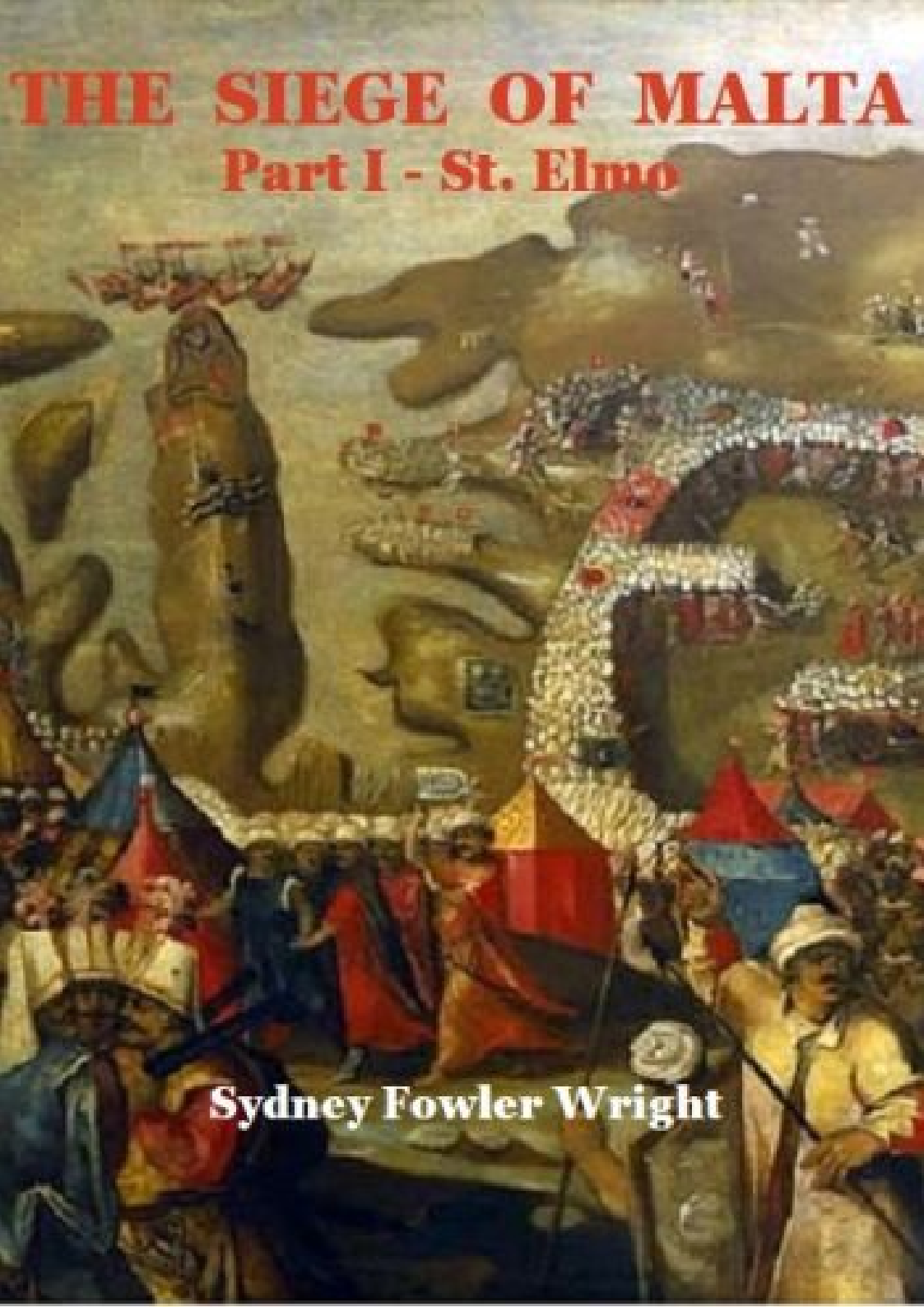
THE SIEGE OF MALTA

Part I - St. Elmo



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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SIEGE OF MALTA
PART II—ST. ANGELO

THE
SIEGE OF MALTA

by

S. FOWLER WRIGHT

Founded on
an Unfinished Romance
by
SIR WALTER SCOTT

PART I
ST. ELMO

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FOREWORD

It was in the last year of his life, and in broken health, that Sir Walter Scott visited Malta, with the double purpose of avoiding the rigour of the northern winter and collecting material for a contemplated romance on the siege of Malta. During that time he was without the clerical assistance to which he had become accustomed, and both his Journal and the MS. of this projected book were written with a hand over which he had lost full control.

Lockhart, into whose possession the MS. came at his death, condemned it lightly as illegible nonsense, and that verdict naturally prevailed so long as its author's reputation for judgment and veracity remained unshaken.

But the fact that the entries in the Journal, made during the same period, have been deciphered, created a presumption that the MS. of the *Siege of Malta*[A] would be equally legible; and the further fact that those entries are very far from nonsense and show Scott's intellect to have had, at the least, intermittent vigour (they include saner and more accurate estimates of his business position and prospects that his son-in-law was afterwards to present) suggested the possibility that it might not be wasted labour to discover what the *Siege of Malta* really was.

In the pursuit of this object, I traced the ownership of the MS. and its copyright to Mr. Gabriel Wells, who gave me an opportunity of inspecting it when in New York, and to whom it is a pleasure to express my gratitude, not merely for giving access to it, but for the courteous generosity of his permission to use it as the foundation of this romance.

The original MS. consists of about 75,000 words. It contains the opening scenes, and one or more later episodes, very much as they now appear. Beyond that, it is mainly an account of the Siege of Malta, which it follows to its conclusion. It is frequently inaccurate and repetitions are numerous.

When Scott started home from Naples on his last journey, in the hope of recovered health (Lockhart's suggestion that he hurried back with a premonition that death was near is not merely a doubtful guess, it is clearly disproved by Scott's own statements and by the leisurely nature of the first part of the journey) he sent this MS. to Abbotsford by sea, to await his arrival; and there is at least one reference by which he appeared to regard it as a finished work.

If he did so, it was a mistake; and had it been published in such a form it must have been a grotesque failure. But it is far more probable, as evidenced

by its substance and brevity, that he considered it rather as the historical skeleton on which he would construct a complete romance in the leisure of the succeeding summer.

The short months in Malta had been used for the accumulation of historical material, and in this sense the brief MS. which he had written with his half-palsied hand had finished what he required. The opening scenes were sketched out: the historic background was complete. The romance itself could be dictated (as had become his method for creative work during several previous years) in the summer peace of his Abbotsford library.

The probability of this theory is increased by the nature of the defects of the MS. in its present form. Had it a weak or confused plot, it might be more reasonable to accept Lockhart's suggestion that it was an abortion of failing powers. But the more curious fact is that *it has none*. After the opening chapters, Angelica (for instance) is not mentioned at all. She fades out; and Francisco soon follows her into a similar silence. The MS. becomes nothing more than a picturesque account of the siege of Malta, vigorous in parts, but with the defects and repetitions that such a draft, so written and unrevised, would be likely to have. Whatever might have happened had Scott lived for another year, it may be asserted with entire confidence that he would not have published it in its present condition.

Its form being thus, it became natural to examine it carefully for any indications of the plot which Scott had designed to use, and this resulted in the discovery of one slight but probably significant clue.

The account of the visit of the Maltese envoy to Don Manuel, with which the story opens, contains no suggestion that he is other than he professes, unless it be in the remark of a boatman whom he first approaches, that he has the look of a heathen Moor, and in some petulance on Don Manuel's part at the medium of communication that the Grand Master had chosen. Neither of these is at all conclusive, as a genuine Maltese might have given such an impression to an Andalusian boatman, and Don Manuel would have had a similar ground of complaint against the genuine messenger. But in a later part of the MS. there is an incidental allusion to the envoy "*said to have been* a herald at some college of arms," as a man under suspicion of being a traitor to the Maltese cause. It is an allusion without consequence, the herald not being mentioned again, but it is obviously suggestive, and it is on the pregnant implications of that phrase, and the foundations supplied by the master of historical romance, that I have ventured to build this tale.

S. FOWLER WRIGHT.

[A] In his Journal, Scott uses the titles "Siege of Malta" or "Knights of

Malta," indifferently, and I have followed this precedent.

PART I—ST. ELMO

CHAPTER I

THE sun was setting over the broad waters of the Straits of Gibraltar, and its western rays adorned with brilliant colours and violet shades the serrated mass which has in its wild variety one of the most impressive effects of mountain scenery in the world, when a light galley, flying the scarlet sign of the Maltese Cross, and having cast anchor in Vilheyna's harbour, but at some distance from the other shipping which it contained, dropped a small skiff, which pulled rapidly toward the quay.

From the boat a single officer disembarked, and had directed it to return, even before he was approached by the warden of the quay with a courteous but yet somewhat peremptory challenge of whom he was, and what business had brought him there.

It was a tone which may have owed something of its quality to the stranger's appearance, his turban, and the looseness of the white garments he wore, giving him more the aspect of a Turk than a Christian man. But he answered with the assurance of one confident alike in himself and the business on which he came.

"I am from Malta, on a commission from the Grand Master to the Commander of Vilheyna and Aldea Bella, to whom I will thank you to guide me without delay."

"Don Manuel will be at meat in the next hour, which is not a time when he will consent to give audience, unless the matter be one of an urgent kind."

"My commission is here," the pursuivant answered, showing a chain of gold with the insignia of Malta around his neck, "and its urgency would excuse intrusion were he engaged in his private prayers."

The Spaniard, surprised at the boldness of this reply, regarded the speaker with more intentness than before.

"He must surely," he thought, "be either Christian or a most insolent and audacious dog to have landed thus; though I have seldom seen one whom I would have more quickly called by the name of a heathen Moor. But to the

Castle he shall go by his own desire, and his reception should not be a dull sight."

Having so resolved, he delayed only to give charge to an assistant officer to take order till his return, and led the way from the harbour and through a fishing village that lay on its eastern side and then by an uphill road to the great castle of Aldea Bella, which stood on a steep height overlooking the bay.

They walked on in the growing dusk until they came within sight of the castle, crowning the head of a deep precipitous valley, the wide sweep of its walls being broken by a succession of turrets, both round and square, after the fashion of the military architecture of that period. The main gate of the castle, to which the road gave access, had the usual defences of barbican, drawbridge and portcullis, which were kept guarded and closed, even in this time of comparative peace, except to those who had a recognized right of entrance.

But as they came to the wide space before the castle which was left bare to prevent the covered approach of a hostile force, they were aware of a solitary figure upon another path, which was converging upon them.

"It appears," the pursuivant's guide remarked, "that you will not need to enter the castle to meet its lord."

A moment later, they stood before the Commander of Vilheyna himself, a tall, grey old man, muscular even in age, clothed in a black cloak which bore neither ornament nor any token of rank, except the scarlet sign of the eight-pointed cross which was embroidered thereon.

Don Manuel's glance passed quickly from the stranger to the servant he knew, with a sharp enquiry of what it meant that they should be there—which did not condescend to the familiarity of a spoken word—and the man answered with the brevity which he knew his master approved: "Lord, this officer comes from Malta."

The Commander turned his gaze upon the pursuivant. "With what tidings?" he asked.

"I am to inform you that the island of Malta is threatened by the instant invasion of the whole force of the Turkish Empire. The Grand Master orders that you shall——"

"You have said enough. I do not need to be told my duty by such as you. Follow me, and be prepared to answer such questions as I may ask at a later hour."

With these words the Commander turned and led the way to the castle, the gravity of the tidings he had received being scarcely sufficient to overcome his resentment at the method by which they had been communicated. "Such," he thought, "is the degradation of the times to which we have come that the Grand Master thinks it no offence to communicate his wishes through such a channel, to one who is little less than himself in the great Order to which we belong;

and who is, besides, one of the greatest nobles of Spain. I can recall a time when a knight of the Order would have been the only possible messenger to employ."

It was not until they had passed the entrance and stood in the great hall of the castle that he again showed himself to be conscious of the pursuivant's presence.

"You have told all that you need," he then said, in a tone somewhat more cordial than before but still of a condescending quality, "when you have told me that the Moors are preparing attack. We know enough of the tender mercies of the infidel to understand what their success would mean to our brothers there. But we may be sustained again, as we have been in many earlier perils. I must suppose, beyond that, that you have come to intimate the Grand Master's pleasure that I shall go to his aid with such troops as my revenues can supply or that I can solicit among my friends."

The pursuivant appeared about to reply in a speech of sufficient solemnity when the Commander abruptly checked him: "But I will spare you the trouble of telling me my duty on this occasion, which it is possible that I know better, not only than yourself, but than most of the younger brethren. You must forgive me, sir herald; I am aware that our Order, following the example of many important potentates, has of late entrusted its relations with its own members or foreign states to diplomatists of your character. It is an innovation of which I do not approve, but I will assure you in few words that I shall support the Grand Master with instant speed and with all the resources at my command."

"My lord," the pursuivant replied, with a ceremonious and even humble courtesy, which yet seemed to be of deliberate assumption rather than a natural attitude, "no one conversant with the Maltese Order could entertain doubt that your Lordship would on this occasion, as on every other of the kind, show a brilliant example to the Knights among whom you have ever been an illustrious light. The summons is of routine, as I need not say, and sent indifferently to all."

"So it may be, yet it remains that it is not fitting for such as you to inform me of what my duties to the Order may be. But," he continued in a more courteous tone, "it is the hour of the evening meal, which I will ask you to share, and after which you can tell me more than it is now convenient to hear. . . . Ramegas, will you make this señor's comfort your care?"

He spoke to one little less than himself in age or gravity of demeanour, and who also wore the distinctive dress of the great half-monastic Order to which the Commander belonged. But though also a servant of St. John of Jerusalem, he was not one who ranked among the dignitaries of the Order. He was one of those who were known as Brothers-at-Arms, or Serving Brothers, being men

of good birth and repute, but not of such rank or wealth as would avail them to claim the high honours of Malta's Knights. Such men would often attach themselves to one of courage and high conduct among the principals of the Order; and those who did this, like Juan Ramegas, and afterwards distinguished themselves by the standard of their own conduct, might gain reputation and authority far beyond the title that they were permitted to bear: but though Ramegas had thus acquitted himself, yet at his patron's retirement from the sea-warfare upon the Turks, which was now the main occupation of the Maltese knights, to the comparative seclusion of his own Commandery of Aldea Bella, the door of preference within the Order was closed against him. His time was now largely occupied in control of the estates which Don Manuel ruled in the Order's name, and his pride may have been secretly somewhat touched that he should be so completely under the domination of one man's pleasure. . . .

Don Manuel having withdrawn to his own apartment, the pursuivant found himself committed to Ramegas's charge, and under the necessity of introducing himself in a more personal way than the Commander had required or would probably have considered it seemly for him to do.

He gave his name as Rinaldo, and described himself as being an ensign of a noble Florentine family; but having said that, he was quick to turn the conversation adroitly to an account of improvements made upon the fortifications of Malta since Señor Ramegas had last been there, and to the reputed size of the Turkish fleet, which was reported to be taking the sea for the destruction of Malta's knights, until they were interrupted by the loud clang of the bell which announced the bringing-in of the evening meal.

CHAPTER II

RINALDO found himself directed to a seat beside Ramegas at the upper end of a long board which divided the centre of the hall, and in a place of honour inferior only to the smaller cross-table at the head, which was reserved for Don Manuel himself and those of his own blood.

The Commander of Vilheyna had taken the vows of the Order of St. John Baptist at an early age, and had been prominent for over forty years in the incessant struggle which had been waged between Christian and Infidel, between Charles V and the great Turkish Emperor Soliman, for the control of the Mediterranean. He had been present at the unsuccessful defence of Rhodes, when the Order had been expelled, though not without the honours of war, which their valiant resistance won: he had taken a distinguished part in the expedition which captured Tunis in 1535, and liberated 20,000 Christian slaves. Six years after that he had been present at the disastrous attack upon Algiers, from which Charles had retreated with a mere remnant of his men, leaving his baggage and artillery for a Turkish spoil.

Now—twenty-four years later—Charles V was dead, and his son, Philip II, ruled in a Spain which still increased in dominion, prestige and wealth. But while it gained in Northern Europe and the Atlantic, the course of events had caused a gradual abandonment of the Mediterranean, which had become little better than a Turkish lake.

Soliman still lived. He still warred in Europe, where he had overrun Transylvania and reduced the power of Hungary.

Forty years before, he had captured Rhodes, driving out the Knights of St. John, who had previously held the island for over two centuries. After that, they had been granted—by Charles V—possession of Malta and the adjacent islands for the quitrent of a yearly falcon to the Sicilian crown. With the bitter experience of Rhodes to urge them, they had made the fortifications of Malta strong, and had remained there during the intervening years in an apparent security, making it an eyrie from which they had preyed upon the commerce of the Mohammedan powers.

But now Soliman the Magnificent, as men had begun to call him, designed to repeat in his age the triumph which had adorned his youth. He planned, with the aid of the tributary powers of Egypt and Algiers, to dispatch a fleet and army of ample strength to drive the Knights from the refuge which Charles had given, and to complete the dominion of the Mediterranean.

But through all these changing fortunes of forty years, the Viceroy of Algiers had learnt that he had, upon the opposite coast of Spain, in the person of the Commander of Vilheyna, a ruthless and sleepless foe. This Viceroy of Soliman, Dragut by name, had become of a great and feared repute in the western waters of the Mediterranean, where, since the battle of Djerbeh four years before, there had been no nation of Europe disposed to dispute his power. But the galleys of Don Manuel still sallied out, as occasion offered, to strike some swift and disconcerting blow, and return, before retribution could overtake them, to shelter beneath the security of his fortress guns.

It was in recognition of these relentless and long-continued activities that Don Manuel had recently received from the King of Spain a present of two large and powerful galleys, to replace others which, after facing many years of battle and storm, had become unfit to be put to sea. . . .

Seated at the Commander's right hand, Rinaldo observed his nephew, Francisco, to whom common repute gave a more direct relationship; but since a statute of the former Grand Master, De L'Isle Adam, had forbidden, under penalty of expulsion, that any knight of the Order should openly admit that he had broken his vows of chastity by recognition of children, the relationship of nephew had become so common as to be almost synonymous with a nearer word. It was, at least, clear to all who observed the youth so seated at the side of the older man, that they were of no distant blood.

Young though he was, Francisco had already received the honour of knighthood, and had seen active service on the decks of his uncle's galleys. It was assumed that he would, in due course, himself enter the Order, and take its monastic vows.

It was a destiny to which the sons of the Maltese knights were directed, if not compelled, by the policy on which it had based its power. The estates that the Commanders controlled, originally dowered by—ancestors or others—those who had dedicated themselves to the Order's service, had become of enormous value in all parts of the Christian world, and were now commonly held on the terms of remitting a certain yearly sum to the Treasury at Malta, beyond which they were not required to make account during peaceful days, on the understanding that threat of war, or other crisis, would place their whole resources at the Grand Master's call.

Holding estates on such terms as these, they could make no disposition of them by gift or will to a son, whether so recognized or not. The only method of succession was by submission to the Order's authority, and the acceptance of its monastic vows.

Seated on Don Manuel's other hand, Rinaldo observed the Señorita Angelica, a girl little younger than Francisco, and the Commander's actual niece, being his sister's child.

The least houseboy in the castle well knew that, as surely as Francisco would be regarded as dedicated to the service of the Order of Malta, so Angelica—from the day when, at the age of ten, on her mother's death, she had come under her uncle's authority—had been engaged to enter the Convent of Holy Cross, where she would be able to confer great benefits on her family by a life of prayer.

But, having arranged this from the first, Don Manuel had seemed in no haste to part with her to her pious calling; and the Abbess of Holy Cross was in no doubt that it would be to her own interest to defer to the Commander regarding the time of introducing his niece to the house over which she ruled.

Angelica's entrance to the holy state continued therefore to be spoken of as a settled thing, though no time was mentioned at which she would begin her novitiate. In the meantime, she had remained under the charge of Morayma, a Moorish captive, who had been her nurse at the first and her duenna in recent years.

Rinaldo had leisure enough to observe the members of Don Manuel's household, and, in particular, to let his eyes linger as much as courtesy would permit upon a type of beauty which may have differed from those which he had previously been privileged to observe, for the Commander made it plain both by his silence and by the directions to which he would lead the conversation when he occasionally interposed, that he had no intention of allowing Rinaldo's errand to be discussed in the common hearing of his retainers and of the menials at the lower end of the board.

It was only as the meal drew to its end that he said, in a voice of authority that brought instant silence upon the hall: "We have with us to-night one who brings word that the invasion of Malta, of which there have been many rumours of late, is no less than a certain thing, and the Sultan's fleet may be already upon the sea. At such a need, we can have neither choice nor wish but to go there with our utmost speed, and with all the rescue that we can raise. I will, therefore, that you shall forthwith address your minds to that end, while awaiting further orders from me. . . . Señor Ramegas, you shall remain to take counsel with me hereon."

His words were sufficient to clear the hall in a brief space, the murmur of excited voices only rising outside the doors. When none but Ramegas and Rinaldo remained, he addressed the latter in the tone of authority which he was accustomed to use.

"I may not ask you to tell where my duty lies, which I am not needing to know, but if you have knowledge of the Sultan's latest designs, or of any special cause from which this invasion springs, you have the season to tell me now."

"There has been something of special cause," Rinaldo replied, "though it

may surely be said that the very principles on which the Order is founded are such that there can be no peace between it and the Sultan's power; and the species of piracy"—here he paused as he observed that the word was ill received, and substituted another expression—"or rather of sea-warfare as practised by us against the commerce of the Moslem states, could not fail to sustain the traditional enmity which divides the Christian world from the followers of Mahomet; but the immediate cause of the invasion that threatens now is said to be the pressure put upon the Sultan by some odalisques that his seraglio holds.

"It appears that a number of these ladies united the gold that his favour gave in a trading venture that would have brought them fortune had it arrived at its intended harbour.

"They equipped a vessel of the largest size with one of the richest cargoes that have ever been loaded into a single hold. To secure its safety, it was mounted with many guns, and half a thousand janizaries manned its upper decks to secure it from capture, if an enemy should succeed in grappling it on the sea. Its commander was one of the most famous officers in the Sultan's fleet.

"But the Knights of Malta, having obtained secret knowledge of when this vessel would put to sea, had made preparations of equal magnitude. In a word, ship and cargo were captured: the captain was mortally wounded: the crew and janizaries who survived the combat were chained to the benches of Maltese galleys, or sold in the slave-market of Venice.

"The odalisques were furious both at the loss and indignity of this issue of their adventure into the merchant's perilous ways, and they had voices which Soliman could not decline to hear. They were extremely offended on finding that it was not a simple matter to obtain redress from a Master whose power they were taught to believe was absolute in extent as well as in kind.

"There is no doubt that the capture of this vessel was felt by the Sultan to be of the nature of a personal affront, and that it roused him to extremities of effort against the Order of Malta, which he might otherwise have directed toward the more active prosecution of the Hungarian war."

"I have heard something of this before," Don Manuel replied, "though in a less detailed way. Can you tell me further to what extent the Sultan's anger is shown in the force he assembles for Malta's end?"

It was a question to which Rinaldo appeared to have no difficulty in finding a full reply. He said, as Don Manuel knew to be no more than a constant truth, that there could be little happening at Byzantium, even in the palace itself, which would not be betrayed for sufficient gold, such as the Grand Master would not neglect to provide for so great a need; but he went on to describe the counsels the Sultan had received, both from Mustapha, the

Egyptian Pasha (now an old man, but of a high military repute, and having been in his youth the general in command when the Knights were driven from Rhodes), and other of his greatest lords, at a secret conference he had called, with such detailed particularity that Don Manuel was led to express some wonder that he could be so fully informed.

"I am somewhat puzzled," he said, "to understand how you can have acquired information so complete, and that even of a conference which, by your own showing, was entirely protected from hearing or observation."

For a moment, the pursuivant appeared to be disconcerted by this criticism, even beyond reasonable expectation; but, if that were so, he recovered himself very quickly, and his explanation was plausible and adroit.

"So I can suppose that it may appear, and had I not thought that personal reference would have approached impertinence, I should have mentioned before that not only have I had, owing to the nature of the office I hold, a full acquaintance with all the information that has reached the Grand Master during the last year, but I have a particular familiarity with the places and individuals of whom I am now speaking, as I was captured by the Turks at the battle of Djerbeh, and was in captivity in Egypt, and afterwards in Byzantium, for nearly three years before my friends were able to effect my ransom."

"May I conclude," Señor Ramegas interposed, with a deferential gesture toward the Commander, as though to speak unasked were in the nature of a liberty in that formidable presence, "that it is to the circumstance of your captivity that you owe the fact that you are somewhat darker in complexion than is common either in this country or your native Florence?"

"I have no doubt that you may," Rinaldo replied very readily, "though, as a fact, those who are native of Malta are sometimes even darker than the hue to which I have been burned by Egyptian suns."

"That is so," Don Manuel confirmed, as one who closes an interruption which had already exceeded its occasion, "for so I have seen it to be. . . . I would now have you proceed."

He addressed a few further questions to Rinaldo concerning the strength and leadership of the Turkish fleet and army, from which he learnt that Mustapha had somewhat reluctantly consented, at the Sultan's urging, to take the military control of the expedition, while the Admiral Piali would command the fleet, and Dragut, with his Barbary corsairs, would bring not only a strong support to the forces that would be engaged in the coming siege, but an experience in Mediterranean warfare, which, by the Sultan's orders, his colleagues were not lightly to overrule.

And then, having learnt all that he wished to know, Don Manuel rose with an abrupt word that he would talk again on the next day.

CHAPTER III

RINALDO found himself in a room which was comfortably, though somewhat austerely, furnished, and of a quality which showed that the rudeness (as he was disposed to view it) of the Commander of Vilheyna did not imply that he would not be regarded as a guest of consideration.

But while he observed this circumstance with satisfaction, he dismissed it promptly from a mind which was fully occupied with more urgent and important things.

"So," he said, half-aloud, but in a tongue which only one in that castle would have been likely to understand, and which we must presume that he had learnt during the years of slavery which had darkened his countenance, "I have played the pursuivant well enough, as I had little doubt that I should. . . . Slave in Egypt! Well, they may prove what it means to be that, if I can shake this fruit to my father's lap, as I have good hope that I shall be able to do. . . . The old Spaniard would learn how to bend his back, and to answer in a more abject way. . . . But the niece is an Allah's dream. It will be soft cushions for her! Worse than she have been sold before now for a Sultan's pet!"

With these singular reflections, Rinaldo stretched himself on the bed and passed into the dreamless slumber of those who have health and youth, and to whom adversity is a distant and unregarded foe.

He was awakened by a beam of light falling across his face from one of the narrow windows of the turret chamber in which he lay, at which he was quick to rise, seeing that the sun was already at some height in the morning sky. He went down, to be met by Señor Ramegas, who invited him to partake of an ample breakfast, at which Don Manuel did not appear, but which was attended by Francisco and brightened by Angelica's presence, with that of the Moorish governess or duenna, who appeared to be her almost inseparable companion.

It was obvious that the absence of the Commander caused a general relaxation of the atmosphere of restraint which Rinaldo had previously experienced. Ramegas was formal still, but it might be described as a more urbane formality and of an added dignity, which did not display itself with the same assurance in Don Manuel's presence. Francisco was, in physical attributes, a striking illustration of the deeply impressed and repeated characteristics of an ancient race. Although not yet come to his full stature or strength, he was a living likeness of what his uncle must have been in his own youth. There was evidence in him already of the same pride, even of the same

dignity and gravity, which made his father distinguished among a race which had come at that time to be regarded as among the most arrogant of mankind; but that which in his uncle had become fixed with the hard coldness of ice, had in him the motion and impetuosity of a torrent; and he was aflame this morning with the hardly-restrained excitement of expectation. For he did not doubt that his uncle would permit him to accompany the expedition, and surely in such a position as the dignity of his name required.

Angelica was alive also with excitement of a different kind. Like her cousin, she saw that they were at the end of the quiet life in which the years had seemed so long to the impatience of youth, but had drifted too quickly past in her uncle's estimation, as he had deferred the day when he must part with her for the convent's claim.

Now, she wondered, would she be left in the castle, alone and forgotten amidst the bustle of more urgent and important matters, or would this crisis of events cause Don Manuel to decide that the time had come when the promise should be fulfilled which had been made nearly eight years before?

If so, could she contrive any argument that would persuade him to defer a purpose which she was hopeless to change, as she knew that she had cajoled him during the last three years, though he might suppose that the delay had been his own decision, the weakness of love for her?

She knew his character well enough to realize that he would tolerate no suggestion of breaking a pledge made to the Church—that the mere proposal of such dishonour would probably produce in him an inflexible resolution for its instant consummation, and she knew that, while he lived, she was at his disposal, alike by social custom and the iron bond of the law. She had also a strong affection for him, as she knew that he had for her, and she had not herself till now been in open rebellion against the idea of a convent life, which had not been entirely repugnant, so long as it remained a vague and undated destiny. Apart from a marriage to be negotiated in the Spanish fashion with some stranger of equal rank, what hope had she of a life of similar dignity or responsibility? For she knew that, even in her novitiate years, the niece of Don Manuel would have an honoured place in the Convent of Holy Cross.

In the end she would be Abbess, when the Abbess died. She would come to an absolute control over the lives of all within the convent walls: a wide authority over the convent lands: an absolute disposal of the convent wealth. There was no other position of equal importance and independence for any woman beneath a queen in the Spain of that day. Yes, it was well enough—as a dream. To take the step to-morrow, in an irrevocable way—well, what was the haste? Let it wait for another year. And beyond that—must we look as far ahead, when the years of our life are few?

"Sir herald," Señor Ramegas remarked from his place at the head of the

board, which he had held since the childhood of those who must soon have come to challenge his place had the life of the castle continued its normal course, “if I may say so without offence, which is not meant, you look more closely your part in a peaceful garb than when you appeared last night with a sword girded, and that somewhat of Turkish pattern to Spanish eyes. I have always seen that those of your office had gone unarmed, as is surely meet in such as claim to be secure from capture or ransom, and to stand aside from the strife of swords.”

Rinaldo looked at the speaker the while this speech pursued its leisurely course, not in a hostile, but in a somewhat watchful way, as though weighing what it might mean; but his answer was easy and frank, and there was reason in what he said.

“What you say is true, as I do not doubt, for those who move only among men of a Christian kind, where, as I suppose, your observations have lain, but on that galley by which I came—had we fallen in with the Corsair’s fleet, and had they boarded our deck, would it have availed me then that I did not fight? Had the galley fallen their prey, would they have sent me home, and by what way? No, it must have been my part to take sword with the rest and drive them back if we could.”

“Yes,” Ramegas replied, “I can see cause that you should feel thus; though I have heard that the heralds pass without risk between the Christian and heathen hosts in the Eastern wars. But we may both have found that the rule of the sea is of a more turbulent kind. Did you see aught of the Corsair’s fleet?”

When he asked that, his thought was of the galleys of the Dey of Algiers, who was the scourge of all who did business in the western waters of the Mediterranean at that time, and so Rinaldo understood it to be.

“No,” he said, “though we might have had little fear if we had, unless we had been entirely becalmed, and even then we might have escaped. For our galliot is not only very lightly built and well rigged, but it has twelve oars aside, and there are not, as I am told, more than three or four of the fastest of Dragut’s fleet which could over-reach its speed on a quiet sea.

“But we saw nothing of them, the Grand Master having secret knowledge of where they would be, which is a matter I have yet to speak in the Commander’s ear. For I was charged, if he should have vessels that he could bring or send at a short date, that I should guide them by such a route that they would reach Malta without being waylaid, which you would not wish them to be.”

“As to that,” Ramegas answered, “if Dragut be one who is to be engaged in this siege, we may as well fight him soon as on a later day, and I suppose that the two galleys that Don Manuel has would not be easy to take, they having been the King’s gift but a short time ago, and perhaps as large and well-found

as any ships in this sea; though they may not be equal to those that are built to sail across to the Spanish Main, which are the largest the world has seen. But those, as you know, are built without oars, it being of doubtful gain for a voyage of such length to take so many men as the benches need, or to be low-waisted amid the storms of the wider sea."

"Do you say your vessels could fight the whole strength of the Corsair's fleet?"

"No, I would not say that. And, for that risk, I daresay that Don Manuel will not despise the guidance that you can give."

"Yet, I dare suppose," Rinaldo went on, "that being so newly built, and as well-found as you say, they are too swift to be greatly in fear of any fight that they might think it wiser to shun?"

"I would not boast to that height," Ramegas replied, "though they are as swift as most, or as their kind can be expected to be. They carry sail of a wide spread, and have twenty oars on each side, but they are heavy with guns, and bear crews which are not much short of a thousand men. They have thick walls, and good space for the holding of stores, being, indeed, built rather to fight than fly."

"And how soon should you say that they will be ready to put to sea?"

"It may be no more than two days, as you heard Don Manuel say that he designed that it should, for their seamen are aboard now, and we can send fighting men enough from the castle here and from the country round at a day's call."

"And for stores?"

"They are kept ever ready to sail at a quick need."

"I like not," Francisco interposed, "that we should turn from a straight course to avoid a fleet of a strength that we do not know, with two such ships as we have—and with the good aid of yours." (He addressed the last words to Rinaldo in a tone of rather perfunctory courtesy.) "I should have said that there would be few so bold on these seas that they might not trim sails to another course; and, if we be in this war, it is our part to grieve Dragut at all times, and the most we may."

Rinaldo looked at him with some curiosity as he said this, debating perhaps in his mind whether the speaker were of the courage his words conveyed, or no more than a boastful youth, who had much to learn of the stern lessons of war. He seemed about to speak, but Morayma was quicker than he.

"The Dey," she said, "has a score of ships that are swifter than those two by a mile in five, and could bay them down as the dogs deal with a wolf which may be somewhat larger than they. . . . I pray the Virgin," she added, for she had long since taken the Christian faith, "that you be kept widely apart." She looked with such real affection at Francisco as she said this, that it must have

been easy to forgive her boast of the power of her native land.

"You will be less rash than your words intend? You will think that we would see you again?" Angelica asked, with eyes upon her cousin which were so troubled that Morayma thought it somewhat more than should be shown at that time. What (she feared) would Don Manuel think, if he should see such a glance, his niece being pledged for the convent walls?

But whether or not she read the look in a true way, she could not think that it brought response from one whose thoughts were clearly on other things. "You would not have me come back," he said, "with no better boast than a skill in avoiding foes?"

There was something of arrogance in both tone and manner as this was said which caused Rinaldo to look at the speaker again in a doubtful way. It was as though he assumed his return to be beyond doubt, and resented suggestion that it might not be made with all his foemen beneath his feet. From the lips of one so young, who could have had little experience or practise of war——But, as Rinaldo looked, he was disposed to rebuke his own doubt for a second time. The youth might have his uncle's arrogant style, but Rinaldo thought that he was one whose boast might be made good at the last. There was a quality in him that shone like a bare sword. Rinaldo thought of a time when he had been a slave who toiled under the constant threat of the driver's lash—when he had been subject to a hundred indignities that it was hard to forget. How would the young Spaniard behave if he were reduced to buying life by endurance of such conditions as those?

But while these thoughts crossed his mind, Angelica answered in a way that showed that she was neither critical of her cousin's manner, nor conscious of rebuke to herself:

"I would have you return, as I think you will, with all the honour that you have the merit to win. For I could not think that you would come back in another way. Yet I would have you use the caution which is said to come with the years, for how can later honour be won, if life be lost on the first day?"

"Your cousin says well in that," Ramegas remarked; "for rashness is ever the snare of youth, and discretion comes at a later year."

Francisco showed no resentment at this admonition, nor did he appear impressed by any wisdom it might contain. He answered with more wit than Rinaldo would have felt sure that he had:

"So the old have said at all times, and who can show they are wrong? Yet how they came alive themselves through the foolish years to be where they are is a thing they do not explain. Their rashness should have destroyed them a hundred times."

"I would take the risk," Angelica surprised their guest by remarking, "with a gay heart, were it twice what it is likely to be, if I were sailing forth on the

same track."

"Señorita," Rinaldo said, looking at her in such a way as brought her to blush as she surely had not for any glance or word that had passed between Francisco and her, "I should have said that few would wish to throw down the potent arms which you now bear for a sword which you could not wield."

"You must not think," Morayma interposed in a quick way, "that the Señorita means more than a jesting word, she knowing well the parts in the game of life which are fitting for such as she. Yet I would not have you think that she could not play a more hardy part than her looks can show, having lived a free life in these hills, where she may go in safety and honour by any path that she will, they being all in her uncle's rule, and she has even had some practise in the lighter weapons of war."

"Then," Rinaldo said, with an admiration in his eyes which was of more boldness than was perhaps becoming from a pursuivant to Don Manuel's niece, "is she doubly armed, which may be held to be less than fair."

Angelica, quickly recovering a self-control which she seldom had occasion to lose, took the explanation upon herself:

"It is true, Señor Rinaldo, that I have some little practice with rapier and poniard, and can send a shaft near the mark at times, but that is not because I am of an Amazon kind. It is because my cousin and I have been reared alone, and must have the same sports or none."

"Yet," Morayma added, as though she thought her own tuition disparaged by the inferences of this explanation, "you must not suppose that they have been taught in the same way. Angelica has no lack of all arts that belong to ladies alone, even to leechcraft and the skill in the healing of wounds which I have been able to give."

"I talked not," Angelica said, "of work but of sport. Yet I would not have you think" (and here her words were for Rinaldo alone) "that I am one who would wish to play a man's part in the dirt and horror of war; but it is possible that a caged bird may look through the bars at times and wish for the open sky."

"Knowing less of hawks," Rinaldo replied, "than it might learn in the next hour."

"Yet some would think that an hour of freedom, and the right to soar to the sun, might be worth more than a longer life in the narrow bars."

"Señorita," Rinaldo replied, "you have said a good word. Yet for such as you there should be the freedom without the fear."

"Which," Ramegas concluded, with gravity, "would be to enter heaven before we die."

Rinaldo became silent. He was not unconscious of the attraction of the girl with whom he had been making exchanges which might have been no more

than idle compliment, but were, in fact, of a sincerity which surprised himself, and roused the thought that to cultivate a too friendly feeling for these Spaniards of a day's acquaintance would ill consort with some plans which were private to his own mind.

"You talk," Francisco said, "as though freedom had all the risks, and there were safety and peace in a captive's gyves. If you asked of our galley-slaves, I should say you would get a different answer from that."

Rinaldo did not respond. He seemed to have retired to his own thoughts. But Ramegas replied:

"You confound restraints of two kinds; for they may be born either of hatred or love, or of such confusion of these as may come to no certain flower. For the slave toils in dread of the driver's stripes, and is gyved in a different style from that of the sure peace of the convent walls."

The words seemed to rouse Rinaldo's attention again. He looked across at Angelica as though seeing her in a new and surprising light. As he did so, their eyes met, and hers fell.

"I had not supposed," he began, and then checked his speech. He concluded: "But it is esteemed a high calling in all the lands of the Christian pale." It was clear to all that that was not what he had been commencing to say.

After a pause, during which he appeared to be withdrawn again to his own thoughts, he said: "If, as I suppose, Don Manuel will not require my presence here, I will return to my own ship, awaiting the time when you will be ready to sail."

"I know not," Ramegas replied, "whether the Commander will wish to hear further from you upon the matter you have reported to him, but I am well assured that he will intend that the hospitality of this castle shall be yours while you wait us here."

But Rinaldo excused himself with the plea that, when all was preparation and haste, it must follow that they would be better pleased to have no strangers within the walls, and when Ramegas replied somewhat coldly to that, saying that the castle could not be incommoded by the care of a single guest, be there what bustle there might, he urged pretexts of his own occupations. Yet, being urged by Ramegas, and it being put to him that Don Manuel might consider that he would show a defect of courtesy if his hospitality should be thus contemned, he agreed that he would go aboard at that time, but would return at dusk, at the banquet hour, and remain ashore during the night.

Upon this bargain, somewhat reluctantly made by Rinaldo, who yet could advance no sufficient reason which would explain a more obdurate attitude, the little party broke up and went their several ways.

CHAPTER IV

IT was at the height of noon that Don Manuel paced the high battlements of the castle of Aldea Bella, from which he could look down upon the fishing village and the harbour where his galleys lay. The quiet peace of yesterday had been transformed into a scene of activity upon which its master could look with the satisfaction of observing the alacrity with which his orders were being carried out. His plans were complete, his directions given, and he was now able to take a space of leisure for his own reflections.

The two galleys lay at the quay. They were raking in such stores as could be hastily collected and were likely to be of most use to the Maltese garrison in the coming siege. Among these it might be observed that the decks were being loaded with planks and logs and huge baulks of timber, for the Maltese islands were naturally destitute of trees, and every beam used in its fortifications had been imported from other lands; every spar that might need to be renewed on its vessels must be obtained in the same way.

The bustle which Don Manuel's orders had aroused was not confined to the castle and its immediate vicinity. As he paced the battlements he could hear the tocsin ringing in a score of hamlets among the Andalusian hills. As though an actual invasion of the Moors—who had been driven from the land a mere half century before—were impending, he had called the people of the countryside at the need of the Maltese order, to which he belonged, and whose feudatories they were.

As he walked the length of the battlements he came upon Angelica, seated at a projecting corner which overlooked the harbour. She did not appear to observe him at first, her eyes being fixed upon the loading galleys and the smaller, more rakish form of Rinaldo's vessel, which was anchored in the outer bay. She watched them with an expression of misery which he did not miss. With the real though formal kindness with which he had always treated her, he enquired the cause of her grief.

She answered with apparent frankness: "Is it not for Francisco that I should fear? He is unpractised in war, though he knows the ways of the sea, and, as I have heard, he is to go without waiting for you."

The doubt which Morayma had felt when she had seen Angelica's concern at her cousin's coming departure did not enter Don Manuel's mind. It seemed to him that she expressed a woman's natural feeling, though it is not one to which much heed can be given when trumpets call. He sat down on the stone

seat beside her as he replied: “He must go, as his fathers went, on the path of danger, without which there is no honour which can be won. He is the one heir of the name I have, yet it is so I would have it be. But the prayers of those who are innocent reach, as I well believe, to the throne of Heaven; and it is such as thou whom the Virgin herself may be prompt to hear.

“I am going myself to the court of Spain, where I will beseech our king for such aid as will be of greater use than could be rendered by my own arm, even were I much younger than I now am; and, after that, I hope to join my brethren, if I can still pass the besiegers’ lines.

“I shall go at sunrise to-morrow, and the galleys should be ready to sail, as I suppose, by the next day. I am giving the command of one to Ramegas, and Francisco will have the other. I was but a few months older than he when I was engaged in a fight by which I sunk one of the corsairs’ fleet. I remember the grief I had that it should have gone down before we could release the slaves who were chained to the rowers’ benches, they being for the most part of Christian blood.

“For yourself, I sent word to the Abbess an hour ago, that she may expect your arrival in two days’ time, which will give Morayma space to prepare your needs. You will go in her charge, but she will return when you are settled there. . . . I have delayed your going too long, it having been an old man’s weakness to have you here. But now that our lives will be broken apart, and we know not to what end, evil or good, it would be wrong to withhold you more.”

The length of this speech had given Angelica time to control the first impulse of protest against a doom which she had dreaded ever since she had heard of the intended expedition the night before. Before Don Manuel had finished, she had realized that to protest would be useless, and might even be worse than that. If there were any way of avoiding a fate from which she rebelled more resolutely as its shadow was closing upon her, it must be found by herself. And what way could there be? There was no one, of whatever rank or degree, to whom she could look for aid. No one would think of listening to any protest with more than inclination to comfort or to persuade. It would appear to all to be a settled, inescapable thing. She thought of the conversation of the morning, and she saw herself as a bird behind bars that she had not the will or the strength to break. Was there really no way? Or, if there were, would it be her courage which would be too small for her need? If the cage-door stood unlatched, would she break loose that she might soar an hour in the sun, before the falcon would strike her down?

As she pondered thus, she became aware that Don Manuel had gone. She had been scarcely conscious of his farewell words, or of the hand that had stroked her hair.

On his part, he had regarded as little that she had heard his decision

without response or reply. He was accustomed to issue orders which would be taken in the same silent manner. It did not occur to him as a possible thing that she would resist his will.

After that, she met Francisco, who had just heard of the command that was to be his. He was affectionate in a pre-occupied way, but it was plain that he was excited by the prospect of adventure and the dignity of his new command, to the exclusion of other emotions or any active sympathy with herself. He looked before, not behind. The playmate of his childhood days, the companion of the years that had ended but yesterday, felt that she was shut out of his life. As she saw that the warship's deck would be natural for him to tread, so he would regard the cloister's wall as being natural for her. They must go out to the world by their different roads, for the days of childhood had passed since the Maltese galley had come to anchor within the bay.

She did not suppose that he had lost affection for her, which would re-assert itself under more normal conditions, and of which he would become more aware as the moment of parting came. But, for the time, nearer and more immediate excitements had left her little place in his thoughts. It would be waste of words to tell him that she did not wish to ride with Morayma in two days' time, to enter the gates of the Convent of Holy Cross.

She might tell Morayma, of course. She would be sure of sympathy, and of some measure of understanding. But there would be no power to help. Sympathy alone was something for which she had no use. She was of a character which can better endure disappointment or grief if it be kept silent in the sufferer's heart.

Resolved that she would not go, she would see the last hours of freedom pass, and would go at last, as how many thousand had gone before on the same road? For what else was there to do?

The hours passed in such thoughts until that of the evening meal returned, at which she took her accustomed place, looking pale and sad. It was a contrast to the bright vivacity of her usual expression which would have attracted attention under different conditions, but now it may be doubted whether it were noticed at all amid the excitement and talk of preparation and plan which was around her, like the buzz of a lively hive, till Don Manuel entered the hall, and which scarcely lessened even under the restraint that his presence caused; and if it were noticed by any, was it not natural that she should be grieved at the thought of parting from those who were her nearest and had been her most intimate relatives? So she was left to her own thoughts, in the midst of talk to which she gave little heed—and to a growing consciousness that she had somewhat more than her share of Rinaldo's eyes.

And with the consciousness, curiosity stirred. She had, in fact, felt a certain intimacy of understanding, of a strange, exciting novelty to her sheltered life,

since the exchanges of the breakfast-table, in which, with that feminine instinct which rarely sleeps or errs, she had known that she had attracted his admiration, and could go further if she should have the will for so bold a game.

And with that consciousness of the interest she had aroused, there came a lively consideration of what Rinaldo was, and a curiosity to know much more than she did.

He had the name of a noble Florentine family—that was well. He was a herald, and so could scarcely claim equality with the niece of Vilheyna's lord. He was a trusted envoy of the Maltese Order, and in command (she had understood) of the galley in which he came. So much was clear; but she felt with the same instinctive certainty that there was much more to know. She had perceived on the previous night, as Don Manuel had failed to do, that the pursuivant's humility of word and manner were little more than a perfunctory deference. He was at ease in himself, or, if there were any awkwardness at all, it was not that of one who is embarrassed by contact with higher rank, but rather that of one who assumes obsequiousness which it is not his habit to use. She felt that there was a mystery here which she would have been glad to solve, and the puzzle kept him before her mind.

Having this imagination, she watched Rinaldo's conversation as he was questioned again by Don Manuel during the meal, for her uncle had many things on which he desired to be more fully informed to enable him to put the needs of Malta before the King; and it seemed to her that, though Rinaldo answered adroitly and well, and with the same manner of deference that he had shown on the previous day, yet he was watching his words, as though he might say the wrong thing if he were not constantly wary of speech. If Don Manuel observed this, he may have thought it to have sprung from no more than the timidity of one who was so much his inferior both in rank and age, but Angelica was sure that it had a different cause. "He is a prince in disguise, and is in fear lest he say something by which his rank will become known." She thought of nobles who had been exiled from Elizabeth's court, or from that of the King of France. But he was not of such race. Of that she was sure. He might be Italian, as he declared. But she was doubtful of that. Perhaps Hungarian? She knew less of the nobles of Eastern lands. They might (she supposed) be as dark as he. Could he be one who had lost his crown as Soliman's army had spread over Hungary and Transylvania during the last forty years, like an advancing plague? Perhaps his father had been a king who had died by the Sultan's sword. Now he sought revenge, fighting the Turkish power where he could do it the greatest harm, but keeping his name concealed till he should raise it to such a height as it held before. Yet why then assume a pursuivant's part? It was that which she could not guess. But she remembered that Ramegas had said that he was armed like a Turk when he landed first.

Who, she wondered in vain, could he really be?

Doubtless, she told herself at the last, he was no more nor less than he said. She made childish mystery in a heart which would know nothing of life, beyond what it could build in a world of dreams. So she would cheat herself, and the hours go by; and the shadow of convent walls was advancing to close her in. And as she thought thus, she became aware that her uncle had risen, and was addressing the hall in sombre words, which were yet lit with a high resolve.

"You have heard, my friends," he said, "of this new affront which the infidels have advanced against the Order of Malta and the Cross of God. They seek our destruction with the same undying ferocity with which they assaulted Rhodes twenty-three years ago, and now, as then, we must defend ourselves in the power of the same Blessed Sign in which our fathers were believers and found their strength.

"Touching earthly valour, we may be loth to compare ourselves to those warriors of immortal fame, but we have been sworn by the same oath to defend the Cross with the best blood that our bodies hold. We may therefore look up to God with the same confident hope that His blessing will point our swords. And in such hope, and no vain confidence of earthly might, we take our arms in the great name of Him, whom these, His enemies, have denied and would now defy.

"And touching the summons of the Grand Master to me, his unworthy brother, you already know the orders that I have given, by which the two galleys that are mine through the gift of my Royal Master the King will sail at the first possible hour, with all the stores and men that they are fitted to bear.

"But I would not that you should think that when I have done that I have finished all that is within my will or my power. At this summons I have now had, all the wealth I own, all the revenues I control, I surrender to the use of the great Order of the Maltese Knights, for it is to no less than that that we are sworn at so great a need."

He paused a moment, and there was a deep murmur of assent and approbation from those who heard, and who were in too much reverence of him who spoke to applaud in a freer way. He went on in a lower voice, that rose again to a final intensity, as it struck a more personal note:

"We will now break up this sad festival, knowing too well that we shall not assemble here again with unbroken ranks, for there is much to be done, and it would be wrong to linger with wine-cups now.

"I go with the morning light to throw myself at the feet of my gracious Sovereign, to solicit his further aid; but I trust it will not be long before I am among you all on the field of war. And for that arch-corsair Dragut, who calls himself Viceroy of Algiers, whom we know as the enemy of our own coasts,

and who has sent a message of defiance to myself, I will say this, that there is no knight of our Order by whom he has been either loved or feared. The sword I wear is still that with which I broke his helm at Golitta's siege, and if we meet again he may find that age has been no more kind to himself than it has to me.

"And here, my friends, is a health to the Christian knight, be he whom he may, who shall meet him first."

He filled his own cup as he spoke, and as the toast was drunk the feelings of the assembly broke out at last in a shout that was unrestrained.

Don Manuel raised his hand in a gesture which was at once recognition and dismissal, and left the hall without further words.

Angelica had not been unmoved, even among her own private troubles, by the tone, stern, melancholy, and at times pathetic, in which her uncle had spoken, with a depth of feeling she had never known him to show before. But through it all the puzzle of Rinaldo continued to vex her mind. In what thoughts had he been so absorbed as Don Manuel spoke that he had failed to make the sacred sign which had been done almost mechanically by all besides at the mention of the name of God? Why had he appeared to hesitate for a moment as the toast was called, so that he had been later than others to fill and raise the cup? Had he not moved his lips in silence before he drank, as though he added invocation or prayer to that which the others heard? Was it, perhaps, his own vow that he would meet the infidel chief, and did he hesitate to drink to himself, as it might seem to him that he had been invited to do?

With such thoughts contending in a confused way with the despair that darkened her mind, Angelica went to her rest. It has been said that, if a woman's curiosity be directed upon a man, she is half-way to the mood in which she will seek his love. Angelica would have been surprised if it had been proposed to her that she could think of Rinaldo in such a way. She would have felt that any tendencies she might have were for one of a nearer blood, who had shown within the last hours that he had no such feeling for her.

Yet it was Rinaldo's dark, handsome, enigmatic face, his slender athletic form, that were on the darkness before her eyes. They were his words that were in her mind: "The potent arms which you now bear—You have said a good word—For such as you there should be the freedom without the fear." She had always been treated with the respect due to her rank. She had taken as her natural right the regard which youth and beauty receive. But here was something different from the deference which domestics pay. Something new in kind, of which she could do with more—which she was never likely to have.

Why must she be held in two days from now within the narrow compass of convent walls, while her cousin would have all the freedom of sea and air and a galley's deck? She had no love for the game of war. She was not of a

masculine mind. But she longed for life—to do, and not merely to be. Her mind shrank from the thought of the Convent of Holy Cross. It was like being laid in a coffin while you yet lived.

If she could have gone to Malta, she felt that she could be useful there—perhaps as much as one who could handle a sword. She had learnt much from Morayma in nursing and the curing of wounds, which had ever been a woman's province among the Moors, and in which Morayma had more than a common skill. But to ask her uncle would, she knew, be a useless attempt. There could be no greater shame to his mind than a broken pledge; and the fact that he had given the pledge, which it was her part to pay, would not weigh with him at all. It was the custom throughout the land. Has a guardian no rights? Shall the old not judge for the young? So he would say, if he should condescend to argue at all. But to move him would, she knew, be most utterly vain. To make such request would do no more than to disturb and anger his mind at a time when he had cares and troubles enough without another from her. She had too much sense, and perhaps too much regard for him, to make such useless attempt.

But suppose—a sudden hope leapt to her heart, and her pulses beat—suppose when he had gone—suppose Francisco could be cajoled to let her go on the *Santa Martha* with him? Three times of four she had had her way in their differences of the past. She would persist or persuade. But not in such a matter as this. It was a wild hope! Such a hope as may seem good in the night, but will shrink to a smaller size in the cold light of day. Yet, for the moment, a hope it was, and it gave sleep, and changed her dreams to a gayer colour than they would otherwise have been likely to have.

CHAPTER V

ANGELICA waked with the ease of youth when the dawn was no more than a line of light along the eastern horizon of the Mediterranean. She looked down from her turret-window upon a harbour which was already astir. Boats moved over the water in the growing light. There was bustle and loading of stores where the two great galleys lay warped along the side of the quay. It seemed that men had not slept at all under the urgency of the preparations that Don Manuel's instructions required. She distinguished Señor Ramegas giving orders upon the quay.

Further out, she saw Rinaldo's galley, the *Flying Hawk*, with the Maltese cross fluttering at its peak: the eight-pointed cross, red on its ground of white, which had been the terror of the infidel through five hundred years of a war that had never ceased. The *Flying Hawk* had its own reputation too. It was not of a weight to face the largest Turkish galleys, but it had a speed which rendered it careless of them. In the five years since it had been built in a Venetian dockyard it had a record of raids and captures, of battles with galliots of its own kind, which it would not have been easy to match.

Angelica looked and was bitter of heart that a mere difference of sex should hold her back from part or place in the great adventure which these preparations forecast. Bitterer still, perhaps, in her secret mind, in the deep instincts of womanhood, that she was destined to a life which would be frustrated in its more natural purpose, in the fulfilment of the very difference which held her separate from the busy crowd that she watched below.

It would be no use till her uncle had gone, but then, though she could deceive herself into no more than a little hope, she would try what could be done when she had only Ramegas and Francisco to cross her will.

She went down to breakfast at a later hour, and felt a new depression when she saw that Rinaldo's seat was empty and was told that he had already gone.

"He has consented," Ramegas said, "to aid us by taking some stores on board which must else have gone on our own decks, which will be burdened enough without them. But, for some reason, which must be a better one than he gave, he will not have the *Flying Hawk* warped to the quay. It must all go out in barges, and be hauled aboard where he now lies. When he had consented to this, he went in haste, as though he feared it might be put in hand before he would be there to control. It might be thought that the *Flying Hawk* were his own babe, instead of a boat that has had five years' buffets of storm and shot,

and of which he has no more than charge for this voyage. It would not be hurt by a bump, if a hawser broke."

Angelica was not interested in the bruises that Rinaldo's galley was not to get. She asked: "Will he be here again for this night?"

"No. He said he would stay aboard. We must sail to-morrow at dawn, or, to be more exact, at an hour before."

Angelica made no answer to that. What was she to him, that he should dally to say good-bye or come back for so small a cause? What, also, was he to her? It seemed that nothing was all he could ever be. Yet she would have been glad to have had him to talk to now; and for him, perhaps, to say such things to her again as it would be easy to bear in mind. But she saw that that dream was done.

And while she put this folly back from her mind, Don Manuel came to the meal, which it was seldom that he would share, it being his habit to eat alone at this hour. But now he would have all the time that he could to talk to Ramegas and Francisco, as he was taking horse in an hour from then, and Angelica found that she could be silent, and none would notice at all. She felt that she had already gone out of their lives.

She had thought that a short respite from what she feared might be won in another way, when it occurred to her that she might go with Don Manuel to Seville, and to this she almost gained his consent.

"Uncle," she said, "it is four years since I have seen Seville, and I would gladly do so again. And the King I have never seen. Would it not be well that you should present me to him? They say he never forgets any whom he has once met either for evil or good. Who can say that I might not be grieved on a far day that I had missed such a chance as this?"

Don Manuel thought, and was not averse. He saw that there was a shrewd reason in what she said. An abbess might have times when she would have petition to make to a king's throne. It may be well to be able to say you are known of him.

Angelica, watching his face, thought that her point was won.

"I see no reason against that, if it will give you joy," he said, in the way of distant kindness he had, "and it would mean but a short delay in that which you have to do. You shall surely come, if you will; though I shall be in haste for one end, and—nay, but it is useless to think, for I am not like to return here. I am more likely to sail from Cadiz, when I have put the case to the King."

"Yet," Angelica urged, "I could return alone. I could take Morayma, if you desire. It is but twenty Spanish leagues to Seville."

"It is not to be thought. I ride with but two knaves, whom I must have with me where I may go. Morayma will have much to do here. Could she leave in an hour's time? I am grieved, but it cannot be."

“Yet it is a safe road——”, Angelica began, but she let the word drop, for she saw that his attention was gone. He was talking to Francisco as though he did not know she was there. It would be useless to ask again. . . . And, after all, it would have spoiled her chance of a larger hope.

So Don Manuel bade her a kind farewell, which would yet have been kinder had he had fewer calls upon his emotions in other ways, and rode off on a steed which was still powerful and proud, though, like himself, it had seen days when it had been more supple of limb, and had thought him a lighter weight; and on the next day he came to the King’s court at Seville.

Seville was a great city at this time, very splendid and gay. It was the frequent home of the Spanish kings, and though Spain was losing strength every year, she still seemed to be of an impregnable power.

It was more than fifty years since she had driven the Moors out of the southern end of the land. She sought to make it one of her own blood, and was now doing herself more harm than good by the severity of her Inquisition against the Jews. It was less than fifty years ahead that she would complete her ruin by driving out all her subjects of Moorish blood, being 600,000 of the best that she had.

But, at this time, the Spanish monarchy was of a great and very arrogant power, and Seville, which was the favourite residence of its kings, was magnificent in its palaces and splendid with silk and gold.

There was the glorious cathedral, which had been building for more than a century, and completed forty years ago. There was La Lonja, the great Exchange, which had been built by the present King. There was La-Torre-del-Oro, a building of still greater significance, which had been erected to receive the cargoes of gold which every year the galleons brought in to Cadiz from the mines of the Spanish Main.

There also was the Palace of Pilate, where the dukes of Alcala lived, and which was said to be an exact replica of that which had been built in Jerusalem by the Roman governor; and, strangest and loveliest of all, there was still the Moorish royal palace, the Alcazar, now become the southern residence of the kings of Spain.

Philip II received Don Manuel with the royal courtesy and munificence which it was his habit to offer to all visitors of importance. There may never have been a more accessible monarch nor one whose courtesies were of smaller worth. He had just returned from Madrid, where he had parted from Count Egmont, the prince of Gavre, after entertaining him with the lavishness which befitted his rank, and showering more substantial favours upon him. Yet he may even then have been contriving within his heart the murder which was soon to follow. He knew, already, more of the contemplated assault upon Malta than Don Manuel would have been able to tell him, and had used it with

Egmont as the reason why he was unable to pay a visit to the Netherlands which (he said) he had been eager to undertake.

Now he praised the energy and devotion which the lord of Vilheyna had shown at this crisis of the fortunes of the great Order to which he belonged. He gave promises of support of the most lavish kinds, which he might mean or not, for in either event it would be his policy to give them in an equal profusion. He urged Don Manuel to convey these assurances to the Grand Master, which he was naturally eager to do.

As the news at the Spanish court indicated that the besiegers might already be surrounding the Maltese island, with such a fleet that the entry of a single vessel to its harbour would be a precarious enterprise before Don Manuel could be expected to arrive before it, he decided to proceed to Sicily in a frigate of that country which was sailing from Cadiz, and to complete his journey by such means as should seem most prudent, in the light of what he would be able to learn on arrival there.

CHAPTER VI

AFTER Don Manuel's departure, Angelica saw that the decisive hour of her life had come. By the break of dawn, the two galleys would have sailed away, and, if she were left behind, she would be doomed to the convent life to which she was more averse as its shadow fell more imminently upon her. While it had seemed a distant and yet inescapable certainty, she had endured it mainly by refusing it the tribute of thought, as one in health may reject the terror of death, though reason cannot doubt that it must be faced at last. But at the near threat of some fatal malady—at the possibility that it may be avoided—or overcome—how different will the feelings be!

So with Angelica had the vague avoided terror become real and near; and, at this extremity, the resignation with which the inevitable might have been faced had broken down as the possibility of escape, however faint, had invaded her mind.

Now she saw two possible sources of flight: to persuade Señor Ramegas to take her on the *Santa Anna* to Malta, or Francisco upon the *Santa Martha*, of which he was to have command, though under the authority of the older and more experienced captain.

But when she considered the possibility of persuading Ramegas to the granting of such permission, her reason told her that it was no more than a baseless hope. Even if she could obtain his sympathy for such a project (which was unlikely enough) his sense of fealty to her uncle would forbid the possibility that he should assist her to defy his authority in such a manner. And even if he could have been persuaded to do so, she saw that it was not fair to petition for that which would involve his own certain disgrace. For Don Manuel was not one who would hear excuse if his authority were defied.

The better, if not the only, chance lay in persuading Francisco that she would not take the veil—or, at least, not at this time—and that she was resolved to help the need of Malta in an extremity in which even women must have some functions they could fulfil.

She considered also boarding his ship at the last hour, and announcing that she was resolved to go, without asking his consent, but the thought that there would be no cabin reserved for her use, no female companion such as she designed to have, and the fear above all that she might be put ashore with the ignominy of force, if Ramegas should be consulted on such an issue, deterred her effectually. For, in her more feminine way, her pride was no less than that

of Francisco or Don Manuel himself. She might brave danger, she might face the unknown with courage; but the fear of failure and ridicule were less easy to overcome.

In the same spirit, she saw that, if she should fail in resolution or power of persuasion now: if the ships should sail at the dawn and she should still be under the castle roof, she would surely go to the Convent of Holy Cross on the next day without showing that it was not cheerfully or even willingly done. It would be intolerable to her pride to remain there in passive, futile rebellion until, sooner or later, her uncle should come again and compel her to that which she had tried in vain to avoid.

On this determination she sought her cousin, and found that it would not be easy to make a favourable opportunity for the interview she desired. Two days before, she could have had his society at any hour. But how great was the difference that that time had made!

She sought him at last on the deck of the *Santa Martha*, through the crowded haste of the quay, to be told, after a time of enquiry that had produced only doubtful or contradictory answers, that he was with Señor Ramegas in the cabin of the other ship, so that she must wait his return, having no wish to go to him there.

And when he came he was in haste and a ruffled mood, for Ramegas had told him of more than one error into which he had fallen through inexperience and slowness to consult one who was his superior officer now, and had made it clear that their ranks held something more than a nominal difference. He had to learn that, though he was Don Manuel's nephew, Admiral of the Fleet was a position he had not yet gained.

"Francisco, can we talk somewhere alone?"

"What is it now?" he exclaimed, with an impatience which, to his cousin at least, he would rarely show. "I have much to do. We sail before dawn."

Angelica thought it best to be straight and bold. "I am coming with you," she said. "I want a cabin for my use, and one for a maid whom I shall bring."

A moment before, she had had the sense of being forgotten or pushed aside, which she had experienced at the morning meal, but there was no doubt that she had his attention now.

"Coming with us! How can you do that? It is to-morrow you are riding to Holy Cross."

"But that can wait. It has done so for eight years. Should not all help at this great need at which Malta lies? There is work for women as well as men in a leaguered town."

"Have you our uncle's word that you come?"

"He had much else of which he must think. I would not vex him with smaller things."

"You will vex him more if you come here when he thinks you at Holy Cross. As to cabins, do you know that we are to bear more than eight hundred men on this ship, and that it is laden with stores? And every hour I hear of more that must come. The men of most rank must lie in a crowded way. The slaves must sleep where they pull.

"Does Señor Ramegas know this? Then you must talk to him. I am nothing here. He would have me ask whether I am to go out by the stern."

"It would be useless to ask him. You must know that. Francis, I cannot go to that tomb at so great a time. I must come with you."

Francisco heard the pleading note in his cousin's voice and considered her request in a more serious way. As he did so, he regained the self-control that he had been near to lose as he came from Ramegas' cabin a few minutes before.

"I would have you here," he said, "with a blithe heart, but I see not how. If we would do this, and let there be wrath at a later day, yet I see not how to contrive. If I should find a cabin for you, there would be those who must be turned out, and they would not keep their tongues still for an hour.

"There are some who are sore now, and have taken tales to Señor Ramegas of how I would have them lie, which I must change, though I know not how.

"It could not be done without the knowledge coming to him and, as I think, it will be better to ask him now. He would not endure that we plan it without his will. You should ask him first. It is a small chance, or else none."

"Well," she said, "I will do that." She had no hope, but she saw that there was no other way.

She went on to the *Santa Anna* and found its commander upon the poop. He observed her at once, seeming to have more leisure than her cousin, and to be aware of all that went on without disturbing the calm of his own mind. He met her with grave rebuke that she should have come seeking him thus.

"Was there none you could send? Did you not know you should not be here?" But when she said she wished to speak to him alone he took her to his own cabin and listened calmly to what she said.

She came out a few minutes later with but one thought in her mind—to keep back tears from the sight of the men among whom she must make her way. Ramegas had been patient and kind. A child's folly had hindered his work, but he was too self-controlled to show anger for that. Also, she was a child of whom he was fond, and Don Manuel's niece. But the thing itself was too foolish for more than a kind rebuke. He had thought her to have more sense, and that her duty would be more plain to her eyes.

When she went, he called to one he could trust to follow her back to the castle gate.

Angelica had passed through a rough crowd, and some things which were

not meant for her eyes and had not been pleasant to see. But except for the slaves who were already being labelled and chained to the benches where they must row till the voyage should end, they had mostly been men she knew. And the galley-slaves had been far beneath, in the low waist of the ship.

She saw well that she would have been queen of her cousin's ship, having all the comfort she could, among hundreds who would have run at her word. And the voyage to Malta would not be long. She would still have gone if she could; but she saw that it would not be. She had done no more than to give others a cause for jest, and to soil her pride.

When she had regained her room, and could be private to her own mood, she looked out on the harbour with eyes that were bright with tears. They were tears of anger and shame, of one who was not used to defeat. She saw Rinaldo's galley anchored far out in the bay. Why had she not asked it of him? His galley would not be so crowded of men. There might be more comfort there. "*The potent arms that you now bear*." She had a confident thought that he would not refuse to help her up the side of the ship. But she knew it to be a thing that she could not do. She did not trust him enough—or, at least, not in the right way.

CHAPTER VII

IT was in the later day that Morayma came to Angelica, where she still sat apart in a mood of rebellion against the fate that was closing her in. The call of sea and wind and the wide freedom of life became louder and more alluring as it seemed more hopeless that she could accept its charm. She had all the hunger of youth and she looked down on a meal which was to lie for a lifetime untasted before her eyes. At least, so it seemed to her. The Abbess of Holy Cross, had she been in a confessional mood, might have told her that the plate was not always bare.

"Señor Francisco," Morayma said, "has sent for some things he needs but lacks time to fetch. There is a yellow scarf which he says you have."

"Yes. It is in my chest. It has been there since the masquerade. I will get it now."

She went to a coffer in which she kept such clothes as she seldom wore. After turning out much that it held, she came to the scarf she sought. It was last winter that she had dressed herself as a page for the Twelfth-day masque, which her uncle had chidden somewhat at first, and then praised her, as making a pretty boy. There was not much that might not be done on that night. She had borrowed her cousin's doublet and hose; a suit that had become small for him, though it had been ample for her. The clothes were still there.

As she looked at them now, a thought came which she put away, but which would come back to her mind. "There is none," she thought, "that would guess, if my hair were shed." Then she thought: "But I should be shamed if they did." And after that: "But I am slim enough, and I stride well. I see not how they should know."

She said aloud: "It is a wild thought. It is a thing I shall never try. . . . I should need a sword, if I did."

She might be sure that it was a thing she would never try, yet she went to her cousin's room and found the rapier he mostly wore when he was dressed in a formal way. He had left it for a heavier sword, now that he went to the grim business of war, so it was there with the belt and dagger to which it belonged, all of which she took to her own room, with some other things which were of a man's kind.

She had some gold saved, which her uncle would give her freely at times, and this she put in a hollow belt that ran round the inside of the doublet, where it was drawn close at the waist, and was well concealed. She did not know

what her need might be, but she knew that to have gold at hand is best for those who wander about. There was a pouch also hanging upon the belt, at the dagger's guard, and she put some smaller money in that for an instant need.

"It is what," she said to herself, "I shall never dare; but it can be no loss to have ordered well if my mind change at the last, as it will not do."

It was in this mood she remained till the day went down and the darkness came, though her hands had not been idle the while, and after that, as the space of escape narrowed towards its last hour, she came to a mood that was both active and bold, and though it might change with another day, it might do more before then than could be undone by too late a fear.

Through the hours of night there was coming and going of men between castle and quay, and the castle gates were not closed, nor its lights dimmed. At two hours before dawn it was easy for one who walked out with assurance enough to pass unchallenged and unobserved; and it was at about that time that an old fisherman, grounding his skiff on his own beach—to which he had returned from taking some goods to Rinaldo's galley—was aware of a young gentleman who stood at the water's edge, and asked him, in a voice that was somewhat husky and low, if he would earn some coins by pulling out again to the *Flying Hawk.*

Vaguely, for he was a tired man, Pedro heard a familiar sound in the voice and, had there been better light, he would more certainly have recognized Francisco's clothes and given a closer look to one who wore them with doubtful right. As it was, he thought only of time and toil.

"Señor," he said, "it will be a hard pull, and the time is short, for they weigh anchor in much less than an hour. But I will do what I can."

"There is time, if you pull well. If you get me aboard I will give you something more than I said. There is this to take."

She handed him a valise which she had found heavy enough, though it was not large. The beach at this place had a good slope, and the boat could come well ashore, but as she got aboard she wetted one leg to the knee, at which she was less than pleased. Pedro had settled more than he knew, for she had resolved that he should be the test of whether her disguise would prevail. As he knew her voice as well as herself, it had seemed a sufficient ordeal to pass, and as he pulled over the dark waters of the bay, she had a better confidence that none would guess that she was not that which she appeared, which did much to control her fear of what her greeting might be when she had climbed to the galley's deck.

They passed close enough under the stern of the *Santa Anna* to hear the voices of those who were casting the hawsers clear, and when they drew into the shadow of the *Flying Hawk* they heard the noise of men who sang at the capstan bars, and the bow anchor was already awash. Pedro pulled round to the

low waist of the ship, and when he hailed that he had a gentleman to be put aboard, the rope-ladder was cast, with less pause to ask for whom it might be required than there might have been in the light of day, or at any moment than that, for the sheet-anchor was hard apeak and as it came clear of the sea-bottom the galley must fall away with the wind. The oarsmen had their long sweeps ready to pull, and Angelica found that she must be agile to seize the swaying ropes before the boat would be backed away. The valise was handled in such a sort that it was by no more than a good chance that it did not fall to the sea.

Pedro pulled away in some wonder and doubt of what he had done, for, as Angelica gave him that he had earned, she had been careless to speak in her own voice, saying farewell. It seemed a wild thought at the first, but when he heard, at a later hour, that the Señorita could not be found, he had little doubt of what he had done, about which he had sufficient sense to keep quiet. He had not seen her, he said, with an oath which his conscience allowed; for who can see in the dark?

Angelica was led by the light of lanterns that swung from the masts, and the first faint efforts of dawn, along a raised plank from which she could look down on the benches of those who were chained to the oarsman's task. She had to keep her footing with care as the ship came loose to the wind, and she heard strange-tongued cries from those who controlled the oarsmen by word and lash, bidding them dip their sweeps to a task which must be sustained till the voyage's end.

She had asked for Captain Rinaldo, not knowing if that were the proper designation to apply to the pursuivant who was also (as she understood) in command of the vessel by which he came. The seaman whom she addressed, who appeared to be of the rank of a quartermaster or boatswain, but whose features were hard to see in the wavering light, had replied in a foreign tongue, which might be Maltese for any better knowledge she had, and had led her toward the poop. He had, in fact, understood no word except "*capitan*," which conveyed all that she needed to say, and her dress and manner were sufficient to indicate the part of the vessel to which she would most naturally be assigned.

When she had climbed to the high poop, she saw Rinaldo there, but the man, having led her so far, either had other work of an urgent nature upon his hands, or he did not think it necessary, or perhaps wise, to interrupt the captain in his task of guiding the ship through the harbour-mouth. He pointed to Rinaldo, with some more words of the foreign tongue he had used before, and hurried away. Angelica stood in the shadow of a short mizzen-mast which rose from the poop deck. She saw Rinaldo in the light of a lantern which hung over the stern. He was clothed in somewhat looser garments than he had worn when

he came ashore, and had a curved sword at his side. She was not sufficiently familiar with the equipment or crew of a Maltese warship to judge the meaning of all she saw, but was aware of a barbaric tone in her new surroundings beyond anything she had expected to meet. It was exotic, even intoxicating, in its first effect, as though she were privileged to walk in safety in Algiers or Egypt, where no Christian, other than the ingratiating ubiquitous Greek, could hope to enter, save in the heavy gyves of a slave.

Finding herself unobserved or unregarded by those around, she turned her attention to the dim forms of her uncle's galleys, coming up behind with spreading widths of canvas which hid at times the lights of the castle which she had left for so wild a path. As she looked back in a tumult of contending thoughts, she was aware of Rinaldo's voice at her side.

There was now a broadening line of dove-grey light on the rim of the eastern sky, foretelling a quiet and misty dawn. She could not see his face clearly, and he less of hers, she being in shadow and her back turned to what light there was.

"May I ask to whom I have the honour to speak?"

The words were courteous, but the tone had an inflection of satire, at which her heart stirred to a sudden fear; but it was a question she had expected, and for which she had an answer prepared.

"I must ask your grace for the way I have come aboard without leave. My name is Garcio—Don Garcio of Murcia—I am near of blood to Don Manuel, and came to give such aid as I could. I did not arrive till his galleys were near to sail, and they were so thronged that I thought it best to ask if you could find me space here."

There was no answer to this, and she added: "If I have taken too great a freedom, I have no doubt Señor Ramegas will find means to bring me to his own vessel. Or I could pace the deck here, if your cabins are full below. You would not mind that?"

She did not want to face Ramegas, but it appeared best to speak in a bold way, and, at the worst, he could not put back for her. She felt that the die had fallen now, and it might not have been unwelcome to have found herself among friends again, and to discard a dress which had served its use. Yet it was not easily to be thought that Rinaldo would be reluctant to welcome any who might come as a volunteer to the defence of the threatened isle, or to refuse hospitality on a ship which the Knights of Malta owned.

"We will speak of this at a later hour." As Rinaldo said this, he moved away without inviting reply. There had been a subtle note of ironic mockery in his voice, at which her heart stirred again to that first instinct of fear.

Yet she was of too fine a blood to be lightly frightened without a cause, and her reason told her that there could be no need for alarm. Even if he had

guessed who she was—which she was not quick to believe—she must be in safety enough, with the Maltese flag over her head, and its own envoy in charge. She did not forget that she was the niece of one of the Commanders of the great Order to which the galley belonged. One who was next in rank to the Grand Master, La Valette himself.

Perhaps it was just because Rinaldo had not guessed who she was that he had dared to speak in that mocking tone. He might think her to claim a rank that she did not own. He might even think her a spy. But, even so, she need have no fear. The truth would be her secure defence. Had she been really alone she might have stirred to a sharper fear. But she looked at the two great ships that were but three furlongs behind, drawing out of the harbour now, the *Santa Martha* slightly in advance on the starboard side, and she knew that Ramegas—her cousin—and a hundred others upon those decks could speak for her of who she was. She looked at the beauty of sea and sky in the growing light with a mind that was more at ease than it had been since Rinaldo's coming had broken the peace of the castle life, as a stone drops in a pool.

And the scene was one of beauty and quiet peace, though it might be pregnant with menace of coming war, as the three galleys, like wide-winged birds, with white gleams of foam at their sides from the measured strokes of the oars, left the dark coastline of Spain behind, and moved outward toward the dawn.

The two galleys of Don Manuel, which had been built at Cadiz, and were the gift of the Spanish king, were each of a length of two hundred feet, being among the largest ships of their kind that were then afloat. The waist was low, where the rowers sat, and they would be drenched in a windy storm, and might even be glad of their chains at such times, without which they had been sucked away by a falling wave; but poop and bow were built high, having several decks. They were like castles, bristling with cannon, crowded with men.

They were built somewhat broad of beam and round of bow, speed being less regarded than strength, and space for armaments and for a large regiment of fighting men. But they carried three masts, and could show a spread of sail that was high and wide. They had twenty oars on either side, each being pulled by three men. With a good wind they could do ten knots an hour, if not more.

The *Flying Hawk* was a smaller ship of a different kind. It was lean and swift. It had some height of poop, and there were gun-decks there, where it showed teeth that were strong and sharp. But the bow was lower and pointed keenly ahead, like a falcon's beak. It had cannon there on a single deck, long brass swivel-mounted guns that could be trained ahead on a flying prey. It had great grappling-hooks hung out on either side of the prow, that could be used to grip the bulwarks of a ship that might be too shy to close with less persuasion than that. With the sharp-pointing prow, they showed like the beak

and claws of the deadly bird that it claimed to be.

It had but twelve oars aside, with two rowers to each, but it could make as good speed with those on a calm sea as could the greater galleys with six score rowers that pulled on their longer oars; and with a fair wind, it could do nigh three knots to their two.

Angelica looked at it now, gliding forward with less than its full effort of sail, and with its oars stilled for a time, that it might not draw too far ahead of her uncle's galleys, which might be said to be panting behind, and she thought it to be a ship which it would be easy to love. She was at peace with herself and with all she saw, when a man stood at her elbow and spoke to her in a tongue which she did not know, but which had some sound of that which Morayma used when she met one of her own race.

The man had on a red cap, and his jacket and drawers were linen, not over-white, which might be excused on a ship that was scarcely clear of the harbour-bar, and was still busy with a crowd of men who were carrying stores to the hold, coiling cables away, and removing raffle from off the decks.

When she answered in Spanish, and he saw that she did not understand him, he found enough words of that tongue to say that Captain Hassan wished to speak to the Señor.

"Captain Hassan?" she asked, in some surprise, thinking that this must be another officer to whom Rinaldo had referred her business; but she followed the man across the deck, and it was to Rinaldo that she was led.

He looked at her in a cold way, and there was no friendliness in his voice, as he asked:

"Señor Garcio, you are, as I understand from yourself, of a wealthy house? You are one for whom a good ransom might well be paid? Should we say of two thousand crowns, or perhaps more?"

"Yes," she said in some wonder and doubt how to reply to this most unexpected query. "What of that?"

"It may be well for you that you have such friends. You were not asked to come here, and must look for the fate of those who adventure with rashness thus."

Angelica was more puzzled than alarmed by the threat which the words contained. She still thought that, if all else should fail, she had but to reveal who she was, and her safety, at least, was sure. She looked at the Maltese flag overhead, and at the two great galleys that were scarce a gunshot away, and there was no more than a foolish jest in the words she heard.

"Captain Rinaldo," she said, "you talk in a strange way. I am on a Maltese ship, and it is Malta I come to aid. Do the Knights of Malta think that to hold their friends to ransom will aid their cause? Why, all Europe would cry them shame."

“Señor, I know not what the Knights of Malta may do. I am not of their Order, nor was I put in command when this galley was sent to sea.”

“Then I will speak to who is.”

“If you would do that, you must call the dead.”

“Do you tell me that the Captain died, and that you, being no more than the Grand Master’s envoy at first, have taken his power?”

“The Grand Master’s envoy is on the third bench from the fore, on the starboard side. It is he over whom the driver is standing now with his whip raised, which he will feel the first time that his oar lags, as it is soon that it will.”

“I cannot tell what you mean.”

“Yet it is simple to see. You are speaking to Captain Hassan, of whom it is likely you may have heard. Six days ago, I was in command of a part of my father’s fleet. I fell in with this galley, which I have long lusted to take. Being six to one, we were able to gain it with little loss, having hemmed it round. I took it by the board, for I would not batter it with our guns, more than by the shooting down of some spars to reduce its speed, which were soon repaired.

“My vessels lie with their yards aback but fifty miles off Iviza’s coast, and I lead Don Manuel’s ships to that place, as two cows that the butcher needs.

“Yet I will not say I have done all that I meant, for I thought that the Lord of Vilheyna would have been the best part of the prey which I took some venture to have. He would have pleased my father better than all, for he had longed to bait him for many years; since, in fact, he broke his helm at Golitta’s siege, though he might have borne no malice for that. It was some words that Don Manuel said at that time which he must learn to repent. My father will not be content that either shall die till he have him impaled at his galley’s stern, for he has a stake there, as you may know, which is seldom vacant of some Christian to whom he may talk at will.

“There is a chance that he may honour you in that way, but it is the larger odds that he will let you go at a good price, thinking you are too feeble and mean for that which he will keep for his major foes.”

Angelica heard this with a mind that was stunned by a horror that left it numb, as the pain of a wound delays till the first shock is spent.

She did not doubt it was true; nor to whom it was that she spoke. It was to Hassan, the son-in-law of Dragut, who was the Sultan’s Viceroy of Algiers, the scourge of the Mediterranean for the last thirty years, the best naval commander who supported the Turkish power. And Hassan, Barbarossa’s son, was his most dreaded lieutenant, to whom he had given his daughter in reward for a former act of audacity such as that which had brought her here. At least—it was her own folly that brought her here!

She looked back at her uncle’s ships, striving to make pace with the swifter

vessel, and thinking that every knot they gained made it more sure that they would arrive at Malta before the Turks could obstruct their way to the harbour mouth, and she felt, illogically enough, as though she had betrayed them to the doom that they strained to reach. And yet, if she could warn. . . . And what way could there be to that? She saw—she could have admired at another time in another mood—the superb audacity which had anchored that galley in Aldea Bella bay, with its benches of Christian slaves: slaves too closely watched, too entirely cowed by their ruthless owners, to be able to give alarm, perhaps too terror-weakened to have used such an opportunity had it come.

But now she saw only the eyes which had looked at her so differently two mornings before—which were now cruel with derisive scorn. Was she to watch impotent here while her cousin and all her uncle's power were lured to slaughter or slavery at the Corsair's will? What would be her own fate when the truth were known, which she could not hope that she would be long able to hide?

Desperation brought its own courage. If she had abandoned her womanhood for this pit of horror and shame, was she to forget also the manhood that she assumed? The sword that she yet wore?

They were alone on the high deck, in an ample space, for Captain Hassan was not one on whom others would intrude unless they knew that they were required. Bitter passion and pride, and the wild hope that she might do something to break the trap to which her friends were now led, urged the sudden movement that brought her rapier clear of its sheath. She would have struck, in the revulsion of that instant's despair, be the consequences what they might, but he was as nimble as she. The curved scimitar leapt to light.

"Back!" he cried. "Stand away!" to the running crew. "Do I need aid for such a boy's bodkin as that?"

Angelica thrust twice with a fury replacing strength. Then she knew that her rapier was snapped off at the hilt. The scimitar skimmed over her head, which it did not cut.

"You are more worth," Captain Hassan remarked, "while you yet live. Yet I see not why you should idle here. You may look again at the pursuivant that you thought me to be. He will not last for an hour. When he faints, they will cast him over the side, and his place will be bare for you."

She looked at the bench to which he had pointed before. Standing at the poop-rail, she looked down on the face of a man who was at the extremity of exhaustion and the desperation of a great dread. His bench companion was a huge negro, with a green turban about his head, who pulled strongly and must, indeed, have been doing three-fourths of the work, but the oars were beyond the power of a single man.

The pursuivant, the real Rinaldo, pulled with the knowledge that, if the oar

should fail to keep its place with the rest, the lash would descend on a back that was already swollen and raw and in a torture of pain every time that it bent for the next stroke. Nature may do much under the stimulus of such fear, but there is a limit it cannot pass. As Angelica looked, the man's body sank limply forward upon the oar. The lash descended in vain upon a back that quivered but did not rise. The oar fouled the one that came forward from those who pulled on the bench behind. There was confusion and loss of stroke till the negro lifted it clear.

The driver called two men forward to strike off the chains of the swooning man. He shouted also for one of the slaves who were held in reserve for such a need to be brought to supply his place.

Angelica saw the pursuivant's senseless form lifted over the bench, and dragged to the vessel's side. She realized abruptly that he was to be thrown overboard while he still lived. She had known, all her life, that such things were but daily events in the merciless Mediterranean warfare that had been waged for five hundred years between the Christian and Moslem powers. For the moment she forgot her own peril, even the threat that she was to take the vacated place. She turned to Hassan with a cry in which horror and appeal had an equal part.

"Oh, not that! You can't let them throw him over. He isn't dead."

"Señor," was the cold reply, "the man had no ransom to pay."

There was no mercy in Hassan's heart, for he had known the misery of a slave himself, all the bitterness and the blows, as he had toiled in Malta at the fortifications of St. Elmo, while his captors had refused to discuss any possible ransom, so that he was only released at last when Dragut made capture of a Commander of the Maltese Order, and both parties had been glad to effect exchange.

The pursuivant's body was flung over the side, to tumble for a moment and disappear among the swirling foam of the oars; but Captain Hassan's attention had left it before it fell.

Something in Angelica's voice, in the urgency of that appealing cry, in which she had forgotten the pose of manhood she had assumed, awaked memory and brought his eyes upon her with a new sharpness, even as he lifted the pipe to his mouth, the shrill note of which had been intended to summon those who would have chained her in the vacant place, and put back the wretch who was now being driven toward the bench.

"Now," he said, "you may call me fool if you will. Allah be thanked for the better light! Did not Morayma say you could use the sword? But she left the doublet unsaid. There will be no slave-bench for you—Señor Garcio. You shall have the cabin beside my own."

"I see you know who I am. There is no occasion to mock. And the sword I

had was no more than a fragile thing. It might have snapped in your own hand. But if you treat me with honour, you may be sure there will be exchange or ransom agreed."

She was conscious, amid the horror of the murder she had just seen, and a host of contending fears, of some satisfaction, even relief, in the fact that he knew her for whom she was, and that the true issue alone need concern her now. She could feel confidence once again in the great name that was hers, and that might, she thought, be some protection, even in this pit to which she had slipped. Fear she must have; but, for the moment, at least, she faced him with a courage that ruled her fear. And as she heard his reply, she had need of all that she could gather from her own spirit or her race's pride.

"You will be held in honour enough. You need have no doubt about that, for it is there that your value lies. But it will be time to talk of ransom when it is asked, if at all. My father may think you a gift that our Sultan will not disdain to take from his hand; though I do not say you should look for that, for the years of the Protector of the Faithful are more than few, and it is said that his seraglio is already beyond his need. My father may think that I have done well, and that I may claim a rose for my own wreath, if I will."

Angelica checked a reply that was near her lips. It seemed that she gained coolness as well as courage from the extremity of danger which was not hers alone, but that of all who were aboard those following ships. If there were a way that they could be warned in time! She saw that the more quietly she accepted the doom that his words implied, the more freedom she was likely to have, and on the retention of such freedom must rest any hope that she could communicate with those who were now being guided to the waiting trap. She said only:

"I had no rest during last night. Will you show me the cabin I am to have?"

He saw that she accepted the position in a very quiet and sensible way, and though he might not have cared had she wept or pleaded or stormed, there being those at call who had the expertness of use in dealing with such cases as hers, yet her attitude proved her friend in securing a different treatment from that which she would have been likely to have.

"Come this way," he said, and led down a short companion-way to the poop-cabins beneath their feet. She recognized in the curt order that she was now something less than either the Señorita Angelica of Vilheyna, or the Señor Garcio that she had claimed to be; but it was something gained that she was being led to the best quarters that the galley held, rather than to the hard slavery of the oar, which she would have had no strength to endure.

"There is no need," he said, as they entered the cabin in which his meals were served, "that it should be known who you are at this time, and will be better not, in two ways."

The room in which they stood was surprisingly large, though its height was little more than six feet. It was on the port-side, and as they entered, looking toward the rudder, there were portholes facing them, and on their right hand, through one of which, as the ship dipped to the waves, Angelica had a glimpse of the *Santa Anna*. She saw the length of its starboard side, and the lifted oars gleam in the sun. She had some comfort in this nearness of friends, and a brave and yet fearful thought that their safety might be dependent upon herself. “I must warn them,” she thought, “while there is time, though my life go.”

While she thought this, Captain Hassan had called to a Moorish boy, and had led the way to the further of two doors which opened at their left hand.

“You will prepare this cabin,” he said, in his own tongue, “for Señor Garcio’s use, bringing his baggage here from the deck, and from now you will serve meals for two.”

Angelica saw that she was in the sternmost of two sleeping-cabins which opened into each other and into the larger one, the suite of three taking the whole width of the stern. The Knights of Malta might crowd their fighting galleys with men, but they had spacious accommodation provided for the one, whether of themselves or not, who was likely to have command. There would be comfort for him and for one other, wife or *amie*, whom he might bring aboard on a safe voyage.

“You will live here,” Hassan went on, when the boy had gone, speaking in Spanish again, “till we come to port, and my father will order all. You may think that you can call to your friends, but you know more than I, if you know how. For even could you swim such a length through the waves (which it would be random to think), you would be shot from these decks as you rose from the first dive, nor would your friends haul a yard that they might come by your way, for they will not pick up that which a consort drowns.”

Angelica feared, as he said this, that he might have observed a moment’s change in her face, for to swim to her uncle’s ships had been a faint hope that had already come to her mind, though it had also filled it with fear. For, having been born at the sea’s side, and of a race that had been less often on land than a ship’s deck, she had learnt to swim, which she could do well, though she had never put her strength to a test such as this would be sure to be.

“If you are wise,” he went on, “you will put such thoughts from your mind, for your own peace. You can bar these doors or not, as you will. While I live, you will be troubled by none till this voyage is through. And you can drive that toy” (looking at the dagger that hung from her belt) “into my back at a likely time, if your folly rise to that height; but it will be no avail to your friends nor to yourself. If you should do that, you might pray for a quick death in the next hour. There are three hundred men on this ship, besides slaves, and no woman at all. They would have no mercy on one who had wrought my death; and what

they would do, should they find that which you are, I may guess but I will not say. You might be glad at the last to be impaled on the stake you will have seen at the helmsman's side, which your friends of Malta have used to the torture of those of the True Faith, as its stains attest, but which will bear Christian fruit from this day."

"I am not of those," she said, "who slay sleeping men or who will strike at the back, as I think you know."

"Are you not? There are few, either women or men, who will not do that at an urgent fear, unless they are faint of heart, which I do not think that you are. I will trust your sense as a better pledge."

"You may trust what you will. While you leave me at peace, I shall not desire evil to you. I can see that it might be to fall into more difficult hands."

"Then we are agreed for this time." He went back to the deck.

Angelica remained in the larger cabin, which was furnished in the style of the Italian luxury of that time, having much of novelty to one who had been brought up in the austere atmosphere of Andalusian grandeur, while the boy Alim prepared her own cabin, fitting with soft cushions and silk coverings a deep-sided berth, which was more fit for a woman's ease than the man she proposed to be.

When he had gone, she lay down in the berth, though without discarding her clothes, for, having had no rest during the previous night, she was physically and mentally exhausted by the experiences through which she had gone. Now, while adversity threatened but paused to strike, she lay for some time devising plans by which she might reach her friends who were so near, and so much more numerous and powerful than these men by whom she was held. But her thoughts showed her no more than the strength of the trap into which she had walked, in a blind way; and, after a time, with the resilient spirit of youth, she passed into dreamless sleep, from which she waked in a mood of buoyant hope, having little cause, beyond the fact that there appeared to be a short space of days during which she need have no imminent fear.

She entered the larger cabin to find a table laden with food, and bearing signs that Captain Hassan had eaten and gone. She ate and drank with some zest, during which she was even aware of some doubt whether she would be back in the walls of Andrea Bella, if the choice could be hers, considering that it must be about the hour when she would have been setting out for the Convent of Holy Cross.

Having eaten, and observing that the air was somewhat oppressive in the low-roofed cabin, she found courage enough to seek the sun and wind that the deck would give. If she were to be Don Garcio till the voyage should end, she need not deny herself such freedom as could be expected to be attached thereto. Captain Hassan walked the deck, watching the ship's response to a

gusty and changeful wind. He did not regard her at all.

She looked down at the bare-backed slaves who toiled under the constant fear of the driver's lash, and her mood sobered again to the depth of the peril in which she lay. The man who had been put in Rinaldo's place had a broad red weal across the white of his back. He did not look very strong. Probably he, too, would go overside, if he had no ransom to pay. Many did. Others had strength to endure, and, in the end, the toil would become almost easy for them.

It was a cruel custom, doing no good to either side, Christian or Infidel, in its result. The galleys of each were pulled by the war-taken slaves of the alien race. They might equally well have each pulled on their own oars, but so the custom had been; slaves died, or were exchanged if they were of sufficient rank; ransoms were paid and repaid. It cancelled out more or less, as it had done since the days of Carthage and Rome. So long had the custom endured, and so long might it last, till the end of time.

Captain Hassan had occupation for his own mind. A cold wind came from the north. The galleys sailed close-hauled to the wind, and the oars pulled under the urgent threats of the drivers' whips. Captain Hassan had no care for his own ship. He could sail two points nearer the wind than the round-hulled vessels that came behind. He felt like a dog that brings slow-moving cattle to the place where they are appointed to die. If there should be a further rise in the wind—if there should be storm in the night, such as would break them apart—it might be the loss of almost all that he had so audaciously attempted to gain.

Angelica felt the chill of that Alpine wind which the Southerner hates to feel, either on water or land. She saw the grey of the sky and the rising sea. She saw that the galleys that held her friends were more distant then they had been on the earlier day. There was no comfort in that.

She watched them awhile over the stern-rail, and when she turned to go below, after she had been spattered by the spray of a heavy wave, she saw that she was standing beside the stake of which Captain Hassan had warned her that she might make closer acquaintance if she should do him hurt. It was a strong, upright stake, about five feet high, firmly fixed in the deck, and having a sharp point. A man being seated thereon, and the stake being thrust in so far that he would not fall off, but no more, might live, it was said, for as much as four days, while the stake would be driven in by his own weight till it should come to a vital part.

It was a form of execution very popular in Asia and Eastern Europe at that time. It resembled crucifixion in that a man might be able to think and talk for a long time after the executioner's work was done; but it was unlike in that a man could not be taken down, and his life saved. After he had once been fixed

on the stake a slow death was his certain fate.

There were corsairs at that time, both Christian and Turk—between which there was little to choose in the modes of warfare they used—who would have a victim impaled by the ship's helm as a constant thing, saying that they must have someone with whom to talk while they steered.

Angelica had heard of such things, which she knew were done, but it is different to see. It was but a bare stake, which had been scrubbed clean of all but some stains that were darker than the grain of the wood. There was nothing frightful in that, nor had she much fear that she would come herself to an end so foul, yet it was not pleasant to see.

She went to her own cabin, and watched for a time, through a stern port-hole, the ships where, if she could reach them, her safety lay.

Lacking air, she tried to open it, but found that it was secured beyond her strength, and, as she thought, on the outside. She went to the starboard port-hole and found that it was easy to set it wide, which she was glad to do, that side being away from the wind. She wondered whether the port-hole astern had been secured so that she should not signal at a place which her friends could see, and whether it might have been done in the last hour, while she was on the deck. She had a fear that she might be watched more than she knew, and resolved to be wary to hide her thoughts.

The ships lay-to during the night, resting their oars, and after the darkness fell, and when she had barred both her doors, she watched the triple masthead lights of the two ships that, at one time, were but a short distance away. She supposed that she could go on deck if she would, by no more than opening her own door; and if she were once in the sea, she thought that she would not be easy to follow or stay. But the night was dark, the waves high. She had little hope that she could do more than drown herself, if she should attempt such a swim; and though she saw that she might have no better chance till it would be too late, she could not make the resolve. She slept for that night, and waked in an April dawn to find that the ships were moving again. The wind had veered to the south of west: the sea was more quiet: the *Santa Anna* and *Santa Martha* came with a full strength of sail: the oars flashed in the foam. With a wind which was dead astern, as it now was, their speed was not greatly less than that of the *Flying Hawk*: they sought to recover the time that had been lost as they lay-to in the night. They made haste to their doom.

Angelica looked, and called herself coward that she had let the night go without an effort to reach their decks. She saw that her life was a small thing beside the stake for which it would be cast in the scale. She might not succeed, but it was a thing that she ought to try. Rather, that she ought to have tried; for there could be no chance now, unless it should come with another night.

Captain Hassan clearly thought it to be an impossible thing. But he might

not guess how well she could swim. There were few Spanish ladies at that day who could have lived in the water at all. Few, indeed, who would have made such an attempt as she now pondered and feared, and yet thought it likely that she could do if she should have sufficient courage to try.

Yet Captain Hassan might be right. To swim in the dark to the side of a moving ship was a thing she had never tried. She thought of herself as struggling vainly among the moving blades of the oars. They were not always out. But they might be put out at any time, even while she were swimming toward the ships.

Even if they had not to be faced, she must so contrive that she must come close to the moving side, amid the darkness and tossing waves, and her cries must be heard, or something seized by which she could climb, or in a moment it would have slipped away, and she be left to a hopeless death. She should have tried while they lay-to, however rough was the sea. It was the one chance she had, and her cowardice had let it go.

As she reproached herself thus, there was a sound of distant guns that came over the sea. She looked out, and far to south there were flashes at times where sea and sky met in a vagueness of morning mist.

The firing was not heavy, but came often from single guns. It was most likely that of flight and pursuit. The dawn had come to one of the pitiless Mediterranean hawks, and had shown it a pigeon near. It was only a detail of the ruthless warfare that never ceased on the inland sea, over which merchant vessels, hugging the land, glad of the coming night, would scurry from coast to coast, as a rabbit dashes across a field where foxes prowl.

There was some signalling between Don Manuel's ships and the *Flying Hawk*, as though they discussed whether they should endeavour to intervene, but it came to nothing. They went on as before. Had they been drawn into such a strife, it might have been hard for Hassan to conceal the side to which he belonged, but it is likely that he would have continued the part he had chosen to play, even to the point of sinking a galley of his own land, rather than lose the greater prey that he had brought so near to the trap.

But they did not turn for a chase which they might have been too slow to reach, even had it been a Christian vessel that was in jeopard of loss, as to which they may have known more than Angelica was able to see. They held their course all that day, the wind continuing fair under a sky that was warm and blue. The sea became a bright mirror that held the sky.

In the afternoon the *Flying Hawk* steered a more northerly course. It must have seemed a cautious route to those who followed, leaving Algiers as far away as they well could, unless they would go round the Balearic Isles, which had been far out of the course that they ought to make. The day ended without event. The night came, and though she could make no more than a vague

guess, having little knowledge of navigation or of distances on the sea, it seemed to Angelica that they could not be far from the place where the trap was set. All the day she had vexed her mind with vain plans by which she should have made a warning signal to those who followed, but she could think of none that would be likely to be understood, though they might lead to her own death. She had leisure enough, for she appeared to be disregarded by all around. The boy Alim was alert to observe her needs, but she did not know his tongue, nor he hers. If he thought her to be other than what she seemed, he made no sign. Captain Hassan gave her no notice at all: his mind, we may suppose, was on larger things.

They met no ships during these two days that were more than a flicker of distant sails, such as would fade away almost as soon as they showed on the horizon, for they were too formidable in their own aspect to invite the weak to a closer view. Curiosity would have been a fatal vice in a merchant-captain of that day, and indifference would have led to the same end by a road nearly as short. They lived longest who were most timid of mood, and would fly from peril while it was no more than a speck on the distant sea.

On the second night, Angelica lay at ease in the soft berth, though she kept her clothes on as before, for there was good reason to rest while she could, if she were to adventure that on which it was hard to resolve, but which yet would not leave her mind.

She rose after a time and looked out on a night that was dark and still. There was no moon, and the stars were few. The two sets of triple masthead lights followed at some distance apart. Perhaps they were further away than they had been during the day, but one was much in advance. They came on with some spread of canvas, but their oars were drawn in; for no weight of lashes will give men the strength to pull without rest and sleep, and the galleys did not carry a reserve of slaves sufficient for complete relief shifts during the night.

She said to herself: “It must be tried now, if at all. If I stay here, I shall be no more than a bartered slave, of such shame as I partly guess, and do not wish to know more; and I shall have the further shame in my own heart that I have not tried to do what I could. If I try and fail, I have lost no more than a life which is near to wreck, and all else will be as though I had never come. But if I succeed, I have saved my uncle’s galleys from being seized and my friends from death. I shall have done more for Malta, besides, than I ever thought when I made that my excuse to come by a wilful way.”

And as she thought thus, she saw that the fact that one galley was in advance gave her a double chance, for if she should fail in boarding the first, the second would still be coming in the right way; and she saw also that the distance they might be behind did not matter as much as she had been inclined

to think at first. For if she could leave the ship unobserved, she could wait rather than tire herself in an effort to swim to them, doing little more than to keep herself afloat till they should be nearer to her.

Having resolved upon this, she lost no more time, but addressed her mind to the trouble of getting clear of the ship. She prayed to St. Christopher first, he being the patron saint of her house, as well as the right one to guide her through a dark flood, and crossed herself with the three names of God, and stood awhile with a hand that trembled upon the bar of the door, listening for any sound there might be before she consented to draw it back.

She knew that Captain Hassan was in the cabin beside her own, where she must hope that he slept, and so, after she had drawn the bolt back, hearing no sound, she crossed the larger cabin on quiet feet, from which she had drawn the shoes that she would not need. She should have cast more of her clothes, but had been loth to do this, not knowing what she would be able to get again, and was glad to silence a wiser thought with the fear that if she should be stopped by any upon the ship, and were not fully clad, it would be harder to deceive them as to what she proposed to do.

She went through the larger cabin, dimly lit by a lantern which swung from the roof, and up the companion ladder, which had no light but the stars, for she must first mount the poop before she could get down to the low waist of the ship. On the poop deck she stood awhile in the dark shadow of the mast, on the further side from that on which its lantern was hung.

She saw—through the helmhouse window—Salim, Hassan's chief mate, a turbaned Turk with a beard that spread as loosely as the clothes he wore, standing beside the helmsman, to whom he talked as he pointed northward into the night.

Seeing that he was not looking her way, she crossed to the head of the ladder that descended to the waist of the ship. She could observe no motion. She heard no sound except the voices of the watch on the forward deck, which came clearly through the night air, but she knew that she would not be noticed by them.

Thinking that she increased her risk by delay, she descended to the oarsmen's level. She came to a vague awareness of men who lay under the stars, sprawling asleep in their chains. The overseers dozed or slept in their places alike, for they were nearly as wearied as those they drove. They must snatch sleep when they could, waking at once if the boatswain's pipe should call them to action again.

The big negro, who had partnered Rinaldo until he died, half waked as someone stumbled against his feet. He heard a splash, such as might be made by a leaping fish. He raised his head, but there was no further sound. He looked at the dim forms of those who were sleeping around, and then up at the

quiet stars, and turned to slumber again.

CHAPTER VIII

SHE came to the first of the galleys on its windward side. It rose above her, a monster of moving gloom. Its masts, its wide spread of sail which towered to an incredible height among distant stars, were leaning somewhat away. So was the smooth side that slipped from her clutching hands as it slid past with such terrible speed. There was nothing to which she could hold. No one answered her cries. The whole ship seemed asleep. Only, as she came under the stern, and looked up in a last despair, high above she saw Francisco's face, on which the light shone from a stern-hung lantern, as he leaned over the rail. He was puzzled by what he heard. Did mermaids call from the sea? And it was strange that the sound should recall Angelica's voice, the more so that it had a note of pleading and fear such as he had never heard from her lips. But the sound went with the wind, where he supposed that its birth had been.

She saw the towering vessel recede, and she felt that her life was done. By instinct she kept afloat, though she did not doubt that the waste of waters would be her tomb. In that minute's despair, as she saw the ship go by, she almost lost the little chance that was still hers, for when she looked for the second galley, she waked to the realization that it was coming up fast, and was not in line behind, but would pass some hundred yards further south.

She knew it to be the last chance of life that was hers, and she struck out again with all the strength that she still had.

How foolish she had been not to cast some of her clothes! Even the belt, with its slender burden of gold, was still round her waist. She could not wait now to endeavour to get it free. She could only exhaust her breath in the effort to reach the ship before it should pass for ever. She did not even call as she swam.

The wide shadow of sail made a black lake of the water to which she came while there was still half the length of the ship to pass, but the hull leaned over her now. At its waterline it was further away, taking some strokes to reach, and there was again nothing to clutch. It slid past her desperate, groping hands. It was at the corner of the stern, at the last second of hope, that her chance came, in a wooden cornice across the stern. Had she been on the starboard side, it would have been lifted high from her reach, but with the ship leaning as it did from the wind, it came down at times, where she was, to the water's edge.

When she looked down in the daylight hours, she was surprised that she had done that climb with such ease in the dark, but she had been bred on the

hills, and there had been no more than a steady breeze which, with the way the ship heeled thereto, had been less hindrance than help. In fact, she remembered little of what she did until she had pulled herself over the bulwark rail, and was aware of a curt crisp voice that asked:

"Now who may you be that come thus where you have no business to be?"

She confronted the small truculent form of Señor Antonio, the Genoese seaman who had been captain of the *Santa Anna* before Ramegas came aboard. He stood with his legs apart, and his left hand bearing down the sword-hilt, so that its blade stuck upwards jauntily at his back. Angelica had seen him once or more at her uncle's board, enough to know who he was, but they had not exchanged twenty words. He was not likely to know her in such a light as that in which she stood now, making a pool of water upon the deck.

"I am—I have swum here from the *Flying Hawk*. I must see Señor Ramegas at once."

"You must be content to see me. Why did they throw you out from the *Flying Hawk*?"

"I was not thrown. I came to bring news of weight."

"Well, you are small enough. You must tell me more."

Antonio thought it an improbable tale. He supposed that he saw one who had been cast out to drown for sufficient cause, and who would now save his life, if he could, on another deck. He expected to hear lies. But he saw that, if the tale were true, it was a bold thing to have done, and he had a belief that most of the world's valour is in the hearts of its smaller men. The slimness of the dripping form that had climbed over his rail caused him to show more patience then he would have given to one of a larger bulk. So he said: "You are small enough. You must tell me more."

"Captain Antonio, it is no time for delay of words, and I am too cold to stand longer here. The *Flying Hawk* is in the hands of the Moors."

He had expected a perjured tale, but not such a wild statement as that. Yet he had lived a life which had taught him to be quickly prepared for most improbable things.

"You will be hanged," he said, "if you lie. Will you say it twice?"

Angelica laughed, which she had not done in the last two days, though she shivered as she stood in the cold of the night-wind. She had been warned of evils enough since she left her home, including impaling, which is not a death to prefer; but to be threatened with hanging on the *Santa Anna* was an addition she had not foreseen.

"I will say it till you are tired. But I shall not be hanged on my uncle's ship, be it false or true. Señor Ramegas will explain that. We lose time standing here."

Antonio might strut through life with his head back and his plumed hat on

the left side, but he was shrewd and discreet, or he would not have stood where he then did.

"You have been warned enough," he said. "Follow me."

They crossed a deck which was similar to that of the *Flying Hawk*, but of twice the width, and they descended to a passage which had the doors of cabins on either side. Antonio tapped upon one, calling his own name, and the voice of Ramegas invited him to come in. Angelica, hearing it, felt that she had come at last to a safe place. She could have cried on his neck.

Ramegas was awake and dressed, though it was night, and was not his watch. He was one who had always been sparing of sleep.

He thought of himself as a man of action rather than business affairs, and now he was gravely glad that a time had come when he might prove to the world that he was no less than his secret dream; yet the custom of stewardship was still his, and he sat at a table which was strewn with records and bills of accounts from which he made schedules of the men and stores that were under his charge, and the extent of the succour which he was bringing to Malta in Don Manuel's name.

His eyes passed Captain Antonio to rest on the slim, drenched form, in Francisco's clothes, that came in behind. She knew that she was recognized at the first glance, and would have come quickly forward, but he raised his hand, waving her back. He had hardly allowed the instant of first surprise to change the settled gravity of his eyes.

"Señor," Captain Antonio began, "here is one who comes up from the sea with a tale that the Moors have captured the *Flying Hawk*. I thought——"

"You have done well. But you should hold your watch till the truth be known. I will deal with this."

Captain Antonio showed his discretion again. Without further words he went back to the deck, where his duty lay. He looked at the *Flying Hawk*, running before the wind with its topsail reefed so that its consorts might not be left in the rear. It was within range of the heavier guns that the *Santa Martha* carried on her forward decks, though beyond gunshot of the *Santa Anna*, which was further away. Its oars were not out, and it was evident that it was making no effort to draw apart, which its greater speed would have made it easy to do. It could not hope to fight the two great galleys if the truth should be shown when the morning came. It was absurd to suppose that Moors would have captured it and make no attempt to part company from the heavier vessels. Besides, how could that have occurred unobserved? From where could they have come? Captain Antonio had no difficulty in concluding that the tale had been a bold lie to secure audience with Señor Ramegas, for whom he recognized that it had been well chosen, and had succeeded with speed. His conceit was chafed that he should have been the subject of such a trick, but he

had seen the instant of recognition in Ramegas' eyes. He felt that he had done well to conduct Angelica below without more opposition than he had shown. And whatever mystery there might be, he felt it was one that he would soon know.

He looked again at the *Flying Hawk*, and then at a long brass culverin, swivel-mounted, upon the poop, that was so placed on that topmost deck that it could be swung round for forward fire with no more than a slight luff of the ship, even though the mark should be straight ahead. He gave an order that the gunner should be called to his place.

He gave order to trim a yard. There would be nothing to rouse suspicion in that. Why should they be behind the *Santa Martha*, as they were now?

Beyond that, he waited till Señor Ramegas should come on deck. If the tale were true, he felt that that time would not be greatly deferred.

When he had left the cabin below, Ramegas said: "You had better tell me from where you came."

"I swam from the *Flying Hawk*. You will give me clothes of some kind, and show me where I can change, unless you wish me to die. Then I will tell you all. But I tell you this first, for it may be that it should not wait. Rinaldo is not Rinaldo at all. He is Hassan, Dragut's son-in-law, of Tunis. The ship has a crew of Moors. There are no Christians there but those who pull at the oars."

"Is this sober truth, or no more than a girl's guess? The Maltese are a swarthy race."

"I saw the true Rinaldo cast into the sea, being yet alive. Do you think I have swum here, barely saving my life, which I thought to lose, to bring you a doubtful tale?"

"Yet I see not to what end——"

"That is what I am coming to say. It is why I am here now. The fleet of Algiers lies await, fifty miles off Iviza isle. It is to that trap you are being led."

As she said this, Ramegas had ceased to doubt that the tale was true. The fact that she had seen a man thrown overboard alive showed that it was more than the conceit of a frightened girl.

"I doubted that man," he said, "from the first. Yet I could not see what could be wrong, it being a Maltese boat, as was known by a score that I trusted well. But you must not stand thus. Come with me."

He led her to his own cabin, for there was no better place to which she could be taken at once on that crowded ship. He gave her a loose robe and some other garments of which she could make use till her own should be dried.

"How you came to be on that ship," he said, "can be told at a better time. But if this be true, as I do not doubt, you have done a great thing, at your life's risk. I praise the saints that you have come through, taking no harm."

He said no more beyond that, asking no further questions, not even how

Hassan came to be in control of the *Flying Hawk*, for his mind was on the main issue he had to face. It seemed that it was soon to be proved whether he were fit for the command he held.

He stood in thought for a moment beside the litter of papers and parchments that he had ceased to heed, and then went on deck. He had decided that the tale he had heard was true, and that he must act on that presumption without weakness or doubt, though he saw that, if he should make mistake, he would be ruined indeed. But he had known Angelica for eight years, and he did not think her to be one who would speak or act as she had on no more than a doubtful guess.

He said to Antonio: "Have you checked our course? How far do we lie from Iviza now?"

Captain Antonio might have been more careful had the course not been set by the *Flying Hawk*. He had been content to keep that vessel in sight during his watch, and had felt that was as far as his duty lay. But there was no need to say that. He had sailed those seas so long that it was said that he could tell where he might be by the very scent of the air.

"We should be twenty leagues south," he said, "or it may be more, but not much."

"Then we are near trapped. The *Flying Hawk* is in the hands of the Moors, as it has been from when it sailed into Aldea Bella bay. Hassan, Dragut's son, has the command, so it is said. He is leading us to where the Algiers fleet lies await."

Antonio stood with his legs well apart. He threw up his head, and his jaw set, so that he looked pleased, in a grim way.

"Then you would say it is time to run. Shall we put about, with no foe in sight, or what will you have us do?"

He looked up at the quiet gravity of the man who held a command which he would have been glad to have, thinking that he would soon know of what sort he would prove to be.

Ramegas looked down at him. "We must sink him first, if we cannot lay him aboard, unless he show heels that we cannot catch."

"That is how I would have it be. Shall we creep near, and challenge him when our guns are trained?"

"We will draw as near as we may, but we will not challenge a treasoned foe. We will send a broadside among her masts, which may be useful to hold her here while we have further to say. But we may find she is too wary to let us close."

Ramegas turned to the helmsman as he said this. He said: "Bring her up to the wind. I would have you cross the track of the *Santa Martha*, and close in on the weather side." He turned to Captain Antonio again. "Have the guns

manned, and the slaves roused, and ready to row, but show no more lights than you cannot spare. I would have waited the dawn, but the time is short. And they may take alarm if they guess we had warning brought."

Antonio saw that he was second to one who could plan in a cool and resolute mind. For as they brought the *Santa Anna* across her consort's stern, the stir and movement of lights, which they could not entirely avoid as their preparations were made, would be hidden from any eyes that might watch from the *Flying Hawk*. He issued such orders as waked the ship to a sudden life, and though the bustle that followed thereon might be concealed from the *Flying Hawk*, it was plain enough to the nearer eyes of those on the *Santa Martha's* deck. They were soon about to know what it might mean, and to receive the letter an arrow brought as the *Santa Anna* crossed their stern, at a distance of no more than a galley's length; after which she fell off from the wind again, sailing at their side, but somewhat faster than they, for there had been further spreading of sail while they had come up astern.

Francisco read a note that was brief and clear:

"The *Flying Hawk* is in the hands of the Moors. She leads us to where the Algiers fleet lies await. We must take a more southern course, but will sink her first, if she do not fly. Support me when you have read this, with all the speed that you can, and have your guns manned. I need not tell you beyond that.

"RAMEGAS."

He read this by the lantern's light, and he looked again at the *Santa Anna*, which was shaking out all the sail she had; and as he looked he saw her oars come over the side. It was a strange thing to learn in that sudden way, but he did not doubt its truth, nor fail to see that every second was of a golden weight, now that Ramegas' ship had made it clear what she would do.

The *Santa Martha* waked to life at a trumpet's sound. Her oars came overside. Lights shone, and men shouted and ran at the battle-summons that they had been trained to know. Francisco did not mean that his first fight should find him far in the rear.

He looked at the *Flying Hawk*, and saw that her oars also were out, and at the same moment the flashes of sudden light were a tempest along her side. The thunder of half her guns sounded across the sea. She had not waited to be attacked, but had been the first to fire, even as she gathered speed for her flight.

The next moment the *Santa Anna*, showing no sign of hurt from the shot that had battered about her bows, luffed somewhat, and a blaze of light leaped out from her guns. As the *Flying Hawk* lit the darkness again with backward flashes of light from decks that were somewhat more distant now, the *Santa*

Anna replied with all the weight of her port-side guns. But even as her broadside deafened the night, her foremast, which had been struck by a shot from the first discharge of the *Flying Hawk*, and had now taken the strain as the bow came up into the wind for the port guns to bear, gave a loud crack, and leaned, for a long moment, with all its spread of canvas and weight of cordage and spars, before it snapped off, at a height of about six feet from the deck, and fell outward and somewhat astern, cumbering the main shrouds and causing the port-side oars to be drawn inward in haste.

It was plain that the *Santa Anna* would make no speed, nor could she be handled with ease, till she had broken clear from the wreckage which dragged like a sea-anchor along her side.

Hassan, watching from a deck where a man died at his feet, joyous of heart as he would ever be when a battle came, though with some cause for wrath both at his own folly and fate's caprice, had an audacious thought that he would put about and use his forward guns at a shortened range on a wreckage which, in the dim light of the stars, he may have thought to be somewhat worse than it was. Even to board might not have been beyond his attempt, for, though his force might have been little better than one to three, he had a high belief in the fighting quality of the pirate crew, which was of the pick of his father's fleet; and the evidence of that fallen mast showed that he had gunners who did not fail.

But the thought died as it rose, his foes being not one, but two. For as the *Santa Anna* lost speed, her consort came up on her starboard side. She came past with a spread of all the sail that she had to a freshening wind. The whips cracked over the rowers' backs. The oars moved rhythmically and fast. As they glided by, Francisco leaned over the rail, and called to know what the damage was. Ramegas answered with words that the wind carried away. Antonio, better practised in the science of shouting at sea, could be partly heard. Between the bursting din of the guns which were now firing each for itself, as their crews could reload and train them again, his voice came clearly enough, though only to a fragment of what he said: "Hold them in play, if you can, till we get it clear."

The *Santa Martha*, straining to equal the speed of the *Flying Hawk*, put her helm down till she had interposed her own bulk between the crippled ship and her smaller, but perhaps deadlier, foe. For the first time her guns entered the fight, making the night louder than before and adding to the heavy drifts of sulphurous smoke which increased its gloom. The gun-flashes stabbed into a darkness they could not lift.

Francisco saw that the *Flying Hawk* was drawing further away. He had a ruthless thought which showed him true to the stern creed of those who had striven for so many inconclusive centuries for the control of the central sea of

the civilized world.

It was the traditional custom of both sides to avoid attack on the galley-slaves, being so largely recruited from those of their own blood. But now Francisco saw that the *Flying Hawk* was drawing surely away. If he luffed, to give her the weight of more than his forward guns, it would be for the last time, unless that broadside could check her speed. He had been taught that no price for victory was too high: no excuse for failure was good enough, if a possibility had been left untried. He ordered that every gun should be trained on the starboard oars of the *Flying Hawk.*

They were to be directed upon the oars, not the men; but the range was already long, the gunnery of that time not exact, and some of the gunners were unused to the pieces they had to work, for Don Manuel's galleys were new ships, which had not been in action before. Some of the shots went wide, but enough found their mark to shatter the starboard oars, and to scatter death among rowers who were also struck by the kicking fragments of the smashed oars that they were pulling as the broadside came.

For a moment Francisco thought that the fight was won. The *Flying Hawk* floundered upon the sea, like a duck with a broken leg. Being lighter, and the swifter sailer, she still kept ahead, but the distance shortened as the chase left the *Santa Anna* behind. Had not the wind increased at this time to half a gale, it is likely that Captain Hassan would have fought his last fight, or had a second spell of slavery which might have been even worse than that from which he had been delivered so hardly before. As it was, the *Santa Martha* soon found that the *Flying Hawk* was beyond the reach of her guns. But having struggled to that distance away, it seemed that she could do no more. She changed her course more than once, as though she would dodge pursuit in the light of a growing dawn. She spat backwards with bursts of fire that seemed no more than a demonstration of futile rage, the shots falling short, though not much.

But Captain Hassan was not one to waste powder with no better purpose than that. He fired that the sound might be carried on the wind to the ears of a fleet which should not be far distant now. He had changed the course of his flight point by point to the north with the same object, until the broadening dawn showed the long line of Formentera upon the northern horizon.

Francisco saw it as well. He looked back to see the *Santa Anna* far to the south. She had cleared her deck, and was sailing freely again, steering an easterly course. Urgently, she signalled for his return.

Reluctantly he gave the order which he should have done half an hour before, shaping his yards for a south-easterly course, and letting the chase go; and, as he did so, the yards of the *Flying Hawk* came round to the same point and she followed upon his track.

He had some cause to doubt the wisdom of his pursuit when he saw that,

and still more when he saw, where the dawn-light curved to the north, making a horizon of lemon sky, the dark specks that were the Algerian fleet coming out from Formentera's easterly point, behind which they may have been at anchor during the night.

CHAPTER IX

MALTA stirred like a threatened hive.

The Knights of St. John had been preparing for this hour by excavation of solid rock, by battery and barricade, ever since Charles V had given them the islands, forty years before. Every year, as Christian power had declined and that of Islam advanced in Eastern Europe by land and sea, it had become a darker and more imminent menace; and the same causes that had brought it near had decreased their power to hold it longer at bay. Christians had ceased to think of the tomb of Christ, or of the breaking of infidel power, being at issue among themselves. Those who had adventurous rather than pious minds turned their eyes to the west, to the wealth and empire of a new world which had the lure of the hardly-known.

When Charles V gave the Maltese islands to the homeless Knights of St. John he asked no more rent than a yearly falcon to be paid to the Sicilian power. The terms seemed easy enough. Being assured that the ancient laws of the islands would be sustained, the people of Malta had accepted the arrangement with short demur. It may have seemed that the Knights received a princely gift, at no price.

But Charles knew what he did, and the Knights of Malta were well aware. Should a wolf-hound give thanks that he is kennelled where he can get his fangs to the throat of the prowler around the flock?

The Knights of Malta were recruited from the most noble blood of every nation throughout the west. They drew revenues from all lands. And now that Palestine had been lost, and their Jerusalem hospitals gone, their sole object was to make war on the Turks. Charles did no more than make an eyrie for hawks, from which they would vex his foes. The form of the yearly rent may be taken as a symbol of what he did.

But meanwhile, as the years passed and the power of Islam increased, the number of the Knights became less and their revenues shrank. An English king, taking the lands of his own Church, was not likely to leave theirs.

It had been intended to build a rampart of stone such as would have made an outer wall of defence of an almost impregnable kind, but this had been abandoned after a calculation of its cost had shown that it could not have been completed without larger funds than the Order could hope to raise.

Of late years there had been few new knights from the nobles of the more Protestant lands. In five hundred names there is but one—that of the Grand

Master's secretary, Sir Oliver Starkey—which has an English sound. Yet the knights had been strongly established in England once, and a Grand Master had come from that land.

And of the knights who were now arriving from all parts of Europe at the call of this final need, many, like Don Manuel, were elderly men. The Grand Master himself, John la Valette (as he would shorten his name) was near the end of his life. He was a hard-faced, bearded man, with a long straight nose, upright and sturdy enough, and still able to use a sword, though becoming slightly corpulent under his belt. He ruled all in a just but merciless way, trusting more to fear than to love.

It was said by all that he was the right man for the crisis that now came. He was a hawk that would be hard to dislodge from the eyrie where he had chosen to dwell.

Now he toiled with servants and slaves that the fort of St. Elmo might be made strong before the Turks should arrive. He was not deterred by the stiffness that comes with years, nor by the dignity of the great office he held. He put his shoulder beneath a beam.

Seeing him do that, his knights could not refuse to toil in the same way. Every day that the Turks delayed to arrive, the defences grew. Every day brought fresh succour of knights who came at their Order's call, and of volunteers who would strike a blow for the Christian cause, or sought the excitement of war. They came daily in fishing vessels, or half-decked boats that made the run from Messina when the seas were kind, and at times in larger galleys. The Sicilian vessels came in a watchful fear, ready to turn and bolt at the first horizon sight of the coming Turk. Having landed their cargoes, they were in a great haste to be gone.

The Grand Master had asked aid from Sicily, both of stores and men, as he had a right to do in return for that falcon he yearly paid, for to attack Malta was to affront Sicily, and Spain beyond that.

The Viceroy of Sicily replied with words of goodwill. He had asked instructions of his master, Philip of Spain, without which he was powerless to move. Doubtless these instructions would accord with the dignity of the Spanish crown, and the insolent unbelievers would be chastised.

Actually, the Viceroy was unsure what Philip would say, except that there would be no lack of fair and promising words, which he would seldom stint; and he was in even more doubt as to what he would wish him to do. For the time, he did nothing at all, beyond writing long reports to Madrid, which he knew that Philip would wish to have. He knew that they would be fully read and very carefully filed away.

So it was, when April changed into May, and the watchman upon St. Elmo's wall saw that two great galleys came from the west. They came fast,

with a fair wind in their sails, and their oars out, but as they drew near, and signalled that they would have a pilot to guide them in, it could be seen that they had been battered, either by storm or war. Their lower sails were tattered and holed, and the foremast of the one had been broken off within a few feet of the deck. Their masthead flags were the Maltese Cross and the haughty symbol of Spain.

They came from a running, day-long fight with the swifter vessels of the Algiers fleet, which had been smaller than they, but had vexed them much, as dogs may trouble a bear. They were glad to be nearing port, for they had taken many shots where the water washes the hull, such as were not easy to plug, and the pumps of the *Santa Martha* were clanking upon the deck.

Angelica stood on the *Santa Anna's* poop in her boy's clothes, and her name was Garcio still; for Ramegas said: "You have done that in which I will have no part, either to hinder or aid. You go now where no women are, and where none should be. And you do this, being pledged, as you know, to the Convent of Holy Cross. It is for Don Manuel to resolve, and I must leave it to him. You have saved his ships at a great peril of life, and he must be grateful for that. But I cannot even guess what he will say.

"I must tell the Grand Master of whom you are, and the whole tale, for I owe my duty to him. Also, if I were silent, and it should be otherwise probed, it might be read in a worse way. But, beyond that, you will be Don Garcio still, having chosen your name, and there being no clothes here of a woman's kind that you could wear if you would.

"Even Francisco I shall not tell. You can do that or not, when you will meet him after you land, but he will hear nothing from me."

Angelica heard this and was well-content. She could speak to whom she chose, and at her own time. Ramegas could not prevent this, if he would. While he would know who she was (and the Grand Master as well) she did not doubt she would walk secure. And, so far, she had had her will, for the Convent of Holy Cross was distant a thousand miles, and she was coming to Malta now.

The harbour which they approached, which was to be called Valletta in later years, was one of the best in the world as far as it was then known. It was deep and large and sheltered from every wind, and it was divided internally in a very curious way. There were, indeed, two harbours, divided by a tongue of land, having the entrances on either side of its point. The entrances were narrow and the harbours widened within. The eastern harbour was in some ways the better, and it was that which the Knights used. But they had built a star-shaped fort, which they had named St. Elmo, on the point of land which separated the two, and while that was held, the western harbour would be useless to any foe. Behind it, the tongue of land rose in a hill of rock that was

solid and bare.

It was at the construction of a ravelin to this fort on its western side that the defenders toiled against time, and the Grand Master was overseeing the work. So the pilot said when Ramegas asked where he could be most quickly found.

Learning that, Ramegas decided that he would take a boat, and go straight to the Grand Master to make report, not waiting until the galleys were docked, to which others could give atttention as well as he.

He hailed Francisco to tell him what he intended to do, and saying that he and Captain Antonio would be left in charge of the ships.

He decided to take Angelica with him, for he thought it best that she should be near himself till her status should be agreed, and it was partly of her that he had to make his report.

So the *Santa Anna* lay-to as they came to the harbour mouth, and dropped a boat which pulled for St. Elmo's beach, and the two galleys went on, the *Santa Anna* following in the wake of Francisco's ship.

They passed St. Elmo on their right, with a shore beyond the fort that was straight and steep; but the harbour widened upon the left, where two spurs of land ran out, long and wide, with a deep basin of water between.

At the end of the first of these spurs the castle of St. Angelo stood, where the Order of the Knights of Malta had centred its power. If that should fall, there would be nothing left it would be worth while to save; and while it stood, the Turks could not say that their purpose was won. Behind the castle at the broadening bend of the spur, was the old town known as the Bourg.

The further spur of land on the other side of the basin had been fortified also and had been named the Sanglea, its ridge being crowned by St. Michael's fort, and behind it a new town called Bermola had grown.

All the shipping was now docked or anchored within the basin between these spurs, and since there had been rumour that the Turks would come, the entrance had been secured with an iron chain of a monstrous size. The two ends, at St. Angelo and Sanglea, were secured on platforms of rock, and the chain could be lowered at will for the ships to go out or in.

It was easy to see that, while St. Elmo was held, both harbours would be closed to the attacking fleet; but if it should fall, though they would have gained access to both, and would have made the western one entirely their own, yet the Knights might do well enough, providing that they could hold the two tongues of land, St. Angelo and Sanglea, with the harbour-basin that lay between, and the two little towns behind.

So in the last days, besides setting up the great chain at the harbour-mouth, they had cut deeper the trenches around the Bourg on the landward side, which had not been easy to do, for the whole island was solid rock, and they had added a terreplein to the ramparts on the further side of Sanglea, and had

established a three-gun battery outside St. Angelo, down at the water's edge, the use of which would be seen at a later date.

La Valette had not been sparing of toil, and he would not be sparing of blood when the time came. He meant that, while its Knights lived, the flag of Malta should fly, and that, if they must go to God with a tale of failure to tell, they should not fear the condemnation of those who fight the battle of life and faith in a lukewarm way.

And so, having made St. Angelo as safe as he could, he turned to St. Elmo next, seeking to build it so strong that the Turks would break their teeth on that at which they might make the first bite.

CHAPTER X

THE galleys went on to find their safety behind the harbour boom, and Ramegas landed on St. Elmo's shore with Angelica at his side.

He did not have to seek the Grand Master, who had seen his approach, and met him upon the beach. He wore a wide-plumed hat, and a doublet and hose of indigo velvet, dark and rich, and finely cut, but now soiled, and having been torn in places and since stitched, showing the uses to which it had been put in the last days, yet it did not seem that he had been labouring much on this, for his ruff was white and clean, as was the lace at his wrists. But he was not one of those who need care for clothes, having his dignity in himself.

He listened while Ramegas said who he was, and explained that Don Manuel would follow after he had pleaded the Order's cause at the Court of Spain.

La Valette said no more than: "He may be kept there." Few men would ever hear what he thought of Philip of Spain. So far, he had got eight hundred Spanish soldiers, for which he owed Philip little thanks, for they had been stationed in Sicily at the Spanish charge, and transferred to him on condition that the Order should find them pay, with some aid that the Pope gave. Philip, on his parsimonious side, would find means of advantaging his purse, even in a war that was truly his.

But La Valette cared nothing for the character of Philip of Spain, be it bad or good. He had to get what he could (if anything) from him for Malta's aid, and he knew that he would not improve that chance by speaking contempt aloud, which might be repeated by one of Philip's ten thousand spies. He went on:

"They look to be the best ships that we have. It will be a good aid. From their look I should say you have fallen in with the Algiers fleet. But where is the *Flying Hawk*? I trust she has not been lost."

Angelica, looking at the man with a woman's eyes, felt that it might go ill if her fate were to be decided by him. She felt that he could be ruthless, even to the taking of life, and put it out of his mind in a second's time. He was not one whom a woman could wheedle or coax, though she were fairer than the Mother of God. Yet she supposed that he would be just in an austere way.

In fact, he had but one thought. She had seen that a faint warmth, like a winter sunlight, had come into his voice as he said: "It will be a good aid."

Ramegas told the whole tale, with a brevity that the Grand Master

approved. He added: “We have little of which to boast, yet we have sunk one of their lighter craft, which became too bold, and came under the full weight of our guns, so that the *Santa Martha* was able to ram it, after its rudder was shot away. And there are others that must run to Tripoli or Algiers to refit before they can vex us here.”

“You have done well to break that trap. How were you first warned?”

“It is that to which I must come. It is that we owe to Don Garcio here, as she is called——”

La Valette waked at the name. It was like to that of the Viceroy of Sicily, Garcio of Toledo, who had promised to send his son to Malta, that he might aid in its defence and gain a knowledge of war. It was a gesture of support, having a value beyond that of a single sword. The Grand Master looked keenly at Angelica, who showed no resemblance to the strongly marked and swarthy features of the Castilian knight, and being puzzled by what he saw, he said nothing. He returned his attention to Ramegas, from whom he heard a tale of a different kind. He said to him, not looking at Angelica again:

“You have done well. She being Don Manuel’s niece, the matter is domestic to him. He is sufficient to discipline his own house. Until he come, so that she bring no disorder within our walls, she may keep the name and part which she had chosen to bear. Only Oliver must not be misled. I will have true records, or none. Beyond him, none will know, unless you speak of yourselves. It is to Sir Oliver Starkey you should report. He is at St. Angelo now. He would be easy to find, but I will send one with you who will be known at the gate, where the guard are watchful for spies.”

He turned to an attendant to whom, being a Piedmontese, he spoke in the Italian tongue, and went back to the scarp of the demi-lune, which he meant to have completed before the Turkish sails should be sighted by those who watched on St. Angelo’s tower.

Señor Ramegas took boat again, and they rowed round the head of St. Elmo’s point (for it was on the western side, overlooking the Marsa Muscetto, as the western harbour was named, that the new ravelin was being built, so that its entrance might be more surely closed to the Turkish ships) and came into the harbour that was filled with shipping, and gave approach to castle and town, and so landed beneath St. Angelo’s walls.

St. Elmo was no more than a fort, or place of gun-platforms and ramparts of stone, where such shelter as its garrison had was contrived rather to save their heads from a dropping shot than to comfort their resting hours. But St. Angelo was a high-walled castle, containing noble chambers which had been cut from the solid rock, appointed as was fitting to the palace of the Grand Master of one of the noblest Orders that the world contained.

Men of many races and diverse tongues might be met at that day in Rome

or Venice, in Paris or Cologne, but there was no such variety to be seen in the world's breadth as passed each other on St. Angelo's stairs, or crowded the audience-hall to which the Señors Ramegas and Garcio were now led; for Knights of the Order from all parts of the Christian world had been gathered here by the urgent call that the Grand Master had sent out, some of whom had seen little of Malta and less of each other before they came. The tongues of Provence and Germany, of Italy and Castile, contended with the more frequent Latin, which the most part of the knights could speak, though their diverse accents made it more easy to use than to understand.

But different as they might be in costume, and colour, and tongue, they were alike in the faith they held and the purpose for which they came: alike in that they were all about to be tested in the bitter ordeal of one of the most merciless struggles of East and West that the world had seen, and that the whole world would now pause to watch; as though the fate of Islam and Christianity, the future of three continents, were brought to final decision in that island arena situated so centrally in their midst.

And though they came thus to a test which they would not all equally endure, so that there would be many changes of place and repute in the coming days, and though they walked under a shadow of death from which few would escape to the life of another year, it could be observed that there was among them a confident and very resolute spirit, which might prove itself to be not less than equal to that which it came to meet. It was in such a mood that their predecessors had gathered for the defence of Rhodes forty years before; and though they had failed at last, they had been able to withdraw with safety and all the honours of war, and with the valour of their Order become a boast through the breadth of Europe for what they did. They were resolved that the record of Malta should not be less, and their hope was to make it more.

"You may wait, if you will," the usher said, with the curtness of a worried man who had much to endure. "You can observe how it is. Sir Oliver cannot see all. There are these who are before you."

Señor Ramegas answered with a cold pride, the humility which he kept for Don Manuel and the Grand Master being about all that he had: "If you will inform Sir Oliver Starkey that I am here, I do not see that you have a duty beyond that, nor that you need tender opinion as to whom he will see, nor of what I shall think fitting to do if I should be long delayed in this hall."

The usher, who was born in Auvergne, went without further words, though with some inward curses at Spanish pride, to announce his presence to the Grand Master's secretary, though he did not think it necessary to communicate the result on his return.

Señor Ramegas stood impassive for five inwardly impatient minutes, which gave his companion time to observe the rich paintings on ceiling and

walls, and all the luxurious dignity of the hall of waiting, as well as the various groups of its human occupants, before the heavy curtain at the head of the hall was lifted somewhat aside, and a slender man, approaching to middle age, and being plainly but very neatly dressed, stood for a moment glancing over the hall with eyes that observed all, but did not rest on any whom he was not anxious to see.

After a second's pause he came straight to where Ramegas and Angelica stood, moving with a light step, which was quick yet without appearance of haste.

"Señor Ramegas," he said, "as I presume? Malta greets you with thanks for yourself and the aid you bring. I would talk with you at more leisure than some will need. Will you delay, of your courtesy, while I deal with those whose business may be more quickly disposed? It will be but a short while."

He spoke in Spanish, and even with an Andalusian idiom which Ramegas had not expected to hear; for he could talk, as he could correspond, in any language of Europe, and in some that were further away, though he did most in Latin, as was the diplomatic use of that time, in which tongue he had grown even accustomed to think. He spoke quietly, as one who was dealing with ease with whatever work he might have to do. He went back, having placated a man who would have become vexed, and in a short further time the usher bowed with somewhat more respect than before, to say that Sir Oliver was at leisure and would be pleased to see Señor Ramegas, if he would follow the way he led.

Sir Oliver Starkey was at this time of a most high repute throughout the western world, for a learning which could be equalled by few, whether in ancient and modern tongues, or in the sciences of the day. He had held a Commandery of the Order in England till the English king (Henry VIII, now dead) had confiscated it for the Crown's use, and he had come to Malta to take an appointment which scholarship and ability equally fitted him to hold.

He controlled the wide correspondence of an Order which held property in every country in Europe, and had envoys at every Catholic court. In all its affairs outside Malta itself, La Valette had given him an absolute trust and an almost absolute power.

Now he gathered the scattered strength of the Order, both in money and men, and the stores of munitions and food which would be needed for the coming siege.

He worked now, as his custom was, in a room which was narrow and long, being the library of the Order, and having shelves along its one side loaded from floor to ceiling with books that were mainly of theological or historical kinds, with classics in ancient tongues, and some on fortifications, and the art of war both by sea and land. On the other side was a row of windows, narrow

and high, that gave a wide view of hills and harbour and of the ocean beyond.

Sir Oliver sat at a wide table which was drawn from wall to window across the narrowness of this room. It was finely carved in dark oak, and its top was inlaid with crimson leather, in which were upholstered also the chairs, ample and soft, of the outer side, in which visitors of consideration were invited to sit.

Behind him, four scribes worked with diligence, on separate tables that were piled with manuscripts and letters and bound books of account, but Sir Oliver's own table was clear.

Sir Oliver rose as his visitors entered, and extended a hand to Señor Ramegas with a formal courtesy, which he had not previously used, and as though he had not seen him before.

He looked at Angelica, as expecting naturally that she would be presented to him, which Ramegas made no motion to do. Ramegas looked at the scribes, who continued their work without appearing to observe those who entered, and said:

"Most of that of which we shall have to speak will be open to all who are in your trust, but there will be one matter which should be private to us alone."

Sir Oliver looked at Angelica again, as though he connected her with this request in an agile mind. She had a feeling that he saw through her disguise, and yet without surprise, and in a way which she could not resent.

"If you will be seated," he said, "you can speak with all privacy here, if you use no Latin; and, beyond that, you should avoid the German and Roumanian tongues."

"I am unlikely," Ramegas replied, "to use those that I do not know, and Latin I will be careful to shun.

"I come to give you account of that which I have brought in Don Manuel's name, and would know first how much you will wish to learn, for I would not talk beyond that which you are willing to hear."

"I would hear all, if I may. I am told that your galleys have come showing the scars of a fight you have had with the Algiers fleet, and that the *Flying Hawk* is a lost ship, which I was sorry to hear.

"Before the close of the day, I will thank your care, if you can let me have tale of the men you have, of whatever rank or degree, with a separate schedule of slaves, and also a record of all stores you have brought to our aid.

"For I have two galleys preparing now, which should sail for Palermo to-morrow, at prime of day, and which I hope to see here returned before the Turks will arrive, and bringing good cargoes of things which we still need; and I may alter the requisition I make when I have seen the succour you have been able to bring."

Sir Oliver did not say that the galleys would have sailed ten days before that, had he not lacked credit or gold sufficient to purchase more than he had

already bought, either of powder or food; but he had now heard from the ambassador of the Order at the Papal Court, that Pope Pius IV had given 10,000 crowns as a donation to meet their need, on which he could draw at once, it being in the hands of goldsmiths in Rome; and when he had read that dispatch, he had not let an hour pass before the galleys were warned to be ready to put to sea.

Señor Ramegas replied that there were documents already prepared giving all such detail, which could be in Sir John's hands as soon as he should return to his ship, and could send them up. On his side, he would be glad to know whether, or to what extent, his men must remain aboard, where they were too crowded for comfort or health, as Sir John would know.

Sir Oliver was prepared for that question, and had disposition already made. Some could be lodged at once in the town. Others would have accommodation found with little further delay. It was likely, when the siege would commence, that the galleys would be emptied of men, they not being of any avail against such a fleet as the Turks would be sure to bring. There were, in fact, only five that belonged to the Order, now that the *Flying Hawk* had been lost, so that there would be seven in all, with a flotilla of smaller vessels, which would lie securely behind the great chain, and beneath the protection of the castle guns, their crews being employed ashore.

For Señor Ramegas, when he could leave his ship, and for Don Manuel's nephew, there would be such lodging found as their position required, allowance being made for the crowded state both of castle and town.

After Sir Oliver had said this he looked at Angelica, and added: "But there was more, as I understood, that you had to say, there being nothing private in this for any who are of our part."

Being reminded thus of matters from which the conversation had turned aside, Señor Ramegas narrated the full circumstances of the voyage, including the escapade of Don Manuel's niece, and the part she had afterwards played in bringing warning of the peril into which they were being led.

As this narrative proceeded, Sir Oliver listened with an impassive face, but with an attention that missed no word. It had not gone far before he reached for a quill-pen, and began to make occasional notes, but of a brevity which did not delay what was being said.

When he heard how Angelica had swum from ship to ship in the night, and had climbed the stern of the *Santa Anna*, he spoke for the first time:

"It was bravely done. Malta owes the Señorita her thanks for that deed."

He looked at Angelica in a way at which she felt pleasure and a new pride. For the first time since she had left her home, she saw kindness in a man's eyes when they were turned to herself. But her pleasure had deeper sources than that, for it had been a glance which respected her in a new way.

She had lived a secure, protected life, destined to one of its permanent backwaters, which she was to have entered in the leisured manner which was characteristic of the whole pattern by which she would live and die. She had been surrounded by formidable powers, but, if she left them unchallenged, their terrors were not for her. Such thunders as she might hear would be distant and overhead.

Don Manuel's regard for her was genuine, and may have been deeper than he was aware, but she was to him no other than a pretty affectionate toy, who should accept without criticism or protest his dispositions on her behalf.

She might not doubt that Ramegas also was fond of her in his own way, but she was primarily his master's ward. His duty was to Don Manuel, not to her; and the claims of duty controlled his mind. If he knew what Don Manuel would have him do on her account, her wishes would not turn the scale by a feather's weight.

She had had admiration from the false Rinaldo, and of a kind that she had liked, and which had also been new. "*The potent arms which you now bear.*" She remembered his look as he had said that. She sometimes thought of it in the night. In fact, she thought of him somewhat more than it may have been wisdom to do. For though he had trapped her, and threatened her liberty and honour—which she had no reason to think that he would have scrupled to sell for the best price he could get—yet she had walked into that trap, which had certainly not been set for her; and, be his intentions what they might, he had done her no wrong, and in the end she had trumped his trick. She could afford to look at all that in a generous mood.

Yet his admiration had been of a different quality from that of Sir Oliver. Rather than herself, it had admired the womanhood that was hers; and her instinct told her that such admiration, pleasant though it might be, was consistent with an oriental contempt even of that womanhood to which the roses of its homage were lightly flung.

But Sir Oliver had looked at her with the eyes of a friend.

He turned to Ramegas to ask: "You say the Grand Master has ordered that she shall keep this pretence, which has served its turn?"

"It was to be known to you, but no other, till Don Manuel's pleasure can be enquired."

Angelica did not think that that was exactly what the Grand Master had said; and, whether it were or not, she felt that Sir Oliver did not approve; but, even if she were right about that, it was clear that La Valette's decision would not be questioned aloud by him.

"Unless," he said, "Don Manuel be soon here, the matter may be resolved in a way which cannot be changed at this time."

Angelica, with a somewhat fearful satisfaction, had had the same thought

in her mind ever since she had climbed the stern of the *Santa Anna*.

He went on: “We should be glad of all aid, whether of ladies or knights, which is offered by those who are of courage and a good will.” He asked her: “Have you any skill in the nursing of wounds?”

“I have been taught much,” she said, “after the manner practised among the Moors, but I have done little, not having been where there was need.”

“You may alter that, if you remain here. Can you write a fair hand?”

“I can write, though not well, in the Spanish style.”

“Señor Ramegas, if you will leave Don Garcio to my care, I will find lodging suitable and secure, which it might not be easy to do without assistance from me, the town being as it is, and this disguise having to be maintained for some days, if not more.”

Ramegas rose at that, taking it as an intimation that the interview was at an end. He said that he would be pleased to leave Angelica in Sir Oliver’s care. He went, feeling that he was relieved of a burden he had been sorry to have, and that all would now be done in the best manner till Don Manuel should come.

Sir Oliver looked at Angelica in a contemplative way when he had gone, which did not disturb her ease, for she felt that she had come at last to one who sought only to help.

“We are an Order,” he said, “as you know, to which no women belong. But there is no lack in the town.”

She did not entirely follow his thought. She said: “I see not why I should continue to wear this garb, which has served the use which it had.”

“Yet it has been so resolved. You could not have the lodging which I intend, were it to be known what you are.” He added: “You must have many needs. You could have brought little away when you passed from ship to ship as you did.” His mind considered the event again. “You did much for Malta, in truth. It should be recorded on our annals, to give you praise. Yet I know not. It might be that which you would not wish to be widely shown. It shall wait for this time.”

She observed that, as with her uncle and Ramegas, as with La Valette, it seemed natural to Sir Oliver to suppose that the interests of the Order supplied the dominant impulse from which heroic action would come. Even Francisco had shown something of that inspiration when he had received his command. Candour caused her to say: “Malta owes me less thanks than you are urgent to see. It was not for that cause that I took the great risk which I did. But I thought of my uncle’s ships, and of those I knew, who were being drawn to a trap that they did not heed. Also, I saved myself.”

She smiled as she said that, thinking that she had motive and troubles enough of her own, and could be excused that those of Malta had been out of

her mind. Their eyes met in a laughter of understanding which was common to both, so that they were better friends than before.

"That," he said, "may all be as you will; yet it was a brave deed, such as many would not have tried, whether of women or men. I should not have done so myself, as I suppose; or, if I had, I should surely have failed."

"You think it was more than it was, for I am practised to swim."

She had risen the while they talked, and as he looked at her he said: "You will need a sword."

She laughed again. "It is useless to me. I have learnt that."

"Well," he said, "I am not of much avail with one myself. Yet one you must have; for if your belt be empty, as it now is, it will draw eyes which should pass you by."

The four scribes had continued their work during this time, not lifting their eyes, nor regarding what might go on, which it was not their business to do. Now Sir Oliver spoke to one in his own tongue, who, after he had listened and replied two or three times, rose and left the apartment by a door at its farther end.

"There is a chamber," Sir Oliver said, when he had gone, "where you may find more than you would be likely to hope; but I will ask, of courtesy not of right, that you make no mention to any if it should appear that a woman may have used it before."

He gave no more explanation than that, and went on to ask: "Do you lack gold? For there must be things you will need, which can be bought in the town."

She said no, she was not lacking in coin.

"Then, if you will be guided by me, you will tell Olrig, on his return, if you can talk in the Latin tongue, or permit me to do so on your behalf, how you have swum from a corsair's ship and have nothing, even of change of linen, such as one of your rank must need, and instruct him to procure all, which he will be glad to do at my word."

As he spoke, Olrig returned, and having received these instructions in a tongue which was foreign to Angelica, and she having given him a sum of money which Sir Oliver advised, he was next instructed to conduct Señor Garcio to the chamber, the keys of which Sir Oliver had previously sent him to fetch.

A short corridor led to a winding stair of stone which, after several doors had been passed, ascended to one which Olrig opened with the two keys he bore.

Angelica, observing that the room had been double-locked, may be excused, after her experiences of the last few days, if she had a moment's thought that she was being led to nothing better than an altered form of

imprisonment, but her memory of Sir Oliver rebuked the doubt, the appearance of the interior of the chamber was reassuring, and any lingering apprehension ceased as Olrig laid the keys down for her own disposal and withdrew with a polite intimation, which she imperfectly understood (it being in the Latin tongue) that His Excellency desired that Señor Garcio should regard the contents of the chamber as being entirely at his own disposal.

Angelica looked round, and was puzzled but well-content. Her privacy was, at least, her own; for in addition to the keys which she now controlled, she observed that the door, itself of stout and ironbound oak, was furnished with two long and heavy bolts which could be dropped into sockets in the stone paving of the floor.

Apart from that, it was a woman's room, and one of a soft and luxurious kind, very different from the dignified simplicity of her own apartment in her uncle's castle. And it was not merely a room which was intended for feminine use, it was one which a woman had recently and (it seemed) abruptly left. Her most intimate possessions, even articles in daily use, were scattered about, as though they represented a recent toilet, nor was there any depth of dust upon them, such as would indicate that they had lain undisturbed for more than a few days at the most.

So, in fact, it had been. The Knights of St. John were a celibate religious order, and the upper chambers of the castle of St. Angelo were among the last places where a woman should have been expected to be. But the vows of celibacy, which were founded at least as much on the policy of protecting the property of the Order from private inheritance as monastic ideal, had been variously and sometimes loosely interpreted by the Commanders of the Order during succeeding centuries, and while the character of the Order had gradually changed from that of ministrants to sick and indigent pilgrims in Palestine to that of ruthless warriors who opposed their own lives as a bulwark of Christendom against the advance of the pagan power, yet it had kept itself comparatively, though not absolutely, free from the luxurious corruptions which had contributed, like an internal cancer, to the destruction of the Order of the Knights Templars, which had once been its rival in power and wealth and valour and equal in devotion to the Christian cause.

The present Grand Master, who had held office only since 1557, was known to be of a stern integrity in his interpretation of the Order's vows. But he had not been able to eradicate all the weaknesses of human nature, nor the results of the more tolerant methods of his predecessors, among the Knights he ruled. Inflexible in discipline in regard to all that came under his notice, there may still have been matters which he thought it inexpedient to go out of his way to see. There must have been many things that he did not know.

When the threat of Turkish invasion required that Malta should be

organized and stript for the stark business of war, there must have been many who scurried away, either from fear of the event itself, or of consequence to themselves which the disclosure of their presence would bring, as insects run from beneath a suddenly lifted stone.

There were women, more than a few, who had found residence in the town (and one, it appeared, some use of the apartment which had been allotted to Commander La Cerda), who had made hurried departures on their own volitions, or with the impetus of hints of humiliation, if not of actual chastisement, should they further delay.

What had occasioned the sudden vacation of the chamber which he had now allocated to Angelica's use, was best known to Sir Oliver, who, while he would have concealed nothing had he been asked by the Grand Master, had yet thought it beyond his duty, or an abstract wisdom, to divert La Valette from more important considerations with a tale which would at least have incensed him further against La Cerda, who had already incurred his disapprobation from a separate cause.

It seemed enough to Sir Oliver, amid a hundred superior urgencies, that he had secured that that chamber should be so abruptly vacated, and it was now by a very fortunate chance that he was able to allot it to such an occupant that its contents would seem natural, when (as he supposed) the secret of Don Garcio's sex would be honourably revealed. He may, amid the pressure of more important things, have found a moment to congratulate himself on the prudence that had kept it locked since its previous denizen had departed, and so avoided the wider scandal which would have followed its investigation.

Be that as it may, it was for Angelica a very fortunate chance. She found herself securely and comfortably lodged; and as Sir Oliver Starkey offered to utilize her services in such clerical work as she could undertake for himself in the moment's emergency, she had occupation which may have been more useful in diverting attention from herself than important in its assistance to him.

She was content, from day to day, to sit in Sir Oliver's room, using a copyist's pen, and observing the hundred persons and activities of which he was the controlling centre, and only shadowed by the doubt of what would happen when Don Manuel should arrive and learn how his wishes had been disregarded and his authority defied.

But the days passed, and Don Manuel did not come; and on the 18th of May, as she sat at her table in Sir Oliver's room, there came, from the castle-roof over her head, the deep boom of a single gun. It came again—and again. A moment later, a gun from St. Elmo's battery answered in the same way. Men listened, and lost a breath. It was the signal that the Turkish fleet had been sighted from St. Angelo's tower.

CHAPTER XI

ANGELICA heard the gun, the signal of fate and death, and the fear that she might be compelled to return to seek the seclusion of Holy Cross faded finally from her mind. Whether or not Don Manuel would succeed in joining his brethren before the investment would be complete, she supposed that he would not wish her to take the risks of leaving, even were a suitable escort available, now that the Turkish fleet had actually arrived. For good or evil, for joy or sorrow, it seemed that she would be there till the siege should end in a day of triumph, or in such a way that she could hope for no better fate than that of a Turkish slave.

Yet, for the next two days after the sound of that warning gun, it seemed that there was no change at all. The Turks did not appear at the harbour-mouth; the Knights toiled at the completion of their defences neither more nor less than they had done before. Angelica remembered the sense that she had had of being forgotten and pushed aside when the news had first been brought to Aldea Bella, and wondered if her position would be very different now.

In the last fortnight she had seen Juan Ramegas once, when he had called upon Sir Oliver, though he had not spoken to her. She had not seen Francisco at all. She knew that, though the great galleys in which they had come were now laid up and moored under the protection of the castle guns, he had been given command of one of the smaller and swifter Maltese galliots, similar to the *Flying Hawk*, which still put to sea, patrolling the Sicilian route by which supplies and recruits would continue to reach the island until the investment should be complete.

Even when she had ventured at times into the narrow, climbing, stone-paved streets of the town no one had spoken or looked at her with curious eyes. There was so much of strangeness in the far-gathered crowd that nothing was strange at all.

And on the afternoon after the cannon had sounded that threefold warning note, she sat copying a schedule which Sir Oliver Starkey had been altering from day to day as new recruits had come in, and which he had now put into final form, to remain as his careful record of the forces with which the Christian nations of Europe were content, after many weeks of warning, that the Knights of Malta should face the full weight of the Turkish power.

It was a schedule which concerned itself less with differences of race than of language, of which three were spoken in France and two in Spain at that

time. It began with a list of those of the Order itself, distinguishing between those who were “Knights of Justice”—that is, in their own right, having that rank, apart from the Order, in their own lands—and the serving-brothers, such as Ramegas, who were of a second rank. This is the list she wrote:

	KNIGHTS	ESQUIRES
Provence	61	15
Auvergne	25	14
France	57	24
Italy	164	5
Aragon	85	2
England	1	0
Germany	13	1
Castile	68	6
	474	67
		474
		541
Hired Spanish troops		800
Garrison troops of St. Angelo		90
Ditto of St. Elmo		60
Grand Master’s household and guard		150
Artillerymen		120
Crews of galleys still in commission		700
Volunteers from Sicily, Italy, Genoa, Piedmont and other countries		875
Total of Regular Troops		3336
Add Militia enrolled:		
From the Bourg	500	
” Burmola & Sanglea	300	
” the rest of the island	4560	5360
		8696

“The militia” were the whole male population of Malta, who were of sufficient vigour to lift a sword, and their fighting value only the test could prove.

The Turkish fleet, consisting of one hundred and thirty-nine oared galleys and about fifty sailing vessels of various other designations, after cruising for some time round the southern coast of the island, selected the Marsa Scirocco,

a wide bay at the south-eastern corner of the island, and landed there, and in the Marsa Scala and St. Thomas's Bay, without opposition, an army of 29,000 men, which was intended to attack St. Angelo on the land side, while the fleet bombarded it from the sea. The Algerian fleet was still to come.

A Council which the Grand Master had called a few days earlier had made a decision, in which his own view had overridden that of other equally experienced soldiers, and on which the course of subsequent events must have radically depended.

The old town of Citta Notabile, in the centre of the island, with its decrepit castle and almost defenceless walls, was not to be abandoned, neither was the Maltese militia to be concentrated within or around the defences of St. Angelo. St. Angelo was to depend upon its own garrison: the bulk of the Maltese militia was to remain at large upon the island. If the whole force of the Turkish attack should be directed upon Citta Notabile the militia must defend it as best they could; if upon St. Angelo, they should vex the rear of the infidels to the extent of their power.

The Turkish army, landing as it did on the south-eastern side of the island, therefore found itself opposed by no organized force capable of engaging it upon the field of battle, neither did it survey an abandoned territory from which the inhabitants had been withdrawn; but it was surrounded by the watchful, lurking hostility of the island militia. It raided inland in a great force, and saw no sign of human life and little of human occupation: it ventured small parties, seeking information or plunder or the filling of water-casks, and they did not return.

It wasted the country around its encampment and gained little, for the land was stony and poor. The goat-herds had driven their flocks to the remoter hills. The imported Sicilian draught-oxen—which had become numerous since the arrival of the Knights had resulted in much additional building throughout the island—were hidden or removed from before the advance of the marauding forces; but of these a sufficient number were captured to ensure the transportation of baggage and, in particular, of the heavy artillery, when the army should be ready to advance either to the attack of St. Angelo or to occupy the interior of the island.

Such was the position when Piali, the admiral of the Turkish fleet, came ashore from his galley to attend a Council of War which Mustapha had called that they might agree upon a plan of action in which the sea and land forces would co-operate for the defeat of the common foe.

Piali was a man of uncertain nationality and nameless birth, brought to the position he now held by the caprice of fortune and the Soldan's whim. Thirty years before Soliman the Magnificent, riding over a victorious Hungarian battle-field, had reined his horse to avoid a living babe that was crawling

among the slain.

The Soldan looked down and was met by the black eyes of a child who looked boldly and curiously up at the splendid vision above him.

“Let the child live,” Soliman said. “Pick him up.”

He ordered that Piali should be reared with his own household. When he was grown, he gave him one of his own granddaughters for a wife.

Having no nationality of his own, Piali may have done well to take to the sea. With the Sultan’s favour, he rose rapidly to the high position he now held. He was not of the disposition of those who may not hear the summons if fortune should try the door. He fought his ships in the same way.

His body, most probably born from hardship and poverty, had grown to an almost giant coarseness and strength amid the softer surroundings of the Sultan’s court. It showed signs already that it would become gross if he should live toward middle age. But now it was impelled by an abundant vitality.

His manner was arrogant and over-bearing. He was impatient of opposition. He came to meet Mustapha knowing his own mind, which he would be certain to speak. He was without subtlety, and might have said that he had no occasion for the practice of guile.

Mustapha was a man of different breed. He stroked the white beard of age, and though his step was still vigorous, and his eye bright, he looked more fit for the Council Chamber than the rough hazards of war. Craft and lies were the familiar weapons by which he had guarded himself through the perils of many years, and come to the lordship of Egypt which he now held. To speak his thoughts would have seemed to him no better than the act of a clumsy fool. He had the reputation of being a very fortunate and able leader of men, cautious, and yet prompt and bold to take advantage of any favourable chance. He was the most popular general in the Turkish empire, it being said that he counted the lives of his men as a miser will tale his gold, and that he would not send them rashly to death for a doubtful gain. It was he, forty years before, under Soliman’s orders, who had captured Rhodes from the Knights. If he had shown reluctance to undertake this new command, and expressed doubts of its success, it did not follow that he would not be resolute to prosecute it, nor inwardly sanguine of its results. He had merely taken the precaution of being able to say afterwards, if it should fail, that it had been against his own judgment, and only undertaken in loyalty to his imperial master’s will. If he should intend to meet Piali’s plans with the same subtlety of precaution, he would have an opponent who would be very unlikely to perceive or avoid the trap.

The Council consisted of about a dozen of the principal military and naval commanders, but the discussion which ensued was between Mustapha and Piali only, to which the others listened in a rarely broken silence. To

Mustapha, their importance lay in the fact that they might be after-witnesses of the things he said.

They sat in a circle, cross-legged on the rich softness of a carpet spread over the open ground, and a strong guard was stationed round them, but out of hearing, to make the privacy of the discussion more certain than would be possible in pavilion walls. They spoke between intervals, during which they smoked in an impressive silence. Even Piali knew that, if he should appear to speak without pauses of thought, he would lose the respect and confidence of those who heard.

"It would seem," Mustapha began, "that there are two courses between which we must make a choice. We may proceed first to make the island our own, which it can have no force to resist, outside the strong forts where the Knights have centred their power; or we can proceed at once to invest them there, both by land and sea, taking no account at the first of those who are loose in other parts of the isle, except that we must slay such as molest our rear."

"There is a thing," Piali replied, "which we must heed before either of those. I must have a harbour where I can lodge my fleet."

"Have you not harbours enough?" Mustapha inquired.

"I have none where I should be secure from a seaward foe."

"Where do you seek to be?"

"There is a fort at St. Elmo's point, which is of so small a size that it does not hold more than three score of men. If we destroy that, we have safe entrance to the best harbour there is, with a mouth of no greater breadth than we can secure by strong batteries on both sides, so that we can lie there without fear, or sally forth as we will."

Mustapha considered this in a silent gravity before he asked again: "Are you secure from the winds as you now are?"

"I am well enough from the winds, there being choice of anchorage in more places than one. I am thinking of seaward foes."

"Of whom we have word of none?"

"Of whom we may hear when it will be too late to gain the safety I seek. We may have all Christendom on our heads at a near day."

Mustapha was silent again. It was a risk which he thought small. He knew too much of the jealousies and divisions of the Christian powers to expect any concerted action from them—and if it came he thought it would be by a slow way, of which they would have warning enough. It was unlikely—but it was a possible thing, and if the Turkish fleet were to be forced to fight because it had no secure harbour in which to lie, and then, if it should have the worse, destroyed because it had no safe harbour to which to retreat, he did not intend that he should be blamed therefor.

“Are you assured,” he asked, “that St. Elmo can be taken with speed, and at a light cost?”

“It can be taken with speed, and at a cost which will not be too high for the gain it brings.”

Mustapha did not dissent. He smoked in silence again.

“I would,” he said at length, “that Dragut were here.”

“And so,” Piali said, “he should be.”

Mustapha did not feel moved to deny that. He said: “He should be here any day now. You know the charge that we have.”

Piali was silenced in turn, and with less of deliberate choice. When he spoke it was to argue with no change of will but somewhat less arrogance than before.

“That was meant for the conduct of the main attack, as I think. We are not meant to sit still, doing nought while our foes thrive, because Dragut is slow to come. Suppose he should not come for a long time? Are we to waste all the strength we have? This is such a thing as may be well done to make ready for when he shall be here.”

The firman that Soliman had given appointed Mustapha to the chief command, but it left Piali in control of the sea-forces, after he had put the army ashore. It directed both to await the arrival of Dragut, the Viceroy of the Barbary coast, and to take no decisive action without seeking counsel with him.

Mustapha, at least, saw clearly why that instruction had been given. Piali might be a bold seaman, and one whom the Sultan loved, but Soliman could not think him to be an equal admiral to the Algerian corsair who, when he was not drunk with rum, to the scandal of all True Believers of stricter habits, had a genius for naval warfare which had done far more than could be credited to any other single commander during the past thirty years to convert the Mediterranean to a Moslem lake. Boastful, truculent, quarrelsome, drunken he might be; but his name was such that his mere presence at a naval battle was enough to give assurance of victory to his friends and dishearten his boldest foes.

“I am an old man,” Mustapha said, “somewhat stricken in years, and the blood runs coldly in aged veins. I will not shrink to confess that I might have so interpreted the instructions we have received that I should have delayed to choose the place of our first assault until we had Dragut here, to join his counsel to ours.

“I might also have been too simple to doubt that the great fleet you have would be sufficient to hold these seas, even without that of Algiers, which cannot be far from our aid, until such time as we shall have resolved the siege and you can anchor in what harbour you will.”

“Do you say that my fleet should be equal to face the whole Christian power, which may be stirred by this assault on an Order which is derived from all their nations alike, and that I should be careless to do that with no harbour to which I could retire at a great need?”

“I should not say that. I say you have less to fear, for they are in division amongst themselves. The English queen (whose ships are the most spiteful of all) will be content that we vex her foes. The Baltic League will not send the worst ships they have; they will not sell a spar, as I think, nor a coil of rope (unless they first have the value paid), to give an Order support which owns the headship of Rome, with whom they have more bitter and nearer feud than can be their hatred of us, for it is not here that their trade lies. We have Spain to fear, but her King is cautious and slow. He has nearer foes, and his fleet must guard the far land where he gets his gold. He will not weaken his power there for this barren isle. He will send many words and, it may be, a few men.”

“Then what,” Piali asked, “would you do?”

“I have not said you are wrong. I have but said that the old are inclined to the surer way.

“I had thought that the island could be overrun in a short time. There are but scattered houses of no defence, and a town in the midst with such walls, so it is said, as our batteries would lay flat. There would be great slaughter, or taking of slaves in a full net. Also, there would be plunder of sorts, though it is a poor land, and unlike to Rhodes, from which we sent many galleys laden with spoil even while that war was not won.

“Or if the people who are now scattered over the land should flee to St. Angelo’s walls and we not be able to cut them off, as it is like that many would do, whether by the hills or along the coast, I suppose that the Knights would gain little by that. They may have men enough for the walls they defend. They must all drink, it is said, from cisterns which the rains fill. They have store-houses of corn which are well stocked, as our spies say, yet they must count to a time when they will come to the end and may not welcome that they will have more to feed.

“They may look to hold out till there will arrive strong aid from Europe at last. I do not say you are wrong in that. They may count the days. Have you thought that they may have built St. Elmo to that very end, that we may waste our own days on assault of such a fort as may fall and leave them little worse than they were before?”

“Have you thought,” Piali replied, his wits being alert enough in a simple way, “that they may have left the Maltese loose for the same end, that we may chase them from shore to shore, while we gain naught that will avail us at last, and the days go by?”

Mustapha, who had thought of that, among many more difficult things, did

not count it worth while to give a direct reply.

"I can see plainly," he said, "that you are bent on your own plan, and though I may have some doubt of what our lord would have had us do before Dragut come, yet I know well that there must be common purpose and good accord between two leaders placed as we now are. It may be that I am somewhat old and not swift to resolve in a bold way. If this fort be so easy to take, as you say it is, you shall have the harbour you will.

"We will survey it to-morrow morn, both by land and sea, that we may combine in such assault as you judge best."

The conference broke up at that word, leaving them both content, though there was little between them either of trust or goodwill; for Mustapha, who saw the advantage, if not the necessity, of capturing St. Elmo as clearly as Piali, but was less confident of an easy success, was satisfied that, if it should fail, the doubts he had uttered would be recalled to the minds of all who had heard, and it would be said that his wisdom had been overridden by the impetuous folly of the younger man. He saw also that, if the attack were to be commenced at that point, it could not be too sudden and swift, and though he had insured himself from the first against the worst penalties of failure, by declining to advocate that the siege should be attempted at all, and by appearing to excuse himself from accepting the chief command, so that Soliman had to thrust it upon him, yet it did not follow that, having so undertaken, he was not resolved to bring it to a successful end, and confident that he would not fail.

As for Piali, so that he had his own way, he was careless of how it came.

"The old rascal," he said to his captains as they walked back to their waiting boats, "would wander over the island till the summer is done, and at the end he would have slaughtered some peasants, and as many goats as would feed his host for two days, or perhaps three.

"He would go back boasting of what he had done, and saying that he had seen that St. Angelo was too strong to take by assault, and that he had spared the lives of his men, as though there were any merit in that. What, in Allah's name, are their lives for?

"But in war you must ever strike at a vital spot, and it is never too costly to win. St. Elmo is but a small fort. We will have it down in two days, and you will enter a harbour where you can lie without fear, though all the fleets of Christendom were cannonading without."

His captains made no answer to that, for the idea was pleasing enough; and they had learned that he was one who loved the sound of his own voice much more than to listen to theirs.

CHAPTER XII

THE same morning that the Turkish Council of War was held Francisco stood on the poop of the *Curse of Islam* (that being the name of the galliot of which he had been given command) which was patrolling about half a mile to the north of St. Elmo's point.

The *Curse of Islam* was built in the style of the *Flying Hawk*, and was as swift but much smaller than she. It had but one mast, and was of light draught so that it could enter inlets and shallow bays without fear that it could be followed by larger ships. Small as it was, it had fourteen oars on each side, for it was in speed that its use alike with its safety lay, whether it were hunting Turkish merchant vessels that it could plunder and sink, or running from their fighting ships that it would be too weak to endure.

Now it tacked against a light north-east wind, so that it might keep out from the shore. Its oars were in, and it moved lazily over a quiet sea, as though it drowsed in the heat of the sunny noon; but it was watchful on every side, that it might be ready to aid its friends or to avoid being cut off from the land if Turkish galleys should approach by a coastward way.

For though Piali had anchored the larger part of his fleet in the Marsa Scirocco and in St. Thomas's Bay, he had spread a swarm of his smaller galleys and other vessels around the islands, so that it might be said that the whole Maltese group were already invested in a loose way. He had over one hundred and eighty ships of all sizes under his control, with crews of more than nine thousand men, and now that they had landed the army and stores they brought, they were light and lean, and very hungry for prey.

Nor did they fish in an empty sea, for there were still Knights of the Order and volunteers of various ranks arriving in Sicily to assist the defence, and the Sicilian coast not being much more than sixty miles distant, and the Maltese boatmen bold and knowing shallows and currents, and often making the night their friend, were still bringing them across, and would continue to do so for several weeks, each side becoming more expert to chase or avoid their foes.

In these first days it was a game of death which was played on both sides in a clumsy, beginner's way, but Turkish galliots of the lighter kind were lurking in many of the inlets around the coast, ready to sally out on a careless prey, or for their guns to do mischief to any who should approach from the landward side.

The *Curse of Islam* put her bow into the wind, and began to glide again on

the starboard tack through the peace of the summer sea, when there came a noise of guns from the north-west, and not, as it seemed to those who listened, at a great distance away, though they could see nothing, the coast in that part being hidden beyond the point of St. George's Bay, nor could they be sure whether the firing came from the land or the sea.

But Francisco did not wait to listen a second time. He felt as one who had ranged the woods for three days without sight or sound of the prey he sought, though he knew that every moment might see it leap from the thicket, and that it was round him on every side. The *Curse of Islam* shook out her wings. Her oars flashed overside, and she leapt, as they smote the foam, like an unleashed dog.

Francisco went forward to see that the guns on the forward deck would be ready, and Captain Antonio stood at his side. He had no duty there. He had come as a volunteer, rather than be idle on land. He watched Francisco with a critical eye. He listened to the sound of guns that became louder as the seconds passed. He had discretion enough to keep a shut mouth, and had his reward when Francisco asked: "Now what would you take it to be?"

"I should opine," Captain Antonio replied, "that the craft are small and are propelled by oars, for they approach fast, and that without favour of wind.

"They carry no cannon on either side and cannot be further distance apart than can be crossed by an arquebus ball, for it is that weapon which we have heard.

"You will have noticed that there were five shots, or it may be six, almost as one, and then after a pause that was somewhat long, there was such a chorus of shots again. I suppose that to mean that the pursuers rest oars at times, that the arquebusiers may not be spoilt in their aim by a lifting prow.

"It is most like that we shall be friendly to those who flee, but, be that as it may, it is a game that we shall decide, for we shall meet them, as I think, almost bow to bow as we are rounding the cape."

"I have no doubt," Francisco said, "you have guessed well." But as he spoke, there came the deep boom of a heavy gun, and another thereafter, showing that, if the guess were good, it had not come to the end of the tale.

Yet, as far as it went, it had been good enough, for as they rounded the cape they came in sight of a half-decked boat that fled before one about twice as large as itself, which had a single mast and a spread of sail that was of little aid, the wind blowing as it did. But behind these there were three galliots coming up, showing the black flag with the green turban thereon and the golden scimitar gleaming below, which was the battle-ensign of the Turkish navy at that time, these symbols being as near to the portrayal of a created thing as the second commandment of Moses would allow a Moslem to go.

The fleeing boat, depending on the strength of its oars alone, had crept over

during the night and the earlier day from the Sicilian shore, aiming to make a landing in St. Paul's Bay, where it was thought that, as yet, no Turks would be likely to be. It was manned by six Maltese oarsmen who did not row with their backs to the bow, as is the more common style, but stood upright, looking ahead, and pushed rather than pulled the boat with the full weight of their bodies on every stroke. Don Manuel and his two servants sat in the stern, and there was a Maltese seaman who steered, making ten in all. The boat was flat-bottomed and shallow of draught, being adapted for coastal work rather than open stretches of sea, though the hardy Maltese boatmen would often use such craft for crossing to Sicily when the winds were kind.

It had come without incident, or sight of more than a distant sail, till it had rounded the curve of St. Paul's Bay, where they had thought to run into a cove which had an easy beach for the boat, and thence make cautious way overland toward St. Angelo, avoiding any advance of the Turkish army, which would have been easy to do among hills where all men were their friends, either to guide or warn.

But as they came to the full sight of the bay, they saw that at which their oars paused in a sudden fear, so that there was a moment when the boat drifted on at its own will.

"Back, men, back," an old seaman called, who was the owner of the boat, and who pushed on one of the bow oars, with his son at his side. But even as the oars were lifted to strike the water again, he altered his word: "It is too late. We are seen. There is no hope but ahead. Push, men, or our lives will pay."

What they had seen was no less than half a dozen Turkish ships of the smaller kinds that had made resort of that bay, and were anchored, more or less, at its upper end. They were not all alert to make chase, some of their men being ashore. They were, in fact, seeking water, of which there was here a little stream entering the sea, which was worth regard in an island where springs were few and most men drank that which had been stored in cisterns after the rain.

Being in a land of foes they had sent a strong party ashore, with the water-casks that they sought to fill, and the two largest galliots had trained their guns to command the beach.

The boatmen felt as a rat might do on finding itself in the very kennel of some careless dog, which stretches and yawns and has no thought of a prey. It will dart back, if it can, before its coming has been observed.

But as the seamen paused in that first panic of doubt they knew that they were too late to draw back, for they had been already seen by the watch on the nearest ship. There was an outbreak of cries. Being perceived, there was no hope in retreat. Their safety lay, as they thought, as far off as within the range of St. Elmo's guns. To reach them, they must pull across the front of St. Paul's

Bay, in full sight of their foes, and then continue along the coast, keeping ahead if they could.

The boatmen pressed on the oars, while the corsair vessel that was nearest, and had first called the alarm, showed that it would soon be in hot pursuit.

Its sail rose to the wind: its oars came overside: its anchor cable was cut.

Its sail might be little use, with the wind blowing the way it did, but its oars were nearly twice the number of those on the Maltese boat, and each was pulled by two men. Against that, its size was much more, but it was built for speed, which the Maltese boat was not. The Turks looked for an easy prey.

Don Manuel sat in the stern. He was clothed in steel and his sword lay across his knees. He said nothing, watching the pursuit with a sombre and haughty gaze that held some hatred, and some contempt, but no fear.

He could see that it was an unequal chase and that the Turkish vessel might almost reach to cross their bows before they could have a straight course ahead. Yet they must converge as they did, for if they should steer a course which would take them more out to sea, they would be further at last from the land where their safety lay. The Turks came fast. They were eager and fresh. The Maltese had been rowing for many hours. But life is a great stake. They were inured to the work they did. Their strength was neither wasted nor spared. The oars moved as one. When they crossed the corsair's bows they were still some hundreds of yards apart.

As they did so the Turks lay on their oars, steadying their deck that the arquebusiers might take a good aim. The arquebus was a heavy weapon, clumsy and slow. It was like a cannon for the use of a single man. When he had loaded it, he must set up a tripod on which he could rest it while he was taking aim. A slow-match would ignite its powder at last. There would be noise, if no more. The lighter, deadlier musket was still to come.

Now a volley came too low, or fell short. Looking back, Don Manuel saw the water spurt upward where it was struck by the heavy balls. His expression altered to that of a somewhat greater contempt than before. He thought that if they would stop often enough for that foolish firework display there might be a good chance of escape, which he had not greatly hoped until then.

He was of a generation which had been reluctant to admit the power of the new weapons or that they had ended the reign of steel. At that time a knight's age might be fairly guessed by the amount of armour he wore.

The Turkish vessel came on again, and though the boatmen strove with their utmost strength, the distance steadily shortened between them. The corsairs had seen the steel-clad form in the stern, and they toiled now for a prize of worth. The Knights of Malta were almost always men of rank and wealth in their own lands, and their ransoms were fixed at rates which were equally high.

Now the corsair's oars lifted again. It steadied somewhat as it lost speed, and the arquebuses were levelled a second time. But now the volley did not fall short: a ball glanced off one of Don Manuel's ailettes and splintered the gunwale of the boat. He stretched out a jarred arm with the satisfaction of finding it would still be equal to using a sword, and observed at that same instant that one of the foremost oarsmen had fallen forward. As he did so, the old man at his side also abandoned his oar and stooped over to lift him up. Don Manuel rose in a quick wrath. "Boniface," he called, "is this a time to regard the dead? I have seen you in bygone days when a bullet——"

"But not through a son's heart."

"Even so, he has gone the sooner to God. We have our duties who still live. You must let him lie."

Don Manuel's voice was kindly but stern. It was, indeed, evident that it was no time to grieve for the dead, which would be to involve all in the common end. As he spoke he took the steersman's place, so that he could go forward to the oar of the dying man, whose father resumed his labour.

There was urgent need now, for the boat had lost speed in this momentary confusion, which more than offset the delay caused to their pursuers when the rowers paused for the arquebusiers to fire Flight would have become hopeless, but for the fact that they now approached a place of shallows and outlying rocks, where they were able to take advantage of a narrow channel through which the corsair's vessel could not venture to follow but must take a course further out to sea, by which it lost half a mile, if not more.

With this timely assistance the chase was repeated on the same lines as before, with the pursuers further behind but closing more rapidly upon the Maltese craft, for the boatmen were finding it beyond human capacity to maintain the exertions with which they began their flight. And at the same time, as though to destroy the last faint hope of escape in despairing hearts, another of the Turkish galleys, a much larger vessel which had stood further out to sea, was now coming up rapidly behind, and opened fire with two of its forward guns on the fleeing boat.

They were not struck at this time, though a plunging ball, dividing the waves, passed them so closely that they were drenched by its scattered spray. And as they became aware of this fresh menace they became conscious also of a hope, which induced Don Manuel to urge them to renewed exertions.

"Push hard," he exclaimed, "there is help ahead."

For at the end of the spur of land which formed the eastern side of the cape which still hid them from the *Curse of Islam* and deprived them of knowledge of that approaching support, there was a group of Maltese soldiers who watched the chase, and in their midst a battery of two mortars which had been placed there by the Knights to defend the point. These mortars were clumsy

weapons, even by the standards of that time, but capable of taking a heavy charge, being of stone and hollowed out of the solid rock. They were loaded with liberal charges of powder, and wooden tompions were then laid over their mouths, on which would be piled an assortment of cannon-balls, stones, and bars and fragments of iron. They were discharged by means of slow-matches, such as would allow time, after their ignition, for their crews to retreat to safety. Their fire could not be accurate nor their range great, as they threw their missiles high into the air, from which they would descend with a force which might not only bring death and wounds to those unable to avoid it on narrow, unsheltered decks, but might well prove sufficient to sink vessels of considerable size.

It was evident that the drama of flight and death was now nearing its climax, and that climax may be taken, alike in its incidence and in the ruthless spirit which inspired its antagonists, as symbolic of the larger struggle which was to come.

The boatmen, with a renewed vigour of hope, which became a mere desperation should they look back at the nearness of the pursuit, rowed straight for the protection of the battery.

The Turkish corsair saw the menace of those loaded mortars, but, like a hawk too intent upon an almost captured prey to heed that it is chasing it to the very foot of a man whom it would otherwise have avoided in terror, could not resolve to leave a capture so nearly made.

"They dare not fire," the Turkish captain exclaimed, "for we are too close to their friends. They could not direct their discharge so that it could descend on one ship, and not both; and those of their part might take the more hurt, their boat being weaker than ours."

"If they follow to within the range," the captain of the battery said, "and we see that our friends cannot escape, we must not scruple to fire, for it is much better that all should sink than that the Turks should sail safely off, having taken their prey."

"Boniface," Don Manuel called from the stern, "if they lay us aboard, I must charge you to send a pistol-shot through that case in the bows where our powder lies, for we shall go to God by a clean road, and not as having been first mauled by these infidel dogs."

"So I will," the old man answered. "So I will at the last need. But you will pardon me if I delay until then, for life is dear to us all."

"You may delay till then, but be sure at the last, if the need come; for if they will not lay off the chase we shall find the land too distant to gain."

And then, as though to mock them with a second mirage of rescue, too distant for real avail, the *Curse of Islam* appeared round the head of the cape, coming on at a great pace, for it could make more use of the wind, and as they

approached one another, though not in a direct line, it had the effect of advancing even faster than it actually did.

It was yet too distant for Francisco to see whom the boat held, but the meaning of all was too clear to misunderstand. He gave an instant order that they should steer straight to the rescue of the Maltese boat, but to train their guns upon the galley that came up further behind, it being a clear mark, with no danger that a shot would go where they would not wish.

So they fired, though at a long range, and their coming cannot be said to have been without result, for the galley, seeing the *Curse of Islam* approach in so bold a way, supposed her to be no more than the first of a Christian squadron which might appear at the next minute around the headland, and so put her helm up, and made off, signalling to her consorts who were further away that they should do the like.

But as though the guns of the *Curse of Islam* had been the overture for a concert of hell, the next moment was loud with thunder, and livid with flame.

Don Manuel had seen that the Turkish vessel was close behind. Her commander had called for a supreme effort from the oarsmen, and whether willing or under threat of the lash, they pulled so that the ship leapt ahead, and this time it was distanced by no answering spurt, for the Maltese rowers could do no more.

Don Manuel saw the prow of the approaching vessel almost over his head. He rose up from the useless rudder. He shouted to Boniface that the time to fire the powder had come; and then, with his bare sword in his hand, and forgetting he was somewhat stiff with the passing of years, he reached up to the bowsprit above his head and swung himself on to the corsair's deck.

It was a moment before that, that the captain of the battery had realized that the Maltese boatmen were doomed, and that only vengeance remained. There was no mercy given, nor often asked in the warfare between Christian and Moslem at that day. The ferocity of the conflict was only tempered by hopes of ransom or of the price that a slave would fetch; and even these considerations were often forgotten when men were roused to a lust for blood.

The flashes of the two great mortars leapt up to the sky: their thunders deafened the air. Like Mount Etna's deadly hail, the heavy missiles flung upward by that giant discharge came rushing down from a blackened sky. They struck the water, sending high columns into the air. They crashed down on a deck where a crowd of turbaned pirates shouted and smote at one armoured figure that fought grimly its final fight. More than one went through the deck to shatter the hull below.

The *Curse of Islam* had no more to do than to send a broadside into a sinking vessel, the decks of which were already awash as it came up. The Maltese boat was floating bottom upwards, a shattered wreck.

Francisco looked down on a sea that was strewn with wreckage, and in which there were men that swam round like drowning rats, having little hope of a better fate.

They picked up five, who were all Turks, of whom they kept four for the labour of the oars, and threw one back, who had a wound which it would have been trouble to heal.

They saw nothing of the Maltese, nor of Don Manuel, who would have sunk with his armour's weight, had he not been already slain.

Francisco sailed back, not knowing whom he had been too late to save.

CHAPTER XIII

ANGELICA still wrote, though in a room which, for the moment, had no occupant but herself. It had an aspect of leisured learning, of wealth and secure peace. The high shelves, laden with calf and vellum-bound volumes, lettered most often in vermilion or gold, were in shadow, but the high sunlight of a morning that neared its noon patterned the softly carpeted floor through windows that showed a few white cumulus clouds moving majestically across the deep blue of the summer sky.

But as she wrote she had heard for the past two hours the low thunder of distant guns. It came from the south, where the Turkish army advanced on a wide front and was opposed by the Maltese militia and as many knights as there were good horses to mount, or the Grand Master would allow to go out of the lines.

She could not tell how the battle went, but she knew that the Turks came on, for as the hours passed the noise grew. The guns were louder, and their volume increased in another way, as though the battle were more generally joined.

Also, in the last half hour, there had been a sound of guns from the north, as though it came from the sea. It had been little at first, but now there came a two-fold explosion of sound that was almost one, which was the firing of the stone mortars upon the beach, and soon after that the sound of cannon firing at once, which was the broadside by which the *Curse of Islam* had sunk her foe.

Angelica was not short of a task, for Sir Oliver Starkey was one who liked his records to be exact.

He must have the name of every man who would be stationed within the lines and the place he would hold. There must be space to record his wounds, or the day he would die, and perhaps a few words beyond that. There must be provision for record if he should be transferred to another front.

In all this Sir Oliver went his own way, being a man of very orderly mind, yet there was a special reason for the care which was shown in the stationing of the garrisons both of castle and town. For to give an order that would have been understood by all the four thousand men that were gathered there it would have been needful to speak in more than a dozen tongues.

It was a difficulty which had been faced by the previous Grand Master, De Lisle Adam, when the Turks had threatened attack many years before. He had arranged his knights so that those adjacent should be such as would be nearest

of tongue to themselves; and though the additions to the fortifications which had been made since that day had strengthened the places once esteemed the most dangerous, and therefore of the greatest honour, so that they might now be the most difficult to assault, yet La Valette had considered it expedient to adopt his predecessor's plan, by which, when it was known, none could say that they were favoured or treated less than the first.

The Italians, under Sir Peter del Monte—who was destined to survive the siege and become Grand Master himself—stretched southward, around the Sanglea and St. Michael's fort.

On the outward side of the Bourg, which had once been protected by no more than a low wall and a shallow ditch but which was now very strongly fortified, were placed the three *Langues* of Provence, Auvergne and France, with the Genoese volunteers in a corner which would otherwise have been too weakly supplied with men.

The Knights of Arragon, with Catalonia and Navarre, defended the bastion which faced north-east, from the end of the French line toward the head of Calcara Bay; and beyond them Castile, Portugal, Germany, England held the northern bastion in that order, from the end of the Arragon line to St. Angelo's seaward walls.

But the German ranks were no more than a tithe of what they had been before division entered the Christian Church, and England, which had been chosen before to defend that outer corner where St. Angelo looked toward the sea, was now represented by no more than a single name, that of Sir Oliver Starkey himself.

This position was met by allocating to this point a number of volunteers of various nationalities and a part of the Spanish troops which had been hired from Sicily, and it was to this body that the name of Don Garcio of Murcia had been attached.

So far, if Angelica's instinct had not erred, no one had guessed that she was other than she appeared. Sir Oliver had been scrupulous to treat her in every way as though she were a young noble of Spain who, though not of the Order, had come to assist the defence, and had been no more than consistent with this in entering Don Garcio's name among those who would be stationed beneath himself. When Don Manuel should appear, as he might any day be expected to do, it would be time enough for the truth to be shown, and the responsibility would have become his. Meanwhile, Sir Oliver was careful to do or omit nothing which might attract attention or rouse suspicion in any mind.

The noon hours passed, and there was no interruption in the quiet room, except that a young page brought refreshment of wine and meat on a silver tray, as it was his habit to do, and two of Sir Oliver's scribes returned and resumed work at their own desks.

Angelica was accustomed to regard them with the smiling but distant courtesy which becomes natural among those who cannot speak the same tongue. Here, as when she passed through the more public rooms of the castle or went abroad, the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the assembled champions of Christianity, with their endless diversities of physique and manners and dress, and with their babel of tongues, was her sufficient protection against the curiosity out of which suspicion is born.

Within the castle she had encountered no women at all, though there were naturally many among the Maltese in the town, and some of these had been employed during the last days in the hard toil of improving the fortifications on which their lives would depend at last.

Now the hours passed, while the noise of conflict increased until it was plain to hear that it was no further away than the outer wall of the town. The noise of firearms was mingled with another sound that came from the mouths of men. But they died as the afternoon waned, and some time after that Sir Oliver entered the room.

He spoke first to the two scribes in their own tongues, giving them such instructions as caused them to rise and leave. He stood for a minute's space looking at Angelica in a thoughtful way. She went on with a steady pen, not lifting her eyes, until he said: "Don Garcio, there is something here you may like to see."

She looked up at that, and observed that he had in his hand an armlet of gold and rose, gaily embroidered in silk, and not looking to be of a Christian kind.

He came and sat on the side of her desk in an easy way, holding it out for her to see.

"Are they words?" she said, looking at a strange scroll, which was not formed of any letters she knew.

"They are words," he said, "and very easy to read for such as know the Arabic tongue. A knight of Navarre, Sir John de Morgut, sent it to me an hour ago, asking that I should read it for him. He took it from the arm of an infidel knight—who was very splendidly dressed—whom his lance had slain."

His words reminded her of that which was most moment to know. "Has all gone well," she asked, "in the day's strife?"

"It has gone well enough, as I hear, though it has not been my part to see. The Turks are about our gates. They came close at one time, but they have paid a full price for that, such as they will not be eager to pay again.

"They have made their advance, yet I should say that we have done well enough. We did not think to hold them off in the open field."

He added, as though thinking that her question might hide a personal fear: "You are safe here. I do not know what the end may be, but it will not come in

a day, nor a week from now."

"I had no such thought. Be they here for a short time or a long, I suppose that the Cross will fly from towers that they will not take."

Sir Oliver, listening to this confident reply, appeared to check something that he had been about to say. When he spoke, after a pause, he said: "I suppose you are of your uncle's blood at the last, though you may be gentler of manner and speech, as is but natural to think, and that is what I should have supposed you would say. Yet it is of that that I came to speak, for there are things that should be said now, if at all. . . . I will tell you what these words are that you cannot read: '*I do not come to Malta for honour or wealth, but I am seeking to save my soul.*' You will see that neither wealth nor honour is his, for he has been slain by a Christian lance on the third day, having done nothing at all, and that he has saved his soul is a thing we cannot believe. We suppose that it is in hell at this hour."

"Why do you show me this?"

"Because you have come to a strife which is not as are those when Christians with Christians strive, though they may be such as a woman cannot avoid too far; but this is one in which it is believed on both sides that we fight in the cause of God against those whom He would have us hate, and for whom pity is sin.

"We know well that we have the true cause—God pity us if we should be wrong in that!—but we know that we are not wrong. . . . I am not telling you to doubt that, but to understand that they are as sure as we.

"Should we fail to sustain our part, there will be none left living within these walls. You may thank God for a quick death, which you may not get. And I must tell you that our defence is not sure. If we have no help from the Christian lands—and as yet we have had fair words, but no more—to hold these walls against such hordes as have come may be beyond human power. We do not complain of that, nor do we regard it with any faintness of heart. We are here to die. Before which time we propose that the infidel deaths will be more than few.

"Yet it is different for you, who should not have come. And there is yet time to go back. If Don Manuel were here, or if he were sure to arrive, I would have said nothing of this, for you are his charge. But he has not come, nor can we say that he ever will.

"Only at this noon, a boat has been sunk carrying some knight who was seeking to join our ranks. I do not say, nor suppose that it was he. But the danger to those who will attempt to reach us from now may be increased beyond what we can guess.

"First and last, he may not come.

"But there is a vessel leaving to-night, a felucca that is built only for speed,

in which the nephew of the Grand Master will sail for Palermo to urge the Viceroy that he shall be more swift to our aid. You would be safe on that ship, and I could commend you to the care of good friends that I have there, so that you would have nothing further to dread."

"Sir Oliver," Angelica replied, "you speak from a kindness which is needful to thank, but it is as you would not do to the man that I ape to be. If I ask you one thing, will you answer in a true way?"

"Yes," he said, "so I will, by my knighthood's oath."

"If I accept the offer you make, after I have come as I have, will it be to augment my honour, or else my shame?"

Sir Oliver was silent for some time after this question was put.

"You have asked," he said at last, "a hard thing, which all might not resolve alike; yet if I answer with truth, as you have adjured me to do, I must say, by the Passion of God, that it will be to your greater honour to remain here, if you can be equal to that which comes, as I think you will."

"That is what I supposed you would say. And on your part, will it be to Malta an aid rather than a burden that I remain?"

"When I think what you have already done in our cause, I should call it a likely aid."

"Then I will not go on that ship."

"Yet you should give thought to the dangers that are ahead, which you may suppose less than they are. There are things that you have not seen."

"I have seen a man thrown overboard while he yet lived, for no fault but his failing strength. Are there worse matters than that?"

"Yes. I should say there are. Yet, as I hope, they may not come in your way, if you are resolved that you will not go."

"You asked me, when first I came, if I had any skill in the healing of wounds, and I answered yes. Was there purpose in what you asked?"

"There was purpose, but it is not a skill which can be put to use at this time. . . . As you know, we are an Order which was first of a healing kind, and all we who have taken John Baptist's vows are of some skill in such arts, though they are such as, for the most part, are not used. Yet we have good spitals within the town, which are served by such of our brethren as have vocation therefor. There are no women within its walls. If you go as you now are, you may find it to be a secret you cannot keep, and might be greatly misthought if it should be discovered when you are without friends at a short call, and the truth held to be no more than a wanton's lie.

"Nor, as I think, could you serve there if your sex were known, being alone among men, and it being against our custom, if not our vows, that women should be of those who work in an infirmary that our Order has built. Or, at least, I suppose you would not be allowed, except in a much greater need than

we now have.

"But that which I came in truth to ask you was this: if Don Manuel shall still delay to arrive, and you stay here, is it well that you should continue this disguise which you now wear? Or shall I speak to the Grand Master thereon that the truth be shown?

"You must consider that men may die at such times as these. Who and what you are is known to none but Ramegas and me; even your cousin is not aware. If our witness were not at hand, who would believe your tale?"

"I suppose that it might be believed by those who are themselves of good conduct and faith."

"So it might. It would be to prove at your cost. And even then. . . ."

"There is the Grand Master himself."

"So there is. But did he greatly heed what was said, as one who would hold it clearly in mind?"

"So I should have supposed. But, in truth, I cannot tell that. Is he one who will lightly forget?"

"He will not forget that which it is for our Order's good that he know. But, at this pass, his mind is set on one thing, that the Cross shall still fly from our towers. Except it bear upon that, you may talk what wisdom you will, or of things of price, and he will not hear."

"If you bring it back to his mind, what will he be most likely to say?"

"I cannot warn you of that. He may send you away, as he did a month ago all who were old or sick, or whom he thought would be less worth than their food, even those who were native born. He showed no mercy in that. He would heed no plea. But I think he would let you stay."

"Yet it is a risk which I will not choose. I think rather to wear this dress, as I have his order to do, until my uncle come, or there be more gain by a change than I see now. . . . Could I keep the chamber I have, if it were known who I am?"

"I should say no to that."

"Then, by your leave, I will stay as I am for the time."

Sir Oliver did not say she was wrong. He looked a doubt, and would surely have said more, but, at that moment, the Grand Master entered the room.

His good friend, the Viceroy of Sicily, had given him some advice at the first, though, being servant to Philip of Spain, he had not been able to give him much else. The advice was that he was worth more to Malta than a sword's point, and that he should guard his life with a great care, keeping away from the front of strife as a duty he owed to Malta and God Himself, though it might be bitter to do.

Seeing him now, it was easy to doubt whether that advice had fallen on heedful ears, for though he wore no arms of offence (which he may have

thrown aside in the last hour) his back and breast were of steel, and he was fouled with dirt on his right side, as one who had been down in the ditch or had rubbed a wall.

He had not come now to his own place, for since the first rumour of the Turkish attack he had left the castle and taken a lodging within the town, which had been a gesture to give confidence to those who dwelt there and to hearten them to strengthen their walls while there was time.

"Sir Oliver," he said, "you are well found. I have dispositions to change."

"Is all well? I thought the strife was done for this day."

"So it is, beyond doubt. But I will have no more of this open war. I will trust to stone. There are those gone I am grieved to lose."

Sir Oliver looked a moment's surprise, for he had supposed that the Grand Master would have given the life of every man that he had, as freely as one will empty a purse which can be filled on the next day, had he thought it to Malta's gain.

So he would. But his mind was also as that of one who will not pay out a coin unless assured that it is buying its utmost worth.

All the morning the Turkish army had made its advance over some miles of land that was scanty of trees, but of an uneven surface, and divided into many small fields surrounded by low walls of stone. Against their advance the Maltese militia—ably commanded by Marshal Couppier, a famous knight of Auvergne—had opposed a guerrilla warfare, firing from behind the shelter of every wall and falling back in time to avoid too close an encounter with numbers which would have overwhelmed them by five to one.

In this way they had inflicted much loss and suffered little. The masses of the Turkish infantry had offered a mark which was not easy to miss: the stone walls had been their friends, both when they had used them to lean their arquebuses for steady aim, and to cover them when they slipped away.

A force of mounted Maltese knights, under Sir Melchior D'Egueras, knowing the ground, had been able to charge the lighter ranks of the Turkish cavalry and break them with a great loss.

In the whole of the two days' fighting up to this evening of Sunday, May 20th, the total losses on the Maltese side were four score of all ranks, and it was estimated that those of the Turks must have been over fifteen hundred, at which it might seem that even La Valette would be well-content.

But the Turks, not being satisfied to advance to the village of St. Catherine, which lay midway between St. Angelo and their former camp, and which was to be their headquarters through many subsequent weeks, finding that, whatever loss they suffered, their advance was not seriously contested, had become somewhat too bold. With fierce cries of *Allah*! some regiments of janissaries, being the very flower of the Turkish army, had carried their horse-

hair banners even up to the bastions of the Bourg, the crest of which was planted with the crowding pennons of over a hundred knights of the three *langues* of France, Provence and Auvergne.

Louder than the fanatic cries with which the infidel host had rushed to assault the wall, cannon and arquebus opened such a fire upon them as left no more than the options of flight or death, between which many found it too late to choose. It was then that the Grand Master himself had leapt down into the ditch, leading a charge by which he had secured that those who limped in a flying rear, expecting Paradise, might be sent to their certain hell.

It was there that a large part of that total of fifteen hundred had learnt the lesson of death, and the Grand Master, calling back his knights lest they should pursue too far for their safe return, and wiping a bloody sword (for his weight had not been enough to keep him behind the line) had reflected upon the heavy loss which must be the lot of those who offer their human flesh against the cold denial of granite walls.

So as he walked away from the bastion of the Bourg, he had said in his heart: “My knights shall ride out no more. I will trust to stone.”

Now he said: “Couppier is falling back into the hills, as I have ordered before. He will make Notabile his base; but if they come there, they will find him gone. He can lead them a long race, as I think, and cause more loss than he is likely to take; but, be that as it may, I cannot have all Malta within these walls.

“It is of D’Egueras I came to speak. He shall ride out no more. I can put my knights to a better use. But I must find him other command, for he is near to the best I have. I will make him Chief of St. Elmo’s fort, for de Broglio is not fit for so hard a charge. He is past his prime. I would have you make out the commission now.”

Sir Oliver sat down at the word. He took parchment. He dipped a quill. But he was slow to commence to write.

“De Broglio,” he said, “is a gallant knight and of great repute.”

“You speak of days that are dead. He is old and fat.”

“He is well loved of the knights.”

“I cannot alter for that. I must have the best man there. I will have St. Elmo held till it is no more than a ruined grave, if it be there that they press attack, as I think they will.”

“You can make him deputy, if you prefer. They are not men who will jar.”

“Yes. It is a good thought. You can make it out in that way.”

So the old knight was left at his post, to gain some more honour which it might be said that he did not need, and a wound that would not be easy to heal (of which he had more than enough in his younger days); and d’Eguaras was appointed his aide, and having got down from his horse for the last time, he

crossed to St. Elmo with sixty knights of the Order in boats during the midnight hour, so that the garrison had been doubled when the dawn came, and that with knights of the greatest names that the breadth of Europe could boast.

Having disposed of that, the Grand Master went on to give instructions on other appointments that must be made. He talked in the Latin tongue, so that Angelica, by whom it could be read better than heard, did not understand much that was said, and though she looked up when the names of Ramegas and Don Francisco came into the talk, yet the eyes of the two men were not turned to her, and she judged that she was outside their thoughts.

La Valette went in some haste at last, for he had ordered that all who could should attend at evensong in San Lorenzo Church, where he purposed, after the service was done, to address his knights, exhorting them to be equal to the great occasion to which they came, speaking in the Latin tongue, which should be commonly understood, and which he was well able to do. So he hastened away, having other things that must be done before that. And Angelica went to the church with Sir Oliver at the due time, and found it crowded, so that they must stand in an aisle and be jostled by those who still pressed in at the doors, till it was trouble to breathe.

There were no more than sentries and an occasional guard along the lines of defence at this time, for there was no doubt that the Turks had had enough for the day, and had fallen back on St. Catherine and a line level therewith. They would not try storming forts again till their artillery had been brought up, after the loss they had had.

Angelica stood at one time within a few yards of her cousin's side and his eyes met hers in an idle way. It was with an effort akin to pain that she controlled her own glance that it should not respond; for the sight of one she had known so well brought back all that had been theirs so few weeks before; the distant peace of Aldea Bella, that was now so lost and far that to think that they would see it again might be held an unlikely thing.

His eyes saw her and went heedlessly on, which might not have been had she still worn the clothes that were his; but she had laid them aside, partly from discretion, lest they should be recognized by any of those who had come in her uncle's ships, and more surely because they had been through the sea-water and soiled by climbing on a ship's stern. The fact that she went in a false guise had not made her careless of what she wore.

She thought that Francisco had changed in another way, his face having become somewhat harder for all its youth, and his eyes sterner than they had been when he had had no care but to hunt in the Andalusian hills. They had both come to a school where much must be learnt in a short time.

There were few who heard the Grand Master's words, women or men, who would be alive when the summer failed. But they would all have lived in a

great day.

Thinking of Francisco as she walked back, and debating in her mind whether she should make herself known to him or wait Don Manuel's coming, caused her to recall the conversation between the Grand Master and Sir Oliver, in which she had heard his name.

"I have been little," she said, "with those who have talked in the Latin tongue, though I can read it well enough, as you know; and there was no cause that I should give heed to words which were not for me. But I thought I heard the Grand Master mention Señor Ramegas, and my cousin thereafter. Am I wrong to ask what was said?"

She had to say this again, for Sir Oliver had his own thoughts and had not been heedful to her. But when he listened, he said:

"Not at all. It is what you should know. As to Señor Ramegas, it was no more than this. He should fight, as you know, under Don Manuel's pennon, being esquire to him. But Don Manuel is not here. Señor Ramegas is of gentle blood, of mature years and of very good repute, especially on the sea, though he is neither a Knight of Justice, nor has he brought us the wealth by which is bought a place in our highest rank.

"But the Grand Master would not put him to shame by placing him under another knight; and these are days when a man must be judged for what he is rather than by any title he bear. So I have orders to draw a commission by which he will have charge of the shipping which we have laid up within the boom, both while it is anchored there and if it should have occasion to sally out."

"You mean that he will be Admiral of the whole Fleet?"

"You may call it so if you will. But you will see that it may be little more than an idle charge, for in a few days, at the most, the boom may be let down for the last time, and the few ships that we have be anchored beneath our guns till the siege is done.

"Yet if there should be occasion to use the ships at a sudden chance, the Grand Master would have one in command who is both bold and discreet and of sea-craft already proved."

"He will be well pleased," Angelica said, "and so, for his sake, am I; for he was always kind to me, though he would have ordered me to the rack at my uncle's word, and thought that I should be glad to go. It is all duty with him—duty and pride. But I wonder what you will do with Captain Antonio, who was on his ship. He is one at which it is easy to laugh, yet I should call him a good man in command, and one who knows much of the sea and of how a ship can be fought in the best way."

"He is a good man, for whom a use will be found. But he is not one who could be put in command of knights, being of plebeian blood; for that is not

our way, as you know."

Sir Oliver, being English-bred, had a thought that it might sometimes be well if that rule were less strictly observed; but there are things which it is better to think than to say, and even of its truth he was less than sure.

The Spanish navy, clashing with that of England in West Indian seas, must have a hidalgo on its quarter-deck, or, by preference, a noble of higher rank, even though he might be a better judge of a lace cuff than a tarry rope. The English seamen were dogs in their own phrase, but they held their own, and enough more to suggest that they might be the better led.

Yet Sir Oliver, moving among men who were gathered from those of all Europe who were of a traditional pride of race, could observe also that breeding may be more than an idle word. Gentle nurture may not be barren in its results. Pride may be a sharp spur.

But Sir Oliver said nothing of what he thought, and Angelica's interest in the plebian Genoese was of a transient kind. She went on to enquire what station Francisco had been appointed to hold, if the *Curse of Islam* were to be idle against the quay.

"That is another matter that the Grand Master has wisely resolved. For, as you know, the honours of our Order are not passed from father to son, we having celibate vows, so that there is none of our knights who can have a son bearing his own name. And though Don Francisco is entered upon our rolls as one destined to take the vows when he is of a full age, yet it should be, both of courtesy and of use, when his uncle is here.

"Therefore, to avoid question of whether he should raise Don Manuel's pennon, or less than that, or in what degree he should serve, or whether he should take the vows in haste, on a day when there is much else to be done, the Grand Master has given him a separate command, and one suited to the eagerness of his youth, for it is one where he should be alert at all hours.

"He will have charge of the battery which has been placed below St. Angelo, at the water's edge, of which the purpose is to defend the great boom which guards the inner harbour where our ships will lie up."

"It is a post of great danger, or so it sounds?"

"It is a post of honour which, had it no danger, it would be unlikely to be. Those who would avoid danger should not be here. . . . Yet it may not be so at the first. For it is the inner basin it must defend, and that cannot be assailed till the outer harbour is won; and that is ours while St. Elmo stands; and I should say it is there, or else at the outer bastions of the Bourg, that the first weight of attack will fall."

Angelica thought of where this battery must be, which she had not seen. She was not yet as clear as she would later become as to the location of the fortified area, for she had walked little abroad except into the town, but she

thought that it must be near the angle which it was Sir Oliver's part to defend —that of the English who, except himself, were not there.

"It is a post to which our station is near?"

"It is closer than that. The place where the battery is now put is before the western salient of the position we hold. We should overshoot it toward the sea, and it would be our place to defend it from such attack, its own guns being pointed across our front to defend the boom which, itself, is somewhat beyond our view.

"It is exposed on the shore front, being beyond our walls. It is a battery newly made, after we had fixed the great boom: for its defence is a vital need."

Angelica asked no more about that, for she was answered enough. She saw that the way in which her cousin was handling the *Curse of Islam* must have been well approved for him to have been chosen for such command, he being so young. She saw also that it was likely that he had bought his own death. Yet the battery could not be attacked as yet. She must use that thought for what comfort she could.

She waked from her thoughts to the knowledge that Sir Oliver was speaking to her again.

"As you know," he said, "I have men under my command who are drawn from all lands, those of my own not being here, where many have left the faith, and those who have been steadfast have lost the lands they had. Now if, as I speak to any, it should seem to you that I am using my own tongue, it is not a thing at which to look twice, nor to remember when you have gone away."

She was puzzled at first, and then thought that she understood. "You may trust me," she said, "in that."

"So I do, or I had not spoken at all."

The fact was that there were a few English who were there under foreign names, being of the Catholic faith, and willing to help the Order at such a need; but they feared (in which they may have been wrong) that, if there should be proof of this, they would lose any lands they had, and their families might suffer alike. For the Order of St. John had been scourged enough when her father was on the throne, but Elizabeth had gone further than he, stripping any Knight of St. John that she could find in her realm till he was as bare as a new-born babe. Yet, as she watched Malta's defence, there is reason to think that she half-turned to another mood.

But these men went to their nameless graves, having no earthly honour for what they did.

CHAPTER XIV

MUSTAPHA PASHA sat his horse on the summit of Mount Calcara, from which a large part of the island of Malta could be surveyed. His chief officers were grouped around, for he had come to resolve how the attack on St. Elmo could best be made.

Like a map he saw the two great harbours spread out below, with the high tongue of land on which Valletta now stands, but which was known as Mount Sceberras then, a barren desolate rock, dividing their entrances, with St. Elmo's fort at its point. He saw that Piali was right in so far that neither harbour could be entered at all while St. Elmo stood, and it was true that it was not a large fort. It should be easy to take.

If it were down, the further north-western harbour, which was now empty, would give a safe retreat for the whole of the Turkish fleet; and the south-eastern one would be free for them to enter at a less risk, so that St. Angelo might be attacked both by land and sea.

He looked down on St. Angelo itself, with keen experienced eyes, being old in war and in all the lore of the taking of towns. He saw that to have St. Elmo would be little more than a wasting of life unless it should be a way to open the gate to the larger gain. He saw that the shape of the occupied harbour, with its out-jutting spurs of land and the basin between, in which the fleet had been moored, favoured defence, and his army had learnt something the day before of the strength of that defence on the landward side. Still, towns and castles had been taken before. Ships had been burnt in the harbours in which they lay. And it was said that there was a weak point in the bastioned wall that was the main defence of the Bourg. He looked round at a manacled man, who was guarded some paces behind, and called for him to be brought to his side.

Two days before, a party of a dozen of the Maltese knights had ridden out to destroy stragglers or scouts who might come too far from the Turkish lines. They had some success at first, but in the end they had been ambushed themselves by a force of Turkish infantry which had opened a heavy fire upon them from the shelter of the low stone walls, which were a continual feature of the more cultivated parts of the island. Leaning their arquebuses, which were longer and carried somewhat further than the Christian weapons, upon the walls, they were able to shoot with considerable accuracy, and the knights, having nothing to oppose but their lances, which were of little use on that broken ground, turned quickly to ride away.

There was a French knight among them, de la Riviere, who would have got clear, but looking back he saw a brother of Portugal, D'Elberne by name, fall from his horse. He was dragged by the stirrup for a time, after which the horse shook him off and fled in the haste of fear. Riviere turned and rode back.

Doing this, he drew the Turkish fire upon himself from all sides but he was not struck. He got down to find that he had returned to the aid of a dead man. D'Elberne was shot through the head: he could do nothing for him. He mounted again to ride off, and as he did so a bullet brought his horse down. He was roughly thrown and the weight of his arms made him slow to rise. When he did so, he found himself surrounded by Turks, who called on him to yield. So he must, having no choice.

He might have hoped for ransom or exchange, but he was taken before Mustapha, who thought he could be better used in another way. He was asked to tell of the strength of the Christian army, where it had mounted its guns, where its defences were weak and where strong. When he refused, he was put on the rack, and under that persuasion he began to talk. He gave much detailed information, including that the best place at which to attack the town was the station held by the Knights of Castile.

Mustapha, having learnt so much, thought it might be worth while to bring him along and hear more. Probably the taste of the rack he had already had would be sufficiently clear in his mind to render it needless to do more than hint at a second application.

"Where," he asked, "is that point which the Knights of Castile now hold in so weak a way?"

La Riviere showed no slackness to point it out. Indeed, what use would there have been in that? Over the wall the pennons of Castile blew in the wind. They could have been seen at a nearer view.

Mustapha looked long. He wished to be quite sure. But he was too old in war to be left in doubt. The Castile pennons floated over the curtain, bastion-flanked, where the Bourg line rested on the head of Calcara bay, showing no weakness at all. He saw that he had been fooled and mocked.

He turned round to the manacled prisoner, and a cruel fury was in his eyes. Few could have more control over face and voice than Mustapha Pasha when he dealt with men of his own race, and he would be subtle to hide his mind. Those who knew him best might doubt their power to guess whom he approved or whom he counted his foe. But there was no need of concealment here. His lip lifted to show yellow teeth over his beard. He spoke no word, but raised the baton he carried, and brought it down with all his force across the eyes of the French knight. Piali, standing by, gave a great laugh. He was amused that Mustapha had been beguiled, but he felt no kindness to Riviere for that. He carried a heavy staff when he climbed the hills, on which a man

cannot balance himself as easily as he has learned to do on his own deck. He brought it down on the captive's head with more force than Mustapha had used, being much stronger than he. Riviere fell at the blow. Being stunned, he did not know that the whole group of officers were belabouring him in turn, each emulating the rest in the strength of the blow he dealt.

Battered so, he was soon dead.

Mustapha said: "Let him be. We will have him back on the rack. He shall give better truth before I have done."

But, by God's good mercy, he spoke too late.

CHAPTER XV

THE Turkish artillery was said at this time to be the best in the world, which there is no reason to doubt. It had proved its worth on a score of battlefields in Eastern Europe: it had breached the walls of a score of towns. It was well served, its gunners being trained in the hard school of continual war.

Piali, looking down on St. Elmo's fort from Calcara's height, counted that it would be his in five days, if not less. It would be bombarded from the sea, where his galleys would be out of range of the Castle guns. He would build a battery on Mount Sceberras, which would bombard it from the land, and though that ridge was within the danger of St. Angelo's guns firing across the harbour, he thought that he could make his battery safe from them by erecting it somewhat on the further side of the ridge, which sloped down to St. Elmo in front and to the two harbours on either side, somewhat in the shape of the smooth back of a beast.

So it was agreed to be tried, and the battery was commenced with an effort that did not slacken when it had been found that it would be harder than was supposed at the first, and was taking a larger toll of the lives of men.

For it was found that the mountain was solid rock, into which it was too hard to dig, and having no soil on its face. It was rock which they could not easily trench. They must labour at first under the fire of St. Elmo's guns, and there was no surrounding material with which they might construct any defence. Every fascine, every earth-filled gabion, had to be dragged over the hills.

They built on the western side of the slope, which hid them, as they had designed, from St. Angelo's guns, but this had a defect which they should have foreseen, as perhaps they did. Had they planted their guns on the ridge's crest they would have been exposed to long-range fire from the castle, to which they could have replied in the same way, but they would also have commanded the water between the castle and fort and could have sunk any boat which had ventured to cross the harbour to comfort St. Elmo's garrison with reinforcements or other aid. As it was, the Grand Master could learn how they did and send them such support as he would.

The Turks toiled at this work for three days, under a constant fire from St. Elmo, to which they could make no reply. They may have worked the faster that they were erecting shelter for their lives, but the whole siege was destined to be carried on in a desperation either of haste or delay; the Grand Master

fighting for time and looking northward for the succour of a Christian continent that had paused to observe the strife, which it made no movement to aid, and the Turks toiling to make an end before such aid should appear.

During these days the Turks had less help from the fleet than Piali had thought to give, for it was found that the St. Elmo guns could outrange all but a few of the longest culverins that the galleys bore; and while they could have no support from the land, to have allowed his ships to close in would have been to risk them overmuch for any hurt they would be likely to do.

St. Elmo was a star-shaped fort, having four salients, the landward side being broken into bastion form by small rounded flanks. On the seaward side it had a high cavalier, with an intervening ditch, the guns of which could either fire out to sea, or landward, over the lower fort. On the western side, overlooking Marsa Muscetto harbour, was the detached ravelin, or lunette, which the knights had been building during the last days before the Turkish fleet came into sight.

The fort was small, and there might well be a confident hope in the Turkish ranks that it would not endure many hours when they should have prepared their attack; but it had somewhat more strength than appeared from the same cause that had hindered the construction of the opposing battery: the site being of solid rock, the Knights, being in less haste than the Turks, when they had first commenced to build it, had sought less to erect it upon the granite their mattocks met than to excavate it therefrom.

Yet the Turkish gunners thought it would be a simple matter to lay it flat when, their emplacements being ready on the morning of Thursday the 24th, they brought up ten heavy guns and trained them upon the fort.

These guns, which the ox-teams pulled, were all mounted on wheels, and were the best and newest of the siege artillery of that day, having been reckoned equal not merely to blowing St. Elmo down but to the reduction of St. Angelo itself. When the Grand Master knew that they were being pointed the way they were, he was well-content, let their effect on St. Elmo be what it might. Not that he was indifferent to that. But he counted days till relief should come. He did not mean that the Order should leave Malta as it had left Rhodes. And though St. Elmo were blown to the sky, while St. Angelo stood it was plain that they would not be shifted at all.

The Turkish battery consisted of ten guns of a like pattern, each throwing a solid ball of eighty pounds weight, and three columbines of somewhat older and lighter make, throwing a sixty-pound shot; and, in addition to these, there was a single basilisk, a monstrous cannon throwing a ball of one hundred and twenty pounds, but for this the gunners had little love, for it was slow and cumbrous to work, and frequently needing repair, having very complicated parts, both for directing its fire and for controlling recoil.

The battery itself could not be seen by those who crowded St. Angelo's walls to watch, but, as the guns opened, the flashes shone over the ridge, followed by the heavy thunder of their discharge; and, for the first time, St. Elmo answered with every gun she could bring to bear.

For till then, her guns had been used in a spasmodic way, firing at times at any mark that might show or sweeping the battery position after a lull, such as would cause the Turks to grow careless and bold, and so assist to their own deaths; for though there was a large store of powder and shot, both in castle and fort, yet there was a limit to what should be fired away at less than a certain mark.

But now St. Elmo replied in an intensity of desperation as the iron tempest hammered her splintering stones; and meanwhile the day, which had opened with some light rain, became misty and dull under a low grey sky. Black clouds of sulphurous smoke hung over battery and fort, and would not shift in the windless air. The gun-flashes showed more brightly, as they pierced the inferno from which they came.

As the day passed the mist thickened, and in the growing gloom the guns faltered and ceased.

It was after that, in the late afternoon, that Angelica sat alone in Sir Oliver's room, where she might most often be found, for it was not only that it was there that her work and her duty lay: it was there that she felt at peace, as one being among friends and secure.

So she worked more than she need, as giving a reason for where she was—when most men would be abroad—and Sir Oliver, sending his scribes right and left as occasion came, gave no such errands to her, which might be explained by the rank she claimed and the dress she wore; and that she was of a different sort from them was very easy to see.

She was of changing moods at this time, having much loneliness, from which would rise a timid fear of what she had done and a great doubt of what its end would be likely to be in this place which was staged for death, and among men of strange nations and famous names, who had taken celibate vows, and most of whom were much older than she. For besides Sir Oliver, who was kind but full of greater affairs, she had no confident friend, so that she was tempted from hour to hour to seek Francisco and tell him all, and yet had a doubt of how much sympathy or blame she would have, which held her back, for it could always be done on the next day.

Yet she had finer moods in which she was less aware of herself or of her own weakness and fear, and more of the great drama in which she moved and in which a small part had become hers; for she saw that she had come to one of the great days of the world, which was to judge how Christian Europe was yet to fare against the rising tide of the Turkish power.

For though the Moors had been thrown from Spain fifty years before, yet, almost from the same day, the dark-skinned infidels had advanced over Eastern Europe like a creeping tide which there was no power that could stay. And the Christian lands had become weak with the blight of internal strife; and while they blasphemed their faith with tortures of stake and rack, the cloud advanced, and was little heeded except by those who were near to the place where its shadow fell. And furthest of all, the English Elizabeth, ruthless, bold and mean, called it a blessing of God that the Turks were active against the Catholic lands.

And so now, in this island arena, in the very centre of all, the test came, when a band of knights—who were not of one country, but had gathered from all parts of the Christian lands to be over-matched by the great host of their infidel foes—strove to keep the Cross afloat over their walls a sufficient time to bring the rescue that had been pledged, and that Europe was well able to give. . . .

It was an hour when the daylight should still have been full in this later May, but the mist had become so dense that Angelica had called for the cresset-candles to be lighted along the walls, when the curtains at the main entrance were flung apart, and a knight whom she did not know strode into the room.

He was richly and gaily attired, wearing light armour of damascened steel, but not enough to hide the under colours of trunk and hose, yellow and olive-green, elaborately embroidered and pinked in a somewhat fantastic way. He had the manner of one who can give orders in the assurance that he need not wait to see them obeyed.

He glanced along the room, and asked abruptly: “Is Sir Oliver here?”

Angelica was annoyed at the manner in which this question was put, showing neither the quality of courtesy which was due to her in her true person, nor that which she had assumed, but character and training combined to prevent her from answering in the same way. She said coldly: “That is to be seen.”

The reply drew the knight’s gaze on herself in a way she could have spared, though she took it with composure enough. Anger gave place as he looked to a change of mood, bringing a more courteous tone. They were both puzzled by whom they met. Angelica observed that he had walked in as though the Castle were his, but she did not know that there was anyone besides the Grand Master of whom she need stand in dread.

“I would know,” he said, “where Sir Oliver Starkey may best be found. Or if he will return here in a short time.”

“I must know to whom I speak before answering that. It is not usual to enter here without your name being first announced.”

“I am La Cerda,” he said, as though that explained all. “I would know by whom I am asked.” The tone had become reserved, but unsure. He was more puzzled than she as to whom it would be who answered him thus in the Andalusian tongue, and it was hard to guess who might be met in the Malta of that day.

“I am Don Garcio of Murcia.”

“You are . . . ? I know Murcia well.” La Cerda did not look less puzzled than before. Angelica had sufficient discretion to keep silent, making it difficult for him to ask more, and at that moment Sir Oliver returned.

His appearance recalled to La Cerda’s mind the purpose for which he came. It was a question about a horse’s food, which it appeared that money had been unable to get.

When the Grand Master had seen that the advance of the Turkish army would divide St. Angelo from the little army which he had decided to leave loose in the island, he had given a general order that the knights’ horses were to be left outside, so that Marshal Couppier might mount as many of his men as their number would allow. These horses would increase the mobility of the Maltese militia, while they would have been of no use in the town. Most of the knights had surrendered them without demur, though it may be supposed that they were not pleased. But La Cerda had thought that such orders were not for him; or, at least, not to be applied to a horse that was his, and which he valued and loved. He had ridden in and put the horse, as before, in the stable where he lodged in the town. And now he had been told by his groom that he could get neither corn nor hay. They were rationed by Sir Oliver Starkey’s order, and a proffer of money had been of no avail.

“I know well,” he said, striving to speak with a courtesy which it was not easy to feel, “that things are done at such times as these such as are not meant, orders being applied in a wrong way, and so I came to yourself.”

Sir Oliver, listening in his own way, which was quiet and cool, thought that there might be another explanation than that. He might have come himself because his pride would not risk a rebuff which his squire would know. It was trouble of a kind with which he must often deal. La Cerda had a great power in his own land. He was used to command, as were half the knights who had now come from the ends of Europe to serve as little more than privates in this defence. And in spite of, or perhaps because of that, the Grand Master was resolved that the obedience he exacted, the discipline he maintained, should be of the strictest kind. It was as though he had to command a regiment, each of whom was a general in his own right. If he should be lax at all, where would it end? It would not be easy to tell.

Sir Oliver did not give a direct reply. He said: “I have been your friend before now.”

The remark recalled the incident of a month ago, when La Cerda's mistress had left the turret chamber, to be embarked without the Grand Master's eyes being turned her way. La Cerda saw the implication of that, but the reminder was another cause of wrath brought to his mind, and the knowledge that there might be more trouble ahead, of a kind which Sir Oliver was not likely to guess.

"So you were," he said, "and it had my thanks. But that there should have been cause! And to think that I was one of those who gave him votes that he could have had no hope to obtain! And what are we now but the leather beneath his feet?"

La Cerda spoke of that which all knew. For when De Lisle Adam had died there had been stronger candidates for the Grand Master's place, and no one had thought of La Valette as a likely man. La Cerda would have called his own the much better claim, though he had not attempted to win the prize. But those who have strong friends may have strong foes. Rival factions quarrelled and strove, and yet all agreed that the Order was so reduced and in so dangerous a pass that the Grand Master must be one who would be accepted by all. And so, at last, they had compromised the claims of rivals too haughty to give way to each other, by the unanimous election of a member of whom few had thought at the first, as would often happen in the election of Popes at that time, from the same cause. And La Valette had found, to the amazement of others, and no doubt his own, that, having come to give his vote to a man of more wealth and much wider fame, he was the Grand Master himself.

"I would not say that. He regards us all as himself, being vowed to a cause which is much greater than we."

"So we are agreed. That is why we are here. It will be death for most, if not all. Yet that is a poor reason why we should have no joy while we live."

"Need we argue on that?"

"I will say no more beyond this, that I have been wroth at times that I should have so meanly withdrawn. I am, as you know, of a wide rule. In my own land there is none who will cross my will. I come here, offering life and wealth, and I find that my very chamber is not secure. I was told that I must cast off the *amie* who shared my bed."

"My lord," Sir Oliver replied in a patient way, rather as one who would wait till the other had spent his words than as having any aim to convince, "you will allow that we have taken celibate vows?"

"We are vowed that we will not wed. To ask more is to ask too much. I am not alone when I say that. Do you think there would be many to blame, should you put the chamber where Venetia lodged to the same use, as I daresay that you do?"

The words were randomly said, but as he spoke them his eyes fell on the

slight figure of the young noble (if such he were) who had given a name which was hard to place, and the idea, which was after the custom of the time, though not of the stricter code La Valette sought to enforce, suddenly took shape as a very probable thing.

"But perhaps," he added boldly, "I say too much, speaking of that which I should not see."

Sir Oliver showed no surprise, nor any sign of offence. He answered in the same cool and patient tone as before: "You may say as you will, for my manner of life is known. But you came to speak of a horse, as I understood, and we have wandered therefrom."

"I ask no more than an order for fodder and corn, which the beast needs."

"You ask something which I am unable to give."

"What! Shall it starve?"

"Surely, no. It can be sent to the stalls here, where it will be fed with the rest."

"Then there are other horses allowed here?"

"There are horses that did not go out of the town."

"And there is this one that has come back. Why should it not be fed at my own place? I will pay what charges you set."

"I cannot offer more than I do. It is a horse that should not be here."

"I will not consent. I will speak to Valette."

"You can do as you will. It will be less trouble to me. But I do not think you are wise."

"Would he not be wroth that you have offered as much as you already have?"

Sir Oliver's eyebrows were slightly raised as he replied, but his voice kept the same level tone. "Do you think I exceed my trust? I should tell him what I have offered, and why. But I conceive that it is my part to see that he is not disturbed by the smaller things, when he had shown me his mind."

La Cerda made no answer to that. He stood in an evident indecision, wisdom fighting with pride. Perhaps it was because his eyes fell on Angelica again that Sir Oliver spoke now in a different tone, though he gave no sign that he saw.

"My lord," he said, in a brief way, "I have given more time to this than I should. I came here, having many matters upon my hands, which were not meant for delay. I ask your pardon. You must do as you will; but I cannot talk more."

He added in mitigation of the curtness of this rebuff: "It is this mist which is spreading over both land and sea which is causing fresh orders to be sent out, such as I have the Grand Master's instructions to draw. It is a matter which should not wait."

He had, in fact, a cipher letter of much secrecy to prepare, which was to be sent to Marshal Couppier through the Turkish lines during the night, if the mist should hold, though he was too discreet to say that, even in his own room. But the mention of the mist brought another thought to La Cerda's mind, on which he had already made his opinion known to his friends while the wine was passed and on which many agreed. He spoke now with the impulse of an anger that rose from another cause.

"The mist will hold during the night. So I am told by those who know these seas better than I. It is a saint's boon to us, if there were wisdom to use the chance. I would see St. Elmo blown up before dawn, so that there should not a stone stand, and every man could be brought safely away. There will not be one alive in two days from now if they are left there. They will be lost for no gain, and our foes heartened by a success that they should not have. But he asks counsel of none, or if he does, he goes his own way in the next hour. Does he think we are babes in war, because he was made Grand Master the way he was?"

Sir Oliver listened to this with an impassive face. He might have resented the tone of the allusion to the Master they were all sworn to obey, but he knew that La Cerda gave voice to an opinion which many held who had no grievance to warp their minds, and who, as La Cerda had truly said, were not children in war.

"It is a matter," he began, "which can be argued another way. If you will think——"

La Cerda broke in: "I have heard it argued enough, but there is one thing you cannot change. We have a strong fortress here, and we send our knights to one that is weak, where they will be more easy to slay. And when they are dead, as it is sure that they will soon be, we must defend these walls with a lesser force and against foes whom we have taught that we can overcome."

Angelica moved with a purpose that they should turn and see what she alone had observed. For, as the words were said, the Grand Master had stood at the door, and his face was black with wrath. And yet, though that which he had heard might be cause enough, she doubted that it were all, for she had thought his looks had been much the same as he had come in, and he was not one who would be likely to listen behind a curtain which he delayed to lift.

Now he advanced into the room, and though his anger was plain to see, yet when he spoke it was with restraint, and with the dignity which he did not lose, even when he toiled with his hands to make St. Elmo's ravelin strong.

"I may be the worst Master that this Order has ever had, but I should be more feeble of mind than I am if I did not know that there can be but one leader in time of war, though he may hear the counsel of all. And while I live, and am Master here, if I find but one who shall murmur against my rule, or

who obeys me with lagging feet while this siege shall last, I will hang him within that hour, though he be of my own blood.

"As to St. Elmo, it will stand, as I think, till it have asked a price which even those who may take it at last will think somewhat too high; and if it fall, it will be to the shame of all Christian lands."

He paused, and went on in an even quieter voice than before: "There were no more than two killed and a few hurt at the cannonading to-day, and the fort has suffered little that can not be mended before the dawn. So De Broglio makes report. We had, it seems, the more accurate range, and have done more harm than we took, though I would not say that to-morrow will end in the same way.

"The dead, and those who are sore hurt, will be brought over during the night, and will be replaced, that the garrison shall not be less as the days go by.

"I send the best men that I have, and you will be one to-night. You will be ready within three hours. Nor should you take this amiss, for I send one whom I know to be a most valiant knight."

La Cerda listened with a set jaw, but said nothing at all. When he was out in the air, striding back to his own lodging, he said, half-aloud, when there could be no one to hear: "So he would have my death for that word. . . . Yet it may turn out in another way."

When he entered his own door he gave command for the horse to be sent to the castle stalls, and within three hours he was in a boat which felt its way through the mist to St. Elmo's point.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN La Cerda had gone, the Grand Master said: "He goes with bitter heart, thinking that he is sent to a sure death, and that, when I do that, I abuse my power. Yet I suppose that we shall all go by the same road before the winter is here. . . . Garcio has sent his reply!"

"The *Bay of Naples* is in?"

"Yes. Salvago brings fair words, and this scroll." He looked round as he spoke to see who might be there to overhear what was said, but Angelica had withdrawn, thinking that his words would not be directed to her, and not wishing to be recalled to his mind with consequences which were not easy to guess.

Sir Oliver took the scroll and read, after a preamble of compliment which was in the custom of the time, and meant nothing at all, though its absence would have meant much:

"You charge me that I have not sent an army by this day such as could have made it vain for the Turks to land, and turned them empty away, as you say that I pledged to do; but for this I cannot take a reproach, even had it been in my power to muster so large a host in so narrow a time, for I must recall that which you cannot have overthought, to wit, that you were to send ships as I men, which you will not say was beyond your power.

"Yet, on my side, I assemble strength. By mid-June, by the fifteenth day, being but three weeks from now, if your navy be here with speed, I trust to send such a force as will grieve them sore and draw them from round your walls.

"Nor do I doubt that you can show them a bold repulse till that rescue shall come, having such walls as you have, and so goodly stored, and with such valiance of knights, of whom it may be said without vaunt that they are the flower of the lands of Christ."

There was more beyond that, but it was in those words that the core of the letter lay.

Sir Oliver read it without heat, for its purport did not surprise him at all, though the excuse it made had not been forethought, even by him.

"It is a lie," he said, "wearing a true cloak."

"And I have thought Garcio friend!"

“And so I think that he is. Is there better by word of mouth?”

“He toils ever to serve our need. They put up prayers to the saints, morn and eve, in Del Gesu church.”

“The scroll may be for Philip’s eyes rather than ours.”

“So I have no doubt that it is. Do you see the meaning of that?”

“I see that we must trust to our own arms, under the high favour of God. But I have thought that from the first. I put no trust in the King of Spain.”

“In which you may think more than is true, being English-born. Even those of your race who are yet of a constant faith have little love for that land.”

Sir Oliver did not dispute that. He asked: “Has Salvago brought the grenades?”

“I have not asked. We may suppose that he has. He says that there are two score of our knights, and many hundreds of volunteers at Palermo, and nearer places along the coast, who are waiting to cross to our aid, and it is likely that they will be here before dawn if this mist be far spread. I am of a mind to raise the boom, and have ready our swifter ships that they may sally out if it lift, and be a guard to the harbour mouth. . . . Oliver, you must send one to St. Elmo, by the boat that crosses to-night, who will take message by word of mouth, telling De Broglio and D’Egueras both that no rescue is near and that they must hold those walls to the last stone and the last man; they must be held to the last hour that they can, leaving the count of the cost to me. . . . Have you one you can surely trust? You must go yourself if you doubt that. You would return before dawn. You may say what you will of Spain, so that it be clear that it has not come from my mouth, and will not go beyond them. . . . But they must hold that fort, though it were against the fiery legions of Hell.

“If there come no succour at all, we may fall at last, but I have in mind that we shall so fall as to shame the world which is called by the name of Christ.”

“Well,” Sir Oliver said, “we are not fallen as yet. I will go myself unless I can send one of whom I am wholly sure. But I must know first if the bombs have come.”

La Valette said: “All that I can trust to you. I will order the ships.” He went out.

Sir Oliver summoned aid. He saw that there was much to be done. He sent messengers right and left. He thought that he must go to St. Elmo himself, and he would have all things arranged so that he would not be missed. Few men guessed how much rested upon himself, but he might soon be missed if he were not there. He had little leisure to think of what La Cerda had hinted or said, yet he gave it a thought, and from that thought an idea came which he rejected at first, but when he weighed it a second time it had a better look than before.

After that, when his room was clear, he summoned a page. “Ask Don

Garcio if he will come here on an urgent cause."

The page knocked on Angelica's door and had no response. After a time he decided that she was not there, and did what she had told him for such a case, and by which he had found her before. He went to the turret-roof, where she was making a habit to walk, rather than to wander too much in the streets of the crowded town.

She looked up to a clear sky in which the stars were brighter because moon-rise was yet distant by two hours. The mist lay low on the water and drifted somewhat, rising at times like a sea round the turret walls. At times, at some places, it would lie so thinly that she could see the slow movements of lights upon the harbour waters beneath, where ships moved, as they did that night, not only there but across the open spaces of sea, groping through the gloom with a double fear, lest a light shown or a warning bell might bring foes as ruthless as shoal or rock, and of a more active hate.

For Salvago had been right when he had told that many would come from Sicily during the night, in the kindly cloak of the mist, which would have been called a peril in time of peace. They came in boats of all kinds, in small swift galleys, but most of all in the light feluccas such as Salvago had used, which were built only for speed, carrying no arms of weight, but being long and low, with rowers' benches along the whole deck from bow to rudder, and a wide lateen sail to give support to the oars when the wind was good.

There were few that failed to come safely through, for the most part of the Turkish fleet lay at anchor in Marsa Scirocco Bay, and even the lighter galleys, ever hunting for prey, were loth to venture far in such mist and in waters they did not know. And so, when the mist rose at the dawn, and with no more than some distant booming of guns and one or two running fights which had little fruit, there were forty-two Knights of St. John and about seven hundred of other sorts who had landed, either on St. Angelo's quay or at other places along the coast, showing that there were men in the world of that day who would give their lives for a cause, having a better blood than moved in the cold hearts of its kings. . . .

Angelica heard the words "for an urgent cause," and did not doubt what it must mean. La Valette had spoken of her to Sir Oliver, or else he to him; or perhaps Don Manuel had come on the ship that had just arrived. She did not know whether she would be glad of that, but it was with a sense of crisis that she went down, which was not removed by the question that Sir Oliver asked.

"You were with La Cerda before I came. Did he doubt who you are?"

"He had a doubt, as I thought, but was not sure."

"It is a doubt that should not be there, for your own peace. We may give him cause to see that it is not as he would be likely to guess. I have a message which must be sent to St. Elmo to-night. If I kept a woman here, should I

choose her for such an errand as that?"

Angelica laughed, being quick to see what he meant, and in a great relief that he had nothing different to say.

"I suppose not. But I must suppose that that is what you purpose to do. I am very willing to go."

"You must go in La Cerda's boat, and will be back before dawn. You will go on a mission of great import and trust, but which it will be simple to do. You must put laughter aside, and listen to me with great care.

"I shall give you no writing but this." (He handed her a short note which read: "The bearer of this will bring an order from the Grand Master; and what else he may say is from myself, even as though it were writ here." He took this back when she had read it, signed and sealed it, and gave it to her again.) "The order and the message are for the two Governors of St. Elmo, whom you must ask to see together, which will be accorded with ease, the superscription of that which you bear showing that it is to be delivered to them.

"The Grand Master's order which you will then give is no more than they have been instructed before, that they must hold their ground to the last stone and the last hour, not counting the cost, which will be for his thought rather than theirs.

"But you will add this, as coming from me alone: The Viceroy (whose name you have taken for yours, though not as of Toledo by a good chance) has pledged himself that he will be here by mid-June, with a strong host to our aid; but they will give no credence to that, for he has made a condition which we shall not keep, as he knows well.

"His letter is so written, as I suppose, that it may please his master, your Spanish king, to whom a copy will be on the way before now. And who would trust Philip of Spain (you must not be vexed that I say what is known to all) must be as simple as a nun's prayer.

"You will tell them that when Don Garcio was here, about a month before now, and he was promising all the aid we could need, he asked that he might have our galleys if we should ever be besieged as we are; for, he said with truth, they would only be laid up here, they not being of a number that could face such a fleet as the Turks would send; while, if they were added to those he has, they would be very useful to him.

"To this the Grand Master agreed, for it had a fair sound, and he knew that it would please the Viceroy more than a little, he being one who cares more for sea-power than for anything that the land can yield, and he was willing to do him all the pleasure he could, both because he was seeking help at his hand and that they had been friends from an old time.

"Had Don Garcio come, and with such an array as he ought to have brought, or had he sent it under other command, it is certain that the galleys

would have been his.

"Indeed, there are two that he now has, for they have been cruising and had orders already given that they should put into Messina rather than here, which they have done, and their captains are instructed to serve the Viceroy's will as though they were ordered by us.

"But what he now professes that we had pledged is that we should deliver the whole fleet to his hand before he should be active toward our help, which was neither required on their side nor is it now possible for us to do. For we cannot send the ships without crews, and with enough men for the oars, either free or slaves, and it would be what we cannot spare, with the Turks already about our walls, and in the number of which you know. Also, if the ships are laid up we may use their guns to make stronger our walls of stone.

"So you may say that it is my thought (but not using the Grand Master's name) that this is no more than a false word put in to provide excuse at a later day, against an expected default on their side. I say that the fifteenth of June will come and go, and there will be no help from your Spanish king, neither will he allow Don Garcio to expend any large sum in our cause, such as must be found if an army is to be gathered, and fully furnished, and shipped here, when the hope of Turkish spoil is not great, they not being in their own land.

"And if we say that the Viceroy is the Grand Master's friend, and perhaps ours, then it is only more sure how this letter should be read; for he must be writing in a way which he would not do of his own will.

"In a word, you may say that the Grand Master sent his own nephew to Palermo, and Commander Salvago of Genoa also, to urge that Sicily should be speedy to our relief, and to learn the truth of what to expect, whether sweet or sour, and this is what he has got. Which is to say that King Philip will not spend his crowns in our cause unless he be more assured that we cannot defend ourselves than he is now; or we must contrive to die in no more than a gradual way, that he may have time to observe."

"I know not," Angelica replied, "if you are right concerning our king, of whom my uncle is used to speak in a different way, but I shall carry your words, while I hope they may be wrong, as we all must."

"We may hope what we will," Sir Oliver replied, "but you will find that what I say will be lightly believed, even though one to whom you will speak was born in your own land. . . . Have you a good cloak for the night?"

"Yes. I have all I need."

"Then I will meet you upon the quay. By which time I hope to have something to send of a better kind."

He was right on that point, for he learnt within an hour's time that the *Bay of Naples* had brought the consignment of bombs which he had been anxious to have. These were made of porcelain, and fitted with wildfire of such a kind

that it stuck where it might be scattered when the crock burst, giving torturing burns, if not death, to those among whom it fell. These bombs, which were made to be flung by hand, had been accounted very terrible weapons before gunpowder had confused the making of munitions throughout the world, and were still widely used. They were made at the great arsenal at Venice, and when La Valette had ordered two thousand of them, the lord of the arsenal, being friendly to him, had put the order in hand, and even sent the bombs on as far as Palermo, before any payment was made; but beyond that he could not be expected to go, for, if he did, it was likely that the Grand Master, being at so urgent a need, would prefer others in payment whose goods were held back for the sight of gold. And though the Order had a reputation for wealth, and for paying the bonds it gave, yet if the Turks should be victors at this time, and Malta lost, it was not certain but that it would be destroyed; nor would it be easy to guess where it might be found by one who had a debt to collect. Even great kings, being rulers of settled realms, did not always find credit easy to get when they were at war in those days, and Philip of Spain himself, at a later time, when he willed to assemble an armada to attack the coasts of the English queen, was to be delayed for a full year (to its ruin at last) because the Baltic merchants would not give him a spar, nor a coil of hemp, till they had his cash in their tills.

The master of the arsenal at Venice had given orders that these bombs should be at the Grand Master's orders, either if the cash were paid or if Don Garcio would give a pledge in the name of the King of Spain. But the Viceroy replied, with the fair words that he used to all, that he had no power except he wrote to Seville, which was a matter of time; and the Grand Master could not spare such a sum from more urgent needs till he had the gift of the Papal crowns, after which Sir Oliver had only waited for a safe chance to get the bombs over the sea, for it would have been evil indeed had they fallen a prey to the Turks, and been flung at last from the wrong hands.

But now the *Bay of Naples* had brought them safely to port, and Sir Oliver would send six score of them to St. Elmo on this night (not risking a larger supply at once, for fear it might not endure, and that there should be no means of getting them back), and these cases were brought to the quay from which the boats, being three in all, would put out into the mist.

La Cerda came to the quay with some retinue of his household servants, who bore his effects, but these were lighter than might have been supposed by one who knew his estate and the luxury in which he was accustomed to live, for he had said to the one esquire whom he was taking with him (as he had no choice but to do): "Gaston, we go, as I suppose, to the deaths of fools, for such are the ends of those who let life slip for less than the full price that they should be able to ask. But there is nothing better to do, for my honour has been

caught in a net which I cannot otherwise break; and you and I must eat of the same dish. So we travel light, for we shall be soon back, if at all, and in such a plight, if I know war, that what we take will be left behind.

"But if you should take a wound, though it be but a broken tooth or a skinned heel, you may claim to be sent back, and I tell you before you ask that you will have a warrant from me, for I think that both you and I will be of more use alive for the defence of St. Angelo's walls than dead in St. Elmo's ditch, as we are more likely to be.

"The Grand Master is an honest and valiant man (as I have told you before), and while he lives our flag will fly, as I think; but he has neither practice nor skill in the crafts of war, nor will he listen to those who are more subtle of mind."

He added, half aloud, as one who would have his thought heard but does not invite reply: "If any man should say he has the brains of a hen they would do the bird a great wrong." And being one who liked to distribute his wit, and perceiving, by the torches' light, that there was a discreet smile on the somewhat stolid face of the squire, he entered the waiting boat gaily enough, though he was one who valued life more than a knight of St. John should be expected to do, and in spite of certain things he had left behind.

As the oars dipped and the boat slid into the mist, to be followed by one bringing the knights' pennon-lances and sundry baggage and stores, and another bringing the wild-fire bombs, La Cerda was so much occupied by his own thoughts that he gave little regard to his companions, who were two knights (the one busy with Latin prayers, and the other looking eagerly forward into the mist, with his sword lying across his knees), and the slight, cloaked form of the secretary who had roused his curiosity in Sir Oliver's room.

But as the boat grounded on St. Elmo's beach, where a flame of torches guided them to the land, and he splashed ashore, he looked back into the face of one on whom the torch-light shone, as she moved to jump from the bow in more caution than he, and there was a moment when he did not doubt that he looked into the face of a girl, and one of more beauty than most. But the next moment she leapt into the water, and came to land lightly enough, and he saw that it was the young noble (as he called himself, and as he appeared to be) with whom he had some words in Sir Oliver's room. He thought him girlish again, as he had done before, but, beyond that, Angelica's appearance in that place had the effect which Sir Oliver had foreseen. Indeed, La Cerda's thought went beyond the fact on the road it had been meant that it should take, for he supposed that Don Garcio of Murcia (but of what family could he be?) had been numbered like himself among the reinforcements for St. Elmo's garrison, and that that had come from the mere chance that he had been in Sir Oliver's

room when the Grand Master appeared. “Does he send all to their deaths here on whom his eyes happen to fall,” he wondered, “or was if because the youth overheard what was said to me, and Valette thought he would be best out of the way?”

But he did not dwell on this thought, for the next moment he was surrounded by knights he knew, being one who had many friends. Also, he was a man of a great repute, and they were glad that he should be raising his pennon beside their own; and, beyond that, he had the name of one who was not without some love for himself and was both wary and shrewd, so that it would seem to all that his presence there made the fort’s defence to be a sound measure of war.

But, in fact, they were in good heart enough, for most of them had been prepared for a desperate strife, and this first day that the Turkish battery had opened fire they had suffered much less than their expectations had been, which was partly because the gunners had been at fault in their range at times, and partly that the fort was so deeply delved from the living rock, and most of all because the mist had come up from the sea while the day was still young.

La Cerda went off with his friends; and Angelica, when she said that she had come from the Grand Master with a message for the Governor’s ears, was led by a different way, along a covered passage which flambeaux lit, and came to a chamber within the rock where De Broglio was seated alone.

She saw a short, corpulent man who was past his prime, and with the front of one who ate too much, and drank more. He looked half-soldier, half-monk, and both in a jovial way. He had a fringe of white hair, but his eyebrows were heavy and black over eyes of the same colour, which were still bright and alert. He feared little on earth, and nothing either in heaven or hell, which may have been why he was somewhat more at home with a jest than a prayer. Now he sat at ease, after toil, with a tankard beside his hand, and with his trunk-hose unbuttoned to give his belly more space than it had had during the day.

Angelica might suppose that he would not have received her in that way had he known her for what she was, but she had learnt in the last three weeks that there were many things which had been beyond the horizon of her previous life, which must now be accepted without surprise if she were to sustain her part in a natural way.

De Broglio took the letter in a careless hand. He must know first who his visitor was, and have his comfort assured: “The boat,” he said, “can wait well enough. There is no need to stand thus. There is no hurt in a bench, be your legs as young as they may. And Sir John should be abed before you can get back. He should not require your answer before the dawn.”

Angelica had a moment’s doubt as to whom he might mean, and how much of herself he might be likely to know, but it was no more than a baseless fear,

such as must come often to those who wear a disguise; for, as the conversation went on, she found that when he talked of Sir John, it was the Grand Master he meant, he having known La Valette in much earlier days, so that he would always be Sir John to him, and sometimes John alone in a careless phrase.

He did not press the point when he found that Don Garcio was not disposed to drink, for he was easy with others, as with himself; but he explained that he was driven to much consumption of wine while he had been in St. Elmo's fort, the only water supply being from a well they had sunk, and that being brackish at times, which was not surprising, they being so close to the shore.

He read the letter at last, and said: "It is a message to the Governors that you bring? Well, you must be content with one less, except you have more patience than you first showed. D'Egueras is in the ravelin, or the mist. He counts sentries, and sets them far out from the wall, where they will get an ague before the dawn. It is very well, though I have told him that the Turks will not come at this time, for I know their ways. And, if they should, they would do no good to themselves. We have but to keep a good watch on the walls. The loss would be to those who should try climbing the scarp, which is a thing I have never loved, either by darkness or day. But it was a kind thought of Sir John to send D'Egueras to me. He is in all places at once. He is one who is never still. My shoulders cannot ache while he is here, for they have no load."

He read the scroll while he talked thus, and laid it down with a look on his face as of one who deals in a good-humoured way with the fussing of fools.

"Now what," he asked, "has Sir John to say that is of such moment that it must be brought thus in the night? And what is Oliver's word, that is not from him?"

Angelica gave the message with which she had been charged, but with a sense that it had been set on too high a note, the passionate intensity of La Valette's mood seeming to be rebuffed in a careless, almost contemptuous way, as one may humour a child.

"The Grand Master will have," she said, "that St. Elmo be held to the last stone and the last man, not regarding the cost, which is for his casting alone."

"Well," de Broglio said, stretching his hand for another drink, "you can tell him to lose no sleep over that, nor to shorten yours. For what else are we here? Does he think we shall clear out in the night, or ask Piali to dine? But that is John's way. I warrant there has not been a jest from his lips since Mustapha came, nor perhaps from when he put on his Grand Master's robes, it is six years since. Not that there is much loss in that, for he jests ill."

There was a twinkling amusement in the glance he gave Angelica as he said this, making it easy to forget that they were in a little separate fort upon

which the whole might of the Turkish army was being turned, both from land and sea; but his next words showed that his humour was not the obtuseness of one too stupid to see the danger in which he stood.

"As to the last man, if Sir John will be counselled by me (which I do not say that he needs) it will come to the last stone before that, for he must keep us supplied. You can tell him that we should have a somewhat greater force than we have now—not to work the guns, for which we have more than enough, but to repel assaults, which may soon be made in great force. And you can tell him that I will find shelter for all he sends, for we are still delving the rock. We cannot burrow too low when our walls shake, as they will when they have been battered enough; and, besides that, it is better that men should work than sit idly, waiting their time to die.

"And he can send as he will, either by night or day (as we can send the wounded to him) so long as the Turks mount their guns only on the west side of the hill, as Piali is doing now. You can say that we have not much to fear while he is directing the siege. He is an ox, with an ox's brains. Had he more wit where to mount a gun, he could do us tenfold the harm that we are likely to suffer now.

"But if Sir John would give us all the aid that he can, he should throw up the mouths of his longer guns and fire over the hill. He is not likely to hit more than the mountain, which will not mind, but he will cause the infidel rogues to feel an itch on their right sides. They will ever be looking up, and they cannot do us much harm while they are jumping about. . . . And now what has Oliver got to say more?"

"Sir Oliver would have you know that the *Bay of Naples* is back. It sailed, as I suppose you will know, bearing the Grand Master's nephew, and——"

"It sailed for some wild-fire bombs! Has it brought those?"

"Yes. Sir Oliver——"

"That should have been said first. Not that they will be needed to-night. But they will be worth more than another hundred of men."

"There were some brought over to-night."

"Oliver is a good man. I would drink to him now, but I have taken enough, and I would not be caught in the wrong mood at a sudden chance, such as may come ever in time of war. Now you shall tell me the talk of nephews and knights, and of what Sir John thinks, but he dare not say."

"The Grand Master sent his nephew and Commander Salvago to the Viceroy to set out the great force of the Turks, and the urgent strait in which Malta is placed thereby, and to enquire by which day he could be assured that relief would come.

"He has replied with a written word, naming the fifteenth of June as the day on which he will have an army upon our shores——"

“Which I am to be assured that he will not do?”

“He says that there was a condition that our ships should be sent to him, for which he still waits.”

De Broglio met this statement with a burst of laughter that filled the room.

“Was Sir John wroth? I would have gone helmless to-morrow to see his face when he read that.”

“He did not look pleased, but I have no message on that from him. Sir Oliver says that we can hope little from Sicily or from Spain, at least at this time. We are to depend on ourselves; for he reads the letter in that way, and he thought that you ought to know.”

“You have a discreet tongue for one in whom the disease of youth is so rank. Oliver chooses well. I will not tempt you to say more than you have heard, but you can tell him from me that (beyond the jest of the ships, which it was worth your trouble to bring, at a time which is too sober and dull) I have learnt nothing I did not know. Reynard thinks that Heaven should be pleased enough that he nets heretics in the Holland towns without killing infidels here, which it is more expensive to do. *Nolite confidere in principibus.* If he come at all, he will wait till there have been much slaughter on either side, so that there will be less for him to do and more honour to be won at a bargain rate. We should build nothing on him.”

Angelica understood easily enough that whom he called Reynard must be her Spanish king, of whom, as she had said to Sir Oliver before, her uncle had been used to speak in a different way, but she used the discretion on which she had just been complimented, giving no answer at all.

She said that the boat would be waiting to take her back, and if the Governor had no further message to send——

De Broglio said no to that. He said he gave thanks for the bombs, praising appropriate saints. For the rest, Sir John could be assured that the Turks would not find it easy to come over St. Elmo’s walls, “for,” he concluded, “we are in more comfort being alone.”

Angelica parted with the ceremonies of courtesy which she had observed to be practised among the Maltese knights, to which she received a jovial informality of response, and a regret that she could not make a more leisurely stay.

As she was about to leave, she was aware of the sound of a guitar in the adjoining apartment, which was the dormitory of a company of the Spanish soldiers who had been hired from the Sicilian Viceroy, and a song rose in her own tongue:

“Love is the same in every clime,
In Afric heat or Arctic snow.
Love was the same at every time,
But only of our own we know;
And when we——”

De Broglio, seeing that she had paused to listen, interrupted with the observation: “You will be able to inform Sir John that we are cheerful of spirit, and—and instant in prayer.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE report that Angelica brought back from St. Elmo was satisfactory enough; though, had she seen others of the garrison, she might have met with some who would have talked in a different tone.

But, indeed, De Broglio's matter-of-course attitude (which treated death as a daily event of no more consequence than a meal) may have been of even greater avail than the higher ideality of D'Egueras (who would talk of the surrender of life as of a supreme sacrifice in a sacred cause) in giving courage and confidence to the heroic company of those who looked up the long slope of Sceberras to the hundred-fold assembly of their pitiless and implacable foe. And even to say that De Broglio was deficient in ideality is to go beyond proof, he being of those who will never speak of themselves, or of what they think, so that we must guess what we will from that which their lives show, with the chance that we may guess wrong.

It was clear that the St. Elmo garrison was yet confident in the strength of its walls and in a mood to repel attack in a resolute way; and there was cause for good heart and hope in St. Angelo also, as the night advanced, and frequent small parties of knights and volunteers came in from the sea, giving a greater effect of numbers than if they had come at once in a single ship, or in two. But this was offset as the morning dawned by the news that a Greek renegade Ulichiali, a pirate who stood high in the confidence and regard of the Turks, had joined them from Alexandria on the previous day (though he had been able to do no more than anchor beyond St. Paul's Bay till the mist cleared), with six galleys which were heavily armed, and crowded with such men as a corsair is likely to have on board.

The Turkish battery did not open next morning against St. Elmo in the first hour, for Piali had been less than satisfied with its performance on the previous day. He was anxious that St. Elmo should fall before Dragut could arrive, so that the full credit should come to himself; and he had been disconcerted already when he had found that the fleet could not operate against it with much effect. It was now realized also that though the fort was intended primarily to defend the harbours from sea-attack, yet it was so designed, its heaviest guns being mounted on a high cavalier on the seaward side, that it could bring them all to bear against a landward assault, as they could be turned and fired over the inner fort, which was less lofty than they.

The idea of attacking it as it were from the rear, on the landward side,

became therefore more formidable at a closer view than Piali had supposed when he had advocated it at the first. Not that he was in any doubt as to the result, the disparity of force being too great; and he was resolved, if all else should fail, that it should be taken by storm before Dragut should come, though it might be at me cost of a thousand slain.

With these thoughts in his mind, he had ordered that the battery should not open on the second day, even though the mist should have cleared, until he should be mere himself to direct its fire; and, being eager to make an end, he was there at an early hour.

The Turkish cannon were heavier than those that were mounted upon the fort, but the mounds which had been built for their protection were less strong than its walls of stone, so that they had suffered more on the first day; but this damage had been well repaired in the night, and a shattered gun-carriage replaced, so that the whole of the fourteen cannon were able to open at once, directing their fire upon the cavalier with the intention of silencing the heavier artillery of the fort.

St. Elmo's guns, which had been silent till then, replied from every angle at which they could be brought to bear on the Turkish battery, and those who watched from St. Angelo's walls saw their separate flashes, and the clouds of sulphurous smoke gathering ever blacker in a still air, as they had done on the day before.

But the Grand Master had not been deaf to the request that De Broglio had sent, and St. Angelo opened fire also, with two long culverins which were mounted upon its battlements, and were intended to sweep the harbour against any hostile ships which might pass its mouth.

Now they were tilted aloft, and threw their balls across the harbour to the opposite hill. They had no better target than the smoke that hung over the Turkish battery and the gun-flashes that could be seen at times. They fired short at first, striking the near side of the hill, but after that they got the range and found that they could fire over the crest, though it was not to be thought that they would do much hurt, not seeing where their shots fell.

More than once the balls bounded down the far side of the hill, falling at last into the harbour beyond with a useless splash, and the Turks watched them and laughed. But after that there came one that may be said to have paid for all. It fell on the battery mound, where it had been built of some blocks of stone. The stone it struck was flung in fragments around, and when the dust cleared, the Admiral Piali lay a senseless heap, for a splinter had struck his head.

Later in the day there came a rumour to St. Angelo that Piali was dead, at which there was rejoicing beyond the cause, for he lay in his tent with nothing worse than a broken head. But the event gave St. Elmo a respite of something less than a week, for Mustapha, taking control, ordered that, though the

bombardment should be kept up, there should be no effort beyond that to obtain the fort till Dragut should arrive.

For a short space of days the event paused, with no more than cannonading at times, some sharp-shooting on both sides, and constant skirmishing along the rear of the Turkish positions, where Marshal Couppier gave them rest neither by dark nor day.

A doubt rose at this time as to whether the attack on St. Elmo were to be pressed as had first appeared, or whether the resolute front which had been shown to the first assault might have caused Mustapha, now that Piali was stilled, to decide on concentration upon the castle itself without wasting further time on the smaller objective.

The people of St. Angelo and the Bourg moved as those who look up to a black cloud which delays to burst, not knowing where it will fall but seeing that the near tempest is sure. Each day a few wounded or dead were brought in from beyond the walls or in boats from St. Elmo's point, and were tended or buried with more of care or ritual than would be thought sufficient at a later time, and each day La Valette counted a gain to him, thinking that it must bring them nearer to that on which the Christian States would become active for his relief; but on the fifth day there was a great salvo of artillery from the Turkish fleet, telling that Dragut had arrived, and giving him the welcome due to his name and the strength he brought.

He came up from the south, with thirteen galleys and two galliots under his flag, from which he landed fifteen hundred men, keeping their crews and rowers aboard, for he would not reduce the fighting strength of his fleet, in which he took more pride than in the provinces that he ruled ashore.

They were all of the same style, ships that were swift and lean and fanged, having little space for cargo below, they being no more than a pack of hunting wolves, the carnivora of the sea.

Dragut came ashore at once, and when he heard that Piali was hurt, he said that Allah was great, which those who heard could take as they would, for he cared for none.

He was met by Mustapha very courteously on the shore, and taken to his tent, where they talked for some time, finding that they could agree well enough, for their opinion of Piali was the same, though it was Dragut who gave it words.

As to attacking St. Elmo, he said it had been folly at first. They should have overrun the island, driving Marshal Couppier into the sea, and then attacked St. Angelo with their whole force. He said the ships could find harbours enough. He scoffed at the idea that Europe would gather a fleet that would be strong enough to offer battle.

"Will they come," he asked, "from England or Spain, or the Baltic seas?

They would take a year to agree about that, if they ever should. We should be home months before. It is no more than a fool's fear."

But when he saw the battery that Piali had set up his contempt broke out into ribald jests. There was in Dragut, whether sober or drunk, a furious energy that was never still, and before which opposition melted away. He had, beyond that, an instinct for the essential which approached genius.

He saw that, if they were to withdraw the battery from before St. Elmo, it would be a confession of divided counsel if not of failure, of which all Europe would hear in the next week. He also saw that they would need the heavy guns that were planted there if they were to attempt to batter through the walls of Burmola or the Bourg.

Therefore they must continue the assault till St. Elmo should fall, on which he agreed with Piali that it should be the work of no more than a few days, but he did not think that his methods would have brought that result. He saw that to attack St. Elmo without speedy success would be just what the Grand Master would have them do. "Shall we be," he asked, "no more than a tail that Valette wags as he will?" He saw that to make St. Elmo's reduction sure it must be cut off from the Castle's support, and that their guns must command the harbour for that. There was no avail in a battery that skulked on the further side of the hill to avoid St. Angelo's guns. He had not landed a day before excavations were being made on the crest of Sceberras, and material being dragged up to make a higher and stronger battery there, which could reply to St. Angelo's guns and sink any boats that should attempt to cross to St. Elmo's point. On the further side of the entrance to the northern harbour he landed men from the fleet, who built a four-gun battery there to bombard St. Elmo from the other side. They had heavy guns and good gunners enough, and he was determined that they should be used to the full. He directed all with his own presence, and his own voice, toiling as one who counted the hours. Some of the Turkish galleys were deprived of their larger guns, and (to silence complaint) he even brought ashore one long serpent-handled culverin from his own ship, which it gave him no joy to do.

Two days later, while the new batteries were still incomplete, the spirit which Dragut had brought to the attack was demonstrated in another way. During the night of June 2nd-3rd, two of his corsair followers crept down, by the light of a clouded moon, till they were under the walls of the ravelin, where it looked out over Marsa Mucetto harbour-mouth, toward the new battery which Dragut planned to erect on the further side.

They listened, and all was still. It was a side from which St. Elmo had yet no fear of attack: its guns had not yet found a target on which to fire. One of the men climbed on the shoulders of the other, and looked in at a gun embrasure. The silence was unbroken. The moonlight shone on a platform of

stone that appeared to be empty of human life. Unseen, unheard, the men stole back to tell what they had found. An hour later, a regiment crept down Sceberras' slope through the night.

The ravelin was no more than an isolated lunette, connected with the main fort by a covered way. During the night it had a garrison of twenty men, who should have kept a good watch. That there were those among them who slept when they should have waked appears sure. But, beyond that, nothing is known, for the whole garrison died.

They did not all die in their sleep. There was alarm given which was too late to avail. The night became loud with voices and the clangour of swords. But the Turks had swarmed up the wall before that, and were ten to one. Having slain all that the ravelin held, they tried to enter the fort itself by the covered way.

But St. Elmo was roused by then. There was strife in the narrow passage, fierce and short, and the Turks gave up what it had become useless to try. But if they could not win the fort, neither could the Christians win the ravelin back. It showed the Turkish flag when the dawn came, as it would continue to do, and its two guns had been turned, and now pointed towards the fort.

It was a poor tale for the Grand Master to hear.

CHAPTER XVIII

"It is vain talk," La Cerda said. "You are like the Grand Master himself in that. You will shut your eyes and think you avoid a fact which you do not see. There is but one course, if we are to recover our loss, as any soldier would say."

"You mean," D'Egueras replied, "that that is a name which I do not bear?"

"Not at all," La Cerda parried, seeing that he had gone too far. "You are a soldier of great repute, as is known to all. Therefore I say you must see the truth unless your eyes are shut by your own resolve."

"Had you had your will, you had blown up the whole fort before now."

"So I would. I have been plain about that. But I would have stayed my hand had I thought the Turks would try such folly as you would now do on our side. If you want to die a vain death, there is no surer way than to stand under a wall from which bombs are thrown, and some boiling pitch, and a few trifles besides. And that might be sound warfare if done by the Turks which were plain folly for us. We have not the men. Even the Grand Master would see that."

"He would see what is seen by all, that you would blow the ravelin up as a step toward that which you have urged from the first. You would blow up all if you could. . . . But you are one who did not toil at the work!"

"Well, it is not for us to decide. I may give advice by the favour of those who hear; but, I thank St. Peter, the decision is not for me."

La Cerda looked at De Broglio as he said this, as though to remind the Lieutenant-Governor that there was one there with more authority than his own. The gesture was lost on D'Egueras, who was not of a jealous kind. He cared for naught but the cause in which he laboured and fought.

De Broglio had said nothing till now. He sat, as he had done when he gave Angelica audience a week before, with his hose comfortably loose, and a tankard beside his hand.

"Nay," he said, "you are both wiser than I. That is why John did not leave me in sole command. I am past my prime. You are more versed in the new science of war, which I did not learn."

He said this with twinkling eyes, not as one who was angered or mocked, but with the tone of one who jests among friends. He added: "But at this time, I should say, if I must, that you are both wrong." He reached for the tankard again. "And if you will have patience awhile, I will tell you why."

D’Egueras had spoken with a passion, and proposed a plan, which were both easy to understand. He blamed himself, more than he need, that the ravelin had been lost. It was no failure of his, though the over-care he had taken at times to watch that the sentries were not asleep, and to augment the patrols, may actually have tended to produce the catastrophe which had now come by causing others to feel that there was no need to be watchful in the same way. Whatever else might go wrong, it might have been thought, there was no fear that a watch would fail while D’Egueras was in command. But it could not be expected that he would recognize, or find consolation in that.

Yet so it had been, and D’Egueras, blaming himself, had proposed to call for volunteers whom he would lead in an endeavour to recover the lost outwork at point of sword, to which La Cerda had retorted that it would end in waste of life, and no more: the only way to undo the reverse they had had was to undermine the outwork and blow it up, sending the Turks which it now contained to their own place without further loss on the Christian side.

D’Egueras rejected the proposal at once, as coming from one whom he thought deficient, if not in valour, yet in completeness of devotion to the cause which had called them together there; and also because he was reluctant to see the ravelin destroyed. He was one of those who had followed the Grand Master’s example, working at its erection with his own hands. He knew the cost and the toil. So far, it had been no use. There had been no attack from the side it covered. Its two guns had not been used. To-morrow, Dragut’s new battery would assume form on the opposite shore, and would be an objective on which to fire; but to-day it was in the hands of the Turks, who were turning its guns upon those who had laboured to place them there. He did not want it destroyed. He wanted it recovered into the hands of those to whom it belonged.

Looking back on an event that is past, we may see that the hope of Malta was not dimmed, though all the toil that had built that outwork in the last days had been so utterly vain; for it lay in the valour of those whose hands had toiled at the work, and that valour remained, as was shown by the venture that D’Egueras was proposing now.

La Cerda had not toiled at the work. He had no sentimental regard for the ravelin. It was to him a small outwork, mounting two guns, neither more nor less. He looked at the matter in a cool way. He considered that the Turks would have filled it with men, and that they would be surely alert, both by night and day, being so close to their foes. It had a glacis which would not be easy to climb against such a greeting as they would be certain to get. The Turks could afford loss of men much better than the Knights of Malta could do. It was plain folly, look at it any way that you would. He thought D’Egueras to be less soldier than monk, and he knew that his own strength was in the opposite scale. Therefore D’Egueras should listen to him, which he would not

do.

De Broglio looked at the angry men, and spoke to La Cerda first:

"If I have understood what I have heard you saying at times, you do not think that this fort can be long held, nor even for a short time without more loss of life than that time is worth. Thinking thus, how can you advise that which would be slow to complete?"

"Because, though you are right that I would blow up the whole fort if the decision rested with me, and withdraw while we can cross the harbour in peace (which we shall not do in two days from now), yet, as it has otherwise been resolved, I would hold out here in the best manner we may, and do our foes the most damage we can, according to the skilful usage of war."

"Well, we are agreed upon that. But have you thought that we must tunnel the solid rock, and how long will that take? If we could work in a soft soil, or a crumbling rock, I would say well. But as it is, and with the secrecy which must be observed, I do not think we shall tunnel them, nor they us, before this bout will be through in another way."

D'Egueras, who was impatiently striding the narrow room, as the Governor gave this opinion in his own leisurely style, turned sharply round at that word.

"Do you mean to say that this fort will not be held? Are you another who talks of flight? I had not thought it of you!"

De Broglio declined to be roused by this outburst.

"Did I talk of flight?" he asked. "I should have thought my words were plain. If you say that this fort can be held against the whole force of the Turkish arms, then I should say you are blind in the way of those who refuse to see. I should say La Cerda here is right about that. It is what even Sir John cannot think, unless he have lost the wits he had in his younger days.

"I should say that we are here to kill Turks, and to draw their fire. He will have us kill all we can, and hold out to the last hour. He will have St. Elmo make such defence that when it fall it will be a shame to the Christian lands that have watched us die.

"If there must be such exhibit made, he will have St. Elmo and not St. Angelo fall; so that, if Europe be roused at last, there will be something left for them to save."

He reached for another drink as he ended this speech. Wiping his mouth, he said placidly, as one considering a matter in which he had no concern: "You may say that John is a hard man, as he ever was at the core, but you need not call him a fool." He turned his glance to D'Egueras as he went on: "And that is why, while I am Governor here, I will have no call for volunteers to climb the lunette walls. We are not here to be killed as we do that, but to kill Turks who climb ours. We must endure (being ever reinforced from the other side) till they get somewhat too bold, or weary of the delay, and are tempted to make

assault, for it may be then that our hour will come."

He went on after another pause, which his hearers did not interrupt, he having given them both something of which to think, as he put that in a plain way which must have been vaguely in many minds.

"And that is why he will have been a wild man when he heard that the ravelin is already lost. I would have given much to hear what was said. I suppose he will have cursed us after the wording of sundry psalms. He will have said that that is what comes of leaving a fat old man in control, who is past the vigour of youth. Well, he may be right about that. He can call me back if he will, and I shall get more sleep than I do now.

"Yet he may think that where I sit down, I am not easy to move. He would not think that I talk of flight because I see how he may have planned that he will leave us to die.

"But be that as it may, he will see that his plan is wrecked if St. Elmo can be taken with ease. He should withdraw now, rather than that."

He turned to La Cerda, as he concluded in a way which may have been more unexpected than anything he had said before:

"Now I will tell you what I have resolved. I will send you back. You will go back in my name, asking the Grand Master that he call a Council, as I think it is within our right that we ask, at which it shall be resolved whether St. Elmo shall be longer held, the ravelin being already lost, or if we shall withdraw while it can still safely be done.

"You can put the case for that better than most, and you may stand up to him in a bolder way. And if, after all is said, it be resolved that we hold it still, we shall know to what end it is that we must endure beyond hope of quarter at last, by the settled usage of war."

La Cerda, as he heard this, looked as a man who feels that he should be pleased, but is not sure that he is.

He asked: "Am I best for that? He will be wroth, seeing me back. It was for such a word that he sent me here."

"Yes. I should call you best. I know none besides who could do more than say Amen to the first speech he might make, let them grumble here as they may.

"He may fume awhile, but what can he say? You will have written word that you come from me."

"Well," La Cerda said, "if I have your order I have no choice but to go. When shall it be?"

"I will have letter writ so that you can put off at the matin hour. You should get some sleep before then, for afterwards you will do talking enough. I am for bed myself now."

La Cerda went out at that hint. So did D'Egueras, who would make another

round of the walls.

De Broglio did but loosen his clothes, and lay down in such a form that he could be about again at a quick need. He smiled somewhat to himself, thinking of how mad La Valette would be when La Cerda should return with such a message from him. “But,” he thought, “I know John. If he be crossed, he will be more set on his own way. He will bear all down. And they will know the purpose for which he sends them to death, which will make them the better men.

“Also, when it is done with purpose agreed, he will send support with less niggard hand than he have done yet; and—by the death of Peter!—I need it now.”

For he had met Dragut before.

CHAPTER XIX

"A MAN of law," Sir Oliver observed, "might say it is less than proved, yet it is beyond doubt to my mind. I have not mentioned it to his son, as I sought first to gather all the assurance I could; but I have questioned Captain Antonio, who was a volunteer on the *Curse of Islam's* deck at the time."

"And what," Señor Ramegas asked, "does he say?"

"He says that, as they came in sight of the chase, there was one wearing knightly arms who climbed from the smaller boat over the bow of the corsair ship, as it ran it down."

"Could it be said that Don Francisco sank the ship, his father being on board?"

"It appears not. Or that, at least, Antonio will not allow. His tale is that the Christian knight had fallen some time before, either from the crowding swords of his foes, or from the fire of the mortars which descended upon the decks, which had nigh sunk the ship before the *Curse of Islam* could use her guns.

"When they came up, they looked down on a deck over which the sea washed. They saw Moors who swarmed up the ropes or were already a-swim. Their guns did no more than to shatter a sinking deck, giving death to the corsair crew by a shorter road."

"It is a thing that Don Francisco must know. Will you tell it yourself, or shall I?"

"I will leave that to you," Sir Oliver said, "by your good will. For you know him better, and also have somewhat more leisure than I. But there are certain matters arising herefrom with which our Order must deal, and concerning which Don Francisco should see me at a near date; though it may be resolved, for the most, if not all, that they may be left somewhat aside till we come to a quieter time."

Sir Oliver paused a moment, as though he would have said more, and then stayed his words; but as Ramegas answered only that Don Francisco would wait upon him without doubt, when he had informed him of what was supposed, and then rose as though there were no more to be said, he added: "There is another matter which cannot be left, if we agree that Don Manuel is no longer alive."

Ramegas did not profess failure to understand what was meant, but he said no more than: "It is the señorita you have in mind?"

"Yes."

Sir Oliver, wishing to know what attitude Ramegas might take to that matter, or what suggestion would come from him, found that he confronted a silent man. Seeing that the conversation must die or be sustained further by him, he asked: “Should you say that she will accept her cousin’s control? He has done well since he came here, but he is one I have scarcely seen.”

“He is one of whom I can speak nothing but good, he being Don Manuel’s son. I cannot say beyond that.”

Sir Oliver thought that he had said nothing at all, and yet that he had implied much concerning which he had not been asked. For he judged Ramegas to mean that if Don Manuel were dead, it did not follow that the responsibility for his family should fall upon him, which was not far from the truth.

To say that Ramegas was glad to hear of Don Manuel’s death would be unjust to one who had been a loyal servant to him, to whom duty was a stern and imminent god, and whose conscience was in good repair.

But he had a pride which had not chafed the less at the lowly office of serving-brother because he had been scrupulous to fulfil its obligations. He had had some liking for Don Manuel, and more respect; but it would have been no pleasure to give up the important separate command which he now held to take a place beneath the Commander’s pennon on St. Angelo’s outer wall, as Don Manuel might have expected that he would do.

Sir Oliver recognized that there was truth in the implication that his obligation was personal to Don Manuel, and did not outlast the separation of death. The very nature of a celibate order precluded the establishment of inherited rights or responsibilities. It had become exceptional (following a statute of De L’Isle Adam thereon, of fifty years before) for any Knight of the Order to have a recognized son, though the number of “nephews” who joined their ranks at this emergency suggests that this may at times have been a euphemistic rather than an accurate description of their relationship.

Juan Ramegas was not indifferent to the fortunes of Don Manuel’s niece. In a sufficient emergency he would have ministered to her security, even her comfort, in a kind and conscientious way. But if Don Manuel were dead, and his service over to him, it must not be understood that he had a remaining duty to her.

For this time he did not regard her as being in any need. He had rendered her to the Grand Master’s charge, who had delivered her to that of Sir Oliver Starkey. Beyond that, her cousin was here, who was also of Don Manuel’s blood. How could she concern him now? Her escapade, which he disapproved in a grave and tolerant way, was no longer his responsibility. Sir Oliver should see that without the crudity of definition. So his silence implied, as he meant that it should.

Sir Oliver understood him and let him go. Finding leisure among a multiplicity of urgencies, which would have distracted one of less orderly mind, he determined to speak to Angelica himself.

Making a prompt opportunity to have her alone, he said: “I have news for you which is not good; but it is needful for you to hear.”

He saw that she became somewhat paler, though she made no guess at the truth. She had a vague fear that Don Manuel had learnt where she was and was exercising his authority to have her sent back, and to the Convent of Holy Cross, even though he were not come himself. She had formed a sound opinion that, if Don Manuel should make such request, she would have no support from the Grand Master against him: he would not give her two thoughts. It would be: “Send her away,” and his regard would turn at once to the one issue that filled his mind.

Even apart from Don Manuel she was not assured that he would not dispose of her with so off-hand a word, if she should be brought to his notice again. She had for warning the fate of the lady who had occupied her chamber before, of whom she knew little but that La Cerda’s position as a Commander of the Order had not been sufficient to keep her, as it was clear that he had wished to do. And St. Angelo was not yet so isolated that return to Sicily had become impossible. If such a crisis should come, she had only one hope, which was in Sir Oliver Starkey himself. She saw that, though he might have little power to influence La Valette on any matter on which he had a fixed mind, yet the Grand Master gave him so large a trust that there were a hundred details on which he would endorse anything that Sir Oliver might propose, or leave him authority to decide as he would; and she could but hope that she might be regarded as one of these lesser things. For though she did not look on the Secretary as one who was weak of will, or would be easy to cajole, she felt that she would have sympathy from him, of which she was less assured when she thought of any others who might have power over her life, and she had an instinctive certainty that he liked her well.

Now she thought that the crisis had come, and, if the news were not good, it must mean that she would be thwarted or shamed, unless she could find both courage and wit which would be sufficient to face the hour.

So she paled somewhat, but remained quiet, her mind wary and alert as Sir Oliver went on:

“It is not certainly known, but it is feared that Don Manuel has come to the harm either of capture or death in endeavour to reach these shores, for it was known to several of those who have joined our ranks during the last days that he had left Messina to cross the strait, and, by the time they give, and by the fact that no other is missed at that date, it is nigh to sure that he was on a boat that a corsair rammed on the day when the Turks first advanced hereon.”

"Was it that which the *Curse of Islam* thereafter sank?"

"So it is thought. . . . I did not know that you had heard of that, or would have it in mind."

"It is likely I should, my cousin having command. If it befell thus, my uncle was soon avenged, and by him whose best right it was."

She did not doubt the truth of the tale, having confidence in the sober judgment of him from whose lips it came. Sorrow was confused in her mind with fear, and doubt, and relief, so that it was uncertain which would prevail.

If Don Manuel were dead, it was the end of the one actual authority she had known since she was too young for clear memory to have remained; she could not tell at once how she would stand, or what new difficulties might arise, but she felt that the shadow of Holy Cross was lifted somewhat away.

Sir Oliver went on: "I have not only to tell you this because you should know of one who is close of blood, but because you must consider how you now stand. You will recall that the Grand Master allowed that you should stay here till Don Manuel should arrive, you being under his charge rather than ours."

"Have you talked to Señor Ramegas of this?"

"Yes. But an hour ago. I understood that he feels that his part is done."

"So I should say that it is. Does Francisco know?"

"He may have told him by now."

"Will he talk of me?"

"I suppose not of himself, and Don Francisco is unlikely to ask. If I understand aright, he will suppose you to be afar, and in convent walls."

"So he does. Am I now free to do as I will?"

"That would be saying too much."

"Need the Grand Master know? Can I have time to think what I will do?"

"The Grand Master has heard that we fear Don Manuel is lost. He may think of you, and give what orders he will. If he does not, I do not say that I need call it to mind, your uncle's end being less than sure. Yet on that I can give no pledge. . . . I suppose that you will now wish that your cousin should know you are here and in what guise, you being left as you are."

"Will you leave that to me?"

"You would rather tell him yourself?"

"Yes. In my own way, if at all. I would think first. Is there occasion for haste?"

"I would not say that. You are safe here for this time. But things may change with the days in a quick way. You do not need to be told that."

While they had spoken the noise of gunfire had been continuous in their ears, for though Dragut had not got all his new batteries complete, he had ordered that there should be no respite for St. Elmo's garrison, and all the guns

of Piali's battery, and some others, were bombarding the fort, which was replying with every one it could bring to bear.

But now the floor shook and a nearer din came from the castle roof, for St. Angelo was joining the concert with the long culverins she had used before, firing upon those who were building the new battery on Sceberras' ridge. There was no need of more words to tell her of the peril of the place to which she had come at the urge of a headstrong will.

"I should be glad if you would leave this to me, at least till we speak again."

"I may do that. But I would ask you this, for your own good. Have you estate apart from your uncle's grace?"

"I have Segura lands in my own right, which I may claim when I am of sufficient age, and the revenues would, in the meantime, have come to his charge. I was to endow the Convent of Holy Cross with these lands, and in return I was to be Abbess at a far day. That was how my uncle had bargained, as I believe, but I suppose that can be ended now."

"So I should conclude; though it may involve questions of law which are less simple than you suppose."

He questioned her as to the stewards and men of law who handled Don Manuel's own affairs, and found them to be the same who dealt with those which he held in the Order's name. He said that, with her consent, which she lightly gave, he would write to them that her rights should be watched with care. He said: "We will talk again on a near day. I think your cousin should know you are here in this guise, even though it should be single to him."

He turned to other affairs, which were of greater moment than that. For the time she saw that there would be nothing said, unless it were of her will. She felt sorrow as she thought of Don Manuel's end, for he had ever been kind to her in a distant way. She felt freedom also, and with it some measure of fear, for she had little practice of how to walk in the open ways of the world, and being garbed as she was, in a way which she was loth to longer maintain, and doubtful how she could cast aside, either to remain or to go. But she put fear aside with a very resolute will. She thought she would meet Francisco and tell him all; and then concluded, as she always did when she thought of that, that it could be done just as well on the next day.

And while she thought of these things and doubted what she would do, or to which end she would be likely to come, the batteries thundered without. And a boat from St. Elmo struck boldly across the harbour, which was not yet under the menace of Turkish guns, and La Cerda sat in the stern, being less than pleased with the mission on which he came, but resolved that he would do his charge in a manner fitting to the name he bore, and that La Valette should not silence his words, though he might conceive himself to be as great as the

Pope of Rome.

CHAPTER XX

VENETIA, raising long, softly-rounded arms over a pale-gold head in a yawn of weariness, such as may be born as surely and less tolerably from idleness as from toil, wondered whether she should be called a fool.

It was a question which she had seldom felt occasion to ask in the twenty years during which the chances of changeful times, her own sharp wits, and a judicious trafficking in the beauty of her supple, milk-washed body (but there was no milk to be had here, either for glance or gold!) had raised her from Genoa's shore-side slums to the exalted, almost respectable, position of the acknowledged mistress of a Knight-Commander of the high Order of St. John —one who was unable to give any woman a more legal name.

A year ago she did not doubt that she was the winner of a splendid prize. La Cerda was a prince in his own land. When the call to Malta had come, and he had said she should not be left behind, it would have seemed a monstrous folly to thwart his will. He was too great for her to doubt his power to protect his own. The talk of Turkish siege had sounded a vague improbable menace, such as was seldom absent from the horizons of those days. There was always the war of yesterday, or that which to-morrow would bring: war advancing over one frontier, or receding across another from a wasted land. It was amid such disorders that the chances had come which had raised her, step by step, to La Cerda's side. Her present name was one that her mother (hanged fifteen years before with sufficient cause) would not have known. Genoa was a city of which she would seldom talk. She had very plausible tales to tell of her early Venetian days, which may be left aside, being untrue. She had come to Malta to find, from the first day, that she was to be kept, if at all, as a hidden toy. She was to be kept like a bird in a gilded cage. Now the cage remained, but the gilt was less easy to see.

Should she have gone when she had the chance? When she had been hurried out of the turret-room she had made her own, in such furtive haste that she had left half her less valuable possessions behind?

She had been pleased at the time when La Cerda swore that he would not let her be sent away, either for fiend or saint: when his gold had been freely spent to find another who would take her place on the ship, and to cause the eyes of the guards to be turned aside.

But it had been irksome to be hidden since that day in this upper room. It had been well enough for La Cerda, who could walk abroad when he would,

and then come to take his pleasure with her. That time had been bad enough; but now La Cerda had gone. . . . She asked herself again, had she been a fool to come? A greater fool not to have gone when she could?

La Cerda had warned her to lie close till his return—and Giles said that it was a score to one that that return would never be. Those who were now in St. Elmo's fort were not likely to come back alive. He said that was the common talk. And he also warned her against being seen, telling frightening tales.

Two days ago there had been a quarrel between two knights in which one had been badly hurt, so that it had come to the Grand Master's ears. They had fought, it was said, for the favour of a wanton who had not been expelled, she being a native, born in the town. It was the kind of trouble which would be likely to rise in a place full of armed men who waited for an attack which delayed to come.

The knights had been condemned to a penance suited to their degree: the woman had been publicly whipped. Giles had made the most of that tale. He had hinted that silence may ask a price. She thought that he would be likely to grow bolder as the days passed, if La Cerda did not return. If he should never return? Might not Giles consider her to be at his mercy then?

Well, she had been in worse holes before now, out of which her wits had won free. More than that, she had sometimes found that from danger she could snatch gain. There had been the governor of San Pietro jail. . . . That was how her fortune began. If she had not been caught with a wallet which was not hers, she might be on Genoa streets still. And yet that was less than a likely thing, she being what she was.

She might wish that she had never come, and that she were riding now, hawk on wrist, over the summer fields, as she had been able to do during the last year, that being a sport she loved; but she did not waste much thought in a vain regret. Like her hawk, in her thoughts, she flew high.

If La Cerda's life should be lost indeed, where could she make a friend who would be of avail to protect her now? She had no mind to be whipped. It was an experience she had never had, though she had been near it at times. She thought of La Valette. If she could seduce the Grand Master it would be a triumph indeed. But she considered him—what she had seen, and much more she had heard, and the certain fact that he was not young—in a mind that was shrewd and cool, and she decided that it would be too risky to try, except at a desperate need. Perhaps if the Turks should be driven out. . . . In the moment of triumph, when mind and body relaxed? But not now.

Then there was Sir Oliver Starkey, who had been her friend to the extent that he had been willing that she should go in a quiet way, and that without any purpose of gain to himself that she had been able to see. She considered him with a baffled mind, concluding that the enigma came of his barbarous blood.

He was English, a race of whom she had seen little, but it was known that they came from a land of unlifting fog, by which their blood was not wholly thawed.

Well, it might be worth while to try. Not that she sought adventure or would take a chance that she might avoid. She had no thought of romance. It was cold business to her and, perhaps, greed. But she had had to fight for the right to live since she had been able to talk, or before, as did all in the underworld to which she was born. We must allow something for that. And she had fought better than most or, at least, to greater avail.

Now she stretched herself on the silk-soft couch that her wits had won, seeming to rest in an idle sensuous ease, without forethought or care. Even though she rested alone, she gave no sign that she hated the single house-top room to which she was confined by La Cerda's order and her own caution: no sign of the wary wakeful mind that sought to probe the future on every side. For it had been one of her first and most vital lessons of life that the face must not betray thought. . . .

Her thoughts paused at the sound of a quick step that was ascending the stair. She had keen ears. Was it——? Yes, she was sure. Her feet slid to the floor. With a cry of pleasure that was not wholly pretence, she moved quickly forward as La Cerda entered the room.

"You have come back?" she asked, as his kisses paused. "You will stay now? You will not be going again?"

"I do not know what will be. I cannot say. For the time, I wait here."

She asked no more, hearing the note of irritation in his voice, and being wise in her own ways. She supposed she would soon know. She understood the pride that was reluctant to be ordered about, which must have been felt by many of the Maltese knights, they being what they were in their own lands, except that they were inspired by the high occasion to which they came.

Her question recalled to his mind the angered annoyance of the reply he had given to Sir Oliver's first surprised query when they had met. "Why am I here? I do ever what I am told. I go forward and back. I carry notes."

He had learnt that the Grand Master had crossed to the Sanglea. He was inspecting the defences of St. Michael's fort. The loss of St. Elmo's ravelin had roused a restless anxiety lest nearer and more vital points might be equally liable to surprise.

La Cerda had agreed with Sir Oliver, after the occasion of his coming was understood, that it would be best to return to his own lodging until La Valette should have had time to read the letter he brought and decide what he would do.

"I suppose," Sir Oliver had said, "there will be council called, and you can then say what you will. I should advise, if you will not take it amiss, that you

should say nothing till then in a private way."

"You may be assured I shall not," he had replied, taking no offence. He wished to keep Sir Oliver's goodwill, for he was not sure that he might not find it needful to ask of him a greater favour than he had had before, and to admit that he had deceived him then. For, in the ordinary course, he would not have been allocated to St. Elmo's garrison without his household retinue fighting with him at the same place. Sir Oliver had been somewhat puzzled at the time that he had submitted to the Grand Master's order to go in a three hours' spare, and a single boat, without raising that question at all, which would have been no more than to claim custom and right; but the fact was that he had seen that he could not have taken Venetia there, and had been content that the event fell as it did, so that his household was not broken up. Now, among other vexations that contended to distract his mind, it was not the least that he might be required to return to St. Elmo with all his train, and must then dispose of the girl as he best could.

It was a position which was not likely to make him less vehement in urging that St. Elmo should not be longer held; but he saw the wisdom of Sir Oliver's hint that he should not further disclose his mind till the Council met, if the Grand Master should consent for it to be called.

As they parted there had been the same thought in both their minds, that it was a fortunate chance that La Valette was away, so that he would read what De Broglio had written before he should meet his messenger face to face.

CHAPTER XXI

"As I see it," Sir Oliver said, "it does not rest upon that. If you will that St. Elmo be longer held, you will prevail at this time. But, beyond that, where do we stand, if it fall on the next day?"

"There is no cause that it should! Had I here but fifty knights of those with whom I had the honour to fight at Rhodes, being then but a youth and the least among famous names!"

Sir Oliver was quiet and exact. "I should say that is about the number we have, though they are not young at this day. . . . But I should also say we have other knights whose valour may not be less, and who are of equal resolve. . . . I did not propose that it need fall on the next day. I only say that we must be prepared against that, if we over-ride those who would blow it up. . . . Let the blame be where it will, we cannot deny that the outwork has been lost in an easy way."

The Grand Master did not deny the reason of this. He said: "It must be held by every means that we have. It were better to blow it up than that it should lightly fall. I need not be told that. I have a mind to go there myself."

"As to that, I should say, if I may, that your place is here."

"My place is that of the most need. Had I been there, do you think I had let the ravelin go? Yet I would not be less than just. There must be blame, though it should be no more than portioned among the dead, and we know not how. All our work in an hour!"

Sir Oliver was silent, understanding the emotion of the older man. And what use was there in words? What could be said?

La Valette paced the room for a time, striving for self-control. Then he asked, in a quieter way: "If I let this Council be held, can you tell me how the voting will go?"

"Yes, I am sure of that. I have been over the names. We can have sufficient support, let La Cerda say what he will."

"Then you advise that we call it now?" The question showed how much the Grand Master was disturbed in mind, for he would rarely ask or welcome advice on such matters as that. He added: "I would have no doubt. It must be held at all risks."

"That," Sir Oliver replied, "is why I would have it called. For after we have carried the vote, which I am assured that we shall, those who have been on our side, and have become hot in debate, will be more eager to prove their case

than they are now. They will go with a better will."

"Then let it be called with speed. Can it be in two hours from now?"

"Yes. It can be that."

"Then, in God's name, let it be."

The Grand Master went out, and Sir Oliver sent messages right and left to the Commanders of the Order who were within call, being all that the island held, except those who were with Marshal Couppier, or in St. Elmo itself, to assemble for an urgent Council of War; so that La Cerda, having had a pleasant hour with his mistress, was fetched away at a quicker word than he had expected to have.

Yet he went in less haste than he might, for he did not intend to open his mind in random arguments before the Council should be sat down in an orderly way, and he had a hope that the Grand Master would state his case first, leaving him to a later reply, for he knew the weight of that which is last said, and he would rather have the Grand Master's words to attack than that his own should be exposed before the others had been advanced.

But in that matter he found that La Valette was as subtle of tactics as himself, and with more power to prevail, for when the assembly was set, the Grand Master rose at once, and, without reading De Broglio's note, he said briefly that it appeared that there were some in St. Elmo's fort who did not think that it should be held, and that its Governor, feeling that all should be of one mind, either to stay or to come away, had sent the noble Chevalier La Cerda to state the case of those who did not wish to remain; and he had therefore called a Council of War, as De Broglio had asked him to do, that the will of the Order regarding St. Elmo might be known beyond single responsibility, or the probability of later dispute. He would therefore ask La Cerda to state his case, so that they would have the objections of those who did not wish to continue the defence set out in the best way.

He said this in the Latin tongue, which was familiar to all those who were there, though in differing degrees, and in which he was fluent, and could be eloquent if he were sufficiently moved, and La Cerda saw that he had no escape but that he must rise at once, and reply in the same tongue, in which he was less expert.

Yet he put his case well enough, being curt and direct, and saying that which he truly believed, and which he knew to have support from the accepted rules and usage of war.

"I would have you know," he said, "that I am not here of my will. I was ordered to come. Nor do I wish to speak now, as it is required that I do. But, being constrained, I will say what I think, who am, as you may allow, of some knowledge and practice, and perhaps of some slight repute, in the exercise and methods of war.

“You are told that I speak for others who are of one mind. It is not I who had said that. You have been told that it is the Governor’s own report. The knights who have been sent to defend the fort are not less brave than ourselves. They came here, as we all did, to protect the isle that is ours, with such courage and strength as we have, and with our lives as the stake we throw.

“The Grand Master would not say that when he chose the knights whose pennons were to appear on St. Elmo’s wall he preferred such as were of doubted courage, or poor repute, even if any such among us would have been easy to find.

“But now, having been there for two weeks, what they say is this (and I do not disguise that I am of one mind with them): St. Elmo is a small fort. It is needless to tell you its size or the guns it bears. They are known to all. It has endured attack for these weeks while St. Angelo has looked on, during which time it has faced the whole might of the Turkish arms. How has it done that? Every day the dead and wounded have been brought off, and new men have been sent, who are to be there till they also fall. They do not complain of that, if it be for sufficient cause, such as will avail at the last.

“But to what end can we look? So far we have held the fort as a sick man may be kept alive, having fresh physic at every hour.

“But those hours are nigh done. Since Dragut came there are new batteries rising on every side. In two days from now, if not less, we shall send no more men to its aid, neither shall we bring the wounded away. It will be cut off, and how long then will it endure an army which is a thousand to ten, and the fire of a hundred guns?

“I say it will be down in three days, either by yielding its flag, when all of us who are there will be Turkish slaves at the best (for what terms could we hope to make, being so cornered apart?), or, if we fight on after hope is gone, those can expect no mercy who may be left alive when the Turks come over the wall, they having continued defence of an untenable post, for such (as I need not say) is the rule of war at all times, and in every land.

“Now to defend it thus we would not complain, though it is much to ask (for the bravest will choose to fight where there is a hope, however slender and faint, that he may be alive on the last day), if sufficient cause could be shown, but we see none.

“We are to be slain, as it seems to us—I will use plain words, as must be right in such an issue as this—for no more than a stubborn whim, which will not own what all others can see.

“We are to defend walls that are weak, while St. Angelo’s walls are strong. We are to face the whole army of Malta’s foes, being no more than some scores, while there are thousands here who look on.

“And all this to no end but that, when they have slain us all, and the fort is

theirs, the Turks may boast a success which they will not have if greater wisdom prevail.

"If St. Elmo were the strongest wall, or the last that we have, we would defend it still, and would not scruple to die.

"But the matter is not thus. For here are walls that are stronger and better held; and it is here that we ought to be."

He paused a moment to consider whether he had put the whole case, and seeking a final word that could be used with convincing force; and Gonzales de Medrano, a noble knight of Castile, who had won much fame in the Spanish wars, asked without rising: "Then what, by your advice, should we now resolve?"

He asked as one with an open mind, who would not decide till the whole case had been fairly put.

Sir Oliver, watching all, had his first doubt (which was not much) as to how the voting would go, for he knew that Medrano could sway half the Spanish knights, if not more.

La Cerda gave a plain question a plain reply. "I would blow up the fort, so that they get no more than a heap of stones, which are cheap on this isle. I would withdraw our men while we yet can, with such stores as we may be able to save. The Turks will find their new batteries are of no avail when we are not there. St. Elmo will have delayed them the most it can, and at a cost which is less than theirs. If we do not, I tell you that it cannot stand for three days. It is annihilation of our own knights which we contrive to ensure, and for the Turks a triumph they need not have."

La Cerda sat down at that, and Medrano said: "It is fairly put," looking round as he did so to other knights, who appeared to be of the same mind, and then to the Grand Master, as the one who should make reply.

La Valette saw that all men waited for him to speak, which he was not reluctant to do.

He spoke with more freedom of phrase than La Cerda had been able to use, and though there may have been more of passion and less of reason in what he said, he had the art of moving men with his words, and he had one argument (if such it could be called) which he kept to the last and by which he felt that he must prevail.

"Brothers," he said, "you have heard what is proposed, that we should blow up our fort, it being otherwise lost, as we are to believe, by the mathematics of war.

"And, if we do that, we may be advised in another week that St. Angelo here should not be held against so great an army as we shall then face, and, by these same reckonings of skill, we shall be advised to make such terms as we can, which may be no worse than that they will let us depart with the honours

of war, and even our baggage, if we should stand out to that point.

"Well, you may do that if you will, but you will not find that I sit here or have a part in such shame.

"We know how we stand. It is as Sicily's fief that we hold this isle, and, behind Sicily, there is the great empire of Spain, within whose shelter we rightly lie. We are weak and few, and against us are gathered Turkey and Egypt, and all the Barbary coast. There was time enough for Spain to have had an army here by which they would not have landed at all, being met on the beach in such a sort that they would have sailed away from a prey that they could not take.

"We have promise now that a strong aid will be here by the middle month, as to which we shall see at that time, but till it come (as I say that it must at last) we must hold our walls by our own strength, and John Baptist's name, and the high mercy of God.

"When I saw how we should be left for a time I said that I would not venture my knights against the infidel hordes, for I could spare them less than I could be comforted by the foes they slew. I said: 'I will trust to stone.' I meant that the Turks should come to our walls, where they will be likely to die.

"So I said, and I have not changed. I will trust to every stone that we have. If we can hold St. Elmo for a time during which they will assault it with all their power, it is time gained during which St. Angelo stands secure, and while St. Angelo stands they have gained naught, let St. Elmo end as it may.

"But if we blow it up, it is of no avail from that hour. Why, it is for that they strive! It would be to do their work, for which they should shed their blood in a larger way than we ours, as must ever be when there are stone walls to be stormed. Did we toil to build it for that?

"You will say there is the ravelin gone in an easy way. I will say nothing to that, lest I say too much. For I would be just, and when I think thereof I am moved by a bitter wrath.

"But the fort shall not fall at so cheap a price. You can be certain of that. For I will go myself, whether with those who will volunteer, or with none. For I will order no more. I will send no man to death which I do not share. But I intend that the Cross shall fly from St. Elmo's walls till it fall at a bitter cost, if so be that it shall fall at last. And I will defend that wall to the last hour, though I stand alone."

The Grand Master paused, not as one who had finished speech, but as though emotion hindered his words, and in the moment's silence a babel of voices rose, protesting that he could not be spared, that his place was there, and that there was no knight who would not go, whether at his order, or alone.

Amid the hubbub, Medrano rose. "Grand Master," he cried in a clear high voice that cut through the din, "may I say a few words, by your leave, before

you reproach us more with that which we have not thought?”

As it was seen that he stood, there was silence among the Spanish knights, which spread through the hall as his voice rose. La Valette stood silent, as though doubtful whether he would not do better to say more, but Sir Oliver’s hand was upon his arm.

“It is enough,” he said, “we must hear them now.” And on that La Valette sat down, saying that Sir Gonzales should next be heard.

CHAPTER XXII

GONZALES DE MEDRANO was one of those fortunate individuals who are not only born to positions of wealth and dignity, but appear to have been particularly adapted by nature for the part which they are called to play in the drama of human life.

Handsome of face and form, combining mental ability and vigour of body with a strength and nobility of character sufficient to withstand the temptations of luxury and ambition, exact in the obligations of honour, generous to his equals, considerate to those who served him, he bore without absurdity the name of "the faultless knight," which had been bestowed upon him by the general voice of his compatriots. Exemplifying in his person and his career the profound truth of the precept that to him that hath shall be given, he yet appeared to have escaped the danger of those of whom all men speak well, and if, at this time, there might have appeared to a detached observer something of arrogance in his manner, of assumption that others would be silent to hear him, it would be contradicted by his deliberate courtesies, and was unnoticed by those around, who, even in that assemblage of princely knights, would give him deference as his natural due.

"We have," he said, "as I see it, a simple issue on which to decide, and one on which we must promptly pronounce with a voice which we cannot change. For in a space of few days, at the most, St. Elmo will be so ringed by its foes that it may be outside our power either to succour or to withdraw.

"We have heard the case for evacuation fairly stated, and well; and I suppose we should all agree that it is so strong that it may be held by those whose valour is of a proved worth and who are masters of the chess-board of war.

"Yet we have heard that it is a course which our Grand Master will not approve, preferring rather to go himself to its last defence, to which we surely could not consent, for his is a life which we may not spare, neither is it to our Order's welfare (which must be first with us all) that our foes should be able to boast they have brought him down.

"We have heard the reasons also upon his side, which are strong alike, and, coming from him whom we have chosen our Order's head, they are such, I think, as we cannot refuse.

"Yet, there is this, I think, on which all will rightly agree, that it were better that the fort should be blown up by our own hands than that it should be

stormed on a near day; so I will submit my advice either that it be destroyed in the next hour, or that it be sustained with a much larger force than it now has, it being agreed that we may be near our last chance to send safely across either munitions or men."

La Valette interposed: "There is always the night."

"There is the night," Medrano agreed; "but the moon is now near its full, and apart even from that, if we were placed as the Turks are, we could devise ways to vex those who should seek to cross when their batteries cover both harbour and landing-beach, as they are designing to do, and we cannot rely that their sleights will be less than ours.

"I say that, if we seek to hold St. Elmo at all we should send strong inforcement this night, and to that end, and that the most time may be gained during which our walls here may be left in peace, I will offer this: I will go with not less than two hundred men, and with fifty knights——" he glanced over the board at his sure friend, De La Motte, who nodded slightly, and he corrected his words—"we will go, De La Motte and I, on one bargain alone, that the Grand Master shall here remain, he having all matters in charge, and being one that we cannot spare. Now who will join us in this, or will say where we are wrong?"

He looked round, and was met with a clamour of assenting cries. At that moment he could have had the names of four-fifths of those who were there, though some of them might have blamed their choice in a cooler hour, and the few that were more cautious or faint of heart were content to sit still and be overthought.

Sir Oliver saw that the end they sought had been reached, though the meeting had not gone quite as he thought it would. He was adroit to contrive that it should break up without the taking of formal vote, so that it should appear that all were agreed, as they mostly were.

The Grand Master said no more of going himself, though it had been meant at the time.

He saw that his will was won, but that did not make him the more complacent toward those who had ventured to cross it. He walked down the room, and faced La Cerda with a look on his face which approached contempt. He said only: "In five minutes from now, there will be a reply written for you to take back to the fort, concerning which you will lose no time."

Having said this, he turned aside, without giving any time for reply.

La Cerda stood motionless, only showing that he had heard by the frowning anger that darkened his eyes.

It was, indeed, a vexation to him in a way that the Grand Master could not guess. He had not supposed that it would be necessary to return after the Council in such haste that he would be unable to visit his lodging again. He

had told Venetia that he would be back in two hours, if not less.

There had been hints of dissatisfaction, even of trouble, in some things she had said, which he had been intending to probe, but which must now be left to a time which would be unlikely to come. And he saw, beyond that, that whatever honour there might be for others at last in St. Elmo's defence, there could be little for him.

There was one other who saw that as clearly as he, and who felt that it should be said.

Medrano stood at his side.

"You had a strong case," he said, "which you put with reason and right. Are you among those who go back?"

"I am ordered there."

Medrano thought that the Grand Master had done wrongly in that. He should have left La Cerda to go back as a volunteer, if at all. But he kept that in his own mind.

"It is hard," he said, "for you; for you must now toil to prove that yourself was wrong. And" (a smile lit his face) "I will tell you this. I am not sure that you were. . . .

"Yet, the Grand Master standing out as he did, I thought that he would get his way in the end, and that it would be best that opposition should not become strong, so that we should go, if we must, with a common will."

"We go," La Cerda answered, "to a vain death for a stubborn fool."

The smile left Medrano's eyes. "We die once," he said easily—"and, as yet, we live."

He walked on, thinking that La Valette had not handled all in the best way. He had a disposition to make men wroth. He roused opposition that he might have saved himself by a gentler word. Yet, if he roused men thus, he was of a mood that would bear them down.

Medrano saw that La Valette had got his way at this time (by his own aid) as a more moderate man might have found it less easy to do. Well, let that be as it might, he had this adventure to fill his mind, it being, as he saw, likely to be the last of a life that he had good causes to love.

He went to seek Sir Oliver that he might be assured that there would be no lack of provisions for the men he would lead, or of munitions transported during the night.

He found him busy with many cares, but with a moment's leisure for him.

"There will be more volunteers," Sir Oliver said, "than the numbers you plan to take, both among soldiers and knights. Will you have these ignored and your force assigned in the customed way, or will you choose among them?"

"I will have none come but of his free choice, whether soldier or knight, for I think we go to a certain death, which is beyond the expectation of war."

“Then shall we meet here at a later hour, when I will have the lists of those who offer fairly set out, which names I am having taken now in the outer hall?

“If they be too many (as they will), you can then make your election therefrom.”

“Yes, I will do that. I suppose you will have much of transport to arrange for so large a force, and for the arms and provisions that we must have, of which I would not risk that we go short, but I would not have a great part of our stores lost. If you allow that we may last for a month, you allow too long, unless there be relief from Spain before then, on which I would stake no more than a small coin. And when you cast up what you should need, I would have you think that men do not eat after they die, by which there may be many who will be supplied if you send food for one day.”

Sir Oliver looked his surprise. “Do you think that they will assault so soon? I had thought that they would bombard for two days, or for three, after their batteries are complete.”

“I have a hope that it may be longer than that. Yet perhaps I have said enough.”

He went away after that to order his own affairs, and came back at the hour agreed. He found Sir Oliver alone, except for a young secretary, Don Garcio, to whom he had not spoken before, and who was now seated at Sir Oliver’s side. There were many papers upon the table, at which he was invited also to sit.

“I have here,” Sir Oliver said, “the lists of the knights who have volunteered, being over two hundred, and of a few serving-brothers thereafter, with other volunteers, who are of noble blood, from among whom we are to take fifty in all.

“Of the soldiers, there is also too long a list, among whom De La Motte is now making a choice, having assembled them to that end.”

Sir Oliver had had a double list prepared, so that Medrano could retain that which he passed to him. He gave the duplicate to Angelica to mark the names of those who were chosen to go.

Medrano turned over the list, ticking a name here and there, and calling it out.

“I have rendered you,” Sir Oliver said, “the full list, that you may see the companions you might have if you would, but there are some there whom it would not be well to select, they being of more use on this side.”

“Well,” Medrano said, “there must be some such, and if I call their names, you must say no.”

They had agreed on thirty or forty names when he came to the list of those who were not knights of the Order, and he saw that there were some there that he did not know. He called the name of John de Sola, a Navarese, whom he

knew, and to whom he gave fame as he made the choice.

"I do not know these," he said, "but I would be fair to all sides. They must be brave men to have come forward thus, not having the obligations of knights. I will take the first six." He paused with his quill raised to tick them off, and looked at Sir Oliver's secretary. He asked: "Is your name here?"

Angelica said simply: "No."

Medrano said: "It is very well. You are too young for this bout."

The words were free of any tone of sarcasm or reproach, and Angelica felt that had her name been there, he would have passed it over, but yet that she was somewhat disparaged by the fact that it was not on the list.

She heard Sir Oliver say: "Don Garcio is one I cannot spare from my side." But her own thought wandered to the resolve that she had already made, that she would see Francisco that night and tell him all. She would not go longer in a guise by which she was not a woman at all and was still less than a man. This question only made it more plain that she must discard a dress that had served its turn when it brought her clear of the shadow of Holy Cross.

Her thoughts came sharply back to the present scene as she heard Medrano call another name for her to tick: "*Don Francisco de Valheyna*." She felt a sudden fear, if he should go thus to death, and with nothing said. . . . Her emotion found voice in a sharp cry that told her distress, before she was aware, and regained control.

"Oh," she had said, "not him!"

Medrano looked his surprise. He asked: "And why not? Are we women here?" hitting the mark with a random arrow he did not mean. But the distress in her voice had a puzzling sound. He asked Sir Oliver: "Is there cause that he should not go? What does he do?"

"He now commands the battery which has been set up to protect the great boom."

"There are many knights could do that. By your leave, I will tick his name. I have heard him spoken of well, as was likely to be, he being of Don Manuel's blood."

He watched Angelica as he said this, wondering what that exclamation might mean.

She looked at Sir Oliver in an appeal which would not venture to further words.

For a moment he gave no sign, and there was silence among the three. Then Sir Oliver said: "I would ask you, of your grace, to omit that name, and to forget that it had been asked. For should you guess at a cause, it is likely that you would guess wrong."

"It is little," Sir Gonzales answered, "either to grant or forget, for I know well that you would not ask without cause."

He went on choosing the names.

CHAPTER XXIII

"YOU should be back in three hours," Sir Oliver said, "for we must all work till the dawn, there being much to dispose when so many go; so that you should rest while you may."

"I was not seeking to rest. It was Don Francisco I thought to see."

"You can do that if you will. But you must still work through the night. It is not a time when we can spare ourselves or put forward our private ends."

"I shall not mind that. I am not easy to tire."

"So I have seen. It is the high boast of youth, which is soon tamed. . . . What is the haste on this night?"

"I must change from how I now am. . . . I had Sir Gonzales' scorn."

"Are you fretted for that? . . . Have you thought what will be changed, and in what way, because your cousin will know who you are?"

"I would I were more clear! But it is plain that I may not see him at all, if I shall longer delay. . . . I suppose he will know of my uncle's death?"

"Yes. He will have been told that. But I have not seen him myself, as I meant, having had no leisure from larger things."

Sir Oliver let her go without further words, thinking that she did right, though the issue was less than clear. He perceived that the resolution to acquaint her cousin with her presence there, and in what guise, which she had delayed day after day in a mood of doubt, had become urgent with the sudden realization that he might pass at any time out of her reach into the near shadow of death; and that the impulse had been strengthened by Medrano's question, which showed her that she was come to a time when she must either be a woman known, or act the part of a man.

She went up to her own chamber and changed quickly into the suit she wore when she walked the streets. It was of velvet, poplar-green, and heavy for the time of year, at which silks and satins were in larger use, but it made her less slim than she would have been in a thinner dress, and it would have been hard to find one at which men would have looked with surprise in the Malta of that day, where they had gathered from many lands.

She put a feathered cap of the same stuff on her black curls, and belted the sword and dagger that she must wear, but had no passion to use. As she did this, she stood before a gilt Venetian cheval-mirror (the chamber being furnished in the Italian style of that day), and was not displeased by what she saw.

“I make,” she said, “a fair boy, but it is not for that I have come here; nor is it a part I can play well.”

She knew where her cousin could be found, for all those who had volunteered had said where they would remain after the sixth hour, so that they could be assembled with speed. It would be at the battery where he held his command.

She had to leave the castle and pass along the harbour shore under its seaward guns, and, as she did so, the sun was low over Sceberras ridge, showing a dusky glow through the black clouds of smoke that slowly drifted to sea from St. Elmo’s point, and were ever reinforced as the batteries fired, not in a constant discharge, but seeking a mark where they could damage the works the Turks were toiling to build or slay them if they were exposed in a careless way.

The guns she sought were set on the open shore, and men still toiled with pick and shovel to give them better defence. They were but three, and they did not point outward, being set at the corner overlooking the mouth of the inlet between St. Angelo and the Sanglea, within which all the shipping was moored.

The entrance to this inner harbour was of a width of about three hundred yards and had been closed by a floating boom. This was formed of a gigantic chain, fastened by great anchors fluked in the solid rock. It was supported on a barrier of oak beams, which had been constructed with cross-pieces, like a huge floating ladder. These beams were themselves floated on rows of empty casks, covered with tar. The colossal cable was wound round a number of windlasses on the St. Angelo side.

The three guns which had been given to Francisco’s charge pointed over this boom. A rampart, still being erected along the shore, was designed to cover them from gun-fire from the seaward harbour, and high overhead were the outward-pointing guns of St. Angelo, on that section of the wall which had been assigned for the defence of the English knights, before the days when the failure of a princess of Arragon to give a male heir to the Tudor king had caused that monarch to break with Rome, whose Pope would not sanction her divorce against the anger of Spain.

Angelica saw her cousin, as she approached, directing the building operations upon the rampart, which on other days he had not scrupled to share, but now he had arrayed himself in his gayest attire, as had most of the knights who had volunteered to cross to St. Elmo that night, for they understood that communications were likely to be cut off, and while they were prepared to face the probability that they would be quickly destroyed by the overwhelming strength of the Turks, they were not disposed to die in a draggled guise.

She had scarcely seen him before she was aware of another, whom she had

not been thinking to meet. Captain Antonio stood at her cousin's side, and while she paused for a moment, thinking what it might mean, striving to recall how much he might know or guess, and of half a mind to turn away for a better time, he was the first to perceive her presence, and quick to recognize who she was, as he had known her before.

She was, in fact, interrupting a conversation in which the captain was imparting the wisdom of a somewhat varied experience respecting the placing of gabions, on which Francisco might have known more than he did, and not much; and there was a shadow of impatience in the mind of the younger man, for, among many virtues, that of taking advice with humility was not one which was likely to have been inherited by Don Manuel's son.

"Why, here comes," Captain Antonio said, "Señor Ramegas' young friend (by which he should be yours too), who brought us news in a wet way. But he has moulted since to a gayer dress, and has gained some flesh."

For the Captain's memory was of a boy's form, standing drenched in the lantern's light on the poop of the *Santa Anna*, to which the clothes clung.

Francisco said: "He is strange to me. I do not think Ramegas can know him well. What can he want here?"

Captain Antonio's words meant nothing to him, for, by the way matters had gone, he had heard little of the way by which Ramegas had learnt that the *Flying Hawk* was in a corsair's hands, and what he had heard had not dwelt in his mind.

Angelica saw she was known. She would have gone back if she could, but it was too late. She did not wish that Francisco should recognize her in Antonio's presence, and she saw a danger that the captain, suspecting nothing, might yet talk in a way which would connect her with the *Flying Hawk* and Vilheyna from which all the ships came, bringing such association of thoughts to her cousin's mind as might pierce her disguise before she should disclose it herself, which she did not desire. He might be led to recall how she had tried to gain a place on his own ship, and so guess her at once to be what she was.

She saw that she must be quick and bold, and also instant to invent a reason for coming thus, and her wits, which were seldom dull, made no trouble of that.

She greeted Captain Antonio as one she had met before, and was glad to see; but turned quickly toward her cousin to say: "You are Don Francisco of Vilheyna, as I presume? Sir Oliver Starkey gives you the Order's thanks for your offer to join the force of those who go to St. Elmo to-night, and I am here to express regret that Sir Gonzales could choose no more than fifty in all, which were completed too soon for the inclusion of all whom it would have been an honour for him to lead."

It was fairly composed for a speech which had so little substance of fact,

and of which she had not thought half a minute before, yet it had an odd sound, even to her ears, and to those of Francisco also, though he knew little more than herself of the island's ways.

He had not supposed that his offer of service would be regarded in such a way. If he were not chosen (of which he had had a good hope) he had supposed that he would have been left to guess that as the hours passed. So, in fact, it would have been. Sir Oliver had enough to do in calling the chosen knights, and marshalling transport, and controlling all that must be sent during the night. But her words had the effect she desired, that her cousin did not regard her as closely as what he heard, being vexed at that.

But Captain Antonio heard with a more experienced mind, and one also that was more detached, and to him the words had a false sound, though he could not guess where they were wrong.

"Could you say," he asked, "how many have made offer to go?"

"There were more," she answered, "than two hundred of noble blood." She knew that there was no secret in that.

"Then," he said, "there will be seven score, or it may be eight, to whom you have yet to go."

She was puzzled for a second's space, and then saw that he challenged the truth of what she said, though it might be, as yet, in a doubtful way. She turned his point aside with as quick a wit as before.

"Those," she said, "who have made offer are of the Order sworn, except only a few, of whom Don Francisco is one. And there are special thanks due to those who have so offered their lives, having much less of obligation thereto."

Captain Antonio had no answer to that, and it seemed that Francisco had scarcely heard. He was vexed that his offer had been refused, having hoped, in a sanguine mind, that it might have proved a path to something better than death. He had the impatience of youth, and felt that he wasted his days in an idle way, being in charge of no more than three guns which might never be used. Why, as things were, the Turks might never enter the outer harbour at all! Even should St. Elmo be lost, they might make their assault on St. Angelo from the landward side, as it was natural for an army to do, and he might be idle there till the Spaniards should come (as he did not doubt that they would) and he have done nothing at all!

Captain Antonio looked up at his commander (for Francisco was a head taller than he and some inches beyond), and understood his mind very well. He had his own cause to be vexed, for he had hoped that the command of the battery might be his, if Francisco had gone, but he had the patience which comes with years. He said: "Do you gloom for that? I should say you were born under a very fortunate star.

"For, from your first days on the sea, you have been so controlled that you

have avoided peril and won praise. Even at the first chance you might have been led to the midst of the corsair fleet, where no fighting would have availed. You had been killed or slaved by this day. But you were saved from that by Don Garcio here, who went dangered and wet, and you dry.

"And after that you have a running fight with the Barbary ships, from which you come clear in an honoured way.

"And then, for your uncle's sake, and through his not being here, you must have the *Curse of Islam's* command, from which you win honour again, having little jeopard therewith, and have the fortune to venge his loss.

"And now you have gained the name of one who had volunteered for a place of death, and you will yet live, for which you should waste no grief.

"But when I say you should thank your star, I say it most for the command that you now have and for the same reason for which you fret.

"For I have seen many wars, and great names eclipsed, and crescent fames that have been clouded or come to full, but there is one thing that has never changed. The men who lead at the first will not be there when the triumph sounds and the bells ring. They will be forgotten or cursed. They will be shamed or else dead. It will be those who were unconsidered at first who will lead the host on the last day.

"For those who are in the first charge have the longer chances to die. Those who must marshal the battle at first must stake their fame on a time when there is nothing ready or ranged. Those who lead on a later day may have larger reserves; their under-captains will be weeded out and of surer worth; they will have had time to learn where their foes are strong or where they are weak. They may come to honour or death, being of two where one must. But those who led at the first, on both sides, will have come down before them.

"But here you stand, doing your part (which is naught as yet) while others blunder or bleed, making places—above you bare, and in the last days. . . . Need I put it plainer than that?"

"It is plain enough," Francisco answered, "but it is not a chivalrous thought, showing honour at little worth from the mouths of men. I would not climb by such steps."

He answered without much heed, for he had found that Captain Antonio had a will to talk more than he was always desirous to hear, and his attention was more given to Don Garcio, who stood as though unsure whether he had something further to say.

Angelica had fought an impulse to go. Circumstance offered excuse in the fact that she had not found Francisco alone, and she was still in a fearing doubt of what might follow the revelation of whom she was, which she also thought that he should be quicker to see. But the moment came when she must decide; for when Antonio ceased his talk, she could not continue to stand there without

showing cause. She could not have guessed whether her courage would stand or fall till she heard herself say: “Don Francisco, there is another matter. May I see you somewhat apart?”

Francisco heard this request without surprise, the thought coming that Sir Oliver might have something to say about his father’s affairs. Apart from that, he would have been willing to talk, for Angelica’s voice brought recollections that vexed his mind. He felt it was not the first time they had met, but could not recall where it had happened before. He had heard nothing from Ramegas of the circumstances under which Angelica had come aboard the *Santa Anna*, but Antonio had made a tale from which he would have expected something different from this slight and handsome boy, richly dressed, and speaking as one in the confidence of the Grand Master’s secretary, though he might have been puzzled to say what there was to occasion surprise. Now he said: “I have no cause to stay longer here. Will you walk my way?”

At which they went off side by side, leaving Captain Antonio in charge of the silent guns.

CHAPTER XXIV

FRANCISCO took the way by which Angelica had come, as though he were returning with her. Having a doubt as they turned to the castle gate whether he might not have misunderstood her to mean that he was required there, she asked: “Is your lodging far?”

“I lodged with Señor Ramegas in the town at first, but I have a place in the castle now, so that I may be near my charge.”

“We shall be alone there?”

“Yes,” he said, wondering that she did not begin at once what she had to say. “Is it so private as that?”

“It is a small thing, but it is important to me.”

That was not what he had expected to hear. He said only: “Well, we shall be soon there.”

He led to a little chamber, much smaller than that which Angelica had, of which there were many within the castle, which was adapted to the accommodation of many knights of a noble blood, such as would expect to be lodged apart, in however straitened a way. Angelica saw that it must be quite close to her own, though it was not so high, and was approached by a different stair. She marvelled, without much cause, that they had not met before that.

The room had a narrow bed, a table, a chair, and two chests. They were all made of oak, heavy and strong. There was a silver mirror upon the wall. The furniture filled the narrow room, so that the space to stand was not much. There was some litter of her cousin’s clothes, and other things, cast about in a man’s way, recalling thoughts of his room as she had known it before.

He offered her the one chair, which she did not heed. “Francisco,” she asked, “do you not know who I am?”

“Why, no,” he said, though he was puzzled by her voice, and an impossible thought which he put aside, “not beyond what I am told.”

“I am Angelica.”

He did not, or else he would not believe, and when she said again: “I am your cousin, Angelica,” he answered curtly: “I will thank you to jest with another name.”

“Why, so I have,” she said, with the sudden laughter which was always await to break through a crisis of words, “I have played with that of Don Garcio, with which the Viceroy has more business than I, as I did not think when I made it my choice. . . . But if you doubt, you can ask Señor Ramegas,

or Sir Oliver, or the Grand Master himself, if he have space in his mind for so small a thing."

But he did not doubt. Conviction came at a laugh's sound. Seeing her now, he was amazed that he had not known her before. She looked to his opened eyes as a girl transparently pranked in a male attire, through which all must see at a second glance. That came of the fact that he had known her before, and that he saw what he looked to see. It edged his words, as he asked: "Will you say how you fell to this shame?"

She answered sharply to that: "I have fallen to none."

Through the next minutes they changed angry words, quarrelling as they had often done when they were boy and girl in her uncle's home.

It was a strife of words in which there was loss and gain on both sides, for she made him see some reason in what he had first concluded to be a monstrous, unbelievable thing; and he gave her an alarm, such as she had not felt before, by the reaction he showed, and by the assertion he made that she had not escaped the shadow of Holy Cross, which had been the one thing she had counted her certain gain, unless (he said) it should prove that they would not receive her now, as he was inclined to suppose. "For," he said, "you must see you can never wed, for no knight of honour would call you clean, you having been where you have; of which, if you do not know what tales will be made, you have much to learn."

She said to that: "You talk as though you know much, who are little elder than I. I may have no liking to wed, though I will not be tied to a life of prayer; but, if I were so disposed, you might find you were wrong for a second time."

She looked at him with confident angry eyes as she said this, showing no weakness of doubt, but her heart sank that there should be such words from him, from whom she had hoped (though she knew it had been with a leaven of doubt) that she would have support, or even admiration for that which she had had the courage and wit to do.

She felt that, had he taken it in another way, she would have been equal either to go on as she was, or to reveal herself without shame; but when he said next, "We must think how you can best be got off in a private way," her anger rose to a flame that broke them apart.

She said: "Have I asked your aid? Do you think I am ward of yours? But I have overstayed, having promised Sir Oliver, with whom I have to work through the night."

She turned quickly and went, none the slower because he called after her "*Angelica*!" which it was plainly foolish to do.

He saw no more of her for that night, but in the morning he sought audience with Sir Oliver, who met him alone, seeming to have leisure enough, and showing no sign that his hours of sleep had been only two.

“I have a matter of which to talk,” he said, “concerning your uncle’s affairs, and to know (but at your own time) whether it is your purpose to join the noble Order to which you now give your support, and to take our vows. But as your cousin sought you last night, I can suppose that it is of her you have come to talk, so, by your leave, we will speak of that first.”

“Then she has told you of that?”

“She has told me naught. But it was with my consent that she came.”

“I come for your counsel and aid, that we may return her with such honour as we may save.”

Sir Oliver looked grave, and then smiled. “Which, you would suggest, is not much?”

The question annoyed Francisco, being put in that way. He realized that, whatever he might think of his cousin’s folly, he would not lightly allow it from other lips. Yet it would have been absurd to resent a question which had its roots in his own words, and the tone in which they were said.

“We know what she has done, which we cannot gloss. I spoke as among friends.”

“Which you may account me to be. You would have her to return home at once, if a safe route could be found?”

“Yes. Or direct to Holy Cross, if they would consent to receive her now. They could hide much, if they would.”

“They would receive her with joy, she having so large a dower. But how would you make her go?”

“What else can she do? She cannot stay here. She must be made to see that. Is she not for me to control, now that my uncle is dead?”

“As I think, no. But I shall be better advised upon that when I have letters from Spain which should be soon here.”

Sir Oliver considered it a folly of youth to have thought that the Convent would have made any difficulty in receiving Don Manuel’s niece, even had her fault been ten times more than it had, but he said less, seeing much of the father (whom he had esteemed) in the son’s manner and words, and judging that he was of a very sensitive pride.

Francisco felt that Sir Oliver’s judgment was not entirely attuned to his own. He even had a vague doubt as to the motives which might actuate the older man, which was less than distrust, but may have united with a consciousness of his own inexperience in dealing with such a matter in disposing him to disclose his own mind no further. He added: “If I have no surety of power, what would you advise me to do?”

“I cannot answer that in a word; beyond that I would advise that you do naught till you have considered its end.

“But I will tell you how the matter now stands, as I see it to be, and you

may deduce therefrom what you will, according as you place your own pride against your cousin's welfare or peace, or in what you may suppose that her peace will lie; and you should also weigh how far you could bend her will.

"There is one thing sure. She should not have come. There is another, that if she stay, it must be to a perilous end.

"But here she is, in a boy's dress; and if you would change that, either of her will or without, you should sum the cost, which you may find that it is not easy to do.

"You say you would send her home. If you would do that, it must be with the Grand Master's consent. I do not say that that would be hard to gain. If the matter be brought back to his mind he may have her expelled. He may do that as being best for herself; but, even so, he may not be over tender to regard her honour or shame. Or he may think she is useful here, and if he think that, you will not move him by any plea. He cares for Malta alone.

"But if she go now, and against her will, she is shamed by a foolish prank, at the least, such as will be thwarted and void, even if (as you have reason to fear) there be nothing talked in a worse way.

"If she stay, should she cast the dress which she now wears? She is here, where no woman should be. It is a secret, as I think, which is guessed by none. She could not stay in these walls were the truth known.

"She could stay in the town, of course, where there are Maltese women enough, though they are not of her kind. It might be best; but I do not think it could be done without common talk."

"Do you mean," Francisco asked in an amazed way, though he had seen the force of some things to which he had not given much thought before, "that it should be allowed to go on?"

"I would suggest that it may be for her to decide, and if she will keep disguise, that she should know she has watchful friends."

Francisco was not quick to convince. "It may be discovered," he said, "by other eyes; and how will it look then?"

"It can be shown, at the worst, that she is here by the Grand Master's direction, which has not ceased; and it can be shown also how she came by her simple device, for Señor Ramegas is witness of all. And we could then make it her praise that she had done more for Malta than most can claim, when she saved your ships from the Moors."

Francisco rose. He remembered, none too soon, that Sir Oliver was a busy man, and that they had talked at length. He said, with some formal stiffness which might become dignity as his years grew: "I must give it thought. I must thank you for that you have been my cousin's friend at a difficult need."

He went away, still convinced that Angelica had shamed both herself and him by a folly almost too monstrous for words, which it must be hard to

forgive; and yet somewhat inclined from that view by the observation that Sir Oliver was disposed to regard it in a more lenient way. But it was not his name that was to be so risked on the tides of chance!

Sir Oliver found a moment's leisure to consider his departing visitor, before turning his thoughts elsewhere. "Spanish pride!" he thought, with a smile, "yet he may go far." But then he thought that there could be few there who would go to more than a near grave.

CHAPTER XXV

THE day passed with no great event, except that a few died, which must have been of some moment to them, but was less in the neat records entered up by Sir Oliver's scribes.

Piali's battery fired at times, but those which Dragut was building on other sites were silent, their teeth being less than grown. There was a gentle steady breeze from the south-west, moving the smoke of the Turkish battery sluggishly toward St. Elmo, where it piled up against that which overhung there, and thence drifted in slow streamers over the sea. Sullen and seldom, St. Elmo's guns boomed reply, and the black smoke thickened over the walls.

During the day the Turks observed that there was a crowding of pennons upon those walls, for the fifty knights who had come in the darker hours must erect their own beside the others already there. The Turks had watched those pennons with care, for when a knight died, or was wounded so that he could not remain, his pennon would be removed, so that they could count the fallen and make a list of their names.

Now they knew that they had been reinforced by a fifty more. They did not know that St. Elmo held a further two hundred Spanish soldiers besides in its crowded walls, nor would they have cared if they had. Dragut would have said that the net was filled with a better haul. The Turks dragged guns over the hill. They brought up powder, which they would not do till the last day, lest it should be fired by a chance shot; they delved in rock: they piled dirt: they heaped sacks of wool. If some died as they worked from St. Elmo's fire, it mattered nothing. They were easy to clear away. There was no shortage of Turks, nor was there fear that they could be translated to Paradise beyond the resources of pleasant fruits and houris' arms that would wait them there.

In St. Elmo the troops who had been transported during the last night slept, as they had been ordered to do; and in the Commander's chamber Medrano urged the plan which had been in his mind when he had told Sir Oliver that there would be many for whom a day's provisions would be enough, but of which he had been too cautious to speak, even in the Secretary's room.

De Broglio pondered awhile. He said: "It is what they will not expect. It is good in that. But you must think that you may blunt your blades with the Turks you kill, and they will not be greatly less. There can be but one end."

"So I suppose," Medrano answered. "It is what we can do before that, if I am not counting too high."

Medrano's plan was no more than to sally out in a sudden way and do the Turkish batteries all the evil they could.

Piali and Dragut had been alike on one point, that when they had chosen the places on which they would set their guns they had feared only the counter-fire which they would get from the fort. With the great army they had, and knowing that St. Elmo's defenders could be counted only in scores, they had not thought that they would venture outside their walls.

Being arrogant in the great numbers they led they had established their batteries somewhat closer to the fort then they might otherwise have thought it prudent to do, and had piled their mounds only in the very front of the guns, leaving the battery flanks naked of stake or ditch.

Medrano said: "I have little doubt that they can be reached by a sudden rush, and if we can be three minutes therein, we need ask no more: after that we must get back as we can, about which we need not despair."

"Well," De Broglio said, "you are surely mad, as we all are. I do not blame you for that. You shall have your way.

"But I will tell you this. I am not coming myself, for my place is here. And, besides that, I am so fat that I could not run either forward or back. Neither shall D'Egueras come, for he is one that I will not lose. And if I would give him leave, I should say that he has worn out his legs watching if sentries sleep, from which, since we lost the lunette, he will never rest.

"Nor shall La Cerda go out, for the old fox" (by which he meant La Valette, as they all knew) "has made him his tool, and, having used him thus, he should not have sent him back. But John is one who looks straight ahead and can see nothing beside.

"In short, you can go yourselves, right and left, you and La Motte here, and you will make slaughter and aid us much, as I do not doubt. If you tumble their guns you will gain us time, and it is for that you are here: and if you do not return we shall be as strong as before you came."

Medrano said: "That is well," and having his plans made, and having agreed with De La Motte what they would both do, he went to rest while he could and slept sound. But he awakened before the dawn, and, while the light was yet dim, they led out their men, he and La Motte, each having twenty-five knights or others of noble blood and a hundred soldiers of Spain, who may have been no less valiant than they. They went out with their swords alone (the soldiers carrying bucklers, they not having breast-plates of steel) so that they could run lightly; and he led those of his part toward the battery that Piali had built, La Motte taking the left hand course to Dragut's new battery that was on the very crest of the ridge, and somewhat on the St. Angelo side.

La Cerda stood on the battlement of the fort, looking upward into the mist that covered Sceberras' side. Beneath him was the depth of the ditch, with its

opposite scarp almost as high as himself, for (excepting the cavalier) St. Elmo had been cut out of the ground rather than raised therefrom.

Even the counter-scarp was not easy to see, for there was a light sea-mist that increased the dimness of dawn, and there had been so little wind in the night that the smoke of battle still darkened the heavy air. The sally-parties had left the fort on the seaward front, for there was no nearer exit unless they should cross the ditch, and they kept to St. Angelo's side, though it was a longer way, lest they should alarm the Turks in the ravelin, if they should go under their wall.

Away on his left hand La Cerda heard the steps of men that he could not see, and once a low voice of command. The steps died and a silence came, every second of which he knew to be pregnant with human fate.

Medrano's order had been that they should approach slowly at first, seeking silence rather than speed, and saving their breaths on an uphill way, but if alarm came they were to run forward at once at their utmost speed. Every second now that the stillness endured must mean that they were nearer success. . . . La Cerda hardly knew what he wished to be.

It was an audacious attempt, such as may sometimes attain its end by the very boldness with which it defies the sounder precepts of war. The Turks might be careless to watch, being so secure in their strength: the batteries might be weakly held, their main supports camping more to the rear. But if they were alert, and in probable force, they could meet the attacking party with such a fire as would be their end: at the best, it must soon retire and expect annihilation as it ran back.

Yet, if this silence endured for three minutes more, they might do that which they sought, even though they should all die in the hour. . . . Was the Grand Master right? Was it wise to drive men thus, till they made resolve to cast their lives away in a desperate chance, they being as few as they were? Might it be said (he allowed this in a mind that sought to judge every side) that the defence of Malta with such a force was so hopeless, by every rule, that the desperate risk might be said to be the more prudent choice, being the small chance against none?

Even so, there was no justice in the way in which the Grand Master had met the advice of those who were more practised in war, and no less valiant than he. . . . Would the silence ever endure? Had they lost their way in the mist? That could not be true of both parties alike. . . . There was the sound of a shot from the left. That must be from Dragut's new battery on the east. De La Motte must have been discovered first, though he had somewhat further to go. . . . Confused cries of alarm. . . . Shots that were almost continuous now. . . . And now, over all, the shout of many voices at once, *St. John! St. John!* the battle-cry of the Order rose, in proof that they had cast concealment

aside, and were running forward to the attack.

Louder, but more confused, the noise of conflict came to those who watched on St. Elmo's wall. La Cerda forgot all but his natural sympathies with men of his cause and blood as he turned to De Broglio at his side to say: "They hold their own, if not more." For it was plain that the noise of battle was not refluent toward those who heard.

"Ay," the Commander replied, "so they would at the first, but it cannot last. Medrano is mad, as we all are. . . . So you see: who are sane, and look on."

The words were said without meaning offence and La Cerda took them in the right way. He knew that De Broglio was without malice and quarrelled with none. He answered: "I do more than look on. I am here alike."

"Ay, so you are, and it is harder for you."

La Cerda made no answer to that. He thought that De Broglio saw the end as clearly as he, and that his remark might have been applied to himself with an equal truth. Yet what could seem hard to a fat man who jested and smiled and surveyed all in a twinkling way?

As he was silent, De Broglio spoke again: "I have seen a madman walk on a roof's ridge and he did not fall, for which I suppose that he lacked wit."

He got no answer to that, for, as he spoke, it seemed that the fort shook. A sheet of upward fire vanquished the gloom from where Piali's battery stood; and instantly, as the gloom returned, there came the thunder that follows flame.

"Dragut," De Broglio said, in a cheerful tone, "will not curse for that, though they all die." He would rather have seen it come from the new battery on the crest, but he had been taught in childhood that that which Heaven put on his plate should be taken with gratitude, or, at least, without grumbling words. "It will be a week longer," he concluded, "before they will try the wall. . . . I would they were safe back. They are men too good for a nameless death, which the most will have."

De La Motte's party were the first to return. They had been both led and withdrawn in a very soldierly way, as might be expected from the leadership of one of so great repute, and it was by no fault of theirs that they had done no more than they did.

The fact was that Dragut had planned that the great bombardment should commence on the coming day, and he did not mean that it should last long. He meant to show Piali (now getting about again with a bandaged head) how such things should be done. Having brought artillery enough to break St. Angelo's walls, and an army to storm there-through, it was absurd that they should be delayed for a week (which was now three) by the little fort on St. Elmo's point. Meaning to make a quick end, he was not easy to please with three times the guns that Piali had thought enough. He brought up more through the night. De

La Motte had advanced upon a battery that was alert with labour and thronged with men.

When the first shot had shown that silence would no longer avail he had charged the battery in a very bold and resolute way. For a brief moment it had been won. There had been some slaughter among the confusion of those who surely had not expected a morning call of that kind: some damage done to the battery, though not more than could be shortly repaired. One gun, being on its own wheels, had even been turned about and fired with deadly effect into the regiment of Turks that was rushing upon them from their camp, which was at no distance away.

But La Motte saw that, for the first purpose he had, the surprise had failed. It remained for him to bring off his men, if he could, with a lighter loss than they had caused to their foes. The mist helped him in this, though it was not much, and was now lifting somewhat to a seaward breeze. As the mass of the infidel host rushed on to retake the battery in an overwhelming force, he spread out his men in a wide line for their retreat so that they should not make a bunched mark to the battery fire; but the Turkish gunners were either slain, or found, on getting back to their guns, that they were obstructed by the eagerness of some of their own men who had run in pursuit of the Christian dogs, and after that they could not get a good view through the mist, and the end was that when La Motte called the muster of those that he had led out an hour before, he found that he had not left behind more than a few, who were dead, for he had brought his wounded away, even carrying those who were sore hurt. It was an example of what may be done by coolness and skill, even when the die has seemed to fall on the wrong side.

But Medrano had come to a different scene. Piali's battery, which he had thought sufficient to flatten the fort, and which, till now, had done all the bombarding which it had endured, was not Dragut's toy. He spoke of it with some contempt. He was not busy during the night to mount it with extra guns. It lay quiet; and those who were on guard sat in a ring throwing dice, and having all their thoughts on a gambling game. But for the sound of the shot when La Motte's party was first perceived, Medrano might have contrived an entire surprise. As it was, he found himself at the first rush in possession of the battery, with scarcely a blow struck, except at the backs of those who made no scruple to fly.

That was what he had hoped, and his plans were made and his orders given, so that all knew what must be done. There were five who stayed at his side, but six score continued advance as though they were seeking to find the Turkish army that they might give battle to it alone. They had to go but a short way before they found as much of it, or more than they would be likely to long endure.

Suddenly roused from sleep, bewildered by the sudden attack they might be, but the Turkish soldiers of that day were among the best in the world, as their conquests proved. They came on, five to one, and were met with a fury alike their own, for the Christians fought as though there were death in a backward step, and this was not from valour alone, or from their fierce hatred of pagan foes, being indeed of a literal truth. For while they had advanced to the Turkish camp, Medrano and his five companions had searched for where the battery powder was stored. They found it in a vault which had been hollowed into the rock to protect it from the danger of being struck by St. Elmo's fire. They did not lose time bringing it out, for it would do very well where it was. They laid a train of powder thereto, and lighted a slow-match, giving themselves time to run forward to where their comrades strove. The Christians fought with the knowledge that every backward step took them nearer to the explosion which was designed, and that they must hold their ground till it came, lest the Turks should get there first, and put out the match.

Medrano looked down at the lighted match, and along the hill to where sword and scimitar clashed in a strife that could not long be sustained.

"Well," he said, with a smile, "we shall not lose life for a little price. . . . But they can do with six more."

He drew out his sword, and would have run forward into the line of strife, when John de Sola cried out and pointed down the side of the hill. A hundred men may hold five hundred back for a time in a stubborn way but there is a limit to how far they can spread their front. Turks ran up the hill, and would be there before the explosion would be likely to come.

Medrano turned and ran down to hold them in play. Four men followed, but John de Sola stood still.

The hillside was somewhat steep at that place. Medrano and his companions covered the ground fast. The first Turks they met paused, or were tumbled back. But it was a position that could not endure for a minute's space. The Turks were coming in dozens from every side. At the best, if they should hold them back (which they could not do), they would be certainly slain. De Sola stooped to the match. He set the powder alight.

Medrano drove his sword through the throat of a man whose sight failed in the sudden glare, which he had the misfortune to face, and, at the same instant, they were flung forward in one heap. He was half-conscious of deafening noise, out of which he rose in a black smoke, while around him shards of iron and fragments of rock fell from the sky.

He had no more orders to give. After the explosion, every man would know that he had nothing to do but to get back if he could.

He could not tell where the Turks were. He could not see three paces away. He supposed they had fallen or run. He recovered his sword, which had left his

hand. He went at a slant, somewhat down the hill, thinking to get as de[tached] from the main line of pursuit, and that to pass under the ravelin might not be beyond the chance of a single man. He saw that there was a hope of life, now he had come through to this point, which he was not willing to miss.

"If this smoke," he said, "will but lie. . . . By Mary's grace, the wind blows it now in the right way."

As he spoke, a man came stumbling blindly down the hill. Medrano stood still, with a ready sword. The man was small, and no weapon was in his hand. As he passed, Medrano saw that he was one of his own men, by his Spanish dress. He called after him: "Have a care. That is not the way."

The man made no reply. Medrano heard the noise of his fall. He followed, and looked on one who was vainly trying to rise. His leg was bleeding and torn, but he might not know how much it was hurt, for he had been struck on the face by a falling rock, and his sight was gone for that time.

Medrano knew the man. A common soldier of small valour, and less repute, whom he would not have picked, but De La Motte had known less. He gave him a helping hand. "Can you walk?" The man limped with his aid for a short space, and collapsed again. Terror of what would be his end in the infidels' hands (which it was not foolish to dread) could no longer give strength to the weakened limb.

"I can no more," he said. "I am sped."

Medrano looked down at the man, and his shoulder lifted in a slight gesture that might be contempt, or perhaps despair, but its meaning must be left for each to read as he will.

"Nay," he said, "it is two or none by my count." He threw the damaged form, from which it seemed that conscious life had now gone, over his left shoulder, so that his sword-arm might be left free. He went on under the pall of the friendly smoke.

Sometime after it was thought that the last straggler had wandered in, and he had been counted among the lost, Medrano came to St. Elmo's gate, bearing a dying man to explain his delay. Was it strange that men called him the faultless knight?

CHAPTER XXVI

AN hour after De La Motte's return, De Broglio sat in his own room, writing a report which he thought the Grand Master would be pleased to read, though its main event had been loud enough to be known without the help of any missive from him.

He would have written before, but wished to make his record complete, and he had only then given up hope that Medrano would return.

He looked up as La Cerda entered the room. "If you go up to the wall," he said, "you will get a good view of a Turkish flag."

"Why, do they attack?" De Broglio's tone was unperturbed as he reached for his sword-belt, letting the letter lie.

"I would not say that. You must see to believe. They have a battery at the door. It is too weird for a war."

De Broglio answered nothing to that. He went up through a crowd of knights who talked and disputed among themselves, but gave way as they saw who came, and he looked at a Turkish flag which hung over the counter-scarp, not thirty yards away.

What had happened may be ascribed, like the loss of the ravelin during the previous week, in part to the boldness of the Turks, and in part to the unaccountable chances of war.

As the noise of the explosion had died, Medrano's men, such as were not dead or too sorely hurt, had commenced to run back, knowing that they had done their work, and that it only remained that they should so contrive, if they could, that they would be alive to boast on the next day. The Turks did not delay in pursuit. They followed, ten to one by now, if not more, under a murk of smoke, which the wind moved somewhat more slowly than their own legs, but in the same direction toward the fort.

Those who fled inclined somewhat over the ridge of the hill to its eastern slope, as they had to enter the fort on that side, and those who were close in pursuit followed the same way, slaying all they could overtake, till they came to where they could be seen by those who watched on St. Elmo's wall. They were betrayed by the smoke, which now lay or drifted in heavy patches around the fort, with clear spaces between, into one of which they ran before they were well aware, and a heavy arquebus fire drove them back with some loss, and made a rescue for such of the flyers as had been able to keep in front to that point.

But meanwhile another party of Turks who were more behind had failed to keep the track of the chase, and had come straight on, being wrapt in the thickest smoke, and were abruptly checked when they found they were on the edge of the counter-scarp of St. Elmo's fort.

They stood in such murk that the garrison of the fort (most of whom were now crowding the eastern wall, where they had opened fire on the pursuit) did not know they were there.

In an instant, the possibility of the moment was seen, and the word was passed back to the Turkish camp. In much less than an hour's time, when the smoke cleared, it was seen that a heavy barricade had been built up on the edge of the counter-scarp; gabions of earth, rocks and beams, and even broken pieces of guns that the explosion had blown apart, had been dragged by a hundred hands, and piled loosely along the edge. Bags of wool were added in the next hour. It was a barrier against which even gun-fire would not avail, for, having so large a start, it could be built up faster than it could be shot down. For the rest of the siege no man could look over that side of St. Elmo's wall without the risk that a bullet would find his head from the sharpshooters that would lurk behind the opposing barrier, making loop-holes so well concealed that they would be hard to discern till the death-shot came, and a wisp of rising smoke would show where the arquebus had been pointed through.

De Broglio had to add twice to his letter before it went, once to say that so little had the sally availed in driving the besiegers back that it had brought them up to the very wall of the fort, and again to say that Medrano was come in, having taken no hurt.

But as to the first, he wrote: "We have still the ditch, and this barrier they have built may avail them no more than does the ravelin on the further side, and having them thus at our door tends to keep all alert to watch and prepared for a quick call, so we may be content, thinking what Piali's words are likely to be as he surveys the battery which he thought enough to have brought us down." Concerning Medrano he wrote: "I am more pleased by his return than irked that the Turks have approached so nigh. He is one whom men will follow with willing feet, and if this siege should go on till I age too much, as it seems that you would wish it to do, or if you would heed advice, as you never will, you would give him the place I have. He is whole, except that his back will ache for some days, he having brought in a man of less than a ducat's worth, being too broken to mend; and it seems that a scimitar slashed his sleeve, which he must get someone to stitch."

The Grand Master read this letter, and was not entirely content, but after talking with Sir Oliver he decided that the loss of the battery would have done more harm to the Turks than it could be to their avail to have piled a barrier on the other side of the ditch, where they would (he supposed) be discommoded

by the fire of the fort, and to which position they would not find it easy to bring their cannon down the slope, which would be exposed to the fire of the cavalier. He considered that it would not be simple for them to snipe those on St. Elmo's walls without exposing themselves to the same fate, which was partly true, but the difference was that they had abundance of men, while those in the fort were few, so that it was a game they could better afford to play, but for which it is likely that they would not have gone there at all. St. Elmo's defence defied the science of war, as it was then taught. La Cerda had some cause when he said: "It is too weird for a war."

But as to Medrano, La Valette read the report, and was not shaken in his belief that he had the right man to govern the fort, about which, at first, he had been unsure.

"Should I put one in such charge who would waste his strength on a wounded man!" he exclaimed. To which Sir Oliver replied: "Had he had that charge on his mind, he would have let the man lie."

Yet Sir Oliver did not deny that De Broglio was the right man for that post, as he had said at the first, and he observed that the Grand Master was not aggrieved because his reports were freely worded toward himself, which he did not appear to see, for it was for Malta only he cared, and those who guarded St. Elmo's walls could say what they would concerning himself, so long as they did not say that they wanted to come away.

In the Turkish camp, the three leaders met in Mustapha's tent, where the Egyptian Pasha stroked his beard, and bit it at times with his yellow teeth, as he watched the quarrels of his two naval colleagues, putting in a suave word to turn the edge of Piali's clumsy anger or Dragut's jesting contempt, and being well content that their difference left the power of final decision so entirely to him, while either would be willing, in case of failure, to agree with him that the other deserved the blame.

Piali wished that he had lain in his tent for a day more, but would have it that it was Dragut's fault that the battery had not been more strongly and vigilantly held, and when he was pressed as to whether its defence had been stronger in the first days before Dragut came, and finding that he was confronted by one whom he could not overbear by loudness of voice, and the truculence of his own bulk, he shifted ground, and said that the loss would not have occurred had he remained in control, for St. Elmo would not have stood to that day.

"You slow the fire," he said, "from the battery I had built, while there must be two others set up; and because you would do that, you say you are a better soldier than I. Very well, I will say we must have four, and I shall be better than you; unless you shall say we must have eight, which will prove you better again."

“Nay, but you could still say sixteen. You should not omit that.” Dragut looked at him with a twinkling in his small rum-reddened eyes, which was itself an insult the Sultan’s favourite was not accustomed to meet. He spoke to him as one humours a child. He asked: “What would you have done before now?”

“I would have stormed its walls, as I was planning to do.”

“And what now?”

“I would storm it in a day’s time, as we quickly can.”

“Have you counted the cost of that?”

“It is a cost we can pay. We have men enough. We sit here while the weeks pass, as we should not do. If we cannot cut the calf’s throat, how shall we deal with the cow?”

“It was not I who resolved that the calf must be slaughtered first. I was not here. But when I saw you had tied it up, I said you would be a jest if you let it go, or if you bungled the knife. . . . Have you seen the storm of a fort that is stoutly built?”

Piali made no answer to that, for his life had been in the harem walls, and after that on the sea.

Dragut went on: “It is what I have; and I will tell you this. If you assault now, you will take the fort at a great loss, if you take it at all, of which I am less than sure, for all the great numbers you have, and they of a valiance I do not doubt. If you take it not, you are shamed, it being so small a thing; and if you do, you will only show that it could have been had for less loss on a better day.

“I tell you, if you do that, I will go afloat. Neither shall any man of mine be among those who attempt the walls, though my guns you can still have.”

Mustapha interposed too quickly for Piali to make reply: “Dragut, the battery being gone, what would you counsel now?”

The corsair turned to the old general, and his voice changed, as though he now spoke to one of his own kind, after being vexed by a boy.

“The battery is gone, as we know, but I should say that the sally failed despite that, for it was the new one which we have built on the crest which it was of most moment to them to have overset, and it is no more damaged than a day will mend. By to-morrow’s dawn we shall have our guns pointed so that we can sink any boat that St. Angelo sends to their relief, or to take them off.

“We shall then have gained what I have said from the first that we must do. We shall have them herded apart.

“After that, I would bombard them from every side with the guns we have set up, and with others which we must find to replace those that are gone. I would bombard them for a full week. I would beat them flat. If they do not yield before then, and if there be any that still live, they will be easy to storm. I

would so deal that none shall escape alive, either to land or sea. I would have those who watch from St. Angelo's walls see what their own end is most likely to be if they do not yield upon terms while they yet can.

"But I say, if we make assault while they are strong, and we should be thrown back from their walls, we have brought shame on our own heads and shall rouse a stir in the Christian lands which may bring them aid, even to the coming of Spain."

"Well," Mustapha said, as one who reflects, and turning to Piali, as taking counsel with him, though his resolution was set, "a week is not long. We may bombard them for that time, and make their end sure." And then, lest he should make querulous reply, for he saw that the quarrel had gone as far as it safely could, he went on to ask what was the extent of the damage that the explosion had caused.

Piali said that the great basilisk was beyond repair, or at least beyond any resources they had, but some of the other guns were less wronged. They had been rolled about, but they could be mounted again.

Mustapha stroked his beard, and turned to Dragut to say: "It will be well that we repair them with speed, and that we bring up further guns to that point, so that it be even more strong than before, for it will hearten the Christian dogs if they think that the explosion did us great harm."

Dragut did not dispute that, though he saw that Mustapha's purpose was to make Piali content, for the reason was good, and, in fact, he had little care whether Piali were petted or vexed. He regarded him no more, when his talk had ceased, than a fly that he had brushed from his face.

Mustapha played the peacemaker here, but it was done without good will to those which he kept apart. He enjoyed their wrangles which he sought ever to keep alive, so long as they did not go to too great a length, but he watched through all that they should come to such decisions at last that the war would be carried on in the best way.

Medrano's raid had so much result that the assault that Dragut had planned was put off for a full week, and it was possible to communicate with St. Angelo in safety during the following day, but on the next morning the dawn had not fully come when Dragut's batteries opened upon the fort, including that which he had planted on the further side of the western harbour-mouth, to which St. Elmo replied with all the guns that it had. St. Angelo's two culverins also joined the concert again, though the range was too long for them to be aimed at a sure mark, and in the afternoon Piali's battery added its voice to the din.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE record of the next week can be quickly told, but it was slow to those who must live through the waiting hours. From morn to night the batteries thundered, and did not cease. There was no doubt that Dragut knew how to place his guns. The fort was hammered from every side. Rock-built as it was, it seemed to cower under the ceaseless hail, as though its battered sides shrank and were near collapse. One by one the great stones of its parapets cracked or were splintered away.

And, as the days passed, its own fire lessened; one by one its guns ceased, till such shots as came were separate, single flashes from the canopy of smoke which now lay over it night and day. It seemed to spit back viciously, impotently, now here, now there, toward the relentless ring of its foes.

And, as the days passed, there was a gradual lessening of the crowds which had watched the duel of death from St. Angelo's walls, till a time came when they would often be bare of all but those who had their duty thereon. What was there to observe but a monotony of smoke through which the gun-flashes could be frequently seen? What to hear but the rumbling thunder which did not cease, and was deafened with a regular but less frequent monotony by the louder fire of the castle's guns, which seemed no more than a protest, impotent and absurd, at the agony of a friend that they could not rescue: a vain barking against a foe that they could not reach.

That was how it was in the castle and town. In St. Elmo, men knew a more urgent suspense, waiting an assault which, at any moment, might bring all to a quicker end, but not more sure than that which must come at last from the metal hail that beat ever against their walls. Many would have been glad had they heard the wild war-cries of the infidel host, and been summoned to face the rush of their crowding hordes.

The soldiers diced long, they slept much; they ate and talked, changing memories and tales. They sharpened weapons which had been sharpened before. There were times when they sang: others when they disputed about the mysteries of an invisible world. But there was little of that, for they were free from speculation and doubt. They were men who knew: they were told, and believed.

The knights believed also; although, knowing somewhat more, they had more to doubt. There were those among them who were very frequent in prayer. Yet most would have agreed that they had little need to fear either the

devil's wiles or the wrath of God. Having come to die in His name, and to slay those who blasphemed His Triune Mystery with obscene words, surely they could have a confident hope that He would look on any weakness or sin (such as is natural to the sons of men) with a very lenient eye?

As the days passed the isolation of St. Elmo increased. Dragut's guns swept the outer harbour now, so that it was impossible to communicate through the day, and though at first there was some traffic during the darker hours, and a further supply of the wild-fire bombs was sent over without event, this security did not last, for the Turks devised a system of drifting flares by which the water might chance to be lit up anywhere and at any time, so that a boat that had been slipping silently through the gloom would find itself in a glare of light, and such a mark for the Turkish guns as they would not be likely to miss.

When a boat had been sunk in this way, with the loss of a dozen lives, apart from those of the wounded men which it had been bringing away, it became evident that such transits must cease, except at a vital need. Up to that time the bodies of the knights who died had been taken up to St. Angelo for burial in the grounds of the Convent Church, but from now St. Elmo must dispose of its dead as it best could.

The Turkish fleet grew bolder now that the Maltese galleys could not leave their inner harbour without coming under the fire of Dragut's batteries, and while the weather was kind, a squadron of them blockaded the harbour-mouth, so that such communication with Sicily as was still maintained was from other parts of the coast, and that at peril enough, for the whole circuit of the island was now patrolled by the corsair ships.

Yet the Grand Master got away another letter to Garcio, telling of the urgent need in which Malta lay and urging that he should send relief at the first hour that he could. This was sent through me Turkish lines to Marshal Couppier, who arranged its despatch; for though their army was now camped from Sceberras to Marsa Scala, so that St. Angelo was cut off from the militia which had been left loose in the inland, the investment was not so close that a man might not have a good hope to creep through in the night.

Meanwhile Marshal Couppier did his part, harassing the outposts of the Turkish positions and cutting off any parties that might wander apart or try the chance of a sudden raid. He took prisoners as he could, saving their lives from no impulse of mercy, of which there was little on either side in this war, but that they might become counters of exchange to redeem any Christians who might be caught in their turn. The Grand Master, though he had forbidden that any should sally beyond the walls of the town, relaxed this rule somewhat, lest inaction should diminish the confidence of his knights, and he also secured some prisoners, who were saved in the same provident way.

And each day Dragut pushed forward further, with barricade and trench, so that St. Elmo was at the same time more nearly menaced and more entirely cut off.

It was on the third day of this bombardment that Venetia's discontent and disgust of mind commenced to demonstrate themselves in active consequences.

She had lived from her earliest years in a world in which safety depended less upon the care of others than her own wary alertness of mind and activity of body. She had learnt to beware of a trap even before its jaws have commenced to close. Malta itself was a major trap which she did not like. La Cerda's house might easily prove to be a minor, but more immediate one, which it was her first need to avoid.

It was not only that he had gone to a place from which few returned. Since the Council of War he had been the talk of the town, as one who had advised a surrender which had been repudiated by the Grand Master and other more valiant knights, so that the Grand Master had openly insulted him as the Council rose. This talk had not failed to penetrate to La Cerda's household nor to reach Venetia's very watchful ears. She did not think the less of Le Cerda for that. She did not care whether he had been right or wrong, and had it been his sole concern to keep his own skin unscratched she would not have blamed him at all. But she saw that his power to protect her, which had shown its limitations before, must be less now, even should he return, which was a dubious hope. If he did not return, she had to consider how long his household would hold together and what would be the consequences to herself should it be dissolved.

Any day the news of his death might come, and though she knew that the hire of the house was paid, and that the house-steward, Giles, had sufficient money for their present needs, she knew also that they were in a state of siege, in which the power of money and the rights of property may be overruled in tyrannical ways.

The house which La Cerda had hired was one of the best in the town. There were great knights who had arrived later than he who were lodged in garrets, or who slept where scullions had slept before. The present position was unusual in that, owing to the sudden way in which La Cerda had been sent, he had not taken his followers with him, as it would have been natural and customary for him to do. He could have repaired this had he willed, but he had deliberately allowed it to be overlooked, possibly because he had had no willingness in going at all, but more probably because he had not wished her own presence to be disclosed.

Considering this led to another thought. Sir Oliver Starkey had a reputation for detailed organization that all men knew. It was said that he missed nothing,

however small. He had shown a spirit of some leniency, if not exactly of toleration, toward herself, on an earlier day. He had said she must go, but he had allowed it to be privately managed. Was it possible that he knew where she now was, and that La Cerda had prevailed upon him that the household should not be disturbed, so that open scandal should not arise? Was it possible, even, that Sir Oliver had assented thereto lest his previous leniency should be exposed, and be displeasing to La Valette?

In this guess she was partly right, for Sir Oliver was aware that La Cerda had gone with a single squire, and that four other men of fighting worth, who had been under his roof, were still there and still stationed upon the wall where his pennon had first been flown. He had felt no inclination to interfere because, of his own will, he would not have sent La Cerda at all. The Grand Master had done that, and if La Cerda obeyed him only in a literal and limited way (for which he could have shown some excuse in the haste of his first dispatch), Sir Oliver saw no occasion to interpose to make trouble more.

She was partly wrong, for he had no suspicion that she had remained in Malta, nor would he have cared had the Grand Master, or the whole world, known what he had done, having thought it best at the time and being content with the tribunal of his own mind.

But the doubt was hers, and may have influenced what she did at a later time.

She was like a rat that considers a threatened hole. It has smelt cats. It has seen a trap. It has become watchful for poisoned food or the dreaded tar. Yet it is in no panic of mind, for it has some confidence in itself, as a combatant in a strife of ten thousand years which has never been lost or won.

She did not think that it was needful as yet to leave a hole where she lay snug for the risk of a harder bed. But she would survey retreats. She must know where other holes could be found at a sharp need. She would go abroad. She would make friends if she could. Well, how was she to do that?

She decided that the house would be easy to leave, but she saw that she could not walk the streets in the dress of a Sicilian lady, and that of the gayer kind. For she looked over all the garments that she had, which were more than few, and they gave her no help. The sombre domino which she had once worn in Mantuan streets, when there had been urgent cause for disguise, would have been welcome now. But even that would have been of little avail. To walk the streets unobserved she must be a Maltese woman, or else a man.

She did not care which it might be. She cared for safety alone. Had it been better for that, she would have walked bare with an equal will. But she could not see that either would be easy to do.

The Maltese women were dark-skinned. They were black of hair and brow. Most of them were much broader than she. When she mirrored her pale-gold

hair, and the flower-soft face that she could change so swiftly to be gay, or impudent, or pathetic, less with her changing moods than as she wished it to be, she saw that the disguise would call for more than a change of attire. And in all she did there was one danger to keep in mind. She must not disguise herself beyond possibility of explanation, or sure identification by those to whom she could still appeal at a last need. It is bad to be whipped for a wanton, but it is far worse to be hanged for a spy.

And with these doubts there was a difficulty that outweighed them all. In all the house there was no woman except herself, and no woman's clothes except hers, so that they would not be easy to steal.

She considered the men that the house held, most of whom knew she was there, if not all. But they had been ordered by La Cerda to keep her concealed, and their loyalty was to him. She saw little of them, except the house-steward, Giles, who waited upon her himself, serving her meals, and doing the duties her chamber required, as La Cerda had straitly charged him to undertake.

He was a man of meagre frame, who had left his youth. He was not old to himself, but he was to her. His right eye had been lost on a dagger's point. His left arm (he said) was of little use, a sinew having been cut across. For these hurts, and his little frame, he stood excused from the war. But to one who watched him move at his work he appeared hardy and strong.

Venetia understood him well, for he was like herself, though of lower kind. He would be traitor to any for the best price he could get, which need not be much. She knew well what he wanted of her, which she had sold to others before. But she thought that she had made it worth a better price than she had taken at first. Now she saw two difficulties, even if she had been disposed to go to market with him. The one was that he did not think to be bought: he thought himself able to buy with his own coin, which was silence, and nothing more. He had begun to talk of the risk he ran (which was next to none) by not denouncing her to the Grand Master, if La Cerda should not return, and she be discovered at last.

The second reason was that he was not a man she could trust, nor did she think he would trust her. He would be likely to take all she could give, and then mock at what he had promised before. To help her to get free from that house was the one thing he would not be likely to do.

Thinking of him, drew her mind to the fact that he was more of her size than any other that the house held, and she determined to try his clothes, of which she was not therefore bound to make use, but if they were not too loose a fit it might be profit to know.

She saw no great risk about that, for he went out at times to such market as was still held in the town, trusting none but himself when there was silver to spend. She knew his times, he being the sort who are most at peace when they

have established routine. She tried his hose and found it too large, but not beyond what she could adjust or a loose cloak would conceal, such as may be worn in the night.

In the afternoon she abstracted some clothes from his room, such as he did not constantly wear and would not be likely to miss. She put these on when the darkness came, and went down through a silent house and into the narrow street, without being seen or so much as a bolt drawn.

When the Knights had come to Malta more than thirty years before, the houses of the Bourg had been small and mean and of one type, which was nearer that of the Afric Moors than the Christian lands. The Knights had built for themselves, as their wealth allowed and according to the fashions of the countries from which they came. They had scattered châteaux over the island, which were now deserted, and in constant danger of plunder and fire. They had largely rebuilt the Bourg, while the native population had spread to Bermolo and the Sanglea. The house which La Cerda hired was built in the French style of that time. It showed a blank wall to the street, and heavy wooden gates therein, one of which had a smaller door in itself, somewhat raised from the ground, through which a single person might pass, and in this door was a grille through which the porter could survey any who pulled the bell. If a man were admitted there he would see a porter's room at his side, and beyond that a large paved yard, around which the house was built, its windows opening on three sides of the square. As the revenues of the Order had shrunk, this house had been divided into three, each opening on the central yard and having a common exit to the street.

In these days, when the walls must be always manned, there was little difference between night and day. Men passed in and out at all hours as their occasions required. The night-porter, who served all, nodded at his post. The smaller door was not barred. Those who passed with a quiet assured air might have no more than a casual glance.

La Cerda's house was the central one, facing the gates. It had a great door which had once been the main one of the whole mansion. It had an iron lantern, which would have been lit even the week before. But Sir Oliver had ordered that there should be saving of oil during the shortness of summer nights. The only light was the one over the great gate that could also do something to illumine the narrow street. Master Giles' hat and cloak would have passed Venetia out had she had a more careful glance than the porter gave, and when she came back in three hours he gave her no notice at all, having seen her pass out before.

She came back without mishap, though she had had one or two frights, which might make her less willing to adventure again in the same way. But she had heard talk, and she knew now that it was the common opinion that St.

Elmo was near its end. It was cut off from support, and the steady cannonade from dawn to dark was now beating it flat. Any time it might be rushed by the Turks. The doubt was whether it could last for another day. No one knew how many of the garrison were already dead, or might yet endure, but they were all regarded as doomed alike. Venetia had been reared in a hard school, in which miracles did not occur, and mistakes of judgment were paid in prompt and physical ways. She put La Cerda out of her mind as already dead.

She concluded that she was in a hole which might be turned inside out at an early day, and she was resolved that when that should occur she would be some distance apart. Even had La Cerda's steward been of a loyal kind, she might have come to the same resolve, but, as it was, she had more excuse.

She spent the day in considering the position, and decided that there must be some among the hundreds of knights who were now idling within castle and town who would be glad of the companionship of one of her sex and sort, if it could be safely arranged. Her business must be to dress herself up again in Master Giles' clothes (but more carefully than at the first attempt), and go boldly out to make acquaintances, among whom she must find one whose conversation or repute made it likely that she could reveal herself with a good result. She told herself that she must aim high. She had proved before that audacity is a good card. There were great princes among the knights who (she supposed) would miss the pleasures which she regarded as inseparable from their estates, more keenly than humbler and (possibly) more continent knights. She knew several languages, or, at least, sufficient of them for the kind of talk that was natural to her, but she reminded herself that ignorance, whether real or pretence, might protect her better than proficiency till she had learnt more of those she might meet than she would like them to do of her.

If she could make such a friend—if she could even locate one to whom she would feel it safe to reveal herself at a later day—she might remain, for a short time, at the least, in La Cerda's house, for if he should return, she would not wish to have lost the position she held, unless she had something secured of a better worth.

She saw that she could not leave the house, in whatever garb, during the day, unless she were prepared to risk the probability that she would be observed. She must choose the dark hours, and those during which Master Giles slept, even though that might somewhat limit the probabilities of whom she might meet when she walked abroad. She saw also that the house-steward's clothes would limit her in another way. It was a time when a man's status, and even his occupation, were still shown by the clothes he wore, though this custom had less of legal requirement, and was less exactly observed in most parts of Europe, than had been the case in an earlier century. Still, even in the medley of race and dress that now jostled in St. Angelo's

streets, there were distinctions that all would know. Knights of the Order might be variously attired, but the materials would be coloured and rich. Silks and satins, brocade and lace, speak a language that all can read. The plain stuff of a steward's doublet, the dull colour of his outer cloak, with its hood falling behind his neck, or pulled forward for rain or sun, was of a different class, and those who were so variously attired would not be likely to fall to intimate speech, though they should lounge on the same wall, or sit side by side at a tavern board, either of which they would be unlikely to do.

Venetia would have preferred a dress of a different kind, but she had a practical mind which lost no sleep over that which it could not get. The steward's hood had its use. It could be pulled forward sufficiently to hide her hair, and it would give her a character that she could claim at need—that of La Cerda's steward, which would be better than none, and would lead, at the worst, to enquiry which would end at the right address rather than the hangman's rope, which would be the likeliest end if she were suspect, and could not establish herself in a quick way. That it would save her from the whipping-post was less sure, but it was a risk that she had to take, and she had found before now that her wits were good.

Very coolly, when Master Giles was abroad, she moved in deserted rooms, raking and adapting what she would have for the night, and secreting it beneath her own bed.

"If he miss aught," she said to herself, "he must look round. Things are misplaced at times." She did not think he would be quick to suspect the truth and, if he did, well, she must deal with that when it came! If she were only, she thought, in Sicily once again, in the great mansion in Cerda there, or in La Cerda's Lombardy home! It would mean no more than a pout or an easy tear, and it would be the steward's back that would be bared for the whip. But there was little satisfaction in that, for it made it more clear that the man would not dare to act as he did if he were not very sure that La Cerda was near his end.

So she waited till the night came and went out with no more trouble than before, and walked in streets that were not crowded as in the day, but yet seldom empty or still, and learned much with alert eyes, such as the gutter had bred, but saw no one she could safely accost, nor any chance she could turn to her own gain, till she grew tired as she was in a street that ran down to the water-side, near to where the great boom closed the inner harbour under the shade of the castle-wall. And so she turned into a wine-shop there, which, in these times, did not close with the night, and sat down on a bench which had a table in front and a wall behind, and was far enough from the lamp to make it likely that she would see more of others than they of her.

She had not been there long when another customer entered, seeming to be a young gentleman of good rank or estate, richly attired, somewhat in the

fashion of Spain, and sat down at a table facing the door, so that he could observe those who came in.

The light was not good, but Venetia observed that he had a face in which youth and beauty were so securely enthroned that Time itself might appear unequal to their defeat. “I could be,” she thought, with a degree of truth which would have surprised herself, “as good a man, were I but pranked in the same style,” though she would not have said that green velvet would be the colour for her.

The young gentleman did not appear as one who had come there to drink, or to sit at ease, but watched the door, as for an expected friend, the while Venetia considered his suitability for the purpose she had in mind. But on this point she found that a conclusion was not easy to reach. He was obviously noble and rich, having that aspect in a community where most were of higher rank than their appearance allowed. She thought it likely that he would be generous and kind, with other good qualities which she appreciated in others, though she excused them in herself. He was handsome also, to which she was not indifferent, though she had learnt that such preferences must be subordinated to the exigent realities of life. Yet she inclined to him to a degree which surprised herself, for her general preference was for larger men. Her practised eyes decided that there was here a combination of innocence, inexperience, and youthful vitality, of which it should be easy to make a prey. Her greatest doubt was whether she might not be more capable of seducing him than he of protecting her.

She did not think him to be one who had taken the Order’s vows, not only regarding his youth but because she knew that there was a Statute of the Order which forbade them frequenting a public inn; though it would be too much to say that it was always observed.

On the whole she was disposed to a further investigation, and would probably have devised some pretext of approach had she not thought it more prudent to wait awhile, to see whether he would be joined by others and of what sort. She had learnt that much may be seen and heard by those who sit on a tavern bench and keep silent themselves.

It was only a few minutes later that she had reason to congratulate herself on her caution, when a little man with a somewhat jaunty manner, dressed as a mariner of the better sort, pushed open the swinging door, glanced round at the two occupants of the low-ceilinged room, and crossed briskly towards the young gentleman, who recognized him, but not quite as though he were an expected friend.

He was not single in that. Venetia’s hand went to her hood, which she pulled somewhat more forward over her face. “Who,” she asked herself, “would have thought to see Tony here?” She congratulated herself on the

caution which had kept her silent till then and became additionally curious and alert.

Captain Antonio spoke as one who has no secrets to hide, and Venetia heard none the worse because it was a voice she had known before.

"Don Francisco would have me say that he will be here in a short time, for I go now to relieve his post."

Angelica gave a short answer to that. "He should have come before now."

The Captain, who was mainly ignorant of the relations between the two, did not improve Don Garcio's temper when he replied: "Well, as I suppose, so he could. But he would know first that he would not be wasting his legs."

Angelica replied with a smile, but there was anger in her eyes: "He will do that if he is slow to come, for I shall not stay. . . . Did he really send you for that?"

The Captain became aware that he had gone somewhat beyond the truth, and had also exhibited himself in an undignified light, as one who played the messenger to save Francisco's legs. He replied with more exactness than he had felt needful before: "I have not turned aside, having to pass here, as I go to relieve his post. He will remain at the guns till I arrive, and I had undertaken to let you know this as I crossed the street."

"Well," Angelica said, being only partly appeased, "I will wait awhile. But it is after the hour he said."

Venetia listened with some interest to this conversation, which was exchanged in the Italian tongue, being that which was native both to Captain Antonio and herself, but which the Spaniard had used as one educated thereto. She saw that she had come to a place at which two gentlemen of some importance had arranged a meeting during the night, which suggested intrigue or quarrel, for, at this time, though all must have their hours of duty upon the walls, and be otherwise ready against a sudden alarm, yet, while St. Angelo waited attack, there was enough of leisure for all to transact their affairs in the daylight hours, and too much for most, excepting those who were of monastic mood, and practised the sword of prayer.

Having delivered his message, the Captain went out, with the brisk and jaunty air by which Venetia remembered him in a certain place in Genoa which she did not wish to recall, as she did also by his habit of depressing his sword-hilt in his left hand so that the blade rose behind as he walked, like the tail of a game-cock bantam, from which it must have come down as he passed out through the swinging door.

Venetia owed most that she had become (which she valued at more than the Grand Master would have allowed) to her watchful eyes, and to a lesson she early learned, that there may be much profit from knowledge of men who quarrel or plot: they may give gold either for active aid or the easy service of

silent lips.

Now she poured herself another glass from the bottle of light Italian wine that she had ordered when she came in. She drank a little, letting the most part stand. She watched Angelica with eyes which could not be seen under her hood, and was satisfied that little notice was being taken of her. After a short time, she leaned back somewhat sideways against the arm of the bench, as one who slumbered rather than sat awake, but having chosen her posture so that she might see well.

She watched Angelica with the patience of a waiting cat, and Angelica watched the door with an impatience which grew as the minutes passed. It seemed that she was about to rise and leave, when Francisco entered, and, after a quick careless glance round the dim-lit room, crossed it to take a seat opposite to hers. "Why," Venetia thought with surprise, "they are two birds of one nest!" For there was between them the elusive likeness which may often be seen in two of the same blood, though it may be hard to define; and Angelica's dress made this more obvious, though it made her look the younger somewhat beyond the fact.

Venetia watched, hearing much that was said, and being puzzled by that, so that she would have liked to hear more. But though Francisco was not of the disposition to give much heed to those beneath him in rank, and regarded the somnolent form in the steward's cloak about as much as the bench upon which it sat, Angelica (having more at stake) was of a more cautious mind. Her tone was lower, and the use of her own name brought a warning protest, after which their words were less audible than before. Also, they spoke in the Andalusian tongue, which Venetia knew, but not well.

Yet, as she watched, there was once that she guessed the truth, thinking: "It was said in a woman's way: it is what she is." But she put the thought out of her mind, as being fantastic in itself, and doubtless arising from the knowledge of her own disguise. Also, whatever might be puzzling in the conversation she overheard, it was not that of lovers who met in a secret way. Rather, it might be that (she thought) of those who were rivals in love. Certainly, as the talk went on, it took a more quarrelsome tone, and once or twice Angelica's voice was raised in an angry word. "That," she said, "you never shall by my will. You shall find it no gain if you do!"

Venetia could not hear beyond that, till there came a mention of a Sir Oliver, who could hardly be other than the Grand Master's secretary, the name being uncommon in Malta at that time. She thought now that she could understand the nature of the dispute, if the one who had come in last were resentful that the other should be a suitor for a sister's hand. But that was not likely if, as she had supposed, they were of one blood; nor was it consistent with the fact that neither of them was likely to have a sister there.

But the next moment she put aside speculation of what the meeting might mean, to consider that to which it was likely to lead. “Here,” she thought, “is duel toward,” for the younger man (who was more facing to her) had spoken in a way which the other was not likely to take, if his pride were what she had thought as he came in.

“Francis,” the younger said, more loudly than he had spoken before, “what you say is a foul lie, which I will not endure.”

But this outburst seemed to subdue, rather than to rouse resentment in him to whom it was addressed. He spoke in a quieter tone.

“You take it as more than I meant. But if you go on as you are. . . .”

“I may bring all to a good end. But what you will not see is that it is the only way there now is. I must go on, for I cannot go backward nor turn aside. I must go on till the war end, or the siege is done. . . . And I had thought that I should have had more comfort from you.”

As he said this, he rose, as though the conversation were done, or he were too wroth to say more. The one who had been called Francis rose also, but in a slower way, as though ill-content that they should part thus. “Where,” he asked, “would you go now?”

“I am going back. I have wasted time enough here. I have work at the dawn.”

“I am coming to the castle also, having left Captain Antonio in charge.”

“We had better enter apart.”

“I do not see——”

“But I do. If you will not wait awhile, then I must.”

“I must wait if you put it thus.” The last words were sullenly said, as Francisco resumed his seat. The last exchanges had been easy both to hear and to understand, as the two had stood, and spoken aloud. Now they parted without sign of intimacy, or the formalities which distance requires.

Venetia thought again, looking at Angelica’s back as she went out: “He is like a girl. . . . I am not sure. . . . It is absurd. It is that which I do myself from which the idea is born. . . . Yet it is a game that more than one may find cause to play in this monkish town.”

She tried to recall such parts of the conversation as she had heard, lest it should hold a clue which she had not caught, and was only puzzled the more. She looked at Francisco, sitting in a frowning irritation, which he had no care to conceal, and thought: “If she be woman in truth, she is no mistress of his, for their talk was not of that kind. But if it be so, he must be aware, for they are acquainted well, and, as I think, of one blood.”

She saw that if she had made a right guess there might be profit, even protection, for herself if she could use her knowledge in the right way. But that would depend upon the circumstances of the case and the rank and influence of

those who were most concerned, which, for her purpose, must not be too low, nor too high.

She had no mind to entangle herself in the troubles of others to no gain, thinking she had enough of her own; and her past experiences had taught her to be wary of those who were placed too high to be pulled down. There had been one (she recalled) who had been found floating in Genoa harbour with a knife-wound in the back, because she had not understood when the eves must be blind, and the tongue still.

Well, she must find out first how these Spaniards were called, and what position they held, which should not be too hard. She looked at Francisco, debating whether she should make a direct attempt. He was young, and she would have been bold enough had she been able to make advance in a woman's way. The shyness might have been on his side, and she would have had some hope she could break it down. But she thought him proud also, and that, against any advance from a stranger not of his own rank, he would be likely to draw off with a more certain reserve than that of an older man.

Wearing the garb she did, she felt unsure how to proceed. She moved somewhat, as one who wakes, yawning under her hood. Sitting upright, she refilled her glass.

For the first time, Francisco gave her a straight look. Keeping her voice husky and low, for she knew that to be a part of her disguise which it was least easy to wear, she said: "It is cold for May. It is the wind from the north. I should say that there will be rain before dawn."

Francisco stared at her, but made no answer at all, unless it were in that which he promptly did, which was to get up, and go out.

She had gained nothing by that, and went home in some doubt as to whether she had not been wasting her time.

CHAPTER XXVIII

VENETIA regained her room without becoming aware that any suspicion had been aroused, and on the next night she went out again.

The day had been without incident, except for the almost continuous sound of the Turkish batteries, still pounding St. Elmo with a monotony which it could not for ever endure, and some talk she overheard from some of the men as they came in from a spell of duty upon the wall. There had been movements observed in the infidel camp by which it was supposed that they were preparing to attack the Bourg as soon as St. Elmo fell. It was assumed, without words, that it was very near to its end. It was said that, if any should remain alive at the last, they must fall into the enemy's hands, for what escape could they have either by land or sea?

Venetia had taken a familiar word from the steward more indifferently than she might have done had her mind not been active on her own plans, and, misreading this, he had become more insolent than before, giving her warning she did not need that the hour of crisis might be with her at any moment.

She had resolved to follow up the knowledge she had gained in the last night, but when she considered how this was to be done she saw the full peril in which she stood. She knew that Don Francisco had command somewhere upon the water-front, which Captain Antonio shared, and that it was so placed that the tavern in which they had met was on the way between it and the castle gate. She knew that Francisco and the other, woman or man, of whose name she was less sure, both had lodging within the castle. But how could this knowledge avail? Could she venture within the castle in the poor disguise which was the best she had been able to get? Should she attempt to search the outer line of defence, where none but those who had duty there would be likely to go, and especially in the night? Where she would be most suspect as a probable spy, and where it would be most difficult to give a plausible explanation of what she sought?

They were not alternatives to be lightly seized, but as she had pondered during the day she had resolved that, unless fortune should prove a capricious friend, one of these she would do. Among some baser qualities, she had courage and wit. "I will not wait," she thought, "till I am caught at a sharper need, or am so placed that I have not this house on which to retire." And so, where a woman of weaker will would have let the days pass in the poor hope of La Cerda's return, trusting to any wiles that she had to meet the troubles that

came on their own days, she went out to make her fate again, as she had done more than once before when she had thought herself to be in the jaws of a closing trap.

Her plan was simple and bold. She would first find out more, if she could, of who these young Spaniards were, and if they were of a quality sufficient to serve her need, of which she had no great doubt, having learned to judge such points in a merciless school; and if she were satisfied upon that, she would seek out whichever of them might be the more easy to reach, asking to speak apart, and reveal sufficient of what she was, and in what strait, to gain a protection to which she might go at once, or else flee at a further need, either through pity, or her own sale, with the argument in reserve that she might know something of a secret of theirs, which she would only use at the last, and if she had cause to think it a card that it would be prudent to play.

At the worst, she resolved that she would use Sir Oliver Starkey's name. Even if she were caught for a spy, and her sex stripped, they would not refuse to refer to him, if she made a tale of the right kind, and she did not think him as hard as the Grand Master, or most of the Commanders of the Order, would be likely to be, if they had to deal with her in a public way. A whipping would be the worst thing she would have to fear, if the truth of who she was should be laid bare, but of that she had a great dread, having seen the lash laid upon other backs, and knowing, beyond that, that she would be worth a poor price in the market in which she dealt, while she carried such scars. But she hoped for better fortune than that, having learnt that those who advance boldly upon a danger they clearly see will often find it withdraw, as though it like better to snare such as are looking another way.

She wandered about for some time with alert ears, but being careful not to loiter in such a style as would draw eyes she would not have too closely upon herself. She learned several things of no present use, and, by a direct question addressed to a Spanish soldier, who looked to be of a dull kind, such as would take most things at their outward show, that Don Francisco (unless there should be two of that name, which was a small risk) commanded the battery that had been set up to protect the boom.

She thought that was enough. She knew his name, she knew his office, she knew him by sight. If she came to talk with him, she had resolved what to say. If she were obstructed by others, she must profess that she had a message which was only for him. She knew where the battery must be, having walked the town in better days, before it had been emptied of such as the Grand Master had thought to be worth much less than the food they took. She made her way there.

She came to a place where there was little light at this time except that, here and there, a lantern flickered above the guns; for there was but a low

moon, which the great bulk of the castle hid. But though the light was dim there was wakeful watch on all sides. There might be little fear of attack from the sea while St. Elmo stood, but the Grand Master was ever warning his knights against the risk of surprise, which he feared in a restless way since the tales had come of St. Elmo's ravelin lost, and the counter-scarp gone, both of which would have been saved by a better watch.

She was challenged as she approached, with a levelled halberd across her breast, and a call for a countersign which she did not know.

She answered in a voice which she tried to keep husky and low, so that it should be nearer to that of Master Giles than her own, but yet in an easy confident way: "I know nothing of that, but I have come on an errand to Don Francisco, having a word for his own ear."

The man drew his halberd somewhat aside, but stood himself in her way. He lifted a lantern, seeking to see more of her face than she was anxious to show. "And from whom," he asked, "may the word be?"

"I am steward to the Chevalier La Cerda," she said, avoiding a more direct answer, "it is on his business I come."

"Do you say that you come from him?"

She avoided the trap, if such it were. "No, for he is away at St. Elmo now. It is for that I must move myself, seeing that his affairs are secured while he is busied apart."

The sentinel took this answer well enough. He said: "Then you are out of luck, for, at this hour, he is not here." He added: "You can see Captain Antonio, if you will. But you must wait. You cannot pass beyond this."

"No," she said, in some haste, "that would be vain, for I have no business with him."

To make herself known to Antonio would have consequences hard to foresee. It was to disclose her origin in a Genoese street, which even La Cerda did not suspect—and other matters appertaining thereto.

She turned toward the castle with a first impulse to follow Francisco there; but was it likely that he would be awake, and accessible at that hour? She remembered the time at which Captain Antonio had been taking charge on the previous night, and concluded that it was within the past two hours that Don Francisco had left, and would most probably have sought his own bed. When she thought of Angelica, she saw that it was equally improbable that she would be about at that time, and in her case she did not even know for what name to enquire!

She thought of the Grand Master's guards, who would be stationed around the gate, and she saw the folly of attempting entrance to the castle during the night in such disguise and with no better pretext than she now had.

For this night, she saw that she had done all she could, though it might not

be much, and her steps quickened to return as she perceived that a faint light of dawn had invaded the eastern sky.

CHAPTER XXIX

MASTER Giles Bonhomme waked with the dawn, or perhaps somewhat before. The common talk that St. Elmo must fall in the next hours had not avoided his ears, and he saw that he must be prepared for his own part, if there should be word of La Cerda's death, which (for all he knew) might have been before now. For who could expect to endure under that pall of smoke that was like a halo of hell, through which the gun shots stabbed inward from every side?

Well, if his lord died, he had his own plans to pursue, and certain profits to make, which were not large, for his position was not of a first importance in La Cerda's household (except only in Malta), but they were important to him and, being mostly of an illicit kind, they would be enough to engage his mind. When he thought of Venetia, he resolved, as he had done from the first, that he would have no trouble for her. He would denounce her to the Grand Master immediately that he should be informed of La Cerda's death.

But that plan could remain private to his own mind. All that it was necessary for her to know was that he had that power which, for the present, he did not use; and he had already hinted of that plainly enough for one of her wit to understand and to consider it well.

It was a restraint on his part for which he had resolved to have such payment as she could give, and he had only delayed to take it before now, because he must first be well assured that La Cerda would not return, and because he had a little fear of the girl herself, which he was reluctant to own, but which had not been easy to overcome. Yet he saw that such fear was absurd, she being the kind she was, of which he knew much more than she guessed, for he had picked the lock of a secret casket which she concealed in her chest, and had read things at which La Cerda would not have looked, even had she forgotten to turn the key.

But he saw that, if he delayed more, it might be a deal spoiled, for the market might be closed and the wares gone. And as he longed for her now with a lust which was strong and starved, and which he had no care to subdue, he resolved that he would no longer defer. He rose and dressed in a hasty way and went up to her room. It might be barred on the inner side, but that was less likely than not, and if it were, she would open soon enough at his call, if he made pretext, as it would be easy to do.

The door gave at once as he pushed the pin, and he entered quietly. He looked round the silent room, and at a bed in which he supposed that she still

slept; but he could not see that, for its curtain was partly drawn. For the purpose he had, she could not be in a better place.

He stood a moment, resolving what he should first say, and what mood he would have to face, for he knew that her feeling to him was little short of an active hate. But if he paused, there was no doubt that he would go on now to the end he sought, having no scruple at all. He had at his belt one of those poniards which were common in Italy at that time, having a three-edged blade and a good point. He would show her that, if reason were not enough, or he might let her feel an inch of its point, which should be more than enough, if she should prove to be in a kicking mood. She would not be one to lose life for a virtue that was seven years gone, if it could be said to be that which she ever had. And as he stood thus, he was surprised to hear a short quick step on the stair, and turned to face Venetia, as she entered the room.

They looked at one another in one silent moment of common surprise, which Venetia was the first to break. "What," she boldly asked, "are you doing here at this hour?"

"I would ask first what you do in that guise, and in a cloak which you must have pilfered from me?"

"Pilfered!" she exclaimed with contempt, for she saw that this could best be sustained in a bold way, and she was one whose courage rose when a climax of conflict came, "why, are you not my lord's and all that you have? . . . If I soil your cloak, will he not give you a dozen more? Unless he pay you another way, if I complain of the hour at which you intrude here."

The steward put her words aside with an equal sneer. "You speak as one who still lives in a past day. It is of that that I came to talk. We shall not see our master again, and we must think for ourselves."

"Well," she said, with a smile that gave no key to her thoughts, "so I have —and so I do now."

"Then you must think that I hide you at a great risk, which I can end in an hour. If I go to the Grand Master and let him know you are here I win safety and praise; and he would be doubly glad because it is his will, as is common talk, to bring our master to shame. He would have you whipped without stint, to teach other knights that they shall not break their vows and insult God, Whose favour they greatly need, by having harlots within the walls."

"Yes," she said, with the same smile, "so he would. I have thought of that too."

"But I do not wish to do that. I would keep you close, though the peril rise. I would be friends, as your safety needs. But you must do me what pleasure you can, and it is for that I have come now."

"Nay," she said, "you are wrong there. I am not your meat. . . . You have thought of much, but there is one thing you have missed. The Grand Master

will not care about you. When our lord is back, if he find that I have miscarried thus by your fault, do you think that your back will pay? You will wish it had when you hang by the heels over Cerda's wall. . . . You must consider he loves me well. And he will be wild wroth, knowing that I have been hurt for the Grand Master's quarrel with him. He cannot injure Valette, but he will look round for one on whom his anger may fall, and you will be useful then."

She said this with the smile that she would not change, and the steward did not look pleased, for she spoke the fear which had kept him idle till now, and it had a real sound as she put it thus in a very confident way. But his reason still told him that the nearer risk was to keep her hidden a longer time, and it added now that he had gone too far for a safe retreat. After this she would bring him down, let him do what he would, if La Cerda should come back to his former power.

"It is idle talk," he said, "for it will not be. Our lord will be dead, if he yet live, as is less than sure. You must choose which you will. I must put you down, or the Grand Master will be told all in the next hour."

As he spoke he had changed his position somewhat, so that he was now nearer the door than she, which she had not opposed, for she saw that this was an issue which could not be altered by flight.

"If I did your will," she asked, as one who will look at all sides, "what warrant have I that you would not betray me still?"

He protested against that with ready oaths, though it was exactly what he was intending to do. If she disbelieved, she gave no sign. They were both of sorts that were common in that day, and perhaps in most; owing little respect for any law, whether God's or man's; ruled alone by their own cautions or lusts; and coming, as chance might lead, either to high estate or the hangman's hands.

"If you had your will," she said, as one who still halts in a doubt, "how could I avoid that my lord should know at last, if he return, as I think he will?"

That was an easier question to put aside, and it seemed to him that it showed surrender was near. Indeed, what choice could she have? "That," he answered, "is very simple to say. For who should tell, except you or I? Which of us will accuse ourselves thus?" And then he added, thinking it no more than a final argument to remove the last reluctance in her own mind, "you may tell yourself that you have no choice, I coming armed as I do."

He touched the poniard at his belt as he said this, and made a step toward her from which she did not retreat.

"Nay," she said, and the smile broke into a little laugh that she knew well how to use at will, "if you play it thus, you solve all."

She let him advance upon her, standing in a passive way, as though he must do all, and she naught. He did not know, as they came close, that she

drew the poniard with a stealthy hand, till he felt the pain as she pushed it upward to find his heart.

CHAPTER XXX

VENETIA rose from a short but desperate flurry upon the floor, during which her hands had covered the mouth of a dying man, that he should not scream. Now he lay limp and still.

She looked down upon a floor that was soaked in blood, and was glad that it was not hers. “It is ill,” she thought, “that men do not die without making so foul a mess.” She thought, as she often would, that she could have made the world in a better way. Then she thanked the good-tempered saints that the soaked garments she wore had been the steward’s rather than hers. Had he come up after she had changed to her own clothes, the pity would have been more than it was.

She wiped a long scratch on her hand, which his teeth had grazed, and wished it were more hurt “Well,” she said, and she smiled with truer mirth than before, “it will suit the tale.”

She had no cause to delay now, for her plans had been made while she had held him in talk, but she saw that there was no haste. It was too early to go abroad, and there was no danger while she was here. No one would come to her room, which was high and apart, and only the steward’s was at the stair-foot. The noise would not have frightened a cat. He would not be missed for some hours, and then it would only be thought that he had gone out. There would be little curiosity quickly astir in that womanless house, where each went his own way in the lack of their natural lord. She had only to keep the door barred, against the small chance of someone climbing the stair with word or question for her, and she could take her own time. She had rid herself of one fear, and betrayal’s risk, and she had a far simpler and, in some ways, truer tale than before if she should be tripped in her next hope. For she had resolved to seek protection elsewhere, telling as much of the truth as it might seem helpful to do, and she saw that she could attempt this now without cutting entirely loose from the anchorage which, a few weeks before, had seemed so delectable and secure. For she would say that she killed the steward to save herself from a foul assault which he had made in the night, and after that she had lost her head (as she was never likely to do) and had fled blindly away. The fact that he would be found in her room would support her tale, and what other cause could she have to stab one who was her lord’s servant and hers?

Because she was *amie* to one whose vows were such that he could not wed, and their love so great that they had come together to Malta’s siege, did it

follow that her honour was less to her than if she were wed by the Church's rule? The relationship was so frequent at this time, and especially among the military monks who were gathered in Malta now, that such a plea would be likely to win support. She thought that she was much safer than before (and especially so against her whipping-post dread), providing only that, if she were accused, she should not deny that the deed was hers, which would place her on trial of fact, with a likely loss of belief in anything she might later say.

She knew the value of truth, and would use all that she could; but she saw that it might be improved, which she was active to do. She dragged the body somewhat nearer the bed, but not much, being very cautious lest she should make a change which could be afterwards guessed. She decided to say that he staggered back when he was stabbed, but holding still to her arm, so that he had pulled her from off the bed. She took off the blood-soaked cloak, which had been his, and cast it on the floor between him and the bed, as though he had worn it when he came in, and then thrown it off, as he might be likely to do. She took a linen shift which she wore at night, and tore it down at the neck, after which she dropped it upon the blood, and then threw it aside on the floor. She did other things which would be slow to recount, working with quick hands and a lively wit. When she had done, she had made a tale in the room that none who entered could fail to read, and that had (she thought) as much of truth as one tale should require, if not more.

She looked at a pouch of silver that had balanced the poniard in the dead man's belt, and bit her lip in a doubt. She knew it ought to be left, but it was hard to resolve, and the more so because she guessed that it would be emptied by others if not by her. She took a few pieces only at last, for it was known that the steward walked with a full purse, and there was too much at stake to be pawned for a small gain. She thought: "If I am to say that I fled in haste, I should not be too long; but if I am not to walk the streets at a lengthened risk, I should not be too early away. Yet it must be allowed that I had to dress! I am so feared" (she smiled to herself) "that there are none but men in the house, after he that was left in charge has approached me thus, that I do not know what I do. How can I tie points with a shaking hand?"

As she thought this, she put on the clothes that she would be most loth to lose, and that would show her flower-fair beauty of youth in its softest way. She hid some jewels, sewing them where they would not be found except by a search that would leave her bare. Then she went boldly down to the steward's room and took the hooded cloak which was his daily wear when he went abroad, and a poke which he might carry if he would market himself. She filled this with some things which she would be most certain to need, or which she could not resolve to leave in a room to which she did not think to return; and, when she thought that the best time had arrived, she went out with more

assurance than she might have felt if she had not practised before in the darker hours.

CHAPTER XXXI

IT has been well said that there are few things that we cannot win, if they be pursued with a ruthless will; but it is not till they are gained that God will show us the price, which we shall have no choice but to pay. So Angelica found it now. She had won clear, as it seemed, from a life of prayer that had no pleasure for her, and here she was, with her legs in a boy's hose, where they had no business to be, and where it seemed they must remain for the time, about which she had little joy. There have been a few women, at sundry rimes, who have played the man from a free choice, even to going unguessed to the camp and the battle-front, but she did not think herself to be of their sort. She felt strangely alone, being cut off at once from her own kind and the natural challenge of men. Being neither woman nor man, she felt less than either, rather than equal to both. She had come to the midst of a man's game, which she saw to be of a great kind, but it was one at which she made a poor play.

She might have been in a different mood had she had Francisco's support instead of a fretful reproach, which charged her ever with having shamed a name that they both bore. They met and quarrelled, and came apart, and she had not even the consolation of knowing that her bitter words had power to give a wound that would ache at a later hour, though his pride turned in a blind way from pain that he was not willing to own.

Feeling herself to be cut off from her own kind, and that she was regarded thus, her mouth, which was made for softer uses than that, set in a hard line as she resolved that she would show those who scorned that she could be equal to the part she took. Had she not saved her uncle's galleys in a good way, though it might never be put to her name in the talk of men?

It was the morning the steward died that Sir Oliver, looking at a list of names which she had made out of those who had volunteered to go to St. Elmo if a chance of mist should allow the sending of further support, had seen that of Don Garcio there among, and had raised questioning brows as he had dipped his quill to erase it with a thick line. What, he wondered, would the end of this folly be? And was the folly all hers, or had he allowed himself a certain portion therein?

It was about the same time that Angelica passed her cousin in the crowd of the castle hall, and was wroth that, as she thought, he saw her and would not speak; forgetting that it had been her own caution that had first proposed that they should keep apart where they were commonly known and their meetings

would be observed. She went up to her own chamber, hearing a step behind as she ascended the winding stair, and thought that he had changed his mind and was following her thus—for who else would it be likely to be?—but would not look round lest he should think her somewhat too quick to forgive.

But as she got higher, the footsteps gained upon hers, and she knew that they were lighter than his of whom she had first thought; and then she had a doubt of who could follow her thus, and would not look round lest it should seem to show fear.

She had a thought for a bolt which could be quickly dropped into its place as she closed her door, which she had been speedy to use in the first days, as she had been careful also to lock it when she went out. But she had felt more secure as the days had passed and none had disturbed her there, and the key had been heavy and would have looked foolish had it been hanged at her belt, and was awkward to hide in doublet or hose, so she had ceased using the lock unless she went abroad for a long hour.

Now she had to control a timid mood, that she should not hasten her last steps; but she did this, and called herself fool for the doubt she had, as she pushed the door wide, and then turned to face whoever followed her thus.

She found, as will often be, that when she faced her fear it was soon gone. She looked at one in a steward's dress, who halted as she turned, being then no more than three steps below. She saw a lifted head, and a hood thrown back enough to disclose a girl's face raised in appeal. She did not doubt it was that, from the first moment she looked. To make a doubt of her sex when the hood was up, Venetia would have needed more disguise than she then had, but that was not her present design. Cloak and hood had fulfilled their use, having brought her there. She had passed the guard by the simple ruse of falling into the rear of those who had better right. She had lingered in the hall long enough to overhear one who had spoken to Angelica, and had heard the name she was called. So far all had gone well.

Now she looked up at one of whom she was still in doubt, whether she feigned like herself, or showed the form of a slender boy, on which much would depend as to the game which it would be profit to play. Angelica looked down upon her with the right hand on the door's jamb, and her left at a dagger's hilt, meaning no menace by that, but it was a trick of habit she had gained in the last days, giving her some comfort to feel it was there and reminding her of the manhood she had assumed, to which she must train her moods.

"Will you say who you are, and why you follow me thus?"

"I am chased by men, one of whom I have killed at my honour's need. I would have protection, and to be hidden by one who will do me no further wrong."

Angelica looked down on her for a moment without reply. She considered a surprising demand with eyes that were grave and intent, so that Venetia had a doubt of the kind of answer she would be likely to get. Then she laughed, short and clear, in a way she had at such times.

"Why," she said, "it seems it is habit here! . . . Well, you may come in. . . . I am not one to betray; but I think I should know more."

She stood back, holding the door wide. Venetia entered a room which had been her own a few weeks away. Angelica dropped the heavy bolt into its socket in the stone floor.

"Now," she said, "if any seek, they must learn to knock. Tell me who you are, and why you have come here."

She sat down on the bedside, or rather leaned there-against, it being too high for the bending of knees, and watched her visitor cast off the hooded cloak, showing herself as the woman she was; for she had not sought to give herself any inner disguise, which had not been of her present plan, apart from her desire to bring away all she could of her clothes, which she might find it hard to replace to her own content in the Malta of that hour.

Angelica looked at a beauty which she thought to be more than her own, on which she was wrong, besides that it was such as would sooner fade. "Why," she asked, "did you come here?"

Venetia's wit found a reason as plausible as the truth, and having a better sound. "It was my own chamber," she said, "where I left much. . . . Some of which" (she looked around as she spoke) "is still here."

Angelica had heard enough of what had been to understand the meaning of that. "Then," she said, "you are La Cerda's friend, who was said to have gone away." She added: "I have not stirred what was not mine beyond that which I could not choose. It is yours to take."

Venetia, seated now on a wooden stool, lifted noon-blue eyes that had learned to plead from her gutter days. "But I would take naught. I would stay here, if I may, having no safety besides."

She was still unsure whether it were boy or girl to whom she must make appeal, though she would have picked the truth at a forced guess, the doubt hindering her in the choice of the tricks that would be prudent to play, and it was one which Angelica's reply did not resolve. Her voice was not unfriendly but had a definite note as she said: "By your leave, if you ask my aid, you must tell me more."

Venetia answered that as she must. She told a tale that was mainly true, both because she was too shrewd to float a bubble lie which must soon burst, and that the truth did not sound so ill when it was well told, as she could be trusted to do.

Angelica said little, either to interrupt, or in comment when it was told. She

had her own problem to face. She could turn the girl out, telling her that she would not or could not help; but she was reluctant to think of that, both from a chivalry of mood which would have been hers at all times, and in a different setting from this, and also because she saw some likeness to her own case. They were both women, trespassing in a place which men had made for themselves alone, and furtively at bay, with more hope from their own wits than from those among whom they had dared to come. The danger of which Venetia told might be hers on another night, and she in flight from the same fear. The few friends she had, and by whom she was kept secure, might all be dead before there would come a time when she could go free. . . . But then she saw that she could not keep the girl here without disclosing herself. She must show who she was to a woman she had not known for an hour, and was not sure that she knew now. She could not tell where that knowledge might go, or what results it might bring which she would not have. She was lonely enough to feel that she might be glad of a friend of her own kind, but it remained a gamble that she would have been willing to miss.

"I would not say you were wrong," she said at length, "but will it not be urged that you could have called aid, had you cried aloud?"

"There was none (if any at all) who could have heard, except soldiers of common kind, who would have taken orders from him, or, had they put him aside, thinking La Cerda dead, they might have been worse than he. That is truth, but I would not say that I thought all sides, being in so sudden and sharp a fear."

"Then, if you did no more than a woman should, being so caught, will it not be folly to hide? By your leave, if I tell Sir Oliver all, I should say you might be held guiltless of any wrong, he being very patient and just, and having more rule in his hands than some who make a greater pageant of power."

"So it might, if the talk would be of the morning's work. But you must recall that I am here with no right, having been expelled by an order Sir Oliver wrote in haste, lest the Grand Master should have dealt in a worse way. And with La Cerda not here, who should be my guard, and a man's death on my hands. . . ."

There was reason here that Angelica could not deny. She saw that she might not refuse such refuge as she could give to this girl who came to her (as it seemed) in a jeopard so like her own, and she might even be said to have the better right to the room in which they now met; and to do that, for loss or gain, she must give her confidence too.

"Well," she said, "you can stay for this time, where, if you came unseen, none will be likely to look. But you must lie close, barring the door when I am not here and giving entrance to none. It will be a dull life if it last long."

"It is change of cage, and no more. I would I were back in a larger land."

"So I should say you may be, if you will, at an early day. I must find what is talked of your steward's death, which cannot long be unfound, and it will be easy for me to hear. Then, as I think, we must let La Cerda know all, if he be alive, as he was a few hours ago by report which was sent during the night, which had a full list of the slain."

She said this with a mind to test the truth of Venetia's tale as far as she might before her own confession were made, but it brought nothing to shake her trust.

"If he yet live, I would well that he knew all by the swiftest means. My best hope is in him."

This was said with a sincerity which it was not easy to doubt, and, as she heard, Angelica put her last suspicion aside.

"I must get you food," she said, "which will not be hard, though you may have to wait for a time. When I come back I will knock twice, and pause, and then once again. We shall be safe if you open only to that. . . . And if we are both to be here for a time, you must know that I am not to be killed for the steward's cause, being as much woman as you."

Venetia learned this with little surprise, but was not sure whether she were more vexed or glad. She said: "I was guessing that," being too adroit to say when the guess began. She thought at once, now the guess was sure, that Sir Oliver must have turned her out of that room because he could find it a nearer use. She said, in an innocent way, as though being simply glad she had come to a safe harbour at last: "I suppose Sir Oliver will do much for you. You will be *amie* to him?"

Angelica did not know how to take this, which she did not like. She looked at Venetia with grave eyes, which she could not read. "Sir Oliver," she said, in a cold voice, "is my good friend, as I think."

Venetia did not doubt that she heard a lie; or, at the most, that she had erred no more than to guess the wrong name. She looked like a hurt child as she said: "Oh, well, if you trust me no more! . . . I suppose it is the whip that we all dread."

She faced puzzled eyes in which comprehension dawned with a moment's anger, that contempt chased. "I have no such fears. Do you know who I am?" Then laughter came, in Angelica's sudden way. "But Captain Antonio did say he would have me hanged! I must give you that."

Venetia saw that she had guessed too far on a blind road. She said: "Oh, you are sure! But we may come to that if we change hands to the Turks, as we are likely to do. We should be soon out of here if our wits do not make a default that our backs will pay!"

Angelica went out without further words. She was sure that the girl had not

meant that at the first, but it bore enough cargo of truth to show her that their fates might not be so far apart as her pride had thought. She was led to recall the peril in which she had stood when she had been the prey of the *Flying Hawk*, and the threats that Captain Hassan had made. She was in a position in which a friend, of her own sex might have more uses than one. She was largely ignorant of the world's ways, character and pride having to take the place of knowledge to bear her through; but she knew that La Cerda's *amie* would be regarded as one who might sit at the boards of kings, while she held her place at his side. She thought of Venetia as one who might see many things that she was likely to miss. She might be a comrade it would be good to have. She even thought her one she might learn to like. But as to trusting, she was less sure.

CHAPTER XXXII

ONE by one St. Elmo's guns ceased. Hour by hour its fire became more fitful and weak, and hour by hour the Turkish batteries pushed advance. New mounds were piled, new trenches slanted ahead. New guns were hauled up from the fleet, of which Dragut would never say that he had enough. St. Angelo could be left alone. It could look idly on, watching till St. Elmo would be no more than a blackened grave of those who had been sent to its vain defence. They could wait their turn, and as they watched they could guess how it would be likely to end. Built of stone it might be, with deep roots in the living rock, but as the days passed Dragut's boast that it should be beaten flat did not seem to be called too high.

Piali would have attacked days before. He said: "You waste powder and time. All it needs is one rush, and it is there that our flag would float in an hour from now."

Dragut said: "So it might. But it would be your men who would rush, and not mine, who are of most use when alive. What are guns for? I make sure." And so the week went, and under a pall of smoke that had ceased to lift the guns stabbed inward until the hard walls shook and crumbled slowly away.

But on the morning of the 15th of June, being the day on which the Viceroy had promised the relief which did not appear, the Turkish leaders stood together on Sceberras, somewhat back on the highest slope, and Dragut turned to Mustapha Pasha to say: "You can rush it now, if you will; as I think, it is fit to fall."

Mustapha stroked his beard, and looked down on a scene as black and foul as though it were one of the boiling cauldrons of hell. "Nay," he said, "you shall take the praise. I will make no claim at the last. You shall order all."

Dragut looked at him, with a laugh that was half a sneer, for he cared not who saw his thoughts, but he cared no more for Mustapha's wiles, being that much greater than he. He saw that if St. Angelo should fall at the last, Mustapha's honour was sure, being first in command of that which would have brought all Europe to shame, the Knights being of every land; but, if that should fail, there would be no help in a minor boast. So he cared not at all to make claim for any detail that might succeed, only watching that, should it fail, he could put the blame on another's head. Dragut said: "If I take charge, I can dispose all as I will? I can choose my troops?" And that being agreed, he was well content. All his life he had been Allah's curse on the misbelievers from

Ceuta to Grecian isles, jovial, reckless, astute, breaking the Prophet's laws as cheerfully as he slaughtered those who refused the faith. He had made a name in his own way through which he could make light of the tricks of state. Let Mustapha plot in the night. He was content that there was good liquor for him. . . . Within an hour the Turkish army was on the move to make an end of its cornered prey.

De Broglio heard and was glad. For seven days he had waited for this to be, watching the battered sides of his crumbling walls and writing the tale of the dead.

"So," he had grumbled, "they kill us, when it is time that we should kill them. And all this because Sir John must butt in, and give Piali a broken skull! Though I will be fair about that. It was what I had asked him to do. . . . Do I call Piali a fool? I would not say that. He is well enough on the sea. I have seen him fight his ships in a stout way. He is not the serpent who blandished Eve. . . . But Dragut and I (if we may be put in one breath), we are old in war. We know the use of a wall, and how a fosse will feed on the lives of men."

During these days he had spared the lives of those he had, to the utmost that care would do. He would only allow such men to be on the walls as were working the guns, or who were stationed to watch. He had plans of defence complete, and held half his force at all times ready for instant call, but yet under cover in the foundations of the fort till the alarm should be blown. He had given stations to every knight, ranging them with three soldiers between, so that there would be no place which could be lost, but a pennon's honour must fall therewith.

He had given Medrano charge of defence where the wall had been breached the worst. "I do not say that others might not be themselves of an equal worth, whether in valour or skill," he had said, "but there is none by whose side men will stand with as firm a will, so it is there he must be." He gave D'Egueras the wall facing the lost ravelin, saying that, as he could never get it out of his thoughts, he had best be there; and he divided the command of the remaining circuit between La Motte, La Cerda, and other knights of good name. He gave La Cerda as high a place as the rest, that his honour might not be slurred, but he had a surer care not to place him where the worst assault would be likely to be, seeing what would be said if this post should be first to be driven in. "As for me," he said, with a booted leg on the board, and a tankard beside his hand, "I will have no place, being somewhat past the great deeds that you will all be likely to do. I will potter round. It is all for which I am yet fit. Except, I can take the praise if your valour shall throw them back. I am not too old to do that." He chuckled to himself as he rose with a twinge of pain in a stiffened knee, and went to talk to the Spanish soldiers, who formed an actual majority of the garrison at this time, and who must do their part as

well as those of knightlier names (and with less hope of reward or honour therefor) if the assault were to be repulsed, which he assured them, as one who was old in observation of war, that they could do if they would.

"For while we are sufficient to line the wall, though they be a hundred to one, it is no advantage to them. They can reach us by the ladders they plant, and no other way, and no faster than they can mount in their single rows, to be thrown back as they show their heads, which you should be equal to do. And you may like to know that those ladders will be too short. Do I know why? Not at all. But they always are. I have seen sieges enough, and the attempted storming of walls, both from within and without, and I can tell you no more beyond that, that they always are. It may be that they are made by men so valiant of heart that they think the wall to be somewhat less than it is; it may be they seek excuse that they may turn back, without aid from those who are standing above: it may be that they would spare wood. I can but tell you that so it is. The ladders will be too short. And if there should be any of such a length that men may climb to the top, I have seen that it is better to be of those who bash their heads as they show over the edge, than of those who come up to that end.

"Not that I would have you think that the wall will be easy to hold, for while you throw back the assault you must be exposed to missiles from every side, which you will be too busy to heed. But you will find that, if you are bold and sure, there will be many yet alive when the night comes, and some with a whole skin, and the Turks will have gone back, having lost ten to our one; but if you blench from the wall for any peril of shots that come from those that will throng the hill, they will swarm over the wall in such force that our swords will be vain to slay, and we shall be all sped in one heap.

"I tell you it will be hard to hold; but it can be done, and I think it will, you being the good men that you are. If I had my way they would be here in the next hour, but they must go to hell by a slower road."

So he had talked; and if the fanatic passion, at once racial and religious, which inspired many of Malta's knights, was a more powerful influence to them, yet to the common soldiers, who must share in that desperate defence without their exaltation of spirit, De Broglio's cheerful unperturbed demeanour, his cool appraisement of the possibilities of the position, may have been a more potent power. For he had a reputation alike for courage and discretion, for common sense and for common wit; and, beyond these, he was known for a practical soldier of long and varied experience, in whom unlearned men would trust more readily than in the aloof theorists of war, and who would talk to them in a different way.

To Medrano, as they examined the gap in the south-east curtain, upon which the fire of Dragut's main battery had been concentrated for the past

three days, while bursts of barbaric music, mingling with many noises from the infidel camp, told that the day of storm was upon them at last, he said other things.

"You will observe that they do not creep up? That they scorn surprise? That is Dragut's way. He will swagger and boast, and they say he has fought his best fights when he was so drunk that he was glad to hold to a neighbour's arm. That may leave the truth somewhat behind, though he is of a riotous blood, and war is to him a sport such as would make him drunk on a great day without the prompting of wine.

"Yet he is not to be valued low; for he wins all, being inspired in his own kind, though John would say it is a fiend that invades his soul. It may be Lucifer's self, by the deeds he has done to affront the standards of Christ, but we have no concern about that, it being beyond our control. What we have to regard (as I need not be saying to you) is that he shall not add an affront the more. And I have some slight hope, even of that, though I suppose Sir John has cast us to drown, either in this tide or the next; for the walls endure in the main, though they be somewhat ragged and split, and men of a better heart I have never led."

Gonzales de Medrano, bareheaded as yet, but otherwise in armour of proof, handsome and splendid in his damascened steel, looked somewhat down on the grosser, slovenly figure of his commander, on soiled leather and a battered breastplate which could have been bettered by half the men-at-arms that the fort held. Was it in unison, he wondered, in a mind which was always alertly observant of the panorama of surrounding life—was it typical of the man who was content to be seen in such guise? "I suppose," De Broglio had said, "that Sir John has cast us to drown, either in this tide or the next"; and with that thought in his mind he went round to range the defence as good-humoured and unperturbed as though he ordered a meal. He professed no religious fervour, no passion of patriotism, no extremity of racial hate. Was his courage no more than the stupidity of routine? It was Medrano's curse that he looked out and afar, that he was aware of that which was around and ahead. He loved life, which had given much, and had promised more. But it must be lived, if at all, in a splendid way. It was that necessity which had brought him here, as he thought, to a sure death. . . . Perhaps the key to De Broglio's mind was in what he had said of the fiendly power that was held to account for the battle-genius of the drunken corsair, and its frequent successes against the banners of Christian knights: "We have no concern about that, it being beyond our control." He was content to do that which lay in his own hands, leaving the ordering of the world, even including his own fate, to the various powers, Divine or human, whose responsibilities they certainly were. In the same mood, he was careless of what he wore, for he did not think of himself, nor

were his eyes on any present or future fame. He was a soldier by use, having no doubt that he fought in a good cause, and if the Grand Master sent him to death, it was for Sir John to make good at the throne of God, which it might be supposed that he would not be backward to do.

Medrano, knowing himself to have the greater honour in the mouths of men, and supposing that he would have the greater fame in the after days (which he had been at more pains to secure), wondered in the clarity of thought which may come to those who see death no more than an hour apart, which of their souls would be of the greater weight in the scales of God, and saw reason to doubt.

While these thoughts moved in his mind, he answered De Broglio's words in a different way.

"You think we may stand the storm for this bout? It is hard to guess. We have walls; but they have, as against us, an almost numberless force and are of a fighting fury that all men know. Yet it is to be thought that they must fight without hope of honour or praise, from the very numbers in which they come; and we can take some pleasure in that. For if the fort fall, it is no more than all men will look to see. There is no glory for them. But if they fail they will have their measure of shame, at which they must vomit much."

"Well," De Broglio said, "you are right enough, and, be that as it may, it is our part to keep them out to the last hour that we can, both for the cause we serve and that our throats may remain uncut. Yet," he continued with twinkling eyes, "there will be one in their camp who will find it good for a sore head if our walls stand, or the talk that passes between the lines has somewhat less than the tenth part of truth which is the measure on which we can mostly count without being tripped by a likely lie."

He spoke of Piali, whose quarrels with Dragut had grown in the mouths of men till it was said that only Mustapha's protesting presence had kept the daggers of the two admirals clean of each other's blood. He went on to survey the defence of other parts of the fort, leaving Medrano to his own thoughts, which were sombre but not ignoble, as he pursued the doubt of whether, in God's sight, he might not be of baser clay than De Broglio, whom no men were ever likely to praise as the perfect knight, either in life or death. But he thought of Sir Lancelot in the old romance, and how he had wept like a beaten child when it had been proved that, in God's sight, he was the greatest of Arthur's knights. He saw that to any man it must be an appalling woe rather than a platform of pride, if he should be shown that all his fellow-men were more base than himself. And after that he crossed himself and prayed briefly to St. John and his own saint, and turned his eyes to the curtain of battery-smoke through which there came a growing and mingled sound of drums and cymbals and clashing arms, and the high shouting of men who scorned death in the

Prophet's name.

It was an advance of which more could be seen as yet from St. Angelo's walls, now thronged by a watchful crowd who could do no more than look on at an arena of strife over which the smoke of battle would close more densely as the hours went by, so that they would hear rather than see the day-long agony of that inferno of smoke, and outcry, and flickering flame.

They could see something at first of the dense lines of the Turkish regiments moving forward down the length of Sceberras height, and St. Angelo's two cannons, being all there were of sufficient range, opened fire upon them with some effect; but to the most he could, Dragut moved his men along the western slope of the ridge. And, beyond that distant, futile cannonade, there was nothing now that the Grand Master could do. He had cast the die for this day when he had withstood La Cerda two weeks before. He stood now with a group of the Commanders of the Order around him, watching that which he had ordered to be, and with no comfort beyond the thought, as the hours went by, that St. Elmo had not fallen as yet, or the noise of conflict could not endure in the style it did.

He looked outward also to where the smoke of battle drifted seaward in slow long wreaths to the north, on a light wind which died as the day waned. He sought with little hope for the relief fleet which Don Garcio should have sent that day. But the sea was empty and quiet, till the sun sank, and a sea-mist rose in the windless air. As it thickened, the sounds of conflict grew less constant, and then less loud, till they ceased at last, leaving men to guess the meaning of that. Was St. Elmo a grave? There were few who could have courage to hope that it still stood, knowing what they did of the strength of the Turkish army which had gathered round it to take a prey.

As the night came, making a double cloak with the mist, the Grand Master ordered that a boat should venture across, so that the truth should be known at last, whether evil or good; but it had left the quay but a short time when one came with a letter bearing D'Egueras' seal, which the Grand Master opened, and read aloud to as many as could find space around him to hear.

"We have endured," he read, "for this day, by the high purpose of God, but I know not what the morning will bring. There is truce made for the hours of night, that the Turks may remove their wounded and slain, which are strewn thickly around our walls.

"You must send either succour during the night, or boats to bear us away. Our loss is two score of knights, and about three hundred of other sorts. There are not three score of all conditions who now remain, not having taken a wound. De Broglio is alive, but sore hurt. Medrano is dead. I am wounded, but can endure. By this mercy of mist, which I take to be the direct action of God,

you may get off the most wounded and slain while the darkness holds, and those, also, if you will, who are yet whole. But I would know your purpose with speed, that I may order all in the best way. You must know that, as we are now placed, we cannot longer endure."

There was a postscript to this letter which read:

"There is a tale that Dragut is slain, which the Saints grant! It may go beyond truth, as when Captain Piali was hurt before, but it is like that it has some substance of fact, for a time came when it seemed that the heart went out of those who had pressed us to such a point that we were becoming too few to man the whole length of the wall. When we thought it vain to hope that we should endure more, it seemed that those who were round us on every side were become less willing to die, so that they drew back, first at this place, and then at that, till a truce was blown at the last, so that, for this night, they will have no foot on our walls."

The Grand Master looked up as he finished the reading of this letter, and there was exaltation in his eyes, and in the voice in which he addressed the assembled knights.

"Behold," he said, "the most high mercy of God, Who does not desert His own, they being of sufficient valour, and the faith without which all else is a broken reed. I trust that Dragut is no more than a dying man, who will yet have space to see the Hell to which he most surely goes.

"Nor can we doubt that this mist is also of the seeing purpose of God, and will not hinder us that we send relief to our comrades who are so sorely beset.

"De Miranda, it is to you that I next must look. You shall assemble a hundred men, of those whose names Sir Oliver already holds as being ready to go. You must embark in the next hour, for who can say how long the mist will lie as it now does?

"Sir Oliver, you shall send instant reply to this scroll, saying that they are to be of good heart, for a strong succour will be theirs at a later hour. And you can say also that they must have ready all who have taken disabling wounds and are not too broken to move, that they may be brought back in the same boats, with such also of the dead as there may be space to embark, that they may be buried as Christian knights."

Those who listened observed that the idea of evacuating the ruined fort had been swept aside without discussion or pause, and if any doubted the wisdom of further defence, they lacked resolution to advance their views against the mood the Grand Master showed, remembering the bitter controversy there had been before, and how arrogantly he had borne it down.

They who had travailled in strife through that day were not to be rescued alive, but were to find comfort in the fact that new comrades would be sent to join in to-morrow's deaths. Yet what did the Grand Master require beyond what they were pledged to give? Chastity—obedience—poverty—to all these they were vowed, their lives having become their Order's, and not their own. But even these vows had been found capable of some differences of interpretation during the later centuries of wealth and ease through which the Order had passed. Poverty? What could that mean to those who controlled the riches the Order owned, except that their wealth must be for its use at sufficient need? Chastity? Was not the plain intention that they should avoid the obligations of legal marriage, or of children such as could claim their names, or any rights they held in the wealth which should be the Order's at last? Obedience? That was certainly the Grand Master's due; but they might still have some rights of argument, of contention, even of bargaining before this obedience were paid. Now they found themselves required to interpret their vows in a harder way, which all were not equally ready to do. It may have been well for Malta, if not for them, that they had a Grand Master who had put his hand to the plough, and would keep the furrow straight, though it should lead to the gates of death.

Yet those who would now go to prolong a hopeless defence would not be sent by duress, but were such as had put down their own names, and others were less directly concerned. Also, it must have been plain to all that it was not a time for debate. That which was done, whether to reinforce or to bring away, must be completed while mist and darkness were joined to give it sufficient cloak, or it would be disaster indeed if the frail boats should be exposed to the fire of the Turkish batteries; or if St. Elmo should be isolated for another day while, still containing no more nor less than its remnant of wearied and wounded men. The Grand Master met no word of protest. There was no comment beyond the silent gravity of those who heard his decision.

Yet he must have been conscious of the meaning of that, for he followed Sir Oliver to his own room, which he paced restlessly while the first orders were issued which would assemble the volunteers, and bring the boats to the outer quay, and when this had been quickly done, and Sir Oliver sat down to write the letter which would send the necessary instructions to those who still lived in St. Elmo's walls, he said abruptly: "Oliver, tell me the truth from your own heart. Do you hold me wrong?"

For a moment Sir Oliver paused with a lifted pen. He was considering what the question might mean, rather than what his answer would be. He decided that the Grand Master asked only for the satisfaction or assurance of his own mind. His purpose had not faltered nor changed. If he should be told that his obstinacy was a rank folly, and nothing more, he might be roused to passion,

perhaps distress, but he would not change the orders which were even now going forth. Sir Oliver had no cause to vex him thus to no gain, for he did not think it a folly beyond defence. When he spoke, he gave frank reply:

"I do not hold you are wrong. I am not sure. It is a matter which will be judged at last by its own end. A week ago, had it rested with me, I should have blown up the fort and brought its garrison off, as we could have done then. I might do the same to-night. Yet I should have been wrong then; and I might be wrong now. For it is plain that, for the past week, the Turks have spent their strength there, and have left us free, and now they have made assault and have failed, which must have been to them a great cost, both of munitions and men; and if you should blow up the fort this night you would have done far better than to have done so a week before. But as to whether it should be done now—we know our own loss, but less, as yet, of that which our foes have felt, or of what heart they are now in; and there is this rumour of Dragut's death—it may prove that it can be held for a longer day, but it is not easy to guess."

The Grand Master made no reply. He went on pacing the room, as one who had retired to his own thoughts. Sir Oliver turned to the letter he had to write, and his glance fell on the list of volunteers who were now being called up. He added: "There is one thing that we should clearly observe. The men who now go are not of the militia of this island, nor are they of the hired soldiers of Spain. They are the most choice of our own knights, of whom the total number is few. They are the best we have, and if they go they will not return. There are few things surer than that. We cannot look for another mist at the right hour to bring off those who remain, even should they outlast assault on another day. When we face the storm of our own walls, they will not be here to our aid; for we send them all to a sure death."

"And for what else did they come? Are their vows naught?" the Grand Master burst out in a voice of protest, but less as though he argued with Sir Oliver than his own soul. "The better men that we send the more stoutly will they maintain. I have good hopes they will hold it long. . . . But the command is too much for a wounded man. I will send Montserrat to take control. There could be none better than he." After a moment of silence he added, in a voice that had become quiet and grave: "Oliver, men can say of me what they will at the last, so that the Order endure. I know I am loved of few. It is not for that I am here; but, as I think, by the choice of God for a settled end."

He went out at that, and Sir Oliver's room, which had been private to them for a time, became busy again as those that he had sent out on various errands returned for fresh instructions from him. There were few in St. Angelo's Castle who would not wake through that night.

Angelica was among those who came. She asked Sir Oliver, at the first chance that she had: "May I see the list of those who are called?"

He answered what he rightly guessed to be in her mind. “You need not trouble for that. Your name is not there. I had struck it out.”

She looked a relief which may be thought natural enough, but which left him a puzzled doubt. Why had she put it down, if she were not seeking to go? Was it to be explained by the instability of her sex? That what had been pleasing at some distance away, did not attract when it must be faced in the next hour? Or did it mean that her cousin had wounded her at the first (which was likely enough), and had now become active to heal the hurt (which it was harder to think)? So he questioned, having no key to the truth, and then he was more startled by that which she asked next.

“I hear that you have a letter to send, which the messenger who came is unfit to bear.”

“That is so. It was brought by a wounded man, who will not return. What of that?”

“May it be taken by me?”

“I should say no. There are others who are more fit. Why do you wish that?”

She faced him with pleading eyes. “If you would not ask? But I have a cause of much weight. There can be none fitter than I, who have been before.”

“Yes. But it was not as it will be now.”

“There can be no risk,” she said stubbornly. “Not in this mist. And there is a truce for the night, so it is said.”

“There will be a limited truce; but I was not thinking of that. A battle may not be pleasant to view, while men die and kill by every manner they may. But it is harder to look on the sight it leaves when the dust sinks, and the trumpets die. . . . Would you still go, being warned?”

“It is what I have asked.”

“Well, so you shall. You should do your part, being here. It may be well to show that you have been of use, if the Grand Master should perceive your disguise, of which he seems to have had no thought after the first. . . . You will give this letter sealed to D’Egueras’ hand, and will tell him that the reinforcements which are mentioned therein are coming in twenty boats in no more than an hour from now, for which he should be quickly prepared, so that they can bring back the wounded and dead, of whom there may be more than will be embarked at one time. He should send message back by them, or else sooner by you, of any needs that we may supply while the darkness holds. You should observe all you may, and bring fuller report than can be sent in a written word. . . . Are you ready now?”

“Yes, I can go now.”

She took the letter, and after a short ascent to her room which might have been for no more than the cloak which must be worn against the mist and the

night-air, she went down to the quay, where the boat that had come from St. Elmo was still moored, being no more than a little skiff that had brought the wounded messenger, and two men who had pushed the oars.

It had some freedom of rope, so that it must be brought in a few feet, which those who lay on its thwarts, being hailed, made no motion to do. A man of the quay-guard hauled it against the steps, and stirred the sleeping men with his foot, at which one arose in a weary way and put an oar overside, showing a bandaged hand.

His comrade did not stir. A lantern's light cast on his face showed an unnatural pallor amid a bristle of coarse black hair. Being raised, it could be seen that he had taken a wound between the shoulder and neck, which had been staunched and bound, but, as he had slipped on the thwart in his heavy sleep, the padding had come away and it had started bleeding anew. He must be lifted out. There would be no more help from him now.

Angelica saw that there was no one there who would be free to take his place without higher orders than hers. It was no time to delay. She had pushed an oar before then, and it was clear that she must do it again. She reached for that which the man had loosed, and found that where she put down her hand it was sticky and wet. She smelt blood. She found that she was on a seat which had been drenched from the open wound. Well, she was there by her own choice, and it was surely there she must stay. She put the oar overside.

As they moved into the mist, she said, more to make talk to the silent figure behind than because it mattered to her: "He must have been badly hurt. He was not fit to have come."

The man did not hear, or found understanding hard. He asked, in bad Italian, what she had said. When it was repeated, he replied: "There are few who have not taken a wound, and they are not to be spared on such an errand as this. When you have seen. . . ." His voice fell. He began to push with a slow, long stroke in a weary way, as though against a sea that made progress hard. There was mist on the sea, as there had been when she had made this passage before, and again the stars showed at times, the mist lying low and being thin in places, like a garment worn into holes.

To Angelica they were lost at once, but she saw that the boatman was now keenly alert. He watched the water and looked up at the stars when the chances came. He watched her stroke, which, tired though he might be, was less strong and regular than his own, and paused at times with a lifted oar, that the boat might be brought to a true course.

After a time he grew more vigilant, listening intently for any sound which might come from the other shore, which they should be nearing now. Once he would have them rest their oars for some moments, drifting backward upon the current, when he must have heard what he sought for; after that he pushed in a

more assured way, till they approached a dark shadow of land, which they skirted for a short time and so came to St. Elmo’s quay.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ST. ELMO lay under the triple palls of night and mist and the smoke of a day-long strife. It was a lazar within, and a shambles without, where its trenches were littered with Turkish wounded and dead. There were places where they lay heaped. Among these the lanterns moved, for the infidels toiled to bear them away while the night endured and the short hours remained of a truce that the dawn would end.

Inside the walls the few that remained whole, worn with the long hours of excitement and strife, must still toil through the night at a hundred tasks which it was vital to perform before day should renew the war.

D'Egueras, striving to bring all to such order as might yet be, found that he had less than three score of men of all conditions and ranks who were not dead or had not taken a wound. He disposed of these as he best could, thinking first of how defence could be made for the next day, unless the Grand Master should direct them to withdraw during the night from the breached and battered walls. After what he had seen that day even he was disposed to think that it might be best to blow the fort up in the night, though he had turned with wrath from such talk before. But now it might be said that it had done the most that it had ever could. He did not know with precision that the Turks would count the tale before dawn of more than a thousand either crippled or dead, but he knew that the loss they had suffered was very great. Having done them that harm it would surely be better to withdraw, leaving them no more than a shattered shell, than to be taken by storm on the next day. So he thought, as he waited to learn the Grand Master's will.

He read the letter Angelica brought, with a mind that was too tired for much emotion to stir. He said only: "Montserrat is a good knight under whom I will gladly serve." He gave orders for those who had lived through that day with wounds which left them able to walk, that they should help those who were sorely hurt, that these should be ready to embark with the least delay. It was an office for which he had no sound men whom he was able to spare. To these last he gave promise that they should have hours of rest when the reliefs should arrive. He had less hope for himself, seeing that he would have much talking to do when Monsterrat and he should meet. He was wounded, where his shoulder had been struck with a flying fragment of rock, of which he took little heed.

It was no more than a wide blackness of bruise, for the piece of stone that

had knocked him down had come with a flat side, giving a species of wound that was common in this war. The cannon-ball of the day, being solid and round, could not damage more than came in its path, except it shattered that upon which it fell. In itself, at long range, it was not over-greatly feared. As it lost pace it might come bouncing along the ground at no more speed than could be dodged by an agile man as he would avoid the bound of a clumsy dog. But when it fell upon metal or stone with shattering force, it might do as much harm as a bursting shell.

It was so that Dragut had taken a wound, by the talk that came, no one could say from where, during these hours of truce. It came in the guise of many conflicting lies, out of which some truth might be dredged with a careful net.

He had always been reckless in self-exposure, holding that life is lived by a destined plan; and he had a fixed belief that it was part of that plan that he should be Allah's evil to Christian lands, making their seamen slaves and their commerce a prey. He had proved his faith, in a fierce rollicking drunken style, till he had become lord of all the African lands from the edge of Egypt to the frontiers of Spain, and he had gone far to make the Mediterranean a Moslem lake, as it would continue to be for twenty years after his death, till the gathered fleets of all Europe should make an end of that curse to the sound of Lepanto's guns. And all these years, in a jovial drunken fury of cruel strife, his scimitar had shone and reddened in the front of a score of battles, on firm land or the swaying deck, and he had not felt so much as the hurt of a scratched skin.

He had been no more careful on this day than his custom was, and if he remained somewhat in the rear at the first, it was only that he might have a broad view of the operations that he directed from the rise of Sceberras' slope. He had ordered that the main attack should be against the length of the landward side, where the fort had been greatly reduced by the fire of the Turkish guns, most of which had been directed thereon. From the captured ravelin there was to be little more than a feint attack, its nearness being of little real advantage against the strength of undamaged walls that were higher than it, while that nearness would avail of itself to hold a part of the defending force immobile, they not knowing how soon or in what strength it might unmask attack from its hiding walls.

By this disposition he had also planned that the new battery which he had built on the opposite shore of the northern harbour (where it is called Dragut's Point to this day) should be able to continue its fire without fear of a misdirected shot falling among its friends, as there was to be no assault from that side.

As the attack proceeded and the hours passed with a dreadful slaughter on

either side but no decisive result, he had become dissatisfied with the work of this battery, which he had directed to concentrate its fire upon the cavalier of the fort, and, with his usual impetuosity, he had ordered a boat and proceeded to cross the northern harbour, so that he might direct its guns with better effect —if necessary with his own hands, as he would often do when afloat—being a gunner of much skill, and with such fortune at times that was widely believed that he had the aid of unearthly powers.

There was a quarter of a mile of water dividing Dragut's Point from the fort, and those who worked the guns there might well think themselves out of the danger of that day, and the more so because the fire of the cavalier was concentrated upon Sceberras' slope, where it took a harvest of death from the regiments of advancing Turks; but De Broglio, who knew that most gunners will work more coolly and take better aim if they are assured that they are out of danger themselves, had ordered that one of the longer guns of the cavalier should be turned at times on the distant battery, so that it should not be too sure of its own peace. And this being well served it chanced that, as Dragut was pointing one of the battery guns with his own hands, a shot struck the top of the wall which had been erected for its defence, scattering a dozen fragments of stone and raising a cloud of dust. When it sank, it could be seen that Dragut lay among other men who were wounded or dead, and when they raised him up it was not easy to see to which he belonged. He bled from a cut head, and on his right side the ribs had been driven in. But he still breathed, and became conscious after a time, asking to be taken back to his own tent.

So it was done, and there he lay between life and death, and as the news spread, the assault, which had been pressed till that time and might have prevailed in another hour, slackened and failed, for its driving force had become still.

Christian men compared his fall with that of Piali before, both of whom had been struck by the scattered stones from a ball that fell from afar, when it might have seemed that their danger was next to none. They saw the guidance of God. The Moslems may be excused that they saw the work of more fiendly powers; yet Dragut would have agreed in so far that he would have said that it showed how vain is the forethought and care of men, and that he had done well to contemn danger through all his life, knowing that it would be lost at the destined time and not a moment before.

"You may tell Sir Oliver," D'Egueras said, "that it seems sure that Dragut is down, though there is a doubt if he be no more than hurt or already dead. It was doubtless by the ruling mercy of God, for we were sore pressed."

Angelica said she would so report. She made no more than needed reply. She was somewhat sick at things she had seen by the light of lantern and torch as she had come to the fort, having had occasion to recall what Sir Oliver had

said of that which is left when the dust sinks and the trumpets die. It would be worse in the cold light of the summer dawn, which was not more than three hours away. She should have been gone before then, but she had in mind her own purpose for which she came, in which she was resolved that she would not fail. She thought of the Italian poem which was much read at this time, of how Beatrice had been given courage of God, by which she could walk unmoved through the pits of Hell, and she was aware of a kindred need.

"Am I free to walk as I will," she asked, "within the range of the fort, now that my errand is done?" It would have been simpler to say that she would see La Cerda, having a message for him, but she was in danger enough without that which might have drawn the lightning around her head.

D'Egueras turned his tired eyes upon her, regarding her for the first time in a personal way. He asked: "Do you go back or stay here?"

"I was to go back at once if you had urgent message to send, or else with the boats that will take the wounded away."

"There may be things which should be brought while the mist allows, but I know not what. It was not my part. There shall be search. I know that we have powder enough; and most else for as long as we shall endure. I should say that Sir Oliver knows better than I what our stores should lack. . . . Could you push a boat without aid? Could you find St. Angelo's quay in this dark?"

"I might handle a boat, if it be lightly built; it is less sure that I could find St. Angelo's quay."

"We have few men who have strength for that at this hour, and less than none we can spare. You must wait till the boats arrive."

She repeated the question that was unanswered as yet. "I can walk at will in the fort's bounds?"

"You can give some help to the hurt. There is none should be idle here. If you are challenged by any who think you strange to the fort, the password is *esto perpetua*, as it will be till to-morrow noon."

Angelica went at that, while she could. She was not unwilling to give aid to those who were in a pitiful need, but she had to do that which had brought her there. She must find La Cerda, if possible by what would seem a chance meeting, and have some words with him which no others would hear.

She learned casually, from a Spanish soldier to whom she gave some help in washing a wounded knee, that the knight she sought was now in command of the southern wall. It was not the post he had first held; but as the hours passed, and men died or withdrew with a wound to staunch, there had been need for others to take defence of the wall where the assault was most strong, and so it had fallen to him. Angelica knew nothing of that, but was glad to hear that he was alive and, as she supposed, unhurt.

La Cerda paced a wall, where he was in charge of a small guard which he

had permitted to lie at ease, and perhaps sleep. There was little to fear, for the Turks could be trusted to keep such a truce as was then made and, in any event, he could have waked alarm before any could scale the wall. He had fought well during the day and had said that he could endure for the night. He had not reported a wound. But he was in a pain too great for it to be easy for him to rest or to keep still.

He had pain both of body and mind. For he had seen that he must fight and (he supposed) die, without honour or praise, whether the fort should fall that day or endure. He had said that it could not be held, and he was to fight to prove himself wrong. He could only be right if the Turks should break in and put all who lived to the sword, as they would be most likely to do.

Well, he had fought his best, as his part was; and he still lived, where most of the best were dead. There was Medrano for one. He had died in the breach where the worst fighting had been. For the ladders were too short for the unbroken parts of the wall, as De Broglio had foretold. But at the place where Medrano had held command the wall was battered to half its height, and the Turks had swarmed up, though they had been slain till their dead bodies had become a mound that made the ascent easy and short. Medrano, better guarded than most by his armour of Milan steel, had held his place while others fell at his side or were replaced by those less weary than they. He had taken so many wounds that none could say by whose hand he had died at last. It was in that breach that De Broglio also fell, even as the assault was losing its force, and it could be seen that the fort was saved for that day. He had pushed stoutly in, when he heard that Medrano was down, and though somewhat scanty of breath, he had shown a skill in using the sword that was too much for the most of those who must face its point, though it might lack the grace of fence that the schools would teach at that time. He lay now among those who were sorely hurt, having taken a body-wound from a Turkish pike which made breathing hard. . . .

La Cerda had no wound to show from a foeman's hand, but he had been hurt in another way. He had been directing those who had been flinging the hoops of fire, which were a weapon of clumsy sound but which had been of more avail even than the wild-fire bombs in swelling the tale of death among the Turks who had ever crowded the ditch and clambered against the wall. They were hoops of wood, soaked with oil, and decked with inflammable rags. They were set alight, and then taken in large tongs made for this work, and flung far out over the wall. They were so large that they might fall around three men in a close rank, and would set the light linen garments of the Turkish soldiers on fire, so that they would be sure of such torturing wounds before they could struggle clear of the flaming hoop and put their own garments out, that they were most like to end in a slow death.

La Cerda had been directing how these hoops might best be thrown from the wall to discourage those who fought up to the breach where Medrano stood, when he came too carelessly near, and his arm was scorched by the caprice of a back-blown flame. He had endured then, as the hour required, and had said nothing since, but the pain did not lessen, he rather growing more conscious thereof, as he paced the wall in the dreadful quiet of a night that was heavy with fate and death, and often loud with outlandish cries, as the Turks lifted those who had not been utterly slain, or as the wounded that they delayed to relieve cried out in pain or a bitter thirst.

La Cerda, in this mood of anguish and wrath, was accosted by one whom he could not know in a light which was next to none, but who seemed no more than a slender boy, with a voice in which the manhood was hard to hear, though it was quiet and assured.

"Is it the Chevalier La Cerda to whom I speak?"

"Yes, I am he. What of that?" He spoke in a curt way, as one who would be left to his own thoughts.

"I would speak with you where we cannot be heard."

"Being whom, and for why?"

"I am Don Garcio, whom you once met in Sir Oliver's room. I come to tell you of that which it is urgent that you should know."

"Well, we are alone here. The men sleep. I would I could do the same. If the Grand Master be stubborn still, and will not clear the fort while the night allows, I know not how we shall endure through the next day. We shall be slain in our sleep. What news do you bring to men who are marked for death that an old fool may not be told he is wrong?"

"It is an issue I cannot judge; but I can tell you that there is strong support now embarking to cross, and the wounded are to be taken back in the same boats."

"Then there can be no weight in aught else you can show, except I am to return."

"Yet you must know, for if it be nothing to you, it is much to me. Venetia is in hiding in my chamber, which once was hers, and the Provost-Marshal is searching the town."

"Fiends in hell! How got he the scent of her?"

"She stabbed your steward, by whom she says that her honour was put to siege, so that it could be saved in no other way."

"The foul impudent cur! Is it thus they affront my name while I am caged here? And do they blame her for that?"

"I know not that there is much jeopard for her. At least, Sir Oliver says that she might come clear, the tale being guessed much as she would have it to be. But the Grand Master will have her found, except (as there is other guess) she

may have escaped to the Turkish lines, being no more than a spy, and she having stabbed your steward when he would have discovered her guilt. Such is common talk, which is false, as we know; but the Grand Master is set to resolve whether she be in hiding or not."

"Does Sir Oliver know?"

"He knows nothing as yet, or I were not here."

"Do you think she will be found where she now is?"

"I cannot say. She will not stay by my will. There is proclamation made that there will be death for any who give her harbour after to-morrow noon."

"She cannot ask that you risk that. She must advance to her own defence. On the facts you give she should not have greatly to fear; and the Order will not wish to do me too much despite, let the Grand Master hate me the most he may. I will write forthwith, both to Sir Oliver and to her. That I might be there to defend my own!"

He roused a drowsing soldier, sending him with word to La Motte that he should relieve him for half an hour, which it had been agreed that he should be ready to do. He turned to Angelica to ask: "How long can you remain here?"

"I can remain long enough. But I must tell you that I cannot give your letter to Sir Oliver's hand, except she assent thereto."

"Do you not want her to go?"

"That I do!" There was a sincerity in this exclamation which it was not easy to doubt.

"Then why would you . . . ?"

"She has my pledged word. She is in a great fear. She will not be revealed except you be there to defend her part."

"She is a coward by that word. Yet she did well when she stabbed Giles. I have known a new mood with each hour. You may find her changed when you get back."

"Not in this." Angelica thought she already knew what was fundamental to Venetia, and could divide it from such moods as she might put on for the pleasure or vexation of the man to whom she belonged.

La Cerda cursed by several devils and saints, and the places where they are said to abide. Then he had a new thought. He asked: "She has held your room for two nights; and now, if you put her forth, it must be on her terms?"

Angelica's sudden laughter startled the night.

Into La Cerda's mind there came an unlikely doubt that had once entered before. He wished much for a better moon.

Angelica's laugh was soon done, for she saw, in an instant's time, that it might prove a poor jest. She said shortly: "She had no welcome from me."

"How did she chance to come? Did she know you before?"

"No. But she knew the room."

La Cerda saw that there was reason in that. He saw also that he might be in debt to one to whom his courtesy had been less than it should. He said, in a different tone: “It seems that we owe you thanks. But I must deal now. Did you say that the wounded are free to leave at this hour!”

“That is how I was told. I should say that the boats may be here now.” So it seemed that it was, by the sounds that came through the mist. As she spoke they were aware of a tall figure that stood at their sides.

La Motte’s voice, formal and grave, and giving little sign of the weariness that he felt, announced that he would take charge of the wall, so that La Cerda was free to go.

“It seems,” La Cerda said, “that I do not return, for the wounded are now to leave.”

“The wounded?” La Motte asked, in a toneless way.

La Cerda’s answer was curt. “Yes; I have a hurt arm.”

“It is well for you.” La Motte’s voice was as level as it had been before. La Cerda went in doubt of whether he heard an insult, or the word of a friend. Angelica kept to his side. It might be of much moment to her to know what was done, and to take her own part if the need should come.

What she told was the truth, and no more; but there were two vexations it left unsaid. Venetia had become a most unwelcome addition to the few to whom Angelica’s secret was known, and her promise that it should not be told was a bond of doubtful worth. Also, Francisco and Venetia had met, and had talked in a way that she did not like but could not resent; for what was it to her? She judged that Venetia sought no more nor less than to cajole him into providing harbourage or escape if La Cerda should fail; and she was half angered and half amazed that Francisco should seem so ready to swallow the hook. She told herself that she feared only lest he should give the girl aid that would bring him to the Grand Master’s wrath, which was reason enough, though it was no more than she had done herself to that hour. But she found that all her fears had pointed the same way. She must get La Cerda to intervene.

CHAPTER XXXIV

La Cerda led the way to the boats. He had brought little with him when he came, and in his pain of body and tumult of mind he had no care to take it away. His squire had been dead for two days. He left his pennon displayed on the wall, as he would not have done had he withdrawn at a quieter time. There would be many pennons of the wounded and dead that would be taken down when the dawn came, to be replaced by those that had come for their turn of death.

He did not go to D'Egueras for permission to leave, as he might have done to De Broglio had he still been in command and as it was his clear duty to do. He disliked the Deputy-Governor, who had a kindred feeling for him, and he had some doubt of whether permission might be refused, or deferred, which he would not risk.

By this omission he came near to a rebuff that his pride would have found it hard to endure, for D'Egueras, being a man of inkhorn and pen, and exact even in that extremity of fatigue and loss, had found time to have an order prepared giving a list of those, both living and dead, who were to be sent back during the night. The boats that were sent were more than enough for the reinforcements they brought, dead and wounded men taking more space than those who are hale. They were emptied at once as they came to the quay, except some that were heavy with stores. All was done in haste, lest the morning should come, or the mist lift, before they should be within the safety of St. Angelo's walls. When La Cerda arrived, some of the boats were already filled and pushing away. There was an officer on the quay who checked all those who embarked from a list he had. Those who had come to land were already employed in bearing the litters of wounded men to the water-side.

La Cerda would have entered a boat which was less than full when the officer interposed. He was courteous, but he would not yield. Without D'Egueras' order he would allow no one to leave. If La Cerda (as he said) would not come out of the boat, then it must be kept at the quay till the Deputy-Governor had been informed.

La Cerda saw that he was wrong and yet it was hard for his pride to yield. It might have ended in a worse way had not De Broglio's litter come down while the wrangle was on and somewhat loud on La Cerda's side.

De Broglio, from a confusion of evil dreams, had been returned to an awareness of painful life by the jolts that his litter got as it descended the steps

that led to the quay. He knew La Cerda's voice, and heard enough to guess more. He told his bearers to halt. He learned enough of the truth to decide that La Cerda should go.

The officer, a punctilious man, whose own temper had been somewhat roused by debate, was not quick to give way, even then. He had written orders, and against them only the word of a man who was near death and in the act of giving up his command.

But De Broglio was not one who was easy to thwart, he being a genial man but not weak. He had life enough for a jest and a shrewd word.

"Why," he said, "you must know I am in command till I leave here. I am not yet in the boat. I am on the quay. The Chevalier La Cerda shall precede me now, having my express command to that end. When I am in the boat I will say no more."

So La Cerda remained in the boat and Angelica followed, the officer saying nothing to her, either because he had instructions thereon or that he felt no disposition to argue anew. La Cerda had his way for the time, but the fact remained that his name was not on the roll of those who should have returned, which would be on Sir Oliver's desk in the next hour.

The boat came safely to St. Angelo's quay, though not without risk of harm, for the Turks could not fail to hear the noise of those who landed and went, they being free of the southern trench by the terms of the truce they made, and as that truce was of no more than a local kind and did not cover the harbour waters at all, they sent word to the batteries on Sceberras' side, and these fired at times into the mist, aiming in a blind way at where they thought the Christian boats were most likely to be. There was none hit, by the protection of watchful saints, but a shot struck the water so near the bow of De Broglio's boat that Angelica, being on the forward thwart, was drenched by the wave it flung.

Her cloak, which had been fouled before by the boatman's blood, was no better for this, and at another time her first thought might have been to cast it off and to have cleansed herself and make other amends, but now she thought only that she must keep to La Cerda's side as they went on to the castle through the great crowd of those who had assembled to meet the boats.

The torches were dimmed at this time by a pale forecast of dawn, and the castle, when they had passed the guard at the inner gate, seemed empty, unless there were those therein who slept through the night, as few did.

As they came to the main hall, Angelica, being a pace ahead, stopped and stood in La Cerda's way. "What," she asked, "would you do now?"

"I would see Venetia first."

"So I suppose you should. It is a room you will know. She will be asleep now, by a likely guess. You must knock twice, and once again after a pause.

That is the signal we have. . . . I will go to Sir Oliver first, for I must make my report to him. How much may I say of this, by your leave?"

"You may say all; for she could not be longer hid. And now I am here it cannot be told too soon."

La Cerda showed more wisdom in this than he always would. For he saw that his own position would be improved if it should appear that he had given no countenance to Venetia being taken away, but had come back with the object of bringing her forth. And if his own position were clear in this, he might do more for her at a later hour in the accusation she had to meet. If, after requiring her to face what she had done, he showed that he believed her account, and that his faith was constant in her, it might avail much. He could not hope that she would be allowed to remain, but if she were acquitted of special guilt it might mean no more than that she would be held in some present restraint, and sent back to Sicily at the first chance, where she could remain on his estate and he could join her at last, if he should have the fortune to keep his life to the war's end.

"Well," Angelica said, "I can do that, for my pledge to her was that she should not be betrayed while you were not present to be her guard."

So it was; for Venetia had been somewhat subtle in that. She cared nothing for Angelica's risk, but she cared much for herself. She saw that, if she were caught at last (as she did not intend), it was of moment that she should be able to explain why she had not come boldly forth if she were unconscious of guilt. She would say then: "I waited only my lord's return, having no courage among hostile men, unless he should give me support. I meant always that I would tell at that time." She would be able to show that she had fled to the only woman of her own rank (or what she professed it to be) that St. Angelo held, for she did not propose to keep Angelica's secret a moment longer than it was profit to her. And Angelica, whose word would be of more value than hers, must support this, admitting that she had only asked to be hidden away till La Cerda's return.

This was only against the chance that she would be discovered and seized. She did not think to see La Cerda ever again, so that it made no difference beyond that. She thought that all in St. Elmo were doomed to death at that time, as they mostly were.

Angelica added: "I may be more than a short time, for Sir Oliver will have his care on other things besides this, but I suppose you will not mind that, having much to hear and to say. I will come as soon as I can, and will knock in the way we have."

They parted at that, he going up the stair that he had learnt to know in the days of more ease, before the Turkish galleys had left their berths in the Golden Horn, and she going to Sir Oliver's room.

She found Olrig there, and learned that the Grand Master's secretary had retired about half an hour before, giving instructions that he should not be called for four hours, unless there were urgent need. She was so used to finding that Sir Oliver was to be reached at all times of crisis or strain, seeming as one who was never weary by night or day, that she had not considered that this might be, as she saw now that she should have done.

She saw that it would be too long to leave La Cerda without word, even should she be able to get Sir Oliver's leisure to hear her tale as soon as he should be wakened again. Also, she was unwilling to be kept so long from her own room, being soiled and wet as she was. "I will go at once," she thought, "getting there not long after himself, and tell them of this delay."

As she went she thought that it might prove the better course of events, for she had resolved that La Cerda should know what she was and give his own promise of silence, as he could not lightly refuse. She thought that if he and Venetia should be together again it would not long be a secret between those two, and she had a shrewd thought that Venetia would be more likely to respect her own pledge if it had been given in La Cerda's hearing, or spoken of when they were present together. It was, at least, essential that she should know what of disclosure she was likely to have to face.

So she made her way to the room that she called hers at a quick pace, but she found that there would be no occasion to knock, for, as she climbed the stairs, she could see that the door stood wide. From within, there came a clashing of swords, and then she heard La Cerda's voice in a loud oath, which changed to an exclamation of pain.

CHAPTER XXXV

LA CERDA had gone up the stairs in some conflict of moods. He was glad that he would be seeing Venetia again, she being to him a dear toy, if no more. He was not of a jealous kind, beyond what a Sicilian noble might be expected to be, but he was in a doubt which had some excuse, though he saw it could not go beyond that. Don Garcio was to him a quiet-toned, and yet confident, boy, whom he judged as having courage and pride, and yet he could not think of him as one who would use a sword. He wondered how he would act if he should be challenged thereto, for which he thought he might have cause before all should end.

He had said, while they were in the boat: "I fear you may have been discommoded more than you should, a lady taking your chamber thus. I trust that you have not been without other resort." And Don Garcio, whose face he had been unable to see, had seemed to be unprepared for reply. He had said: "Oh, I—I do well enough." And then: "It has needed care to avoid that any should suspect she is there." That was true enough; but it might be taken as an excuse that they had made common use of one room, which had to be explained away as it best could. Still, it appeared that Venetia had gone there of her own choice, being in a perilous need and having sought a room where she had been hidden before. It was hard to judge till he should have speech with her. The cause that was said to have brought her there did not suggest that she was careless of her own honour or unequal to its defence. . . . Yet Don Garcio's directions suggested that she would give access, without demur, at any hour of the night. He had enough doubt to go up with a light step, thinking that she should have no reason to pause through hearing a heavier tread than Don Garcio's would be likely to be. He would knock in the secret way, and see what the response would be before she could guess it was he, and whether her first recognition of him would show confusion or joy.

So he did; and he heard a low voice in the room, for which he had not been prepared. But he heard also the lifted bolt, and the door opened without delay.

As it widened he saw that it was held by a young knight, richly dressed in the Spanish style, whom he did not know. Behind him, Venetia lay in the bed where he had often seen her before. She saw him at once and gave a welcoming cry; but there had been a first moment when her face had shown a surprise that he did not like, for, instant though it had been, he had thought it akin to fear.

The face of the young knight had changed also, with more cause, and in a more open way. He had looked unconcerned as he drew the door wide, showing that he had expected Don Garcio, or some other, and had been willing to let him in. When he saw that a stranger was there, he stepped quickly forward, barring the way to the room.

La Cerda took a step in, as though he would have pushed him aside. “I would know,” he said, “what you do here?”

Francisco’s reply was quick to come. “I would know that of you.”

“Why,” La Cerda exclaimed, “is the chamber yours and the lady alike? It was what I had not known until now.”

“It is my cousin’s room, to which no one has right but she.”

It was an unfortunate word, which Francisco did not observe that he had used, as was natural enough. It was no less natural that La Cerda misunderstood. He had had a passing doubt of Angelica’s sex at a cooler time, but he did not think of that now.

“It is a kinship,” he said, “of which I was not aware. But it seems that she keeps a most common room in the night.”

Venetia was forth of the bed by this time. “You misread,” she said in an urgent voice, “he was not speaking of me.”

She called to one who had ceased to hear. He had tried to push Francisco backward to enter the room, and it would have been hard to say which sword was the first out.

Venetia looked on with the eyes of an angry cat. She was not of the sort to rush between meeting blades. She might have said that this was not because she lacked courage but because she was not barren of wit. Also, she had too much wit to cry out, even for that folly to cease, though she saw that it might be ruin to them as well as to herself, with which last she was most concerned. But she knew that it may make the difference of death to cause a man’s mind to swerve, for so much as an instant’s space, in such a bout as that which she now saw.

The two fought with the fury of those who are roused by a jealous hate and are both sure that the right is theirs. Francisco did not know that La Cerda had the name of the best swordsman in Sicily. (In fact, he did not know who he was.) Nor, in the mood that was his, would he have cared if he had. He had the impetuous courage of youth, and some belief in his own skill. He had some gain in the fact that he fought with a weary man.

La Cerda, turning aside the first fury of attack with a skilful blade, found that he would have enough to do to guard his own life at the first. Well, he thought, he would have wisdom to wait. He had proved before that his defence was not easy to pierce; and when an opponent became weary of the attempt, and fear would come to his heart as he found he was always foiled, then he

would be apt to become wild in attack, and would be simple to overcome.

So the swords clashed for a time in the narrow space of the room, where there was little chance either to draw back or to swerve aside, but it did not come to the end which La Cerda planned. For Francisco made a thrust that was sudden and very hard, thinking to make an end as he had turned La Cerda's sword somewhat aside, but his opponent was quick to regain his guard. He deflected the thrust so far that it passed his side, and the point drove into the arm of a chair beside which he stood. Francisco wrenched sideward to get it free, and the blade snapped. He leaped backward beside the bed, his sword being no more than two feet of a broken blade, and drew his dagger out in his other hand.

La Cerda, in quick pursuit, found Venetia in his way, somewhat on his left side, for she respected his sword. "Leon," she cried, in an urgent passionate voice, "will you ruin all? Will you heed naught?" And as he only swore and pushed her aside, for he was in a state of body and mind in which it was harder to think than to act in a blind way, as habit or instinct led, she seized his left arm. Her grasp was hard, for her strength was far more than her aspect showed. The small fingers pressed deep into the burnt flesh, and it was then that he cried out at the sudden pain, so that Angelica heard before she entered the room.

Angelica looked at the scene of interrupted violence with cooler eyes than those upon whom she came would be likely to have, but she found little pleasure in what she saw or what she thought it to mean. Her first question turned to that which was of most moment to her.

"Francis," she asked, "what should you do here at this hour?"

He had come out from beside the bed, on which he had thrown down the broken sword, and had put his dagger back. It was clear, for the time, that the fight was done.

"Why," he said, in an awkward way, which may have come from some shortness of breath or another cause, "I heard you had gone to St. Elmo alone and had not returned. I came here to learn what I could, and if you were back, being anxious at the delay."

Angelica looked at him in a sombre silence, biting her lip. She wondered what had been going on in that room which La Cerda had seen, fearing more than the truth was.

She looked at La Cerda, who was now seated on the chair, in the arm of which the broken blade was still stuck. He looked ill, being exhausted with weariness, and passion and pain. He had felt faint in the first anguish that Venetia's grasp had caused, and had feared that he was about to swoon.

Venetia was at his side now, in her tender mood. She talked to him in rapid words that were so low that they could only partly be heard.

Angelica considered what she should say.

She wished no evil to any there, even to Venetia, providing only that she could separate her from Francisco, which (however little he might be to her) she thought it duty, as it would certainly be pleasure, to do. She saw nothing but added trouble if La Cerda should quarrel respecting the girl, and perhaps cast her off, thinking that she had been faithless to him.

She turned to La Cerda to say: “Sir Oliver cannot be seen for some hours. When he is about, I will come for you again. You had better rest here till then, where none is likely to knock, and, if they do, you need not open except to me.

“But there is one thing you should know first. I am not Don Garcio. I am the Señorita Angelica of Vilheyna and of Segura, where my lands are. I came to help in this siege, in a dress which I have found that I cannot cast.

“Perhaps you will understand, when you know this, why Venetia has found safety here, which, in other rooms in these towers, it had been much harder to do.”

Venetia was silent now, watching her with intent eyes, as though she would have read her mind. La Cerda had recovered more of his wits and his self-control than he had had when he sat down.

“That,” he said, “can be lightly believed, for I can say now that it is no more than I have suspicioned at times. You have been a good friend, to whom I owe more thanks than I had concluded before. . . . But I may still ask if this knight came here with no right in the morning hours or if he had warrant from you.”

“Don Francisco,” she said, “is my near cousin, and natural friend.” She would have left it there, but saw that La Cerda waited for more, and added: “Is that not enough? Then he had warrant from me. . . .” She turned to Francisco to say: “Francis, we had better go for this time.” She looked back at La Cerda, who was still seated in the chair, with Venetia kneeling at his left side. On the other, the broken sword was against his sleeve. She laughed in her sudden way. “You should take more heed, or you may find that my cousin’s blade has a sharp edge.”

La Cerda stared, in a moment’s surprise, at words that had the sound of a threat. Then his eyes followed hers and he understood. “Yes,” he said, “we must draw it forth.” He saw that he had almost been foolish enough to take her words in a wrong way, yet the impression remained, as though she had warned him that it was for herself (and not for Venetia) that her cousin’s sword would be quickly drawn, and the last suspicion of Venetia’s faith passed from his mind.

Angelica went down the stairs in no mood for talk, and they were near the foot before Don Francisco, who had his own reasons for wrath, broke the silence to say: “You came at a good time.”

“At a good time!” she exclaimed bitterly. “Do you not see how I am shamed? That he will think I am mistress to you? That is what you have done this night.”

“Nay,” he protested, “I said naught. There had been no harm had you said no more.”

“So you think. You said naught, for you could not see. I will allow that. But you should not have been there, as you know well. Will you leave her now, or have you not had trouble enough?”

Francisco left the last question aside. He said: “You may say your will, but it can all be put in one word. You should not be here. I told you that at the first, and when you find where it has led you blame me.”

“I blame you where you are wrong, as we both know.”

He made no answer to that. He noticed, none too soon, in a light that was now near to the full day, how her eyes were dark from the lack of sleep, and her dress had been soiled and stained.

“What have you there?” he asked. “It is like to blood.”

“You need not fret for that. It is not mine.”

His imagination stirred to wonder what she had seen during the night, through what dangers she might have come, and what it could mean that her cloak should be so stained as it was. There was something of the old comradeship of Vilheyna days in his voice as he said: “You will have nowhere to go, having given your room to them. Will you come to mine?”

It was where they had talked once before, when she had been willing to go. But she said now: “It is there I shall never be. You should know that. We are apart from this hour.”

As she said this, which she did not mean, though it proved true, she turned sharply away. He did not follow, feeling that they had quarrelled enough, as they mostly did, if not at first, at the end. His thoughts turned to one whom he believed to have softer moods, and such as were more plastic to his. Why had La Cerda returned at the wrong hour, and just as they had agreed that he never would? Was Angelica to be thanked for that? He would have said that thank was the wrong word. Why had she come here, where she had no business to be?

CHAPTER XXXVI

ANGELICA finished her tale, and Sir Oliver remained silent, his hand restless about his chin. He did not look pleased, but she had a hope that he was not angry with her.

"The Chevalier La Cerda," she said, "has been firm, from when he was first told, that she must give herself up for the steward's death, which came from her, as she does not deny. He will have told her by now, which she may not like, for she seems to have more fear than I think she should. Can I say that she will not have greatly to dread?"

"If her tale stand," Sir Oliver replied, "she should not have greatly to dread from that cause. You can tell her that. And for La Cerda keeping her here, it is his matter rather than hers. She should not be chastened for that. But you must say that the judgment will not be mine. I will tell you this, which you need not mention again. I know more of her than she will be likely to show you. She has fooled me once—or La Cerda rather than she. But it will not be twice. By my will she will not remain here, either in castle or town. I would as soon that she should be sold to the Turks, for which she is quite fit."

Angelica spoke for one she had no reason to love, thinking she had heard a merciless word and one that was less than fair.

"I know not what she has done, and I suppose it is a gutter from which she comes, though that is more than some men will see; but I know something of what she is, and you must let me say that I think you wrong. She is like a hunted beast, being insecure among men. But were she set in a sure place she might have virtues that others lack."

Angelica did not know that her thought was born from the perilled chances of her own life in its last months, though she might have come through them in ways that Venetia would not have tried, they having more difference of blood than she was able to see. She spoke for herself, and for all women who walked in peril of laws that they did not make and customs which were less for their peace than for the pleasure or gain of men.

Sir Oliver was not vexed but unmoved. "It seems," he said with a smile, "that she outpaces her trade, cajoling those who are not men. But what you say is no more than that Eve had not sinned if the tree of knowledge had not been there. . . . You can tell La Cerda that I will see him now, and alone. The girl can stay where she is till you hear more, which will not be long. For when I have talked to him I shall not delay to acquaint the Grand Master with all, and

we know that his ways are prompt. But he should be in a merciful mood, for the news is good. Dragut is sore hurt, if he be not dead. It is said that a galliot sailed at dawn, at its utmost speed, to bring his son-in-law from Algiers, with whom he would speak before death, and who will take his command. He is one of whom you know more than I."

"Captain Hassan?" she said. "Yes, we have met before." She smiled at something that came back to her mind, as she had not done at the time. Where would she be now if she had not left his ship in the night? She was to have been one of his wives, if Dragut were in a generous mood and could forego the price she would bring in the Byzantium trade! Her mind was capricious in a vivid memory of how she had stepped over the sleeping slaves as she had made her way to the lower waist of the ship. Well, if the Turks should take Malta at last, she might come to no better end. She might even meet Hassan again, and be paid by him—how?—for the way she had wrecked his plan.

"Besides that," Sir Oliver went on, "it seems that Mustapha has taken control from Piali's hands. He has surveyed the fort and doubtless counted the slain, and he has resolved that the assault shall not be resumed. The batteries are to be reinforced and to open again. That is sure, for the troops are drawn backward to where they were before Dragut's advance. It is no more than time gained, but that is the aim we have; so there is to be thanksgiving at three hours after noon, which will be service also for Medrano and other knights whose bodies have been brought here in the night. . . . But you should not be there. You should take the rest you need when we shall have got this woman away."

Angelica went at that, and found La Cerda asleep; but, being wakened, he rose at once. He had talked with Venetia, and become assured both that she was faithful to him and not worthy of any blame for the blow she struck. He was confident that, if he should offer to find a ship at his own risk and charge to send her to Cerda, to his estate there, his friends in the Order would not let it be worse than that, even if the Grand Master were hard to rule. He saw some gain even in the fact that La Valette was known to be unfriendly to him. For himself he had hope of life, now that he was clear of St. Elmo's walls. He rose with a resolve that he would hold his temper in check, being prudent in speech, even if he should be chafed by the words of others whom he thought in his heart to be less than he, of whom the Grand Master was one. He went to meet Sir Oliver in that mood, and Venetia and Angelica stayed to wait his return, or for those who would come (as she had a fear) to take Venetia away.

"Leon," she said, "is resolved he can bring me clear. I would I were not less sure. What did Sir Oliver say?"

"He said the judgment was not with him. But, for himself, he thought you had little guilt, either for staying here, or the man you slew."

“Well,” she said, “it seems you are all agreed, but it is not your backs that will bleed if your guess be wrong.”

She lay stretched on the bed in an easeful style, but with regard for the crown of her pale-gold hair, which she had just dressed in a mode of innocent youth, making her less than her years, though they were still few. Her eyes were on the door at times, for she felt like a trapped rat. She wondered what Angelica would do now if she should resolve to fly. But she concluded that she would not get far beyond the foot of the stair, even in Master Giles’ hood, now that everyone was alert and aware of the disguise in which she had fled. And she saw that her case would not be helped if she should now be held in attempted flight, for it was to be urged that she had only waited La Cerda’s return to explain all.

Why could he not have been killed where so many were, she asked, with a savage anger at heart? It was not how she had meant matters to be; and now that the crisis came she had a fear lest her wits had failed to protect her skin, to which they had been equal till now.

And he had come at so wrong a time! Though, she admitted in thought, it might have been far worse had it been half an hour later, for Francisco had entered but a few minutes before, and she knew what she had meant to have done, whether he may have had the same expectation or not.

“Your cousin,” she said, “has a quick sword. It is not often, if talk be true, that Leon is held so long.”

“Yes,” Angelica said, “he can fence well.”

“So he may; but that is a different thing from when points are bare.”

“That I found. I thought once I was equal to him, if not more. But when I tried, it was soon done. I should not be here now, but that I was not worth Captain Hassan’s trouble to kill.” It seemed that Sir Oliver’s words had brought one back to her mind, of whom she had been ceasing to think. She added: “But he had the better sword and is far stronger than I.”

Venetia went on with her own thought. “He has a great name in his own land?”

“Who? Captain Hassan? Oh, Francisco. You may say that, of course. There is no name in Spain that is more than ours, except only the King.”

“You should not be here in that guise. You could wed whom you will, with so great a name, and with the lands that you have. But with these men, who are mostly monks, what have you to do?”

“That has a sound of sense,” Angelica allowed, having seen it clearly enough before now, “but I am so placed that it is hard to draw back without shame, or to go on.”

“So you say; but I think, if your place were mine, I should have no trouble at all.”

Angelica considered that and saw that it was true. But it was not helpful to her.

Venetia had a surprising doubt as to whether, if Angelica were in her place, she might not also do better than she herself. Francisco had a great name, and a pride which was even greater than that. But he was also of a fine honour, an abysmal innocence (as she thought), and very sensitive to her own charms. Suppose La Cerda should still be killed in the war? Suppose (as she thought likely enough) he should be sent back to St. Elmo, when the Grand Master should learn that he had come away as he had? Was it possible that this game should be played in another way than that which she knew so well? That she would have made the mistake of her life in that next half-hour, if Leon had not come when he did?

If Francisco should be kept to his present command, she thought that few had a better chance of outlasting the war. She had that quality of audacity which had raised many, both men and women, from the gutters of city streets to high places of rank and power. Might she not yet come to be something more than the toy of a monkish knight? She was not afraid that she should fail as one of the first ladies in Spain. The doubt did not enter her mind.

An hour passed, and another. La Cerda did not return, nor did others come. Venetia grumbled and yawned, finding suspense hard, though her mind was active enough, planning what she would say or do in a score of different events, and what replies she should give if she should be questioned in sundry ways. A true tale may be hard to tell without fault, but Venetia had more difficult burdens than that. She had a fictitious past, which must be sustained without fail if she should be examined on that, which experience warned her was likely enough; and that, perhaps, with La Cerda there, so that all must conform to many tales she had told to him. She knew how a whole chain of true witness may fail if it be linked with a lonely lie. But she had confidence in herself that she would not be trapped, nor justly condemned, on the evidence she would give. She had most fear of the temper of those in whose hands she would be likely to be.

Angelica yawned with more reason and less suspense. But she was sombre of mood after her quarrel with Francisco and had a bitter feeling that he had been disloyal to her, which went beyond reason’s bounds; for what loyalty could she claim, beyond that which was required by a kindred blood? It would have been more had they come to Malta together in a comradely way, but he had said from the first she should not be there, as most would agree. But she was exhausted, even to the extremity of her vital youth, by excitement and lack of rest. She was conscious of one desire beyond all, that Venetia should be gone.

But La Cerda did not return. It seemed that they might remain quiet and

forgotten there till the day of doom; and at last Angelica could endure it no more. “I will find,” she said, “what has occurred, for it is foolish to wait here as we do.”

“So you may, but I am held, as you know. I can only hope that you will not be long gone.”

“You can be at ease about that,” Angelica replied, and was no worse than her word, for that which she went to hear could be quickly told.

She learned that, almost as she had gone from Sir Oliver’s room, there had been an officer there, in the uniform of the Grand Master’s guards. He said that he sought the Chevalier La Cerda, having an order for his arrest, but he could nowhere be found. Could His Excellency help him in that?

It was a title to which Sir Oliver had no claim, but the man, who would be sent on the Grand Master’s business more than once in each day, among those who might be princes in their own lands, and of many dignities and titles he did not know, had found that to call them all as of the highest degree was a safe rule and sometimes of profit to him. Sir Oliver, who was addressed in many titles and tongues, and had no care what they might be, answered only: “Well, you will see him soon enough, I suppose, if you wait here. But you must show the warrant you have.”

So he did; and Sir Oliver found that it was in good form, having been issued by the Grand Master himself, and that but two hours before. He was vexed that it had been done thus, while he had been dealing with the event in a different way, but he showed nothing of that. In the next minute La Cerda came.

Sir Oliver showed him the warrant at once. “You will acquit me,” he said, “of any knowledge of this when I made appointment to see you here. But you are charged, as you will observe, of leaving St. Elmo without leave (which may be right or wrong, as you will know better than I), and for the moment, as you will agree, the warrant must be obeyed. But I will see the Grand Master at once, and will use what persuasion I have that it may end in a better way.”

La Cerda said: “It is utter lie. I came in De Broglio’s boat, which I had his express order to do.”

“Well,” Sir Oliver said, “I am glad of that, which is much as I should have supposed it to be. But you should know that your name is not on the list of those who were ordered to leave, which I have here, and which you can see if you will. I had observed it before, but left it to be cleared at a better time.”

“It will be easy to prove,” La Cerda said. “I should say that most men will see now that he goes too far.”

They both knew that the Grand Master was meant, though he was not named. Sir Oliver made no reply. La Cerda added, in another tone: “But I can see that I owe you thanks, and perhaps more than I have given before.”

He went out with the officer after that, with no word of the purpose for which he came, which he judged then could best be left for Sir Oliver to deal with all in his own way.

Sir Oliver had gone to seek the Grand Master at once, but he had not been easy to reach. He was aware of the great need of sustained vigilance round the wide girth of his own defences, as the weeks passed and the Turkish army left them alone, and he had a dream in the night that the Sanglea had been lost, captured by sudden storm. He considered, when he awoke, that that would be a likely thing for the Turks to attempt, and that they might have planned to do it while the eyes and thoughts of all would be turned to St. Elmo's strife. He thought that the dream might be no less than direct warning of God, and he resolved to pay a visit to the Sanglea in the next hours, to surprise the truth of how the walls were kept by the Italian knights who were stationed there.

He took a boat across the inner harbour, having told his purpose to none, and discovered slackness which stirred him to a great wrath, and confirmed his belief that the dream had been no less than a warning from those who were not willing that Malta should fall into heathen hands. He was rowed back by way of the great boom, and landed at the battery which was to be its defence, where he found Captain Antonio in charge, and with an alertness at which he was better pleased.

When Sir Oliver found him at last he was in no mood to listen to him. His mind was on the thanksgiving service that was about to be held and on the discourse which he intended to give.

"Oliver," he said, at the first sound of La Cerda's name, "when I ordered the warrant should be made out, I thought there would be protest from you. Why you should give more heed to one who is traitor and coward than you can spare for much better men is beyond reason of mine, but for once I must ask you to stand aside and let me deal."

"By your leave," Sir Oliver replied, not allowing himself to be vexed or rebuffed by a manner which La Valette would often show to others but rarely to him, "there is one thing I must say, for your own honour is nearly risked, and much more than that. For if it be shown at last that you have had La Cerda imprisoned without a cause, it will give him more sympathy and support than he has now, which you would not wittingly do."

"If I should imprison any without a cause," the Grand Master replied, in a more temperate voice than before, "I should be unworthy of the high office I hold, nor could I look for the favour of Those above, which is more than the strength or wisdom of men. But I can see that you speak, as you seldom will, without knowledge of fact.

"There was a note from D'Egueras himself, by one of the last boats, and addressed for my own hand, in which he reports that La Cerda, having suffered

no wound, and being in command of the southern wall, had summoned one to relieve his charge and had not returned. It was supposed that, having asked no leave, he had left in one of the boats, about which D'Egueras would make fuller enquiry than he had then been able to do; but he thought I should know with speed, thinking that he would be active at once to stir opposition to my will that St. Elmo should still be held."

"I was not likely to know what I was not told. The letter, as D'Egueras is well aware, should first have been sent to my hand, and much trouble might have been spared."

"He may have thought you too much his friend."

"I am not that. I am not his foe. But it is for Malta my care is spent."

"Then you should leave this, with no wasting of further words. Would you have such a man loose, to work more harm than before with those who are faint of heart, or fractious of mood?"

"I would not have him jailed for a wrong cause. Though I had not D'Egueras' note, I could have told you much more. It is untrue that he had no wound, and the cause with which he would be concerned was not St. Elmo at all, but that he should find her by whom his steward was slain."

"I had forgot that! That he should have hidden his harlot here! Oliver, it is such men and such ways that would bring our Cross to the dust, to be trodden by heathen feet."

"Then, if you feel thus, would you aim a random blow, which will go astray? Suppose he came by De Broglio's own command, in the same boat?"

"Do you know that?"

"It is what he says; and I am inclined to believe."

The Grand Master pondered this in a mind which was astute enough, though it was stubborn at times, and deaf to that which it was not anxious to hear. He saw that he might make a mistake which would defeat his own ends. Yet the tale might be false, which he would prefer to believe, and it should be easy to prove.

"Oliver," he said, "we will test this in the next hour." He went on to say that he had already resolved to visit the wounded that had been brought over during the night, before he went to the Church. He would meet Sir Oliver there, and they would question De Broglio, and learn what the truth was. "And if he die (for it is said that he is sore hurt), you will be witness for me, for men will believe that you would not condemn La Cerda for less than a certain fault."

This being agreed, Sir Oliver went back to his own room, arriving there while Angelica was enquiring what had occurred, of which he told more.

"We shall see De Broglio," he said, "in the next hour; and, in the meantime, it will be best that the girl shall remain quiet where she now is, for it

seems to me that on De Broglio's answer much will depend. If the Grand Master should find that a mistake has been made, he may be in a mood to bring easy accord, and I shall propose to him that La Cerda, with all his household, have leave to go, which I should say he will be willing to do, and for which means could be found on an early day."

Angelica could not deny that this counsel was good, though she was loth that Venetia should be on her hands for a longer time. Also, she remembered that a proclamation had been made threatening death to all who should harbour her after the noon of that day, which was very near. And she felt that she had had trouble enough without having to defend herself from that charge.

"She shall stay if you will," she said, "for it is what I cannot deny, owing you all I do. But will you bear me out if she be discovered, and not through you?"

"You shall have no jeopard for that. You shall have it now, under my own seal, that she is in your charge by my order and will, till new disposition be made at a later hour."

He wrote this as he spoke, and Angelica made no further demur, but went back to tell Venetia what she had learnt.

Venetia heard, and said few words in reply, nor did she show any emotion at all, which was a danger-signal with her, as Angelica would have known if they had been together a longer time. For, when Venetia was alarmed, she would become wary and quiet, like a wild thing among foes. She might smile or frown, or be sweet or bitter of speech, but it would show no more of herself or her own thoughts than if she acted part in a play.

Now she thought that La Cerda's day must be done, either to help her or himself. She did not think it mattered much what De Broglio might have said, or say now (which she supposed might not be the same, for she knew nothing of him), but she supposed that the Grand Master was of a fixed will to bring La Cerda down, and was not lacking in power. Sir Oliver had not known what would occur, for the Grand Master went his own way, without confiding in him. It was clear that he was not in control, and it would be folly to trust him more, even if it were sure that his words were meant.

If La Cerda were in jail on an accusation which might bring him to quick death in a time of war, where would his mistress be, if they should discover her now, with a charge of murder against her name? If the charge against him were false, was there any comfort in that? Would it not show that a false charge was enough, against one whom the Grand Master's anger was hot?

That which had been counselled by others for her relief had always looked more like a trap to her. She would not have talked as she had, but that she had believed that he would not return. "Now," she thought, "we are to be drowned in the same boat if I stay here. I must trust none but my own wits if I am yet to

win free. And, at the worst, if I be caught as I try to flee, can I not say that when I heard the arrest of him whom I love and trust, I was seized with a panic fear . . . ?

"You are worn," she said, "and too tired to stand, you should rest now, for there is no more can be done."

Angelica did not deny that. She lay down on the bed, and was quickly asleep. Venetia watched her awhile, and resolved that she would not wake though a bolt should fall.

She had leisure for what she planned, so that she could first eat a good meal from the store of food which Angelica had brought for her use, and then she searched through Angelica's clothes, making the best disguise for herself that she could among them. She waited, after packing all she could lightly bear, till she heard the sound of the organ-music from the Church which told that the service of thanksgiving and burial had begun. She judged that her chance was then, for between those who must man the walls, and those who could be crowding the Church, she thought that the castle would be empty enough. She drew the door-bolt with a cautious hand, but Angelica did not stir. She went out from the room in an unhurried way, as one who knew where she was, and where she would go. She went down to Francisco's room, meeting none on the way. She had enquired of him as to how it stood, and remembered with such care that she could now enter without doubt. It was only that it might be locked that she had had reason to fear, and that was unlikely enough, for she knew that it was not custom among the knights to so fasten their doors except when they were within, and would be alone, either for sleep or prayer. She looked round on a room which was of inferior comfort and smaller than either of those which had been her prisons before. But she did not intend to remain there after Francisco should return. She intended that he should find her better and surer harbour than that.

Angelica slept undisturbed either by the sounds of music and chanting that came at times from the church, or the distant booming of guns which began much at the same time, telling that the bombardment of St. Elmo's garrison had become active again, and that they replied with such guns as they were still able to work.

The service was long at the church, for the bodies of the knights who had been killed must be buried with a full mass, and each in his own *langue*, the great church having been so built that it contained a separate chapel of burial for each country from which they came. And before this, after a chanting of psalms and a time of prayer, the Grand Master gave his discourse, the theme of which was that men might fail, but God did not desert His own. When he spoke of the failure of men, it might be thought either that he glanced at the promised relief of Spain that delayed to come, or that he would rebuke those

who would have been unwilling to continue St. Elmo's defence. When he spoke of the sure rescue of God, his thought was on the mist which had risen during the night, without which it had been impossible to send reliefs or to bring off those who were most hurt. There could be little doubt that Mustapha would have renewed the assault with fresh troops at the dawn had he known the fort to contain none but those who had been exhausted, and more wounded than not, by the strife of the day before; nor could it be thought they would have repelled such an assault for another day, they having been brought as low as they were.

It seemed to many who heard that it was so put that men must either deny their faith, or admit that the mist had shown that St. Elmo's defence had the approval of God, and His active support. It was not a hard gospel for those who remained within St. Angelo's bounds, and saw that their own walls remained free from attack, and only loosely contained, while the weeks went by, and the Turkish army reduced its strength, both in munitions and men. But it was different for those who had been sent to a death that was nearly sure, for whom the distant music was drowned by the thunder of Turkish guns.

CHAPTER XXXVII

BOTH the booming of guns and the organ-music had ceased when Angelica waked in the late twilight and saw, with a sense of relief preceding surprise, that Venetia was not there.

She found the door was unbarred, and concluded, with reason enough, that she had been fetched while she slept, by Sir Oliver's order or as a result of information given by him; and that, as she had not waked, she had been left in peace by those who had no mission to her.

She dropped the bolt with a pleasant sense of having regained a privacy that she had been vexed to lose, and seeing that night was near and having no reluctance for further rest, she threw off the clothes that she had been wearing till then and slept till the morning came.

It was not till she waked again that she discovered that not only had Venetia gone but other things with which she was less willing to part, including garments, at which she had a new doubt, and then thought, by the sun's height, that Sir Oliver would be back at work, and if she went to him she would soon know.

She found him as willing to talk to her as she could have wished, for he put other matters aside at once, and ordered that his room should be private till he should call.

"I supposed," he said, "that you would sleep long, which I would not break, but there are some matters on which your witness may help me now."

"I should not have thought. . . ."

"Yet so it is. La Cerda——"

"Has he not been set free?"

"No. It is of him I have to enquire. When he was charged that he had left his post without leave, he replied that he had De Broglio's order for what he did. When I told the Grand Master this, he sought to have justice done, and he went with me to the hospital where the wounded lie. We gained little by that, for De Broglio has been near death since his wound was searched, and, except for one moment at first, he did not seem conscious of what was said." (The one moment, on which Sir Oliver did not think well to be more explicit, had been when La Valette approached the bed, and, at the first sound of his voice, De Broglio had opened his eyes, and said, clearly enough to be heard by several around: "Ah, John, shall I cheat you yet of the death you had meant for me?" Men who heard might have thought that he accused the Grand Master of

having placed him in St. Elmo's command to ensure his death, as the issue of some old feud which was only known to them two, but that his tone had been that of one who mentions a jest. And after that, his eyes were closed and it seemed that he did not hear.)

"So it seemed," Sir Oliver went on, "that La Cerda's defence must lack proof; but I have thought that you came at the same time and may know something of this, though the chance is small."

"We were together and I heard all. It was on De Broglio's order he came."

Sir Oliver looked relieved at that, thinking that it gave him the means of bringing this affair to a quick end, and perhaps having some natural satisfaction in the fact that the Grand Master would be proved wrong, rather than he; and though this satisfaction was somewhat less when he had the full tale, for it showed beyond doubt that La Cerda had been determined to come away before the chance of De Broglio's presence had given him the authority on which he now built his defence, yet he still thought that the way in which he had been arrested without fuller enquiry would be held by most to be evidence of the Grand Master's prejudice rather than of a rule that was wise and just, and he had a hope that he might make La Valette see this, so that he might be in a mood to bring all to a simple end by letting both La Cerda and his mistress go.

"It will be well," he said, "that you should meet the Grand Master here, telling him not only of this, but of how Venetia has been hidden in your own room. It is a thing he must know, and though you may not welcome that it should be recalled to his mind who you are, yet I do not see how we can avoid that; and having this other matter on hand, he may take it in a good way.

"But I do not wish that she should be apprehended by the Provost-Marshal before the Grand Master shall have considered the matter more, nor can I be party to her concealment now that I know where she is hid. You must tell her she must be ready at any time to meet the Grand Master here, and with such a tale as will stand test, if she is to hope that she may go free."

"I cannot do that. Do you not know she is gone?"

"Do you mean she has left your room of her own will, or been taken away?"

"She was gone while I slept, and my door left without bar."

"Then you know naught beyond that?"

"I have missed such clothes that I think she went in disguise, and so of her own will."

"She is a very pestilent fool."

Sir Oliver spoke with more passion than he was accustomed to show. He saw the neatness of his own plans dishevelled by the one party to these events whom he was not careful to save, and that against her own good, simply, as he

supposed, because she was of those who must always find it hard to accept law, or to trust the justice of any into whose hands they may fall. She had done after her own kind, though how far she had gone on that road was beyond his guess, and it was clear that La Cerda's affairs could not be closed with the completeness which he had planned a moment before.

But the question of his imprisonment still remained, and a promise that the Grand Master had made that he should be brought to justice without delay had a double edge, while De Broglio was not able to speak.

"You must bear witness in this," he said, "for, as I see it, you cannot remain still without shame; and I would prefer, for your own peace, that you tell the Grand Master in this room, rather than in public assize."

Angelica did not agree about that. While it had seemed that it would be Venetia of whom she must give account, she had seen it plainly enough, for she could not say that she had kept her in her own room without prejudice to Venetia's repute, which might reduce the credence with which her tale would be heard, nor would her own part in the matter be clear, while she called herself by Don Garcio's name.

But if there were no more to be told than what she had seen and heard at St. Elmo's quay, she thought that she could better sustain the character which she was now accustomed to wear in witness in open court, than if she should have the Grand Master's attention closely drawn to herself, with chance of query of what she was, or even recollection of how he had seen her first.

But she found that Sir Oliver could show cause that she should come to another view. "For you must think," he said, "that if you give witness in the court that our Order holds, it must be under oath, and with declaration of who you are, and even if you would bear false witness thereon, you might be questioned in ways which would be hard to endure. . . . Does La Cerda know your true name?"

"Yes; and Venetia alike."

"That is worse."

"It was needful to tell. . . . But is my witness required? There were others who heard. There was the officer on the quay, with whom he quarrelled while in the boat. He could not forget nor deny."

Sir Oliver agreed about that, for his only defence for having allowed La Cerda to go when he was not on the list would be that he had De Broglio's order therefor. That his evidence would be otherwise unfavourable to La Cerda was equally sure, but he was not overmuch concerned about that, having no zeal to protect him beyond the truth.

"He might be brought," he said, "in the night, and your public witness excused. But I must still think that the Grand Master should be first informed of what you can tell, and that in a private way. Beyond that, I cannot consent,

now that she has foolishly fled, that your harbouring of the woman should remain privy to me. As to the Provost-Marshal, I should say that he may discover it for himself, if he can. But the Grand Master should know all, both as his due and lest he should hear of it in a lying way. Also, now that there are more that have knowledge of who you are, and some being less than your certain friends, he should be made fully aware of how you are still here; for if he have it from me in the right way, he may be more your friend than you are timid to fear."

Angelica did not dispute that Sir Oliver should do this, being in a mood to accept what came in a dull way, and, apart from that, she had trust in him, and she had also found that when he was once resolved he was hard to turn. He was one who could see all sides, making him at times slower to act than would be those of a single view, but he was not weak of will when his purpose formed.

"You will do," she said, "as you think well. I knew it would be vexation to me, when she first entered my room. I would have thrown her out with a good will, but it was yet that which I could not do."

"It would have been wiser than what you did."

Angelica did not dispute that. She went back to the room that was hers again, meeting Olrig upon the way, who told her that her friend, Don Francisco, must have been looking for her, as he had seen him coming down her own stairs. She had a moment's pleasure at that, thinking that he had come to make accord of the quarrel of yesterday, but was puzzled also, for it was not a time when she was likely to be there, for she would work in Sir Oliver's room during the morning hours. She was going now to the town, by his leave, to purchase such clothes as the damage that hers had taken during the night—and Venetia's discriminate thefts—had rendered needful to get, which she had now confidence to do for herself, and for which she did not regard Olrig's choice as to be preferred to her own.

She thought with some satisfaction that Francisco must have had an urgent wish to see her alone that he should have made attempt at that hour, and then in explanation that he must choose a time when he was not on duty at his command. But when she came to look round her room, she had a thought of another kind. He had not come to see her, but to remove some things that Venetia had not ventured to carry away, not wishing to seem to be burdened when she had walked through the castle halls. She had had a fear before that it was to him that Venetia had fled. But it is different to know.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MUSTAPHA PASHA looked down on St. Elmo's fort and his eyes were cruel and fierce. He had more than the lust of an eagle who takes a prey. He had a cold anger and hate toward those who had repulsed his army's assault and brought shame on the banners of Islam that no success of to-morrow could wipe away.

A walled place must always be taken with waste of life, if it be stoutly held, and whether it be worth the price of storm must be pondered with care. That was true, even if success were a fruit you could surely pluck, as it had seemed to be here. But to squander strength in a vain attempt—that was a fault which no sophistry could condone, and one that, in a lifetime of many wars, he had avoided till now. It must be either the general's or the army's shame, and in this case it might be put to both doors.

He was glad that he had left the immediate command in the hands of those colleagues who had been given to him by the wisdom of Soliman, who had doubtless thought that he would be the better for the counsel of younger and more vigorous men. Well, they had had their turn. Piali's blind bull-courage, and Dragut's wilier impetuosities, had failed alike. It was time that the cooler methods of long experience should take control and prevail.

So he thought. But while he might be content that the repulse should be coupled with Dragut's name, his own judgment did not blame him for an assault which he might have ordered himself and which he had not expected to fail. He saw now that they had under-valued the defence of these obstinate Christian dogs. Had he not warned Soliman at the first that they would have to meet the very flower of the Christian lands. . . . ? They should have bombarded for another week, till the fort would have been no more than a heap of stones; "and yet," he said bitterly, repeating Piali's words in a way which would be remembered by those who heard, "if it be so hard to slaughter the calf, how shall we cut the throat of the cow?"

He ordered more guns to be brought up, more gabions to be piled. He pushed forward his batteries on every side. If there must be some loss of life before their protections were made secure, it would be much less than had been spent in that vain assault, and it led to a surer end. From early dawn to the late dusk of the next day, the batteries did not pause. The iron hail battered ceaselessly on the splintering, falling stones. The guns came closer; and still closer during the night.

So it was again on the next day, and after that, at the darkest hour, a boat

slipped away with muffled oars and came safely to St. Angelo's quay. It brought a letter from the new governor of St. Elmo, Melchior de Montserrat, saying first that, as to the officer whom the Grand Master required, he regretted that he could not be sent, being dead. He enclosed a list of the casualties of the last two days, that the Grand Master might know the strength that he still had. He enclosed also a petition, signed by fifty-three knights, on which he desired to express no opinion himself, only giving assurance that all were loyal and in good heart, and that whatever instructions might come would be bravely obeyed.

Sir Oliver read it with care. He said to himself: "He will not be pleased. Yet it is fairly put, and must be answered alike. He cannot say that La Cerda's hand is in this."

He went to the Grand Master, to whom it was clear that it must be instantly shown, and La Valette would have answered at once in his own hand, but Sir Oliver, being patient and firmly resolved, was able to get his way at last, so that a Council of the Commanders was called. "For," he said, "you have had your will to this day, and none can say you have erred, and you have La Cerda jailed, with a good pretext enough. But if you decide this for yourself, and you are wrong, as the event prove, you will be blamed on all sides, and all who have opposed at the first, and are now stilled, will be vocal again. If you are still resolved, let it be handled so that there shall be some who will have been persuaded to say Amen."

So the Council was quickly called, and the petition read out, of which the substance was this, after the forms of loyalty had been done, and the core came:

"If it be your will that we shall remain here to our deaths, which cannot be long delayed (for the fort is now shattered on every side, except we lurk in the lowest chambers beneath the ground), we do not complain, having respect for our vows. But we humbly petition this, that we may sally forth and die in a knightly way, working mischief among our foes. For, as it is, we are destroyed by bombardment to which we cannot largely reply, the cavalier being wrecked as it is, and its guns down. So that it is we who bleed, and they laugh.

"But if we have license to sally forth, we have some hope that our swords will reduce them before we die."

The Grand Master heard the reading of that which he knew before and watched the faces of those who heard. When he spoke, it was in a more temperate style than he had used when St. Elmo had been cause of debate on a former day.

"Brothers," he said, "you have heard the petition of those who will be

agreed by all to be loyal and valiant men. And we may be agreed on this too, that it is a petition we cannot grant. For if St. Elmo be so flattened and rent that it can no longer repulse attack, then we should withdraw those who yet live to the protecting strength of our walls, and that while there is still time to convey them here, which, even now, it might not be simple to do.

"So that there is one question remains, and no more. Is it indeed truth that St. Elmo's walls have fallen beyond further defence?

"We have the witness of those who are there, which is not lightly to be contemned; but we know also that it is not three days since the whole might of the Turkish arms was thrown back from those walls with such slaughter and shame as all Europe will hear with pride. Now we see that they do not assault again. They prowl round like a pack of wolves that have not the heart to spring, having been so chastened before.

"If they should be tempted to make attack and thrown back for another time, it would be great glory and gain to the Cross of Christ, which it is our honour to bear, and beside which our lives are no more than a dust which the winds will strew.

"Yet I would assume naught as against the witness of those who see. I would send three of ourselves, who can cross this night with a good hope that they can safely return (for the moon is late), and if they agree without internal dissent that the fort cannot be longer held, they shall have commission under my own seal to order that its garrison prepare at once to be brought away, having first set its powder alight, that nothing fall into heathen hands."

The Commanders agreed to this without much debate, for even those who would have abandoned the fort before must admit now that it had been used to do a sore hurt to the Turkish arms; and the plan itself had a fair sound. Moreover, they so far prevailed that two of the commission were men of no special valour, nor likely to go far on a desperate road, but the Grand Master cared nothing for that, having secured that De Castriot should be the last, and he being a knight who would be loth to fight with three foes if he could find four. For he had said that the commissioners must be in agreement among themselves if the fort were to be given up, as he did not mean it to be. His thought was that, when the garrison knew beyond hope that their lives would last so long as they kept the Turks out but no more, they would yet make a hard fight before they would let them in.

And so, with a mind at ease, when the Council had broken apart, he turned to a tale which Sir Oliver had told him two days before, and with which he had pledged his word that he would not deal without thought in a sudden way.

"As to the wanton," he said now, "she must be found, when she will have a sore back, if no more; but he who harbours her for another day shall hang without grace, though he be the best knight that we have, and so you shall

make it known.

"For the rest, I would not fret for a small thing, and, if there be fault, it is mostly mine; for I will own I was told at first, and it left my mind. Nor would I see the name of Don Manuel brought to scorn, for he was a good knight, and my early friend.

"It seems that his house has bred one of a pert sort, whom it will be needful to tame, but the part is not mine; and I have your warrant that she is chaste, and has worked no mischief among my knights.

"I have in mind that I will send to the Viceroy again, by a boat which will leave Melletia three nights from now, as Marshal Couppier will arrange. She can go by that, if not in a safe way, yet with lighter risk than if she should longer remain, for I suppose we have darker hours to face than we have yet seen."

"Where will you have her go?"

"I will recommend her to him whose name (or one like to it) she has too lightly assumed. He will do her the honour her own requires, and find escort, either by land or sea, that she be returned to the place she should not have quit. You can assure her that, when Palermo is reached, she will have no more cause for alarm."

"I should say that she will not be greatly feared of that risk, but she will be loth to be sent away as being compelled, and so shamed."

"That is well, for she will be lessoned thereby."

"Will you see her before this be lastly resolved?"

"I will see her, though not to bicker thereon. For, the officer on whose witness La Cerda trusts being dead, as Montserrat writes, I will hear her tale of that night."

Sir Oliver, who knew when speech was of no avail and, besides that, was less than sure that the Grand Master was wrong, said no more; and, when he saw Angelica next, he told her that she must be prepared to meet the Grand Master at any time that he might be at leisure to hear her tale.

"He is resolved," he went on, "that you shall return to Spain, which he says you should not have quit, and, Don Manuel being dead, he takes it upon himself to see that you are despatched in the best way that can be contrived, which will mean that you will be transferred to the other side of the isle either through the Turkish lines in the night or by a boat that will trust the moon and the shallow channels along the coast, after which you will be on such ship as can show speed on the sea. It is a risk which it may be said that you came to take, but after Palermo is reached you will have no cause to dread more, being within the protection of Spain."

"How soon is this intended to be?"

"In three nights from now."

“Is it because Venetia hid in my room?”

“No. The Grand Master made little of that, you having made your report to me within the time the proclamation allowed.”

“She has not been found?”

“Not that I know. But she will gain nothing by this second escape. She is like to be whipped, if no worse. She is said to be known as one of a wanton trade before she came to La Cerda’s bed.”

“I suppose she cannot be hid long?”

“It is hard to think; and the more so that there will be new proclamation made that the utmost judgment will be enforced without grace against whoever shall hide her more, whether high or low.”

Sir Oliver looked at Angelica as he spoke, and saw fear in her eyes. There was a sharpness in his tone that was not frequent with him as he asked: “You are not hiding her more? You would not engage in such folly as that?”

“No, there is a point where my folly ends—and she is one for whom I have little love.”

“Have you any thought of where she is now, or in whose hands?”

It was then that Angelica learned to lie. “No. For I was asleep when she went, and it was a thing of which she had not spoken before. Why do you ask that?”

“Because, when I spoke of judgment on who should harbour her more, you looked somewhat troubled and pale, as though with a sudden fear.”

“I was amazed, as I still am, that while her own guilt is held in doubt, or as of minor degree, there should be a worse fate for who may do no more than give her shelter and food.”

“That is because you do not observe the terms on which a fortress must be controlled at a time of war. That which is venial of itself may be offence of the rankest growth if it be done in defiance of order proclaimed.”

Angelica felt that there were answers to that which were best unsaid. She replied only: “Yet it had a hard sound. . . . May she not have crossed to the Turkish lines for a spy’s pay?”

“I should call her too shrewd for that, unless she were pricked by a most sharp fear. The Turks would use whip or rack for a Christian’s pay, thinking that they would then get the truth by a short road and one cheaper than gold.”

“Well, I wish her less ill than that; but I wish her far.”

She went at that, fearing that she might say too much if she stayed, and left Sir Oliver assured that she was not hiding the girl, but puzzled in a shrewd mind as to why she should be perturbed by the threat of judgment against those who should take her in, or so urgent to wish her farther away.

Angelica went to her own thoughts, which were grey enough.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE governor led the way, carrying a lantern himself, for he did not wish that the conversation should be overheard as he showed the three commissioners the extent to which his guns had been shattered and overcast and the state of his crumbling walls.

They came back to his own room by a passage which led near to the well from which the garrison drank, and there was a sound of splashing, as though articles of weight were being cast therein, one after one, in a regular way.

De Castriot, who had said little till now, paused to listen. "What," he asked, "may that be?"

"It is round-shot," Montserrat answered, "which we shall not be able to use. I have it cast into the well lest it fall into other hands and be used in a worse way."

"May it be stayed for an hour?"

"To what end?"

"Because it is not yet resolved whether the fort be longer held. If but in courtesy to ourselves. . . ."

"You misapprehend. But it can be stayed for that time."

Montserrat gave the order required, and led them on to his own room. When they were private there, he addressed them at once, without waiting for them to speak.

"Signors," he said, "you have seen with your own eyes; and I have said nothing, leaving you to judge of yourselves. As to the purpose for which you came, I shall say no more, not being asked. I was sent here to defend this fort, and that, while I live, and my orders remain, I shall continue to do.

"As to the shot which I was casting away, you must consider this. We cannot use all that we have, though we should be here, and the Turks kept out, for another week; for the most of our guns are too wrecked to fire. If we withdraw from the fort (as I see not how we could do, even now, except by sudden, very perilous flight with much likely loss) it is sure that we should not take the round-shot away, preferring things of more worth and less weight. If we blow up the fort, the shot might be found to be none the worse, if it were not buried too deep to dig. I would have it thrown to the one place where it will surely remain, and not be used to batter St. Angelo's walls.

"It is the part of one who commands to consider all, and to judge well. If the fact that I have ordered the round-shot to be cast away be held to show that

I am unfit for the place I hold, there are knights enough who are used to commands in their own lands who would be likely to do better than I, and the change should be quickly made."

The first commissioner, a grave, grey-bearded man, past the vigour of youth, and one who looked less soldier than priest, was the first to reply.

"You may say what you will," he said, "with the name you have, both for valour and skill in war. The casting down of that shot was a prudence which we do not misread; but I would charge you by your own vows, and the cause we serve, that you speak with freedom, and fully of all, for we would have all the guidance we can. You spoke a moment ago of the Turks being kept out for another week. Is that the most that can fairly be hoped, if the fort be held?"

"If you constrain me thus," Montserrat answered, "I will say what I think, which I had not intended to do. We can hold this fort for some days if they are content to hammer our walls and no more, in the sense that, by that time, we shall not be all dead. But Mustapha knows his trade, and will storm again before then: and when they rush us will be the end."

"Then you would withdraw while you can?"

"That is not for me to resolve. I suppose we shall not die, being behind walls that are less than flat, without slaying more Turks than our numbers are; and that, and the way that we waste their time while St. Angelo stands secure, may be reason that we remain. But I will tell you two things, one being for either scale, so that you may weigh all when you make resolve.

"The first is that to withdraw is not as simple as may be supposed, even in darkness of night, for the Turks are alert for that. Their spies crouch in shadows beneath the walls: their boats, being swift and light, hover in the water around. It is most like that they know you are here now. If we should attempt to move many boats, even to-night, we should be quickly grieved by their fire. And their batteries come closer with every day. To-morrow noon I suppose that our landing-stage will be under fire, and all the water around, and we should withdraw at a great loss. I should say that to-night is the last chance we shall have, which will be soon gone.

"And the second is this. The Turks have no name for mercy in storming of town or fort, even when it be held by the rules of war; but it may be said that we are not in that case. We are rather in that of those who prolong defence of a post that is outnumbered or overcome and who yield too late, as thinking first to inflict all the loss they may and then to save their own lives. But those lives are forfeit by rule of war in all lands.

"If they storm this fort, you must expect that it will be the end of all that its walls contain, for they will let loose all the ferocity which is theirs, being moved thereto, both to avenge the long tale of their own dead, and to give warning of what St. Angelo may expect if its defence be prolonged to a like

extreme.

"You should understand that we who are here will maintain the strife to the last moment we may, but our end is sure. . . . Unless only," he added, "that the Viceroy shall send relief in a large way, so that the Turks must lift their attack, which we may expect if we will."

The second commissioner, a small wizened man, very wise in the healing art (which was not closely pursued by all the Knights of St. John at this time), but whose fitness for the office he held was to be explained, if at all, by those who proposed his name, answered at once, as stating what must be clear to all:

"The case being so, it is not to be thought that you should remain, to be no more than a Turkish prey. We lose time while we talk, and the night goes. For, as I suppose, we are sent for no other cause than that it should not be said that you have withdrawn of your own will, but as having orders from us."

The first commissioner agreed, though in a less resolute way. "I would not," he said, "go to that length, for our orders are that we shall think of Malta alone, and not of the lives of men, but, as I see it, St. Elmo has done its part, having inflicted upon the foemen of Christ a great loss and a greater shame. Why then should we yield our comrades to useless death and allow the Moslems to boast of a late success? Let the fort be so set that it shall be blown to the skies with those who shall be first to trespass within its walls. But let us get off all the men we may while the darkness holds."

"I am the least among three," De Castriot said, "but it seems that I am of the better heart, and the better concept of why we came. We are not here to make excuses for flight, but to resolve if this fort have yet strength to resist the Turk, which I say it has; and I should say that to the latest hour that its walls can stand, for we must resist if we are to overcome at the last, with every stone that we have, as our Grand Master has made it clear, whether we think to endure till we have the succour of Spain, or till the infidel host shall lose patience and sail away."

"It has a brave sound," the first commissioner said, "yet you might reflect that St. Angelo has many stones, yet few men; and those behind walls that are higher than these, and of triple strength."

"We may better think that the Saracen host has been thrown back once from these walls, with a slaughter they will not forget to a far day. Now they lie nursing their courage, which is yet not enough for them to come for another meal from the same dish. We should use the hours without weakness of doubt that we may prepare for them a worse time when they come again, that this fort may be a name of fear in the infidel lands for a hundred years, as it is most likely to be."

De Montserrat listened to this talk with a dumb face. He was resolved, having answered what he was asked, that he would say no more. He observed

that the two other commissioners were unmoved by the passion that stirred De Castriot's speech. They looked at one another, and their eyes said that, though folly be bravely brayed, it is folly still.

"What you urge," the physician said, "would be of a good sound, though it might lead to no more than heroic deaths, if these were not the weakest walls that we have. But we say that there are good men here who will be lost for no equal good, and who could be of greater avail if they were within St. Angelo's bounds."

"You talk," his colleague went on, "as though we were sent here to devise defence or to take over control. But our mission is less than that. We have to resolve if St. Elmo can still be held, for which it is plainly unfit, its guns being overset and its walls crumbling away, as our eyes have seen, and it being alone amidst an army that is as forty to one, if it approach in its utmost power."

"Yet I have said what I have, which I will not change, so we may spare our words at this time," De Castriot said, "as it is clear that we shall not agree."

"Yet must our judgment prevail, being two to one."

"But that is not so at all, for our commission is clear. We can order retreat if we accord to that end, which we shall not do."

"Do you think," the physician exclaimed, "you can over-ride us both?"

"I think we must make report to the Grand Master that we cannot agree."

"Do you reflect that it is not ourselves but our brothers that we leave here to a useless death?"

"I shall not leave them at all, by my will. I will raise such as respect their vows, by the Grand Master's leave, and bring them here that they may await the Turkish attack, giving them a worse day than they had before."

"Signors," Montserrat interrupted, "you can dispute this in the boat (though I would recommend that your voices be lower than they now are) or when you are in St. Angelo's walls, but you will risk yourselves to no gain if you stay here."

He led them back to the boat, having a desire to be alone with his own thoughts. He parted with De Castriot in a very cordial way. "There are few," he said, "I would rather have at my side in the coming days; but, as I suppose, I shall not see you again."

He was right in that, as in all, for though De Castriot meant his words, and was active when he returned to collect the names of such knights as would be willing to go to their comrades aid, yet it came to naught, for the next day it was seen that the Turkish batteries were advanced too far for such rescue to reach. Even in the dimness of summer night the boats could not hope but that they would be sunk as they neared the land.

All that day and the next the Turkish guns poured their fire into a fort that was now cut off upon every side.

CHAPTER XL

THE Grand Master listened to Angelica's witness concerning Venetia, and also how she had sought La Cerda and been the cause that he came away, and of how De Broglio had interposed at the quay. He asked few questions, and those fairly enough. She told all to that point, having little to hide; but she said nothing of her cousin's duel with La Cerda or of his being found in her room, on which she was not likely to be asked, it being outside any knowledge that either the Grand Master or Sir Oliver had. Nor did she say that, after Venetia left, some of her things had gone on the next day.

At the end the Grand Master said: "Oliver, I was too hasty in this, as I will not hide. I say not that La Cerda was hardly served, for he was guilty of will. He would have come, if he could, though De Broglio had been further away. But being wrongly charged by my fault, I will not alter the count now I know more. He shall go free for this time, taking his place with the knights of his own land, so soon as he shall be fit therefor, in defence of the Sanglea wall."

He said "when he is fit therefor" because there could be no doubt now of La Cerda's hurt, which may have influenced his mind to the decision to which he came. The burnt arm, having been left too long to itself, except where Venetia's fingers had pressed, had taken so ill a course that it was said to be more likely that it must come off than that it could be healed by all the art which St. Angelo held, which was perhaps the best in the world at this time.

"There is one thing," he went on, "of which La Cerda is cleared through his arrest, of which he may so far be glad. He had no hand in the woman's second escape, of which he had else been very shrewdly suspect. We may hope that she is outside our lines, to such fate as we need not enquire; for I cannot think that any would find her harbourage here; or, if they should, there will be no mercy for them."

He turned his eyes on Angelica for the first time in a personal way. "You had a look of Don Manuel once," he said, "as you made your account, recalling him as he was when we were at the siege of Rhodes, and were boys but little older than you. It was but as a passing shadow across your face, which I might not have seen had you been in a better dress."

He paused a moment, as though his memory went back to forgotten things. He went on: "Sir Oliver gives me good report, as I should have expected of one of so fine a blood. . . . You saved our ships at a peril that few would dare. . . . If you feared that I would send you back as being found in garments

of shame, you were largely wrong. But this is no place where a woman should seek to be."

"Yet," she said, with a new confidence, born of the manner in which he spoke, "I would stay if I may."

He looked at her with a puzzled gaze, and intently, as though he must read her mind. "Will you tell me why?"

It was a question which she could have answered a week before, but she could not now, having a reason he must not guess. She said, after a pause in which she found it hard to sustain his eyes: "You care for Malta alone. If I stay, I will do what I can; and you say I have served you once. Why should it not be again?"

As she spoke, the dull booming of the guns that battered at St. Elmo was in their ears. It was a sound that only ceased with the night. The doomed fort was isolated now, waiting its end, with the men he had sent to death, and would not withdraw while there had been time. Now it was too late: there was nothing left but to watch till the end should come.

"Yes," he said, with a sigh that was not for her, "I care for Malta alone. Men will say that, at the best. At the worst——I know not what they may say. But it is to God I must stand or fall." He fell silent, and then said: "Oliver, life is not much, but death is a lesser thing." He appeared to become conscious of Angelica again. "Oliver," he said, "I will leave this to you. She may stay or go. But," he turned his eyes to Angelica, and they had resumed the implacable resolution which set all softer feelings aside, "it is your own word. I care for Malta alone. If you stay I will use you thus, and I warn you now."

Having said that, he went out to join those who watched on the highest wall, though there was nothing to see but the sudden flashes of guns and the murk of smoke that lay over St. Elmo and Sceberras ridge, and drifted somewhat to sea. He had got a letter to Marshal Couppier through the Turkish lines, charging him to give no rest to the Turkish rear, but what help was there in that? The Maltese militia were a force brave enough, but unskilled. They harrassed the Turks without respite and with a hatred that was no less than that of the knights, for they fought not only for faith and race but for their children and homes, but they could not stand against the trained regiments of spahis and janissaries who had spent their lives in the art of war. They vexed the skirts of the Turkish camp, sniping by night and day. They made bold and sudden attacks at places where they could scatter among the hills before they could be faced by too large a force. But they could not reach to St. Elmo's aid or hinder its siege. Before the main force of the Turkish arms they were no more than gnats to be brushed away, or, at the most, as having a waspish sting. . . .

It was the early dawn of Friday, the 22nd of June, when Mustapha ordered advance upon St. Elmo again. He had given charge of the operations to

Ulichiali, the Greek-born pirate whose lean Egyptian galleys, merciless to the weak and swift to fly from the strong, had been a ten-years' curse in Levantine seas. In this he pursued his usual policy of providing other shoulders than his for any blame of failure that might arise. The Greek was eager to take control, being jealous of the authority Piali and Dragut had received, which had been greater than his, and regarding the assault as one which would come to easy success, the fort being so battered and scarred and its garrison known to be few, among which there were many wounded and spent. Besides that, it seemed that its guns had been almost stilled; for, during the past two days, it had made so faint a reply to the Turkish fire as was next to none. Either its guns must be broken down, or its powder spent, or its garrison must be mostly dead.

It was thought by some that Mustapha had been too cautious in the length of this final pause: had he continued the assault the fort would have been his in an hour at the dawn of the second day.

It was the weakness of this belief that the Turkish troops advanced in the expectation of reward to be lightly won. They did not look for a desperate strife, or that their own lives should be hardly staked: they came to make end of a dying prey.

Yet they came in a great force, moving up on every side, with the batteries firing over their heads at a fort which might have been empty and dead, but that the pennons of many knights were still displayed on its walls and the Cross of Malta was over all. The Turks had ladders this time of the right length, and they thought to be up them with little strife. Ulichiali, watching all from a safe rear, thought that a white flag would soon flutter over the wall, and had given command that, if it did, the batteries should not cease; for, he said, the time for mercy was past.

Montserrat stood on the ruined wall and looked at the shouting infidel host, the noise of which and of the barbaric music which cheered their ranks deadened the duller thunder of the guns that were still firing above their rear. "They make a brave show," he thought, "but they will be somewhat surprised, and there must be many there who will not live to the next hour." But he said nothing of this to those who stood round, for he was not a man who loved words, and they could see it as well as he.

He had not seemed one who would inspire a hopeless defence when he had first come, saying little, and some of the orders he gave showed that he had no assurance that the fort could be held for another week. It might have been thought by any to whom his record was not known that the Grand Master had chosen with less than his usual wisdom, or as being unwilling to lose one more of his greatest knights. But as men observed the disposition he made they perceived that they were part of a careful plan, which was to encourage the

Turks to assault again and to persuade them that they would have little resistance to meet.

There were at this time within the fort about a hundred and fifty men who had not taken a wound, including the hundred that Montserrat had brought, and about two hundred who had been more or less hurt but were able to serve. He set these men to such hours of labour as they could endure without too much fatigue to be fit to fight at a short call. They toiled to build inner defences where the walls were worst breached, so that the Turks might swarm in, and find, when they thought they were near to win all, that they had come to a deadly trap and a welcome of boiling pitch.

Also, he had the cannon closely surveyed, and remounted such as were not shattered beyond repair, but he would not use them again lest the Turks should be aware of the strength that remained, and also lest they should draw the fire of opposing batteries on themselves till they were dismounted again. The Turkish round-shot battered the walls where the breaches showed, and the silent hidden cannon were left alone. Now they were loaded with stones and small fragments of iron, but they were silent still, waiting till the advancing host, which was expecting no more than a thin volley of bullets from such arquebusiers as the Christians could still muster to line their walls, should be nearer and more largely exposed. There was a good distribution of wild-fire bombs, of which Montserrat had brought over a new supply, and the great hoops were ready to be set alight and flung over the wall at all points where its weakness might tempt attack.

But for the fluttering pennons along the wall the advancing army might have thought that they came to capture an empty shell from which the garrison had already fled; but they were more like to those who handle a bee which they think dead till they feel its sting. For as the first lines of the storming troops were about to deploy under the walls, some having already advanced to that point in column of march, a trumpet sounded within the fort. It was but one flourish, brief and high, and as it died the silent walls burst to a halo of outward flame. It was seen by those who watched on St. Angelo's walls, telling them that, though St. Elmo might be in no better case than that of a cornered rat, it had still the strength and the will to bite hard at those who came round it to make an end. After that the smoke of battle closed blackly above that cauldron of bitter strife, as it had done seven days before, and only the confused noise that came over the harbour waters at the caprice of a shifting wind told the watchers that it refused to fall as the hours went by. There were times that were loud with the cries of men, when the Turks assaulted the wall, as they often did during the day, and others, in the spaces between, when there was no sound but that of the guns that were never still. So it was, during the length of the summer day; but with the night, the noise fell. . . .

After that the Grand Master came to Sir Oliver's room. "I must know," he said, "if St. Elmo stands, but the boatmen say that it is vain to approach the quay. They would be certainly sunk, and what use is there in that? I must have one who can swim well, and can land unseen."

"That," Sir Oliver replied, "should not be too hard to find."

"Yet it is not easy at all. It is near a mile, if not more, both to come and go. I have made enquiry of many knights who would not decline, but the most of them could not swim, though it were but a short way, being inland born; nor could they be sure in the dark to find a quay that they do not know."

"There must be Maltese of the town who would call it a little thing. They have a common repute that they swim well."

"So it is, and so I suppose it must be; but I would have preferred one of ourselves, or, at least, one who would be able to talk a tongue in which Montserrat can reply. I thought there would be one of whom you would be likely to know."

His eyes fell on Angelica as he spoke, and their expression changed, as though he saw what he sought.

"Now," he said, "if you——It is what you have done before in a worse way!"

"I should say," Sir Oliver remarked, "that there could be others found who are more fit."

"But," the Grand Master went on, "I do not know that there are." He said to Angelica: "You have been there before. You have been twice?"

"Yes," she said, "that was so." Beyond that, she was not quick to reply.

"You could swim so far," he queried again, "both to go and return, while the darkness holds . . . ? It would be no gain for you to stay there, nor to drown on the way back."

"Yes, I suppose I could."

"There might be a boat sent out which would meet you upon the way."

"In the night?" she asked. "I should not trust greatly to that."

"I could make enquiry," Sir Oliver said, "among the Spanish soldiers upon the wall. There may be one who can speak and can also swim."

"And how long would that take? The night is short and soon sped." He looked at Angelica again as he said: "It was on such terms that you had leave to remain. I warned you that I would not spare you at all."

"Yet in such a matter as this——" Sir Oliver began; but she interrupted him now, having made her resolve.

"It is a thing I can do, and no more than the bargain was."

"You will go forthwith?" the Grand Master asked, in a style that was half query and half command.

"Yes."

"You will approach the fort with all care, not knowing but that it may now be in infidel hands, and with such caution as is required by the watch that our friends will keep within if they be still there, lest you be slain as a Turkish foe. You will bring full report if it still stand, and in what guise of defence. But if it be still held, and its flags fly, you shall tell those who have slaughtered Turks for a full day that their part is done. If you are back while there is still night in the sky, we will make bold to send over sufficient boats, when the moon is down, even at a great risk, to bring off those who remain. But I must first know that the fort endures, and that they would not row to no more than a useless death."

"Then," she said, "it seems by that that it is a matter of urgent haste."

"So I say. Can you swim fast?"

"I can swim fast at that need." She got up to go. "I must somewhat prepare. I shall not be long."

The Grand Master looked well content. "She is of a good race," he said, "and I am assured that she will not fail. I did well when I resolved that she should remain." He added: "God rules all." But it was not clear whether he gave the praise in the right place or made boast of a strong ally.

"Do you think we can bring them off?" Sir Oliver asked, in a doubtful tone.

"I have a very confident hope. I would not that our faith should fall behind the sure succour we have. . . . Do you doubt?"

"I should call it too late. But I have been wrong before now. We shall know more when Don Garcio brings his report."

"Don Garc—— . . . ? Yes, I recall. It is how she is called."

"It is the only name that I use."

"It is the more prudent way. I will do the same." As he spoke Angelica returned to the room. She was in no mood to delay now. Imagination had the support of what she had seen in the fort at the end of the last assault. If they had kept out the Turks for another day of the same kind. . . . She saw that she could not be there too soon, having a better message to take than had been her portion before.

Sir Oliver had not been idle the while he talked. He had written a brief line to the effect that the bearer, Don Garcio, might be trusted in all he said as from the Grand Master himself, and this he read out, and wrapped in an oilskin case, that it might not be soaked in the flood.

"I have written no more," he said, "lest by evil chance it should reach the hand of our foes, when it will tell naught. But I would counsel you none the less, if you be in any danger of being snared, that you destroy it in good time, that none may see what you do. For if this letter be read they will go to all lengths to obtain knowledge of what message you bear, and it will be much the

same if you should be seen to cast it away. So that, at the worst, you should be prepared with a likely lie, such as may save yourself and yet will do us no ill. But it will be much better than that if you are so wary and wise that you do not fall to their danger at all, as I have good hope you will be."

She wore no more than the close-fitting singlet and drawers—which were the usual inner garments of men at that day—below a cloak which would bring her unremarked to the water-side. Sir Oliver walked with her himself to that point, for what was done could not be too secret from all. Even within the walls there was talk of spies, and wonder at times that the Turks learned so quickly of the events of each hour, even to trivial things.

"You could go down with the tide," he said, "in an hour's time, which would be your aid, though it is not much in these seas."

"No, I will not delay."

She had the thought in her mind of those who might have endured through the day, and to whom she was to go this time with a word of slender, belated hope, rather than to tell them that they had done so well that they were to continue to strive and die.

The night was quiet and warm. There was a thin declining moon which the clouds hid, but which gave a faint light, showing the dark outline of the opposite shore. The clouds were broken at times, disveiling uncertain stars.

"I would," she said, "there were more light. But I may be glad of darkness before I land."

Sir Oliver thought he heard a note of fear in her voice, which the thought of that landing brought, and he was more doubtful than he had been at first of the wisdom of the Grand Master's choice.

"It is not too late," he said, "to decline that which most would say that you should not have been asked to do. I am of small doubt that boatmen could be found who would call it a little thing. The Grand Master had made enquiry only among his knights. Are you not afraid, now you face the attempt?"

"No," she replied, "not overmuch. I am not afraid of the sea. It is less than I did before at another need. It is less risk. . . . When I land, I shall do well enough. I know the approach."

"I will have those I can trust await here with a dry cloak."

"Then I will be careful of where I come."

She dived in without further words, and struck out in a steady way, turning once, when she was a short distance out, to see how the quay looked from that view, so that she should have no doubt where she would land on her return. The water was warm enough. She was not afraid that her strength would fail, nor that she would go greatly astray. The ridge of Sceberras showed darkly beneath the veiled light of the moon. The stars would be guides enough, if they would be no less than they were then, between fluctuant clouds. She swam

lightly and fast, breaking waters that were level and quiet. . . . There came a time when she was glad that the stars were few, and that the clouded moon was hid by the height of land, so that St. Elmo's point was black where it met the sea. . . . Her hand felt up the wet face of the rock, which sank sheer so that there was no footing to gain; but it shelved backward not more than two feet over her head, so that, with a short effort, she came to land. She had not dared to land at the quay, and she moved now with more caution than speed. Lights flickered around the fort, and barbaric shouts came at times on the quiet air of the night. Yet, in fact, she had little to dread but her own fears. The fort had been held till the darkness came, and now there was truce till dawn, as there had been five days before, that the Turks might succour the wounded and count the slain.

She entered with no demur, being accepted at once by a guard at the fort gate who seemed to have no briskness in what he did. There must have been valour enough in those who still lived in St. Elmo's walls, but there was no hope. There was a truce made, so that it seemed that they would be allowed to live through the night. They had no thought that they could endure for another day. And even so—there would be no doubt of the end. The hour struck. D'Egueras, who had given much time to prayer since the last assault, was with those who now prayed through the night. There were some twenty of these, of whom none had less than a bandaged wound.

Angelica, begging the loan of a cloak before she should come to a full light, which was a boon easy to grant, for there were more cloaks in St. Elmo now than living shoulders to put them on, heard the hymn which the monkish knights, who had fought all day against what must seem no less than unbelievable odds, were now raising to Mary's praise.

"Patens cœli janua,
Salus infirmorum,
Videamus Regem,
In aula Sanctorum."

It seemed a prayer which she would be very likely to grant.

Angelica was led to the room where she had seen De Broglio when she first came. Montserrat did not wake nor pray. He slept on a bench. On the table he had cast down a sword that was blunted and stained; and another, sharp and clean, was lying nearer his hand. His heavier armour was taken off, but he slept in clothes which were formal and rich and had made a brave show when he put them on. Now they were rent and stained, and the most part of one sleeve had been torn away, but when he waked, which he did at the first word, he was quiet and grave, as he had ever been since he came. He read the letter that Angelica brought, and listened to what she said with an expression that did

not change.

After he heard, he pondered awhile, and then said slowly, as one who would have his words remembered with care: “I will write naught. Sir Oliver was right about that.” He broke off what he had meant to say to enquire: “What did he say? Did he approve he Grand Master’s plan?”

“He said little while I was there.”

“Which meant much. . . . You will say that, having still some advantage of walls and by the use of some deadly tricks, and of the valour of cornered men, and no less by the high favour of God, we have held our own for this day, with such slaughter of those who came as the Grand Master will joy to hear. I should say we have slain more than was done at the former assault, for they came at first with less care. But, for ourselves, we are mostly dead or maimed, as you may see yourself if you are in no haste to return.

“As to taking us off, you need not hide that we should be willing to go, but it is yet an attempt which will have no sanction from me, for I hold it vain. It is a thing which the truce does not protect, and the Turkish guns are now trained on the water around the quay.”

He paused and pondered again, and then asked: “Is he bent to do this at the last in his stubborn way?”

Angelica recalled what she had heard. She thought that La Valette would not easily abandon his present plan, and she thought that, however desperate it might be (which she could not properly judge), it ought to be tried. It seemed dreadful to her that all who still lived in the fort should be left without hope to a cruel death.

“He seemed,” she said, “fixed in resolve.”

“So he would be.” He fell silent again, as though he would examine the question on every side. Then he said, with the same slow gravity as before, but as one who had weighed all and could speak in a final way:

“You shall say that we are at the end of our strength, and will be glad to be taken off as we should have been content to remain. But, for to-night, it will be too late to arrange. To-morrow night, if the fort stand until then, and if the attempt is to be made at all, it is in all ways the better chance; the more so as the Turks will expect it less, having seen that we let this night go, and knowing to what straits we have fallen now.

“I do not say that we shall endure through another day, yet I do not say that we may not, having seen all that I have; for, when I let this be known, it will recruit hope, which can be a great spur, and, while we fought through this day, we had little, or less than that. . . . I will announce that the rescue comes, for I must serve the orders you bring, but you will say in plain words that I do not approve, nor shall I blame if the Grand Master adjust his mind when he shall have taken more counsel thereon, for I think the attempt will fail, with the loss

of some who might live to a further day."

He asked: "You can remember that? It need not be twice said?" And then: "The boats will not put off till you return . . . ? If that be so, there is no haste. You can give us aid for an hour, if not two. . . . What can you do best? Why, you can give water to those who thirst. You will find corners where they have crawled, or they may lie where they fell. There is none to tend or to nurse, where we are all wounded or near to death." Her eyes followed his to where the hose about his ankle was darkly stained, which she had not noticed before. "But I would not be too quick to staunch blood, nor to stir those who are plainly sped. There will be no mercy in that."

The words revealed that he saw the end beyond doubt, as he had done at first when he had ordered that the round-shot should be cast into the well. But he showed no sign of feeling thereon, unless it were that he had talked more than his habit was. He lay down again, and Angelica went out, seeing that he had finished with her. . . . He heard the sound of singing which rose again from the little chapel within the fort. "Men go," he thought, "by many roads to one inn, where the night's lodging is sure, but who can speak for the next day?" He thought thus, having faltered somewhat in faith since the Lutheran heresy had shaken the foundations on which he supposed that the Church had stood, of which he had spoken to none. Then he thought: "Why should we draw others to useless deaths? The boats would be smashed before they could reach the quay. That at least may be saved, for I suppose that we shall not last till the noon is high." Then he muttered a prayer which held comfort still, having been learnt from his mother's lips; and after that he slept well.

CHAPTER XLI

IN the first dimness of dawn, the Turks assaulted again, bringing fresh troops, and having resolved that the time had come when they could make an end against men who were wearied and few.

But, before then, Montserrat had been round the fort arousing all who were not too injured to stand and strive, with a word of new hope if they could but endure for another day; so that they overcame fatigue and the stiffening of wounds, and went in little bands to the weakest parts of the wall, and loaded the single gun that they were still able to work, and laid bombs and the hoops of fire where they would be ready to throw. Also, De Montserrat gave orders that the pennons of the knights who had fallen during the previous day should not be withdrawn, but that they should be somewhat shifted about, so that their weakness should not be known nor the trick guessed.

The new troops advanced in a bold and confident way and set their ladders against the wall. They were not easy to thwart, for they had no more to overcome than three or four score men who were little fitted to fight, but they were met by these men with a courage which was blended of despair and a new hope, and in so stubborn a way that they drew off at the last, leaving many dead in the ditch; and after that a rumour spread in their ranks that the Christians had landed secret reinforcements during the night, and that the fort was no nearer to fall than it had been on the previous day.

The sound of the renewed bombardment was pleasant in the Grand Master's ears. It seemed that the Turks had ceased assault after one day's repulse, as they had done a week before. The fort could endure the battering of round-shot for another day, and at night he did not doubt that, with Heaven's aid, he would bring off those who remained. He ordered Señor Ramegas to prepare a sufficient number of boats, leaving the details to him, as a man he had found fit for the trust he held.

Ramegas considered the instructions he received, against which he did not protest, for who could urge that no attempt should be made to rescue comrades who were so desperately placed? But he thought it a forlorn hope, with only one slender chance of success, if they could surprise the Turks when they were careless and unaware. He considered also, from the report that Angelica had made, that the men to be brought off alive, whether wounded or whole, could not fill many boats, but, if a relief should land, and there should be a skirmish ashore, he would need some force to hold a clear line while he brought the

wounded men to the quay. He ordered that nine boats should be prepared, with as much secrecy as such an order allowed, each of which was to carry ten or a dozen men, whom he picked with care from the fleet, or from the Maltese boatmen to whom the harbour was known, including such seamen as were arquebusiers of skill. They were to be ready, with muffled oars, to leave as soon as the darkness fell, and to proceed down the nearer shore, only crossing to St. Elmo when they came to the harbour mouth.

It was noon when Ulichiali assaulted again, and the Christians, after some hours of respite and rest, manned the wall for the last struggle which, as they hoped, they would have to face, and endured again for a time. But their numbers failed, one by one, which was an end they could not help, till it was plain to all that they were at their last hour; and then, as by a miracle, the attack slackened and then withdrew.

They could look round, as the bombardment resumed, and count those who remained, and there were scarce a score who had any strength either to stand or strive. They must stand from now, if at all, less by any valour of theirs than by the forbearance of most merciless foes. Or was it by the over-ruling mercy of God that there might yet be a remnant saved?

They might be glad that this respite came, from whatever cause and however short, but they would have found no pleasure in the words with which Mustapha, coming up himself to the place from which Ulichiali controlled the attack (well in the rear, for the Greek-born pirate had neither Piali's headlong courage nor Dragut's fatalistic audacity) had told him abruptly to call it off, having heard from a renegade spy, who swam at times, at a great risk, from the Sanglea shore to that of the Turkish camp, that there was talk of preparing boats which were to take off the garrison, if they should endure through a further day.

Now he said: "Let them be. Will you draw the last bait from the trap?" So it was by Mustapha's design that the Christian flag still flew from St. Elmo's wall when the darkness came. . . .

The Grand Master, seeing that the hours passed, and the fort stood, was confirmed in belief that some of those who had been its defence would be brought off in the night, giving him a last boast against the Turkish arms, which had been foiled so long by a fort so weak that it would be said, by all the canons of war, that it should have been reduced in a day from when Piali's battery had been made ready to open fire.

"To-morrow," the Grand Master said, "being the twenty-fourth of the month, is John Baptist's day. It may well be that he will show his power and favour to those who exalt his name, bringing our brothers safely away and making mock of the heathen power."

In the fort (where D'Egueras lay dead, having done with prayers for this

time) Montserrat lay with a deep wound from which his life was ebbing quickly away; for he had taken a thrust when his sword failed in the last scuffle by which the Turks were kept to their own side of the wall.

He was faint of speech, and his sight was dim. He knew that his time was short, and he found that thought was hard to control, being urgent to wander apart to its own dreams, and a brother-knight, who was sorely hurt, but to whom duty was more than life, would have shrived his soul. But he put him aside, having, as he conceived, a more urgent duty than that, and gave command that all who were yet fit should leave their posts and be assembled where he was laid.

There were no more than could be held in a small room, being a bare score, and when they had come he spoke so that most could hear:

"I have called you together here because it is vain to hope that you can longer defend the wall, being too few for another bout. So, if they venture again, you may let them do as they will, which you cannot stay. But if they leave you alone till the night fall (as they seem likely to do, though I can make no more than an evil guess as to the meaning of that), then you may look for the coming of boats in the darkest hour, when the moon is down. You should then be ready to leave with speed, taking all who are not dead.

"But if the boats do not come, or are beaten back, then my counsel and orders are that all who can, not being too weakened or maimed, shall leave this fort before dawn and swim, if their strength allow, to the far side of the harbour-mouth. And for those who remain perforce, my orders are that they do not resist when the Turks come with the dawn, as they are most likely to do, but be found engaged in the taking of food or other peaceful affairs, when they are more likely to save their lives than if they be found with a futile sword."

He said this with some pauses at times, and it seemed that he would have said more but his strength failed, or his awareness of where he lay. He died in the next hour, leaving the name of a good knight, as he surely was. . . .

The night came, to the hour of the setting moon, and the Grand Master stood on the quay as the nine boats were manned with ten or twelve good seamen in each, and pushed off into a darkness that was more relieved by the stars than they would have wished it to be. He gave Ramegas a strait charge that he should bring away not only all that lived, but the pennons of those knights who had shown them there, whether living or dead, with the flags of Malta and Spain that were over all.

The boats, moving with noiseless oars, passed out of sight, and there was a long time during which those who waited for their return could count the silence as proof that they had not been espied by a watchful foe. But when hope had come to a good height, there was the sound of a single cannon from the point where St. Elmo lay, and after that a burst of heavy fire, as though the

fort were bombarded with all the batteries that the Turks had set up. But this quickly fell to a rumble of fewer guns, and then to single shots, and then ceased. It was hard to guess what it might mean and harder to think that its meaning might be good for the boats, but after a time they were to be seen returning toward the quay. There were seven now, and they came unhurt, with no more than a wounded man. They said that they had been close to St. Elmo's quay, the boat of Señor Ramegas and another being somewhat ahead, when a single cannon had been discharged from the shore, upon which the trumpeter upon the Captain's boat had blown the signal for them to retire, which they had done when it was sounded a second time, having his strict orders that they should withdraw in haste if such a signal should blow. They had been followed by many shots, which had gone astray in the night, but of the two leading boats they had seen no more.

So it had been; they having come clear of a trap which would have ended all if it had not been sprung too soon. For the Turks, knowing that the boats would come, and finding little danger left from the fort if they should leave it alone, had brought up their cannon very close to the water's edge, and so trained, while the light held, that they were assured that no boat would live long if it should come near the shore. But a certain gunner, having good eyes, had seen the foremost boat coming out of the night while it was still some distance away, and, being too eager to hurt his foes, he had blown his match and put it to the gun before he had received orders to fire (for which he would lose his head on the next day), and the shot, being well-aimed, struck the foremost boat, smashing its side, so that those it held were soon in the sea.

Señor Ramegas had seen that, if the Turks were alert, there would be no hope that they could bring off those that the fort held, though he had said little of what he thought, for there was no gain in making those faint of heart who must bring it to proof. He had given such orders as might enable some to escape if the worst should be, and had meant his own boat to be first of all, but the eagerness of the second boat had taken it somewhat ahead. When he saw that it was hit by the first shot, while still some way from the shore, he knew that they could do no more than bring up their boats to be sunk by the Turks who, besides, if they should land, would be a hundred to one; so he bade his trumpeter sound the retire, while he ordered his own boat to push on that they might rescue those who were now overset in the sea.

Of these, they hauled two to safety over their side, and might have sought more but that their own bows were stove in with a glancing shot, after which they could do no more than crowd to the stern and so lift the broken bows somewhat out of the sea, and bail hard till they were glad to beach the boat at the nearest point on the opposite shore.

The Grand Master must take what comfort he could from the fact that he

had lost but one boat and one crew. He could not blame Ramegas that he had ordered retreat, for the thing was too plain, and the more so that he had made his own courage clear by pushing forward to rescue those he could from the sunk boat.

But St. Elmo was lost at dawn of John Baptist's day, with all it held, except that there were nine who had entered the sea at that bitter need and found strength to swim the breadth of the harbour-mouth. They did this in the night, after they had seen the boats driven away, and knew that no hope of rescue remained.

The Turks entered a fort that made no further defence, for Montserrat's orders were obeyed, and so they kept nine or ten of those who had been too feeble, or unable to swim, making them slaves for the bench. They slew all who were wounded to death or whom they thought too hurt to be worth their care.

But Dragut died in his tent as the green banner rose over St. Elmo's walls, for which St. John could be thanked, if for little else on that day.

Mustapha stood in the taken fort, and he was a wroth man as he saw how weak it had been, and how weakly held at the last, and as he thought of the long tale of the Turkish dead and the weeks they had wasted around its walls. It was said afterwards that the loss to the Turkish arms, first and last, in this siege was not less than eight thousand men, though it may be that many of these were not too hurt to be of service again.

He asked again how they thought to deal with the cow, if to butcher the calf had been a work of such toil and blood, and being eager to take revenge for his own loss, though it were but barren abuse of the dead, he collected the bodies of those knights who had died in the last days and ordered that their heads be cut off, and their bodies cut down and across, making a mock of the faith they held. When this had been done, he had the bodies cast into the sea at such times as the tide would bear them to St. Angelo's quay.

He gained nothing by that, for La Valette's wrath, as the bodies were brought ashore, was too fierce to be stilled till some reprisal was made. He ordered that, for every body the tide might bring, the head of a Turkish prisoner should be cut off and fired over to Sceberras ridge from a cannon's mouth; and after this had been done for a few times the bodies ceased to arrive.

On the next day, the Turkish fleet, with those of Alexandria and Algiers, being nearly eight score of great vessels in all, sailed round the coast from Marsa Scirocco bay and anchored in the new harbour that had become free for their use. Their crews landed upon the shore, making a camp which was under the shelter of many guns of the fleet, so that they felt strong and secure. They found cisterns from which they could drink that were not far from the shore, and were well content with the new quarters that they had gained. But they

were in another mood on the next day, for Marshal Couppier had poisoned the wells, which was not guessed till the water had been drunk by half the crews that were there, and not less than eight hundred died.

The war grew more bitter on either side from the hour when St. Elmo fell, and in the old inland city, where Marshal Couppier's headquarters were—to which at the time the Turks did not attempt to invade, feeling that they needed their whole force to contain St. Angelo's walls—there was order made that a Turk should be hanged each noon at the market-cross, that the people might be somewhat cheered to see that the infidel vermin were one less than the day before.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Siege of Malta (Part I--St. Elmo)* by Sydney Fowler Wright]