tread the earth with goddess feet."

THE HUNTER

Hildebrand repeated his question. "Was she so fair?"

There was a rapture on Robert's face as he answered:

"Naples is a very rose-garden of radiant women, but this wild rose of the woods was as far above them as I am above other men. She gave me drink from a fountain, lifting it to me in a cool, green leaf, and the clear water was sweeter than wine of Cyprus and headier than wine of Hungary, and I drank delicious madness."

A smile puckered Hildebrand's lips.

"Did you pluck this wild rose of the woods?" he asked.

Robert shook his head, but there was no look of regret in his eyes or sound of regret in his voice.

"No, no, no! Oh, not then, not yet! There are pleasures of Tantalus as well as pains of Tantalus. Had I told her I was the King, she would have flung herself into my arms and there would have been a workaday end to the wonder. No. I lingered and sipped at sweet desires. I masqued and ambled Arcady for her; was no

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more than I seemed, a simple hunter; flattered her with honest boy-babble, said her farewell with a low sweep of my cap, and left her with a new happiness in my heart, the happiness of an unsatisfied longing, an unanswered ache. If your school-boy were ever an epicure, he would sometimes leave the queen apples of the orchard unfingered."

"Is this the end of the idyl?" Hildebrand asked, quietly, when the King had run to the end of his rhapsody. Again Robert shook his head.

"You are a traitor, Hildebrand, to think such treason of your King. What of the wisdom of Solomon? I am of the mind of the ungodly, and let no flower of the spring go by me. But I have lived an exquisite week—sunlight and starlight I have dreamed dreams. In other arms I have sighed divinely for my dryad; but I know she will prove rarer than my most adorable guesses. That I will tell you to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" Hildebrand asked.

Robert laughed joyously as he pointed to Theron's dwelling.

THE HUNTER

"She lives here, Hildebrand. She is the daughter of Theron the executioner."

Hildebrand shrugged his shoulders. "Fie! A vile parentage!" he protested.

"I am like Midas," Robert retorted. "All I touch turns to gold. My love will make her flesh imperial as a pope's niece and her rags as purple as Cæsar's mantle."

Hildebrand smiled admiration.

"I have seldom seen your Majesty so enamoured," he said.

Robert put his arm affectionately round his companion's neck.

"I tell you, Hildebrand," he said, earnestly, "my heart sings as it has never sung since its earliest love-flutter. I feel like a stainless god in a sacred garden, listening for the first time to the dear madness of the nightingale. No subtle Neapolitan ever stirred me as this wood-nymph does with her flaming hair and her frank eyes. No wonder the old gods loved mortal women, if they knew my royal joy with this child of earth. Into the church, man, and leave me to my wooing!"

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Hildebrand responded to the release of Robert's arm, and the impatient gesture of dismissal that followed, by a reverential salutation, which Robert suddenly interrupted.

"I had forgotten," he said. "Did you do as I bade you, and bring a hunter's cloak with you?"

Hildebrand bowed. "I hid it behind yonder fallen pillar," he said, and, going to the spot, he returned to the King bearing a large, green cloak, which the King threw over his shoulders and gathered about his arms so as to muffle his royal bravery.

"I woo as the hunter, not as the King," he said.

Hildebrand bowed again. Then, turning, he climbed the hill that led to the church. Robert's eyes followed him till the doors of the church had closed upon his minister. Then with swift, noiseless steps he sped in the opposite direction, and, pausing before the dwelling of Perpetua, knocked lightly at the door and listened eagerly for answer. He could hear a sound as of an inner door being opened, of light footsteps crossing an intervening space; then his answer came in the voice of Perpetua.

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"Who is there?" Perpetua called through the door. She was wondering at this sudden fulfilment of her father's fears, but she felt no fear herself. Instantly a voice outside whispered her name:

"Perpetua! Perpetua!"

The words came so softly through the closed door that they might have been uttered by any one. But she was conscious of a stirring at her heart as she asked anew:

"Who calls?"

This time the response came clearly, in the unmistakable voice.

"A certain hunter," Robert said; and at the sound a passion of memory conquered her, banishing her father's cautions.

Robert could hear her give a little, glad cry. He could hear the sound of a bolt being shot back; then the door opened and Perpetua came out into the sunlight. Her eyes were very bright, her hands extended in welcome. He drew back a little in delight at her beauty, and she advanced to him joyously.

"You have come back?" she said.

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Robert caught her outstretched hands.

"How could I keep away?" he asked, looking into her eyes that mirrored his.

She drew her hands away and spoke softly.

"I dreamed that you would come back. With my eyes open and with my eyes shut, I dreamed that you would come back."

Robert's heart leaped at her speech.

"Are you glad to see me?" he questioned, tenderly.

The girl responded with the frankness of a child.

"Very glad. I liked you much that day when we met in the woods hollow, and those whom I like I am always glad to greet."

Robert took her hand again, and this time she suffered him to hold it for a little, unresisting, as he led her to where a fallen column at the edge of the pine wood offered a noble throne.

"Would you have grieved if I had not come again?" he asked her, as they sat side by side, and the girl answered, simply:

"Much, for my own sake and for yours."

"For mine, too, maiden?" Robert asked, wondering at her words.

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Perpetua shook back her mane of flame.

"Yes, for you said you would come, and truth is the best thing in the world."

If she had seemed adorable before in the green heart of the ancient wood, she seemed many times more adorable now to the hot eyes of the man as she sat there so quietly, speaking so frankly, looking at him so frankly. He would linger no more over this sweet preface of pleasure. He asked her eagerly:

"Shall I tell you the best truth in the world? I love you."

The girl's calm eyes studied his flushed face gravely.

"Love is the greatest truth or the greatest lie in the world. We have met but twice. Can you love so quickly?"

The fierce desire which the King called love clamored for interpretation. Robert spoke swiftly, warmly, feeding his greedy eyes with her beauty.

"When I drank the white water from your hands, I drank love with it. When I looked into your glorious eyes love leaped from them, all

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armed, and conquered me. The wood wind blew one tress of your red hair across my face and the red flame of love ran through my veins and burned out all memories save only the memory of your face. I would lose a kingdom to kiss you on the lips. I would surrender the power and the glory to be kissed upon the lips by you."

He made as if to clasp her in his arms, but in a moment she eluded him with the quickness of some forest creature. She had risen and was standing at a little distance before he realized that his longing arms clasped emptiness.

"You speak with the speech of angels," Perpetua said, speaking low; "wonderful words that shine like little stars, that make me tremble as if they were little flames that played about me." She paused for a moment as if thoughts troubled her; then went on: "And yet I think you say too much. All I should ask of my lover would be but a true heart and a true hand."

Anger strove with admiration on Robert's cheeks and in his eyes. He was untrained to any cross, and the composure with which the girl at once accepted and held off his homage galled

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him. But he curbed his irritation, remembering himself as the beseeching hunter, not as the commanding King.

Quitting the column, he came to where she stood. She did not move, but she did not take his offered hand, and he let it fall idly by his side, while he tried to overcrow her with his bold eyes.

“You have never loved or you would not reason so,” he argued. “Let me look into your eyes. I think you love me a little.”

He was very close to her now, but she did not surrender to his lips or his eyes. A kind of wonder was growing in her face, but she met his gaze as firmly as she answered his words.

“I have never loved, and yet I know what love might be. The spring wind sighs in these forests, and the nightingales are my friends. Though I know only of the world by hearsay, I know that men and women have done great things for love’s sake, and are remembered with songs and tears. I am not afraid of love.”

Her eyes were smiling as she spoke. Life seemed clear and easy to her. Life seemed clear

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and easy to her suitor; but his clarity, his ease, were not those of the mountain maid, and he misunderstood her, weighing her soul in false scales. He wooed her now with a low, triumphant challenge.

“I believe you love me a little.”

She baffled his challenge by her immediate frankness. The powers of life were not to be denied in shyness by a child who might have been a nymph of Artemis.

“I think I might love you a great deal. I will love you with all my heart if you know how to win me. I will surrender my soul to my true lord and lover when he comes.”

Her eyes softened as she made her sweet confession, and his cheeks burned to hear her. But her purity only tempted him without touching him. Again he made to clasp her in his arms.

“He has come. Kiss me, Perpetua!” he cried, exultingly; but she flitted from his reach as subtly as a shadow shifting with the sun, and there was command in her voice as she motioned to him to hold aloof.

THE HUNTER

“Wait! I am not to be won in a whirlwind. Great love is gentle love, hunter.”

He could have cursed at her for avoiding him, yet the avoidance spurred him to succeed, and his words were tender as caresses.

“When I clasp you in my arms you will forget to be so wise.”

The fair girl knitted her brows in a frown at his overboldness. For his life the King could not tell why he refrained from again attempting to embrace her—and yet he did refrain, standing and listening while she reproved him, and to his ears there seemed to be something of irony and something of mirth in her smooth, cool tones.

“Then you shall not clasp me in your arms till I am sure of myself and you.”

Robert wrestled with an unwelcome sense of reverence. Surely it was madness to be baffled by a country maid. He held out his comely hands, he commanded every appealing intonation of his musical voice.

“Child,” he cried, “you shall not deny me now. I am your hunter, sweet, and you my quarry. Be happy, being mine.”

THE PROUD PRINCE

He moved upon her as he spoke, trusting to charm her with the spell of speech that never yet had known defeat. But the girl stretched out her hand to stay him, and he paused, angry and yet curious to see how far she would carry contradiction.

"Stand back!" she said. "I am not afraid of love. I am not afraid of you. But your voice is not the voice of the woods, and your eyes shine with another light. You cannot snare me so."

He saw that she distrusted him; he saw that she did not fear him; he knew that he had not won her, yet believed himself near to the winning.

"If you love me—" Robert cried.

The girl stretched out her arms to the wide sky in protest.

"If I love you!" Her arms dropped to her sides and she continued, sadly, "I have dreamed of you very often, but I never dreamed of you thus."

"All lovers love fiercely," Robert insisted, passionately.

Perpetua shook her head. "I do not believe you."

THE HUNTER

Chafing to find himself so powerless to soften her, Robert made a gesture of despair.

"Ah!" he sighed, "we waste irrevocable seconds that should be spent in kisses."

Perpetua moved a little closer to him. The man's pain in his voice stirred the woman's pity in her heart, and she spoke more tenderly than she had spoken for some time.

"Hunter, if you love me, you shall tell my father your tale and he will be your friend as he is mine, and we will marry and live and die in the woodland."

She stood before him, beautiful as the living image of a goddess offering herself to a mortal with Olympian simplicity. So might C enone have willed to wed with Paris. Robert stared at her, amazed, confounded.

"I cannot marry you," he protested. "You are the executioner's daughter."

Now, indeed, the warm color of her cheeks grew warmer and her eyes darkened with indignation.

"My father is a good and honest man, but were I the child of a robber, were I a fosterling of a

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wolf of the woods, I am a woman—the woman you say you love.”

Robert waved her words away disdainfully, peevishly.

“I cannot marry you.”

Perpetua’s cheeks paled and her lips quivered a little, and her eyes were moist beneath their lowered lids, but she answered him as firmly as before and more sadly.

“Good-bye, then. I am not sorry you came, for I cherish sweet thoughts of you, but I shall be glad to see you go.”

She turned as if to glide into the woods, but Robert stayed her, calling to her in a voice of loud command.

“I will not lose you!” he cried. “If I cannot win you as the simple hunter, I will command you as the King. I am Robert of Sicily.”

As he spoke he slipped the green mantle from his arms and shoulders, flung it from him, and stood before her in the royal garments of the King. Perpetua gazed in astonishment at the rich habit, at splendor such as she had never seen.

“You are the King?” she whispered.

THE HUNTER

Robert answered proudly, confident now of reward.

“I am, indeed, the King.”

Perpetua looked on him with the same fearless honor wherewith she would have faced some monster in the forest.

“If you are the King, what have you to do with me?” she asked.

Robert answered her joyously, passionately.

“You shall be my loveliest mistress now, my loveliest memory forever.” But even as he spoke the fire in his blood was chilled by the scorn and wrath in Perpetua’s eyes.

“God pity and God pardon you,” she prayed. “You are called Robert the Bad by honest men. Be called so always by clean women!” Her outstretched right hand seemed to hurl her imprecation into his brain. Blind fury seized upon him.

“You play the fool with me!” he said, and advanced upon her only to recoil as she slipped her hand to her girdle and drew the long, keen knife that rested there.

“Keep away from me!” she warned him. “For I am strong and young, and I might kill you.”

THE PROUD PRINCE

Her face was pitifully pale now in its great sorrow, but the determination in her eyes menaced more than steel.

"I think I could master you," Robert sneered, but he kept his place, watching her.

"Then you should kill me," Perpetua sighed. "And that might be best, for you have destroyed my beautiful dream."

She turned as she spoke, and, casting her weapon from her, to fall upon the soft grass, she ran into the wood. For a moment the King stood still, stupidly conscious of the humming of the bees, stupidly staring after the flying child. Then he stirred himself into pursuit, crying, "Stay, fool, stay!" but desisted instantly, for the girl was as fleet as a fawn, and could run surely where his feet would stumble. Already she was out of sight in the thick of the trees.

"Go, fool, go!" he shouted. "If you are crazy enough to repel greatness!" And flinging himself upon the fallen column, he buried his face in his hands to keep back the bitter tears.

V

LYCABETTA

LYING there in his wild rage, he babbled to himself.

“Am I mad? Shall I, Sicily, be defied by this cold Amazon? She shall burn as a witch for this; she shall burn! She has put some spell upon me, and she shall burn for my burning. I would not have her now, but she shall die in pain.”

Drowned in his frenzy of thwarted passion and baffled anger, the King was unaware that a woman had entered the open space from the mountain-path, and was moving with light steps across the grasses towards the spot where he sat and ate his heart. The new-comer was beautiful with a beauty so different from that of the girl whose kingdom was the hill-top that few to whom the one seemed perfect would have found the other all-conquering fair. Tall and imperious as some

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evil empress of old Rome, her black hair bound with ivy leaves of gold, her fine body draped in strangely dyed silks—snake-colored, blue and green and golden-scaled—that shot a shimmering iridescence with every movement of the limbs, whose whiteness their transparency rather betrayed than veiled, she trod the earth with such an air as Balkis may have worn when she came a-visiting Solomon. The painters of the antique world would have welcomed in that voluptuous flesh, in the poppy of her mouth, in the midnight of those eyes that glowed with the fires of Thessalian incantations, their ideal for some image of the goddess of all-conquering desire. The Sophists of the antique world would have read her story characterized in every lithe line, in every appealing motion, and saluted in her the priestess of sheer appetite, for whom the gods were dead, indeed, yet living in their material form—Dionysus as wine, Aphrodite as the act of love, Apollo as the kindling sunlight.

As Balkis came to seek Solomon, so this woman came to the mountain-summit seeking a king. But she had thought to greet him coming out of

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the gray church, and it was with a start of surprise that she saw the glittering figure crouched in an attitude of woe upon the fallen column, and recognized in that image of abasement the Prince of Naples, the young lord of Sicily. Swiftly, but with the stately grace of those who of old time moved and allured in the streets of Rome when the feast of Flora was towards, she passed through the thick grasses to the column and the King. She knew it was he by his habit, by the familiar form, though she could not see his face, and she wondered why he sat there alone and with such show of grief. She was by his side without his hearing her, and it was not until she spoke that he knew of her presence.

“My lord!” she said, softly, in a voice as sweet as the voices of the women who sang the praises of the mystic Venus in the secret gardens of Cyrene.

Robert jerked his head from his hands, startled to find that he was no longer alone, but, when he saw who it was that had interrupted his meditations, wonder and joy contended in his countenance.

THE PROUD PRINCE

“Lycabetta!” he cried; “Lycabetta, by the gods! Why is the priestess of love on these summits?”

Lycabetta had dropped on her knees at his feet in Oriental abasement, but her face was raised to his and her eyes were lamps of passion.

“Sire,” she sighed. “If I disturb your Majesty’s quiet, sign and I will retire.”

Robert, bending to her, caught her by the shoulders, and, lifting her to her feet, kissed her mouth.

“No, no!” he cried. “Stay, fair priestess of the ungovernable flesh. What brought you here?”

Lycabetta knitted her white fingers together beseechingly.

“Your Majesty is a most Christian king. Will you promise me your pardon if I confess to a pagan superstition?”

Robert kissed her again and laughed. Her trained senses knew the unreality of his kisses, of the words with which he answered her.

“Exquisite idol, I could pardon you much for the sake of your kisses. What bountiful wind

LYCABETTA

has blown you to the height of this Sicilian hillock?"

Lycabetta answered him humbly, the false humility enhancing her exuberant beauty.

"When I and my women followed your Majesty from Naples—for what could such poor sun-flowers as we are do without our sun?—I learned that on this hill there stood long ago a temple to Venus, very propitious to women of my kind, who came and prayed there. Your father suffered no daughters of delight to ply their trade in Syracuse, and so in gratitude for our happy restoration I came to kneel in the ancient, sacred dust. My litter bore me part of the way, till the path became too steep and I had even to climb like a peasant or abandon my purpose."

Robert smiled condescension.

"Dear goddess of exquisite desires, our piety has power to pardon your paganism. I am king over the pagan shrine as over the Christian altar. But, before I absolve you, I have a command to lay upon you." His smile became cruel as he spoke, for a scheme of revenge, exquisitely evil, possessed him.

THE PROUD PRINCE

“Your slave listens,” Lycabetta said, lifting her hands to her jewelled forehead in sign of submission.

Robert flung his arm around her and drew her down beside him on the column.

“Lycabetta,” he said. “If I know you well, you are a creature of little scruple, to whom what fools call virtue is a soundless word, and virginity but an unpierced pearl of price in the market.” He paused for a moment, weighing his revenge, tasting it, finding it sweet to savor. “To-night I will deliver into your care a young girl, proud of her purity, strong in her simple innocence. It shall be your task to make her into a courtesan like yourself, shaming and staining the flower of her girlhood into a flaming rose of vice. You can do this?”

“It is an easy task, sire.”

Robert shook his head, and the cruelty in his face deepened.

“You will not find it easy. I think she will resist you. I know she will resist you. Conquer her resistance by what means you please. I shall not question them.” His voice broke into a

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scream of rage. "Break her spirit, degrade her body, slay her soul, and when she is as I would have her be, send me word that I may come and laugh at her."

Lycabetta watched him curiously.

"It shall be done, sire," she said, dispassionately.

"She is angel-fair. Fools would say she was angel-good—fools who believe in angels. She will plead with the speech of angels. You must be pitiless."

Lycabetta shrugged her shoulders. In her heart she wondered if the King were losing his wits.

"Were she my sister, sire, your whim should be my law. Trust me, I shall make her worthy of our ancient rites. But, sire, forgive me if I doubt this fierce resistance. We women are all alike in the end."

Robert turned away from her with a stifled groan.

"I thought so till this morning," he said, heavily.

Lycabetta guessed at the secret and pricked with a question.

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“Surely this moon-flower never defied you, sire?”

Instantly the King turned on her, his fair face so hideous with fury that Lycabetta slipped from his side and cowered before him.

“Silence, jade!” he snarled, beastlike. “If you play with me, I will nail you naked to your own door for Syracusan clowns to mock at.”

Lycabetta grovelled in the grass at his feet.

“Forgiveness, sire,” she begged.

Robert shook his rage from him, for he needed the woman to play out the evil play.

“Go into the chapel,” he ordered her, “and whisper to the captain of the guard that I need Hildebrand.”

Pagan though the woman was, she respected the ruling faith and made bold to protest.

“Sire, if I disturb the ceremony—”

Robert rose and towered above her, disdainful in pride.

“I am the King. There is no church, no shrine, no ceremony where I am not. Go!”

Not daring to disobey, Lycabetta left him, and, mounting the steps of the chapel, opened

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the door cautiously and entered. Robert seated himself again with burning brain and heart. A little white, bell-like flower grew at his feet. He trampled it with his heel into the grass, crushing it shapeless.

"How I shall triumph over this Diana," he said, aloud, hugging his foul thought, "when every sea-man can command her!"

Then he sat in silence, brooding over sins, till Lycabetta came out of the chapel and descended the steps, followed by Hildebrand, who came to Robert.

"You called me, sire?" he said.

Robert sprang to his feet and drew Hildebrand apart.

"Speed to the city," he whispered. "When it dusks, send my two Moorish slaves to Theron's hut. They must persuade or force the girl to go with them and bear her to the house of Lycabetta."

Hildebrand bowed.

"I obey, sire. Will you enter the chapel? They wait for you."

"They shall wait till the world's end, if I choose," Robert answered, sourly. "If I choose

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that they shall sit there till they die and rot, what is that to you?" He dropped moodily on the seat and sat staring fiercely at the empty air.

Hildebrand left him and joined Lycabetta.

"The King is peevish," he whispered to her, and Lycabetta whispered back to him:

"Some girl has crossed him. It is the first time he has known refusal, and it maddens him like mandrake."

Hildebrand looked thoughtful.

"She may prove court favorite yet, if his mood changes. Maybe we were wise to use her gently. Let me bring you to your litter."

She gave him her hand and the pair descended the mountain-path, leaving the King again alone.

VI

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STILL the King sat on the column, the living sovereign throned on the relic of dead grandeur. He sat so motionless that the birds heeded him no more than if he had stiffened into stone, senseless as the block which supported him, monumental as the marble. His robes, his jewels, glowed and glittered in the light of the descending sun; but the birds in their wheelings heeded them no more than if they had been the adornments of the radiant image that once had reigned in that place. The bees boomed homeward, the shadows lengthened, all the sounds of evening began to voice along the aisles of the forest, but the King gave them no heed. From fierce thoughts of vengeance, from the ache of defied desires, his mind had dropped into the past as a swimmer might drop into the darkness of a cool pool. And

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as such a swimmer snared by treacherous weeds might in his struggles see all the facts and happenings of his past life flow before him, so to Robert's brain the flood of memory flowed unsummoned, or, rather, he seemed to sit, with a great painted book upon his knee, and turn at once unreluctant and indifferent the gold-and-purple pages of his past—his fretful, curious youth, his joyous flight over-sea, his viceroyalty at Naples. And every page of the book was a tale of pleasure sated, fleshly greeds gratified, the pride of life, the lust of the eye. And every page was starred with the faces of fair women, who had welcomed, wooed, worshipped; they seemed to shift and flicker over the fancied pages like the vivid faces of dreams, the many forgotten, the few faintly remembered—dark Faustina, fair Messalinda, brown Yolande—whose score was yet to pay—Lycabetta, the miracle of ivory and ebony. So the faces thronged, thick-haunting, beseeching, teasing, pleading, and then suddenly they vanished; on a white, stainless page one face glowed into life, the face of a girl with clear, honest eyes, with adorable, maiden mouth, with wind-blown tresses as red

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as the most royal sunset—the face of the executioner's daughter, the face of a brave virgin, the face of Perpetua.

Robert wrenched himself from his lethargy with an impious oath, and glared about him. He laughed as he thought of his company, priests and courtiers, minions and soldiers, cooped up in the church, while he, their master, sat out there enjoying sunshine and shadow and telling the beads of his sweetest sins. A mad thought came into his mind—would it not be droll to girdle the church with soldiers sworn to slay whoever dared to issue from the church without the summons of the King, and so hold them there to hunger and thirst and belike die, so long as it pleased him so to hold them? As he hugged the fancy, chuckling over attendant thoughts, a little bell sounded, clear and sweet as the voice of a child, calling from the belfry of the church. It was vesper-time, and the servants of the church were fulfilling their service for the largest congregation their temple had known since its foundation. Robert frowned at the sound. How did the shavelings dare not to wait for his presence? He struck his

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hands angrily together. In the chime of the bell he seemed to hear the voice of Perpetua crying out against the words that had ruined the beautiful world. In the golden evening light he seemed to see the face of Perpetua gazing with scornful eyes upon her enemy. He closed his hands as if he were crushing her body and soul in his grasp.

“I did not think the woman lived who could so wound me,” he cried, aloud. “If she fawned at my feet now, I would spurn her. To deny me—me, the greatest prince in the world! There is not another woman in the world who would say me nay.”

From the little church came the swell of solemn music, mingled with clear, human voices, the voices of the holy ones within chanting the “Magnificat.” The noble Roman words came flowing through the still air, grand and simple, to the ears of the King. But their grandeur, their simplicity, carried no calm to his writhing spirit.

“Magnificat anima mea Dominum: et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo.”

Robert frowned as he listened. He remembered enough of his boyhood’s Latin to interpret their

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message, and he muttered it sourly to himself in the vulgar tongue of Sicily.

“My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

The reverential words chafed his disordered temper. He wove their fine gold into the dark web of his tempestuous passions. “Why do these monks plague me with their croakings?” he cried. “I need no help from Heaven to strengthen me against this buffet.”

Renewed rage at his denial set him devising new pangs for her who had denied him, heedless of the chanting from the church; but soon again he found himself listening, as if against his will, to the sonorous words.

“Fecit potentiam in brachio suo: dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.”

“What are the fools crooning?” cried the exasperated King. “He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.”

The words, as he rendered them, rang in his ears like a warning. He hardened his heart, but he listened still, for the next sentence seemed to

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lapse with deeper solemnity through the golden air.

“*Deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles.*”

Robert echoed the words in a scream of insane fury.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree.”

In the quiet of the evening his voice sounded strange to him, horridly shouting; he shook his clinched fists at the church as he raved.

“These fools shall bray no more folly. Who shall uplift or cast down here save I? Is there any other God save I in Sicily?”

To him, in his heat, it seemed as if the church, through the voices of her ministrants, was seeking to come between him and his purpose, to save Perpetua from his hate. Though the voices had ceased, the august menace echoed in his brain, and he raved again.

“Shall I, who am the glory of the world, the very flower of knighthood, believe that any power beyond those skies can cast me from my seat or save this woman from my will?”

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Even as he spoke the golden sunlight withered around him; the blackness of darkness seemed to muffle all the earth; only a pale light like the light of earliest dawn illuminated the gray walls of the church and gleamed with strange effulgence upon the armored image of the archangel. The King, rigid with terror, beheld the image of the archangel move slowly into life. It lifted the drawn sword on which its hands had rested and pointed the weapon at the crouching King. Slowly the radiant figure seemed to leave its niche; stately it descended the rough-hewn steps. Then it paused. The church now was swallowed up in the enveloping darkness. Only the figure of the archangel was visible in that agony of blackness, bright as burnished silver, bright as moonlight. Its right arm extended its sword towards the crouching King, and the blade glowed like a blade of white fire. Like a flash of lightning it seemed to leap to Robert's breast and sear his heart; he would have screamed with the pain, but his voice seemed dead within him, and all around him thunder rolled, horrible as the noise of a dispersing world.

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The awful tumult was followed by a yet more awful silence. Robert, unable to move, unable to speak, feeling as if he were the last living thing on an obliterated earth, unable to do aught save stare in terror at that shining, celestial shape, now saw the beautiful lips part, now heard a voice address him; and the sound of that voice was clear like light, and loud as all the winds of all the world—a terrible, beautiful voice, the trumpet of doom.

“Robert of Sicily!”

The great voice called him by his name, and the King in his abasement thrust out his hands appealingly.

“Heaven has been patient with your pride. But now the cup of your offence is overfull, your silver has become dross, and Heaven is weary of you. You shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth and as a garden that hath no water. I will set you up as a gazing-stock, and it shall come to pass that all they that look upon you shall loathe you. Base of soul, be base of body. God will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible.”

As the great words died into silence, Robert's



"I AM ROBERT OF SICILY."

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body was wrung with pangs. His spirit seemed to struggle in its earthly house, his flesh to divide and dissolve in anguish. Horrid tremors tore him; rigor of cold clawed at his heart, yet fever seemed to flush every channel of his body; his senses reeled as if to dissolution. Again the lightning flamed from the sword of the archangel; again the sullen thunder rumbled through the vaulted darkness. Robert staggered to his feet with an inarticulate cry as the archangel vanished from his view. All was unutterable night, and then in a moment the veil of darkness dissipated; again the mountain summit was flooded with golden air; again the kindly sunlight reigned over earth and sea; again the birds called joyously through the trees, and belated bees forsook the flowers; again Robert, dizzy and dismayed, sat on the fallen column and stared at the gray church.

But not Robert the King, the young, the comely, the radiantly clad. His fair features had withered to the foul features of the fool Diogenes; his body had warped to the crooks and hunches of the fool's body; his raiment had faded from its regal pomp to the stained livery of the mountebank. But it

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was with no knowledge of his metamorphosis that the changed man stared at the church and shuddered in the warm air.

“What a horrible dream!” he muttered to himself, drawing his hand across his damp forehead. “I must have dozed in the warm air; yet I did not think I slept. The storm seemed so real, and the spirit with the flaming sword—”

At the thought of the spirit he scrambled to his feet and limped across the grass to the church. The bronze image of the archangel stood in its niche, its hands resting as of yore on the hilt of the great sword. Robert peered at it with eyes still dazzled, and he babbled to himself weakly.

“That image seemed to quicken, but now it is no more than motionless bronze. I slept; I dreamed, and the lying vision has shaken me. I am wet with sweat and my knees tremble. I will go into the chapel and pray.”

He moved a little farther to ascend the steps, conscious of an unfamiliar heaviness, unconscious of transformation. But as he made to set his foot upon the lowest of the steps leading to the church, its doors were thrown wide open, and to

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Robert's astonishment the congregation began to issue forth, headed by the archbishop of Syracuse, and ranged themselves in a double rank on the semicircle of the steps as if forming a lane for one who was yet to come.

For a moment, in his rage, speech seemed denied to Robert as he glared at the many-colored crowd before him—the fair ladies of honor, butterfly bright; the slim, Italianate youths, fantastically foppish; the smooth, eager priesthood; the soldiers weary of ceremonial but indifferent to fatigue; the sturdy bulk, blue eyes, and yellow hair of the Northern Guards. They paid no heed to Robert, standing there below them; their glances were all for the open portal of the church and its depths beyond of cool twilight.

Rage overcame amazement and gave Robert back his speech.

“How is this, my lord archbishop?” he cried out in a great voice—“I bade you wait within the church till I came.”

The archbishop, hearing this sudden appeal to him, turned for a moment his wrinkled, astute face in the direction of the speaker, and, following

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his example for the moment, all the others turned their indifferent eyes upon Robert. Some of the pretty she - things whispered and tittered. The archbishop spoke in a voice of gentle petulance.

“Peace, fool!” he said, and waved his jewelled hand in gentle reproof of importunacy. If the jewelled hand had struck Robert brutally in the face it could not more have staggered him. All the air seemed to glow red around him; his reason surrendered itself to fury at this unmeaning, indecent affront.

“Are you mad, priest?” he gasped, pointing a hand that trembled with passion at the prelate, who had turned away from him and was again gazing reverentially into the church. The women now were laughing outright, but most of the men had only frowns for the unseemly license of a court buffoon. Sigurd Blue Wolf, the captain of the Varangians, moved leisurely down a step.

“Stand aside, fellow!” he said, placidly, in his large voice of Northern command. He had some pity in his heart for the misshapen thing.

“Where did the buffoon spring from?” Faustina whispered behind her fan to Messalinda.

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Robert had no eyes for the laughing, frowning faces; no ears for the bidding of Sigurd. He mouthed at the archbishop, foam on his lips and blood in his eyes.

“You shall hang for this were you ten times archbishop!” he cried. He could not understand the madness, the audacity of his people; his anger could not pause in its gallop to make coherent question, to frame coherent answer. A slim, courtier creature, a thing of jewels and feathers, perched on the lowest tier of the steps, admonished him with a shake of scented fingers. Through his frenzy Robert remembered that only last night he made this same courtier serve him as a footstool.

“Do you dare to speak thus to your King?” he gasped, tearing at the breast of his jerkin in a new-felt difficulty of breathing, a new-felt longing for air.

Messalinda turned to those about her as one who held the key to the riddle.

“This is how he played the King yesterday,” she said, “and earned the King’s displeasure.”

The others nodded. They knew Diogenes’ per-

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tinacity with a joke. Yolande gave voice to the general feeling:

“It is ever the worst of these mountebanks, that they will harp on a dull jest.”

The archbishop, irritated at the continuance of the talking and brawling, averted his eyes a moment from the interior of the church, and turned them again upon Robert, who stood as if rooted to his place, the image of a fighting beast at bay.

“You presume too much upon our patience,” he said, sharply. “You will vex the King again.” As he spoke he glanced in the direction of Sigurd Blue Wolf, a significant glance, suggesting that it was time these interruptions should be ended. Sigurd moved leisurely a little nearer to Robert, who did not heed him, heeding only the archbishop. Through his bewildered mind bewildering thoughts were flitting. What was the meaning of this strange jest at his expense? Could the archbishop believe that he would ever pardon so preposterous an enormity? Yet now a kind of fear crept in upon his rage, as he heard the priest use the name of the King.

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“I am the King,” he asserted, hotly. “What ribaldry is this? I am the King!”

A chorus of derisive laughter came from his spectators, amused at the insistence of the fool. After all, if Diogenes chose to jeopardize his head, what was it to them? Robert glared at all those familiar faces that dared to regard him so familiarly. Every contemptuous glance of their eyes, every mocking note of their voices were so many arrows, stinging his tortured mind beyond endurance. Was this some sick dream from which a mighty effort of will should set him free?

“This is dangerous sport, to tease the lion!” he yelled. “Now, by my royal word—”

He made a stride forward as if to advance upon his tormentors. Sigurd Blue Wolf advanced, caught him by the arm and whispered to him, not unkindly:

“His Majesty is at his prayers within. You were wise to slip away ere he comes out, for the sight of you may anger him. Quick, fool, into the wood.”

Robert tried in vain to shake off his mighty grasp. He beat ineffectually at the Northman’s

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breast as he might have beaten at a gate of brass.

“Insolent fool!” he screamed. “How can the King be within when I stand here? I am the King!”

But even as he spoke he stiffened as a man suddenly struck with catalepsy. For again all eyes were turned away from him to the doorway of the church, and there, framed in that doorway, Robert’s haggard eyes saw his own image, his loyal likeness, his very self. So had he seen himself that morning in his Venetian mirror—the familiar smooth face and waved hair, the familiar carriage, the chosen robes and gold and jewels. All present, save only Robert, saluted Robert’s double reverentially, Sigurd released his grasp of Robert’s arm, and then on Robert’s stricken ears came the sound of his own voice from the threshold of the church.

“Who says he is the King?” his own voice asked. The archbishop turned to him who spoke and answered, “Sire, your fool in a most unseemly humor plagues us.”

Into Robert’s distraught brain there leaped

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some wild idea of conspiracy, of intrigue to supplant him by the means of some pretender fashioned like himself.

"Who is this impostor?" he cried, and, turning to Sigurd, he commanded, "Seize him, soldiers!"

Sigurd answered with a blow like the butt of a ram.

"Silence, dog!" he shouted, now out of all patience. Robert reeled under an insult bitterer than the blow, and insanity overswept his senses.

"Traitors! villains!" he cried, and clapped his hand to his girdle, where his sword-hilt should have been. But no sword-hilt answered to his eager fingers. Mad, confused thoughts of treachery mastered him. "Where is my sword?" he cried. "Who has disarmed me while I slept?" A wild sense of defied kingship flooded his spirit. "With my naked hands I will overthrow this treason."

Blindly, idly, he flung himself forward, meaning to scale the steps and grapple with his parallel, but in a moment the strong arms of Sigurd held him in the grip of a bear. Then he who stood at the summit of the steps, and wore the likeness

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of the lord of Sicily, lifted his hand and spoke, and his voice was as the voice of King Robert in the ears of all men there save only one, save only Robert the King, struggling in the grip of Sigurd Blue Wolf, and to him, through the cruel echo of his own speech there seemed to ring some note of tones heard in a dream, a dream of a bronze image that quickened and spoke words of doom.

“Do him no hurt,” said the kingly presence, gently. “He is mad, and madness needs compassion. Let him be in peace, and those of you who are pitiful may well pray for him. Let us go hence, friends.”

“You hear what the King says,” Sigurd growled in Robert’s ear. “To your knees, fool!” Robert struggled helplessly to release himself, crying, “I am the King!” whereat Sigurd, dropping his strong hands on his captive’s shoulders and repeating, angrily, “To your knees, fool!” forced him ignominiously to the ground, first tottering on his knees and then collapsing in a huddle on the ground.

The kingly presence on the steps surveyed the

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grovelling, abject thing in the fool's livery with an implacable smile.

"Remember," he said, softly, and the word beat upon Robert's brain like the blow of a hammer. Then he came slowly down the steps through the lane of adoring faces. As he came to the last, Sigurd, as if fearing some further attempt on the part of the fool, set his heavy foot on Robert's back where he sprawled, and pinned him to the ground. But Robert made no struggle. Unchallenged, his presentment passed to the edge of the mountain-path, and, descending, disappeared, followed by whispering courtiers, full of the King's mercy to a brawling fool. Sigurd lifted his foot from the fallen man and headed his Varangians. Ladies and youths, priests and soldiers, all in their turn and order descended the slope of the hill, and Syracuse swallowed them up in time.

But the man in the fool's motley lay on his face on the grass and made no sign of life.

VII

DISCROWNED, DISHONORED

THE red shield of the sun had slipped into the sea, the warm twilight had glided into warm night, and the yellow circle of the perfect moon glowed in a sea-blue sky. To your Sicilian the moon is ever a marvel, a mystical influence, now generous, now maleficent, always portentous. One salutes in her the spirit of Diana; another sees on that yellow disk only the awful face of Cain; to yet a third the moon is nothing more nor less than a baker's daughter; while a fourth will swear that she is the sister of the sun, who loved her brother too well and is condemned, in punishment for her sin, to drift forever in solitude through the skies. But whatever the moon meant to each, all paid the moon homage. Lovers in Syracuse, wandering in grove or garden, looked up at it, thinking sweet thoughts, uttering sweet words,

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and then, looking into each other's eyes, forgot the world as their lips met. Poets in Syracuse, catching sight of the moon through their open casemates, abandoned lamp and parchment, and, propping their chins on their hands, stared at that enigmatic field of silver and believed themselves to be inspired. Philosophers in Syracuse, pacing quiet streets, smiled at the ancient of days and sighed over their flying shadows, symbolical of much. Needy folk, greedy folk, showed pieces of silver to it, singing:

“O Holy Moon,
I beg a boon:
Keep me healthy,
Make me wealthy
Very soon.”

Children not yet abed played quaint blindfold games in which they made the moon their playmate, shrilling the distich:

“Tell us, Mistress Moon, who ask it,
What you carry in your basket.”

Fishermen in Syracuse, hanging out their little lanterns at the prows of their boats, compared on

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the dancing waters the lustre of the moonlight with the reflection of their little wicks, and were proud of the power of their fish-oil. Dogs in Syracuse bayed.

In the hills above Syracuse all was silent. The moonlight, flooding slope and valley, wood and ruin and church, shone on the figure of a man in motley lying motionless upon the grass. It shone, too, on the sad face of a girl wandering, wandering through the pine woods. The moonlight shone caressingly upon her crown of flame-colored hair, upon his deep, tearless eyes.

Since she had fled from the false hunter into the thickets of the wood Perpetua had wandered hither and thither in its familiar deeps, drinking the cup of pain. In one short day she had learned from foul face and from fair face such knowledge of the evil of the world as tortured her brave heart. Nothing could stagger her belief in goodness as the law of life, but she had not dreamed until this day of the strength of its enemies. The bright of face, made in the mould of beauty, stamped with the seal of grace, these could be traitors to God, slayers of peace.

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Torn by such thoughts, she drifted almost unconsciously, fighting with her sorrow, to all the dear places of her daily visits—the companionable tree, the well-spring of cool waters, the bowl-shaped hollow in which she loved to lie and see nothing but the sky, the little shrine in the clearing where a path ran through the wood—to each of these spots she went in turn as one who makes a pilgrimage. All were the same in the sweet moonlight as they had been that morning in the light of the sweet sun. How green the world had seemed that morning!—and now it had grown gray and the birds sang nothing but dirges. But the girl was too strong to let her young sadness master her. Stoutly she told herself she was a fool to think that the world was changed because of a maid's sorrow; bravely she bade herself bear her cross. To-morrow, perhaps, she would tell her father, and they would climb higher on the hills, hide deeper in the woods—fly somewhere from the envy of the evil King. To-night she might not sleep, but at least she would not weep.

Perpetua made her way homeward through

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the wood. As she passed into the open space where the ancient fane had risen, she saw in the bright moonlight the figure of a man extended at full length on the grass. A sudden fear for her father leaped into her mind—could he have fallen there? She ran swiftly forward, but as she neared the prostrate figure her fears fled, for she recognized by his garments the withered fool of the morning. He seemed to be moaning like a beast in pain, and her distaste of him could make no head against her pity. She knew, too, being Sicilian, how dangerous it was to lie in the moonlight—to do so was to court madness. She bent down beside him and touched him very softly on the shoulder. “What is the matter with you?” she asked.

She had moved so lightly over the thick grasses—he was steeped so heavily in his stupor—that he did not know of her approach until she spoke. Then Robert raised his heavy, weary head and stared at her, dazed, while she looked sadly at the twisted visage of the fool. Then consciousness came back to Robert, and he knew Perpetua, and his heart rejoiced within him.

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"You! you!" he cried, hopefully. "Do you not know me?"

Perpetua looked pitifully at the ill-favored face. Who that had once seen it could fail to remember it, she thought; so she answered, gently,

"Indeed I do."

Robert rose stiffly to his feet and held out his hands to her eagerly. In the moonlight his face seemed to her more hideous than even she had thought it in the morning, and she drew away from him involuntarily, but he paid no heed to this, thinking only of her words.

"Ah, Heaven be praised!" he sighed. "You know I am the King."

Instantly Perpetua remembered the fool's tale of the morning—how he had played at being the King and was menaced with death for his mimicry. She felt sure that the moon had overthrown his weak wits, and that he had now come to believe, in his madness, that he was, indeed, the King. But Robert plied her eagerly.

"You remember," he insisted, "a while ago, in the sunlight, how I told you who I was? I am the King."

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He drew himself up proudly, and his air of dignity contrasted so grimly with his wry figure that Perpetua, who had found no tears for her own grief, was ready to weep for him. So she answered him according to his folly, hoping to soothe him.

“Yes, yes, I remember,” she murmured, touched to the heart by the trouble in his wild eyes. “But you seem sick and faint. Shall I bring you some water?”

She made as if to leave him, to seek for water, but he stayed her with a gesture, speaking rapidly, in a low voice that seemed charged with fear.

“There is a strange conspiracy against me”—he paused, as if trying to command his fevered thoughts, and pressed his hands to his forehead—“or else I have been dreaming a strange dream.” He looked around him drearily, and then again fixed his questioning gaze upon her. “But you—you know me?”

“Yes, yes, I know you,” Perpetua answered him, gently; but to herself she said, “Poor soul! poor soul!” and she wondered what she could do to help the afflicted thing. If her father had returned he would know what to do—or one of

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the holy brothers of the Church. Even while she reflected two forms rose against the sky, coming from the pathway, giant figures with skins like burnished copper, clad with a barbaric splendor, with pelts of leopards over their shoulders, and having great rings of gold upon their arms and in their ears.

“This is the place,” said one; and, “Knock at the door,” ordered the other. Perpetua stepped out of the shadow of the trees towards them. Robert, following her action with his eyes, saw the men and knew them, amazed, for his Moorish slaves Zal and Rustum. He asked himself why they were there, and could not answer the question; yet some memory seemed to be trying to assert itself in his troubled brain, and he watched what followed vaguely as one shackled by sleep.

“What do you seek?” Perpetua asked of the new-comers.

The one who had spoken last questioned her.

“Are you the daughter of Theron the executioner?”

“I am she,” Perpetua answered.

The other black giant spoke.

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“You must come with us. Your father has sent for you. He lies sick at Syracuse.”

Perpetua gave a great cry.

“My father sick! I will go with you at once.”

The sound of her cry seemed to rend the veil of forgetfulness that hung about the brain of Robert. He knew now why these men had come, sent by Hildebrand in obedience to his King's command. For the first time in his foolish life Robert felt his heart throb with pity, his spirit rise in arms against injustice. The girl who had disdained him in his pride had been kind to him in his misery; she should suffer no wrong from him. He limped into the open space and waved the Saracens aside with a gesture of command, while he called to Perpetua:

“No, no; do not go with them. It is a trick, a lie.” Advancing fiercely upon the slaves, who stared at the sudden appearance of the discredited jester, he cried out: “I have changed my mind. Begone!” Then, reading only derision and denial on their countenances, he raged at them.

“Do you not know me, fellows? I am the King!”

DISCROWNED, DISHONORED

The black slaves grinned evilly. One of them turned to Perpetua, who, in her eagerness to join her father, listened with impatience to the grotesque assertions of the fool.

"Come, maiden, come," he said. "There is no time to lose." Then as Robert interposed himself between the girl and the slave, the slave roared at him, "Out of the way, fool!"

Robert felt his members tremble at the ferocity of the monster who was wont to kiss his hand, but he stood his ground.

"She shall not go," he said.

"I say she shall," the black answered, and with his huge hand he dealt Robert a blow that beat him brutally to the earth. Perpetua sprang forward to prevent further cruelty, but the slave paid no further heed to the prostrate man. Catching Perpetua by the hands, they hurried her at full speed down the mountain-path to the place where a litter was waiting.

Robert lay alone on the summit of the hill, dizzy with pain and rage, beating the earth with his clinched fists and moaning to himself: "I am the King! I am the King! I am the King!"

VIII

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A LITTLE way from the city Lycabetta had found, dedicated to our Lady of Delights, a fitting shelter for herself and for her attendant nymphs. This was the palace of a dead and heirless duke, some while abandoned and now renewed with life and color by the gold of the Neapolitan. It stood apart in spacious gardens that were girdled so thickly with groves of cypresses that none save the initiated could dream of the wonders masked by the melancholy trees. But those initiated knew well that behind the solemn barrier there smiled a kind of earthly paradise—pleasances where even the flowerful soil of Sicily seemed extravagantly prolific of color, extravagantly prodigal of odors; thickets wherein the great god Pan might have delighted to lurk; fair colonnades thick-carpeted with the petals of roses



“ ROBERT CAUGHT HER OUTSTRETCHED HANDS ”



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and framed to greet all cool, benevolent breezes; temples to exquisite divinities; fountains lapsing, murmurous as the laughter of youth, into great basins whose smooth waters welcomed smooth bodies; grottoes deep and mysterious, affording shelter in the fiercest heats. To these enchanted privacies the young and rich who had followed Robert from Naples and had welcomed his coming to Sicily made pilgrimage, and day and night pleasure held there her pagan court as if the wild cry had never been heard by Thamus, the pilot, calling from the islands of Paxæ and heralding the coming of the white Christ.

On this night the House of Pleasure was unusually quiet. Those who guarded the golden gates denied admission to all who could not conjure with the King's name, and Lycabetta was alone with her favorite women, fair, Greek-faced girls with fair, Greek names — Glycerium, Hypsipyle, Euphrosyne, Lysidice. The room that shrined her beauty was a marvellous medley of the styles of many architectures, of the arts of many lands, as if the streams of wealth and splendor flowing from all the sources of the world

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had carried thither its rarest treasures. Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the genius of the Saracen, and the vigor of the Norman had shared in the decoration of those walls, gorgeous with gold and color, hung with sumptuous tapestries woven with alluring figures from the legends of love. The floor, inlaid with iridescent tiles that Persian hands had painted, was strewn with costly stuffs and furs. Before a life-size statue in bronze of Venus, a copy of that Venus Callipyge given by Helio-gabalus to Syracuse, a fire of shifting, many-tinted flames burned on a metal tripod, whose stems represented the figures of beautiful, nude women. The air was heavily scented from the burning woods and spices in the brazier, sandal and cinnamon and cassia. Hanging lamps, of strangely fantastic design, filled the wide room with delicate light.

Lycabetta, the triumphant jewel of all this gorgeous setting, reclined upon a golden couch that was made soft for her body with rare furs, and bright—to enhance her whiteness—with brilliant silks. Clad in thin, transparent webs, whose shifting shimmer recalled, whenever she stirred her limbs, the glitter of the serpent, Lycabetta lay

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with a look of weariness on her face, while Hypsipyle fanned her softly with a huge feather fan of black and white ostrich plumes. Glycerium, seated by the head of the couch, was busy in adorning her mistress's black hair with flowers. At her feet Euphrosyne nursed a kind of lute and sang the Venus song in a small, sweet voice:

“Venus whispered from her nest:
‘White Adonis, bright Adonis!
Love is better than the best,
Heaven is hidden in my breast,
Take delight and leave the rest,
Blithe Adonis, lithe Adonis!’

“Venus stretched her arms and said:
‘Shy Adonis, sly Adonis!
Gather blooms and make a bed
Of the scented petals shed
By the roses, white and red,
Brisk Adonis, frisk Adonis!’

“Venus murmured with a sigh:
‘Dumb Adonis, numb Adonis!
Fast the golden moments fly,
Love and let the world go by,
Be a god before you die,
Child Adonis, wild Adonis!’ ”

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Lycabetta yawned and lifted up her hand. Euphrosyne ceased in her singing.

“There, you have sung enough,” Lycabetta said. “I am neither more sleepy nor more wakeful than I was, and your music wearies me. Have many knocked at our doors to-night?”

She looked at the girl Glycerium as she spoke, and Glycerium answered her.

“The young Duke Ferdinand of Etruria.”

Lycabetta gave a little laugh of disdain.

“A handsome fool with a foolish hand. How did he carry himself when you put him by?”

“He was bright with wine,” Glycerium answered. “He swore a Greek oath or two, but he left you this pearl.”

Glycerium handed a great, round pearl to Lycabetta, who took it from her with indifference, weighing it lightly in the hollow of her hand.

“It is rare and fair,” she commented, “but I will not wear it. There is no jewel in the world that is worth what it hides of my whiteness. Who else?”

Glycerium thought for a moment before she answered,

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“Messer Gian Sanminiato.”

Lycabetta sneered at the name.

“The court poet who would pay for favors with phrases and runs aside to rhyme a sonnet every time he wins the kiss of a lip. What did he say?”

“He seemed very downcast, and he sighed like a dromedary,” Glycerium answered. “He charged me to deliver this ode to your loveliness.”

She handed a scroll of parchment to Lycabetta, who took it and opened it contemptuously.

“Oh, ancient gods!” she sighed. “Let me see it. Yes, indeed; I am Venus and the Graces Three and the Muses Nine—all which I knew before ever he fumbled for rhymes; and he loves me as Ixion loved the Queen of Heaven. Well, he had better find a cloud of consolation to-night. Who else?”

“Casimir, the rich Muscovy merchant,” Glycerium replied.

Lycabetta gave a shrug.

“He rains gold like Jove, but he smells of civet.”

Glycerium ventured a protest.

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"His money smells sweet enough," she said.
"He flung me this purse on account."

Lycabetta took no notice of the gold.

"Is that all?" she asked.

Glycerium responded, with a slight air of constraint, "Sigurd Olafson, the young Varangian captain."

Lycabetta lifted herself on one elbow with a look of interest.

"I would have welcomed him, for he can hug like a bear and his blue eyes are as bright as the northern star. I could hate the King for swearing he would come to-night and so forcing me to keep my door shut. Did he leave me anything?"

"Nothing," Glycerium admitted; "but he lifted me, there in the moonlit street, to the level of his lips and kissed me."

Lycabetta leaned forward and gave Glycerium a playful box on the ear.

"You little thief," she cried, "to steal the best gift of the bunch. If I thought he cared for you, child, I would make you very unkissable. Oh, I wish the King would come!"

Glycerium gave a sigh of admiration.

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“He is better than the best of them,” she asserted.

Lycabetta nodded her head.

“He is the all-conquering lover, for he never yields an inch of his heart. If a goddess condescended from Olympus, he would woo her with hot blood and cold brain. His eyes are torches of desire, but there never is a tender light in them. If a woman died in his arms, he would leave her without a sigh. And yet he can speak the speech of love more eloquently than an angel. You will laugh when I tell you that I would give much to believe that he loved me.”

“He is the King,” Glycerium said, simply.

“If he were a shepherd on a hill-side, I should think the same thoughts. But he is alike with all women. I do not believe the woman is born of woman who could make gentle his cruelty. He is as pitiless as the plague, that never spares the fairest.”

Glycerium shivered.

“Do not speak of the plague, dear lady. They say some have died of it in Syracuse.”

“Or call it by some pretty name to placate it,”

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Euphrosyne suggested. "Say that the blessing is abroad."

Glycerium shivered again.

"Oh, how I wish we had never left Naples!"

Lycabetta's face had grown pale and she gasped her words.

"Gods, how I fear it! But it will not creep in here. We stand high from the city. Our garden is warded with medicinal herbs, and these odors and essences defend us. So we need not fear it. And yet, gods, how I fear it!"

Even as she spoke and shuddered the hangings of the portal parted, and one of her women entered and saluted reverentially. Lycabetta turned a little on the couch to look at her.

"What is it, Lysidice?" she asked.

"Zal and Rustum, the King's Moors, wait without," Lysidice answered. "They come with a charge from the King."

"What charge?" Lycabetta asked, attracted by any interruption in the monotony of her night.

"They say they have a woman with them," Lysidice answered.

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Lycabetta struck herself upon the forehead with her open palm.

“A woman!” she cried, joyously. “Why, I had forgotten. Now I shall have sport in my loneliness. This is the girl who is to be my plaything. Admit them and tell them to leave the girl here alone. But bid them wait within call. I may have need of them. Fly away, love-birds.”

Lysidice went out as she had come, to bear Lycabetta’s bidding to the Moorish slaves. The others, fluttering like frightened doves before Lycabetta’s dismissal, disappeared into the farther apartments of the palace. Lycabetta rose alertly, and, mounting the steps that rose behind the altar leading to another room, concealed herself behind the dividing curtains. In a few moments Zal and Rustum came in bearing between them a gilded litter curtained with crimson silk. Setting this upon the ground, they drew the curtains and bade Perpetua come forth. As Perpetua emerged from the litter the brightness of the light after her long journey through the night dazzled her, and for a moment she put her hands to her eyes to shield them from the unexpected light. In that

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moment Zal and Rustum had lifted up the litter and disappeared through the hangings.

When Perpetua removed her hands she found herself alone in the most wonderful room she had ever seen or dreamed of. She looked with astonishment at the gorgeous stuffs and furs, the gold and color, the glow of fire and gleam of jewels; she breathed in amazement the subtly perfumed air which seemed at first to make her feel giddy, her who could stand upon the brink of the grimmest precipice in Sicily and look down untroubled to its distant floor. Her senses were confused by the lights, the odors, by the long, strange journey through the night, closely mewed in a litter borne by black giants, who offered her no harm but answered her no word. Anxiety for her father had denied anxiety for herself and still denied her.

“What is this place?” she cried aloud to emptiness. “Is there no one here?”

Instantly the curtains in front of her divided, revealing Lycabetta in the pride of her whiteness, almost unclothed in her transparent drapery.

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"I am here," she said, and, descending, advanced a little way towards the girl.

Perpetua stared at the woman who had come upon her so noiselessly, her white body shining through her thin, glittering robes.

"Where is my father?" she asked.

Lycabetta laughed a little, cruel laugh.

"This is a strange place to come and cry for a father," she answered, reading with amusement the wonder in the girl's eyes.

Perpetua caught her breath in sudden suspicion.

"Is not my father here?" she said. "They told me he was sick and had called for me."

Lycabetta shrugged her beautiful shoulders and her gleaming raiment rippled in little waves of changing color.

"Sick or well, living or dead, you will find no father here, nor mother neither; but I will be your sister, if you please, sweet simplicity."

She smiled alluringly.

Perpetua looked at her with brave, quiet eyes of dislike.

"Who are you?" she asked, holding her senses well together in the presence of unsuspected danger.

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Lycabetta answered her, languidly amused.

"I am everything and nothing. There are poets who rhyme me the Rose of the World. There are priests who name me the Strange Woman. I am Lycabetta."

"Lycabetta!" Perpetua repeated the name almost unconsciously, and Lycabetta saw that it had no meaning to her ears.

"Has no love-wind ever blown my name to your sky-nest?" she asked. "Has your royal lover never named my name For I, too, am one of the King's darlings."

Perpetua started at the mention of the King's name, and looked around again at the gorgeous cage.

"The King! the King! Is this the King's house?" she asked, with wider eyes and clinched fingers.

Lycabetta made her a mocking reverence.

"Every house in Sicily is the King's house, and my poor roof is as loyal as the best. This is my house and yours, for now you dwell in it at the King's pleasure."

"Then I will leave it at my own pleasure, in-

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stantly." She knew that she was snared, but she showed no sign of fear.

Lycabetta shook her head and smiled evilly.

"I think you will stay. Every door is guarded, every bolt driven home. My frightened bird, you cannot escape from this cage."

She knew that the girl was at her mercy and began to find stealthy delight in the thought. Perpetua faced her boldly, holding her head high. Pagan and Christian faced each other with bright eyes.

"I do not fear you," Perpetua said, calmly. "You dare not hold me here against my will. The King himself has no power over a free woman. If you restrain me, I will call for help, and every honest hand in Syracuse will be raised to set me free."

Lycabetta laughed again, and her laughter seemed to run over her in waves of colored fire as her thin garments trembled on her body.

"My gardens are deep and dim and quiet. No sound from here would reach the world outside. No, not the death-cry nor the shriek of tortured flesh."

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Perpetua gazed at her as she might at some spirit of evil released at midnight to wreak its will upon the sinful. There was a great horror in her heart, but there was a great courage in her voice.

“Whoever you are, you cannot frighten me; you dare not keep me here.”

Lycabetta thrust her head a little forward, like a snake about to strike.

“You silly wood savage, you will be very tame presently,” she promised, in a low, hard voice.

“In the name of God I defy you, and I go,” Perpetua said, and turned to go out by the entrance through which she came.

“In the name of the devil you stay where you are,” Lycabetta cried, and clapped her hands.

Instantly the hangings that concealed the entrance parted, and the black giants entered and stood silently awaiting Lycabetta’s orders.

Perpetua moved to them with a gesture of authority.

“Let me pass,” she commanded.

The Moors stood motionless. Lycabetta called to her captive:

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“Those slaves are as strong and merciless as wild beasts. Whatever I told them to do to you, they would do to you.”

Perpetua moved back towards Lycabetta. Lycabetta gave a sign and the blacks disappeared behind the curtains.

Perpetua advanced to Lycabetta and looked her squarely in the face.

“Why have I been brought here?” she demanded, sternly, though despair was tugging at her heartstrings.

Lycabetta leaned back upon her couch and looked at her prisoner curiously. The Neapolitan recognized that there was beauty of a kind given to the girl—in her hair, red as the reddest sunset, in her candid eyes, in the strong, supple body, overbrowed from mountain light and mountain air for Lycabetta’s fancy. This was a raw taste of the King’s, she thought, contemptuously; the girl would only be passable in a while, in a long while. What kind of passion was it that a king could feel for a country wench, while her gardens were thronged with shapes of loveliness, while she, Lycabetta, still lived? The passions of the great

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are mad fancies, but surely this was the maddest fancy greatness ever entertained. So she mused while Perpetua watched her. She was stirred from her meditations when the girl repeated her question.

“Why have I been brought here?”

“You are too idle in the forest,” Lycabetta answered, “and so you are sent here to be apprenticed to my trade.”

Perpetua moved a little nearer to her, questioning her with eyes and speech.

“What is your trade?”

Lycabetta turned to the bronze image of Venus and held out her hands to it.

“The oldest in the world. We were busy before Babylon was built or Troy burned. We shall be busy till the world grows gray.”

Perpetua repeated her question.

“Speak plainly. What is your trade?”

Lycabetta answered her frankly.

“The trade of love. We sell smiles and kisses and sweet hours, and men buy them gladly, even at the price of their souls.”

“I know you now,” Perpetua said, crossing

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herself. "Though I dwell with innocence upon the heights, I am not ignorant of the world's depths. I know you now, and God knows I pity you. Let me go."

Lycabetta shook her head.

"Why should you pity me? You should rather envy me. I am the joy of life. I grasp and clasp all pleasures, heedless of the passing hour. I make the most of our little summer, our fleeting sunlight. To drink, to love, to laugh is the swallow flight of my soul. You shall be as wise as I am and as happy."

"Have you no fear of God?" Perpetua asked, in sad curiosity. Brought face to face with sin, her soul felt its pity stronger than its horror.

Lycabetta laughed, and her laughter sounded to Perpetua like the music of birds in a magic wood.

"I fear nothing but old age. Chilling kisses, the death of desire, the sands that overwhelm the altar of youth, the dying lights and fading garlands of life's waning feast—these things I fear, but these things are not yet for you or for me, and when they come there is always the hemlock."

"You speak despair," Perpetua insisted, eager

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with the eagerness of untainted youth. "I answer with God's mercy that can cleanse and save you. You are the Strange Woman—but you are a woman, born of a woman, made to bear the burden of women. Woman to woman, let me go."

"I love you too well to lose you," Lycabetta retorted. "You dream too much. I shall take great joy in teaching you realities. You do not know the value of your violet freshness. You will make a sweet priestess of love."

Perpetua thrust out her hands as if to ward off her enemy, while she cried:

"You are the Strange Woman! Were you a devil, do you think you could ever make me like you?"

Lycabetta nodded ominously.

"I will conquer your mad maidenhood, I promise you, and when you sleep in silk and shine in splendor you will thank me devoutly. Already your cheek flushes gratitude."

The girl's cheeks were flushed, but her eyes were unchanged in defiance as she answered:

"Your words sting me like blows, and my face

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flames at them. But you are not so wise as you think, if you hope to tempt me or terrify me."

Lycabetta watched her, catlike.

"Torture may change your mind, as shame shall change your body."

Perpetua crossed herself again.

"Nothing that you can do to me will change my soul. That I will carry with me pure to heaven."

"You may long for death ere I have done with you," Lycabetta whispered, sourly. She would have said more, but her speech was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Lysidice through the curtained portal. Lycabetta questioned her, frowning.

"Why do you come here?"

Lysidice answered, hurriedly:

"There is one outside muffled like oblivion, whose command is to see you in the King's name."

Lycabetta gave a cry of joy.

"It is the King! Admit him. Wait!" She turned to Perpetua. "You shall have leisure, my woodfinch, to grow wise in. School yourself into submission ere I send for you again."

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Perpetua folded her arms across her breast.

"I am as changeless as the sun," she said, proudly.

"The sun sets," Lycabetta sneered.

"Ay," Perpetua answered, "to rise again in heaven."

Chafing at the girl's obstinacy, Lycabetta clapped her hands and the black slaves entered.

"Take her away," she commanded, pointing to Perpetua.

Zal and Rustum seized Perpetua, who, knowing herself powerless, offered no vain resistance, and drew her through the curtained space behind the statue of Venus, and thence to a more distant room, in which they left her in darkness and alone.

The darkness was full of strange perfumes—full of strange sounds. To a child of the mountains, bred in the perfect mountain air, the heavy odors of the House of Pleasure were nauseating, almost insupportable. Below in the garden a woman's voice sang softly in Sicilian the song of the "Two - and - Twenty Subtle Caresses." Women listened to it and laughed, for the only

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sounds that floated up were the sounds of women's voices. Perpetua put her hands over her ears and shuddered. She had come to womanhood sanely, sweetly, innocent, not ignorant, and she knew that the world of the valley was not the world of the hill. But it hurt her to the heart that any world could make such use of women, and she knew the fate that was meant to wait for her in the hateful place. But she knew no fear, not even the fear of death. She prayed once and no more; she was not one to weary Heaven with vain repetition. Then she waited in patience for the moment when she should hear again the footsteps outside the fastened door.

IX

THE LILY OF SICILY

As soon as Perpetua was withdrawn, Lycabetta turned to Lysidice. "Entreat the King to enter," she commanded. To her surprise Lysidice made no move, but stood staring at Lycabetta with bright eyes of wonder.

"Why do you linger?" Lycabetta shrilled at her minion. The slight child answered, timidly:

"Daughter of the gods, I am amazed."

Lycabetta frowned.

"What amazes you?"

Lysidice crept nearer to her mistress and whispered, "Though he says he is the King, though he commands kingly, he is wrapped in his mantle so closely that I could not see his face."

Lycabetta laughed derisively.

"Is that all? What of that? When great folk

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come to these gardens they sometimes ape invisibility."

Lysidice ventured a little closer to Lycabetta. Her tale was not all told.

"Ay," she said; "but the night wind fluttered his cloak a little and I saw something of his habit. It was more like the livery of a fool than the apparel of a king."

Lycabetta's dark eyebrows lowered a little; her red lips tightened.

"Indeed! Does he send his fool for an ambassador after keeping me close through the long dark? Well, bring him in. We shall see."

Lysidice saluted and passed from her presence. Lycabetta seated herself on her couch thoughtfully. She was not in her gentlest temper, for she was vexed at her failure to snare Perpetua, and she was restless after denying her door to so many friends for a king who did not come, and now perhaps sent his fool on love-errands. The King was the King; there was no one like the King; but was there a woman in Syracuse like herself, or worth her favors? Mentally she reviewed her rivals with a crafty eye; the pretty

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court peahens, her own skilled minions, none could please the King so well. As for Perpetua, the King's hot love and hot hate for the mountain maid earned only her contempt. The girl might prove enticing by-and-by, to a green palate, when she was pliant, but now she was rough country fare.

Her reverie was interrupted by the return of Lysidice, followed by a man so muffled in a rough cloak that he was impossible to divine. It might hide a king; it might hide a beggar; it covered both. Whoever he was, the man stood still within a few feet of Lycabetta. His eyes were watching her over his lifted arm, which draped the cloak about his body, but some of the stuff was wound so cowl-like about his head that she could discover nothing of his face. Lysidice lingered, curiosity conquering her duty to depart, and Lycabetta did not heed her; she heeded only the silent, motionless man.

"Well?" she interrogated, sharply, as the man made no sign. At her word he cast his wrapping from him, and Lycabetta beheld with some irritation the twisted form and writhen features of

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the fool Diogenes. Lysidice crept round to the other side of her mistress and whispered to her:

“It is the fool.”

Robert moved a little nearer to Lycabetta, with strange fear and strange hope in his heart. Through all the horrors and denials of the night, through all his consciousness of a conspiracy he could neither fathom nor baffle, his distraught mind carried some memory of Perpetua, and that memory had steered him to the gate of Lycabetta's garden of delight. At those gates he found no obstacle; his word was taken without question; no unbridled hand sought to draw the mantle from his face; unchallenged, untroubled, he had made his way through the sweet-smelling lawns and arbors to Lycabetta's door. Perhaps she was not in the conspiracy; perhaps she was loyal. These thoughts were racing through his mind as he stood before her and cast the mantle from him; these thoughts forced him towards her, forced him, with lips parted eagerly, pitifully, like the lips of a thirst-goaded man, to speak.

“Do you know me?” he gasped, hoarsely, and

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his voice sounded strange and unfamiliar in his ears, like the voice of a lost spirit.

Lycabetta smiled a little as she stretched herself carelessly on the couch.

"Surely I know you," she answered, and at her words the warm blood seemed to well back into Robert's heart, and he lifted up his hands in a rapture.

"Heaven," he cried, "I thank you that all the world has not gone mad."

He mouthed the world's madness so bitterly that Lycabetta propped herself on an elbow and eyed him curiously. She disliked Diogenes less than the courtier-creatures did, for she had less chance to counter his scathing phrases, and, besides, he was near the King, and it is ever well to be friends with kings' neighbors.

"You seem angry," she said.

Robert answered her almost in a yell.

"Angry! The rage of hell raves in me. The night is full of voices, but I will not hear them. The night is thick with terrors, but I will not fear them."

He was pacing up and down the room now,

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striking his hands together, trampling upon the rich furs that strewed the floor, as if they were his enemies grovelling at his feet, so possessed with the hysterical passion that he seemed to have forgotten the women who watched him and wondered.

Lysidice whispered in a low voice to Lycabetta, "He has gone mad."

Lycabetta nodded, tacitly agreeing. If the fool were mad, as in very deed he seemed to be, she wished him well out of her borders. Madness was one of the ugly things of life for which she had no pity; madness was one of the dangerous things of life, and of all dangers she was greatly afraid. The fool carried a dagger at his girdle, and it were well to pacify him. She could send for the Moorish slaves to cast him forth, but if he were indeed sent by the King, any ill-treatment of his messenger might offend Robert, and the anger of offended Robert might take uglier shapes than the fool's dagger. So she watched the figure uneasily. Suddenly he stopped in his pacing and turned to her.

"There is the strangest treason abroad in Sicily," he cried. "My creatures defy me; my

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friends deny me They have set a sham king on my seat; they bow to a crowned pretender; they shall die to-morrow."

Lysidice whispered again to Lycabetta, "He thinks he is the King."

Lycabetta nodded. She had heard how the fool Diogenes had parodied the King's manner and earned the King's anger. She knew no more than this, and it seemed strange that the King's rage should have frightened the knave into madness. But he seemed, indeed, insane as he raged up and down the room.

"Give me a sword!" he shouted. "Syracuse will stand by me. We will crush this treason bloodily. Give me a sword! give me a sword!"

In that palace of pleasure there were no weapons of death, yet Robert ranged the room wildly as if dreaming that some soldier's friend might lurk behind silken curtains. Lycabetta turned to her comrade and whispered to her behind her hand:

"The poor ape is moon-crazed—clean out of his wits. He mimicked the King yesterday, and now the trick grows on him."

The sound of her voice seemed to arrest Robert

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in his search for a sword, for he turned and eyed them suspiciously.

“Do not anger him,” Lysidice entreated, catching in her fear at her mistress’s hand. Robert moved towards the women, frowning.

“Why are you whispering?” he asked, savagely. Lysidice shivered, but Lycabetta was less fearful. Serene in her beauty, she was confident of her power to flatter the fool according to his folly, and she gave him a deep salutation, mockingly reverential.

“We did but admire the thunder of authority, the lightning of royalty,” she said; and then, thinking she had done enough to placate his passion, she turned to whisper to Lysidice, “Let us tickle this fool like a cracked lute.”

Instantly Robert’s rage blazed higher. His bemused senses snuffed treason everywhere. What might these two light women be plotting.

“If you whisper again,” he shrieked at them, “I will have you whipped; I will have you crucified. Are you stained with treason?”

There was that in his voice which startled Lycabetta from her indifference. Again she mimed servility.

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“Have I offended your Majesty?” she sighed. “I pray your royal pardon. I was but planning with this minion here some way to freshen your spirits. See, I do you obeisance.”

She served him a sweeping salutation, in which her lithe body seemed to swoon at his feet in complete surrender. Then, straightening, she swerved and called to her women:

“Girls, girls, girls—Glycerium, Euphrosyne, Hypsipyle—all of you come hither.”

Obedient to her voice, the girls came trooping in, from garden and gallery, fluttering like doves, murmuring like doves. Lycabetta held up her hand and they halted, wonder in their lovely eyes to see the priestess of Venus giving audience to the loathly fool.

“Dainties,” Lycabetta cried, “his Majesty honors us with his presence to-night.”

And as she spoke she pointed with extended arm to the deformed, dishonored man. Glycerium alone voiced the surprise of her fellows.

“His Majesty!” she repeated.

Lycabetta swooped in among her women, laughing and whispering, catching now one and now

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another of her pretty minions by the hand, as if seeking to choose the fairest.

“He is crack-brained, and calls himself the King,” she murmured. “Let him believe it for our sport.” Then she called aloud, gulling the suspicious visitor, “Do homage to the King, damsels, and perhaps he may fling his favor to the one of you that dances the most alluringly.”

Instantly the girls made a rush towards Robert, a wave of flowing hair, of laughing faces, of fluttering, transparent dresses, a wave that rippled close to him and then receded as the women swayed wantonly into postures of impudent supplication.

“Long live the King!” piped Glycerium; and “God save the King!” altered Euphrosyne; and the others, catching up the cries, repeated them, a babble of merry blessings, while Lycabetta crowned the clamor with the cry of, “Hail to the Lily of Sicily!”

Robert waved his hands angrily to banish the bright eyes, the bright voices, the bright bodies. They were supple and servile enough, but he did not need them then.

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“Dismiss these women,” he ordered. “I do not come for them.”

Lycabetta thanked him with a deep salutation, dropping her body almost to the ground in mocking reverence.

“You came for me, sire?” she asserted. Robert shook his head and beckoned her, and she glided towards him, while her women huddled together at the back of the hall, quivering with mirth at the sport of fool-baiting.

“No, sweeting,” Robert said, gravely. No. We have shared rose-red hours; you are made very comely; but there is one here more beautiful than you—than all the world.”

Even from the mouth of a derided fool it is never delightful for loveliness to be told that it is outshone. Lycabetta's lips tightened a little as she asked, “Which is she, sire?”

In her heart she promised herself that when the King did come she would use her interest to gain master fool the grace of a score of stripes. But Robert, not noticing an irritation which he would not have heeded if he had seen it, went on in his most royal manner:

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“The mountain maid we flung to you. I have somewhat turned my thoughts. Bring her to me. I think I will make her Queen of Sicily when I have overthrown my enemies.”

Lycabetta found it hard not to laugh in the fool's face for his antic assumption of the regal carriage, but her mind seemed instantly illuminated with knowledge. Now she understood the presence of the fool in her palace. This was Robert's ugliest revenge. He had sent this hideous thing to prey upon Perpetua, and Lycabetta applauded. What degradation more cruel could be found for stubborn purity.

“Do, sire,” she cried, delightedly, clapping her hands. Robert turned away from her and walked moodily up and down the room, his vexed brain a chaos of conflicting purposes. Lycabetta moved towards her women and beckoned to Hypsipyle, who hastened to her side.

“A brave jest,” she said. “The King, whom Heaven preserve for us, his lovers, has sent this grimacing fool here to plague and shame the girl whom his Majesty once was pleased to love and now is pleased to hate. It is a dear revenge

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and worthy of a great king. The deformed evil thing will make the girl as evil as himself ere he be done with her. Bid the others begone and bring the girl here."

Hypsipyle glanced at the twisted figure limping across the hall. "I would not like her lover," she sneered; then, hurrying to her companions, she and they vanished through the curtains. Lycabetta turned to Robert.

"Sire," she said, "I will send your Majesty his mountain maid." Robert stopped in his shambling walk and stared at her. A thousand wild thoughts were warring in his burning brain, and the interruption irked him.

"Very well," he muttered. "Leave me. I have much to think of—how to meet this treason."

Lycabetta saluted deeply and left the room to join her women in the cool colonnades of the garden. She was willing enough that the King should wreak his revenge upon the captive in whatever fashion best pleased him. It might have been amusing to tame the girl herself, but it would certainly have been troublesome; and it was less trouble to wander in the rose-strewn

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galleries among the painted pillars, entwined with Lysidice or Hypsipyle, whispering strange songs and feeding on strange thoughts. There was even no desire in Lycabetta's mind to witness unseen through silken curtains the wooing of fool and maid. If Perpetua was passable for a nymph, Diogenes was too ugly for a satyr, and the sight of anything ugly was physically repulsive to Lycabetta. She would have beheld with composure any shame or suffering that could be inflicted upon Perpetua so long as those who inflicted shame and suffering were themselves fair to see, comely women or comely men. But since it had suited the King's pleasure to place the task of punishing Perpetua in the hands of a hideous fool, a crippled, twisted thing, there was no pleasure left in the sport for Lycabetta. By-and-by she would learn how the fool had fared; in the mean time the young moon rode high in heaven, the gardens were rich with a thousand odors, and the voices of her companions were very sweet.

X

THE TWO VOICES

ROBERT, left alone, went on muttering to himself, as he shuffled restlessly up and down. Through all the bewildering discord of his thoughts the face of Perpetua seemed to shine clearly, like the light on a pharos to a striver in an angry sea. Where so many had denied him, she had recognized him. Lycabetta had, indeed, done as much, but Lycabetta was the gift of the past; Perpetua was the promise of the future. She and he would go down hand in hand into the streets of Syracuse. They would rouse the people, who would surely fight for such a king, for such a queen. They would sweep the palace clean of their enemies and rule in Sicily forever.

As, body shambling, mind rambling, he drifted thus about the room, the curtains behind the statue of Venus parted, and Perpetua appeared

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in the opening, standing between the two Moorish slaves. Then the curtains fell, the slaves disappeared, and Perpetua was left alone with the seeming fool. She recognized him at once, and the fire of hope flickered higher in her heart as she came down the steps and ran eagerly to meet him. He was but a withered fool, but still he was a man and might have pity, might have generosity, might have courage.

“Help me,” she cried, holding out her hands to him. To her surprise the thing she took to be the fool Diogenes advanced as eagerly to her.

“You are free, Perpetua,” he cried. “Free, if you will be my queen.”

Perpetua recoiled. “Your queen?” she gasped, but Robert gave her no chance of further speech, for he went on hotly, whipping his blood with the recital of his wrongs.

“Traitors have taken my throne, traitors have stolen my crown; traitors bar the gates of my palace in my face and laugh at me through the bars; there is a false king in Syracuse, but he shall not usurp unchallenged.”

Perpetua’s heart grew cold. “Heaven help

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me," she thought in her despair, as she watched the wild gestures and listened to the wild words of her companion. "He is crazed beyond all cure."

Robert, in the midst of his vehemence, saw the sorrow in her face, saw that she moved away as he advanced to her.

"Why do you shrink from me?" he asked. "I mean you no ill. You shall be queen; I swear you shall be queen. Come with me," and he held out his hand with an air of royal condescension which contrasted ridiculously enough with his grotesque outside. Perpetua turned away from him with a little moan. "Alas, poor wretch," she sighed, her pity for his plight for the moment overpowering her sense of her own peril. Robert did not catch her words, but he saw her trouble and wondered at it.

"What do you fear?" he questioned, tenderly. "I am the King."

Perpetua clasped her hands together in an agony of compassion for the unhappy fool, and for herself, more helpless and alone through his coming.

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“Dear Heaven,” she prayed, “help me to mend this madness.”

“Do you still shun me?” Robert asked, angrily, fretted by the girl’s resistance. “Am I young, smooth, strong, comely to so little purpose? Is it a light thing to be a king like me?”

Perpetua listened to his ravings in despair. It seemed so horrible to see the ugly fool stand there mouthing his own praises, his kingship. As she shrank from him, her averted eyes fell on the silver mirror which Lycabetta had left lying upon her couch. A sudden wild hope came into Perpetua’s mind. Though the man’s brain might be moonstruck, his eyes might still be honest, and a glance might bring him back to sanity. At least the test was worth trying. She sprang to the couch, caught up the mirror, and, turning to Robert as he followed her, thrust, with extended arms, the mirror before his face. Had he been struck by lightning his advance had not stayed more surely.

“God in heaven,” he cried, in a dreadful voice, that made the girl shiver to hear. He snatched the mirror from her and stared into the shining

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field, reading there the hideous lineaments of the fool Diogenes. His wild eyes turned from the mirror to her and back again.

“What damnable trick is this? I am bewitched, for the fool’s face leers at me. Some devil reigns in Sicily, who has put this stain upon me.”

The tears came into Perpetua’s eyes for the blighted wretch who could thus deny his own image. Robert saw the tears and guessed their meaning.

“Woman,” he entreated. “Can you not pierce through this glamour? I am, indeed, the King. For holy charity believe me. Though it has pleased Heaven or Hell to change me thus, I am the King.”

He held out his hands to her in piteous supplication, and for a moment for very pity’s sake there came the temptation into Perpetua’s mind to humor the poor ruin. But she thrust the temptation from her, and sadly turned her head. Robert, with a groan, flung himself upon the couch and sat there staring into the mirror, trying to understand the calamity that had come upon him and blotted out his form. In the shining glass the

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wrinkled, twisted face of Diogenes twitched viciously. Blind rage overswept him, and he shook his fist at the foul reflection, screaming madly:

“I am the King! I am the King!”

Perpetua suffered with him as she would have suffered with some wounded forest beast; even sorrowed more, for if the forest beast were a dumb thing and could not tell its woes, the fool could speak, and his speech was worse than silence. Her compassionate womanhood sent her to his side, and she touched him gently on the shoulder, trying to whisper some words of sympathy, of pity.

But at the touch of her hand, at the sound of her voice, Robert flung the mirror from him, and, springing to his feet, faced the girl with evil in his eyes. Ugly thoughts crowded upon him, wicked impulses pricked his blood. If he was thus deformed, thus degraded, thus stripped of his youth, his beauty, and his power, at least he would not suffer alone; at least he, the outcast, had one at his command. The girl who had denied the King was in the power of the fool.

“Do you sorrow for me,” he cried—“for me,

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the great King, the fair King? Keep sorrow for yourself; for, if my body be blighted, yours is smooth and soft, and at my mercy."

He made a snatch at her, but his wild eyes had warned her, and she eluded his grasp. She felt herself indeed helpless, in such a place and at a madman's mercy, but she prayed and faced him with steadfast eyes. He moved slowly towards her, gloating over his purpose.

"Now you are mine," he said. "Doomed as I am, degraded as I am, you are mine; you cannot escape me. Cling to your bridegroom, bride."

Perpetua slowly drew back from him, and there was that in her steady gaze which, in spite of himself, restrained him.

"God, grant me the key to a madman's pity," she prayed; then to the fool she pleaded: "Sir, in all hearts Heaven has set some spot of gentleness. I am a woman set about by enemies, helpless but not hopeless. If ever any woman's face was sacred in your eyes, if ever any woman's speech was music to your ears, be gentle and befriend me."

Robert laughed a malign laugh. He seemed to

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revenge his own ruin in triumphing over the child.

“My heart is a harp in a tree, and it sings to women’s voices,” he said. “But you must whisper me love-words if you think to win me.”

Perpetua answered him bravely, hoping for Heaven’s help in the words she might choose to soothe the madman.

“I will not kneel to you, for my knees bend only to Heaven. But I will speak you fair. If you were shapely, strong, and beautiful, with the white fire of knighthood glowing in your soul, you would laugh at death to pluck the meanest woman in the world from such a snare as mine is.”

Her speech stabbed Robert with a fresh fury at the thought of his transformation, and he answered her, grinning like a snarling beast:

“If I were shapely, strong, and beautiful, I would do as I will do. The powers that torture me have flung a jewel at my feet, and I will wear it till I weary of it. You are in my power, saintliness! Discrowned, deformed, dishonored, over you I can still be king.”

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Perpetua shook her head proudly.

“Do not cheat yourself. I am not in your power.”

Robert laughed again.

“Am I deceived? I thought you were a prisoner here. I thought your jailers flung you to me for my pleasure. I thought just now you were my suppliant. Will these walls vanish at your wish? Will those hearts melt at your pleadings? Will I deny myself delight? You are in my power.”

Perpetua watched him as calmly as a martyr of old days watched the advance of the doomsman.

“I am not in your power. I am young, and I love life, and would be glad to grow old in the world’s way. But I would rather die than live with any stain of shame.”

Robert retorted swiftly, mocking her, yet conscious, against his will, of unfamiliar admiration of opposition to his will.

“You foolish ermine, Death’s angel does not come at a girl’s call.”

“She who finds life hateful will find the means to end it,” Perpetua said, proudly.

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"Is this your virtue?" Robert jeered. "May meekness do self-murder?"

Perpetua lifted her tearless eyes towards the painted roof, fretted with pagan emblems.

"When I appear before the court of Heaven," she answered, quietly, "I think I will find pardon for that sin."

All manner of strange thoughts were contending for the supremacy of Robert's reason. Was that an aureole, strangely luminous, about her head, or only the wealth of her red hair? Was she, indeed, as brave as her brave phrases?

"I take you at your word," he said, more mildly. "Here is that which can set you free from all of us."

He drew the fool's dagger from his girdle and held it to her by its blade.

"Have you the heart to drive this home?" he asked.

Perpetua seized the hilt eagerly.

"Ay, with all my heart, into my heart," she cried, with a confidence that he could not question. "You are the gentlest tyrant in the world, and I will pray for you in paradise." She pressed

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the weapon with both hands to her breast and bowed her head.

Robert felt certain that she would keep her word, yet the evil in him drove him to taunt her. "You do not strike," he said.

Perpetua lifted her bright eyes, and he read in them the joy of a white soul escaping shame. On his ears her words came like saintly music. "I do but commend my spirit to its Maker. When it is done, of your clemency say a prayer by me. Farewell!"

She raised the weapon in the air, and Robert's troubled soul assured him that she meant to strike, that she meant to die. Awful influences seemed to struggle around him, darkness striving with light. He caught at the light. Voices were calling in his ears, urging evil, urging good. He caught at the good.

"Stop!" he called. "I think your hand has driven a devil from my heart. You are a saint; you have a soldier's courage; you have conquered me. I am your servant."

Perpetua hid the knife in her bosom and came close to Robert. "Will you truly help me? Let

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me see your eyes. Yes, I believe you. How may we escape?"

Robert drew his withered body proudly up. "I will command them to set you free."

"Alas! poor soul, they will not obey you," Perpetua said, sadly.

Robert fell from his high estate in a second. "Oh, God, I had forgotten," he groaned. He clasped his hands; his lips murmured a prayer for strength to bear his cross, for strength to serve this woman. For the second time in his sinful life he was thinking of another than himself, and that other was Perpetua. He turned to her with what he meant to be a smile. "Then we are weak things, you and I, a fool and a woman, and we must fight force with craft. Do you trust me?"

"I trust you," Perpetua said, simply.

Robert came close to her and whispered in her ear. "Seem to consent to this cruel jest of theirs. I will say I have cast a spell upon you, and that you can refuse me nothing. When I command you to follow me, say that you obey. Once you are outside these gates, you will be safe. Do you understand?"

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Perpetua looked at him with shining eyes. "I understand that I have found a friend."

The words seemed to burn Robert's heart with purifying fire. "A slave who will serve you faithfully," he whispered. "Hush, some one is coming."

XI

GLAMOUR

THE hangings behind the image of Venus parted, and Lycabetta surveyed the strange pair. She had grown weary of the garden, grown curious to know how the fool had progressed with his wooing.

“Well,” she asked, “are the lovers happy?”

Perpetua folded her arms in silence as Lycabetta descended the steps, but Robert danced up to the Neapolitan anticly.

“A marvel, a marvel,” he carolled; “I have won the mad maid’s heart.”

Lycabetta stared at him. “Does Andromeda dote on the monster? Does Beauty love the Beast?”

Robert jiggled and skipped in front of her, almost singing his words. If he had the fool’s shape, he would play the fool’s part to save Perpetua. “Bah, the husk belies the kernel. I am skilled

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in philtres—I can cast love spells as well as the straightest and the smoothest.”

“Love-making has mended your wits,” said Lycabetta. “So you no longer think yourself the King.”

Robert laughed wildly. “King or no king,” he gibbered, “I sway a maid’s heart.” He was playing his part bravely, for the air seemed full of voices calling, “Save Perpetua!”

“Does the girl accept you?” Lycabetta questioned.

“Accept me?” Robert echoed, gleefully. “I have so overcome her that she will woo me in season and out of season. I shall boast the most loving, patient spouse in Christendom. Mark, now, how my bird flies to a call. Come hither, rusticity.”

He beckoned, and Perpetua moved slowly towards him, outwardly calm. “Do you take me for your lord and master?” he asked her.

“Ay,” Perpetua answered.

Lycabetta looked at the girl’s grave face in amaze. “This is a wonder,” she said; “she seems spellbound.”

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Robert nodded joyously. "Why, I have cast the glamour upon her, and she will listen to me as the fish listened to St. Anthony. Will you swear to obey me, maiden?"

Again Perpetua answered, "Ay."

"Are you in league with the devil?" Lycabetta asked, astonished at the girl's acquiescence.

Robert grinned impishly. "I will not sell my secret. I suppose you do not care how I conquer the maid, so long as I do conquer her."

"So long as you do what the King wishes," Lycabetta answered, contemptuously.

"I swear I will do what the King wishes," Robert retorted. "She shall be humble enough, she shall be wise enough when I am done with her. You are skilled in mischief; but I still could be your school-master. Did you ever hear of Orpheus and his magic lute?"

"What of it?" Lycabetta asked.

"He could pipe so divinely," Robert related, "that all things must needs follow him, not merely men and women, birds and beasts, but silly stocks and stones; and your phlegmatic stay-at-home

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tree would needs uproot itself and skip to his jingle. Well, you shall see this intractable virgin follow, lamblike, when I pipe, as I lead the way to my hovel."

"If you can do this, I shall be glad to be rid of her," Lycabetta confessed. "I have better use for my hours than the training of country girls."

Robert came nearer to her, confiding: "I know a spell my master mountebank taught me. A Greek fellow made it, a Roman rogue stole it, an Italian rascal gave a new twist to it; here is the pith of it. Oh, it sounds simple enough, but it will win a matron from her allegiance, a nun from her orisons, a maid from her modesty. See, now, how she will trip to my whistle. Mistress Modesty, Mistress Modesty, follow me home, follow me home, follow me home!"

He took up the lute Euphrosyne had laid down, and moved around the room slowly, playing a quaint little country-side air in a minor key, while he chanted his song, and, as he went, Perpetua moved slowly after him, as if compelled by the spell of the music:

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“By the music of the morn,
When equipped with spear and shield,
Oberon, the elfin-born,
Winding on his wizard horn,
Calls the fairies to the field—
I conjure thee, maiden, yield!

“By the magic of the moon,
When Diana from her dome
Wakes from slumber, woos from swoon
All the folk who fear the noon,
Dwarf and kobold, witch and gnome—
I conjure thee, maiden, come!

“By the beauty, by the bliss
Of the ancient gods who ride
Eros, Phœbus, Artemis,
Aphrodite, side by side,
Through the purple eventide,
On the cloudy steeds of Dis—
I conjure thee, maiden, kiss.”

Lycabetta watched, astounded, the submission with which Perpetua followed the incantation of the fool. “This is the black magic,” she said; and then asked Perpetua, “Are you content to follow this fool?”

Perpetua paused in her patient following of the

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singer, and, looking Lycabetta full in the face, she answered, "Ay."

Lycabetta raised protesting hands. "And to go with him where he will?" she persisted.

Again Perpetua answered, "Ay."

Robert interrupted the colloquy with a sweep of the strings that drifted into a new tune with new words:

"Caper, sweeting, while I play;
Love and lover, we will stray
Over the hills and far away."

He beckoned to the girl and ambled backward towards the entrance, obediently followed by Perpetua.

As he was about to pass luting through the entrance, Lysidice parted the curtains and entered the room. Robert fell back to give her passage. With a reverence to Lycabetta, she said:

"The Lord Hildebrand waits without."

The news brought very different thoughts to the three hearers. Lycabetta, always willing to welcome the King's favorite, gave order gladly

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enough to admit him. In Robert's mind the name rekindled hopes that had died away. His heart's friend, his brother in arms, the companion of his vices, the flatterer of his follies, he surely would not be deceived by the fantastic transformation. Flinging aside his lute, he shouted, joyously: "Hildebrand! Surely he will know me."

Perpetua's heart grew cold at this proof of renewed madness, and she caught him by the arm. "Do not abandon me," she entreated.

Robert shook her off in his eagerness to greet Hildebrand. "No, no, have no fear —" he promised, hurriedly, pressing forward towards the entrance. The hangings parted and Hildebrand entered, exquisite, debonair, radiant.

"Salutations, sweet lady," he said, gayly, advancing towards her, but his advance was interrupted by Robert, who rushed forward, exclaiming: "Hildebrand! Hildebrand! do you not know me? Do you not know my voice?"

Hildebrand frowned resentfully on the intruder. "Why are you here, fool!" he grumbled. "Your head and your hump are like to part company."

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Robert gave a great groan and turned away. His last hope had withered. The spell under which he suffered was too potent for his dearest friend to resist; even the eye of comradeship could not pierce through that fleshly mask; even the ear of affection could not discern a familiar voice. Perpetua stood where she was, full of dread at this untimely interruption. Lycabetta tapped her forehead mockingly as she looked from Diogenes to Hildebrand.

"The crazy zany thinks he is the King," she said.

Hildebrand nodded. "He mimicked the King so pertly yesterday morn that the King doomed him, and fear has so addled his weak wits that he believes himself to be his master."

"Yet he is a cunning rogue," Lycabetta added, "for he has won the heart of the wood-chuck."

Hildebrand caught at her words. "I came on that business. Have you obeyed the King?"

"Bravely," Lycabetta replied. "I flung her to this fool for a marriage morsel, knowing him to be as cruel as he is crooked, and, by our Lady of

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Lesbos, he has bewitched her, and she follows his songs like a lamb to the sacrifice."

At the sound of her words, Robert roused himself from his lethargy. "Ay, ay," he chirped, "you shall see. She will follow where I call. Come, sweetheart, come!"

Again he began to move, and again he was followed by Perpetua. Now, for the first time, Hildebrand caught sight of her and moved forward, captured by her loveliness.

"Is this the King's fancy?" he asked.

Lycabetta answered: "This is the girl the King sent me to tame and shame for him. Could I do it better than by giving her to this limping devil?"

Hildebrand struck his hands loudly together in protest. "Ay, by the gods, much better. She is far too fair for the first sweetness of her youth to be wasted on a clumsy clown. We are ourselves indifferent good at this taming and the rest, and, like a loyal subject, I will gladly serve the King in this." He advanced towards Perpetua, but Robert instantly came between them.

"The girl is mine," he asserted. "You shall not take her from me."

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Hildebrand grinned maliciously. "Gently, beast, gently," he purred. "You shall have your turn by-and-by. You must give place to your betters, bowback."

Robert glared at him in hate. "I say you shall not have her!" he repeated.

Lycabetta burst into a fit of laughing. "Have a care, my lord," she warned; "the fool's eyes roll horridly, and his mouth twitches. He will do you hurt if you steal his leman."

"You shall not have her!" Robert insisted, fiercely.

Hildebrand's affability vanished. "Out of the way, monkey!" he ordered; then, catching Robert lightly by the collar, he cast him aside as easily as he might have cast a kitten. Robert staggered and fell on his knees. Unheeding him, Hildebrand went towards Perpetua. "You lithe idol of the heights," he asked, smiling, "would you not choose me for your paramour?"

Perpetua looked steadily at her new danger, and her heart was glad to think of the knife that lay hidden in her bosom. "I will go with the fool," she said.

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In the corner where he knelt unnoticed Robert was muttering confused, disjointed prayers to Heaven. The passionate desire to save the girl revived within him, and he implored the Heaven that he had wronged for help.

At Perpetua's speech, Lycabetta clapped her hands derisively. "I said he had bewitched her."

"We will exorcise her," Hildebrand laughed back, and advanced towards the girl. Perpetua drew away a little, regarding Hildebrand with a steadiness that puzzled him, resolved to drive the knife into her heart before he could lay hand on her. To Robert, where he lay huddled, the spinning seconds seemed to be beating against his ears like the booming of great bells, and through their clangor came a babble of brisk voices reproaching him, mocking him. "Now for one hour," they seemed to say, "of that royal power which you have used so ill, and now might use so nobly." Again his agony spurred him to supplicate Heaven to send him some thought that might save her, but no thought came; he was weak, helpless, dishonored, and through the darkness of

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his soul the voices of his enemies stabbed him like many arrows.

Lycabetta, seeing how Hildebrand paused for a moment in his advance upon Perpetua, stung him with a sneer.

“Lord Hildebrand, for a lover of ladies you are at a loss. She clings to her cripple.”

Hildebrand, irritated, made a step forward, and again Perpetua moved a step away. Hildebrand frowned, accustomed to conquest.

“You shun me, child,” he protested, “as if I had the plague.”

The plague!

At those words the booming bells ceased, the babbling voices ceased; Robert's darkness became light; an inspiration told him what to do. He sprang to his feet and advanced towards Hildebrand, barring his way to Perpetua. With outstretched palms, with cringing shoulders, he appealed to Hildebrand, to Lycabetta.

“Sweet lord, sweet lady, I entreat a sweet word with you.”

Perpetua, who had lifted her hand to clasp the handle of the knife, let it fall again. Hildebrand,

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who had forgotten the fool's existence, scowled and snarled at him.

"To heel, sirrah, to heel!"

Lycabetta shook with mirth. "You forget, my lord," she suggested, "that it is the King who addresses you."

"I'll wring his majesty's neck," Hildebrand answered, savagely, "if he vexes me further."

"Nay, if he vexes you, there be others for that task," and Lycabetta struck sharply with a golden hammer upon a golden gong. Immediately the curtains parted and Zal and Rustum entered. At their heels came several of Lycabetta's women, wondering at the summons.

Lycabetta pointed to Robert.

"Cast the fool forth," she commanded.

The black slaves descended the steps. Robert turned a mocking, mouthing face towards Lycabetta.

"Wait, wait," he said; "I have a tale to tell that should divert you much."

Something in the fool's fantastic manner, in his grotesque attitude, in his promise of diversion, took Lycabetta's fitful fancy. She held up a

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hand and the slaves halted. Robert, who had edged a little nearer to where Perpetua stood, wondering what strange purpose urged the fool, was making singular gestures with his hands, as one inviting, even commanding attention.

“Listen,” he said, and his voice had a strange sound in it of defiance, of dominion, of frightful triumph, that jarred horridly on his hearers. “It was cold on the hills to-night and the wind chilled me. By the road-side near the city’s gate I found one who slept or seemed to sleep. Wait, wait, my tale is wonderful and worth your patience. The sleeper was wrapped in a great mantle. Why should he lie snug while I shivered? I would have killed him sleeping to steal his cloak, but I was spared the pains, for as I twitched at a corner of it the fellow rolled in a lump before me and lay there dead. Wait, wait, your patience shall not be strained to breaking, and my adventure is good hearing. My man lay on his back in the moonlight, staring stupidly, and I who looked saw that his face was drawn and twisted, as if he had died in great pain; his teeth were dropping from

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their livid gums and his skin was stained and mottled and discolored, blue and black and green, and he seemed to rot as I watched him. But I was cold and I fear nothing, being a fool, so I went my ways, warm in his mantle. What do I care for the plague?"

The plague!

At that name the listeners shivered as if a wind of death had blown through the heavy scented air. Hildebrand drew back in horror, gasping the dreaded words, "The plague!" Lycabetta grew white with fear. "Oh, gods, the plague!" she moaned, groping for support which none gave her. Her women fluttered together paralyzed with terror, and the black slaves recoiled from the one enemy their courage dared not face.

Robert, lifting his hands as if in a kind of hideous benediction, gibbered at their fear.

"The very plague!" he screamed. "The plague is in the port, the plague is on the city, the plague is at your gates! What care I if all Syracuse dies of it! My mantle reeks with its sweat."

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With a rattle of damnable laughter Robert clutched at his mantle, which lay where he had cast it down when he entered, now near his feet. Fluttering it in the air so that its folds seemed to quiver like the pinions of a fiend, he flung it upon Perpetua and swathed it tightly about her unresisting body. To her the plague was better than self-slaughter, as self-slaughter was better than pollution. Still the others covered, spell-bound by their dread.

“Who will woo her now?” Robert screamed, folding her in his arms. “Who now will draw death from her lips? If she dies, she dies mine, and I will sit hunched by her side and watch her white flesh wither.”

While he shrieked he was dragging Perpetua towards the entrance, and now he caught at the silken hangings, while his voice, swelling in volume of malignant imprecation, yelled at his terrified enemies, “The plague! the plague! make way there for the plague!”

There was no one to say him nay. With a scream Lycabetta fell fainting to the floor, Hildebrand was trying to cross himself with nerveless

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fingers, the women were sobbing hysterically, and the slaves had fled.

Robert and Perpetua passed unchallenged from the room and from the house.

XII

IN SYRACUSE

ONCE in the moonlit darkness of the gardens, maid and man took hands and ran as swiftly as they could through the scented night. They could not go overfast, and it was the maid's hand that helped the man, not the man's hand the maid. Perpetua was as fleet as a deer, but the degraded King limped like the fool whose likeness had been flung upon him, and Perpetua had to slacken her speed in order that he might keep pace with her. But there were no signs of pursuit from the house of Lycabetta. The terror of the plague was so great that Robert's mantle was an unquestionable defence. The most licentious youth in Syracuse would not go near the loveliest woman if he had the least reason to believe that she had been but lightly touched by a plague-spotted garment. Limping and running, their shadows

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streaming behind them on the white path that threaded the cypresses, they reached the golden gates which opened without demur to Robert's summons in the King's name, and in another instant they were speeding on the level highway to the city. No word passed between them; the dominant thought of each was to get as far as might be, as soon as might be, from the place sacred to the strange Venus.

Suddenly, as they reached the outskirts of the city, Robert tugged at Perpetua's hand and stayed her flight. In an angle of a house at the corner of a street there was a niche. In the niche was the image of a saint, and at the feet of the image the little flame of a votive lamp flickered in the soft air. Robert dropped on his knees and buried his face in his hands. Perpetua immediately knelt by his side, and the two fugitives prayed silently, earnestly for some moments. Perpetua's simple prayer was first that Heaven might be pleased to deliver the fool from his delusion, and next that she might be strengthened to face and accept her threatened fate. Robert's prayers were incoherent, confused supplications for pity,

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for pardon, whirling with ejaculations of gratitude for having been permitted to rescue the maid from her enemies.

Perpetua rose first, and stood, observing with infinite pity how the deformed body of the fool shook with the storm of emotions that seemed to convulse him. Suddenly Robert sprang to his feet and faced her.

“Did you hear nothing?” he asked. Perpetua shook her head reassuringly, for she thought that he meant the sound of pursuing feet, but Robert persisted.

“Did you not hear a voice that said, ‘He will cast down the mighty from their seats?’”

“I heard nothing, Perpetua answered, wondering; then in the darkness the thought of their threatened doom came upon her anew like a black and icy shadow.

“Is there no cure for the plague?” she asked, faintly, her face strained towards his. She almost hated herself for asking; better to die of the plague than to live at the pleasure of Hildebrand. But she was young, and life had been bright. To her astonishment her companion an-

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swered her question with a laugh that twisted his thin cheeks fantastically:

“You need not fear the plague, child,” he said; and as he spoke his voice sounded kinder than she had ever heard it. “My cloak was my own clean mantle, and came from no dead sailor’s carcass. I played on their terrors as I played on the lute-strings. I knew that a whisper of the plague would palsy their hearts, and I conquered them with a lying tale.” He added, in a graver tone: “For the which falsehood I have but now prayed Heaven to forgive me. I hope my one good deed may be pardoned to one in whom there is so much to pardon.”

Perpetua was amazed at the change that had come over the fool. He seemed saner, gentler, and, as she looked at him now in the moonlight, his features did not show so wholly repulsive as she had first esteemed them. Robert read the amazement in her eyes.

“Child,” he said, “do you truly trust me now?”

She extended her hands to him frankly, her heart swelling with gratitude, big with the two-

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fold joy of escape from the house of Lycabetta and release from the terror of the plague.

"I do," she answered, "with all my heart."

Robert caught at her outstretched hands, and, dropping on his knees in the causeway, kissed them reverentially. Then he rose and faced her, and as he did so it seemed to the maiden that his body was really less distorted than it appeared on a first view.

"Perpetua," he said, and he named her name very tenderly. "Perpetua, I am going to take you to a place of safety. Such women as Lycabetta, such men as Hildebrand, are ever to be feared; we have fooled them for the hour, but they may learn that they have been befooled, and the knowledge will make them revengeful. There is an ancient church in Syracuse, by the sea, whose crypt communicates with the catacombs that burrow into the rock. Hieronymus is its priest, famous as a good and holy man. He will shelter you, protect you; if there be danger you can hide in the catacombs, where our enemies might seek in vain for a century. Come, shall we go to Hieronymus?"

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“Let us go,” she said; then suddenly: “But you, you too are in danger. The King’s anger, the anger of Hildebrand—you must evade these.”

A melancholy smile came over the foolish face and lent it a kind of grace.

“Perhaps the good father may find some nook for me. I do not think his heart will be hard, even to me, a sinner. Come.”

He turned as if to lead the way, then paused and spoke to her again.

“Perpetua,” he said. “Your trust in the fool”—the girl noticed that he shuddered as he spoke, and she wondered—“your trust in the fool is not unwisely placed. In the name of that trust, ask me, I pray you, no questions of my past. Let us believe between us that the fool Diogenes”—and again the convulsive shudder wrung him—“was newly born to-day.”

“I will do as you wish,” she answered, full of amazement at the change which had come to his warped wits.

He took her hand and guided her through the streets of Syracuse to the little church by the sea.

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The moon shone brightly on them as they went,
the moon which swayed Syracuse, making lovers
kiss, poets dream, philosophers sigh, children
sport, dogs bay. It guided them, benignly, to
their goal.

XIII

THE CHURCH BY THE SEA

THE moon which had shone upon the flight of Perpetua had waxed and waned, and her successor ruled the night in the pride of her first quarter. Early one morning in the new month one of Lycabetta's women, Lysidice, amber-haired, slender-limbed, with eyes like sapphires, was wandering in the flower-market of Syracuse, seeking the loveliest blooms for her mistress. Lycabetta loved Lysidice above her fellows, for her slim, boyish body, for her quaint, virginal air; she had not yet tired of the morning sport when Lysidice came from the flower-market and pelted her with many colored blossoms. So as Lysidice, eager to please, went hither and thither, seeking ever the best, her attention was attracted by the sight of a man in a friar's robe, who was buying white roses at a stall. Though friars did not often buy

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roses in the Syracuse flower-market, the thing was not in itself passing strange, but the fancy of Lysidice, arrested at first by the contrast between the friar in his humble robe, with all that it suggested of denial, and the glory of the brilliant blooms about him, noted that the friar kept his cowl so close about his face as to conceal it completely from view.

The mere fact that the man in thus muffling himself seemed to indicate a desire not to be seen was enough to spur the curiosity of Lysidice into a determination to see. She tiptoed through the flower-stalls and fruit-stalls; she ambushed behind piles of melons; she peeped through clusters of grapes and bunches of lilies. The friar was choosing the loveliest of the white roses; he was eager to choose only the loveliest; as he stooped over them in his eagerness, a little breeze caught for a moment the cowl that hooded him, filled out its folds, and showed a momentary glimpse of features that Lysidice remembered well, the features of the fool who had fled from the house of Lycabetta a month before, bearing with him the girl from the hills and leaving behind him the

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terror of the plague. In a moment the friar's lean hand had pulled the hood close again about his cheeks, about his chin, but the glimpse had been enough for Lysidice.

What news would be so welcome to Lycabetta, languorous Lycabetta, as news of the whereabouts of the fool who had caused her so many hours of mortal anguish. Lysidice shivered still in the warm air at the thought of that night when all in the palace of pleasure believed themselves to be plague-stricken, and of the slow relief that came with day and the assurances of the physicians that Hildebrand had at last found strength to seek. There was no plague in the city; the fool had befooled them finely, carrying off his prize and disappearing into an obscurity so profound that no searches could unearth him. And now chance would seem to have given him to Lysidice.

Lilting the burden of a love-song, she passed by the stall where the friar stood, and saw, without seeming to see, how the friar dragged his hood closer about his face and bent lower over the roses. It would never do for her, she knew

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well enough, to attempt to follow the fool to his hiding-place. Her bright robes were not made to play the spy in. She strolled unconcernedly to the end of the market, and at the foot of a pillar she saw a small boy leisurely devouring a vast cantle of melon. She beckoned the boy into the cover of a country cart that had carried fruit and vegetables to the market, and from that intrenchment she pointed out to him the friar who was now bearing away his roses, bade the boy follow him, and promised him a silver piece if he would come back with news of the friar's destination. The boy understood and trotted off after the unconscious friar.

Lysidice had not to wait long for knowledge. In a few minutes the boy came back and told her what she wanted to know; the friar had disappeared within the doors of a little church by the sea-shore, not many yards distant, a church under the charge of an austere religious, Father Hieronymus. Delighted, Lysidice gave the urchin his piece of silver and scurried hot-foot home.

Robert, on his side—for the friar was, indeed,

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he who wore the fool's face—had seen Lysidice as she passed him, and had pulled his cowl closer about his face. He did not think she had seen him, deceived by her indifferent air and gait, and when he left the market bearing his burden of white roses, though he glanced behind him now and then, he saw nothing of Lycabetta's woman, and believed himself in security. It was, therefore, with a contented mind that he pushed open a doorway in the little church by the sea, and passed from the bright sunlight into the cool shade of the pillared place.

With a contented mind! A month had wrought great changes in him. On the night when the two fugitives sped through the darkness and threw themselves on the protection of Father Hieronymus, Robert's brain, reeling from rebellion and despair to surrender, was too distraught to entertain much else than the wild desire to save Perpetua. But in the mild twilight of the holy place, under the calm authority of Hieronymus, there came to him a strength, a courage of a kind that he had never known before. Hieronymus had welcomed the suppliants. The church com-

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municated through its crypt with some of the many catacombs that pierced the hills of Syracuse into a labyrinth; in one of these it was easy to conceal Perpetua with safety and with some degree of comfort. As for the fool, the church just needed a sacristan; a friar's robe was soon found and fitted; a brown hood concealed the ugly, haggard face, and the cripple Diogenes, who had been Robert the King, became the willing, patient servant of the little church by the sea.

Robert stood there in the church newly importuned by the memories of a month that had seemed at once as brief as a noon-day dream and yet to stretch into an age-long quiet. He recalled the gentle gravity with which Hieronymus had listened to the tale of flight, and had forgiven him in the name of Heaven for a fraud that had saved from dishonor the body of a Christian maid. He recalled the gentle strength with which Hieronymus had silenced him when he told for the last time his wild tale of transformation, and declared that he was Robert of Sicily. The rest of his memories were of peaceful hours of service, starred by golden moments of sight of Perpetua,

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of speech with Perpetua. A strange resignation came to reign in his fevered brain. He had been King—surely he had been King—but now he was no longer King; it had pleased Heaven to cast him from his kingship and to lead him in his degradation to thoughts and deeds undreamed of in his hours of greatness. There were times when he could wellnigh believe, dreamily, that what those nearest to him, Perpetua and Hieronymus, believed was indeed the truth, and that he was in very fact the fool Diogenes, who had lain in the maleficent moonlight on the mountain summit, and dreamed in his madness that he was the lord of Sicily. Moments truly came of fierce rebellion, but they were fewer now, and even while they racked him, the thought of Perpetua brought with it resignation to his fate. She had taught him the meaning of service, of patience, of love.

Quietly he set down his basket of roses; quietly he took from a corner a broom, and, opening the door that gave upon the sea, he reverently swept the little church. As he worked at his humble toil, he mused on the doings of him who was now

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King of Sicily, how point by point, in his tyrannies, he followed out the plans that had been hatched in Robert's head. How would it end for Perpetua—how would it end for Sicily? He scarcely thought to ask how it would end for himself. Sometime, when it could be safely done, Perpetua should escape to Italy; he would be with her as her servant, his hands would toil for her. Already he had learned to weave baskets, and it was with the money that he got through Hieronymus for these that he had bought the roses which were to adorn the altar of the church.

As he thought, his task was ended, the floor of the little church was clean.

"Swept," he murmured to himself as he laid his broom aside, and taking up the basket of white roses proceeded to set them tenderly upon the altar.

"Garnished," he murmured again, as he stepped back a little way and regarded his handiwork with a greater pleasure than he had ever known, in days now dim as dreams, in the pageants and the festals of Naples. The little church was now

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the kingdom in which he lived, not as king, but as its lowliest servitor; yet he breathed in it a spirit of content such as he had never known before. Those solemn pillars, those gloomy spaces, those narrow staircases set in the thickness of the walls, were the landmarks, were the confines of his home. The colored light that poured through the windows of painted glass, mottling the stone flooring with splendid patches of yellow and blue and red, gave the gray place to his sad eyes a pomp beyond the pride of courts. Here and there in the darkness dim lamps burned, the beacons for him of inexpressible havens. Portions of the walls were covered with votive offerings—little models of ships that had been set there by sailors, grateful for succor in storm and escape from shipwreck, wreaths and pictures and crosses and images of saints, emblems all of a simple piety that his racked spirit was slowly learning to understand. In front of him was the altar with its image of Our Lady of the Sea, curiously and beautifully wrought in silver, the figure of the Divine Woman on a space of tumbling sea. At the left of the altar, in a niche in

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the wall hard by, stood the most precious relic of the church, a huge iron cross more than seven feet in height, which had been carried on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem by the founder of the church. On the right of the altar was the golden railing and gateway on which the eyes of Robert always rested in joy, for behind it lay the space of sanctuary, the spot where Perpetua had found a shelter from her enemies. Yet close to this railing rose a pillar, the sight of which always had power to banish any joy from Robert's eyes. Down its length hung a thick rope running through iron rings set in the stone-work. That rope conducted to a bell on the roof of the church. That bell had been set there in the spring of the reign of King Robert the Good for this purpose, that if any man in his kingdom thought he was wrongly used by its King, he had but to drag at the rope to set the great bell ringing, whose sound, tolling over the city, called all good citizens together to hear and decide upon the complaint of the subject against the King. In such a benignant spirit had Sicily been ruled in the days of Robert the Good.

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One white rose remained in his fingers. He lifted it to his lips and kissed it reverently. Then he laid it down before the gilded gateway of the sanctuary, with the thought in his mind that perhaps her foot might touch it as she passed and make it sacred. Then he lit a taper at a lamp, and in obedience to the order given him by Father Hieronymus the previous night, he carried the tiny flame to each of the candles on the altar, till all were lighted. This task done, he prostrated himself on the steps before the shrine and prayed aloud.

“Heaven,” he supplicated—“Heaven, against whom I have sinned so deeply, hear my prayer for the white child who has led Thy light into my dark. Shield her from danger. Keep holy her who is holy.”

As his voice died away into silence, he still knelt with bent head and clasped hands, so steeped in penitential thoughts that he did not hear the sea-door open, did not hear the entrance of a man, grizzled, bronzed, eagle-faced, ascetic, clad in the brown robe of his order. Father Hieronymus paused for a moment, seeing with

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gratification the kneeling figure before the altar. It would be the sweetest triumph of a life of ceaseless struggle with the Prince of the Power of the Air to save alive the soul of the distracted fool.

XIV

THE EXILES

HIERONYMUS advanced to the kneeling figure. "My son," he said, gently.

Robert leaped to his feet at the sound of the familiar voice, and moved to meet Hieronymus.

"Father, when we came to you a month ago and begged for shelter, I told you how I lied to save the girl, pretending to be plague-stricken."

Hieronymus inclined his head. "And I absolved you."

Robert spoke in a lower voice, almost a whisper. "I told you, too, that I was Sicily, Robert himself, lapped in this hideous shape."

Hieronymus raised a warning hand. "Does that delusion still vex you?" he asked, sadly.

Robert bowed his head. "My spirit is free from many delusions," he whispered; "but I did not tell you that I, unlovely as I am, I love

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Perpetua. Her hand has led me, her voice has inspired me. If ever I be saved she will have saved me."

The grave face of Hieronymus looked kindly pity upon the fool in the friar's gown.

"God chooses the time and the way. An earthly love may win the grace of Heaven."

Robert sighed. "My hopeless love is happy service. Daily my spirit creeps a little nearer to the light."

Hieronymus beat his breast.

"Daily the tyrant of Sicily grows more wicked, reeling like a madman from crime to crime. The island groans beneath him more piteously than the imprisoned Titan groans beneath Mount Etna."

Robert turned away from Hieronymus with a bitter sigh. "God forgive me," he said to himself, "for he does the deeds I meant to do!"

Hieronymus did not heed the agitation of his companion; he stood as if listening to some distant sound. "Son, do you hear . . .?" he questioned.

Robert came swiftly to his side, listened,

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heard, and answered: "The measured tread of many feet. They seem to walk mournfully over my heart."

"Look out, my son," Hieronymus commanded, "and tell me what you see."

Robert opened the door that gave upon the sea, looked out, and answered, sadly: "A company of men and women, all in black. They seem weighed down with sorrow."

"These," said Hieronymus, grimly, "are the noblest folk in Sicily, flying into exile from the tyrant's lust and greed."

Robert stood motionless, frozen with sorrow.

"These," he said, in his heart, "are the just and righteous whom I meant to vex and banish."

As in a dream he heard the voice of Hieronymus calling to him: "My son, give me that iron cross, the cross of the founder of our church. They shall salute it for the last time."

Robert, going to the wall where the relic stood, tried vainly to lift the cross. Its weight mocked his efforts, and he turned, gasping and trembling, to Hieronymus. "Father, I cannot. The sinews of the fool are too feeble to lift it."

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Hieronymus gave a cry of compassion.

"Forgive me. It is heavy, and taxes my strength to move."

In his turn he moved to the cross, lifted it with an effort from its place, and carried it with difficulty to the altar, where he rested it for the new-comers to see.

The ache in Robert's heart was crueler than the ache in Robert's arms.

"I was once so proud of my strength," he murmured.

He moved towards the altar, and seated himself on the lowest step, huddled in grief, while Hieronimus, mounting to the altar, turned to face the new-comers. Through the sea-door came a company of men and women, all dressed in black, who ranged themselves, kneeling, in front of the altar.

Hieronimus addressed the kneeling mourners. "My brethren, are ye going forth into exile?"

An old man rose and spoke.

"From the land where I was born, from the soil where my father's fathers sprang, I now must

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go a wanderer, houseless, penniless. Woe to the wicked King!"

He knelt again.

Robert, where he crouched, muttered to himself, "I have sinned, I have sinned, I have grievously sinned."

Next a young woman rose and spoke.

"I and these other women with me, we must fly from the land of our life and of our love. For the honor of no woman is safe in the reign of Robert the Bad, and the feet of good women go not in his halls. Woe to the wicked King!"

She knelt again.

Robert, where he crouched, muttered to himself, "I have sinned, I have sinned, I have grievously sinned."

A young man rose and spoke.

"No youth with a clean spirit can live in peace in Sicily. Only the man who will sell his wife, the brother who will betray his sister, the lover who will surrender his sweetheart, may find favor with the tyrant. Woe to the wicked King!"

He knelt again.

Robert, where he crouched, muttered to him-

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self, "I have sinned, I have sinned, I have grievously sinned."

Robert's face was very pale, his body shook with anguish, and he crouched more and more upon the steps of the altar.

A soldier rose and spoke.

"I am not squeamish; I have seen cities sacked, but I will not serve this man-beast. I will carry my sword over-seas. I will follow the flag of some gallant captain, and die remembering Sicily. Woe to the wicked King!"

He knelt again.

Robert, where he crouched, muttered to himself, "I have sinned, I have sinned, I have grievously sinned."

He heard Hieronymus give his benediction—"Benedico vos in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti." A thought came to Robert, he crept to Hieronymus, plucking at his sleeve:

"Father," he whispered, "may I, who am so sore afflicted, speak to these unhappy?"

Hieronimus rested his hand gently on Robert's shoulder as he again addressed the kneeling figures.

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“Brethren,” he said, “lo, here is one of the tyrant’s victims. Speak, my son.”

He moved aside a little to give Robert more space, resting his hand upon the iron cross. Robert, his face hidden in his hood, addressed the mourners.

“Brethren,” he wailed, “I am the most unhappy soul in Sicily, for God has cursed me with a fearful curse. At night I dream I am this wicked King, and all day long the evil of his deeds grinds down my heart. But in my misery I have heard words more sweet than honey, more fragrant than myrrh, which if you will guard them in your hearts will be to you as wells in the waste places, as orchards in the sand, as shade of palm and strength of manna in the weary, hungry land. ‘He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree.’”

He would have fallen if Hieronymus’s strong arms had not sustained him. With one voice all the wanderers echoed his words.

“‘He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree.’”

The wanderers rose very slowly from their

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knees and went very slowly out at the sea-door, followed by Hieronymous, who almost carried Robert in his arms to the outer air.

For some minutes the little church was empty and dark and silent. Then a side door opened and a woman and a man entered, coming from a quiet street. The woman was Lycabetta; the man was Hildebrand. Hildebrand looked curiously around him.

“Why have you brought me here?” he asked.

“Answer me first,” Lycabetta replied. “How is the King?”

Hildebrand shrugged his shoulders. “Bloody of purpose, and yet bloodless. Lustful of purpose, and yet loveless. In his prisons many wait for death, but none perish; for the King has sworn that none shall die before the fool Diogenes, and we cannot find the fool. The loveliest women of Sicily have been torn from their homes to his palace, but they have not seen the King, for he will love no woman until he has found the girl Perpetua. And the girl cannot be found.”

Lycabetta whispered in his ear:

“Listen; this morning in the flower-market my

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Lysidice noted a hooded friar who bought white roses. A wind stirred his cowl and she saw the face of Diogenes."

Hildebrand started.

"Was she sure?"

"'Tis no face to forget," Lycabetta answered; "though she swears it less frightful than of old. She made no sign, but she bribed a child to follow the false friar, and the brat ran him to earth here."

Hildebrand grinned savagely.

"If they be here, no fable of the plague shall save them this time."

Lycabetta caught him eagerly by the arm and drew him behind a concealing pillar. She had seen the sea-door open and had seen a figure in a friar's gown.

"Who is this?" she whispered triumphantly to Hildebrand.

Robert came through the sea-door. Inside the church he threw back his hood and his face was plainly visible to the watchers, themselves invisible, screened by the pillars and the gloom. Hildebrand pressed Lycabetta's hand signifi-

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cantly. He had seen all he wanted to see. The pair slipped quietly out by the door through which they had entered. Robert advanced slowly to the altar and flung himself on the steps.

“Dear God,” he prayed, “let not the guiltless suffer for my guilt. Punish me to the top of my sin, but pity Sicily.”

XV

THE HUNTER'S VOICE

OUT of the shadow-land at the back of the altar emerged a white figure, with a fair face and hair the color of flame. She moved unheard across the pavement of the place of sanctuary; unheard she pushed open the little golden wicket in the golden railing; unheard she noted the white rose where it lay upon the ground, and, picking it up, lifted it to her lips before she placed it in her girdle; unheard she moved to where Robert lay in his agony before the altar.

“Friend,” she whispered, softly.

Robert’s consciousness awoke from its dark dreams. He rose and faced the girl, naming her name with joy.

“Perpetua!”

Perpetua came close to him.

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You have been abroad. Have you any news of my father?"

Robert shook his head.

"He is still kept close in the palace; his sword is still idle. The King has doomed many to death, but it seems that none shall die until the fool dies—and they cannot find the fool," he added, with a grim laugh.

Perpetua looked at him with sad affection and said, earnestly, "I wish you would fly from Sicily."

Robert answered her as earnestly, "I wish you would fly from Sicily."

"I will not leave my father."

"I will not leave you in danger."

Perpetua, smiling, gently chided. "All men live in danger through each second of each minute. I do not know the color of fear."

Robert drew a little nearer to her and spoke with a warning voice.

"I fear for you. This morning I saw in the market-place one of the women of Lycabetta. She did not see me, but to see her renewed my fear. If danger should come here ring at this

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bell," and he pointed to the great rope on the column by the altar. "It was set here by King Robert the Good, that any man having cause of complaint against the King might ring it and rouse all Syracuse to sit in judgment between sovereign and subject. In all his reign no hand ever tugged at that cord."

Perpetua looked at it sadly. "Every hand in Syracuse might itch to clasp it in the reign of Robert the Bad."

There were tears in Robert's eyes as he echoed her.

"Robert the Bad. You might have loved him," he said, after a short silence.

Perpetua turned away, for now there were tears in her eyes. "Oh, I know nothing of love," she said.

Robert saw her sadness and combated his own to cheer her. "Is it not strange," he asked, "your loveliness knows nothing of love while my unloveliness is cunning in love-wisdom? Year in and year out I have watched the world a-wooing—shepherd and shepherdess under the hawthorn hedge, knight and dame in the rose-bower, king and queen on the marble terrace."

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She turned to him again and there were now no tears in her eyes; grief should not conquer her and she spoke brightly, entering into the spirit of his speech.

“A prodigal preface. But what is the sum of all your wisdom?”

The wild fancy which had come into Robert's brain when he spoke of love-wisdom grew with the moment into a wild resolve. The lips of the fool should interpret the heart of the King. He motioned to her to sit on the lowest of the steps that led to the altar place, and when she had done so he seated himself thereon. The sunlight fell between them and lay, a pool of many colors at their feet. Neither of them knew that the little side door, which led from the quiet street, opened a little, allowing a woman to slip into the church and vanish behind the shadow of a pillar.

Robert spoke in a slow voice. “Love is the soul of the world. I am no better than a mouthing fool, but I believe the perfect lover to be next of kin to the angels.”

Perpetua gave a little sigh. “What is the perfect lover?” she asked, softly. She felt as if

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she were back in her mountain hut, sitting by her father's side, and asking him questions of the youth of the world. Robert's voice came back to her like a solemn chant.

"Such a one as the many dull would meanly scorn and the few wise nobly envy. For him love comes like a mighty wind of fire and burns his heart clean. He may have been stained and spotted in the slough of life, but when the woman comes she saves him."

There was a nobleness in his voice which she had not noted before; it charmed and lulled her.

"Can human love do so much?" she asked, more of herself than of him.

Robert's voice rose in triumphant assertion. "The heart's woman is the soul's star. She lifts her lover from the common whirl of things. He is thrilled with the elemental wonder, fulfilled with the immortal truth. He shelters imperishable passion in the perishable flesh. To a gray world such love brings glory, and he that is so graced walks in the wilderness as in a rose garden—gentle in reverence, loyal in honor, simple in faith. His eyes have glimpses of the flight of

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angels; his ears hear snatches of the music of the spheres, and even the very dust he treads upon becomes the golden dust of stars. This is the love that is mightier than death, this is the mystery of mysteries, the rose of changeless youth."

Perpetua put her hand to her heart.

"Is there such love?" she breathed, and instantly Robert answered her and his answer came like music to her ears.

"There is such love. It is no dream, but a glorious reality transfiguring the world, exalting men, immortalizing women. If I could woo you with a hunter's voice, I would cry to you through the parted leaves: Perpetua, I love you with this mighty love, have loved you since that happy forest day, shall love you so, Perpetua, till I die, and bear as my one claim to opened heaven the changeless cry, I love Perpetua."

While Robert was speaking his face seemed to grow comelier, and the pale face of Perpetua showed the influence of his words. Her eyes shone with his enthusiasm, her lips quivered with his emotion, her cheek flushed with his inspiration; she was entirely under the spell of his speech and

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the associations it evoked. As he came to an end she rose as if entranced, and moved slowly towards him. He, too, rose, as if himself bewitched by the magic of his tongue, and stood with parted arms as if to clasp and welcome her. Each had forgotten time and place, both were again in the green wood with their hearts on fire.

"Hunter, my hunter," Perpetua cried; "your voice comes through the leaves and conquers me!"

Her eyes were half closed, her hands stretched out; she swayed towards him.

Robert sprang forward with a mighty cry. "Perpetua!"

She was almost in his arms; suddenly her opened eyes realized that she was confronted by the rugged visage of the fool. She drew back with a start, and put her hands to her eyes as if to brush away the dream that had possessed her.

Robert, who had advanced like a conqueror, fell back like a slave.

"Ah!" Perpetua moaned. "What have you said to me? I have dreamed a dream."

With a heavy sigh Robert answered her, striving to smile.

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"I too have dreamed a dream. As the golden words glowed from my brain they worked a spell upon me, and for a moment I, the hideous cripple, fancied myself young and comely, the lover of my vision. Forgive me, Perpetua."

"What is there to forgive?" Perpetua answered. "I have slept waking, have dreamed with open eyes, and in my dream I seemed to hear a voice that carries all the music of the world, which called me by my name and made me come to it."

"Perpetua!" Robert pleaded.

But she went on speaking, unheeding him, as if she were indeed still under the influence of a dream.

"I was again in the green wood; the fountain bubbled at my feet. Strong hands parted the curtain of green leaves, and through the gap came sunlight—sunlight and the hunter with eyes like mountain lakes; and as I moved to meet him the vision vanished. Are you a wizard?"

Robert could now command himself.

"No," he said; "only a fool who teases his soul with Elysian fancies. But the strings of the lute have snapped; they were made of heart-strings,

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and a thought too fine for the work. I will play that air no more."

She did not seem to notice the sorrow in his voice; she longed for solitude. "Leave me a little while to myself," she entreated. "I want to be alone and pray."

Robert looked at her wistfully; for a few golden moments he had known youth again, and hope, and the speech of passionate love, had seen the woman he worshipped come to him under the spell of his words. Now he was again God's outcast.

"The will of Heaven be done," he murmured to himself; then to Perpetua he said, quietly, "When you pray, pray for your poor servant, for I think your pure voice must soar at once into the courts of Heaven."

Perpetua smiled kindly at him. "Dear Diogenes," she said; and with that name ringing in his ears Robert went slowly out through the sea-door. Perpetua turned and knelt at the altar, praying,

"Dear Mother of Mercy, help me to forget the hunter's face!"

XVI

THE CALL OF THE BELL

OUT of the darkest shadows a woman crept towards the altar. She bent over Perpetua where she knelt, and said, mockingly:

“You would do better to pray to forget the fool’s face, for the fool has led you into folly.”

Perpetua sprang to her feet and saw Lycabetta. Making the sign of the cross she confronted her. “Why are you here? This place is holy.”

Lycabetta laughed. “I loved you so well that I could not part from you. You have no plague mark on your beauty That was a rare trick, and your fool hid you cunningly—but we have found you, bird, at last.”

“I am in sanctuary,” Perpetua said, steadily.

Lycabetta sneered, “Our king-hawk will not be scared by a sacred name.”

“Sicily still stands in Christendom,” Perpetua

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answered; "and this ground is as holy as the old Jerusalem or the new."

Lycabetta looked at her with languid wonder.

"Why are you so perverse? It is a smiling fortune to be the darling of a king."

"It is a fairer fortune to be the darling of the Lord," Perpetua answered, proudly. "Why do you plague me so vainly? There is no fear nor favor in the world that can move me."

Lycabetta watched her with half-closed lids. "Are you so sure?" she said, cruelly. Then she went to the side door and opened it, calling out, "My lord!" and instant to her summons Hildebrand entered the church.

"Your chaste angel will play no game with us."

Hildebrand gave Perpetua a courtly salutation.

"I am glad to find you, lady."

Perpetua had drawn close to King Robert's pillar and caught the rope in her hands.

"If you come near me," she cried, "I will ring this bell and Syracuse will guard me."

"You mistake me," Hildebrand said, calmly.

"I am your friend, and by your leave I would save you from the King. Do not believe that sanctuary

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will serve you. His lust of hate would pluck you from between the horns of the altar."

"This shrine is sacred, even to him," Perpetua asserted, wearing a greater confidence than she felt.

Lycabetta laughed stealthily. Hildebrand shrugged his shoulders.

"You talk briskly, but you cannot make and mend the world at your maid's pleasure. I alone can save you from the King."

"How can you save me?" Perpetua asked him. She was undaunted, but she thought to gain time.

"Very simply," Hildebrand answered; "I desire your favors more than the King's favor, and if you will give me yourself I will take care of what is mine own."

"You are a faithful servant," Perpetua said, in scorn.

Hildebrand waved her scorn away dispassionately with his delicate white hands.

"I wear no fetters. If the King irks me I will drive my dagger between his ribs, and make myself king in Sicily. I think a change in the dynasty would not be unpopular in the island.

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Why, I will do this to-night to please you, and make you my queen if you will."

"You are baser than your master." Perpetua flung the words at him.

Hildebrand heard them unmoved. "I am what I am. Will you come to me?"

Perpetua answered him, steadfast in scorn, "You are as foolish as you are cruel, and you weary me."

Hildebrand turned to Lycabetta. "Daughter of Venus," he said, "a few paces hence you will find the northern soldier whose kisses you relish. Bring him here with his company."

Lycabetta went a little way nearer to Perpetua and stared at her. "You must be a witch," she said, "for you make men mad for you. I cannot see your marvel." Then she went out of the church.

"I will appeal to Syracuse," Perpetua cried to Hildebrand. She seized the rope of the great bell and tugged at it. The deep note of the bell was heard booming out over the city, to be answered almost immediately by the hum of voices and the hurry of feet.

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"Now you are doomed indeed," Hildebrand commented, ironically.

Perpetua still tugged at the bell.

"Syracuse will defend me," she asserted, brave against danger.

"Syracuse will do nothing," Hildebrand said, confidently.

Even as he spoke the sea-door was flung open and a mob of people flooded the church, bearing Hieronymus in their midst. At the same moment through the side door Sigurd entered with his soldiers, followed by Lycabetta.

"Who rings the bell?" Hieronymus asked, sternly, gazing in amazement at Perpetua and the strange display of armed force.

"I do, father," Perpetua answered. Then eagerly she appealed to the murmuring crowd: "People of Syracuse, protect me. That bell appeals to you with the voice of the dead good King, to defend me against the living evil King."

Men and women, the crowd clustered together, murmurous, menacing sound—the men had weapons in their hands and looked as if they were

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ready to use them in defence of their ancient rights.

Unmoved by their attitude, Hildebrand said to Sigurd: "Make that woman your prisoner. She is the King's enemy."

Sigurd and his soldiers advanced towards Perpetua. As they did so the uneasy crowd about the door parted, and Robert rushed in through the human lane, wild-eyed; he looked from Perpetua to Hildebrand, from the soldiers to the people.

"Perpetua! Perpetua!" he cried. "You dare not touch her. She is in sanctuary."

Instantly the people about the door took up the cry and thundered it: "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!"

Hildebrand greeted Robert with an evil smile. "Fool, fool, I thought we should lure you."

"Sanctuary!" Robert cried again. He tried to reach Perpetua, but the soldiers were between him and her, a wall of weapons.

"Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" the people raved, swaying at Robert's heels.

Hildebrand lifted his hand; there was a lull, and he spoke. "Silence, slaves! There is no sanctuary against sorcery."

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Perpetua, clinging to the pillar, echoed his word in horror. "Sorcery!"

"Ay," repeated Hildebrand. "Sorcery. The King swears you have cast spells upon him, delivering him madness in a draught of well-water, that you are a damnable sorceress."

Through the confused clamor that followed this charge, Perpetua's voice rang out.

"This is the wickedest story ever told."

"People of Syracuse," Robert called, "do not believe this man. She is the victim of a wicked King. As you have wives, daughters, sweethearts, stand by me and save her."

He appealed eagerly to the crowd, rushing to man after man among them, but each shook his head and hung back, daunted by the terrible charge of witchcraft.

"Sorcery's a vile thing," said one.

"I'll not meddle with sorcery," said another.

Perpetua's hopes drooped as she saw how popular feeling fell from her.

"I am no sorceress, men of Syracuse," she said, sadly.

Robert pointed to the pale, beautiful girl stand-

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ing by the pillar and surrounded by the armed men.

“Can you look upon her and believe one evil thought? Save her, in God’s name!”

Again the crowd swayed a little towards the soldiers, urged by Robert, urged by Hieronymus. Again it fell back when Hildebrand raised his hand.

“Friends, this fellow is a madman. If you ask him he will tell you that he is the King.”

The crowd that was wellnigh stirred to mutiny by Robert’s appeals drew back from him suspiciously.

Hildebrand saw his advantage and pressed it. “Is it not so, fellow? Are you not the King?”

Robert’s hands raised in appeal, raised in menace, dropped inertly to his side, and his head drooped on his breast.

“I was the King,” he said, in a voice that was but a whisper.

Hildebrand caught at the admission exultantly.

“You hear him? Secure him!”

All his supporters, save Hieronymus, ebbed away from Robert. Two of Sigurd’s soldiers seized

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him. Whatever chance there might have been of rescuing Perpetua was lost.

Hildebrand went on, triumphantly:

“Against witchcraft no sanctuary prevails. Let no man hinder the King’s justice on pain of death.”

Lycabetta, who had crept near to Perpetua, whispered in her ear:

“My lord Flame is a fierce lover. He clings close and he kisses quick and he will not spare your modesty. You will burn like a bright torch.”

Then Lycabetta went out of the church as she had come in, with a smile on her face.

Perpetua called to Hieronymus. “Is there any help?”

“There is no help,” Hieronymus answered despairingly.

“Then I will go to death holding my head high,” the girl said, valiantly.

“Take her away,” Hildebrand ordered; and at his order Perpetua was borne away in the midst of a guard of soldiers and followed by Hieronymus. “Clear the church.”

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The remaining soldiers drove the crowd into the streets.

“Fling the fool on the altar steps. I think he will have a praying fit on him.”

His captors cast Robert roughly on the altar steps, where he lay like one dying.

“Now leave me.”

The two soldiers went out, the sea-door closed, and Hildebrand and Robert were left alone.

Hildebrand went slowly over to where Robert lay and talked mockingly to him.

“How mulish a woman may be! Here is a great country girl, who has never lain soft nor known cheer, never worn silk and never sported a jewel, and yet when great men scuffle for her, she will rather die than serve them and herself. Yes, friend Diogenes, your sweetheart will be burned as a witch.”

Robert lifted his head. “Pray Heaven you lie!” he moaned.

“I am more truthful than an oracle,” Hildebrand retorted. “When the wood-wench flouted him, our good King vowed that she should burn for her virtue.”

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Robert shuddered at the memory of his own words, of his own purpose.

"Oh, God, have mercy on my wicked soul!" he prayed.

Hildebrand mocked him with a false compassion. "Yet all is not lost, friend Diogenes. If your wit saved her before, your valor may save her now."

Robert turned to him again.

"If your heart holds any pity, speak," he entreated, hoping against hope for some leaven of charity in the heart of Hildebrand.

"She can appeal to the ordeal of battle," Hildebrand said, calmly. "And if she finds a champion valiant enough to overthrow the King's man, who shall accuse her, then she is free."

Robert hid his face. "Heaven have pity!" he murmured.

Hildebrand went on unmoved.

"The King has picked me for his champion, and, as you know, I am skilled in arms. But you are a stalwart fellow. Prove yourself the better man and save your paramour."

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A crazy thought came into Robert's brain. He had a dagger at his belt; if he could but take Hildebrand unawares and slay him, one danger would be out of Perpetua's path. His hand felt for the handle, held it fast. He poised his crippled body for a spring, turned swiftly on the altar stairs, and leaped with lifted blade at Hildebrand. But Hildebrand had watched his gesture, divined his thoughts; he caught him as he sprang, by the throat and wrist, and while with the one hand he squeezed so hard that he wellnigh forced the breath from Robert's body, with the other he twisted Robert's wrist so that the knife fell clattering on the flags of the church. Then he tossed Robert, limp and gasping, to the ground.

"Keep your fury for the day of fight," Hildebrand sneered. "See now how easily you could overcome me. Yet you are a trouble to me now, and I think I will kill you, Master Fool!"

Robert did not heed, did not hear his threat. While Hildebrand put his hand to the hilt of his sword and loosened it in its sheath, Robert crawled to the steps of the altar, cowering, with clasped hands.

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“God give me back my strength,” he prayed. “There is no punishment too heavy for my sin, but for this woman’s sake breathe back my manhood into this withered body that I may fight for her. Then cast me unprotesting into hell. Ah!”

Even as he prayed he seemed to feel the breath of a great spirit fill his body with new life, his sinews with new strength, his pulses with new fire. A voice seemed to be calling in his ear, telling him what to do, and he obeyed it as a child obeys its sire. He rose and faced Hildebrand.

“You shall not do this thing,” Robert said, and the sound of his voice thrilled him with unspeakable hope.

Hildebrand laughed mockingly.

“Shall I not, rascal? Is it still the King who commands me?” he asked, and his fingers closed tighter upon his sword-hilt.

The voice seemed ever to speak in Robert’s ear, and ever Robert obeyed its prompting.

“No,” he cried. “It is not the King who commands you, but the humblest, the meanest, the unworthiest of mortal men. There is no creature living in the world lowlier than I, yet

“ ROBERT, SWINGING THE CROSS, WITH ONE BLOW BEAT HIM TO THE GROUND.”



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I command you in the name of that symbol which casts down the mighty, and before which the King and the beggar are alike but a little quickened dust."

Spurred by inspiration he rushed to the altar and clasped his hands around the iron cross. Scarcely to his surprise he found that he could lift the massive symbol like a reed. Poising the cross on high he turned upon Hildebrand.

"Will you set your cross against my sword?" Hildebrand cried. "You shall carry it to hell."

Robert answered with the voice of a strong man.

"The cross against the sword, in the name of God!"

He advanced against Hildebrand with the iron cross raised. Hildebrand drew his great sword and made to strike, but before he could deal a stroke Robert, swinging the cross, with one blow beat him to the ground, and stood over him with the cross raised.

"The cross against the sword," Robert thundered.

Hildebrand, grovelling on the ground like a crushed snake, rolled on one side, felt at the cold

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stones with his hands futilely for a moment, and then with infinite difficulty propped himself up a little and looked up at Robert.

“You have killed me,” he gasped. Fear and wonder questioned in his dying eyes, forced a question from his dying lips. “Who are you?” Even as he asked, an awful look came over his face, he saw and knew. “The King!” he cried, horribly. His hands slipped on the stones, his head struck the floor, he was dead.

Robert dropped on his knees beside the dead man, and spoke softly.

“He hath uplifted the humble.”

XVII

IN THE ARENA

THE great amphitheatre which Roman craft had planned, which Roman hands had fashioned, lived almost in its integrity in the days of King Robert the Good. He had girdled it with gardens; he had sought to obliterate the memories of its old-time brutalities, its old-time bloodshed, by the institution of kindly sports and gentle pastimes. A populace had laughed innocently, had contested healthily in the place where man had fought with man, where man had fought with beast, where the soil had sucked thirstily the red wine of life. But a good king does not last forever, and a good king's ways are not always inherited, and Syracuse had been fluttered by the rumor that King Robert the Bad intended to surpass the pagans and to make the ancient amphitheatre again the scene of evil deeds. And by way of consecration

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to its new-old use, a maiden was to be burned by fire in its arena on a charge of sorcery against the King—burned by fire, unless her appeal to the ordeal of battle could find for her between sky and earth any champion doughty enough to overthrow the King's man, the challenger, who stood for the King and accused the girl of witchcraft. And this did not seem likely, for the King was known to have chosen for his champion the strongest, the most skilful swordsman in all Sicily, his dearest friend, his favorite companion, the Lord Hildebrand.

Of the girl herself, whose life stood in such jeopardy, Syracuse knew little. She was the daughter of Theron the executioner; she had lived on the top of a mountain; she had been snared in a church. Certain citizens of Syracuse had seen her in the church, a beautiful white child, with flame-colored hair, who tugged at King Robert's bell and appealed for pity. There was a queer fool, too, mixed up with the business, but he seemed to have disappeared, and really nobody cared very much what had happened to him. What everybody cared for very much,

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indeed, was the news that there was to be this great show in the ancient amphitheatre: two men fighting for a woman's life, a young man and an old man—for everybody knew, too, that the only champion Perpetua could find was her own father, the executioner Theron—and at the end of the battle a fair maid on a stack of faggots, and then a big blaze. Such a thing had not been seen, had not been heard of in Syracuse for many a long day, and those who heard of it now were resolved, to a man and to a woman, to see it. Not that the citizens of Syracuse were particularly cruel; but in the first place it was a spectacle too novel to miss, and in the second place all Syracuse had been formally summoned, under pain of death, to be present at the event, and to witness the King's vengeance on his enemy.

The day after Perpetua's capture was lovely, even for Syracuse, even for Sicily. The great amphitheatre lay in the soft morning light, a wonder of white curves, beneath great awnings of silk, crimson and gold. All around the orchards and gardens, that the good King had planted, showed cool and green; the subtle odors of many

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flowers charged the air with sweetness, and the ceaseless lapse of fountains lulled the ear with distant whispers of delight. It were hard to believe that so fair a place, upon so fair a day, could be destined for a scene of trial by bloodshed and punishment by fire. But in the great space of the arena one object stood ominous, to remind the spectator that the reign of Robert the Good was ended. This was a small wooden platform with two steps and an upright beam, the whole painted a glaring scarlet. Round this platform were banked great piles of faggots, sinister witnesses to the work that was to be done ere noon.

The great arena was almost empty. By order of the King, no citizens of Syracuse were to be permitted to enter the royal gardens, through which alone access to the amphitheatre was possible, until the sounding of a trumpet told the city that the hour had come. The great arena was almost empty, but not quite. On one of the lowest tiers of seats an old man sat in an attitude of grief. This man was Theron the executioner.

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It had been his duty, as instrument of the King's justice, to make all the preparations for the deed that was to be done that day, and now all was completed and he sat alone and thought bitter thoughts. The child of his life was in peril, the beautiful Perpetua, so dear to him for herself, so dear in reincarnating for him the great love and the great sorrow of his manhood. Only one moon ago their life had been as it had ever been, tranquil, happy, a companionship of peace and joy. And now this beloved child, this dear companion, lay a prisoner under the terrible charge of sorcery, and in the ordeal of battle which was to decide her fate the only arm that could be found to champion her was her father's arm, the arm of an old man against the arm of the most brilliant swordsman in Sicily. Theron remembered with a pang the ease and grace with which Hildebrand had wielded the great sword of the headsman on that unhappy morning, and he asked himself, despairingly, what hope there could be for him against such an adversary.

Out from an archway in the side of the amphitheatre, a dark archway that opened from the

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corridor leading to the cells where prisoners used to be confined, and where Perpetua was now confined, Hieronymus came forth. He saw Theron where he sat, and advancing towards him rested his hand on his shoulder and named his name.

Theron looked wearily up and bowed for the benediction of the religious.

“My son,” Hieronymus said, gravely, “by trumpet-call, within the hour, the chafing populace will be admitted into these royal gardens to witness the ordeal by battle. My son, my son, when your child’s voice cries for a champion to-day, I fear yours will be the only hand raised to defend her.”

“They fear her for a witch,” Theron answered, bitterly; “as if such golden goodness could go to the making of witch-flesh. Men are fools—men are devils.”

“Be brave, be patient,” Hieronymus exhorted. “Courage and patience are the harness of a soldier of God.”

Theron made a gesture of impatience. “You have every man and woman in Syracuse for son and daughter. She is my only child. How is she?”

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"Smiling like a bride," Hieronymus replied. "Never since the heathen built these walls did any martyr face her fate more radiantly."

"She is not harshly treated?" Theron asked, anxiously.

Hieronymus shook his head.

"Will they not let me see her?" Theron questioned anew.

"I think they will let you see her by-and-by," Hieronymus answered. "I have entreated for you. I shall know soon."

Theron gripped his hands tightly together. "I wish I had the King here at my mercy," he muttered.

Hieronymus raised a reproving hand. "We must forgive our enemies, though, indeed, such a King is God's enemy. His prisons are filled with the flower of Sicilian chivalry—the list of those he dooms to die is long."

"Though none have died yet," Theron interrupted.

Hieronymus nodded. "They say he swore a great oath his court-fool should be the first victim of your sword, and till the fool is found the victims wait on death."

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“Please Heaven he be not found, then,” Theron prayed.

Hieronymus smiled sadly. “He will be found when his time comes,” he said. “Yet Heaven seems to counter the wicked King. Those whom he drove into exile still linger in the port. Contrary winds deny their sails.”

Theron lifted his head from his hands. “They say the fairest maids of Sicily have been carried to his palace.”

“Yet they are maids still,” Hieronymus said, “for he swears to love no woman till your daughter dies.”

“He is so sure of that,” Theron sighed.

Hieronymus sought to console him.

“Your cause is just, your sword is sharp; fight in God’s name. I will go to your daughter now.”

Theron thanked him with a grateful glance.

“Tell her her father loves her. She knows that well, yet tell it to her.”

Hieronymus left him and passed out of the arena through the archway which led to the cells. Theron remained sitting on the step with his

IN THE ARENĀ

elbows on his knees and his chin propped on his hands.

“This is the time when a man should pray,” he said to himself, “but my thoughts tangle and my words jangle.”

Through the gardens came a singular figure, tall and lean and withered, with a wry shoulder like a gibbous moon and a wry leg like a stricken tree, and his face had a long, peaked nose and loose, protruding lips, and ears like the wings of bats. His mottled livery was grass-stained and earth-stained, and he had dizened it with a kind of woodland finery. He had wild flowers twisted in his hair; a chaplet of scarlet woodberries was about his neck; he carried an ash sapling for a staff, and he munched at an apple. He looked about him curiously, as if a little dazed. Then he saw Theron and went towards him.

“Good-morning, gaffer,” he said.

Theron looked up and beheld to his surprise the missing court-fool Diogenes.

“You are the fool Diogenes,” Theron said. “Why have you come back? The King longs for

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your head. I care little who lives or dies, save one, but fly if you are wise."

Diogenes, for it was indeed he, shook his head. "Nay, nay, gaffer," he answered. "I am wise; I know my business. I think I have been asleep in the green wood a thousand years and waited upon by elves and fairies and all manner of pygmies, and they taught me the speech of birds, and what the trees whisper to each other from dawn to dusk, and the war-cries of the winds, with other much delectable knowledge which would have made me wiser than the wisest—but now that I am awake I have forgot it all."

Theron eyed him curiously. This was not the way the bitter court-fool had been wont to speak. "You seem to me a changed fool," he said, wearily.

Diogenes patted him fondly on the shoulder.

"Set it down to hearing birds whistle and watching green things grow. I am ripe and mellow. If you squeezed me dry you would find no drop of bitter in me. I bulge with benevolence like a ripe fig—and therefore your lugubrious visage troubles me."

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Theron answered, heavily: "My child is charged with sorcery. There is no man but me to champion her. If I fail to win the day she dies by fire."

Diogenes seemed grieved. "She was a sweet lass and she gave me sweet milk to drink, and she showed me the way to the wonder-world of the wood. If I were something more of a fool and something less of a wiseacre I would champion her myself." And he swelled his lean body and strutted, ludicrously martial.

"Away, fool!" Theron said, angrily, for the fantastic figure vexed him.

But Diogenes was not to be offended.

"Nay, now," he hummed, benignly. "You are short with me, yet my brain bubbles with all the wit of the elder world. When I woke this morn in the green wood, a bird sang in my ear and his song told me to go down to Syracuse and creep into the King's garden; and because I am wise enough to know that the birds are wiser than I, why, I came, but I did not think it was to see a fair maid murdered. I would have liked such a sight once, but now I do not, so I will go and

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sleep in the rose-garden. That is what the fairies told me to do, and they will tell me when to wake. Courage, ancient! courage!"

He paused for a moment, with his head cocked on one side, eying the executioner compassionately, yet listening with pricked, bat-wing ears. Some sound startled him, for he suddenly stirred like a startled hare, and, stooping, scuttled with incredible swiftness into the shelter of the royal gardens, where he was soon lost to sight.

Theron sighed as if his heart would break. "The very fool pities me. I am grown old and weak and have no hope."

Even as he spoke the sound of the footsteps that had scared away Diogenes grew louder, and Hieronymus emerged from the archway and came to Theron.

"Come," Hieronymus said. "Some unfamiliar gentleness in the King permits you to see your daughter. Go at once. The jailer will admit you."

Theron bowed his head. "Your blessing and your prayers," he said. Then he rose and moved slowly to the archway and disappeared.

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Hieronimus looked after him thoughtfully. "Oh," he mused, "that a poor priest's blessing might be as potent as a great King's curse!"

At that moment a great trumpet sounded, the signal to admit the people of Syracuse to the royal gardens. Hieronimus could hear the eager shouts and the tramp of hurrying feet. Sadly he turned and followed Theron to the cell where Perpetua lay.

The arena was not long empty. Soon the human flood poured over its sand, babbling, shouting, eager to get seated.

"Hurry, dame, hurry!" cried one citizen to his mate. "'Tis first come first served, and there is a rare scrambling for the seats."

"I wish," grumbled another, "the King had given us leave to enter the gardens earlier. We could have sat here cosily, eating and drinking till the sport began."

"Nay," philosophized a third, "kings have their whimsies like the rest of the world and love to make folk uncomfortable."

"Humph!" said a stalwart fellow as he sped. "If I had an odd life or two to spare I would strike a stroke for the child."

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“Ay,” grunted his companion, “and be damned for your pains if she be no better than a black witch.”

“I cannot believe it,” stalwart said, stoutly.

His companion was positive.

“They say there’s no mortal doubt of the matter. She fondles a black cat, her familiar, and straddles a broomstick for a sky-ride when the wind is howling.”

A listener commented briskly. “Nay, then it is no worse than very well that she should die. For my part, I cannot abide cats since my neighbor’s grimalkin stole my sausage.”

And so they hurried on gossiping, a stream of humanity climbing to its appointed places. Languidly through the crowd moved Lycabetta with her women.

“Truly,” Lycabetta said to Lysidice, “the King is ever a good friend to us. We shall sit in the royal quarter and see as well as any of the courtly wantons. It is a warm day, but I swear I shall feel a cold at my heart till I can warm my palms at the girl blazing.”

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“Have you no pity for her?” Lysidice asked.

Lycabetta laughed. “Why should I, you green ape? She is our enemy. If there were many such as she in the world we might as well haul down our sign, for we should not have a bed to lie on.”

“’Tis said the Lord Hildebrand is the accuser,” Glycerium observed.

“Yea,” Lycabetta answered, “and sure of victory. I thought he would have visited me last night.”

“He husbands himself for the combat,” Hypsipyle suggested.

Lycabetta tapped her woman in playful anger with her fan.

“You wrong him, minion,” she said. Her eyes suddenly brightened, for she saw Sigurd Olafson making his way towards her through the press. There was a look of constraint in his blue eyes as he greeted her.

“Loveliest lady,” he said, hesitatingly, “I have some unlovely news for you.”

Lycabetta raised her eyebrows in surprise. The salutation was unexpected.

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“What grief do you herald?” she questioned, with an air of unconcern.

Sigurd spoke with evident embarrassment.

“Lady, the King commands that you and all your women return to Naples with the first fair wind.”

For a moment the words shook Lycabetta and her eyes flashed anger. Then instantly she recovered her composure. She knew that it would be useless to appeal against any command of the King, the King who had not visited her now for more than a month.

“Is it so?” she said. “Then be it so. Naples or Sicily, what does it matter so long as there is sun to warm the blood?”

The blue eyes of Sigurd Olafson burned bright with passion.

“I will follow you to Naples,” he said, in a low, eager voice.

Lycabetta’s eyes answered his passion, Lycabetta’s voice replied to his desire.

“You will be very welcome, blue eyes,” she promised. “But to-day at least we may stay and see the show?”

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“Surely,” answered Sigurd. “Let me guide you to your places. They are of the best.” And he conducted her and her women to the tier where their seats had been set apart.

XVIII

ORDEAL OF BATTLE

By this time the vast amphitheatre, that was capable of seating twenty-four thousand people, if Syracuse had only had twenty-four thousand people to offer it, had swallowed up the eager crowds, and the arena lay bare, save for the little wooden platform with its scarlet stain. There was a flourish of royal music. Cries of "The King! The King!" ran from lip to lip; many soldiers marched across the arena from the royal gardens, and in their midst, on an open litter, was carried the likeness of the King, attended by a brilliant cloud of courtiers. As it seemed to all the thousand watching eyes, the King descended from his litter and mounted, amid salutations, to the enclosure on the amphitheatre where his throne was set up, and seating himself upon the throne gazed steadfastly at the arena, where now assistant

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executioners were piling the faggots close about the platform.

Not far from the King the court ladies babbled.

"Do they need so much wood to burn one little woman?" Messalinda asked, curiously, watching the executioners at their task.

Faustina chuckled maliciously.

"If she be a witch, it will take a deal of fire to frighten the devil out of her."

Soft-haired, soft-eyed Yolande gave a little, delicate shiver, for she was sensitive and fastidious.

"I hope she will not make a great noise," she said.

Faustina reassured her.

"I do not think so; they say the smoke will soon choke her."

Yolande gave a sigh of relief and settled herself down for entertainment. Over in the royal enclosure the archbishop of Syracuse turned with an obeisance to the image of the King.

"Shall we begin, sire?" he asked, and the seeming King answered him.

"Is all ready?"

"All, sire," the archbishop answered.

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“Let them begin,” the royal figure commanded. The archbishop bent to where Sigurd Olafson stood, below the royal enclosure.

“The King waits,” he said. Sigurd instantly gave the order for the prisoner to be brought forth. There was a brief pause, then a new flourish of trumpets, and from the dark archway, that yawned like a wolf’s mouth in the side of the amphitheatre, Perpetua was brought in, chained and guarded, and led in front of the royal throne. “She looked very pale,” wrote an old Norman chronicler, “and very fair, and as brave as a sainted martyr.”

The archbishop of Syracuse rose and addressed her.

“Woman, you are charged by the King’s sainted majesty with working by witchcraft against his sovereign person, delivering him to his lips enchantment in a draught of seeming water, to the hurt of his body and the peril of his soul. If you are guilty and will confess yourself, we need not waste some precious moments in a vain contest for your sinful flesh.”

Perpetua answered very quietly and very clear-

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ly, and all men in Syracuse heard what she had to say that day.

“I am not guilty. My soul is as clean of sin as on the day my mother gave me birth. I pray Heaven’s forgiveness for the King.”

The archbishop flushed angrily.

“Do not blaspheme,” he commanded. “Then you persist in your appeal to the ordeal of battle?”

“I do appeal,” Perpetua answered, firmly, “hoping that Heaven will strengthen the hand that is lifted to-day in my cause, which is God’s.”

The archbishop frowned.

“You are perverse and stubborn, but the law is plain and must be obeyed. Call the King’s challenger.”

Sigurd, raising his voice, called loudly:

“In the King’s name I call on the King’s challenger to appear.” Rang out a great rattle of trumpets, voices hummed in expectation, and all heads turned in the direction of another archway in the amphitheatre, from which it was known that the challenger and the champion would appear.

Out of the darkness, into the bright light of the

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arena stepped a figure all in armor, with the visor of his helmet down, so that none could see his face. The armor was plain; the shield bore no device, but it was buzzed about in all directions that this was the Lord Hildebrand, and any doubts were answered by the assertion, patently true, that the Lord Hildebrand did not make one of the glittering group about the King. The archbishop addressed the new-comer.

“Proclaim your purpose,” he commanded.

The challenger, still with his visor lowered, said in a low voice:

“In the King’s name I accuse this woman of witchcraft, and will maintain that charge with my sword, if any be found bold to challenge it.”

The archbishop again rose and asked:

“Does any champion answer on the woman’s side?”

Out of the same archway came Theron in old and rusty armor, with the visor of his helmet up, so that all could behold his wrinkled, haggard face.

“I do,” he cried. “I am her father, and I know her stainless soul. This hand that has so

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often dealt justice to others may now do justice for itself."

The archbishop again rose, and spoke.

"Then, by the law, opposer and opposed must do battle to the death. If the challenger gain the day, his charge is proved and the woman dies by fire. If the woman's champion win, the woman shall be counted innocent and her accuser shall die as she would have died. Let them begin."

There was a new flourish of trumpets. Then a number of soldiers ran into the arena and set up a spacious ring of short painted staves of wood, colored white and red, and linked together with thick ropes of similarly colored silk. Into this space the challenger and the champion were conducted and left facing each other, while Perpetua was led to the stake, where she mounted the platform and stood, with the piled faggots at her feet, clasping a crucifix to her breast. Father Hieronymus stood with the assistant executioners at the foot of the platform. Once again the archbishop rose, and his words seemed the only stir in the intense silence.

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“Let them begin, and God defend the right.”

Again the trumpets thundered, and as the sound died away champion and challenger engaged in combat. The great swords gleamed in the bright air, fell heavily on the lifted shields. All the spectators held their breath. No one expected the fight to last long; and indeed it did not last long. Everybody was confident that the challenger would easily overcome the aged champion, but everybody's confidence was ill-founded. After a few blows hotly exchanged the sword of Theron struck the helm of his enemy, and to the amazement of the spectators the King's challenger reeled and fell heavily, clattering to the ground. In a moment Theron was over him with the great sword at the fallen man's throat.

“Yield or die!” he cried, in a voice in which exultation and astonishment struggled for the mastery.

The fallen man propped himself on one arm.

“I am defeated,” he gasped. “The maid is innocent.”

XIX

ROBERT THE RIGHTEOUS

“GLORY to God!” cried Theron, and flung away his sword. He turned and ran towards the stake, from which Perpetua was at once unfastened, and caught her in his arms. Hieronymus hurried to the side of the fallen man, whose head was now raised on the knee of one soldier, while another unfastened his helmet. All the great multitude in the arena leaned forward eagerly to see the face of Hildebrand. Only the figure like the King remained unmoved and impassive. But when the challenger’s helmet was removed, the spectators saw with astonishment the twisted features of a face that they knew for the face of the fool Diogenes.

A strange murmur of surprise rippled along the tiers. Sigurd Olafson called out the name in wonder to the archbishop.

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“The fool Diogenes!”

Theron, leaving Perpetua, leaned over his antagonist and muttered, “The fool Diogenes!”

All over the great amphitheatre the words ran, “The fool Diogenes!”

The archbishop turned to the kingly image:

“It was an ill chance, sire, that found you a fool for a champion, but there’s no help now. By the laws of Sicily the field is fought and won.”

Robert, lying conquered on the ground, gasped out one word:

“Perpetua!”

Hieronimus beckoned to Perpetua, who came and knelt by the side of the seeming fool. Her senses were in a whirl, and, hardly conscious, she stooped and listened to the words which Robert whispered eagerly into her ear:

“You must not misread me; you must know why I have done what I have done. My arm was too weak to wield a weapon in your defence, but my vile body might well be flung away to rescue yours. Hildebrand is dead. Hieronimus found me a suit of armor. I came as the challenger, resolved to fall and die.”

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"I knew this," confirmed Hieronymus; "but I was pledged to keep his secret."

Perpetua looked into Robert's eyes tenderly. What could be said of devotion such as his?

"You must not die," she whispered.

Robert shook his head.

"The law demands my death as the very seal of your innocence. But it is better to die thus in your service than to live forever having wronged you in a thought."

Fighting emotions swayed Perpetua's soul. Hardly knowing what she said, she spoke quickly:

"You must not die. Your life is very dear to me. I love you." Her cheeks flamed crimson as she spoke, but her lips and her eyes were steadfast.

Robert shook his head.

"You could not love this monster. You pity me and you call your pity love."

All Syracuse watched and wondered at the colloquy between the redeemed maid and the mysterious fool who had taken the place of the Lord Hildebrand. Now they saw Perpetua spring to her feet.

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"I love you," she said to Robert, "for I love your noble soul."

She left him and advanced to the place where the figure like the King sat. "King," she cried, so that all could hear, "give me this man!"

Instantly the figure like the King answered her: "He is yours if you love him."

Robert staggered to his feet and limped over to where Perpetua stood.

"I love him," Perpetua said, proudly.

Robert saw the eyes of the kingly likeness fixed upon him, and he knew that they asked him if he was content to escape death by this gate.

"No, no, no!" he cried, in answer. He turned to Perpetua. "I should be baser than I have ever been if I took you at your word. Though no man may recognize me for a king over men, at least there is one realm in which I will rule. Here I am king, and while reason rules in my brain and my blood runs in its channels, I will live a king and die a king, king over myself and my own evil passions. Take me to my death."

There came no change over the face of him who seemed the King; only his eyes, terribly bright,

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were fixed on Robert's eyes and seemed to flood them with light. Robert turned to the platform and mounted the steps. Perpetua gave a cry and would have fallen but that Theron caught her in his arms. Hieronymus held out his crucifix to the doomed man. One of the executioners, who had a torch in readiness, stooped and applied its flame to the piled-up faggots. Red tongues of fire licked at the dry wood.

Even then it seemed to Robert as if again the great darkness came over the world, a darkness in which nothing was visible save the shining shape of an angel. And the angel spoke and the voice was the voice that had spoken the words of doom on the mountain-summit.

“Robert of Sicily, purified as by fire, be once again a king, be now and ever a loyal soldier of the living God. It was Heaven's will that I should do the wicked deeds you dreamed of. But Heaven now annuls them and they are as if they had not been.”

The darkness vanished, and Robert found himself standing in the arena, and he knew that he was his old self again, clad in the garments of a

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king. At his feet the fool Diogenes knelt a suppliant; the royal throne was vacant. All in the great amphitheatre were cheering, for they believed that they had seen the King descend from his throne, enter the arena, and order the liberation of Diogenes. And that belief they cherished to the end. But Robert looked into Perpetua's eyes and read there that she knew better. He caught her hands.

"The hunter wooed you, the King wronged you, the fool served you, the man loves you. Queen of the world, make me indeed a king."

And Perpetua answered him.

"I love the man."

This is how Perpetua became Queen of Sicily, and how Robert in his long and happy reign won and wore the title of Robert the Righteous.

THE END

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