

SIR JOHN HAWKWOOD

Two crossed swords are positioned diagonally across the cover. The sword on the left has a dark hilt and a straight blade. The sword on the right has a hilt with a decorative guard and a blade with a serrated edge. The background is a dark green with a fine, vertical ribbed texture.

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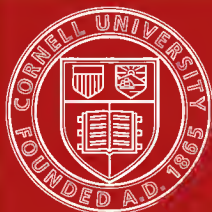
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SIR JOHN HAWKWOOD



“I had got my sword free and leapt to the side of the Princess. She was tense in every limb but made no sign of fright.”

Sir John Hawkwood

A TALE OF

The White Company in Italy

BY

Marion Polk Angellotti



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Sir John Hawkwood.

TO MY MOTHER

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“There’s aye thing yet, there’s twa thing yet
To brag on that ye know;
He never, never failed a friend,
And never feared a foe.”

SIR JOHN HAWKWOOD

CHAPTER I

BARE STEEL

“GIOVANNI DELLA GUGLIA!”

The words, subdued yet perfectly audible, fell on my ears just as I set my foot on the threshold of the door leading into the palace loggia. A titter accompanied them, and a buzz of whispering comment followed. Instantly I swung round on my heel, narrowed my eyes, and glanced keenly about to discover the author of the jest.

My task was like to prove no easy one, I saw at once; for all the busy court-yard was thronged with onlookers who now fixed me with glances of amusement. A group of pert young pages in white and gold livery were gathered round the fountain—the taunt might have come from one of them, but I thought not, for they had learned that I was no safe butt for their tricks. Gorgeous lackeys stood about in troops, soldiers of the Prince’s Guard sprawled on the stone pavement and played at dice, and not far from where I stood I perceived a score

of my own free companions, each wearing across his left shoulder the white scarf, embroidered in silver, which was the badge of the White Company. They were dare-devil rogues, fellows from England and France and Spain and all the duchies of Italy, men who would not have feared to jest at the expense of a king, or, what would have been held worse by most, at the Pope himself; but I wasted no time in scanning their faces for signs of guilt, being well aware that, indifferent as they were to the great of the earth, they one and all entertained a dread of me that kept their tongues civil in my presence, if not always in my absence. They had heard the taunt even as I had, and were elbowing a way to the front of the throng that they might have a clear view of the turmoil which, they plainly believed, was sure to follow.

Not far from the threshold where I had halted stood a group of different metal from the other occupants of the court—a half-dozen of the Prince of Verona's own friends and followers, young fops with splendid raiment and empty heads, any of them likely enough to have attempted a jest at the expense of me, whom they did not love. In the centre of the circle I saw Ranucio della Torre, Prince Antonio's favorite. Though he was my very bitter enemy and tireless in his efforts to work me harm, I had never felt any wonder that he was so beloved by his royal master, for he was a shrewd man and a brave one, and gifted with a dark beauty of face

that made him better worth gazing at than any picture on the palace walls. To-day he stood among the laughing young courtiers like a king among his subjects, and I had never seen a more splendid sight than he, in his rose and silver satin, swinging gold-embroidered cloak, and wide hat with its plume buckled with jewels. If I gave him a certain grudging admiration, however, I nevertheless hated him with all my heart, and so sure was I now that the whispered taunt had come from him that I swung about in his direction, one foot poised for an advance.

At this instant I felt a hand laid on my arm. It was Michael O'Meara, my Irish lieutenant, who stood second in authority in my company of mercenaries, and was the only man in all Verona to whom I gave an absolute trust. "Whist, now, Sir John, 'tis wrong you are," he whispered in my ear. And I paused, for I knew well enough that, whatever he wanted, it was not to withhold me from fighting. He was too thorough an Irishman for that—nay, at this very moment his blue eyes were fairly blazing with delighted zest for battle. "'Twas not Della Torre," he continued, in the same low voice. "'Twas the old rogue beside him, Raimondo del Mayno they call him—blessed saints, 'tis a heathen fashion of name, and enough to break the jaw of the man who says it! Shall I be after going up and taking him by the nose, Sir John, and teaching him manners to fit his station?"

I looked again at the little group of courtiers, all of whom were gazing at me in manifest amusement, and exchanging whispers which, it took small wit on my part to guess, were at my expense. The man whom O'Meara had indicated stood at Della Torre's elbow, laughing loudly, and with an appearance of delighted mockery which I instantly assured myself would not last many moments. He might have been five and fifty years old, and was very fat and pompous, with shrewd choleric blue eyes half buried in thick pockets of flesh, and a short gray beard carefully cut in a square. His dress of green and gold velvet was magnificent, and he had all the manner of a person used to exacting his full due of deference from those about him, as was suitable in one of his rank and importance. Though I had never exchanged a word with him in the whole time I had spent in Verona, I knew him well enough for a rich noble of the Court, a kinsman, in some distant fashion, of Prince Antonio himself, and therefore treated by every one with a flattering attention which there was little about him to warrant.

To speak frankly, I would have given something to have avoided a quarrel with him; for the Prince, under whom I now fought, and whose pay was as generous as his name in Italy was evil, had very high ideas of his royal dignity, and of the dignity of all who belonged to his house. A quarrel with Lord Raimondo was plainly not likely to assure or

strengthen my position at a Court where I had already a round number of intriguing enemies, and prudence counselled me to turn a deaf ear and proceed on my way. Nevertheless, I did no such thing. Prudence, truth to tell, got little welcome from me at that time of my life, and recklessness and daredeviltry were the chief traits of my character. Had it been otherwise, I think I should scarcely have been hailed by all as the greatest free captain of my time in Europe; for could a cautious, mild-mannered, amiable man have ruled my mad band of villains and cutthroats from the four corners of the earth, and turned them into the best fighters to be found anywhere for the hiring of those needing defenders? Moreover, I had so many jealous enemies that my one hope of safety lay in the name I had won of being a man unsafe for meddling and very dangerous when provoked.

Del Mayno's words had been heard by his own circle, who greeted them with laughter and applause; by the pages and lackeys, who grinned and smirked and stood a-tiptoe to see what would happen next; by my own men, who were now waiting in suppressed glee to see the discomfiture which they did not doubt awaited the jester. Should I turn on my heel and pass on, to-morrow all the city of Verona would know the part I had played. There was but one course for me to pursue, and I did pursue it—not as the result of all these sage reflections, but

by instinct and at once, the moment that O'Meara's words had left his mouth.

Striding across the space that separated me from Del Mayno, I halted before him. The crowd gasped in delighted anticipation, and surged forward to see. O'Meara followed me so closely that his shoulder almost touched mine—the rogue! I knew well enough that he was hoping some turn of the business would give him a chance at a quarrel. The group of courtiers, their mocking laughter still on their lips, stared at me haughtily, and Della Torre scowled as if incensed at my daring in approaching him. As for Del Mayno, he set his head back and roared noisily with mirth. Plainly he thought himself quite safe by virtue of his rank, and was inclined to enjoy his jest to the full.

For some reason all this merriment suffered a slight check as I paused and looked steadily about the circle. During the moment which I spent in a deliberate survey, the laughing faces sobered not a little, and unless I am mistaken some of those present called to mind various tales that had reached their ears of my summary methods of dealing with those who offended me. When the pause had grown strained I spoke. "My lord," I said to Del Mayno, "you said *Giovanni della Guglia*, if I am not wrong. The jest is somewhat thread-bare by now, it appears to me; none but dull wits continue to harp on a jibe that has grown old by use. Moreover, at its newest this sobriquet was never particularly to my

fancy, as I endeavored to show by killing one gentleman who called me by it, disabling three more, and giving two others such a lesson in sword-play as they will not forget. But come—no doubt you are of a merry turn of mind; I would not be too hard upon you; and then, you are kin to the Prince. Take a warning from me that I do not greatly love jests like this, and the matter shall end here.”

My tone infuriated him, as I knew it would. He turned crimson, puffed out his cheeks with rage, and squared his shoulders in fierce determination to crush me. Those about him scowled on me darkly and muttered curses on my insolence. “I believe,” Del Mayno said scornfully, “that you are the English condottiere who fights the Prince’s battles for hire. That is all I know concerning you. As for your name, it may be John Hawkwood or Giovanni della Guglia—do you think I have no better use for my thoughts than the remembering of how you style yourself? What are you doing here before me, pray? Did you think, because you heard me speak your name, that I called you? Not I. Begone, then, and if you must have company, talk to my lackeys yonder—they are nearer your rank than I am.”

“Now the Virgin pity you, me poor fool, and aid ye too—for it’s yourself will soon be needing aid most urgent,” I heard my irrepressible Irishman mutter behind me; and a sigh of rapturous anticipation ran about among my mercenaries. Del Mayno heard it too, and with rage.

“Bid your horse-boys be silent when I speak,” he cried. “Ah, Sir John Hawkwood, you may think to rule tavern loiterers and thieves and bullies, such as this famous Company of yours, with black looks and wild words, but you need not hope to awe the nobles of Verona. Yes, we know you, braggart, drunkard and cutthroat that you are—but never dream you can frighten me, Sir Ruffian!”

He stopped, partly from exhaustion and partly in startled horror; for on his last word I had seized my sword-hilt and pulled the weapon out, flashing it under his eyes. For a moment he stared at me in blank amazement, while the surrounding circle of his friends gave back a trifle, and O’Meara uttered an exclamation of blissful content. “Del Mayo,” I said with brutal directness, “you are an old fool, and badly in want of a lesson. You have called me John of the Needle. Do you not know that a needle is a very sharp thing, not one with which to jest? Then you shall learn it now. This blue blade in my hand is my needle, and I am going to give you some experience of its powers. Why do you stand there staring at me like any imbecile? Get your sword out, unless you desire that I should spit you while you wait!” And I made a pass within an inch of his nose.

I had fancied he would quibble at so far lowering his dignity as to meet me sword in hand—but I had forgotten the power of bare steel. After all, it is no very pleasant experience to have a blade flashed

before your eyes, and Lord Raimondo, a powerful noble, was not used to such attentions. With a wild snort of mingled rage and fear he pulled his sword loose and came at me in a fury. I gave an exclamation of triumph. All was as I would have it now.

The difference in rank which he had forgotten his friends remembered for him. There was a cry of horror from the young courtiers. "Insolence!" shouted Della Torre. "Come, let us cut down this adventurer who would butcher the Prince's kinsman!" For an instant I felt some alarm, but it was needless.

"I'm thinking you do very well where you are, and that there you'll stay, my jewels," O'Meara remarked blandly, and my uneasiness faded as quickly as it had come. He had poignantly regretted, I knew, his own exclusion from the quarrel, and was overjoyed at an opportunity to mix in it. "Here, you rogues, come aid your captain!" At which my men, having no mind at all to see the sport spoiled, pushed roughly in between the courtiers and myself, and kept a clear space in which Del Mayno and I might decide the issue as man to man. Under these circumstances it was child's play for me to do what I would, for in all my life I have met but three swordsmen—by name, the Black Prince, Sir John Chandos, and Bertrand du Guesclin—who could best me, and Lord Raimondo was as a babe in my hands.

“Now, my friend,” I said pleasantly, as I turned his wild thrusts aside, “I am going to amuse myself. You have had your jest and enjoyed it, now I shall have mine. I shall not kill you—what good would that do me?—but if I do not make you cut a poor figure this day, then let me never besiege a fort or sack a town again! You are a very poor swordsman, and I think that even were my eyes blindfolded I could parry your thrusts without danger. Do your best, for with this sword of mine—with my needle, if you please!—I intend to instruct you how dangerous a matter was your pretty jibe. Now, gentlemen, I pray your attention, for the play begins!”

With that I sent him backward, stumbling and panting, wildly defending himself from my attacks; and I followed him, driving him onward relentlessly, and executing a series of thrusts at his fat legs which made him squeal like a frightened pig. Straight across the court I drove him, and through the gateway into the palace loggia; and close on our heels came the soldiers and pages and lackeys, who, beside themselves with excitement now, gave vent to wild outbursts of laughter and cheering, and fairly danced for glee as the battle went on.

The great loggia was a fair sunny place, the brightest spot in all the palace. Flowers lay thickly scattered over the pavement, which was built of Verona marble, with alternating blocks of close-grained cream-color and rich mottled red, forming a

dazzling checkered pattern. An arched cloister of pure white marble supported a marble gallery above, which had a great door in the centre, and a winding staircase leading down to the court. Over the gallery, through the arches, and on the stairs were masses of roses and lilies and jasmine, twining, mingling, smothering the senses with their rich color and their heavy perfume. From beneath these gorgeous blooms peeped out, like pictures in their gilded frames, rare fresco paintings in the stiff golden Byzantine style, alternating with voussoirs of marble covered with gilded leaves and flowers. This splendid place stood empty as I swept into it with Del Mayno stumbling and cursing at my sword's point; but the hubbub raised by the shouting, dancing rogues who followed me was such that it could not help but rouse the palace—the very end I had in view. Almost within the moment startled voices sounded in-doors, and a great crowd of ladies and courtiers, some frightened, some curious, came quickly out into the gallery to see what was afoot. I had a good audience now—half the Prince's Court above, half his servants in the outer square and packed about the loggia gate. Certainly the jest was at present on my side.

Putting forth all my skill, I advanced on Del Mayno in such fashion that I believe he thought me turned into the devil in person. Easily parrying all his desperate thrusts, between them I pricked him prettily in whatever spot my fancy suggested to me.

We stormed across the loggia like a whirlwind, narrowly escaping a table in our course, then bearing down on the staircase. Just as we reached it I swung in a skilful circle and started back again for the gate, still driving my reluctant and panting prey before me. Round and round the loggia we went, while the spectators cheered us on; and now I began to add mockery to my torture.

"So there, so there!" I cried, shaking with laughter, but taking good care not to miss a thrust. "To the right, my friend—now to the left—ha, you obey my guidance as prettily as could be wished! *Prime, seconde, coupe*—come, what makes you squeal so like a stuck pig? Did I go too deep? Yes, I see a spreading blood-stain on your fine satin hose; but it is only a prick, as I can show you if I choose to go deeper. Does my needle please you, my needle concerning which you were so witty? Does it still amuse you, now that you know it better? Is it a sharp needle, eh?" I thrust again, and my wretched victim leapt into the air with a yell.

"Sir John! Sir John Hawkwood! Are you mad?" called an angry voice from the gallery, and I knew that Antonio della Scala, Prince of Verona and Vincenza, was now numbered among my audience.

I feigned to have heard nothing, and my pretense was aided by the delighted clamor of the onlookers, which might well have drowned the Prince's words. "Bravo, bravo, Sir John!" the soldiers and pages were crying, in an ecstasy. O'Meara, who had fol-

lowed us closely in, stood leaning on the wall, alternately giving war-whoops of delight and pausing to wipe tears of laughter from his eyes. "Glory be that I've lived to see this hour! Ah, is it not a beautiful sight?" he gurgled joyously. From the upper gallery, where the ladies and courtiers were gathered, came audible and indignant comments on adventurers who dared attack great nobles in this fashion, mingled with irrepressible bursts of merriment as my unlucky victim cut some especially wild caper. The chase was growing hotter now. Round and round the loggia we went, skirting the wall by scarcely a foot, avoiding crashing into the staircase only by an apparent intervention of Providence. My quarry was scarlet in the face, and so blown that it was plain he must soon fall for very exhaustion. He tripped and stumbled, wheezed noisily in his efforts to catch breath, and made wild sounds of mingled rage and anguish. At this moment I was inspired by a new mode of torture.

"Dance, my friend! Dance for this noble assemblage!" I cried, and wielded my sword to such good effect that Del Mayno pranced and curvetted in the liveliest fashion possible. "So—you do very creditably, on my word. Is not this despised needle of mine a useful thing, since it can make a fat old has-been like you pick up your heels like any dancing-master? Turn to the right—turn to the left—raise your right foot—now your left foot. Higher, higher, or I will prick again——" I shook with helpless

laughter to see the desperate efforts and wild protruding eyes of my pupil. Flesh and blood could not resist the absurd scene; the loggia was now one great roar of mirth, and even those in the gallery held their sides and wiped their eyes.

“Sir John!” the Prince screamed, in a rage. “Do you hear me? Put up your sword on the instant! Cease your horse-play and let him go!”

This time I was ready to obey him, for I saw that my victim could bear no more. “Once again, one final effort,” I cried, and swung my sword in a hissing circle straight at the feet of Del Mayno, who, with a wild cry and a convulsive spring, leapt high into the air and just cleared the blow. “Well done, my friend. Now rest and get your breath, and take warning by this lesson that needles are too sharp to be spoken of in jest—they have the power to prick, you see.” Still roaring with laughter, I thrust my sword into its scabbard. “Let Della Torre and his friends pass in now, O’Meara. The play is ended,” I called to the Irishman. And then I stood waiting, unable to guess what might be the result of my mad whim, but tolerably certain that the next half-hour would prove a stirring one for me.

CHAPTER II

MISCHIEF

As I sheathed my sword a tumult of cheers broke from the spectators, and the soldiers of my Company, in a mad burst of delight, came circling round me in an impromptu dance of triumph. "Begone, begone!" I cried, forcing a way through them. "What have you to do in the Prince's loggia? Take yourselves off, knaves, or you will get into trouble!"

Antonio della Scala came slowly down the staircase from the gallery. He was obviously in a rage, though the fact showed only in his increased pallor and the slight trembling of his hands. For a moment I had an insane desire to treat him as I had treated Raimondo del Mayno, for, truth to tell, I loved one scarcely better than the other. He was not to my taste, this last of the Scaligeri, this languid, foppish, sulky man who painted his cheeks and covered his hands with rings, and wore his blond hair so low that it shaded his pale lack-lustre eyes. It was a part of my trade to read men, and I read this Prince as easily as any ruffling cutthroat among my free companions, and judged him as evil at bottom as the worst of them. He came of a bloody

race, a family in which the father slew the son and the husband the wife; and, unless report slandered him, he had himself the blood of his only brother on his conscience. There was an ominous threat under his languid pretense of indifference—his veiled sleepy eyes sometimes held the fierce glint of a wild beast's rage; and more than once I had seen him, when startled into anger, drop all his airs and graces, and rave in a violent fashion that might well chill the blood of any in his power. He accorded me civil treatment, however, for I was not a little useful to him. Would he choose to be indulgent now, or not, I wondered, as I gazed at his slim, lazy, insolent figure, glittering in violet velvet slashed with gold and sewn with pearls. In a trial of strength I could have broken his neck, and the knowledge gave me a kind of scorn for what he might do.

There was silence for a moment, while the rabble about the gate eyed me with reverence, and the crowd in the gallery gave me looks of scorn. I stood indifferent, staring back at them. No doubt I wore the plainest attire that could have been found that day in all the Scaligeri palace, where even the servants went splendidly dressed. I had a loose leather jerkin and a short red cloak over my steel cuirass, there was dust on my high boots, and the plume in my hat was draggled, though it still arched with a ruffling air of arrogance. Even O'Meara, clad in the spoil of many a foray, far outshone me. I could feel the scorn in the bright eyes above, and it made

me laugh again to think how I had served the splendid Del Mayno.

Even as I thought of this gentleman he took the centre of the stage. Pulling himself together, he staggered over to where Antonio stood at the foot of the staircase. He was still panting wildly, but was already breathing wrath and vengeance. "My lord, my lord, this is beyond bearing," he wheezed passionately. "Am I, as great a noble as any man in Verona save yourself—yes, and your own kin by marriage—to be put to shame by this adventurer from heaven knows where, and jeered at by his soldiers, and made the laughing-stock of all the city? Never shall I hear the end of this outrage! I have been made a mock of—and oh, my sufferings! Holy saints, I think I shall never walk again!" He fell on the lowest step, clutching wildly at his bleeding legs. "He pricked me, he lacerated me, and that last thrust of his—if the Virgin herself had not aided me I could never have found strength to jump above it, and he would have shorn my feet off at the ankles! Will you endure this outrage, my good lord?"

The Prince stood regarding me with a dark frown. A little more and his self-control would leave him, and then a pretty tempest would fall about my ears. "Sir John," he said coldly, "can you explain this whim of yours? Do you choose my kin for your horse-play, and my loggia for its scene? Faith, I had thought Francesco Carrara and his Paduans

were upon us, so great was the Bedlam you raised!"

This was no time for hesitation; my only hope lay in boldness. I lounged cheerfully across to the stairs and faced Antonio, while Del Mayno, letting out a startled squeal at my approach, climbed half a dozen steps and took sanctuary behind his royal master's back. "Why, my lord," I explained, laughing, "the matter is of the simplest. It appears that various wits among your courtiers are curious as to my birth, my parentage, my ancestry, and other matters concerning me which might be thought no affair of theirs. Since I have not cared to gratify their curiosity, they have invented various histories to fit me, and of these inventions the favorite one is that I am the son of a tailor. Therefore, it seems, they have christened me Giovanni della Guglia—John of the Needle. You see? I have done my best to take the point from this jest by dealing roughly with all who cracked it, but it appears I have been too patient; for to-day, as I came into the palace court, I passed this noble standing among a crowd of his friends, and he called me very audibly by the name I have mentioned. Perhaps he thought his rank would awe me into patience, perhaps he flattered himself that his skill at the sword equalled mine—I cannot say; at any rate the fancy took me to show him how sharp my needle was and how dangerous, that he might address me more circumspectly in future. I think he has learned his lesson well," I ended, pointing with a roar of laughter

to the wretched noble who cowered behind Antonio, still gingerly feeling at his calves.

"And did you not know, Sir John," said the Prince, with the measured coldness that spelt suppressed fury with him, "that this lord was Raimondo del Mayno, the uncle of my cousin the Princess Giulia, and therefore my own kinsman in a distant fashion?"

"Indeed, then, my lord, I am sorry both for you and for the Princess," I cried, and stared again at the noble in question. At present he was charily bending one knee, as if suspecting that it might be broken.

The Prince gave me so black a look that I fancied the end was come. Perhaps he did not value me so highly as I had believed—perhaps, much as he longed to worst the Duke of Padua by means of my men and my skill in warfare, he might toss away all such hopes in sheer rage at my presumption. But even as I looked, to my utter amazement he choked back the angry words that were on his lips, smoothed out the dark line from his forehead, and banished the dangerous gleam that had come into his half-closed eyes. There was a short silence; then he spoke—angrily, indeed, but not to me; to those who had thronged into the loggia to watch the conflict.

"Begone, you!" he cried, snarling at them with his upper lip raised from his teeth in the fashion of a threatening dog. "Do you know no better than to

swarm into my very presence with your yells and shouting? Go, I say, or I will have the place cleared with small ceremony!" The onlookers took the hint and fled hastily out, while those in the gallery followed suit. "Stay, Ranucio," he added to his favorite, Della Torre, who had come up to him. "And do you stop also," he added to O'Meara, who indeed had shown no sign of budging, despite the fierce order for a general departure. The Prince crossed the loggia slowly and seated himself at a great table covered with cards and dice and gold drinking-cups. "And now," he said sourly, "if your merry humor is satisfied, Sir John, in the name of Heaven let us sit down and talk like men of sense."

His sudden change of front so amazed me that I could find no words, and must have cut a foolish figure enough had not Del Mayno come to my rescue by diverting the attention of the others to himself. Pulling himself up with difficulty from his seat on the stairs, he hurried indignantly over to the Prince. "Oh, my lord, my lord, am I to have no vengeance?" he cried, shaking his clenched hand at me, but prudently keeping the table between us. "I am your own kinsman, you yourself have said it, and yet you refuse me redress when I am mocked and outraged? Send the rogue to prison, or banish him forever from Verona—let his crime against your dignity and mine be suitably punished. You will not suffer him to flaunt it here as if nothing had happened? I tell you, my lord, I can hardly stand for pain!" He

groaned, and despite my bewilderment I laughed until I was near to choking.

“Oh, you make too much of the matter, my good friend,” said Antonio, with a look of humorous tolerance which dazed me—this was not his usual way of dealing with such happenings, I knew it well. “Surely you have lost all sense of humor if you rave so over a merry prank that has done you no lasting harm. Sir John’s wit is of a rough kind, perhaps, and reeks more of the camp than the Court, but we must pardon something in one who is so good a friend to Verona. Besides, it is plain that you brought all this on yourself by an imprudent remark concerning a man who has my favor. Keep a still tongue next time, and all will be well. Now go get a doctor for your hurts, though I think they are not deep ones.” Del Mayno flung out both his hands in indignant protest, and seemed about to favor us with another tirade, but the Prince’s patience was exhausted. “Go, Del Mayno, do you hear? I have said that the matter is ended, and what I say I mean. Are you master in this palace, or am I?” His tone was so menacing that Del Mayno, with a gesture of despair, turned and struggled up the staircase—a true pilgrimage of penance, for he groaned and panted at every step.

In the silence that followed I heard O’Meara draw his breath and mutter audibly, “Thank the blissid saints for this miracle, then—’tis no less!” Still speechless with astonishment, I sat down slowly,

leaned my elbows on the table, and stared straight before me, collecting my thoughts while I waited for the Prince to speak. Why he had chosen to brush aside my offense as a matter of no consequence, he alone knew. It was not from good-nature; he had none. Was it because he believed that I alone could help him cast down his deadly foe, Francesco Carrara, the Duke of Padua? Perhaps, for he hated that ruler fiercely, and feared him too; and since I had come to Verona with my mercenaries I had won him a dozen victories over his rival. Yes, I was of value to him, and he knew it—that was surely the cause of his complaisance.

Suddenly I became aware that he was watching me maliciously. "You are dreaming, Sir John," he drawled. "Your conduct to-day makes me somewhat doubtful whether you are quite sober. I fear you could scarcely fight a successful battle for me now!"

"Faith, my lord, you show yourself very ignorant of war when you say that," I answered, with a curt laugh—I understood the taunt in his words well enough, but would not show it. "Soldiers never fight so well as when their hearts are warmed with drink. When I stormed the Pont d'Esprit near Avignon I think not a man in all my force sat his horse without reeling in the saddle, yet they did not fight the less well for that. However, I am sober enough at present, though perhaps I could not have said so this morning at sunrise; reassure yourself—

if you want a battle won at once, I am in the mood to do it."

"This morning at sunrise," said Della Torre, repeating my words with a sneer on his darkly handsome face. "Yes, to be sure. It was near dawn this morning when I passed you, I think. You were reeling through the streets of Verona in great uncertainty whether you lodged near the river or near Sant' Anastasia. Two of your rogues were holding you up, and you had a bare sword in your hand, with which you were pricking all who came in your path——"

"Bedad, thin, and what was yourself doing in the streets at such an hour, at all, at all?" broke in O'Meara, before I could speak. His voice was suspiciously sweet, a bright glint danced in his blue eyes, and his head was thrown back a trifle, all of which spelt danger where he was concerned. "May I be after asking, pray, if it goes against your conscience to see a man that's had his glass? Truly, then, I've been misinformed; this Court of Verona, which I've heard is a gay place enough, is now turned to a nunnery; you gallants taste nothing stronger than water; at sight of wine you raise your hands in holy horror! God forgive me if I do you wrong, me friend, but 'tis in my mind you're no better than a hypocrite! And for this you may take my word—Sir John Hawkwood will be remembered long after your tomb falls to bits from old age!" He paused, for want of breath, not for want of

ideas. In fact, he was merely at the beginning of his speech, and being quite aware of this fact I seized the opportunity of silencing him.

“Hold your tongue, Michael,” I cried. The Prince was chuckling in malicious amusement, and Della Torre had turned on the Irishman a glare of such indignant astonishment as he might have worn had a lackey bearded him. “It matters nothing to those here whether I go drunken through the streets or not. I am hired to win battles, not to chant prayers. The Prince desires to say something to us—give him a moment to word his thoughts, then, and let Della Torre alone.”

Antonio was watching me furtively from beneath lowered lids. “Yes, Sir John,” he said slowly, after a pause, during which O’Meara hummed an air, Della Torre scowled, and I racked my brains as to what could be coming. “I sent for you to-day to beg your help in a matter of great importance to me. It is an affair of a different sort from what you have done for me hitherto, but then, it will also be more profitable. You are not averse to gaining a round sum of money, eh? If you will carry out this business to my satisfaction, I will give you a great bag of golden coins, and fling this diamond a-top for good measure.” He touched an enormous jewel that sparkled at his throat, then darted a keen glance at me to mark if I appeared dazzled by the offer.

“Why, my lord,” I said bluntly, “I do not under-

stand you. I have sold my sword to you for a certain space of time, and am bound to aid you in all your enterprises until the bargain expires. Why should you offer me more gold than is named in our contract? I am not the man to demand anything above the bond, even if you have set your mind on a siege or combat difficult beyond the ordinary. Danger is my trade, and I am content with the pretty penny you have already given me. You pay well, my lord, otherwise I should not be here, since, as you may guess, I do not fight for mere joy of fighting. My money must be prepaid when I give my sword to a duchy or republic; the sound of coins clinking in my pouch makes me combat like any madman, but to no other music will I dance a step."

Della Torre gave me a look of scorn. "I think," he sneered, "that your only aim in all these bloody affairs is money. When I march out to battle, I go for love of Verona and love of my Prince. Why do you go? Simply to earn a bag of gold pieces?"

"To be sure!" said I nodding. "What cause have I got, pray, to care a flip of my finger for either Verona or Padua, or any other of your little slices of land, I who come from a great country over-seas? Why should I love the Prince here, can you tell me? We are not of one land, or one blood, or one nature, and he has done nothing for me save to pay me a certain amount of gold, for which I have given him full return. No, I do not love him, but during all the time for which he has bought my sword I will

be utterly faithful to him, and serve him better than you could do, you that profess such devotion for him. He does not hire me for affection, he hires me that I may fight Padua in his behalf. It is all a matter of buying and selling." I laughed again, but there was little enough merriment in my heart, for when I paused to consider my trade it sometimes appeared to me that I was but a step above the braves of the day, men who might be hired for a handful of scudi to waylay and murder on the streets.

"A strange life," said Della Torre, sourly, "to roam about all Italy, fighting now for one duchy, and now for another, and caring nothing for any save as self-interest leads you."

"That is the kernel of the matter in a few words," I assented, undisturbed. "I have no leanings, no sympathies. I wait, with a clear mind and an unbiased judgment, until some ruler buys my sword and my Company; then I fight, and win. I have had a checkered life. I have fought the Pope and levied tribute on him." The Prince and Della Torre raised eyes of horror, and hastily crossed themselves, at which, knowing the measure of true piety possessed by each, I was again overcome with mirth. "Oh, I have no love for Church mummeries. When I took Pau by storm I reversed the usual custom—my men spared the laity and the poor, but robbed the clergy and sacked their houses, thus getting much rich booty. In those days my force was called the Accurst Company; but later the Pope hired me to

protect him, and I fought in his cause as stoutly as ever I fought against him, so the name was changed to the Holy Company. That was very amusing to me, since by no flight of fancy could my wild rioting band of mercenaries from all over the world be thought holy in any fashion. I fought for the Pisans, too, when they defied Florence, and later I sold my sword to Florence and served her as well as though I had never stood in arms against her. The highest bidder gets me, and I admit it frankly; but, though I have a keen eye to the lining of my pockets, I am honest—there lives no man who dare accuse me of failing to give good measure for my hire. Why, I would fight for the devil if he paid me well!"

"And perhaps you're doing that same now," O'Meara muttered, with a side-glance at the Prince, who, luckily, failed to catch the remark.

"Was this your mind when you fought at Poitiers under the Black Prince? Did you serve then for hope of gain and nothing else?" asked Della Torre, scornfully.

He had put his finger on the one weak spot in my armor, and I make no doubt that I winced at the touch. Nay, I was so moved that for an instant I forgot him and spoke with a gesture of reckless self-scorn. "Ah, you go too far back. In those days I was an English soldier, the friend of the greatest hero this world has ever seen—not a drunken ruffling condottiere whose sword was for sale to any

bidder, a besieger and sacker of towns, a man who fought for money with which to get himself wine as a means of forgetfulness! I loved Edward Plantagenet. I think he would not know me now, and I am as well pleased that he cannot see me——” Coming to my senses, I pulled myself up hastily. “Why, can you wonder if I am changed now, when you consider the difference in the men I serve?” I cried mockingly to Della Torre. “Do you think I would fight for love of the Pope or the Gonfalonieri of Florence or the Pisans, as I fought for love of the Black Prince?” I let my eyes rest on Antonio as I ended, and such was my black humor that I cared not a scudo if he guessed that I included him in the list.

He was determined not to take offense at me to-day, it seemed, for he leaned back in his chair and trifled languidly with his rings, smiling as if in somewhat bored indulgence of my acrid mood. “I quarrel with the money-love of no man who can earn his gold as well as you, Sir John,” he drawled placidly, “and I know that whether you hold me dear or not, you will fight Francesco Carrara like any demon in my behalf.”

“Aye, for the remaining month for which I have sold you my service, and after that if you choose to renew the contract on terms profitable to us both,” I answered, in practical tones. “As for the future, who knows? I can never say one year where I may be the next. Stranger things have come to

pass than that some day I might enter Francesco Carrara's service and drive the house of Della Scala from Verona!" I laughed loudly. "Why, what's amiss, my lord? Has my jest startled you? I have no thought of going over to Padua while you continue to pay me well."

Antonio had turned a shade paler and shivered as if in a sudden chill, but he recovered instantly. "Nothing—a twinge," he answered, pouring some wine and drinking it.

"Or a presentiment, maybe," I suggested, filling myself a cup. "Perhaps I am a prophet, though I never guessed it before. In passing, my lord, it appears to me that we are wasting time. You summoned me here for some purpose beyond the discussion of my past life? Your lamented brother, Prince Bartolomeo, was wont to sit with me often for the purpose of listening to my war tales, but I cannot recall that you ever showed such curiosity until to-day."

It was believed by all that the death of Bartolomeo, which had taken place scarcely three months before, was the work of the Prince; therefore it was not customary, as may be believed, to mention the murdered man's name at Court. I knew this, but to-day one of my black reckless fits was driving me to all manner of imprudences at which a calmer man might have shuddered. Della Torre, to whom rumor credited a share in the bloody business, started violently, paled, and favored me with a fierce scowl,

but the Prince displayed an admirable self-possession, and gave no sign of concern save a slight quiver of the lids. "It is true that I had something to say to you, Sir John," he answered serenely. "You do well to remind me. Let us come to the point," and he glared suspiciously about the loggia to assure himself that we were quite alone.

"Why so much mystery?" I cried. "What can you want of me, my lord, that all the world may not hear? Is it another such enterprise as the taking of Lerino, which I stormed for you last week? I left most of my Company there to hold it, you recall—I shall have to send for them if you are planning a new attempt——"

"It is nothing of the kind. Listen," said the Prince, bending across the table and speaking in a low voice, with his eyes searching now one part of the loggia, now another, but never meeting mine. "It is no warlike enterprise, Sir John, and therefore I am willing to reward you richly if you consent to undertake it. The affair concerns my cousin, the Princess Giulia. Ha—why did you start?"

"In wonder that anything concerning her could concern me also," I answered, mentally cursing his keen sight.

His painted cheeks flushed slightly, and he bit his lip. He was very ill at ease, and, perceiving it, I suspected foul play. "All Verona knows, I think, that I love my cousin and desire to marry her," he went on, low but resolutely. "As for her, she is

very young still and very foolish. She reads romances and dreams of hero-knights, and longs for a perfect cavalier to come and woo her. Well, I am slight of figure and cold of manner and not too handsome of feature, and I do not resemble the fairy-knight of her dreams. She repulses me. Now, Sir John, I have determined to overcome her coldness—I have determined to play a knight's part and win her favor."

I sat staring at him. "Well, what of it, my lord?" I asked bluntly. "This concerns you and the Princess, not me."

Again he hesitated, then bent closer to me. "It shall concern you to the tune of a round sum, if you choose," he muttered. "What I desire is that you and some score of your men should carry off my cousin under pretense of holding her to ransom. You may seize her when the Court is without the walls on a hunt, and carry her to my deserted castle near Vincenza. There I will come at once with fifty horsemen, and after some pretense at resistance you will yield me the castle and the Princess. Such a rescue will leave her far less indifferent, far more kindly disposed toward me and my love suit; besides, she will be alone and in my power, and I can make what terms I choose. As for you, after some pretense at anger I will pardon you in consideration of your services to Verona, and will privately give you a rich reward. Now, is not that a simple way to earn a bag of coins?"

In the silence that followed I clenched my hands till the nails bit into the flesh. The Prince's face was close to mine, and the impulse to strike him full across his painted cheeks and pale sneering eyes was almost more than I could rule. It was O'Meara's voice which broke the spell, and saved me, perhaps, from a fatal act. "The devil!" I heard him mutter soulfully, and in sudden fear lest he should do some such thing as I had myself contemplated, I kicked him warningly under the table—or tried to kick him, for my boot caught Antonio's leg instead, and he jumped and muttered an angry oath.

I was calm enough now. "Thank you, my lord," I said, bowing. "Your generosity is indeed great, but I think I will not accept it. I take towns, not ladies; I make treaties, not marriages. Let your friend Della Torre carry out your scheme—he is more fitted to such an affair than I."

The Prince and his favorite eyed me in a far from loving fashion. "Ah," said Antonio, and his drawling voice was thick and unpleasant. "You have scruples, then? A scheme which a royal prince proposes to you is not choice enough for your dainty hands? Forgive me, Sir John, if I say that I had fancied, from the tales that have come to my ears concerning your doings and the doings of the men you lead, that you had long since ceased to consider the nice balances of right and custom when a chance of gain hovered before your eyes!"

"I understand," I answered, and my rage was such

that I could hardly answer him. "Now hear me for a moment. It is quite true that I am a hireling, a ruffling cutthroat, a bully, a drunkard sometimes! It is true that my men are ruffians, thieves, the scouring of Europe! But in all my life I have never shared in such a business as the one you propose for the gulling of your innocent cousin, and though I have led my Company on many a rough wild foray I have never taken them against a woman. I fight in the open, my lord, and I choose enemies whom I can meet with a high head and without lowered eyes!"

Antonio rose quietly from the table. "Why, you have said enough. It is a matter for your own deciding, and if you prefer hard fighting to an easier way of getting gold, it is all one to me. You shall combat Padua instead of my pretty cousin. Come, Ranucio." He took his favorite's arm, and without another look at me they passed together across the loggia, through the gate into the outer court, and so from my sight.

CHAPTER III

O'MEARA'S LADY

FOR a full moment the Irishman and myself sat staring after the departing Italians. At length O'Meara shook his head, drained the cup of wine he had filled just before the coming of the crisis, and said "The divil!" even more soulfully than he had said it a few instants earlier. This done, he sat looking at me with so blank an expression that I was irritated into speech.

"Well," I growled, "and what do you think of this?"

O'Meara was seldom at a loss for an opinion, whatever the event. "I'm thinking you and I had best be after finding a prince in need of soldiers," he said lucidly, "for that, come one month and the end of your bargain, that son of the divil will be turning us out of Verona—and maybe killing us before he does that same," he added, like the Irishman he was.

There was not a little to be said for this view of the case. I knew Antonio too well to be deceived by the blandness of his farewell. He never forgave contumacy on the part of those with whom he had to deal, and the fact that I had won him a dozen bril-

liant victories would not soften him at all now that I had dared refuse to aid him in his knavish scheme. The best I could hope was to be permitted to leave Verona quietly when the month was ended; and it would be quite in keeping with the Prince's character if, as O'Meara suggested, he tried to take revenge on me in the meantime.

"'Tis a black-hearted rogue he is, Prince or no Prince, and that jewel of a Della Torre is his worthy follower," the Irishman muttered, drinking again. "Had ye consented to their nefarious dealing and carried off the Princess, would they have kept the bargain, do you think? Not they. When she was rescued, you would have hanged. Trust me for that —'tis myself has the keen eye to read villains such as these."

I made no response to this profound remark, though I quite agreed with the speaker. He was not one to be discouraged by silence. "Faith, and after this I've no doubt at all he killed his brother, as 'tis said he did, bad 'cess to him," he went on with animation. "And what are you going to do now, Sir John, I should be glad to hear?"

"I am going to reflect seriously over the matter, so pray keep your thoughts to yourself and let me have peace," I answered rather savagely, though it was impossible for me to feel real irritation against him. And going across the loggia I flung myself down on a gilded settle hidden behind the marble pillars.

"Faith, with all the pleasure in life," O'Meara rejoined good-naturedly; and by way of obedience he immediately began to walk noisily up and down, his spurs ringing on the pavement. From time to time he paused to rock on his heels, and sang light-heartedly a song marked by a rich brogue and a merry rollicking lilt, which ran somewhat as follows:

*"In me childhood I learned from the priest
—And believed it, the more to me shame!—
That the divil, that evil old beast,
Was for all this world's mischief to blame.
Some years later, I learned in one minute
Just be watching a dimple and curi,
That for mischief the divil's not in it
With a sweet little, shy little girl!"*

I smiled despite myself as I watched him. Far from home as he had travelled in the course of an adventurous career, he had the stamp of his land in every feature and gesture, and must have been known for an Irishman had one met him among the Turks. There was no better fighter in Europe, yet how boyish he looked and how gay! A mass of red hair curled under his swaggering plumed hat, and his long-lashed Irish-blue eyes were merry and twinkling one moment, aggressive the next, and an instant later filled with a coaxing, flattering light if they chanced to rest on a pretty face. Abounding humor and rich

joy of living spoke in the wide curves of his mouth, the quick swing of his shoulders, the half-rollicking, half-defiant toss of his head. He was honest and loyal to the bone, for all his flippant ways, and it meant much to me, placed as I was in Italy, to have such a friend.

Even as I looked one of his quick changes of humor came over him, and, abandoning his catch, he paused before the gate and shook his fist savagely in the direction whither the Prince and Della Torre had gone. "Ill luck come to you both, with your proud scowling faces and sneering mouths!" he cried heartily. "If I had you in my troop I'd put you through your paces, the pair of ye! May the devil fly away with you, say I—for you're no friends to Sir John, bless him! and I've no manner of use for you——" He started and wheeled about in surprise, for at this moment his animated tirade was abruptly broken by a great red rose which, striking him lightly in the face, rebounded into his outstretched hands.

The loggia was apparently deserted and empty, and nothing rewarded his eager gaze; but he had evidently some suspicion as to the invisible agency responsible for the flower, and no unpleasant suspicion either, to judge from the sudden clearing of the anger on his forehead and the quick change of his blue eyes from savagery to delight. Reconnoitering with the cautious skill of an experienced soldier, he made a brisk circuit of the loggia, and

despite his quickness almost suffered a defeat, for the second rose, coming from an unexpected quarter, struck the back of his head and caused him to breathe an audible wish that he had eyes in that unlikely spot. Whirling about again, he proved too quick for the strategist above, who had no time to draw back behind the sheltering pillar of the gallery, and stood confessed in the full light of day. At the sight O'Meara gave a loud crow of triumph and rejoicing. "Aha, Madonna Francesca!" he cried, "you, is it, in ambush in the gallery there, and flinging roses as pretty as yourself?"

The sight above was indeed a sufficiently charming one to rejoice sourer eyes than those of the impressionable Irishman. Leaning on the rail of the gallery, framed by the gleaming whiteness of the marble walls and pillars and the clinging red masses of the vivid roses, was the slender figure of a girl in a pale green gown broided with scarlet. She had a crown of misty gold hair, a pair of shy dark eyes fit to witch any unwary heart from the breast of the man who gazed into them, and a soft, coquettish, whimsical red mouth, just now a-curve with the most tempting smile to be imagined. "Good-day, Messer O'Meara," she said demurely, gazing down at the enraptured soldier of fortune below.

O'Meara flung out his hands in an ecstasy of admiration. "Indeed, and you're a vision to make the dead quicken again," he cried, enthusiastically; then,

moderating his voice to a coaxing tone, "Come down, Madonna. Sure, now, this loggia down here is a most inviting place, cool, green, flowery, many times fairer than that gallery perched in the air. Come down, then."

Francesca di Montalto shook her head, though with a laugh. "No. From here I have a better view of you, with your knitted brow and set lips. Ah, how sour you looked when I first came out and saw you! When you look so I should never dare come down to you, lest you should devour me."

"Ah, Madonna," cried the Irishman, fatuous with delight, "'tis a grave wrong you do me. Were I the sourest curmudgeon that ever breathed the air, one glimpse of you would set me to beaming, and make me as smooth as a summer morning!"

"Yet you were out of humor before you saw me," the girl persisted.

"I was that same," admitted O'Meara, scowling slightly even in his bliss at the remembrance of his tilt with the Prince and Della Torre, and shaking his fist at the gate by which they had departed. "Foul fall their black hearts and their silky tongues! But what for am I raving at the likes of them, when you stand there above me, welcome as flowers in May? Come down, Madonna."

Francesca left the gallery and came slowly down the staircase, a witching figure as she moved among the roses. "I must do as you ask me, I suppose," she answered, as the Irishman advanced to join

her. "I would not be cruel to you now, when you have but just come home from battle. I hear there was great bloodshed at Lerino."

"There was that, praise be!" O'Meara responded, meeting her at the foot of the stairs and kissing both her hands with fervor. "Ah, Madonna Francesca, if there is anything on earth could give me as great pleasure as gazing into your eyes, 'tis a rousing fracas, a desperate fight, with the odds, maybe, a little against me, just to make the winning sweeter. And, bedad, 'twas a pleasure I got; these Paduans fight well, and gave us a pretty struggle." His blue eyes shone riotously with pure joy in the recollection, and Francesca frowned and drew her hands pettishly away.

"Fie, you make me shudder with your talk of blood," she complained, sitting down on a marble bench built in against the stairs. "To fight, to kill men, to see dead bodies all about you—I cannot see any pleasure in that, Messer O'Meara."

Michael, who was wont to show an alarming truculence toward any who dared criticise him by word or look, and would have called any man on earth to account for such a speech as this, now looked as crestfallen as a guilty school-boy. "No, truly, I suppose no woman could," he admitted, sitting down beside her with a rueful look. "However," he added, cheering up swiftly, "I'll not say another word about such matters. Instead, we'll talk of you. Ah, ma-

vousneen!" rapturously, "where did you get your eyes? They're two stars from heaven——"

"You would make me vain if I believed you," Francesca pouted. "To how many other ladies have you said that?"

"A hundred, no less," the Irishman confessed cheerfully.

"Oh!" cried the girl indignantly, and started up from the bench.

O'Meara restrained her. "But never with such fervor as I'm saying it now," he assured her hastily, whereupon she sank back appeased. I suppressed a chuckle. At first I had wondered that neither of them took any notice of me, but after a moment's reflection I realized that the screen of flowers and marble quite shut me off from the lady's sight. As for O'Meara, he was perfectly aware of my presence, and if he chose to do his love-making within my hearing, that was his own affair.

"I swear on my soul it's the truth I'm telling you," he was protesting. "Since the night I saw you masking it here in your Venetian dress, I've been no better than your slave. Sure, I love you, sweetheart. Say you love me, and bedad, I'll be the happiest man the sun shines on. Say it, say it. Is it without mercy you are, that you can take pleasure in the torments of a fellow-creature?"

"But I do not love you," Francesca protested demurely. "And my father hates you—it is well he cannot see us talking here."

"Hates me? Heaven bless the old man! But no matter," cried O'Meara. "'Tis easy enough to solve that difficulty—we'll just be marrying without asking his leave, since 'tis plain enough he'd be after denying it. Give me your consent, and 'tis little enough I'll care for his. You'll not starve with me, Madonna, never think it; I'll dress you in silks and hang you with jewels if I have to take Padua to get them for you. Faith, though, for your sake I wish that instead of standing here a soldier of fortune I had the inheritance that will be mine some fine day. Over in blessed Ireland, you know, is a castle that will come to me yet if I live long enough, and the lands and titles of the grimmest, most cantankerous old uncle the Lord ever made. Little good they do me now! The old sinner turned me out because he hated my roving ways, and declines to hear my name spoken in his house, bless his heart!"

"Why, then," the girl exclaimed, between laughter and disapproval, "how comes it you left Ireland?"

"Heaven knows," said O'Meara. "There are men made like that, Madonna—men who must roam the world. I never yet saw a place so fair it made me forget that there were other places just as fair yet to be seen—and, bedad, it was the same with faces till I saw yours and lost all interest in life save as it meant the joy of seeing you!"

Francesca pursed her lips in an effort to conceal her delight. "If my father knew that you left wealth

and comfort to come a-soldiering over here," she said severely, "he would think you even more foolish than he does now."

"It is with your father's daughter I am concerned," rejoined the Irishman. "Ah, but the wooing of a woman is a maddening thing! I have but one thought in my head—to win you; you have a thousand thoughts in yours, and talk of them all. Madonna, I implore you, take pity on me—say yes, or say no."

"Then—no," Francesca murmured demurely, her eyes on her lap. O'Meara flung away angrily in the direction of the gate, whereupon she started up eagerly and pursued him. "Don't go!" she begged.

"Go! I wasn't going, more black shame to me," cried O'Meara—thereby losing, it struck me, an opportunity to bring the pretty coquette very quickly to terms. "Had I the spirit of a cat, I'd speak to you no more; but I've no spirit left. Come, be merciful," he urged, blarneying her. "Take pity on me, won't you now?"

"Ireland is very far away," she answered dubiously, enticing him back to the abandoned bench. "I should be very lonely there, without my father and the Princess Giulia."

"The Prince's cousin?" said O'Meara absently. He was skilfully attempting to capture her hand, which, with equal skill, she kept out of his reach. "She's a fair lady, yet surely you can learn to live without her."

Francesca's pretty coquettish face grew very serious. "The Princess has been my friend since we were both children," she answered, "and surely no two have ever loved more than we, though her house is a royal one and mine sunk in poverty."

"I understand—you've seen better days, you're poor but proud; sure and I'm like that too," broke in the irrepressible Irishman.

"She is very dear to me, and I think she would not be happy without me," the girl went on, unheeding him. "She needs me, for in spite of her birth and riches she is not happy. Look you." She turned on O'Meara a sweet serious face of confidence, which made him gasp for admiration. "The Princess Giulia is akin, through her dead mother, both to Prince Antonio and his foe the Duke of Padua. She is a great heiress, with a splendid dowry of lands and castles and gold, and therefore in her childhood both the Duke of Padua and Can Signorio, Prince Antonio's father, claimed her as their ward when the death of her parents left her an orphan. Well, Can Signorio, a shrewder man than his rival, got her into his hands and brought her here to his Court, where she has grown up; and now Prince Antonio has his mind settled to wed her." She dropped her head with a heavy sigh of distress.

"Well," said O'Meara, more from a desire to comfort her than from conviction, "surely that is not such an evil fate, to wed with the last of the Scaligeri, the man who reigns over Verona?"

"Indeed!" Francesca murmured, drawing away from him. "Do you think so? Then I am glad you have not the choosing of my husband!"

"But that is just what I do hope to have," he assured her, and she dimpled demurely and allowed him to diminish the distance she had put between them.

"But oh, indeed, Messer O'Meara, this Court is no place for a girl like my Princess, a lady who is young and beautiful and rich and good," she said, growing swiftly serious. "Verona is a place of plotting and evil, as all must admit who know its history. The royal throne has blood-stains on it, and for a century now the Delle Scale have shed the blood of their own kin. Can Signorio slew two of his brothers who blocked his way to power; and Antonio——" She bent closer to O'Meara, a look of horror on her face. "Three months ago there were two Princes of Verona, sharing equally in power—Antonio and Bartolomeo. All the city dreaded the first and loved the last. He was like a young god, Bartolomeo della Scala, with his blond hair and laughing eyes and merry mouth. He laughed from dawn till dark, he was the happiest man on earth, and whenever he passed through the streets the people cheered for joy. All loved him, the nobles, the merchants, the peasants, even the beggars. He hunted and hawked and danced and feasted, and vowed that the gods, in pity of human misery, had created one man whose whole life should

be radiantly happy. Then came a morning when he was found stabbed in the Street of the Two Moors, near the Palazzo Nogarola. It was said he had gone by night to see old Nogarola's daughter, whom he loved, and that he had been killed by her father and young Malaspina, her betrothed. They were executed, these two men, and the girl died on the rack, protesting her innocence to the end. She spoke truth, Messer O'Meara. None of these were guilty. Bartolomeo died by the will of his brother, by the hands of bravoës hired by Della Torre—he was stabbed in his sleep, lying on a couch in the palace, where he had thrown himself when he came home weary from hunting. All the city knows this, yet still Antonio rules, and all fear him too greatly to dare whisper of his guilt."

She put her hand over her face, and O'Meara muttered a fierce oath. "There, there, darlint, what for do you think of such things?" he urged soothingly. "'Tis true there are evil men in the world, but for all that 'tis none so bad a place. Sun and flowers and love are fitter matters for the brain of a dainty witch like yourself!"

She paid him no heed. "And it is this Prince, this murderer, who dares to say he will wed my Princess!" she cried passionately. "He loves her in some strange, cold, evil fashion of his own; when his eyes rest on her they have a gleam that makes me grow cold. Then, too, he desires her for her great dowry, which can add so much to his holdings. She has

refused to wed him, but he vows he will find a way to force her—and if he does, though she will be a great lady and the wife of a sovereign, she will never be happy again. Oh, when I think of all this I tremble for her. Antonio has set spies to watch her comings and goings, to listen when she and I talk together in the hall or the gardens. He has bidden Della Torre's wife be with her, talk to her of him, learn her mind and tell him how she looks upon him. That is a terrible woman. All the Court knows that, though she brought her lord a rich dowry, she was but a merchant's daughter; yet now she bears herself like any queen, and never lowers her eyes before the Princess Giulia herself. Ah, this is an evil land we live in, a sad place for those who are weak and helpless!"

"There, mavourneen, never fret like that, for *you* shall never be weak or helpless either while Michael O'Meara has a sword and a hand to hold it in," cried the warm-hearted Irishman, quite unmanned at the sight of tears sparkling in Francesca's pretty eyes. "But you're right in what you say of this country, bad 'cess to it; for plotting and stabbing and lying and all such black-hearted knavery I never saw a spot to match this bright sunny Italy of yours. Come, say the word, and I'll take you where you need never wrinkle that sweet little brow with pondering over forced marriages and murdered princes; where, if we do fight sometimes—and sure, what would be the use of living if we didn't?—the fight is fair and

honest, and every man for himself, instead of a matter for bravoës to settle on a dark night, or a cup of poison to finish at a dinner. Will you do it, Madonna? Will you mate with a poor good-for-nothing soldier of fortune who's not fit to touch the tip of your finger, and knows he isn't, but loves you more than all the gold the world could give him——”

Francesca had been listening with a shy demure smile and no sign of displeasure, but at this critical moment she cut him abruptly short. “Oh, hush, hush, Messer O'Meara!” she whispered, urgently. “Do you not see? It is Madonna Violante, Della Torre's wife. She hates Sir John and all his followers, and I would not have her hear your love-making for the world.”

CHAPTER IV,

VIOLANTE

FOR a moment O'Meara, thus rudely checked in the full tide of his eloquence, stared about him blankly in search of the person whose coming had interrupted the harangue from the conclusion of which he had hoped so much. Had the intruder been a man I fancy he might have feared somewhat badly at that instant, for the Irishman, if meek as a lamb beneath Francesca's caprices, was by no means so angelic toward the members of his own sex, and possessed in large measure the truculence for which his nation has always been famed. When, however, he had discovered with the aid of his lady's pointing finger the cause of the interruption, he smothered the oath on his lips and indulged instead in a somewhat rueful laugh.

A woman had come out on the upper gallery and was standing at the head of the stairs, gazing down steadily and in obvious displeasure at the two below. She was a splendid figure and a stately one, for if Violante della Torre was indeed, as the gossip ran at Court, the daughter of a merchant, there was little about her to suggest such origin; hers was rather the proud disdainful beauty of one born to a great

and noble house. She had a thick heavy mass of black hair, a straight, resolute red mouth, and a haughty face that held little womanly softness, but much cold determination and confident strength. Her eyes, set under wide thick dark brows, were as black as her hair, and had a straight piercing glance like the flash of a keen sword. She was dressed splendidly in a purple robe embroidered with gold and pearls, and had jewels in her locks and on her neck and hands. Plainly she was not one to hide her feelings, for though the two below were now looking up at her she did not change her attitude or withdraw her gaze, but stood regarding them with an ominous intentness that verged on insolence.

This fixed look had some effect on Francesca, who stirred, flushed, and presently rose, abandoning O'Meara, who, not in the least abashed, was sitting defiantly motionless and returning the lady's stare with interest. "Good-bye," she murmured, with a smile and a sigh and a last witching glance from the corners of her eyes.

"Why, sure you won't be leaving me, Madonna?" cried the Irishman in dismay. "The divil take her, if you go because she appears! How dare she glare at you like that? Come, stay, if only to show her how little you heed her scowls."

"I dare not," whispered Francesca. "She would tell my father that I sat here talking with you, and he would be greatly angered. Good-bye." With a last alluring glance she left him and ran lightly up

the steps, pausing by Violante to drop a curtsy. "Good-day, my lady," she said, in greeting.

Violante nodded somewhat curtly. "Thank you, Madonna," she answered, in a voice that was full and rich, but very dominant. "I too wish you a good-day, and, though you may not thank me for my solicitude, I take the liberty to also wish you better company."

Francesca flushed charmingly in anger and vexation, half turned as if to retort, then thought better of it and vanished through the gallery door with a defiant toss of her pretty head, while Violante, having gazed after her in displeasure for a moment, began slowly to descend the stairs.

If Francesca had been intimidated by the favorite's wife, however, O'Meara had not, nor was it in his nature to retreat save in good order. "Faith, the company was good enough a minute since, though now I'll admit 'tis none of the best," he remarked truculently, no doubt addressing the circumambient air, since his gaze was directed on no one in particular. The words had hardly left his lips when he caught sight of Della Torre returning through the loggia gate, a sight that seemed to drive away his last remnant of patience. "Worse and worse! I'll be after going into the outer court; this is no place for a peaceable man who doesn't want the crime of murder on his soul," he growled noisily, passing the favorite and betaking himself out through the gate.

Della Torre's face had changed swiftly at sight of his wife, losing the haughty repellent look it wore for the rest of the world, and lighting with a tender glow that surprised me. "Ah, my sweet, is that you? I came here on my way to seek you," he said eagerly.

Violante did not seem to perceive his approach. She had now reached the last step of the staircase, and paused there with her head thrown back slightly and her lip drawn between her teeth. "The insolent knave!" she said, in the low cutting tones a strong man might have used under stress of anger. "How dares he, a hired fighter, a mercenary, address me in words like those? It is unbearable, monstrous! Since these gentry came to Verona the city has been no better than a camp; I marvel how the Prince allows horse-boys in his palace!"

"What? The Irish rogue? Did he dare offer you an affront?" cried Della Torre, his dark face flaming into a rage as fierce as Antonio della Scala's own. "He shall rue it dearly, Violante! This very instant I will go call my lackeys to beat him from the palace gates——"

I smiled grimly, thinking with pity of the lackeys to whom such a charge might be given. Having no desire to spy on the favorite and his wife, I stretched myself, rose, and was about to emerge from my hiding-place when the lady's next words halted me.

"Wait, listen," she said swiftly, catching his sleeve as he swung about. Instantly he paused, his angry

eyes softening unconsciously as they rested on her face. She went on swiftly and angrily, her jewelled hands clinched, her eyes blazing. "What would you do to the Irishman? He is a hireling, beneath your notice, of no consequence. It is his master of whom we have to think, Ranucio, his master who daily shows you such insolence as this man shows me."

"Yes, Sir John!" said Della Torre gloomily. The rage had died from his face at my name, leaving a kind of sullen dejection in its place. I sank down again on the bench. All was fair in war, and if this worthy couple—my remorseless foes, I knew—were about to discuss me, I was disposed to learn all I might of their plans.

The woman confronted her husband in a blaze of scornful anger that made her magnificently beautiful. "You acknowledge it, then? And yet you bear it!" she cried fiercely. "Shame! You, a noble of Verona, the Prince's favorite, stand second in this Court to a mercenary, a ruffing bravo, an adventurer! one who scorns you openly and treats you with insolence in Antonio's very presence! When the Veronese forces go out to battle, who commands them? Do you? No, you march under this man's orders! Ah, you are a rare noble indeed, you whom any drunken bully dares to bait! Sir John Hawkwood! a tailor's son, knighted by some trickery, and disgracing the name of chivalry by his life! Every tavern in Verona knows him; he drinks and revels like the worst of his cutthroat fiends; he kills all

who offend him, cracks the heads of those who block his way on the streets—and you endure his insolence! Are you a man, then, or have I for these years unknowingly been wedded to a coward?”

“I can do nothing, dear wife,” said Della Torre, gloomily. His face was very dark, but plainly its rage was all for me and not at all for Violante. “He has had the Prince’s favor from the first, or I would have made short work of putting him from my way forever. I hate him to the death——”

“And I! I could kill him with my own hand, that he dares hold the power that you should enjoy, my husband, my beloved!” cried his wife, with an outburst of passionate tenderness that transfigured her. At the words Della Torre caught her hands in his and kissed them, and she smiled on him radiantly, but a moment later drew away, the lines of her face hardening again. “Come, listen, Ranucio, for this matter is serious. For months now this Englishman has led every siege and every sally, has won great victories for Antonio, and thrust you aside. The Prince has given him more favor and more, till all the Court has begun to whisper that with his warlike successes and his bluster and his tales of adventure he has got the love of our master, and will push you aside and rule as favorite. And why not? Antonio has taken a strange fancy to him, humors his wild ways, delights in showing him honor. Last week, when you spoke against him, the Prince silenced you sternly; another month, and he

will maybe banish you and set up this rogue instead——”

“I too feared that until to-day, but now I have good news,” answered Della Torre, with a look of evil triumph. “Sir John is a fool, and has done that which will not be undone easily. Listen, my beloved. To-day Antonio, in my presence, spoke to the Englishman concerning this affair of the Princess Giulia—I told you of it last night, you recall?”

“Yes, yes,” she cried eagerly. “Go on.”

“He refused to play his part. Yes, believe it or not as you please, this ruffianly cutthroat, this man who has a worse name than any in Verona, has scruples in this matter, and will not carry off the girl, though the Prince offered his famous diamond and a fat bag of coins in payment. I think he is mad! Well, the affair must be carried through without his help. The Prince has determined that it shall be done during the hunt to-morrow. You and I are to draw off the Princess from the others, and then to feign to lose our way. After some wandering we will come upon the little road-inn near the black wood—you know the place?—and alight there for an instant’s rest and food. Then a party of the Prince’s troopers will come upon us, led by Gianni Potrero, who has done other matters of this sort for our master and may be trusted. They will seize her and carry her off to the castle near Vincenza, you understand, showing her no rudeness, and declaring their intention to hold her for ransom. The

next day Antonio will ride out with his men and rescue her, and he trusts she will be sufficiently grateful to love him in return. It is a foolish scheme, eh? Were I in his place I would seize her and force her into marriage, and care little enough for her love if I could get her lands; but my lord is mad over her face as well as her moneybags, and he is the master. It should be easily done, I think, if once we can separate her from the rest of the hunt; and your sharp wits will find a way to do that, eh?"

"The plan is very bold," said Violante thoughtfully. "To seize the Princess in Antonio's own lands, his troopers aiding! Unless she is witless she must surely guess that none would dare a thing so desperate without the Prince's connivance. Well, it matters nothing to us. What has this to do with Sir John Hawkwood?"

Della Torre's dark handsome face lit up with a sneering triumph. "This, my sweet—that Antonio is bitterly angered against him for his refusal, and for his rough handling of that old fool Lord Raimondo, and for a hundred other small insolences which he has done in the past. The day of reckoning is at hand now. Antonio has determined to be revenged, and faith, when he is in such a mood I do not envy the man he hates. He is not very merciful, our royal master. Well, he plans to be gracious as ever to Sir John for some ten days more, and allow him to besiege and take one more Paduan town

which would be better in our hands than Duke Francesco's. Then, says my lord, he will need the Englishman no more, and will throw him into prison—and once that is done we need feel small uneasiness, for those who enter a cell in Verona do not often come out. He is an imbecile, this man. Had he played his cards well and done all the Prince desired he might have risen to be the favorite and to see me banished; as it is, I shall rule here long after he is dead."

Violante threw out her hands in a gesture of fierce delight. "Ah, Ranucio," she cried, "this is surely a happy turn of fate for us! I had thought Sir John Hawkwood a man of sense, not a madman who would fling away all things for some weak scruple! Now he will be cleared from our path, and you will have none to stand in your way, my lord, my love!" Her eyes narrowed shrewdly, and she stood for a moment lost in deep thought. "Ranucio," she said, slowly, "the Prince is variable, as we have reason to know; he blows hot one day and cold the next. In a week he may change his mind and forgive the Englishman, and then what advantage will we have gained from all this? I tell you, now when Antonio is wroth against him is the time to make his downfall quite sure by a final blow."

"With all my heart," Della Torre answered. "I would give half my life to ruin him. But how?"

She laid her hand on his arm. "I have thought

much over the matter," she told him, "but I had not hoped for so favoring a chance as this. Antonio is angered and suspicious, ready to believe any tale that comes to his ears. Listen—you know that his hatred of Padua is no less than a madness. He dreams of a day when he shall take Francesco Carrara prisoner and spurn him with his foot; he plans fearful torments for him, he lives only to conquer him and his lands. Now, my friend, what think you he would do to a servant of his who sought to betray him to Padua?"

"We know that already," Della Torre answered, staring at her. "Do you not recall the fate of poor Cagliari, whose treachery was discovered a year ago? They tore his eyes from his head, pulled out his tongue—faugh! I shudder still when I recall it!"

Violante smiled, her resolute red lips curling apart so evilly that I thought she had the look of a sorceress at her incantations. All of this conference was, it must be admitted, no very pleasant hearing for me, and I had a presentiment that worse still was to come. Fortunately, among my very few virtues I numbered courage and coolness, and I now retained sufficient presence of mind to remain motionless behind my flowery screen and lose no word of what was said. "Well," the woman continued slowly, "do you not understand? Sir John Hawkwood has betrayed us. For a long time he has been plotting with Francesco Carrara. All that we need is to intercept a packet from him to the Duke, contain-

ing clear proofs of his treason, and lay it before our lord the Prince!"

Her plan was clear to me on the instant, and its horrible cunning struck me with a kind of stunned admiration. Small wonder Ranucio della Torre had ruled Verona for years, with a woman such as this to help him cast down his rivals and clear his path! At present he was looking at her stupidly. "But Sir John has not conspired," he muttered, "and there is no such packet, Violante."

"No," she answered, with the same evil smile. "But if you arrested one of Sir John's troopers as he was leaving the city, searched him—yourself, without witnesses, or with witnesses whom you might trust—and then gave Antonio a packet purporting to have been concealed upon him—what then, my good friend? Would it lessen the Prince's wrath that the packet was a forged one? For he would not know that, you see."

Della Torre started at the meaning of her words burst on him. For a moment he stood quite silent, reflecting, while she watched him eagerly. "It might be done as you say; the plan is a shrewd one enough," he said presently, in a curiously muffled voice. "But in doing this I doom the Englishman to a frightful death, to sufferings of such horror as your mind could never paint. Antonio has no jot of mercy in him, and an accusation such as this would turn him to a fiend——"

"Well, and what of that?" cried his wife. "Are

you so soft-hearted that you care what ill comes to an enemy? Such a chance may never come again. See, you run no risk, you can never be discovered——”

“It would be treachery,” said Della Torre. “I am not a good man, not a scrupulous man; you know it. But I have never done such a thing as this.”

“Think,” she urged craftily. “He will be swept from your path forever. You need never again fear that he will get the Prince’s favor by his victories. He will never more crack his insolent jests at your expense——”

“But to see him die in torment by my plotting! I do not like it,” the favorite muttered. “I would rather fight in the open. Consider——”

“You hesitate?” Violante cried scornfully. “Are you then one of these white-faced churchmen who dare not snatch what they dare long for? Are you a coward? Then let this Englishman climb higher, higher, finally take your place as favorite and cause your ruin! Scruples will never hinder *him*; he will form a plot of his own, and carry it out, and conquer. Choose between your fall and his. Since when, Ranucio, have you grown so scrupulous? You were of a different mind when you joined with Antonio in his plot for his brother’s death!”

“Hush, Violante! Are you mad?” cried her husband, peering about the loggia with startled eyes. “If you were heard to speak such words——”

“You pleased me better in that business,” she

swept on passionately. "Then you did not fear to look on flowing blood—then you were a man! Bartolomeo hated you, Antonio favored you, and your fortune hung on which of the two got full power in Verona. You made your choice, and shared in the killing. Well, have you been the worse for it?"

"Indeed, I have never looked back with pleasure to that night," said Della Torre, hoarsely. "When I shut my eyes I can see Bartolomeo as he lay at my feet when all was over, blood on his blond head, blood running from his scarlet hunting-habit. And what you urge on me is worse. You propose black treachery——"

"Can you put such a name to words of mine?" cried Violante. "Then you scorn me, you despise me! It is natural, I suppose. You are a noble, and I am but the daughter of a merchant; though you wedded me, you do not hold me your equal, but look down on me and my thoughts of honor. Ah, I knew your Court friends made a mock of me, but I had believed you held me dear. Now I see the truth——"

"Hush, hush!" cried Della Torre, his face as white as if she had struck him. "When you say such words you tear my heart in two. Why, my sweet, you know you are all the world to me—you know that since the day when, riding out to hunt with the Prince, I saw you standing in the door of your father's shop, I have had no thought but for you. I love you, Violante; I am as proud to call

you wife as if you were a king's daughter; I love you——”

He had caught her in his arms, and she clung to him passionately. “As I love you, my husband, my beloved!” she breathed; then, freeing herself, “But as I shall love you no more if you prove craven now! Do as I entreat you, assure Hawkwood's ruin, or I despise you, and despise myself that I have worshipped you. For your sake and for mine, stamp down this adventurer. Every day sees his star more in the ascendant. Soon he will overthrow you, and I shall see you in the dust, and my heart will be broken and my life shattered. Oh, will you hesitate in a desperate case like this?”

Della Torre made a gesture of surrender. “I will do it. You shall have your way. You know very well that I can refuse you nothing, my beloved,” he said, and she cried out triumphantly and swayed toward him with a flushed face and starry eyes.

“In a good hour!” she exclaimed. “All will be well now. Come into the palace, Ranucio, and we will speak further of this and perfect the plan.” She put out her hand and took his, and they passed together up the stairs and through the gallery door.

CHAPTER V.

GIULIA

FOR some time after their departure I made no movement to come out from my hiding-place, but remained motionless, my chin propped in my hands and my thoughts busy with what I had overheard. Long years of peril and tense situations had given me sound nerves, yet I take no shame to confess that at present I felt a trifle blank and not a little at a loss. Antonio della Scala had shown me favor and indulgence for so long that I had fancied myself necessary to him, and had believed no action on my part could prick him into anger. Well, I was excellently paid for my conceit. He was tired of me; he had no doubt been checking up for a long time certain curt speeches of mine, which I, like a true soldier, had forgotten as soon as said, and now meant to wipe the score clear once for all. For some ten days yet he would show me his usual graciousness; he would send me out to capture him another town. I was glad to have heard that, at least! Certainly I would spare myself the trouble of any further fighting in his cause. Then he planned to throw me into prison; and, as if this were not enough, Della Torre and his wife were plotting to

regale him with such a set of lies concerning me as would surely drive him into a murderous fury. Carrara was his pet hatred, even as Violante had said, and he would have small mercy on me if he suspected me of treason. I had seen Antonio della Scala mastered by rage more than once, and at such times he was no more nor less than a fiend, delighting in the blackest cruelty, laughing to see his victims suffer. No doubt he would plan for me some such end as Cagliari had enjoyed, the wretched traitor who had lost his eyes and tongue, and then been broken on the wheel.

I laughed at the thought, setting my shoulders back and jerking my head. I had weathered worse storms than this in my time. Danger and I were old friends, and it would surprise me not a little if I left my bones to bleach in Verona. "There is a way out of everything," I reflected, to encourage myself. "In this case, no doubt, the wisest course is to take myself out of Antonio's lands as quickly as may be. And where shall I go? Well, as to that, no doubt I can find a refuge. There are princes and dukes a-plenty who would be glad enough to get me and my lances for friends. I will go find O'Meara, and talk with him concerning the matter——" A slight sound startled me, and I glanced up hastily.

A young and very beautiful girl was slowly descending the staircase, one hand resting lightly on the balustrade, the other gathering up her gown.

She might have been seventeen or eighteen years old, not more, yet her obvious youth was counter-acted in some sort by a delicate remote air of pride and aloofness, the look, it might be, of one placed so high above the rest of the world that its doings could concern her little. Her hair was soft and dark, and shaded a low forehead. She had large, lustrous dark eyes that were both sweet and proud, screened by black lashes that fell on her cheeks when she let them droop. Her skin was of the waxen whiteness of a camellia blossom, and her scarlet lips curved in lines that were at once soft and haughty. She wore a white dress with a cluster of yellow roses pinned at the breast, and had across her shoulders a white scarf flowered and branched in gold. Framed by the mass of flowers above and below, her slender figure stood out clearly, marvellously and delicately beautiful, perfect as some flawless painting. All about her breathed a subtle compelling charm, though she had the air of one too proud to value any homage paid her loveliness.

She descended the stairs very slowly, stood for a moment gazing about her, and then seated herself on the marble bench where Francesca and O'Meara had ensconced themselves among the flowers. Her head fell back against the roses, and she sat motionless and silent, her hands clasped in her lap and her eyes fixed absently on the loggia gate. She did not look happy; her every feature spoke of a vague unrest and trouble, long hidden, revealed for an instant

here in solitude as though she had raised a curtain and displayed a hidden window.

It was the Princess Giulia, Antonio della Scala's cousin, known as the proudest and loveliest lady in all Italy. I had seen her a hundred times, but never before had I seen her alone, and never had I seen this look of trouble in her eyes. One might have thought, indeed, that she had small cause for any grief. She was young, she was rich, she had great beauty and a great dowry. All her life she had lived in a gorgeous Court, served and flattered and adored. She spent her days in hawking and dancing and feasting, and many men had loved her in vain, and now the Prince of Verona desired to put his crown on her head and his sceptre in her hands. I had seen her dancing in the great hall of the palace, splendid in silks and jewels, and walking in the gardens with twenty cavaliers about her, and riding through the city with a falcon on her wrist, and always there had been a proud smile on her lips and a serene look on her face. Yet now there was trouble in her eyes; and I, who knew trouble too, and hid it from all under rough laughter or rougher temper, had power to read that it was no passing thing that moved her, but some doubt or fear that had long lain heavy on her heart.

On the instant I forgot my own danger, Della Torre's treachery, the Prince's deadly plot against me; now I remembered only that this lady too was in the toils, that they meant to practice on her and

drive her into marriage with the Prince. They had desired me to help them in it. Saints! was I sunk so low that men believed me capable of such a deed as that? And yet why not, since I was known to all for a ruffing bully and brawler, as ungentle as my troopers? I bit my lip savagely and muttered a curse. The best thing I could do was to go hang myself; failing that, to get to horse and speedily take myself away from a city which was like to prove unhealthy for me if I dallied long.

As for this girl, what was she to me? I could not help her even if I desired it. Suppose I warned her of what was in the wind, would she believe me? Would she suspect Antonio della Scala, her own cousin, on the word of one who bore such a name as mine? Her face spoke of a pride that would scorn any man not of royal birth and blood—how much more Sir John Hawkwood, free companion, cutthroat mercenary? Well, and even if the scheme succeeded, it would not be such a bad fate for her to sit by Antonio and rule Verona. I had affairs enough of my own to consider, and had better cease to think of hers.

Instead of carrying out this sensible resolution, I rose, came out of my flowery screen, and approached the bench. "Your pardon, Princess," I said, pausing before her, "will you grant me a word on a matter of much import?"

The troubled look vanished from her eyes at sound of my voice. She looked up quickly, met my

gaze, and recognized me. On the instant her mouth hardened and her every feature took on an air of haughty surprise and scorn. She looked very beautiful in this guise, but also very forbidding, and I saw anew the folly of my attempt. "What can you desire of me?" she asked, in the tone she might have used to a lackey. "You mistake, I think; I do not know you—I have never seen you before."

That she should greet me so roused the slumbering devil that, alas, lay always near the surface with me in those wild days of my life. Nor was I quite without excuse. That day I had refused to join Antonio's plot against her, and had so lost his favor and plunged myself into an imbroglio that was like to cost me dear. Now I came to warn her, and she looked at me as at the dust beneath her scarlet-shod feet. It was never my way to turn the other cheek, and a great anger rose in me and blotted out reason.

I flung back my head and laughed, and she stared at me with widening eyes. No doubt I looked dangerous enough, with my rough jerkin and grim scarred face and black look of mirth. "You have never seen me before?" I cried, still shaking, though I was far more savage than light-hearted. "What, have you never seen the White Company march through the streets of Verona under my command? Then you are the only person in the city who has not! And have you never marked me in all the times I have come to the palace to confer with the Prince? I have passed within touch of you

often; and once a jewelled clasp fell from your sleeve as I went by, and I restored it to you and received a cold word of thanks in payment. Oh, yes, Princess, you mistake; you have seen me before to-day."

Of the two of us, Princess and condottiere, the great lady was the more at a loss for an instant. I doubt not it was the first time in all her life that such words had fallen on her ears, and they stunned her. At once, however, her amazement passed, and a fierce anger blazed up in her eyes. "I know not what right you have to speak to me or to approach me or to question my words," she said, watching me through lowered lids and speaking with a contempt that bit me, "but I suppose you know no better. It is true we have seen each other before to-day; and I have not only seen you, I have heard of you, Sir John Hawkwood." She clinched her hands, still fully meeting my gaze. "I have heard of your tavern revels, your street brawls, your drunken shameless fashion of life—and I turn cold with rage to think that you dare address me, the Prince's cousin, the first lady of the Court! Learn your proper place, sir; go out yonder in the square and talk to the horse-boys and the pages. Do not address us who are of another world, or my cousin will know how to teach you better manners." She turned her eyes disdainfully aside, and sat with a slight flush on her cheeks, her quick breath stirring the roses at her breast.

"Yes," I said, unmoved and smiling darkly on her, "you know me for a wild reveller and brawler, do you not? Yet many nobles are that. It is not for my fashion of life that you despise me, but because my birth is less high than yours. If I were blameless as any saint, would you not even then disdain to hold speech with me unless I could show as many quarterings as these Court fops?"

Again she tried to crush me with her scorn. Strangely enough, no thought appeared to come to her of leaving me and so ending our distasteful interview—or perhaps she wished to humble me first. "It is not my custom," she said haughtily, "to talk with tailors, sir. I have heard that your father was of that profession." Had she accused me of being fathered by the devil her tone could have held no more contempt.

I laughed again, and this time with real amusement. "Do you know, Madonna Giulia," I asked, "that some dozen persons have already made that statement to me, and that all of them have bitterly repented it almost within the instant? Ah, well, I will not avenge myself on you—I will even tell you the facts of my parentage, though I have never done as much before. Those who say that my father was a tailor lie most villainously. He was not. He was a tanner. And I too was a tanner's apprentice before I left England and took to soldiering."

She turned her eyes away from me as if loath to contemplate a thing so mean. The action stung me

unreasonably. "Yes, you think I come of very poor stock," I said harshly, "but to my mind my birth is as good as Prince Antonio's."

She looked at me, her anger lost in utter amazement. "Why, you talk madness," she exclaimed. "You are a tanner's son, and you would compare yourself with a Della Scala, a great and powerful Prince?"

"He is descended from a crafty murderer; his father and his grandfather were villains, so were all his race from the beginning," I answered recklessly. "Look at him, Princess—what do you see in him? A hero, a mighty ruler? I see a smirking, drawling fop with paint on his cheeks, tricked out in silks and jewels, appearing more like a woman than a man. If I engaged with him in a hand to hand contest, which of us would win, do you think—the last of all the Scaligeri, or plain John Hawkwood, who has the strength of an ox in his arm and the skill of a fiend with his sword? Faith, I would rather be myself than Antonio della Scala!"

She stared at me in anger mixed with wonder. "I think you are quite mad," she said indignantly. "How dare you speak so to me concerning my own race?"

"This noble blood, of what use is it?" I demanded bitterly. "How many of your great lords and princes can take towns and win battles, as I can do? If they tried to fight for themselves, they would fail most shamefully. They hire me to do such work for

them! I keep them firmly seated on their thrones, I make them great and powerful—but they despise me because I have no ancient title with which to deck out my name! Little enough do I care for that, when I see that it is I who rule their destinies by the winning of their battles. It seems to me, when I pause to reflect, that I am greater and more powerful than those who hold their heads so high and rejoice so loudly over the possession of a few quarterings!”

She laughed with a light scorn more biting than her anger. “It is something to be a prince, to rule and hire others,” she said. “You would know that, Sir John Hawkwood, if you were yourself of good birth. As it is, I do not think my cousin need care very greatly whether he pleases you or not. It is not the custom of the Scaligeri to seek the love of free companions.”

So young and lovely was she in her pride, so soft of feature despite her contempt, that I felt the anger die from my heart as I looked at her. I remembered how this cousin whom she defended planned to dupe her into marriage, and my face set hard at the thought. “Princess,” I said gently, “you defend the house of Della Scala with great warmth. Do you love it so? You are kin to the house of Carrara too, and Duke Francesco claims you for his ward—do you not wish at times that you might go to him and be quit of this bloody Court ruled by an evil Prince?”

Her blazing eyes sought to shrivel me with their fire. "Are you mad to speak to me in this fashion?" she flashed; and then, passionately, "Prince Antonio is not evil, nor is his Court bloody. I have lived here since my childhood; Can Signorio della Scala was kind to me as any father, and my cousin Antonio has never denied me any indulgence. I am happy here, and your insolence is very great to question me concerning the matter——" She broke off, striving to resume her cold aloofness.

"No, you are not happy at all," I answered, with a directness that was brutal. "It is part of my trade to read others, and long practice has made my eyes sharp. You may tell me what you please, but I know very well that you are troubled and distressed, and would be frightened if you had not a higher braver spirit than is given to most women."

She sat staring at me, too dazed for words.

"I read you plainly enough," I went on harshly. If I were to help her or convince her it could not be by gentleness. "You know that Della Scala desires to marry you, and the thought fills you with horror, though you seek to convince yourself that you are wrong. You fear this simpering fool who killed his own brother——"

At the words a blank staring terror filled her face. She swayed on the marble bench, put out her hands for support, and, with the air of one sick with fear of what she might see, turned her eyes slowly about the loggia to discover if I had been overheard. Yes;

she had poured scorn and anger on my head, but in that moment her first thought was plainly for my danger. She was a woman, after all, and not without a heart.

"Well, I was right, I see," said I, laughing grimly. "You fear him. And why not? If he will slay a brother, may he not slay a wife too? Were I a fair lady I think I would not choose to wed him, even though he could make me great and powerful. I think his consort will not sleep soundly o' nights for dreaming of steel and poison. I cannot blame you, Madonna, that you are fearful and uncertain rather than happy and proud at thought of becoming the Princess of Verona."

"You are surely mad," she murmured, still sick with terror. "Had any heard you then and carried the tale to my cousin, nothing in all the world could have saved you from a terrible death. Have you never seen his wild savage temper, that you dare tempt him so?" She stiffened, her anger returning. "Indeed, I think you deserve that some one should have heard you," she said proudly, though her breath still came fast. "What you say is a vile invention, a lie. Prince Bartolomeo was killed by old Nogarola and the young noble to whom his daughter was betrothed. They have paid the penalty for their crime, and if the people mouth and chatter suspicions of my cousin, what need he care for the words of of the rabble? They are dogs, no more! It is an unknighly thing, Sir John Hawkwood, that

you should make such accusations behind the back of the man in whose service you are!"

"I never bound myself to uphold the Prince's doings in my speech; I swore only to defend them with my sword," I answered. "I affirm on my honor that I believe him guilty of his brother's death. As for an accusation made behind his back, do you think I fear him? If you like I will go find him now, wherever he may be, and ask him to his face who killed Bartolomeo." And I swung half round on my heel, possessed by a sudden impulse of wild reckless daring.

Giulia sprang up from the bench. Her gold-broidered scarf, loosened by the sudden movement, fell from her shoulders to the pavement. There was terror in her face. "No, no! Stop, Sir John!" she cried, clutching my arm with fingers that had grown suddenly cold. "He would kill you! Do not go!"

For a long minute I made no answer at all, but stood gazing down into her eyes. "Well, then," I said at last, "I will not." Her fingers dropped from my arm, and she drew away with a slight flush that was half wonder and half relief. I stooped and picked up her shining scarf, and she held out her hand to take it. "This is a pretty thing," I said, eyeing it curiously, and keeping it out of her reach. "Such a token is said to work marvels in time of battle for the favored knight who bears it. Will you give me this, Madonna, to knot on the handle of my lance?"

A haughty frown drew her brows together. "Assuredly I will not," she said coldly. "Return it to me, then."

"And why?" I asked, smiling and not obeying her.

"Because in all my life I have never given a token, not even to a royal prince," she answered, her dark eyes flashing angrily into mine. "Return me my scarf, I say."

I folded it calmly and stored it in my pouch. "I will wind it about my lance," I said, "and it shall inspire me to such valorous deeds as I never did before. I have heard Prince Antonio say that you love romance. Very good, I will be your knight, and carry your colors to glory and victory."

A proud anger shook her and dyed her cheeks. "You dare too much," she cried. "Can you not understand that I am of royal blood, a princess, a great lady? Do you think I will endure the shame of knowing that you wear my scarf—you, a mercenary, a condottiere, a soldier of fortune, and the son of a tanner—you, whom my cousin bribes with scudi to fight his battles? It is beyond bearing! Give it back! Why, you fool, do you not know that I can send the best knights of the Court to take it from you, if I choose?"

I laughed recklessly. "Send them then, Madonna. I am a rough fellow, I have no knack for chopping words with great ladies, but as for men, I think I may account for any knight you may send against

me. I am not a weakling—you will find that the tanner's son can hold his own against any noble of Verona. And I will keep your scarf, and carry it through all my combats, all my combats till I die!"

We faced each other for a long instant, her eyes full of rage and scorn, mine full of mirth. "Ah," she said, under her breath, "ah, how I hate you, Sir John Hawkwood!"

The words hurt me strangely. "No, do not hate me," I said gently, "for I wish you well, Madonna. I sought you here to tell you a thing that concerns you greatly. Will you listen? You may trust what I tell you—"

As I spoke a group of courtiers came out on the gallery, laughing and chattering. At the sight Giulia started, dropped her lashes on her flushed cheeks, and turned from me. "A moment, Princess—only a moment, for your own sake," I said, low and urgently. She paid me no heed. Gathering up her dress, she passed me without another glance, went quickly up the stairs, and mingled with the group above.

I had lost my chance to warn her; I had wasted precious moments in foolish changing of words—and to-morrow Antonio della Scala's troopers were to carry her off and hold her prisoner till his coming.

CHAPTER VI

THE TURNING-POINT

It was night when I reached the tavern, yet I was the first arrival there. The candles were lighted, and under their softening rays the tiled floor strewn with old bear-skins appeared less shabby, while the worn drooping red tapestries on the walls took on a warmth and richness of color that pleased and held the eye. At the left of the room was a great fireplace, full of blazing logs. Blue smoke and the odor of roasting meat drifted in from the near-by kitchen, where supper was being got ready.

I sat down at one of the tables set for whatever guests might appear, and stared now at the window, now at the fire, but without noting either the one or the other. After a time the host's pretty daughter came in, brought me half-a-dozen flasks of wine at my order, and lingered, willing to drink or chat with me had I encouraged her. At another time I might have paid some heed to her bold laughing eyes, red saucy lips, and biting wit, but to-night none of these held interest for me, and I remained darkly silent, making no answer to her sallies.

"Ah, well," she said after a pause, with a toss of her comely head, "you are not very civil to-night,

Sir John Hawkwood. You are a man of moods, eh? Last night you came in laughing and humming a catch, and kissed me when I brought the wine, and would have me sit on your knee and drink out of your cup. You told me battle-tales till near dawn, do you remember? I vow, though, it would not surprise me over-much if you had forgotten, for you were in a sad state when you left this house. Had not Messer O'Meara led you through the streets I think you would never have found your lodging. And now you come here and look through me as if I were made of air! I have seen many men and many soldiers, Sir John, but none like you!"

"As well for the others!" I muttered, without looking at her. She laughed and swung herself on the table-edge, showing a dainty foot and ankle.

"You puzzle me," she said, propping her chin in her hands. "Sometimes you are gay, sometimes you are grim. And yet I think you are never truly merry. When you laugh loudest there is bitterness in your face, and when you drink most deeply you have the air of one sick at heart. As for me, you think no more of me when you smile at me and talk of my eyes and lips than when you pass me without a glance. Is not that so?"

She had startled me into looking at her, for the words were truer ones than I had looked for from her mouth. She laughed again, and bent toward me, her neck shining white above the dull red of her bodice.

"You are in a black mood now," she said, "one of the moods that come to you so often, that have cut those deep lines of reckless gloom across your face. When you are of this way of thinking your freelances fear you as I am quite sure they do not fear the devil. When you look so you come here for a wild revelling drinking-bout, or go on the streets for one of those mad swashbuckling adventures that have made you feared and hated through all Verona. You have quarrelled with many men when in this temper, and always to their hurt. I would give something to know what comes over you from time to time, Sir John."

"You who know so much should guess that too," I answered, mocking her, but without merriment.

"I think I can," she answered shrewdly. "I think that there are days when you hate yourself and scorn your fashion of life, and in such moods you turn to wine or fighting for relief. That is why you have so grim and black and reckless a face, why there is a look of angry defiance in your eyes. So! you winced then! Did I hit the mark?"

"Go, leave me!" I cried in a rage. "Whatever my mood may be, it is not one for talk."

"Why, I have no wish to talk with anyone so rough," she cried, pettishly, and whisked out of the door with a flirt of her gay petticoat. No sooner was she gone than I regretted my dismissal of her, for in truth I was scarce more inclined for solitude than for chatter that night.

A little thing had put me out of temper. In the street near the inn I had passed two friars, dusty and worn from walking, and they had nudged each other and whispered at the sight of me. "Sir John Hawkwood, the great captain," they muttered in awed tones, and with the deep admiration which, in wild times, most men of peaceful ways feel for men of the sword. As they drew back to give me way they ventured to salute me. "God give you peace, Sir John Hawkwood," they said together.

I raised my head and stared at them from under threatening brows. "God take away your alms," I rejoined curtly

The friars stared at each other, amazed at such a response to their timid civility. They consulted in whispers for a moment, then the bolder of the two spoke again. "Have we displeased you, Sir John? Indeed, we meant no offense," he said, regarding me from the shelter of his cowl.

"No offense, when you pray God to give me peace?" I cried. "Do you not know that I live by war, and that if peace ever comes to me all my means of sustenance will be gone? To pray peace for me is to pray that I shall die of starvation. If you wish me well, pray that all Italy shall writhe in the throes of conflict, that blood shall flow like water." The two friars, comprehending at last, began to laugh, and I laughed too, but without much mirth, for I was out of sorts with my freebooting trade that day.

As I sat drinking in the tavern their words recurred to me and brought a bitter smile to my lips. "Peace! What would I do to gain my bread in time of peace, I wonder," I muttered gloomily. "I am good for nothing save the taking of towns and the winning of battles. If the world ever turns from bloodshed, I shall die for want of bread, or take refuge in a monastery like those meek fellows. A rare monk I would make!" I laughed, and again my laughter was without mirth.

Filling a cup slowly, I drained it, then refilled it. The candle-light struck across my eyes, and I moved my chair noisily. "I am good only for warfare," I repeated under my breath, and scowled darkly at the fire. "If one of my many wounds had proved mortal and I had died, would any living soul have grieved for me? If in one of my wild sallies I were to go down and never rise again to my feet, as may well happen any day of a life like mine, who would regret me? Who?"

There was O'Meara, my friend and comrade. The warm-hearted, mercurial Irishman loved me. But in all the world had I another friend? Many princes had shown me favor, flattered me, permitted me such freedom of speech and manner as perhaps they allowed to no one else; but not for love of me. They knew my skill as a soldier, my ability to win battles even when the odds were all against me, and therefore they made use of me. Well, why not? I did not love them either, I served them only to

get their gold. Why should I care whether or no they had any affection for me? Bah! I was dreaming like a foolish girl!

No friend in all the world save the Irishman, an adventurer like myself! To be sure, my men loved me after a rough fashion, despite the unceremonious way in which I was accustomed to treat them. No doubt they would miss me when the time came that I could lead them no more. Yet, after all, they loved my warlike skill, my power to lead them to victory, rather than myself. A hundred times, under cover of night, I had led them on a sally against some town, taken the place by storm, given it over to fire and pillage, and swept away before dawn, every man laden with the spoils of rich houses. It was this fashion of life that pleased the White Company, and they would love anyone who could give them such diversions.

Having thus conclusively proved my lonely position, I poured more wine and drank it, scowling at the hearth. What was I, after all, but a roystering adventurer with an evil name for truculence and wild living? That was how the world thought of me. That was how——

A face took shape between me and the great chimney, a very beautiful, proud face, with dusky hair and sweet haughty dark eyes veiled by long lashes, and white skin contrasting with warm scarlet lips. It was so real that I started, then laughed aloud in bitterness. How she had scorned me, this cold young

girl with the royal look! She thought me a tavern loiterer, a man of the same stamp as the members of my free company. Well, was I not like them? Was she not right?

I refilled my empty cup. "I wish I had remained in England. I wish I had never come across the seas," I muttered, and drank again.

My thoughts turned to the days when, as a lad, I had been apprenticed to a tanner, that I might in time follow my father's trade. Perhaps it would have been better for me had I done so—yet how I had hated those months of labor! At the remembrance I grimaced, feeling the smell of the tanning-vats rise again in my nostrils, and the odor of the steeping hides that my boyish heart had so loathed. I had been a romantic-minded lad, in spite of my strength and self-will. Nothing so pleased me as to hear tales of warfare and chivalry and noble deeds. I sought out broken old soldiers—there were hundreds of such in London in those times—and spent my scant pennies in buying them ale, asking in return only the story of their adventures in France and the Low Countries. My stolid practical father had thought me a fool, and had been confirmed in this opinion when at last I ran away and joined the Black Prince's army across the seas. Had it indeed been a foolish act? If I had remained in England I might have been a prosperous tanner like my sire before me, stout and silent, caring nothing

for the gleam of arms or the sound of a trumpet. The picture made me smile grimly.

Those days in France had been happy ones for me. All my radiant boyish visions had seemed to come true; I had lived among gallant knights and brave soldiers, and noble gentlemen whose names stood for chivalry over all the world. My skill and my desperate courage won me notice as time went on; no less a man than the great Sir John Chandos, the pride of knighthood, had praised and encouraged me, and drawn the Prince's notice to my doings. I had won my golden spurs—ah, the rapture of that day, when I had the right to mingle with other knights and surpass them in great deeds if I could! At Poitiers I had done good work, had helped not a little in the winning of the victory, and had led those who broke through the French King's guard and took him prisoner.

The Black Prince had loved me and had treated me as a comrade.

I clinched my hands at the remembrance, for this man had been my hero, one for whose smile I would have faced any danger and dared any impossible enterprise. I had worshipped this son of a great ruler, this Prince who was never to be King of England, yet was to have more fame than any crowned sovereign of them all. What would I not have done for Black Edward's sake?

The Peace of Bretigny ended all warfare on the part of England, and I found myself without means

of livelihood. I could never return to my work of tanning, for the fever of fighting was in my blood and would never leave it. I gathered a band of mercenaries, wandered down to Italy, and began to sell my sword to one ruler and another. I had plied this trade for long years now, and slowly, slowly, I had fallen to what I was. It was too late for me to change.

“Sir John, no one of my lords has a knightlier heart than you——”

The King’s son had spoken these words to me long ago. I cursed at the remembrance, thinking of all that had come to pass since. Pulling myself to my feet, I made my way to the wall, and stared gloomily into a cracked Venetian mirror that hung there. The candle-light fell over my shoulder and threw the reflection of my face back redly, and I saw myself with a clearness none too pleasing. My hair was grizzled at the forehead, there were deep lines about my lips, and an old sword-cut seamed my right cheek from temple to chin. My eyes were stern and piercing, my mouth had the look of a steel trap, and I had an arrogant, reckless air very like that of my wild troopers.

“Prince Edward, would you know Sir John Hawkwood if you could see him now?” I muttered staring at myself.

After a time I went back to my seat, moving slowly. “Well, well, a few more cups will put me beyond remorse and regret,” I thought savagely,

as I poured more wine and brought it to my lips.

Again Giulia's face rose before me, pure and pale, regarding me with dark disdainful eyes. Her lips moved, and it seemed to me that she was murmuring the same words that the Black Prince had spoken to me so long ago.

In sudden passion I flung my cup violently down. It clattered on the floor, rolled over and over, and stopped at the brink of the fire-place, the spilt wine marking its course with a thick red stream that had the look of blood. I laid my arms on the table, bowed my head upon them, and remained quite motionless for a long time.

The silence was presently broken by the sound of hoofs outside, mingling with the catch of an Irish song in O'Meara's gay rollicking voice. My lieutenant was coming in search of me. Apparently he entered by way of the kitchen after leaving his horse, for his blarneying tones could presently be heard there addressing the host's daughter. She detained him as long as possible, no doubt being taken, like most other women who encountered him, with his good looks and his gay charm; and he willingly lingered, being never averse to an exchange of words with anyone. Laughter and the noise of a struggle floated to my ears, then the unmistakable sound of a kiss. A moment later O'Meara flung the door open and came in, turning his head across his shoulder to send back a final shot.

“Sure and your lips are made of sugar, no less,” he laughed. “I’d a deal rather breakfast, dine and sup off them than off the best meat and wine in the world. What was it they called the food the gods lived on? I’m thinking ’tis the same as what you—Now the saints preserve us!” He broke off abruptly, slamming the door behind him. I had not raised my head at his entrance, and at sight of my posture he at once jumped to a conclusion far from flattering to my general habits. “What, Sir John, again, and you scarce sober from last night? By Hivin, it’s unfit you are to be left alone for a moment. Sorra a bit of sinse have you got, and I’ll say it to your face—to the back of your neck, rather—if you break me of my rank for it, or break my head, as you could do easy enough, you sodden galoot you! How far gone are ye, then?” he scolded, advancing and shaking my arm energetically. “Think black shame of yourself, Sir John Hawkwood, you that are the greatest soldier in Europe, lying here like any log! Faith and I’m sorry I took the trouble to defend you against Della Torre to-day when he was after hinting you took too much. ’Twas right he was, and I’ll ask his pardon. Are ye gone deaf, or is it dumb you are?”

“Neither,” I answered composedly, straightening and facing him. It would surely have been an evil hour for any other man on earth who had so addressed me, but I was accustomed to allow all manner of liberties to the Irishman, the more so

that I knew he would have flown at the throat of anyone who had dared utter a thousandth part of the tirade with which he had just favored me.

At sight of my face he looked properly ashamed of his mistake. "Faith and I see you're as sober as mesilf," he apologized penitently. "Bad 'cess to me, I've the mind of a goose—because I see you with your brow in your hands I must be forming conclusions as to how many glasses you've had. Sure and why shouldn't you sit that way if you feel inclined? Split me head open if you choose, I'll not hinder you. There, don't ye be holding it against me, Sir John, darlint," he coaxed, blarneying me shamelessly. "After all, 'tis better for a man to speak out his hard thoughts than to keep them locked in his heart, is not that the truth? And you know well that though I may chatter like any jackdaw, I niver yet failed you in time of need, did I now?"

"Oh, sit down, Michael, and pour yourself some wine," I said impatiently. "I have something to tell you. Perhaps, when you have heard it, you will see the wisdom of leaving me and finding yourself another captain."

"Wirra wirra! and what is there should make me feel like that?" said O'Meara, emptying a cup. "No, no, I'm thinking you'll just have to put up with me as long as you live, cruel-like though you may long to be rid of me. But let's hear this tale of sorrows—'twill be best for you to get it off your mind."

Thereupon I told him, in detail, all that had

passed after he left the loggia of the palace, and all I had overheard—the Prince’s amiable intention to be rid of me, Violante’s plan to complete my disgrace, and the plot against the Princess Giulia. O’Meara heard me out in silence, save for occasional exclamations of “Mother av mercy!” “Hivin forbid!” “The blissid saints preserve us!” and the like. When I had finished he sat staring at me for some moments, then passed suddenly from bewilderment to fury, struck the table a violent blow, and began with Irish whole-heartedness and volubility to curse Antonio della Scala. First paying his respects to the Prince’s ancestors, whom he disrespectfully christened a pack of knaves and cutthroats, he proceeded to give in detail his unflattering opinion of Can Signorio, and at length arrived at Antonio himself. On this branch of the subject his vocabulary proved amazing. He poured forth a steady torrent of abuse, varied with a strange collection of epithets which none but an Irishman could have fully comprehended, but which no one of any nation could have had the slightest difficulty in recognizing as opprobrious in the extreme. By degrees he became enraptured with his own eloquence, and soared to such extraordinary heights that I, albeit in no mood for mirth, could not repress a burst of laughter. Pausing at last for want of breath, he shook both hands wildly above his head. “May the divil fly away with him and take him to his kind!” he gasped, in parting benediction on the unhappy Prince.

"Be still, you madman," I cried, still laughing. "How does such raving as that help us? I stand in need of calm thought now, if ever I stood so in all my life. Oh, I understand this knave of an Antonio, and I am aware that I have more to fear from him than from any foe I ever met. If once he gets his clutches on me I may say good-bye to earth and make my peace with Heaven. That I have won a dozen bloody battles for him will not make his thoughts any the softer to me now!" I propped my elbows on the table and fell to thinking, with my eyes narrowed and my brows drawn into a scowl, while O'Meara watched me and favored me from time to time with a series of suggestions, each one more impossible than the last.

"Be Saint Patrick, and why should we let this villain strike the first blow. Let's march on the palace and take him prisoner. Why not, Sir John dear? Sure, and 'tis mesilf has the grand imagination!" he cried, his blue eyes sparkling with joy at the thought of battle.

"Too grand a one by far," I retorted curtly. "You forget that last week, when I took Lerino for my grateful Prince, I left the White Company within its walls to hold it should the Paduans try to win it back. Cortesia Seregno, Antonio's brother-in-law, is in command of them—he begged the honor of me, and one cannot refuse such things to a Prince's kinsman. I fear he is having a sorry time, poor pompous fool, for I have my doubts how those

wild devils of mine will amuse themselves once my hand is off them. I had meant to ride there to-morrow and restore order." I paused to laugh at the thought of pompous Seregno, surrounded by the horde of my grim, scarred, terrible free companions. "Well, Michael, I have no more than two-score men here in Verona, and I fear we could not take the palace with their help."

"Praise be, I have it!" cried the Irishman, with a war-whoop. "Fling yourself into Lerino! The White Company will defend you till the last man falls."

I considered the suggestion for a moment, then dismissed it with a shake of the head. "No, that would be a fool's act. Lerino is too close to Padua, too much desired by Carrara. He would send out his forces to take it and me—would even heal his differences with Antonio for the nonce, and join hands with him in reducing an adventurer bold enough to seize a town claimed by two great princes."

"Be the powers, and you're right," confessed O'Meara, with profound admiration. "'Tis a great head you have, no doubt of that. Well, and if you can't fight, then there's nothing left but to fly," he concluded reasonably, "since I take it you've no mind to sit here waiting till it shall please the Prince to take you and fling you into prison."

"I could fly very easily," I answered, "though I should need to show discretion in the choosing of

my place of refuge, for I have enemies in Italy at this time. Francesco Carrara is so mightily angered by the success of my skirmishes against him that he has sworn to hang me out of hand if ever I fall into his power—therefore I think it would not be wise for me to take sanctuary within the Paduan lines. I have fought so well for Verona that the houses of Este and Gonzaga both curse my name, and therefore I will do well to keep clear of Ferrara and Mantua. The Duke of Milan has an old grudge against me. No matter, if I have enemies I have also friends. The Florentines and the Pisans have not forgotten what I did for them in past days, and would gladly shelter me for the sake of old times. They have better memories than Antonio della Scala.”

“Begorra, then, let’s get to horse and never draw rein till we’re there,” cried O’Meara, “for if the Prince gets a hint of what we’re intending, sure he’ll stop us before ever we’re started.”

“Yes,” I said slowly, “you advise me to the sensible course, Michael. If I delay here, I am no better than a fool. But I think I shall not go.”

“And why not?” the Irishman exclaimed, regarding me as if he thought my senses had forsaken me.

I was silent for a time, while the fire roared and the light of the candles flickered dully on the tapestried walls. “If we get to horse to-morrow morning and leave Verona behind us,” I said, “what will become of the Princess Giulia?”

He looked still blanker. "'Tis mesilf is always most keen on the ladies," he said, penitently, "yet for the moment I had forgot her entirely; 'twas you I was considering, not the Princess, God bless her. Well, but what can you be after doing for her if you stay? 'Twill be down with the pair of ye, no less. I'm thinking you must just leave her to be wedded to the Prince, which is after all a fate many a woman would envy her."

"She fears him," I answered. "I could see it, Michael, though she has a brave spirit and tries hard to keep down her terror. Francesco Carrara is her kinsman and claims her as his ward, and he at least is a gentleman and a true prince, not a murderer and plotter like Antonio. In his hands she would be safe. If we could get her to Padua and give her over to the Duke——"

"Aye, but that's just what we can't do. 'Tis mad you are," cried O'Meara, with emphasis. "See now; I'll give you full a hundred reasons, excellent and not to be answered, why there's naught but failure in such an attempt——"

"I lack patience to hear them," said I. "You are right as to danger, but I shall try it whether or no. My mind is made up." And so it was, though even to me the enterprise appeared ridiculous. Why should I risk my life to help a proud scornful girl who had poured disdain on my head and treated me like some lackey in disgrace? Yet I meant to

fling myself into the worst danger of my life for her sake.

"She'll not believe in your good intentions, nor let you help her," cried O'Meara. "She's no twittering shivering little fool to fly into hysterics at a word of warning, let me tell you, but a most scornful, stubborn lady with a will and temper that I might be venturing to call the devil's own were she any less lovely than she is. She'll die shrieking black hate at you before she'll trust you. 'Tis me-silf has the keen eye to read women, and I've studied her particular, being some taken with her looks."

"I shall help her without asking her leave," I answered grimly. "Leave it to me. A man who has won a hundred battles can conquer a girl and her whims, more especially when his life hangs on the issue."

"I'm thinking you know very little of the sex to say that," O'Meara rejoined sagely. "Faith, and I'd rather fight ten men than one woman; ye can have some idea what a man may do, judging by what you would do yourself in his stead; but whatever you give a woman credit for, sure and she's like to do just the opposite, for contrariness, no less. And be the same token, if there's a thing in all the world you would give the heart from your body to keep her from doing, 'tis that thing and no other she'll do, choosing it from a thousand things you'd have fancied she'd like better. Ah, women

are the divil, and that sweet little piece of perfection, Madonna Francesca, is the most maddening of all the sex!"

I made no comment on his profound philosophy, but returned to the subject under discussion. "Well, Michael, and will you help me in this?" I asked.

"'Tis the height of insanity!" he wailed, flinging up his hands in despair.

"Very well," I answered, my scant patience exhausted. "Since the business is so little to your liking, I will carry it out alone. Do you stay here in Verona, and when Antonio finds that you have left me he will not do you any harm."

The roar of mingled grief and rage which he emitted at this proposal might have been heard at the palace. He burst into a frenzied appeal to heaven to witness what he had done to deserve such a speech, whether he had ever flinched from any danger in my service, if he were a coward and a poltroon and a double-faced villain that I should think him likely to make peace with Antonio. When at length I had pacified him, it seemed taken for granted by both of us that the matter was settled, and we refilled our cups in preparation for an amicable conference as to details.

"And yet," O'Meara muttered, eyeing me curiously, "'tis amazed I am at you, no less. Niver did I guess you were the man to throw yourself among the lions for the rescue of a lady of whom you knew nothing. With Antonio planning to clap you

in prison, and Della Torre and his she-devil of a wife concocting nefarious schemes against you, 'tis this girl you consider. Instead of riding hard and fast for safety, you make nothing of your danger, and think only of a gallant rescue for a haughty lady who'll not thank us, like as not, for the trouble we're taking. 'Tis a fit adventure for a Paladín, on me soul, or a mad Irishman like mesilf—but no thing for one like you, a man born in that grim England. Sure and you must be taken most madly by the lovely face of her. Is it that, Sir John dear?"

I was leaning my elbows on the table and staring at the fire. "There is another reason than that," I answered, more to myself than to him. "As you say, this is a strange business for my doing, and I scarcely know myself what drives me to it. But I think—yes, I think it is because I desire to be friends again with the Black Prince."

I had not thought he would understand my meaning, or I should not have spoken; but Irishmen have keen wits. He kept silence a moment, not looking at me. "Yes, yes; I see," he muttered, and though his head was turned away I saw that he had tears in his eyes. "I see now, Sir John. And, be Saint Patrick," he added, with sudden energy, "we'll save her, or my name's not Michael O'Meara! I'll stick by you through thick and thin, and, impossible or not, we'll find a way to worst that knave of a Della Scala! *Erin go bragh*, then,

say I—and a health to you, Sir John, a health to you!”

We clasped hands impulsively across the table, then looked ashamed of our emotion, and settled back in our chairs to consider how best to conduct the perilous business to which we had pledged ourselves.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIGHT IN THE INN.

“At the road-inn near the black wood,” Della Torre had said to his wife when recounting Antonio’s plot. It was here that Gianni Potrero and his bravoës were to seize the Princess if all went as the Prince and his abettors planned; and it was here that O’Meara and myself alighted quietly in the afternoon of the fated day, having ridden merrily out of Verona with the rest of the hunting-party, separated ourselves from the others on the first opportunity, and betaken ourselves hither by the shortest route known to us.

We had sat until near dawn at the tavern, whispering over our plans, looking suspiciously at those near us to make sure we were not overheard; and in the end we had determined on a course of action, reckless indeed, but by no means hopeless. It was to be a case of diamond cut diamond, and the success of the first act of our play hung on the question whether Antonio’s bully or I were the more skilful bravo, whether my men or Potrero’s were the greater ruffians.

I had not slept at all, for at daybreak my work began. As I had told O’Meara, there were no more

than two-score of my soldiers in Verona—a small number with which to attempt so perilous an enterprise. I had sent two trusty fellows to Florence, by different routes, with letters from me begging the Republic, for the sake of old times and my great services, to send a strong troop of men to my aid; and I believed that they would comply, for it was never the Florentine way to forget old allies—beside which, they were no friends to Antonio della Scala. Half-a-dozen of my men I had sent to the deserted castle near Vincenza where Gianni Potrero and his troopers meant to take the Princess. I knew this place well, having spent a night within its walls more than once when on my way across country with my company. Despite its deserted condition it was a strong place, and I believed that it could be well defended. My six ruffians had taken heavy loads of provisions with which to stock the larder, and were to tinker with the bridge and see that the bolts and bars were firm; for it was my intention, as it were, to seize Gianni's thunder—that is, to wrest the Princess from him, carry her to the very spot where he had planned to take her, and defend the walls until the force from Florence should arrive. Then I might send Madonna Giulia across the Paduan lines with a strong escort, and take myself off to Florence, to Pisa, or any other spot where I might get good hire for my sword. Wherever I might go my White Company could rejoin me, and we would renew our

trade. Some may wonder why I did not send to Lerino now for my troops, instead of writing to distant Florence; but my reason was simple enough. These mercenaries of mine fought not for pleasure but for gain, and in such an enterprise as this they would have had small desire to help me. I looked for trouble with the two-score men who were at hand, and whose help I must have were I to succeed. At present they knew nothing of the aim of the day's adventure, or the reason why I was preparing the old castle for our coming; they believed it all a part of some service I was doing at the Prince's bidding. When they discovered that I was carrying off Antonio's cousin in his very teeth, they would be sullen enough, and might turn against me. Well, I thought I could quell them. At any rate, I would give no thought to that until the time came.

It was a bright spring day, and the breezes and sunshine raised my spirits and disposed me to regard the undertaking very hopefully. After all, win or lose, at least I was drawing sword for something other than gold, and was risking my life in a cause that Prince Edward and Sir John Chandos would have held worthy of me. As O'Meara and I galloped through the flowering fields and fragrant woods I found myself singing as merrily as a boy. The Irishman, for his part, was in the seventh heaven of bliss at the near prospect of fighting, a diversion dearer to him than any other thing on

earth. It was in the highest of spirits that we came in sight of the rude little inn, and saw some hundred paces away from it the thick-growing, dense little grove known as the black wood.

"We will go there first," I said to O'Meara, "and find out whether all is as I ordered." And, striking spurs to our horses, we galloped quickly over the soft meadow into the grove.

From a distance of ten feet the sharpest eyes could have perceived no sign of life, but on forcing our way in among the close-growing trees we found ourselves in the midst of a small force, made up of the thirty men with whose help I meant to free Madonna Giulia. They were, I must admit, a villainous-looking set of knaves, not the kind of gentry among whom a man of timid disposition would have cared to find himself in those days of the strong hand. Some were clad in ragged cloaks and dented armor, others had profited by forays and were tricked out in bedraggled finery and hats with stained drooping plumes. The faces of all were seamed with scars that failed to improve features which even without them would have been unprepossessing in the extreme; one fellow had a stump of flesh in place of an ear, another lacked three fingers. These were the pick of the White Company for skill and wild courage, and also, it must be admitted, for lawlessness and brutality, as might be guessed from the far from reassuring look in their eyes. There were Englishmen among

them, Frenchmen, Italians, fellows from the Low Countries. Some two or three boasted gentle blood, and these, in their fall, were perhaps of worse metal than the others. All had been through such scenes of raiding and pillaging and slaughter as had left them callous and inhuman, but all were excellent fighters, of a sort that might well wrest victory from the teeth of death.

“You are here, then—good!” I said, pulling up my horse. “Were you observed by anyone as you came?”

“Not we, Sir John,” answered the fellow in command, a rogue with a horribly scarred face, who had first seen the light of day in Paris, but had wandered through so many countries that he had wellnigh forgotten which was the land of his birth. “We came as quietly as mice, and settled ourselves snugly here to wait till you should need us. And we came none too soon; an hour ago Gianni Potrero rode up with his men, and they are now drinking yonder in the inn. Is it with them we are to fight, Sir John? I had thought he was a friend of the Prince, even as we are—”

“You think too much, and talk too much,” I interrupted curtly. “Remember that I am captain of this company, and do my bidding without question, or you will get into trouble. Now, you will remain here till I sound my whistle yonder at the inn; then charge as you never charged before, throw down as many of Potrero’s men as you may, and be

prepared to ride off again in haste. Have you got this by heart? Good—I have no more time to lose, but must get on to the scene of battle.”

Jacques scowled slightly, but gave back and asked no more questions, and I wheeled my horse with the certainty that my orders would be obeyed—which, almost certainly, they would not have been had I given a detailed explanation of my aims and intentions. O'Meara and I left the wood, struck spurs to our mounts, and did not draw rein until we reached the inn.

The tumult inside was deafening. Apparently the troopers were passing the time of their long wait over the cups, and had reached a condition of great hilarity. We caught snatches of song, the rattle of dice, and the din of laughter. O'Meara and I tethered our horses at the door and were about to enter when a great swaggering figure lurched into the doorway, and a loud drunken voice hailed us in insolent accents.

“No room here, messers,” cried the apparition, swaying tipsily from side to side. “This inn is full to-day. We are on the Prince's business, and want no audience. Ride on up the road, and in an hour's time you will find another stopping-place—but do not try to enter here, or ill will come of it.” His speech broke into a hiccough.

It was one of Gianni Potrero's men, a black-visored fierce giant whom I had seen many times in Verona, and of whom I knew no good. At the uproar

he made a dozen of his comrades come crowding into the doorway and emphasized his words with shouts and gestures. As for me, I knew better than to hesitate while dealing with such gentry. Setting my hat rakishly on one side and adopting an air as fierce and ruffling as their own, I advanced quickly to the door.

"Ill will come of it, did you say?" I roared at the spokesman. "You are right—but the ill will come to you if you dare stand in my path!" With this I seized the ruffian by the neck, buffeted him across the face, and flung him sprawling out on the ground. Then, before his comrades had recovered from their amazement, O'Meara and I had forced a way into the inn, pushing and elbowing and treading on the toes of all who barred our path.

The great room within was full of roosting troopers. For a moment, so numerous did they appear, I wondered if my knaves would have any chance against them when the pinch came; but in a moment I saw that the din they made caused the number to appear far greater than it was, and that in fact there were no more than twenty men in the room. When I sounded my whistle I would have the advantage by ten. This cheered me, and I turned a composed smile on the crowd that came cursing round me, and on Gianni Potrero himself, who leapt up from a table by the window and came striding forward to see who dared intrude.

We were old enemies, this man and I, for he

had long envied me the Prince's favor, and I had never hidden my contempt for him. Heaven knows my own profession was no exalted one, but still it was better than his, for I led out my men only in fair fight, whereas his troop got their living by murder, black secret work such as they were bent on to-day, and all manner of knavery more fitted to cut-throat bravos than to soldiers. A ruler like Antonio della Scala had need of those who would do his bidding without question in various matters not fit for public knowledge, and certainly he could have found no better helpers than this band of midnight stabbers under their worthy leader. Gianni himself was a giant, hard and merciless as flint, with a villainous face burnt well-nigh black from exposure and covered with great scars.

"Who dares come in here when halted in the Prince's name?" he thundered as he advanced. "Whoever you may be, my fine gentlemen, I'll have you lashed away with the stirrup-leathers to teach you respect for Della Scala! Come here, let me have a look at you!" He ended his speech with a torrent of oaths, which ceased abruptly as he recognized me. "Sir John Hawkwood!" he muttered, and scowled in a fashion which I took to mean that he would have found an additional zest in carrying out his threat, now that he knew the name of the intruder.

"Yes, Sir John Hawkwood," I said fiercely, facing him down. "And what of it? On my soul, my

good friend, you and your men are rather too insolent to please me! Since when have you possessed the right to bar my way when I enter a public inn? Have you gone mad? Unless you come quickly to your senses I will take means to sober you," and I laid my hand threateningly on my sword-hilt.

He gave back a step, scowling blackly on me. For a moment I saw his eyes roam about among his men, and it came home to me with unpleasant clearness that O'Meara and I were but two to twenty. "What business have you here?" he growled, apparently undecided what course to pursue. "We are on the Prince's affairs, and want this inn to ourselves."

"Then you want what you will not get!" I retorted curtly. "Do you think that you are the only man in Verona who rides on Prince Antonio's business? Am I not in his service, too, and far higher in it than yourself? How can you tell that he has not sent me here to learn whether you do the business to his liking?"

His scowl deepened, but he looked shaken. It was gall to his soul to think that Antonio could have sent me on such an errand, yet, since I had enjoyed the royal favor for so long, he could not deny that the thing seemed possible enough. "And did he send you?" he snarled, at length.

"That, if you will pardon me," I retorted coolly, "is what I have no intention at all of telling you. I am not one to give account of my comings and go-

ings, Messer Gianni. Yes, look as black as you please, finger your sword, bite your lip till the blood comes! You will learn nothing from me save this—that I am here on my own business, that I intend to remain here as long as it may please me, and that if you meddle with me it will be the maddest act of all your life.” With this benediction I turned my back on him, sat down at a table near the window, and, appropriating a flask of wine that stood thereon, filled two cups for the refreshment of O’Meara and myself.

He lingered, regarding me with an expression of baffled rage. I was his better at sword-play, but with many evil qualities Gianni Potrero was no coward, and had we stood man to man I do not doubt that he would then and there have flown at my throat. But between us stood the shadow of Prince Antonio, a ruler who never forgave those who blundered or meddled with his will. I had been high in his favor for months past, and he had shown me such graciousness as he gave to few. Alas, poor Gianni could not know that all this was now over, and that the Prince, once my indulgent friend, was become my bitter enemy, nursing plans for my immediate disgrace. And I thanked Heaven that he could not know it, for otherwise he and his troopers would have made short work of me before the whistle at my neck could have called my men to my assistance. As it was, he stood glowering at me for a moment in indecision; then, as I took no no-

tice of him, he shrugged his shoulders with a black look.

"Have your way, then," he muttered. "But I warn you not to meddle with what I am to do here, unless you want trouble with the Prince. If I thought you came here without his bidding I would send you off in short order! Wait till we are both back in Verona, Sir John, and I'll teach you to treat me with more respect!"

"When you please," I answered, turning my head to laugh contemptuously at him. "I will serve you such a trick as I served my Lord Raimondo yesterday, and all Verona will laugh at your expense. For the present, leave me in peace. I have no love for that ruffian's face of yours, Messer Gianni, and had rather you bestowed it elsewhere."

He turned on his heel with an oath and a muttered promise to mar my face into a worse condition than his at some not distant day, and seated himself at the next table, where he proceeded to watch me narrowly. I took no notice of him, but began to drink and jest with O'Meara. The Irishman, who was always particularly bland in moments of danger, produced cards from his pouch, and we began to play, pushing a steadily growing pile of gold back and forth across the table as the luck ran for us or against. Potrero regarded us steadily, his men stared at us, shook their fists furtively, and muttered profane comments on our presence. Perhaps an hour went by in this fashion, and I saw that Potrero was be-

ginning to forget us in the anticipation of the Princess' coming.

"'Tis as nervous as any ould cat he is," O'Meara whispered, raking in his gains. "I'm thinking she'll soon be here. Begorra, and I'd give my soul to kill that knave of a Potrero in the beautiful mêlée we are shortly going to have—I could never abide him, and my antipathy's growing steady-like every minute I sit here and watch him glower. I'm confident I could worst him in a fair fight—Hark, Sir John! did ye not hear something then?"

I heard the sound of hoofs, very faint at first, then growing louder. In a moment the troopers heard it, too, and leapt up with a shout. Potrero strode about among them in a fury, silencing them with blows and curses. "To your tables, all of you," he stormed. "No man is to take notice of the party or to make a move against the Princess till I give the signal. We are not to appear to expect them—she is not to suspect that my Lord Ranucio and Madonna Violante have any hand in the business; it is to appear that we form the plan on seeing her in our power." He drove them into their seats, resumed his own, and waited, tense in every limb.

The clatter of hoofs came closer, and now, looking from the window, I could see the party approaching. In a moment Della Torre had pulled up his horse before the inn, and was speaking back across his shoulder to those behind. He looked mag-

nificently handsome in his hunting-habit of gold and scarlet, a plumed hat shading his face and a hooded hawk clinging to his wrist; but he looked darkly angry as well, and I suspected at once that all had not gone to his liking. In another instant I understood. The rest of the party had come up, and I saw not only the splendid haughty Madonna Violante and the slim figure of the Princess, but also Madonna Francesca, and a fat, pompous gentleman in gold and green, who was, if my eyes did not deceive me, no other than Raimondo del Mayno. In a flash I understood that the favorite had only partially succeeded in his plan; he had separated Madonna Giulia from the hunting-party, as had been agreed, and had brought her safe to the inn; but in some fashion Francesca and Del Mayno had contrived to remain with them.

What was said outside I could not hear, but from Della Torre's gestures I gathered that he was urging them to enter the inn for rest and refreshment before proceeding on their way. All except the Princess appeared willing enough, and Del Mayno, who had no doubt reached an age when a day in the saddle was more wearying than agreeable, plainly assented to the proposition with enthusiasm. For a time they all clustered around Madonna Giulia, urging her, and at length she nodded her head slightly and prepared to dismount. A moment later they were at the door of the inn.

“’Tis my pretty Francesca, bless her heart,”

O'Meara whispered, and I trod savagely on his foot as a hint for silence.

At the threshold they paused, and the Princess, who was in advance, threw a startled look about at the crowd of black-faced troopers. "The place is full," she said across her shoulder to Della Torre. "Let us go on. I have no mind to sit among a band of soldiers."

"Stay but a few moments, Princess," Violante urged. "Indeed, I can go no further now—I am faint with the sun and lack of food. These are but a troop of the Prince's men, riding somewhere on his business; we have nothing to fear from them."

"I am not afraid," said the Princess, coldly. The word had been a shrewd one, for it sent her forward at once into the inn. Della Torre followed her closely, shouting to the troopers to make room for their betters, and bidding the host, whose frightened face peered through the kitchen-door, to bring out his best food and wine. The party sat down at a table midway between Gianni Potrero and myself. I had pulled my hat down low about my eyes, and since O'Meara had followed my example we appeared in no way different from the men around us.

It was plain on the instant that the spirit of discord ruled among the party. The Princess, a charming figure in her green habit laced with silver, seemed the most out of sorts of them all; her dark eyes shone angrily through the slits of her riding-mask, and she carried her head in the stiff fashion

of one who wished to blazon forth her displeasure to all the world. Francesca, close beside her, looked uneasy and suspicious; Violante was making great pretense at faintness, though the color in her cheeks was tolerably bright; Della Torre was nervously alert, and Del Mayno was plainly more absorbed in the longing for meat and wine than in any interest in his companions.

"You have played the fool very prettily to-day, my lord," the Princess said indignantly to Della Torre, after a strained pause. "I thought it very kind of you when you asked me if I were not weary and would not prefer to let you guide me back to Verona by a shorter road. Had I guessed that you would lose your way and keep us wandering for hours, and in the end bring us to such a place as this, I think I should not have accepted your kind offer. Hush, child," she added, pulling away from Francesca, who had whispered in her ear, "I will speak my mind. Does he think I am to be dragged all over my cousin's lands to suit his pleasure?"

"Forgive me, Princess," Della Torre urged. "You are right, I have played the fool, but even yet I cannot tell how we missed the road——"

There was a stir and a movement. Half the troopers were going out quietly, and I guessed their aim—to bring the horses to the door. Giulia stared haughtily at them as they passed her, and drew away the hem of her habit. "A rare company you have brought me among," she said angrily.

"Why, Princess," Violante murmured, with some malice in her slow smile, "are you so dainty that the mere passing of these fellows hurts you?"

Giulia gave her a straight glance that held both suspicion and anger. "Be patient with me. Remember that, not having been born like you to a lower rank, I know nothing of such men," she answered, and the favorite's wife bit her lip.

I heard a subdued noise without—the horses were being brought around. Potrero heard it, too, and grew tense and ready. At this instant the host approached Della Torre's table with wine and meat, and Del Mayno raised his voice in thanksgiving. "Come, niece, patience," he cried. "Eat and drink—all will seem brighter to you within the hour, I'll warrant." So saying, he began to heap her plate with food. Gianni Potrero was starting to rise from his seat, and on the instant I raised my whistle to my lips, bent far out of the window, and blew it loudly.

The sudden noise startled all the room, Potrero most of all. For a moment he hung undecided, staring about him, and then pulled out his sword and sprang forward with a cry. But O'Meara, too, had risen and leapt forward, and the two came together with a crash in the centre of the room.

"Now a thousand curses on ye, where is it you're going, anyway?" roared O'Meara, in such a realistic pretense at rage as only an Irishman could have given. "Is it eyeless you are, that you tread on my toes in this most discourteous manner? Not from a

king would I take as much, let alone a marauding scut like yourself! Me advancing slow and peaceable-like on me own affairs, and you careening against me like a bolt from heaven—or likelier the other place——”

The diversion had caused the troopers to halt open-mouthed for a moment—and that moment was what we had needed desperately. I had got my sword free and leapt to the side of the Princess, and Della Torre gave back after a brief pretense at resistance, not recognizing me, and taking me, naturally enough, for one of Potrero’s troopers. Then, even as O’Meara sprang back to join me, I heard the clatter of hoofs, cries of fright from the men without, and the shouts of my own ruffians as they flung themselves from their horses and came into the inn with swords already bloody from the brief conflict outside.

The Princess had sprung to her feet. She was tense in every limb, but made no sign of fright. Francesca clung to her moaning with terror, and putting her hands across her eyes to shut out the evil faces all about her. As for me, I shouted furiously to my men to stand between me and Potrero and keep a clear path to the door, and they obeyed me. There was a wild clashing of swords, a circling and parrying, a fight hand to hand. I had the advantage in numbers, and my men were the more skilful; but all my thoughts were fixed on getting quickly away before the tide of battle turned.

I caught the Princess up, put my left arm around her, and took my sword in my free hand. She fought me furiously, but without making any outcry. Francesca clung to her desperately until O'Meara, coming up, caught her and raised her in his arms, she screaming and scratching the while like a madwoman. "Close around us, keep the others off us," I cried to my men, and as they obeyed me I ran from the inn and found the horses waiting at the door.

It had all taken place so quickly that Potrero's men were utterly dazed, some of them taking us for a reinforcement, others screaming that the Paduans were on them, and the remainder, taken unprepared, giving back in bewilderment. Della Torre had not yet discovered that anything was wrong, and believed us all to be members of the party chosen for the Princess' capture. Violante had fallen forward in a pretended swoon; but to my amazement old Del Mayno had kept close beside his niece, and was at my elbow as I reached the door. He seemed dazed, and made no effort to draw his sword, so it was a mystery to me why he should thrust himself in among us. I suppose that since for many years now he had enjoyed great honor by virtue of being the Princess' uncle, it had become second nature with him to follow her wherever she might go, and such was his impulse even at a wild moment like this.

Potrero was shrieking to his men to rally and

cut us off. They began to draw together, and presently surged forward; but now we had reached the horses and were mounting. A dozen of my men wheeled about, in obedience to my order, and barred the door of the inn till we were in the saddle, then surged out to mount themselves. Del Mayno had clambered clumsily on a riderless horse and was striving desperately to keep beside me and my burden. The sight made me laugh.

As I put spurs to my good mount Potrero and his men burst out of the inn, raging and cursing. After them came Della Torre, with the bewildered look of one who begins to perceive that all is not right. "Farewell, my Lord Ranucio," I cried, waving my sword at him. "Tell the Prince his plot has failed. He must sharpen his wits if he wishes to try a throw with me!"

"A thousand curses!" cried the favorite, his face black with fury. "It is Sir John Hawkwood!"

CHAPTER VIII

CASTEL PAURA

FOR some time I was too much occupied in putting the greatest possible space between ourselves and our foes to give any attention to the lady in my arms. She had ceased her struggling as soon as I got to saddle, thus displaying, it struck me, an amount of common-sense hardly to be expected in a woman—for had she continued to fight for freedom she might easily enough have fallen from my racing horse and come to serious harm. We fairly flew across the country, crossing meadows and hills and woods as though our mounts had wings to their feet; but we went none too fast for my taste, and I was angry enough when at length I saw some among my troopers give signs of slackening speed.

“What are you about there?” I cried, and cursed them furiously. “Do you think I wished to be overtaken by Gianni and his men? Is this a pleasure-party, that you dally here and linger there? Set spurs to your horses, I say, and ride like men, not weary girls—or when we reach the castle I will have a word to say to the loiterers!”

“Faith, never worry over Gianni Potrero and his men, Sir John,” cried a knave with a Flemish ac-

cent, spurring up to my side. "They will not be like to pursue us for many a good hour—I have seen to that!"

"And how, fool? Are you a sorcerer, then?" I asked impatiently.

"Nay, God forbid," said he, and crossed himself; for the worst of my men showed remains of religion at unexpected times. "But one need not be a sorcerer to understand horses, Sir John. I was wearied lying in the wood yonder waiting for your whistle to blow, and so was Franz here; and to pass the time we crept up unseen to the inn stable, and so doctored all Messer Gianni's steeds that they will carry their masters very little distance either to-day or to-morrow. So, you see, there is no need that we should kill ourselves with hard riding."

"You are a shrewd fellow, Pierre," I cried, "and you shall not lose by this business, be sure of that. Nevertheless, we will not slacken speed. I shall feel more at ease when I have a castle wall about me."

Somewhat reassured by this new development, I now took time to glance down at the Princess, whose continued stillness had amazed me. No wonder she was limp and motionless, however; for, as I now discovered, she was in a dead swoon.

The sight shocked me unreasonably. I had seen many and many a man lose his senses, yes, and die, sometimes in horrible suffering, but this was the first time I had held a fainting woman in my arms.

After all, I assured myself, there was no cause for alarm—she had swooned for terror, and would come to herself none the worse for it. Perhaps, indeed, it was better so, for in her right senses she would have made my task doubly hard. It was natural, too. In all her sheltered luxurious life she had known no danger, and this sudden attack of a crowd of villainous-faced troopers had proved too much for her, although up to the very instant when her consciousness failed she had met the danger bravely and struggled against me like any seasoned soldier. It gave me an absurd pleasure to remember that she had made no moan or outcry. She was a woman, but she had the spirit of a brave man.

I looked down at her as she lay limp in my clasp, and a sudden wave of pity came over me, blotting out all else, making me forget the free lances around me as completely as if she and I had the whole world to ourselves. How young she was, though they called her Princess and bent before her and flattered her! She was scarcely more than a child, and would have been a surpassingly sweet one but for the pride of place that had been taught her from her birth. I could see her white eyelids through the slits in her mask; her red mouth was bare, and her chin; both looked very soft and innocent. Her head rested on my shoulder as confidently as if she knew and trusted me instead of hating and despising me. Its light weight seemed to burn me, and I thought how pure and beautiful she was, and that

I was utterly unworthy to touch her. I was glad that I had undertaken to save her from Antonio della Scala. Even if I lost my life in the attempt, what did it matter to any on earth whether I lived or died? While she—

Madonna Francesca was still in O'Meara's care. She was in a sad state, torn between terror of us who had seized her and carried her off, and fear of a fall from the racing horse beneath her. The latter dread proved the stronger, and she was clinging to O'Meara as if he were her one hope of salvation, tightening her clasp convulsively each time his mount swerved or shied, gasping, sobbing, giving vent to desperate lamentations and prophecies of her fast approaching doom. The Irishman was far more concerned and distressed than he would have been at the prospect of a deadly conflict with Gianni Potrero's men, and was making superhuman efforts to soothe and reassure her. He poured out protestations that no harm was intended, that she was as safe as in the Prince's palace at Verona; he declared that soon she should rest and revive herself, and implored her in the tenderest manner to trust to him and have no fear of anything. He might have spared his breath to better advantage. She heard nothing and saw nothing; all her faculties were concentrated on keeping a firm hold around his neck and escaping from being hurled to earth. As for O'Meara, despite his distress in her behalf, I think he found a hint of pleasure in the situation, for

I distinctly noted an expression of shame-faced rapture overspread his face each time her arms tightened convulsively about him.

It was dark when we neared the end of our journey, and, riding quickly through a dark-green wood, came on a tiny hill in its midst, crowned by the deserted place known as Castel Paura. It had been a noble stronghold once, and had still the grim lowering air of the defiant fortress. I breathed a prayer that my knaves had prepared food and fire for our coming, for the night air was cold, and we were one and all in need of comfort. As we approached I sounded the horn that hung about my neck, and immediately lights shone out at the windows and a hoarse cry of welcome was raised by the men within. We were at the dark moat now, and a tottering unsteady drawbridge was being lowered to give us entrance. Riding across it in imminent danger of being dashed down to perdition, we passed under the portcullis and into the outer court, where the men I had sent in advance came crowding round with lighted torches.

“Have you done as I bade, and prepared the place for our holding?” I demanded. “You have patched the drawbridge up, I see; good. What of the walls? They are broken in parts, but are they so far gone we cannot man them.”

“Oh, we have made a brave stand in worse places than this, Sir John,” one of them answered cheerfully, then paused open-mouthed and stared at the

Princess' figure huddled in my arms. None of them had gathered the aim of my enterprise as yet, and, to speak truth, I looked forward with no great anticipation to the moment when light should break in on them.

"Well, why do you stand there staring like a fool?" I demanded sharply. "Have you kindled a fire and prepared supper for us? Lead on to the hall, and let me see how you have spent your time. Heaven send, for your own sakes, that you have not wasted it, for I am in no very easy humor to-night. What, have you never seen a woman before, that your eyes must pop from your head at sight of a mask and a riding-cloak?"

They drew back in a circle, cowed by my roughness, and we rode through to an inner court, where we dismounted. Bearing the Princess in my arms, I strode up a flight of stone steps and passed through a carved doorway into the great hall of the castle.

At a former time, when hung with brocades and set forth with costly furniture, this apartment must have been a magnificent one. Now the walls were bare, the floor crumbling, and the ceiling cracked and hung with a thousand cobwebs. The great size of the place made it the more dreary; it seemed like a deserted banquet-chamber, a haunt where ghosts might come at midnight to hold their revels. Nevertheless, the presence of my men had already driven away a part of the gloom. A great fire blazed cheerfully in the wide chimney, scattered cloaks and

weapons lent an air of habitation to floor and walls, and meat roasting above the flames sent forth an odor far from displeasing to one as hungry as myself.

I strode across the room to a broken wood settle that stood beneath the window, laid the Princess upon it, and dropping on my knees beside her began to chafe her hands. She lay motionless, not stirring, not seeming to breathe. My mercenaries came crowding into the hall after me, and stood herded at a distance, staring at me with round eyes. I had no name among them as a lover of women, and they were surprised enough to see me bringing back two ladies in my train.

"Where did he get her, eh?" one demanded of another. "Who is she, and why has he brought her here?"

Pierre shrugged his shoulders. "She is the Princess Giulia, Della Scala's cousin," he answered. "We carried her off from the inn near the black wood. Gianni Potrero was there for the same purpose, but we worsted him and got the prize. That is her lady-in-waiting that Messer O'Meara is just bringing in. As for the why and the wherefore of the business, I know no more about it than a babe unborn."

Jacques joined them, looking sour and dissatisfied. "This affair is not to my taste," I heard him mutter. "See you, if we carry off the Prince's cousin we are surely no longer in the Prince's service—is not that common-sense? Well, and if we are

against him, how is this to profit us, tell me that? We shall run great danger, and gain nothing. What does it mean?"

"I do not know, and, what is more, I have no mind to ask Sir John!" Pierre answered with a grin. "You had best leave him alone, too, if you value a whole skin. For my part, I will trust him and ask no questions, even if he leads us straight on the city of Verona. He has never yet undertaken an enterprise that proved unlucky for us, nor will he now. He has a better head than any of us, else why should we serve under him as we do?"

Francesca had come in, still clinging to O'Meara. Poor child, the deserted place and the evil scarred faces turned on her in the torchlight made her believe herself in a bad dream, and she looked instinctively for protection to the Irishman, the only one of us all whom she knew. As yet she had not seemed to realize his share in her misfortunes, though no doubt she would visit this on him heavily later on. The sight of Giulia took her mind from her own selfish fears, and she ran forward with a little cry, falling on her knees beside me and catching her friend's hands.

I rose to my feet and looked about the room. Never before had I known what ruffians my troopers appeared. It filled me with anger that they should gaze on the Princess in her swoon, and the thought of her terror should she wake to find them all about her struck me like a blow. "Have you got

nothing better to do than stand there gaping?" I asked roughly. "You have left the bridge down, I'll be bound, and the portcullis up! Pretty soldiers you! Begone and see the castle is secure—or stop; is any room but this heated by a fire and in a state to be occupied?"

One of the men stammered that he had kindled a fire in the room off the upper gallery, and had prepared it as well as he might for my housing.

"Good!" I answered, and raising the Princess in my arms I ran up the great staircase of carved stone, through a wide fretted gallery that rang hollow and empty to my tread, and into a room hung with faded tapestry falling to pieces for decay. A broken couch stood near the fire, and on this I gently placed the Princess. Francesca had followed me closely, and now knelt by her lady and began to remove her mask and cloak, quite forgetful of her terror the instant another needed her aid, like the true woman she was.

"We'd best be leaving them alone," O'Meara said to me from the doorway.

I nodded. "Do you stay here and see that none of the men come meddling," I answered, as I swung round on my heel and went down the stairs to the great hall.

The shouts of rude glee that came to my ears as I descended warned me that the knaves had found some pleasant mode of diversion. I was ready for anything as I joined them, but so completely had

Raimondo del Mayno passed from my mind in the hurry of the flight that I felt a shock of amazement as I saw his pompous figure in the midst of a crowd of my troopers.

He had ridden with us all the way from the inn—no easy jaunt for a man of his years and size. Since he had mounted one of my horses and started the journey beside me, my men had fancied him a part of the capture, and had kept close about him, cutting off all chance of escape even had sober reflection led him to attempt flight. I think that at first the wild rush and the hard riding had dazed him; and now, finding himself pulled from his horse and thrust none too gently into a ruined castle which his high-strung nerves immediately colored as a fitting spot for a murder, it was small wonder if his heart failed him. His fat face was very pale above the splendor of his green and gold hunting-dress, and he wavered somewhat on his feet, partly from stiffness, but more from alarm. Nevertheless it had apparently occurred to him that his best hope was in a show of boldness, and he was trying to address my men in the imperious hectoring fashion he used in Verona—a course of action not likely to impress them.

“Where is the Princess? What have you done with my niece, you villains?” he cried furiously, but with a quaver in his voice. “Are you mad to seize upon us and bring us here? Speak, I say, tell me the meaning of all this! Do you think to hold us

for ransom? Then let me tell you that this is the most foolish act of all your lives, for we are kin to Prince Antonio, and he will not pay you in golden coins, but in hempen cord. Oh, he will hang you high, never doubt it, and so avenge this unheard-of outrage! Take counsel, let us go at once, and perhaps we will spare you——”

My men were in an ecstasy of amusement. They louted low before him, with exaggerated gestures of respect that would not have tricked a child; they begged him in broken voices to spare them, to plead with Prince Antonio for them, to have mercy on a set of poor but honest rogues who were his humble servants. They dried mock tears with the backs of their hands, and fell sobbing on each others' breasts. Some carried the jest so far as to kneel with clasped hands raised in fervent appeals for grace. My lord, growing paler and paler, stared at them round-eyed, as if doubting his own sanity. “Come, brothers, we dare not keep him prisoner, we must let him go,” one cried, in a paroxysm of feigned terror. They surged apart and left an open way to the door, and Del Mayno, a gleam of hope lighting up his face, darted forward. Instantly they surged in upon him again with a hoarse battle-cry that made him yelp wildly for fright. It was boisterous horse-play, to be sure, but it was side-splitting, and I stood on the lowest stair laughing till the tears filled my eyes.

“Come, my friends,” I said at last, striding for-

ward, "by your leave I will have a word with this grand gentleman." The circle gave back before me, and I found myself face to face with my lord, who straightened himself and made a brave effort to awe me with his royal manner.

"Do you command here, then?" he demanded haughtily. "You will do well to end this outrage and let us go, for if the Prince——"

He started and paused as I thrust my hat back from my eyes, for until this instant he had not recognized me. The expression on his fat face was ludicrous—all its pretense at grandeur fell away, and his anger merged into a horror so intense that I stood helpless, rocking from side to side with laughter. Even it seemed to me that his gray hair stood more upright in his dismay, that his round eyes turned to starting bits of blue glass. It was a strange figure and one far from princely-looking that I confronted now.

"Ah, I see you know me," I said, when I could get my breath. "I am your old friend Giovanni della Guglia, and see, I have brought my needle with me. Shall I give you another such dancing-lesson as I gave yesterday in the Prince's loggia? Alas, I fear your legs are still sore from my pricks, though I treated you with all gentleness. Why, one might think you were not pleased to see me. You have not a cordial manner, my good lord."

He gasped and retreated from me wildly, then made a last clutch at his vanished dignity. "Sir

John Hawkwood," he bleated, somewhat in the fashion of a frightened sheep, "what does this mean? Why have you brought us here?"

"My good friend," I answered bluntly, "I have not brought you here, nor do I mean that you shall stay here. You chose to get to horse and follow us—that is your affair, not mine; if you fancy a long ride I have nothing to say. But we are like to have to stand a siege in this place, and our provisions are none too plentiful, so you can understand that I have no desire for an extra mouth within the gate. I fancy you eat very heartily, is it not so? Your girth hints as much. Well, you cannot eat here. Go out and mount your horse, and make your way back to Verona. You shall be my ambassador to the Prince—tell him that Gianni Potrero is a fool, and that he will do well to find a soldier with better wits to carry out his plots and plans."

Del Mayno stared at me in dismay. "You will send me away now, at night, without food?" he stammered.

"Surely," said I. "We are not your stewards, my lord. Besides, I thought it was your greatest desire a moment since to leave us."

He stamped his foot in a weak fury. "I will not go and leave my niece in your hands!" he stormed. "I will stay here; you cannot force me away."

"You will not go?" I repeated grimly. And for a full moment I stared at him, while his courage oozed visibly under my eyes. "Well, it is all the

same to me. I will get rid of you in another way, then. Pierre—Franz!”

The two stepped forward promptly. They were as evil-looking a pair as any men on earth, and Del Mayno shrank away from them with a grunt of horror.

“Take this old fool up on the battlements,” I said coolly, “and set him to dangle by the neck.”

Franz and Pierre caught Lord Raimondo promptly by the arms, exchanging winks of amusement across his head. He cried out wildly, but they paid no heed at all, and dragged him to the door amid the cheering and laughter of the others. His courage gave way utterly, and he fell forward on his knees.

“No, no, not that!” he roared piteously. “Spare me, Sir John Hawkwood—let me go, and I will ride back to Verona this very night and take your message to the Prince!”

“Very good, I will be merciful, though I stand amazed at my own patience,” I answered sternly, repressing my laughter. “Take him across the moat instead of to the battlements, you, and give him his horse, and see him started. God-speed, my lord, and remember Giovanni della Guglia in your prayers!”

He was now only too eager to be gone. The two troopers led him out, none too gently, and presently their footsteps died away in the outer court. I turned back into the hall. My men were roaring with laughter at the comedy, but my mirth had passed,

leaving a sick disgust and contempt behind. He was a poor creature, this noble of Verona—in his anguish for his own safety he had forgotten his niece as completely as if she did not exist.

A hand fell lightly on my shoulder, and I turned to face O'Meara. He was looking at me strangely, with solemn eyes that concealed a twinkle in their depths. "Well, man, what is it?" I asked impatiently.

He jerked his thumb in the direction of the stairs. "She would speak with ye," he announced, in the solemn manner of one issuing a proclamation.

"The Princess?" I exclaimed. "She has come to herself, then?" He nodded speechlessly. "What ails you?" I cried, irritated at his reticence. "Have you lost your tongue, that you cannot tell me what she wants?"

"I'm thinking you'll be after wishing some one else had lost a tongue before many minutes," he observed mysteriously. "As for what she wants, 'tis she will tell you that. I'm confident she'll do the subject full justice. And now may the Virgin have mercy on your soul, Sir John!" he spluttered, retreating to the fire in a sudden irrepressible burst of laughter. "I'd a deal rather face the Paduans, me-silf!"

CHAPTER IX

THE DAGGER THRUST.

It was with no very lively anticipation that I went slowly up the stairs. To be sure, I had done all my day's work in the Princess Giulia's service, and at the greatest possible risk and sacrifice. I was trying earnestly to save her from Prince Antonio and his plots, and to send her in safety to Francesco Carrara, who, though no friend of mine, was a brave and noble ruler and would deal honestly with his young kinswoman. I deserved her thanks—but I was tolerably sure that I would not get them. She knew nothing at all of the Prince's scheme to win her hand; she knew only that I had seized her at the inn and carried her off to a deserted castle garrisoned by ruffians whose appearance no doubt made her blood run cold. How was I to convince her of my friendly intent?

I had enjoyed but one interview with her, and on that occasion she had shown her unflattering opinion of me with a clearness I could have spared. Now she would believe herself justified in her contempt for me, and my accusations of the Prince would be so much wasted breath. For my part, I had no

knowledge of how to deal with great ladies. My life had lain among men, most of all among my wild band of free companions, fellows who were to be ruled by blows and curses, and in no other way. The thought of changing words with a woman was disconcerting to me, and I admitted in advance that I was like to show to poor advantage in the conflict.

And yet, perversely enough, I was pleased at the fact that she had sent for me. It was like her, this soft girl whose life I could have crushed out with one twist of my hands, to demand my presence the moment that her swoon had passed, and to undauntedly face odds that would have caused many strong men to quail. She had no fear; I might kill her, but I could never break her spirit, and the knowledge gave me a ridiculous pleasure. Few women on earth, I believed, would have done aught but cower weeping above, listening to the rude sounds of mirth below, and praying to be left in solitude. The Prince's cousin was cast in a different mould, and I honored her for it, and was more than ever glad that I had risked my life to help her. But I had something the feeling of a school-boy as I crossed the gallery and passed through her door.

The fire was blazing merrily, throwing bright gleams on the mouldering tapestry, and lighting the ceiling, which was covered by a faded painting in blue and gold. The women's cloaks and masks were piled on the floor by the couch, and a whip with a

jewelled handle lay at the threshold, where it had fallen from Madonna Francesca's hands.

The Princess was standing in the centre of the room, her head thrown back, her dark eyes regarding me steadily. She was very pale, and her breath came a trifle fast, but there was no fear in her face—only anger and scorn that might well have shriveled me had I been the creature of her fancy. The light gleamed on her green dress, on its heavy silver broidery, and on the jewels at her throat; she had the look of a splendid statue. Madonna Francesca, all her brief courage gone now that her lady no longer needed her aid, was crouching against the wall with tears on her cheeks. I had entered, I thought, in a most quiet fashion—indeed, I fear my manner might have been described as foolish and shame-faced—but the clash of my spurs and the glitter of my cuirass proved too much for O'Meara's charming enchantress, who shrieked, ran forward, and flung herself kneeling beside Giulia, clutching with trembling fingers at her gown.

"Hush, Francesca, hush," said the Princess, putting an arm around her, but not withdrawing her straight gaze from mine. "Be calm, child. Are you afraid of such creatures as this man?" Her eyes burned me as she went on. "Sir John Hawkwood, I have sent for you to demand the meaning of this most dastardly and unknighly outrage done on me and my friend. You seize me in a public inn, you bring me to this place—where we are I do

not know, for I never saw this castle until to-night—you surround me with men who have the look of fiends! I, a woman, the cousin of the Prince of Verona! I who never dreamed that such horrors could be done! Speak, sir!" she cried, her anger growing at my silence. "I have asked you the meaning of this thing. Are you a false knight, a villain, a coward? Have you brought me here to murder me? Speak, do not stand there staring at me, you that are unworthy to rest your eyes upon me! Oh, it maddens me that I must breathe the same air with a thing as vile as you! Tell me why you have done this, what I must expect—then leave me, for your presence is more than I can bear!"

Her words were hard ones, yet I felt no resentment, for so I would have had her face the man who had served her as she believed with reason that I had done. Had Gianni Potrero succeeded in his attempt, had he stood where I stood now, then he would surely have deserved her anger and contempt; and what cause had she to know that I was better than Potrero? She was magnificently beautiful in her brave defiance—very different from her uncle, who had played the woman below and ridden away, abandoning her gladly to purchase his own safety. She was the man of her family, far more fitted to rule Verona than her foppish painted cousin Antonio, the last of the Scaligeri. I felt a rush of pride in her spirit, a desire to

salute her with my sword as I might have saluted a brave soldier whom I had met in battle.

“Princess,” I said quietly, “you do me great wrong, but I cannot blame you, since you know nothing of the causes of my action. Will you listen patiently to what I desire to tell you?”

“I have no wish to listen to you,” she cried passionately. “Tell me in a word what you desire of me. Will you kill me here? I do not doubt it; your soldiers have the air of men who would find murder a merry pastime! Will you hold me to ransom? That would be a plan worthy of Sir John Hawkwood, mercenary, free-lance, noble gentleman who sells his sword for scudi and auctions himself to all the rulers of Europe! Oh, I had not believed that any man who wore a knight’s spurs could do so vile a deed!”

There was rising irritation in my heart now. She had the right to feel anger at her capture, yes—but this harping on my trade, all these hard words as to my fighting, had begun to sting me. She was too proud, this girl. She had never learned that high birth may be a poor thing if unbolstered by something more. After all, it ill became those who bought my services to jeer at me for rendering them. I had brought her house great gain, and when all was said and done a trade in which I risked my life almost daily could not be wholly despicable.

“But I understand—it is not the knight who has

planned and carried out this pretty scheme," she continued bitterly. "It is the tanner's son, the peasant, the man who, here in Verona, would never have owned a sword, but would have been set to labor for his betters! Perhaps I have been too hard on you, after all—what should such as you know of truth and honor?"

I controlled myself with an effort. "Listen to me, Princess," I said coldly. "It is quite true that I am not of high birth, it is true that all my life has not been lived on a noble level. But I swear to you that when I brought you here to-day at risk of my own death, I did the noblest thing that I have ever done yet!"

"And a rare and knightly life yours has been, then, and an honor to chivalry," she cut me short, "if the capture of two helpless women may take such high rank among its deeds!"

"Princess," I said, with what grim patience I could muster, "if I were indeed the man you think me, you would serve yourself very ill by the uttering of such words!"

"Ah, Madonna Giulia, for the dear Virgin's sake let him be," Francesco moaned, pressing her face against her lady's dress in an agony of terror. "If you offend him, he can call in those horrible creatures from below-stairs, and then the saints alone know what might come to us! I saw their knives as they sat in the hall—great long knives, with such sharp blades as I shall see in my dreams

until I die! You are mad to speak as you do. Let us pay whatever ransom they desire; surely the Prince would rather his strong-box were drained dry than that we should be murdered here! I would give ten years of my life to be safe within the walls of Verona!"

"Hush, child," Giulia answered soothingly. "If we are to die, let us at least die bravely. Come, you will not let this man think that you fear him?"

"There is no need of any fear," I said, getting in my word at last. "You are safe here, both of you, and I swear that all I have done to-day has been in your service——"

"In our service! And how, pray? Such a tale is very credible, is it not?" the Princess scoffed mercilessly. "You take me from Verona, where I live in the royal palace, where my cousin protects me and all others serve me. You bring me to this wild deserted place, surround me with cutthroats, put me in the midst of such men as have never before stood in my presence!" She threw her eyes about the bare gloomy room, shivering in spite of herself. Only a dauntless resolution held her from despair, and I knew it, despite her brave front. "I could gladly dispense with such services, Sir John! But you have not yet informed me of your object. Is it ransom? Surely even one as base as you cannot have done this thing for pure diversion—you must have had a purpose?"

Oh, it was hopeless, the whole of it. I could have

groaned to think that I had ever hoped to persuade her of my honesty. If now I told her the tale from the beginning to the end, if I painted Antonio della Scala in all his baseness, would she credit a word of what I said? Only too well I knew that she would not. Had I possessed the tongues of angels, what I told her must needs be lost in the mere fact of the horror of her surroundings; she could never believe that I, who had brought her to this place and surrounded her with these men, had her welfare at heart. Nor could I honestly blame her. Cradled in luxury throughout her life, served and flattered from her birth, she had never known force or violence until now, and it was but natural she should hate and distrust me with all her heart. I shrugged my shoulders and set my teeth, and vowed that I would save her despite herself. I would hold this castle till the Florentines sent me succor; then she should go, well guarded, to Padua—and once there, Francesco Carrara would never let her escape. For years he had claimed her as his ward and schemed to get her in his power, and twice he had made unsuccessful attempts to seize her. He would guard her well, and when her first anger had passed she would be happy, for he was a kindly man and no doubt would show her all indulgence.

As I stood blackly reflecting, and she watched me coldly, we heard heavy footsteps in the gallery without, and after a moment Franz and Pierre ap-

peared at the door, one bearing food and wine and the other carrying a sadly broken table, found somewhere in the castle. "It was Messer O'Meara bade us come," Pierre explained hastily, as I wheeled about to see the meaning of the intrusion. "He said, Sir John, you would be wishing the two ladies to break fast after their long ride."

I welcomed the diversion. "A good thought," I answered. "Come, lay out the table. We are all worn with riding and will feel the better for food."

The two men moved busily about their work, throwing curious side-glances at the women, and no doubt racking their brains as to the meaning of the night's adventure. Francesca broke into renewed sobbing, and clung to the Princess as to her one hope in life, brokenly whispering prayers now to one saint and now to another, and promising endless quantities of offerings at their shrines should she ever see Verona again. Madonna Giulia stood rigid and motionless, but her dark eyes followed every movement of the two fellows with a resolutely controlled dread and horror that went to my heart. They were not such evil rogues, Franz and Pierre—indeed, I reckoned them among the best and most faithful of my troop. They were undeniably thieves, and would not have held back from murder had they seen any gain to be got that way, but they possessed a kind of dogged fidelity and a desperate courage that made me value them and even feel a vague fondness for them. Never-

theless, looking at them now, and putting myself by an effort of imagination in the place of my captives, I could not deny that they had all the air of most abandoned ruffians. The Fleming was swart and dark, with a trap-mouth, and a colorless face so seamed with scars that his own mother would not have known him had chance thrown her across his path. Franz, the great blond German, had the look of a reckless desperate giant, at odds with the world, and disposed to take vengeance on it for a thousand wrongs. I could well fancy the terror of two sheltered girls at finding themselves at the mercy of such men, in a castle far from any help or protection, and the thought softened me again toward the dauntless little lady who confronted dangers so far removed from her luxurious life, and never faltered or showed her fright.

I sent the men away when their work was done, and as they passed the door the Princess and Francesca breathed audible sighs of relief—though I have small doubt they both thought me well-nigh as formidable as my troopers. I had seen so many people gain courage by virtue of food and wine, so many tempers soothed by the same means, that I was inclined to bless O'Meara for his inspiration. No doubt, I told myself hopefully, when the Princess had eaten she would be more in a mood to listen patiently to what I had to tell her. With a determined effort at friendliness I waved her toward the table. "Come, sit, Madonna," I urged her.

"You are weary, and no wonder, for what you have endured to-day might well have tired a strong man."

She shook her head angrily. "I will not sit at table with you," she said, bitterly. "I will not break bread with you, Sir John Hawkwood. You have me here in your power, and you can kill me if you choose, but you can never make me deal on equal terms with a tanner's son and a cutthroat bravo!"

Again I shrugged, trying to hide from her how the words hurt me. Indeed, after a moment's reflection I forgot my own discomfiture in a kind of amused pity for her. She was white and tired, poor child, and the look she cast toward the table told me plainly enough that the roughly cooked meat—a dish which in the palace at Verona she would have rejected with scorn—tempted her not a little now. Yet she would go hungry sooner than sit down with me! Oh, she was very young, the pretty termagant, and it were foolishness on my part to take seriously a word she said. As for Madonna Francesca, that charming lady was apparently of a very different mind from her mistress.

"Oh, why should we refuse?" she whispered pathetically, staring with obvious longing at the steaming food. "We spite ourselves, not him—and after all, is it worse to sit at table with him than to stand in the room with him, as we needs must do as long as he chooses to remain? I have eaten nothing since early morning, and am near dead with hunger; and that meat has a good odor, while I

would give my rings for a sup of wine. Let us eat, Madonna Giulia. What good to go supperless from pride?"

"If you hesitate only from distaste to my company," I cut in, before the Princess could speak, "reassure yourselves, I beg. It was not my intention to sit down with you, and if you choose I will leave the room and remain away from you till your meal is ended. Will that content you, Princess? Only, I entreat, do not fast any longer, for you are not accustomed to such privations."

As I spoke I saw a quick change in her expression, a gleam in her eyes, followed immediately by a cautious glance at me to discover if I had noted it. Since I looked as stolid and grim as ever, she apparently took it for granted that I had seen nothing—but I had, and I was quite aware that a plan had come to her in that instant, and that she was going to set her wits against mine. Until now she had abandoned herself to unreasoning anger and defiance, but at length her mind was turning toward a means of escape. I could have smiled at the thought, so absurd did it seem that this girl should cope with me. After a moment she confirmed my guess by moving slowly and reluctantly toward the table, seating herself, and looking up at me with what she no doubt fancied was a softened air.

"After all, Sir John, it may be that I wrong you," she said, trying to keep the anger from her voice and render it gentle. "You say that you have

wished to serve me—it may be so, though I confess I do not understand. My cousin trusts you; surely you would not act altogether evilly to me who am kin to him.” She paused an instant as if to constrain herself to her part, then added, with an obvious effort, “Sit with us, Sir John, it is my desire.”

I seated myself at her right hand, suppressing a smile. Did she fancy that by softer words and cajolements she might persuade me to set her free? However, I was but too glad if for any cause she would cease raging at me and eat the food which she must sorely need after her wild ride and her swoon. I served her, and she thanked me with an effort at graciousness, then began to eat slowly and without looking at her plate. Not so Madonna Francesca, who fell on her share with avidity, and I think forgot for the nonce all her peril in the pleasant occupation of clearing her dish. As for me, I ate heartily, for I had a true soldier's appetite, and had yet to see the emotion that should put me out of temper with my supper. It was not the fare for dainty women, to be sure, but fatigue and hunger made a good sauce, and I heard no complaints.

For a time none of us spoke, and the silence, the ruddy fire, and the fact that a strange lull seemed to have fallen on us, set me dreaming. I began to eat more slowly, staring the while at the Princess as though I would have learned her face by heart. Surely she was the most beautiful thing

on which my eyes had ever rested, though in my long years of soldiering I had seen many foreign Courts and many famous and lovely ladies. Her black hair had dragged loose about her forehead; its soft shadow made her face seem whiter, her eyes darker, her lips more scarlet. I cursed myself bitterly for a fool, and tried to turn my thoughts to other things. Why had she changed her manner toward me so suddenly? It was not from any relenting, I was sure of it. Even now I could see that, despite her pretense at calm, she was laboring under great emotion.

Some movement of Madonna Francesca's roused her, and she looked up and caught my eye. "You said, Sir John," she began, still with that resolute pretense at graciousness, "that you would tell me of your reasons for all these strange doings. I am more myself now, and can hear you patiently. Will you not begin at once?"

"Surely, Princess," I answered readily. "It will be a hard tale for you to believe, I know that; but I swear to you by all I hold sacred that I will tell you nothing but the truth. And I think you may believe me, for the reason that I stand to gain nothing by what I have done, but rather to lose my life unless all goes according to my hopes. What I have to say, Madonna, concerns your cousin, Antonio della Scala——"

I broke off abruptly. At the beginning of my speech she had swayed close to me as if in eager at-

tention; but her face had held no consciousness of what I said, only a strained white look of intentness. And now, suddenly as a flash of lightning, her hand flew out, seized the handle of my dagger, and brought it hissing from its sheath. I caught the gleam of the steel poised above me, and heard a low terror-smitten cry from Madonna Francesca. Then, with the unconscious impulse of the trained soldier, I acted. My own hand went out mechanically, caught the Princess' wrist, and arrested it just as the dagger reached my breast. The sharp point tore the folds of my cloak, struck my cuirass, then stopped; and I stood breathing hard, my clutch still on the girl's arm, the bright blade still poised against me.

A hundred times I had been in danger of my life and had escaped only by a hair-breadth, but never had any attempt at killing struck me with such amazement and left me in a state of such bewildered emotion. She, the Princess, had tried to plunge my own dagger into my heart! The words beat themselves again and again in my ears, stunning me. I could not believe it—I would have fancied myself in a dream had not the light, flashing on the steel, given me visible proof of what had passed, and a hint at what might have been.

I had Madonna Giulia's wrist in my grasp. She stood motionless, staring at me in breathless fascination, as if waiting for me to strike her down. Under the pressure of my fingers her hand opened

and the dagger rang clattering at our feet. Our eyes met in a straight look, and her face drew into lines of desperate anger and despair; but even now she gave no sign of fear, nor did she make any effort to pull herself loose from my grasp. Madonna Francesca cried out and caught at my arm.

"So, Princess," I said slowly, looking at her, "you thought to kill me, eh? To stab me while I sat with you at the table, and while you shared my bread?"

She stared back at me, not pulling away, hardly seeming to breathe. "Yes, I thought to stab you," she said passionately. "Why not? You have imprisoned me for some evil purpose of your own—for all I know it may be your life or mine. I come of a race that can hate well, that strikes its enemies. Oh, have I not good cause to kill you, Sir John Hawkwood, you that have brought me to this horrible place for some horrible purpose?"

After a pause I laughed grimly and released her. She fell back a little, still staring at me wildly. I picked up my dagger, regarded the blade critically, and sheathed it, then strode across the room to the door, and with my foot on the threshold turned and looked back. Madonna Francesca had run to the Princess, and the two were clinging to each other, their eyes following me in fascinated wonder.

"It is a mistake, Princess," I said coolly, "to try to stab an old soldier who is far quicker with the dagger than any lady could be. I am used to such

attempts on my life, and I do not fear them—continue them, by all means, if the diversion consoles you. Only, I would advise you to consider this—had you killed me a moment since God alone can tell what would have been your fate; you would have been at the mercy of my devils below-stairs, and if once my hand were off them I do not like to consider how two dainty ladies would fare in their midst. Well, I see that since you look on me with such hatred, I should waste words in telling you the tale of why I brought you hither, so I will leave you to get your rest. Good-night.”

Turning on my heel, I left the room and swung the door shut behind me, and hardly had I crossed the gallery when I heard them forcing the rusty bolt into place.

CHAPTER X

AN ATTACK FROM WITHIN

THERE was little sleep for me that night. On leaving the Princess I went to the lower hall, supplemented what food I had consumed above by a second share of meat and wine, and then, after a conference with O'Meara, went over the castle from top to bottom to discover how well fitted it was for the standing of a siege. I was not ill satisfied with what I found. There were spots, to be sure, where the walls were thin and broken; but on the whole I fancied that, aided by the moat and the draw-bridge, I could make shift to hold the place for as long as our scant provisions lasted, unless Prince Antonio came against me with a large force and powerful cannon. And I thought he would not do this until he had wasted time in sending Gianni Potrero, or another troop of the same sort—and every hour gained was an aid to me, since in ten days or thereabouts I might look for succor from Florence. On reflection my spirits rose, and I began to feel that I had at least a fair chance of success.

I set some ten of my men on sentinel duty, bade the others get their rest, and sat down by the fire in the hall. O'Meara joined me and demanded an

account of my interview with the Princess, but I was in no mood for talk, and after expressing himself very freely on the subject of my taciturnity he went off in dudgeon to get what sleep he could. At intervals I made the rounds of the castle to see that my men were not failing in their duty and nodding at their posts. I found nothing of the sort, but nevertheless I failed to return from my wanderings with an easy mind, for it was plain to me that a spirit of discord was stirring in the place. When I came on two men together, they had their heads close, and were deep in some conference which, at sight of me, they broke off with an air half sheepish and half sullen. Their obedience to my orders was prompt enough, yet something in their manner told me plainly that they were out of sorts. The meaning of all this was easy to guess. There had been a deal of secret discussion as to why the Prince's cousin was our prisoner, and some of my troop had come to the conclusion that the business was not to their liking.

Returning to the hall, I kicked the fire and polished the hilt of my sword. If the next four and twenty hours did not find me with something very like a mutiny upon my hand, then I had lost all my shrewdness in reading signs and portents. A mutiny! And if I fell, as might happen easily enough should my free lances conclude that I was bringing them into trouble, what would then become of the Princess? Had I, after all, been mad to bring her

to this place? I shuddered to think what might chance if O'Meara and I were cut down, and the wild horde about us were left free to do their own will. However, it was useless for me to pass the night in worry. I needed all my strength if I were to bring this business to a successful termination; I had better try to sleep. I accordingly stretched myself near the fire with my cloak rolled into a pillow, but hardly had I closed my eyes when a new thought sent me to my feet in a cold chill. What if some among my men should try tampering with the Princess' door? I hastened up the stairs like one gone mad, and drew a free breath only when I found the gallery quite empty. In the end I stretched myself at full length close to the threshold, and as the stone paving was very chilly I cannot say that I have a pleasant recollection of the remainder of the night.

When at last I fell asleep it was dawn, and exhaustion kept my eyes shut until the sun was well up. Rising hastily, I stretched my cramped limbs, thought eagerly of breakfast, and descended to the lower hall, where various savory smells told me I might gratify my hunger. This done with, I bade O'Meara take food to the ladies, whom I had no intention of seeking that day. It was quite useless, I knew, to try to convince the Princess of my good faith, and I had resolved to make no further effort.

O'Meara did not return, and after finishing my meal in solitude I began to experience considerable

curiosity as to what he could be about. Yielding at last, I went quietly up the stairs, but paused with my foot on the topmost step, my mouth falling open in astonishment.

The door to the Princess' room was ajar, and Madonna Giulia was no doubt within; but Francesca and O'Meara had come out into the gallery. For a moment I smiled, thinking that I understood. Since Giulia had failed the night before in her attempt to crush me with her anger and her cold steel, no doubt her lady had determined to see if she might not have better luck in winning O'Meara over to their cause.

At the further end of the gallery, beneath a window looking out on the inner court, was a wide stone bench built into the wall; and on this lay Madonna Francesca in the most limp and pathetic heap imaginable, her misty golden hair dishevelled, her dark eyes full of tears, her pretty lips quivering in a fashion that might well have made any living man long to kiss them into smiles.

The Irishman stood before her, and at sight of him I came near to betraying my presence with a roar of mirth. It had long been my opinion, based on wide experience and observation, that Michael O'Meara was the equal in bravery of any of the numerous valiant men I had encountered in a long and warlike career. Nay, he was the better of most of them, for he had a love of danger for its own sake, a delight in peril, that many brave men lack.

I had seen him lead a charge against odds that seemed hopeless, I had seen him hold a pass single-handed with twenty men against him, I had seen him beat to a jelly a mutineer far larger and more formidable-looking than himself. But I must confess that to-day he came near to losing my high opinion for good and all; for never in my life had I beheld such a picture of abject cowardice as he now appeared before this little golden-haired lady, whose head, had she stood on the tips of her toes, could scarcely have reached the level of his shoulder.

"Ah," she sobbed, piteously enough, "I cannot believe it of you, Messer O'Meara, indeed I cannot. Only two days ago we were in the Prince's loggia, and you swore you loved me with all your heart and soul——"

"And I did that same," he protested passionately.

"Yet you have joined in this horrible plot to carry me off, to take me from Verona and my father and all my people, and lock me in this grim place among thieves and cutthroats, whose faces make me shiver——" Her voice broke into renewed sobbing. "All night I could not sleep for terror. Are we to be murdered here? Is that your purpose?"

"Heaven forbid," cried he. "You're as safe here as in a nunnery, mavourneen, while Sir John and I live to protect you——"

"Fie, never speak your evil captain's name in my presence," cried the girl. "I had thought you a

noble gentleman, Messer O'Meara—I had believed that if I were in peril you would risk your life to save me. Instead of that, you carry me off like any brigand. Ah, I see now that I was very wrong. You are a bravo, a cutthroat, like the men below and like your brave Sir John!" It struck me as rather inconsistent in the lady to herself mention the name she had chided him for uttering, but he did not appear to notice it. "Yes, my father was right, and I am well served for having been so disobedient as to fancy you. I have learned better now. If ever I get back to Verona in safety, I will be a dutiful daughter. I will never see you again, and I will wed with Lord Paolo Ravnani, as my father wishes. He is not a young man, Lord Paolo, but at least he does not carry maids off to prison. And he is handsome, and very rich—he could have had his choice among all the ladies at the Prince's Court—I was very foolish to show him coldness, or to listen to you for a moment when you came whispering in my ear!"

"Sure and you're not meaning a word of that," cried O'Meara, plainly undergoing the torments of the damned. "Listen, now—we mean no harm by you; 'tis myself would kill the man that touched a hair of your head. Never fret so, in the end all will come well. Can't you be trusting me, dear?"

She turned away from him pettishly. "I can never trust you again, I can never look on you without fear and horror," she informed him relent-

lessly. "Do you think I shall ever forget the ride you gave me yesterday? Ah, no, you do not love me, or you would not have risked dashing out my brains beneath your horse's hoofs. I am stiff and sore and frightened yet—and see how you bruised my finger against your steel vest! It is blue at the tip, you can see for yourself!" And she extended a little white hand with an intensely tragic gesture.

The utter horror that instantly depicted itself on O'Meara's face appeared to mollify her slightly, and amused me to such a point that I came near betraying my presence by a burst of laughter. A bruised finger, indeed! The Irishman was accustomed to see blood run like water, and I had seen him take wounds that were near mortal with never a groan; yet his anguished solicitude was as sincere as though he were some young girl who had never looked on a bare blade. Ah, well, his case was quite hopeless. This merry, dauntless, hard-riding, hard-hitting comrade of mine was utterly at the mercy of a flouting, pouting girl, who held his heart in her hand and wrung it for her diversion. Nevertheless, any one less blinded by love than himself could have guessed that she was very far from disliking him, and I fancied that if we all won through the perilous pass where we now stood it was very likely that Madonna Francesca di Montalto would choose for her lord and master a penniless soldier of fortune, setting aside in his favor a Veronese

noble whom every lady at the Prince's Court might well have envied her.

I left the two at their wrangling and made the round of the castle, finding nothing that heartened me greatly. The dissatisfaction of the men had grown in the night; that was plain enough to be read by any one with eyes. Presently there would be an outbreak—and I found myself looking forward to it with an uneasiness I had never felt before in time of peril. Women, I reflected angrily, were a sore drag to any enterprise; their presence doubled the danger, made the thought of failure a hundred times more terrible. I gave no sign that I perceived anything ominous in the wind, but strode about briskly, praising some, rating others who appeared laggards, giving curt orders after my usual fashion. The men toward whom my eyes were turned assumed for the moment an air of ready obedience, but I knew that the instant my gaze was off them they fell to grumbling and plotting behind my back. The air had the still tenseness of a coming storm. And if my own troopers turned against me, how was I to hold the castle against Antonio?

Weary and disheartened, I went up on the battlements and lay stretched out in the sun, gazing across the black woods and the fertile country that melted away in the distance. How soon might I hope to see the Florentine troop come across that stretch of land to help me in my need? And what if, for reasons of policy, they should forget my

old services and fail me? I decided that it was best not to consider this possibility. Come what might, having gone thus far I must go further, and save the Princess.

I had been reflecting in melancholy solitude for perhaps an hour when hurrying footsteps sounded near me and Pierre came rushing into sight. "Sir John, Sir John," he cried eagerly, "come below, I beg you! Messer O'Meara has sent me to summon you. It is the men—curse them, they have gone mad! They say you have betrayed them and turned the Prince against them. Last night they saw the jewels that the Princess wore, and now they swear to seize them and divide them, and scatter over Italy to seek fortune where they may. But first they will kill you and Messer O'Meara, and as for the women——"

I waited for no more, but darted down the stairs with him at my heels. There was a ringing in my ears, a quick darkness before my eyes. Not on my own account, let me do myself that justice; for myself, I was well used to danger and looked for no other fate than to die some day by the sword; nor was my life so noble a thing that I would have grieved greatly over the losing of it. But the Princess! Had I brought her here that she might fall into the hands of men like my mercenaries? Better a thousand times that I had left her to Antonio della Scala! The thought lent wings to my feet as I hurried down into the castle.

The murmur of voices told me that the men were gathered in the gallery. No doubt they had swarmed up the stairs to break in Madonna Giulia's door and help themselves to her jewels. As I drew nearer I caught the angry note in their tones, the accent of unbridled lawlessness that spelt terrible danger. For a moment I paused on the stairs, knowing better than to burst in upon them with any appearance of haste and fright; and in that moment my anxiety seemed to pass away like a cloud, leaving me confident of my power to rule the storm. I had subdued these cutthroats before in time of peril, I would do the same again. There must be no failure—for the Princess' sake!

A great crash fell on my ears, followed by a hoarse evil shout of triumph. Delaying no longer, I left the stairs and strode into the gallery.

The crash had been caused by the breaking in of the Princess' door, which had flown into splinters. The men were surging forward now, then giving back slightly, for in the opening stood O'Meara, his face white with anger, his eyes blazing, and his drawn sword flashing in his hand. Behind him stood Madonna Giulia. She was very pale and had a look of restrained horror, but held herself proudly erect and made no sign of fear. Francesca was clinging to her in terror, trembling and hiding her face.

"God curse ye all for a set of cowardly devils," O'Meara was crying fiercely. "Come on, then—

come on, and taste cold steel! Never fear, Princess—and you, mavourneen, keep up heart,” he encouraged the ladies, across his shoulder. “’Tis Sir John will be after settling the knaves in the wink of an eye when he comes. Ah, would ye, you sons of perdition? ’Tis black shame you bring on the name of the White Company with such doings as these. Now glory be, here’s Sir John!” He gave a war-whoop of delight at seeing me. “All’s well now,” he went on to the ladies, with an easy assurance most flattering to my powers. “Now there’ll be no more danger at all, at all. Make yourselves easy, and never trouble to look any more at these dogs.”

I strode across the gallery, straight through the crowd, which parted instinctively to give me room. I had reached O’Meara and the doorway before one of the men shrieked out, bidding the others cut me off and end me with a dagger-thrust. Again they surged forward, and I looked on a circle of fierce evil faces full of the dangerous passions of the wild beast. All were armed; I caught the flash of many a ragged-looking knife and many a keen cutlass. Instinctively I turned my head for a glance at the Princess. Her eyes had the look of one who gazed on a vision of hell, nor did they change as they rested on me. To her I was but of the rest, as evil as they, as brutal. And I have no doubt I appeared so in that instant, for I had learned long ago that the only fashion in which

one might rule a band of wild ruffians like my free lances was by playing the part of a wilder ruffian than the greatest among them; and I confronted them now with a look fierce and grim enough to put their swagger to shame.

“Well!” I said sternly. “And what does this mean, I should be glad to hear? I commanded that this gallery should be kept empty; I come down to find my entire force assembled in it, and a door broken to bits. Who is to blame, then? Who has led you? Faith, I would not choose to stand in his boots, for by my knightly spurs I will have him beaten to a jelly for this day’s work. Answer me, you dogs—what does this thing mean, and on whose suggestion did you act?”

They kept silence for a moment. They had come there with their minds fully made up to kill me, yet so strong is the habit of obedience that my unmoved front made them quail. Had I turned pale or hesitated ever so little, then they would surely have fallen on me and struck me down, and the Princess’ fate would have been irrevocably sealed. Since I confronted them threateningly, they looked half shame-faced, and no one seemed anxious to make the first move against the door.

“Well, am I to stand here forever staring at you?” I demanded, and backed the question with such a volley of camp oaths as no doubt offended the Princess more than the sight of steel. “Have you lost your tongues? You have lost your courage, at

least, I see. And you have good cause to lose it, for you shall all pay for this! What, is there no one of you that dares stand forward and face me? Faugh, you are all girls, unfit to wear swords and bestride horses! Rally up your spirits, find a spokesman who will dare tell me what all this may mean!"

My jibes had some effect on them. There was a growl of threatening anger, and, encouraged by the sound, the leader ventured to step forward. It was Jacques, as I had guessed from the beginning. For a long time I had known him for a malcontent, urging the others on to small acts of rebellion, plotting for a time when he might get a large enough following to leave me and turn into a leader of free companions on his own account. I had kept him down with a strong hand, and he had many a grudge against me to pay off. Knowing him as I did, I felt anew the danger of the moment. If I failed, if Madonna Giulia fell into this man's hands——

"So, it is you!" I cried contemptuously, as he came a pace forward. "A pity they could get no better leader! Let me tell you, my friend, an hour from now there will not be an inch of skin left on your back, so flaunt your time while you may, and act the hero! Go on—have you no tongue, after all?"

For a moment he quailed, then laughed maliciously. "My back is safe enough, mon capitaine,"

he mocked. "In an hour—in a half-hour—nay, in half of that—you will be dead. We have had enough of you, we are finished with the White Company. When you are gone, and we have amused ourselves for a time with the women, we will go back to France and take service there. Say a prayer, Sir John, if you have not forgotten the art. We will give you a moment to save your soul!" The others, surging forward ominously, laughed in an evil fashion at the jest.

"I am not dead yet," I said coolly, "nor do I think that such rogues as you can ever kill me. But come, you make me curious. Why is it that you are all so angered against me?" And I began to rock on my heels, laughing as at the best joke in the world.

"Because you are a traitor to us, *mon capitaine*," the ruffian answered, showing his teeth in a snarling smile. "You turned against Prince Antonio, giving us no warning of it, and embarked in this scheme against his cousin. Now our lives are not worth a pin here in Verona. Very good, we will put you out of our way, we will show the Princess good cheer, and then we will shake the dust of Verona from our heels and go where we shall be safe. You have put all our heads into a noose, but it is only your neck that will be wrung. What do you say to that, Sir John Hawkwood?" He had come quite close to me, and was sneering maliciously into my face.

The situation was desperate, and I took the only possible course, one which might, I knew, bring ruin on us, or might perhaps save us—there was no guessing which. “What do I say?” I retorted. “I say that you need a lesson in the proper fashion of address to use to your captain, and that I shall give it to you!” And I caught him by the back of the neck and began to beat him lustily with the flat of my sword.

At his cry of rage and pain I was quite sure that his comrades would sweep forward and annihilate me; but they did nothing of the sort. Jacques was not too well loved among them, though he had a large following in his rebellion, and I have small doubt it was the general sentiment that one as boastful as he should be able to defend himself. Since he was apparently capable of doing nothing more than to struggle helplessly in my grasp and yell to them for succor, they at once experienced a feeling of contempt for him, and an added respect for me. For the moment, at least, my bold move had succeeded even according to my hopes.

“Have you more to say, you dog?” I asked grimly, through my teeth, as I belabored him. “Then let us hear it, by all means. Are you turned coward already? You would make a better monk than soldier! Another time you will mind your manners with me, I think!” And I added another string of oaths for the benefit of my hearers, who thought no speech emphatic which was not so garnished. “Well,

is your lesson learned, or will you have more? Ah, would you then, knave?"

He had made a desperate clutch at his dagger and got it out of its sheath; seeing which, and none too soon, I struck him full across the side of the head with the hilt of my sword, and he fell like a log at my feet, in a dead swoon. I kicked the body out of my way.

"Well," I said coolly, turning to confront the others, "and who comes next to question me?"

No one answered me. Had they rushed me where I stood, as I had looked for them to do, nothing on earth could have saved me. O'Meara and I stood alone, two against two-score. But it is a strange fact that sheer daring and defiance may sometimes cow better than numbers; and, as I looked about the circle, a feeling of triumph ran through my veins like wine, and I knew that there was at least a chance that I might win through and save the Princess.

There were men at the rear of the crowd who had taken no part in the tumult, who had merely waited to see how the tide would turn. These, I knew, were not unfriendly to me. Others were well enough disposed save for a natural anger at the thought that I had led them into danger of the Prince's vengeance for some purpose of my own. If I could appease them all might yet go well with my enterprise.

There was a movement in the crowd, and Pierre came through and faced me. "I hope, Sir John,

you'll not use me as you did Jacques," he said, kicking contemptuously at the fallen man, and grinning broadly, "but I'd like to ask you a question of my own. You've led us for years now, and if in some ways you've been a hard master, you've been a just one too. You've played us fair, and never tricked us. I believe the same of you now. We can't tell why you have the Prince's cousin here a prisoner, but I'll never believe you are leading us into danger without good reason. Just tell me as much, and say that you mean to play us fair, and I'll stand for you against any odds that come."

The time for close-mouthed defiance had passed. If the storm were to blow over, I must quiet these fellows with some plausible explanation of my strange actions; and after an instant's reflection I hit upon the very thing. To be sure, it would not be truth, and it is the bounden duty of all knights to scorn false statements. As a common thing I was as truthful as any other man, but in the present situation, with the lives of us all hanging on the fall of the dice, I admit without shame that I would have sworn away my soul if I could thereby have added one iota to the Princess' safety.

"Why, you fools," I began, with an appearance of bluff heartiness, "I am leading you into no danger at all, though I will admit the enterprise is a trifle difficult. Since you have come to your senses and ceased to threaten me, I am willing enough to tell you the meaning of it all. A short time since I

overheard Prince Antonio conferring with Della Torre, and learned that he was weary of my services and had it in mind to turn me off. That was a poor prospect both for me and for you, eh? so I looked about for a way to better it. Well, I knew that this lady was kin to the Duke of Padua, who claims her as his ward and has long tried to get possession of her; and I fancied he might be willing to give a rich reward to those who put her in his hands. I held secret communication with him, and arranged the terms—then I carried off the lady. We are to hold her safely here until the Duke sends a strong escort to bring us safely into Padua, where we will be well treated, I can promise you. Come, is not this better than waiting in Verona until Prince Antonio is pleased to turn us adrift? And have I not a shrewder head than this fellow Jacques, who would have persuaded you that I had some trick in mind? To be sure, there is risk and danger in the business; but you are not afraid to venture something in hope of gain, I know of old; and our reward will pay us well for all our trouble. Are you content?"

I heard the Princess give a low gasp behind me, but for the moment I paid her no heed at all. I was looking with desperate eagerness at the troopers to see if they accepted what I had said. If they did, all was well. Fired by the hope of gain, they would defend the castle like madmen against any force that the Prince might send out to take it, and

we would be safe until the Florentine men came to my aid. After that, I cared very little how soon they knew that I had tricked them in my tale. Could it be that the danger had blown over?

It had. They were accustomed to reckless desperate enterprises, and what I had told them sounded reasonable enough. After conferring for a time they began to give back sheepishly, some of them cursing Antonio for his plan to throw us over, and congratulating themselves on the rare revenge of robbing him of his cousin; others guessing how much Francesco Carrara would give for so great a service. Presently, too, they began to cast furtive glances at me, as if uncertain how I might be inclined to visit my anger at their unruliness upon them. "Oh, we were fools to doubt you, Sir John. You have a better head than any of us," one of the ring-leaders muttered apologetically.

"You will be fools if you do it twice, for I shall not be so patient again!" I answered grimly. "For the present I will be indulgent—after all, you had some cause for suspicion, and this dog Jacques stirred you up for his own ends. Take yourselves off, you had better, while I stay in a good-natured mood!"

They obeyed me with cheers and glances of admiration, and in a moment the gallery was empty.

CHAPTER XI

THE COMING OF VIOLANTE

WHEN the last man had clattered down the stairs I swung about on my heel and faced the three who had stood behind me throughout the episode. O'Meara had, it struck me, appeared to enjoy himself a great deal more than the circumstances warranted. On my coming all feeling of responsibility and anxiety had seemed to leave him, and he had leaned calmly on the wall, watching my struggles with a merry glint in his blue eyes, and laughing heartily when I pommeled Jacques into submission. Now that all was over he sheathed his sword, then flung his arms about me and favored me with a bear's embrace which came near making my ribs crack.

"Glory be, 'twas yourself settled them in no time, just as I was after telling the ladies you would," he rejoiced, loosening me, and executing a dance about the gallery in his excitement. "But the affair was a close one, do you know that? May we never be nearer dying till our last day comes! Faith and I knew you'd best them in the end, but at one time I was mortal afraid they'd kill you first," he

rattled on, twisting his speech into such absurdities as only an excited Irishman could have uttered.

“Oh, hold your tongue, Michael,” I said curtly, turning to the ladies. Francesca was on her knees with her face in her hands, offering up fervent prayers in gratitude for her safety. As for the Princess, she was standing proudly erect just within the door; her pale face was turned toward me, and in its every feature breathed such an indignant contempt as I shall never forget.

“So now at last I have learned the truth, Sir John Hawkwood,” she said in a low voice that trembled curiously with emotion. “You have taken a bribe from the Duke of Padua to seize me and bring me to him. Now I understand.”

For an instant I did not answer her. Perhaps I had cherished some vague hope that the manner in which I had saved her from imminent death might a little soften her toward me—might perhaps even lead her to say a proud word of thanks. The scorn and anger in her face hurt me sharply, hurt me as the knives of my free lances could never have done.

She continued to look at me with a searching disdain. “Listen, sir,” she said presently, in the tone which she might have used to a dog. “I understand you very well now. You care only for money. Honor, knightliness, chivalry—all these are nothing to you; but golden coins are a great deal. Good—

I will make you an offer, as I might make one to a merchant. I am not as rich as the Duke of Padua, but nevertheless I have much gold. Tell me what Francesco Carrara has promised you for this pretty business, and I will give you double the sum to set me free."

I bowed low to her. "Thank you, Madonna," I said, with a bitter laugh. "Remember that even a man as vile as I may have some scruples, may not care to betray the master whose enterprise he has undertaken. I believe that even my enemies do not deny me this one virtue."

Her face twisted suddenly. "How can it be, how can it be!" she cried, turning away from me passionately. "Is there no good in you, that you treat a helpless girl so for your own gain? Have you no shred of knightliness, you that wear a knight's spurs?" She confronted me again, and this time her eyes were kinder. "When you stood between me and that crowd of cutthroats, Sir John Hawkwood, my heart softened to you. I thought, at least he is a brave man, at least he does not fear to risk his life. And a moment later I heard from your own lips for what base motive you had brought me here. It is too much; I cannot believe that any man can fall so low!"

"Madonna Giulia," I cried, "listen to me. What I told the men was but a tale of my own inventing, a means to pacify them and turn them off. Do you not understand? My motive is different——"

Her face hardened again. "I do not believe you!" she flung at me. "By your own confession you have lied either to me or to your troopers, and I have no trust for a knight who lies. Do your will with me, I cannot escape you; I am a helpless woman who cannot wield a sword——"

"Small matter for that, Princess, when you possess a tongue!" I retorted, stung out of my manners. "Since you choose to disbelieve me, I will say no more. *Liar* is no pretty word, and since you use it to me it is as well you are a helpless girl and not a man with a sword! We waste time chattering here. Since your door is broken down, I must beg you to cross the gallery and enter the room there at the right. One of the men shall build a fire in it to drive away the chill, though I think the sun has already warmed it well enough."

She hesitated for a moment, looking as if she would speak again; but my grim manner silenced her. She was turning away when Pierre came hastily into the gallery.

"Your pardon, Sir John," he cried, much excited, "but a small company of horsemen are coming from the direction of Verona. I have seen them from the battlements. What they want I cannot guess, for they are not enough to storm the castle——"

"Wait for me below," I cut him short. Then, striding across the gallery, I opened the door of the room I had chosen for the ladies, bowed to them, and awaited their entrance. The Princess

stood motionless, her color risen, her eyes bright as stars.

"Men are coming from Verona!" she cried. "They are coming to find me, to free me—is it not so?"

"That, Princess," I answered coldly, "is what I propose to descend and discover, if you will first oblige me by entering this room."

"You will keep me imprisoned here?" she cried angrily. "You will let me know nothing of this party that has ridden here to help me?"

"It would do you no good at all to see them," I answered. "For depend upon it, Princess, whatever troop of horsemen ride to Castel Paura to effect your liberty will turn their horses' heads back to Verona with their object unfulfilled!"

Our eyes met in a clashing glance. "You have the right of force, Sir John Hawkwood," she said coldly, taking Francesca's hand in hers and drawing the girl forward. They entered the room together, and I closed the door and drew the outer bolt.

"Come," I said quickly to O'Meara, and we ran swiftly up to the battlements of the castle.

Off in the distance a small group of horsemen were riding in the direction of our stronghold. They might have been a dozen, not more. "There is no danger," I said to the Irishman, drawing a breath of relief as my eye ranged over them. "But what can it mean? Why are they coming here?"

As we looked they put spurs to their horses and

came on at a good pace. Now they were near the edge of the wood, and I could see the gleam of the sunlight on bright half-armor and cloaks and plumes. It was a gaily dressed little party that was coming to pay us a visit. O'Meara muttered an oath and caught my arm. "Do you see—do you see?" he cried excitedly. "'Tis a woman there in the midst of them! Now, be all that's wonderful, Sir John, can you tell me what it is that a woman's wanting here?"

"I can tell you that she is here for no good purpose," I said curtly, "for I have just recognized her as Madonna Violante, Della Torre's wife, and of all women I have ever seen she is the most dangerous. And yet, why should she come? It would have been more to the point had they sent a troop of experienced soldiers."

"Maybe so, and maybe not," said O'Meara, with a wise shake of his head. "'Tis my theory that the most dangerous soldier in the world is not a soldier at all, but a woman. What is it you'll be doing, Sir John? You'll not let her put her head inside these doors, I'm thinking?"

"We will see what is in the wind," I answered. "Let us go down into the court and set Pierre to parleying with them across the moat."

The little party soon reached the castle, and made known their desire for a conference by sounding a horn. I sent Pierre to demand their business, and that worthy presently returned with a puzzled face.

“It is my Lord Ranucio della Torre, Sir John—the Prince’s favorite,” he told me. “He wants speech with you, and begs permission to enter with two of his party. He will tell me nothing of his business.”

O’Meara and I stared at each other, considerably mystified. However, in such an offer the risk lay all on Della Torre’s side, since three people would be utterly at my mercy once they had entered the castle. “Lower the draw-bridge and let them in,” I commanded, “but take care that no more than three pass the portcullis.”

My orders were promptly obeyed, and a moment later I heard the hoofs of the horses rattling on the crazy draw-bridge. My troopers came thronging into the court-yard in great excitement, and I let them remain, not being averse to a display of strength in the presence of the Prince’s envoy. There was much struggling and pressing and fighting for place as the three visitors rode slowly in among us.

Della Torre came first, a splendid sight, as always. He was superbly mounted, and dressed in the same gold and scarlet habit which he had worn the previous day at the hunt. I must do him the justice, too, to admit that he showed not a little courage, for though he and I were old enemies, and the odds stood at present entirely on my side, he appeared as serene and haughty as though he were riding into the royal palace at Verona. I had seen

very great gentlemen look less at ease when surrounded by my grim-faced ruffians, and much as I detested my Lord Ranucio I admitted inwardly that he was no coward.

Madonna Violante followed him, glittering in gold and purple, holding her head high and gazing through us as if we did not exist. At sight of her a cold shiver ran over me, a presentiment of evil. I could have sworn that she had some evil purpose in mind, and that harm to me would come of her visit. And yet what harm could come? Truly, I was growing womanish; I had never felt such qualms on any former enterprise. Hastily I turned to look at the third arrival, who proved to be no other than Gianni Potrero.

There was a moment's silence, then I stepped forward and swept off my plumed hat in a low bow. "Welcome, my lady—welcome, my lord the favorite, and you, sir knight of the noble order of bravoes!" I cried, saluting each in turn. "Truly, strange things come to pass, do they not? Who would have guessed that one day Sir John Hawkwood would receive so noble a party in his own castle—that the great Della Torre would be kept waiting at the moat? Well, and how can I serve you, that you deign to flatter me by taking note of my existence?"

Messer Gianni gave me a very black look and muttered something inaudible, while Madonna Violante stared through me as though I were made of

air. As for Della Torre, he dismounted slowly, came forward a step, and spoke in a remote indifferent fashion. "Sir John Hawkwood," he said, "I have not come here to talk of your mad and fatal act, your seizure of the royal lady who is cousin to the Prince of Verona. You know your own motive in such a deed, you know the consequences which must come of it—but all that you will settle later with Prince Antonio. I have come here to-day at my master's bidding to demand one thing of you, which, if you possess any honor, you cannot refuse."

"Well?" I asked curtly. "Come to the point, man! It is plainly to be seen you are no soldier, you waste so much good time in words."

He flushed and gave me an angry glance. "Prince Antonio is filled with anguish at the brutal seizure of his cousin," he said, trying to resume his measured fashion of speech, "and is half-mad with anxiety for her welfare. If you are not false to your vows of knighthood, Sir John, if you have any spark of chivalry left in your nature, you will allow Madonna Violante to speak alone with the Princess and to learn from her own lips whether she has come to any harm."

So this was their object! I stood in silence for a time, reflecting. Every instinct bade me refuse to grant the interview, for I was sure that some deep plot underlay the seemingly simple request. An insistent inner voice told me plainly that I should

do well to give them a curt refusal and send them packing from the castle. And yet my reckless pride would not allow it. I hated Della Torre, I hated Violante, and I would not have them think that I feared them or anything that they might do.

I turned to O'Meara, who had stood at my elbow throughout the scene. "Go to the Princess," I bade him, "tell her what has passed, and ask her if it is her desire to speak with Madonna Violante. If she wishes for an interview, the matter is all one to me."

"I trust, Sir John, that this is not a trick," Della Torre sneered, as Michael left us. "I know something of that Irishman of yours—he would swear black was white at your bidding. Perhaps he will dally for a few minutes just within the castle door, then return and inform us that the Princess has no wish for our company!"

"Pray do not judge Messer O'Meara by yourself, my lord!" I answered politely. "I am well aware that it is your business to lie in your master's service, and that you do it with great success; but it is an accomplishment that I have never required from my followers."

A guffaw from my troopers pointed the remark, and increased Della Torre's fury. He fingered his sword-hilt, then controlled himself with an effort. "You use insult safely, Sir John Hawkwood," he told me, in a voice thickened with passion. "You know very well that I cannot stoop to fight you."

“Perhaps it is more prudent in you to refrain,” I mocked. “You remember, no doubt, how I served your friend Lord Raimondo; you have no taste for a similar experience——”

“I prefer to wait,” he answered, white with fury, “and see the business done by hands more fit than mine to touch you. The Prince has some pleasant plans for your end, Sir John. You recall how he served the traitor Cagliari? Your death will be more lingering still——”

“He has not caught me yet,” I pointed out. “Keep your sympathy till it is needed, my good friend. Is it the wheel he plans for me, or will he despatch me secretly with a dagger-thrust? I have heard that the latter is his favorite device. Was it not so that you and he rid Verona of Bartolomeo della Scala?”

His pallor told me that the blow had gone home. He recovered himself, however, and was about to favor me with a fierce retort when O’Meara’s voice announced from behind us that the Princess desired instant speech with Madonna Violante. I shrugged my shoulders and bit my lip, for I had entertained a feeble hope that she might refuse. She had no love for the favorite’s shrewd scheming wife, I was sure of that, and would never have sought her company in the days when she was safe in Verona; but now, imprisoned among wild free lances in a deserted castle, no doubt she turned with eagerness toward the woman who came to her from her home. Moreover, I suspected—perhaps I was wrong, but I do

not think so—that she possessed perversity enough to take pleasure in sending a message likely to be the contrary of what I would have desired.

Della Torre went over to his wife, assisted her gallantly to dismount, and offered her his arm to lead her into the castle. I waved him back. "Messer O'Meara will escort the Lady Violante to the Princess," I stated coldly. "You, my lord, will remain here."

For the second time Della Torre flinched. His wife was the one person in the world for whom he felt real tenderness, and to see her go without him into a castle garrisoned with wild mercenaries hurt him as few other things could have done. For an instant I thought him about to refuse to let her go, but she had no thought of retreat, and it was she who ruled.

"What matter, my lord?" she said to her husband, gently loosening his clasp. "I am not afraid. Sir John Hawkwood, I see, enjoys the giving of orders and the regulating of trifles. Well, surely it would be cruel in us to deny him this pleasure—he will have so short a time to play the master!" She gave me a contemptuous glance, then swept into the castle, her head high. I admitted inwardly that Madonna Violante, also, was no coward. O'Meara accompanied her, looking rather grim, and displaying none of the extremely gallant air he usually exhibited in the presence of a beautiful lady.

For a time there was silence save for the whis-pers of my staring troopers. Della Torre was obviously uneasy, Messer Gianni in the sulks. Being none too happy myself, I decided to divert myself with some further exchange of wit with these two.

“Well, now, Potrero,” I began, “tell me frankly, as one soldier to another, did you not admire the pretty fashion in which I seized your prey from under your nose at the inn yesterday? Never look so black—it was a fair fight. If you are a true soldier you will never bear malice. On my honor, I think I could not have done it more neatly, could I?”

He scowled furiously. “He laughs best who laughs last, Sir John,” he muttered. “My day will come, and very soon. Yes, you played me a pretty trick, but for all that I would not like to stand in your boots now!”

“You speak very mysteriously. I see you have a plot in progress against me,” I remarked. “Faith, I am glad to be quit of the Veronese Court—never did I see a place so full of plots; they make the head of a plain blunt Englishman turn round. There is Della Torre, for instance. Two days ago he was plotting with his wife to forge a packet in my hand, convey it to the Prince’s notice, and so convict me of conspiracy with Padua and put me from his way forever!”

Della Torre turned white as death and gazed at

me as at an apparition from the grave. Taken utterly by surprise, for once he showed his true emotions without concealment, and no one who saw him then could have doubted his guilt for an instant.

"You are mad!" he muttered through dry lips, after a long moment of frightened silence which I enjoyed to the full. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that a man should not plan such evil tricks in an open loggia where he may well be overheard," I answered airily. "There, pluck up heart, man. It matters nothing whether I know your plot or am in ignorance of it, for you will not need it now—I have put myself from your way of my own accord. You look extremely foolish, Della Torre. If the Prince could see you now I think he would regret that he ever gave his favor to a person who so much resembled an imbecile. Take my counsel—if you must blacken your noble soul with such schemes, at least school yourself to meet discovery without such a look of guilt!"

"Keep your advice," he answered rudely, recovering himself. "Do not waste your wits on me, you will need them all before long to save yourself. It is you that are the fool, Sir John Hawkwood. Had you flattered the Prince and done all he bade you, in time you might have risen to be his favorite—you might have supplanted me, and ruled Verona! Instead, you have chosen to stake your life on this mad enterprise, the saints know why, and you will

come to such an end as will make you envy the traitor Cagliari!"

"That is as may be," I answered, shrugging. "Whatever my fate proves I shall never envy you, my Lord Ranucio. But here is Madonna Violante returned to bear witness that I have not cut the Princess' throat or robbed her of her jewels."

Della Torre's wife paused beside us, as calm and composed as ever. "The Princess is unhurt," she said to her husband, "and has met with no injury save the outrage of the seizure, for which this man must answer to the Prince. Come, we have done our errand, let us get back to Verona."

Della Torre helped her to her horse, mounted his own, and made me a low and mocking bow. "Farewell, Sir John," he sneered. "We give you thanks for your courtesy. When we meet again, I think we shall stand on a very different footing!"

"Since truthfulness and plain-speaking are a soldier's virtues," I answered coolly, "I must tell you with all frankness that it would not greatly displease me were we never to meet again."

"I believe it," he cried, with a mocking laugh, "but the Prince desires otherwise—and the Prince's will be done, say I!" Again he saluted me, and they moved slowly out of the court-yard.

I turned to O'Meara. "She did not come here to pass the time of day with the Princess," I said, knitting my brows. "Why did she come, then? What have they got in their minds?"

He shook his head. "Sorra the day, I've no power to read thoughts; but it's mischief," he said positively. "Ah, I hate her, that woman. Were I Della Torre, I would have cut her throat the day after the wedding, except for the fact that I would never have wedded her at all!"

CHAPTER XII

THE WAITING

THE day passed uneventfully, and the night, and the next day. I began to doubt my senses. Was it possible that Antonio della Scala meant to make no move to rescue his cousin and take vengeance on me? I had thought that long before this a strong body of troopers, under Potrero or another of his sort, would have swooped down upon me and given me an evil hour by storming my walls. Instead, I was left in undisturbed possession, and the peaceful visit of Della Torre and his wife had been the only notice given to the Princess' capture. I held many a conference with O'Meara on the subject, and for once that ready-witted Irishman owned himself completely at a loss and unable to suggest a solution. I tried to cheer myself with all manner of reasoning, but when all was said and done the fact remained that I was not satisfied. Under this inactivity lay something that menaced me—something that I would learn when it was too late.

Madonna Violante's coming had one visible result; it wrought a change in the Princess' behavior. Hardly had the little troop ridden away from the

castle when she sent for me, and asked me, with the stiffness of one more accustomed to commanding than to entreating, if I would not cease to keep her behind a bolted door. "You are shrewd enough to know, Sir John, that two helpless girls cannot fly across a moat," she said, with some scorn, "and therefore you surely need not fear to let us go where we please within the castle walls. I am not accustomed to imprisonment, and it wearies me. As for Madonna Francesca, she is pining like a bird in a cage."

I was willing enough to grant her request, for, now that my men believed they were to gain a rich reward for taking her to Padua, she was quite safe from any molestation at their hands. "Surely, Princess, go where you please," I answered. "I would have given you the freedom of the castle sooner had I guessed you would care to wander about it."

She shrugged slightly. "There is small good in moping over what cannot be helped," she said coldly. "Very soon my cousin will free me from this hateful prison, but in the meantime I know not why I should sicken myself by staying within four walls. Come, Francesca, we will go on the battlements and breathe spring air again, since our gaoler is pleased to be merciful." She passed me with the hint of a scornful curtsy, and Francesca followed her out to the stairs.

After that they roamed the castle at their will, much to my amazement, for I would never have

guessed that one so proud as the Princess would have chosen to go about among such men as my free companions. More than once I found her questioning one of them in her haughty fashion, and getting answers that were roughly civil. Most of the time she sat on the battlements gazing off in the direction of Verona. O'Meara was often with them, for the sight of Francesca seemed to draw him like a magnet; and though the Princess treated him very coldly at first, I think she ended by liking him, as indeed few people in the world could have failed to do after a brief acquaintance.

As for me, I held to myself, and spent my time in solitude. If there were hours when I longed to join the group, if at times the Princess' proud pale face beckoned me even as Francesca's merry mocking eyes drew the Irishman, I was too proud to yield. She scorned me and distrusted me, when I was freely risking my life to help her. Very good, she should not have my hateful company to endure. I preferred to pass lonely hours in the castle hall, thinking of many things, wishing vaguely that I might wipe out ten years of my life and live them over in a different fashion. Then the sound of O'Meara's rollicking tones raised in song would come to me from the distance, followed by Francesca's merry laugh, or sometimes by a few words in a sweet proud voice that I knew for Madonna Giulia's. Oh, I was not too happy, and if there were sins in my life I think I paid the price of them in

those days when I held the Princess prisoner for the sake of her own good.

It was near nightfall of the second day, and I was stretched on the edge of the battlements, staring gloomily across the country. The first hint of dusk had come, and the sun was setting gloriously in the distance. For hours I had been struggling fiercely with the longing to see the Princess, and now it seemed to me that I could resist no longer. I cursed myself angrily for a fool. If I went to her, what would I gain save a few such scornful words as she might throw to a lackey? Far better to stay alone, to save at least a shred of dignity in her eyes by showing her that I did not thrust myself into her presence when she had plainly shown me her contempt. And yet, even as I told myself this, I got to my feet and went slowly into the castle.

There were voices in the room that opened from the gallery, and I paused at the door, still silently urging myself to play the man and remain apart. They had not seen me, they were intent on each other. I could pass on unnoticed. Yet I did not—I stood there motionless, gazing at the Princess, who sat by the window with the last light of the sun falling across her dark hair.

She was thinking deeply, it appeared, for her face was turned away from O'Meara and Francesca. My heart beat more quickly as I looked at her. She was the loveliest woman in the world, I thought,

and the farthest from me by birth and nature. Why was I standing there with my eyes glued to her face? It gave me no pleasure, only suffering, and I would do better to go see if my men were keeping their watch.

“And so, glory be,” O’Meara concluded, with great enthusiasm, “we drove them flying before us into the back of beyant, and the day was ours—and all thanks to Sir John!”

The Princess turned slowly toward him. “You think him a great man, this master of yours?” she asked, with some scorn in her voice. Her tone hurt me. I cursed myself for remaining, yet could not tear myself away.

“Was it master you said, Princess?” O’Meara demanded, turning to her with ready good-fellowship. He was equally at ease with a king or with a beggar; rank had no terrors for him. “No, you’re wrong to use that word. There’s no man in all this broad beautiful earth of ours that can call himself master of an O’Meara. My family doesn’t take kindly to masters; and as for my country, bless you, I believe it began struggling against them before ever it was created! An angel straight from heaven couldn’t suit Ireland as a king, and that’s the truth. But if you mean the finest general that ever stepped, the rarest leader, the best friend and greatest soldier—bedad, it’s perfect he’d be if he’d only had the good luck to be born in ould Ireland—

if you mean Sir John Hawkwood, Princess, why then, yes, I'm thinking he's the greatest man I've ever known or ever will know!"

I had dragged myself a few paces from the door, repeating again and again that I must not enter. Francesca's pretty voice came to me faintly as she broke in. "At first I hated your captain," she told him, "but now there are times when I think he does not appear altogether evil. He has the look of one who suffers for his sins——"

"You are mad, child," cried the Princess. "He has taken us prisoners, dragged us from home, and you defend him! Think of the tales they tell of him in Verona—a ruffian, a cutthroat, drinking in taverns, quarreling in the streets, swearing and buffeting, ruling his men by terror!" She broke off as if in utter distaste for my many crimes.

I squared my shoulders and threw back my head. My hesitation was at an end. Come what might of it, I would see her and talk with her, though Heaven knew what I could say, for her charges were all true enough, and I had no intention of denying them.

"That's as unjust a speech as ever you uttered in all your life, Madonna," cried my faithful comrade. "You've heard these tales from Court fops, I'll swear—jackdaws not fit to touch Sir John's shoes. 'Tis easy enough for men who never fought in their lives to speak ill of a great soldier, but let them once try to equal what he's done and they'll

change their tune, the jewels! And by the same token," he continued, much excited, "'tis blithe I'd be to set them in the midst of a bloody battle, with the odds all against them and the day well-nigh lost, and then see if they'd be after knowing the way to bring order from slaughter and victory from despair, as I've seen Sir John do more times than I could count——"

"There, Michael, you have chanted my praises enough," I said, and they started as I strode across the room. "I have just come from the battlements, where the evening breeze is very soft and sweet. Madonna Francesca, I am sure, would enjoy it greatly if you took her there to walk."

Francesca, I thought, felt no great distaste for the proposal; but she evidently considered it due herself to crush me for my presumption. "I will go if the Princess desires me to leave her, and not otherwise, Sir John," she answered saucily, with a fling of her head.

Madonna Giulia folded her hands in her lap and assumed a look of proud endurance. "Have you not learned yet, child," she asked, "that Sir John Hawkwood is the master here, and that we needs must do as he wills? What matter whether I desire you to go or stay, if he bids you go?"

"You wrong me, Princess," I said, looking at her straightly. "Do me the justice to admit that hitherto I have not once entered your presence save when you have sent to bid me come. If you desire it I

will leave you now—you are the mistress, and may command.”

“I had not guessed it,” she retorted. “But there, what matter? Go, Francesca, and I will stay to hear what our gaoler desires to tell me.”

Francesca went out readily enough, O'Meara following her in unmistakable rapture at the prospect of an interview in which to urge his suit. The Princess and I kept silence for a time, then she turned her head and looked at me. “Perhaps, Sir John,” she said, “you have thought better of my offer to out-bid the Duke of Padua? Is it of that you wish to speak?”

“No,” I answered grimly. Why had I sought speech with one who had such power to hurt me with every word?

“It would have been better for you had you accepted that offer when I made it,” she murmured, and I thought there was a tinge of regret in her voice. “Now I shall escape in spite of you, and the Prince will not show you any mercy.”

“I do not need his mercy yet,” I answered more cheerfully, “and I hope that I never shall.”

We were silent again. I turned and walked the length of the room twice or thrice, seeking for words to express the things I wished to tell her. Looking up suddenly, I caught her regarding me with a gaze that held reluctant pity. One might have thought her in possession of some secret knowledge that assured her of ultimate escape and venge-

ance. My thoughts went back to Violante's strange visit, and I wondered anew what would come of it in the future. Then I forgot all else in the consciousness of Madonna Giulia's softer attitude toward me, the sadder look in her proud eyes, the gentler curve of her scarlet lips. Let come what might, for the present it was enough to be close beside her, and to know that she was not watching me with the cold disdain I had learned to dread.

I leaned on the wall and watched her. I could have touched her hair by stretching out my hand, and the thought made my heart beat fast. For the present I had no wish to speak. Words might stir her to anger and resentment, and this I could not bear to risk, for some inner voice told me unerringly that at this instant she did not hate me. It would be a remembrance that would never leave me while I lived—the bare room, the twilight shade, the sweet scent of spring drifting through the window, and the Princess and I side by side, with no bitterness in our hearts and no hard words on our lips. I had not hoped for even so much happiness.

Madonna Giulia leaned her head against the wall and looked absently across the room. It was she who broke the long silence, and I started, fearing an angry word; but her voice was curiously sad and gentle. "I wonder why you ever came to Italy, Sir John," she said, as if to herself. "I wonder what evil fate ever brought you to Verona."

I did not understand her meaning, but I smiled a little in the gathering gloom. It was not all an evil fate that had brought me to Verona, since it had given me the chance to strike a blow for the Princess, and to enjoy these few moments of peaceful happiness. I did not answer her, lest my voice should break the spell.

"You fought bravely in France," she went on, "you won a knight's spurs, all men honored you. What trick of destiny turned you into a mercenary and set your feet in such a path as this? Now you will come to a most cruel end, you that might have lived out a long and honored life in your own land. It is a sad thought, and against my will it hurts me."

"I too have often wondered why fate played such tricks with me," I answered soberly, "and have cursed destiny and myself. But now, Princess, I am content. I grudge nothing now." She would not understand, I knew; for my meaning was that had I lived out a calm happy life in England I would not now be standing between her and Antonio della Scala, the one defense that kept her evil kinsman from her. Surely this was payment enough for all the sufferings of my life.

The trouble in her beautiful face was growing steadily. She clasped her hands and pressed them against her heart. "There is something under all this that I cannot understand," she said, looking at me strangely. "There is more in you than I can

read, Sir John. I have felt it from the first, and struggled against the belief, and tried to think you entirely evil. But to-night—when it is too late—I find myself doubting and regretting.” The pride was all gone from her eyes now, and only anxiety remained. “Sir John,” she said in a low uncertain voice, “tell me the truth. Tell me why you brought me to this place.”

“Will you hear me without anger?” I asked. “Will you listen with an open mind to a strange story?”

She bowed her head. “I will try,” she answered.

“Then you shall hear,” said I, “and I swear by the soul of the Black Prince that I will say no word that is not the truth.”

CHAPTER XIII

FOR LOVE OF A WOMAN

FOR a time there was silence in the dim room, while I gathered my thoughts and tried to still the beating of my heart, and the Princess sat motionless, gazing at me with that strange look of trouble always in her eyes. At last I spoke.

"Before I tell you why I brought you here," I said, "there is something else that you should know—something that has ruled my actions for a long time, that has led us both where we stand to-night, Will you listen, Princess?"

"Yes," she said, in a low voice.

"I have been in Verona for some eight months," I began. "I came here for no love of the Scaligeri, but because Prince Antonio offered me good payment for my sword. You know what I am—a free companion, wandering where my service takes me, fighting for now one man and now another. It is not a very noble profession, though as I have practiced it there is no dishonesty in the trade. As for the life I have led, you know that too—I should be foolish to defend it. I heard you tell O'Meara what you held me—a swaggering cutthroat, a drunken mercenary."

"Perhaps," she said, wistfully, "I did you wrong."

"No, you were right," I answered, for I had sworn a solemn oath that she should hear only the truth from my lips. "I was what you thought me—though I think that now I am somewhat better. Well, I came to Verona and entered the Prince's service. One day I went to the palace to take leave of him before marching for an attack on a Paduan fortress. I was bidden to come to him in his closet, and on my way there I passed through the great hall of state. It was full of courtiers, who were laughing, dicing, whispering in the ears of ladies. I strode through them all in contempt, thinking of how little use they would be in battle, pitted against my wild free lances. And then, suddenly, I saw you for the first time."

A startled look crossed her face. "You saw—me?" she murmured.

"Yes," I said, "I saw you, standing in the alcove of a window, with a jewelled lute in your hands. You wore a dress the color of dull gold, and had pearls on your neck and in your hair. A little crowd of gentlemen were all about you, and you were singing a soft catch of song. I could repeat it word for word; it has rung in my ears ever since, in battle, in quiet, even in my dreams. When you had finished all the room applauded you, and you smiled in a proud indifferent fashion and tossed the lute away. As you did so our eyes met. I suppose

you noted me no more than if I had been a picture on the wall, but it was otherwise with me. I went on into the Prince's closet, and he was greatly angered because I seemed to pay no heed to what he told me. Faith, I could not have listened to him then had he possessed the tongue of an angel!"

The Princess had straightened herself slightly. "I do not understand, Sir John," she said, with pride and displeasure entering her voice once more. "You are surely wasting words. What matter when you saw me first?"

"Be patient, Princess," I answered, with a slow smile. "When you know the truth you will see that I deserve some kindness from you—and I ask as my reward only this one hour, and the right to tell you freely what is in my heart."

She sank back in her seat, looking at me with the same strange air of perplexity and trouble.

"As time went on," I continued, "I saw you often. Many a time you passed me on the streets, riding out to the hunt, or with a falcon on your wrist. Sometimes I saw you in the palace garden, walking among the flowers, or plucking roses and lilies. More than once I watched when the Prince led you out to dance. And always, always, from the first moment when my eyes fell on you, I loved you with my whole unworthy heart."

"Sir John Hawkwood!" she cried sharply. "How dare you say such words? How dare you speak of love to me? You, a mercenary, an adventurer!"

Her softness was gone now, and the scornful lady of the past looked at me once more from her lovely face.

“Yes, a mercenary, an adventurer, unworthy, God knows, to touch your finger,” I answered soberly. “But yet a lover, worshipping you with as deep and reverent an affection as any crowned king or mighty hero ever gave his lady. I had no thought that you would ever learn it, no hope that I might ever win you. I believed that I would never even stand face to face with you and change words on indifferent subjects. Knowing well how far I stood below you, I had no wish to lower you by any contact with me. And yet whenever I might I gazed on you from a distance, and suffered silently, and endured proudly—and loved you with all my heart, with all my heart!”

“You loved me—you? A tanner’s son?” she cried. It seemed to me that now there was less anger in her tones, though she strove hard to make them cruel.

“I am the son of a tanner,” I answered, “yet I love you as never man loved woman before! I could recount to you the tale of each day I saw you. Once as I passed you a clasp fell from your sleeve, and I raised it and placed it in your hand. You thanked me coldly, not glancing at me, and my heart beat until it hurt my side. Since the day when first I saw you, your face has been before me always. I saw it in camp when I lay before the fire, and longed

to sleep, and could not for the pain in my soul. I saw it as I rode into battle, and it so maddened me that at times I prayed for a straight sword-thrust to end my useless life and all its agony. Night and day I saw you, in the streets, in the palace, in the conflict, in the open country——”

“Say rather in the tavern!” she mocked disdainfully. But her voice was faint now.

“Yes, in the tavern, too,” I said, “when I sat over the cups till dawn. Does that offend you? It is true. And many a night I drank till I lost all knowledge, only because the dull pain in my heart was beyond my bearing, and I could not endure the proud indifferent gaze your eyes turned on me. You were part of my life, Princess—you were with me in my best moments and in my worst ones. You have made me pay for all my sins, never doubt it. When I thought of what you were, and of what I was, and how far I had fallen from what I might have been, then do you think I did not suffer?”

She did not speak. She was staring at me, her face very pale in the gloom. Night was coming fast, and I could see her only with dimness now.

“There is no need that you should feel anger at me,” I told her gently. “My love never harmed you. It harmed no one save myself, and even to me it has brought great good. Do you think, Madonna Giulia, that I would have had it otherwise? I would rather suffer for your sake than be happy because I had never seen you. And I have known

happy hours, too. Will you hate me if I tell you this? Well, I must take the risk, since I have sworn to tell the truth. Sometimes I lay by the camp fire at midnight and dreamed that I was a great prince, and free to tell you of my love. I pictured myself wedded to you, setting a crown on your head and a sceptre in your hands, pouring out jewels at your feet—or carving you out a great empire with my sword! Are you angered now? There is worse to be told—I had a still dearer dream. Sometimes I pictured what I well knew could never be, what I would not have had be for your sake. I dreamed that if you knew me, and learned to love me, out of the nobleness of your heart you might find the power to toss away rank and greatness, and gladly give yourself to a poor soldier of fortune who stood alone save for his sword. I saw myself shield you and protect you, and make poverty so sweet a thing that you would never look back with longing to the days when you reigned a Princess. I saw you learn that want, sweetened by love, is far happier than state and power without it. I pictured us all alone, you and I, hand in hand, walking through life, well contented since we had each other. Was not that a foolish dream, Madonna Giulia? Yet it was so dear to me that I could not tear it from my heart.”

The room was dark now, and I could see nothing but the dim outline of her form. She did not speak as I paused, and I was glad, for I had not dared to

hope that she would hear my tale with so much patience.

"I had a third dream," I said slowly. "Sometimes I thought that, since I could never possess you, it would be the crown of my life if I might die in doing you some service. I was accustomed to hold this the most foolish of all my vain imaginings. You were rich and great and powerful, and I was the captain of a rough band of free companions. What service could the Princess Giulia ever need from Sir John Hawkwood? And yet at last the time has come when I can serve you, and I do it gladly and proudly; and if I die in the enterprise, I will die in the most worthy act of all my life. First I must get you into safety, then I care not a jot what may come—it would be as well that my life should end with its best deed."

"End!" She breathed the word so softly that I hardly heard it.

"You will think," I said in a low voice, "that my love was a poor thing, since it made me no better than I was before—since, seeing your face in my dreams, I still continued to haunt the taverns, to game and dice and brawl like any bully of the streets. But it was love that drove me to all this, love and the desperate knowledge that my longing was altogether hopeless. I raged against fate, and my anger drove me to many evil things, and day by day I made myself more and more unworthy of a glance from your eyes. But all this passed away

in the instant that I found I was to have the chance of serving you. In one short night I became another man, my old self fell away from me like a husk, I went back ten long years and became again the man who fought at Poitiers with the Black Prince. Since I have brought you here to the castle I have not been the mercenary who served Antonio della Scala at Verona, or the bravo who fought Raimondo del Mayno in the loggia and turned him into mockery throughout the city. I have been an English knight once more. It is true that from time to time I have assumed the manners of my old self, because so alone could I rule my men for your service and assure your safety; but it has been a matter of the surface only, underneath I have been different. I am changed, Princess, and through my love."

In the pause there was a sound of stumbling steps outside, and Pierre came in from the gallery bearing lights. The blackness of the room flamed suddenly into brightness, and I saw something that made my heart leap. Pierre set the candles down, then stood staring stupidly until I curtly bade him begone, when he clattered out noisily and stumbled off down the dark stairs.

The Princess was lying back in her chair, her face hidden in her arms, her shoulders shaken. She was not angered at me for my presumption, not embittered at my daring—she was weeping as if her heart would break. What had I done to wound

her? I cursed myself for a rough fool who had no place among women, and racked my brains for a way to soothe her.

“Are you weeping because you pity me, Madonna?” I asked, thrilling with joy despite myself at the thought. “There is no need. God knows I had not meant to pain you. See you, although my love is mad and hopeless it has done great good, for it has wakened me and changed me, and brought me back to that part of myself which has lain dead for many years. For as long as I may live now I can never be again what I was a week ago; I can never again sink to be the cutthroat bully that I was in Verona. I am changed and wakened, and through my love.”

She said nothing, and I crossed the room and fell on one knee beside her. “You have brought back the old Sir John Hawkwood, Princess,” I said, “and I thank you, and am your servant for as long as my life shall last.” I gently raised one of her hands from where it lay against the chair, and touched it to my lips. It had the chill of death.

“That is all,” I said cheerfully, stepping back. “I thank you for your patient hearing, which will be a sweet memory to me in days to come, when I am far from you and may not see your face. Now I will tell you what chanced in Verona a few days since, and why I brought you here to save you from Antonio della Scala——”

“No, no, do not tell me! Ah, what matter now!”

The Princess had sprung up from her chair and was facing me, white as death, and with such terror and anguish in her eyes as made me cold with horror.

“What is it?” I cried. “What is it, Madonna?”

“I did not know!” she cried pitifully, appealing to me as if for pardon. “I did not know—you never told me! Ah, why did I not hear you patiently on the first night you brought me here? Now it is too late, and there is no help——”

“What is it?” I cried again, frightened by the look of pale anguish on her face.

“They are coming!” she wailed, throwing her arm across her eyes. “They are coming! Within the hour they will be here!”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SCARF WITH THE GOLD FLOWERS

FOR a moment I stood staring at her, too dazed for words. At last the meaning of her warning burst on my clouded wits, and I sprang forward and caught her by the hand. "Be calm, Madonna Giulia," I said quietly, though my blood was all on fire. "Be quite calm—whatever comes, no harm shall touch you. Do you mean that Antonio della Scala is coming here to-night?"

She uncovered her eyes and looked wildly at me, and the sight of her anguish moved me as the thought of danger could never have done. "Yes," she murmured, half inaudibly.

"But how can you know that? Who has told you?" I asked, in utter amazement.

"Madonna Violante," she answered, with tears of despair running down her cheeks. "She came here, and you let her see me, and together we formed the plot. You can do nothing, they will be here within the hour!"

In an instant all was clear to me. "Ah!" I cried, with a sudden sharp, unreasonable bitterness gnawing at my heart, "you plotted this with Madonna

Violante—you told me nothing of it! You did not trust me ever so little, Princess, and yet I was freely risking my life to do you service!”

Every vestige of her pride and scorn had left her. She looked at me with the pale desperate face of a suffering child. “I did not know that you loved me, that you wished to help me!” she wailed, her hands stretched out in prayer for pardon. “You had not told me this. I had heard you say that you would sell me to Francesco Carrara to fill your purse and the purses of your bravoës. Madonna Violante told me that I was not safe when in your hands; she said that one day you would boast that you had won my favor, as you boasted now of tavern girls and camp women——”

“Do you not know that Ranucio della Torre and his wife would lie away their souls if they could gain thereby?” I said sternly, white with anger at what they had put in her thoughts concerning me. “Do you trust them? Do you know me so little, when I have striven so hard to serve you?”

“You had not spoken then,” she repeated drearily. “I did not know. Ah, what have I done, Sir John?”

“No great harm, save that by your mistrust you have hurt me,” I answered, forcing myself to cheerfulness. “Let them come, they shall not get you! My free lances, whom you rightly consider evil-faced fellows enough, have yet one great virtue, they can hold a castle or a city in the teeth of the devil, if

need be. Cheer yourself, I will go prepare, and we will give Antonio della Scala such a welcome as will be little to his fancy." I swung on my heel with a laugh, for the prospect of a fight was sweet to me at all times, and I was not loth to show the Princess that, though not a noble and her peer, I was at least a brave soldier.

She caught my arm. "Oh, you do not understand. It is useless, you can do nothing. They will not attack the castle walls—they have a surer way to make their entrance. I have killed you, Sir John, when you were striving hard to serve me. All my life I shall have your blood on my hands and your death on my soul!"

A wild triumph filled me at the words, for now I saw that she trusted me. After all, what else mattered, if she believed in my good faith? "Tell me all, Madonna," I said, striving to force my thoughts to the matter in hand. "Never fear, I will find a way to outwit them."

"You cannot," she moaned, and hid her face again. "Antonio knows this castle well; it was his stronghold before he left it for a place more secure. He knows the secret passage——"

"The passage!" My voice was steady on the words, but my heart was beating faster.

"Yes, yes. There is an underground passage that crosses beneath the moat and opens through a moving block of stone in the castle store-room. They can enter it through a great hollow oak in the wood

yonder. It is an old trick of the place, and has been tried many times in the past. Do you see now? They will come and take you, and I have doomed you to certain death!" She looked at me with hopeless eyes.

I understood. For a moment I remained lost in reluctant admiration for the shrewd scheme, but this sentiment was soon banished by the thought of our great danger. "No matter, Madonna Giulia," I said cheerfully. "I have seen more desperate affairs than this. Wait here in peace and ease of mind while I go summon my men, and we will barricade the entrance to the passage——"

She shook her head with a moan. "It is too late. How can I tell you what I have done? I begged you to give me the freedom of the castle only that I might get speech with your men, and I bribed your fellow Jacques—the soldier whom you beat on the morning of the mutiny——"

"Yes," I said. "Go on, Princess." I knew now that the matter was desperate, but if my wild life had done me no other good it had at least given me the power of meeting danger with coolness, and my voice was calm and unhurried. She looked at me in amazement.

"Do you not understand?" she cried. "I have brought you to ruin. The man was embittered against you; he was eager for revenge. I bribed him with the jewels I wore and a promise of gold in the future, and he helped me."

"I understand," I answered. "What did he do? Tell me in as few words as may be."

"He has taken off the stones from the mouth of the passage, and left it free for my cousin's men," she answered. "None went near the room, he was free to work there all day. He has pried loose the door, so that you may not cut off their entrance by locking it. He has done what you cannot repair by hours of work—and at any instant we may hear the cries of my cousin's men! They will kill you; they will cut you down before my eyes, or worse, they will take you back to Verona and end your life by torture. Why do you not curse me, Sir John?"

She had taken my wild look for anger, and small blame to her. My calm was gone. Jacques had made an entrance for Antonio's men, and had ruined my scheme for the saving of Antonio's cousin. I could not hold the castle now; she was doomed.

"Curse you, child?" I said at last, and my voice had a strange hoarse note that I had never heard in it before, but which I had heard in the voices of men who turned cowards at the pinch. The sound shamed me, and yet I swear I felt no fear for myself and took no thought for my own life. All my mind was set on her. "Why should I curse you? I am trying to devise a way to save you. This is a terrible thing that you have done so innocently. It will bring you great trouble——"

"To me!" the Princess cried, raising her face in

a bewilderment that drowned her terror. "What harm can come to me? Are you mad, Sir John? I shall be safe among my own people; it is you that will be in the hands of your foes——"

"You do not understand. You know nothing," I said dully. "Can you not see that there were two plots woven about you? The day I carried you from the inn to the castle here, Gianni Potrero was hard upon my heels. He had been minded to do the same thing—and by the Prince's orders."

"The Prince's orders! And why?" she cried, staring.

"Because you would not wed him when he wooed you," I muttered, not thinking of what I said, only wondering how I was to save her. "He planned that you should be carried off by Gianni Potrero, who was to make pretense at holding you for ransom. Later you were to be rescued by the Prince, and he fancied that you would feel much gratitude and admiration for him, and listen more willingly to his suit. I overheard the plot in the palace loggia, and planned to save you by taking you to the Duke of Padua. Do you understand now?"

She did not answer me, and I turned to look at her, struck by her silence. She could have turned no whiter than she was before, but all her strength seemed gone, and she swayed and fell limply into her chair. She believed me—she took my statement without question, though it concerned her own

cousin. Even in this desperate pass I felt a reckless triumph in the thought.

“Yes,” she breathed, struggling hard for composure. “Yes, I understand at last. In an hour I shall be in Antonio della Scala’s hands and at his mercy in this wild lonely place. What will become of me when he finds that I have no gratitude for him, that I am not duped, that I fear and loathe him? He will have me in his power, Sir John, do you hear? Oh, always I have known that he was an evil man, though for the sake of our common blood I have struggled hard to think otherwise! And of late I have had a horror of him; when he wooed me the ghost of dead Bartolomeo rose between us; I fancied I saw blood upon his hands! He has sworn to wed me, and to-night I will be in his power!” She drew herself up with a gesture of desperate pride. “Heaven help me, am I going to play the coward, I who have been so sure of my courage? Am I going to be false to my blood and weep like any peasant because danger threatens? Oh, I am ashamed, Sir John—I have ruined you and brought you to your death, and now I am cold with fear of my cousin and what may come to me when you are slain!”

I had scarcely been listening, so intent was I on finding a way out of the danger. Think as I might, rack my brains as much as I chose, I could plan nothing save to barricade the room into which the secret passage opened, and hold it as best I could;

and this would prove efficacious only for a brief time, as I very well knew. But now, suddenly, a new thought flashed into my head, and I wheeled to face the Princess with an exclamation of joy.

She misunderstood me. "You do not care what may come to me, then?" she cried bitterly. "It does not distress you that I shall fall into my cousin's power? Ah! then all this talk of love with which you entertained me a few moments since was but a cheat?"

"No, Princess," I answered quietly. "I love you, and it is for me to save you—and so I shall do, with God's help. Be calm now, waste no time in fear, for we shall be hard pressed to carry out my scheme before Antonio comes."

"You will save me?" she cried incredulously.

Voices and laughter came to us from without. Francesca and her Irish lover were returning from the battlements, and from the snatches of their talk which floated down I gathered that he was eloquently importuning her for a kiss, which she coyly, but by no means indignantly, refused to grant. A moment later they were in the room, and the laughter died on their lips as they gazed from the Princess' white face to my grim set one.

"What's gone amiss, Sir John?" O'Meara cried, springing forward and catching me by the arm.

I laid my hand on his shoulder and drew him to me. "Michael," I said soberly, "you are the one friend I have in all the world. I have trusted you

for years, though I trust no one else on earth. You would not refuse me anything on which my heart was set, would you, lad?"

He looked bewildered and somewhat emotional. "Faith, and I think you've got no need to ask that," he answered, almost angrily. "It's ask and have, Sir John. Tell me to go to Verona and strike the Prince across the face, or to besiege the city walls all alone, and I'll not say no——"

"I am sure of that," I answered, keeping my hold on his shoulder. "But would you do something harder, Michael? Would you turn your back on a deadly fight for my sake, and ride for safety as fast as ever your horse could take you?"

The Irishman's expressive features twisted in an obvious struggle. "'Tis a deal to ask of any man, and above all of one of my country," he cried, "but bedad, I love you so well I believe I'd be after doing even *that* if you asked it! But you'll not ask it, will you, Sir John, dear?" he pleaded, in manifest alarm.

"I must, Michael," I answered. He was staring at me now with his mouth fallen open. Francesca, conscious that an evil moment was upon us, had run to the Princess and put her arms about her. "Antonio della Scala is to come here within the hour, and will enter by a secret passage that runs beneath the moat. We cannot resist him, therefore we must not let him find the Princess here. I had meant, as you know, to remain here until a strong

troop of Florentines might escort Madonna Giulia safely across the Paduan boundaries, but since this is impossible you must take her to-night—at once. You shall have twenty men; it is not a great number, but I can do nothing better for you. Ride as if the devil were at your heels, cut through any obstacles that cross your way, never draw rein for an instant till you reach Padua and Duke Francesco. Is it clear in your mind what you have in hand?"

"And what of yourself meanwhile, Sir John?" said O'Meara, in a very low voice.

"Oh, I shall have plenty to do, never doubt it," I answered cheerfully. "I will remain here and hold the castle as long as may be against the Prince, that he may believe Madonna Giulia is still here, and make no move to pursue her. That should give you so good a start that you cannot be overtaken."

"Yes, we should get away safely," said O'Meara, vaguely and indifferently, as if he cared little whether they did or not. "But you? 'Tis signing your own death-warrant you are——"

"Hush!" I whispered fiercely, with a glance at the Princess. He broke off and stood silent, very pale, biting at his lip. I went over to Madonna Francesca and spoke to her gently. "Madonna, you can help us greatly in this matter if you choose. Are you brave enough to run some risk for the sake of your lady?"

She looked at me in a bewildered fashion. "I

do not understand," she murmured. "The Princess is in no danger—what harm can come to her through falling into her cousin's hands? It is what she desires——"

"No, no, child," cried the Princess, desperately. "I have been tricked, I have been duped by the Prince. It was his plan to have me brought here that he might force me into marriage with him. Sir John heard the plot and did all that a true knight could to save me, and in my madness I have ruined him. If Antonio takes me now, the Virgin help me!"

"Will you aid us in saving your lady?" I asked Francesca again.

She drew away from the Princess and stood erect, her pale face raised. "I am not brave, and I am very foolish and feather-headed," she answered, with a pitiful little effort at mirth, "but I would gladly give my life for Madonna Giulia. Tell me how I may help her and you shall have no cause to call me coward."

"Then you must stay here in the castle while she leaves us," I answered. "O'Meara, go get your men to horse. Choose out the most evil and greedy of the troop—the ones who would be most like to fail me when they found the pinch a hopeless one; in that way I shall have the stauncher men left for the holding of the castle, and you will have no trouble, for those who ride with you will look for a rich reward in Padua."

He hesitated, looking at me uncertainly. "I've said I'd leave you, and I'll be keeping my word, though it hurts me near beyond all bearing to do it," he said, coming close to me. "But Madonna Francesca there, Sir John? Sure and death is all in the day's work for us men, but what of a sweet little girl like that who never has looked on a drop of blood and never should? Have we got the right to bring her into peril?"

She had heard him, and even at this moment a faint smile played about her mouth. "I shall not be in great danger, Messer O'Meara," she said prettily, coming up and laying her fingers on his arm. "Prince Antonio will not dare do me any serious evil, no matter how far I enrage him. My family is poor now, but we have kinsmen who are powerful, and all Verona would cry out if harm came to me. Never fear! But I would—I would——" She broke off with tears filling her eyes.

"What then, mavourneen?" he cried passionately.

"I would," she repeated, between tears and laughter, "that you were not going, Messer O'Meara! You must find means to come back to Verona some day, for if I should never see you again——"

"Yes? Yes? Tell me, then?" he urged eagerly.

"I would find me a convent!" she answered, sobbing and laughing at one and the same time. "For I will be a nun, I vow it, before my Lord Ravignani shall call me wife, or any other noble of Verona, or any man on earth save—save——"

It was here that O'Meara forgot all the world in his rapture, and caught her in his arms and covered her face with kisses. She clung to him, laughing joyfully through her tears, as pretty a picture as I had ever seen; and though I well knew that every moment was precious to me, I had not the heart to interrupt the brief heaven of these two who might never meet again on earth.

"Sir John Hawkwood," said the Princess' voice in my ear.

She was standing close beside me, pale and tense, but very composed. "I will not go," she said, and with an accent of finality that chilled me. "I have caused all this by my own fault. If I had heard you patiently when first you brought me here, we should stand in no danger now. But I would not listen, I brought all your brave enterprise to failure, and now I will not save myself and leave you to die for my sake. I shall stay, and share the evil that is coming. That is the only reparation I can make you now!"

The other two were oblivious to us, and did not see that I bent and took both the Princess' hands in mine. "You speak like a great lady and a brave woman," I answered, "but you are wrong. There is a greater reparation than that which you can make me. Whether you stay or go, my death is certain; but it rests with you whether I die in all content, having redeemed my spotted life in some part, or whether I die with all my sins uncleansed

and my heart in a tumult of despair. Go—let me feel that I have saved you, that I have not lived in vain. Once you are on the road to Padua I will be quite happy, and Antonio's daggers will be sweet to me as they let out my heart's blood. You will let me die in peace, Madonna Giulia? I have tried to serve you, I have risked all in your behalf, and this is my first and last prayer, the only thing that I shall ever ask you."

She was silent for a long moment, and I saw that there were heavy tears on her lashes. "Yes, I will go," she said at last, very softly.

"I thank you, Princess." I could say no more than that in a steady voice.

She raised her eyes to mine, and they had a wonderful star-like look. "Do you remember, Sir John," she said, "that one day in the palace loggia—it was the afternoon when you would have warned me of my cousin, and I would not listen—you took my scarf? Have you it now?"

"Yes," I answered, in amazement.

"Then give it to me," she said.

"You desire it?" I asked, with a keen stab of pain at my heart. "I was unworthy of it when I took it, true—but am I all unworthy now? May I not keep it until the end, the end which will soon be here?"

She shook her head and held out her hand. Slowly, biting my lips to keep down the pain, I drew the soft gold-embroidered thing from under-

neath my cuirass and gave it to her. She took it, and now I saw that she was smiling in a wonderful fashion such as I had never before seen on the lips of any woman, it was at once so sweet and so sad.

“You are the only man who has ever served me for my own sake and for no object of his own,” she said softly. “You are the truest knight I have ever known, Sir John.” And with her own hands she passed the scarf across my shoulder and knotted it over my bright cuirass.

For a moment I could find no words, nor any power to speak them. Coming to myself at last, I went on one knee and kissed her hand. “Princess,” I said, my voice quavering in a womanish fashion for which I felt no shame at all, “you have given me back my knighthood, and I ask no greater joy or honor than to die for you.”

CHAPTER XV.

THE LADY IN THE MASK

It was no easy task for me to put all thought of the Princess' sudden kindness out of my head and set myself to caring for her safety, but by a great effort of will I accomplished the feat. I tore O'Meara from his lady-love, sent him below to get his men to horse, and followed him to the court-yard after bidding the Princess change her riding cloak for that of Madonna Francesca, and join me as soon as she was prepared. Both women looked bewildered at the order, but made no protest; for the time being the mantel of authority had fallen on my shoulders, and no one in the castle would have questioned what I commanded.

O'Meara had made a shrewd choice of his men, as I had known I might trust him to do. They were the dregs of the troop, fellows to whom under other circumstances I would not have trusted the Princess for any inducement the world could offer; yet, all being as it was, they were the safest possible escort for her, since, in their cupidity to win a rich reward from the Duke of Padua for her safe conduct, they would have defended her with the utmost

fire and fury from any who sought to take her from them.

The excitement among my free companions was great, as I had of course foreseen. This new move of mine bewildered and startled them, and they thronged the court in an eager fashion, peering and muttering, looking for any hint of explanation. Luckily, however, their late mutiny and the fashion in which I had convinced them of their stupidity in doubting me had left them far from sure of their own judgment, and had inspired them with an added respect for my shrewdness. The general opinion now appeared to be that I had some excellent, though invisible, reason for suddenly despatching the Princess under a small guard; there was no great amount of dissatisfaction expressed, and what there was seemed caused rather by fear that those who accompanied the Princess would get the lion's share of the reward than by any distrust of me.

"You understand what you are to do?" I said shortly to the men O'Meara had picked out. "You will take the Princess to her kinsman, who will make the matter worth your while. If any try to bar your way, cut through them at whatever cost, and never rest until you are out of Prince Antonio's lands. As for the rest of us, we will join you in a day or two—I have a little matter of a castle to take by storm before I cry quits with Della Scala, and these fellows here shall help me in it and gather in some booty." This was a happy thought, as a loud cheer

and a sudden lightening of faces proved. "Mount your horses, here comes the Princess. Guard her well, all of you, or when I reach Padua you shall answer for it!" With this threat I turned aside to hide a grim smile at my own assurance. I knew well enough that I should never see Padua, that I had, in fact, but a few minutes left to live. Already my ears were straining to catch the sound of the Prince's men within the castle, and my heart was beating fast in the fear that he might come before I could get the Princess safely on her way.

She came slowly into the court, cloaked and masked. I advanced to meet her, took her hand, and led her up to her horse. Her fingers lay cold against mine, but she carried her head high. There could be no leave-taking between us now, lest my troopers should see that we had come to an understanding, and suspect the tale I had told them; but as I helped her to mount I felt her clasp tighten on my hand, and knew that the pressure spoke her thanks as words could scarce have done. "Good luck on your journey, Madonna Giulia," I cried bluffly, so that all might hear. "Never tremble, these fellows will guard you well to Duke Francesco's doors. 'Tis a pity you have no wish to go there, but I doubt you will find him such an ogre as your fancy paints!"

Again her fingers pressed mine, then she withdrew them. "Good-bye, Sir John Hawkwood," she breathed, so gently that none save myself caught the

words. "Good-bye, my gallant knight!" She was in the saddle, and I stepped back.

O'Meara had come up to me, very white, his eyelids lowered to hide the tears. "I'd rather die a thousand times than to be leaving you so," he muttered in my ear. "By all the saints, and if it wasn't yourself that bade me be off, and if I didn't know that it was in this way I'm serving you best in all you long for, then I'd sell my soul before ever I'd stir a step! But never give up, Sir John. Fight like the devil himself, and who knows but you'll best them yet? Sure and you must, for my sake, no less. There'll be no joy left in the world for me on the day you leave it!" He put out both his hands and clasped mine as if he would never let them go.

An instant later he had sprung on his horse, the men had closed about Madonna Giulia, and the little troop was moving slowly out of the court-yard. I heard the horses' hoofs rattle on the crazy draw-bridge, then the sound diminished, and I knew that they were in the open. The Princess was on the way to Padua, and if she did not reach there safely it would be because Michael O'Meara was strangely altered from his old self.

I had the draw-bridge raised again and the portcullis lowered, then turned back and faced my men. At any moment now the alarm might sound, the Prince's troopers might be upon us. Every noise made me start, every clink of mail seemed to me to

proclaim their approach. It was necessary that we should make a brave resistance, since in this way alone could we give the Princess a clear start. I must in some fashion persuade the fellows to support me, and in my extremity I longed for the tongues of angels.

"Come here, all of you," I cried boldly, standing by the court entrance. "I have a thing to tell you, and very little time in which to do it."

They came crowding about eagerly enough, and as the torch-light fell on their dark scarred faces I wondered if, in undertaking to play with such a set of fellows, I had not begun a task utterly without chance of fulfilment. Franz and Pierre stood in the first row, almost at my elbow, and their eyes were turned on me with a faithful dog-like look that brought me comfort. I looked about keenly, and discovered skulking in the rear the man I sought—Jacques, the traitor.

He was white beneath his darkened skin, and his face had a baffled dangerous look horrible to see. He alone had understood the departure of the Princess, yet he had not dared to speak, for to do so he must convict himself of treason to his comrades, a thing never forgiven by them and always terribly avenged. He knew, also, that I must have learned of his treachery, and as our eyes met I saw the look of a trapped beast shoot across his features.

"Come here, Jacques," I said curtly.

The men opened to let him through. For a mo-

ment he stood motionless, afraid to advance, afraid to refuse obedience. Very slowly he came forward until he stood before me. His face was ghastly now. He was sick with terror, yet I knew he was very dangerous in this mood, and I let not a motion of his right hand escape me.

“What have you done with the jewels you took from the Princess as payment for opening a passage for the Prince?” I asked sharply.

He gave a sharp gasp of horror, then made a desperate effort at denial. “Jewels? You are mad, mon capitaine,” he muttered insolently, through pallid lips. “I have seen no jewels, the worse luck for me——”

“So you are a liar as well as a traitor!” I cried. “The two go well together! You fool, I know all; I know how you took the stones from the mouth of the passage, how you pried loose the door to give free entrance——”

The movement that I had looked for came. His right hand went swiftly to the hilt of his dagger and grasped it, but I was before him. In an instant my sword was out of its sheath, and I ran him through with as small compunction as though he had been in body the dog he was at heart.

He went down without a groan and lay huddled at my feet. I pulled my sword loose, then faced the circle of my men, who were gazing blankly at me and their fallen comrade. None spoke for a time, save to utter disjointed oaths, but there was

no apparent feeling of anger. Pierre was the first to break the silence. "So Jacques was a traitor, eh, Sir John?" he cried. "I always thought as much—he had eyes that never met those of the man to whom he spoke. A good riddance, say I! I could never abide him. Is it your pleasure, captain, to tell us what he did?"

"He plotted with the Princess, and opened a secret passage leading under the moat, by which Antonio della Scala will enter the castle within the hour," I answered coolly, though my heart beat fast. The crisis was close upon me now.

There was a panic at this. The men swayed forward, cursing and shouting. "Then why do we linger here? To be butchered? Why did we not all go to Padua with the Princess?" one screamed, and the others took up the cry. They would have burst past me out of the court and under the portcullis, but I stood firm in the narrow entrance with my bared sword in my hand, and they knew its point too well to dare it.

"Be silent, and hear me!" I shouted sternly, backing my command with such oaths as I thought most likely to prove effective. "Antonio is coming. If we flee now, he will pursue us and overtake us. Whatever we do, there is no hope save in a brave resistance. We can defend ourselves better here than out upon the road. Come, courage! Are you afraid? You shame the White Company! Faith, I had known that my graceless rogues possessed few

virtues, but I had thought that at least they feared nothing under heaven. Will you scatter in useless flight, only to be overtaken in the forest yonder where there are no walls behind which to make a stand?"

"Why have you sent away the Princess?" shrilled a furious voice.

I gave a reckless laugh and tossed my sword in the air. "Because I think that whatever we do we shall die to-night," I answered. "Stand or fly, the end will be the same; and I have a fancy to die like a good soldier. The Prince means ill by Madonna Giulia, therefore I will not let her fall into his hands. Look, my knaves, shall we not for once in our lives do a gallant deed? For my part, I am grown weary of blood and booty and drinking and ruffling, and am minded to strike a blow for a lady and do a deed of which, in my last moment on earth, I need not be ashamed. We have done little good in all our days, you and I; shall we not prove to-night that after all we are something better than mercenaries who cut throats for a bag of scudi? Shall we not fight for something else than gold? I am minded to prove my manhood now. Who follows me? Who fights for honor and the Princess Giulia?"

It was a strange appeal to make to such graceless villains. I had never meant to say such words—I think that the soft touch of Madonna Giulia's hands as she knotted her scarf across my breast had

robbed me of my senses and turned me to a madman, prating of honor and chivalry and words that had not passed my lips for years. And yet I think that nothing I could have said would so have moved my men. I struck a chord in their breasts that had been long untouched; my fire lit an answering fire in their hearts. With a shock of amazement I saw a new look come into their dark faces.

"For old times' sake!" Pierre muttered. "For the time when I was a foolish boy and had never seen blood flow, and scarce knew a woman save my good old mother! Yes, to-night I'll fight for something else than gold!"

"I'll fight for Sir John!" Franz shouted. "Ah, captain, I've served you now for ten long years, and where you bid me go I'll go, even if the path leads straight to death!"

"I'll strike one blow against Della Scala, I!" another shouted. "He thought to toss off our captain, eh? He shall get a lesson to-night!"

An evil-faced fellow, whose present degradation shamed the good blood that ran in his veins, flung back his head and put his hand on his sword-hilt. "I'm weary too of being a cutthroat, Sir John Hawkwood," he cried. "I'll bear myself once more as I did long years ago, and if I die 'twill be only a fair price to pay for the luxury!"

For one reason or another all declared roughly but honestly their willingness to fight. Perhaps their air of falling in with my mood was but a pre-

tense—perhaps their true thought was that since die they must in any case, it was as well to bear themselves with a reckless disregard for danger. I choose to believe better of them. Indeed, I was moved and touched to see in these fellows a fidelity to me, a kind feeling of remembrance for the long years of my harsh command, for which I had never given them credit. It came to me then that there is something of good in the worst man, that, it might be, my words had roused the knightlier side of these wild ruffians even as my love for the Princess Giulia had roused the knightlier side of my fallen nature. I laughed out merrily and clapped Pierre on the shoulder. “Well said, lads, all of you!” I cried, with a wave of my sword. “We will do good work to-night, and teach Antonio della Scala to say his prayers before he comes against the men of the White Company! Come, let us go block up the passage and undo as much as we may of this poor traitor’s work——”

It was not to be. There was no time left us for preparations or defense. Even as I spoke my ears caught the sound for which I had long been listening, the echo of a battle-cry, the crash of arms and armor. The Prince’s men had entered by the secret passage and were pouring up into the castle.

With a shout to my troopers to follow me, I took to my heels, raced through the castle at full speed, and darted down the steps that led into that part of

it which lay underground. At the foot of these stairs we came on our foes.

I had been in many a fight in my life, and had grown used to bloodshed, as men must who make a trade of killing. Cold steel was what brought me my bread, and I had little left to learn of warfare; but never had I fought as on that night in the deserted castle. It was a hopeless business from the first, since Gianni Potrero, the leader of the invaders, had brought a force that outnumbered my little band five to one. I knew it, and had no hope of conquering, or of going out alive from the castle walls. My whole aim was to give Madonna Giulia time to get well along the road to Padua, so that when the truth was learned she might defy pursuit. I fought as I had not dreamed that any man could fight, with a wild exultation, a triumph, and all the knightly ardor of the days of my youth. Not for a moment could I forget the scarf that lay across my breast; it seemed to burn me through my cuirass, as once the Black Prince's sword had burned my shoulder when he touched it to make me knight. I was fighting for my lady. I was not a mercenary any more, but an English gentleman drawing sword for the woman I loved.

We were driven back up the steps, contesting every inch of the way. My troopers fought like heroes, cursing, stumbling, rallying when all seemed lost, bringing down man after man of our oppo-

nents. The odds against them were hopeless, and they fell one by one, fighting bravely to the last. God rest their souls, I say! If they were great sinners and had led most evil lives, at least they died that night as soldiers should long to die.

I could not have told how long we had been fighting. I had been driven to the top of the stairs and across the passage, and my breath was beginning to come fast. When I looked around I saw scarce half-a-dozen of my men about me, and all of them were panting and had smeared bloody faces. The mass of our foes were bearing on us heavily in a new attack. It came over me with a shock of surprise that I was wounded, and glancing down I saw that Madonna Giulia's white scarf was stained with blood. Two more of my men fell. I turned, ran swiftly forward with a score of men at my heels, and dashed into the great hall of the castle.

Had Madonna Francesca obeyed the last order I had given her? I hoped so, for I must gain more time yet for the Princess. I looked at the staircase. Half-way up it crouched the figure of a woman muffled in a riding-cloak and disguised by a mask. The invaders saw it too, and a great cry of "The Princess!" shook the walls. I cleared the room at a bound, took my stand on the stairs, and waited for the advance.

Gianni Potrero and his men had darted after me, and the torch-light shone on their armor and ran along their bare blades. They looked dangerous,

for the entertainment had not gone according to their fancy—we had resisted too bravely and too well. Now they had conquered, for only Pierre and Franz were left beside me, and we stood three against thirty or more. Nevertheless, they hesitated, for my sword was a famous one, and it is well known that a staircase is well-nigh as good a coign of vantage as a guarded fortress.

The knowledge that I could still gain time for the Princess went to my head like wine. "Who comes next? Who comes next?" I cried tauntingly. "Brave and gallant gentlemen, do you hesitate to charge three men? What, is there not a single brave soldier among you all? Now shame on a country so poorly stocked with valor! Small wonder your Prince must needs hire me to fight his battles, if his own servants are so backward! See, I fling you my gauntlet—will not that rouse you? Or will you come if I call you cowards? That is a taunt to be wiped out by blood alone! Who comes to take the stairs?"

There was a stir at the door as two men came in, the soldiers pressing back to give them passage. I shook with laughter at the sight, for they were Antonio della Scala and his favorite, and neither of them had unsheathed their swords. It seemed that a share in the fight was not to their taste; they preferred to watch from the rear. The Prince was peering at me with an evil malicious look, his lids fallen, his pale face twisted into lines of mocking

triumph. Della Torre stood in haughty silence, a splendid figure of disdain.

"Well, Sir John Hawkwood," said the Prince, "we have come to take you to Verona and give you a taste of the wheel." His gaze fell on the cloaked figure that crouched behind me on the stairs. "Giulia!" he cried, and at the hoarse note that spoke in his voice I thanked Heaven that the Princess was now well on her way. "Never fear, cousin—we have come to save you and avenge you! Keep your courage but a few moments longer, all will go well now." He wheeled angrily on Gianni Potrero, who stood fingering his sword. "Man, why are you loitering here? Do I pay you to stare like any peasant, or to fight like a soldier—which? Rally your men, charge the stairs, and take me that villain!"

Messer Gianni looked first at his master and then at me, and shifted his feet like an uneasy schoolboy. His men, massed about him, did the same, though they scowled at me and muttered curses. "Domeniddio!" the Prince cried fiercely. "Are you all cowards, then? Was this knave Hawkwood the one brave man in my service? Are you afraid of him, all of you? I will have you thrown in prison when we reach Verona if you do not mend your ways! I will dress you as monks and thrust you into a monastery, for surely you are not soldiers! Will no one pluck up heart to take the stairs?" His voice turned shrill with rage, and he bit his lip till the blood came.

Only a few moments more, and the Princess might smile at all pursuit! I was full of a great joy and triumph that conquered even a certain sickening faintness, the result of my wound, which was beginning to creep over me. "Aye, who will come?" I cried, saluting them with my sword. "Are you all afraid of me? You have good cause for fear. I am not the cutthroat any more, the tavern loiterer, the bully—I am Sir John Hawkwood, an English gentleman, the comrade of the Black Prince! I cast down the gauntlet to all knaves and ruffians, whether they be princes born or common rogues like Messer Gianni there. Come forward yourself, Antonio della Scala—let us see which can deal the better strokes, a man who shames his royal blood, or a knight who combats for a lady and has faith and loyalty on his side. Ah, I thank God for this chance to go back to my youth, to die as I have not lived! Who comes to take the stairs?"

"Will no one answer him?" the Prince screamed, hoarse with rage.

"I will," said Ranucio della Torre, coldly. "It is greater honor than he merits that a noble should touch his blade, but at least he shall learn that there is one man here who dares to face him!" He pulled out his sword and ran forward. "Ho, Sir John Hawkwood, say your prayers!" he cried as he came.

"Say yours," I cried back, "my lord the fa-

vorite! You will need them sorely before our bout is done!"

As our blades rang together my exultation grew. I was fighting for Madonna Giulia. Here before me, with his sword crossing mine, was the man who had plotted against her for his own gain. Here was the man who had sworn to put on me the stain of treason. I meant to kill him, though it should be the last act of my life. The torch-light fell full on his dark, sombre, splendid face, on the jewels in his hat and the gold broidery of his cloak. There was bitter hate in his eyes. I had been his enemy for a long time, and he too meant that our score should be wiped out by blood.

He fought well, Ranucio della Torre. He was a base man and an evil man, but never did I meet with greater skill and courage than his. From the instant that our blades crossed I knew that I was pitted against a marvellous fencer—and every moment I was growing weaker. He was trying to bewilder me with many strange thrusts and feints and parries, but I had lived out my life among swordsmen and knew all his tricks. We were both breathing hard, and I was turning faint. The steel rang and clashed, but save for this noise the room was very still. All were looking at us wide-eyed, as at a play.

Knowing my increasing weakness, I ceased to defend myself and began to attack. I tried thrusts known to few living fencers, keen darts, subtle

feints. He knew them, and smiled in dark mockery. I pressed on him fiercely, and he stood his ground without wavering. One by one I tried the tricks that had given me victory over skilful rivals, and one by one he turned them off with a sneer. I had met my match at last.

Suddenly Della Torre's point slipped within my guard. As quick as thought I leapt aside, but he had grazed me, and I felt a swift sting on my neck and the trickle of running blood. I recovered on the instant and renewed the conflict, my face hot, my knees weakening.

"A hit, a hit! Ha, you mercenary, it shall be the heart next," Della Torre cried, his sombre eyes glowing with hate and triumph.

"To boast too soon brings ill luck," I retorted. All was growing dark around me. The great hall seemed a black blur that framed Della Torre's exultant, passionate, vindictive face. The end was coming fast. Soon my senses would fail me and I would swoon like any girl. If I was to conquer, I must act now or never. "For the Princess!" I muttered, as, gathering all my strength, I essayed the trick that I had learned in Paris—the high thrust, the sweeping parry, the low lightning-like dart. Our swords rang together fiercely, then mine slipped under and ran straight through Della Torre's throat.

For a moment he stood upright and motionless, then his muscles loosened, and he went down with a great crash and lay motionless at my feet. I could

not see him now for the growing darkness. I had fought to the end, tasted the joys of restored knight-hood, drained the cup to the dregs. With my last strength I bent my sword across my knee and broke it. "Saint George and England!" I cried hoarsely, going back by instinct to the battle-shout of my youth; and I flung the broken pieces down into the hall and reeled forward after them.

The blood and the conflict had maddened Antonio. Seeing the stairs left clear, he leapt over Della Torre's body, darted up them, and caught the cloaked figure in his arms. "Ah, Giulia, I have you now!" he shouted, and tore the mask from the woman's face; then stood dumb, gazing into the eyes of Francesca di Montalto.

"Where is the Princess?" he cried at last, looking about him with the eyes of a madman.

I leaned on the wall and laughed. My mirth had a strange sound, and I could hardly stand erect. "The Princess is well on her way to Padua, my lord," I answered. "Before dawn she will be with Duke Francesco. He will guard her well, never fear. Choose yourself another wife, you will never see her again!"

"Curses on you!" he snarled, with foam on his lips. "You shall die by such torments as you have never dreamed——"

"I care not what you do to me!" I cried, swaying on my feet. "You cannot take away the memory of this hour, or the knowledge that I have

saved Madonna Giulia! You cannot rob me of the knighthood that I have won back the right to claim. Saint George and England!" And then dense blackness settled over me, and I flung out my hands and fell.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BARGAINING

FOUR days had passed since the flight of the Princess and the fall of Castel Paura. Prince Antonio was once more in his good city of Verona, and I was his guest, the victim of an urgent hospitality I would very gladly have spared.

My wound had not been a deep one, though loss of blood had caused a long swoon enduring for some three hours. I had felt small joy when my senses returned and I found myself little the worse for wear. Surely, I thought, it were many times better to have died fighting for Madonna Giulia, sword in hand, as became a knight and a gentleman, than to come back to life and suffer the indignities that the Prince was planning for me. I cursed Gianni Potrero, who was on his knees beside me when I opened my eyes. He laughed in answer, with more than a touch of malice. "We have been giving you as good care as a great noble would have found at our hands," he said, setting down the cup of wine which he had been pouring down my throat. "It is the Prince's own bidding that we cure you—he values you too much to lose you, Sir John. You have killed his favorite, you have spirited away his

cousin, and you may guess how dear he holds you now! He will prove his affection later. Oh, you will not find him ungrateful, believe me when I say it!"

When morning came we returned to Verona. I was able to walk well enough by then, though my head swam a trifle with the first steps, and I dreaded the motion of my horse as a happier man might have dreaded death. I had passed the night in one of the upper rooms, strongly guarded, and now they led me down the stairs and into the great hall, with my hands bound behind my back, and my scabbard hanging empty at my side.

At the foot of the stairs we halted, and I saw below me a strange scene. Antonio della Scala stood at the end of the hall, pale and cold, with an ominous glimmer in his half-shut eyes; and before him knelt a woman shrouded in black robes and a black hood. Beside them, on a sort of litter, was stretched the body of Ranucio della Torre. The sun, slanting through the window, gleamed on his bright cuirass half hidden by its violet sash, his strong supple figure, his splendid sombre face set in the cold lines of death. On the instant I understood. No doubt a rider had taken the ill news to Verona in the night, and Madonna Violante had come in haste with the litter for the bearing of her dead husband to his home.

The sight of her up-turned face made me shudder. She was an evil woman, and I had borne her

no love, but I could not doubt now that she had lost all that made her life worth the living, and despite myself I pitied her. She was white as marble, and as cold. I knew that there was despair in her heart, and passionate hate, and the fierce suffering of a strong proud nature despoiled of the one thing it holds most dear. "My lord," she said in low hard tones, as I stood watching her, "Ranucio della Torre is dead. Your chosen friend, your most faithful servant, has been killed by a mercenary and a bravo. Life is all over for me now, save for this one thing—the winning of vengeance. My lord, I ask for blood as the payment of blood. I ask for the death of Sir John Hawkwood."

I came forward and stood close beside the Prince. Her eyes met mine; there was no change in her set face save an increased pallor, a tightening of the features, that told of a bitter hate which would never die while her heart beat.

"This is the man who killed your lord and my friend," said Antonio, in his low silky voice. "Take comfort, Madonna. By my royal blood I swear that his act shall not go unavenged. I too have a score to settle with Sir John Hawkwood, and when I am done with him I think that his worst enemy will be quite content. A week from now you and I will stand side by side in Verona, Madonna Violante, and watch what remains of this brave soldier, and then you shall tell me if I have not done what should appease the ghost of Ranucio della Torre." He

raised her up and led her out to where her escort waited, and as I followed with my guards I reflected that matters looked very dark for me.

Madonna Francesca did not return to Verona with us. One of the men who rode beside me, after some urging, told me her fate, and I learned with amazement that she had been sent under a small escort to Padua, to rejoin her mistress. It took me a long time to discover from my sulky guard the cause of this, which proved at last to have been a desire on Antonio's part to send a message to his cousin to the effect that since she had chosen to leave him she might make her home hereafter with Francesco Carrara, but need never hope to see again her lands and castles, which he would guard with a tight hand and not permit to slip through his fingers as she had done. I was glad to hear that the Princess would have her favorite lady at her side again to keep her company in her new life. With Francesca and Michael O'Meara at hand, she would be sure of two good and devoted friends, for I knew the Irishman well enough to count on him in any cause that I had confided to his care.

It is not my purpose to say much concerning the journey from Castel Paura to Verona. I might tell how the pain of my wound worked upon me till I reeled in my saddle and would have fallen but for my bonds; or how the Prince, riding at the head of the party, sometimes checked his horse to gaze on

me maliciously and tell me of his plans for my entertainment when we should reach the city. But, truth to tell, I cared little for either suffering or taunts. The affair of the previous night had lit in me a fire that would not grow cold while my life lasted. I had saved Madonna Giulia and redeemed my knighthood, and I could find strength to face without weakness the worst of the torments which, as I well knew, would surely be my fate. It was a better end than I could have hoped. I was content, and my calm indifference first puzzled, then enraged the Prince. He redoubled his sneers and threats, and exhausted himself in the effort to break down my courage. The very ruffians who were my guards stared at me in growing wonder, amazed at the change that a night had worked in the ruffing captain of free lances whom they had all known and dreaded in Verona.

We entered the city by the Porta de' Borsari. I was a proud man in those days, and at another time it would have been bitter enough to me, this entry into the city, with my hands and feet tied together and armed guards pressing all about my horse. The news ran about the streets, and crowds of people gathered to gape at me and point and whisper. I scarcely noted it. Fatigue and pain and humiliation had no power to touch me when, glancing down at my cuirass, I saw knotted over it the scarf Madonna Giulia had fastened there. She had called me her knight. Looking up, I saw Antonio's nar-

rowed eyes turned on me to drink in the sight of my shame at being thus paraded through the streets where I had swaggered so long. Despite myself I smiled. He had never learned, this Prince, how one word from a woman can strengthen the heart and steel it against all petty sufferings, against even such things as ruin and death.

I was lodged underneath the castle, in one of the cells where state prisoners were often confined. Gianni Potrero saw me conducted there, and lingered to point mockingly at the bare stone walls and the pitiful glimmer of sunlight that filtered through the window. "No very lordly lodging, eh, Sir John Hawkwood?" he said, standing staring at me, with his hands on his sides and his cheeks puffed out. He had been my rival for so long a time that my fall was honey on his lips. "But yet a better home than you will have when a week has passed. Very soon, my English gentleman, six feet of earth will be your bed, and our land will be rid of one more bully from overseas!"

I laughed and flung myself down on a pile of straw in the corner. "Any lodging is good enough for an old soldier like myself," I answered, "one who has learned to sleep on the ground and find it a soft pillow. Faith, walls of any kind are a luxury. As for the grave, if I had ever feared it would I have chosen a profession that has brought me face to face with death every month of the year? You are a poor fighter, Messer Gianni—I learned

that in Castel Paura, when I held the stairs and you dared not come near me. Della Torre, though as villainous as yourself, had at least the advantage of some courage!"

"Your tongue will wag less bravely when you have had a taste of the wheel," he growled.

I shook my head. "Come, I have two gold coins left in my pocket," I answered gaily, "and I am willing to wager them that I meet the wheel more bravely than you will do when your turn comes—as come it surely will when Prince Antonio has squeezed from you all the black service of which you are capable."

He winced at the thought, crossed himself, and went out with no further effort to divert himself at my expense. I laughed again, but felt half regretful that he had gone. Confinement when waiting for death is no cheerful business to the most courageous of men, and even changing words with Gianni Potrero was better sport than sitting alone, counting the hours, watching the sunlight flicker and fade above me, and wondering how long a time it would be until the Prince haled me out to suffer for my service to his cousin.

Knowing as I did that he was not one to delay in a matter of vengeance, I was not a little amazed when three long days went by without bringing any developments. Morning and evening a sour-faced gaoler came stumbling into my cell with food and drink, and every night Gianni Potrero came to see

that I had not been spirited away. It was easy to guess from his air of baffled sulkiness that it pleased him very ill to see me still alive, but I could drag nothing from him that helped me to understand the strange delay.

“Are you so anxious to die, then, Sir John?” he muttered, leering at me. “Have patience, the end will come soon enough. This respite is due to the mercy of the Prince, who, reflecting on your many sins, has been pleased to give you time to make your peace with Heaven. Shall I send you a priest to shrive your soul? One could do little, I fear—I had best send a round dozen, eh?”

I answered him with the rough wit taught by camp life, and he went away cursing and fingering his dagger. Left alone, I racked my brains in vain for an explanation. When my gaoler came in with my frugal meal I began to talk to him, and he leaned on the wall and watched me as I ate. “I’ll stop until you have finished, ’twill spare me from coming back to fetch your dish,” he muttered ill-temperedly.

“Tell me, Sir Sour-Face,” I demanded, “why am I kept so long in this pestilent hole? Since the Prince is amiable enough to destine me for the wheel, why not break me on it and be done with the matter? Come, you are surely high in his confidence, let me into the secret.”

“I do not come here to chatter, but to fetch your food,” he answered shortly. From his manner it

was plain to me that he could satisfy me if he chose, and I had dealt with too many ruffians in my life to be at a loss with this one.

"See," I said, taking out and displaying the two coins that I had offered to wager with Gianni Potrero. "You shall have your choice—shall I give you these, or shall I break open your head before you can reach the door of this room? One or the other I will do as surely as my name is John Hawkwood, and if you are a man of sense you will choose the gold, for my arm is no light one."

I had risen and shouldered my way between him and the door, and he shrank away, looking at me with dread and at the gold with avarice. "But," he protested, more civilly than he had ever spoken yet, "if the Prince should learn of what I tell you, he might give me a taste of the rack, and that is worse than a broken head, signore."

"He shall never learn through me," I answered. "Come, will you speak or must I teach you?"

"I will speak," he cried hastily, and clutched at the gold, which, however, I kept well out of his reach until his part of the bargain was fulfilled. "The Prince has had no time to think of you and your affairs. News has come to him that on the very day of your capture the White Company, hearing that you were taken prisoner, surrendered the town of Lerino to the Paduans. My Lord Cortesia Seregno, the Prince's brother-in-law, was taken prisoner and carried to Padua, and they are moving

heaven and earth to raise a ransom for him. I know nothing more." He snatched the coins from my hand, slipped past me, and vanished, bolting the door behind him.

I flung myself down again on the straw. Here was news indeed! It was like my graceless knaves, on the hearing that the Prince had turned against me, and therefore no doubt against them also, to turn the tables by promptly surrendering the stronghold of Lerino into Paduan hands. Cortesia Seregno, whom I had left there in nominal charge when I returned to Verona after capturing the place, had apparently proved quite helpless to ride the storm, and had been delivered over by my fellows to his enemy Carrara. No doubt a great ransom would be demanded for him; and whatever was demanded, Antonio must pay,—for, having already roused Italy to indignant horror by the murder of his brother, he could scarce afford to kindle further resentment by an appearance of lukewarmness in the cause of his brother-in-law. No doubt, as my gaoler had said, he would have scant time to think of me and my affairs for the present. Well, it mattered little. Since I must die sooner or later, it gave me small comfort to know that a few more days stretched before me.

It seemed to me that I had passed a long eternity in confinement. Accustomed as I was to continual activity and excitement, the spending of my time behind bars was a keen torment to me. My

wound gave me no more pain and my strength had come back, but I suffered more than I had done on the afternoon they brought me into Verona. At times I was hard put to it to appear cheerful and indifferent when Gianni Potrero paid me his nightly visit, but here my pride came to my aid, and I never failed to come off victor in our engagements.

It was morning, and I was sitting staring up at the barred window, wondering how matters had gone with O'Meara. Suddenly I heard the sound of feet in the passage without—not the shuffling tread of my gaoler, but the hard fall of heavy boots and the ringing of spurs. I got to my feet on the instant, squaring my shoulders with a reckless laugh. No doubt they were coming for me at last, and I could have found it in my heart to be thankful that the suspense was over. I had never failed when the test came, and I knew that I could trust myself not to fail now, whatever tortures they might try upon me.

The door swung open, and I gaped like any fool to see the Prince standing on the threshold with Gianni Potrero and a score of troopers behind him. He wore a splendid dress of rose and gold, and carried in his hand a jewelled box from which he was composedly eating comfits. For a long moment he stood staring at me from under lowered lids, his eyes gleaming with hate and malice, his lips curving in an evil smile. I gave him back look for look.

"So, you are not tamed yet, Sir John," he drawled at last. "You have a stubborn back, but it will bend before the play is over. I have come to talk to you, and before I begin we will have your hands bound behind you, lest your temper should drive you to some reckless act." He nodded to his men.

I allowed them to bind my hands with a shrug of disdain. A struggle would have been hopeless, nor would I stoop to it. "If I were a royal Prince and the last of the Scaligeri, my lord," I said with a laugh, "I think I should take shame to fear a plain English adventurer so much that I dared not face him save when his hands were pinioned. Faith, I have the best of the matter, for I do not fear you one little bit."

"You will not have the best of the matter long," he answered, with a threat under his smiling sneer. "Go, leave me," he added to his men, and they trooped out and closed the door, Gianni alone remaining. The Prince leaned on the wall and stared at me, and I lounged carelessly, as if quite indifferent to my fate.

"You have thrown the dice with me, Sir John," Antonio drawled, "and you have lost—lost, as my brother Bartolomeo did, and the traitor Cagliari, and all other men who have striven to stand between me and my will. I have got you in my power. Is the thought a pleasant one to you? Is your heart quite stout and untroubled when you reflect that I may tear you on the rack and break you on the wheel?"

I nodded. "I am indifferent as to what you do," I answered, "and I do not understand why you waste so many words. It is not the way of English princes to stand chattering with men who have offended them and who are in their power."

His fixed smile did not alter. "Now some rulers might call you insolent, Sir John," he said, "but I have determined to be patient, and patient I shall be no matter how briskly your tongue wags. I have made up my mind to be merciful, do you understand? I shall not sentence you to the rack or to the wheel, I shall not hurt you in any way. Am I not a generous enemy, Sir John Hawkwood?"

"Such is not your name among your foes," I answered. "I cannot read the meaning of your riddle, my lord, but of one thing I am very certain, and that is that you do not wish me well or mean well by me."

"I have always heard that you were shrewd, Sir John, and now I perceive that what I heard was true," the Prince replied, showing his teeth in a noiseless laugh. "Listen, my friend. Your gallant chevaliers of the White Company have deserted my banner and surrendered the town of Lerino into Francesco Carrara's hands."

"I am glad of that," I said, with a shrug. "If I am to meet an evil end through you, I cannot see why you should continue to enjoy the towns I took for you."

"My brother-in-law, Cortesia Seregno, was taken

prisoner when your men surrendered," Antonio went on slowly.

I laughed. "He is little loss to you, and less gain to the Paduans," I cried, for indeed I had never esteemed the pompous gentleman very highly. He was another such one as Raimondo del Mayno.

"It appears that Carrara is of your mind," said the Prince, apparently not at all disturbed, "for when I sent a messenger to offer a rich ransom, he sent me back word that he valued my brother-in-law only as a means to an end. He would give up Cortesia Seregno, he said, in exchange for a more dangerous enemy, a man whose life imperiled his power and his sovereignty, a dangerous soldier against whom he had long vowed vengeance. Can you guess who this was?"

"No," I answered, "nor shall I try."

"You have heard the name many times," Antonio murmured, smiling evilly at me. "It is Sir John Hawkwood."

All was clear to me on the instant, and I take some pride in the remembrance that I met the news without a quiver of the face to add to my enemy's triumph. "Well?" I said coolly.

My impassivity forced a gesture of annoyance from him. "Has not Francesco Carrara often sworn that if ever you fell into his hands he would hang you like any thief?" he demanded, his even voice growing shriller and sharper.

"Yes," said I, "he has sworn that."

"It is my intention to give him a chance to fulfil his vow," Antonio informed me. "I am going to send you to him, Sir John."

We stood facing each other in silence for a moment, then the Prince laughed and helped himself to another comfit. "Danger has given you steady nerves, my friend," he mocked, "but for all your brave front I think you are far from happy at this moment. It is not a pleasant thing to be hanged like a dog." He came closer, and thrust his snarling face against mine. "I had planned to kill you myself, Sir John," he said, with cold fury in his voice. "I had planned to torture you and humble you before I snuffed out your life; but this way will do full as well. You robbed me of my cousin, you killed my favorite. Good—you shall go to Francesco Carrara, who has hated you for many years and has sworn to take vengeance on you. In this fashion I shall gain doubly, for I shall rid myself of the debt I owe you, and I shall ransom my brother-in-law at no greater cost than the surrender of your cursed body. When they fasten the rope about your neck, then think of Ranuccio della Torre and the blow you dealt him! When you are set to dangle in the air, and all turns black about you, and you struggle in vain to breathe, then recall that you robbed Antonio della Scala of his bride, and ask yourself if the game were worth the price! Good-bye, Sir John Hawkwood. In an hour you leave Verona on your way to the Paduan Court."

CHAPTER XVII

ON THE ROAD

“AND what came next, Sir John?”

“They brought the French King safe into the English camp, is it not so? And the young Duke of Burgundy as well, he that to-day stands higher in France than his brother and sovereign? You helped to capture them?”

“You saw the blind King of Bohemia dash into the fight with his horse led by his squires? You heard him vow to strike one blow before his death?”

“You saw Chandos, the great chevalier? and the Black Prince, and the Knights of the Star, who had vowed to die before they would retreat one step, from whatever foe?”

They were urging their horses close about me, bending forward eagerly lest they should lose a word I let fall. The red light of the morning sun fell on their dark faces and intent eyes, and gave them, despite their grim strength, the look of boys who listen earnestly to a marvelous tale. I answered the hail of questions as best I might, laughing a little.

“Come, come, we are wasting time, we must mend our pace; already we have dallied enough on the way,” the voice of the leader cut in sharply. Again my guards set spurs to their horses, and we started briskly forward. We were very near to Padua now; I could see its first faint outline in the distance.

We had passed the night at a road-side inn, and as we supped before the fire I had made acquaintance with the score of Paduan troopers whom Francesca Carrara had sent to Verona to be my guards. It was never my way to mope over what could not be helped, and despite the great peril in which I stood I preferred cheerful comradeship to silent brooding. Soldiers have a fellow-feeling all the world over, and I was not surprised to discover that my captors were disposed to treat me civilly enough. They had met me before, in many a skirmish, and respected my skill at warfare; having got me in their power now, and being convinced that they would never again stand in any danger from me, they were in high good humor, and showed me rough civility. The cheerful way in which I met adversity, too, soon won me their approval, and when I began to jest with them over the wine and tell them battle-tales they were ready to swear friendship with me.

“Indeed, ’tis a pity you ever took service with that rogue Della Scala,” the leader told me, with real regret. “Why not have come to Padua and fought

for Duke Francesco, who makes a generous master and a just one? Now you have served him so that he has sworn to hang you, and hang you he will. You have scarce a day more to exist, you that are the greatest soldier in Italy. It is evil luck, as I live."

"If I am to die to-morrow, let me drink to-night," I cried laughing, and refilled my cup. We sat late about the fire, but were early astir, and had taken the road to Padua by the time the sun was up.

I rode along in a strange content. Before me lay an old and bitter enemy and the death of a dog, yet I felt no tremor and no grief. I was ready to meet my fate with a smile, I who had been so fierce and so embittered once, who had found no joy save in smiting my foes. I was much changed indeed, since I could ride to Padua among armed guards and feel my heart clean of all hate and all desire for revenge.

As we galloped on our way I laughed and jested with my captors, talking so merrily that they stared at me in wonder and mounting admiration. They were accustomed to bravery, and had seen many men meet death with a pretense at light-heartedness, but I think my merriment, unforced and natural, was a new thing in their experience. A strange gaiety ruled me. Wondering at myself, I suddenly understood. I had dropped ten long and hateful years from my life. I had gone back to the days when first I went soldiering in France. It was so

that I had laughed then, sitting with John Chandos and his friends, dreaming of knightly deeds, planning gallant enterprises that should win a smile from our royal master.

I had risked and lost my life for the service of the Princess Giulia, and in the losing I had gained a far more precious thing—the renewal of my youth, the recovery of my knighthood. I would die, but she was saved, and through me. Far better this, than to have dragged out a long life of such years as I had passed of late. Since I had wrecked my own existence, it was well that I should end it in the saving of another from evil and suffering. Why should I desire to live longer, since I had already done the supreme thing? She was safe now, I could help her no more, and life far from her presence would be ceaseless torture. Fate had been merciful to me in bringing such an end.

Her face rose before me, proud and pale and sweet. I saw her defy me in the palace loggia, struggle against me in the inn, seek to stab me in the ruined castle. I saw the change come over her when I told her of my love, the terror leap into her gaze when she knew that she had betrayed one who had striven to serve her. Last, I saw her bend over me and knot her gold-embroidered scarf across my breast. "Good-bye, Sir John Hawkwood," she had said, as I helped her to her horse. "Good-bye, my gallant knight!" Was it not an easy thing to die,

since those words would be in my ears until the end?

Sudden longing came over me at the thought. I saw again the soft dusky masses of her hair, the proud splendor of her eyes, the curve of her scarlet mouth. Striving hard to put the vision from my mind, I turned to a comfort that in the last week had never failed me.

For years now, when I had thought of my soldier hero, the Black Prince, I had turned sick with shame and hatred of myself. He was dead now, this lord of mine; but had he lived, had he seen me as I had been for long years, what would he have felt toward his old servant, the man he had knighted? Always this reflection had roused in me a pain and a bitterness that nothing could quench; but now I could hold my head erect, knowing that if he stood before me I could meet his eyes and never flinch. I had risked my life in a good cause, I would lose it in a knightly one. He would have approved me, he would have said that I had borne myself like a gentleman of England.

I was friends again with the Black Prince. The thought was so sweet to me that I hugged it, caring nothing for a death that would take me toward the ruler I had served and loved. As we rode along I found myself singing in a voice as gay as that of any boy—singing an old camp song that the English troops had been wont to shout when their idol went by.

*"We met the French near Poitiers town,
Bonny Edward, royal Edward.
We broke their lines, we mowed them down,
Oh my bonny Edward.
Their King was there, their princes too,
And Guesclin, Clisson, and Anjou,
But which of these could cope with you,
My soldier prince, my Edward?"*

It seemed to me, as I sang, that he was close beside me, that we were riding stirrup to stirrup. He was smiling on me, and saying that I had done well, and that death was a small thing when weighed with honor. Again I laughed, and again my captors eyed me curiously, for they could not see the friend who rode at my rein.

He was still there when we rode at last into Padua, when we passed through the narrow streets lined with shops and quaint houses, and entered the more splendid quarter of the town. Spring was in the air, and the city had a blue sky overhead and a carpet of flowers underfoot. Roses twined about the buildings, towers and pinnacles caught the glimmering light. Through the pierced traceries of marble walls stole heavy blossomed boughs that filled the streets with fragrance. I was in the city of Francesco Carrara, my old enemy; yet I could scarce believe that beneath this surface of flowers and marble and softly stirring leaves there lurked danger and death.

We turned aside into a narrow lane. A great blank wall loomed before us, shutting out the sun. "Where are we? What place is this?" I muttered, dazed by the sudden gloom.

The leader motioned me to be silent. "We are coming to the private entrance of the royal palace," he said curtly. "My commands, Sir John, are to bring you in by the secret staircase. Be silent now, make no noise."

We halted at a door built into the stone wall, and the leader knocked on it softly with his sword-hilt. After an instant it swung open, and there was a low-voiced conference, some man within asking questions which my gaoler answered. Then I was curtly bidden to dismount; a dozen of my guards pressed round me, and I was led into a long dark hall, empty save for the man who had admitted us. This fellow now touched the wall with practiced fingers, and to my amazement I saw the wooden panels glide away under his hands, revealing a narrow staircase leading upward into the dusk. Obeying a low command, I stumbled forward, my guards around me.

At the top there was more juggling with the wall, and a second opening appeared, giving us entrance into a long low room hung with tapestry. Two men were standing by the window, conversing in whispers; one had the look of a soldier, the other of a secretary. The latter started at our appearance, then came forward hastily. "You have succeeded? You have brought him?" he cried, peering at me

with short-sighted eyes. "Is it Sir John Hawkwood? Wait, then, until I carry the news to my lord." He went hastily across to the door, knocked, and vanished into an inner room.

I knew now that I was in the antechamber of Francesco Carrara, and my heart beat quicker at the thought. My guards were gazing on me with rough pity, and I forced myself to look back at them with a laugh. Scarcely an instant had passed when the secretary reappeared.

"Sir John Hawkwood is to enter—alone," he said, and at the last word I saw a glance of surprise pass around the circle.

I nodded carelessly in assent and passed through the open door, which closed behind me as soon as I had entered.

CHAPTER XVIII

CARRARA OF PADUA

It was a magnificent room, an apartment glittering with all the splendor suitable in a royal palace. The walls were set in square oaken panels crusted with blue and gold and gilded with wreaths and hanging garlands—a medley of rich coloring that caught the light and flung it back in a ruddy blaze. The white plastered ground of the ceiling was covered by a hunting scene, done in deep warm colors by the hand of Giacomo degli Avanzi, that pupil of the great Giotto, who was held by many to surpass his master in grace and skill. Even at this tense moment I noted it absently—the warm confusion of plunging horses, the riders in rich habits of blue and gold that blended with the panels on the walls, the blue sky atop of them, the golden sun at their backs. An Eastern carpet of gold and blue covered the floor, and all about the room was scattered costly furniture blazoned in gold with the arms of the house of Carrara. The breeze, coming in strongly at the window, blew apart the heavy curtains and brought me the sweet heavy scent of many flowers blooming in the gardens below.

In a great throne-like chair beside a littered table

sat a man whom I guessed at once to be the Duke of Padua. I have heard many say that princes are but men, and in no wise different from other and less fortunate mortals, and no doubt this is true; but in every ruler that ever I saw, good, bad, or indifferent, I have found one common trait—an assurance born of years of command, an unconscious look of superiority that would proclaim the sovereign were its owner clad in a leather jerkin and the rude cuirass of a common soldier. Francesco Carrara possessed this characteristic even beyond most princes. He had the royal air here in his palace, but I knew that he would also have had it on the road, in battle, wherever fate might choose to place him.

He was a man of middle age, not tall, but well and strongly knit and of powerful build. His hair was dark, and he had sharp shrewd gray eyes and a straight determined mouth that could yet curve into a pleasant smile. His dress of dull green satin was very rich, and the jewels on his doublet were many, yet these adornments, which in Antonio della Scala caught the gaze and roused a sense of contempt, seemed in this man but the fitting accompaniment of a great and proud nature. Of all the princes I had seen, none save Edward Plantaganet had ever so impressed me as this my old enemy, before whom I now stood for the first time in my life.

For some moments we remained motionless and silent. The Duke's eyes met mine steadily and cu-

riously, and I would not be the first to look away. He had a great dog curled at his feet, and presently the animal, fretted by my sudden entrance and the long pause, rose with a snarl and advanced threateningly toward me. I put out my hand to it, and after an instant of distrust and hesitation it came closer, eyed me questioningly, and in the end began to lick my fingers.

The Duke of Padua smiled curiously. "I fear my dog is a Veronese, Sir John Hawkwood," he said, in the low, level tones of a strong man, "since he leaves me in this base fashion for one who is the enemy of my land."

"Not a Veronese, my lord," I answered, as cheerfully as I could, "for, believe me, to-day the Veronese hate me as much as ever the Paduans did."

"Yes, the Paduans have hated you for a long time," he said, with a quiet nod. "It is of that we have to speak. Will you sit down, Sir John?"

I shook my head, surprised by the invitation. It amazed me that I should be admitted here without guards. True, I was unarmed, and any injury I might do the Duke would not help me to escape, but nevertheless his indifferent unconcern showed in strange contrast to the action of Prince Antonio, who had dared speak to me only when my hands were bound. However, I had no mind to attempt any mischief. This man was my enemy, he had captured me, and by all the laws of warfare it was his

right to wipe the score clean by my death. I was prepared to suffer without complaint, and as I waited I confessed inwardly that I preferred to suffer at this man's bidding rather than at that of the Prince of Verona.

The Duke leaned back in his chair and regarded me with inscrutable intentness. "You have been my foe for a long time, Sir John," he said, "and though in my life I have had many foes, princes and dukes and cardinals and generals, rich men and proud, strong men and great, I must do you the justice of admitting that none of them brought me such distress as you. It was natural, that. Kings and princes are often poor soldiers, and you are a very good one. For years now, whatever duchy or republic you supported, you have found yourself arrayed in arms against Padua. You have taken my towns and pillaged them, and ravaged my country, and razed my castles. You have baffled me as no other man on earth has ever done. I am not patient, and therefore, some time since, I took an oath of vengeance against you. Perhaps it reached your ears?"

"To be sure," I nodded, caressing the head of the great dog, who was still licking at my hand. "You swore that if ever I fell into your power, you would hang me like any thief—have I not got it right?"

He looked at me steadily, as if searching for some sign of fear or weakness. "And what did you

do," he asked curiously, "when you heard of my intention?"

"Faith, I swore an oath of my own," I answered. "I swore that if ever you fell into my power I would march you through my camp tied to my stirrup, that all might see the end to which Sir John Hawkwood brings his enemies."

The Duke smiled, without any sign of resentment. "Those who told me that you had courage did not lie," he said thoughtfully. "There is no reason why I should show you any mercy, Sir John. You agree with me, do you not? It is evident that you would have shown me none. You have injured me in a thousand ways, and you have done me but one service——"

"I did that one without intent, then," I cried, "nor can I call it to mind, my lord."

"A week ago," he answered, "you sent me my young cousin, the Princess Giulia, of whom I have long sought to get possession."

"It was for her own sake I did that, not for yours, and you owe me no thanks," I answered curtly. I had no wish to speak of the Princess. Death and I were old friends, I could face him with a calm defiance, but I was not sure that I could talk of Madonna Giulia without playing the woman.

"After all," the Duke said deliberately, "I am not sure that you did me so great a service when you sent her to me. I desired a rich and docile ward, whom I might give in marriage in a fashion

which would increase my power by a suitable alliance. Instead, I find myself saddled with a lady whose lands remain in the clutches of Antonio della Scala; a lady, moreover, who appears far from pliant—who has, in fact, a strong will of her own, and is scarce likely to play the part of a pawn in my game of chess. It may be that very soon I shall wish her back in Verona, unless she mends her ways.”

I could have sworn that there was a twinkle in his eye, and certainly I was near laughter myself. Madonna Giulia was assuredly not one to wed according to her cousin’s will, or to follow any guidance save that of her own desires. “Truly, you are right, my lord,” I said cheerfully. “If you join issue with the Princess, I think you will find her a worse enemy than ever you found me.”

“Well, then, it is plain that I owe you nothing at all,” he pointed out briskly. “Do you wish to throw yourself upon my mercy, to make an appeal for grace?”

“No, my lord,” I answered, crumpling the dog’s ears in my fingers. “Why should I do that? We have been fair foes for years. You should never have caught me could I have prevented it, but fortune has proved your friend, and you have got me at last. Very well, I do not complain; it is a risk I have long taken. Call in your men and order them to string me up. I will submit with a good grace,

and wish you joy of your victory and your vengeance."

"You do not wish to plead, then?" he asked curiously.

"I am sure, my lord," I answered, with the bow I had learned in the days when I served Prince Edward, and which I had not troubled to bestow on Antonio della Scala and his like, "that you would not have begged mercy of me had I captured you. Give me credit, I beg, for being as good a soldier as yourself."

"Yet I scarce dare order your execution," he murmured, with a grave shake of the head. "You cannot know in what peril I stand on your account——"

"Peril?" I stared at him blankly.

"Peril, indeed. There is a madman here in Padua, the Irish gentleman who brought the Princess from Verona. He has forced his way into my presence a dozen times, now pleading, now threatening. He kneels before me and craves mercy for you with tears in his eyes, then leaps up and swears to kill me if a hair of your head falls, though I shelter myself behind a thousand bolts and bars and defend myself with a thousand soldiers. I could find him diverting, this gentleman, if he did not cause me to go in hourly terror of my life. Do you find it agreeable, Sir John, to have a madman for a friend?"

I laughed despite myself, but there was a moisture in my eyes, so exactly did this account jibe with the action I should have expected from Michael O'Meara. If I had but one ally in the world, at least that one was devoted and faithful to the death. "Messer O'Meara was never made to move in courts, my lord," I answered. "He has too true a heart. Do not let him suffer because of his loyalty to me—that is the one request I shall ever make you."

He looked at me again in silence. "You are not the man I had pictured you, Sir John Hawkwood," he said at last. "It does not cause me great surprise that this Messer O'Meara defends you with such warmth. I think I might have felt some fondness for you myself had you served me instead of fighting me with such fury. Why did you sell your sword to Antonio della Scala?"

"Not for love of him, my lord, for I always held him a villain," I answered frankly. "For a bag of gold coins."

"That speech runs with the evil tales I have heard of you, but not with the nature I had thought I read in your face," said the Duke, and I, famed over all Italy for my truculence, stood dumb beneath the rebuke; for it was so that the Black Prince might have spoken. "Does an English knight combat only for gain? Well, no matter. Tell me this—when you fought me in Della Scala's cause, did you believe that he had the right of the quarrel?"

"No, my lord," I answered, looking him frankly in the eyes. "I believed you to be right; but for my own interest I chose to fight on the other side."

"And now Antonio della Scala has thrown you off and turned against you—for his own interests," said the Duke shrewdly. "And you blame him for that, no doubt; yet is the one worse than the other?"

"That is true," I answered honestly, for it was never my way to avoid a fair thrust. "But it is useless to talk of this, my lord—I have seen these things before you pointed them out. I have learned much in the past few days——"

"And I could guess, I think, who was your teacher," the Duke interrupted, with that strange hint of a smile playing once more about his lips. "Then if you were not to die so soon, Sir John, you would in future sell your sword only where there was right as well as gold?"

"Small use to consider such questions now!" I cried. "Your hangman will save me the trouble of putting together the pieces of my life. Come, why do you not call him in? I think, on the whole, I prefer death to the cheerful occupation of considering my past sins."

The Duke of Padua rose from his chair and stood facing me across the table. "Before I call in the hangman, let us have matters clear between us," he said calmly. "If you were to live longer, Sir John, you would fight only for a cause you approved; and you believe that in my quarrel with

Antonio della Scala I am in the right. Is that true?"

I looked at him blankly. The dog, anxious for more caresses, began to jump on me fawningly, but I scarcely noted it in the sudden whirl of my thoughts.

"This being the case," said Francesco Carrara cheerfully, "will you take service with me, Sir John Hawkwood? If you consent, I will do for you what I have never done before—I will break my oath, and forego my vengeance. No doubt I can get absolution for my broken vow from his Holiness the Pope, who is well disposed to me at present. Well, and how say you?"

Still I stared at him in silence. The thing was so unexpected that I could find no words. The Duke continued to regard me with a quiet smile.

"Well," he said, "have you hated me so long that you cannot bring yourself to fight in my cause? That will pass; last month I hated you with all my heart, yet now I find you as much to my taste as ever I found a man yet. Take service with me, and within the year we will have driven Antonio della Scala out of Verona. It is said that you are the best soldier in Italy, Sir John, and I think you will be of more use to me in armor and a-horse-back than dangling by a halter. Am I not right?"

"You do not mean that I shall die?" I stammered, far more at a loss than when I had believed that he

was bent upon my execution. "You wish me to live—to serve you?"

"I read once, in some old book," said the Duke, thoughtfully, "that a foe, won over, sometimes makes a better ally than one who has always been devoted. And it is my own belief, Sir John, that the man who makes as brave an enemy as you should make the best of friends. We have grown to know each other well, you and I, because we hated; but I think we might as easily feel affection. You are to my taste, a thing I cannot say of many men. Am I, perhaps, to yours?"

"Yes," I said, in a low voice that was not altogether steady, "to my taste as never any man I have served, save one, has ever been. I will repay you, my lord. I will fight for you as I fought years ago in France——"

"That is well," the Duke responded cheerfully, "for I mean to put the command of all my forces in your hands. You might do me great treachery and bring me to ruin if you abused my trust, but I do not fear that. I have learned to read men, Sir John, and I can read you."

"If you read me right, you read great gratitude, my lord," I answered, and bent my knee to him as I had not bent it to any ruler since I stood for the last time before the Black Prince.

CHAPTER XIX

IN DUKE FRANCESCO'S GARDEN

BEFORE me stretched a wilderness of flowers and trees, threaded by walks paved with marble. Broad sloping terraces, covered by many-hued blossoms, ran off toward the distant walls that shut the palace in. Roses grew all about in flaming vivid masses. and lilies and myrtle were everywhere. I heard the soft plashing of many fountains, and the murmur of water in the conduits. Nothing met my eyes save flowers and foliage and birds and great floating butterflies, and the warm blue of the spring-time heaven. It was like a scene from the Decameron, those romantic tales which I had heard so many fair ladies quote in Florence.

The Duke of Padua had walked with me to the gate of the garden, his hand resting on my shoulder. "You will find her in among the blossoms, my pretty cousin," he said, as he left me. "She desires to thank you for the service that you did her. She says, Sir John, that never in any tale of chivalry did she read of a more gallant knight than you." He turned away, and I passed into the garden, still dazed with the happenings of the last hour.

Where to search for the Princess I did not know, but as I wandered aimlessly down one of the many paths a sound of talk and laughter fell on my ears, and an instant later I stumbled on as pretty a scene as man could wish. On the rim of a marble fountain, dipping her hands in the foamy spray, sat Francesca di Montalto, looking as sweet as Fiammetta of the Decameron herself. She had a crown of roses in her misty golden hair, and flowers lay thick about her feet where she had dropped them when she began to play with the water. O'Meara sat beside her, singing an Irish love catch and laughing down into her upturned face. So absorbed and happy did they appear that I would have passed on had not they caught sight of me and leapt up with a cry of welcome.

"Glory be!" O'Meara whooped ecstatically, bearing down upon me. "'Tis Sir John himself, or may I never swing a sword or drain a glass again! Oh, Sir John dear, 'tis a sight for sore eyes you are, and this hour's the happiest of my life! Sorra a free breath did I draw while you were in Della Scala's hands, I swear it be every saint in the Calendar!" He caught me in his arms and hugged me until my ribs were near to cracking, then released me and began to dance around me in a circle. "Glory be! Glory be!" he repeated again and again, between tears and laughter. "Bedad, I knew very well 'twas not Antonio della Scala would have the killing of you. It's free you are, and good times are

coming, and there's not a cloud in the sky saving for the one small consideration that I lost the joy of seeing you kill Ranucio della Torre, that jewel of a Veronese! Have you seen the Duke of Padua, Sir John? Has he been after offering you service, as he swore to me by all that's holy that he would? I pledged my soul to run him through unless he did, and faith, I'd keep my word, no less!" He flung himself on me again, and for some moments we behaved in the most foolish fashion possible.

"And now," O'Meara continued presently, drawing himself up in a stately manner, "I'll be thanking you, Sir John, to congratulate me in proper terms on my new dignity." He paused impressively. "'Tis a stupendously exalted person you have now the honor to address, little as ye guess it."

"Why, what has come to you?" I demanded.

"What you'll never credit—what I couldn't credit mesilf till I'd heard it a dozen times and more," he assured me. "My uncle's gone, and may God rest his soul and forgive him for all the hard thoughts he ever had of me—he was right in some of them, I'm fearing—and pardon me for all the hard words I've ever said of him—and some of those were gospel truth too!" He crossed himself piously as a conclusion to this strange petition. "Well, and what do you say to that, now? I'll thank you to swear at me no more when you've taken a drop too much, nor yet to risk me precious life in sending me on enterprises that you well know are hope-

less, and that are only saved from being such by the brilliant genius that distinguishes every one of my actions! Is it stricken dumb you are, or what for do you stare at me as at a banshee?"

"Your uncle dead!" I repeated slowly. "But how have you learned that, Michael?"

"Faith, 'twas like a page from a romance," he declared cheerfully. "The news came to me through old Patrick, the truest-hearted creature in all this wide world, who served me when I was a lad, and my father before me. I sent him a word from time to time, all these years, and he alone of all in Ireland knew of my whereabouts, so when my uncle died—God rest his soul, and deal better by it than it deserves!—he crossed the seas and turned his face toward Verona to bring me the news. On his way he paused here in Padua for a night's shelter, and met me, who had come here with the Princess. 'Twas a clear act of Providence, no less. Oh, 'tis as true as gospel, Sir John. I've gold to throw to the birds if I choose—but I'll not, I'll throw it at Madonna Francesca's little feet instead. Do you comprehend, 'tis myself can make her my Lady O'Meara now, whenever she ceases to torment me and makes me the happiest man the sun shines on."

Again I wrung his hands, with warm words of pleasure and congratulation. "But I thought, Michael, that Madonna Francesca had ceased long ago to torture you," I said slyly, with a glance at that blushing witch. "The night you left Castel

Paura she seemed far from averse to treating you with kindness——”

“Bedad, and that’s what I tell her,” cried the Irishman, “but she has the grand air of one who remembers nothing! She flouts me, she that threw herself in my arms that night, never waiting to be properly entreated! ’Tis a bold-faced minx she is, no doubt of it. Tell me this now, what cause had she to guess I wanted her pretty arms stealing about my neck, that she dared to risk that same——”

“Oh!” Francesca cried indignantly. “You are very brutal, Messer O’Meara, and very foolish as well. It was only fright that made me do so, and I will never wed you, never, never——”

“Sure and you will, mavourneen,” he blarneyed, going closer to her, “when you know that should you do anything else I’d go mad entirely, no less. My heart’s under those pretty feet of yours—not an instant of happiness do I know save in the light of your eyes—come, be merciful, now, or I’ll be after dying before your sight!”

She smiled shyly, showing two deep dimples that might well have maddened a colder man than O’Meara. “Do you hold me so dear, indeed, indeed, Messer Michele?” she murmured, struggling hard with the name of Michael, a word ill adapted to Italian lips. His arm went around her, and she swayed toward him. I turned away. O’Meara was my oldest comrade, my truest ally, but I knew that at times the best friend may outwear his welcome.

In the distance I caught the flutter of a dress; no doubt it was the Princess. I would go find her.

My heart was heavy as I strode along, treading the flowers under my spurred feet. Glad as I was of Michael's happiness, it seemed to throw into sharp contrast my own loneliness and the hopelessness of my love. For a moment I ceased to rejoice over the miraculous good fortune that had come to me, the saving of my life, the graciousness of Francesco Carrara, and found myself remembering only that the two behind me, the Irish soldier and the Veronese girl, were tasting a bliss for the want of which I must go lonely and longing to the day of my death. The perfumed breeze swept across my face, the birds sang merrily, the odor of flowers rose all about me, but there was pain at my heart and a dead weight of suffering on my spirit.

"Sir John Hawkwood! Is it you?"

Before me, among the roses and the lilies, stood the Princess. She wore a dress of pale golden brocade belted and brodered with great sapphires, and there were jewels on her neck and in her dusky hair. Her fingers were full of a great mass of crimson flowers, over which a huge butterfly hovered longingly, waving its gaudy wings. She was beautiful beyond all sights that I had ever seen, and her face, upturned to mine, stole away all my strength and left me weak and silent, staring at her as a worshipper gazes at a niched saint. I had seen her many times, and always her loveliness had been great

enough to wring my heart, but never had I seen her so fair as now. There was a new charm clinging all about her, a look of youth and happiness, and the smile that curved her scarlet mouth spoke all of sweetness, not at all of the pride and disdain that had so often marred her beauty. "You have come, Sir John! You have come at last, and you have no more to fear from Antonio della Scala!" she said joyously, and held out both her hands.

I knelt and kissed them, finding no words. She was welcoming me with all graciousness, greeting me with such favor as I had never dared to look for, yet I felt further from her than on the day when I had first spoken to her in the Prince's loggia, and she had scorned and mocked me and refused to listen to my warning. My eyes turned on her again as I let her hands go, and I caught my breath sharply for very pain. She stood here in the garden of the Duke of Padua, whose ward and kinswoman she was; her rich dress, her jewels, the flowers and marble that framed her bright figure—all these things were her proper setting. What was mine? The camp, or the tavern, or a wild and bloody battle, but never a palace. She was the Princess Giulia, I was Sir John Hawkwood, a mercenary and a leader of free companions. I would do well to leave her as soon as might be, and never again to approach one so far above me.

"You have seen the Duke?" she was asking eagerly. "You have had speech with him, Sir John?"

"Yes, Madonna Giulia."

"And he has offered you service, and his favor?"

"Yes, Princess." I could say no more. Her beauty, her radiant kindness, her sweet words all seemed to make my case but the more hopeless. Even this show of favor, I told myself savagely, was but the graciousness of one too proud not to requite the service done by a man far below her.

"It gives me joy to see you here, Sir John," she said, her voice trembling. "While you lay in Antonio's hands, while I knew that your life was imperiled for your kindness to me—ah, I had little pleasure then! Had you paid so dearly for my saving, I think I would never have known peace again."

The trees rustled softly in the scented wind. At my feet lay the scarlet flowers that Madonna Giulia had dropped when I kissed her hands. The great butterfly floated down upon them, spread his wings, and began to draw out the honey.

"What is it, Sir John?" said the Princess, and I felt her hand laid lightly on my sleeve. "Is not all well with you? Why do you knit your brows and bite your lip?"

With an effort I gathered myself up and faced her as bravely as might be. "All is indeed well with me," I cried, "if I find you well and happy, Princess. Come, tell me, have you made a change for the better? Will you find Padua as fair a home as Verona

was, and is Duke Francesco as much to your taste as Prince Antonio?"

She bowed her head. "I breathe freely for the first time in many years," she answered. "In that bloody Court of my cousin's I lived in terror, though my pride made me conceal it from all the world. It is an evil dream to me now, yet a dream I do not regret, for without it I had never known the bravest knight that ever served lady." She smiled on me in a sweet fashion that wellnigh wrung a groan from my lips. "I am happy here, Sir John. I find Duke Francesco a kind gentleman, a loving kinsman."

"That is well," I answered. "He will cherish you truly, and wed you in the end to an Este or a Gonzaga, some great prince who will set you on a throne." My voice turned bitter on the words, and I scorned myself for the weakness. None who had looked at her then could have pictured her in any home save a royal one, yet the thought hurt me beyond bearing.

She smiled wisely and shook her head. "So he said when first I came to him, but now he knows better," she murmured. Coming a step closer to me across the flowers, she looked up into my eyes. "I have learned a great deal in a little time, Sir John," she said softly. "A month ago I was a proud, hard girl; vain of my rank, scornful of all the world save the few that had crowns upon their brows. But to-day I am different. I have learned that royal blood is a

poor thing if not backed by a noble nature. Which bore himself in the more knightly fashion toward me, Sir John Hawkwood who is of poor birth, or Antonio della Scala who is the last of a great line of rulers? I have learned a great deal. If ever I wed, it will not be for place or for power, but for love."

My breath came fast as I looked across the brilliant garden. In the distance I saw O'Meara take Francesca in his hold and kiss her, and a wild longing seized me to throw out my arms and take the Princess into them. "May you have love and power too, and all other blessings," I said, my voice shaking. "I shall pray always for that, Madonna Giulia."

Her lustrous dark eyes were still smiling into mine, stealing away my strength. "The love would be enough, Sir John—without the place—without the power," she said softly.

"Then thrice happy the man to whom you will some day give your love," I said, clenching my hands, wondering for how long I could find strength to meet her smiling gaze.

She glanced down at the gaudy butterfly on the bright flowers. "Do you remember, Sir John," she asked, in a low voice, "what you told me in Castel Paura concerning a dream of yours? You dreamed that if I loved enough I might find strength to lay aside my rank and wealth, to put off my pride of blood like a worn garment, to face poverty boldly

and laugh at it so long as the man I loved stood by my side——”

She broke off, and I stood speechless, my heart twisted by the memory that her words had called up. I had told her that in Castel Paura on the night of the Prince's coming, and she had heard me gently and without scorn. Why did she hurt me now by speaking of what could never be?

“Ah,” she cried suddenly and sharply, her hand falling from my sleeve as she swayed away, “you are unkind, Sir John. You shame me. Will you not help me ever so little, then?”

“Help you, Madonna Giulia?” I cried, amazed, but very eager now. “Do you mean that there is something which I may yet do for your service? Tell me then, for on my honor I had never hoped for such happiness as to aid you once more——”

“Yes, there is something you may do to serve me,” she said. She turned her face up to mine again, and I saw tears in her eyes and laughter on her lips. “You may marry me, Sir John Hawkwood,” she murmured, in a wonderful voice unlike any sound that had ever reached my ears, “you may marry me, if your love has not died since last you told me of it!”

For an instant I stared at her like one gone mad. A great joy swept over me, an exaltation and triumph such as I had never known could exist on earth. The beating of my heart grew faster and

faster until it hurt me. "You love me?" I muttered. "You love me?"

She dropped her eyes. Into her cheeks crept a soft warm flush, and her lips trembled strangely. "Yes, Sir John. Yes, I love you."

I could not move hand or foot; a spell seemed to bind me and keep me gazing at her beautiful lowered head. "Since when?" I heard myself say. "Since when—Giulia? Since the days in Castel Paura?"

"Before that," she murmured, so low that I could scarcely catch the words.

"What," I cried, "did you love me when I seized you at the inn and carried you away?"

"Before that," she whispered.

"On the day when I spoke to you in the Prince's loggia to warn you of the plot?" I did not know my own voice now.

She looked at me once more, her eyes swimming with tears and laughter. "I loved you from the time when first you came to Verona, my knight," she told me bravely. "I loved you when I saw you march through the streets with your Company. I hung from the window to watch you, and dreamed afterward of your face, and when you passed me in the palace my heart leapt at sound of your step. But I was hard and proud, and scorned all who were not royal; and I heard many evil tales of you, and despised myself that I could not tear the thought of you from my mind. I was angered against you un-

til at times I believed my heart was full of hate. Yet through it all I loved you. I loved you when I spoke most cruelly to you, I loved you when I despised you most for the tales I heard of your life—I loved you when, mad with rage because I thought you had carried me off to sell me to the Duke, I would have stabbed you there in the castle. Can you forgive me? You thought always of my service, and I scorned you, mocked you, would have killed you. I have been proud and wayward and cruel, but if you will forgive me—if you will let me be your wife, Sir John—I will be very obedient and very true; I will teach you that I am not all ungrateful——”

I flung out my arms to gather her to me, then dropped them with a groan. “It cannot be, Giulia,” I cried hoarsely. “I cannot wrong you by taking you to wife. You are a Princess, a lady of royal blood and great possessions——”

“I have very little now,” she answered, smiling as if lands and gold were nothing. “Antonio has all my inheritance in his grasp. I will come to you very poor—you will be generous to wed so undowered a bride.”

“I am to march against Antonio,” I answered desperately. I had never fought so hard a battle as this one in all my days; I had never feared a sword as I feared the light of her tender eyes. “Duke Francesco and I will get you back your lands, and you will be rich again——”

"Then Duke Francesco shall add them to his possessions," she cried, with the gesture of one who tosses away a thing of little worth. "I have told him that he may keep as much of my inheritance as it pleases him. As for me, I shall be content to have my husband's love."

"Giulia! Giulia!" I groaned. "You cannot wed such a man as I. You are great, you are royal, and I am a tanner's son——"

"The more honor to you then, my dear lord, that you have a nature nobler than that of any king," she answered, dropping me such a stately curtsy as she might have made to the Duke of Padua.

"I am a rough soldier," I cried. "I am a captain of mercenaries, a leader of free lances. I have been a bully and a cutthroat, a tavern loiterer, a street fighter——"

"You are a knight and a gentleman and a soldier," she said, with her head high. "I shall never blush to wear your name—I am proud of you, and I love you."

"It is madness," I groaned. "It cannot be——"

"I love you," she said again. With a sudden graceful movement she fell on her knees on the flowery sward before me, turning up a tearful laughing face full of such tender lovelight as sapped my last strength away. "Will you wed me, Sir John Hawkwood?" she murmured. "Will you marry me? See, I am on my knees before you. If you

are true chevalier and gallant knight you will never suffer a lady to humble herself in vain——”

“Giulia!” I cried, as I caught her to her feet and pressed her in my arms. “Giulia, my beloved!” And it seemed to me that the sun shone brighter and the wind blew softer and the flower-scent grew more rich and sweet as her lips met mine in the glory of our first kiss.

THE END

NOTE

THE great English condottiere, Sir John Hawkwood, was in command of the Paduan forces at the battle of Castagnaro, on which occasion Antonio della Scala, the last ruler of the house of Scaliger, was disastrously defeated and put to flight. Soon afterward this unfortunate Prince was forced to quit Verona in disguise and to seek a refuge at Venice, where after a short and unhappy exile he died. Verona fell into the hands of Francesco Carrara, Duke of Padua.

Sir John Hawkwood lived to a green old age, and died full of years and honors, leaving sons who later returned to England and there carried on the name of their famous father. He was deeply and sincerely mourned by many of those whom he had served, above all by the Republic of Florence, which accorded him a magnificent state funeral, and placed in its great Cathedral an equestrian picture of the great soldier, which may be seen there to this day.

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