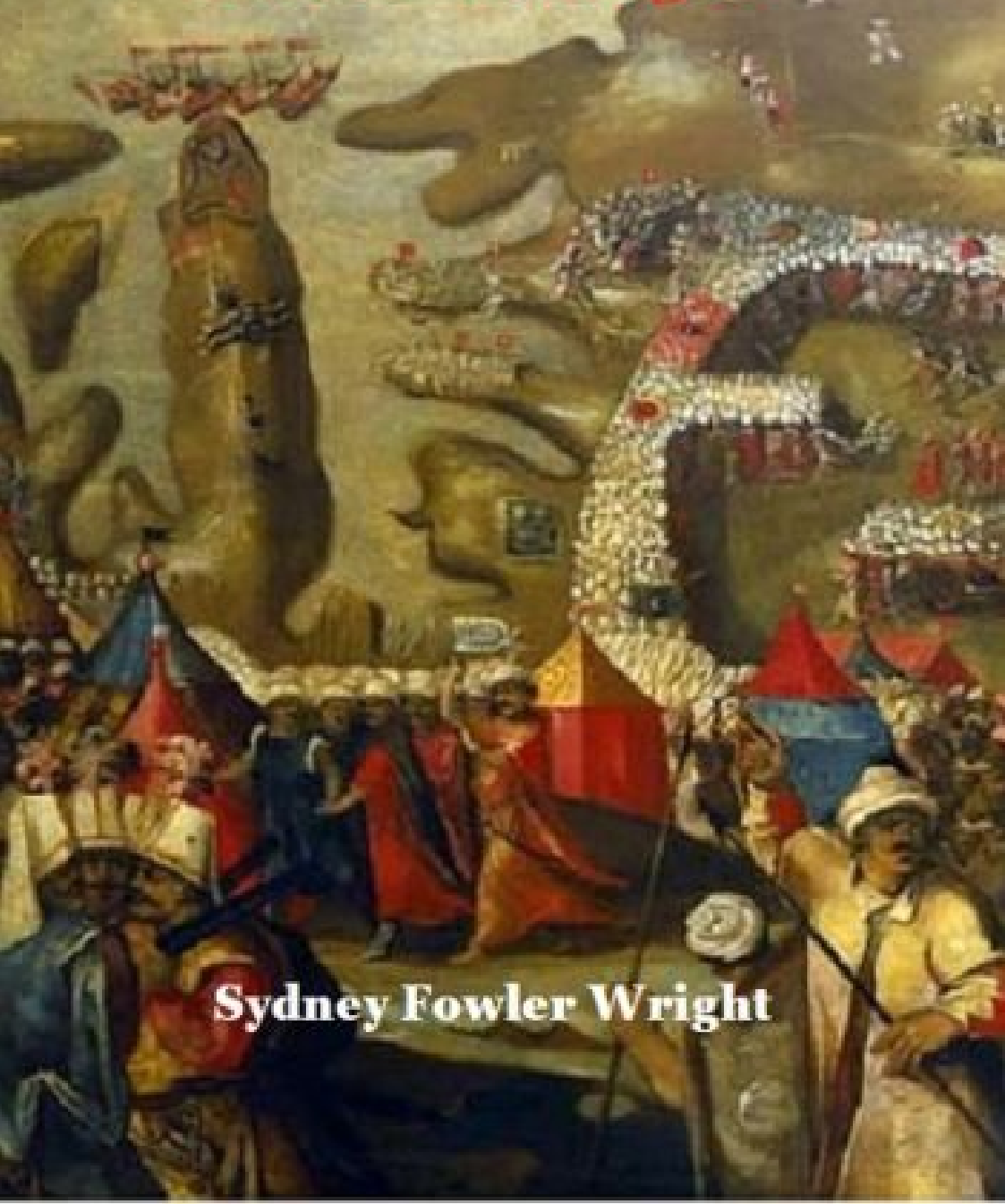


# THE SIEGE OF MALTA

## Part II - St. Angelo



**Sydney Fowler Wright**

**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* The Siege of Malta (Part II--St. Angelo)

*Date of first publication:* 1942

*Author:* Sydney Fowler Wright (1874-1965)

*Date first posted:* July 16, 2018

*Date last updated:* July 16, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20180783

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SIEGE OF MALTA  
PART I—ST. ELMO

# THE SIEGE OF MALTA

by  
S. FOWLER WRIGHT

*Founded on  
an Unfinished Romance*

by  
SIR WALTER SCOTT

PART II  
ST. ANGELO

\*

LONDON  
FREDERICK MULLER LTD.  
29 Great James Street  
W.C.1

FIRST PUBLISHED BY FREDERICK MULLER LTD.  
IN 1942  
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
GREYCAINES (TAYLOR GARNETT EVANS & CO. LTD.)  
WATFORD HERTS



## PART II—ST. ANGELO

### CHAPTER I

“YOU are one,” Captain Antonio said, “for whom I would do much. If it would not ruffle your pride, I would call you friend. But there is a length to which you cannot ask me to go. I will not be hanged for that slut.”

Francisco controlled his anger in a way which, had he considered it, might have been surprise to himself. It was an evidence of the strait in which he stood, which he was coming to see, and which a quarrel with the Genoese sailor would not relieve. But it was the most he could do to reply in temperate words.

“I must ask you to take that back, after which we can talk of that which is on your mind.”

“Why, so I do, if you wish,” Antonio replied, in a ready way. “I will call her La Cerda’s mistress, or what you will, but you must allow for this, that I have known her before.”

“I should say that you do not know her at all.”

“Well, so you may. It is a thing I have never sought. So of what she is, or is not, I will say no more, except that she is one for whom I am loth to hang.”

“So you have said once before. But you are not asked. Do you know where she is now?”

“I could make a most excellent guess.”

“So might the Provost-Marshall himself and guess wrong. They cannot hang you for that.”

“Yet if there be signs littered before my eyes——”

“Which you have no occasion to see.”

“Which it might be said that I have. . . . And it is not for myself that I fear alone. For who does that which I must say that I do not know that you do—he is in a most perilous pass, for the Grand Master is one that not only the Turks may dread.”

“Yet he may threaten that which he would not dare, or for which his strength would be too weak at a test. I am more in my own land than was he in

his, and there are Spanish knights who would be my friends, should he seek to abuse his power.”

“Do you think that? It is a test that you should not try. You would go down like a straw. . . . Even La Cerda is more than most in his own land.”

“He was not long held. He was soon free.”

“So he was. But it was said that the Grand Master did it himself, both to bind and loose, his friends looking another way. . . . They say that there is none but one to whom the Grand Master will give more than a moment’s heed when his mind is set; and your friend that was has his ear, as the talk goes. It is Sir Oliver that I mean, as it may be needless to say. But you have quarrelled now with your friend, so that there would be little comfort in that, even were there more at the most.”

“I know little of what you mean. I have quarrelled with none.”

“Well, you should know of that better than I. . . . But I had observed that you do not meet since you took—I will say since you took what was there from his own room, and came away with a shortened sword.”

“It was not broken as you suppose: the point caught by chance in a chair’s arm.”

“I have never doubted your word. But I may conclude that the point was bare.”

“You must conclude as you will, but it was not pointed at him; nor did he draw upon me, as he never would.”

“You may be right there, for I should say that he is not one whose sword would be quickly out. Yet I have a doubt when I say that, for I should not think him one who is poorly dowered either with courage or pride. . . . There have been times when I have thought that he would make a better maid than some are. But when I have seen how Sir Oliver sends him forth in most perilous ways I have put it by. I suppose that there are so few here wearing shift or gown that our eyes can no longer compare in a true way. . . . But I have vexed you again, and I know not why? I will be resolved to say naught, and to see no more. I will not even know that your sword snapped. For I am resolved of two things beyond that. I will neither hang for her nor will I quarrel with you.”

Francisco felt that their words could not end in that way. He had found Captain Antonio, though not of his rank or race, and though they were of many alien habits and thoughts, yet to be a man of some good parts, and with the will of a loyal friend, and he had become aware that his friends were few. He was young, and of a reserve which was partly shyness and partly pride. The Knights of Malta, for the most, were much older men. He had been brought up to regard the Order as the first cause for which men must live and be very willing to die. To that extent he was one with the spirit that drew them there from ease and honour in many lands, to be at the Grand Master’s command

and to die for Malta's defence. But, beyond that, he had little in common with most of those among whom he moved, and though he might have made some friends of the right kind had he been placed on the wall amid the knights of his own land, yet, being in command of a battery that stood somewhat apart, and having to keep station there for long hours of each day, he knew little more of the knights of Castile who were lined on the eastern wall than when he had landed two months before.

He felt, rather than thought, that it would be a fool's part to let Antonio sulk, and the little Captain's face showed more offence than his words held. Yet he did not ask for a full confidence which, indeed, he might have good cause not to desire. Francisco answered with such measure of frankness as Antonio might be likely to take in the right way.

"If you had asked, I would not have held it from you, though it is not to be widely told. It was La Cerda drew upon me, Don Garcio not being there. When he came he made peace, being my friend in that, for I was reduced to two feet of blade and such aid as a dagger gives. . . . But it was true that the sword had snapped as I told you before. It was a mischance of the narrow room."

"Well," Antonio replied, "I did not doubt what you said. Nor do I ask what she did in the bedchamber of the one, nor why the other should have drawn upon you. But I may conclude that he is less than your friend; and it is a fact I cannot fail to observe that since the day you have walked aside of where Don Garcio goes, while I had thought before that you used some contrivance to meet. . . . I have no concern with the cause of this, but I must suppose that, if you were in the Grand Master's peril for aught you do, the Knights of Sicily would be dumb, and there might be those of your own land who would say no more, and I would rather see you with more friends and to need them less."

"So would I," Francisco replied, "and it is a friend's thought, and I must thank you for that. Yet I do not feel in more peril than I may lightly endure, for even if that should be laid bare of which it is agreed that we shall not speak, you must not disregard that I have not taken the Order's vows, to which it cannot be held that I should therefore conform in their monkish way, nor am I in the Grand Master's danger to that degree."

"That is true; and it is what, at such a pass, you would be certain to say. But I should be loth that my own life should hang on so thin a thread. For it is time of war, and you are under his rule, and I should say that the Grand Master's regard for any logic of speech would be of less than a groat's worth when his wrath is high."

"He has such repute," Francisco agreed; "but my uncle called him a friend, and I would not think him to be without some recollection of that. And it might be thought that there are foes enough over the wall, even for him, that he need not be stubborn to vex his friends."



This conversation took place three weeks from John Baptist's day, when St. Elmo fell. Francisco had become slow to leave the battery now and quick to return, even though Antonio might be in charge, for none knew when or where the Turks might attack next, either by water or land. Now their fleet was anchored in the harbour waters over Scebarras ridge, and the whole army was camped round the landward walls. St. Angelo could no longer hear the sound of guns which were pointed another way, and look across at an agony which it did not feel. The shots shook their own walls and battered the houses within the town.

The hardest part must now be sustained by those who manned the fort of St. Michael which stood on the Sanglea spur, and the outer walls of the Sanglea, for the inlet which was its southern side was neither deep nor of great breadth, and the Turkish batteries rose on the height of the opposite shore and Turkish troops swarmed at its landward end. But the Turks were now on all sides, and so closely drawn both by land and sea that there was no point at which instant watch must not be kept; none from which peril might not suddenly rise to a deadly height; none which was safe from the risk of a flying death.

Compassed thus, there was a show of reason in Francisco's complaint that even La Valette might be content with the count of his outer foes, and shun the making of more from those who would be his friends.

The Turks blew what boast they could of St. Elmo's fall. They loaded the wreckage of thirty guns into a galley which would bear them as trophies to Byzantium's quay. If Dragut were dead (which could not be denied), De Broglio was dead too, having spoken no further word since he made the Grand Master his parting jape. The Turks made a list of the great knights who had died in defence of St. Elmo's wall, and it was better reading to them than it would be in the Christian lands.

Had the Viceroy yet sent the relief which should have come on John Baptist's day? He would have said yes, which the Grand Master would have denied. He should have sent a great fleet, and an army which would have enabled Couppier to draw the Turks from St. Angelo's walls to guard their own heads on an open field. He read orders from his master, the Spanish king, which were not meant to be clear to any except himself and, if he read them aright, they were such as he did not like.

He had pledged his word to Valette, and he knew where his honour lay. It was Spain's honour alike. Yet could he go against the King's will?

He ordered that the two galleys which had belonged to the Maltese knights should put to sea, and he added two which flew the ensign of Spain. He filled them with volunteers, who crowded Sicily at this time, seeking to aid Malta's defence from love of race, or love of God, or of what we will.

He put the four galleys under command of Don Juan de Cardona, a good knight, with written orders that he should approach the island in such a way as would be most likely to avoid the Turkish fleet, and to learn whether St. Elmo yet stood.

If it had fallen, he was to bring back the troops, for what use would there be in so small a force, if the strife went ill, and the Turks were already crowding round St. Angelo's walls? But if St. Elmo stood, and the Turks had the worse loss, he was to land them during the night, and leave promise of more to come.

Cardona read this order and may have thought it good, or may have cursed those whom he would not name. There is no record of that. But he sailed his galleys under cloak of night, to cast anchor outside Pietro Negri, and there he landed a knight who learnt that St. Elmo had fallen some days before.

There is some doubt of his name, by which we lack that of a valiant man, but he was one who had come to Sicily with the purpose of aiding the Christian cause, and having now landed in Malta, he had no mind to go back. He returned to Cardona's ship, where he lied in God's name, and we may suppose that the saints were glad. He said that St. Elmo stood and the Cross prevailed. Cardona did not question that which he may have been hoping to hear. He landed forty knights and seven hundred other soldiers of sundry sorts. He sailed back to Palermo with empty decks, having avoided the Turks again, and bringing a tale which he held for true, though it was soon changed by other reports.

The men who had landed thus in the night did that which made sport of the rules of war, as courage so often will. They marched where they wished to go, and so passed through the Turkish lines in a silent file, entering St. Angelo's gate without sound of a hostile shot, the Turks not having kept a good watch against that which was unlikely to be.

The Grand Master was glad of the aid that came and saw that its meaning was clear. For the time he had got all that he would from the crown of Spain. He did not despond for that, but he observed that he must prepare for a lengthened siege. He went over his stores. When he had done that, he made an order that Turkish prisoners were not to be taken, as food would be needed for better mouths. There had been little of quarter or mercy on either side before now, but there was none from this day. To each side their foes came to be held as no more than pestilent rats, till the last should be slain or gone, and Cross or Crescent should float in the only peace that either side could conceive in a single land. . . .

The news of St. Elmo's fall spread through the lands of Christ, and there were many of every faith whose hearts were heavy thereat. Even the English Queen, though it was by her will that those of the Order of St. John had been

chased away, forgot the bitter Protestant feud, and ordered that there should be prayer for the Maltese knights in all the churches of which she was called the head.

Caring nothing for Christian prayers, Mustapha Pasha tightened his lines of siege and made his batteries strong.

## CHAPTER II

THERE was no station in St. Angelo's girth, either by water or land, that was not fronted by active foes. The weakest point, as Mustapha saw, and Valette would have agreed, was the Sanglea, with St. Michael's fort at its highest point both because it was separated by the inner harbour from St. Angelo and the Bourg, and because of the shallowness of the inlet which protected its southern side.

It was against the Sanglea that Mustapha now directed his heaviest guns, and planned that which he expected to be decisive attack; while the Grand Master, warned both by his own military knowledge and by the report of a Greek-born engineer, Lascaris, who had deserted to the Christian ranks from a high post in the infidel army, that it was there that the first fury of storm would beat, laboured with an energy that seemed to increase with the passing days to strengthen barricades and make bastions firm; so that, while they were battered by Turkish shot, the defence, now here, now there, grew more formidable with every hour.

So that he should attack St. Michael both by land and water, and yet not risk his boats beneath St. Angelo's guns, Mustapha had a number of these, of the largest size, dragged on rollers over Scebarras ridge; and against this threat (which Lascaris may have betrayed) the Grand Master barricaded the mouth of the shallow inlet with piles; to which Mustapha replied by searching out men who could swim well, that they might ply axes at the right moment to break them down. . . .

Hearing its need, La Cerda came to the Sanglea, where his station was. He might have been excused for a further time, having an arm that he would not use for a long space, if it should heal at all, which was less than sure. But he would not be held slack in the cause for which he had come, so long as he were not driven too hard on what he thought to be the wrong road.

Admiral Sir Peter del Monte was in chief command at Sanglea, having the Italian knights under his rule. La Cerda reported to him that he was fit and willing to take his place on the wall.

Sir Peter, a discreet man, of that type of valour which makes no foes, and who was to be Grand Master himself at a later day, looked at a swathed arm, and said: "It is not what I had guessed, had I not heard it from you."

"But my sword arm," La Cerda said, "is still good."

Sir Peter thought of several things he might say, of which he said none. What he did say was: "If you are so resolved, I must not deny, having too

urgent a need: and you are one I am glad to have.”

La Cerda set his pennon on St. Michael’s wall on the next day, having no mind that any should say that he loitered at such a time nursing a wound. He had a bitter wrath against La Valette, whom he would gladly have slain at a quieter time.

He charged him in his heart with Venetia’s loss and perhaps her death. For he was convinced that she had had no purpose of flight when he had left her, a few hours before she was gone. That he thought (and was right in part) was the result of Valette’s harshness to him. She had fled in panic, when she had heard that he was arrested without a cause—had fled to what fate, and where? It might be to death or torture or unspeakable shames at the infidels’ hands. And he held Valette to be guilty of this by his intolerance of the natural conditions of human life; as also by the arrogance with which he imposed his power upon those who were of nobler blood than himself, and of higher rank in their own lands: and who might, by whatever scale of judgment, be better men; and also by the stubborn military folly of which he had made him the victim first, and then unjustly confined him without trial or question asked, which had been the final cause of Venetia’s flight.

His attachment to her might have no spiritual profundities, no intellectual support, but it was real in its own way. He loved her for what she was, as well as what he supposed her to be. At the least, she was a possession he valued much. She was the most costly of all the gay material things: castles and woods, horses and hawks, tapestries and jewelled clothes, which had embroidered his life till now.

And Valette had taken his mistress, as he had taken his horse, and had even done these things without courtesy of request, in an unmannerly way, like the boor that he surely was. He had assaulted his honour too, which might have been as hard to forgive had not La Cerda felt that his loss was less under that count. It stood, he thought, too secure for Valette to have pulled it down. Yet even there he had a wound that he felt more than a burnt arm, it being the pain of that which drove him to take the wall when most would have said that he was unfit to serve.

For it is certain that he did not go thus to the wall because his passion for slaying Turks was beyond control (as might have happened to some of the Order’s knights), nor did he think St. Michael’s peril to be so nicely poised that it would stand or fall by his single arm. He went that he might assert his valour in all men’s sight, and be esteemed among the Italian knights who were his natural friends.

The last hour he had had with Venetia, when Angelica left them alone, had assured him both of her loyalty to himself and of her innocence of any different offence. He would have sought her now, to the delay of his pennon’s

flaunt, as well from obstinacy as regard, but that he was not sure that it was what she would thank him to do.

If he found her, could he protect? It was a bitter question to have to ask himself, and take a doubtful reply.

If he should find her, and did not disclose her hiding, it was doubtful that he could do her any avail, while the search itself might be watched by those who would make it their aid to find her for other ends. And if any were giving her harbour now in the town, to disclose what they had done would be to put them in the way of a likely death.

If she had escaped, whether to Christian or Turk, whether by land or sea, he could do nothing to aid her more. If she were still in the town she would hear of him, though he might know nothing of her, and she might find safer means of letting him know of any need that was hers than he could find to reach her.

These things were simple to see, but they did not content his mind. It is always harder to remain still than to act, even though action and wisdom may not lie in the same bed. He must learn what he could, and for this there were three to whom he could talk, though in different ways.

He would see Sir Oliver and Don Garcio (as he supposed she must still be called), and Don Francisco, whom he had ceased to suspect. He had La Valette and the Provost-Marshal further back in his mind.

He went to Sir Oliver first, who received him with courtesy though without warmth, being a tired man, and burdened with matters for which he felt greater concern than for any troubles which (he would have said) La Cerda had brought on to his own back.

“You will admit,” La Cerda said, “that she was one whom it was my part to protect, having brought her here.”

“It may have been your part,” Sir Oliver replied, “but it was not mine. Yet I did something in that, and perhaps more than I should; and I think, had she not fled as she did, I should have sent her hence with a whole skin.”

“With a whole skin!” La Cerda exclaimed, taking the phrase in a more literal way than it may have been meant, “would you say that she risked that? Why what, in the devil’s name, or in the Grand Master’s if you prefer, had she done but what her honour required? I should say that some have been sainted for less than that. . . . And does he think that she can be shamed and my honour stand? It is poor reward that Sir John gives to those who put all aside that they might come here at the greatest peril that well could be.”

“You speak,” Sir Oliver more quietly replied, “beyond reason and beyond fact. You have not been without cause for wrath, and there are matters in which I have not been less than your friend, as perhaps you see.

“But I must remind you first that she was kept here by a trick, after I had

secured that she should be sent safely away. That was an affront to me, of which I might say more than I have yet done, and you may see how your honour came clear in that (if I may say it without offence) more than I have been able to do.

“And, beyond that, when a man is slain at a dagger’s point, in a place apart, it is required in all lawful lands that he by whom it is done (and a woman cannot be in a better case) shall come forward to show that there was sufficient cause. What has she done? She has replied by hiding and flight, as one who protests her guilt. Yet, had she been found, she would have had fair trial of all, as I may say that she will now.

“But the last thing I must say is that you use the Grand Master’s name as it is not reason to do (I say naught of our vows, of which each must judge), for we did not come here as doing favour to him, but as being joined in a common cause; of which, by our own votes, we had made him head.”

“Yes. We were demented in that.”

“I must differ there. I say he is the man for this hour, and a better would not be easy to find.”

“Well, he is friend to you.”

“He is more than that. He is Malta’s shield.”

“So he should be. We will not quarrel for that. I came not to ask of him. Have you tidings of her?”

“I can answer freely in that, having had none. We may hope that she has fled far. But if I knew more, I might have said less, rather than told it to you. I cannot counsel more as a friend than when I say you should put her out of your thoughts. This is not randomly said, for it is like I know more of her than you ever will. I say not this of myself but of the office I hold. It is my business to know.”

There were angry words on La Cerda’s lips, which he did not speak. He remembered that he had come there resolved that he would not injure his cause (or else hers) because patience failed, as he had done before then.

“But I will tell you this,” Sir Oliver went on; “if you find a man who is giving her harbour now, you will meet one who is next neighbour to death, for orders may not be lightly flouted in time of war. I had that in mind when I said that I hoped she had fled away.”

“You would let me know without pause, if she were found?”

“Yes. It would be your due.”

“Then I can ask nothing more.”

He rose with these words, feeling that it would be waste to speak more, and aware that Sir Oliver would be very willing for him to go. He resolved that, should she be found, as he thought it likely she would, he would test his strength to the last friend he had before he would see her shamed or death

come to those who had been her aid. . . .

She lay on a bed at this time, having excuse that there was little else for her to do. She had learnt that La Cerda was released from any charge the Grand Master had made, and that he was walking abroad, though with an arm that was thickly wrapped, at which she bit a petulant lip. Would he neither prevail nor die? A protector who could no longer protect was no use to her. She cursed the day that she had lost sight of Sicily's shore. "I lie here," she said to herself, "and the food is poor. And if it were better, I dare not eat as I would. I must starve or grow fat as I lie here. . . . Yet it might be changed for a worse jail. . . ." She thought of La Cerda again and wished he were dead, which would solve much. For she had other plans that went well.



### CHAPTER III

LA CERDA met Angelica in the hall.

“Don Garcio,” he asked, with more courtesy than he would have given to whom she professed to be, “may I speak with you apart?”

“Yes,” she said, with a readiness which she would have found it hard to assume, “we can talk here, if you will. . . . But will you do me the kindness to recollect that I am that which you called me now?”

As she spoke, she had turned to a window-seat in an alcove near, which was so placed that those who were seated there could not be secretly overheard. She had no quarrel with La Cerda, whom she might rather have felt to be somewhat in her own case, and in an alliance of which she could not make him aware, but the tone and gesture of his address had been such as would be given more naturally to a woman than to another knight, and her first thought had been to restrain that and to draw him quietly apart. It was only when they were seated that she recalled that there were things which she knew or guessed that he must not suspect, but by that time the frankness of her first response had assured him that she had no reserve on her mind, and that her sole fear had been that he might make disclosure of whom she was, which her first words confirmed.

“I would be sure,” she said, “that you would not reveal——”

“It was needless to ask, for that which you did being for Venetia, and therefore for me, we are bound alike to hold the confidence which you thereby gave.”

“I did not doubt,” she replied, “that you would regard it thus; but I had rather in mind that more is disclosed by inadvertence than by design.” She did not add that she would not trust Venetia a yard away, let him protest as he might. If Venetia kept a closed mouth, it must be that she could open it to no gain, or that it had been shut for another than her.

“It shall be my care,” he said, “that I do not err in that wise. . . . It was from your room, as I understand, that Venetia went. May I ask if you have either knowledge or guess as to where she may be now, which, though you might withhold from others, you would not cover from me?”

“She went while I slept, having said nothing of her intent. I have not heard from her since.”

“Do you think she went out alone, or was she taken or lured?”

“As I think, she went of herself, and with a good will, for she had unbolted

the door, and she had dressed with some leisure and care, taking some things of mine which she must have preferred.”

“It was freely done,” La Cerda allowed. “She may have thought it was for your own peace that you should have no knowledge of where she went.”

Angelica agreed about that, thinking it might have even more reason than he supposed. She said: “Well, she took naught that I grudge, and her need was surely the more.” She turned the course of her words to ask of his hurt, which he answered was well enough. He looked at her for herself at this time, and had a wonder of what she did. He could not think that she had come with no more resolve than to be her cousin’s mistress in that inferno of bitter war, nor did it consort either with the way in which he had seen her to risk her life in active affairs, nor with Sir Oliver’s knowledge of whom she was and that she was allowed to remain. Yet Sir Oliver (he reminded himself) had been more lenient to Venetia than the Grand Master might have approved. It was a puzzle it might be profit to solve, with Venetia in jeopardy, and in a case that seemed somewhat alike, and yet it might be that which his honour would not allow.

“I would,” he said, “that you could have shown me more than you do. But I can see that she went in a secret way. I owe you thanks, which I will pay if occasion come.”

He went with no other courtesy of retreat than he would have shown to a knight of his own rank, being much younger than he.

Angelica reflected that she had revealed no more than she had told Sir Oliver at the first, and that La Cerda had no share in her own guess, of which she supposed that she must be glad.

## CHAPTER IV

LA CERDA had resolved that there was one more to whom he should have something to say, though with less expectation that there was knowledge of Venetia to be gained. Still, he told himself, he had gained nothing where he had gone in more hope, and the third attempt might well result in a contrary way.

He was rebuffed at his first effort to meet Francisco, being told that he was seldom seen in the castle now, and that his chamber was given up to another knight.

“Well,” he thought, “I suppose there is one above that will do better for him, when he has the time to come here.” But that thought was confused by what he heard in the next breath.

“Don Francisco will not leave his battery more than he must, the Turks being round on all sides, and none knowing when they may assault the boom which it is his special duty to guard, but I should say that he has less cause to come here than he once had, for he had but one of whom he made friend before, that being Don Garcio, who is of a land that is near to his, and it has been observed that they will not meet since the time when, as it is said, Don Garcio had a——” The speaker, an old gossiping knight, who was too maimed for the wars, and had an usher’s duty about the hall, became suddenly aware of the indiscretion he had been near to commit. He was so facile of tongue that he had hardly regarded until that moment that it was La Cerda to whom he spoke. He remembered that the wanton of whom the talk had been that she was found in Don Garcio’s room (but whom no one had seen) was said to be one that La Cerda had kept for his own bed.

He added: “There is always talk, which is mostly false, and the rest better unsaid. But it is true that they do not meet, for either will turn aside to avoid that, as I have observed more than once, as I have stood here.”

La Cerda thanked him, and walked on. The battery was not far. He could quickly be there. That Francisco had quarrelled with Angelica since they had fought in her room might point to something he had not guessed, and that it would be useful to know. But he saw that the evidence did not go far. If a special intimacy had been noticed between them, it might be policy only which now kept them apart—a discretion that came too late, and that might be most strictly observed when a certain old gossiping knight had his eyes upon them in open hall.

The battery of which Francisco had charge lay, as has been previously observed, outside St. Angelo's wall, on the narrow space that divided the citadel from the harbour waters. It had, in that respect, a position that was specially precarious, mitigated by the fact that it lay so closely under the castle's seaward guns and that it could only be attacked from the water while St. Angelo stood.

It had a further peculiarity, or potential weakness, in the fact that its guns did not point outward across the harbour, where its own danger lay, but were mounted diagonally to St. Angelo's wall, being trained to protect the boom, which closed the inner harbour from hostile attack, and protected the Maltese fleet, which was anchored therein.

The obligations of military discipline can never be more urgently necessary than in a place that is closely sieged, and defended by a mixed garrison in which there is no unity either of language or race, the dangers of treachery or surprise rising under such conditions to their maximum possibilities. It might be said, beyond that, that the exposed position of Francisco's battery, being beyond the main walls of defence, imposed a special obligation of vigilance, for though, as yet, he had commanded no more than an idle post, and might continue to do no more till the siege should end, yet if the call to defend himself or the boom should come, it might be both sudden and vital in its demand.

La Cerda did not expect to find the battery wide open to any who might wish to inspect its guns. Even in time of peace there might have been less freedom than that; but he encountered a rigidity of discipline and precaution beyond anything which he had expected to meet.

Though his dress and demeanour proclaimed him an Italian knight of high rank, and would have enabled him to walk freely through most places within the Christian lines, he found himself challenged sharply before he had even entered the trench by which the battery was approached on its northern side. At the further end of that trench the pass-word and his own name proved insufficient to procure him a further advance until the Captain's will should be known. The sentinel was deferential enough, but his halberd remained lowered across the way.

He was kept there for more minutes than his dignity could lightly endure before Captain Antonio came, so that he had leisure to observe, so far as his position allowed, that the battery was now a larger and more substantial work than he had expected to find, and to hear sounds of mattock and spade proclaiming that its strength was not yet equal to Francisco's desire.

## CHAPTER V

CAPTAIN ANTONIO might have come at a better speed had he been otherwise engaged than he was or had he heard any name but the one he did. It was but a few moments before that he had stood at the backs of two men who had not heard his approach, owing to the noise of the excavating at which their companions worked, and at which they should have been doing an equal part.

“But,” he overheard, “if it should be she for whom the proclamation is made——” The man’s voice ceased, as he became aware that his captain was not more than three paces away.

“Lonzo,” Captain Antonio asked, “of whom are you talking now?”

The man became silent, looking confused, and would have been urged by a sharper word, but his companion replied:

“It is that he saw a lady enter the Captain’s room, when the moon shone over the scarp.”

“Then,” Captain Antonio advised, “he should drink less.”

“He is not one,” his self-appointed advocate replied, for the man said nothing at all, “to drink more than he should.”

“To how many has this folly been told?”

“To no other but me, for I am his only friend, and he had mentioned it but a moment before.”

“Which was too soon for such talk. Lonzo, I say this to you, and to Pietri alike. There could be no lady enter the Captain’s room, for there is none here. I swear that by Our Lady Herself, which is not an oath on which I would be forsworn.” He added the names of certain Genoese saints which he was known to revere, feeling that what he did should be done well, and assuring himself that he swore truth, for who could call that slut by the name which God’s Mother does not despise?

“No,” he said, “no madonna is there. It was the shadows that lied of the passing clouds. . . . But I will give you counsel that you should heed.

“You are men who have been chosen by me, being changed from those who were first here, as you all are. You are well paid from the Order’s chest, and you have more beyond that, which Don Francisco supplies. You were chosen thus because there is little that can be said or done, whether in castle or town, of which the Turks do not hear by the next day, and Don Francisco was well resolved that no word should pass out from this place, for which the reason is known to you.

“Now if you should gossip in foolish ways, you would show that you are not worthy of such a trust. You might find yourselves in a worse place and taking a smaller pay. And if you should tell a tale that was false you might end, beyond that, where you would be sorry to be. For it is by such ways that men come to the lash or the prison cell, who are too good for such use.

“And even if you should tell one which is true (but which you need not have seen, had you looked aslant), which you could not do for this time, there being no substance in what you say, should you be the better for that?”

“Let us suppose that you had come on traces of her for whom proclamation is made, as you were rashly saying you might have done. Well, it would be your duty to so report. I shall not tell you other than that. But would it be to your gain? I should say not. You would be a witness to be questioned apart. If you did not say all that they would think that you ought to know, or if there should be dispute, so that your tale should become suspect and yourself therefor, would not the thumb-screw be called to aid? He is a man with good eyes who can be blind when he should not see. It is such men who live long.”

The man, Pietri, who had seen the wraith in the night, and who had been silent till now, found some words to say when Antonio’s lecture was done.

“Captain,” he said, “I have eyes which see well in the light” (he could not deny that, for it was as a gunner that he drew pay), “yet it is well known that they are of little avail when the light is poor.”

“So I had supposed,” Captain Antonio replied, “from that which I heard you say.” And as he spoke there was one at his side with a tale that La Cerda was there, and seeking speech with Don Francisco on private affairs, and there was no name that Antonio, who desired trouble neither for others nor for himself, would have been less willing to hear.

“Well,” he said, “let him wait, while Don Francisco shall be informed. . . . Or it may be enough that I see him first, for it may be a matter too light to disturb Don Francisco’s rest.”

And having said that, he went in no haste (for he had some thinking to do), to where La Cerda waited at the near end of the trench.

He met a man whose patience was not reputed to last overlong, and was near its end, whom he greeted with the deference that his rank required, but without speaking the one word that La Cerda expected to hear.

“I have come myself,” he said, “being in command while Don Francisco is taking rest, and he having given me charge that he shall not be called unless there is reason of war.”

“The matter on which I came,” La Cerda replied, “is one on which I can speak only to him. . . . Do you say that he will sleep long?”

Captain Antonio would have liked to lie, but he was not sure that he would be thanked by him for whom it would have been done. “He is to be roused,” he

said, "within half an hour of this time."

"Then I will wait, in what comfort you have, making my time his."

"My orders," Captain Antonio replied, in some embarrassment, which was not usual to him, "are strict and exact, that none may enter beyond this point, except at my captain's leave."

La Cerda stared his surprise. "Why, man," he exclaimed, with more contempt for him he addressed than he would have shown at a better time, "do you think I shall stand here? Do you call me Turk?"

Antonio felt a doubt of whether he had been as wise as he wished. Orders were strict, and had a cause which the Grand Master himself would have approved, but he was not sure that they should be applied to one who was a Commander of the Order himself, and whom he knew well by sight. Beyond that he had a shrewd doubt that he was acting as he would not have done but for another thing, which it was equally sure that the Grand Master would have condemned, and of which no suspicion, however faint, should be allowed to rise in La Cerda's mind.

"You will admit," he said, "that in time of war orders may be so framed as to hinder those for whom they are not meant, and that he may take blame who shall interpret them in a better way, being beyond that which he has commission to do. Yet I am assured that this order was not to have held you here, and it shall be my risk that you wait in a better place."

La Cerda was little appeased by an admission that came too late. He said: "You are a wise man," in a tone that proposed a doubt, or at best that his wisdom had been tardy in its advice. He followed Captain Antonio through a tunnel which had been hewed from the rock, having small chambers along its side, and was again surprised that so much had been done at what he had thought to be little more than a gun-platform outside the wall. He came to where the guns were, and saw two long culverins of the newest make pointing through embrasures which showed him, as in a frame, a picture of the long floating boom and of St. Michael's fort at its further end, and something of the inner and outer harbours to left and right.

"I had not been told," he said, "that you had such weapons as these. I thought that you had but three sakers, such as would throw their discharge to little more than the boom's length."

"So we had," Captain Antonio replied, "and so we have still," and he pointed to where these cannon were drawn aside, "but Don Francisco would have these guns from the *Santa Martha*, which was his own ship, thinking that they might be of more use. . . . It is that which is known to none but the twelve men we have in garrison here, and the seamen by whom they were brought during the night, which must be excuse for the strict orders I have that none shall enter without his leave."

La Cerda was more appeased when he saw that it was something beyond the routine of a leaguered place which had held him back; he unbent enough to discuss matters of warfare by land and sea, on which Captain Antonio had some observations of wit to make and some tales to tell. The time did not seem long before Francisco appeared.

He had heard already, by Captain Antonio's care—though no more than the bare fact—that La Cerda waited him by the guns. He could not guess what La Cerda knew, nor to what questions he might have to make instant reply, and though he came forward in a quiet and confident style, born of his pride and his blood, yet he could not tell, being young, how he should act, nor what he would be likely to say.

La Cerda, having folded his cloak for a seat, had found comfort enough on a stone ledge of the parapet which protected the guns. Captain Antonio stood at his side, in which positions their heights were not so different that they could not discourse with ease. La Cerda rose as Francisco approached, and looked at one who seemed to have advanced in dignity and the qualities by which manhood is known since he had seen him before, more than the short weeks would explain. "War," he thought, laying praise at a wrong door, "may do much for those men it does not kill."

He spoke at once when they met, without waiting to be asked why he had come.

"Don Francisco," he said, "I am still in doubt of whether I owe you thanks, or the word of regret that it may be knightly to speak at times, or no more than a bare sword, such as was between us before, but, by your leave, I will put such questions aside at this time, both because it is hour of war and because you could say that I am unfit" (he looked down at his bandaged arm) "to support my words, and also until I am more fully informed. But I would ask you now, on your knightly word, if you can give me help on a search which I still make?"

"Chevalier," Francisco replied, "it is knightly said, and I will answer it in the best manner I may.

"As to ourselves, there are times when I have the same doubt; but, by your own choice, I will say no more, except that, as I suppose, my honour is still clean.

"As to what you ask, I would ask this in reply: If one should know, or suppose, to where the lady Venetia has made her retreat, is it that which should be told to any without her leave, she being in the great jeopard she is, and there also being proclamation of death against whoever may have taken her in?"

La Cerda weighed the implications of this in a mind that was alert, and with suspicions not buried to any depth. He remembered what he had been told in the last hour, that Francisco had quarrelled with her whom he supposed to



have been more close than she was, and that that had been from when they had found him in the room where Venetia lay. It was a simple conclusion that Francisco could tell him where she now was, and a presumption that she was still in the Maltese lines. His doubt of Francisco's faith stirred him to an anxious wrath that he could not lightly restrain.

Yet restrain it he did, remembering the declaration that he had just made; and so, reflecting that it was by patience, if at all, that he would come to the knowledge he sought, he made a reasoned reply.

"As to that—I must conclude that you would not propose it in such a form unless your own knowledge made it to be of something more than idle debate—you may think the Lady Venetia's jeopardy to be much more than it is. I have been told by Sir Oliver Starkey himself that she may not have much to dread if she will come forward now, and I should say that her peril is greatly more while she lie concealed, for she will have less mercy to hope if she be dug out than if she will now advance, saying that she did but wait till I should be free to give her support.

"As to the part of who may have been her aid I will say this: It could be told to me—as I think it should, I having the right I have—on my plighted word (which should be assurance enough) that there would be no disclosure without consent, nor such as would bring him to peril he might have missed."

"There would be the question, beyond that, of her own will."

"Which you would ask me to doubt?"

"I mean that she may not agree that she can come forward at little cost, and a mistake would be learned too late."

"But is it not that for her, and for me? Do you propose that I might betray her against her will?"

La Cerda spoke now with an impatience he could hardly repress. Francisco's words seemed to make it clear that he knew where Venetia lay, and his tone to imply that he had a right of decision, and even to speak for her, which gave jealousy more grounds than the position must have contained in its simplest form.

Yet he reminded himself again that, if Francisco had secured her safety when he was himself unable to do so, there might be a debt of thanks to be paid in a better form than the base coinage of suspicions which might be utterly false, and, beyond that, he must have put himself in a peril which was even greater than hers, and that alone must give him some right to say what should be done now. And while he strove to control himself to a temperate mood, and yet one which would still persist—for he was resolved that he would not now turn from that quest, till he had heard Venetia protest her truth with her own lips—Francisco answered with more candour than he had spoken before.

“Chevalier,” he said, “I would have you know that I wish to act as a knight should, and I will say that I have no practice in such matters as this, and that I would that the course of honour were more easy to see.

“I will tell you that she came to me, being in a great dread, when she heard that you were powerless (as for that time) to be her support. She asked for aid which I did not refuse, and I suppose that we may have no quarrel for that.”

“As to that,” La Cerda interposed, “you have thanks.” The words were well enough, but they were without warmth, as though he waited to hear that which was still to say.

“I put myself in your hands,” Francisco went on, “in the confidence of your own pledge, and because you urge that you have a right to be told, when I say that I may know where she is now. But you must own that my obligation is not to you, but to her. I will see her between now and to-morrow noon, and, if I have her consent, I will then lead you to where she is.”

La Cerda heard this, and suspicions stirred with more force in his mind and would not be still. He was not too angry to see that, in the strict logic of the position, Francisco was right; but passion put logic aside to ask with what object he had helped her at all, and why he should be in doubt (as he professed) as to whether she should be willing for him to tell where she now lay. He had to remind himself of his bandaged arm, and of the resolution he had made, as he replied:

“Well, it is but a day, and I suppose there is no doubt of what her answer will be. We will so agree till to-morrow noon, if you will assure me of but one thing, which you will forgive that I ask——”

But the question, which might have brought crisis in its reply, was not asked, the words being drowned in a thunder of Turkish guns which broke out in a sudden fury of storm from every battery round St. Angelo’s girth. It was a thunder that did not cease, and La Cerda said: “I must seek my post. I will be here at to-morrow noon.”

He spoke to one who had ceased to give attention to him, and went in haste to take boat across the inner harbour to reach his place on St. Michael’s wall. He went through a bustle of those who ran different ways with the same object as he, for the noise of the Turkish guns was now drowned in the nearer thunder of Christian reply, and the bells tolled to call all men to their stations upon the walls.

## CHAPTER VI

SIR OLIVER picked up his sword, which he did not constantly wear. He was slightly bent with his studious toils, so that, as they stood, Angelica's height was little the less and in the supple straightness of youth she might have been held for the better man.

"We must to the wall," he said, "and I would that you had some armour of proof, of which I should have warned you before, though it has been my thought to hold you excused, as long as I can, from the active strife which you should not see, and of which, as I suppose, you will be in no danger to-day. . . . It is the risk of a straying shot."

"You mean that they will not attack our part of the wall?" . . .

"Yes. For it is what they cannot do until they have made much further advance, unless it were from the sea, with the fleet to aid."

"And they will not do that?"

"No. It is such a risk as Piali might not scruple to try, but Mustapha would not waste ships and men in so simple a way. It would be stone against wood, and at a short range, and our cannon pointed downward upon their decks. . . . There is no peril of that. . . . The Turks will fire from all sides, that we may be in doubt of where they will throw their strength, yet that is not in much doubt. It is St. Michael that they will pull down, if the fiends are strong."

Sir Oliver went to the wall where he held command, rather in the routine which would not let any part remain unwatched at a time of storm than with expectation that there would be occasion for its defence. He had sent the best part of his own men to the support of those who were more likely to face attack on the Bourg front, but he had little doubt that it was on the southern side that the worst fury of storm would beat for that day.

He went on, as he ascended the winding stair, with Angelica at his side:

"There is a friend of yours who has come, so it is said, to the Turkish camp. I mean Hassan, whom you met on his own deck, and who, by Dragut's death, is now Viceroy of the whole Barbary coast. I should have said on a deck which he had made his, having been ours at the first, and where you made him your jest, as we may suppose that he will not quickly forget. I should say that he would have more lust to meet you again than it would be pleasure to you. Which is a reason (for you) that we guard our walls."

"Is it sure he is here?"

"There is the *Flying Hawk* in Massa Muscetto bay, which he is said to

choose for his own ship since he took it from us, finding its speed to be hard to match. . . . There is no doubt he has come, and with him some thousands more of the corsairs that Barbary breeds. He is lord now of all Tripoli and Algiers, and it is said that Dragut's wealth is for him, to augment his own. He keeps Mahound's law so far that he has not Dragut's liking for rum, but that he holds to the Prophet's limit of wives is what I have not heard, though it may also be true."

Angelica laughed in her quick way at a recollection which came with Sir Oliver's words.

"I know not how many he have, nor how few, but I was to be extra to them, unless Dragut should refuse to forego my price for a better deal. . . . I thought it was time that I came away."

It was a danger passed, at which the light spirit of youth could look back in a mocking mood, but there was no levity in the tone with which Sir Oliver made reply.

"The saints keep you from that!—as they doubtless did, with your own courage to aid. But you may well pray that you do not fall to his hands for a second time, which would be no jesting for you."

"Well," she replied, somewhat sobered by this, but still feeling confident against a danger so vague and far, "I suppose I am secure for this time; and I have heard you say that if we fret at a distant fear we are likely to vex our peace for that which will never be. . . . Is St. Michael in peril beyond likely defence? Are we greatly maimed if it fall?"

"I would not say that it is in peril beyond repulse, nor that we are lost if it fall. St. Michael is more strong than St. Elmo was, whether we reckon by weight of guns or by height of walls, or by its nearness to us. But the whole length of the Sanglea is less strong, and that not only where it faces the land but because its southern water is shallow, so that it is said that it may be waded at more places than one, and it is no more than a short gun-shot from shore to shore.

"If St. Michael fall we shall still stand, but we shall have a wound which will bleed much. It is a greater risk that they will cut it off, winning the Sanglea, so that the inner harbour and our galleys would be under their fire, but we may have good hope that they will not prevail, even to that."

They spoke amid a surrounding rumble of guns, and the louder separate thunder of those that fired from the castle walls that were near at hand. It was clear that the Turks attacked with their utmost force, being insurgent on every side. Mustapha, having slain the calf, had now come for the cow, and would not be lightly denied.

Angelica watched from the outer angle of the wall, where her station was, and could see little beyond the smoke of St. Michael's guns and that which

rose and drifted over the Sanglea, which, being lower and further from her own front, was beyond her sight, though she could see part of the inner harbour where the Maltese galleys were sheltered safely as yet, and the boom at its mouth was beneath her eyes, as was the battery of which Francisco had charge. She saw him at times, waiting watchful beside his guns, though as yet they could not point at a foe. But it would not be supposed that he should attempt to look up to a place where he did not know her to be, even if he would if he had. . . .

The hours passed, and Sir Oliver came to her side.

“There is little use that I stay here, where we can but watch what we do not share. I have given command to the Chevalier de la Roye, for I have more urgent matters with which to deal. You must stay, for you make one, and give release to a man who can be used at another place. . . . But what are they that come out from the further shore?”

There was a scurry of strife at this time at the entrance to the inlet which was south of St. Michael’s fort, which was almost beyond their sight, where Mustapha’s swimmers strove with axes to break down the palisade, and Del Monte had called for volunteers to swim out and prevent the damage they sought to do.

He found no lack of those who could swim and who would risk their lives in that way, but the palisades were easier to break down than to mend, and while men fought like sharks in the reddened flood it was broken in places beyond repair. . . .

Angelica, watching from St. Angelo’s higher wall, could see ten great boats come out, one after one, from the further shore. They were loaded with men, bearing more than a thousand in all, and they came at a great pace, being propelled by those who knew that a second saved might be no less than the lives of all.

Avoiding all but such guns of St. Michael’s fort as could be hastily trained their way, which were neither many nor of much range, they came round toward the gaps in the palisade which had been broken to let them through, aiming to pass under St. Michael’s fort and take by storm the long, low water-front of the Sanglea.

“If they succeed in that,” Sir Oliver said, “they will thrust a wedge between the fort and those who defend the Sanglea on its landward side, so that those last may be surrounded and sped,” and as he spoke a rumble of distant sound arose to further confuse the tormented air, from where, far beyond their sight, Hassan’s corsairs swarmed to attack the Sanglea at its southern end.

“Francisco,” Angelica said, looking down, “is getting busy at last. But what can he hope to do?”

“Well,” Sir Oliver answered to that, “I did not know that he had guns of so

great a range, for he was set there to defend the near boom. But if you ask what he can do, I must reply that it will be nothing or all.”

Francisco looked out through an embrasure from which pointed the long black muzzle of one of the culverins which he had brought from his own ship and he knew that his day had come.

“Antonio,” he asked, “could you reach them now?”

The little captain looked out over the boom, past the entrance to the inner harbour, past the spur which was crowned with St. Michael’s fort, to where the ten great boats came on, with trails of following foam, toward the gaps in the palisade which he could not see.

“I could reach them now, but there would be those who would get free, if they were speedy to turn. I will wait yet for a minute’s space.” He spoke to the man who stood waiting his word at the other gun with his linstock lit: “You said your sight was good in the day? It is now you must prove your word.”

A moment later, Angelica, looking down, saw sudden flashes that came as one from the out-thrust muzzles. She saw the great guns leap to the recoil, wrenching their chains. She heard, next instant, the double thunder of their discharge amid the din of encircling sound.

Far out, on the harbour water, a boat sank by the head, spilling its cargo of dead and maimed, and of those who would be unable to live in an element they did not know. Another boat was struggling to turn, pushing frantic oars, while the water poured through a broken side. Below, the two guns were being sponged and loaded anew, and, as it seemed, in no more than a moment’s time, they were thrust outward again, sending an even more deadly message of death to boats which had now bunched in a confusion between those who would fall back, those who would still go on, and those who lay on uncertain oars disputing among themselves. But after those second shots, there was but one mind among men who saw that their deaths were near: they turned in flight and, as they did so, the cannon thundered again.

Of the ten boats which set out, bearing about eight hundred of the janissaries which were the flower of Mustapha’s troops, and two hundred more of the Tripoli corsairs that Candelissa led, there was but one that got back to the shore; and but two hundred men, including those who were able to swim to land, who would answer their names when the roll would be called on the next day.

Antonio, overlooking the cleaning out of the culverins with a gunner’s eye, knew that their work was done for that time and, perhaps, till the siege should end. But it had been enough. It was an example of that which is frequent in the annals of war, of a device which goes beyond that for which it was thought at first; for it was a battery that would not have been erected at all but that the Grand Master had been urgent to protect the inner harbour, where the fleet

must be laid up, with an ample boom, and then with guns to defend that. And so it was seen that, with longer guns, it might be used to another end, firing over Isola Point to guard the approach to the Sanglea, which would be likely to be much sooner attacked.

“We shall see no more,” Sir Oliver said, “from this point, and I cannot longer remain. But you may have a good hope that St. Michael will not go down for this day, and your cousin has won a praise which, as I suppose, will be the talk of more lands than one.”

He went with that word, but the noise of storm that beat on the Sanglea did not slacken till evening fell.

## CHAPTER VII

VENETIA, clasping small, soft, muscular hands behind her pale-gold head, and lifting a flower-fair face to Francisco's regard, had a thought of content, both for the judgment which had brought her to where she lay and the skill with which she had handled a position which had been novel to her, so that the highest stake for which she could play might still be within her grasp. She had come to a rich market, where the prospects of barter grew better with every day.

Now she listened to Francisco's account of how he had shattered the Turkish boats, and she thought him one who might rise high in the turbulent world she knew. She did not think of it as much more than a fortunate chance (as it was), though the idea of the longer guns had been his, with a boy's desire to make the most of his own command. Actually, he seemed to her, at this moment of conscious triumph, younger, less mature, than she had seen him before, as the excitement of the deed broke through the reserves which were born of shyness and pride, and had been augmented by the restraints which he practised toward herself.

For the moment, it even caused him to forget La Cerda's visit, and that which must shortly be asked of her.

Venetia, surveying the world around her with cool and accurate eyes, did not regard him as a genius of battle, but as a gallant and very fortunate boy, which it was much better to be. For fortune, in her world, was a very tangible thing.

It would have been absurd to compare him, in military experience, in political knowledge, in a score of various abilities, with La Cerda, who had the name of one of the most capable men of his troubled times. But what was the use of that, if it had not kept him from the Grand Master's disgrace, from the peril of St. Elmo's massacre? He was one to whom fortune showed a frown which seemed unlikely to change. . . . And Venetia meant that Francisco should give her more than it could ever be in the power of La Cerda to do.

Her first thought had been no more than to change protectors, when it had seemed that La Cerda's star had been near to set; and had he been later by half an hour when he came on Francisco and her in Angelico's room, she might have put the virtue of the younger man to a test which it would not easily have sustained. But after that she had changed to a bolder dream. To be Francisco's mistress might be pleasant enough, but it would be better to be his wife.



There was nothing in the fact of her known position as the *amie* of a monkish prince to prevent such a marriage, either in civil or ecclesiastical law, or in the social customs that ruled the time. There was more obstacle in the gutter from which she came, but even that was no more than had been overcome by other women who were among the highest in Europe then. Indeed, her position as La Cerda's mistress might be held as evidence that it had already suffered its first defeat. By the code of that day, it was demonstration that she could not be entirely unfitted to become one of the most honoured ladies of Spain. Still—she had far to go, and some high barriers to be overcome.

She did not doubt that she had shown wisdom in her restraint, though she chafed at times that she must not follow her body's will. To be wanton to this proud and very innocent boy (who was nearly of her own years, but was child to her) would have been pleasant enough, and would have held him by a strong cord, but she had resolved that she would be a madonna instead, and was shrewd enough to see that she took a way that held him more strongly still.

So she endured the confinement of the small chamber of stone, coming out only at night, as her safety required, feeling that she had found a safe lair at a very difficult need, and that she was not wasting her time.

None would disturb her there: the discipline was too strict: the movements of the men too straitly controlled. The turn in the stone entrance, which was in lieu of a door, and was intended to secure the occupant from the danger of shot, or flying fragments of stone, was as absolute as a concealment could be, unless one of the men should step in, and look round into his captain's retreat; and who would venture to leave his post for such a purpose as that?

Even so, he might have been silenced or cajoled, either by bribe or threat; but, in fact, none looked, and none but Captain Antonio, who had an adjoining retreat, had suspicion, until she had become careless, and stood revealed to a sudden moon, of which she was still unaware. A few yards from the movements of men, she had been as secure as though separated by dividing miles.

She had used the exigencies of that narrow space, into which Francisco must frequently come, and where he must sleep and dress, with a discreet skill, which would have been beyond the resource of one less experienced in the world's ways, and in the habits and dispositions of men.

He had given up his chamber within the castle, under pretext that he would not leave the battery now that St. Angelo was so closely besieged, but with the further reason that he must be constantly there to secure the privacy for his own cell that it had become vital to have. He must make it his in fact, as well as in name, that the intrusion of others might not be risked.

In this intimacy, she had been careful to maintain a physical distance, a

discreet modesty, such as would hold his respect: she had made pretence that she trusted his chivalry as sufficient shield for one who was La Cerda's mistress, not his.

But having established this distance first, she had proceeded to allure him with every weapon she had, either of beauty or wit, as though seeming unconscious of what she did; doing no more in this than to secure redundant victories in a strife she had already won. And gradually, as the days passed, she had hinted in casual ways that she was in no haste to return to La Cerda's arms. Was it wonder if he dreamed, though with slender hope, of a time when she might come to his in a woman's way? That she was seldom out of his waking thoughts? That in his heart he cursed the way that she had come to his power, so that he supposed he could not press her to love without his own honour's loss, unless they should come to a freer time? Understanding which, Venetia smiled in the dark, and was well content. . . .

Now, after she had lain on her couch in that narrow place, listening to the confused uproar that told of the Turkish storm, and then to the crashing discharge of culverins that were not many yards from her own head, Francisco had come to tell her of the effect with which he had been able to use his guns.

"It will be," she said, "a most high honour for you; for which the Order should give you thanks in a public way."

"They will not do that," Francisco replied, being a better prophet than she on that point. "It is not their way. Nor have I done more than to take a chance that came to my hands, and I could not miss. I have done nothing, beyond that I changed the sakers for guns of a better length that were idle in my own ship, it being moored to the inner quay. After that, the praise is for them who laid them well, that they did not miss."

"But that," she said, "even though it were fairly said, is not how honour is paid. It is he who succeeds, from whatever cause, and he who is first in command on the winning day who will take reward. They would make you Commander, I well suppose, for this and your Uncle's name. But you do not think to take the oath of a Maltese knight?"

There was something more than a casual curiosity in the way in which this question was put, something of the tone of one who has a personal stake at issue on the reply, of which he could not fail to become aware, as she may have meant.

"I have not thought much of that," he replied; "it was my uncle's design, which, had he lived, he would have urged me to do. It is a high honour, and so esteemed in all Christian lands. But I like not the monkish vows."

"The vows," she said, "are not such as can be praised by a woman's lips, be they evil or good. Nor am I likely to love that which has chased me here.

"And the Grand Master," she went on, feeling it to be a discourse that the

text required, "may not show his full wisdom in this, that he holds that we who have the high honour to be the consolation of Knights of God, are in ourselves of less honour than ladies should like to be; which is because, as I suppose, if he had his way, they would have no consolation at all, which may be more than men of a living blood will consent to endure.

"But he would see, if his harshness of hate did not cast a scarf round his reason's eyes, that if we be faithful to whom we love, though we be not held in the Church's bond, our honour must stand with those who may be wed in a colder way."

She spoke what she had thought out before, as having a good sound for Francisco's ears, but she was not unaware that it had more than one edge, coming from the lips of her who had little will to be true to La Cerda now. She had a sound instinct that, though she might be legally free to wed, she would have a better chance to win Francisco to that end if La Cerda were not alive. Why would he not die, where so many did? Even St. Elmo had not been able to bring him to that!

Her words brought La Cerda to Francisco's mind in another way, which was as unwelcome to him.

"The Chevalier La Cerda was here to-day," he said, "enquiring for you."

"Leon here!" she exclaimed. "You told him naught? He does not know where I hide?"

Her voice was sharp with a sudden dread, which confirmed the doubt he had felt before as to what she would wish him to do, and gave him a satisfaction therefrom which it would have pleased her to know. But she had little pleasure in his reply, though he could deny that he had done that which was her first fear.

"I said I could tell him naught, unless I have warrant from you."

She saw some implications of that which she did not like.

"Then he must know I am here?"

"He knows less than that. He will conclude that I can see you within the day. That I could not avoid."

Could not avoid! She thought things which it would have been foolish to say. She grew very still, as she would when danger was near. Her face ceased to reveal her thoughts.

As she was not quick to speak, he went on: "I have his promise that he will not make revelation of aught to which you do not consent; and even then it shall be in such form that there will be nothing said of how I have held you here."

"And how," she asked, with some reason behind her scorn, "did he think to contrive that? We are to plead mercy of most pitiless men, and I with my hands red with the blood of death, and we are to elect what we will say, or where we

will remain still. It would be to ask for the rack in an urgent voice!"

"I know not what he may have in mind," Francisco replied, feeling that he faced a blame which should not be his, "but he would have it that I presumed too far in that which was his matter and yours, and on which he would let me know that you would come to easy accord if I let you meet. . . . But that his arm is not healed, and that I did not know what you would wish, it had been likely to come to steel, as it did when we met before."

"When will he be next here?"

"At to-morrow noon."

"I will tell you before then what you shall say. We will leave it now. . . . But I have been sheltered here while the storm goes by, and to venture out, when there is no evident need——!"

Francisco felt with her in that. For her to go would be as though the sun should have left the sky; and he could not think either that La Cerda would find her a surer retreat, or that she could now be disclosed without more trouble than it would be easy to overcome. Why must the man come with a bandaged arm? He should have been met with denial of all reply but a dagger's point, and if swords and daggers had soon been bare—well, there might have been some comfort in that!

Even the great deed he had done had come to seem no more than a little thing, nor was he urgent to know whether, in that noise of strife that still thundered to south and east, the Sanglea endured or was overrun. War and love battled for his regard, and he was most aware of the tyranny of a woman's eyes, which might be withdrawn after they had lately softened to him.

He went out to where Antonio watched by the waiting guns that would not be loosed on another prey, or at least not for that time.

## CHAPTER VIII

MUSTAPHA, having resolved to attack the Sanglea with all the force that he had, had given Hassan sole command of the operations thereagainst, both by water and land. He had done this because Hassan had come with a crescent fame: he had the vigour of youth: he had the confident manner of those who are sufficient for the crises of life: and his name was one to give valour to doubtful men.

It was also to be weighed that he had had no share in St. Elmo's siege, and its abortive assaults, which had brought no glory to Turkish arms, but only reaped with a hungry sickle the lives of men. He came freshly upon the scene, with an unsullied prestige.

But Mustapha, who resolved all in a subtle mind, had a motive beyond these. The losses of the regular army of the Turks, of the famous regiments of spahis and janissaries whose horsehair standards had been the terror of the Balkan battlefields for the half-century that had seen the Cross go down, and the rise of the Crescent Moon, had suffered losses since they had been landed in Malta two months before, of which he had dreaded to make report.

He knew that Soliman would hear more lightly of the loss of every man that Dragut brought to the war than that one of his favourite regiments had been destroyed. And Dragut had stubbornly and perversely regarded matters in a quite opposite light. If Piali would attack too soon, he had said more than once, it should be Turkish lives that should be exposed to the Christian fire. He preferred that his pirates should live to another day.

Mustapha considered the new levies that Hassan had brought, and he thought that it would be an excellent thing that they should advance on the Sanglea redoubts, and be shot down by St. Michael's guns. But he saw that Hassan might be of Dragut's mind, rather than his, on this point. To ensure that he should not refuse his own troops, there could be no better way than to give him command of the whole operation, to which, indeed, Hassan made no demur.

He agreed to conduct the attack on the Sanglea, and that his own corsairs should lead the assault on the inland side. Mustapha made his mistake when he loaded the boats with the very flower of the Turkish ranks. He had been subtle in that too, not doubting that they would land, and at a time when the Christian strength would have been largely engaged (if not spent) in resisting Hassan's attack, so that the honour of success might be lightly theirs, as he would prefer

it to be.

Hassan made no more objection to that. With a seaman's eye, he may have judged the risk of the water attack to be greater than it appeared to one who was more familiar with operations on solid ground. He said that his own lieutenant, Candelissa, should command the boats, for which he was as good a man as could have been found. So it is said that he did. But as he was alive on the next day, we must suppose that he was in the one boat that was left unsunk, or that he found some pretext to stay ashore.

When Piali sulked that the command was not to be his, as Mustapha had expected him to do, he was appeased with words adroit in a falsehood which could not be seen, if at all, till a later day: "This is not for you, whether it may fail or succeed. For, if it fail, it will remain yours to succeed at a better time. And should it succeed is there not St. Angelo standing beyond? It will be your turn for the greater deed."

But in his heart Mustapha resolved that there should be no other name than his own to be linked with that last assault, when the eight-pointed cross should be trampled down from its last footing on Malta's rocks, as he had served it in the fertile garden of Rhodes, forty years before. . . .

Hassan looked with cool and confident eyes on a chaos of strife and blood that spread far around the bastioned trenches of the Sanglea, and from which a confused and dreadful noise rose into the tortured air.

The Christians fought well. So he had expected that they would do. The losses of his own troops must be rising to a high tale. He had expected no less. He knew (as De Broglio said before) that a fosse will feed on the lives of men. But he knew, beyond that, that the cost of failure, at the last count, is always heavier than that which success will ask. He did not intend to fail. He loved the war of the sea better than these bloody scuffles upon the shore, but, if he undertook to storm the Sanglea, he meant that it should be done.

When they brought him the tale (which he had partly seen from afar) of the dreadful loss of the boats, he could afford to take it without despair, seeing how sorely he pressed the Christian lines by that time. He may even have thought: "Well, it is Tripoli will have honour here," with a content that he must not show.

He looked at the Christian ramparts, against which his legions rose like a storming sea. Knightly pennons which had flaunted at dawn were no longer there. They were in his own camp, the raped spoil of waves of attack which had risen over the wall. These had been thrown back, but they rose again, and he watched for a higher wave to advance at last which would rise, and rise—and go on.

They who fought to retain the low long ramparts of the Sanglea were not in danger alone from those who made its assault; they were exposed to a pitiless,

ceaseless fire from a surrounding circle of foes, who were in number as six to one. They must show themselves to a hail of death, or, if they crouched low, it would be to see the gleam of scimitars rising over the wall.

Hassan said: "It is time to bring this to a right end." He planned well. He saw that the most part of the defenders had been drawn to the eastward ramparts that faced the land, which it was his effort to take by storm. He judged that there would be few left to protect those that faced the inlet, between the land and the fort of St. Michael at the end of the spur. He ordered that the cannon that had bombarded the Sanglea over the narrow inlet, shattering the palisade which ran the length of the middle creek, should prepare to augment their fire. He chose men of good courage, used to water, and to taking ships by the board. He ordered that they should be led by those who knew where the shallow inlet could be waded, leaving their shoulders bare at the deepest parts. The shorter men were to fall out of the ranks at their own choice, should they be unable to swim.

When he had launched these attacks, which he did not expect to succeed, he supposed that they would draw off many of those who were now on his own front, who were few and weary enough as they then were, and so the time would come for the last assault, by which he was resolved to prevail.

He marshalled his best troops, which he had held back till that time, and rode along the front of the fierce turbaned ranks, pointing with his scimitar to the ramparts that had so far endured, but which he thought to be near their fall.

"Sons of the Prophet," he cried, "I point the way of honour and safety alike, for if you allow yourselves to be thrown back now, as you need not be, you must charge again, at a further cost, till that wall is won. The Christian dogs are weary and few. Forward, my children, in Allah's name, and the town is yours."

The fierce dark fanatic faces, lifted to his, burst into a wild barbaric cry, as of a beast that has scented prey. With shouts of God's and the Prophet's names, with clash of cymbals and throbbing of urgent drums, they surged forward to the attack.

The Christians met them with a fire that strewed the ground with the best and bravest who led the charge, but it was one that would not falter nor pause. Gapped and thinned as they were, the ardent ranks swept on, and over the wall. Sword and scimitar, axe and pike, met in a turmoil of bitter strife, where no thought of mercy would be likely to come. Either side might have their own chivalries for themselves, but in this war they slew dogs, such as could not be too quickly sent to their native hells. He who, for the moment, could not meet with an active foe, would seek the wounded, to make an end with another thrust, knowing that what he did would be pleasing to God, and might cancel a score of sins. But such respites were few. Under the meeting ranks, fosse and

wall became a shambles of blood and the trampled dead.

Hassan had not led the charge, which it was not his business to do. But he rode forward, urging the rearward rank in support, and reined his horse so close to the fosse's edge that he could observe how each man played his part for honour or blame, which he would not forget to give.

There was, in fact, little danger in what he did, for the discharge of firearms had almost ceased on both sides, now that they were locked in so close a broil that no shot could have been aimed at a foe which would not have been as likely to find its rest in a friend's back. He sat there as separate and secure as one who looks on at a show.

As he looked, his face took on a stern satisfied smile, for he saw that his corsairs' fury was not in vain. Inch by inch, they won footing upon the wall.

But the Christian knights, though driven back for some space, were of no disposition to fly. They fought on in a stubborn way, and others came running to their support. The strife swayed backward again. Hassan's face changed. He shouted encouragement to men who were unable to hear: who were most concerned with their own lives, as they struggled to hold their ground, drenched, as they mostly were, either with their own or another's blood.

He saw that it was one of those moments when the issue quivers between victory and defeat, and may be turned by a shout, or a single blow. He rode his horse back for a few yards, and then forward toward the ditch, which he took with a flying leap.

The splendid barb that he rode came down on the curtain's edge as surely as a swallow alights, but the next moment it rolled screaming upon the ground, its belly pierced by a Christian lance. Hassan avoided it as it fell. His scimitar came down in a flashing death upon a man whose lance could not be recovered in time to protect his head. He shouted a war-cry that rose over the clamour of meeting steel and the voices of frenzied men, and his name echoed an inspiration along the strife. The Moorish line was swaying forward again.

La Cerda had been among those who had run to the support of that perilled front. He had been sent, on Del Monte's order, with other knights from a quieter place. They came fresh of vigour and heart among wearied and wounded men. For a moment they had sustained the defence, until Hassan had leapt the fosse. A short distance behind, Del Monte himself, with all the men he could spare from St. Michael's fort, was hurrying to the threatened line.

Hassan saw a knight who was not easy to miss. He showed some freshness of silk, and of polished steel, among those whose armour was soiled and dimmed. He stood firm also, among men who gave ground, who flinched somewhat away. He bore no shield, but had his sword in a single hand, his left arm bandaged against his side.

Hassan's scimitar, keen and curved, cut the air as it threatened the head of



the Christian knight, and was parried well. Hassan had a small round buckler on his left arm, to take the point of the straighter sword which was the weapon of Western lands. So it must do now. The two warriors found themselves engaged in one of those duels which were common in the hand-to-hand strife of that day, from which others might stand aside. The difference of weapons and styles of fence made attack more dangerous than defence was sure, and such combats were quickly done.

Hassan gave the first wound. Aiming at the weakest approach, he slashed at La Cerda's left, so that the scimitar's keen thin point cut down the length of the upper arm to such depth that the blood spouted high from the wound. Seeing that he could not endure with that hurt, La Cerda staked all on a downward blow that the Moor was too late to turn. He wore a turban lined with Damascus steel, which was well for him. The fine metal was furrowed deeply, but not cut through. Hassan stumbled forward, and fell at La Cerda's feet.

The fierce hostile crowds that had paused a moment to watch the bout closed in an instant rush to rescue or make an end. Behind them, Del Monte, with a score of knights at his side, charged forward in a rush that regained the wall. The corsairs perished or fled, their inspiration ended with Hassan's fall, but not till they had borne him safely away. In another hour, he was again in control, with no more hurt than a bruised head, and a turban to be repaired.

But Del Monte had bent his knee by a dying man. The arm might have been staunched, and would have proved less than a fatal wound, but La Cerda had taken another thrust from a nameless hand.

Del Monte heard talk that La Cerda had cut down the Moorish leader, so that it was likely that he was dead. It was certain that his valour, and Hassan's fall had held back the tide of attack, giving Del Monte time to arrive.

He would have shriven him, seeing him to be close to death. "You have done well," he said, "for the Cross of Christ, and if you are sped now, as you must know that you are, it is such a death as must give pleasure to God. Have you aught you would now confess? Have you worldly charge that I can make mine, to secure your peace?"

La Cerda spoke from a fluctuant mind, and his voice was low.

"I would have your word," he said, "—for the Commanders will listen to you when the Council meets—I would have your word that he shall do me no further despite."

"If I understand what you mean," Del Monte replied, "as I will not pretend in another way, it is that which is lightly sworn, for the Grand Master will give you honour for what you have done this day, as it is his nature to do."

"I will take your oath," La Cerda replied to that, "though as to what the Grand Master would be likely to do, I should say you misdeem, for he has a

venom which will not stay at the gates of death. . . . But I will the content that I have your oath that he shall do me no more despite, either against her, or him who has sheltered her from his bitter hate.”

The words were slow and faint, so that Del Monte must bend to hear. As he caught them, he was perplexed with a doubt that he had been taken to swear something more and different from that which he had supposed to be in La Cerda’s mind.

So he would have said, or at least that he must be better informed on that which he was expected to do, but he saw that he spoke, if not to a dead man, to one who had become deaf to all earthly words.

“It is the death,” he said, “of a good and most misfortunate knight.” He made the sign over his breast which the devils fear, and turned to order a strife which was not yet done, though its issue was no longer in doubt.

## CHAPTER IX

“HE shall be buried,” the Grand Master said, “with all the honour his deeds deserve, for it was a most valorous act to so stand his ground when the line sagged, and against one of Hassan’s repute, he having, as we may say, but one arm.

“I have a confident hope that God allowed him thus to assoil his soul, putting aside the feeble counsel he gave before, which came, as I suppose, from the lecherous life which he then led, by which devils had entrance to whisper behind his ear. But we may hope that he had also renounced that lechery from his soul, its cause having been vanished away.”

He said this in Sir Oliver’s room, Del Monte also being there. He was exultant at the great success of the last day, for if they had to provide for the burial of two hundred who had been slain, including such knights as it was pity to lose, yet the attack had been thrown back upon every side, and with such loss that the Turks might not be over-quick to attempt it a second time. It was talked that, including those who had been drowned from the boats, their loss was not far short of four thousand men, which may be hard to believe; but if we suppose it to include such as would soon be healed for another bout, we may say that it is no more than may be the lot of those who set flesh against stubborn stone, if it be defended well from above.

The Grand Master spoke less as one expecting reply, than as giving judgment over the dead, but Del Monte was a man of plain words, though not contentious of mood, and he would make it clear that he did not agree.

“You are right,” he said, “as to half, and perhaps more. But as to St. Elmo, and the counsel he gave, I would advise, if you will not take it amiss, that there should be no such words over his tomb, if you should have occasion to speak in a public way when our brothers are laid to rest. For there are many who hold that he said no more than a good knight should, giving honest counsel of war; and he has shown by his end that he did not speak from any faintness of heart, as was said by some at that time.

“And as to putting lechery from his soul, it is between God and him now, and there is no need to say more; except only this, that as he died he made his appeal to me, that I should speak on his part, if you should seek to do him further despite.

“That I said you would never practise to do, and so I lightly swore that I would take his part in such case; but if I should prove to be in error in that,

then, by the high Passion of God, I will not be dumb.

“Yet I will say that at the time I swore I did not clearly perceive (hearing but the faint words of a dying man) that his thoughts were on her whom you supposed he had put aside, his petition being made for the wanton who fled away, and for one (as I understood) who had sheltered her from the law’s pursuit.”

The Grand Master listened to this with a look in which resentment followed surprise, but he controlled himself as a smaller man would have been less able to do.

“Del Monte,” he said, “we will have no quarrel for this, and on a day when Heaven’s mercy has blessed our arms. La Cerda’s soul is with God, and its judgment His, and we have our own, which are still to save. But having sworn such an oath to maintain his part, I will say that you have spoken knightly and well, though it may have been little honour to me. Nor would I be wroth at honest words which are spoken for me to hear, knowing that worse are said when I am further away, by those who are worthy of less esteem. . . . And as to the wanton who could so corrupt the soul of a knight of God, I will go so far as to hope she may not be found. But if she be, I will do justice without reprieve, thinking only of the high office I hold, and neither to favour the living, nor to heed the pleas of the dead.”

Having said this, he went out, being more deeply moved even than his words showed, for he thought at times that he was hated by all, and was less than sure that he had such support of God as should make him deaf to the contemning voices of men.

Sir Oliver looked after him, and spoke with a friend’s voice.

“I would that he were not so deeply stirred as he often is, for he is not young” (La Valette was sixty-eight at this time), “and he spends his strength in too free a way. He is wrong at times, as we may be tempted to think, but I suppose that he was sent by God to support this hour, and he lives for Malta alone.”

“You are his good friend,” Del Monte replied, “and have spoken nothing to which I do not agree. . . . I will tell you this, that I was, as it were, trapped to the oath I gave, from which I cannot think that I am therefore absolved, for I do not conclude that La Cerda meant to trap me at all. But he thought of a woman he loved, as a man will at the gates of death, and St. Elmo was in my mind.”

“So I have no doubt that it was; yet, if you will heed my guess, the woman of whom you speak, as she is not one to deserve a love of a constant kind, so she did not have it from him. It was pride that stirred, rather than love, in a dying man. It was, in your own word, which I take for his, that the Grand Master should not do him further despite.”

Del Monte did not dispute that. He said: "Well, there was one hope the Grand Master had, with which we may both accord. It will be well that she be not found."

It was at this time that Francisco was with Venetia in his rock-hewn cell, and they talked of La Cerda's death. It was a joy to her which she knew she must not show. She had contrived a tear, which may have been slower to fall, knowing that there were no more of its kind to come.

Francisco sat by her couch, and a soft hand fell on his wrist, as though by an idle chance, and was not taken away.

"I cannot grieve," she said, "as I should, having been so friended by you."

Francisco kissed her hand for so kind a word.

His fingers moved on her arm, and were sharply withdrawn, for he had thrilled to a sudden passion at which he feared, lest his knighthood be brought to shame. Yet La Cerda's death had been joy to him, with the birth of a better hope than he had been able to feel before. It was a hope he could not obtrude in this moment of natural grief. . . . But at a near day. . . . When this siege would be done, as it soon might (how many more boats must be first sunk? What a slaughter it must have been to a nearer view!) and when people would come and go in a free way, so that she could be removed without fear—or perhaps sooner than that—he had eager, impatient dreams, over which honour shone, an unclouded star. . . .

An hour later, when they were talking still, between silences which were more pregnant than words, he was roused by Captain Antonio's voice. He stood discreetly without. He said: "Captain, the Grand Master is nearly here. I suppose I am not to hold him at bay?"

Francisco went out with an elation that he found hard to conceal beneath the cloaks of shyness and pride, for he knew that the Grand Master must be coming to inspect the battery which had worked such havoc the day before, and perhaps to give him some tangible honour, or more certain praise for the part which he had been able to play.

He did not meet the Grand Master alone, for Sir Oliver Starkey was there; and three other Commanders of the Order; and a file behind of the gay-uniformed Castle Guards showed that the visit was of an official sort. There was one other that Francisco had not expected to see, for Sir Oliver brought Angelica at his side.

"You shall come," he said; "for it must be pleasure to hear that your cousin will have a merited praise, and to him alike to know that you hear it said."

Angelica would have preferred to have kept away, but she had been alert that Sir Oliver should have no guess that Francisco and she were estranged, lest he should guess further toward the cause, and the same caution had kept her dumb now, being unable to think of a plausible pretext that she would not

be glad to be there.

The Grand Master was generous in his praise, and particular in the inspection he made. He must see not only the *Santa Martha's* guns, by which the boats had been overset, but the ways in which the battery had been made strong, beyond the thought of its first design.

"I had no purpose in this," he was frank to say, "beyond to here establish guns of such range that they would command the boom which they overlook. But you have brought guns of a greater range, and made it an outwork of solid strength, so that both harbour and castle are more secure; and, beyond that, you have been able to strike in a vital way from where they thought we had no such fangs. . . . I marvel that it had not been betrayed before now, for there is little they do not learn."

Francisco must answer that with explanation of the care with which he had chosen those who must handle the battery guns, and the discipline which made spying hard, and the Grand Master approved again.

"You are of your Uncle's blood," he said, "and it is pleasure to know that it does not fail. For it draws the venom of death if we can feel that we live again in those that are of a near blood." He sighed, as he spoke, from a private grief, having had his own son (or nephew as he must be called by the etiquette which the Statute of De L'Isle Adam required, and which he had himself been stern to enforce, since he had come to his present power) killed but a few days before, which may be held to show that he had been less austere in his younger days than he now was; but he said nothing of that.

He asked how the guns with which the battery had been first supplied would be put to use, and gave praise again when he was shown that preparations to mount them at a new angle were well advanced.

"By which time," Sir Oliver said, "I must make allotment of further men for this post. Can you give good shelter to such?"

Francisco said there need be no doubt about that, and the Grand Master, who was ever one to see all, to the last item there was, must inspect the excavations in which men might crouch secure against hostile shot, when they were not working the guns.

Venetia heard the voices without, which approached her cell. She could tell they were looking into that which Captain Antonio had, being next to hers. She was in her bed at this time, being the sole one that the cell held, for Francisco would lie on the floor. There she would be most of these days, having no purpose for which to rise. She had lain as they had talked for the last hour, with Francisco on a stool at her side.

Now she looked round in a sudden fear. Was there no place where she could hide from intruding eyes? She sprang out to the floor. As to clothes, she could have had more on, and not much. She ran round, like a trapped rat,

seeking a hole that was not there. She heard Captain Antonio's voice without: "There is naught to be seen here, it is like to mine." She stood in the midst of the floor, not daring to move. Was the danger past?

She heard a more austere voice, being that of the Grand Master, though that was more than she knew. "But the angle should be sharper than that, if it is to keep out a fragment of flying stone. Now you observe here——"

Footsteps approached round the bend.

For once Venetia did not know what to do. She stood still.

The Grand Master stopped, as must those behind, who could see less. He may be excused that there was a moment when amazement had made him dumb.

He came from the sun to a cell that was dimly lit, and may have wondered at first if he could be deceived by the sudden gloom. But as his eyes adjusted themselves he became assured that he looked at a woman whose body, supple and young, was reserved from sight by no more than a short shift, and a shawl of price, blue and brodered with gold, that was round her neck as a frame for a pale-gold head.

"Oliver," he said, "what in the fiend's name do we find here?"

The Grand Master did not suppose that Sir Oliver had any special knowledge of this. He simply appealed to him for any information that he required; as it was his habit to do.

Had he not been directly asked, Sir Oliver might have kept still, and the Grand Master discovered no more than that Francisco kept a wanton within his cell. That might have been trouble enough, but it could not have gone deep or far after the service he had just done, for he was not bound by the Order's vows.

But, being so addressed, Sir Oliver made explicit reply: "As I think, it is she who is sought for the steward's death."

"It is shrewdly guessed." The Grand Master had advanced into the cell by this time, and it was half filled by those who crowded behind. He looked round to ask in a sharp voice: "Don Francisco, will you explain?"

Francisco had been at the rear of the group, and, as those of better right followed the Grand Master into the cell, Angelica was left at his side. She knew what was to come some seconds before the Grand Master spoke, for it was what she had been fearing to see. For where else could he have hidden the girl, as she had no doubt he had done?

She had watched Antonio turn La Valette adroitly to his own cell, and then his futile effort to prevent the entrance of that before which they stood. At the moment, all other thoughts were swept back by that of the danger in which Francisco lay.

Standing as though dazed, to await that which he had no power to control,

he heard her voice, low and intense, at his side: "Francis, will you not go? There is yet time."

Antonio spoke at his other hand. "There is a boat under the quay, at the hither steps." It was a provision he had made for such a moment as this, though he had said no word of it before.

And it was clearly a chance. There were none around but the Grand Master's Guards, who surely would not oppose his way, and some of his own men. If he could reach the boat, he might row round to some part of the island which was still in Maltese hands. With the help of gold, of which he carried a full pouch. . . . Antonio would have said that a slender chance is much better than none.

There was a moment during which Francisco was unresolved, though it is unlikely that he would have fled, being of too high a pride not to defend that which he had thought fitting to do. But while he paused, he heard Venetia's voice—a cool, insolent voice—and his resolution was made. "I will not leave her," he said, "having done nothing beyond my right."

Venetia had not left it to Francisco to give the Grand Master reply. In that pause of silence she had seen that she was cornered beyond retreat, and her courage rose to the audacity which (as she thought) the occasion required.

"If you will know who I am," she said, "I am here to ask. I am La Cerda's *amie*, as you suppose. I was his who died for your cause in the last day. Would you seek to shame me for that? Is it knightly done, that you do not retire when you see me as I now am?"

Francisco had come forward by this. He faced the Grand Master in the pride of youth and a foolish love, and was neither abashed nor afraid.

"There is not much to explain. I gave shelter to one who came to me in a great need, he who should have been her shield having been jailed for a cause which I do not know. If I may say it with great respect, I am not of the High Order of which you are Head, nor am I under its vows, but I have done in this as my own honour required (or as I so held); and for this you may hold me excused the more if I have been of some service to you, as you have graciously said in the last hour."

The Grand Master heard them both, but did not directly reply. He looked round the narrow cell, and its meaning did not seem doubtful to him, seeing what she had been, and what she was to his own eyes. He saw that the cell had no exit, except that through which they had come. He said to her: "You will have time to be more seemly attired for this hour, and for walking abroad, but you must do it with speed. You are charged with a man's death, and you must first answer to that."

He turned, and those who were there withdrew before him out of the cell, so that Venetia was left alone. He placed two of his guards at the entrance, to



make arrest when she should come out. “You will give her,” he said, “to the Provost-Marshal’s hands, letting her have commerce with none till you have delivered her thus, she being charged with a public crime.”

He walked away with no further word till he mounted the castle stairs, letting those follow who would. Then he turned to say: “Oliver, I would be alone. We will talk of this at a later hour.”

He saw that he was alone already, except that Sir Oliver had come closely behind, and there were two guards who had followed to the foot of the stair, as their duty was. He went on to his own room, which he still kept for his official affairs, though his lodging was in the town.

## CHAPTER X

ANGELICA, with misery at her cousin's peril warring with other feelings (but with a bright colour in none), lingered at his side, unsure that he wished her there, but reluctant to go. Antonio stood his ground alike, thinking that he saw what must be done, and of a resolute purpose to make it clear.

Francisco stood with no thought now of the flight which Antonio would have urged. His irresolution was of another sort. How could he aid her most? Should he go to her now, to take counsel while there was time? He was unsure whether the guards who stood waiting to make her arrest would regard it as within their duty to bar his way, and he might well hesitate to incur the humiliation of refusal or to attempt a violent entrance.

Antonio, knowing his own mind better than the others knew theirs, was the first to speak.

"If you will take advice from one who has seen more of the ways of men than you have had leisure to do, and can observe where you stand, as has ever seemed to be somewhat beyond your sight, you will use a time which may not be long. You should be away in this hour."

The words brought decision to Francisco's mind, or perhaps rather consciousness of decision already made.

"You may see well," he replied, "with your eyes, but they are not mine. I will neither desert her part at this need, nor will I fly as one pleading a guilt which I do not own. . . . And I may be in less danger than you suppose, for you must see that the Grand Master has passed me by, though he has made her arrest, he being silenced by what I said."

"I have observed you," Antonio answered to that, "to be as guileless as any man I have met, and as no woman could ever be; but, if you can think that, you are more innocent than I had concluded before. He owes you thanks for these guns, and for what they did. He will neither forget that, nor will it turn him aside from the hard methods of war. He will act by the process the law provides, without dally or haste, and if you should use the time to be quickly gone, I would not say that he would be over-much grieved. But in her case there was process already out, and her arrest is the routine of the law. . . . And he may be the more content that you go, having her safely within the bag. . . . Here is Don Garcio, who was once your friend. He may know more of these matters than we, being in Sir Oliver's grace as few are. You can ask him, if you will, and see whether we do not counsel alike."

Francisco must look at his cousin when this was said, and met troubled eyes.

“Francis,” she said, “I would not urge you to flee, if you think it shame, but I am in a great fear. There was proclamation of death against who should do what you cannot deny, and it was said to be without favour to any, of whatever degree. It is time of war, and the Grand Master can be a most hard, though I would not say that he is a pitiless man.”

“Be he as hard as he may,” Francisco replied, “he has foes enough over the wall, without making others of those who have done such service as I. . . . I would say that it is counsel of cowards, if you will not take it amiss. But we may urge our friends to that which our honour would not allow.”

“Then,” Antonio replied, “if you call me coward, I will say no more, beyond this. You may go in the next hour, or you will be dead in a week. So in that space you must get all the further honour your life will know.”

“That you are wrong in that,” Francisco replied, with more confidence than he had spoken before, “I would wager all you could lose, except that, if the loss were mine, I might lack occasion to pay. But, in a word, I will stay here, as my duty is. Only, I will leave you in charge for a short time, for I will see the Provost-Marshal, that she be lodged as her station requires, and have such comforts as gold will buy.”

“You may spare your legs,” Antonio replied, “for a better cause. For I can tell you that the Provost-Marshal has not so base an apartment to give, but it would be better than was the cellar from which she came.”

Angelica did not understand all the implications of this remark, not being aware that Venetia had been born in the next Genoese street to that in which Captain Antonio made his home, but she felt that there was another beside herself who would not have valued Venetia at her own price, at which she was not displeased. She felt also that Francisco was taking the course which honour required, and, if that were so, it must not be her part to turn him aside for any peril it had.

She saw too that dignity and discretion (for even he must see that his friends were few enough now!) might be insufficient to restrain her cousin’s resentment at Antonio’s contemptuous words, and was the quicker to speak, that she might turn his mind in another way.

“Francis, I would not ask you to play the coward, as I think you know. But will you assent that I see Sir Oliver now, and learn all I can of what the Grand Master will be likely to do? And I will meet you again, and you could then resolve how it may be avoided, or else met.”

“Yes,” he said, though with less grace than he might, “I will thank you for that, if it can be readily learned, for it will be of avail to know. . . . Can you say a word beyond that, that Venetia be not too straitly confined, she having done

that which her honour required, and no more?"

There was a pause during which she was not sure what her answer would be. Venetia's honour? She did not think its requirements could be much, at whatever pass. Much less than even a steward's blood should be spilled to save. Look where she was now! But then she laughed in her sudden way: "Yes. I will say that, if you so desire." She turned abruptly, seeing that Venetia was coming out, whom she was not anxious to meet.

Francisco, when he cast his thoughts in that way at a later hour, was content to feel that the shadow which had lain between his cousin and him was somewhat lifted aside. He associated it vaguely with his having taken Venetia under his protection, which it had been necessary to conceal, even from her. But if she had not known, nor perhaps guessed, till now, could it be that? Then he remembered Angelica's reproach that he had put her in such a position that she had been obliged to appear as his mistress in La Cerda's eyes, lest there should have been more mischief than that. . . . It had been as they came down the stairs that the quarrel had reached its head, though it had been latent before. Its root had lain in his reproaches against herself that she had come in a disguise that he thought shame to the name she bore. . . . Yet he saw that her honour stood, and that she had maintained it somewhat more firmly than he could be said to have done with his to that hour. He saw also that she had shown more loyalty to himself than he had to her (though he would never have loitered to reach her side, had she been in peril that he could aid, as he may have failed to observe), and these were thoughts that he did not like. They abased his pride. He had been grave to rebuke what he thought the unseemly prank that had brought her there, and it was he who was fallen into the pit, while she walked cool and secure.

Yet he was glad to feel that the cloud between them was less, though it had not gone. When he thought of that, he realized, by instinct's rather than logic's aid, that Venetia was the cause, and that she was one whom Angelica was never likely to love. In fact, he must make a choice. Sooner or later, it would come to that, more definitely than now. He did not doubt what the choice would be, for Venetia filled his thoughts, and every passionate hope was centred upon her sharp gay wit, her courageous conduct of life, and the grace of her pale-gold head; but the thought gave him no joy. For, by a paradox which is frequent in the interchanges of human life, as Angelica had become less to him, she had become more. But Venetia was the madonna who filled his dreams.

Turning from these thoughts to his own peril (if such it were), he found that he could face it with less fear than it may have seemed to deserve. Every passion must thrive at the cost of others, which dwindle that it may swell. He thought of what he had done, and could see little to blame, and even less to

regret. The Grand Master's proclamation might threaten a felon's fate, but why should such things be proclaimed? Bitter anger and pride strengthened him to fight fear, and to meet any accusation which might be made with a bold front. Had he not sunk the boats which would else have landed those who might have won the centre of the Sanglea, even had St. Michael's fort still flown the eight-pointed cross, which was less than sure? And it had been something more than the competence which every battery commander may be expected to show, that his guns be fired at the best time, and pointed aright. It was through himself alone that there had been guns there of range sufficient to fire across the whole length of the Christian defence on the harbour-front. And his reward was no more than this! He felt that he would not lack words in his own relief, though he was not always known for a fluent tongue. If he had played a boy's part, it seemed that it would be met in a man's way.

He had these thoughts as he walked back from the common jail in the Bourg, where Venetia had been confined. He had found gold to be as potent there as it ever is, whether in palace or slum; though he had paid out less than he would, having had the use of Antonio's wisdom before he went.

For the little captain had not spared his advice, though he thought it to be a fool's errand which Francisco pursued. "You will do less with ten crowns of gold," he had said, "if you pay them down, than if you give one, and show other four which are to be earned in a settled way. But with gold enough that is kept in sight but not pouched, you could put her even to the Grand Master's bed, so that he must sleep on the floor."

Francisco may have gained less for Venetia than for his own peace; for she knew enough of jails on their inner side to have got most that she would, short perhaps of the master-key, but she would have paid in a coin which he would not have been quick to guess; as to which she would have said that it left her as rich as she was before, which we may find to be true enough, if we consider it well.

Francisco was not overlong abroad, but he found that Angelica had come and gone when he got back, having had no more to say than she could ask Antonio to report to him.

## CHAPTER XI

“I MUST know,” Angelica said, “in what danger my cousin lies, for I can have no peace till I do.”

Sir Oliver did not resent the words or manner of this address, which would have been unfitting from whom she pretended to be, and was not much better from whom she was as they both knew, for the sharp anxiety in her tone was easy for him to hear, and his reply was kinder than may be plain in the written word.

“Then you must know something I cannot tell, for there is nothing resolved. But I tell you all that I may when I say that the Grand Master is agreed that he will do nothing alone. There is Council called for the last hour of the day, when the Commanders will consider your cousin’s case.”

“Then he can be under no restraint till that hour?”

Sir Oliver frowned a little at a question which he thought should not have been asked, and the more so if it were not done in an idle way.

“Why do you ask? It is that which you should be able to resolve in your own mind, without assurance from me.”

“I ask because I would have it clear that he will remain of his own will, as having done nothing which should be dispraised in a just mind.”

“Can you think that?”

“It is not what I think that can be of any account. It is for him I would speak. He is resolved that he will not go, as he has time to do.”

“Can you say where?”

“No. But there are those who could. Of whom he is one.”

“You have learnt this from him?”

“There are things I have heard, and I think there are none that I may not say, or at least to you, so that I mention no name but his. He could have gone if he would.”

“Well, I will not ask where, which is not easy to see. But I will say that I think him wise. . . . Yet, when I say that, you must not build on it too much, for this is a matter on which I shall have no warrant to deal. It is over me.”

“I should be slow to say that. You have a great power.”

“You may call it more than it is. And against that which the Council resolve it is nothing at all.”

“But you will be there.”

“I shall be one among ten or twelve, and there will be some who can speak

with more weight than I.”

“It is what I will not believe.”

“Well, I have said as much as I should. I will not forecast the Council’s resolve, nor disclose what my part may be to one who (I suppose) would soon tell it to him. If he remain (as I have said that he should, for it is that, as I think, that his honour needs), he shall have no warrant from me.”

“Then I will ask no more at this time, except this, which I have promised to do. Will the woman be so confined that she will have no hardship or shame till her trial come?”

Sir Oliver looked at her with eyes which were less grave than before. “Do you speak as a parrot does, or are you grieving for her?”

“It is a promise I gave. I have said that before. But I will say of myself that I do not think she has done very much wrong; or, at least, it is not for that which she has done wrong that she is pursued, but for that which she would not do, and which she denied (as she must) with a dagger’s point. And for one placed as she says she was, I should call it a good way.”

“You speak well for one whom I can still see that you do not love. But I will answer you in two words.

“The first is this. She will be fairly tried, and she will be kept in sufficient honour till then (even if she have not had the help of your cousin’s gold, which is easy to guess); and this is not an Italian town.

“And the second is this. I know not how the man died, about which it is right, as you must allow, that a proper inquest be made; but the woman is one who will work mischief until she have a knife in her own ribs, for which I should say she is no less fit than you would have me think that the steward was. She will find trouble as a wet sponge gathers the dirt.

“But you shall not say that you have asked a small thing which I would not do. You shall indite a note to the Provost-Marshal from me which I think he will not contemn.”

Having obtained all that she could, Angelica went without loss of time to tell Francisco of that, and may have been less than pleased to find that he was away, but she had seen that Captain Antonio was his friend sufficiently for her to leave a message with him.

“You can tell him,” she said, “that the case is one which the Grand Master will not decide on the power he has, as he might do if he were moved by wrathful resolve (for the proclamation, as I understand, gives him power enough, it being a martial time, even to the taking of life), but there will be Council held at the last hour of the day, when there will be debate on what Don Francisco has done. I suppose (though I have no warrant to say) that they will look on the good deed as well as that which they must call by another name, and they should see that the first is of greater weight.”

“So it may be that they should,” the little Captain agreed, “but do you think that they will? There will be those who will contend that a proclamation so strait and clear cannot be flouted in time of war, lest it be said that there is no rule over those who do well in the field, on which any army would break apart.”

“There will be foolish talk,” Angelica replied. “That is sure. But we hope that better words will prevail.”

“So we will. And so it may be, if you have made Sir Oliver friend.”

“He may be of good will. But he says that in this he has little power. We are to build nothing on him.”

“Well, I have given my counsel before. I must hope I am shown wrong. . . . Is that all you would have me say?”

“Except that I have obtained that the Provost-Marshal shall have written request that she shall be lodged in a seemly way until the trial is due.”

“In a seemly way? I should say that that would not be far from the filth of the middle street.”

“That was not what I meant, as I think you know.”

“So I do. It is strange how a flower-like face will entrap those who are young, even though it may bring nothing to them.”

Angelica laughed at that, though laughter was not near to her heart, for the thought that she had been seduced by Venetia’s face to beg a soft lodging for her was a jest which she could not miss.

But when Captain Antonio went on: “Now a score of years will show her better for what she is, so that it will be a book that the young can read,” she felt the desire to take the part of one whom she did not love which Sir Oliver had noticed an hour before.

“That,” she said, “may be true of all whom God makes, and not only of her. But it may also be that His thought is more surely shown in the freshness of youth than in later years, when the blinds are down, and twilight is on the soul.”

“Well,” he said, “you take her part, and you may know why, at which I will guess no more.”

She thought of why it could be, which had not been clear to herself, and spoke the answer aloud, as she should have been too guarded to do: “It is, as I suppose, that we are caught alike in a world of men.” But her voice fell on the last word, as she became sharply aware of the implication of what she said.

She looked at Captain Antonio in a cool way, which it was not easy to do, and found that he was not looking at her. There was a silence the meaning of which was plain for her to guess, but which she was resolved should be broken by him, that she might judge what he knew, and how he would be likely to act thereon.



There came to both their minds (as they could not know, except each for one) a vision of night and a sloping deck, and of two who met in the light of a lantern that hung aloft. The salt water dripped from her doublet's folds: there was a cold wind at her back: and overhead were a few stars.

Then he spoke, and still without looking her way: "It is the gain of those who will wander much that they see things that are strange to tell, or which some would doubt, though they might be sworn in the Virgin's name. And we must see things at times that we do not speak at a later hour."

She considered this, and it was of her nature to take his word in the best way.

"It is knightly said," she replied, "as I should have thought that you would," at which he was well pleased, having some vanity of his own, which was not willing to think himself less than were those of a knight's degree, though he knew that most men would give him a smaller sum.

She went away with the assurance that what she had been careless to show would not be published abroad, and she left a much-puzzled man.

"We see much," he reflected, meaning they who wander on the face of the world, "but the enigmas are hard to rede."

He thought of her as he had seen her first, and of what she had done since to his own sight, and of the position she had come to hold, which was plain to all, at Sir Oliver's side, as one to whom he gave trust, and whom he would yet send on missions from which she might not return.

Why had she come to this peril in such a dress? What was the place she now held, either as woman or man? Was her sex known, and if so to how many, and who were they? What had she been to Don Francisco, or was she now? He had come on a strange vision of life, and its focus was changed by a word, but it was still blurred.

"And why," he thought, "she should be friend to that slut, I see less than before. Is it for the reason she gave? That they are two women snared in a world of men?" Well, so he must think, if it could be solved in no better way. But Angelica did not walk as one snared, but rather, though in a quiet style, as one cool and serene. And though Venetia might be closed in a world of men, he did not think it to be of that she would make complaint, but rather that they were not of a more infidel blood when they looked her way.

## CHAPTER XII

THE High Council of the Commanders of the Order of the Knights of St. John met in a formal style, as they had done when they had debated St. Elmo's fate, in the same hall, that was rich and high and of noble size, and furnished in the latest Italian style, so that a synod of cardinals would not have called it a mean place in which to debate the mysteries of the Faith, or the chastising of rebel lands.

But the Grand Master, looking round, thought not of grandeur or pride, seeing the empty places of those who had been there but a month before.

Where was Miranda now? De Broglio? D'Egueras? Medrano? Montserrat? Where a dozen more who had died on St. Elmo's walls? Where Zanoguerra, who had commanded the water-front of the Sanglea, and died at the moment when he had flung backward the last attack? Where La Cerda, the one man who had dared to assert opinion against his own? They were surely with God, having shed their blood to His and the Order's praise, and in the cause of all Christian lands. He did not doubt nor regret, but he saw how high St. Elmo's cost had been in his greatest names.

As to those who had fallen in the storming attack of the last day, he had made oration that afternoon over their flag-draped biers, and among them La Cerda's had not been the least of honour, as he had told himself in a stubborn but honest mind, and with the consciousness that we are all but a poor dust before the Infinite God, which must be felt by all Christian men, as they bend over the dead. . . .

There were others absent besides the dead—knights who excused themselves for weariness or for wounds, or that they must stand to a threatened post; and those who came, being a poor dozen at best, had the look of men who would have welcomed rest more than debate. Yet they had the aspect of stern and resolute men, with will and strength to endure, though the youth of most was a past day.

"Brothers," the Grand Master said, having made but a short prayer, as the time required, "I have called you here for a simple cause, and one, I hope, which may be quickly resolved.

"It is known to all, for it was debated before, that the Chevalier La Cerda brought to this place, in contempt of his own vows and to the scandal of Christian faith, a certain woman whom he had hidden away in his hired house when he was appointed to St. Elmo's defence.

“This woman, as was likely to be, became a fountain of lust and crime, so that a man was soon slain by her hand, and she fled, to make mischief in new resorts.

“I desire to say little of her, she being now laid by the heels, that she may be justly tried, as our custom is: nor would I have mentioned the Chevalier La Cerda as so debased, he being now dead in a better way, except that the tree which springs from this seed of hell has fruited again, with an evil which is not easy to mend.

“When this woman fled, there was proclamation made, by our common resolve, that none should give her cover to cheat the law, except at the pain of his own life, which should be forfeit therefor, and this alike were he high or low, with lack of favour to all.

“Now it was laid bare to my own eyes, and to others who are now here, that she was so hidden away by one who would not have been soon suspect, he being younger than most, of good name and blood, and being free from the lewd report to which some of our youth will fall when they are not under the Order’s vows. I mean, as you mostly know, the youth, Don Francisco, who is nephew to our late brother, the Commander Don Manuel, who so lately died.

“Don Manuel was my friend for fifty years, or but little less to the time he died, and he served our Order as few, under the favour of God, have been permitted to do. Don Francisco alike, seeming to be of his uncle’s complexion in this, has done good service to Malta’s cause, it being due to him, both in design and control, that the boats of the Turks were sunk, with a loss to them which I need not say.

“That is a matter for which we might give reward with a free hand, either of gold (but that would be naught to him for he does not lack) or in honour that he might put at a higher price; but how can we reward one whom we must apprehend, and put to a quick death, or have it said that we deal justice with partial scales?”

Having put the issue thus, the Grand Master sat down without suggesting a decision he would prefer. He let others speak, which all were not ready to do.

Del Monte sat silently await, conceiving that he was bound by his oath, not as having opinion himself, but as one holding a brief to speak the mind of a dead man, as he must suppose that he would have wished him to do. He waited to hear others first, that he might know what it might be necessary for him to say.

A Commander with a narrow ascetic face, and bright, piercing eyes under penthouse brows, whose name may be left aside, was the first to speak: “There is no choice that I see, but the law must perform its part. For we must observe that this was not an outrage of sudden blood, but that Don Francisco has defied both the law and the special proclamation we made, in a mood of sustained

contempt, which is too much to condone in a time of war, when discipline must not fail.”

His words were followed by comment of sundry sorts, showing that the Commanders might not be lightly agreed.

For one said: “Yet it was a fault of youth, and of the hot blood that pertains thereto. I say it should not be too hardly judged, he having done the great service he has.”

And another: “It is matter to mourn, as is all weakness and sin. . . . It should be most straitly proved that she was hidden of his device, and not secretly there. Yet must the law stand at the last, if it be so sustained. We must pluck forth the offending eye, though the flesh shrink in its human way.”

And a third: “It may be observed that Don Francisco is not sworn to the Order’s rule, either as serving-brother or knight, and his fault is the less for that.”

To which another rejoined: “But that is not the issue with which we deal. He is not charged that he has made lecherous use of the quarters where he is placed, but that he has hidden one whom the law required.”

And a fifth agreed: “It was a risk he took, having been warned in a plain way. What can he object, being caught?”

But after that there was a voice of dissent: “It is the temptress who should feel stripes, rather than those whom she brings to sin, and that the more when they are knights who will give their blood for our cause.”

And the seventh voice was that of one who agreed: “May we not say that it is shed too greatly by heathen hands for us to spill at this time? That it can be spent in a better way, as such knights are not unwilling to do?”

Del Monte felt that he had heard enough to judge what would be best to say, and that it would be wiser to intervene before differences had become too sharply shown for their advocates to accord with a ready will.

“Brothers,” he said, “you will bear with me when I say that I speak for one who would be mostly concerned, but that he is now dead, and it is his dying charge that I give you now. He hewed Hassan down at his life’s cost, when he was over the fosse, and if it be said that but for him I should have lost the Sanglea (excepting only St. Michael’s fort) I would call it less than a lie. That being so, I am the more bold to ask you to hear me now.

“As to the woman, she must be tried, as we may lightly agree, and I suppose that La Cerda himself would not have cavilled at that.”

“I can tell you,” Sir Oliver interposed, “that it was no less than his urgent will that she should be tried, and (as he thought) absolved thereby of the steward’s death. . . . And, as I suppose, she would not have fled, but that she was seized with fear when she heard that he was himself held, so that he would not be free to support her part.”

“That,” Del Monte replied, “was how I thought it to be. And had he not been slain, we may say that she would have come forth by his will, and there had been better end than is threatened now. . . . She must be fairly tried. There is no issue on that. For there must be justice done to the dead, as well as to those who still live, and no less that he who died was suspect, and of mean degree.

“But when we come to the part which Don Francisco has played, of which we know less, as it may have been either at his own will, or as one who would aid a friend——”

“The wanton,” the Grand Master said, “was in the single chamber he used. You must face that.” He did not speak in a hostile way, but as one sitting above, who would point out that which Del Monte’s logic must overcome.

“So I agree,” Del Monte replied. “We know not how little it meant, nor how much, and I submit that if we leave it unprobed we may show wisdom in that. . . . But there is one thing you should know, that La Cerda, being at point of death, said that to grieve Don Francisco for this would be equal despite to him, by which you may say, if no more, that he did not think him to be less than a loyal friend.”

“As between themselves,” the Grand Master allowed, “it is the best point that you have, and you take it well when you do not urge it too far, for it might break at a higher strain. But this is largely beside the cause which has drawn us here. It is not to La Cerda that Don Francisco must be absolved, nor (as has been said) is he charged with lecherous ways. It is of contempt of law that he stands accused, and can you clear him of that?”

“I do not know that I can. And if he be tried, and let free, or but lightly rebuked, I do not say that respect of law will be fostered thereby.

“I may offer better counsel than that, if I propose that we do nothing at all. For while we do naught, none can tell what is to appear on the next day. And few, if any, will surely know but that we may have witness by which we hold him excused, or even that she was exposed by his own will. There will be sundry tales scattered abroad, and none true; and none will be held by discreet men as more than a likely lie.

“Let us keep this in suspense, and if we drive the Turk from the land at last (to which this is a little thing), then we may review all that Don Francisco has done in another mood, and in the hour of triumph and thanks to God amnesty will seem no more than is timely to give; but if we fail, as we are resolved by the grace of God that we shall not do, then it is all one, and he may better perish by heathen swords than at Christian hands.”

There was a voice that asked: “If we accord to that, how will you secure that he will not openly boast that we fear to enforce the law as against himself? From one who has been so hardy in his contempt, it is no less than a likely

thing.”

“As to that,” Sir Oliver said, “I can give some manner of pledge; for I can convey warning to him in a private way, and, if he ignore that, he will not be in the case of a pardoned man, but we can make arrest with a good cause, and his death will be on his own head.”

“Is it agreed,” the Grand Master asked, “that this matter be put to suspense, to be considered again if the need come, or else not till a further day?”

There were some who murmured assent, and the rest were still. The Grand Master had his way, as he mostly would, whether for mercy or blood, and Del Monte felt that he had got more than he had forecast, and with fewer words, till La Valette addressed him again:

“That this woman be fairly tried, and in accordance with the usage in time of war, there should be one who will put her case, as she can be little fitted to do. Will you take this, as you have so well assumed the part of La Cerda’s friend, whose mistress she was?”

There was a short pause, and Del Monte said that he would, though it was plain that he had a poor will. . . .

The Grand Master left the hall leaning on Sir Oliver’s arm, as it was becoming his habit to do.

“Oliver,” he said, “I may have done well or ill, but I lacked heart to bring one who is near of blood to so old a friend to the shame which would have been surely his, for, if he were found guilty of such a fault, though I might grant reprieve of his life, or even find pretext to set him free, it would be a shame that would mark his life; so that he would be debarred from the companionship of this Order in which his Uncle had more honour than most, and it may be from any high trust or command whether with us, or from the hands of his own King.

“I may grow feeble with age, so that God should cut me off like a rotten branch, as he must at last; but I have a better thought that He will let me endure till the land is free.”

“You should take more rest,” Sir Oliver replied; “but I say in this that you have done wisely and well.”

## CHAPTER XIII

“DON FRANCISCO,” Sir Oliver said, as one who asks that he already knows; “is not easy to guide?”

“No. He was never that.”

“But it may be done best, if at all, by a woman’s hand?”

“That is not by me.”

“Well, you must choose. For either you must do this, or I will send for him here, and I would prefer to leave it to you.”

“Is he to be expelled with his own consent, or to have time to flee in a secret way? He has said that he will not go.”

“It is not that. He can stay, or I should say that he must, for he would be shamed to desert, having no cause. All that is required is that he shall be secret as to his having kept Venetia as he did, and that he shall make no boast that the Council do not chastise him therefor.”

“There should be few words about that. Is it so condoned?”

“It is less than that. It is in suspense. Yet if his part be observed with care, it is a sword which will not be likely to fall. But you should make it plain that if he fail on his side it will be his death, and there is none who would aid.”

“It is more than he could have reason to hope. . . . Can you tell me what they are doing to her? For it is what he will expect me to know.”

“She will be tried, as she must; but Del Monte himself will be called her friend.”

“We have to thank you for much.”

“It is not our rule to speak of what is done when the Council meets, but you must not thank me too far. I did less than I saw done.”

“So I must believe, if you say. But I thank you still.”

“I may tell you this, that the Grand Master is your cousin’s friend, more than you would lightly believe, for he does not forget that he is of Don Manuel’s blood. It will be his fault now, if there be more of this either thought or said, for our minds will turn back to the larger things.”

“There is her trial to come. He will not forget that.”

“That is so. But she is not to be harshly served, beyond what her desert may be shown to be; and I will tell you this for your peace, having watched the world for more years than you have been able to do. When a woman, such as we think her to be, has given all that she can, it is not much, and men will sooner forget than if they had been paid with a grudging hand.”

Angelica considered this, but there was no relief in her eyes.

“You think,” she said, “that she was mistress to him.”

“So I must. I should say that it would be vain to deny, she being caught as she was in their common cell.”

“Yet I am not sure.”

Sir Oliver considered that she knew her cousin better than he, and he had watched the doings of men enough to know that the obvious is not always true.

He said: “That would be worse.”

“So I think.”

“Then you shall tell him this. He will be free to attend her trial, or rather that he will be required to be there, though his witness may not be called.”

“There is gain in that?”

“Yes. For there will be exposure of what she was.”

“He has been told something of that, but he will not hear.”

“I would know from whom.”

“From Captain Antonio. It is he who——”

“Yes. I know. . . . He may have met her before. He is Genoese. I had not thought of that chance.”

“Have I said too much?”

“You have said nothing to vex your peace. But it is my business to know who are here, lest we harbour spies. . . . Captain Antonio may know much. Yet he is a witness we shall not need.

“But you may tell Francisco this, putting it as a warning from me. There will be inquisition made as to who she is, and of what repute before she came to La Cerda’s care, and on her answers to that vindication may largely depend. If he would be friendly to her, he should inform himself of these matters by all the means that he may, and counsel her that the truth, though it have some stench, will do her less harm than if she be trapped in a damning lie.”

“Can you say how soon the trial will be?”

“It will be publicly held, in three days from now. That is, if Mustapha give us peace, as I think he will, having wounds to lick. So there should be no losing of time by those who would put her case in the best array.”

Angelica went to tell Francisco what she had learned, and Sir Oliver turned to matters of more moment than this could be (except to those who were most concerned), until Del Monte came to his room at a later hour.

“Sir John,” he said, “has just put that upon me in which I am not skilled, and which is no pleasure to do.”

Sir Oliver smiled. “It seemed a right choice, for you would be advocate, as it appeared, whether you were appointed or no.”

“You heard the reason of that. . . . I must say that it is a jest for which I do not love him the more. . . . But I am not willing to fail in that which I



undertake.”

“I am well assured that you will put her defence in the best style.”

“So you would say. But I have seen her an hour ago, and I cannot find that she is hotly accused. She has a likely tale, and no other was there, except he whose talking is done. Must not her tale stand? And, if it do, is she not to be acquitted of right, by the laws of our own Order, or by those of Malta, to which she may be more strictly exposed? Or have you more to bring up in a second line when the battle join?”

“I will answer freely on that. I should say that her tale is half false, and perhaps more. But that may be beyond proof, and she may bear it out, if she can tell it in a plausible way, which I should call her practised to do.

“We have no witness, such as you might not suspect, by which we could foil a lie. You can be content about that.

“But you will not be surprised that we shall probe her as to the character that she professes to bear. You should look to that, if you are thinking to bring her clear.”

“You mean that you have report against her good name to which she must make reply?”

“We have much.”

“It is not of the sort that she was mistress to those whom she could not wed? She is not to be measured by monkish rule?”

“It goes beyond that. We shall say that there is no man with whom she would not have lain for a ducat’s pay, though it were one that had been twice clipped by the Jews. That is, if she could not have got more.”

Del Monte considered this, and thought he saw a reply.

“You may say that, if you will. You may call it a groat, and I still protest that it should not help you at all; and so, as it has no part in your case, it should not be said.”

“If you can argue that, I will listen with care.”

“It is simply said. She might have objected for no more cause than that she feared to lose the comforts she had, if La Cerda should suddenly come, and find one in her bed who should not be there. She might have cared no more than that it was not an opportune time, or that she had a pain in her head. Could he therefore rape her of right?

“I should say that it would be strange logic, and a law which we have not heard before now. If you build on that, I should suppose I shall bring her free.”

“Well, I shall not be irked if you do.”

“But I must still protest that we should not wander so far.”

“Which you can put to those who are appointed to judge, but you will find that they will not hear. For it will be a question of how far she should be believed, and when there are questions asked she may be left with no more

than a shaken tale. Do you say that we cannot then weigh whom she is who protests that which it has become easy to doubt?"

"That might be; but you go too far, if you so forecast before you arrive. I would still ask that, in this case, we may be content to probe that which has happened in Malta here, to which our laws must apply. . . . I had thought that the Grand Master was of a mind to end this with the least words that are needful to speak."

"I will not dispute about that. I will only say that those who ask overmuch may get less than they had before. . . . But I will be frank to tell you that I have an object in this, for I would show her to Don Francisco for what she is, which he is not anxious to see."

"And if I could take you there by another road?"

"I would be content to arrive, without having chosen the way. . . . But I should still tell you that she must be prepared for inquisition upon herself, which we could not avoid. . . . She must give witness herself, if she is to come clear? You will agree upon that?"

"Yes. She must tell her tale. He having been slain by her bed, and she vanished away, she might be convict if she would not speak. I will allow that."

"And being put upon oath, she must give her name, and whom she professes to be?"

"Yes. That is no more than the common use. It is shortly asked, and soon said."

"And we shall say she is not. We shall give her another name."

"How can you say that, until you have heard what she will swear?"

"I mean, if she say that which La Cerda believed, and which she has told to others, as I can guess."

"And if she give you a true name?"

"She will be well counselled to that. But it is what she will be reluctant to do."

"It is what she will."

"So I supposed, she being guided by you."

"And if she do that . . . ? But I will ask no pledge. I will see you again, when I have taken counsel with her. . . . But I will tell you one thing which you might not suppose. . . . She protests that Don Francisco has been no more than La Cerda's friend, and I think in this she spoke with an open mind. You may consider how far it fits the part in which she is dressed by your own reports."

"That may be true, though it will not be lightly believed. But I have been told the same by one who would make a good guess, and the truth is what cannot be known except to the two who were alone in that cell. . . . But if I believe, I should not say she had the more honour, but the more wit."

"Well, I may call Don Francisco's witness on that."

“Which I must hope that you will not do. It would be to stir that which is now still.”

“Meaning as against him? Well, I must promise naught. We will talk again.”

Del Monte went away with a feeling that he had done more than appeared, for he saw that, if he threatened that he would make Francisco a witness for the defence, he proposed that which Sir Oliver would prefer to avoid. He resolved that he would see Venetia again, for which he must visit the common jail, from which she would not be loosed. But it was not fitting that he should bustle about as though he were a paid tool of the law, and he sent Don Francisco a letter, written in his own hand, proposing that he should come to him, at St. Michael’s fort, which he supposed that he would be willing to do.

## CHAPTER XIV

ANGELICA did not go to the battery again, which she was reluctant to do. She sent message to Francisco that she could be found at the noon hour at the inn where they met before.

She found him there when she arrived, which she might not have done had she been to her own time, which she had been careful to miss, for she had some pride of her own, though it might not be equal to his, and now that she had found that there was no present danger for him, she had space for thoughts of another kind.

They had come at an hour when there would be few but themselves in the common room, and as he had found a seat in a corner apart, she thought that they would talk there rather than ask for a private place, as though they had secret matters with which to deal.

Before she spoke of the matters of which he had come to hear, she mentioned one which she meant him to know, and which might be overthought if it were left.

“Francis, I should tell you first that Captain Antonio knows what I am.”

He frowned at that, as he replied: “Then how many are there who guess now? How did he learn? Is it not what I have always said, that you should not have come?”

“You have said enough. . . . We agree there. . . . Yet that I am here may have been useful to you. At least, it has done you no ill. . . . I was caught by a careless word, such as I should not have said. Did he tell you aught?”

“No. I have not guessed that he knew.”

“Then he keeps faith, as I think. I need not trouble for that.”

“I would that you could go back, being no more shamed than you now are.”

It was a subject which better suited his restless pride than that of which he had come to hear, but it could not be expected that she would look on it in the same way.

“If you call me shamed, it is what no other would do, and it is a word that you should be last to use to one who is so near of your blood, even if you have no care beyond that.”

He had the grace to take the rebuke, and to go as near to deny his words as he would be likely to do.

“You took what I said in a wrong way. You have no shame in yourself, as

you could not have; and there should be none to say it aloud while I have a sword which is at your call, as I think you know. . . . You may consider that, if I regarded you no more than as one who chanced to be of a kindred blood, I should not fret that your honour walks on so keen an edge, as you must allow that it does now.”

“Well,” she said, more mollified by the manner of his reply than she was entirely willing to show, “had I need, I would ask your sword in a quick way, both for a sharp point, and as one that would be bare at the first word, as you need not say. But, till I ask, you may be sure that the need is none.”

“It is so I will practise to think. But I suppose that you had other matter in mind when you asked me here.”

“I have news, which you may call good, Sir Oliver, as I think, having proved our friend, though he will make little of that. The Council met last night, and debated what you had done, or what else they may have supposed from where Venetia was found——”

“What do you mean when you say that?”

“What I said. It is plain enough. Is it not a matter which all men will judge in the same way?”

“They should consider the urgency with which she fled.”

“So they may. Shall we leave that, and come to what they resolved, which it is of more moment to know?”

“I would only say that her honour should not be mired, while she is charged that she was too constant in its defence.”

“There is no need to tell me. It will all be said at the right time, for Del Monte will undertake her retort.”

“When is the trial to be?”

“In three days, if we are quiet from further attack. But I would tell you first of yourself.”

“And I am more anxious for her.”

“You will learn all, if you let me speak. As to yourself, the Council agreed after debate that you shall be left clear, if you are silent enough. I suppose that is in reward for the good service you did. Also, the Grand Master proved your friend at the last.

“But it is to be plain, and I am the one that must tell you this, as speaking in Sir Oliver’s place, that there is no more than suspense. There is not pardon at all. And the Council will not endure that their forbearance be talked, or that you make boast, as though they threatened that which they dare not do. And if they are stirred to move, it will be in a merciless way, for they consider that what you did cannot be condoned in a time of war; and if you give them such cause, those who had been your friends will not attempt, or will be feeble to aid you more.”

“Well, it is what you are charged to say. And there must be those I should thank, as I do you. . . . I will be still from no fear. But it is not my way to go boasting abroad. . . . I am content that I did as I have supposed that a knight should. . . . The Grand Master may see that it was his feud with La Cerda by which she fell.”

“So you may think, if you only say it to me; but it may be your death if it enter another ear. Can I avoid dread when you talk in so bold a way?”

“I will be still as a grave. But will you tell me of her?”

“Sir Oliver thinks that the charge against her is not so black in itself but that she should come clear, and that Del Monte is appointed to be her friend may be proof that she is not too hotly pursued. But Sir Oliver was urgent that I should warn you of this, for her own good. Her credit may be straightly arraigned, and when she answers of whom she is, and by what road she arrived, it may break her if she be caught in a wrong word.”

“Why should he be doubtful of that? She is not one whose record requires a lie.”

“Well, he is. It is a warning well meant, whether it be needed or no. And if you fail to tell it to her, and she stumble when she is asked, you will be the cause of her grief.”

“Can I see her again? I was told, that there would be much trouble in that, so that even gold might not avail.”

“I suppose I could secure that, if I give a good cause. You cannot advise her unless you do.”

“I would thank you therefor.”

“So you shall. . . . But you would do well for her if you learn what you can first. . . . Captain Antonio knew her before.”

“So he will have it to be, but I conclude that he makes a wrong guess. He is Genoese, and it is a town where she never was. He is not her friend.”

“But he is yours. . . . If he have the wrong tale, you should not avoid: you should face it, and break it down.”

Francisco could not deny that this counsel was good. He said: “If you will contrive that I see her again, I will give her warning of this, of which Del Monte should know. I suppose that she will answer truly when she is charged, and that she will have little to fear, for he will not have her abused.”

“If you will meet me here at to-morrow noon, I will bring you an order to see her then, which I am assured that Sir Oliver will not deny.”

## CHAPTER XV

FRANCISCO did as he had agreed, asking Antonio, when he got back, to tell him why he spoke of Venetia as he did, and promising that, if he said no more than he held for truth, there should be no quarrel thereon.

Having that pledge, Antonio told him enough, or too much, for it confirmed Francisco's thought that he had confused her with another of a like manner or face, as it is easy for those to do who wander about, seeing many in diverse lands.

"Well," Antonio said, "if I have, I have done her a great wrong, which I should be glad to regret. But you should ask it of her."

In the later day, he had Del Monte's letter, and went to him at once. Here he heard much the same talk that Angelica gave him before.

"Let her tell the truth," the Commander said, "and, though it stink, I may bring her free. But if she lie, she may fall in too deep a pit for any rescue to reach, and if you are her true friend you must warn her of that, as I have intention to do. But it is you who should see her first."

"I am her friend," Francisco replied, "and too much so to believe that which is spoken to her dispraise, she being one (if I come through this war) whom I hope to wed. But I will tell her all that you say, for it is right she should know."

"You may recall to her mind that I urged upon her that she should be artless without reserve, but I must tell you that they were words (as it seemed to me) that she was not grateful to hear."

Francisco said nothing to that. But he became more urgent of heart that he should see Venetia himself, both that he might have the relief of assurance from her own lips, and because it seemed that so fair a face had few friends in that monkish hold.

Del Monte saw how she looked to him, and said less than he might, being a man of controlled speech, though he would have words enough for the right time, which he handled as he would handle a sword, using the point more than the edge.

He saw well what had been in Sir Oliver's mind, which he would be glad to support. "Yet," he reflected, "I must practise to bring her clear, putting that before all, for I have pledged my honour thereto. I know not how the steward died, as none will (except she) to the world's end, and as to her, if she spoke in her sleep, she would be most likely to lie. For she is of that sort who should be

hanged by one who would govern well (whether for the man's death or another cause, it is no matter for that); in which he would act without malice to her, but as one orders a room."

After that, he had another thought, seeing a plan by which he might protect her, and guide other things to a good end, if Sir Oliver would see it in his way, and could bring the Grand Master to that accord. . . .

Francisco waited till the next day (having no choice), when Angelica met him again, giving him a pass by which he could see Venetia as much as he would, till she should be called to answer her charge; and it was not long from that hour before the key turned in the door of the chamber where she was held, and he was present to her.

The chamber was of a fair size, and, if its appointments were not rich, they were the best the jailer could do; for Francisco's gold had spoken loudly enough, and Sir Oliver's order that she should not be abused had played the same tune, so that the jailer could feel that he was obeying orders by the same means that his pouch swelled, which he was not always able to do.

But she was lodged in the common jail, which was not designed for those of the better sort. A Knight of the Order, or even a serving-brother, being accused either of light or heavy offence, would not have been harboured there, but in a dungeon or tower. The jail had common rooms for those whose purses were lean or bare, and these were noisome enough; and if men fought there for crusts at times, it would not be esteemed matter for scandal against the state, for why should true men be taxed that felons should be able to loose their belts?

But if we think that we live in a better day, we may observe that when Francisco entered the cell there was no jailer beside, nor partition to keep him from her whom he came to see.

The cruelties of those days were most largely of abstinence and neglect, or to a politic end, while those of our own jails are carefully planned to degrade the soul and torture the mind, and are enforced with a bitter and very tyrannous will.

A jail is seldom a place of comfort or peace, though there are few of the world's best, from Christ Himself, who have not entered such doors, but the scrupulous cruelties of design that snatch at a man's clothes, and forbid his speech, and beat him down to a servitude of routine, may be more merciless, as they are more deliberate, than those of dirt and neglect.

Francisco came to a room that was somewhat bare, and its walls were stone, and that only washed with a plain paint, at a time when it was the fashion to have them panelled in wood, or else patterned in paints, if not gay with a pictured scene, unless they might be draped with tapestry in a wealthy hall.



The walls were plain blue: the ceiling bare: the window darkened with heavy bars. The rushes on the floor were too few to soften the tread, and were not clean, having been there for a week, it being a time when rushes were not easy to get. But that, in this time of siege, could have been excused in a better place, and it was at least the best room in the jail, and better than those where the jailer must make his home.

Venetia rose up from a bed, being the place where she mostly was when she could not be active abroad; for she thought that it was so that she nursed the soft contours of youth, on which she depended to make her trade. But she was not soft in a woman's way, being tireless to walk, or to ride or swim, if she should be roused by sufficient need.

Her hatred of Malta (which it would not be easy to overcall) came mostly from how she had been confined, after the first month that La Cerda had brought her there. To her mind, she had not been free from that hour. She had done no more than change jails, and each time for the worse till now, when she might be said to have moved a step up, from the narrow battery cell.

She was not meagrely clad, as we have seen her before, having procured (we may wonder how, but guess with some use of Francisco's gold) a gown of daffodil green, long and slender and straight, being a colour that pleased the pale gold of her hair, and gave her a very simple and chaste allure, as of a madonna in bud.

She had the wary eyes of a cat as the key turned in the heavy door, which changed to a softer glance, as she heard Francisco's voice before he appeared.

"If I am back in an hour's time?" It was the turnkey who could be heard to enquire.

"You can come then, but you must be ready to wait if I am not done."

The man agreed, and there was a sound of the clinking of coins. "I will knock twice," he said, "before I open the door." He wished it understood that he would not appear in a sudden way to the disconcerting of those who might be busy within.

"You are my good friend," she said, "to come thus. I feared that I should be too closely confined, recalling what the Grand Master's malice had said." Her voice was soft, and her eyes added to her words, both in gratitude and appeal.

"I am ever your friend," he replied, any doubt that may have been an undercurrent of trouble in his thoughts during the last day retreating now that her bodily presence possessed him again. "I would be more, if I might."

What did he mean by that? How, she wondered, must this game be played in the best way? She owed much to him. Did he think the time for payment had come? They would be alone for the next hour. She had heard him provide for that. Did he think to play the steward's part, for something better than he had

got?

She put the thought aside, and then embraced it again as she considered that he might have taken La Cerda's death to give him more freedom than his honour had permitted before.

He was of another world than that in which she had been bred to bend and cozen and lie, and she would have had some excuse if she had failed to sum his passion, his loyalty, his pride, his knowledge of his own code, and his inexperience of the baser ways of the world, to the total they truly made.

It showed the quality of quick perception, and of a wit that had raised her high from the gutter in which her childhood had sprawled and fought, that she could read one who was so far from herself in standards and ideals of life.

"There is little," she said, "that you could not ask, having done so much."

"It is nothing," he said. "It has been pleasure to me. . . . I would ask nothing of right, which it were unknighly to do. . . . Yet . . . when you have had time to forget . . . I will hope that I can ask more at a better time."

She held out a hand, which he kissed. His reticence wooed her as boldness would have been powerless to do. She came at that time to the threshold of love, which she could not cross, being held back by her own past, the rose of love having fallen in sundry mire.

She said: "You are good to me," and her voice was sincere without need of the art which she would have found it easy to use. But her thoughts, now that she was sure that modesty was the best card to play from a lying pack, returned to that from which they were seldom far, since the Grand Master's eyes had fallen upon her half-draped form in Francisco's cell.

She asked: "But you will be bringing me news? Is it good? Will they let me through? The Chevalier Del Monte was here, and said I had done no more than the law supports, and it should give me quittance of that."

"I have seen him, and had word from Sir Oliver Starkey as well. They speak to another point, and both are urgent that I should put it to your reply.

"I think it needless to do, but I must keep my word, as, except he be clear on this, Del Monte will not undertake your defence in the right way.

"I will tell you what Captain Antonio says, on which he is very sure, and which points to the same danger as they.

"It seems that he knew of a Genoese girl—he is Genoa born and bred—Maria Pezzo by name, of whom he has matter to tell, such as that she was jailed on a charge of robbing seamen who made resort to a house where she was one (he says) of a gang of evil repute.

"He says he knows that she was near to be hanged at another time, though little more than a child, her name being as bad as it was.

"The second time was not more than three years ago, when Doria's galleys were in the port, as he could find men from the fleet here who would witness,

and would know her again (which he does not propose to do). He says that she escaped by defect of proof, as was publicly shown, but that, indeed, she bought herself out of the jail by ways he does not scruple to say.

“All this would be naught to us, but that he will have it that you are this girl of his own slums, which he should perceive that you could not be.

“Sir Oliver may have the same talk, or may not, but he is plain that there will be challenge of who you are, and he has warned Del Monte, who says that, let the truth be what it may, if it be told, he has good hope he can bring you off, but he will be cast down by a lie.

“You will forgive that I tell you this, for it is right that you should know what is proposed, that we may be equal to its repulse.”

Venetia listened, and there was no sign on her face of the thoughts she had. She saw that she must choose now, either to show what she had been, and to expose the falsehood of that which she had told to him and to La Cerda before, or she must be hardy in a denial which must be sustained when the trial came, lest she come to worse wreck even than the sore back that she had feared since La Cerda had proved too weak to be her defence among these knights where (as she would have said) the manhood was hard to find.

Had it been no more than Antonio’s tale, she thought that she might have beaten it down, but there were the two years between the flight from Genoa, and when she came to La Cerda’s bed, and what—if she could only guess!—might be known of them . . . ? There was the merchant who was robbed and slain in Turin. Her hands, in fact, had been clean of that, but she had been in the house, plying the same trade, even in the next room when they choked his scream, and afterwards they had given her fifty ducats to keep her still. . . . It was by that gold she had made advance. But she knew that three had been hanged for that deed (after a time on the wheel), and that another was wanted, who was not unlike to herself. . . .

“You would think,” she said, “that none would believe such tales, which it is wicked to tell. As to Genoa, I was never there in my life days. It is their malice to bring me down, which they cannot do, except they be armed with lies.

“But I will not say that I am not in a new fear, for it is always a simpler thing to propose a lie than to prove that it is untrue. And how am I to do that, we being sieged here as we are?”

Francisco saw some reason in that, but he thought he saw also a way out which she might have missed.

“As to that,” he said, “I know not what tale Sir Oliver may have got, but if it be this of which Captain Antonio talks, there should be a confident way. For the Grand Master would not practise to bring you down with a false word, nor would Sir Oliver be a party thereto; and if Captain Antonio will find those

seamen he says he can, and they will say (as they must) that Maria Pezzo was different from you, we shall have witness that might be put to Sir Oliver himself before the trial be held, and he would see that he had been wrongly led.”

Venetia listened to this, and must look more pleased than she felt. Yet she let a doubt be seen.

“So it would. It is well thought. . . . But what if Sir Oliver have a quite different lie? We should know that first, and I suppose that we must not move in this till Del Monte have consented thereto. He will see me here to-morrow at matin hour, and I will tell him what Captain Antonio would be able to do.”

“So it shall be, if you will. . . . But the time goes.”

He was reluctant to have delay, but he saw that, if she wished Del Monte to be told first, as having her defence in his hands, it was a wish he could not deny.

She turned the talk after that into other ways, becoming soft of glances and voice, but yet holding him off with his own words: “We will say more at a better time.”

He understood that she would give him her love when the charge of murder would be lifted from off her name. He was not likely to give faith to Antonio’s tales, judging her both with the blindness of love and as he found her to be.

But she was doing no more than to maintain a position which it could be no profit to lose, though she had ceased to hope it would be her gain. She wanted to think well, which she could not do till he should be gone.

When he left, she lay unmoving for a time which lengthened to hours, her fingers knitted behind her head. Her eyes were distant and hard, and over them at times there came a shadow of fear, and, at others a smile dimpled her face, and passed as a little wind may ruffle a quiet lake, and pass quickly away.

She rose at last, as one throwing off doubt, like a cloak on a summer day. She looked round the room, and said aloud: “Well, there is little to leave,” as though there were some comfort in that; and then, more to herself: “I suppose I may come to harbour at last, but the road is long.”

She did not think that the harbour for such as she was most often the hangman’s cart, for she had courage to meet her need. She had a thing to do now which she had done before in a Genoese jail, when she had been younger and less assured, and she did not expect to fail.

The jailer came in the next hour, bringing the evening meal, which was better than most men had who were free in that time of siege, for there was a promise of gold from Francisco’s purse, which he did not intend to miss by any grumbling from her. He had had more now than he should have asked, and as to that which was still to come, he judged that Don Francisco would keep faith, but would not be easy to overbear.

She looked at fish, and a steaming stew, a plate of grapes, and a half-bottle of wine.

“Well,” he asked, “are you pleased?”

“It is well enough,” she replied; “but you will suppose that I have drunk better vintage than that.”

“It is good wine,” he grumbled; “you are sore to please.”

“It is well enough,” she said again. She looked at the man’s heavy sensual face in a more familiar way that she had done until then. “I may have other needs.”

“Then you must tell other than me.” He turned away. He had done enough. It was not she who gave out the gold.

“No,” she said, “there is no haste. It is you I must tell. I must have silks bought in the town at an early hour, before Del Monte shall see me here.”

He stood hesitating. There might be profit in this, if he would go to trouble enough.

“You should know,” he said, “that you must pay first. It is the law of the jail. Can you do that?”

“I do not say but I might. . . . But I have to talk of another thing. Should I have bugs in the bed at the price Don Francisco has paid?”

Anger swelled the veins in the heavy face. Was this a device to cheat him of what was to come, unless he should now dance to her tune?

“There are none such. That I swear,” he said in a truculent way. And, indeed, it was a good bed, and the linen sheets were fragrant and clean, beside that it had blankets of wool.

“But if I itch where they bite? I will show you this.”

She put a foot on the bed, drawing up her gown to show the inner side of a thigh that was smoothly slender, but rounded well. For a moment’s glimpse, she may have shown above that, and his eyes were greedy of what they saw.

He said: “I see naught. There is naught to see.” But he came closer, seeing all that he could, at which she flicked the skirt down.

“You may not see,” she said, “but I feel.” And then: “But there need be no trouble for that. If you get me that which I need, I will pay you all in a good way.”

He stood looking at her with heavy lustful eyes, still uncertain what she might mean, and unwilling to show his hope till he were made sure. Besides that, he was half afraid, remembering the accusation that brought her there. But he did not think she would wish to have another dead man laid to her door, with no more than the same excuse.

“You must pay first,” he said; “it is the rule of the jail, and after that I will get you the silks.”

“Why so I will,” she said, “I am in the humour for that. If you will come

back at a later hour—and you must bring wine of a better vintage than this.”

He looked at her now in a coarse way, seeing her for what she was, or perhaps less.

“Why,” he said, “he that was here, did he not feed you full for this time?”

“He did naught but to kiss my hand. But you will know how to deal in a better way.”

He was doubtful still, like a wasp that hovers over a candied snare, but he could not resist.

“I will be back,” he said, “when the cells are locked, and we shall not be disturbed by any knocks on the outer gate.”

He went to his rounds. He would return at an hour when the common rooms would be closed and every prisoner locked away in his own cell till the next day.

After that, there would be two besides himself to keep ward through the night, but the first watch would be his, and they would sleep, unless they were roused by the bell.

She called after him as he went: “You will bring better wine? It is on that that our bargain hangs. . . .”

The next morning, Del Monte saw Sir Oliver at an early hour. He said: “I have looked at this on all sides, and I have a proposal to make. If you take her tale to be true (which you have no witness to overset) I may bring her off; and if you probe her past, I may do it or not, but there is one thing that is sure, I must call Don Francisco in her defence, and Don Garcio also, of whom she tells me that which it is not my business to know, except so far as it may be needful for her relief. But I know you do not want them called at this time.

“Now it seems to me that we each have something with which to trade. Why will you not be agreed to remand her now, till the siege is through? She will do no harm in a prison cell, and you can set her free at the end (as you must now, if I bring her off) when the Turks are gone. You can say now that there is more witness which you must sift, and I will agree for her side, and it will be forgotten amid the thunder of greater things. . . . I came to put this to you, before I see her again.”

“Which,” Sir Oliver said with a smile, “I am assured that you will not do. She has resolved this for us both, having escaped in the night, none knoweth how; but there is cause to think that she is now in the Turkish lines.”

## CHAPTER XVI

VENETIA had looked down on a man with whom she had played till he slept in a sated way, being heavy with the wine which she had coaxed him to drink, and of which she had had more than enough.

He had been hard to bring to that point, and she did not think that his doze was deep, or that it would last long, but a short time should be sufficient for her.

She would have liked well to give him a thrust such as that which had gone up to the steward's heart, knowing of none whom she hated more, but she would not do that which might bring her down, if she should be caught at a later hour. Besides that, she had no weapon at all, for the man had been prudent to leave his poniard where it could not be brought into that game, having had the steward's end at the back of his mind. With bare hands, he knew that he could break her across his knee, and he had, in fact, given her bruises that would be black for some days, though in no more than an evil sport, after the manner of such as he when they are brutish with lust and wine.

Her hands were silent and swift as she clad herself with the best she had, and only became slow as she turned the key that it should not grate, for he had locked the door on the inside, as it had been prudent to do for more reasons than one.

She had to trust her own wits beyond that, for he did not carry all the keys of the jail at his belt, as warders would do in the romances which men read at that time, both because it would have been a great burden to bear about, and because it would have been asking men to knock him on the head and go free.

She went along a short passage, and through a door at the end that was standing wide, as he had left it for his return. She closed this, observing a bolt on its outer side, which fell into a socket in the stone floor. As she dropped it, she smiled as one whose vengeance was sure, though it might not come from her hand. He would have much to do (she thought) to explain how he came to be at the wrong side of that door.

After that, she had no trouble at all. She knew the way out, having observed it well as she came in, which those who have been jailed before will have learnt that it is prudent to do. She passed an open door, where a man slept on a bench. She did not see the third man, from whatever cause. She found keys on a wall. It was all as simple as that.

She was sobered by the night air, and the need of caution, which was even

greater than when she had been in the jail, but she moved with a settled plan. She was noiseless on the shadowed side of the street, and quick to hide at the sound of a distant step. She came to the quay, and to a place where the skiffs were tied. There was a man set to watch there, and he did not drowse, as she had hoped that he might. He paced the length of the quay, looking out on a water which was covered by a light mist, as it often was in the night hours.

This was the greatest risk that she had. When he was furthest from where she crouched, and near to turn, she crept across, and slipped into a boat, where she lay flat.

He was alert to hear the little noise that she made as she gained the boat. He came back, looking round in a wary way, but she was not seen. When he walked the next time, she unknotted the rope by which the boat was tied, but held it until he had come back and turned again, so that she should have all the time she could at the last. . . . He heard the splash of an oar, and turned to see a boat thrust off from the quay. He pulled out a pistol and fired, meaning at once to hit her if he could, and to give the alarm. . . . Men came then at a run, and boats were pushed out in pursuit, but the mist was her friend that she was not found. It had been more perilous than she had thought, but she did not fret about that, it having been safely done.

She wished to make her way to the corsairs' camp rather than that of the Turks, both because she would rather come to Hassan's than Mustapha's hands, and because she knew that among the men of the Barbary coast she would find those who would understand what she said, which those of Turkey or Egypt would have been less likely to do. There was a jargon talked on the sea-coasts, from Morocco to the Levant, which she knew well enough, having learnt it from the seamen who came ashore at Genoa where she was bred.

It would do well enough for the first of those she would be likely to meet, and it was said that Hassan could talk in more tongues than two. She did not doubt that she would be understood when she came to him.

Here were reasons for what would be best to do, but there was no help in them as to how it should best be done. The Barbary ships lay, for the most part, as did the whole fleet, in the great harbour which was on the further side of Sceberas ridge; but she knew that Hassan's attack on the Sanglea had been at the eastern end, which was on the opposite side of the Turkish girdle which closed St. Angelo in, and it was still there that he would be likely to be. To row up the inlet which was south of the Sanglea would be to invite bullets from either side, as her oars would be heard in the misty light of the dawn. Even in darkness (and if she could find her way) it would be perilous to attempt.

The skiff she had taken was light, being one meant for the harbour alone, and not fit for the open sea. She had been used to boats from her childhood's days, and could control it with ease. She resolved to lie out in the midst, till the



night should be further spent, and then pull up to the head of the harbour, and land where (if there were any Turks about, which was less likely than not), they would not be keeping a watch, as they could not be attacked there by the Christians, unless they should sally out from the inner harbour with all their ships, and even then it would not be a place they would choose. The land at the head of the harbour was of no moment to either side, though it would be within the lines of the Turks, which swept round to Sceberras, and to the further harbour beyond. If she landed there shortly before the dawn, she would be well within the lines of the Turks, where no special watch would be kept, and she thought that, with good fortune's help, she might find her way to Hassan's command. . . .

It was two hours after dawn that Hassan sat in his tent, taking the first meal of the day. Most of the Turkish leaders, when they saw how long the siege was likely to be, had found roofs for their heads from the deserted villas which the knights had built in time of peace in all parts of the island. But Hassan would choose a tent when he was not on a moving deck, having the desert ways in his blood, though he had a great house at Tripoli where he kept his wives, and would sometimes be, and Dragut's palace at Algiers, which was splendidly built in the Moorish style, and was now his, and he would spend some time there in the future years, if he did not die at this siege.

He had a pavilion, ample and rich, with partitions within itself, and here he sat on the cushioned, carpeted ground, and ate and drank in a frugal way, for which Dragut would have had a jest of contempt.

A servant entered, and said: "Lord, there is a giaour woman without, who says she has escaped from the town, having been wrongly accused, and fled where she supposes she will be safer than there. She says that she has matter you will be grateful to hear."

"Is she one of a common kind?"

"She has been well-kept, and is white and clean. . . . She is richly attired, and fair enough in the Christian way."

Hassan saw that the man gave grudging praise. He said: "There is one woman who is, as I suppose, in St. Angelo now, whom I would be thankful to get, but I suppose it is not she."

"She is soft of speech, and her hair is paler than gold."

"Then it is not. But I will hear what she has to say. Bring her in, and leave her with me alone."

Venetia came, looking confident in a quiet way, for she was always equal to an event which she expected to meet. With a woman's art, she had contrived to bear little sign of the way in which she had toiled and walked during the night. She was one who would always save that which she wore, at the cost, if not of her skin, at least of a pain which would be less easy to see.

Hassan looked at her with friendly, approving eyes, but she knew too much of Saracen ways to give much value to that. She knew that, if he should order her to the strangler's hands, it would be done in a smooth way, without hardening his voice, as a Christian would be likely to do.

"You have come," he said, "from St. Angelo during the night? By what way did you do that?"

"I came from the quay that is under the castle wall. I took a boat and rowed to the end of the harbour, and then I walked here."

"It is as easy as that? Why have you walked so far from the place where you came ashore?"

"It was to you that I came."

"Why to me?"

"I preferred you to the Turkish leaders, thinking you would listen to what I have come to tell."

"Why should you think that?"

"I was born on Genoa quay."

Hassan considered this reply, which he understood. Mustapha would have been likely to put her to torture as the readiest way of getting the truth from lips which, being Christian, would be likely to lie to him; and when he had done, he would have made an end of a woman's body that was no longer of marketable condition. He might have acted better than that, but it was not a chance that any woman would choose. Piali might have been worse than he. But the corsairs of the Barbary coast had a reputation for destroying little that they would be able to sell. Their mercies were no better than that. But a Christian woman who came to their hands would be stripped and examined with a slave-merchant's eye, and if they cut her throat when they had done, she might be sure that she was of little good, either for man's pleasure or woman's toil.

Hassan looked at her with considering eyes, and there was a silence which was not easy for her to endure. She knew that he would act without haste, but when his next words should come they would be likely to make her fate plain. When he spoke at last, it had the form of a threat, and yet it put a better confidence in her heart than she had yet had.

"I am about to ask you some questions which you will do well to answer with great care; for if you attempt to lie, I do not say you will find a quick death, but you will wish that you had."

"I shall not stumble on that stone."

"Many do. You are Christian?"

"I am Christian born."

"Would you betray those of your race and creed?"

"I seek to save my own life, taking the only way that I have. Had they left

me in peace, I had not been here. If their own lives are in more hazard from me, it is no more than they threatened mine.”

She spoke the thoughts which had come as she had lain and planned on the previous day, and which were in part what she truly felt, but more largely what she had considered that she must be ready to say. They held a logic which is less likely to be perceived by the rulers of states than by those whom their laws pursue. For a state will make war on the life of a single man who is born on its own land, and think that he should still be loyal to it in separate ways, which is to ask much, and especially so of one whom it esteems unworthy to live.

Hassan asked: “You have no more reason than that?”

“It is said that the Grand Master once rowed as a Turkish slave.”

“So he did. What then?”

“Would you have him do it again?”

“Do you mean that you would?”

“It would give me a special joy.”

Hassan saw that there might be more in this than he had first thought. It was a fact that La Valette had spent a year of his earlier life toiling on the bench of a Turkish galley, and with a back raw from the driver’s stripes. It was an experience such as fell to many of the leaders of both sides in the fierce naval strife that had raged for centuries on the Mediterranean Sea. For, if they were captured, their ransoms would be fixed so high that the money could not be quickly raised, and meanwhile it was held by some that the worse they were served the more their friends would strive to provide the gold.

La Valette had been a captain in the fleet of the Knights of Malta, before any thought that he would come to his present power. He had been a scourge to the Turks, and they had shown him no love when he came into their hands. It may have been his treatment at that time which urged him now (among higher motives than that) to be their so bitter foe.

Hassan had been captive too, and had been one of those slaves who were chained in couples to work at the walls by which Malta was now strong to protect the Cross which its ramparts flew. He also might remember that, when a mood of mercy must be put by.

Now he clapped his hands, at which an attendant came quickly and silently to receive his commands.

“Alif,” he said, “I will talk to this woman apart. You will see that none enters here, till you are again summoned by me.”

The man bowed without words, and withdrew.

Venetia did not understand what was said, it not being in any tongue that she knew; but as Hassan rose and raised the curtain of the inner pavilion, she could make a good guess at what it had been, and that Hassan did not regard her coming as a matter of no account.

She felt that the first skirmish was hers, but she knew that she had yet to tread on a very perilous edge.

He motioned her to go first, in an abrupt imperative way. He may not have thought that she would have failed to understand what was said before. The precedence was not courtesy to herself, which he would have thought an unseemly thing, even had she been a princess of his own blood, it was no more than the routine prudence of one who did not wish to offer his back to be stabbed by those who might not be friends.

Venetia looked round on a couch and cushions of silk, and on coffers of metal and ivory which she knew to be of a great price, and may have been of the best that the world held at that time. She saw that one, having an open lid, was filled with books which were richly bound, in the style that Morocco had made its own. Her eyes passed over them in a heedless way, as might be excused at the pass at which she then was. But she would have had no use for them at another time, even had they been in her tongue. The world was her book, and she found it to be one of which the last page would be hard to reach.

There were rich arms hanging on the pavilion wall. She saw jewelled hilts, and gilded bucklers finely engraved, and the dark-blue of Damascus steel. In all she saw there was demonstration of culture and wealth.

The pavilion contained other personal, intimate things which she was more quick to observe than a chest of books, but she resolved at the first glance that it was a place where no woman came.

His words sounded as though he had heard her thought: "You may say all you will here without danger of other ears, for I bring no woman to war, no more by land than by sea."

He motioned her to a heap of cushions upon the ground, and stretched himself on his couch.

"And now," he said, "you can tell me much, and by that path you can win safety and ease; for what you sell (if the goods be sound) I will fairly buy. But I warn you again that, if you give me false word, I will have no mercy for that. So when you speak, you should think well."

"I can tell you much," she said, "and I have no purpose to lie. But I have had no food since I left the jail in the Bourg, which was ten hours before now."

"I had thought that, but my time is short. I suppose that you can sit there and not faint; and when I go you can have better food than the town gives, if I am content that you give honest replies. Can you tell me the weakest points at which we could make attack on the town?"

"I could tell you some things it might be useful to know, and of one that may be the best way, but you would judge better than I. I will not boast that I can do more than is true, for (except in the first days) I have been little abroad since I came to Malta when April began, so that there is much that I do not

know.”

“Then we will leave that, for this time.” He began to question her upon many matters which she could not see that it would be much gain for him to know, and on which she soon had reason to think that he knew more than herself, which made her the more careful to answer with exactness, and not to profess familiarities which were not hers.

She was, in fact, in more peril than she could guess, for he was using the knowledge that he had gained when he had been prisoner within Malta’s walls, added to and revised by that which he had had from the lips of his present spies, to test both her truth, and her value as to any witness which she might give.

He rose abruptly when these questions were done. “I shall be away,” he said, “till the noon hour, or beyond. After that, you shall tell me more.”

He returned with her to the outer pavilion. “You can wait my return here,” he said. He called Alif, to whom he gave instructions that she was to be well served.

He left her with a sense that she had commenced well. She had not hoped so much as that she would be sheltered in Hassan’s own tent, even for some hours of the middle day when he was not there.

When he was outside, he gave commands that she should not be allowed to leave (but this she would have too much sense to attempt, as he might have guessed), and that enquiry should be made as to who she was, and the circumstances under which she had fled from the town. Then he went to join a Council of War that Mustapha had called.

## CHAPTER XVII

VENETIA could not know that she had come at a good time for herself, the jealousies of the commanders of the Turkish army having broken out in open dispute since the failure of the attack on the Sanglea. Hassan was determined that he would lose no more men in assault unless at his own time, and to plans that had his assent, while he was not willing that Piali should lead his forces to a success which would emphasize his own failure a week before.

Into Mustapha's heart there had come a doubt of whether St. Angelo would ever be taken by the army he now had, but he would not entertain this, being stubborn in his resolve, with the cold implacable purpose of age, which would not lightly be turned aside. His generals had failed more than enough. Was it in himself to succeed at last? The present Council was to resolve whether there should be further assault, or that they should be content for a time to invest St. Angelo's walls, and bombard it from every side.

Piali was for a continued assault, and, whether his judgment were good or bad, he sustained it at this time with better argument than he always had.

"You talk of caution," he said, "and the lives of men, and I tell you that it is prudence that fears delay, and that you lose more life in the end with this length of siege than if you should drive your regiments against the wall even by firing upon their rear.

"You do worse than that, for you risk that we shall withdraw at last, or be chased away, to the shame of the Moslem lands.

"How long will Europe be still? Do you forget that the allied fleets would be stronger than ours? If we cannot prevail as we now are, shall we do so when a Spanish army is round our rear? Will it be months before the Viceroy is stirred to move? You will find that weeks is a better word."

"You are full of words," Hassan said, when Piali's passionate speech had run down, and after a pause to show that he was not roused to an equal heat, "and some are foolish to me, and some have a better sound. But would you tell us just what you would do, if you have your own way?"

"I would assault," he said, "on every side, and with every man that I have, and I would not cease by day and scarcely by night till the place is won. If they are stubborn and fierce of heart (as I do not deny), I would be more stubborn and fiercer than they, I would bombard with every gun that we have, and I would not cease while we have a keg of powder unbroached."

"It is low enough now," Hassan interposed.

“So it is; but there is more on the way which will soon be here, which is more than the Grand Master can hope on his part. The more we bombard the walls, the more must they reply, unless they would be utterly crushed. Every shot they fire is what they cannot replace.

“I tell you this,” he concluded, “of which I am well assured, that if we cannot succeed with our utmost force, as I would have it instantly used, then we shall fail in a slower way.”

Mustapha, pulling a white beard, watched him with intent and yet expressionless eyes, and Hassan saw that it was left to him to reply.

He said: “There is one thing for which you do not allow. You do not observe that if we storm upon walls that we do not take, we waste lives that might be used with avail on a later day, when we have beaten their walls to be less defence, and have slain many with constant fire. It is the lesson of every siege that you lose by too early assault. Would you not have those alive now if you could, whom we have lost because we assailed the Sanglea before it was ripe to fall? Should we not be better equipped to succeed on a later day, if we had left that undone?”

“As it is,” Piali replied, “I may say yes; but I would have had the assault sustained. We should have been at their walls with the dawn of the next day.”

“The men would not have been easy to move. I say nothing of yours, who had been less used, but mine had had enough for that time.”

“And was it not the same in the town? We look at our dead at the end of a day of strife, and we feel the ache in our own bones, but we are less aware of those that our foes must feel. It is often that we defeat ourselves rather than that we are defeated by them. . . . But I will ask you, as you ask me. What would you counsel to do?”

“I would not assault again till we have further beaten the walls, unless we can find a weak point of which they are not fully aware. Or, when I do, it should be with every man that we have, the fleet aiding thereto, at which my galleys will not be slack.”

“And if the weeks pass, and there be gathering of the Christian fleets, will you say what you would do then?”

Piali looked at him with suspicious questioning eyes, and Hassan was aware that Mustapha was regarding him in a similar way, as though he would probe his mind; and he knew that there was some reason behind the fear that the others had.

His galleys were swift and light, and if there were news that the Christian fleets drew to a head at Genoa or Naples, or even nearer than that, he might not find it too late to embark his men, and with a fair wind at his stern he would not be easy to catch.

Many of Piali’s warships were of slower and heavier build. They might be

harder to take, but they would also be slower to run, and he had store-ships that were neither strong to fight nor agile to flee, and for which his galleys must be the guard, or they would fall to the Christians an easy prey. He saw that Piali feared for his fleet, and lest, if he should be threatened with a combination of Europe's powers, his position might become worse, because Barbary's galleys would not be there.

Hassan was under allegiance to Turkey, Byzantium being both temporal and spiritual head of the Moslem lands, but it was an allegiance which could not easily have been asserted by Soliman in a punitive way, and especially so with the war of Hungary on his hands; and if his fleet should be destroyed, and that of Hassan remain, the north African coast would be a land to which Soliman's shadow would cease to stretch. If the Christian fleet should approach in a threatening force, and Hassan's galleys should back yards to await their fire, it would be by his own will, and not because Mustapha spoke with his master's voice.

"If," Hassan said, returning the glances which he received in the same deliberate way, "there be mustering of the Christian fleets, I suppose that we must meet them with every galley we have, of which there are some which are not here now, but which I should summon with speed, for, if we were beaten in such a strife, the whole of the inland sea would be no more than a Christian lake. And if you should be so destroyed, and I were not there, it would come to the same end, for how could I singly resist on a later day?"

Piali was silent when he heard this, for he saw that Hassan looked ahead somewhat farther than he, fearing that which would come to pass at Lepanto twenty years after that, which one who sat at that Council would live to share.

Mustapha saw that the time had come when he should speak. He said: "It is well thought, and what I should have expected to hear. And I will tell you now what I think, which is that Piali is largely right, except only that it will not be till a later day, if at all, that we shall have any fear of the Christian fleet. For these blasphemers, for whom one God is too few, and who make God of a man, are now in so fierce a strife of superstition among themselves that they will not unite, even to save those of their misbelief from the swords of the true servants of God. . . . We must press the siege with our utmost power, but we are yet under the shadow of no imminent fear. . . . And there is another ally we have, of which you have not spoken as yet, for there is talk that provision (except corn) is failing within the town."

Piali listened to this, and though his fear was less that Hassan would leave him to be destroyed at the sight of the Christian ships, yet he was still urgent that the siege should be pushed by storm rather than in more gradual ways, and he wished to know (which he thought his right) that he should be in command at such times, rather than Hassan again.



“There is another thing,” he replied, “which has not been said, and that is that the summer passes its prime. There will come a day when it is not good to keep an army in tents, and when the seas are loud with contending winds. If you will be counselled by me, we shall then be tied up to our several quays, and unloading the spoil. If you give me command,” he turned to Mustapha to add, “with every man that we have, it will not be two days before we are over the walls of the Sanglea, and St. Michael will not be long after to fall.”

Mustapha did not return his glance. His eyes were between the two as he answered: “I have had good counsel, on which I shall think well.”

He saw that he was weakened by the ambitious hates of those on whom he must most rely, but he could reflect that they were less held apart than were those of the Christian lands. He did not think that the guns of Europe could have thundered round Byzantium’s walls and Egypt or Tripoli stood aside in debate of whose part it was to succour those of their own faith, or in a poor hope that the Turks might have single strength to sustain the war. . . .

Yet it was not all Christian men, of whatever faith, who should be blamed at this time, for the spirit of Europe stirred against rulers of colder blood. As the news of St. Elmo’s fall, and of the Turkish repulse at the Sanglea was carried from land to land, there was clamour that the Knights of Malta should not be left to perish at infidel hands, and there were prayers in churches of every creed. In the chancelleries of Europe there was frequent debate, and plans were proposed, and put by. For each would ask from whom the cost was to come, or who would gather the spoil, or to whom the glory would be likely to go. They thought less of the rescue they might have made than of how they would be aligned again on the next day.

Elizabeth said: “They fight well. It would be to our glory to give them aid. Shall the Papists do it alone? For we are all foes of the Turks who are Christian men.”

She looked at Burleigh, tapping the board with a restless hand, and he looked back at her, judging her mood, as he was very able to do.

“It is Philip’s part,” he said; “let him waste his strength before ours. We shall have more peace on the Spanish main.”

Elizabeth saw that. Her eyes became distant and shrewd as she schemed ahead for her own land. As she was silent, he spoke again, driving in a new wedge. “There would be a great cost. Do you think Philip would pay?”

“That he would not!” Elizabeth spoke with the contempt that the mean-minded are quick to feel for others of kindred ways. “But the Mayor would support a new tax for so great a cause?”

The assertion had a note of question, if not of doubt. There was much craft to be used in the pretexts for raising taxes at that time, so that men might pay from a willing purse. But Burleigh was cold to that.

“We have other needs,” he said, “and what I think is a better plan.”

Elizabeth saw that it should be left for that time. “But,” she said, “be they papists or no, they are bold men. They shall have a place in our prayers.” She gave a charge that news from Malta should reach her hand without pause, be she where she might, either by night or day. . . .

Philip, in his great palace in Seville, which had once been that of the Moorish king, heard that the Sanglea had stood the storm, and wrote to Garcio with his own hand, as his habit was. It was doubtless (he said) by the high mercy of Heaven that these men who denied Christ, and made unholy mock of the Mother of God, should break their teeth as they did on the Maltese rock. The Viceroy should watch with care, and if it should seem that help was required (that is, if St. Angelo would be likely to fall if it were withheld) and if such help could be prudently sent (that is, if there were no danger that it would be less than enough, making no difference to the result, and so being to the shame of Spain, besides that it would be at a cost that no one would be likely to pay), then he might use such force as was near his hand, either of soldiers or ships.

But he must look on all sides, as a statesman should, and also ahead. It would be a great matter to be drawn into a Moslem war. The German Emperor had that on his hands now, and it kept him from being vexatious in other ways. He said again that Garcio must look on all sides, being wary in what he did. . . . But he should let the Pope know that he was preparing help in an ample way. He should receive well all those volunteers who came to Sicily from the northern lands, seeking shipping that they might be transported to Malta’s aid. Even if there should be some expenses in their equipment, or entertainment (that the sympathies of Spain should be shown in a public way) Garcio need not fear that he would be expected to pay these from his own purse. He had a generous lord. He could charge them in his accounts, at least so far as they would be covered by the revenues which would reach his hands. . . .

Philip sealed the letter himself as his habit was, and turned his pen to write of matters more near his heart, being of how Egmont was to be weeded out of a land where he had the love of too many men, and the Flanders burghers brought to a humble mood.

Pius IV, the one ruler who wished with a single mind to see Mustapha chased from St. Angelo’s walls, strove by pleading, by admonition, even by threats of the Church’s wrath, to shorten delay. All the troubled intrigues by which the Vatican paid for its secular power were now centred round the rescue of the beleaguered knights. But he was dealing with statesmen as astute and less scrupulous than himself. They gave fair words and pledges that they were not instant to keep. . . . The weeks passed, and those who watched from

St. Angelo's highest tower could see the flashes of the encircling guns, which were never still from this time, having become a girdle of fire, which, like the coil of a constricting snake, drew closer from day to day, but there was no sign of a Christian fleet on the summer sea.

## CHAPTER XVIII

HASSAN rode back from the Council, revolving many things in his mind, but with a fixed resolve that the event of the siege should subserve his own ambitious designs, as Dragut, as bold but not so careful as he, would not have troubled to plan.

He had seen clearly enough that Mustapha had meant that the toll of losses which must result from the attack on the Sanglea should be taken mainly from his own men, as would have happened had not Don Francisco's guns brought disaster to the Turkish boats. He had accepted that position, which it would not have been easy to refuse, and with some hope that the capture of the Sanglea would have added to his renown. Since it had failed, he had been resolute that he would not be used again as the cat's-paw for Mustapha's plans. The next time that he ordered his men to death, it should be at his own will, both on its occasion and in its design. But there was no need to tell Mustapha that in crude, quarrel-breeding words. He revolved the problem of St. Angelo's capture in a mind that was not accustomed to fail, and he aimed at such a plan as would make its fall to be clearly due to himself, and the wild army that called him chief.

He pondered Malta as an outpost of his own power, rather than as a distant jewel to be set in Soliman's crown, and was not sure that it would be easy to hold, even if it were won. It was too distant from his own base: too near the Sicilian shore. Certainly it could not be securely held unless the naval predominance which the Turks had obtained in the Mediterranean during the last ten years were more absolute than it had yet become. . . . But Malta's capture, with that of the small, but excellent fleet which was warped to the quays of the inner harbour now, would be an important advance to that end. . . . He would not choose to be besieged here as La Valette was now. Better Tripoli or Algiers than that. . . . But the dissensions by which Allah drew the teeth of the Christian dogs. . . . If they should stand idle now, while the stones of Malta crumbled under the ceaseless thunder of Turkish guns. . . . Well, he was young in years. There would be time to go far. . . . And Soliman was still breaking the Christian armies, and was through the mountains beyond Belgrade.

He did not doubt that, if St. Angelo were to fall, it was he that must bring it down. He did not doubt Mustapha's astuteness, and he knew that he was of a vast experience in methods and tactics of war. But he was old, and cautious of

habit. Too circumspect in his ways to strike straight and hard, as this occasion required. Hassan agreed with Piali on that, more than he had been disposed to admit. For he thought Piali to be a worse fool than he was. The grossness of the man's size, his truculent overbearing manner of speech, as though he would silence opposition by mere loudness of voice, stirred contempt in one who had more culture, more self-control, and an assurance more confident of itself than Piali's doubtful ancestry and harem breeding had enabled him to acquire. . . .

His thoughts turned to the woman who had wandered that morning into his camp. He did not doubt her to be of a shameless sort, even by the Frankish standards, which revolted his conceptions of the place of women in ordered life. Probably she was criminal too. But she might have knowledge that it would be profit to buy. He thanked Allah that she had come to his tent rather than that of Mustapha or Piali; either of whom, he correctly supposed, would have kept her as secret as he purposed to do.

He thought of another woman who must be, he supposed, within St. Angelo's walls. One whose wit and courage had enabled her not only to escape when she had been in his hands, but by that freedom to bring to wreck the climax of what might have been one of the most splendid and spectacular audacities of a career in which failure was not frequent to find.

Even in that, he had not been without some reason to boast, for there was the capture of the *Flying Hawk*, and then the successful impersonation of the Grand Master's envoy, of which men would talk with little care that he had planned beyond that, and had hoped to lure Don Manuel's galleys to the Formentera trap.

But the fact that he had been so foiled, and by one whose follies of sex and youth had seemed to drop her into his hands like a falling fruit, gave her a larger place in his mind than she would otherwise have been likely to have.

He recalled her as he had seen her first, in the setting of Don Manuel's castle, being that to which she was born, and in the garb which was usual to virgins of gentle blood in the Latin lands. He remembered a pulcritude at which it had been pleasant to gaze, joined to a vivacity of spirit which was not easy to find among the more secluded, restricted women of his own race. But he had not looked at her then with more than a casual admiration, and praised her with courtesies appropriate to the part he played.

He remembered her as she had boarded the *Flying Hawk* in a page's dress, which had deceived him at first. . . . And the spirit in which she had met his recognition, and the knowledge of how she had come by her own will to the jaws of a deadly snare. Had she planned escape from the first? Had she understood the desperate peril she took when she left his deck in the night for the wind-tossed sea? He did not know, and could only guess in a vague way

which did not lessen the deed, how she could have come at last to the deck of her cousin's ship. . . . He was not given to the sexual indulgence which was too frequent among the rulers of Moslem lands. Ambition centred his mind. He had Dragut's daughter for wife, a woman to whom he had given honour for her father's sake, and his obligations to him, which he would not lightly forget, even had it not been politic while he lived to keep them before his mind. But for that, she would have tasted more than once the chastisement that such women deserve. For she had her father's passion for the strong drinks that the law of Mahomet will not permit, and if it were either starved or too greatly indulged she would fall into quarrelsome moods, such as women should not be suffered to show to their natural lords. . . .

He had two others who were pleasant playthings at times, but, beyond that, they had no place in his thoughts. . . . He wondered, from what he had seen and heard when a Maltese slave and at other times, what such a wife as Angelica would be worth to have.

He might doubt of that; but that she would be pleasant to beat was no doubt at all. He might admire her for courage and other things, including that she had the look of one who would be likely to bear a good son for the man to whose hands she was fated to come, but the first thought that would fill his mind if she should become his by the chance of war, was that she must be taught that no woman could make sport of his plans without being brought to shame, or a bitter death.

It would be absurd to suppose that the capture of Angelica could appear to him as a major reason for compassing St. Angelo's fall. He had greater dreams; and would have said that there was no woman the world could hold who would be worth the hazard of life, Allah having supplied them in a very plentiful way. But he had resolved that when St. Angelo fell (as he meant it should) there was one who would not escape, nor be included in any amnesty that might place her beyond his power. He would give such orders as would bring her captured and still alive. . . . He had never ordered that a woman should be impaled, as Dragut would sometimes do, but it would have its amusement to see how she would behave in front of that death. . . . He did not resolve that he would order her to be ended thus. It would depend on his mood. But he meant to have her, and to give her sufficient cause to regret that of which he supposed she was boasting now, as a detail that his satisfaction required. . . .

He had this thought in his mind, among larger things, as he rode back to his camp, and enquired what had been learnt of Venetia while he had been away. He found that he had been well served in that, as he mostly was, being one who would be generous to reward, and also just (which is more) both in praise and blame, while having no forgiveness for failure of act or will.

It was proof of the activities and prevalence of Turkish spies in the town that he could be told at once of the charge on which her arrest had been made, with some detail, which did not deviate far from fact, of what she had been, and how she had come to her present pass. He saw that she had not fled without cause, which he supposed to be even more than it was, and somewhat differently based; and when he joined that to the fact that she had endured his first examination without being caught in a mendacious reply, he concluded that she might be one of whom a use could be made.

He went into his tent resolved to question her again concerning herself, and what she had been and done, and after that he would decide whether she would be of more use to him than a slave's price.

Venetia had had her own thoughts in this time. She had been served with better food than she had seen for some weeks, and she was one who was dainty in what she ate, as will often be with those whose childhood did not disdain a scrap of meat that the dogs had left. She knew the difference between that to which she had reached and that she had known in her early days, to which she would not lightly return.

She considered the inquisition through which she had come, which she concluded that she had well sustained. She looked round the comfort of Hassan's tent, and decided that she had arrived at a good place, which she must practise to keep. She knew that Moslems did not regard women quite in the Christian way, and that success might require a somewhat different technique from that at which she had become proficient before, but she did not think that she would prove unequal to that, and she had a sound belief that men are fundamentally alike in all lands, when they are snared in a woman's wiles.

She considered what she should tell concerning herself, and why she had fled, and decided that a large proportion of truth would be expedient in itself, as well as saving much trouble to her. Those who live by lies (if it be done with any success) must have learned that the lie is a weapon to use with reluctance as well as care. It is apt to be like the sting of the bee, which might die (as she had been told) through having used it against a foe.

She did not regard the adventures of her life with either scruple or shame, providing that they could be told without rousing interference of law, or losing the regard of those to whom she should speak, as would have been the case if she had exposed herself to Francisco in a bare way, either in body or soul.

But when a woman offers to betray those of her own race to their deadly foes, they do not seek assurance of virtue in her, as making it more sure that she will perform her bond, but rather that she shall give, for that time, no sign of a lying tongue. She decided that Hassan should have as much simple truth as any man could in reason require from a woman's mouth.

"I have one leg over the wall," she said to herself, "and it is my fault if I

slip now.”

She looked at Hassan as he came in, handsome in the loose crimson and white of his military undress, and she thought him to be one to whom she would not object to belong, though she knew that there were disadvantages in being a Moslem’s wife, particularly if he should get another at any time whom he should come to prefer. It might then be necessary, perhaps for years, to live a very continent life, while being neglected by him; with the fear of a bowstring tightening around the neck as the price of an indiscretion so slight that even a jealous Italian husband, whose love had not wandered another way, would not have been much disturbed. . . .

“They have fed you well?” he asked, as he entered, and the question was well enough, as was the good-humoured glance he gave her as she rose up from the cushions on which she had posed herself to await his coming. But she recognized it as being no more than the way in which a man might ask if his dog had been given sufficient meat, or even as he might enquire concerning a creature that was being fattened for his own dish. And he might look at such a beast in just that good-humoured way, as something it gave him pleasure to have. She was shrewd enough to perceive that there was no friendliness in his regard. She must prove her use, if she were to have any favours from him, and then she might find herself shipped for the slave-market at Byzantium or Algiers the next day when her use was done. . . . She had far to go before he would look at her in a personal way.

Well, she had done difficult things before now. She remembered how she had first invited La Cerda’s eyes. . . .

He had given orders that he was to be left alone, and he settled himself now to listen at ease, telling her to seat herself in the same way. His power was too great, she was too absolutely in his hands, for him to be careful of the parade of rule. His object was to lead her to fluent talk, that she might reveal herself, and confirm what he had heard, or else be snared in a lie, in which case he proposed to put her in the torturer’s hands, while he would stand by to hear what answers the pain would bring.

“I would know,” he said, “by what stress you came here, and also what you suppose you can do to earn a life which we do not need. I suppose you know that those Turks who are captured from us are being hanged every day at Notabile market-cross? You must show me why you should be served in a better way.”

“I suppose,” she said, not being disturbed by a threat which it was clear that (for the moment) he did not mean, “I could show you that, if you are truly desirous to know. For if you should think me of no more worth than a slave would be, a thousand ducats would not be easy to get for what were left when the rope’s work had been done.”



“You name yourself at a high price,” he replied, his eyes wandering critically over her form, which conformed more to the Italian ideals of loveliness than to those of his own race.

“Had he lived, La Cerda would have paid more.”

“So he might. Do you grudge that he died by me?”

It was an idea that only came to him as he spoke. Had she found entrance here that she might have revenge for a lover’s death? It was a possible thing.

Actually, the idea was new to her, having no substance of fact, and not having been circulated within the Christian lines, though it was a version of the combat in which Hassan had been cut down which had won an easy popularity on the Turkish side; and if Hassan had some cause to doubt it himself (concerning an event on the closing moments of which he had no more than a dazed mind), yet it did not follow that she had not heard the tale, and believed it true.

It was a danger she had not expected to meet that he should doubt her in that way; but she was instant in the adroitness of her reply, in which truth, having been wooed in her imaginations before, was no less than an easy friend: “Did you so? I had not heard that, having been jailed as I was. He is one of whom I will say no ill beyond this, that he had proved unequal to be my shield against the Grand Master’s pursuit. . . . I had supposed him dead at St. Elmo before.”

“It is of the Grand Master’s pursuit you shall tell me now.”

“So I will; and you will see that I had no choice but to come here, if I would save my own skin, which I will keep unbruised if my wits can.”

“You are one,” Hassan said, looking at her in an appraising way, “who would shrink at the whip?”

“I have soft flesh, as you see. . . . I might not be cowardly to cry out, more than most will do. . . . But I have a good hope that I shall compass a better way.”

“So you may, if you answer now with a truthful tongue, and if you avoid that you may find that there are worse pains than a whip can give.”

“I have no cause nor motive to lie. Having good wares to trade, shall I sell trash? What do you want me to tell?”

“You can tell all you will. I have time to hear.”

She told him then how La Cerda had brought her into St. Angelo, and found her lodging in the citadel there, how Sir Oliver Starkey had arranged for her to be sent away, how La Cerda had professed to do that, but had hidden her in his own house, and how he had quarrelled with the Grand Master over St. Elmo, and been sent there in so sudden a way that he could make no further disposition for her.

“I heard something of that,” Hassan allowed, being the first time he had

spoken since she began.

“So I suppose you might. I heard that there was much talk in the town, and dissension, even among the Commanders, thereon. But I do not say it from my own knowledge thereof, having to lie so close that it was as though I were jailed from before you came.”

She went on to her tale of the steward’s death, which she had told so often before in one way that it had become fact to her as much as to those who heard, and then, in a briefer style, feeling that she had talked a sufficient time, she added that she had been in hiding since then, till she had been caught by the Grand Master a few days before, and only escaped when her trial had been at hand.

“So far,” he said, “your tale has a likely sound, and it makes junction enough with what has reached me from other mouths. Yet I do not see that you have shown cause for so great a dread that you should break jail (and you have not told me how you did that!) to come here. . . . On your own tale, you had cause to push with the dagger’s point, as would be allowed in all lands.”

“So it may seem to you. But have you weighed the Grand Master’s hate against such as I? Or against all women, as I suppose, unless it be a few saints of a bloodless sort.”

“There is some weight in that,” he allowed, “on your side. For it is a fact, as we all know, that the misbelievers are cursed of God, so that they will not put you to that use for which you are made and meant, and then back in your own place: but they must either raise you to heights which are not for you, or else scourge their own loins, and refuse to touch you at all; which is a marvel of men who are sane in some other ways. . . . I can suppose that the Grand Master was not your friend, yet his repute is not that of one who would have you falsely condemned, and I must still say that your reason was not enough.”

“Yet it seemed other to me; and you may better believe when I tell you how they practised to bring me down. I was to be trapped, so I was warned by those who were friend to me, by being required to declare who I was, and from where I came, and when I had told the tale which I had said to Leon—to the Chevalier La Cerda——”

“That being untrue?”

“I had not told him all, as who would in such case as that?”

“Yet being warned?”

“I have told you so far that I will not restrict. I was so caught that there was a ditch on each side, both of which I had no hope to avoid. For if I held to the tale I had told before, they would bring witness to show that I had been born with another name, and if I were first with that, so that their witnesses would sing a stale song, then I must own that I was one whom Turin would be glad to have, with a charge of murder against her name.”

“Which we must suppose true, seeing of what you were now charged?”

“Which was not true at all. I was in the house where it was done, in the next room, but I had no part in it further than that, nor knowledge of it before. . . . There were four who knew that for truth, of which three are now hanged for the deed they did, and the fourth, who was with me then, would not speak though the halter were round my neck, for he was one of high rank, and a clean public repute, who should not have been there with me.”

“Turin is a far place. Even in time of peace they would not bear you from land to land.”

“So it may sound, but Malta is not as most countries are. The Grand Master has friends in all lands, which he is careful to keep. Yet I will not say I was most fearful of that. I feared that it would be said, as you have said now, that I was one to hang, having murdered before if not then, and so most likely at that time, by a good guess.”

“And that is what I must not believe?”

“It is untrue. I suppose there is no reason beside, for you will not care what may have been in Turin, if I can be useful to you; and, if I cannot, you will not give me a soft couch because my hands are clean of all but the steward’s blood.”

“You may be right there, and yet you may have spoken your bane, for I must tell you that, having heard your tale, which I largely believe, I do not see what use you can be.

“You will say that you know much of the town, and something of its defence. But, if you said all that you can, you might find that I know more. We have good spies, as I have no doubt that the Grand Master has on his side. They are of scanty avail, not being men who hold posts of command, or have keys in reach. They cannot betray that in which they have no trust. But how are you better than they? I should call you less. By your own tale, you have been closely immured, almost from when you were brought to this shore. I suppose that there are few who can know less. . . . Now I will ask you one thing: Have you courage and wit enough that you will go back, saying that you have repented, or what you will, and taking news of that which I will tell you to say? It is for that (and nothing beside) that I will give you gold you will like to have.”

Venetia did not like this design, which she weighed in a quick mind, and saw to be beset with dangers on every hand. She saw a tangle of lies in which she might be doubted on either side, and she knew enough of the ways of war to guess that she would not long be safe from a knife drawn briskly across her throat, even from the hands of those she might be preferring to serve. Yet she did not look so downcast as he had thought she would, as she made her reply.

“You say you have spies enough, and, if they content you with what they

tell, it is not my part to say they are less than good. Did they tell you much of the cannon by which you lost nine boats of ten, and, as the talk goes, more than a thousand lives? If they did, they were boats that were boldly led."

Hassan looked at her with a quickened regard when she asked that. "No," he said, "they failed us there, as you have been sharp to see. They make excuse that the battery was too secretly held. Have you other things, such as that, that you are able to tell?"

"How can I say? Should I have known you were so badly served about that, had not the boats come to where they could be put down?"

"And is that a thing you could have told us before?"

"It was there I was hid for the last days, till the Grand Master must come into a cell where he had no business to be."

"You did not tell me of that."

"I thought I made the tale long enough without talk of each place where I lay close."

"Then I ask you now. Did you so contrive that you could hide in the battery itself, and none know you were there?"

"You misconceive what I did. I was harboured there by Don Francisco of Vilheyra himself."

"By——? What is his post there . . . ? He is one I have met before."

"So I heard from him. He is in command. It was his devise to secretly change the guns for those of a longer range."

"Tophet's fiends! We owe that to him . . . ? Why did he hide you there? Was he so greatly La Cerda's friend? Or did you pay as a woman can?"

"I paid naught. It was gift from him. He thought me hardly abused."

"Well, so he might. . . . Tell me this, has he one who is cousin to him, woman or man, I cannot tell which, nor what they may call her now, whether Don Garcio or another name?"

"She is man to all but a few. She was not to me, for I hid first in her room."

"Where was that?"

"In the castle itself. In a turret over the part that Sir Oliver has."

"How did you get there?"

"It was where La Cerda had me at first, before trouble began. . . . I fled both to a room I knew, and where I knew her to be."

"And she hid you there, being friend to you?"

There was a tone of puzzled doubt in the query, which Venetia understood, but did not resent. She was ever content to be what she was, and assured that she could be other things if her well-being required. She answered with a candour which may have been more natural to her than the art of lying in which she had brought herself to a trained skill: "She was not my friend. She was never that. But she is not one to betray."

“Do they know you for what you are?”

“She could make a good guess. I am saint to him, unless he changed when he heard me fled.”

“Are they not then in accord?”

“Over me? They are far from that.”

She told in detail the events which had followed her flight to Angelica’s room, filling up with some shrewdness of surmise the gaps where her knowledge failed.

When she had done, he said: “I will think of this, and talk to you again. Meantime you will stay here, for your presence must not be known.”

He summoned Alif, to whom he said: “There is no talk that this woman is in my tent?”

“It is known or guessed by two, but they will not speak.”

“I will slit their tongues if they do. But if they are still, you can bring me their names on a later day, and they shall touch gold. She must stay here for a time. You will place a guard round the tent, both by night and day, that none may go in or out, except that I so command. If she should do me harm in the night, you will flay her slowly, taking the feet first.”

He turned to her, when Alif had gone. “Did you understand what I said? Then I will tell you what will be useful for you to know. You will stay here for this night, and if you mean evil to me you will have the best chance that a woman could. But I gave order that this tent should be circled so that none can go either in or out, and if I should come to harm, they will flay you alive in a slow way, taking the feet first, which (I will tell you as one who has seen it done) you will not greatly enjoy.”

He spoke in a smiling way, being pleased to take what might seem to those who looked on an unmeasured risk, as when he had put himself in Don Manuel’s power, but which he felt he could control to his own end. Men would say that, having slain La Cerda, and his concubine having found her way to his tent (with what purpose it would be easy to doubt), he had slept with her alone, trusting the Prophet’s care as few of the faithful would hazard to do. But in his heart there was a confident hope that Venetia would not seek such revenge, with the surety that she would be peeled alive on the next day. It was more of his own revenge on which his mind was disposed to dwell, and of the larger issue of St. Angelo’s fall, as he considered how he could use Venetia’s acquaintance with Francisco and his cousin to some treacherous ruse.

Venetia took the threat with a laugh, being content that she was to have a further time during which to win, if she could, the approval of the most powerful man to whom her adventurous youth had yet closely come; though she could not wholly avoid a thought of the hourly danger in which she stood among those who were natural foes, and were ruthless in what they did. She

had to guard her life against all with no more to aid than her single wit, and the market value her body bore.

So she laughed with all the courage she had, and gave Hassan a bold reply: “Then I must be glad that you look to be in good health, as one who may live to another dawn, for I would keep my skin where it is most useful to me. Did you doubt lest I would use a knife in the night . . . ? I am less of that kind than you may suppose; though you cannot have felt a great doubt, or you had disposed in another way. . . . But, if you will, I can serve you in better sort.”

He looked at her somewhat as one will look at a market beast, and she felt a sudden quickening of heart, not of passion, but at the possibility that she was on the way to a new success. She saw that he was not wholly cold to that which her words implied, but when he spoke it was plain that what she sought would be less than simple to win.

“So you could, and so you will, if I wish. You are fair enough in a pale way, but, by your own tale, you are too much of a common kind.”

“So I have been,” she allowed, “but you could mend that if you would. . . . It is men who alter, not I. . . . I seek harbour that has not been easy to find.”

“Well,” he said, “you must seek again. For this night, you must stay here.”

They were in the outer pavilion when he said this. He went inward, leaving her alone.

She saw that she would have comfort enough, for there were cushions that she could pile to her own will, and rich shawls for warmth. There was a lamp that would last the night.

She lay down and, at first, she was too weary to sleep. Her mind was active to hope and plan. She saw that she had escaped, and come to the place where she now lay, with better fortune than would have been forecast by a cautious mind.

She had been rebuffed by Hassan’s last words, and she saw that he looked at her with a contempt the reason of which she did not deny. Those who would come to a clean bed should not be too much mired on the way. Yet, if the storm come, and the rain, and good shelter be hard to find? She took little blame to herself. She was not ashamed before men, and even to God, if He should be hard with her when the time should come, she supposed that she would have something to say. But she did not therefore deny fact. If a ruler preferred to take women only into his bed who were private to him, then a harlot such as herself would not be a likely choice. She must trade at another booth. She would be a fool to complain of that; but if she could overcome his contempt till he should prefer her to those (most probably gross and stupid and fat) whom he now owned—well, it would be more triumph to her.

Her mind turned to the warning threat he had made, and the doubt it showed. In fact, though it did not incline her to seek his life, it fathered the

thought, which would not otherwise have been there.

She was one who would always do more in dreams than the waking day. Now she lay lost in imagination of what would be said within St. Angelo's walls, if a tale should reach there that the woman they had harried and jailed had penetrated the Turkish lines and slain the corsair ruler within his tent.

She imagined dispute in which some would say she had broken jail that she might revenge the lover who had fallen to Hassan's sword (she did not doubt that La Cerda had died in that way, having heard no different report), while others would have it that she had been moved by higher zeal for the Christian cause, and had escaped with the noble purpose of ridding it of its most dangerous foe, as well as of vindicating her own character from the imputations that had been cast upon it. She would be Judith to them. Judith was a great name. She wondered what Judith had done in her later years. Probably she had made a noble match with some Hebrew prince, who would be glad to wed with one of such valiant fame, and who had a face to seduce kings. In the day, she would have been queen of the society of her time: and in the night she would have her prince, whose head would not have to be cut off when he had drowsed after their amorous play. . . . She did not think much of the deed itself. She could have cut off the jailer's head easily enough when he fell asleep, and he would have been little loss to the world. She would not have minded doing that, if only he had been considerate enough to bring a sword, as Holofernes seemed to have done. (But what a mess Judith must have made in the bed! Hacking off heads seemed a needlessly sanguinary way to kill men, if it had to be done with good furniture all around.) She supposed Judith had wanted the head. She had heard that version of the tale in which the Hebrew heroine had strolled back to her city swinging Holofernes' head by the hair; and, when she considered that, she saw she had come to the place where the parallel would be sure to fail.

Her imagination became lively on a new path. She had skinned living eels with her own hands. She had seen butchers skin beasts that were just dead, as all men might at that day, when slaughtering was not performed behind solid doors. Men do not greatly change with the years; and it may be error to think that the age in which Malta's agony was endured was more cruel than are those that have been since, or now are. There are cruelties in the laboratories of a later time, at seeing which a fiend might blush to be called a man. But cruelties were open then that are secret now. . . . Venetia was concerned for no more than her own case. If she could have been sure that she would walk up the Bourg swinging Hassan's head by the hair (which would have been short enough to require a good grip that it should not drop) the project might have had attractions which it now lacked.

But she was convinced that it would not end in that way. It would end with

her in the midst of a hollow square, surrounded by a crowd of corsairs, very variously and gaily garbed, and all in a silent, eager expectancy to hear how she would scream when the executioners started to peel her feet. . . . No, her skin should stay where it was, as far as that decision might rest with her.

She turned her thoughts to the more practical consideration of how she could earn the goodwill of those in whose power she had put her life. She did not wish to betray her own blood (with some possible exceptions, the Grand Master heading that list), if she could avoid this without risk. She was simply striving to save herself, as most men (she supposed) would think it natural for her to do. Anyway, it was natural to her. She had played for her own hand through more than twenty difficult years, and was not likely to stop now, being among those who might make her back raw for a morning's sport, if she should give them excuse. Her trouble was that she did not see how she was to be of sufficient use to earn a good price in safety and then reward. Hassan's idea that she should go back to cajole the Grand Master with some tale of changing sides again, and betraying the Turkish plans, did not please her at all. She thought (in particular) that Sir Oliver would be hard to fool. The Grand Master might not skin her alive, but he would rack her if he had reason to think she lied, so that she might be a cripple till she should reach the grave, which would be hard to endure. If he guessed that she had come back as a Turkish spy, he would hang her in the next hour, and she would be in fortune if she did not come to a worse pain. . . . She might, of course, decline to fulfil the plan when she would be again under the shelter of Malta's flag. But would the mere fact of that be enough to turn the Grand Master's anger aside? Would he not talk of the law in the hateful way that the strong will, and those in a settled place, as being something above himself, to which he must commit her perforce, though he might grieve with her pain?

She had been adroit to turn Hassan's talk aside with the tale of how she had been concealed in the battery which shattered the Turkish boats. He had been plainly intrigued by her account, for reasons she could not entirely guess; but would he come back to his first idea when he should think of it again?



## CHAPTER XIX

“I WOULD be more at ease,” Francisco said, “if I could know where she is gone; for I have a hope that she will not have put me out of her mind, and, if I come through this war, I am resolved that I will find her again.”

This was to Angelica, a week after Venetia fled. They were better friends now than they had been since she had come into their lives, or perhaps before that. Francisco, being troubled and anxious in mind, would have someone to whom to talk, and Angelica gave a sympathy that was no less true because she had some thoughts, both about Venetia and other things, which she kept unsaid.

As to where Venetia had gone, or even how she had escaped, there was no more than a poor guess.

The jailer had not been found on the wrong side of a locked door or at least it was not known that he had, except by the man who had come to relieve his watch, for they had seen that they would be caught in an equal blame. One had let her escape the cell, and the other had failed to keep watch at the outer door. It was a better tale to say that she had escaped, none could guess when or how, beyond that her place was empty when morning came.

It might not be believed, but it left the blame among three, of whom two might be quite innocent men, and one, in fact, was, being the one who opened her door when the morning came, and his protests that she must have gone in a witch's way had a genuine sound.

It was a good guess that it was she who had fled in the boat which had left the quay with a pistol bullet in swifter pursuit, but it was no more; for she had never been clearly seen in the misty night, and the boat had been adrift the next day near the harbour-mouth, being empty then, and the wind carrying it to St. Elmo's point.

The spies brought no word of her having been caught by the Turks, and the most likely guess was that she had got away to some other part of the island, and would there try for passage in a coasting boat, such as would slip over to Sicily in the night. Or it was supposed by some that she had been wounded and fallen out of the boat.

Anyway she was gone; and Sir Oliver saw no harm in that, and Del Monte thought it a mercy for which his own saint deserved more than common thanks, for he had had no heart in the wanton's defence, which he did not think to consort with his dignity or deserve his care. He thought himself more fitly

engaged in command of St. Michael's fort, with which most men would agree.

The defence of that fort and the Sanglea was not a post that allowed of much rest at this time, for it was recognized to be the weakest of the bastioned line which was St. Angelo's outer guard, and the Turks, while they had not attempted further storm during the last week either there or elsewhere, were still pressing closer on every side. They had received some store-ships with extra artillery, and large consignments of powder and shot, and other munitions of war, so that they could still erect more batteries, and maintain fire on all sides both by day and sometimes by night, to which the Christians must make more cautious reply.

It was seen also that the Turkish infantry changed camp in sundry places, so that they lay closer around the walls. None could say when the storm would burst, nor at which point, but there must be vigilance at all, which must never sleep. And every day there came to Sir Oliver's table a list of those who had been wounded or died in the town from the Turkish fire, and in the bicker around the wall; and ever a watch was kept from the highest tower for the Spanish succour which did not come.

The Maltese militia at this time was still holding the most part of the island, except the coasts, with Marshal Couppier in command. They had neither numbers, discipline, nor practice in arms sufficient for them to offer battle to the Turks, but they harassed them both by night and day. Mustapha had held more than one Council to resolve whether he should not divert his strength for a time to strike at Notabile (as it was then called), the ancient town in the centre of the island, which was the headquarters of this guerrilla attack. But the decision was always the same, that though it could be reached, and the whole island overrun, so that the militia would be destroyed, and the remaining population given to slavery or massacre, as Turkish greed or animosity might decide, yet the time which this enterprise would require, and the losses it would entail when operating in a country whose every field had a wall of stone which could shelter an ambushed foe, would be such that, when it would have been done, there would be little remaining strength with which to threaten St. Angelo's walls.

It would be St. Elmo again in a second, fatal event. But if St. Angelo should be brought down, then the island could be made a more leisured, being a certain prey.

So Marshal Couppier, who had been prepared to resist a Turkish advance till the last man should be dead, found that his task was less hard, though not less needful to do. Up to the time of the great assault on the Sanglea, he had been able, either by water or land, to maintain communication with the Grand Master, so that they would often time operations to vex the Turks at the same hour from their separate sides; but now the Turkish lines were so closely

drawn, and so keenly watched, that it was an equal chance that a creeping messenger would be espied, and either shot as he ran or caught to hang in a rope's noose on the next day.

Sir Oliver sent a letter out to tell of Venetia's escape, and to provide that she should be apprehended if she were found, but at this time he had had no reply, nor was he sure that the letter had been safely conveyed through the Turkish lines.

"I suppose," Angelica said on this day, when Venetia came into the talk, "that you will wish that she did not fall into Turkish hands, lest she should have told them things that were best unsaid?"

"She has not done that, as I think," Sir Oliver replied, "for we should have certainly heard. There is not much in the Turkish camp that we may not know if we wish, though the news has become harder to get in the last week. I suppose that they think we are nearly down, in which I should call them wrong. But the scum of men, such as will spy and betray, will ever watch for the winning side and will prefer to barter with them. . . . But as to her whom you name, she could do us but little harm, for what did she know more than a thousand besides? I should say, less. . . . But I perceive that you do not trust that she would not betray those of her own blood?"

"I would not think evil without a cause," Angelica said to that; "but I suppose she would think first of her own skin."

Sir Oliver agreed about that, not guessing how literally it had been, but he did not think her of much account, either to be true or betray. He said: "I suppose you can put her out of your thoughts, as one of whom you will not hear, nor yet see, till your life is through. . . . I am glad to see that, now she is gone, you and Don Francisco are in better accord. . . . I have news for you on another matter, which should give you no pain. You will not have much from Don Manuel's wealth, which the Order claims, but your Segura lands will bring you revenue in your own right, which the Church cannot touch except by your own deed when of full age, so there will be no strife of law about that. You are a ward for the next year, and after that you can freely wed, giving him you choose a great dower. . . . And now you know this to be, I suppose you will leave, if a chance should come that would take you free."

Angelica looked at him with troubled eyes. "Do you think that?" she asked. "I had not thought to hear it from you."

"It is what wisdom would urge, you being free of the doubt you fled, and which held you here."

"Being here, am I less use than my food is worth?"

"You have done your part, and few men have done more, or as much, if I make a full sum, from when you saved your ships from the Moorish trap."

"Had I been a man, would you have said what you did now?"

“Perhaps not. But you are a woman, who should not have come.”

“Am I that? I think at times I am neither woman nor man, being less than either. Would you say that a woman’s honour must be less than a man should have?”

“No. But it is rooted in other soil.”

“And that honour there are those who would say that I did not regard when I came here?”

“That is what I have never said.”

“Nor perhaps thought. I did not mean it of you. But there are those who would. There are those who will in the after days. Am I to lose on both counts? By your leave, I stay here till the siege is through.”

“I do not refuse. But—do you so decide for no more than the reason you say? For, if you do, I might reply that your honour on both counts is too rooted to shake. But you should ask of your own heart: is it for Malta you so resolve or a nearer cause?”

Angelica took this with a moment’s bending of puzzled brows, which lifted again as she gave a candid reply.

“It is Francis you mean by that! What if it should be for him? He is the nearest I have. But I should say it is both. It is also Malta I will not leave while this siege endures.”

“Then there is no more to be said, except to pray that it shall not come to such end as will bring you grief, and we must ask that for larger reasons than that you shall steer to a restful sea.”

He turned his thoughts to more urgent cares, and she, having done the work she had for that hour, went out to meet Francisco at the tavern which had now become habit to them, and where they knew they would both be at an hour before noon, unless there should be signs of stir in the Turkish camp, such as would keep him beside his guns, or she should have work of another kind which she could not leave.

Now she found that he was seated there when she came. They were alone, for the stringency of the siege had brought such a shortage of food (except only flour) as had caused the Grand Master to take it under his control and ration it in a strict way. There was nothing which could be sold in a tavern now, except a light wine, of which the Grand Master took little account, whether it flowed or ran dry, the water tanks being as full as they were.

Angelica saw at a glance that Francisco was stirred by some instant cause, though whether it were trouble or joy was not easy to see.

“I have had this,” he said, “in the past hour,” and with the words he passed her a letter, ill-writ on what appeared to be the fly-leaves torn from a large book. “It is for you also to read.”

MY LORD AND I THINK MY FRIEND,

I am close held by the Turk, having been caught by them, which I did not intend, when the boat drifted to shore, being beyond control of my hands.

I have made plan to escape, which will be, I cannot say on which night, but the one next after this will be delivered to you.

I shall bring news of such weight as will buy my peace, and some honour for you, but I must entreat and give you my trust in this, that you will tell my coming to none, till I am again in the cell from which I was dragged by the Grand Master away.

When he will know how I have been served, and what I have done for the Christian cause, he may regret that he would have chased me to death, or he may not care even then, saying that I was sent here by the Saints, that I might be used to Malta's avail, which I suppose to be all his care.

I shall come by way of the sea, at the second hour of the night, landing under your guns, being the one place where I am not most like to be met first with an arquebus ball, and after that with a question of who may come in the night from the Turkish lines.

When I plead with you to tell none, and to so contrive that I may gain the cell without being seen except only by you (if that cannot be saved) I do not mean that Don Garcio shall not be told—he not being one to betray. He is one I shall ask you to tell, and he may think in what plight I shall be, having been racked, and had some tortures besides that I cannot write, and being kept in such bareness and dirt as you need not guess. Will you ask him to be your friend to procure such things as I greatly need, and that in the most secret way, to be in the cell when I arrive? And if he can be there himself for my better aid I shall be grateful the while I live.

Your fri—— VENETIA.

The letter ended thus with a broken word, not as though she had written all that she might, but as being hindered by lack of space on the torn sheets which may have been all she had.

Angelica read it twice, saying nothing the while. She had pity at what she read, which she did not doubt, but her heart sank that they were to be so troubled again. When she spoke, it was at first only to say: "It is Arabic book," as she turned the paper, which had been good, but was soiled and torn, and had a brown smear at one place, as of recent blood.

"You will do what she asks?" Francisco enquired, as one who hoped but was less than sure.

"She asks more than enough, and some things that she cannot have."

"You mean that you will not be her friend at so great a need?"

"I meant less. But she must not teach what we shall do. Do you see that she

asks your honour, if not your life, that she may cover her own show?—which, I will allow, may be evil enough.”

“I see no great risk, if it be shortly revealed, as she must mean it to be.”

“She asks what she does not say, that you will draw your men back from the guns. How would you answer for that?”

“It would be but a short time, and a little space.”

“Which would be too far and too long. . . . It is time of war. She must find courage to face her shame.”

“You think little of her.” His face showed the misery of his doubt of what she might have endured.

“You are wrong in that. I will do all that I can that is not hurtful to you, who have gone too near to wreck for her once, which should be enough. . . . She is less than wise for herself at times, being too careful about her fears.”

“I should say that she has had high courage, and evil use.”

“Which may be true, and yet I may not have said wrong. . . . I will help you in this (unless I change with more thought) on one bargain alone. I must let Sir Oliver know that she is likely to come, bringing news from the Turkish camp.”

“It was of my honour you talked. What should I have left if you do that?”

“You would have all that is yours now. How could you lose it by me?”

“She trusts me that I will not disclose.”

“You were to tell me.”

“And none else.”

“But if I do? Could she charge you with that? I think your wits go when you deal with her.”

“Then I will say that it is my trust in you which you cast aside.”

“Francis, will you hear sense? Have I failed you before? I will only say that she may come, and not when or where. It might be the saving of all (and not least of her) if she should be discovered by chance while she had not been able to disclose herself in her own way.”

“Well, if you are so resolved, I cannot prevent. We must trust to you.”

Angelica disliked that he should link Venetia’s name with his own in the common “we”, more than anything that had yet been said, but it was not a feeling which she elected to show. “I will do what I can,” she said, “but I think her ways to be such that they bring more trouble to those around than she has herself, and that might be called enough.”

She saw Francisco frown at this, which, she became aware as she spoke, had an ungenerous sound, Venetia having suffered so much as her letter showed. She asked: “Am I shrew? Yet I am one to help, as you may have found me before. And if it be more for you than for her (we being so close of blood) you must forgive me for that.”

Francisco looked at her in a confused humour which he could not have

explained to himself had he tried (which it was sure he would not).

“You are not shrew,” he said, “nor unkind. You are the one aid that we have. But you do things in your own way, as you ever would.”

He went at that, and had he been asked if he were sorry or glad he would have felt it hard to reply.

Venetia lived. That was good. She was coming back. That was good, too. She brought a hope that she might win pardon, from which his own hopes rose to a new height. She would be here, and La Cerda dead. It should not be beyond him to win her love. He had more pride than conceit of his own worth, but he knew himself to be of a great name, and a great wealth. He had proved he could be her friend, and it was to him that she looked in her present need. There was much in that. He might not be vain of himself, and yet hope she would soon be his, she being cast off by La Cerda’s death from a place that had seemed high and secure a few months before, when Malta had not called its victims from every land. . . . But then he thought of what her letter had said. There had been the rack, which could leave men and women crippled beyond repair, though it was not often used to so great extreme. There had been tortures she would not write. And she was now such that she would not be seen except by those she could not avoid. That might be from no worse than dirt, or garments missing or fouled or torn. . . . It was vain to guess. He must wait, striving neither to fear too much, nor to hope too high.

Angelica went to Sir Oliver, who was busy with many cares, and whom there were those who waited to see, not being able to go in by her door.

“I have something to say, if you are not too deeply sunk in matters of greater weight.”

“I am not so much that I will not listen to you, let it be on what subject it may, so that La Cerda’s mistress do not return.”

“But it is of her that I come to speak.”

Sir Oliver raised eyebrows of half-humorous resignation, and then showed his more serious mood in the tired sigh of a man who was weary with work which would never cease.

“Well, I must hear. What is it now? She is a cork that will never sink.”

“She was caught in the Turkish lines. She has been racked, and had other pains, I know not for what cause. I have to ask this. If she can escape, bringing information you should be grateful to have, will she be received in the right way?”

“How do you know?”

“I cannot say that. I am pledged not.”

“Has Francisco been changing letters with her? Will he never learn? She will be his death. . . . I must warn you now that if he helped her escape (of which there has been debate, but there is no proof, so it blew away) he is in

more jeopard than she.”

“I am assured he did not, for he told me that, and I am one to whom he would be unlikely to lie. Nor has he written to her, nor known where she was, as I have his word, and a better proof.”

“It is well for him. But he knows now?”

“If you would not ask what I cannot say?”

“There is no need to say. It is plain without words.”

“He was to tell no one but me. You will see how I must stand if I say more.”

“But if she makes such query as that——”

“You misconceive. It is not she, it is I who ask.”

“And I must know more, or refuse reply. Do you ask with Francisco’s consent?”

“I can tell you this. He has had a letter from her, which he had not sought. We took counsel on that, and he agreed that I should ask what I now have.”

“You could tell more. How will she get his reply?”

“I have said all that I can.”

“Then I will answer this far, and no more. She will be wise to come back, being in such hands, by any means that she may. Being so returned, if she can bring knowledge of great avail, such as the point where they will next make their attack, she will have done service for which we pay. But she must find no promise in that.”

“I do not get much.”

“Nor do you give with a free hand. . . . I will tell you this. Whatever tale she may bring, we shall not be quick to believe. For a matter of weight would not be opened to her, nor would I trust her at any time.”

Angelica looked as though a new thought had troubled her mind. “You think her one who would betray those of her own faith?”

“Her own faith? What is that . . . ? If she come back, I suppose she will betray the Turks rather than us, for reasons easy to see. . . . But I do not trust her at all.”

Angelica, considering this conversation, felt that she had done well. She had given Venetia any help that she could, which might not be much, but she had not been active for her. She had cleared Francisco of having been in secret communication with her, or having aided in her escape, and as to this letter he had now had, Sir Oliver must allow that he had been promptly informed, and also that Venetia purposed return.

It was not all—it might not be enough for Francisco’s defence—if it should afterwards be disclosed that he had disposed his men rather to enable her to gain his cell unobserved than with a single thought for his battery needs, as his duty was, but it was all she could do. She turned her thoughts to supplying



Francisco's cell with such comforts as a woman would most urgently need who would come from torture and dirt. She had to use some circumspection in this, and she must visit the battery more than she wished, besides sending a valise to Francisco which was not to be opened except by him.

She blamed herself that she did these things with so poor a will, thinking of that which she supposed Venetia must have endured, but her feelings were less easy to rule than were acts and words.

## CHAPTER XX

THE oars moved with long, slow, silent strokes, the muffled blades making no more sound than would be concealed by the lapping of the water on the seawall, or the wind would carry away.

The night was dark, and Venetia, sitting in the bow of the boat, could see no more than the dim outline of St. Angelo's towers rising blackly against the sky.

Hassan himself sat at her side. He leaned forward, his eyes searching the night. His presence there may be held for proof of the reckless-seeming courage which had made his name one that the world knew, but there was calculation in what he did.

"You must go slowly," she whispered, "and give me time. It is hard to be exact here, but we cannot be greatly wrong."

"If you fail," he said, "there will be no mercy from me. There shall not be less than one death." His bare scimitar lay at his hand, of which he had warned her before. She was not in a great dread as to that, thinking that she could guide him aright; but it was a threat that she may have required to control her mind to his own will, for she became aware, as the moment neared, that she disliked that which she came to do, more than she thought that she would. Nor was she clear as to what its consequences were likely to be, for she had been plain to him that if the battery should be entered they would be (as it seemed to her) no nearer to the entering of St. Angelo's towers. They would have no more than a place they could not hold for an hour, nor with hope to escape alive when the light should come.

"That," he had said, "is quite clear. Guide the boat there, and do what is agreed when we arrive, and your part is through. I mean no more than to be there for a short time."

Yet if that were true (and she could not see how he could hope to do more), for what use were the boats, laden with men, that she had seen when they embarked, and which were now following silently in their rear? For the battery was beneath and outside the citadel wall, being built on the narrow space between wall and shore.

Francisco was to be caught (so she had been told) and his guns quickly destroyed. There was no design beyond that. And he was needed to save the life of Candelissa's son, whom Marshal Couppier had caught, and was proposing to hang, according to the way of this war. They would be

exchanged, and she would have won her reward with less harm to her own race than they might deserve, seeing how they had treated her.

But that fleet of boats, small though they were, and bearing no such number of men as had been in those that Francisco's guns had shattered before, showed that there was a further purpose, of which she had not been told. Well, could she help that? Her first care must be for her own neck. She had no wish to have that scimitar drawn across it, Hassan having shown her, in an idle way, how keen was the shining blade, so that it could sever a cushion which had been thrown into the air. . . .

She could not be greatly wrong if she guided them under the shadow of the main tower, and not too much to the left, by which they would have come to the little quay where the boats were moored—the quay from which she had made escape. If she should go too much to the right, there would be more open sky over the boom which closed the inner harbour that lay between St. Angelo and the Sanglea. . . . She had used all her arts during the past week, and thought she had now some place in Hassan's regard, so that he might be more inclined to keep than to send her away, but she knew he would have no ruth if she should fail now, or if she should not use her voice to betray. . . .

Francisco leaned on the wall, listening into the night, with Angelica at his side. They were intent to watch, for it was close to the time that Venetia had said. The men who should have been stationed around the guns had been withdrawn by Francisco's orders. They lay asleep, or dived by the light of a hanging lamp in their shelter at the battery's rear.

"It is wonder," Angelica said, "that she can handle a boat alone to find her way here in the night (and so that she can say at what time she will come), and that the more that she has been racked and hurt as she says. Nor is it easy to think that she has found those in the Turkish camp who will row her here."

"She is not simple to thwart," Francisco replied. "We do not know how she escaped from prison before."

Angelica made no answer to that, thinking it easy to guess, though she would have guessed wrong. She supposed that it had been with the aid of Francisco's gold, though that might be more than himself knew. She said: "Well, it will soon be shown. . . . What should you do if she should appear with a crew of men, and we here alone?"

"Is it likely she would? But, even then, there is the parapet to be scaled, and my own men are not far."

"Well, I would it were done."

"So do I. . . . Is that not a boat? Out to the right? Can you not see?"

As he spoke, the great clock of San Lorenzo Church sounded a double stroke, that came clearly through the silent calm of the night, and they knew that the hour had come.

At the same moment, hearing that sound, Hassan said, in his own tongue, which Venetia could not understand: "Pull in now. Pull hard, for the time is short."

The two men at the oars quickened their strokes, and the boat came fast out of the night.

"That is she," Francisco said, and there was excitement in his voice which, to Angelica, was not pleasant to hear. "She has not come with a large crew. There is one at her side, and two who row."

So it was. The boat grounded a short distance away. The man who was beside Venetia jumped quickly out, and helped her ashore. The rowers sat where they were. Venetia came forward with the one man at her side. There was no menace in that, though there might be a puzzle as to why they did not push off, having put her ashore. So Angelica said.

"They wait only to see that she is safely received," Francisco supposed.

Well, so it might be, though she saw little sense in that. It was at least certain that it was Venetia who approached, and, by the way she walked, it appeared that she had not been racked enough to make her slow over the stones.

Hassan was not far behind, having a delicate choice to make. He did not know that he might not be greeted with a volley of arquebus balls, which would be likely to shorten a life for which he had future use. But he had resolved to take this chance in a cool mind, and he would not shrink. If he let Venetia go alone, how would he be sure that she would speak the right words? He resolved that it would be best to follow closely behind. If there were a volley to come, he would be as much covered by her as her smaller size would provide.

Francisco leaned over the edge, and Venetia called from below: "How am I to come up?"

"You must have a rope. There is no other way on this side."

Their voices were guarded and low, for high overhead rose the great mass of St. Angelo's castle, and sentries watched from the wall.

Francisco let down a looped rope. The parapet was not high; and, if she should come round to enter the battery from behind, that she would be seen or heard by the men was a likely thing.

Venetia began to adjust the rope, and Hassan turned away as though his part were done, and he must go back. The two men in the boat began to haul on a rope which had been trailing through the water behind. Its other end was in one of the boats, loaded with men, which the darkness hid. As it tightened, it became a signal to them to pull in, which they were instant to do. Everything had been carefully timed. At ten minutes after the hour the Turkish batteries would open on every side, circling castle and town with an inferno of stabbing

flame. But that was still six minutes away.

Venetia came over the top. "Get me to the cell," she said, in a breathless way; "we will talk there."

They crossed the gun-platform, and entered Francisco's cell. They could not see that three boats, loaded with men, had come out of the night. They could not know that a dozen more were pulling toward the boom which it was Francisco's duty to protect with the battery's fire.

The men were leaping out before the boats were aground. They had rope ladders with hooks, which they threw up to grip the ledge of the low parapet. They were up almost as soon as the hooks held, Hassan being one of the first.

A voice calling through the night came down from the citadel wall. The commotion had been observed, but its cause was not easy to guess. The sentinel looked down into a darkness in which he thought that men moved, but, if there were hostile attack, why did not the battery show its need?

The next moment he saw the flash of a pistol-shot on the platform below. He called his alarm and St. Angelo sprang alive. But the drama of Francisco's battery was played out before help could reach.

Francisco had looked at Venetia as she had come to the light of the lamp that was in the cell. She had looked pale, and as one who had an excitement that strained control, but there might be no wonder in that. She showed no sign of what she said she had lately endured.

Francisco, seeing her thus, turned to call his men back to their posts. "I will be," he said, "but a moment away."

Venetia's order had been that she should keep him within the cell. This she tried to do, whether for his sake or her own would be hard to guess. But she did not succeed. "It is but a word," he said, "and I am with you again."

Seeing him go, she followed, and Angelica followed her. They saw men clambering over the edge of the scarp. Francisco ran at them with his sword bare, shouting loud for the men who should have been lining the parapet to fling them back. A corsair's pistol flashed, but the ball went wide in the night. Francisco's sword thrust and killed, and it seemed that foes were round him on every side. Yet he was aware that most of them ran for the guns rather than him, and he guessed what they would do.

Angelica heard Venetia's voice in her ear. "You can escape if you run now. But do not say you were warned by me. It would be my death. You were to be caught in the cell, and Francisco both."

She had time to say this, for Angelica stood still, as though she would understand all before she would either remain or fly.

"So you have done this," she said, and wonder was in her voice. But she did not know that Venetia had heard. She had left her side. Venetia knew that there was but one chance for her own life now, and that must be what the

Turks would give to one who had partly failed. She had but a moment to run back to the wall, for Francisco's men were swarming in now, with Captain Antonio at their head.

Antonio saw where Francisco fought with a savage fury which made him more than he would have been at another time, for he was aware in that moment's sight of how he had been fooled and shamed, and by whom it had been contrived. He cared not for his own life, having only a lust to kill, and it is a mood before which many will shrink aside.

Antonio ran to his aid, and was shouted away. "Not to me. Guard the guns—the guns." He turned to that which he saw was the greater need.

Angelica saw how Francisco fought, with two men at his front, and one working round to his side. This man made a thrust which might have found flesh, but that Francisco stumbled at the same time over one he had killed before. He came down with his left hand on the ground, and leapt up, facing them again. Angelica remembered, none too soon, that she was Don Garcio, wearing a sword. She ran then to her cousin's aid, feeling that it could not be used in a better way.

The man who preferred to come sideward to those he fought saw that there was one at his own left side. He saw it in time to stay the stroke he would have aimed at Francisco's head, but it was half a second too late for his own avail. Angelica made a thrust under his arm which lacked the vigour which those should use who engage in such deadly play. The point struck the leather baldric, metal-studded, that crossed his side, and had no strength to go through. Feeling that she was foiled, and seeing that eyes and weapon came round to her, she pressed with her full strength. The point slipped off the edge of the belt, and drove in. She felt it sink soft and deep, and would have stayed it in revulsion of what she did, but the sudden strength she had used had done that which she could not change. Through ribs to heart, the keen blade had gone, and it was a dying man who slipped off her sword.

She saw the convulsion that changed his face as he fell, in a flicker of ruddy light that passed over the scene, which was now fought in a red inconstant glare, such as might glow among fiends in a striving hell.

Overhead, the cannon on St. Angelo's walls flashed and thundered into the night. The boom to leftward was lit up with red floating flares which its defenders had set alight to guide them in what they did. Along the line of the boom, swimmers fought in the water; men struggled to defend or capture the Turkish boats: axes laboured to break the boom.

Round Francisco's guns, which should have been raking those boats with a fatal fire, Turk and Christian swayed and struggled in a force that was about equally strong and equally resolute to prevail.

Had Francisco's garrison consisted of none but the twelve men he had had

before, as Venetia had told Hassan, speaking truth as far as she knew, there could have been but one end. They would have all been slain, and the guns damaged beyond repair, for which Hassan's men had the spikes and hammers that this office required. But in the last week, the importance of the battery having been better perceived than had been the case before the Sanglea attack, the embrasures for the three smaller guns had been quickly built, and the garrison increased to three times what it had been at first.

Turk and Christian met in numbers that nearly matched, and the strife might have gone on till few were living on either side; but Hassan saw that it could not be many moments before reinforcements would arrive, against which he could not hope to contend.

To that extent, the surprise had failed, though it had given time for the boats to approach the boom without hurt from the battery fire. He was not one to ignore facts to his own death. He looked round to see what there was still time to do. He saw where Francisco fought, and Angelica at his side. He called those men who were near, and whom he could bring to heed in that confusion and din.

Angelica heard Francisco's voice, as he spoke to her without turning his head: "You are mad to be here. You should get clear while you can."

But Angelica had recalled that those who wear a man's dress are expected to do that which a man should. She stood with the dripping sword in her hand, resolute not to retire.

Francisco had but one man facing him now. The other had backed away when his comrade fell to Angelica's sword, the odds changing in a way he did not approve. He had joined the rabble of those who fought round the idle guns. The man who remained was one who could fence with skill. Francisco found him harder to match now he was alone than when he had been one of a crowd. He had a curved scimitar which stabbed at times, and at others would sweep round with a whistling sound. He had a small round buckler on his left arm, which seemed to meet every thrust that the scimitar did not turn, as though it had a magnetic power. Francisco had his dagger out, making it what the buckler was to the Turk, having been trained in that way. It was a duel between those who had different techniques of strife, and might end in any way in that changing light, but Francisco found it too hard to risk turning his head.

Angelica felt her arm seized, as though in a vice of steel. She looked into Hassan's eyes. With a quick effort, she changed her sword to her free hand. In another instant, his violence would have been repaid in a worse way, but other hands were around her now. She was dragged to the wall, crying for help that she did not get.

A whistle shrilled through the strife, calling on the Turks to retire. Francisco felt the sharp pain of a slashed arm, and his opponent was gone.

Angelica's voice came from the wall, doubtfully heard in the confused uproar of powder and steel, and the clamour of human cries.

Spanish soldiers were crowding the platform now, from which the last Turks had gone who had legs to flee. Colonna, the head of the Spanish troops, came to where Francisco stood, and saw the fallen around his feet.

"Señor," he said, "you have made a most stout defence."

Francisco looked round. He looked down at a dripping sleeve. He asked: "Has she gone? Is she safe? She was here a moment before."

Colonna thought him dazed by his wound, as perhaps he was.

A voice said: "It is Don Garcio they have got. I saw them drag him away."

Francisco made a quick step forward toward the wall. He seemed to slip on the blood-drenched ground, as it was easy to do. He fell forward, and did not rise.

"Pick him up," Colonna said, "and bear him away. He is sore hurt."



## CHAPTER XXI

“BIND her hands,” Hassan said. “She is quick to swim.”

Angelica was in a mood to have gone overside with her hands bound, trusting that her legs would get her to shore, but she had no chance to lose her life that way, for the man to whom Hassan spoke did his work well. He bound her hands with one end of a good rope, and kept a twist of the other round his own arm.

The boat was fuller than it had been before, having two men to row, besides the one who was Angelica’s guard. Venetia sat in the bow, where she had been before. Angelica was on a thwart in the midst.

Hassan, in the stern, watched the scene he left, as the boat moved fast for a few strokes, being followed by arquebus balls from those who now had the battery to themselves, and could look round at their foes.

But that peril was quickly past. The darkness covered them from the search of those whose eyes were in the half-lights of lantern and flaring pitch, and the flashing of frequent guns. The oars stayed at Hassan’s word, and he looked back at the wide scene of tumult and fire which had not slackened because he had withdrawn, and those of his men who still lived tumbled out of the battery when his whistle blew, and had pushed off in boats that were round him now.

He was not one to desert such a scene in a careless way. He ordered the oarsmen to turn somewhat toward the boom, that he might better see how the fight went.

When he saw how it was, he said to himself: “The boom may be broken through, and the shipping taken or fired, and after that we shall have the Sanglea, and be near the end. But it will not be done on this night.”

He considered that it would be few moments now before Francisco’s guns would commence to fire. He rowed boldly toward the boom, giving orders that the attack should cease. As they came into the more lighted space, the battery guns opened, firing across the front of the boom, as they had been first purposed to do. It seemed to Angelica that it would be a mere waste to consider where she would be on the next day. The boat could not endure, and she would have no chance of life with her hands tied as they were.

But the boat did not sink, though a round-shot struck the water so closely that it was near to capsize. Water-logged with the wave it took in, it struggled back into the darkness again, and was baled out by all hands that were free of the oars, except hers, which she could not use. Then it shaped its course to land

somewhat south of the Sanglea, being the nearest point that Hassan could choose to come to his own camp. The noise of strife had not ceased at this time, but it was sinking on every side.

Hassan considered the night's events, and, though the attack had failed, he was not wholly displeased. He had added one more to those calculated audacities of which men would talk in a way to augment his fame. He might not have done all that had been in his hopes, but he had stormed the battery that lay securely, as it had seemed, between the sea and the shelter of the citadel walls, and had rendered it impotent during those vital minutes when the boats were approaching the boom. He had a more personal satisfaction in that he had captured one who had outwitted him once before. He had fetched her out of the foemen's lines, where she might have seemed secure beyond any possible reach either of violence or guile. It should be a lesson which would be told through the years, warning those who would thwart his will. . . .

Venetia sat by herself, with some fears which, for that moment at least, she need not have had. She knew that, had she kept Francisco within the cell for even two or three minutes more than she had been able to do, the battery would have been entered, and the guns destroyed before any alarm could have been raised. She knew also that the event would have gone differently had there been no more than the dozen men at call, which, as she had said and believed, were the whole garrison that Francisco had. She did not know whether Hassan would have judged her to have misled him as to the muster of men with deliberate craft, or to have let Francisco come out with a double thought that those of her own race should not be utterly wrecked; or, if he did not really believe, that he might find pretext in these events to deny reward, or even to punish with the ferocity that was the custom of his race and time.

But Hassan thought in a clearer mind. To him, the essential part of the tale she told had been her assertion of influence over Don Francisco, so that he would obey her desire that none should see her arrive. That had been his great risk. Had she deceived him in that, or misconceived her power, as some women do, his own life would have been hard to save, and he had been resolved, in that event, that she should die first.

But, on this vital point, she had proved right: and it was through the use of her power over Francisco that he had entered the battery and returned alive, after doing half his intent, and seizing the captive he most desired.

He was too experienced in the ways of war to expect that all could be made to fall out to an exact plan.

He would have said (had he talked on a matter to which, in fact, he paid little tribute of thought) that the fact that she had come back to his boat as she did was proof enough that she had not attempted to warn Francisco.

So it may be taken to be, though, had she known how matters were likely

to go, and in particular that Francisco had not twelve but two score of men within easy call, it may be a good guess that she would have spoken a warning word the first second that she was over the parapet edge, and so gained the name of one who had saved the battery at a great risk, if she could have made it appear in that way.

But she had not known; and with the Turks swarming around, and her treason become plain to those two who had met her first, it had seemed that to get back to Hassan's boat, while the way was still clear, was the best chance that she had. . . .

The boat grounded upon the stones, and Hassan, who had more urgent matters with which to deal, gave a short command: "You will take her," he said to Venetia, and looking at Angelica as he spoke, "to the house where you now are. She is to have her needs, but should she attempt to flee it will be her death, as it would be to any who would help her thereto."

He gave such orders as left little hope or fear that Angelica would escape again. Her wrists remained tied, and the end of the rope was now in the hand of a mounted man. She must move at the horse's speed, but Hassan had given instructions that she should not be ill-used till he should be free to deal with her himself, so that she found the pace was easy to keep.

That was well, for there were three miles to be walked on a rough way by one who had cause to be tired enough before that, but she gave no thought to how she might feel, whether wearied or light of limb, having too much grief of mind to be aware of the body's toil.

Francisco was more likely dead than alive, and if not dead he was shamed (which might be thought worse) beyond hope of a good defence, by a wanton's wiles. He had betrayed his trust, and (if he were not dead) his life might be held forfeit by the usage of war, and he be judged to a shameful end. It would be better that he should have found death from a Turkish sword! So she came even to pray that it might have been. . . . If he were alive, she would not be there to plead his cause as it would be certain to need. . . . She saw that her capture might be laid to his door, and held to augment his guilt. She judged rightly enough that it would not make Sir Oliver more disposed to remain his friend. . . . And when she thought of how much she had told of Venetia's letter she had a fresh grief. Suppose it might not have been known, but for what she herself had said, that Venetia had been there? That even the fact that the battery had been deserted when the Turks scaled the scarp might not have been known or guessed? But she was sure that Sir Oliver would not leave it till now, till he had probed all to the lowest depth. Had her interference not only brought her here, but become the cause that would lead Francisco to shameful death? She forgot herself as she thought of the disgrace which would so surely be his. Or, if her thoughts came to herself, it was only that she must find some escape

which would enable her to defend his part—to explain, to excuse, to plead, even to lie, if that would do him avail. . . . There must be a way. Had she not left a moving ship in the night for the open sea? Here on land there must—*there must*—be a simpler way.

They gave Venetia a mule to ride, trusting her to a larger degree, at which Angelica was not surprised, remembering how she had played the traitor to her own friends. It was an old mule and slow, and, had Venetia reined it aside, it would have been quickly caught. But she took what courage she could from the favour it showed, and turned an agile mind to wonder what she could say to Angelica, or what would be said to her, she having betrayed her to such a trap. She had not supposed that, if Angelica were brought away, they would be put into the same place.

The house to which they came was one of those which were scattered over the countryside, having been built by the wealthier knights for more ease in the summer heat than they could find in the crowded town, and at a time when none thought that the Turks would be bold enough to invade the land. It was built in the Italian style, on a ridge of rock, having a seaward view to the east, with a wide belvedere looking that way, and a garden below, which had been well-kept in its day but was now a riot of lawless bloom.

It had been furnished in a luxurious style, which the invaders had abused, but it still had much of comfort for those who might be more concerned that they should lie soft than clean.

Venetia made her way to a bedroom which had been hers for two nights before. She would have been content to have been single there, and would have gone quickly to rest, but Angelica was led in at her back, and the rope loosed, making her aware of how much it had hurt her wrists.

Venetia spoke at once when they were alone, being one to show a bold face to that which she could not miss.

“You will say I have brought you here; but it is what I did not intend.”

Angelica looked at her with cold eyes, as at something not worth contempt. But she would be just, as her way was. “No. You warned me to flee.”

Venetia had actually forgotten that she had done that. She thought that, after all, she had not much to excuse. She replied, in a more confident tone: “It was all I could; and I did that at a great risk. There is none around in this place who knows (as I suppose) the tongue we now speak, but I will ask you not to talk of it again. It might bring me to death.”

“It shall have no mention from me.”

“I have been hardly placed, and I would have you know that I am not less than your friend.”

“It is more than I should ask you to be.”

Angelica turned away as she spoke. She looked out into the night, where a

moon rose. She saw the glitter of arms in the garden below, showing that there were those by whom the window was watched. She closed jalousies thereat.

But Venetia would not be so lightly rebuffed. She opened battle again.

“Are you so wroth . . . ? It may be that you have not come to so great an ill. . . . I will tell you this. I did not write of my will. Hassan gave me that it should be. He stood there to read. Would you have your skin peeled while you live, from the feet up?”

“It is not of myself I think. It is of one who gave you his trust. You have made him traitor, or naught, who stood well.”

“I could not do that. He is what God made him, not I.”

“You have likely compassed his death.”

“There are many deaths at this time. I had my own life to regard. And I may have saved yours.”

“Which you were not needed to do. And I should say it was safer before.”

“That is because you have not seen both sides of the wall. Hassan is not one who will fail. In the end, St. Angelo will go up in fire. Have you seen a town sacked? Well, I have not. But I have heard tales. Do you know what these pirates are? There would be a gutter red with your blood. Or, if they knew you for what you are. . . . It would not be to go to a quiet bed with one man, as you are now likely to do.”

“There are ways to die before that. But I will not talk. Your thoughts are not mine, and your words have no meaning to me. . . . But you have made a poor guess. The Turks will flee as the summer wanes, and the Cross of Christ will still fly.”

“You say what you desire. But I have learned to look more sharply than you. Does a tide not rise because it also retires? Do you not see that each time the Turks are thrown back they are closer in? They say in St. Angelo now: ‘We have beaten the Turks again. Did we not see them leap over the battery scarp? Did they not run for the shore?’ But would they have reached to there a month past? It would not have been thought. But ever they close in. They are a cord which is drawn more tight till the breath goes. They are a water that rises to overwhelm.”

“It is vain to talk. We have different tongues.”

Venetia had been throwing off her clothes as she spoke. She answered: “Well, there is one thing you can understand. You should come to bed. The lamp will not last. I suppose you can see that. I will have more oil for another night, if I can contrive that, for the dark is what I have never loved.”

Angelica asked in a bitter tone: “You boast that you see much. Do you see yourself as you are?”

Venetia was bare now. She looked in a long mirror against the wall, which was cracked, but still good enough, in the smoky light of a poor lamp, to show

her that which it gave her pleasure to see.

“So I do,” she said, “I was not made to be peeled, but for better work; which it may be your business to learn. . . . There are no shifts in this place. . . . I have thrown out the flax, which was soiled: we must lie in wool.”

There was one bed in the room, of ample size, into which she got as she spoke: “Will you not come? You should rest while you can, and you are more fit for the next day. I have learnt that in harder ways than you have been likely to know.”

“We are not for one bed.”

“Then has God made you a fool! Will you not sleep, and when you wake you can talk venom again? I know not why I am so vexed. You care nothing for me. You would have had me skinned with a quiet mind. And I gave you warning you would not heed, in the only minute I had.”

Angelica said: “I am fool indeed. You have found the word.” Her laughter, sudden and short, sounded strange to her own ears.

She drew off some of her clothes, though not all, being in those of a man, and lay down in the harlot’s bed.

After that, Venetia was soon asleep, being wearied, and having a conscience at ease. She had done what she could for peace, using words which convinced herself, if Angelica were less easy to move.

“She is stubborn, ignorant fool,” she thought, as her eyes closed. “I know not why I care as I do.”

## CHAPTER XXII

ANGELICA slept late, as the young may when emotion has tired the mind. She waked to the sound of horse-hooves on the gravel below. Memory came back with the sight of Venetia, who had waked earlier, and dressed with care, in other clothes than those she had worn in the night. She had opened the jalousies wide to the morning sun. She looked out at the sound.

“There is Hassan here,” she said. “You should rise, unless you will that he see you thus. He will be here for you more than for me, as I hope.”

So she did, being still unsure of whether he would approve of what she had done.

Angelica rose in some haste. She saw herself to be ruffled and soiled, which no woman would choose to show, though she may walk in a man’s dress.

Venetia said: “There is water here, if you will.” There was no doubt that she would be friend, if she could. She gave help unasked, and her movements were light and sure.

It was a short time before one of Hassan’s men entered the room, without delaying for leave. He looked at Angelica, and said something in a tongue that was strange to her, but Venetia could understand.

“You are to go below,” she said. “I am not for now. . . . It seems,” she added, a sudden jealous doubt crossing her mind, “that he could have but short sleep till he must see you again.”

Angelica said: “I could have spared him a longer time.” Her heart was cold with a fear which she would not show, courage rising to meet her need.

She followed the man down, and found Hassan to be seated on the couch of a salon which had been luxurious once, but of which the furniture had been booted about, and which had not been cleaned since its owner fled.

Seated thus, in a western way, he reminded her, in spite of his different dress, of the Rinaldo she had first met at her uncle’s board. He may have thought of her as she had been at that time, but his thoughts were not always easy to guess.

“So,” he said, with a smile that she did not like, “you have come to me again.”

“I know not,” she answered, “why you should go to such trouble to have me here,” and was conscious of the futility of the words, even before they were wholly out.

“Well,” he said, “as to that, it was not much. And why you are here you may soon learn. But, as I think, you had a wet sword.”

“Do you blame me for that? I struck for my cousin’s life.”

“Which it was your business to save? But it is mine to see that you kill no more, for I have lost a good man.”

“I have no wish to use sword, at which I have no skill.”

“You have little skill, and less strength. But if you trade as a man, you must pay debts in his coin. . . . Marshal Couppier catches our men, and they hang in his market square. Do you suppose we like that, or that we shall treat those we catch in a better way?”

“I did not make the customs of war, which I would change if I could. But I suppose that they had no gold.”

“They would have been worth gold to sell. I say not to your price.” He looked at her with eyes that narrowed in an insolent doubting way. “Are you virgin still, after your time in that dress?”

She looked back with an anger that forgot fear. She had a mind not to answer; and then thought that silence would be misjudged. “I am unwed, which should be sufficient reply. But it is nothing to you. I have gold to pay.”

“That is well. But there is another matter between us two, which must be balanced before you go. How will you do that?”

“I do not know what you mean.”

“There are your cousin’s ships, which I should have had but for you.”

“It is of him I would know. Can you tell me if he was slain when I was taken away?”

“It is likely enough, but it is more than I chanced to see. I did not ask you of that.”

“I will pay for a true tale.”

“You can have that without gold. It will all be known in the next hour. But you must think now of that which I asked before. How will you get me the ships?”

“You know I cannot do that.”

“But it is what you must, or else pay as you will not like.”

“It is wild to ask. Do you think I would betray them to you? I am not as \_\_\_\_\_”

“No. You would be worth less if you were. You are better bred. And you would have me think that you differ in other ways. But, if you show a stiff neck, you may come to the same port. . . . Now I will tell you what I will do. I will set your ransom at 3,000 ducats of gold. That is fair, for you would be worth a high price at Damascus mart, and still more if they should send you further away. You can be set free for that sum. But I must have the ships first, for it is by such means that men will know that I am not one of whom others



can make a jest. If I have the ships, you can go free when the ransom is paid, which, in your case, I suppose could be quickly arranged. . . . But if I have not the ships, you have done that which your back must pay. You will be stripped and whipped in a public place, for that is what my honour requires; and after that you will heal, and be worth no less than you now are, and you will be sold in the best market the merchants advise. . . . And when I so resolve, I deal with you in a most merciful way. . . . Dragut would have had you set on an upright stake, for much less than you did, where you would have waited to die.”

Angelica thought: “You would have no ships by my word, if I had the power, which it is plain that I have not got.” But she checked her speech, for if she might gain no more, the discretion of silence might win some delay, and it was on escape that her mind was set. She said: “I must know first how my cousin fared.”

“Do you think you can give orders to me . . . ? But you shall know that.” He smiled at his own thought.

He said to the man who stood by, and who had understood nothing of this talk: “Take him back, and see that he is guarded with care, for he is one of those for whom men hang, if they get free.”

She was returned to the upstairs room, where she found Venetia was back on the bed. Under her pale-gold head her hands met in a way she had. She had been thinking of herself, in whom she was most concerned, but she had had a thought of Angelica too, and when she saw that her companion showed no disposition to speak, she addressed her with words that had a sharp edge, although they were said in a smiling, indolent way.

“If we are to be shut here, as we have not sought, there must be one of us who has sense, if not more, and I will give you words that are plain and true.

“If I am one who is shown a rack, I will say all that I can to keep my joints as they are, being those for which I have the first care. If you have things which you would not have me tell, being so abused, they are best kept in your own mind while we are here. But can you understand that I can be weak to that point, and be still your friend of my will, and one to aid in the smaller things?”

“You have brought one I love to his death, or worse. Can I put that by?”

“I do not know that I have, nor, I think, do you. Will you let me call it a coward’s guess, which I had not thought you to be? But you should consider that what I did, if you call it the worst you may, was not of malice either to him or you, whom I would more lightly have helped, being those who have friended me, of whom there have been too few in the right way.

“As I told Hassan when we talked, it is some days back, I do not seek to bring others to wreck, but for a harbour I cannot find. Have you the will to see that?”

“You are one, by your own words, to bring your friends to wreck for your

own gain, and it is a thing for which they will not love you the more.”

“So I am. And so, I suppose, are many more, or I have watched the world with worse sight than I think I have. But did I ask you for love? I ask you to make common accord, being two in a place of foes. For if you think more of what is past than of that which now is, you are naked to every wind.”

Angelica saw that there was some sense in that, but she thought that if two are alone in a world of foes it is a common trust that they both need, and trust was that which Venetia would never have from her again. But it was useless to say. What she said was: “I am not one in whom hate is a strong plant, but you have brought me to bitter dole. . . . Can you show me way to get free? I would give you more gold for that than I suppose you have seen in your life days.”

“I would do much for that gold, and something for you, but my skin has a closer claim. Do not speak of it again.” And then she added, in so low a voice that Angelica scarcely caught the words: “Unless I speak of it to you.”

Angelica understood that Venetia feared, even in that room alone, lest they might be talking for other ears. A faint hope stirred in her heart. Venetia might have a plan which she was too cautious to share. It might be true that she might lose more than she yet had (and there was no margin for that) if she should refuse to meet Venetia on the ground she offered. . . . But she was not one who would feign what she did not feel. . . . *‘Forgive us, as we forgive—’* The divine prayer came to her mind. But she had heard it said that such forgiveness is only required to be given to those who ask. Well, had not Venetia asked? Perhaps, scarcely that. . . . She would try to forgive, but to trust was more than even Heaven would ask her to do. . . . Venetia was speaking again.

“If you will say what he said, I may tell you what it was worth, for I have watched his moods and his ways, even while he thought he was learning me.”

“You can know that, if you will. He said first that I could be ransomed for 3,000 ducats of gold.”

“That is how they begin. You will proffer one, or else less, and in the end he will take two.”

“I did not bicker thereon.”

“Then you are not one who should manage your own affairs. You are not (if you will forgive a plain word) worth half the price in any market there is.”

“I am not to sell. If any gave that for me, he would wish his gold back in his own pouch. . . . But he required something else which he will not get. He will have our two ships, which he says he would have won on the seas had I not been there.”

“How can he get them?”

“So I said. It is vain talk. If they were mine to give, they should not be his. And if I would, it is a thing which the Grand Master would not allow in a session of war.”

“He must know that. He does not mean you to go.”

“Yet I must. I must find a way.”

“Did he say what he would do if the ships are not to be made his?”

“I am to be beaten, and then sold.”

Venetia considered this with a frown she was not careful to smooth away.

“You are not to sell, as you said. You were right in that. He will have the ships, or else you. . . . Did I not say that my harbour is still to seek?”

“You will not lose it by me, if you mean that. . . . And I should say you misdeem. Would he beat one who had his regard, in a public way?”

“That he would. He would think you better for that, as a trained horse is worth more than one that is not broken to ride. . . . But you need not fret greatly thereon, for he will not have you beaten more than will heal and will leave no scar. . . . It is queen you may be of all the Barbary coast in a year from now.”

Angelica looked at a window which had been open last night, and might be opened again. There might be guards stationed below, but men doze in the night. . . . To drop suddenly, and to run. The height was not so great that she might not come down on her feet. . . . And a poor chance is much better than none. . . . She must watch for hers.

The man who had come to the door before entered again. He said something which she could not understand. Venetia interpreted: “He says it has been learned from the Christian lines that Don Francisco has a wound in the arm, but is not mortally hurt.”

Angelica’s glance wandered to the window again.

## CHAPTER XXIII

THE Grand Master held inquisition of the events of the night. The storm had fallen before the dawn. The boom had been damaged, but not forced. Attacks had been repulsed that had been made on the land side of the Sanglea, and round the Bourg. There was nothing left but to repair damage, to count the slain, and to judge how praise or blame should be given out.

Pompea Colonna had come to Malta in command of four hundred of the Spanish soldiers who had been enlisted when the first peril was known. These men had been lost in strife, or scattered at different posts, till there were not more than a hundred he could array. He had been sent with these to the battery's aid, when it was known that the Turks were over the scarp and its guns were still.

"We ran in haste," he said, "but we did nothing when we arrived, for there was nothing to do. We saw the flight of a beaten foe."

It was generously said. He went on to tell how he had seen Don Francisco fall in the midst of those that his hands had slain, of whom (as he did not know) Angelica should have been thanked for the death of one.

"Yet I see not," the Grand Master said, "how the Turks made so swift a surprise that no alarm could be called till they were over the scarp, if a watch were kept as it was duty to do."

"Don Francisco has the name of one who watched his charge, and would seldom sleep." The words came from a knight of Castile, who felt that all Spaniards should stand as one against the Italian knights who were of more numbers than they.

"So he had," the Grand Master allowed, though with a thought that there had once been a woman found where she should not be. "So he had. But what does he say now?"

"He cannot be asked at this time," Sir Oliver answered. "There is report that his fever is high."

"Then we will hear what Captain Antonio has to say."

Captain Antonio was quite ready to talk.

"I was not on duty," he said, "Don Francisco himself taking the night watch, as he would most often prefer. But I was alert, having been warned that there might be a special need."

His words waked the sharp attention of all who heard.

"Warned by whom?" the Grand Master asked.

“By Don Garcio, as—he—was called. He came to the battery in the late day, when I was in command, and, we having some words, he said that, if he were I, he would be alert for the night, it being without a moon in its first hours, and so inviting surprise.”

“Were they no more than words of an idle kind, or did you think that he spoke with a special cause?”

“With a special cause, as I thought, so that I did not unbelt my sword.”

“We must know more of this,” the Grand Master said. . . . “You say you were there with speed. What did you first see?”

“There was bicker along the scarp, where the Turks came tumbling over the parapet at all parts; and Don Francisco, being nearly alone, was thrusting to force them back. I would have run to his support, but he shouted to me to let him be, and to guard the guns.”

“So you went on to them?”

“So I did, with the men that came up with me. . . . There was lively flurry around the guns, to which the most of the Turks ran, having purpose to knock them out, in which they did not prevail.”

La Valette looked at him, as he said this, in a more regardful way than before. He saw that one side of his face was black with a great bruise.

“You had a knock yourself,” he said. “Are you much hurt?”

“It is naught. I came clear enough, as I often do, being more hard to hit than a larger man.”

“Were the whole of the men engaged by this time that you got up?”

“Except those who had been asleep, as their right was at that time. They came tumbling out, as I suppose, with but short delay, for it was soon that they were all there, but at that time I was at no leisure to see.”

He went on to tell how he had got the guns to work as the Turks fled, so that they had done their part at the last in driving the boats away that attacked the boom, of which there would have been more sunk had they not fled under St. Michael’s fort, and so to the farther shore, skirting the palisades that ran up the centre of the inlet of the Sanglea, and getting some protection from them.

“I can see,” La Valette said, “that you did your part. But this is a matter on which the whole is not said. If Don Francisco is not able to speak, we must have this—Garcio, was it?—by whom you were warned.”

“That,” Antonio replied, “I suppose to be more than you can, for there is talk that the Turks bore him away.”

Sir Oliver’s voice broke in sharply: “Why do you say that?”

“It is so believed. It is what I did not see, being concerned with those who were round the guns. . . . But it is sure that she was there when the fight began, and was not seen after that.”

“Why do you say she?” the Grand Master asked.

“It was a most careless word, but I may suppose that I have done no great wrong, it having chanced as it has.”

“It is Don Francisco’s cousin,” Sir Oliver said to the Grand Master, bringing the truth back to his mind, and then to Antonio: “Why was this not reported before?”

“So I tried to do for two hours, but those who might have heard have been busy with larger things.”

There was a new gravity in La Valette’s face as he said: “This is evil news, if it be true. There are few I would be less willing to think in those devils’ hands.” And then his mind went to the core of the problem to ask: “Was she always there during the night?”

“No,” Antonio answered, “as I believe, never before. I suppose she was there for her cousin’s help, having some reason to fear what the night might bring.”

“You are sure,” Sir Oliver asked, “that she was there . . . ? Sure of that which you did not see?”

“There were those who did. She was there when the fight began. It is said she pushed in to her cousin’s aid, he being hardly beset, and using her sword somewhat to his relief. And after that there are those who say that she was dragged over the wall when the Turks fled.”

“It seems,” the Grand Master said, weighing what he had heard in a careful mind, “that there was no absence of watch, but rather a special care, from what cause it may be hard to enquire. We must suppose that the Turks came with a bold and most sudden rush, or some subtle ruse, and were most gallantly met, by which valour the guns were saved.”

But Sir Oliver said, with a grimmer look than he often had, “By your leave, I will enquire when Don Francisco is able to speak.”

The Grand Master saw there was more on his mind than he was open to say. “So you shall, Oliver,” he replied, “we will leave it so. . . . But I am grieved for one who should not have been here, as we have said before now. She has served Malta well, and if you can find that she still lives, and we can make any exchange, it shall not be grudged—or if payment of gold will do, it must in reason be found if she be poor in her own right.”

“She is not that. She can find ransom enough,” Sir Oliver replied, “if that will suffice.” He asked Captain Antonio to bring those who had seen Angelica to be examined by him in the next hour.

He caused enquiry to be made through the pursuivants who were passing between St. Angelo and the Turkish camp to arrange for exchange of wounded and removal of dead, and other business such as will ever follow a day of strife, asking if one Don Garcio had been taken prisoner in the attack on the battery, for he had a hope that Angelica might not be discovered for what she

was.

He had a reply before night. It said that Angelica (giving her all the titles she had in her own name) was in Hassan's hands, and could be ransomed within two days for 3,000 ducats of gold, which could be paid in bills of exchange (in a form which was in common use in the ransomings of that day, for which there was a clearing-house in Amsterdam to which all nations would make resort), and also the two galleons which Don Francisco had brought from Spain. If these were delivered within the time, she would be returned in safety and honour. If the ransom should be more laggardly paid, it would be no less in amount, and she would be delivered in the condition in which she might be at the time.

## CHAPTER XXIV

IT was late that night, after the Grand Master had disposed of some larger things, that Sir Oliver was able to say: "And there is also the matter of Don Manuel's niece."

He mentioned her in that way to remind the Grand Master of the old friendship he had, but it was without hope, for what was there that could be done?

"Then it is true she was caught? What ransom do they require?"

"Three thousand ducats is named."

"That is absurd. They must come down."

"So they might. But they ask something beside. They will have the two galleys that Don Francisco brought."

"Do they think us mad, or are they? It is not Mustapha's way to jest in such manner as that."

"It is not he. Hassan claims that she was his prey. The ransom, as I conclude, would be gain to him."

"Even so, it is foolish jest. What does it mean?"

"It is not a jest without point. It was through her that the galleys were saved out of Hassan's hands."

"So I recall. It was boldly done. Is he seeking revenge for that?"

"So I suppose. He cannot think the galleys will be given to him."

"In what time must we reply?"

"In something less than two days. After that, the offer is not withdrawn but we must be content to take her as she may then be, without reduction of price."

"Meaning that she will be racked or raped?"

"So we must think. I see not what can be done, unless we could offer such exchange that they could not refuse assent."

The Grand Master pondered this. "There is Candelissa's son. Couppier has him. There is a bargain there to be made, but we should have much more than one girl. . . . If it be two galleys for her, it should be all Hassan's fleet for him. . . . She should not have come, or should have been sent back at the first."

"She has done a man's part, if not more. You must think of that."

"So she has. She is of good blood. And if she be martyred now, as it seems she must, it will not be for naught, she having taken these galleys from Hassan's clutch; and if she be tormented therefor, there should be joy in the courts of God, and much comfort for her when the short time of trial is past



and done.”

“Shall I offer Yusef?—Candelissa’s son?”

“Not surely for her alone! We can do better than that. . . . But I will leave it to you. I am less hard than you think. She is one I would gladly save. But it is my part to bring Malta through.”

“I will bargain the best I can,” Sir Oliver answered, feeling that he had gained more than he could fairly have hoped, having all left in his hands.

La Valette turned to go, and came back. “Oliver,” he asked, “have you thought it strange that she should be there to be taken by Hassan’s hands, and he at the right spot? She is one, it seems, that he was singly anxious to have. Was it often that she would be thus exposed, even outside the strength of our walls . . . ? And she with premonition of that which came, as is shown by the warning to—to him with the battered face?”

“To Captain Antonio. Yes, I have thought much. She had a place assigned on my own part of the wall, which I could not avoid, she having come with a man’s name. But she stood high over the strife, even on the day of the Sanglea assault. When I sent her to take her place, she was in no danger, unless, it might be, from a flying fragment of stone. . . . But the battery was where she had no business to be, nor was ever there, as I am now told, except when she followed me on the day La Cerda’s mistress was there revealed, and on this midnight of strife. . . . It is what I will probe more than I have yet done.”

“It is Don Francisco’s report we must have, and make inquiry straitly thereon. Is he equal to that?”

“He was not to-day, but of to-morrow there is more hope.”

“Was he sore hurt?”

“His arm was slashed to the bone. He lost blood. The fever was high, but is now less. . . . He made, as they say, a most gallant fight for his guns’ defence.”

“So he would. He has done badly and well, so that it is hard to resolve. There was that woman he hid. And now the Turks should not have been over the edge, and he single to drive them back, as the tale sounds. And again there is a woman where she should not be, though I would not join her name with the first. But, apart from these, he had done better than well. . . . Oliver, if it were not too near to a Moslem thought, I would doubt if there can be Heaven where women come.”

He went out at that word, leaving Sir Oliver to reflect that there could be Hell where no women were, as in that boiling cauldron of strife which he fed and stirred; and that there was one he would save if he yet could.

He sent a pursuivant on the next day to Hassan, saying that Yusef (whom he mentioned that Marshal Couppier was very anxious to hang) would not be returned alive if Angelica were dishonoured or harmed, and proposing that they should talk of terms in a serious way, which he implied that they had not

yet begun. He sent also to Marshal Couppier, asking that Yusef should be cherished with care, knowing that the guerrilla leader had bitter and implacable moods. And having done these things, and others which it is needless to write, he went to the hospital on the north side of the Bourg, where Francisco was nursed.

Francisco lay on a pallet bed, in a ward with a dozen more, for wounded men were easy to find around St. Angelo's walls at this time, and even those of good blood (as so many were) must be content to be herded thus, if they were to have the best physicians around their beds. He looked up at Sir Oliver with eager impatient eyes. He had outfought the fever of the first hours, and the resilience of healthful youth was bringing vigour back to his weakened blood.

He half rose, and sank back, cursing the arm which he had for a moment forgotten, and which reminded him of its needs in its own way.

"They will tell me naught," he said bitterly, "naught at all. It is not this wound by which I am fevered and vexed. It is to learn that which I am not told. Why must men lose all other sense from their heads when they profess the curing of wounds?"

"If you will be quiet," Sir Oliver replied, "and act as you say you are, I will tell you more than the physicians would be likely to do."

"Then I will ask first—were the guns saved?"

"They were not only saved, they were used on a flying foe, Captain Antonio having been stout to belabour the Turks, and then active to run them out."

"You would not be here with a light cause," Francisco shrewdly observed, and his eyes showed his second fear. "Is Angelica hurt?"

"She was not hurt that I know. But there are things I must ask of you, if you are fit to reply. Did you expect the Turks to come on that night?"

"I had no thought that they would, or they had been met at first in a warmer way."

"Yet it seems that your cousin did. Can you say why?"

"I should say she should answer that."

"So she should. But, for the present, it cannot be asked."

"But you said she was unharmed?"

"That was true. If you will take it in a quiet way, and believe that there is no ill that we may not yet be able to cure, I will tell you all that I know, and after that I will ask you to tell me some things I have still to learn."

Francisco said nothing to this, and Sir Oliver went on to tell him what he had heard of the battery's defence, of how Angelica had been carried away, and of the efforts for her ransom which he had since made.

Francisco was still quiet. He lay so still that Sir Oliver wondered at one time whether he heard all with his mind, though his eyes were not closed. But

when the tale came to an end, he said in a low tone: "It is clear now from the first. What do you want to know?"

"It is hard to see how the Turks could so closely approach before the alarm was called. Was it by subtle ruse, or do you blame those who failed to keep a good watch?"

"It was I who failed."

"Then I must ask you to tell me how."

"So I will."

In a low toneless voice, he told of the letter he had received, and so lightly believed, and of the dispositions he made thereon; and how at last he had gone with Venetia into the cell so that the platform was bare of men when the Turks came.

Sir Oliver listened to a tale which was not different from what he had guessed for truth, though he had not supposed that it would be told in so open a way.

His first question was not what Francisco expected to hear, being on a point which was of less moment to him than to Malta's defence, which was Sir Oliver's greater care.

"How did the letter come to your hand?"

"It was given me outside the citadel wall, as I returned to the battery, having met my cousin within the town, by the hand of a half-grown boy."

"Did you see him well?"

"No. It was a bad light. He was one I had no cause to regard, and he was soon gone."

"There is nothing you can recall?"

"He had a scarred chin."

"Should you know him by that again?"

"Unless there be two with such marks."

"You may have done some service in this. . . . Was it with your will that your cousin reported this letter to me?"

"It was her wish. I agreed thereto. . . . She must have had more doubt than she showed to me, or she had not warned Antonio, as you say."

"It was well for you that she did, for Antonio sat with a girded sword, and some men in the same array, or I suppose the guns would have been destroyed. . . . Did you see how your cousin was seized?"

"She came to my aid when I was faced by three, of whom one sought to reach me behind, and him she brought to ground in a bold way, so that I endured to deal with the other two. . . . I called to her to stand back, as I thought she did, but after that there is not much I recall."

"It must have been then she was snatched, for at that time the Turks were turning to flee."

“I have been so fooled that you will say I am not worthy the trust I had.”

“That is truth. You are relieved of your command from this hour. Beyond that, it must be left till your wound is closed.”

Francisco made no answer to that. He asked: “There is no doubt you will bring her free?”

“So I suppose we may, having this Yusef in pawn. I have a good hope. I will not go beyond that.”

“You will let me hear?”

“You shall be quickly told, either of evil or good.”

“It is all I ask. . . . I know well you will not fail her part from a slack will.”

Sir Oliver went at that, having more matter for thought. He had heard much that Francisco need not have told, and that (unless Angelica should return, and in more mood to talk than before) could not have been discovered in other ways. Sir Oliver had little sympathy with him, and it was his hard resolve to uncover the truth which had kept the matter alive when the Grand Master (knowing less than he) might have passed it by. But at that time he had been careful to say no more than would leave it still in his own hands, lest he should stir more than he could after control. But, since Hassan had mentioned his ransom terms, he saw that the Grand Master’s eyes were on the event with a new keenness, which would not lightly be turned aside.

His first duty was to Malta’s defence, and he had resolved before seeing Francisco that he should not continue in his command, unless he could give a better account than he expected to hear.

Having heard the tale, he had been instant in his decision that Francisco could not be left in a trust he had twice abused; but, beyond that, on his own confession, he was worthy of death by the laws of war, as they have been at all times.

Sir Oliver might have little sympathy for him, but he did not wish to get Angelica back (which was his greater concern) and meet her with the news that he had been active to bring her cousin to shameful death. Nor was he sure where his duty lay. If Francisco’s fault had been widely known, discipline would have rendered merciless punishment almost a necessity of routine, which he would himself have approved, and from which no private feeling would have turned him aside. But it was known to none but himself. He did not doubt that Francisco, if his dishonour were not exposed, might still be more use alive than dead for Malta’s defence. . . . None is bound to convict himself. . . . Nor should too much heed be given to the words of a wounded and fevered man. . . . It must be left for more thought, and he would speak to Francisco again.

He was pressed with contending cares when he got back to his own rooms, and it was at a late hour that a Maltese spy, who had got through the Turkish

lines, was brought to him to make report.

The man bore no letter, it being held the safer way to trust wholly to spoken words (the Turks thinking the man to be their own spy). He brought account of some volunteers who had landed by night in St. Paul's Bay, and of some stir at Palermo in preparation to send relief (which might be in time, if St. Angelo could endure for another year), and of a good word from Doria, the Genoese admiral, who was ever La Valette's friend, and was now active on his behalf. But when mention was made of Yusef, he said: "Why, I suppose he is hanged by now. So it was to be when I left Notabile this morn. The Marshal was wroth that the Turks dallied to come to terms, having been told the sum that he would not abate. He will have one man hanged on each day, that the folk may see that the vermin are less by that count; and as there was no other caught for this morn, he said that to hang a man of such rank would put those who are weak-kneed in a better heart. Anyway, it was so talked when I came away."

"I must hope," Sir Oliver said, "that a letter I sent may have been in time to prevent that."

"I cannot say," the man replied, "beyond this, that it had not when I left, and Yusef was to be hanged in an hour from then."

"Well," Sir Oliver said, "we can but wait till we hear more." He turned his mind to give the man certain messages for Marshal Couppier's own ear, which must be repeated with care.

## CHAPTER XXV

HASSAN listened to what the pursuivant had to say, with a wrath that he must not show, either for him to take back such report to the Christian dogs, or for those around to observe.

He had made an offer to accept ransom for Angelica, in a form to which he knew that the Grand Master would not agree, so that it could not be said that he had not observed the procedure usual on both sides in regard to captives of noble blood; and still more that a wide attention might be drawn to what he had done, as well as what he proposed to do.

He wished to do more than gratify a private revenge. He wished the world to observe how one by whom he had been foiled at first had been captured by him, even from under St. Angelo's guns, and of the fate to which she had fallen at last, though she might be a señorita of great estate, and of the noblest Andalusian blood.

It might sound a jest to ask for the surrender of two of the best galleys in the Maltese fleet as a girl's exchange, and one that must surely be rejected in time of war, but, as Sir Oliver had said, it had not been without point. It emphasized the reason why she had been seized, and that it had been something more than a casual chance of war.

Hassan had supposed that the ransom he asked would be refused (though, in the improbable event of the ships being given up, his pride would have been well served in another way), and that, by his public mention of them, the subsequent stripes which he intended for Angelica's back, and the indignities which were to be hers in the slave-markets of the East, would be recognized as his revenge for her interference to frustrate his plans.

When the pursuivant began by saying that the ransom asked must be regarded as no more than a pleasant jape (which he did with the adroit choosing of words which was the second teaching of the college from which he came, the first being the knowledge of many tongues), Hassan had listened with the inward smile of one who sees his foes dance to a tune which he had chosen before. He expected to hear next of an offer of gold, which he would refuse, be it little or much, to the annoyance of the Grand Master and his Council, who would doubtless wrangle over the proffer of larger sums. He would let them bid up and up, till he saw they would bid no more, and when he had played with them to that end, she should have a whipping she would not like (for he could not omit that, it being little indeed to the tortures he would

have used upon one who had treated him with such successful contumely, had he not been disposed to a lenience which he seldom felt), and, after that, he would consider what he would do. There was a Nizam of Central India, he had heard, who would pay a fabulous price for a Spanish virgin of the best blood, if she were of a beauty he could admire, as Angelica could not fail to be (the Turks had spread at this time beyond the mountains of middle Asia, and the crescent flew over Delhi walls), but he might put such thoughts aside, for his wealth was great, and keep her for himself, if she would be docile to him, as he did not doubt he could bring her to be; and she would have Dragut's daughter (now that Dragut was dead) and a score of others, if she desired, whom she could use as she would.

He heard the first part of the pursuivant's speech with an inward smile, which did not disturb the quiet gravity of his face, but when it went on to say that if an offer were made for exchange against the release of Candelissa's son it might be variously received, he found it harder to hear with a passive front, for he saw at once that, though it was a bargain he did not want, it might be hard to decline. It had been to make other provision for this exchange that he had thought to capture Francisco also, and come away with a double bag, for which he had lacked time at the last.

Candelissa had been Dragut's second in command when Hassan had been no more than a cradled child. He was of a great wealth, and in Tripoli he had a great power. He had a reputation for a cunning which brought his foes to an end which it was often hard to lay at his door. He was not one whom Hassan would lightly offend, and, with a common parental perversity, he valued his son more highly than other men (unless Marshal Couppier) were disposed to do.

Hitherto the negotiation for Yusef's release had been in Mustapha's hands, and Hassan had not been directly concerned. It was recognized to be a difficult matter to arrange, for the Marshal was not easily moved from what he regarded as the mission he had from God, which was to kill those of the Moslem faith. If he hanged a Turk, he knew that there was rejoicing among the saints, but, if he let him go for a bag of gold, he was less sure that they would approve. If a man had a trapped rat, would he let him loose in his larder again? Even though he could pay ransom with a portion of cheese? A Turk loosed must be killed or captured again, or, till he was, he would continue to work destruction to Christian men.

Marshal Couppier, being asked the price at which he would let Yusef go, named impossible sums, and did no more than defer his death while he had others to keep the daily hangings supplied.

Mustapha, using his wits to save the youth, if it could be done without payment of sums at which a king might have been over-priced, had promised

consideration rather than made rejection of these demands, hoping the while that the chance of war might bring a captive to his own hands, such as the Grand Master would allow to be an equal exchange.

Now it seemed that the chance had come. Hassan (with Candelissa three yards away) could not say that Yusef should hang rather than the girl should be given up.

He sat silent and passive for a time, giving no sign of his thoughts, which was no more than the customed way in which rulers of his race and rank would behave in Council, and still more when they gave audience either to inferior men, or those who represented their foes.

He asked at last: "Yusef would be returned having all his limbs, and in such health as he was on the day when he was caught?"

The question was one which the pursuivant knew to be reasonable, and which Candelissa must recognize as being in the interest of his son. There had been tricks on both sides, at sundry places and times, when prisoners who were not exchanged simultaneously or for whom ransom was paid without adequate care, were returned in such mutilated conditions as the humour of their captors devised. It was the more necessary to be clear on such points, because the offer came from St. Angelo, and Yusef was in Notabile, with which communication was not freely maintained.

"It is so," the pursuivant replied, "that the Grand Master would wish it to be, and he is not one, as I need not say, to do less than his word is pledged."

"He has such a name," Hassan allowed, after a pause of nearly as much length as before, "and that, I do not doubt, he will still maintain. Don Garcio, as it is agreed that our captive is called, is one whom the Grand Master would not lose, which would be (for reasons I will not express) to his special shame. If this exchange be agreed, he will add gold with a free hand?"

"It was rather thought that there would be such offer from you, or the exchange would be less than fair."

"But if Don Garcio be returned with no dishonour of any sort? That is not of an equal weight, as the Grand Master will perceive without explanation from me."

"I must still say that it is on your side that the scale would tilt."

"The offer is not refused," Hassan said, after the longest silence of all, "but you shall come again to-morrow at this time, when I must hope that you will have something to add to make a fairer exchange, and, in the meantime, you will allow that we send to Marshal Couppier in the next hour, having a plain writing from you, that we may be assured both that Yusef is well, and that he will be so kept till this is agreed or it have fallen wholly apart."

The pursuivant made no objection to this, having done most, if not all, at which his instructions aimed, and Hassan felt that he had made the best fight



that the position allowed against an offer at which he could not curse aloud, as it would have been a pleasure to do. He cared as much for Candelissa's son as for an old mule, or perhaps less; and he saw the vengeance and vindication which he had designed taken out of his hands for no profit at all, beyond what he could get the old corsair to pay. But, by gaining the day's respite, he had done all that he could to keep the jaws of the trap apart. He had time for thought, and who knows to what thought may lead?

He sent to Notabile, being about six miles away, with a flag of truce, to enquire concerning Yusef's health, as he could not delay to do, and then approached Candelissa, to get what he could out of a lost game, if there were no way by which it could still be won.

Candelissa, a grey old wolf who barked little but would bite in a savage way, turned crafty suspicious eyes upon one whom he regarded as little more than a handsome fortunate youth, who, by Dragut's favour, daughter, and death, had come so soon to a Viceroy's power, to which he himself had the better right, and at one time may have had a good hope to get. They were united by nothing but the belief that it was Allah's will that they should raid the commerce of Christian men, and enslave or slay all who came to their hands, and even in this Hassan had less than the certitude, single and simple, which was dominant in the more primitive mind.

Candelissa knew of a good reason why Hassan should not have agreed the exchange without first talking to him, and that being in the front of his mind, he supposed it to have controlled the event. In fact, it was only after the pursuivant had gone that Hassan considered it at all, though it was one that he would not ultimately have overlooked. The point was that Angelica was Hassan's private property by the usage of war. If she should be given in exchange to purchase Yusef's release, by whom would Hassan be paid for her, and how would the price be fixed?

That, it might be supposed, would be for them to agree now, and for Candelissa to pay, which agreement might not have been easy to reach, but the position was less simple than that.

Candelissa had been resolved that his own son should be released at whatever price, but he had not been equally willing that the gold should be poured from his own stores. He said that the youth had been taken in Turkey's war, and that it was for Mustapha to get him free. This was going further than a jurist of that time would have sustained, but he brought forward some crafty arguments in its support. He made much of the fact that Yusef had been taken on Piali's front, as the commands were set at that time, and as a result of orders he had from him, which (Candelissa said) should not have been given at all, Yusef not being under Piali's control. He hinted that, if the ransom must be provided by him, he might have to go home (with his men) to provide the gold,

in which case it would be supposed that Mustapha would not see him again.

To have deserted the siege on such a pretext would have been a defiance of the Turkish power, and of its Viceroy, Hassan, to whom he was more immediately responsible; but Candelissa had looked to Hassan to give him support, as in a matter on which those of the Barbary coast should stand together against Byzantium's domination and greed.

Hassan had taken a middle course, talking to Mustapha and Candelissa in different tones, as the situation required. He gave Candelissa a hope that he would have his support if he would be guided by him, and Mustapha a fainter fear (which was more than enough) that if Candelissa withdrew he would do the same, which would have been the end of the siege.

Mustapha, knowing that Soliman would not lightly forgive if the siege should be abandoned from such a cause, and also that, if a huge ransom were paid under such dispute, it would be likely to be the loss of him from whose purse it should come, temporised, prolonging the argument as to what the amount of the ransom should be, and both he and Hassan may have offered Allah most fervent prayers that Marshal Couppier would cut the knot by twisting one of another kind round Yusef's neck.

Now Hassan saw that, if the youth's life were to be purchased by Angelica's return, there would be need of a clear bargain before as to who should pay her value to him, and even that might leave him no more in the end than an empty purse, and a quarrel upon his hands.

"Candelissa," he said, "you have heard that I did not refuse to give up one for your son's life whom I had purposed to keep, and who is of special value to me. I did that because I would not give you so great a grief to my own gain. But, if I do this, you will not think me less than a friend if I ask a pledge from you that her fair value shall be paid without delay or demur on the day that Yusef is free."

"That," Candelissa replied, "is fair to ask, but it is for Mustapha to grant."

"But if Mustapha will not accord?"

"You have said yourself that it is his part to get Yusef free."

"I do not deny that. But it is for you to bargain with him, not for me. You should buy Don Garcio (who, as you may have heard, is no man) from me, and then ask Mustapha to find her price. Or, if you will say that Mustapha should buy from me, which I do not deny, it is for you to arrange with him."

But Candelissa would not agree to this. He argued in many ways. He talked of obsolescent accounts between the last Viceroy (Dragut) and himself, which a common discretion had resigned to a buried past. He suggested Hassan's power to withhold payments which he should make, in his vice-regal capacity, to the Turkish crown. He talked of many various things, including that they should make common cause to sail away from a siege which was slow to end,

and where the plunder at last might not be more than would pay the charges they had to bear. But Hassan saw that these various themes had one feature which did not change. They all meant trouble for him. Loss of prestige, or gold, or quarrels old and new to be on his hands; and the lesson, if not the text, of all was that he had better give Angelica up with no payment at all, beyond such goodwill as it would purchase from Candelissa, which he thought he might value at a small coin, and yet over its worth.

In the end he agreed to see Mustapha himself, thinking that they might devise some compromise which they could unite to enforce, but seeing it to be no more than a poor hope.

Candelissa was the one man who was left with a mind content. He expected to see his son back on the next day, and he thought that he would be a clever man who would afterwards get him to open the secret hoards where his gold was hid.

This conversation took place soon after the noon hour. Hassan knew that it would not be a time to disturb Mustapha, unless for a more urgent cause, for he rested from that time till the sun was further down in the sky. It was a custom born of Egyptian heat, and the habits of age are not lightly changed.

Being alone, he returned his mind to that about which he cared more than the collection of Angelica's price. How could he avoid letting her go? That which he valued before took a higher worth as it became harder to keep.

As he pondered, a subtle thought came. Suppose he could persuade her to remain by her own will? That would be to triumph in a new and even more spectacular way. It seemed fantastic at first, but, as he considered it on all sides, it dressed itself in a garb of reason that gave him a good hope. Rather than lose all, he would bid high, and win a different success from that he had first designed.

## CHAPTER XXVI

HASSAN had seen nothing of Angelica since he had told her the ransom he required, and what her fate would be if it were not found. He had no more to say to her till the time should come for her to pay for what she had done. And it may be doubted whether he had given Venetia a further thought, her efforts to reach his regard during the days when she had been confined to his inner tent having borne little fruit to this time.

He had ordered that the two should have freedom within the limits of the house, and had appointed servants to wait on them in more comfort than a Turkish captive would often have. He had surrounded the house with such guard as made escape seem a vain thought. There they could wait, and spend their time in guessing what was to come.

For two to be kept together thus among those of another race, and who were hostile to them, could not fail to establish an intimacy which would be of such kind and degree as their natures allowed.

In a space of two days, Venetia found that she had told her companion more of the adventures of her past life than any living may have heard from her lips before. She had talked thus, having nothing other to do, and by an impulse she did not trouble herself to understand, which sought to justify what she had done by explaining what she had been, and now was. Angelica gave her no confidence in return, but a measure of liking at which she wondered herself, Venetia being, by her standards, despicable in almost all she exposed in her shameless way.

“To understand is to forgive. . . .” It is a proverb of Spain, and of other lands. It is most often less than true, for to understand may be to see that occasion for forgiveness does not arise. Angelica’s judgment did not excuse. She saw that Venetia had acted in a base way, bringing others to grief or death for her own gain, and not being greatly ashamed.

She admitted that there might be many who would do the same if it were the only way to escape being flayed from the feet up, though she supposed that most would be afterwards moved both to grief and shame, whereas Venetia would have it that she had behaved as well as she could be reasonably expected to do.

She wondered how she would behave herself under a like threat, and prayed thereon to her own saint, both that she might not be subject to such a test, and that she should not fail if it should come.

Venetia succeeded by her self-revelations so far that Angelica obtained an appreciation of what she was and of what she could never be. Do we blame a tree that it does not dance, or a kitten that it is seldom still? Do we complain that a butterfly lacks size, or that an elephant has no grace? We accept all as they are, and may agree with God when He called them good.

Venetia had a body, slim and soft, that seemed formed for the rites of love, which it was not slow to observe. She had a flower-fair face, and a crown of pale-gold hair, for which many women of better name would have given what soul they had and thought it a low price, as it might have been. She had courage, and a quick wit, and she claimed to be that which she was, and no more. Angelica, to whom she made herself bare both of body and any soul that she had, saw the wisdom of accepting her in the same way. And so they came to accord.

It was while Hassan was arguing with Candelissa, and getting little satisfaction therefrom, that they sat together on the belvedere of the house, being so placed that they could not be overheard in a guarded speech, nor overseen unaware.

“I suppose,” Venetia said, “you would get from here, if you could, and if it could be done at less than a great risk.”

Angelica was cautious in her reply: “It is not hard to suppose that.”

“You will trust,” Venetia said shrewdly, but with no sign of taking offence, “where you must, but no inch beyond. . . . I have taught you that (which you were needing to learn), if no more. . . . I will be franker than you, that I would get from here if I could, but I lack gold in a large sum.”

“I told you before that I have that, and you said that your skin was worth more to you, as it was likely to be.”

“I meant that I would not set you free and remain here, for all the gold that is under the sky. But I have gained a dread of this place, and a fear that it is here I shall end, unless I am soon away. If I knew one to which I could safely flee——”

“How would gold be a help to that?”

“It would solve all, as it ever will.”

“Can you show me a plan?”

“There is only one. It is always to bribe. Of the guard and servants around, there is always one. . . . It is to find him, and not to approach those of the harder kind. It is a Greek we need, and it is seldom they cannot be found. A Greek, or a Jew. But to find a Jew here——Well, it could not be done.”

“I would give much to be gone with speed. It is for that I would pay.”

“That might be hard to contrive. But there is a question beyond. Where should we go? Or, at least, where should I? Could you give me a pledge that I should not be chastened again if I should arrive within St. Angelo’s walls?”

That you could not! We cannot tell what may be known or guessed of my part when you were seized, even though you should never say.

“But if we could so escape that we should be put ashore on the Italian coast, or even Sicily might do well enough——You would soon find means to be where you would, either in St. Angelo or another place, and, if I had some gold for my instant needs, I should not long be easy to find.”

“It is to St. Angelo I would go by the shortest way.”

“Then it could not be with me. Is my offer vain?”

“I have not said that. It may be better to take a long road than to stay here.”

Venetia would doubtless have said more to develop her plan, but at that moment there were sounds on the stony path of the approach of a number of mounted men.

“This,” she said, “will be with meaning for you. We must hope that you will not be taken apart.”

Angelica, seeing that Hassan centred the group, did not doubt that she would soon know more of what her fate was likely to be. She might have surprised herself to observe that Venetia’s wish, that they should not be parted now, had a response in her own heart, as though, being so compassed with foes, the woman from whose treachery all her troubles came was a friend that she must not lose.

The riders passed from view, coming closely beneath where they sat. They could be heard to dismount. Shortly, a servant came with the summons they had expected to hear. But it was Venetia who was required.

Angelica, left alone, had leisure to thank herself that she had been guarded in what she said. She did not think that Venetia would betray it, but, if she did, what would it be? Only that, if Venetia fled, she would agree to go too. Hassan would not suppose that she stayed of her own will. It would tell him nothing he would not guess.

But her better purpose was to escape alone, for which she watched at all times like a trapped rat, and on which her mind dwelt, declining to think that it could not be done, though as yet she had seen no way.

She had no desire for the Sicilian shore, from which to return to St. Angelo might be little easier than to escape from this place—especially, she being the woman she was. It was at Francisco’s side that she longed to be, taking his part, so that she forgot her present danger at times in the insistence of that desire. . . . But she had seen from Venetia’s words that her single escape would be unwelcome as throwing suspicion on the one who remained. Nor could Venetia return with her to St. Angelo, if the chance should appear. She was glad that she had said little of her own thoughts. . . .

Venetia came to Hassan, who was seated in the salon where he had seen Angelica before. He asked: “You would go from here, if you could?”

She was cautious in her reply. "It would be a question of where. I like not a guarded door. I did not fret in your tent."

"There is a felucca sails by night, in four days from now. It would put you ashore on the Calabrian coast. If you were there, with a purse of gold, would you say you had been paid in a fair way?"

It was as though he had read her thoughts. She was about to assent, when he added: "There is one thing more you must do first, which may not be hard."

Her heart sank somewhat at that. Would there always be the one thing more, and the promise moving ahead?

He went on, not requiring reply. "The señorita's ransom has been refused. She is mine for such vengeance as she has earned. I may give her for a plaything for men among whom she will live for a few hours, but not more. I may impale her, or have her skinned. If I do less, she may be whipped, and sold at the market's chance. I may brand her, and make her the jeered slave of my own house.

"Having these powers, I may act in another way, making her my first queen over all my house, with next to a royal rank, and with the riches that women crave. If I should so resolve, I should require one pledge in return, that she would be loyal to me, neither fractious nor sullen of mood, but docile to meet my will. Do you think she would deny that?"

"She would be mere fool if she did."

"How do you stand, after two nights in one bed? Will she take wisdom from you? Have you come to accord?"

"Not so ill. But I am not trusted at all."

"That would be much to require. . . . If she come to this, there will be the felucca for you, and the purse will not be lean."

"If it be more than my power, which I do not think. . . . If I do all that I may. . . . You will let me go?"

"You shall go if you do. It has not a hard sound. You should be content."

She saw that it was all she would get. She said: "It should not be hard. You will see her first? Or do you leave it wholly to me?"

"I will see her now. So you can say; but you need not add what I have said. You can hear it from her."

Venetia went back, saying no more than: "I am to be let loose, but not yet. He would talk to you."

"Did you learn anything but that?"

"Your ransom is not agreed. He said not how they came apart. He seems in a good mood."

Angelica took little comfort from that, thinking that his good mood might be because she was his to bait; but she went down with what courage she could contrive.

## CHAPTER XXVII

HASSAN looked at Angelica, as it seemed to her as she entered, with approving eyes. She took what satisfaction she could from that, and from the fact that, though he did not rise at her approach, he did not require her to stand. "You can sit," he said, "if you will."

She had the wit to see that, if he had meant no more than to put her to shame and sale, it would have been done in an open way. When he saw her alone, the idea of some bargain that he would make came to her mind. Perhaps the way in which they had first met may have given her more confidence than she would have felt had she known him in no guise than that of the savage ruler of the Barbary coast. And when they had met for the second time, she had proved the better in that bout—for which it seemed she had now to pay.

"When I talk," she said, in a cooler way than it was easy to feel, "I am not accustomed to stand."

"You might be glad to do that," he countered coldly, "if you were put in another way. . . . It seems that your ransom will not be paid."

"You mean the ships? Did you ever think that it would? It was jest to ask."

"It was none of me. You may call it yours if you will."

She asked boldly: "Then what will you do now? Will you take a price?"

"I will take none. You are mine by the custom of war; which is better than gold."

"Gold will build ships, or will buy."

"But not those two, which I have meant to have. As I will when St. Angelo falls."

"Which it will not do."

"We will change no words about that. If you are wise for the next day, you may live to see. . . . I have said I will have you or the ships, and it seems that you can be better spared."

"What am I worth beyond gold? I can give you that."

"You are worth revenge, and to show that none can flout me and walk secure."

"You have exposed that, for the world to see. You can be content. You can be generous beyond that, knowing that I did no more than I ought on my part. It is the weak who must watch their repute, but you stand too high."

It was shrewdly said, and held a wisdom that he allowed, though it was not of his code. Also, it stroked his pride. But his will was not to be deflected by



any words that her wit might find for her need.

“It is so,” he said, “that I am able to give you choice. On the one hand, I will not say what I will do, for I have yet to decide; or I may even leave it to you. There is sport if I give you dice for yourself to throw, and as they fall you may be flayed, or impaled, or fastened for ants to eat, or merely whipped, or bastinado’d across the feet. It is for your own wrist to decree. But, in my present mood, the choice will be, on the one side, that you be whipped in St. Catherine’s Square, and then sent to a Damascus merchant, who will get me the best price that such as you can command.

“Now against that I will give you a chance that you may pay your debt in a better way, and its condition is only one, of which you cannot complain. I will give you that for which a million women would lick dirt with a ready tongue. I will make you my own wife, wedding you with honour at the eleventh hour of to-morrow morn, and you shall be first of the four which our laws allow (of which I have but three now), and so far as those laws permit, for I am one by whom the injunctions of the Koran are not lightly ignored, they will be servants around your feet.”

“When,” Angelica asked, desperately fencing for further time, “will you require my reply?”

“It is not a choice that should be hard to decide. . . . But there is a condition that is almost needless to say. If I do this, giving reward to one to whom stripes are due, I must be assured that you will not fail on your part in the duties a wife should yield, but will be docile to please my will.”

“It is not thus that ladies are woo’d in my own land.”

“Which you have left, and are unlikely to see again. You must be content with the customs to which you come.”

“You may see it another way; but it is a hard choice for one who has no purpose to wed.”

“Which all women have, who are not sick. You must find different words, or you will have a sore back, if no worse. Would you stand stripped in the sun where the crowd will laugh? Have you seen the whip curl round a woman’s thigh? You may dream of that, and give me answer when you awake, which I shall require at the seventh hour, for by noon you will find that you have been either wedded or whipped.”

Angelica looked at him in some doubt whether it would be of any avail if she should break into a passion of tearful appeal, which it would not have been hard to do; but she thought it would have no more result than to reduce both his patience and his regard, and, thinking that, her pride was sufficient to hold her in.

“You will be clear,” he said, “that it is a loyal wife you would have to be, putting regrets by, and making my country yours.”

“You would not require that I change my faith?”

“It is a matter which could be left for this time. You would have instructions to heed. Your faith of a man-born god is for children, not men. You will put it by, when you have been pointed a better way. . . . Yet you should have freedom in that till your own time. . . . There is no more to be said now.”

Hassan rose with that word, and walked out without looking at her again. She went back to where Venetia was, being aware, as she climbed the stairs, that her heart beat in a choking way, and that fear had come close to her side, as she had not felt it before. She heard the clatter of hooves on stones, and knew that Hassan had ridden away. She had till seven of the next dawn.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

“You are hard,” Venetia said, “either to coax or to drive. There was a convent to which you might go, and which you would have ruled at a far day, but it must be another manner of life. It must be marriage for you.

“Now you can be wed to a great prince. You can be the first woman on the Barbary coast, from Alexandria to the narrow Straits, and you say you would liever be whipped. Can I think that? Suppose he change his mind, and yet give you no worse than a rope’s choice? Have you seen men hanged? But I have, and some women too. When they are cut down they are not pleasant to see.

“But you know naught. You are not fit to walk in the world’s ways. You should be in the cells. I say your uncle was right in that.

“But you are here now. You cannot grow melons and gather figs. You must do what a woman does. Being caught here as you are, you should be glad that you will not go to the rack, or else be raped in a rude way.”

“I have thought,” Angelica said, “that it is not what may be done to us, but that which we do ourselves, by which we are shamed.”

“Well, if you can get comfort from that!”

“I get no comfort at all. I have choice of ills.”

“I would give you comfort with a good heart. But who could? You are so stubborn of will. If you dislike to be wife to a Barbary prince, it need not be long. Can you not smile a lie? You could find occasion to get away when he thought you lulled.”

“We have a proverb in our land that a lie has short legs. It is a part that I should not sustain, had I mind to try.”

“That I doubt. Were you of resolute will, you are one who would lie well. . . . I have heard another proverb of Spain, that truth is for children to speak, or else fools.”

“I suppose the meaning to be that, of all mankind, they are nearest God.”

“Do you so?” Venetia yawned. “It could be taken another way. . . . But I have heard from a priest’s mouth that you are not bound when you swear, being wrongly compelled thereto. It is an oath of duress. I have had much comfort from that, swearing when I am trapped as it may seem wisest to do, and by any oath I am asked, though it be by Bethlehem’s star, or the manger that cradled Christ.”

“You are versed in much,” Angelica allowed, “which I have not pondered till now, but if I wed him at all”—“as you see you must,” Venetia interposed

—“if I wed him at all, I would practise to keep my vows.”

“Well, you could do worse. And it is what I should wish, at the least till I am set free.”

Venetia’s voice, as she said this, had an accent of sleep, into which she soon after fell, having ease of body and mind, and thinking that she was near the end of as dark a path as she had yet trod.

Angelica lay awake, having more cause. She did not wish to be whipped or slaved, nor did she wish to take the way out that Hassan’s offer proposed, concerning which she had some wonder as to why it was made, not being vain enough to suppose that he was drawn thereto by her beauty’s power, as some women would have been quicker to do.

Thinking of that, she recalled his courtesies to herself when they had first met.

“The potent arms that you now bear.” It had pleased her then. She had thought it sincere. But she knew now that he had been acting a part, which she saw that he had done well.

She remembered then that his face had engaged her thoughts in the night hours. She would have regarded the idea that she should wed him rather differently then from how she did now. But now she knew who he was. The heathen foe of her race and faith. A man with three wives for whom he had so little of love that he offered to put them under her feet. . . . And at that time she had been seeking escape from the dark shadow of convent walls. Something must be allowed for that. . . . And then she had been so young! It was . . . *it was less than four months ago*. It seemed impossible to believe. The quiet, sheltered life, with its many rules, its restraints, its prohibitions of petty things, had the remoteness of prehistoric times. How she had lived in the days between!—And then she must think of that to which it had brought her now.

She had a choice to make, or, as Venetia would have said, with her clear shallow sense, she had really none. Rather, she had a fate to face, to endure, to come through with what honour she could.

But she could not bring herself to regard it thus. She had one dominant thought—to get back to St. Angelo, where she ought to be. Beside that, all other decisions had an aspect of irrelevance. It mattered little whether she were wedded or whipped, if in either case she were foiled of the thing she would.

Indeed, if she were wed, she would be in the worse case, for (she supposed) she would be pledged in honour, if not in words, not to return. Her mind went back to seek way of escape, as it ever would. . . . Francis had a wound in the arm. It was not one (she supposed) by which he would be likely to die. She had greater fear that it would be mended before she could be there, for she judged, truly enough, that as he grew better in health, he would be nearer the day when he must give account of what he had done; and when he

did that she did not wish to be far off.

She did not think she could do much of herself, but she felt that Sir Oliver was her friend, and she knew that, even over the Grand Master, he had a great power. . . . He was friend to her, but that he was that to Francisco she was less sure. . . . Francis would be blamed the more that she was not there. And he had called on her to stand back, as she should have done. She had given him the help he required. She might have done more, or withdrawn. But she had done neither of those. She had stood like a fool—like a blind fool—till there had been sudden hands on her arms, and they had dragged her away. Should they blame Francis for that . . . ? She might fail to get free, but if she did not attempt, she would be shamed in her own thoughts, which should be worse than to be abused by the violence of infidel men.

She knew that Venetia would not aid her to single escape, nor be willing to risk that she herself should fall either into the Grand Master's or Marshal Couppier's hands. She would be more likely to raise the alarm. But Venetia was sleeping now.

Angelica looked at her as she lay, cheek on hand, in the dim light of the lamp. In her sleep, she had the very innocent look of one whom conscience did not trouble at all. She lived by her own law, and was not ashamed. Her face looked fragile in sleep, though a shoulder, which the blanket did not conceal, was firm with sufficient flesh under its white smoothness of satin skin.

If there were any marks on her face of what her life had been to that day, the night was kind that they could not be seen in that shadowy room. She looked so fair as she lay that it seemed strange that God should so create that which would be destroyed by the malice of time; which may be true alike of the fading of every flower.

"I shall have tried, if I do but walk out, and be driven back," Angelica thought, silently drawing her doublet over her head. And then it came to her mind that Venetia might not escape blame for her flight, and she had a sense of fantastic guilt that she should desert her thus, forgetting how it had come to that pass, and then she thought: "But as yet I am not free!" and there was a sudden laughter to check, which would have come at the wrong time.

Her dressing was soon done, and she spared a moment to wish she had weapon to take, of which there was none in the room, except a dagger Damascus-made, that Venetia had secreted, she would not say by what wile, and which was under her pillow now. Angelica saw its hilt, and thought she could have drawn it out, leaving the sheath still under the pale-gold head, and there came a memory of how Venetia had robbed her room while she slept, at another time. "But," she thought, "I will not go by her code; and it is not weapons but stealth that should get me through."

So she let the dagger be, and went out very silently, closing the door, and

down stairs which were half in moonlight and half in shade, and so to the back part of the house, where there was a small window that she thought she might have got through.

She believed that the house was empty at night, the servants not sleeping within, but barring it on the outside, and watching with such patrols through the dark hours that to get out unseen was a feeble chance, though it was one she was bent to try.

But as she entered the kitchen, a man rose, who had been drowsing beside the board. "What is that?" he asked in a sharp voice, and Angelica thought that her effort was soon done.

A shaft of moonlight came from the higher part of a window that was shuttered below. It crossed herself and glittered on a bare sword that had lain by the man's hand, and was now held.

"Telek," she said, "you keep a good watch."

"So I must," he replied, "if I would keep my head where it is. What do you do here?"

"Why, I have no rest. I must walk abroad, as I often do in the night."

"You cannot go beyond here."

"But I will talk to you, if I may."

The man made no objection to that. He was the one she knew best, she being able to understand his speech alone among those who were round the house. But of what race he was she could make no more than a poor guess, and he may have been in nearly as much doubt.

He rose to trim a lamp that had gone out as he dozed, and gave her a better look than he could before. He saw she was fully dressed in a way she would not have been had she meant no more than a walk within doors, having a feathered cap on the black curls which she had shortened to a boy's length, as they were worn in the Spain of that day.

"Why," he asked, in a chuckling voice, "did you think to walk free?"

He was a big man, awkwardly made, having black eyes, under straw-coloured hair, and a large mouth which was used to laugh but could set into cruel lines. Angelica looked at him, wondering whether Venetia would class him among those with whom gold would prevail or as one of the harder kind. Well, it had to be tried.

"I would not turn," she said, "from an open door."

"No," he said, chuckling again, as though at a joke he did not expect her to share. "I do not blame you for that. . . . You will have heard that Yusef was hanged."

"Yusef?" she asked. "Who is he?"

The man showed his surprise. He knew that the Viceroy had visited her after the exchange had been proposed, and before the envoy had come back

with the news that it could not be, he having been shown where Yusef yet hung on the gallows that Marshal Couppier had set up in Notabile square. For what purpose should he have come, except to inform her of the proposed exchange on the next day? And would she seek to escape, supposing that her release was so near? He sensed something here that he did not understand, and he knew that heads are sometimes lost by a loose tongue.

“I meant naught,” he said, and would say no more.

Angelica had seated herself on the other side of the board. She pushed a ducat across. “There is none to hear,” she said, “and it will be silent with me.”

“Why,” he said, “it is no more than that the Grand Master had proposed that Captain Yusef, whom the Marshal had caught, should be handed over for you. So it was said, and the exchange was to be arranged for to-morrow noon; but the Marshal had been somewhat too quick, and Yusef was hanged this morn, before word could be got to him. That is common talk, and I suppose it is true. But, if you did not know he was hanged, I see not why you should be anxious to quit.”

“I had been told that no ransom could be agreed.”

“That is how it may prove to be, but there was a different talk on this day, until it was heard at dusk that Captain Yusef was hanged.”

“You heard naught beyond that?”

“I heard talk that our General, who is Yusef’s father, was wroth, and said there must be as thick a rope for your neck, and the Viceroy said you would be shortly for sale and he could buy you and hang you then.”

“So it seems it is time for me to go.”

“So it is, if you know how.”

“It is that I would ask you.” She leant forward, and said in a low voice, as though mentioning that which could not be spoken aloud: “*For a thousand ducats of gold.*”

The man was silent. It was an immense sum to be handled by such as he. Greed and fear strove in his eyes. But he shook his head. It could not be done.

“It is gold I could not collect, nor you pay, being both dead.”

“I have better hope.”

He quoted an old proverb of many lands. “Live in hope and die in a ditch.”

“This is not to hope but to act. . . . There is no haste. You can give it thought.”

There was silence for some time after that, except for the sound of a large clock on the wall, of which the single hand was moving upward toward the hour. . . . As it reached the summit, the clock struck—twice.

The man started, and looked at the clock, as though to challenge what it had said. He got up, and pulled a string, by which it would repeat what it had struck at the last hour. The two strokes sounded again.

"I had not thought it had been so late," he said, "I thought it would but have struck once."

"It is so," she said, "when you sleep, as you must have done."

"So I may," he said, "but I wake now. I will not be talked to my death."

"Do you know," she asked, "why I am here?"

"It is some tale of two ships, but I have not heard it all in the right way."

"Then I will tell you now, and you will know that I am one to get free. I have a fortunate star."

She told the tale of how she swam in the night from the *Flying Hawk*, and he stared at her again. His eyes had a bold searching look, as he said: "I was told you were woman under your hose."

"So I am," she said. "I am one of the noblest ladies of Spain, which is why I shall pay you well."

"If it could be done at all," he said in a doubtful way, "it would be when the guard change, but I think you tempt me to death."

He had a new doubt. "How should I be sure of the gold, if I got you free?"

"I will give you a writing now."

"To be my death, if it were found, and I here? No, I would rather trust you than that. . . . It was a thousand ducats you said? Solid ducats of gold of a true mint?"

"So I said. But I will not hold you to that. I will make it twelve. With a home, if you will, in my own land."

He was silent again, wrestling with the temptation, as was plain in his changing face, and she felt that she must bring him to a more resolute mood, lest the night should go.

"When do the guard change?"

"It is at the third hour."

"Then there is a short time to prepare. Will you tell me the plan you have?"

"It is no more than that I shall go out a moment before the hour, holding a light so that you may slip after and not be seen. You will draw into the shade of the shrubs that are by the door, and I will talk for a moment to the man who is near relief. As he is changed, the one who comes to his place will suppose that I am one of the guard who is then relieved. He will not expect me to return to the house, but to walk off. I will hold him in talk for long enough for you to slip by, and will then move away. You must not be too far gone to join me again, and after that we will go to the hills, if we can get through."

"It has the sound of a good plan. Had you thought that to raise alarm on the far side of the house might be a good way?"

The man pondered that. "It might be good at the first, but what start would you get? You would be caught in the larger trap. As I hope, we may get clear before it is known that you are escaped."



“You said that we should go to the hills. It is St. Angelo where I would be.”

“Then you must get other guide. I am not mad to that point. We must seek the hills. It is on that side we must get free.”

“Then it shall be so, if it must.”

He explained, as was easy to see, that the Turkish armies lay so that they had a narrow front of attack and a wider rear. It was toward the rear, which they did not besiege, that there would be the better chance of escape. It would, indeed, have been easy, but for the fear of Marshal Couppier’s raids, which kept the outskirts of the Turkish positions in constant, restless alarm.

From this point he made no further demur, and exhibited some intelligence, and a cautious thoroughness in his plans, which gave ground for hope that he would earn his reward if the fates were kind.

He was minute in description of how the bushes lay outside the door, so that Angelica should be able to reach their shelter, on stepping out, without an instant’s pause. He calculated how the moonlight would fall. As the hour approached, he extinguished the light, so that her eyes should become used to the dark. He lit a lantern, which he covered behind a bin, till he should require it on going out.

At about three minutes before the hour, he rose up, and unbarred the door. He stepped out, with the lantern aswing on one hand, and the door-key in the other. He laid the lantern on the ground slightly away, and nearer the hinged side of the door. As he turned to lock it, Angelica slipped out. She made no sound, and could not have been seen even a few yards away.

He was hailed almost at once, for there were a dozen watchers around the house, and he shouted back in a great voice, as he moved outward to meet the man who approached him, leaving the lantern where he had laid it down.

“Is all quiet within?” the man asked.

“Within what?” Telek replied. “It is not quiet within me. I have eaten bad fish, as I think. If I could vomit, I might be at better ease. It is for that I am out. But I will not lose sight of the door, though I may be Etna within.”

“You will do well, if you can,” the man replied. “I have seen one dead in two hours from no better cause. . . . Is the door fast?”

“Yes, and I have left the lantern beside.”

The man was one who would leave nothing to chance. He walked up to the door, which it was beyond his duty to do, feeling that it was firmly secure. There was no default in Telek being outside. It was his special duty to guard that door, which he might do from within or without. He had chosen the comfort of a roof and a kitchen chair. The man who guarded the door at the front lay across the outside, knowing that he would be likely to doze during the hours of his watch. He would lean a halberd against it, which must fall with a

great clatter if the door should be opened from within, which would not have been easy to do in a quiet way, while its great key yet hung at his belt.

The man, having seen that the door was fast, moved back to his post, shouting to those who were left and right that all was well, which they were anxious to know. Telek walked at his side, or somewhat behind, threatening to vomit at times, which it seemed that he could not do.

“It is worse,” the man said, “as I have heard, if you cannot bring it to rise. You should find a leech at the first moment you can.”

“I will leave no port where I am put,” Telek replied, “while I have legs which will bear me up. But there is a relief due” (they could hear, as he spoke, the steps of approaching men), “and if you will ask the captain——” He stopped in mid-speech, remembering that, if another should be sent to relieve his post, there would be risk that the flight would be discovered earlier than it otherwise might. He changed to: “But no, I will hold on till the dawn. I am somewhat better I think, now that I am in the open air of the night. I will not risk losing this post, and being in the trenches again.”

“Well, that is your choice. But to vomit when you have pains is the safer way.” Another man came out of the night, and there was changing of passwords in a perfunctory style. The man who was about to leave appealed to the newcomer: “Here is Telek, who has eaten fish which was bad. I tell him he must vomit or die. Is it not so?”

He went off, having asked that, without waiting for a reply. He had to fall into rank at the front of the house, where those whose duty was done would be marched off.

Telek said: “Well, I may last till I get back.” He stood a moment, explaining pain, and then went the same way.

The new guard went to inspect the door, seeing a light. He found that a lantern was on the ground. The door was locked. He thought: “It is to mark where the door is, for us who watch from the outside.” It seemed a good way to him. He hung the lantern on the latch of the door.

## CHAPTER XXIX

“We must endure,” the Grand Master said, “till the autumn days, when they may become weary and go.”

“Well,” Sir Oliver answered to that, “we may do no less; and, if we can, I suppose it may be enough, for the Turks do not lay siege as do those to whom a month is no loss.”

Valette agreed about that. It was plain to all. It gave distant hope, if some increase of present fear. There were signs, even now, in the Turkish lines, that they were preparing another storm. They would not rest in a passive grip of those who must get nearer with every day to when they would starve within. They came storming around the walls as having men to lose, but no time. Doing that, they gave future hope, to balance the present stress.

But the future hope must be faint, for its cause was clear. Mustapha looked north and west for a tempest that did not come; but with a doubt of how long the skies would continue blue.

The menace of Europe was ever before his mind, urging him on. He had had two months incredibly lengthening into three, and Europe had watched, and talked of much which it did not do. But it was a position that might not endure. It was emphatic reason why the armies of Turkey should not camp idly about, as vultures watch round a starving cow.

Europe had heard of St. Elmo’s fall, and had muttered, but had not moved. If the next news should be that the horsehair standards had overwhelmed the Sanglea it might mutter curses again, but would it not conclude that the end was near, and that it would be too late for any succour to reach? So Mustapha might hope, and that the Sanglea should fall he was clearly resolved, though it was not there alone that the tide rose and the tempest beat but at every yard of the leaguered walls. And the Turkish batteries thundered with little rest either by night or day.

“They are in fear,” the Grand Master said, “that we may be relieved in a large way, if they dally more. From that cause, there is more fury in their assaults, and we are more pressed at the present hour, though we do our part, and may boast that they bleed well. But will they therefore go when the summer is past, and there is no succour arrived? It is hard to say, but we must still endure as the days pass, not counting toward the end.”

He spoke of the powder, of which there was still a good store, but which grew less with each day. Against the tempest of Turkish shot he had ordered

before now that there should be no random reply. Each gun must be silent, or trained with care on a mark which would be profit to hit. Now he spoke of rationing every gun, except at issues of active storm.

Sir Oliver said that he would have a plan for that worked out for the next day. The Grand Master said it would be well to do that: he would go to rest now, if there were no other matter of present care.

“I do not know that there is,” Sir Oliver replied, “or not one that I see how we can help. You will have heard that the Marshal was over-quick to hang Candelissa’s son?”

“I cannot blame him for that. I have said that prisoners shall not be fed. He need not have kept him at all; but I suppose it to be cheering to some to see that there is one less on each day. . . . Yet I am grieved that the exchange was not made. Do you know how they have served her to now?”

“She is lodged at the villa near St. Catherine that Le Tonneau built, and she had not been abused up to the last news, which was but a few hours ago. She is companioned by La Cerda’s mistress that was, whom Hassan also has in his care.”

La Valette frowned at this, in a puzzled way. “Why,” he said, “they were together, as I recall, in her chamber before, and it was the same battery in which the wanton was hid that was so sharply attacked, and from which Angelica was secured. . . . Oliver, there is more in this than we have yet probed. It shall not be left till we have turned over the last stone. . . . Is Don Francisco fit to be inquisitioned thereon?”

“I have seen him in the spital where he is laid. He was very frank in his own blame, and, as he was fevered and ill, I put it by in my mind to a better time. . . . But I have given Colonna charge of his battery while he is laid aside, and that appointment I would ask you to confirm in a more permanent way.”

“Removing Don Francisco therefrom?”

“So I thought. We should have one there in command of whom we are more sure.”

“So it shall be. . . . Have you no further thought that can get her free?”

“I know not what to advise. Beyond that we must bargain anew, offering gold with a free hand.”

“We have offered more than her worth.”

“Yes. But they may take it at last. . . . There is some hope beyond, that if she be sold the merchants may offer her first to us. I have let the word be passed in the right way that Palermo will give more than the seraglio price would be likely to be. . . . But she must be sold first, as I fear, for Hassan is not looking for gold alone, but to requite the way she foiled him before.”

As they spoke, there was a sound at the door, where one would enter whom the usher stoutly withstood.

“What is that?” La Valette asked, with a sharp frown.

“It is soon seen.” Sir Oliver went to the door. “So,” La Valette heard his voice, “you were right to do. But you can let him in now.”

He came back, with Don Francisco following. “Here,” he said, “is one who should lie flat. But you shall sit, and tell us why you have come.”

Francisco was pale, and his arm was bound to his side, but he was in a mood to forget that.

La Valette looked at him, and a memory came of his own youth, and of a companion who had had the same look forty years before, when he had been wounded, and would still take his place in the breach at a great need, and whose son was before him now.

“Don Francisco,” he said, “I have just heard that Colonna has your command while you are unfit, which is well, for it could not be in the hands of a better man. I have been asked to give him that post in a more permanent way, and to remove you therefrom. If it be from that cause you are here, you have but to say that it would be poor justice to you (who did well when the boats were sunk, as I have no mind to forget), and I will reserve all till you are more equal to your defence.”

Francisco lifted his eyes to the Grand Master, and it was clear that he found no pleasure in what he heard.

“No,” he said, “I do not protest of that. I am justly served.”

La Valette’s eyes, as he heard that, took on a sterner and more questioning look. “Do you mean me to think,” he asked, “that it was by your fault that the battery was surprised, and the guns still, when they should have defended the boom?”

“I must say that, or else lie, which I will not do. . . . But it is of Angelica I must know. . . . There is tale that Yusef is hanged. I must know what you will do now.”

Sir Oliver interposed to reply: “There is still some hope that gold will avail, as it mostly does.”

“I would be sure, rather than hope, she being placed as she is. Do you know where they have her now?”

“She is not hardly abused by the latest news that the spies bring. She is in a villa some miles away, being there confined with Venetia in the same room.”

“With——? It is a fiend’s jest.”

“Well, so it is. It might be worse, as you can see.”

“Is it strongly held?”

“It is nigh three miles in the Turkish lines. There is no rescue could reach, if you mean that. . . . There are armed guards at each door, and a cordon of men is round it both night and day. Hassan does not mean that she shall twice escape from his power.”

“Be it what distance it may, or were it held by the whole army of Turks, as you may call it to be, I had thought that she would be for the rescue of Christian knights.”

La Valette was stern. “Do you teach duty to me? I have Malta to guard. Should I forget that for a single life, it is there that my shame would lie.”

“But I am shamed, if I do not attempt her aid. . . . Will you tell me how this villa lies, when I shall have passed the Sanglea?”

Francisco turned to Sir Oliver, as he put this question, but it was La Valette who replied.

“Oliver, you can be still for the time. It is vain talk, but I will know why he should feel in so shamed a way. . . . Was it by your fault”—he addressed Francisco—“that your cousin came to be there in the night hours?”

But Sir Oliver would not be still. “I can answer that,” he said; “for he has told all to me, by whom it shall come to you. . . . But, by your leave, I should let him go.”

The eyes of the Grand Master and the secretary met, and La Valette knew it to be one of those times when Sir Oliver would not lightly give way. “But, Oliver,” he said, “it is madly vain. Shall he waste his life to no use . . . ? But I must trust you in this, as I have trusted in larger things.”

La Valette said no more. He stood silently, as having forgotten his purpose to go, gravely regardful, while Sir Oliver drew out a map of the district where the Turkish army was camped, and pointed out where the villa stood in which Angelica was confined. With clear brevity of phrase, he explained the roads and other physical features, and how the Turks were encamped. He spoke as though he were describing that which was within his own lines. When he had done, he looked up to ask: “Can you remember all?”

“Can I forget?” Francisco rose to go. He asked: “Have you a sword?”

La Valette loosed one from his side. “I cannot use it,” he said, “as I once did; but in your hand it may yet strike a good blow. It is yours, for the sake of one I do not forget.”

Sir Oliver said: “You will need this.” He wrote a pass which would enable him to leave the Christian lines by the Bourg gates. “When you show it,” he said, “they will point you the way the spies go, where you will not be shot by those who are unaware who you may be.”

Francisco said a word of thanks, and went out, silently watched by the two older men, who were not quick to speak when he was gone.

“Oliver,” La Valette said at last, “you have let him go to a most sure death, which can be to no gain, either to us, or to her whom he seeks to save.”

“So I suppose,” Sir Oliver replied. “But it was what I had no choice but to do, for his honour is a soiled rag, both to Malta and her, and I think he has gone in the right way.”

After that, he told all that he knew, and more that he guessed, in which he was seldom wrong.

The Grand Master said, when he had done, “I must have hanged him for that, as I have hanged others for lesser things. . . . But God has opened a better way.” He sighed at a thought he had. “We may pray for his soul to-night,” he went on, “with a good will. . . . I suppose there are Turks who will feel his sword.” He seemed to find some comfort in that, but as he went to his bed he had the look of a tired and sorrowful man.

## CHAPTER XXX

VENETIA waked to the sound of a closing door, too vaguely heard to judge what it might be. She saw, by the dim light of the lamp, that the bed was empty beside her. She sat up quickly; awake, watchful, alert. Her eyes, swiftly searching the room, saw that Angelica's cap was gone.

Doubt, anger, fear, contended within her, as she swung her feet lightly over the side of the stately bed, and made for the door. She opened it to listen to a silent house. From the kitchen there came the three deep slow notes of the striking clock. Outside, she could hear the noise of the changing guard. . . . What did it mean? Was Angelica still in the house? Should she give alarm? Had she gone two—three—hours ago? How wild Hassan would be! Would it prove pretext enough to send her to the slave-market, if not to the lash, or to more terrible things? She was innocent of any complicity in Angelica's escape, if escaped she was, but she had seen enough of the world's ways to know that innocence might be a detail irrelevant to the position in which she stood. . . . Was it possible that Angelica had not fled, but been fetched away? The idea was rejected. Venetia was sure that she would not have slept through such an event: would not have slept through Angelica's dressing at all, unless it had been noiselessly done.

She took clothes in a quick way, but not so that she was careless of how she might look, if she should meet men before she should regain the room. She lifted the lamp, and put it down, thinking that it might be a fault that any movement of hers should be visible from without. There should be moonlight enough. She opened the door again, and after another moment of listening which returned no sound, she went down the corkscrew stair.

There was silence in the house, and in the kitchen the lamp was out, and Telek gone. Venetia was better acquainted with his habits than Angelica had been. She knew that, though the soldiers who circled the house were changed during the night, the guarding of the doors, which was a duty of those of the inner staff, was undertaken in watches of eight hours, and that Telek's habit was to do his turn on a fireside chair.

The moonlight fell over the table in a slanting line, and showed where a ducat lay. Telek, pondering the huge sum which was his to earn, and then how it could be achieved, had failed incredibly to pouch that which was his to lift.

Venetia did not need to be told more. She had read a plain tale. She went silently back, not failing to pick up the coin.



Should she give alarm? An instinctive habit by which she would be slow to resolve without searching thought, unless she were cornered and forced, held decision back. Then she saw that, if there should be sudden outcry to wake the house, she must not be dressed as she was, and she was quickly back in the bed.

If she knew how long it was since Angelica got away! She wished she had confided in her, but without resentment for that. "Had she so," she allowed in a candid mind, "she had been pure fool, after what she had known me do."

She imagined Angelica, with Telek for guide ("who would be one to trust as you must, but no more") creeping among the rocks, and her natural sympathy for those who were hunted by force or law was an instinct to keep her still.

She was not conscious of any virtue in her resolve (of which we may say there was not much) as she decided at last: "She shall have till the next hour strike, and after that she must use her wits, as I mine." It was after that she began to dream (when would the dreams fail that had brought her far?) that, if Angelica were gone, she might win Hassan's regard, if she could face his first wrath in a skilful way. . . . The hours passed. The guard watched without, and the house was silent within. When the clock struck four, she rose, and put on some clothes in what should appear to be the disorder of haste. She went down, and roused the man who had his watch at the front, with the tale that Angelica was not there.

It was not a thing that had to be said twice to unlistening ears. It seemed but a moment before the house was loud with clamour and search, and little more before Hassan himself had ridden up, and, black with fury, was directing pursuit.

In the next hour it seemed that he had the whole army awake. Horsemen had ridden at random speed to warn the outposts on every side. Not waiting for dawn, far out from the environs of the house, intensive search spread over the moonlit scene.

It was not till all had been done that wrathful energy could contrive that he sent for Venetia, who had courage and experience in such crises of life sufficient to enable her to conceal the fear that reason could not deny.

"You will tell me," he said, "all that you know. It is the one chance that you have, which may not be much."

"So I will," she replied, "and you will see that you owe me thanks. It was I who waked the alarm. Had I slept, as you will not say I was not permitted to do, there would have been no stir till the morn, and if she should now be caught (as I should say is a likely thing) it will be to me it is due."

"I can think such things for myself," he returned, in a cold voice, "and it will be well for you if I shall go by your road. But what I ask is your tale."

“You asked my tale with a threat which I had not earned,” she replied, meeting his frown with a quiet front, though her heart beat hard. “I will tell you all I know, which is not much. . . . I was waked by a clock that strikes loud, so that it can be heard through the house, and I saw that her place was bare. She might have left the bed for a light cause, and, had I turned over and slept, I do not think I should have been greatly wrong, the house being so guarded and barred, and I not having been made her watch; but I looked further, and saw that her cap was gone, and on that I did not pause even to dress, but was most instant to raise alarm.”

“Then,” he said, searching her with suspicious eyes, “you must have had cause to think she purposed to fly, or you had been less quick so to conclude.”

“I was so far from that, that I believed she had agreed in her heart that she would do well to be wedded to you. We had talked long on that, and I had so practised, as you desired.”

“It would not have been. Yusef is hanged.” A new thought came, and he asked sharply: “Had you heard that? It is that which it must have been!”

Venetia’s look of puzzled wonder was not assumed, as she replied: “Who is he? I cannot guess what you mean.”

“Then there is no need to say more.” He did not propose to explain to her that the idea of marrying Angelica had been no more than a last expedient, to prevent her exchange taking her out of his power, and that he had dismissed it at once on hearing that Yusef was dead. He saw, also, at a second thought, that this could not have been more than guessed, whatever knowledge Angelica might have gained, for his motives, or his later change of purpose, had been confided to none. He asked: “She has spoken of flight before?”

“That she had not. Do you think she would be open to me?”

Her tone mocked, and Hassan saw that there was reason in that. Still he urged: “But you were alone, and no more than two. There must have been talk.”

“So there was. But she is one who speaks truth in a frank way, and yet has thoughts that she will not snow. I have not met one who at times may be harder to read.”

He thought of how Angelica had escaped before, and he did not dispute that.

“There is this Telek,” he said, “who is also gone. You will have seen her talking to him?”

“Even that I have not. I am amazed that she could have purchased his help. I should have said that he would not be moved by aught to a great risk of his own skin, nor that he was one on whom to rest faith for any pledge he could give.”

“Having sounded him thus?”

“Will you call me so great a fool? Have I fled? Do you not see I am here? And whereto should I go? It is your favour I seek, which is why I stirred as I did the first moment I found her gone.”

Hassan considered this, and again he saw that it was a plausible defence, and most likely true. He did not mean that Angelica should escape without all concerned feeling his wrath in a way which would be hard to forget, if he let them live. But though he could be ruthless and cruel, even in fantastic modes, as was the way of his race, yet he had no wish to cut off an innocent head if he could find one that deserved it more.

“I have little doubt,” he said, “that they will be caught as the dawn comes, and I will judge all when I have heard their own tale, which the rack may aid.” He looked at her with as hard a glance as she had yet had, as he asked: “You swear now that you keep nothing back? It is the one chance you will have. Do you doubt that she fled with this Telek’s aid, and has not done him away with some trick?”

“I have told all I know, except one thing that I have been waiting to say. I have no doubt that it was with Telek she fled. I suppose she went in the night, in a secret way, and persuaded him as he sat at watch, for when I went down, there was this coin on the kitchen board.”

She produced the golden ducat that she had picked up, and Hassan took it, and observed that it was one of Ferrara’s mint.

“Has she a store of these?”

“She had ten or twelve.”

“Why did you not let it lie? Was it yours to take? Why did you secrete it away?”

“Let it lie? For how long? When I was calling the guard! I thought it was to be held for your own eye.”

He gave her a better glance than before as he said: “Well, you have answered all in a bold way. If you have told truth, and with nothing hid, you need not have a great fear.”

He went, leaving her well content. She had not meant to show the ducat, which he had taken away, as she supposed that he would; but, as he had pressed her to tell all, she had felt it to be the safer course. Beyond that, what had she concealed? Her tale had been wrong by an hour. But who would discover that? It was a question of when she waked, and who else could say?

She had overpassed another peril of which her life was too full, by the aid of a cool wit, and having no scruples at all, either to speak or to do.

## CHAPTER XXXI

“You must not go out by the gate,” Del Formo said, “even by night, for that would be to ask for notice at once, it being a thing which is not done.

“There is a place where the bastion is low, and has been shaken into the fosse more than it should, at which we have winked for reasons I need not say (but if the Turks should choose to rush us at that point they would find it an ill choice), and there you could go down without toil, but, as you have no more than one arm in use, you shall have a rope’s help. You will go for thirty paces along the fosse, and you will find the counter-scarp in no better case, and very easy to climb.

“How long you will endure after that is beyond my guess. But I will tell you this. The spies say that they are little observed when they attempt to enter the infidel lines. It is when they return that they must lurk and twist, and that their bellies must worm the ground.

“We understand this, for we are disposed to act in the same way. For if we catch a man coming in, he will have a smooth tale. He will be Christian at heart (that is if he be of Greek blood, as they mostly are), and so deserting to us, or he will pull a script from his caftan’s folds, being a letter to one of our own knights. What can we do? We have no sieve that will sift his tale.

“But if we catch him when he is on his way back, we have a man with a full crop. If he have writings, they will not be such as he will be glad for us to see.

“And it will do him no good to say that he was deserting us because he was getting to love Mahound. He can tell few tales that we cannot test, and if he lie he is soon hanged.

“But we might not do that to a known spy, for there are some of these men who can so contrive that none can tell whom they prefer. They have become of use to both sides, being like a post. They are men that neither trusts but both use. It is likely they are loyal to nothing more than their own necks and the coins they get from both sides.

“So you may have a safe start. You may creep the fosse knowing that you will be no mark for our men, who will have warning from me, and after that you will not be shot by the Turks in the gloom, even if you are seen, without they first find who you are.”

Francisco thanked Del Formo for this advice, which was better than he had expected to hear. The knight, who was in charge of some length of the bastion

of Provence, gave him also the Turkish pass-word for that night, which was something more he had not thought to have, and also a turban to replace the morion which he wore.

“There will be no use,” Del Formo said, “for disguise beyond that; for you are not one who could come into the light, and sustain any lie that I could give you to tell. But you must have a turban to meet the moon. I should advise, if you get but a short space from our own lines, that you advance as one owning the earth, with the pass-word to see you through, and may St. Christopher be your guard.”

Francisco left him at that, being given to a smaller man to be led to the wall, and Del Formo looked after him with a thought that he had seen him for the last time, but there was not much to stir emotion in that, while men died every day, and your own time was fixed for not more than a month ahead.

Francisco descended the wall, and must stumble somewhat along the fosse, it being more dark than was the open night, and strewn with debris from the round-shot battering of the mound. But he came to the place of which he had been told, and looked up to a light gap where the counter-scarp had fallen in, both lowering itself and raising the floor of the fosse. He clambered out here with little trouble, though with a loud falling of rubble beneath his feet, which would have been his end had he been watched from the wall by those who were not friends.

As he came up to the level land, he thought he saw the movement of one who was not five yards away, and his sword was half out of its sheath, but the man (if one there were) may have wished to be seen as little as he; and so, after a moment of waiting silence, he went on to the Turkish lines.

He heard a sentry’s call on his right, and bent his course to the left. Then there were voices out of the night from that side, and he swerved again. The ground was hard and broken, having been ploughed by shot and trampled by many feet. He had to give his most heed to that, lest he should lame himself against rocks, or fall to a sudden pit. . . . He came to a low wall of stone, with a beaten path on its right. It was not quite in the direction in which he wished to go, trending too much eastward, toward the shore, but he thought it best to follow it, till he should come to a road which the map had shown. . . . Out of the darkness he was challenged sharply, in a strange tongue. . . . He shouted back the pass-word he had been instructed to say, and walked quickly on. The voice shouted again a peremptory and yet questioning call, to which he replied with the pass-word again. The voice that called had a note of menace now, but it did not pursue, and it was already some distance behind. The next moment, he had come to the road.

He thought: “I may thank the turban for that. He would not have let a morion by with no more than a wrathful word.” But his thoughts were few. He

was but aware of the night, and the purpose for which he came. He walked on a silent road, going with an assured mien, as Del Formo had advised him to do. He had no need to ponder or pause, for, now he had found the road, his way was clear by the map he had seen, till he should be near the villa where Angelica was. He remembered each turning, each hill and fall, as Sir Oliver had explained them to be, and the forked road by the little bridge——

He met no one at all, and he was come to the uphill road which approached the villa he sought, when he found that he must shorten his pace, or he would overtake a group of men who marched in a slack way, as they may do in the reality of war, where its pageantry is of little avail, and especially when they move in the night.

He was the more content to have followed, himself unseen, when he found that their destination was his, and that they were halting before the villa, on the side where the ground sank, the front being approached by a flight of steps. The garden rose round the house, becoming level with the door at the back through which Angelica had fled. Before the front of the house, the moonlight gave him a wide view of open country that fell eastward to meet the sea. He looked up, and saw the belvedere, and near to that a dim light, where he supposed that Angelica lay. He stood at the road-side, in a black shadow of cypresses, and saw what the nature of his problem was likely to be. He might succeed with a first blow. He might come out of the night to slay any sentry he might select. He might slay one or two more of those who would be first to come at their comrade's cry. He felt equal to that. But more would arrive. Though he could kill or scatter them all, it might be to earn no more than the right to beat on a barred door. He did not know what watch there might be in the house, but he saw that, if his single arm should be sufficient to foil the outside guard, he would have short time to get Angelica out before there would be wider alarm. . . . There might be no earthly odds that would make him turn, but he had come to save Angelica, not to kill Turks; and, perhaps equally, though he might not observe the impulse that drove him on, to see her, to confess his folly, to gain forgiveness for the fault that had brought her there.

But one thing was clear, whatever might be best to do beyond that. It would be stupid to challenge a double guard. He must stand aside till those who were relieved had marched wholly away, and he saw that they would march back along the road where he stood in a shadow that was black enough, but against a wall that he could not quickly scale with one useful arm. He considered climbing it now, and hiding in the cypresses which grew close on its other side, and then elected a bolder and better way, going forward while the movements around the house would be protection for one who need not be closely seen. He found a small gate, where he entered the garden, which spread wide of the house on that side, and went up a narrow twisting path that was

further from the house than the cordon were placed. He had little fear of being perceived, the garden being planted thickly with flowering shrubs, from which the air was loaded with strong scents in the August night, offering quick shelter if he should become aware of a step that might come too close.

He came to the back of the house, as those who were withdrawn assembled below the front. He stopped when he reached a rock-garden that was too open to cross with prudence at such a moment. He drew into a screen of shrubs, through which he could see toward the house. There were two men who talked. Vaguely, uncertainly, for a moment, he thought a shadow passed behind them, coming into the bushes where he was hid. The men's voices were loud. He heard advice: "You should vomit well." Then one turned away. It seemed for a few steps that he would go down by the side of the house, but when the one he left turned to look at the door, he came into the shrubs. Francisco thought: "The man is sick. He is coming to vomit here." He became very still. . . . After a time, there were rustling movements that came close. He perceived that there were two who were coming with a great caution toward the path by which he had approached the house.

He could not tell what it meant, but it was clear that they were as intent as himself that their movements should not be known. Men do not creep through shrubs in the night in a furtive way without cause. They might hunt; but not in a garden which was patrolled. They might burgle; but these men moved away from the house. A wild hope came to his heart, and was put aside, before that which he thought incredible became known for true. Silent, with senses preternaturally alert, as they will be at such physical crises of life, he heard Angelica's voice.

He could not hear what was said, nor the single low word of reply, but after that the two, who had been almost upon him, turned away to the right, so that they would strike the path by which he had come lower than he had left it.

There came a joy, sudden and great, to his heart, with the thought that Angelica had escaped, and the tension of spirit under which he had approached to attempt her rescue somewhat relaxed.

His next mood was a natural doubt, and a fear lest he might do that which would bring ruin on her again. He could not guess who her companion might be, nor what might be the effect of revealing himself; but he saw that, if they should hear him approach, they would think him a certain foe. He would be a fancied danger where they would have real ones more than enough, and might cause them to turn aside from their best way. He saw also that, if he should contrive to follow them at a short distance, he increased the risk of causing discovery and alarm, such as might be fatal to both.

Yet he was reluctant to lose sight of her, when he had come so near, and, if she should be stopped or pursued, his sword might be a good help.

He resolved to follow in a distant and cautious way, risking rather to lose sight than to cause alarm; and then to make himself known by a low call, if they should come to some desolate place where it could be done without fear.

He succeeded in this so far that he did not draw observation from others upon himself, such as would be dangerous to those who were no great distance ahead; and so long, that he was able to learn with certainty that they were not aiming to reach St. Angelo's walls, but rather that part of the island which the Turks had first overrun when they landed in St. Thomas's Bay, and which was now spoiled and bare, not being much occupied by the Turks, nor a place where any of Maltese blood would be likely to make his home.

He did not wholly avoid the suspicion of those he followed, for there came a time when Telek paused to listen, having a vague doubt that they were pursued in a furtive way. But there was silence while they were still, and then, when they started again, and his suspicions recurred, there rose two noises at once to render listening vain. A Turkish battery suddenly opened with all its guns against the Sanglea, as might often be now during the night, when Mustapha would allow his foes no assurance of rest, and there was also the noise of a company of men who were marched to the front line.

At this time, they were on rather high and open ground, which was divided into small fields by low walls of stone. The men who marched were on a road at a lower level than theirs. Telek led in a crouching position, so that they should keep as low as the wall. It was a slow method to choose, and worse for him, he being a large man. But he knew that there was still some time of darkness ahead, and he did not mean to lose either his head or the offered reward. But there were moments when he must rest with an aching back.

It was a mode of progression, however slow, which was not easy to keep in view. Francisco resolved to try to come closely here, and then call Angelica's name, delaying only till the men who marched should be gone, and the night still. He thought to do this by choosing the other side of the wall, and moving more rapidly than they would be likely to do. But when he rose, thinking that they would be near, he could not perceive them at all. He thought that they might have heard his approach and become still. He waited awhile, till they should have courage to move again. Still hearing no sound, he called in a low voice, but had no response. He felt sure that they could not have gone far ahead. He crossed the wall, and crept some way back on the other side.

Here he found an explanation he did not like. There was another wall on this side, at right angles to the one he had followed. Doubtless, they had turned there, while he had gone on, there having been no similar wall on his side.

He followed this, but was soon in doubt. There was a gap in the wall. Had they gone through that, or kept on? Other doubts followed, of a similar kind. He could but keep in the same direction which they had previously held, for



which the moon was sufficient guide.

As he went on, the night woke. Behind him, the villa sprang into light. There were noises, and distant cries. It was easy to guess that there had been discovery of Angelica's flight, but had he come no further than that? And what should he do now? It would be hard to escape through the Turkish lines, now that there had been sound of alarm. It would be death to be on such open ground when the light should come. He thought less of his own peril than of those he would aid if he could, but how should he reach them now? It would be their first thought to make themselves hard to find.

Down the road, to which he was now close, a rider came at speed, his loose *burnous* blowing back on the wind. Doubtless he rode to warn the outposts who kept sleepless watch against Marshal Couppier's raids that a prisoner had got free.

Francisco crouched under a wall, doubting what he should do. He knew that he had betrayed his military trust in a way that the Grand Master would not be quick to forgive. He had thought less of that than he otherwise might, because his mind had been obsessed with Angelica's peril, and his equal betrayal of her. He had thought either to die in this attempt, or to bring her back, having redeemed one-half of his offence, and so to face that which he could not change. But it seemed that, if she were to escape, it would be likely to be without aid from him. Even in that, Fate had rejected him as unworthy or unrequired.

He saw now, more clearly than imagination had conceived, that the extent of territory that was occupied by the Turks, stretching from the great harbour to Marsa Scala Bay, was too wide to be closely occupied by an army which may not, at this time, have totalled more than 23,000 men, of whom the far greater part were entrenched in positions of attack, or stationed in support of the batteries that surrounded the Maltese lines. To pass the outposts, either at front or rear, might normally be a dangerous, but it could not be less than a very possible venture. But it would be harder—much harder—now that Angelica's flight had been discovered, and there would be alert watch on all sides for a prisoner of such value, and one whom Hassan would be furious to lose twice. Much harder, also, would it be to find concealment within the lines, where there would be active search. A wild thought came, that he should go back to St. Angelo, and call for volunteers who would join him in the knightly folly of attempting his cousin's rescue from the peril in which she stood. . . . He did not doubt that, after the proof he had made that the Turkish lines could be passed in the night, there would be those of sufficient hardihood to give him support. But reason told him that the hours of darkness were nearly done, that Angelica might now be no easier for her friends than her foes to find, and, most definitely of all, it was a thing which could not be attempted without the

Grand Master's consent, which it was sure that he would not give.

To sally out in any force, large or small, was to abandon the strength of stone, on which he relied to outface a foe who must have been five to one at this time, even when what remained of the island militia is added on the Maltese side, and the principle was the same whether it were done with twenty or two thousand men. Knowing the Grand Master, it was absurd to suppose that he would be influenced by the fate of a single life, to deviate, though it were by no more than a yard, from his plans for Malta's defence.

Being in such confusion of doubt, it was an impulse of feeling, rather than a reasoned decision, by which he followed in the direction in which he supposed Angelica to have gone.

Angelica, at this time, was not more than three hundred yards ahead, following Telek down a rocky path to the road with no concealment at all, that being what Telek had told her to do.

She came in doubt and fear, for she saw that, had her companion been the best knight in the world, they were in a desperate case now that the alarm had been loudly raised, and it was plain that he was much less than that.

From the moment that it had become clear that their escape was known, he had sunk to irresolution, and a fear that he could not hide.

He said now that their best chance would be to descend to the road, where they could make more rapid progress than over the fields. Haste was their one chance. She could not say he was wrong, though she failed to see how haste would avail on a road on which warning had gone before. She knew only that she followed a cunning and frightened man whom she could not trust, and in whose power she was in a most absolute way. He was stronger than she. He was the only guide that she had. If she should run, he could probably outpace her for a short spurt. She was weaponless, and he had a sword, and a pistol was in his belt. If he should decide that she would be better dead, it would not be easily avoided by her.

That had, in fact, been in active debate in his mind, as they had crawled over the hill. He thought of the offered reward, for which he had a great greed. But it could not be paid to a dead man. Life is more even than gold, and for his he had now a most urgent fear.

If he were caught, as he saw now to be a most likely thing, the chance that Hassan would spare his life was not worth a groat. He would be lucky if he were not taken alive, for it would be strange indeed if Hassan should give him an easy death.

There came one hope to a cunning, desperate mind. Could he say that Angelica had slipped out by a trick, or perhaps when he dozed, and that he had followed her without giving alarm, knowing that the only hope of mercy for himself would be that he should be the one who would bring her back? It was a

poor tale, and a poor hope even if it should be believed, but it was the best he could do. A trapped rat will try to squeeze through a small hole. He remembered the ducat that he had left on the kitchen board. He must spin a tale around that, and, if it had been found, it would give support to less provable words. . . . It was with these thoughts in his mind that he had debated whether it would be best to kill her with a thrust in the back, and say that he had pursued her, and struck to prevent her escape.

Had it seemed best for his skin, he would have done it with no scruple at all, and it was fortunate for Angelica that the probable consequences were ambiguous to his own mind. If she were dead, she could not contradict his tale, which she would otherwise be likely to do. That was to the good. But he had a well-founded belief that Hassan would prefer to recover her alive, rather than dead. A sufficient reason for having killed her would be difficult to contrive. The better plan would be to go on while there might be any hope of getting through the lines, and to be found in the act of dragging back a recovered captive if discovery should come closely upon their heels.

It was with an obscure idea that this programme would have more verisimilitude if it were performed on the road (for how should he, more than another, have discovered her lurking in the dark fields?), but perhaps urged more strongly by the desire to bring the event to a prompt issue, whether for good or ill, which is natural to some natures when nervous cowardice is in control, that he had urged the dubious advantages of the open road.

They had reached it, but had not trodden its stony surface for more than twenty or thirty yards when there came the sound of a running pursuit. After the first horsemen had been sent out to warn the outposts and contain the fugitives, footmen had been scattered in all directions to round them up. Hassan had sent them not by the roads only, but widely scattered over the fields, with promise of rich reward to those who should win the chase. But it was natural that they who came by the roads should make quicker advance than those who spread over pathless fields.

Angelica looked at the man to whom she had given more trust than she would have done at a lighter need. Were they to try the chance of the dark fields again, before pursuit would come up? Even now there was time to get away, it might be unobserved, if no moment were lost. Or was he of the sort to pull out his sword, hearing that there were not many who came? In her desperate fear of being recaptured, and all that it was likely to mean, she felt that she would strike a good blow herself, if she had a weapon of any kind, before their hands should be upon her again.

But he did not offer either to fight or fly. With a sudden movement, he caught her arm in both hands in a brutal grip.

He shouted: "Ho, comrades! Comrades, I have her here! She is caught!"

He snarled at her in a lower voice: "Would you have brought me to death? Will you lie now? Will you say I have not caught you in hot pursuit?"

He shook her in a rough way, though she made no effort to resist, or to get free, having too much pride for a useless strife.

"Would you not rather win the reward," she asked, "than go back to be flogged, as I think you will, if you get no worse?"

"Would you tempt me again," he asked, "as you did with the ducat I would not lift?"

He seemed to be endeavouring to convince his own mind of the tale he had made, or to practise assertion against her own. He began to drag her backward upon the road.

There was time for this, for the men who pursued had ceased to come on. They seemed to have turned to face some trouble upon their rear. Telek slackened his pace as he became aware, by the light of a breaking moon that had been clouded till now, that steel clattered and shone.

A man, turbaned and tall, came forward, with a bare sword, leaving others upon the ground.

Telek stood for a moment in hesitation, doubting what it might mean, as was not easy to guess.

Francisco called: "Angelica, is it you?" in the Spanish tongue, which he did not know.

At that, she wrenched to get free. She called: "Francis, to me!" in a sudden wonderful hope.

Into Telek's mind came a guess that was half true, and an idea by which he might yet save his skin from scars, or his neck from the sabre's sweep.

Here was some rescue intended for her, of which but one man remained, and he, if the faint light told truth, with a bandaged arm. He had a further thought that Angelica must have deceived him as to the details of her escape, which had never been meant to depend on him, nor would he have had any reward. But now, if he could show a Christian dead by his sword (and perhaps others upon the road?) he could make a better tale than he had hoped to be able to tell. He might have not stripes, but reward!

Thoughts are swift, so that he had time for these, for which his life would otherwise have been less than enough. He pulled his sword free, a curved scimitar in which he had a skill he was apt to boast, still grasping Angelica, whom he was unwilling to loose, in his other hand. But Francisco's coming did not pause, as that of a man should when he is met with a bare blade. His sword came straight and swift as a cobra strikes, and when the scimitar swept round to turn it away, it struck a blade that was through Telek's neck, and half a foot out beyond.

## CHAPTER XXXII

ANGELICA stood in joy that was careless of the man who bled to death at her feet, or of the menace of farther things.

“Francis, are you hurt? How did you come here? Are you alone?”

“I came to give you aid if I could, you being snared by my fault.”

“That I was not. I should have stood back, or taken a better heed. . . . But you are not fit to be here! You were sore hurt, as I heard. . . . Were you single to attack those who pursued?”

“There were but three, on whom I ran at the back. Two are down, and one fled.”

“Then we should not stand here.”

That was plain, but where were they to go?

Angelica looked down on a man who had become still. She did not regard that his blood had soaked one of her own feet. She said: “There is a pistol we ought to have.” In this place to which she had come by her own will, she was not singular if she were forgetting that it was not a Spanish señorita’s business to scuffle in bloody bouts. There were few women in St. Angelo’s bourg who would not learn in the next few weeks to fight with Turks on a failing wall. . . . There were two hundred children who were being practised with slings, that they might help the defence of the Sanglea at its next assault. . . .

Francisco said: “Yes. We will have that.” He knelt down, laying his bare sword on the ground. Angelica saw that he had only one hand to use. She must give him aid.

“It was so,” she thought, “that La Cerda fought at the last.” Was there an omen in that? She put the dread away with a steadfast will. By Mary’s grace, it might still come to a better end, as she would be firm of faith to believe. . . . It was strange that Venetia’s two lovers should have been disabled in a similar way. At least—perhaps it was less than fair to give Francisco that name. He must know better now. And then the doubt rose—she was not the only one in the Turkish camp. Had he ventured here in truth solely for her? Or was there another whom he could not put from his heart?

She thought: “I will not be vexed by a false doubt. There should be true words between those who walk as we on the edge of death.” She asked: “Francis, did you come in truth only for me, or is there another whom we should save?”

Francisco was handling the pistol with care with his one hand in the faint

light of the dawn, seeing that it was loaded and primed. He turned to her with an expression she could not see, but his voice had a bitter tone.

“Can you doubt that? Well, I should not complain. It is what I have earned from you.”

“You must not say that! I did but ask that a doubt might die. You know I was ever one for the plain word.” Her arm came to his neck, as it had not done since their childhood days. His cheek felt her lips. “Francis, we are friends again—it may be for the last hours?” There were tears from both. But whether they came to a new accord as lovers or friends, it would have been hard for themselves to say.

They rose from the side of the dead man with a new courage and hope, the source of which must have been in themselves, for it had no other nurturing soil. He said: “We must get from here. There will be full light in an hour.”

But which way should they go? To attempt to pass the Turkish lines, either at front or rear, did not seem sane to attempt, now that they would be warned and alert, nor could there be much hope that they would stay in the fields unbound.

Angelica had a better thought: “When Venetia fled, she brought her boat to the harbour head, and she landed (that was by night) on a lonely shore. If we could get there—but it is vain, for you could not swim with that arm!”

“We might find a boat. It is the best hope that we have.”

They set out over the fields, having for compass the dawn from which they must turn away.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

THE Grand Master was in Sir Oliver's room. Assembled here were all the Commanders who could be spared from the walls, for there was news from the Viceroy's court.

Commander Salvago, the Grand Master's envoy at Palermo, sent his own account of a scene which himself had made on the palace steps. Other letters, which had been smuggled in by the same hand, gave various accounts of the stir that had been in the Viceroy's court, and what they deduced therefrom. The Grand Master read, and his own deduction was soon made.

Passion shook in his voice, as he said: "Brothers, I have been silent till now. I would neither give excuse for offence by a petulant word, such as might be swelled in the mouths of men, nor would I think evil of Christian Kings. But I must tell you that which we have to face, and that the word of Spain is a cloaked lie. Would Garcio speak so of his own will? He is one I have known too long. He palters between his master and us, hoping that he may have Philip's smile, and yet save us at last; and he will find that he has worked for a poor wage, for it is on him, when Europe regards our graves, that Philip will throw the shame. Is it not ever the fate of those who let honour go for a king's regard? But I say still that Garcio would not act so of his own choice. He is the tool of a meaner man.

"Salvago says that, being moved by news of how we had bled at the Sanglea, and how the Turks press on all sides, so that it may be said, as it were, that we breathe with pain, he spoke to the Viceroy apart, pleading that the promised aid should be instant to our relief. Might it not well be so urged? Is not Italy full of swords? Does it lack galleys or gold? Is not the day long past when we were promised that their sails should appear?

"So he said, and what answer did Garcio give? If he should come with those who could be quickly arrayed, they might prove too weak, to the shame of Spain. We must not risk that. Shame of Spain! Can it have more than it now has, as the weeks go?

"And then, if he gather an army and a great fleet, such as will be sure to prevail, it may be too late! Should he risk that? It is to be considered with care. He would talk more on another day!

"And when Salvago urged him again, as he was loyal to us to do, what did the Viceroy say then? We have bravely fought, and much honour is ours. Should we not make terms with the Turks, and withdraw, as we did from

Rhodes, leaving Malta to them?

“Now, by the passion of God, is it for our honour we fight and die? That would be but a poor gage for men who have sworn our vows. Is it wonder that Salvago was so moved that he walked out, and denounced the Viceroy aloud on the palace steps, so that a crowd gathered and heard? It was not our honour of which he spoke, it was Europe’s shame.

“Was Garcio wroth thereat, as one would be who should be so denounced, doing honest part? No, he was smooth still! But he saw such stir at his doors that he knew something must be said, if not done.

“So he has called a great Council of War! All the princes of Italy are to meet to decide whether we are to be relieved, or if they would more wisely leave us to die. And it can be little less than a moon’s change before such assembly can be convened and its wisdom heard.

“Brothers, I know not what is to come, which is of the counsel of God, but here I swear, by His Holy Name, that I will yield no inch of this land to infidel feet that is not taken by bloody force, and it is here that our flag shall fly or our Order end.”

His voice sank to another note as he looked round and asked: “Do I say well?” His eyes searched sharply for any sign of dissent, as one may look for a hidden snake, and being satisfied with the deep murmur of response from those whom his words had moved to something of his own passionate faith, he went on:

“Brothers, I would not paint with too black a brush, and there is one man who is strong of heart, and constant to be our friend.”

He spoke of the Genoese admiral, John Andrew Doria, who had put forward a bold plan, which it was not yet known whether the Viceroy would accept.

Doria had sailed into Messina harbour, bringing such galleys as he controlled, and with a plan for Malta’s relief which he pledged his word, being that of one of the best admirals of the day, that he could carry through to success.

He did not ask for a great fleet to destroy that of the Turks, nor for a great army, such as would defeat them in open array. He said: “Give me 2,000 men, and store of all munitions and goods such as men are glad to have in a leaguered place, and enough of light oared galliots to transport them across (and he could name the ships he required, which were then at hand), and I will run them up to St. Angelo’s quays before the Turkish fleet will become aware.” He would promise to have them there before the Turks would have weighed anchor or cut cables, to come out of their own harbour to block the way.

So he said he would do; and should he fail in the expected surprise, his



galleys would be too swift to be overhauled, so what evil could be?

He allowed, should his plan succeed, they might have entered a harbour it would be less easy to leave, and even that they might be destroyed. But he asked, what of that? If the men be landed alive, and the stores tumbled on to the quay, let the galleys go. With such strong support for the valour that Malta showed, it was a likely thing that the Turks would lose heart, and leave. Or, if they did not, then the defence could be stoutly made, and the Turks kept to the outside of the wall.

That was Doria's plan, which had a good sound, and might have come to success. But what the Viceroy did (as the Grand Master would hear on a later day) was to answer him with fair words, and to propose that he should sail to Genoa in haste to collect stores, saying that it would be better that he should be later by a few days than to sail with less than full holds. So Doria hastened north, using oars when the wind failed, and was soon back, thinking that the Viceroy would have assembled men, and been ready to put all aboard.

But what he had done was to send two galleys under a captain whose name is in a doubt which it can be pleased to keep, to sail along Malta's coast, and give his report on Doria's plan, which was no more than that it would be likely to fail: being what he was expected to say. So Doria's galleys were warped again to Messina's quay.

Now the Grand Master told of Doria's plan, not as expecting the Viceroy to give it birth, but as one who would do justice to all. He urged his knights, as he was himself resolved, to put thought of human succour out of their minds. It must be fought out by themselves alone, and to the last sword they had, and the last day that they could endure. If they were to fall, they would fall as St. Elmo fell.

And while they talked thus, looking with clear eyes in the face of death, the door which was at the side opened, and Angelica came into the room.

She was half-clad and drenched, under a borrowed cloak, and there was little of youth in a face that was white with fatigue alike of body and mind, and a fear that she could not still.

She made a motion as though she were in doubt to withdraw, seeing how the room was filled, but Sir Oliver was quick to step forward, and draw her to a seat, speaking with more emotion than his voice would often be heard to bear: "I praise the Mother of God, to whom I have been frequent in prayer," and other voices were not slow to speak in a like way, knowing or guessing who she must be, and having heard how she had been taken away, and for what cause she had Hassan's hate, so that she could feel that she was among friends.

"Are you free from hurt of those fiends?" the Grand Master asked, and with more meaning than his words held, seeing a look in her eyes which

should not be there.

“By God’s grace,” she said, “I have neither shame nor hurt. But I am glad you are here, for it is you I should have been seeking to see. . . . I will ask you now, before all these knights, have I done that which I could for Malta, since you allowed that I should stay here? Am I too bold if I ask a boon which is much to me?”

“You have done more than well,” the Grand Master replied, “and as to this time when you were seized, it has not been hidden that it was your warning by which there was rescue near for the guns, which your cousin’s treason had cast away.”

“By your leave,” she said, “that is not the word. He was in a great fault, being beguiled, but treasoned he could not be.” She would have risen, but Sir Oliver’s hand on her shoulder restrained her from that. “It is his pardon, I ask, as the last boon that I ever will.”

“The wrong he did,” the Grand Master replied, “is not one to be lightly weighed, nor to be put aside by a woman’s prayer. But he has appealed, as I suppose, to a tribunal which will not err. . . . You must tell her, Oliver, what he has so vainly essayed to do.”

“You will tell me less than I know,” she said. “And that which he essayed was not vain, for you must not think that I have escaped by a separate chance. It is by his sword I am here.”

“That,” Sir Oliver said, “is a good word, for it will have been consolation to him, who had done you a great wrong.”

“Do you say,” the Grand Master asked, “that he is here now?” His tone was kindly enough, but with a gravity of reserve which showed that he would not be lightly swayed.

“No,” she replied, “I would he were, for it is for his life I fear. But it is by his sword that I am.”

“Did he get you forth?” The Grand Master asked. “For to have done that is a most marvellous thing. Brothers,” he turned to those around him to ask, “does it not show that, where there is courage to so attempt, God will work beyond the counsel of man?”

“It was not as you may suppose,” she replied, “nor quite as he had forecast his attempt; but that he saved me to be here now there are three to prove who lie dead in the Turkish lines.”

Sir Oliver said: “You had better tell us the tale.”

Sir John de la Fere spoke: “She should have wine before that.”

There was a flask found, and a cup, at which she drank once, and let it stand, being forgotten in what she said.

She told shortly how she had been captured and mured, and how she had escaped by her own art, and all were silent to hear her speak, until she came to

the alarm that had been roused after she fled, when the Grand Master spoke in a sharp way: "It was that viper again. It is wonder that such can be bred of a Christian stock. She shall see a near death if she come again to our hands."

To which she answered: "So I have thought it was." And then, finding Venetia more fit to forgive since she knew that she had lost hold of Francisco's heart, and her mind being clear, and yet in a tired way which was not easy to rein, she went on about her, saying what she had thought before.

"But I should say there are worse than she. She but seeks an unshaken place, paying the world the while as it was first to pay her. Had she come by a clean road she might have borne a good name, and even lived to the praise of God."

The Grand Master listened to this, which he understood, being one who had given much thought to the natures of men before Malta's need had chased all else from his mind, but he was not complaisant in his reply.

"Had she come by a road where no pits were digged, it is that you mean, and it would be one that no feet have found. Nor while there are fiends that are loose from hell will such ever be, for they are active to dig. But there is one thing I will know. How did you come to be in that battery during the night, that you could be betrayed by your cousin and her?"

"I was not so betrayed, but rather failed, in that I was not fully awake to the quick dangers of war. . . . But I was there with a double cause, both to give succour to one who fled, as she would have had us believe, from tortures she had endured at the Turks' hands, and to be alert if there should be need in another way."

The Grand Master frowned over this reply, and Sir Oliver thought that she would have done better with fewer words, but when Valette spoke he said: "I had guessed the truth, but not that it would be so honestly told. . . . How did you fare beyond that?"

Angelica went on to tell how she had been pursued, and of the betrayal that Telek tried, and how Francisco had come when she would otherwise have been in worse case than before she fled, so that those by whom she would have been caught were either scattered or slain.

Passing over such things as were private to him and her, she told how they had made for the harbour head, finding it to be a bare and desolate way, and meeting none, though they heard voices at times, and had remained very still till they had receded from where they were.

"When we reached the water-side," she said, "it was past dawn, and we could see some distance away, but there was none in sight, nor any boat, such as we had hoped we might find. Francis was unable to swim as I did, his arm being so hurt, but he would have me come, and would not leave me while I remained, so that, as the light spread, my delay made his peril more.

“Seeing that, and as he urged that he would have a better chance, being alone, to come back in his own way, I did not longer refuse. But I have a great fear that he will not survive, for they will be active on every side, and I should say that his strength was about done.”

“What is it you ask for your cousin’s name?” De Valette’s voice was grave, and Sir Oliver, who knew him best, was in doubt of what he would be likely to say.

“I ask, if he return, as I have a great fear that he will not do, that the past may be blotted out, both for evil and good.”

“If he die,” the Grand Master said, “having bought your life at the greatest price that a man can give, I will say that he has done all that he might to redeem his fault, and in our annals there shall be nothing writ beyond the service he did in mounting the *Santa Martha’s* guns where they were potent to vex our foes, and also that when the Turks came he used his sword in a valiant way.

“Shall it be otherwise held if he come back alive, which is, at most, a faint hope? I should say, no; but we will hold that his return is by the mercy of God, which we will not mar.” He looked round on the assembled knights and, seeing no dissent, he went on: “The battery which he ruled has passed to another knight. That he has lost. But I will give him a new command, in which I have some hope that he will not fail.”

## CHAPTER XXXIV

MUSTAPHA had called a Council of War. Angelica's escape, which was much to her, and which disturbed Hassan's mind more than it would have been vexed by a larger loss, was nothing to him. He thought of the passing days, and of the report which Soliman expected to have with each galley he sent home, either for supplies, or with a cargo of wounded men.

Like the Grand Master, he had had reports from the Viceroy's Court, where he had many spies. They were not as sure as those the Grand Master read, being gossip brought from the street and the palace stairs, and observations of those who came and went, and of what galleys were in the ports, and of the enlisting of men.

But they told much, and suggested more; and Mustapha resolved that, for the final stages of the reduction of Malta's knights, there should be plans clearly agreed, so that none of those who shared his command could afterwards say that he had known of a better course.

It was a summons Hassan could not ignore, and he set out for the country house of a rich knight of Auvergne, which Mustapha had made a residence for himself, furnishing it in the Turkish style; but first ordering that the search should not be relaxed until Angelica should be found.

It was to be intensive toward the rear of the Turkish lines, for it was in that direction that Telek and two others had been found inexplicably dead on the road, all having been slain by the straight thrusts of a Christian sword. The man who fled (having a wound of the same kind to justify his retreat) had a strange tale of a giaour with a single arm, who had appeared from the moonlit sky. Hassan called and thought him a fool, but was aware of a thrill of fear, to his own contempt, for there was a vision before his eyes of a Christian sword that was sweeping down, which he would be too late to avoid, and it was in the hand of a one-armed man.

He decided, as Telek had done in his last minute of conscious life, that Angelica must have escaped at a time which had been previously agreed, and by a concerted plan. She must have joined those, one or more, who had been waiting for her. That did not explain why Telek had died when it appeared that he had been aiding her, nor why (as it seemed) La Cerda should have come from the grave for the help of one who had not been mistress to him. But Hassan saw that it was as near the truth as he was likely to get, till he should have Angelica in his hands again and could obtain the explanation from her.

This he still had some hope to do, for the horsemen who had ridden first to give the alarm had arrived at the rearward outposts before the time when Telek and those others must have been slain, and by implication it followed that Angelica had not got away when that warning had been received; and after that there was good reason to think that the outposts had not been passed in the direction which it appeared that she must have been aiming to reach. . . .

The Council of War was long, for it was not the Moslem way to debate in haste, and there was much to resolve.

The reports of Mustapha's Palermo spies made it clear that there was no present danger that the Viceroy would assemble either army or fleet in such force as to challenge the Turkish arms. That was good; but the news was more disquieting when it dealt with what might be on a later day. Salvago's oration from the palace steps, and the excitement which had disturbed the city thereon, were indications that Italy might soon be stirred to a mood which even the Spanish King could not ignore. There had been some leakage, too, of Doria's plan, which, if it were to avail, should have been secret and swift, and the possibility that relief should be rushed into St. Angelo's citadel must be considered, and measures taken to frustrate such attempt.

It was agreed, after long debate, that it was a first necessity that the beleaguered garrison should not receive any support, and to secure this result the entrance to St. Angelo's outer harbour must be watched and held, be the cost little or much, and that meant in so great a force that nothing less than an assembly of Europe's fleets would be sufficient to break through it.

Eighty galleys were to be put into fighting shape, even though some men who were now in camp must go back to the sea, and some guns that had been landed reshipped; and these were not to lie at anchor henceforth but to cruise outside the great harbour, except only when tempests blew.

The question of who was to command so large a fleet was not quickly resolved. It was a position to which Piali had the first claim, with Hassan as a clear second. But it was a post which neither desired. The fleet was not intended to fight, but rather to show such force that any probable foe would be frightened away. If St. Angelo should fall by a land assault, it was to those who ordered the storm that the praise would go. There would be little for him who had done no more than make a splash with his galleys' oars in patrol of the Maltese coast. Had there been assembly of Christian fleets, with prospect that the result of the siege might be decided by naval war, there might have been opposite words from those which were now exchanged between the two admirals of the sea.

Hassan said that the command must go to Piali, by right not only of great deeds of the past as leader of Turkey's fleet, but because that fleet was so much larger than that which he had been able to bring from the Barbary coast.

Piali, with weaker logic but equal resolve, said that, had they been in more Eastern waters, it was a right which he would have expected and claimed. On Egypt's or Syria's coasts only Turkey's admiral could command the Ottoman fleet. But here, in waters where Tripoli's galleys were accustomed to represent the combined Moslem power, by the same courtesy he must stand aside.

It was an argument which would have had more force had Turkey and Tripoli been equal allies, or if it could have been supposed that Piali would have consented that Hassan should take command of the whole fleet had there been a major naval battle in view, with himself in the second place.

Mustapha, stroking a beard which hid most of the cynical smile with which he listened while these courtesies were changed, saw that it was time to intervene with the proposal which he had intended before they met.

"I can suppose," he said, turning to Hassan as he spoke, "that you would not willingly leave the Sanglea after the repulses our arms have had until you have brought it down; and I would propose, as Admiral Piali does not desire to assume active command of the half of a fleet which is his to rule as he will, that he should consent to give that to your own lieutenant, Candelissa, than whom one of more veteran valour or knowledge of these seas it would not be easy to name."

It was a solution wise in itself, and to which even Piali could not object; and having resolved that the road of succour to the besieged should be so heavily barred, they went on to discuss the means by which they should complete the pulling down of a weakened prey.

Hassan was to continue to concentrate upon the Sanglea, to which he could not demur if he would, for a change in command at that place, after the failure of the first attacks, would have been dishonour to him, and that the more if it should soon afterward fall, even though that might be from weakening of earlier wounds.

And as Mustapha proposed that Piali should undertake the assault of St. Angelo and the Bourg, he must also show a face of content, having that which might be considered the greater task, and for which he had pleaded before.

That Mustapha did not now take specific control at either front may be held proof enough that he had not less than a strong doubt that the downfall of Malta's knights would not come till they had inflicted a further repulse upon their outnumbering foes; but when he counted their lessening strength, and considered that they would now be isolated beyond relief, he had a confident hope that their resistance would not much longer endure.

It had become a question of the determination with which he would press the attack, the prodigality with which he would use the resources he had, both in weapons and men; and he saw now, in a cautious but very resolute mind, that failure had become the one thing that he could not afford to face. The cost

of the invasion had been so great already, its losses so high, that to retire defeated had become an intolerable, as it must surely be an avoidable, shame.

The news from Palermo convinced him that there would be at least some further weeks before the Viceroy would organize relief on a scale which the fleet to be put under Candelissa's command could not easily drive away. It must be his part to use every hour of that time, so that there would be no danger that it would be less than enough.

There was another reason why he should hasten the final agony which St. Angelo was to feel, in the fact that sickness had broken out in his army in what threatened to be epidemic form, and he knew enough of war to dread it more than any hurt that could come from the cannon on St. Angelo's walls. His Arabian physicians, with a degree of knowledge and skill which is not lightly to be despised, were fighting an outbreak of the bloody flux which had already prostrated some hundreds of men.

It was dusk when the Council broke up, having resolved that St. Angelo and the Sanglea should be subjected to four days of intensive bombardment from every side, after which there was to be a demonstration of attack at all points, in which the whole army would be employed with a concentrated assault upon the Sanglea's battered and weakened walls.



## CHAPTER XXXV

HASSAN rode away well content with the resolutions to which the Council had come, for he thought that his corsairs had the easier task, the Sanglea having been more weakened than the lines of the Bourg (except, perhaps, some parts of the bastion of Castile), and having been less strong at the first. The siege of St. Angelo might be held to be the most important command, but it would be a poor choice that would fail there rather than succeed at the Sanglea.

Unlike Piali, who had come to the Council as the centre of a gaily-glittering group of lieutenants and guards, Hassan rode alone, being less concerned with the pageantry than the fact of power; and, being content with the resolutions agreed, his thoughts turned the more readily back to that subject which had engaged them before.

There was one question that filled his mind—should he learn, on arriving at his own headquarters, that Angelica had been found, or must he reconcile himself to the idea that she had foiled him a second time?

Bitter as the thought was, he had already accepted its possibility in a fatalistic mind, which, though it might be free from (what he would have considered) the grosser superstitions of Christianity, was yet possessed by belief in the activities of many unseen powers, both evil and good.

When he considered the mystery of those who had been found dead, with Telek inexplicably among them, and the tale of wonder told by the wounded man, he did not assume that there must be some simple reasonable solution to a puzzle of which he had not the key. His mind, even against the efforts of better judgment and conscious will, wandered among dark imaginations of the interference of malignant jinns.

How should a Christian knight—one, at least, who had wielded a Christian sword—have appeared in the night to Angelica's aid, some miles within the Turkish lines? One who had spirited her strangely away, after slaying the Turk who had assisted her escape to that point when his use had ceased?—*One who had but one active arm?*—As had been La Cerda's state at the last, who (as he was now inclined to believe) had died by his own hand a fortnight before, and whose spirit would be active to work him ill.

He recalled that it had never been more than a presumption that Angelica had escaped by swimming from the deck of the *Flying Hawk*. Within a few hours of her disappearance he had been attacked by the Andalusian galleys, and it had been a natural conclusion that she must have reached and warned

them by transit of the intervening water. But was it a natural—even a possible—thing for her to have done? And to so have foiled him not once but twice! And each time in a manner which natural explanation would not lightly resolve! Was it strange if he asked himself if she were not befriended by one of the dark spirits of fire, who are said to serve the enemies of the True Faith, to their own ruin at last?

It would be too much to say that he believed the explanation that superstition proposed, but as he rode he pondered it in a troubled mind. . . .

Francisco had spent the day in the hills, in a narrow cleft of rock that was less than a cave, and so placed that it would not attract the suspicions of any searcher who did not stumble directly upon it.

Being resolved that he would not die, if any privation or pain of the passing hours could preserve his life, he had lain there through the whole day till the light should fail. He had been without water or food. For some time, he had been exposed to the direct rays of the midday sun, with but a few inches of shadow toward which he could shrink beneath the hot face of the rock.

As the night darkened, he shook off an intermittent, uneasy sleep, and rose on unsteady feet, to creep, if he could, through the Turkish lines. The night was not too dense for him to look down on the great harbour and to see the black outlines of St. Angelo's towers, in which lights began to appear. Lights twinkled in the hills and over the plain, showing the Turkish encampments, the batteries that now circled St. Angelo and the Sanglea, and the lines that their outposts held.

With ears alert to every sound that the night wind brought, he followed a road that seemed deserted at that hour. It may have been of little use for the ways that the Turks would go, and they who would have used it for their own routine were either scattered or dead. . . . Behind him, there came the sound of a single rider, and a sudden hope stirred in the fatigue of his clouded mind. If he had a horse. . . . It was surely worth the attempt. . . . He drew back into a shadow of wayside trees.

With no more light than was given by stars that had brightened as darkness fell, he looked on a bare road, along which Hassan came, riding at no great pace, for he was lost in his own thoughts. Francisco drew out his sword, and put it back, seeing that he must stop the horse with his one hand, or he might do no more than to make his presence known to a man who could ride away. Better do nothing than that. He staked all on a sudden rush which would seize the rein.

Had Hassan been alert of mind at the time, and aware of surrounding things, it must have come to another end. As it was, having learnt to live on a horse's back even before he had to keep his feet on a swaying deck, he was not thrown when his horse reared and plunged abruptly aside, with a high scream

of anger and fear. He came down on his feet, but, for the first time in his life, as it was likely to be the last, he ran from a single foe. He had not seen the face of the man who rose under his horse's head, but he saw that he had a bandaged arm.

He paused after a time, having found courage to look back, and seeing that he was unpursued. His heart beat hard from haste and fear, and he had a sense of shame for what he had done which inclined him to the belief, in his own defence, that he had been the object of superhuman arrest.

Yet he went some paces back, with a drawn scimitar in his hand, for even the jinns (he thought) should be met by those who are bold, in the Prophet's name; and what was this but the spirit of one whom in life he slew?

But what use, he thought again, could there be in returning now? If the horse were free, it would follow. There was no question of that. But the road was silent and bare. If it had been seized by a mortal man, he would have ridden away. The bravest of human race cannot be required to vanquish unearthly powers. He thanked Allah that none had seen his ignominious flight.

He walked on to his tent, giving no explanation of why he had come on his own feet. He asked at once if Angelica had been found, and was not surprised at the answer he got. He said: "I will see that other again."

An hour later, Venetia, wary and alert, half hopeful and half afraid, had been fetched from the villa where she had remained since Angelica's flight, and was alone with Hassan within his tent.

She had no key to the mood in which he regarded her now, with his scimitar laid naked across his knees.

"Are you one," he asked, "to know when you are near death?"

"We are all that," she said, trying to force her lips to the smile that was hard to bring, "for death is round us on every side."

"Is there an oath," he asked, "that you are able to swear, which would keep your lips from a lie?"

"There are oaths," she answered slowly, her words advancing like the feet of one who treads a treacherous ground, "which it would be terror to break, but there may be none that would hold me to truth so surely as does the desire to come to a certain rest."

"So you would say, if you had planned to slay me when next I sleep."

"But you have proved me in that."

"So I have," he agreed, the memory doing more on her behalf than she was able to guess, for with that recollection an idea came to his mind that he would regain the self-respect he had nearly lost, if he could have courage to test her now in a final way, being one also (it must be allowed) which it would be pleasure to do.

"Looking," he said, "into the guile which your heart must hide, have you

no fear that I may sweep your head with this sword from the neck where it now rests, as with one stroke I should be able to do, and for which purpose I drew it before you came?"

She looked at the keen thin blade, which could go, as she knew, so swiftly through the slender space of her neck, with eyes which she would not allow to flinch.

"I fear death," she said, "with a great fear. But of that you threaten my fear is not much. I have seen men slain in that style, and there are silks here which you would not purpose to spoil; and, besides that, I am one you could use in a better way."

"So I might," he agreed, "if I could trust one of your creed and race; but a viper warmed is one that will be potent to bite."

"Can you not see," she asked, and the petulance in her voice was more convincing than would have been a more reasoned tone, "that I have all to lose, and no gain, if I should earn disfavour of you? Should I go back to those who would jail me again? Who would have my blood in a cruel way, you may call it sure, now that they must know by whose device you entered the battery at their gates? It is your favour I seek to earn, or I am lost on all sides."

He looked at her with brooding, uncertain eyes. Was she a wanton toy for his couch? Or a genie of evil power, such as may tempt the Prophet's sons to the ways of death? Or La Cerda's mistress, perhaps, with a scheme to balance the debt of her lover's life?

He could not be sure; but he knew the shame he felt at his flight of a few hours before, and with the thought his resolution was made, the mixed sources of which—lust, and courage, and pride, and the love of peril which had sailed the *Flying Hawk* to a Spanish port—would have been hard for himself to weigh. He would prove this doubt, staking body and soul alike on his own courage and wit. For, if he should slay her now, could he ever prove whether wisdom had urged the blow, or a coward's folly, such as will fear a dancing shadow of fire?

There was little change in the brooding doubt of his eyes as he said: "I would see you bare."

She was still in a watchful doubt, but the smile that dimpled the flower-fair face was less hard to wear, as, one by one, her garments slipped to the floor. . . .

An hour later, he looked down with kinder eyes on one who slept in a very innocent way, with a small hand cupping her face, as her habit was.

He had been careful that he should not drowse till her sleep was sure.

"She has wanton's wiles," he thought, "and lips that can lie with ease, but she would be loyal in sheltered days."

He compared her to the darker, fleshier, soon-ageing women of his own

race. "She would last better than they, and would always sell."

But he did not know that he would want to do that.

"I must learn your tongue," she had said. "I am quick at tongues. There are many words I have learnt in the last days."

He could understand her without that, having studied the Latin *lingues*, and the years he had been a slave in Malta had helped him therein. He had praised her now in words of his own land, and she had tried to use his language in her replies, but it was in her own that she had asked, with a sincerity that his mind had not been active to doubt: "Should you say that I have come to harbour at last?"

He had no thought to make her a wife, being what she was, and also of alien faith and blood. But, if she were discreet in the future days, she might hold the place of a favourite slave.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

FRANCISCO stood at the horse's side on the dark road. The animal, nervous and restless at first, had quietened to his voice and hand, and was still now, as, with the rein twisted round his arm, he leaned on the saddle, conscious from that sudden effort that he was near the end of his physical strength.

Alert and conscious of his new master's condition, as a good horse will be likely to be, the animal remained quiet as he gained the saddle with an effort which seemed near to fail, after which control cannot have ceased, for how then should the horse have gone by ways it surely would not have chosen by its own will? But it was a ride which he could not afterwards recall, beyond a dim memory of once having been followed by shouts and shots; and it must have been at a slow pace, or by tortuous ways, for the night was far gone when he came again to the ruined fosse of Provence, from which he had set out on the previous night.

"Now if one should doubt the miracles of the Faith," Del Formo's voice sounded dimly in his ears, as he drank the wine they had been speedy to bring, "he may be assured here by a most wonderful thing. I would have wagered all I have to a nicked groat that you had gone to a quick death."

"Which will be his," said another voice, "unless he come to a quick bed, for you can see that his strength is done."

After that he wakened to whitened walls, and the varied sounds that come from those who are fevered or torn with wounds, some of which are not pleasant to hear, and to know for a better thing that his cousin was at his side.

For Angelica had come, when the day was young, to Sir Oliver's room, having slept little, and he less, there having been warning received, even within an hour of when the council had broken up, and there had been much stir during the night in the Turkish lines, in preparation of that which was soon to be.

Sir Oliver said: "I have an order which you must first write and then quickly obey, which is to transfer you to the infirmary which is for those who are hurt at the north wall, where your cousin lay."

Angelica was neither pleased at this, nor at the way it was said, which was as though he would not be loth to observe her go. She asked: "Will you tell me why?"

"That is simply said. For unless you show openly what you are (for which it might be called a late day) I cannot keep you here, who should be on the

wall with a bare sword. Nor can I say that you will long be left to a healer's work, for I have an order in draft by which the hurt must be served by those who are hurt in a less way. Nor can I say that you would be saved for long by a woman's skirts, for we are near the time, as I suppose you can see, when the walls must be held by all who have legs to stand, for, as our numbers shrink, the walls will not contract their girth. . . . There was a woman slain in the breach of the Sanglea who was five months with child, as we did not know till she was dead."

"If you give me a less part than the Maltese women are forward to take, you do me a double shame, I being dressed as I am."

"It is no shame to obey, which you should be more careful to do than your cousin was, having had to battle for him. . . . Which brings me to what I should have been quicker to say had you said less, that you will find him to have come back to the same bed."

"You mean Francisco is back?" Sir Oliver heard the change in the startled voice, and looked at the lighted eyes, and knew for truth what he had little doubted before.

"So I supposed I had said."

"Is he more hurt?"

"I believe no. He had lacked water and food, and his strength was gone. He should survive that, being young."

"Do you know how he got through?"

"Not at all. He is one who should tell you that. But he rode up to the bastion of Provence, to the place from which he had set out, having between his knees a good horse, which, from some signs it bore, had been Hassan's during the last day."

So it came to be that Francisco opened his eyes to see Angelica at the pallet's side, and to tell her what he could recall of how he had come, which was not much; and what he told she did not believe, thinking it to be rather a dream such as fever breeds. For she did not think Hassan would be quick to run from a single foe.

"I should rather think that you cut him down, and that it has left your mind."

"And will you tell me," Francisco asked, "how I could have done that, holding the horse with the one hand that I had? My sword did not come out, and is still bright, as yourself can see."

"Well," she said, "let it be as it may. It is more to him than to us. I am content that you are returned, to which hope had but faintly dared, and that I can tell you this: the trouble there was is a dead thing. I have had that from the Grand Master's mouth; and he will give you a new command."

"Then it is one from which I shall not be withheld beyond a few hours, for

I have no need to be here.”

“You will lie here for some further days, for that is my charge, in which I am not meaning to fail; but you will not be kept back when you are fit, for the need is urgent on every hand.”

And as she spoke, as though to confirm her words, the Turkish batteries opened with a deep thunder of sound from before the bastion of Castile to the southern side of the Sanglea, and across from Sceberras hill. They saw naught of that, in their sheltered place, but they heard the thunder that did not cease.

“I have a doubt,” Angelica said, “that you will be sent to the Sanglea, for it is there that the need is worst, and there is report that Del Monte is so sick that he is no longer fit to command, though he is unwilling to come away.”

She went on to tell of how a young Knight of the Order, John Anthony Rosio, had devised a bridge of tar-barrels covered by planks to replace the slow ferryboat which had suffered from the Sceberras batteries when crossing to the Sanglea. This bridge was high up the inner harbour, above the quays where the galleys were moored, and men could cross without fear of the Turkish fire, and yet be within the Sanglea lines on the further side. But for that, the Sanglea might have been entirely without support at this time.

“It is said,” she went on, “that the bastion which Señor Roubles commands, being at the outmost corner where the water meets with the land, has been so shattered that it is no more than a tumble of stones, which those who make defence will pile anew in the night, to be flattened out again during the day.”

The inferno of outer sound increased as they spoke thus, for the Christian guns opened in more measured reply. Powder must be conserved, but the Turkish gunners could not be allowed to train and fire without ducking of heads, and the sight at times of a comrade so torn apart that it could be left to the darker hours to clear him away.

Knowing that this bombardment was to go on for four days and then to end in a rush of foes to the ruined walls, the Christians, all who had strength to lift stone, or to handle tools, whether women or men, laboured without ceasing to rebuild and strengthen the lines on which the lives of all must so soon depend.

In the infirmaries the skilled, but stinted, service strove not only to wait on sick and wounded men, for whom they were too few to do all they would, but to prepare for a coming of many, shot-torn or slashed, who would be certain to be crowded upon them when the assault should come. Even now the influx was steady, and would have been sufficient to strain their resources but for a mitigation which did not cease—the carrying out of the dead. For the peril of those who toiled to keep the walls strong against the constant hammering of the guns was not only from the bombardment itself. Arquebus balls from the long weapons of the Turkish sharp-shooters shortened the lives of many who exposed head or arm during daylight hours, and the besieging trenches had



now slanted so near that the old artillery could be used to support the new—bowmen lay below sight, and their arrows, rising into the air, and discharged with the skill of those to whom the bow had been a life-long weapon for sport and war, fell, a silent, infernal hail, over the parapets of defence; and the Christians commenced to answer in the same way. It seemed that the war became more primitive in its form as it approached the final struggle of hand-on-throat which must end the agony of battered castle and ruined town: but in the pitiless ferocity it had already reached there was no lower depth to be probed.

The Christians looked at the nearness with which the trenches, ever advanced during the darker hours, approached them around the bastioned lines which were becoming too long for the numbers by which they could still be manned, and they saw that the siege contracted, grip by grip, like a python's folds. . . . They listened for the sounds of shovel and pick, and arrows rose in the night, to fall on those who laboured, a noiseless death.

Angelica, working to the limit of her vital youth to relieve the wounded and sick, saw another angle of the dark horror of war. It would have been dark indeed but for the fierce, almost fanatic valour which was opposed to privation, pain, and an increasing squalor, against which the high standards of sanitation and decency which had once prevailed in the town went down in a fighting way. In a hundred moods, translated by the nobility or baseness of their own souls, men fought or suffered in a unity of belief that they were the servants of God, striving against His foes rather than theirs, and to be rewarded at last with His gift of eternal bliss. . . .

But amid that pauseless, and often futile, service to maimed and shattered bodies, to which skill and pity could give no more than a lessened agony of decease, Angelica had one comfort which did not pale. Francisco was there, and his wound healed. The physicians, gathering round his bed, and recondite in the Latin tongue, resolved that, though their dressings had been delayed by his absence on such adventure as is not usually prescribed for the healing of wounds, yet the abstinence which had been involuntary on his part, and was a treatment in accordance with the medical practice of the time, must have had a most salutary effect; and now that food was taken again (and somewhat more liberally allowed than the custom was, as antidote to the time when he had had none) he showed a quick returning of strength, and they agreed that the wound would heal in a kindly way.

So he lay for two days, in a quiet which impatience would but prolong, and with leisure to look back and to see himself; and before noon on the third there was a stir at the door, and the Grand Master entered the ward.

There was no wonder in that, for he was ceaseless to oversee, and there was no corner of St. Angelo or the Bourg where his eyes might not be cast in

the next hour. He was dressed with more care than when he had laboured among the slaves to make St. Elmo's ravelin strong. That was not because he cared for how he might look at this hour. The time for pomp and pageant was gone by, but he thought that it would be little heartening to those he led if he should appear among them as one distrait. And though he would tire at times with a lengthened day, showing signs of his years, and of the hard life he had led, yet his step now was firm and quick, and he had the look of one who has no care for the protests the body makes, his mind being full of more urgent cares.

Francisco was not surprised that he should have come there, nor would he have supposed that it could concern himself, till he observed that Valette, telling a little group who were with him, including two of his uniformed guards, to remain at the door, came directly toward his bed.

La Valette was never one to waste words. The way he would reach his point was like the thrust of a straight sword. He said nothing now of the past, either to condemn or condone.

"I am told," he said, "that you heal well."

"So I do. I could rise now."

"But you are unfit for the changing of blows, as you must be for a long day. Yet I may have that you can do. Del Monte is sick, and is no longer fit for the command of the Sanglea."

Through Francisco's heart there passed a wild incredible hope that he might himself be considered fit for that high and perilous place, but it sank to its true remoteness as the Grand Master went on:

"I must have one there who will not yield while a stone stands, and who is of the best skill in the defending of leaguered towns. I will have Couppier here, if I can, before the hour when the storm will burst. You are not so ill that you could not sit on a boat's thwart? That you could not ride a mule on a mountain way . . . ? So I supposed. Then you will be at St. Angelo's quay when the dusk falls. And you must listen now to what I would have you do, for I shall have no time to see you again."

The Grand Master went on to explain that he wished his orders to Marshal Couppier to be taken by word of mouth, to save the fear that a letter might fall into evil hands, and that that must be done by one of his own Order, or rank, rather than by the mouth of a Maltese spy. For this purpose he chose Francisco, rather than lose an unwounded knight from the defence of the threatened walls.

"You will tell him that we are in good heart and confident to endure, but you will not hide that we are hard pressed upon every side. Our foes swarm, and are bold. I will have him here to command at the Sanglea, if he can get through, which he should do when the night is dark. If there could be devise by

which he could bring four or five score of his best men, it would be added strength, which we should be glad to have. But I must leave that to him. He can appoint whom he will to take over his command, but I should say that De Ligny, or else Vertura, would be a good choice. You will take this letter, which is so small that it can be swallowed with ease, as you should do if you are near caught; for if they get it they will rack you for all you know; also, it might be an evil thing in the wrong hands.”

Francisco took the scrap of paper, which read:

“Don Francisco speaks with my mouth.

J. DE LA VALETTE.”

The Grand Master turned away, having finished the instructions he had to give, and saw Angelica near his side.

“You serve here?” he said. “You do well. But the time is near when all who are sound of limb must scuffle upon the wall. For what avail would there be in the tending of wounds if the Turks should swarm in?”

There was the cold reason in that by which Valette would earn the name of a hard man, such as Angelica did not think him entirely to be. But he was implacable to secure his ends, as are the laws of Nature themselves, which neither forget nor forgive.

She saw that he gave Francisco a chance to serve in a new way, by which he might redeem what was done before. But she saw also that he had chosen him as being best in himself. He was fit by bearing and rank to carry the Grand Master’s command: he had shown some capacity to walk in enemy ways: and he had a wound that rendered him unequal to active war. It was a matter of small concern that he might be less than fit for exposure and toil. What he had done for her own release could be done again in a greater cause. So La Valette would have said, and it would be hard to show that he was wrong. He used all to the limit of strength they had, and gave them to death with a firm will, as he had done at St. Elmo before, if it could be to Malta’s avail.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

THE last days had been hot and still, so that the gun-smoke hung in a heavy circular cloud, as though St. Angelo had been crowned thereby from a baptism of hell, but the night brought a movement of cooler wind. It was not enough to ruffle the surface of the indolent sea, even when the boat slipped under a shadowy hill and so clear of the harbour-mouth. But it moved the heavy curtains of smoke and parted a low mist that the waters bred, so that there was more light than the boatmen would have chosen to have.

There were four of these men, one who steered and two who pushed at the oars, while a fourth crouched in the bow, being a man whose sight and hearing were keen and who watched for those they were not anxious to meet. They knew that the light Barbary galleys did not cease to patrol during the night, watching the harbour-mouth, and seeking to frustrate any attempts at landing upon the coast. But a galley could be heard or seen before it could take notice of them, and unless they went directly across its path they could slip quietly away. And when Dragut's Point was a mile behind they drew in too close to the shore for any fear that there could be more than a small boat, such as theirs, in the shallow waters beneath their keel. But even such they would not welcome to meet. They crept on, as a mouse creeps in the night, with no thought of escape from the swoop of the silent owl by any challenge of strife, but only to run and hide in shadows and covered ways.

So they came, when they had crossed St. Julian's Bay, and having rowed for some hours, to something less than a cove, a mere dent in a rocky shore, where they could not have approached to land without the leave of a gentle sea, and when they had come ashore here, there was lantern lit, for the path was too narrow and steep to be climbed without light by one who had not known it before. The man who had watched in the bows became Francisco's guide for the land, the other three taking the boat back in the night, for it was not a place where it could be safely moored, nor could there be the risk of a boat being seen there when the light should come. It would have been evil indeed if the landing-place had become known to the Turks, and for fear of that it was never used, nor even approached, in the daylight hours, either by land or sea.

Francisco, climbing the narrow cliff-side path, would have been glad of a second arm, as he would later when he was on a mule's back, riding rough precipitous tracks which would be upward at one moment and down the next,

with no warning that he was able to see, but he kept his seat, and his feelings to his own mind, and so, and still before dawn was due, he entered the city which was old when the Phœnicians came to the land.

The six miles he had ridden of rugged ways and terraced hills dimly seen in the summer night, with the constant succession of low stone walls dividing the lower fields, were sufficient demonstration, to anyone conversant with the methods of warfare of that day, of how formidable a task it would have been to attempt subjection of the interior of the island before commencing St. Angelo's siege. And the invaders actually increased this difficulty by the ferocity of their reputation, for the inhabitants, having nothing better to expect, if they should be overcome, and spared from more probable massacre, than that their homes would be burned, and themselves sent into distant and divided slavery, would be expected to fight with the valour of those who have no hope if their arms shall fail. . . .

Marshal Couppier held no state at this time, neither did he regard hours. He must have slept, but it was little observed, and he was as likely to be about in the night as the day. It was, in fact, in the night that most of his work was done.

It was not only that he made attacks on the Turkish lines. It was in the short hours of the dark that he moved troops, that he distributed stores (of which he had reserves in the catacombs of the ancient city, and also in a secret cave of the south), that he sent out and received spies, and that he sought in a score of ways to make the Turks wish that they had gone to another place.

Francisco rode through a beam-barred gate, and up a narrow street where the houses were dark shadows on either side; and having got off his mule, he must bend somewhat to enter a room which was a foot lower than the street, and was half-lit with candles on a table at its far end, where Marshal Couppier sat, with his sword cast on the board, and a secretary at his side.

"It is from the Grand Master you come? You are hurt? But not of this night? Gaspard, a stool."

"I have brought this scroll," Francisco replied, "and I think that what I have to say should be spoken to you alone."

The Marshal looked at the note, which was soon read. He looked at Francisco in a keen way which would believe nothing without proof. Was the letter forged? Has it been stolen, and was Francisco disguised? Was it a plot to stab him, when he should be alone? The Marshal's eyes looked blacker in that light than they were: they would be bright whether in daylight or dark. They were eyes which were quick to see, and no slower to doubt.

Marshal Couppier was an old man, with a great fame. He had taken cities, he had commanded armies on open fields, before he came here at Malta's need, and the Order's call. He did not look old. He had a lean vigour which

even years seemed unable to tire. He believed in God and the Saints, and that he had come there to kill Turks, with a mind as simple and clear as that with which a rat-catcher enters a barn. The Order to which he belonged was originally of charitable design, and had become half-monastic, half-military in later centuries. Some of the Commanders whom it had gathered from Europe's bounds were soldiers before all, and their tribute to their Order's vows was to call their wars by the Sacred Name. Marshal Couppier was one of those men to whom war is the sole occupation that fills the mind. Art and philosophy and science are idle toys beside the chessboards of life and death on which they become skilful to play.

Marshal Couppier had a ruthless name, but to call him cruel might be unfair. He took no pleasure in causing pain. He would not order torture without a strong cause, nor further than that cause might require. He killed Turks as a man might kill wolves, being glad of a full bag, and yet with no special pleasure about their deaths. He was not merely ruthless in a blind way, he was sleepless in energy, fertile in design. For the Maltese, fighting to keep their homes unburned and their children alive, he was a leader they did well to revere.

He gave Francisco a short look, which saw much. He said: "Will you follow me?" He got up, and led the way to an inner room, closing a stout door. "You can say what you will here."

"The Grand Master asks that you shall leave one in command, for which he supposes that either of the Chevaliers Vertura or De Ligny would be a fit choice, and come yourself to take command at the Sanglea."

"Is Del Monte sped?"

"He is not wounded, but sick."

"Is there instant need?"

"There is expectation of storm when the bombardment will have endured for four days. He would have you there before that."

The Marshal paced the room with short quick steps, for he was one who could not keep still when his thoughts stirred. He was too good a soldier to question the orders he had received, though he would have preferred to keep the command he had.

He shot out sharp brief questions as to the conditions prevailing at the Sanglea, which Francisco answered as best he could.

"I knew," he said, "that the storm was planned for that day. I had sundry schemes to warn them then on the rear side, but they can be performed without me. . . . Have you more to say?"

"The Grand Master would not desire that you try a too desperate chance, such as might bring men to a vain death, but the defence is becoming somewhat few for the full lengths of the walls, even of St. Angelo and the

Bourg, and not only at the Sanglea. Four or five score men, if they could be got through, would not be missed here, and might be there of greater avail."

The Marshal took another turn on the floor. "It should be by boats, if at all. . . . Did you have hindrance to-night?"

"No. But there is talk, so I am told, that the Turkish fleet is being garnished for sea, and that the harbour may be more closely watched, even by the next night."

"So I had heard, but the word came in a doubtful way. We must do other than that."

He thought how quickly one of Piali's galleys might send a dozen boats to the sea-floor, with loss of all. It was a risk that he did not like. Besides that, the hazards of the sea were less familiar than those of the land. Unlike most of the Maltese Commanders, his warfare had been ashore rather than in amphibious struggles with Turkey upon the sea and along the Barbary coast.

"Do you know," he asked, "how closely the lines are manned on the inner side of the siege?—You need not tell me of this."

"I know of one point. I have seen little beyond that."

Francisco went on to tell of his adventure into the Turkish lines. The Marshal did not interrupt while the tale went on, only continuing to pace the room, but after that he asked many questions till he had all the knowledge that Francisco could give.

At the last he asked: "If you were at the villa of which you spoke, could you guide from there to the bastion of Provence?"

"Yes, I could do that."

"In the dark?"

"Not if it were dense. I should need little light."

"There would be eighty lives trusted to that."

"Well, I think I could. I can say no more."

"No. You might be shot before then. It is risk of war, and I think it is not too great. It was done by those who landed from Cardona's galleys before in a larger way, though the siege then was less tight. Will you say nothing while you are here, either of what has passed now or even that you have been in the Turkish lines?"

Having received this assurance, Marshal Couppier returned to the outer room, where he gave instructions that a good lodging should be put to Francisco's use, being that of a man who had died of wounds a few hours before.

"You shall be served with food," he said, "and if you are wise you will rest through the day, for after that I may ask you to ride again."

Francisco found the advice good, and all that he saw of the ancient town was not much, for he was little awake till he was roused to see that another

night had begun.

But Marshal Couppier did not rest. He had the choice that he might attempt to reach his command at the Sanglea by the boat which had brought Francisco, and which would be sent for his use at the same hour of the next night, or that he should attempt to ride through the Turkish host, trusting to darkness and speed, and to the fact that it was something they would not expect him to try.

He thought of all in a thorough way, as his habit was, that nothing might go amiss through indolence or preoccupation of mind, but he may have known himself well enough to be aware that there could be but one end when he had once accepted the idea as a possible thing.

He sent for Vertura and De Ligny, telling them that he needed four score of men, mounted on the best horses they had, and picked with care as not being such as would falter or tire, for a secret mission which the Grand Master had required him to undertake.

“If,” he said, “I should be slain, or slow to return, from whatever cause, you will jointly command until a new order arrive, which I know you are well fitted to do.” For he knew them to be two who would accord well, having equal zeal, and the one being content to follow the other’s will.

He said no more than that, even to them, having a fear of the spreading word which he would seldom forget. “The food,” he would say, “should be near your mouth before you let your hand know where it is intended that it shall go.”



## CHAPTER XXXVIII

FRANCISCO, roused in the late dusk, found that there was a good horse at his door, and another, which a man rode, who was to guide him out of the town.

They rode by rough ways to a hollow field, it might be two miles away, where there was assemblage of horses and men.

Seen by a better light, they would have been but a ragged crowd, sundry of weapons and dress, and with horses as far apart as the heavy mount of the armoured knight, and the light, sure-footed breed that were born among Sicilian hills. Now the saddles were bare, and the men knelt to a priest who assoiled their souls before they rode on a way that might be death to all, and would almost surely mean that some had seen the last sunset their eyes would know.

As they rose, Francisco was led forward to Marshal Couppier's side. "You will keep ever," he said, "at my left hand. There will be one on your other side who will be careful to hold your rein, if we should come to any flurry of strife, that you may use a sword in the hand you have."

There was a bustle now of the mounting and ranging of men, as the Marshal went on: "The pass-word of this night will be 'Peter's keys', which you will see to be one that is not hard to recall for those who ride seeking a heaven of life in St. Angelo's walls. It is not good, if there be a doubt in the dark, that such a word shall not spring to a ready mind."

Francisco said it was a good word, and one he would not forget. The pass-words the Grand Master would choose were weighed in a different scale. They must be such as would call men to high endeavour, or contempt of peril and pain, or remind them of their vows and the waiting judgment of God, but Marshal Couppier was of a more practical mind.

Two by two the little force trailed off on to the road. In the van, half-a-dozen knightly lances rose high into the night, but most of the riders were armed, as they were mounted, in diverse ways, and were varied of tongue and race but alike in being those who were more used to a horse than their own feet, and in being fearless of heart, and possessed of a fierce hatred of all who swore by the Prophet's name. Marshal Couppier had picked four score who would ride through the Turks if it were within human power, and might have found it hard among all he had to equal them with the same number again.

The last four rode singly, each with a saddled horse at his side, which would be for the use of those whose own horses might come to ground through

wounds, or a false step when they would race through the dark by uncertain ways. It was for such that these men must watch, keeping to what might be safe at first, but must become a very perilous rear. To all but them the Marshal's orders were strict that there should be no pause for the aid of a fallen or wounded man, for they must think first to get through with their own lives, that they might aid defence of the Sanglea walls, being the place where he would prefer them to die.

They moved through the night at a slow trot, which fell to a walking pace at any lift of the road, for the horses must be kept fresh for the later need.

The sky was open and bright with stars, but the best guides they had were the Turkish guns, which did not cease during the night. They were not fully served at all points as during the day, when the gunners could watch their effect, and train them upon visible marks, but they kept up a constant fire from all points, both from around the Bourg and the Sanglea and from the further side of the harbour, so that there was a booming of guns that was seldom still.

But after a time they came to a lower road, where the gun-flashes could not be seen, though the noise endured, and the Marshal turned to Francisco to say: "We ride fast from now, but you will have nothing to do but to keep your seat, and your place here, till Le Tonneau's villa is passed. We are led by those who know the road to that point."

He pointed to where lights flickered somewhat forward and away to their left. "That," he said, "is the outpost which we must avoid as widely as we can do, but there is no hope that we should pass them in such force without being observed, for they have eyes that are never closed. We have planned to surprise them twice, and to wipe them out, which we could not do. It is beyond them, at La Marsa Spring, that the Turks have a great camp for the wounded and sick, who lie in tents or in open air, being the mode of cure that the Arab physicians teach."

Having said this, he gave an order by which the horses were roused to a quick trot, being the fastest pace that such a force would be likely to make, unless scattered in flight. Even when they had walked, the tramping of many hooves had been a sound that carried far in the night, and would be easy to divide from the more distant booming of guns. To the Turkish outpost, knowing that to doze at watch would mean that they would be unlikely to wake at the next dawn, it would be the kind of noise that they did not miss.

It was a strong post, holding thirty men, a low stone house having been mounded and ditched about. Its duty was to watch half a mile of the now desolate land which lay outside the Turkish lines, and to give instant warning of any coming attack, after which they must hold their ground till relief should come from larger forces camped at no great distance away for the guard of La Marsa Camp. There had been a time when they had thrown out chains of

sentry-posts each of one or two men as an outer line, but there had been so many deaths from snipers' bullets out of the dark, or the knife of a crawling foe, that it had been hard to get men to face a risk which would mean death in a few nights, if not the first it was tried, and so these posts were made strong, with a chain of sentries further behind.

The horses stirred to a rapid trot, and the line of march curved to avoid the alert watch at the post, so far as it might without rousing the one beyond, which was screened from sight by the broken ground. But they had come to a point now where they must stake their safety on speed rather than secrecy of advance. Every yard gained was a larger hope that they might ride through without the mustering of sufficient force to prevent their way.

The seconds passed with no sound but the clattering hooves, and the boom of the distant guns, until the lights of the outpost they sought to avoid were almost level upon their left, and then those who were at the head of the line were aware of running feet on the stony road, and of a shadow that leapt a wall, and slipped into the night.

"Shall I follow?" a voice asked at the Marshal's side.

"No. Straight ahead." It was the one chance to hold together, and to ride on while there was a clear way.

A moment later, a shot came from the darkness. Most of the troop had ridden past by that time. A horse toward the rear plunged out of the line, and was reined back. Its rider soothed it with a hand on a trembling neck. He could not tell where, or how badly, it had been hurt, but he urged it on. Out of the darkness there came a second shot, and a third.

From the outpost, a trumpet shrilled. The horses quickened to the sound, as though sharing their riders' thoughts, and sensitive to the tension of the event.

Instantly the night became loud with confused noise, through which there was a throbbing of drums. A light which had twinkled ahead became multiplied into half a score.

Marshal Couppier called to the guide, who was at his front. "Can we turn aside?"

"No. We shall be caught in the walls. We must ride through."

So they did, facing some shots, but not knowing clearly what they passed. They saw a low stone house, and carts parked in a field. Horses could be heard to run, either mounted or not. There was no attempt to obstruct their way.

There were many lights ahead now, and the fires of an open camp. It seemed that they rode straight at what must be a more difficult point to pass. The Marshal spoke again. "Must we ride through this?"

But the guide halted here. There was a gate at the right side of the road, which was soon unbarred. They rode into a field.

As they went forward, the ground dipped, so that they lost sight of the

camp, which was not more than two or three hundred yards away, but before half the horses were through the gate, they were challenged, and shots followed when they did not reply. Those who came last must pause to look at one who was past their help, and to secure a horse for which there might be another need.

Crossing the field, they came to a gap in the further wall, and turned right on a wider way. Whatever it might have been at the first—field track, or perhaps nothing at all—it was now hard-beaten and broad, being the road by which the ox-teams had hauled the Turkish artillery from their first landing-place at Marsa Scirocco Bay to Sceberras ridge. They closed up here, riding six abreast, and making a better pace. Their course was to the south-east, and had Francisco been alone he would have been likely to turn the opposite way, but the guide knew what he did. They came to an older road bisecting that which had been made for the guns, and swung round to the north again.

The road was good enough, though narrower than that they had left. It stretched ahead, dark and bare. The guide said that Le Tonneau's villa was less than half a mile ahead. If there had been any life on that road in the midnight hours, it must have scuttled away before the sound of the trampling hooves. It was plain that the whole camp was alert, but, for the most part, it was as yet in a blind stir, wondering what had caused the alarm. In all operations of war, to do an unlooked-for thing is to be half-way to success.

As they approached the villa it was natural that Francisco's thoughts should turn to one whom he supposed might still be within its walls. He even wondered whether, if he should tell Marshal Couppier all the tale, he would halt for a sufficient time to break in, and bear her away. It would have been an almost fantastic conclusion to Hassan's exploit, and he would think it to have been the whole intent of the raid. It would be an abuse which it would gall his pride to endure.

But Francisco thought that Marshal Couppier would decline to halt, even for the chance of a better bag, nor was he sure that he would have found any pleasure in such a deed, for though he saw Venetia now for what she was (if not worse), yet he was more bitter against his own folly than her, and even that bitterness was not much, now that he was in accord with his cousin again. But as they rode under the front of the house it became clear that it could not have been done, even though they had come with a settled plan, for it was unguarded and dark, with a clear presumption that Venetia was not there.

But from this point he had not time for other thoughts than that of guiding the rapidly-moving force by the way he had come, with the lives of all, it might be, staked on the accuracy of memory which must trace the path he had found before in a reverse way, which is not always easy to do. If he could do this, it would be to find a way which avoided the Turkish trenches and camps,

and which would come at last to the bastion of Provence, where (if a letter which Marshal Couppier had sent by water at the last hour he could choose had got through) they would be expected to come, and would not be met by the fire of their own friends.

To him, from that time, his attention concentrated on his own task, there remained no more than blurred memory of strained sight searching a way through a dark countryside, lit by the dim light of a rising moon, which was past its full, and guided by the gun-flashes from the outer walls of the Bourg. To most, except those who fell, it remained a nightmare of confusion and noise, of struggle and urgent speed.

As the path curved outward to the right, and the forward view was no longer obscured by the higher ground that faced the Sanglea on its southern side, Marshal Couppier saw the blue light on St. Angelo's tower signalling that his message had been received, and, almost at once, there was an outbreak of heavy fire from the batteries of the Sanglea, and such parts of St. Angelo's defences as would tend to draw the attention of the Turks from the road by which he was expected to come. Then there was the sound of horse-hooves ahead, and a single rider, who appeared to have been stationary on their path, galloped away.

"You are sure," Francisco heard the Marshal's voice at his side, "that this is the way?"

It was a moment when he had his own anxiety, for he knew, if he were on the right road, that there was a little bridge to be crossed, to which it seemed they would never come.

"Yes," he said, "is there reason to doubt?"

"There is a large force on the left, almost ahead. If there were a more easterly road——"

"It is the one that I know." The reply came with confidence, for, as they spoke, the road fell, and the little hollow that the bridge crossed was beneath their eyes. He looked up to see the force of which the Marshal had spoken, but the descent had already hidden all forward view. He was disposed to doubt that they could be so opposed, for he knew that there had been no camp in that place but four days before; and how could their coming have been warned and their route guessed, in time for men to have been so assembled to bar the way? The speed with which they had ridden seemed to make it a baseless fear, and that the more because the main force of the Turkish cavalry was known to be stationed further west, on the low ground near La Marsa Spring. It would have been more likely that pursuit would have been toiling upon their rear, of which, as yet, there was none.

Yet Marshal Couppier had done rightly to trust his eyes, which could see far in the dark. But those who moved on their front had not been seeking for

them, but were troops who marched in the night to take up a position in reserve for the storm which was to break on the Sanglea when the dawn should come. They were picked troops, meant to be used at a late hour to swarm over a weakened wall. They were to be so placed that they could either advance to the Sanglea, or to the bastion of Auvergne, if the feint attack which was to be made thereat should meet with some unlooked-for success, such as must be supported with speed.

They would, in fact, have been across the road by which Marshal Couppier sought to advance, and it would have been a choice of evils to seek to thrust a way through, or to turn aside to the stone-walled fields, had they not been halted when the first alarm spread a confused doubt through the whole extent of the Turkish lines, and then commenced a more cautious advance when the horseman who had come so close to the column's head had ridden back to tell them what he had seen.

The road was narrow as it fell to the bridge and rose again to a higher ground, but after that it again became wide enough for several to ride abreast.

Francisco, riding now at the head of the troop with the Marshal on his right hand, and on his left the horseman who held his rein, was aware of a broader front, and lances on either side. It seemed a change of formation of doubtful gain when shots came from the darkness on their left hand. The Marshal's trumpeter sounded at that. The horses broke into a gallop. While the road in front remained clear, it seemed that most might get through unhurt. But that hope was vain. The regiment which had been approaching upon their flank had a troop of cavalry detailed to its support. Having ridden round its left flank, they were now filing through a gate on to the road as the Maltese horsemen approached. Stirring to what speed they could as they came out, they charged with a front as narrow as that they met.

Had they been equally matched, there might have been a deadlock of slaughter with stone walls to right and left, and pressure behind of those who waited their turn to slay. The Turks were of the flower of that army which had spread Soliman's power till Vienna shook with alarm; and such delay would of itself have been fatal to the Maltese, with the Turkish infantry closing upon their flank, and firing as it advanced.

But the Turkish cavalry rode lighter horses, and were more lightly armed than were those knights who led Marshal Couppier's line. Filing out on to the road as they did, they could not rouse an equal impetus to the charge they met. The very peril of those in the Maltese rear, whose pistols were making a poor reply to the volleys of the advancing infantry, increased the rush of a charge in which there was none more urgent to get ahead than those who rode at the back.

They pressed forward as toward the only hope of safety they had. By the

shock of the meeting fronts, the Christian charge was hindered, but never stayed. Yard by yard, its front a swaying, jostling chaos of cries and blows, it moved on. By sheer pressure it bore the struggling Turkish cavalry backward at a pace which grew more rapid as their horses struggled to turn their heads to the way they were forced to go. They were ridden down at the last, or were swept aside. Those who would have been last to come through the gate were driven back by others who jostled to get back from the jammed inferno of the road, where the wounded fell to be trampled by many hooves, and horses reared and screamed in the press. With reddened lances, the Christian knights rode on at the head of a line which had lessened its pace but never been really stayed.

Francisco, held back from the actual front, with Marshal Couppier still at his side, was glad that the road was straight at this time, and not easy to miss. It was a rush which even the calling trumpet would not lightly have stayed or turned, while the Turkish horsemen were active around its rear. For they were not routed, though they had been ridden through. They were like wolves behind, and on either side of the line. Marshal Couppier was not anxious to check the pace on which safety might depend at the last, but he saw a danger that speed might be converted to random flight.

His voice came to Francisco through the din, asking if the road were still straight ahead, and for how long. Francisco answered as best he could. He remembered it to be so for half-a-mile beyond, or perhaps more. But there must come a time of a slackened pace and caution of where they trod. There was the no-man's land in front of the Maltese lines, through which he had stumbled on foot, but which would be different for a troop of horses; a land of ruins, and ditches, and broken walls, ploughed and shattered by the round-shot of months of seldom-ceasing fire, and through which the slanting advance of the Turkish trenches must be avoided with watchful eyes.

It was fortunate that the Marshal's men had been picked with care, both as being equal to the changing of blows, and such as would be slow to be swayed by a panic fear: fortunate, too, that the road was walled on both sides, and so covered the flanks from the Turkish horse. Their pressure also meant a cessation of hostile fire, which must have fallen alike upon friend and foe. But the rear bled.

The Turkish cavalry were called off, after a time. They rode a bypath in single file, seeking to get ahead to ground where they could operate in a better way. Warning had now gone in advance, and every second lost made it less likely that the little force would get through. Marshal Couppier could guess that; yet he was urgent to slacken pace and have his troop in better control before they should come to the open ground. The horses must be breathed, that they should be fit for the last, and what might be the hardest need.

So when they came to the place where the road must be left for the wilderness ground, they were reined down to a walk, and the Marshal, drawing aside as they rode past, could observe that his losses were yet less than half-a-score, and that for those who remained there were horses more than enough, for more than one kept to the troop though its rider was left behind.

He rode again to the head, where Francisco was. "It is but a short way now," he said. "I suppose we may get through with a good speed. Is it straight ahead?"

"No. We must curve widely toward the right, for there are trenches ahead, and there is a battery not far to our left as we now are."

As Francisco spoke, there was proof of this, for a gun, which had been hauled round, opened upon them, showing that warning had gone before.

"That," the Marshal said, "was a gun ill-laid," for the shot had passed some distance away. "They will not often do that." He considered coolly the distance from which the gunflash had come. Should he ride into the battery, cutting the gunners down, and destroying the guns? He knew it to be a possible thing, for the Turks, confident in numbers, were careful only to protect their guns at the front from St. Angelo's fire. At a battery's rear, now that he was within the lines, there would not be as much as a four-foot ditch to obstruct his charge. It might have been worth the loss, even had he sacrificed half the men that he had. . . . But he remembered that his orders were not to destroy Turkish guns, but to enter St. Angelo's walls. He put the thought out of his mind. There might be trouble enough in doing that which his orders required. He heard Francisco saying that the ground was too broken and rough for much more than a walking pace; and then the Turkish cavalry were upon them again.

It was fortunate that these assailants were few, though they became more, and it seemed that footmen rose out of the night, as though from a sowing of dragon's teeth. They must fight their way from this point, faced more than once by an ordered front, which they must break through unless they would all die, and always vexed on all sides, as a boar when the dogs throng.

They fought on in a group from which it was death to part, the Marshal's trumpet sounding ever to give them a centre to which to draw if they should be sundered for a moment by darkness, or stress of strife, or a stumbling steed.

It may be doubted that they would have got through at the last, had there not come a time when there was another Christian trumpet sounding the charge. Knights who had thought that they would never climb horse again, or put lance to rest, had sallied out of the Bourg gate by the Grand Master's consent, to give them a good aid. And so at last they came through.

It was a triumph of audacious resolve, showing how much may be done by him whose purpose is fixed and clear, as opposed to those who are surprised and unsure.



It did no good to the Turks, who had a night of alarm, when they should have had a good rest for the assault they had planned for the next day, and who had a new lesson in the bold confidence of the Maltese knights, who had put the whole Turkish army to such contempt, which must be to them an ill-omen of things to come.

Francisco, standing weary and somewhat dazed in the guard-room of the Bourg gate, was surprised to see that he held a sword that had lost two inches of point and was wet with blood. He stood in a group which the Grand Master had come to receive, but with no more than a short glance for himself. It was Marshal Couppier to whom the Grand Master would talk. He said: "You shall have two hours rest, if you will, and I will go with you to the Sanglea."

## CHAPTER XXXIX

“HE has done well in this,” the Grand Master said, “and I will forget the past (as I am pledged) with a good will. I have in mind, as a fit reward, that he shall command the bastion of Castile.”

“It would be a high honour, indeed,” Sir Oliver replied, “and one for which he may soon be fit; but for the time (if you will not cancel what I have done), finding that he was loth to go back to the lazar where he should be, I have given him my own place, on a wall where no attack is yet likely to come.”

“And why, I must ask, would you waste him there?”

“Because he is one with a deep wound, which should have occasion to heal.”

“We have lines that would hardly be held if none but the hale were there.”

“So I know. But, by your leave, he is not to waste, being of more value to us even than some of our older knights. We are here alike to one end, which is to die, as we do; but I should say that his time is not yet (nor for that matter is mine). It is for a week ahead, or perhaps three. . . . And I should say that Castile is in good hands enough for this day, for, if our spies be not greatly deceived, it is on the Sanglea alone that they will storm as men hoping to win.”

The Grand Master considered this, and accepted arguments which his mind approved. He knew that Sir Oliver had transferred men from the high wall to defend which had been part of the English *langue*, and which, by the chance of war, was not presently risked, until few but cripples remained. He could not say that it should be wholly divested of men, nor that Francisco might not be of more use after a time of rest than he was now. And as to the bastion of Castile, it might be true that it would be in no extreme on the coming day. But the fact was that the Turks had pressed their attacks at the points that were furthest apart, and De Roubles' bastion at the southern end of the Sanglea, and the bastion of Castile which was at the northern end of the Bourg, were of all places the most battered and flattened out, being little more than heaps of disjointed stones, looking down to a half-filled ditch.

It was morning when this conversation took place. The Grand Master had come from the Sanglea, where he had gone with Marshal Couppier during the night, and to which he purposed return. It was the day which was set for storm, and the Maltese lines were manned in expectation thereof, but the hours passed, and it did not begin. The Turkish guns thundered on, and the noon came. Yet there was no doubt that they had come to the set day, not only from

the reports of the spies, but from the movements which had been reported behind the lines.

At midday the Grand Master returned to the Sanglea, crossing by Rosio's bridge. He found that Marshal Couppier, who seemed unaware that he had spent the last night on a horse's back, had brought new energy to a place where it had not been lacking before. There were nearly fifty of those who had ridden in who were either whole, or not too wounded to stand, and he had distributed these where the need was most.

In St. Michael's fort there were few left but those who were serving the guns, and, except at the lazar, it seemed that the Bermola's ruined streets were empty of life; for all toiled alike at the walls, to which they would add strength to the last hour when the storm should come. It was a task at which women and children joined with an equal will, for what hope of life would be theirs if the walls should be found too weak when the tide should rise of that outer sea?

The Grand Master and Marshal Couppier went together to the southern corner where Colonel Roubles had his command. The Colonel met him, a bluff resolute man, who was not of the Order, but had come with Cardona's galleys, as one to whom war was the trade he knew, and having had scent of a fight that he would have been sorry to miss.

When he saw who had come, he was blunt in rebuke. "Why," he said, "do you come here? Would you hearten the Turks with the tale that they have blown you apart? Or do you think me unfit for the post I hold?"

"We are in God's hands," the Grand Master replied, "but it is my part to see all, which I may do without meaning dispraise."

"Well, it is your choice. You may see all you will. But you have come where we learn to duck if we would keep our heads in one place."

The Grand Master could understand that, for there might be no spot in the whole line which had been bombarded with such constant and heavy fire, as it still was. As he stood under the scarp he heard a ball strike, and the rumble of falling stone. But he saw other things that he did not like.

"Why," he asked, "are the guns withdrawn as they are?"

"They are less strong than those that the Turks have been bringing to bear," Colonel Roubles replied, in an easy way. "I would not have them tumbled about, nor would I see my men dead. They are withdrawn for a greater need."

La Valette heard this with a puzzled frown. Report gave the Colonel a good name. "Your men," he said, "are here to be spent in defence."

"And I should say that so they have been. I have lost enough."

Marshal Couppier stood by and said nothing to this; and the Grand Master went on: "I have seen no place where the Turks would be more likely to enter in, or where it looks that they would be less stoutly opposed. Do you think you will keep them out with the dispositions you have?"

“No,” the Colonel allowed, “I would not say that. I had fifty men, which was something more than my share for the front I have, of whom nine are down, and I have eight women besides, who will serve the guns, and be of other uses than that. And it is here, as I think, that the Turks have resolved to come. Can I keep thousands out with two score? I should say not. I must make them glad to go back.”

La Valette saw that there was more to be understood, and a possibility that his stricture might have been undeserved. But he had been chafed by the Colonel’s tone, which was less in deference than he would have from the Maltese knights; and, besides that, he was a tired man, sustained less by physical vigour than an implacable will, and irritation was easy to feel. He said: “You can explain more.”

“So I will. They are meant to come and be butchered here. It is a bearpit where they will dance to our tune.”

He went on to show a device he was soon to prove, at which the Grand Master frowned at first and was then better content. For he had thought at the opening words that there was to be some yielding of ground, which he was never willing to have, and then saw that he might be wrong.

He walked back with the Marshal through the Bermola streets, in which the houses were mostly damaged if not fallen in by the bombardment of the last month, and was vexed again in the same way, though Marshal Couppier had but mentioned that which was satisfaction to him.

“They may fill the fosse,” he said, “they may flatten the wall, but I see not that they will have cause to boast of a great gain. Yard by yard, we can fall back to the fort, and every ruin be bought with blood.”

The Grand Master’s tone had become sharp in reply: “You think to fall back to St. Michael’s fort?”

“I think we can make them overpay for the streets between.”

“But I have sworn we will yield no foot. It is of that we have made resolve while our lives endure. For St. Elmo was loss enough.”

Marshal Couppier thought that which he was discreet that he would not say.

Seeing him silent, Valette asked sharply again: “You do not think to retire at this storm?”

“I shall not be easy to push.”

La Valette must take what consolation he could from the Marshal’s tone, and the reputation he had, he having called him to this post, to which he had come in a prompt and almost contemptuous disregard of the dangers that lay between. He was not one who loved Turks, or would be likely to give them ground that he should be able to hold.

La Valette returned to his own post, being at the centre of all, and as he did

so the storm broke.

It broke an hour after noon, being a time when the Turks had hoped that the Christians might be somewhat disposed to rest in the heat of the summer day; and it was dusk when it fell. For six hours the Turks swarmed round the shattered bastions of the Sanglea, and were met with bullets and bombs, with stones and arrows, with hoops of fire and with burning pitch, and a dozen other of the hellish weapons of war; but when they fell back at last they had done no more than to penetrate the bastion of which Colonel Roubles had charge, of which they were unlikely to boast.

The Colonel had not abandoned defence of a sheltered front. He had been more subtle than that. He had fired but one gun, as though all others were broken down. He had met the first rush of the Barbary hordes with all the engines and weapons of war that had been prepared, so that they fell back, their courage having paid its heavy tribute of death. But the next time that they came, after the Turkish guns had pounded the broken walls for another hour, they were met with a weaker fire. Hassan, watching this point as that where he had the most hope to win, thought that the hour had come which was to pay for all losses before. He flung forward his bravest troops in a wave which did not recede. It was met with two flanking fires from where the wall was of better height both to right and left, but it went on over a half-filled ditch and a broken scarp, from which the defenders fled as though lacking heart, being so few, to be slain by their swarming foes. They came down to an open space, with ruins scattered about, and the sight of a rising street up which they could see those who were urgent to fly. There was a moment when they thought they had won. They were in the town.

Then the cannon opened upon them which had been missing before. They were the exposed target of a converging fire such as none could sustain and live, and they were powerless to reach their foes. The cannon belched through walls that they could not scale: bullet and arrow fell from windows of houses that had been barricaded below. They drew back from that pit of death, and were delayed by those who were still pouring eagerly in, not knowing to what they came. And when the ground opened beneath the wall in an explosion of earth and fire, leaving a great pit to hinder retreat of those that it did not destroy, they had become sheep that the butchers slew.

## CHAPTER XL

IT was on the second of August that the Turks were thrown back from the Sanglea, and after that there was the usual truce to remove the dead, and then the guns opened again.

Mustapha, having watched the assault from a backward height, cursed the obstinacy of the idolatrous dogs, but in his heart he was not ill-content. He had gauged the resistance that could still be made at the Sanglea, and he saw, with eyes that had become wise in the warfares of fifty years, that it was not far from its fall. It was like a judgment of doom when he resolved that the next assault should be led by himself, and be made in his own name.

He said to Hassan: "Your corsairs are brave, but this is too hard for any part of our army to win in a single way. It is a matter for all. It must be the whole army shall bear it down, for the time has come when we can endure neither failure nor more delay."

He ordered that the bombardment should go on for four further days, and he resolved that the sun should not set on the seventh day of the month with the Maltese Cross floating over the Sanglea. He chose 8,000 men, being of the best who yet lived, and his judgment was clear and cool that the few hundreds who could still be arrayed on the battered parapets would be unequal to turn them back. "They shall die," he said, "to the last man, before I will allow their retreat, and if we go forward in that resolve there is but one end there can be."

He said to Piali: "I will not hold you back from the honour which should be yours, for I will give you 3,000 men, apart from those that will be under my rule, with which you shall attack the bastion of Castile. I will not ask you to do this before I have advanced upon the Sanglea, showing all the force with which I shall make attack, and when I have drawn to my own front all the might that the Christians can yet array (which cannot be much, for there are already women upon their walls) you can then strike at a point too distant for their return, even had they the strength to outface us both, which I suppose that they will not have when they have buried yesterday's dead."

Piali heard this, and was pleased, thinking that 3,000 should be enough at that time and place, and that the greater honour would fall to him; but Mustapha had a secret thought of another kind. He had little hope that Piali would prevail, but he thought that he would hold the Grand Master back from sending succour to the Sanglea, having a shrewd thought that La Valette, being obstinate in defence of all, would not deplete his lines, at whatever point, in the

first hour of assault.

So, this being agreed, there were four more days which went quickly under Italian skies, where Garcio sought a date at which it might be convenient for the princes to meet, but were longer to those St. Angelo held, who must endure the deadly monotone of the guns; and Francisco, pacing a high wall where shots were not frequent to come, had leisure to look back upon things which should not have been, and forward to better things which might be in the future days, if he should outlive the peril through which St. Angelo was now dreadfully crowned with a ring of smoke and converging fire.

Angelica remained for these days in the Bourg spital which was near the north wall, being also a place that was apart from all but a straying shot, and saw there a new angle of the divine horror of war, as she overtoiled in a vain strife against weakness, disease, and pain, watching agony that did not protest, and fortitudes of blinded or crippled men, and faith that transcended death, amidst other things that are less fit to be told, being of baser and fouler kinds.

“If we sustain this day,” the Grand Master said, “as I have a confident hope, with St. John to aid, that we shall be able to do, then we may think that the worst is past, for they will try this time, as our spies report, with their utmost strength, and after that there must come a time when they will lose heart, and be reluctant to die.”

It was an opinion with which Mustapha might not have been slow to agree, but he would have seen little to vex himself, or for the Grand Master’s comfort in that, for he meant that he should not fail.

He looked at the battlements of the Sanglea, of which no more remained than a ragged ruin of stones rising a few feet or less from a fosse that tumbled fragments had largely filled, he considered the fanatic valour of the regiments that he was now moving to the front of war: he weighed the strength (or the weakness, rather) that the Grand Master had, which he could have told within twenty men: he counted the length of front on which defence must be made: and the issue was clear as the day that was dawning then, with a threat of heat, in a heaven of cloudless blue.

He did not wait now till the noon was past, meaning to have full time, as he was ample in strength, for that he purposed to do. The sun was but two hours height from the sea when the first wave of storm broke on the bastions of the Sanglea, and was thrown back by the hail of shots and missiles, of hoops and bombs which Marshal Couppier had prepared.

They came again to the same fate. They were thrown back, and returned. Mustapha, ordering the advance of new troops, as the hours passed, must curse at the growing tale of the dead, but he had a purpose that would not change. He had imagination to see the other side of the wall. He knew the desperate valour of those who fought for honour and faith, or for their own and their children’s

lives, behind that ragged rampart of stone. But he knew also that there is a point beyond which human strength is unequal to go: he knew that numbers must overwhelm at the last. When his own troops grew reluctant to advance again to that wall of death, he went himself in their rear, and slew with his own hand the first two who turned their eyes in a backward way.

There came a time when Marshal Couppier sent the Grand Master word that he must have help or he could no longer endure. Could he hold out an army with a few score of wounded, exhausted men? It had become an impossible thing. If the Turks came again, as it was clear that they intended to do, there was no doubt they would enter the town.

La Valette listened, but he had every man that he could muster from other points struggling to keep Piali to the outer side of the bastion of Castile. He replied with urgent, confident words; but with no help beyond that.

It was a decision for which he cannot be blamed. The Sanglea—even St. Michael's fort—might fall, and St. Angelo still endure for a time, though it might not be long; but if St. Angelo fell, the fate of the Sanglea must be decided in the same hour. Piali, and his three thousand men, were doing exactly that which Mustapha had intended they should. . . . An hour later, in the midst of the afternoon, the Turks swarmed over the wall of the Sanglea and began a systematic, sanguinary advance through the narrow streets of the town, striving to win all they could while their opponents were weary and might be disheartened men.

Mustapha, slow as he might be to resolve, with the cautious wisdom of age, was not slack when, as he saw, the decisive moment had come. He resolved that he would still press the attack for every hour of light that remained and with every man that he had. The Sanglea his—the inner harbour under his guns—the galleys taken or sunk—he saw that the day could not be far of St. Angelo's final fall.

But as he gave orders for this result, to pour more troops into the streets of the half-taken town, he paused to listen, breaking a sentence that was half-said, puzzled by a distant murmur of dreadful sound.



## CHAPTER XLI

It was the night before the great assault that swept over the Sanglea walls that the two commanders of Notabile sat together considering a letter which had been intended for other eyes.

It was, in fact, a draft of the last report that Mustapha had drawn up for his master's regard, and was of no older date than the day before. Their pockets were empty of gold, for it had been bought at a great price, but they did not think it was dear. It told much which was of more value to them to know than of worth to be set down anew, and there was an allusion to themselves at which Vertura's swarthy face creased to a smile, and even De Ligny's showed a gleam of wintry light, though the thin lips did not alter their level line.

Mustapha had narrated Marshal Couppier's transit to St. Angelo fairly enough, though not quite as it would have come from a Christian pen, representing it as an act of desperation in itself, showing the extremity of those in St. Angelo's walls, and as cause for thanksgiving in its results, for the Maltese militia had done nothing, he said, since that night, their movements being likened to those of a snake that had lost its head.

The guerrilla leaders smiled as they read, for that was what they had meant him to think. Since Marshal Couppier had gone, they had done no more than to snipe the Turkish outposts at times, and that in a distant and timid way, so that the change had been too great to be unobserved. It was Mustapha's natural conclusion that the annoyance ceased because the driving impulse had gone. When he gathered force for what he had resolved should be his last attack on the Sanglea, he did not omit arrangements to guard his rear, but he was more frugal in his allocation of troops for those positions, and more confident that it was no more than a perfunctory disposition, than he would have been had Marshal Couppier remained in the Notabile command.

When the attack was at its height, in the latter part of the day, the rear lines, three or four miles away, were more weakly held than they had been at any time since the siege began, and this was particularly the case at La Marsa Springs, where the great open-air hospital of the Turks held over a thousand sick and wounded men: for this had not been a point Marshal Couppier had previously annoyed, nor had he ever ventured anything which amounted to a serious assault of the Turkish encampments, considering that his untrained militia could be used to more advantage in other ways.

To his two lieutenants, suddenly finding themselves in control where they

had been content to take his orders before, there had occurred the audacious project of reversing this policy, and making a sudden and concentrated attack on the Turkish camp at the time when its best troops would be engaged beneath St. Angelo's walls.

To approve this is not to condemn the Marshal's previous sagacity, for it was out of that that the opportunity came. Had the Turks been alert to anticipate the event, they could have made such disposition as would have repulsed it with a loss which might have been ten-fold that which it could have inflicted upon them.

But they thought of the Marshal's men as prowlers that might destroy a straggling patrol; as wolves that came in the night. And even that menace had fallen to naught since their leader had been required for the defence of the Sanglea.

There were two hundred men who guarded La Marsa Camp. In the heat of the afternoon they dozed or dived, keeping little watch, for they supposed at that hour that the need was none. Those who lifted eyes looked to where the Sanglea was hidden by the Corradin ridge. They listened only for the distant murmur of strife, and were glad that they were not there. Most of them were men who convalesced from sickness or wounds, such as could be excused from the front of war, and yet do that which would give release to an active man. They wondered how the attack fared at the Sanglea, hoping to hear that night that St. Angelo had been brought nearer its fall, and that the time was not far when they would be sailing away, which they were never destined to do. Even those who were diligent to attend the sick did not grudge themselves an hour's sleep in the heat, considering that they would have little rest when the wounded should be brought in during the night and the next day.

There was one who had more reputation for talk than for wisdom of thought, who called out that he saw a flash of weapons among the hills, and was abused for the fool that he was reputed to be. . . .

They came from two points, Vertura with a thousand, and De Ligny with over twelve hundred men. They came to defend their lives and their ruined homes from a merciless, infidel foe who had invaded them in numbers which were far more than their own, and ruth did not enter their hearts. If a Turk were sick, or if he were maimed by a wound before, was he not more easy to slay? Do we make terms with a rat? If a wolf limp, shall it therefore go free? The guard made a short fight, in a dazed way, being confounded by the sudden manner in which they were caught from two sides, and the numbers that came. When it was too late there were some who started to run; but in the end the Turkish army was less by two hundred men.

After that, the Maltese leaders proceeded on a clear plan. The larger part of their force circled inward to take some further detachments of guards in the

rear, such as were not too numerous to destroy, and to plunder and burn. They were careful to do the utmost damage they could without going too far or remaining too long for a safe retreat, before Mustapha could turn the scale.

The rest remained to slaughter the sick, which they were very active to do.

It was the cry of this horror which came to Mustapha's ears, and had he known it for what it was, neither more nor less, he could have dealt with it by the despatch of a thousand men, or, indeed, none; for the Maltese had finished and gone before the fastest rescue could reach, being harassed more than enough at the last by some troops of Spahis who had been guarding another point, and charged them in a very resolute style. But there came men running in a panic of foolish fear who cried out that a Spanish army had come to land. Mustapha saw that he was faced by utter ruin, if that were true, unless he could marshal his men to a new front. It was no time for debate, nor to await more definite news than could be heard in the dreadful wail that the wind brought, or seen in the smoke of a burning camp. He ordered instant retreat.

The next day, La Valette gave service of praise to God in San Lorenzo Church, saying that His signal mercy had saved the land, when it seemed that their own arms had been too feeble for their avail.

Mustapha had a bitter wrath as he looked at his ruined camp, and counted the dreadful tale of the dead; but he was not discouraged as he would have been had he stormed in vain against an impregnable wall. He had missed success, but he had proved the weakness of those against whom he fought, and he was at once more implacable and more confident than before that he could bring St. Angelo down.

And though the Grand Master might give thanks in San Lorenzo Church, as he had good reason to do, he could not feel that the event had such an end that Mustapha would be encouraged to go, as he had supposed it would be if the Christian ramparts should still be held when the night came.

He saw that they must look forward to a more desperate strife in the coming days, which they had little strength to endure.

But, for the moment, there was exhaustion on either side. It was toil enough to lift the spades by which they buried their dead.

## CHAPTER XLII

VENETIA was at Le Tonneau's villa again. She had been there since the day when Marshal Couppier had ridden through the lines of the Turks, Hassan having resolved that she was out of place in his tent. She was in a somewhat altered state from that she had known before, having two negroid slave-girls under her rule, and the male servants keeping to the outside of the door.

As the hours passed of the last attack on the Sanglea, she listened while the steady boom of the guns changed to a confused murmur of distant sound, and she imagined the flood that rose round the ruined walls, which (as she had little doubt) would overwhelm at the last, and she was glad she was not there.

But she had less comfort in the thought of the place to which she had come, or in that to which she was soon likely to go, as to which she had heard gossip she did not like.

Hassan, so it was said, would ship her to Tripoli by the next galley he had occasion for sending home. It might be false, but it was a tale which had a true sound. She had come upon the difference between the western and oriental treatment of women, of which she had heard before, and she found the experience to be different from the idea and more difficult to be overcome.

She had vaguely supposed that she could make her own way, thinking of herself rather as an individual than as one of a race; and so she had still a bold hope that she would be able to do, but it was less assured than before. To a point, she had succeeded in her design, and her worst danger was past. She was Hassan's accepted toy. If she should use all her wits and wiles, she might become a much-favoured slave. But she was aware of a distance she could not cross, making her experience different from any she had had among western men, and it was a distance which must always keep her wary and in a doubt which might change to fear.

As the dread of St. Angelo's justice receded, she became more sharply aware of her distastes for the new life to which she had come at so small a choice. Now that, in a sense, she had won the game, and in the leisure that success gives it was natural to look at that which was gained, and appraise its worth. This she did; and the more closely she looked the more its value would shrink, till it was not easy to see.

The slender place she had won in Hassan's regard might be gauged from the fact that he should think of sending her to Tripoli now, as something that could wait his leisure for further use, and though she knew its significance to

be less than would have been such treatment from Christian hands, it held warnings that one of her wit was not likely to miss.

She thought of what her life would be among Moorish women, who would be likely to hate her before they knew, and of the seclusion in which she would be expected to share their lives, and she could have wished herself back in the Genoese gutter from which she came.

She thought of herself going veiled in the Moorish style, and her lips curved to a contempt that they seldom showed. She supposed that, as being no more than a Christian slave, she might go unveiled if she would. But it was not by such means that she would win a respected place in an alien land. She might go unveiled, it might be, but her status would be that of the dirt.

Hassan, thinking of her as one who would be loyal in easy times, had failed as completely as she to comprehend the distances of habit and tradition and race which must ever keep them apart. Had they come to any alliance of mind it might have been a problem of hard, but not insoluble sort. But even if she could have come to such an accord, it had not entered his thoughts that she should be more than a pleasant sport for his idle hours, being (as he would have said) the best, if not the sole use that a woman has.

So she thought, while she heard the distant clamour of storm that surged into the Bermola streets, till she became aware of a new sound and was waked to a different fear, as the wind brought the wail of a thousand disabled men who were butchered as they would have crawled or hobbled away, or who died in their burning tents.

As she listened, questioning what the sound might mean, rumour ran to the gates, bringing the same tale that was on the way to Mustapha's ears. The Spaniards had come ashore!

Venetia's thoughts became quick and cool, though her face paled as it may not have done at some of the worst perils her life had known. If the tale were true, and a Spanish army were breaking the Turkish rear, then she might be ruined indeed. She saw that such an army, being already at La Marsa Springs, might have cut off the Turks even from the refuge of their own ships. She imagined them in headlong, disordered flight, or making desperate defence while their fleet sailed round to St. Thomas's Bay. What safety, what security, what recognition of whom she was, would there be, in such a flight, for one of her breed?

Or the Turkish army might be obliged to surrender on terms—but would such terms make any notice of her? She would be exposed at the last like a fish in a drained pool! And what mercy from the Grand Master would she have then?

While these thoughts moved in her mind, she prepared for flight, packing what of value she would be able to take away and the slaves be able to bear.

She told them that all must be ready for flight if the Spaniards should come too near, or if there should be an order for them to go.

But while she said this, her heart formed a different resolve that if the Spaniards were really near she would fly to them. There would be safety at first, for it could be seen beyond doubt, as it could be heard in her speech, that she was neither Turk nor Barbary Moor. Her tale that she was a prisoner escaping from them would be lightly believed. After that? Her agile mind could still see a hope, if she could face all in a confident mood. She might slip away to some further part of the isle, might even get to sea before her identity would be further probed, in the excitement of greater events. Or—at the worst—might not men be in a generous mood in the hour of victory and relief? She would say that she had escaped back to her own kind at the first moment she could. There would be proof of that which none could deny. She would say that what she had done before had been under threat of most dreadful death, and there was some truth in that too.

She would call Angelica for her friend, who must admit that she had warned her to fly from the battery while it could have been done. At what a risk had those words been said! And she would say, beyond that, that she had heard Angelica leave the room, and the stairs creak as she went down, but remained quiet, though she knew that it must be at her life's risk. It would be hard to prove that the truth in that was not much, and it had a good sound. . . . She might even be praised!

She had not long for these thoughts, for there came soon a more certain tale that there had been no more than a Maltese raid, but they had taught her one thing of which she would have doubted before, and which would remain when the scare was done. . . . She would rather find her way back to her own kind, even at a great risk, than set foot on a boat that would land her on Tripoli quay.

She still had thought of Hassan without active dislike, though he stirred some fear; but, apart from that, she had come to regard him much as she had done La Cerda in those last days when she saw that his star was likely to set. She must find a way to get free.

She pondered how this could be done, and at what time, during the next two days, and then, it being an idle pause for those who controlled the siege, though the army had little rest from routines of attack that did not relax, Hassan sent her word to receive him that night, which she knew that she must be complaisant to do.

## CHAPTER XLIII

HASSAN would have said that Venetia had no wits to compare with his, and she might have been as confident of an opposite fact, and they might both have been right. At this time she did all that she had planned, her mind working in ways that he did not guess.

That she pleased him well was small praise to her, for that was the trade she knew. It says more for her wits that she told him how she had prepared for flight when there came a cry that the Spaniards were near (of which he had heard before) in such a way that he did not doubt that she would have gone the way of the Barbary ships; and it says much that she drew him to talk of the siege so that she could judge for herself how long St. Angelo would be likely to fly the flag of the Christian cross.

He went when the dawn came, having resolved that he would not send her away while he remained, and he left her pondering what she had learned, which was briefly this:

There was news from Sicily which made sure that no relief would reach St. Angelo for some weeks, with no more than a faint chance beyond that; and the result of the last attack on the Sanglea had left the Turks with a confident hope that the resistance of the Christian knights was coming near to its end. The next assault should see the end of the siege, and Malta a Turkish isle. But for this assault there was no haste for a week, or perhaps more. The trenches had now been pushed so close that the engineers could have the next word. Mines were being tunnelled under the walls. The army was to be rested and prepared for the last triumphant assault, which might be little more than a march through wide breaches which would be blown when the day should come. And meanwhile the remnant of Christian knights, having no respites from daily losses along their walls, or from the useless toil of piling stones that the roundshots tumbled back to the fosse or flung fatally upward among themselves, would have time to consider how weak they were and dread the approaching day.

She listened, and seeing reason behind his words, she had no lust to be back within St. Angelo's walls. . . . But elsewhere in the island might be a much better choice, and she thought that it should not be much longer delayed.

She remained quiet for some days after he left, her mind active with many thoughts behind inscrutable eyes. She did not think that she was confined to the villa's walls within the point that her own prudence would teach, but it was

a doubt which she did not put to a hard test, having too much caution for that. She played the part of one who was content in a narrow peace.

The resolve to seek escape by an inland way became firmer as the days passed, but she saw that it would be at a great risk if it were tried either too soon or too late. It should be before St. Angelo's fall, but, within that limit, the longer it were deferred the more suspicion would be quietened to sleep, and the less risk there was that the Grand Master could still stretch out an arm to seize her if she were seeking flight from the island's more distant shore. She did not think it to be better than a perilous chance, but it seemed the best hope that remained.

She had a separate hope that some knowledge might come her way such as she could sell at Notabile to those who commanded there at the price of her own release. She watched ever for this, with a caution that gave no sign, thinking that a mere suspicion might be enough to ensure her death, but she learnt nothing at all, even though Hassan came to take his pleasure a second time.

It was a week later that he did this, and mid-August had come with a heat that was rare and oppressive even to the Maltese, and still more to those who had come from more northern lands, though to the Barbary Moors it was nothing at which to fret.

When he was gone she was disposed to condemn herself that she had been over-careful to avoid showing a curious mind, but it was a matter in which wisdom had ruled, for she had gone as far as she safely could, and she had learnt no more for the good reason that he had had nothing to tell.

The fact was that while Mustapha still pressed the siege with all the artillery that he had, and with bomb and bullet and mine, he neither ordered assault nor fixed a day when it should be. In the secrecy of his own mind he had resolved that the day should be fixed by Don Garcio of Toledo rather than by himself, that being the Viceroy's most direct contribution to the events of the siege for the three months that it had endured. As he had decided to take council with the princes of Italy upon the question of Malta's relief, it was clear that nothing would be done until that Council had met. When it did, it might resolve that no relief should be sent, and Mustapha could then conclude his work in such leisure as the remaining weeks of summer allowed. Or it might resolve that succour should not be longer withheld. But that could not be gathered in a menacing force by a day or even a week, if it be allowed that it could be mustered to such numbers at all.

Mustapha resolved that he would make no assault until the conclusions of the Council were known, but that if it should resolve on relief he would make it on the next day after the news came to his hands, and that it should then be continued without respite, until the Crescent should float over St. Angelo's



central tower.

He did not doubt that he could make the relief too late, nor that he would bring that result before the Spanish Crown would have had time to do more than incur the vexation of some abortive outlay of gold, which its King would be loth to lose. . . .

It was August 17th when the news came, both to Mustapha and the Grand Master in the same hour, that the Council had met, and of the resolution to which they came, on which there had been division and hot debate. For there had been many princes who said that they had been called on too late a day, and that to attempt relief would be to add a second disaster to one which was now impossible to avoid. And this opinion had the more weight because it was put by a good knight, Alvarez de Sande, who had won great repute in warfare upon the Barbary coast. Nor can it be fairly urged that this should lessen his fame, for there was reason behind his words.

“You ask us,” he said, “to assemble strength on too late a day, when St. Angelo already totters toward its fall. If we gather in haste, we shall be too weak to make landing against the great fleet of the Turks, and shall but give them the glory of our repulse. Or if we delay while the strength of Spain assembles to our support, we shall be Europe’s jest, for the Turk will have laid St. Angelo flat, and have sailed away.

“Had you asked us three months ago, there is none who would have been backward to bare his sword; but now, if you will heed a soldier’s advice, who would save you a second shame, you will not attempt that for which your time must be either too short or your strength too weak. You should not delude the Grand Master more with a hope which will prove a mere mock at the last: you will advise him to make terms for his life while he yet can.”

These were words which many voices acclaimed, but not all, for Ascanio della Corna, a famed knight of Piedmont (which had been the land alike of De Broglio’s birth), made a more passionate reply:

“It is a good word that we should have been called together three months ago, and when you add that we may hasten now and be too late by a day I do not say you are wrong. I say we have bought a shame which may not be easy to miss. But I say, beyond that, that our shame grows with the days, and that there is but one way, and one hope, by which we may put it by, which is to arm at this hour. We must go with what force we have, be it weak or strong, and though it be to no better fate than came to those who fell under St. Elmo’s walls.

“But I say that we may yet go with a good hope, for we are not feeble of arm, nor of small resource, even at the call of a day, and if Valette can endure, being so compassed and left alone, shall he fall when our swords are near?

“I say we should still attempt, though we were more likely to fail than I

think we are. We have but a partial strength if we move with speed. I will give you that. But if you could see to the Turkish camp, you might view more weakness than you suppose. I should say that they have not more than sixteen thousand men who are on their legs at this hour. And if there were count only of those who are hale and of good heart, I suppose it would be greatly lower than that. Nor could they confront us with such a force and maintain the siege. They would have something worse than the vexed rear that they have now, when we had got ashore, though it were but with a few thousands of men."

"When you have got ashore!" a voice of protest was heard. "Now will you say how you would do that? Do you know the count of the Turkish fleet, that would be watchful to bar the way?"

"I might make answer even to that," della Corna replied; "but there are sea-captains here who should be heard thereon before I."

There was more debate on this point, from which it appeared that the seamen were of a general accord that, though they could not assemble a fleet which would be fit to meet that of the Turks in a set fight, yet if they were asked to do no more than to use darkness and speed to land troops on the island shore at their own choice of the place, it would be a fair hazard of war.

And so at last Don Garcio, having let the talk have its way, put it to the vote, in some doubt of how it should turn: Should they adventure to Malta's aid? And when he found that there was a majority who were of della Corna's resolve, he saw that he must make some show of preparation therefor, though his own had been alike to De Sande's thought, that they had arrived at too late a day.

He wrote to the Grand Master that night that, if he could endure for no more than two further weeks, there should be rescue arrived.

La Valette read the letter to Sir Oliver first, who said: "Well, we may endure for that time." If he had a doubt, it was one which he did not think it useful to speak, but Valette answered:

"For that time? So we must, and for more beyond. For if they say two, we may call it four, and find we have guessed too low."

Sir Oliver saw that La Valette would not admit, even to his own mind, that they could fail to endure for whatever time might be required before the Turks would either be chased away or feel an inclination to go.

Well, need he say a word to disturb that? It is a good mood for one on whom all depend. There is much force in a resolute will.

But in this case the will to win was not on a single side. Mustapha heard, and his mind froze to a cold intensity of resolve. "Two weeks?" he thought, almost in the Grand Master's words in his alien tongue. "We may call it four, and find it under the count—if they come at all, which is less than sure. But two weeks is enough now."

He ordered that both St. Angelo and the Sanglea should be taken by storm on the afternoon of the next day.

## CHAPTER XLIV

It was the hottest hour of the day, and Angelica found it hard to sustain in the foul air of the crowded hospital ward, which was not relieved by any impulse of wind. She was not practised to move among death and wounds without the exhaustion of emotional stress adding to the physical strain of service which must cease at times, but was never done.

For in the pause of the last ten days—if pause it can fitly be called while the hail of death drove inward ever from every side—there had been so strait an inquisition into the stations of all who had eyes to see an approaching foe, and could lift weapon to strike him down, and so stringent an ordering of their places upon the wall, as had left her the head of a nursing staff of whom there was none besides who was both able and young.

The sick and hurt must be tended by wounded or crippled men, and by women feeble with age.

And as she toiled thus, the pretence of her sex had failed or been cast aside, as pretences will before the crises of life and death. She had not cast off the doublet that had Don Garcio's name, having, indeed, little leisure for any casting of clothes, but she had become señorita to those she nursed, of which she was careless or unaware.

Nor was she excused from the ultimate risks of war, either by her sex or the place to which she was put, being on the list of those who did the unavoidable civilian tasks, but who must be ready at every hour, on the signal of the three whistles (two long, one short) to catch up weapons and run to their stations upon the wall.

If she had any thought of joy in these days of exhausting toil to mend the bloody wreckage of war, it was that Francisco was still placed, by the grace of a healing wound, on the high wall of the English *langue*, where he was almost alone, and to which the tide of battle was unlikely to rise, unless it should have come to a height which must be fatal to all. . . . But how long could she think that he would be there? For ten days of sleepless vigilance and suspense the meagre line of defenders had crouched behind shattered bastions and connecting walls, or toiled in perilous exposure at rebuilding the tumbled stones. And for these ten days the spies had failed to bring news of the date of the next assault. Certain to come, it had remained an hour of which no one knew.

But this morning there had been word of hope, which the Commanders had

passed about. Palermo bustled to send them aid. Messina's harbour would be astir with galleys fitting for sea. In fourteen days, could they endure for that time, there might be slaying of Turks by hands less wearied than theirs. Surely they could endure for two weeks! The word brought a light of hope to the eyes of men both in the hospital beds and crouching under the parapets who would be dead alike by the next day.

And, as the hours passed, it seemed that another sunset would come with no more event than the bombardment which did not cease, and to which there would now be no more than infrequent or spasmodic reply. Mustapha, when he had attacked before with a purpose to make an end, had chosen a morning hour. But this time he had a different plan.

Yet, except for the hour he chose, it began and, to a point, it was to proceed in the same way. "They will expect," he had thought, in a cunning and subtle mind, "that I shall attack at a new point rather than that I shall do the same as before." He, himself, undertook the assault of the Sanglea, and ordered Piali to storm the bastion of Castile, where there was a reason to think that he would not fail.

At two hours after noon, the Turkish batteries suddenly quickened to the discharge of every gun that they had, and the advancing movement of troops could be observed at a score of points.

Angelica, uselessly dressing a festered wound, became aware of the added volume of sound. She heard a boy's voice calling the news in the narrow street, and the noise of a man who ran. She knew that the assault had begun.

After that, for her, there were four hours of suspense. Away at the Sanglea there came a time when the Turks were over the wall as they had been at the last storm. They fought forward from house to house through the ruined Bermola streets, Marshal Couppier finding what satisfaction he could in the price of blood that he made them pay.

At the bastion of Castile, the first wave of storm had been thrown back, and the pressure had increased against the more southern lines of Provence and Auvergne, as though it were there that the final effort would be.

When it might be thought that attention would have been drawn away from the Spanish front, with some consequent weakening of their support, and at a time when the defenders at all points would be wearied with heat and strife, Piali sprang his surprise.

In the last week he had driven mines toward the Castile bastion, one of which had been countermined and destroyed, men having met in the dark passages underground, as rats fight in a sewer. But the second, which burrowed beneath the eastern salient, had been left unguessed. Now there came to those who yet guarded the Castile wall a low rumble of dreadful sound, being the last that would ever trouble their earthly ears.

De Castriot, watching from the neighbouring bastion of Arragon, saw fosse and parapet lifted into the air. They fell in a flattened ruin he did not see through an atmosphere which had become blackened with smoke, and was soon thick with a falling dust. But ditch and rampart were gone, and the gap was wide through which the Turks might enter the town.

It happened, by the blundering chances of war, or, as Valette would have said, by the interposing mercy of God, that the first rush of the Turks was not in too great a force to be stoutly met; for among those who advanced there arose a cry that there was a second mine to be sprung, and that they should stand back for a time, lest they met the fate which they had designed for their foes to feel. They stayed at this, and some of them were not easy for their officers to urge on, till they could be convinced that there would not be a second explosion beneath their feet. But those who came on at once, being some scores, had entered the town before there could be any living of the Maltese who could bar their way.

A certain chaplain of the Order, a man more expert in prayer than with the pike which he had been told to use, saw the inrush of the Turks, and did not doubt that the end had come. As a dog seeks his master in time of fear, so he ran for Valette.

The Grand Master was at his lodging within the town. It was a house, old and large, which he had made the headquarters from which he directed all on a day of assault, and where all knew that he would be found. He had put on his arms at the first call, but had since cast his cuirass aside, being oppressed by the day's heat.

The street that approached the house was steep, and its pavement was a series of steps that gave no ease to a man whose breath was already gone. The chaplain must gasp his tale that the Turks were swarming into the town. His thought was on the narrow safety of the citadel walls. He urged that Valette should be instant to gain St. Angelo's bounds while there was still possible time. He appears to have thought of his master before himself, which may claim some praise which he did not get.

Valette had been at the door, looking for news, for which it had not been easy to wait. He had heard the sound of the bursting mine, which had been an explosion to shake the town. What had happened thereon was not hard to guess, and might have been even worse than it was. He struck the chaplain across the face, so that he fell backward upon the steps he had been so eager to climb. The Grand Master snatched up the pike which had dropped from the hand of a man who may not have known that it was still there. He turned to Sir Oliver, who was at his side, fastening on his own sword. He said: "You must stay here. There must be one to control." He ran down the steps, not regarding that his cuirass had been left behind.

Some guards and attendants came running after him from the house, but he did not look back. He raised a whistle to his mouth as he ran, and the two long blasts and the short shrilled through the street, and were repeated by those whose duty it was to pass such a signal on.

The sound came to Angelica's ears, and she knew that the time had come when all must fight for their lives if they would endure for another day. What use was there in nursing those who were round her now, if they were to be massacred in the next hour? To share the fate of those who had died from the Christian swords at La Marsa's camp?

The Grand Master was right on that. There was no service of any worth unless the Turks could be kept to the outside of the wall. And the call that was shrilling now, even without that preceding havoc of sound, was proclamation that it was no longer simple to do.

With quick hands she reached for Don Garcio's belt, with the sword and dagger which were the only weapons that she had been, careful to have, and joined the growing crowd of those who ran to the breach.

It was a motley crowd, of both sexes, of childhood and age, that the whistles called. They varied in language and race, in weapons and in attire, but a common passion was fierce in the hearts of all: the lust to kill the hated invading foe—to kill first, before they should be destined themselves to die. They were not less in number than two hundred of sundry sorts when they came in sight of the breach, and of a drama the first act of which was already done.

For in those first moments, pregnant with Malta's fate, when the Turkish regiment which had been held ready to rush the breach had faltered to the mistaken cry of a second mine, the Spanish knights on either side of the ruined gap had come running to its defence, as blood thickens to close a wound.

Struggling over shattered bodies and tumbled stone, through the mirk of the sulphurous dust-choked air, they had fallen on those few dozens of Turks who had first rushed into the breach with a fury that they had been too few to endure.

As the air cleared, it could be seen that the gap was wide but not so great that it might not be held by the Christian swords, if they would be steadfast to meet the advancing shock. For the Turks had lost that moment when the breach should have been in their own hands, through which their army might have been poured into the town.

Castile and Arragon, Catalonia and Navarre, joining slender numbers to make living wall where the stone had failed, looked out on a rushing regiment of Turks, being one that had made its fame in the Balkan wars. It had been twelve hundred strong when it had disembarked three months before, and might still muster five hundred men.

They came swiftly with double cause, being eager to win the breach, and because the air had cleared enough for them to be in view of the Arragon bastion as their own trenches were left, and De Castriot's guns now scourged their advance with a flanking fire.

As to De Castriot himself, having shown his gunners a mark that they would not miss, he ran to the breach with every man he dare call away from his own part of the wall. When the Grand Master came to the scene it was choked with a jostling, striving crowd of Christians and Turks, who struggled and slew with no certain foothold on the broken masonry that was jagged or slipping beneath their feet.

It was a surface on which men could not move at a quick pace, either to attack or defend, and, broken down though the scarp might be, it still gave advantage to those who would bar the way, both in its own height, and that it now had higher walls both to right and left from which arquebusiers were firing down on the Turks at so short a range as to be able to pick their prey.

The reinforcement the Grand Master brought had such effect both by the weight of its own advance and the inspiration his presence gave, that the Turks yielded some ground, and there was an actual pause in the strife at one time, the Turks falling back some yards from the reach of the Christian swords, unless they should advance beyond support of their flanking walls, which they lacked folly to try.

For a moment it was a matter of flying stones, and worse missiles than they, while the combatants took breath to look at those whom they had seldom seen so closely before.

But it was a moment that could not last. Piali, cursing the slowness of those who had missed their chance, was still without doubt that the town's defence, if not the castle's alike, had come to its last day. He urged the janissaries on again, being himself close on their rear. He ordered up more troops to support their storm and to be ready to swarm into the town when the breach were won.

On the Christian side, reinforcements were gathered fast, and nearly to the denuding of other parts of the wall. Stores of missiles were rushed to the tops of the ragged wall on either side of the breach, to be discharged on the Turks below, so that every forward yard would bring them more under a rain of death from their flanking foes.

For the next hour the Turks came on as though being impatient to die; and with no less courage and bitter hate the Christians refused their way, until the gaps between the tumble of masoned stone were dreadfully levelled up with the trampled dead and hollows brimmed with their blood.

To Sir Oliver, still at the centre of all in Valette's house, careful and cool, and busy with many orders of support and supply, Marshal Couppier came.

"That I am here," he said, "is no reason to fret, for I have left De Roubles



in charge, and you could not ask for a better man. . . . But I would hear for myself how matters are like to go, either from the Grand Master or you, for it may change my defence in a vital way.”

Sir Oliver at the first was rather cold in reply. “We keep our walls,” he said, “as you may suppose that we should. . . . You will not want opinion from me, but I may surmise that the Grand Master, if he were here, would not be pleased that your place is left at a time of storm, be De Roubles the most you say.”

Marshal Couppier was unmoved. “You keep your walls?” he asked. “I can boast of less. But do you keep them unbreached? I may be old, and not deaf.”

“They have blown a mine at the Castile wall. The Grand Master is at the breach.”

“Then they will find it hard to get through. We may pray St. John he come to no hurt. It would be worse than a broken wall.”

“We may agree there. What is it you come to know?”

“What I suppose I have learned. That the breach holds.”

“Was there so urgent cause to enquire?”

“So I thought, or I were not here. . . . I would not have men die to no gain, and the point is this. We do not boast of our wall. We have let the Turks enter the town. They have half Bermola now, being near to where they will come on some grape from St. Michael’s guns, some of which have been turned inward to meet the need.

“I do not fret about that, they having been in the streets for three hours, and losing six to our one. I suppose they may be ill-pleased when they count the slain.”

“The Grand Master will be wroth that they have entered the town. He would have them counting the dead with no gain to offset thereto.”

“Well, he should not have put me in charge. He has better men. . . . But I fret from another cause. I have but let them enter the town from the south. I have held them off at a great cost from the northern side, lest the harbour come under fire, and the galleys go. . . . I mean at a great cost in the lives of men that I might have used in another way. . . . Now if there be retreat at the Bourg, then is the harbour lost and the galleys gone. It will be St. Angelo for yourselves, and either that for me or to hold out in St. Michael’s fort, which I should not be hopeless to do.”

“You mean that you would abandon defence of the north side of the town, if you thought that we gave ground at the Bourg?”

“So I should in the next hour.”

“For which you would have no sanction from me.”

“So I suppose. You are near to say that I shall be blamed that I have not held the whole length of the ditch, which I tell you, as one having some

knowledge of war, that I had no longer the strength to do. But that is what the Grand Master will be impatient to hear, for I would say that beside him a mule is a beaten child. Yet he may be more for Malta's avail being wrong, than would another of more placable moods, though with a wisdom that none would doubt. . . . And for those Turks who are in Bermola streets, you may tell him that we have plans to disturb their sleep."

Marshal Couppier went at that, with no more than a parting word: "You should get him back from the wall," with which Sir Oliver was not inclined to debate, except to see that it would not be easy to do unless the Grand Master were of the same mind.

He considered Marshal Couppier's words with more agreement than he had expressed, for he was used to thinking much that he did not say. In fact, the tactics which the Marshal employed (for which De Roubles had been responsible at the first) had enabled Mustapha to achieve his aim more easily than he otherwise would, but had caused its success to be of a very dubious kind.

Mustapha had supposed that the garrison of the Sanglea would exhaust its strength in defence of a wall which had become too weak to be held, and for the length of which their numbers had become too few. He had supposed that he would repeat the success of the last assault in a more absolute form, and from which no false alarm would recall him at last. He did not expect that his troops, after having been slaughtered as they approached the wall, in the unavoidable loss that a storm must mean against a resolute foe, would then be allowed to scale it, to find themselves not in pursuit of a flying rout, but to be entangled among ruined houses and barricaded streets, which had been prepared with much cunning to be traps of death, and were held by bold and very obstinate men. With fanatic valour, and a mirage of success that they could not reach, the Turks fought forward from trap to trap, winning no more than streets that were littered with their own dead, who had fallen beneath the fire of those whom they rarely saw.

Only on the northern side of the town, where the Marshal had given orders that no ground must be lost beyond a line where there had been much ditching and barricading of streets, and mounting of guns that had been withdrawn from the wall, had there been such fighting as took heavy toll of Maltese lives. Here he had put De Roubles in command of his best knights, and they had proved their worth so far that they did not fly, but they could not avoid their deaths. The line was still held as the sun was low, and the Turks still hindered from the inner harbour which they would have been glad to see, but the cost was such as Marshal Couppier had no relish to count, and he would call it evil indeed if it should prove at last that he could have withdrawn, with more loss to the Turks and with less of knights whom he could not spare. . . .

Sir Oliver did not doubt that the Marshal had been wise, both in the decision to fall back to St. Michael's fort and in the manner in which it had been done; but that he had been also right when he had said that the Grand Master would not be content unless the Turks should be counting the dead with no gain to offset thereto had its proof in that which occurred in the same hour, at the breach which the Turks had at last suspended effort to force.

La Valette sat on a stone. A bloody pike lay at his side, he having fought in the front rank, and it being due to those who had surrounded him there, rather than to any care he took of his own head, that his life remained.

"Will you not retire," De Castriot asked, "while we can yet give thanks to merciful saints that there can be no boast of your death? Can you not see that you sit here at a great risk, which is gain to none? For if they cease effort to scale the breach, then will they resume their fire in a short while, turning all their guns on this place, and their sharp-shooters alike, as it is simple to guess."

He spoke amid a chorus of those who were urgent that the Grand Master should not remain, but Valette rose as one forgetting the weariness that his face had shown a moment before. He pointed to a regimental Turkish standard which had been planted defiantly on the debris at the further side of the ruined fosse.

"Shall I retire," he asked, "while the Cross of Christ is so flouted and shamed? It were to hear before morn that their standards root where we now stand. I must prefer to abide."

De Castriot gave a short laugh. He looked round on men who were weary with strife, but yet aware of the exultation of having thwarted the Turkish rush and come through with their own lives in a place of death.

"Why then," he said, "it seems we must fetch it in."

He drew out a sword which he had but just wiped and put up. He went out through the breach. Those who stood round stared at first; and then, one by one the Spanish knights, and some others of as much valour as they, followed the way he led. . . . They were fewer when they came back; but De Castriot laid a horsehair standard at the Grand Master's feet.

## CHAPTER XLV

SIR OLIVER was still at the Grand Master's house when he returned, a satisfied but much-wearied man. It showed the measure of his fatigue that he was content when Sir Oliver gave him no more than a vague word of assent to his query of whether all went well at the Sanglea. He was asleep in a short time, and Sir Oliver would have returned to his own rooms, as it might well have been thought that they had outfaced a storm which would subside till the next day, or beyond; but he observed one thing that he did not like. There had been no request from the Turks for the hours of truce which were usual after a day of strife for the removal of wounded and dead, who must often be drawn by both sides from a common heap.

Considering this, he resolved that he would stay at watch in the Grand Master's house, both to secure that he would not be disturbed by less than an urgent call, and that he should be there himself to make dispositions with speed if there should be alarm in the night.

Brother William, the chaplain whom the Grand Master had struck, had been brought in by his own care and now sat nursing a broken head. Sir Oliver, having no other messenger at his call, sent him to the castle, with a word that he should not return for that night, and sat down to ponder the day's events and to judge of what the end was likely to be.

"The siege must end," he thought, "in short days, either in our common deaths or in a triumph which a few will yet be alive to share; of which few I am more likely to be than is any else, for there may be no man besides me, and scarce a woman or child, who will not have scuffled upon the wall. It is as though I watch a woe which I will not share."

It was from no passion for the blood-shedding of Turks that he thought thus, having another temper of mind, but it was no joy to think that there was hazard of life for all, except only him.

"I suppose," he thought, "that I may be blamed or envied of some, as one who had contrived to keep his own head from under the storm in a careful way. I should not fret for that overmuch, not being one who has practised for praise of men, but I would not be shamed in my own soul. I would do my part at the last."

For it seemed to him that while he held a high place, it was yet no more than that of one who had a mean part in a great day.

As he thought thus, Brother William returned from the errand on which he

had gone. He was one whose own place had been one of esteem before the time of the siege, and had seemed soft and secure. Now he had a sore head, and a grief of mind which was more vexatious than that.

He felt that he had been shamed by the Grand Master's blow in a way that his reputation would not survive; and he had a grief of a different kind when he asked himself if it were displeasing to God that he was more zealous to heal the mind than to give the body a wound, even though it were infidel flesh that would feel the sting.

He found Sir Oliver in more leisure for talk than he often was, and in the mood when fatigue of mind will somewhat relax restraint, even in those who are of a settled control.

Brother William began to talk of himself, and of the event that had brought him there, seeking to learn if he might yet have a place in Sir Oliver's esteem. He forgot himself as he went on to discuss questions of doctrine and of the ethics of faith, in which he was more expert than with thrusting pikes. He quotes text: "*Omnes enim qui acceperint gladium*—" to which Sir Oliver replied that it might avoid truth to assert that they did that, unless he spoke of the hired soldiers of Spain; and gave him another text: "*Non veni pacem mittere*—" as to the meaning of which they found also that they were not in accord.

"It may be no merit in us," Sir Oliver said at the last, "that we slay men whose souls (as you will not deny) are doomed to eternal fire, and who would constrain others, even by force, to share the damnations to which they go; but that men should expose themselves to jeopardy of their own death that the Christian faith may be buttressed about, is it not that of which the angels of God are glad?"

"By which you mean," Brother William replied, "that I should have pushed forward into the breach, even though I should have been a poor help and been quickly sped, rather than have run to warn others to safety they would not seek?"

"You are one who teaches the Faith," Sir Oliver answered to that, "which I have no title to do. Should you not ask that of yourself, as one who knows the reply?"

"You are more plain," Brother William replied, "than you were before. I will seek my place."

He picked up his pike, which was near at hand, as the Grand Master had brought it back, showing more signs of use than might have been had it remained in its owner's hands. He went to take his place on the wall.

He left Sir Oliver in more thought than before, till he was disturbed by a messenger that De Castriot sent to report a stir in the Turkish camp.

He was not slow to see the meaning of that, and its explanation of why

there had been no truce to remove the dead. Mustapha had planned that they should have no peace from that hour till they were taken or slain. There must be another struggle to hold the breach.

He knew that the Grand Master would be wroth if he were not roused, but what purpose was there in that? Would he go again to the front of strife, and a likely death in the night, which would bring joy to the Turkish host, and make the Christians despond?

It seemed to Sir Oliver that he had come to the time of his own chance, and his own test. Should he not do in the dark that which the Grand Master had done in the day? He went out, buckling his sword.

He walked quickly toward the breach, around which the guns were active again, and which was now lit by unquenchable flares flung out from the wall, so that the light would reveal an advancing foe while making the breach darker to those who came. As he walked, he had a great joy in the thought that, whether he lived or died, he would have taken his part that night in the common hazards of war, and a will to maintain the breach as fixed as the Grand Master's could be, so that it would be sure that his life was done if the Turks should enter the town.

But yet as he walked he thought of a score of things which must be required on the next day, of confusions his death would cause, of details that none would know.

He was not of a vain mind, and he knew that the Grand Master was more to Malta than he, but he could suppose that, if Valette lived, there might be no death than his own of which the Turks would be more eager to hear.

Abruptly, he stood still. De Castriot was a good man for that post, valiant, stubborn, and versed in the defending of leaguered holds. Was he needed there of a truth, or did he go as one seeking his own praise?

He went back where his duty was, with sufficient shame, content that he had been near to a folly that no one knew, and to which he would be unlikely to fall again.

## CHAPTER XLVI

As Sir Oliver walked back to the place he had left on an impulse which he would find it hard to excuse, if not to believe, on the next day, he heard a growing volume of sound, as the guns of the Turkish batteries, which had been silent before so that the night attack might have the element of surprise, opened from every side, and, one by one, those of castle and town made a more halting reply.

He heard also the deeper rumble of explosions, three or four, that came almost as one, from the direction of the Sanglea, and wondered what Marshal Couppier did, or was done to him, in the disputed Bermola streets.

He saw that Mustapha had begun the assault at a late hour of the day because he had planned to resume it during the night if it were not ended before. It was not a common way with the Turks, their military science at that time not favouring operations during the darker hours, and Mustapha may have counted on that, as making it more likely that the Christians would have been off their guard after the fatigue of their daytime strife. But if that hope had been his, Sir Oliver was glad to think that it had been vain against the vigilance of those whose tired arms had not ceased the lifting of stones to guard their lives as they could for the coming day. Yet he saw that, if St. Angelo were to maintain even for two more weeks, its hardest ordeal was still to come. The first result of the Viceroy's belated movement for its relief had been to rouse a fiercer tempest of storm against its diminished numbers and shattered walls. That might be excused and endured if the promised succour were swift and strong, but it would be evil indeed if it were not more than a half-hearted attempt or an empty tale. . . .

He roused the Grand Master when he got back, who took the news in a more temperate mood than he had thought him likely to do. "I suppose," he said, "that De Castriot will not lose the breach in the night hours. You must rouse me with further cause," and returned to sleep as one whose mind was anchored at ease.

His judgment was right in that, as the dawn showed. For the breach stood, and its approach was strewn with Turks who had come too close to get safely away. Also it was partly repaired, De Castriot having driven those who made its defence to labour thereon at all times when they need not be active to slay, to which they had not been slow, as men who barricaded their own lives were not likely to be.

For the comfort which the dawn brought there was also a good word from the Sanglea, where Marshal Couppier had shown that the undermining of foes is an art of war that both sides can employ. For at the time when the Turks had been about to resume attack, having moved fresh troops into the town, there had been mines sprung under the streets and houses which had been taken by them, having been prepared for that hour even before the Turks had been allowed to come over the wall. And these had been so placed as to be in the rear of those who had made furthest advance in the direction of St. Michael's fort; and those who held the northern streets sallying out at the moment after the mines were sprung, and that in such force that, to make their strength, the fort had been almost denuded of men, there was a large part of the Turks who were surrounded and, being stricken with panic, were either slain, or forced to flee by water, waded or swum, to reach the Corradin shore.

In fact, so well had the Marshal planned the use of the slender forces he had, and with such energy did he counter-attack during the night, that the morning found his wall back in his own hands, and the Turks again on the side where he preferred them to be. So that the Grand Master was not told that there had been Turks in Bermola streets till it was a past tale.

The satisfaction that he could feel in the fact that this last assault had been futile to scale his walls either by night or day was not lessened when there came request from the Turks that there should be a truce of six hours. It was a proposal such as was of the routine of war, as it was waged at that time, and would be lightly agreed where there was exhaustion on either side, but it may have seemed to hold more cause for hope than it did, for Mustapha's purpose was neither to cease assault nor to give respite to the besieged for one avoidable hour.

But men must have some time in which they can sleep and feed, and he had movements and preparations to make for what he thought to be the last act of a drama on which the curtain was near to fall. He thought also to use that truce to his own gain, for he was soon riding along the edge of the ditch to observe what defence of stone had still to be overcome, and all else that could be read by one who was old and crafty in war.

He was ill-content with his own repulse at the Sanglea, and had a bitter wrath that Piali had failed to push troops into the breach in those fateful moments when it could have been his and would have been hard indeed for the ranks of the Christian knights to regain, but he did not see more in these events than a triumph delayed, and when Piali proposed that a summons to surrender should be sent during the hours of truce, as being that which the Christian dogs might now be hoping to hear, and likely, at the least, to produce dissension between the Grand Master, who was known to have a stiff neck, and such as might prefer to make terms for their own lives, Mustapha replied that the time



was past for such talk, there being no terms he would give. It had become his purpose to put all to the sword who might still have lives to lose when he should enter the town, unless he might prefer that the Grand Master should have the ignominy of one who toils in chains on the galley-bench, as he had done before in his more vigorous days.

The Grand Master, having no thought of surrender on any terms, whether good or bad, but being resolved to abate any confidence that his foes might feel, was no less alert than the Turkish leader to use the opportunities that the truce allowed.

Being Sunday, there would have been high mass in San Lorenzo Church had it been a time of less urgent stress, with ceremony of burial, each in his own *langue*, of the knights who had died in the last week, but he ordered now that it should be celebrated in the breach itself, and in full sight of the Turks, for which there was double cause.

For he purposed to show the Turks all the strength he had, and as much more as they could be made to guess, to which end, making full use of a risk that the truce allowed, he drew every man he could, both from castle and town, as well as every part of the wall, that they might make such assembly, in numbers and in array, as Mustapha could have no pleasure to see.

It was to be requiem also, and consecration of ground for knights who would never lie in the bounds of the convent church, having been blown apart when the mine was sprung and covered by its collapse, or who had fallen after among the shattered fragments on which they fought, being trampled down and covered by other deaths, whether of friend or foe, and dreadfully buried at last by the stones which those who remained had rolled or tumbled into the breach.

The Grand Master would not have hastened the mass though the earth rose or the heavens fell; but when he spoke himself (as he determined to do, seeing so many assembled there whom he would rouse to his own zeal) he was short of words, considering how much was to be done by few hands during the quick hours of the truce.

“*Gratias ageus Deo, accepit fiduciam,*” were the high words of the text he chose, being the record of Paul, after he had left that same isle, fifteen hundred years before that, when he approached Rome in a captive’s gyves, and found that he was not forgotten of friends who came out to meet him, and were await at the Three Taverns, on the Appian Way.

It was well said that they should have courage equal to his, seeing that they had endured for the same time, the Apostle having been shipwrecked in Malta for three months before the *Castor & Pollux* sailed (it was likely) from St. Angelo’s quay to bear him away, and they now hearing that the Viceroy was stirring to bring them aid; but he was brief about that. He would not have them

fight as men clinging to life, and counting only how themselves might come out at the last, for he knew that there will ever be those who crouch low under the wall, having no better impulse than that, leaving it to others to do the great deeds by which all are to go free, through which they may all come to a poor end at the last.

He rather called their thoughts to the vows by which they had become part of the great Order which joined them now, asserting that which he would have them to be in such confident words that it became easy to their belief. He adjured them as men under the inspiration of God to bring down the infidel pride which blasphemed His power before the eyes of the watchful saints.

“We have no lust,” he made boast, “for a slothful ease: we have put from us carnal desire: we listen not for the plaudits of men: but before our eyes is the symbol of Christian faith, and in our ears the high trumpet of God calls us to the unfaltering ranks of those who may be martyred but do not fail.”

They heard him, and looked out over the half-filled fosse to where Mustapha watched the scene with curious and contemptuous eyes. He rode a milk-white mare that the deserts bred: he was splendid in inlaid armour and crimson silks, and surrounded by those of barbaric glitter that matched his own. Behind him were the trenches which had crept up close to ruined ramparts too weak to control their foes, batteries which had nearly silenced the Christian guns, and regiments forming to make instant assault when the hours of truce should be done; but they looked up to the lifted Cross with the assurance that they were partnered by an Invincible Power, and outward with the fortitude of men who are sacramentally destined to die.

## CHAPTER XLVII

FRANCISCO was one of those who had been able to leave his post and had listened to the Grand Master's words, by which he was not unmoved, but his thoughts were on other things which were nearer to him. That most who heard, if not all, would be destined to perish in the next days might have been a most likely guess, and it may be said that, in whatever mood it should be perceived, there could be nothing nearer to him than that. But youth has a sanguine blood, and will plan for life in a very obstinate way.

It was Angelica on whom he had centred his thoughts, being in his sight, though she was one he could not reach till the Mass was done.

He was himself gaily attired, and with care, as his habit was. He was not aware of less vigorous health because he had an arm which must be used, if at all, at more risk to himself than menace to any foe. During the last days he had done little but walk a wall which looked down on Calcara Creek, which had been empty of life. He had had no more than a demi-falcon at his control, which might have been sufficient to sink an enemy's boat, if one had been there, which he did not expect to see.

Calcara Creek was deep enough for the Turkish galleys to have sailed in, if they would have braved St. Angelo's seaward guns (as Piali was now urging that they should do), but if they were there they could do no more than fire upward at walls of stone, and there were more hopeful sides of attack, both by water and land, so that it was left to itself; and as the need grew the Grand Master had ordered that the guns should be removed from that part of the wall to the outer lines of the Bourg, where they would be facing an active foe.

Francisco, being left in this idle place, which had been almost emptied of men, wondered at times if the Grand Master had placed him there as one who had lost his trust, but he recalled the Notabile mission on which he had not failed, and he considered that his wound was still something less than healed, and renewed hope that he might be reserved aside until he should be fit for a better use.

But his impatience stirred to a more urgent resolve when he saw Angelica at a place where he was sure that she should not be, and though he was glad to know that she still bore an unwounded life, he saw other things at which he was less content. For though her eyes met his with a glad and confident look, her face was dark with fatigue which was not of the body alone, but of the ordeal through which she came. And he saw that the clothes she wore were

soiled and torn beyond what he would have supposed that she would have endured, though having but an hour to choose for their exchange or either for food or sleep, but now she seemed unaware of the condition in which she stood. . . .

The Mass being done, there were many who hastened to go, some having to reach distant posts in the hour of truce that remained, and most having their own parts of the wall in mind, for the fact that there had been a breach blown in the bastion of Castile did not mean that it would be more easy to make defence of shattered ramparts elsewhere if Mustapha should change his attack. And those who stayed were as urgent to disregard the stiffness of which their own limbs would have been willing to make complaint, as they resumed their work on the tumbled stones before the Turkish guns would open on them again.

Francisco stayed Sir Oliver as he was moving away.

“If I may,” he said, “I would have a more active place than I now hold.”

Sir Oliver looked at him, and considered that there were many less fit than he who were now at more dangered posts.

“So you will,” he said. “And at a near hour. You may be content about that.”

Francisco thanked him, but did not give ground.

“I would know,” he said, “if it be by order that my cousin is here, or by no more than her own will.”

“She is one who must do her part at a final need, and that need was here. But, for the moment, that need is less. There are others who were summoned with her who have returned to their own tasks. She may go back if she will, as I think she should.”

“Will you order that?”

“No. For I can neither order all women to leave the wall, we being as few as we now are, nor will I make difference for her. She may go back if she will.”

“I may tell her that? . . . It is four hours before my duty resumes at my own post. Can I aid here until then?”

“You should ask De Castriot that, though there is no doubt what he will say. But you must observe that he can give you no warrant to remain if there be renewal of the assault, for which, as I think, Mustapha is even now making array. For you must then move to your own place, though your hour of rest be not done, for it is there that your trust lies.”

Francisco understood a warning in that, which he supposed that he did not need, but he let it pass, having a more urgent question upon his mind. He would have made further request, but Sir Oliver, having other matters on hand, excused himself in a brief word, and hastened away.

Angelica, not supposing that Francisco could stay, had gone back to her own toil. With Brother William, of whom she had made a friend, she sought to roll a great fragment of rock to the edge of the higher wall, where it was broken above the breach, and to poise it so that it could be tipped into the fosse at the right time to fall on a crowding foe. The chaplain's pike was a lever now, which may have been a more congenial use than it first had, but in fact Brother William had shown no slackness of spirit since he had seen the face of his fears.

Angelica looked up with a glad word, and a glance which withdrew somewhat at the sight of her cousin's face. She asked, "Is all well? Are you changed? Are you stationed here?"

"You should not be at that work," he said, without making reply. "Look at your hands."

"So I do," she said. "Or so I might. But there is not much I can see."

She looked at hands which were soiled and skinned, and stained with neglected blood, being too soft for the work they did.

"They are poor hands, as I might have learnt before now, and the stones are rough. But the Turks would be rougher still, and the breach is low."

"You have left that for which you are more fit, and an equal need. Sir Oliver says you can go back."

"Does he say I must?"

"He says you may, which should be the same thing."

"I am not sure. I will go if there be no further assault when the truce is done."

"Which were the more reason to go. Have you been here through the night?"

"I have been here from the first call, when the mine was blown. But you may think too much of my risk, or of what I do. I was one of a crowd. I would not say that I gave no help, but I did little with push of sword, for which others were more forward than I. It is the same jeopardy for all, and the need is great. . . . I asked, are you stationed here?"

"No. Though it is what I purposed to ask. . . . But Sir Oliver is agreed that I be released from a place where I do naught. . . . I have De Castriot's thanks that I stay here while I can, though I must go if the Turks come."

They stood talking thus on the edge of the rent the explosion had made, looking down into the breach, that men were toiling to heal. Brother William gave them a glance which saw much, and went on prising the rock. Below them there was a bustle where De Castriot directed the bringing up of a gun which was to be concealed behind a tumble of stones, out of which it would discharge a deadly scatter of grape into the faces of those who should be first in scaling the breach. It was a work which he would have complete when the

truce should end, but which he still could not allow to be seen by those Turks who now came even to the further edge of the fosse, seeking to see as much as the terms of truce would permit them to do.

The two stood there looking down at that which they were not careful to see, and forgetful of the urgency of the hour, though it had been the subject on which they spoke.

Francisco was vexed both that she should remain, and that she should be unmoved by his own judgement or wish and even more that, though he had come to long for her when they were apart, they could be of no better accord when they met.

She was aware of the same cloud, but with a fixed will to break it apart. She saw, with a clarity born of the hard tuition of war, and in a situation pregnant with death, that though one might survive by a doubtful chance, that both would was no more than a frail hope, and if they could not part in the right way, it might be to either a burden of long regret which they need not have.

“Francis,” she asked, “will you say why you are vexed that I would not go?”

“You are in a danger you should not have, and which is hard to endure. I must think of what happened before.”

“Then you waste fear. I shall not be caught twice in that way.”

“There are dangers no less than that, which you cannot miss if you stay here.”

“So there are. It is as the Grand Master said. We are all likely to die. But if we are bold in holding the wall we have, we may hope for a better end.”

“So we hope. Yet I may be anxious for you.”

“I expect that, having a dread for you that I cannot still, which will be more when you are gone to a dangerous place. . . . But, Francis, in very truth, is it that alone? Do you not think what I do to be both danger and shame? From which you would keep me clean, if I would be meeker to you?”

“I have not spoken of shame. I would have you away from here. I am plain on that.”

“So you are. . . . We are of a great house. You do not forget that? We have honour to keep.”

“So I think.”

“There are Maltese women along the wall. . . . Having come here as I did, would you have me do less than they? Am I to stand further back for fear of death or a fouled hand? It were a poor boast for our house’s pride.”

He controlled his own difficult pride to answer in words that were not easy to say: “I have been foolish before, and was near to be wrong again. . . . You are one with whom our honour is very sure, and for your safety I can but

pray.”

He caught a hand at which she had looked down as she spoke, raising it to his lips. He kissed dirt and blood, but she knew it to be a better thing than if he had kissed her mouth, they having been together from childhood days.

Her blood beat fast to a thrill of triumph and of desire as she felt his kiss. There came vision of a lifetime of happy days, which she saw, at her next thought, to be mirage which she had made it likely she would not reach. Yet had she not come thereto by the only road? There would have been no way through the gates of the convent of Holy Cross.

If life were too dear to lose, should she not go back to her work at the lazar, where none would blame her to be?

“Francis,” she said, “De Castriot will give you no thanks that we idle here.”

## CHAPTER XLVIII

MARSHAL COUPPIER had some cause to be content with the success of the tactics he had employed, having recovered his walls, and that after inflicting a loss upon the Turks which they would be grieved to count; and so he was until he considered the tale of his own dead, which he was worse placed to endure, and that the length of his walls was no less than it had been two days ago, when he had decided that he was too weak to maintain the line.

He could do no better now than to plan that he would fall back as before, asking Mustapha to pay again for that which he had been unable to keep; but he would have been spared some thought, at least for that day, had he known Mustapha's resolve, which was not much less than to leave him alone, as being worth less than the price he asked.

For Mustapha, when he had proposed a truce for the removal of wounded and dead, as it was custom to do, had his plans made, on the assurance that St. Angelo was not far from its fall. He had no mind to entangle himself again in the Bermola streets while Piali broke into the Bourg, and might even bring St. Angelo down, so that the name would be his for the exploit that would bring triumph to Turkish arms. Piali had had his chance for a day and night at the breach of the ruined wall and he had failed to enter the town. Now Mustapha sent him away, with pretext enough, so that he could not object, though he must go in a sullen mood, more being understood on both sides than even Piali would be reckless to say.

For there had been store-ships come into port with equipment both for army and fleet, but especially to refurnish the ships which had been stripped for the army's need. Now that there was talk of the assembly of Christian galleys in the harbours of Sicily, and none knew what fleets might be sailing to join them from further ports, it had become urgent need to refit the ships which had been half emptied both of artillery and crews, so that they might reinforce the squadron which was at sea under Candellissa's command. The fleet was Piali's charge, and the ordering of a naval battle would rest with him. How could he object when Mustapha said that he would take control of St. Angelo's siege, and that Piali should look to his ships?

To Hassan also Mustapha gave a part which he could not decline, and which he accepted without sign of demur, having more control of his thoughts than Piali was ever likely to gain, and those thoughts seeing somewhat further and more clearly ahead.



Hassan had not been idle these last days. Mustapha had had no wish to repeat the blunder which had cost the lives of all who had lain at La Marsa Springs. He had learned that De Vigny and Vertura were no less to be feared than Marshal Couppier had been before, and he had given Hassan charge to protect their rear in a thorough way. This would have meant no more than that some good Barbary troops, and some regiments of Spahis who still had horses for which there had been little use, would have paraded idly from point to point of the Turkish lines, had the Marshal's lieutenants pursued the policy of caution which he had practised and taught. But they conceived, with good reason enough, that the desperation of St. Angelo's plight required that they should take greater risks, to lessen pressure upon its crumbling walls.

They commenced attacks both by night and day, showing valour and skill, but still playing the game that Hassan would have asked them to do.

The untrained Maltese showed a courage none could doubt. They had some success. But De Ligny was ambushed, being betrayed by a Greek spy, and died with a hundred more. There were other encounters in which the Maltese met with disastrous loss.

Now it was known that Vertura was laid up with a poisoned foot. The command at Notabile had passed to the Chevalier Mesquita, a Portuguese of whom little was known, either good or bad, but who had claimed it with no better reason than that he was the oldest knight in Notabile still alive and without a disabling wound.

Mustapha felt that the guerrilla menace was tamed, if not entirely subdued. He proposed to Hassan that he should use the most part of his troops to threaten the Sanglea, so that the Marshal should be too closely contained to consider aiding the Grand Master at any need, but without again attempting to enter the town, unless at such a chance as would offer less costly success than Mustapha himself had won.

"I suppose," he said, "that the first time I was over the wall I should have gone on to St. Michael's fort, had I not been stayed by a lying tale, but the next they were more prepared, and our troops bled.

"It may be now that we shall find the Bourg simpler to win, as it must be the larger gain. But I will leave it to you. You may storm again, if you think well. They must be nearing the end. By every report they are weak and few, and they must get fewer with every day that we hammer around their walls."

Hassan agreed about that, but said that he would be cautious in wasting men. Let the guns resume. There had been a cargo of powder landed the day before. They could fire night and day with no fear of stint, using every gun they had, which the Christians had become unable to do. And their guns on all sides were now six to one, or something better than that.

The Turkish army at this time had been reinforced with some extra

regiments, as well as with cargoes of munitions and other stores. Della Corna's guess that they had no more than 16,000 men who could stand on their own legs was too sanguine a word. Mustapha could still count 20,000 good troops whom he could use in a mobile way, without sum of details of guard or supply or the ships' crews that were not ashore. There was a grain-ship from Gerbes expected in a week's time, and when it had arrived they would not be short of any kind of supplies, even though it were two months more that the Cross would fly from St. Angelo's tower, which would be a miracle of the Christian saints. . . . The last hour of the truce struck, and the guns opened again.

## CHAPTER XLIX

MUSTAPHA had used the hours of truce to remove his own troops from before the Sanglea, where those of Hassan arrived, and with these he increased the weight of attack against the walls of the Bourg.

While the truce endured, he had made open show of such massing of troops before diverse parts of the wall as would make the Grand Master afraid to weaken defence at whatever point, though they might now be no more than a menace of force that the trenches hid. He had been able to rest his men, except for such movements as have been told, while the Christians had toiled on in the growing heat of the day to strengthen their shattered walls, and so it was not without good reasons for hope that St. Angelo had come to its last hour that he ordered that the breach should be stormed again.

The Turkish trenches were now so close to the wall that there was no great space to be rushed, which was well for those who must cross it now, for they must face a hail of shots and missiles of many kinds (but none good) from the preparation of those who knew before where they would be likely to start, and where they would seek to come, and they were exposed besides to the flanking fire of the Arragon bastion, where men had stood by their guns await for the moment when they could be discharged on an emerging foe.

The fact was that when Piali lost the first minutes after the mine was blown, he lost three-fourths of the advantage which such a gap can give in a line which is stoutly and skilfully held. Mustapha was not regardless of this, but he knew how great the exhaustion and how few the numbers must be of the Maltese knights, and he sought to make a quick end. His natural caution may have been somewhat overcome by the obduracy of his resolve that St. Angelo should not escape at last, after the losses he had sustained, of which it might already be said that an army had perished before St. Elmo's and St. Angelo's walls.

The threat of Sicilian succour, vague and weak as it was, also urged him to strike hard while the hour was his. With the numbers he still controlled, if they should be implacably used in assaults which would seldom cease, he did not doubt that he could win all before any aid could appear and, however dreadful the cost, he knew that failure, to Soliman's ears, would be a less tolerable tale.

So it came that as the truce expired, and at the hottest hour of the day, there was a burst of barbaric cries, a throbbing of urgent drums, and the trenches spouted an outrush of dark-faced fanatic forms toward a breach which was

now half repaired, and well furnished to fling them back.

So it did; with a slaughter which even this siege could not often have matched, such were the crowding ranks, and such the wanton exposure in which they came. Yet they scaled twice to the breach, and for one perilous moment were within it in a rush against which the reckless valour of the Christian knights was hardly equal to throw them back, even with the aid of the rain of missiles which were directed from both sides of the gap upon those who were climbing upward to their comrades' support.

It was then that Angelica joined with Brother William to send their poised fragment of rock on its dreadful leap upon the turbaned heads of those who were pressing into the breach. It bore down three, wounded or dead, and came to rest on a man's leg, which it broke and pinned, so that it was beyond his strength to get free, in the position in which he lay. He called uselessly to comrades who were now tumbling or slipping down the stones in a desperate haste not to be slowest in flight, that they should lift it and bear him away. A wild-fire bomb, flung wildly after retreating foes, burst beside him, burning and blinding his eyes. A man came to Angelica's side, bending a bow, with which he would have put an end to a tortured life.

De Castriot's voice sounded in sharp command: "Let him be. His cries daunt those who will be told to return." The man lowered the bow.

She felt the air of a missile that passed her face. She could not tell what it was. She realized that it was foolish to stand longer there, having done her part. She turned to say this to Brother William, and saw that he was on the ground. She went on her knees to find a wound from which the blood welled in a tide she could never staunch. He crossed himself with a shaking hand. His lips moved in prayer. He seemed unconscious of her and of what she did.

De Castriot's voice sounded sharply again: "You must not wait. Pull him away." There was one who seized the dying man by the feet, and dragged him roughly aside. They had a cauldron of boiling pitch, which they would place where her stone had been.

De Castriot recognized her as she was drawing aside. "Señorita," he said, in an altered voice, "you should not be here. It is too exposed. You should go below."

"So I will," she said. "I have no more to do here."

He answered: "You did it well," and his attention went back to the cauldron, which he would see with his own eyes to be so placed that it would be of most avail at the next rush.

She went down feeling no horror at what she had seen—she was past that—and little fear for herself. The mind adjusts itself in a short time, and it had become natural to see swords rending in human flesh, and the entrails of those whom the gun-shots tore. She might not have used her own hands to pull a

dying man away by the legs, but she understood the tension of those who did. They were obsessed by one overwhelming need—to keep out the Turks, and their own lives had been risked anew in every second they were delayed in that which they were exposed to do.

But as she withdrew from the top of the wall, she became aware that she was exhausted both in body and mind, so that she could do no more for that time. She had leave to go if she would, and she made her way back to her own room in the castle turret, which seemed a haven of peace, even though the noise of the guns was a constant rumble from every side, and at times there would come the nearer thunder of the great cannon on the castle roof, that fired at some distant mark.

When she had changed and cleansed herself of the worst dirt, she went down to Sir Oliver's room, where he was at work, as he always was.

He looked almost as weary as she, but gave her a glance she was glad to have.

"It is well," he said, "that you are safely returned."

"I must sleep. I could do no more. I suppose that they will hold the breach for this day."

"So I think. I should say there are other points that are weaker now, if Mustapha could make the right guess."

There was a tone in that which she heard from him for the first time. She asked: "Can we endure?"

"It is that which we should not doubt, even in our own minds."

"I will practise to avoid that. . . . I may sleep long."

"So you should. You will be safe in these walls."

"I was not doubting of that."

She went to rest which was quickly hers, and the agony of the siege went on till the darkness came.

But its events of that day gave Mustapha no occasion to boast, when Hassan came to him with the falling of night, except for the report that La Valette had a wound, which he would be glad to believe.

So he had; having been struck on the leg by a fragment of grenade, when he had been inspecting the bastion of Provence. But as he found that he could still walk, when it had been bound and the blood stayed, he had made nothing of that, and went on to traverse the wall, as he had been doing before, and to encourage a line that was now so thin that they could but wonder, at any point, how they would fare if they should be chosen for storm on the next day.

## CHAPTER L

HASSAN had done well enough at the Sanglea, and perhaps more by attempting less. He had kept Marshal Couppier fully engaged, and had made some advance, which he would be unlikely to lose, for he had gone forward no more than where he could lay the defences flat. He had resolved to progress thus in a gradual way, which would be as final as fate, not using his men for what the guns could better do at a short range where there was but feeble reply, and avoiding danger of mines by not bringing on his men too close to the ebbing Maltese line.

He told Mustapha how he had fared, but it was not that of which he had come to talk, but of a new plan.

“If there be relief from Palermo before we have St. Angelo down, where do you say they would land?”

“I suppose,” Mustapha answered, “we can be sure of this, if no more. They will not seek to engage our fleet, though we must meet theirs if we can. They will have an army to get ashore. It will be in some quiet bay, where they will hope that we shall not come.”

“So I agree. And where will they make their base, if they should come safely to land?”

“At Notabile at the first. They will rest on that, and advance to attack our rear, where we must face round. It might all be done in two days. We must have St. Angelo down before then.”

“But if Notabile were ours?”

“They would be worse placed, that is sure. They might not come to land, if they heard that.”

“Or they might not put to sea, if they should hear it before they embark. . . . If I should make sudden attack thereon, might it not be a good gain?”

“It should be sudden, so that they have neither time to prepare defence nor avoid the town. . . . And our time is short.”

“I could march at dawn, with 4,000 men, leaving enough to hold the front at Sanglea.”

“Then you have planned this before?”

“So I have; but I have spoken to none. I would have let it lapse had our assaults had more gain in the last two days, but I suppose it may now be a good plan.”

Mustapha agreed to that. He saw that it might be one of those smaller

things by which greater are changed. If Notabile should fall, it would dishearten both those who were in St. Angelo's walls and those who talked of rescue they had not been hasty to bring. And it was a risk which Hassan would take on his own head.

Hassan did not prolong words, having Mustapha's consent. He returned to his own tent, where he would not be alone.

For the fact that he might be marching on Notabile at an early hour of the dawn had not appeared to him to be a sufficient reason why he should not have Venetia's company during the night. Only, as his time would be short for sleep and for her, he had sent her an order to come to his own tent, which she had been pleased to receive.

For though she knew that she lived at a great risk, and might fall by a careless word, having that in her heart which it now held, she saw as clearly that she was not so placed that she could come through in a passive way. Unless she could content herself from that day with the life of a Moorish slave, she must be wise both to think and act in her skin's cause, and to keep her blood where she would prefer it to be.

If she were discreet for this night, she might increase confidence in herself: she might even learn things which it was vital to know. She had gone to a man's bed before then for a poorer price, and he more hateful to her.

She had thought much in these days, which had been quiet for her, though for most around they had held excitement more than enough. She had wondered how the Turkish women endured the monotony of the lives in which they were idly penned, to be called for a man's pleasure at times which must seem seldom enough, being the one event that they were permitted to share. But she had used the time well in her own way, to review how she was placed, and to weigh the chances by which she might hope to come away with her life, and perhaps with a scarless skin.

Now she found Hassan to talk, as she thought, with a free tongue. He told her how they had been foiled in the strife of the last days, but with confidence that St. Angelo was about to fall. He talked of the stores and munitions which had been brought to port in the last week, and of how Piali had gone to the fleet in a sulky mood. He mentioned the grain-ship which was due to arrive in four days' time, and the port from which it had come.

She thought that suspicion had left his mind, and that he talked with less reserve every time that they met, for which she thanked her own discretion, not entirely without a cause. She did not doubt what he said, nor that the end of the knights of Malta was near, and she decided that, if she should delay more, she might find it too late to fly. She had a half-formed purpose at the rear of her mind that she would slip away and take refuge at Notabile on the coming day; but she would not consider that, even in thought, while she was talking to him,

lest she should lay it bare in some guardless way, which she would have been unlikely to do.

It was at a later hour, when she heard from other mouths where he had gone, that she saw that his confidence came but a short way. She knew that he must have had Notabile more in his mind than the subjects of which he had spoken to her. She saw also that it must have been harmless to tell her of a march on which he would set out as soon as he left her side, even had she been no less than a practised spy, but it was a matter which he had very secretly planned, and such matters might never be open to her.

She went over all he had said, for which she had leisure enough, seeking something which might be offered for sale at the Grand Master's mart, and found no more than a small thing, of which Hassan himself might have said that it could do neither good nor harm, at that date, for the Grand Master to know. Yet if a small coin be all that your pouch hold——

Beyond that, when she thought of such trade, there was another doubt of equal moment to her. If the Grand Master liked her goods, would he be able to pay? Could he promise her life for more than a few days, even had he a better will than it was easy to think?

She supposed that she must put thought of flight to Notabile out of her mind. She saw that it might be her only course, if she would avoid a great risk, to accept the fate which would ship her away to Algiers. After all, it had been her own choice. (But at how urgent a need!) Yet she would not consent to that till she had tried her cage, bar by bar, for she had come to see that it would be a life which she would find it hard to endure.

Her thoughts turned to St. Angelo again, and though she put herself first, as she would have said that most do, she considered those she had left and betrayed in a different mood from that in which she had fled from their threatened process of law. She may not have observed this, and yet it may have been enough to tip an uncertain scale.

All her life, authority had been her watched and avoided foe. Even wealth was not native to her or to be wooed as a friend. It was to be won, if at all, by violence or subtle wiles. Should it become hers, it must have the look of a captured prey. All the sympathy she could spare from her own needs had been for those who were under the hard heel of the law: whom it caught and baited and jailed in its cold merciless way.

She had not looked upon Malta's knights as being men of her faith and blood: they had been her most powerful and pitiless foes. Secure in a great strength and a great pride, the Grand Master had not quarrelled with her. She had been mere dirt from which he would cleanse his town. And she had repaid contempt with a lively hate, which had yet been short of venom to do him hurt, if he would have left her alone.



That feeling had not changed at the root, for its cause remained. Had she seen the Grand Master chained to a slave's oar, her face might have dimpled into a smile. But St. Angelo had changed from its former aspect of strength, and (from her view) of a too orgulous pride. It had become of her own kind. It looked round for a way to save itself, which was not easy to see. It gasped for life, biting hard the while at the hounds that had dragged it down. Seeing it thus, she became aware that its people were more to her than those to whom she had come. She would have given it help, if she could, at a cost less than her own skin. She had needed all her practised schooling of lips and eyes that Hassan should guess nothing of this when he had talked of its coming fall.

And during the last three days she had observed a vaguely possible way—that is, if she should have any word for the Grand Master that it would be profit to send—which she had considered, and put firmly aside, as being a poor hope and a risk that she did not like. Now, having come back to Le Tonneau's villa, she weighed it again in a more tolerant mind. If she had better hope that St. Angelo would endure—if she had a better message to send—if she were more assured that she might not be at the jaws of a deadly trap—it was hard to resolve. In the heat of the afternoon she strolled out into the road, with one of her negroid slaves at her heels, as she had been making it her habit to do.

The road that ran under the front of the villa had a steep cliff falling away on its further side. It must have been damaged by the heavy traffic which had passed over it during the first weeks of the war. Now a portion of it had fallen away and a slave-gang had been sent for its repair. They were half a dozen men of various origins, war-captives rather than criminals, who were in the charge of an overseer and with two armed soldiers for guard. The men were driven hard, but were allowed two hours for rest and food at the hottest part of the day, which may have been for the overseer's convenience rather than theirs.

At those times he would retire some distance away, as though thinking it unseemly that he should eat or relax with them, but the two guards, who were changed at the noon hour, remained watchful over the resting men.

Venetia had made an easy friend of the overseer, with a gift neither too small nor too large. She could talk to the slaves if she would. It was nothing to him, if it did not hinder the work. Indeed, there had been no need for the gift while it was known that Hassan's favour was hers. She had talked to them, testing the languages that they spoke, and her power to make herself understood; and there had been nothing said (excepting with one, and that little enough) which might not have been shouted aloud. She had been carefully-careless also to tell Hassan of this interest which she had found for her idle days. "I learn tongues," she had said, in which he knew her to have some skill, and quickness to learn, of which she had boasted to him before.

The slave-driver was an easy jovial man, who would do no more, even to one who paused in his work, than to give him a prick with his sword-point, to which a slave should not object. And even that would be done with a jesting word, showing that there was no malice behind the point. It would not commonly go more than half an inch deep, and if some of his charges had more scars from this cause than it would be simple to count, it showed no more than how lazy they were, and how lenient he had been not to have reported them for the lash.

Venetia came to the men, who sat under the narrow shade of citron trees overhanging her garden wall. They ate food which was plain enough, but not stinted, for their owners knew that hard work cannot be got, even by means of the lash, from beasts that are badly fed. After eating well, they would sleep till the overseer should rouse them to work again.

Venetia passed the two guards, whom she had seen before. She gave them a smiling word in their own tongue, which she was learning fast, and which she had assured herself before to be the only one that they knew. She was in no peril from them.

There was one man to whom she could talk in her own tongue, he being Ligurian born. Of the other five, she was sure that her words would have no meaning except to one, a Levantine, of whom she was less sure, and whom she judged to be of the sort who would betray his mother to death for a stale crust if he were hungry enough, but this man was some distance away.

The man of her own land sat as far apart as he could venture to do without the fear of being herded back by the guards. He was not liked, even by those who were fellows in the bondage that he endured, for he was one of morose and passionate moods.

She sauntered on, talking to those she passed in their own tongues as far as she was able to do, and so came to this man, to whom she spoke also of indifferent things, the negroid girl standing by, and understanding nothing at all. There came a time when she said, low, but in a casual tone, and with the smile that should go with a jesting word:

“If I should do all that you ask, would you take a word to the Grand Master for me?”

The man was slow to reply. “How could I do that? I should not be there. St. Angelo is a falling town. I would be loose in the land.”

“For the dogs to catch? St. Angelo is the only safety you have. Do you know that Hassan marched on Notabile this dawn?”

“Then there is no safety to find. It would be but few days till they would have me again.”

“Not if you have a good wit. When a town falls, there are ever those who get free.”

“Shall I have the knife?”

“I will promise naught. There is a low ledge under the wall, as you pass the gate. If you feel there in the dusk—But if you fumble you will be seen.”

“I shall not fail. . . . What must the Grand Master be told?”

She gave him the message, repeating it twice with care. She went back, passing men who dozed, regardless of what she did.

She had an irresolute mind. If St. Angelo were about to fall, the Grand Master’s goodwill, even if it could be bought, would be useless to her. Yet it was an insurance against some possible turns of event which she would be glad to have. But the risk was great. The man might betray her in the next hour. He would be likely to do so if he were caught and tortured, which was a probable end. Should he succeed in escape, he might not enter the town. She had to give him absolute trust, paying first, and in her own peril, for that which she might not get. She would have thought it a less risk had he asked her only for gold. But he must have a knife also, which was to go under the driver’s ribs. She saw that revenge, not escape, was the main object that filled his mind. The escape must follow, so that he would avoid penalty for revenge. But to escape while the overseer lived was outside his thought.

She considered it for some time, and resolved: “It is foolish risk, and would be to buy that which I may not get or which may be of no value to me.” She put it out of her mind.

At a later hour there was gossip brought to the house. It was vague, and not easy to understand, but it seemed that, on all sides, the Turks had had a bad day.

Hassan was said to be in retreat. A further assault had failed at the Castile breach, and it was said now that it was to be bombarded again, work having been resumed on the construction of a platform or cavalier from which it was to be battered with heavy guns brought almost to the counter-scarp edge. This had been Piali’s idea, before he had been sent to his ships, and Mustapha had put it aside.

There were rumours also about Mustapha himself, some saying that he was wounded or dead, or at least that he had been down in a ditch for some hours, from which he did not emerge.

Venetia did not know how much to believe, but she knew that such rumours may show a face of truth which is not properly theirs. They were not the kind of tales which would be scattered about if the Turks were winning the town, or Hassan had carried the horsehair standards over Notabile’s ancient and crumbling walls.

Hearing these things, Venetia came to a different mind. She gave tasks to her girls which would keep them from observation of her. She wrapped a sharp knife with some pieces of gold. She strolled down, and put them where she had

said she would. The quick Malta dusk was already near, when the slaves would cease work and be marched away, passing the length of wall.

After all, the risk did not seem over-great. The rag in which knife and gold had been wrapped she had found on a midden heap. The knife would be hard to trace to her. The gold was Italian coin which had come from Francisco's pouch: there was no avoiding of that.

Having done her part, she put it easily out of her mind, after resolving how she would act and speak if suspicion should come, so that she should not be trapped unaware. She had not asked the man's plan for escape, nor how the gold was to be used, having avoided all needless words. She knew only that the knife was for the overseer to feel, which seemed to her as good a use as it was likely to have, and she knew the value of gold, for whatever end.

At a later hour, there was a confirmation of what had been rumoured before. For the most part, the first tales had been true, though their implications might have appeared more than they were.

Hassan had made a march so swift, and with such sudden surprise, that he had come in sight of the walls of the ancient capital of the isle.

As he marched he had surveyed the land with a soldier's eye, and it had become clear to him that he would not have come so far had he not kept his intention secret till the last hour. A few score of men who could shoot from the protection of the low walls that divided the little barley-stubbed fields, and falling back as he advanced, could have inflicted such loss on his ordered ranks as would have been hard to endure. Even to return might be at a great cost, if he should be stoutly opposed.

But he marched over bare fields and by empty roads, with no more to face than some futile shots, as the outposts of the Maltese guerrillas scattered to give him way, and these were no more to him than a score of bees to a bear.

But the surprise, great as it was, did not find Notabile with open gates, which would have been too much to expect. Nor was there any sign that Mesquita was unequal to his command, or that Hassan had come to the spoil of an easy prey. Women joined with men in manning the ancient walls. They showed a bold and confident front.

Hassan rode round the city, surveying its defences on every side. He had no time for a siege. He must storm the wall, or go back. His artillery was no more than two guns, as yet half a mile behind. If he should attempt that which would not succeed, he would have lost men who were needed at the Sanglea, and every hour he remained those might be gathering in the hills who would be active to obstruct his return. The men of Malta might be overcome in the open field, but, being behind the walls, they were foes to fear. He was one who could take a bold risk, if it had his judgment's support. But he did not disguise facts from himself. He said: "They would hold the walls. We should lose men

to no gain." He gave orders for instant retreat.

He brought his army clear with a trivial loss, giving the Maltese some reason to boast, but not much.

It was an audacious attempt which might have come to success had the ancient walls been more fallen apart, or been manned in a fainter way. It might have been disaster, had it been led by one less able to see an unwelcome fact, or to act thereon with decisive speed.

Mesquita was not pleased. He said: "Had I known it a day before, he had paid in blood for each yard he came." But it was of no avail to say that, for the chance was gone.

As to Mustapha, it was true that he had been in a ditch for five hours, but it was not before the bastion of Castile, but at a different part of the Bourg wall.

Being over-bold, or over-confident in surveying a weakened foe, he had ridden too close to a silent wall, and had found that he was under fire of those who were pleased to have so important a mark. He rode off with his staff, who got clear, but his own horse went down, with a cross-bow bolt in its heart. He had a rough fall. As he rose a bullet rattled his scabbard and another tore through the crimson surcoat which he wore loosely over his mail. He was glad to crawl into a half-dug trench, which had been abandoned as being in a too lively quarter for the comfort of those who had started it on a moonless night. Mustapha was glad to be there till the darkness came and he could crawl safely away. He had for company a Turk who had been dead for ten days. He suffered in temper and pride, but the incident did not strengthen St. Angelo's walls.

Before he made that mistake he had ordered that there should be a two-days' cessation of assault at the breach, the guns taking their part again. He had caused a sealed envelope, addressed to the Grand Master, to be thrown over the wall. La Valette opened it when it was taken to him, and read the one word *Thursday* written in the Latin tongue. That was clear enough. It was Monday evening then. The Turkish batteries were to pound them for two more days, after which Mustapha would make an end. He scorned surprise, not acting as one who ordered a battle, but rather fixing a day when the execution would be. Counting the few who yet lived within St. Angelo's weakened walls, it would have been a bold guess to say that he boasted more than he would be equal to do.

## CHAPTER LI

IT was on Tuesday morning that the Grand Master called a Council of War, for which there had been common request, that all might know how they stood, and what their action should be if the Turks should further prevail. And it was at the same hour, in the great reception hall of his Palermo palace, that the Viceroy of Sicily received the Grand Prior of Auvergne with the honour his rank required, and was insulted by one who addressed him in reply without using the titles which were his, both in his own right and in that of the semi-regal office he held.

“Sir Prior,” he asked in a cool way, by which his dignity stood, “do you address me thus of a set will, and, if so, will you tell me why?”

“I have good cause,” De Lastic replied, in a voice which was heard even by those that stood at the door, “but should I see you move to Malta’s relief, I would call you by all your rights, or by that of Majesty if you prefer.”

The Viceroy heard him with an expressionless face. “Sir Prior,” he asked, “will you speak to me aside?”

When they had withdrawn to a windowed recess, he said, in an altered voice: “You may be surprised that I give you thanks for words which are good for Malta and me. . . . You are Malta’s friend. That is clear. And I can tell you that which I know you will not blazon abroad.

“When I was unable to send the aid which I would have been glad to do—for it is the curse of rulers, as your wisdom will not deny, that we are often hindered from that which our hearts desire—then I sent comforting words, being all I could, and promises which I made loud in all mouths to disturb our foes; but, now that I move indeed, you can give Malta no better help than to protest that I lie still, which we must hope that they hear, and perhaps believe. Yet, if you watch, you may come to another mind, for there are preparations afoot which I cannot hide, as I would be more pleased to do.”

The Grand Prior listened to this, and was in doubt what to believe. “It is true,” he said, “that I have heard little of this you do, and have seen less. Yet if you contrive all in a secret way, it is that which is wise in war.”

He went in a great doubt.

Yet that which Don Garcio urged was in part true. There were Genoese galleys in Messina harbour, ready to put to sea when they should see assembly of force such as would make it more than a poor jest. There was hurried raising of troops, both in Naples and further north at Milan. The Viceroy saw himself

committed to an effort to raise St. Angelo's siege, with no time, nor with support from the Spanish king, such as would enable him to sail with the army which the position plainly required. He might well hope that Mustapha's eyes were not turned this way, nor his fleet alert. He might even had felt relief in his secret heart had he heard report of St. Angelo's fall. For he feared either to be cursed in all men's mouths for a further delay, or to sail with a fleet too feeble to raise the siege, in which case he could see that the shame would be left to him. . . .

Knowing nothing of this, but being in as much doubt as the Grand Prior of what Don Garcio would be likely to do, the Council of Malta met, not now composed of Commanders of the Order alone, as had been the case in earlier days, but of those who, by merit shown or the chance of avoiding death, had come to command at different parts of the wall.

Assault had ceased, except at the Sanglea, where, one by one, with fighting that did not slack, the streets of Bermola passed into the hands of the Moors and were levelled down where they had not been flattened enough before.

But from all sides the batteries fired on the ruined walls, the defenders of which were too few and too worn to repair them anew, as the round-shot shook and tumbled them down. And it was with this sound in their ears that the Council of Malta met for the last time—till the last shot should be fired, and the siege done.

Marshal Couppier was there, with Colonel Roubles from the Sanglea, and Ramegas from his post of guard over the empty ships; De Castriot also, and De Claremont, who had taken over his command of the Arragon wall now that De Castriot had charge of the Castile breach, and Del Formo was there from the bastion of Provence, and others of equal valour from parts of the line which had not yet been subjected to such extremities of assault as it had been their lots to sustain.

The Grand Master had talked much with Sir Oliver in the last hour, and they had not always agreed, but now he gave no sign of his thoughts, nor did he commence with any confident words, as it had been his custom to do.

He looked round on men who were haggard with toil and strife, half of them having bandaged wounds, and almost all more fit for the lazar beds than for that which must face them now. His eyes fell on Marshal Couppier, who may have shown least sign of any there that he had not come from a quiet life. He asked: "Will you tell us first how you fare at the Sanglea, and what men you could spare, if you should hear that we come to a greater need?"

Marshal Couppier was quiet in reply, as one who talks of a meal. "I do well enough, as I think. I am dear to buy. You must not expect beyond that. St. Michael's fort may be hard to take; but I am not yet so far back. I can hold them off from the harbour side for another week, or perhaps more. But if am I

to do that, you must not tell me of nearer needs. I cannot spare you a man.”

La Valette heard this, and did not look pleased; but he only said, addressing all rather than one: “You have heard how matters stand at the Sanglea. Have you counsel for the Bourg’s better defence?”

There was some confused talk thereon, each commander urging the weakness of his own front, and asking assurance that it could be reinforced with speed if it should become a point of special attack, which Cardona interrupted to say: “Chevaliers, if you will listen to one who has spent some years in the trade of war, you have one question first to resolve, on which all must depend. You have two days to dispose, if we have made a right guess of what the Turks are meaning to do; and the first question must be, can we sustain the length of the Bourg lines, or shall we withdraw to the strength of the castle walls?”

The Grand Master spoke as one whose passion was hard to rein: “Do you propose that we yield them walls that they fail to take?”

Cardona was precise: “I proposed neither to stand nor withdraw. I did but urge that we should first be clear on what we purpose to do.”

La Valette made no reply. Sir Oliver urged him, in a low tone, which could still be heard by those who sat near: “You must let them speak.”

A discussion began in which, while no one urged that they should give up the town, yet they talked of how it could best be done, of how the wounded should be conveyed within St. Angelo’s walls, and of other details of such retreat, showing that it must have been thought, and perhaps debated, before.

It went on till the Grand Master could no longer endure. He said: “You will withdraw no yard by my will.”

Marshal Couppier spoke, not as one who would argue a course, but as asking the Grand Master a question which would be for him to decide: “There are, in all, twelve hundred men who can stand, or perhaps less. I count some women therewith, and also those I have at the Sanglea. Can you hold the line with that force?”

La Valette was sharp in reply: “Do you, too, counsel retreat?”

“I do not counsel at all. I but seek to know. I have told you what I can do, and how long, on the southern side. But of this side I know less.”

“We can hold the line,” the Grand Master said, “for we have no choice.” He looked round to add: “You have thought of much, but there is one thing you have not observed. Shall we drink of a dry tank?”

There was a moment’s silence as they considered this, and saw that there was no answer to make. The castle tank, which collected the winter rain, was of a size sufficient for such a garrison as the castle required and something beyond that. But at this time of the year it was low, as it was likely to be, and now, including wounded and sick, there must be not less than 1,500, besides



children, who must be crowded into the citadel walls, unless St. Michael's fort were to be defended apart, which would be separate folly and insufficient relief. They would be dead of thirst in a month, if not less.

They might observe—they might even resent—that the Grand Master's tone had been one of satisfaction, as though the lowness of that tank, which might be death to all who sat there, and many hundreds without, were a special mercy of God: they might feel assured that, had that argument failed, he would have been no less stubborn for his own will. But the fact stood. Retreat to the castle could only be made, if at all, when there were fewer who were yet waiting to die.

De Claremont spoke then, being one who had said little before:

"We cannot all drink of that well. We must be equal to hold the town (as we have done to this day) till the Viceroy come. . . . Yet there is much that can be done in two days, if that time be ours, and better now than if the Turks were over the wall. Let the Grand Master take his place in his own state, as he used to be, and let the most precious treasures that the town holds be also conveyed to where they will be more safe than they now are. Let the stores be moved to the castle vaults, and such of the wounded men as cannot walk of themselves, and must be handled with care, be sheltered therein; and we shall feel, at the worst, that there has been provision made by which some may endure, though the pagans enter the town."

There was some murmur of approval at this, but the Grand Master was not grateful in his reply. "It has," he said, "a most prudent sound; but have you thought that it will hearten the Turks (who will quickly hear) and weaken every arm on our own walls? I should say, if you do that, you will be scaled on the next day. You will make Mustapha right in his date. As for myself, I will stay where I now lodge, where I may still be when the siege is done. . . . But I will tell you that which it will be wiser to do. . . . I will have no men withdrawn to the castle walls. I will send them out to the town. There shall be none that the castle holds by to-morrow noon, save those who handle the guns. . . . If we have strength and time to bear stores therein, or the wounded who can no longer avail, and even the treasures the town contains, will you say that we lack means to make our defences strong? Can we lift all except stones?" His voice rose and shook with the passion that moved his heart, as he said at last: "I tell you we should work as men who blaspheme God, having resolved on our own defeat, which you must see that He does not will."

His passion bore down any opposition there might have been from exhausted men, whose valour was not less than his, though they may have been of a less obstinate faith. The talk turned to the making of a census of all who lived, and allocating them anew, so that there might be equality of strength—or rather of weakness—at every part, with clear order of who should

move, and at what stress, to the support of a threatened point. Even the wounded were to be counted in; for, as the Grand Master said, a man may not find it easy to stand, yet he may watch while another sleeps, or be of more active uses than that.

Sir Oliver said that that would be short to do. He had most that would be needed to know in his own records, if not in his own mind.

Marshal Couppier added to that: "It will be shorter yet, for you can leave the Sanglea. I ask naught. I have told you what (or so I think) I can do. But I cannot spare you a man."

"If," the Grand Master began, "it should appear that you have more——"

Marshal Couppier was curt with an interrupting reply: "Then it would prove what you would not be willing to see. . . . If you will hear counsel from me, you will dig trenches where they will shorten your lines. You will fall back, as I do, where you cannot stand, and will not wait to be pushed too hard. It is whether you choose to kill, or yourselves die. It is as simple as that."

La Valette surprised him with a quiet reply. "It is advice I will weigh well."

Marshal Couppier rose. "If you have done, I will back to boil my own pot. . . . Sir Oliver, I would have some words with you before I go."

They talked apart for a few moments on matters of supply at the Sanglea, the Council breaking up the while into little groups of debate. As he went, the Marshal spoke of the Grand Master as one who would see no colour but that which his eyes preferred. He added: "It is he who will save our flag, if a man can. He is of a most stubborn grain. . . . But have you thought there are two?"

"You mean that Mustapha can be as stubborn as he?"

"You are quick to see. You will have had the same thought. . . . Mustapha would not give these two days (of which he was fool to tell) had there not been weary men on both sides of the wall. I should say, if we hold, they are near to break, but I have not said that we can. . . . They have bled much, as we must contrive that they still do. . . . It is good news that Hassan has come back with a drooped tail."

"It had been better had he wasted his strength for no gain."

"He was too careful for that. I call him best of three. . . . Well, I shall have him knocking again. They do not cease at my door. I must get back. Roubles, will you come now?"

De Claremont and De Castriot were also speaking apart. The first said: "I will blow it down if I can. But they build fast. You know what my guns are."

"I cannot hold for a week if they root there. We must face fact."

"It is powder is my most need. Starkey is a Jew about that."

"So he must be. I hear they have scraped the ships. But you must put this plainly to him."

They spoke of the cavalier that the Turks built up to the very face of the

breach. Even De Castriot could not think that it would be long held if the stones with which they had piled it up in a loose way were to be blown about from so short a range, with the great guns that the Turks were known to be bringing up.

De Claremont caught Sir Oliver as he was moving away. When he understood what the need was, he gave a frank reply to one whom he knew to be discreet with his own tongue. "It is a great need, as I do not deny. You may have all you can use for two days, besides the ration of course. . . . But I will tell you how we now are. We have powder enough for a month, or perhaps more, if we are frugal in what we fire. If we served our guns as the Turks do, it would be done in six days. I have the most part safe in the vaults here, where it would not be lost, though the town fall in an hour. (You need not tell the Grand Master that. Should he ask, it is his to know). But if you must batter the cavalier, you can have all that you will. You can work your guns night and day for that need."

"I would not ask, were it not a great end, and you will see that it is not for myself."

De Claremont went back to his own place, with a vexed mind. His bastion raked the front of the Castile breach, and his two guns on the northern side were the sole hope of beating down the cavalier which the Turks built. He had a feeling that the advice he had given at the Council had sounded that of a timid man. He saw himself as in a position of safety which might not be equalled elsewhere on the whole length of the wall.

Mustapha might attack at other points of a weak-held line, but, if it were not at the breach, it would be at points far apart. The next bastion was about the last place that he would be likely to choose. It might be said that Castile's weakness made Arragon more sure of a quiet time. De Claremont considered the caprice of Fate, which gave death to one, and to another a quick fame, and to the next to look on in an idle way, though he might not be least as he came (as he surely must) from the imagination of God. He may fret at that, but he should be sure first that he does all that his place permits. . . . As he thought thus, an idea came. . . .

He went back to direct the fire of his two guns, which were served well. They caused the Turks damage and loss, though they had their own ills, drawing the fire of Turkish batteries to which they had no time to reply, by which one was dismounted at last and damaged beyond easy repair. But the cavalier rose, and, as the night came, it could be seen that there was mounting of heavy guns.

## CHAPTER LII

“THERE is a name that I do not see.”

Angelica was again in Sir Oliver’s room. She wrote orders for transfers of men from a schedule he had prepared. Olig, the last of his scribes, had gone to the wall, come back with a wounded head, gone again when his hurt healed, and was now on the long list of the dead.

“It is your cousin you mean.”

“Yes. . . . He is not hurt?”

“When did you see him last?”

“It was three hours ago.”

“Then we may suppose not. But there will be no knight left on our English wall. We can spare none now for a place which is not sought by the foe. There will be a woman to sound alarm.”

“But he is not on these lists.”

“You may suppose that I know that.”

She saw that he was not inclined to be more open of speech, and had the sense to wait for what she must soon learn. She saw herself to be posted again to the lazar near the north wall of the town, but, as before, at the call of a sharp need.

She went on with the work she had, and in a short time La Valette entered the room.

Sir Oliver asked: “Would you see these?” showing the schedules of the new orders that would be made, but the Grand Master put them quickly aside. Sir Oliver took up another sheet, that had been under his hand. “There are the thirty here whom I have reserved. . . . Don Francisco is now due.”

Angelica heard, with a quick heart-beat she could not still. On what new peril was Francisco now to be sent . . . ? But at least she might learn, if she should remain here, as it seemed that she might be permitted to do. She bent to her work, but with her attention on what was said.

The Grand Master paced the room in the way he had when he was troubled in mind. “Oliver,” he asked, in an abrupt way, “shall we take the word of that slut?”

“I think in this that we may. For a lie, whether of herself, or being given to her, would have been made in a larger way, and to look more useful to us.”

“You think it sounds as of small avail?”

“Of what use can she have thought it to be?”

The Grand Master made no immediate reply. He paced the room again. He broke out: "It may be of the saints themselves, by which they test courage and faith alike, and the scales of God may tremble to rise or fall."

Sir Oliver did not dispute that, though he supposed it might equally be thought a device of devils to detach thirty men whom they could not spare, and whose lack might be the last straw by which they would lose the wall; and this probability did not decrease when he considered the direction from which it came, but he only said: "Well, he should be here soon."

As he spoke, he observed that Angelica had forgotten her work. Their eyes met. She asked: "Is it Venetia again?" Her tone was as though she spoke of an unescapable plague.

"So it is. . . . I suppose you would not trust her at all?"

"Not though she swore by Bethlehem's star, or the manger that cradled Christ. So she told me her code."

"Yet you should hear first."

Her words had drawn the Grand Master's regard. He said: "So you should. You were with her much. You are best to judge."

Angelica saw that whatever cause brought Francisco there, it was not to be hidden from her, and with the thought her cousin entered the room.

He came expecting no more than to take orders in a short way, which he was eager to hear. He was surprised to see not only Sir Oliver but the Grand Master there, and still more when La Valette sat down, as he seldom would when he talked, and pointed him to another chair.

Sir Oliver drew one up for Angelica's use, so that she came from her own desk. They sat round the one table now, and Francisco saw that he must have come to something different from a mere command of where his place would be on the wall, though he could not guess what it could mean.

The Grand Master said: "It is of La Cerda's mistress that we must speak. She is Hassan's now."

To Francisco it was an unwelcome word, besides that it was not what he had expected to hear. Surely that folly was not to be opened again? He had thought it so safely dead. He said foolishly: "She was never mine."

The Grand Master replied in an absent way: "So I am pleased to believe." It was clear that his thoughts were on other things. He added: "Oliver, tell him the tale."

Sir Oliver addressed Angelica equally with her cousin as he began: "The matter is briefly this. There is a slave escaped from the Moors. He is of Ligurian speech. He has scars, old and new, which he could not feign. We think him to be as he says. He tells a tale of one who gave him help to escape, by which Venetia must be meant. He describes her well. He was at work beside the villa where she is lodged. He says she gave him gold and a knife,

with which last he slew one he had cause to hate before coming away. With the gold he won free. On his part, he was pledged to bring her message to us, as he truly did. She had charged him to report that a ship loaded with grain is now on the high seas, bound for Marsa Scala Bay, on which provision the Turkish army depends. The message is precise as to the port from which she sailed, and the date due. . . . Now would she do this, and why?"

Francisco found this question hard to resolve, and she was one of whom he was slow to speak in a frank way. While he paused, Angelica asked: "Of what mint were the coins? Did you learn that?"

"They were gold, struck at Ferrera."

"They were of those she had, Francis, from you! They were of some we took from the changers here. The tale has a true sound."

"Even," Sir Oliver smiled, "though you would not trust her at all? Though she would be so lightly foresworn?"

"I say she will lie with ease. She has will and wit, and no conscience at all. But would she not lie in a better way? It sounds that which it is useless to know, we being compassed here as we are."

Francisco objected: "It is not that. It is what Messina would pay to hear."

Sir Oliver explained: "Your cousin is right in that. It is the kind of tale for which captains will pay, and it might be of much moment to us."

That was simple to see. There were galleys in Sicilian ports that would be quickly loosed at the hope of a fat prize, though they would not be active for war till they should know who would pay their risk, and have either gold in hand or a sure bond.

"I suppose," Angelica said, "she thought we could get message through?"

"So we might. It is still a possible thing. Yet she could not have thought that, for there is no time. For the ship is due in two days, if the winds are kind, as we have known them to be."

"Would she count that?"

"That she would. She was born on Genoa quay."

"Then it is likely true, though it may have no value at all. Would she lay a trap with no better bait?"

"You mean she sends wool, having no silk?"

"So I suppose. Is it of any moment at all—being so near a day?"

"It is nothing, or very much. If we could sink this ship, we should give Mustapha a new reason to go, for the corn will be a great need. But we have first to resolve this—is it lie or trap? For, as you know, she has been used to trap us before."

Francisco said nothing. He was content to let Angelica speak, even though she mentioned how he had used his gold, which he would have preferred to forget. He had been fooled once, to his own shame. It may be excused that he

was slow to protest belief for a second time. Yet he thought the tale true, without seeing how it could be of any avail. Had there been time to let Messina know——

Seeing that he would leave it to her, Angelica asked: “How could it be trap to us?”

“It is hard to see, unless she could guess what we are thinking to do, which few would, it having too wild a sound.”

“She has a most lively mind.”

“She has the devil’s help (as we must allow that she may) if she could foresee this.”

“What I do not see,” the Grand Master—who had been listening to this talk as one who watched for a point which it did not reach—interposed to say, “is why she should seek to help us at all, she being such as we now know her, and her treason naked to us, as she cannot doubt it to be.”

Angelica differed there, and was hardy in her reply: “You misconceive from the root up. She would be friends if she could.”

“Yet she has gone to a Turk’s bed.”

“You did not welcome her here. You must weigh that. I can tell you one thing I learnt when I was caught there. She sought a way back that she could not see. She has no love for the Moors.”

The Grand Master considered this in an acute mind. He said: “You know her best, as I think, of all here. She is not one you trust, having been caught by her before. If you incline to this tale, I will call it true.”

“I should say she believed it true, but it may have been on a poor ground. I will not go beyond that.”

The Grand Master spoke in a final way: “We will call it true. . . . The next question is this.” He turned to Francisco now, as though Angelica’s part were done, and she left his mind. “Can you take the *Curse of Islam* out in the night, avoiding the Turkish fleet, and sink this ship, which you must do as it approaches the Scala Bay? You must not be far out, for a ship is easy to miss on the wide seas, and you must not fail.”

“I will do all that I can.”

The Grand Master saw the joy of action, of adventure, wake in his eyes, and his voice took a sterner tone. “You must not take this in too light a way. You may lose yourself and your ship, as you are likely to do, but you must not fail. There is but one way that is sure. *You must ram to sink*. Will you do that, though you both drown?”

“Will she have more guns than are mine?”

“You will have none. There is no time to put them aboard, and too many spies. . . . Oliver, you shall explain.”

Sir Oliver said: “It is a plan which has been heard by none but we who are

now here. It is a risk which is likely death, but it must so stand unless you can offer a better choice.

“You will have thirty men who are seamen proved, and twenty slaves for the oars (which last we can well spare, for they labour ill, and are a curse to guard and feed as we now are). You will go aboard in two hours from now, each man carrying rations and arms, and the boom will be loosed as you cast off from the quay where the *Curse of Islam* is now tied. To take powder and guns aboard were an added risk, for every second’s delay after there is stir at the quay will reduce the chance that you find the harbour-mouth will be free to pass. But, be that as it may, you are not to fight but to trust to speed.

“We do not know if the grain-ship be armed, nor if it be escorted by ships of war, against which you could not contend, it is a probable guess, had you every gun that your own would bear. But two things are sure. You will not be easy to catch by any ship in the Turkish fleet, if you be once out on the open sea, and the grain-ship will be much slower than you. You must find her first, and then ram to sink, as the Grand Master has said.

“If you aim at that with a single mind, you should not be simple to stay.”

Francisco had no better plan to propose. If it were not what at first he had hoped it to be, he allowed no sign to appear. He said: “It is well thought. When the ship is down, we may save ourselves, if we yet can?”

“So we hope that you may.”

“There is one thing I will ask. I would have Captain Antonio at my side, where I shall need a good man.”

“He is on the list, as it is now drawn.”

“Then I have nothing to ask.”

“You can be at call in the next hour?”

“Or in less, if you will.”

Angelica said: “May I see the list? Is there space for one more?”

Her eyes met Sir Oliver’s in a dispute which neither would yield. He said: “There is no space, for the list is closed.”

Her eyes went on to La Valette. It was strange to think him the better chance. “Do I ask more than I should?”

“Are you so urgent to go?”

“I am more so than it is easy to say.”

“Can you show me cause?”

“It will save a good man for the wall.”

“So it will, and you are used to the sea. Oliver, she is in God’s hands. We owe her much, as it is. She shall have her way.”

Sir Oliver made no further demur. He took the list, and struck out one, Juan Solles, for whom he could find a use. He wrote Angelica’s name.

Francisco stood in a doubt. Should he protest? Did he lead her he loved to



a sure death? Could he forget that in a selfish joy . . . ? He remembered how he had come up through empty halls, which had been filled with a coloured crowd, bright and rich, when he had come to Malta four months before. The Grand Master had done as he said he would. He had emptied St. Angelo's castle of all but those who were serving its guns. Even his own guards had gone from a vacant gate. Who could say that it was not near to its fall, or that Angelica might not remain to a worse and more certain fate? There are graves that are less clean than the sea will give.

"Francis, we must not stand here. We have little time." Her voice had a buoyant tone, as of one who was glad to wake from an evil dream. He felt her hand on his arm. They went out together.

La Valette said: "I send all to death. But there are worse things, as we both know."

It was a ruthless plan, but it was the one which held the best chance of success. He had spared thirty men, when men were his desperate need. They were dead to his use from now, let them live or die. But if the grain-ship should still come into port, they would be a sheer loss, which he must not have.

Two hours later the *Curse of Islam* slipped out of the inner harbour, and the great boom was anchored again. She came out with rapid oars, and sails that felt for the wind. The great harbour was empty and quiet: the night cloudy and dark, except for the gun-flashes that struck inward from every side upon St. Angelo and the Sanglea. Far off, from the Castile breach, the noise of guns was louder than it had been before, showing that the cavalier battery had been got to work; and as the *Curse of Islam* came round to its course for the harbour-mouth the night was lit with a sheet of flame from the further side of the Bourg, and there came a crash of sound that deafened the rumbling noise of the guns.

Captain Antonio said: "They have sprung a new mine at the Castile breach: we may be best where we now are."

But he had made a wrong guess.

## CHAPTER LIII

"If we come clear of the harbour-mouth," Captain Antonio said, "I would risk a guess that we get free, being swift and light."

"And," Francisco asked, "does your wisdom say that we shall come clear?"

The little Captain said yes to that, though in a less confident tone. It must hang on the alertness of those whose eyes (if they were open at all) would be turned the opposite way. For the Turks must know that all the ships that the harbour held had been laid up, being stripped of guns and men, and even the powder taken out of their holds. The sole one that had been kept in use, in which Salvago had slipped out to Sicily and back more than once before, had been tied up for the last month at Messina quay.

The Grand Master had been right in judging that the one chance to get clear was to leave at such sudden speed that no sign of preparation could be observed, no rumour surmount the wall, before the *Curse of Islam* should pass the boom.

It might be vain to expect that the mouth of the great harbour would be unwatched. It was known that, night and day, it was patrolled by some of the faster galleys that Candellissa was keeping at sea, and there were the guns of St. Elmo to pass, by which the *Curse of Islam* might be sent to the sea-floor at the first discharge.

But would St. Elmo's gunners stand ready through the night hours beside loaded guns and with their matches alight? It was not a probable fear. St. Elmo would expect warning of the approach of a seaward foe when the fleets would clash in the night, and the guns wake. There would be a watch kept, of course; but if they could be under her guns before suspicion should stir, they might be out of sight, on so dark a night, before they would open fire.

"Yet I should be better pleased," Francisco said, "had I shotted guns at our own bows."

"So should I," Captain Antonio allowed; "for such is the carnal weakness that all must feel who are used to a loaded deck. . . . Yet I will say that the Grand Master is right in that, even for this time; for if we had guns, and came under fire, we should reply, as it would be nature to do, and every flash would show where we are to we know not what other foes.

"What could it avail to us should we rap on St. Elmo's wall or spread death on a Turkish deck? It is our part to take wounds, if we must, in a patient way, and to slip off in the night."

Francisco did not deny that; but he knew that if he had had guns he would have gone on that voyage in a more confident mood, even though his orders might have been what they were. There had been good reason for not waiting to bring them aboard, which could scarcely have been contrived in a secret way, but to call it good in itself was more than he was willing to do.

Yet it made emphatic the purpose for which he sailed and the method he must employ. The sharp bow, fashioned to ram, being the only weapon the galley had, they must close at speed, to shorten the time during which they would be battered without reply; and could he board a well furnished ship, having but a score and a half of men? He saw that the Grand Master's mind would cut straight to its goal in a ruthless way, by which quality failure had been delayed, whether or not they might win to a last success. . . . But he must see that there should be success in this part that rested with him, in which he was resolved that he should not fail by defect of his own will. . . . And his part now must be that of the skulking rat, when the owls are active to seek their prey.

They went down the harbour showing no lights, and keeping as close to the eastern shore as it was wisdom to do on a moonless night. They gave St. Elmo all the distance they could, and though they saw lights on her walls, there was no challenge from her. It would have been hard, at that distance, for the Turks to see that the *Curse of Islam* was not a prowling unit of their own fleet, which they might have said she was almost certain to be.

It was not till the land was falling away at each side of the harbour-mouth that they became aware of the dark shadow of a galley which moved slowly across their way. Its oars were in, and the wind abeam to it, which was fair to them, so that they moved at a better speed.

Captain Antonio, who was conning the ship, must put the helm over in haste, to give it a wider berth. There was no cause of suspicion in that, for had they kept a straight course they would have struck the galley, ramming it in the waist; and that, had they had no larger purpose ahead, they would have been very willing to do. It was a strange chance of the night, such as no scheming would bring.

There were cries from the galley's deck, and shouting of orders which would not have availed, as the *Curse of Islam* came on it out of the night. But she fell off somewhat from the wind, and Captain Antonio handling his ship well, she passed under the poop of the larger vessel, but yet so closely that she could once have been touched with a stretched hand.

There was a man of Malta who had been a slave for ten years, at first in Algiers, and afterwards at the bench of one of Dragut's ships, till it had been taken and he released. He had learnt to speak the tongue of the Moors in a native way, and Sir Oliver had put him on the list of the crew to be used at

such a meeting as this. Now he answered the shouts that came from the Turkish ship in such a tongue that there would have been no suspicion that they were not one of their own fleet, but that a slave cried from the rowers' bench, giving a warning they could not miss.

There was a challenge shouted over the widening distance of sea, to which there could be no useful reply. Then the oars of the Turkish galley came out in haste. She came round in pursuit, and her guns spoke. She fired at a mark which had become little more than a guess in the dark, and still moving faster than she, so that it was a danger that was soon done; but it had wakened the Turkish fleet.

The *Curse of Islam* could do no more than shape its course away from the land, and trust the darkness to get it free, as at last it did, though it was fired on again from as long a range as the night allowed, from which it took no more hurt than a splintered rail, which an hour would mend.

The dawn found them on a north-westerly course, with Gozo away on the port side, and no sail in sight over the summer blue of a windless sea.

It must be their choice to remain unseen, and their course unguessed, but, beyond that, they were free from a present dread, having no doubt that they were speedy enough to keep far off from a likely foe.

Angelica was early on deck. She was light of heart, having come from that which it was pleasant to leave, to a day of leisure and peace, though she saw that it might be no longer than that; and she was conscious of other things, which, to the young, may be of more value than they. It might be little pleasure to look back, or to look ahead, but the hour was hers.

The day was still cool, though with a menace of heat to come. The sun mounted a cloudless sky.

Francisco had come up a few moments before. He would relieve Captain Antonio, who had been on duty since they had cast off from the quay. The two were talking as she appeared.

She heard Captain Antonio say: "It is one of two, but there is a doubt between them. There must be one to drown. You will flog both, if you will take wisdom from me. When we have loosened their tongues, we shall soon know."

Francisco stood in a frowning doubt. He knew the ruthless code of the inland sea, and that he would not be equal to his command if he let mercy weaken his rule, or failed to subdue himself, with all that he there controlled, to the purpose for which he sailed. It was his mission and his resolve to drive his ship to such goal as would most probably be the deaths of all there, including his own, within two days' time. He would not have scrupled to make an end of the slave whose cry had given alarm to the Turkish ship; but he had some reluctance to order the scourging of an innocent man, as one of the two

accused must certainly be.

He knew that hesitation would seem mere weakness to his subordinate in command, and he was not sure that he would be wrong. He could not see it as the strength of one who would not lightly surrender himself, or his independence of will, to the customs to which he came.

He said: "I will see the men."

The slave-master, who was standing await, turned at the order, and went down to the waist to have the two loosed from the bench, and brought up to the poop.

Angelica heard what she did not like. Captain Antonio's words had been plain as she approached, and they were discord to her. Was there no escape from the stench of blood, the horror of death, even for this space of a summer's day, which she thought she had? She was discomfited too by the tone of the greeting her cousin gave. She had not expected more than the situation allowed. She was still Don Garcio: the third officer of the ship. She had not come on deck to be kissed. But his face was a book she knew well, and she was aware (which others would not have seen) that he would have preferred that she were not there.

It was to Antonio that she spoke: "Are we not few enough as we are? Who is to be drowned now?"

"It is no more than he who cried warning last night, when we blundered under the Turk's stern."

She considered this, and was no more pleased than before. "Would you drown him for that? It was no more than nature to do."

"Which it is our nature not to allow." Captain Antonio smiled at the neatness of his retort. "Do you see that it might have brought us to death?"

"From which," she said, "it seems we are never far. Would you grudge us a cloudless day?"

Captain Antonio frowned over this, finding it less easy to understand, and while he paused the slave-master appeared, with the two men between whom suspicion fell.

They came with manacled hands, and were naked for the coming heat of the day, except for loin-clothes of tattered filth.

The one was small, wizened with age, with a stubble of greying hair above a face which might have been that of an ape without requiring a great change. His eyes were reddened by some disease, from which he blinked as one who saw in a mist. His lean muscles must have had some remaining strength, or he would not have been kept alive at a time when there must be no wasting of food.

The other was a much taller and younger man. Misery and toil had not been able to bend his neck, nor to tame the gaze with which he met the little

group of officers on the poop. He was lean with the hardships of little food and much work, for St. Angelo's slaves, in recent days, had not been fed as well as those in the Turkish camp; and across his back were the scars of the drivers' whips, confused by that of a wound a flying splinter had dealt, as he had rolled stones to the barricades of the Sanglea a few days before.

Francisco looked at men whom he would have questioned direct, but that he knew nothing of their tongues, nor was it likely that they would know his. He was not ill-taught, knowing (besides his own) the language of Arragon, and to read the three tongues of France; also Italian and Latin to read and speak, and many words of the bastard dialects of the sea; but he felt here an ignorance which he should not have.

He addressed them in the Italian tongue, which they gave no sign that they understood.

"It will do for them," Captain Antonio said, "as well as the devil's patter to which they were bred, for they are fixed that they will not speak. . . . But the slave-master can talk their tongue."

So he could have done himself well enough, but his vanity was reluctant to attempt that which he knew that the slave-master could do much better than he, so that he would listen with critical ears.

Francisco said: "Tell them that silence will be no gain, for we know it was one, and if they are still they will both bleed."

The slave-master repeated this, speaking separately, in different tongues, to the two men; but they remained still. The younger looked about, as one giving no heed to that which he heard. His eyes met Angelica's. She was regarding him as the one who must be destined to die, whom she would have been glad to save. She did not doubt it was he. He had the look of the bolder man. He was likely to have the more voice. He had more to gain if he could win free. . . . She remembered how she had felt as the *Santa Martha* had slipped past her clutching hands. . . . He regarded her in a speculative way, as though judging whether she could be hope for him. His eyes met hers again with a pleading she understood, and to which she dumbly replied. He could not think that there would be much power to aid in a third officer, as he saw her to be, even if there were an improbable will, but he was near to drown, and he clutched a straw. As he looked, his eyes changed to a puzzled doubt which they quickly cleared, and Angelica knew that, with the insight of those who must elbow death, he had put her disguise aside, to see her for what she was.

All this was in an instant of time, while the slave-master said: "They are resolved that they will not speak. Shall I have them tied up for the lash?"

He addressed Captain Antonio, rather than him who was head of all. He meant no offence in that, speaking to the officer who had had the affair in hand at an earlier hour, but Francisco observed it with a sensitive pride. Antonio was

the older and more experienced man. It might easily come to be that he would be regarded as the actual captain of the ship, if he himself should prove less equal to the position he held.

Angelica, seeing clearly how the case stood, and with an impulse to save the man if she could, became aware that she must be wary in what she said. She must not act as other than that which she was taken to be, nor so that Francisco's authority would be slurred if he should give her her will. She moved closer to him, as she said, in a low voice: "Francis, will you leave this for an hour's time?"

He heard the urgency in her voice. He asked: "Why, what gain is there in that?"

"I would explain to you apart."

He said: "Take them back to the bench. I will deal with this at a later hour, by which time one may have come to a wiser mind."

When all but the three officers were clear of the poop, he asked: "Why did you wish this delayed?"

"I hoped you would let it be. But I would not plead while others were round to hear."

"But if we do that—can you not see that he brought us all near to death, and the ship lost? If we allow that, how would it be at another chance? There would be a full chorus of who we are."

"It is no more than a wild chance. Would it happen twice?"

"Not, we may suppose, in the same way. But if we are weak with slaves, we are asking for our own throats to be cut. It has been proved before now, both by the Moors and by us, and I would not be one to have to learn it anew."

"It would be a good man lost at the oars, if not two."

"We can make shift to endure that."

"If you owe me aught for past days—which I will not say—I will take this in quittance for all."

"I would do it, you know, for you, without bargain called, but I must put first the duty I have. If I pardon such an offence——"

"Which I do not ask you to do. Let the thing lie. It may be no more than two days and it will matter to none, we being lost or in such triumph that this will be overthought."

As she spoke, a thought came to the minds of both, which she had not meant, of how he had had mercy from such a cup, when he had seemed as surely lost by the hard custom of war. He said: "Well, it can stand for this hour. While they pull on the oars they are gain to us, as you have been shrewd to see. I will do nothing unless I tell you before, but I do not pledge beyond that."

They both knew she had had her way, and were in accord that they had

done well.

Captain Antonio, looking on, and hearing all that was said, was discreet to say nothing at all. He went down to his own rest, leaving the two lovers, as he did not doubt them to be, together upon the deck.

When he came up for his next watch the sun was past its height in the sky, and Gozo was the dark line on the horizon behind. The oars were in, and the galley tacking into the wind. She was coming round to a southerly course, meaning to fetch a compass round the islands, and approach Marsa Scala from Malta's southern shore. She was in no haste for this hour, being in that part of her course where she would be least likely to encounter a Turkish ship, and she would make more speed when the darkness fell.

Francisco went below, but Angelica, who was still on deck, was slower to leave. Captain Antonio stood at the poop, looking down into the waist, where the slaves pulled. Angelica came to his side.

"So," he said, "you were potent to let him live. Now will you say why you did that?"

"Him?" she asked. "It was a matter of two."

"But there was one that you were urgent to save."

She considered this. "Did it so appear? Yet I should say you were wrong. I would save two."

"And will you say why?"

"There was once that I came wet from the sea, where I was near to remain."

"You had such logic as that. And there was a time when I could not see you for what you are! I must suppose that my wits failed. . . . But am I bold to ask why you should have come by a way for which you are so unfit, and that not alone by what I know you to be?"

"You would say that I am unfit in a special sense, such as (from what you know) I should not be certain to be?"

"And so you must know you are. Would you not go back if you could?"

"Not a step. . . . I came, as I think, having cause enough."

"Which I should not ask?"

"It is less secret than that. I was too near to a Convent gate."

"Which you would call a great cause? So you came where the dirt was more, and the prayer less."

"It is less simple than that, as I need not say. . . . Nor is it Malta's fault to lack prayer. . . . But I must go below now, for I am to take a watch during the night, which I am equal to do."

Captain Antonio did not question the wisdom of that. He saw that Don Francisco would have them both fresh for the needs of a later hour. Angelica left the deck, and Antonio to his own thoughts, which were on the strange



natures and ways of men, and on women the more, and of one most, whom he had come to like and admire.

She had come to that for which she was unfit, by her own word, and which would be likely to end in shame, or a bloody death, which she could have missed for a convent's ease, and she said that she would not go back a step, having come with sufficient cause.

He concluded that she had no love for celibate life. He did not marvel thereat, knowing it to be that which most women will go far to avoid. Venetia would have said the same in another tongue.

Yet to admit that was to marvel with a new cause. He did not doubt that it was for Francisco that she had come, at a peril which was not passed, nor that they had arrived at a common mind. Yet there were two cabins below (being all that the ship had in its after part), of which the smaller had been reserved for Don Garcio's use, and the larger was shared by Don Francisco and himself, "though," he thought, "it is that which his pride will not lightly bear, he being one who will lie alone."

He thought (being their friend) that the cabins could have been better filled. It was as though they should confine themselves by the pretence of a locked door, which they could open at will. And they might go, even now, to tomorrow's death, for which they would be searching with care.

Was there reason in such restraints, until the moment's blessing of life might be snatched back by the jealous gods? Or was it a barren folly of men to deny themselves in that which the kindlier Heavens would not have stayed? Men looked at the open hand of God, and themselves closed it again.

"If it be wisdom," he concluded, "it is not mine. For I would reap while the skies are warm. I would drink, seeing a full cup, and while it stands steady upon the board. Can we take it up, being spilled? Can we go back to a lost day?"

Yet was he sure that they played the game of life by a poor rule? He was less than that. He thought how such as Venetia would jape, mocking that which they lost occasion to do. He looked on at the panorama of life as one may look at a show, and he saw dignity and grace in the control of continent life which such as Venetia could be surely trusted to miss.

He allowed at last that if he were a god, and were peopling heaven, it was among such that he would be likely to choose, and having so come to a verdict of which he was not fully aware, he turned his thought to the horizon which darkened before his eyes, as the sun sank in the backward sky. He had to steer an unlighted ship through the first part of the night, with Gozo on his port bow making a leeward shore, from which the coast lights had been withdrawn at this time of war, and he was content that the night was clear.

## CHAPTER LIV

IT was four hours after the sun had fallen that Angelica came on deck and Antonio's watch was done.

He said: "You will do well enough, I suppose, for the hours of dark, we being close at call, and there being need of no more than to keep on the present course, for which the helmsman can have your trust, and the present watch, they being men of these seas. You need do no more than to keep the deck, if you will, though (if you prefer to do more) they must be ordered by you."

She answered that she would be content to allow that which went well, without interference from her, and that, if they should give a wide offing to Malta's coasts, she supposed that there was no other danger to fear while they sailed through a lonely sea. He went below, and she remained on a deck where, except in a formal way, she knew that there was no occasion for her to be.

The night-watch consisted of Maltese seamen who could sail the ship on that coast much better than she, and at least as well as Captain Antonio would have been able to do. The night was clear, and a light wind had veered somewhat to the west, making it fairer for them.

She must be alert for the sudden call of a strange sail in the night, but, beyond that, she could fall to her own thoughts. She leaned on the poop-rail, looking backward on a wide wake that shone faintly in the starlit night, and became aware of a sombre fear, which she had refused to feel in the daylight hours.

She had had her day, which was done. A day of quiet peace, during which much had been said on that deck while Captain Antonio rested below, bringing love to a more evident flower. It had been a time during which the pressure of urgent circumstance had relaxed, so that they might have more consciousness of themselves and less of surrounding things, leaving memories which neither would be quick to forget in the after-days. In the after-days? But were they destined to be? For to what were they steering now . . . ? It was not that hope should be thrown aside, which it is hard for the young to do. They were seeking a ship that they might not find. There was hope in the core of that, even though they must sail with gunless decks through seas which their foes patrolled. . . . But it was to Francisco's honour to find that ship, as it must be to Malta's relief. Did she wish him to fail? Either for Malta's need or for his own repute, she would have been slow to say that. The incalculable chances of fate—the unexpected event—she must think of them with what hope she

could. . . . And as for Malta, who could say that, let them do all they sought, it might not be too late to avail . . . ? She listened for sound of guns which she did not hear. There might be no wonder in that. They must be distant more than ten—perhaps even twenty or thirty miles—from St. Angelo’s mortal pain. She could not guess more nearly than that. And the wind was in the wrong quarter to help the sound. . . . She did not know how far that murmur of dreadful noise could be borne over land and sea, but the silence was sinister to her mood. She remembered the rumble, as of a bursting mine, which had come to their ears as they left St. Angelo’s quay: the light that had lifted into the sky. Was it already stormed, and those she knew either dead or enduring the ignominy of Turkish chains? Or would it still endure through the coming day—the “Thursday” of Mustapha’s insolent warning note? It might well be that they sailed on a useless quest, giving lives that were dear to them, for that which could bring no comfort to those who were already captive or dead. . . . And as she fell in this doubt she became aware, with a quick joy, that Francisco stood at her side.

His hand came on her shoulder first, and as she turned they closed in a strained embrace. She shamed herself with a sudden passion of tears. . . . She gained control of herself, and of lips where kisses had hindered speech, to say: “I am a mere fool. I should not be here. . . . Should you not rest while you can?”

“It was vain to try, remembering where you would be. When he slept, I came up.”

He said he would not go down again. He would remain there till the time when he would have been called, and she gone to her own rest. Here were hours of life which they were of accord that they would not lose.

But she crushed emotion down with a steady will. She had not come to weaken resolve, nor to make sorrow he might have missed. She asked: “Are you sure we have time enough? That we need not haste?”

“If—she—have spoken truth on a late day, we have time enough. We must suppose she has, without which we are at no purpose at all. The wind is light, but it moves us on, and must be adverse to them. We can go softly, and rest the slaves.”

“Shall you close in to the land?”

“Not at once. It is added risk of our own loss to be there too soon, which would be profit to none. But if we do not quickly find her afloat, I must sail in to view those ships that will be lying in Scala Bay.”

“For if it have gone in, there will be no purpose to stay?”

“I did not mean that. It maybe we can ram it there while it will still have cargo to spill.”

She had gained that to which she had thought to steer, for he forgot

themselves as he spoke of the plans he had, and showed the hard resolve he had formed that he would not fail. She saw that he lost thought of himself—even of her—in the vision of that which he was pledged to attempt, and which he believed that he would be equal to do.

To help Malta at desperate need—to destroy that which would sustain her blood-lusting foes—there was impulse, conscious and strong, and sufficient in itself to have called him to throw his life in the trembling scale; but, beyond that, there were the supporting passions of honour and pride, calling him to vindication of what he had been before, and to the narrow moment of fame that success would bring.

He had done a great thing before by his secret guns, but it might be said that it was only through a fortunate chance that the occasion had come; and that event was confused with others which might have brought him to final shame.

He had done his part in conveying the Grand Master's message to Marshal Couppier, and in guiding him back through the Turkish lines; but—to be a messenger and a guide? It is no high ambition that will be so content, though the message be truly borne, the guidance skilfully done.

Perhaps his greatest exploit had been when he had gone, at the double calls of damaged honour and dawning love, to seek and save from the midst of a thousand foes. But that was private to him and her. That was the price at which he made betrayal a memory tolerable to endure.

But if he could now serve Malta a third and more excellent way, putting his unarmed prow into the vitals of the approaching ship, and bringing privation to her pitiless and exultant foes, he saw that the past must be forgotten in that result, or remembered only so far as it would support his praise.

In the impulse of these mingled motives, urged by the sanguine spirit of youth, he could look to the time when he would drive his prow in the grain-ship's side without too close regard of where he would be likely to be on the next day.

The words of Captain Antonio's somewhat sententious wisdom came back to his mind: "*I have seen many wars, and . . . 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.*"

Well, if there were no choice beyond that, then death was surely the fairer end. But under the sombre thought there beat the buoyant spirit of youth, and a heart that rejected fear.

## CHAPTER LV

CAPTAIN ANTONIO looked at a boat. It was a large boat for the ship's size, or so it would have been viewed by seamen of later times, being designed to take in all the lives of the crew, the slaves falling outside the count. It lay amidships, behind the mast on the low deck of the waist. There were the rowers' benches on either side, and inside of these were two raised gangways of two-foot breadths, running from poop to fore, along which the slave-drivers would parade with whips of sufficient length to reach to the backs they sought; and midmost, between these, there lay the great boat, the lashings of which could be cast loose, or cut at a sharp need. So that, if the ship should sink, in the slow manner of those which are built wholly of wood, the boat would be floated off, even while fore-castle and poop might still be high over the waves.

Within the boat was a small skiff, which would be used if an officer should be requiring to go ashore while they were anchored in harbour, or for passing from ship to ship, but which would be thrown aside at a greater need. This was the accommodation which was common in the galleys of that day.

Captain Antonio looked with a careful eye at the lashings which held the boat, and at the gear, the beakers of water, and the provisions which it contained. He might not suppose it probable that it would be a means of life to those who now trod the *Curse of Islam's* decks, but he was thorough in all he did.

In the ship's arsenal there were hand-weapons enough, though she had sailed without mounting of guns; and he had distributed these with the same care, giving to each man those which he was best able to use, and making their duties clear. There were those who must stand by to handle the ship; and others who were to gather upon the prow when the moment came, either to board, or to resist attack upon their own decks; and there were four whom he found to be expert with the cross-bow, who were to be stationed where they would be sheltered themselves, and well placed to shoot over the prow.

Having seen that the great boat was garnished, and would not be delayed in floating clear at a sudden need, he made his way back to the poop, from where Angelica had been observing that which he did. She asked: "Do you count that we may find safety there?"

"It is less than that, but I am one to regard all, lest we come to death by a missed chance, which I would not have. There was a time when I came free by the help of night and a good boat, from a sinking wreck, as those who meant us

no good had supposed that we could not do.”

“You think we may sink their ship and yet save ourselves?”

“So we may. Though we have done neither as yet, which is the more likely end. . . . If we find her, I suppose that she may go down, and that we shall be in less than a good shape when we have brought her to that. But it is the escort which she may have which we should hold most greatly in fear. . . . If we talk of that we can do no more than to guess, and those who guess what the sea will give are sure of naught, except that they will guess wrong.”

It was on Friday morning that this was said. The sun had but just cleared the sea. The night had been windless and warm. Now a light breeze came from the south, but bringing no clouds to the bare blue of the sky, so that the heat of the last week was not likely to decrease with the coming day.

They had sailed far out across the track by which the grain-ship would come, and had approached Marsa Scala as the last evening had waned. Until then they had seen no more than distant sails, which were not those of the ship they sought, and which, if they had surveyed themselves with enquiring eyes, had seen no reason to doubt the Turkish flag which they now flew, or had refused the folly of pursuit of a distant galliot which was plainly faster than they, and would only remain if it were what it professed, and content to be overhauled.

As the dusk fell they had looked audaciously into Scala Bay, going close enough to be assured that the *Flooded Nile*, which was the name the grain-ship was said to bear, had not come to anchor therein. They had gone about as though sailing up the coast to put in at Marsa Scirocco, or St. Thomas’s Bay, which was not what a Christian vessel, of their size and alone, would be likely to do.

After that they had cruised backward and forward during the night across the path by which the grain-ship must come, and now, as the dawn had risen, they had so far avoided the land that they might hope to have escaped observation therefrom, but yet remaining so that they would surely observe any sail that might enter the harbour-mouth.

Through the last day they had been near enough at times to hear the low reverberation of the guns that battered St. Angelo’s walls, from which they must take what courage the knowledge gave that it had not fallen before Mustapha’s appointed day; and what of resolve might come from the thought of its urgent need, which they might do some part to relieve.

Now, in the morning silence, there was no proof that it still endured. Had Mustapha equalled his boast that Thursday would be the end, or had the stubborn courage that the Grand Master felt and inspired been sufficient to throw the Turks back once more to die in the blood-drenched fosse? Was the town still under Christian flag, or were there but a remnant of survivors cooped

up in St. Angelo's central towers? It was vain to wonder or ask. They had their own part to play, and must look away from that which they were powerless to change.

And while they watched, the *Flooded Nile* was coming in from the west, with two of the strongest galliots of Piali's fleet, which had met her a hundred miles out at sea, as her escort on either side.

The *Flooded Nile* was a ship built for the bearing of grain. Her hull was deep and large, and her oar-deck high for that space, so that her sweeps were long, and must each be pulled by three men. She was a three-masted ship, and trusted less to her oars than to the wide spread of sail that she could open to friendly winds. Now she came to the end of a perilous voyage which had shown no threat of pirate or storm on the blue of a summer sea, seeing the coast-line of Malta on the horizon faintly ahead. The two galliots that had her in charge can have little blame that they thought that their task was done. They had orders to guide her in, and to join Piali's fleet in Muscetto Bay when they had done this. To this end, they began to draw slowly apart, steering a more northerly course, while she kept straight ahead for Marsa Scala, where her cargo should be discharged.

The captain of the galliots was not less assured that he had brought the *Flooded Nile* safely through the dangers of seas in which Christian pirates were not easy to miss because he saw a small vessel flying the Turkish flag, and drifting lazily northward, as though content that it should move by the way that the wind preferred, and at the pace its lightness allowed, with no more than a mainsail spread. In that sea, on that day, seeing it loiter along, it would seem absurd to suppose it other than one of the hundred-and-eighty sail that were round the island under Piali's command.

The *Flooded Nile* carried a crew of 130 men, besides slaves at the oars. She had four heavy fore-deck guns, and two sakers pointing astern from the lower deck of the poop, where the fighting galleys would be less likely to mount their guns, but she was equipped to spit back at a foe's pursuit.

Her slaves had been driven hard during the night and the last day, and were now sprawled asleep on the benches where they were chained, taking such short rest as their drivers willed, till the whips' cracks should rouse them again, to take the ship through the harbour-mouth. She came slowly on, with close-hauled canvas to use the breeze for her own way.

"It is the mercy of all the saints," Captain Antonio said. "She comes like a pig that pushes open the door where the butcher waits."

Francisco made no answer to that. He looked at the grain-ship's size with a doubt that he would not speak. He had heard much talk of the ramming of ships, by which way the galleys would still trust to resolve a fight, rather than in the cannon upon their decks. It was for that use they were built, with great

height and sharpness of metal prows; it was for the clashing of that event that their crews were trained. It was that moment of battle that the chained slaves had most cause to dread, for it might send one ship, if not two, reeling down to the ocean-floor, with them helpless in padlocked chains. . . .

These were matters of which Francisco had heard much talk. There was much that he had been taught. But it is different to see. He knew that Antonio, though he might be under his command, as the difference of rank required, had a long experience of the fighting ways of the sea. He had seen ships rammed, and go down or survive as the Fates allowed. If he looked content, it could scarcely be less than well, and his expression was that of one to whom fortune brings more than his hope proposed.

Yet Captain Antonio looked all sides as they drifted on, and when he saw a galley, with spread of sail and pressure of oars, come out of St. Thomas's Bay, he said: "So it would be. It was beyond reason to hope. . . . Yet I suppose we shall have our will, and the Grand Master will bless our graves."

Up to that moment they had avoided all which might draw suspicion upon themselves. They had even cast off their own garments, above their shirts, lest keen eyes should see that the poop was held by those who wore doublets in Christian style. There were men stationed upon the fore clothed in the loose linen garb that the Turkish seamen preferred. Every second was an added prize as they came nearer their prey, and its escort drew further apart.

"If," Captain Antonio said, "you will take wisdom from me, you will turn to speed, and let caution go."

"So," Francisco replied, "I was thinking to do," and, as he spoke, a gun sounded from the ship which was coming out of the bay.

It was a shot that they were in no range to receive, but it was unlikely that it was intended for them. Its import was that suspicion had been aroused, and that the *Flooded Nile* and her escort were to be waked to alarm; and its effect was instant to see.

The grain-ship stirred to a sudden tremor of life: the two warships came quickly round, like dogs that have strayed too far from the flock when the wolf-pack howls. The *Curse of Islam* cast caution aside. Its sails opened in haste. The whips swung over the rowers' backs. Under the urge of a freshening wind it came fast on its cumbrous prey.

The *Flooded Nile* was futile in blundering effort to avoid that which she was not destined to miss. Her helm went up and then down. But the *Curse of Islam* was first alert, and the fatal seconds were hers. She had the wind at her back, and she could turn more quickly to strike than could the heavier vessel to dodge the blow.

There came a moment when Angelica, standing by Captain Antonio on the poop, saw that they were about to strike their victim amidships with the full



force of their driven prow.

As she watched for the crash of impact to come, she was scarcely aware that two of the grain-ship's guns had found time and direction in which to fire, and that a round-shot came over the heads of the straining slaves, to crash through the cabin beneath her feet.

Francisco had gone forward to order those who were gathered to guard the prow. Captain Antonio was left to handle the ship, as he was well able to do. In the last minute, as it became plain that the collision could not be shunned, he directed Angelica how best to hold to the rail, and use the support of a rope's loop, that she should not be cast down to the deck, taking the same precaution himself, as she saw that others did, except only the slaves and those who still lashed them to pull.

The *Flooded Nile* was so much the larger ship, and was built with so high a waist, that their rowers' benches were not greatly below the peak of the Christian prow. Francisco could look into the eyes of men of his own blood, chained to benches through which it drove. It drove through crashing timbers, and cries and blood, and underneath, as the harpoon enters the whale, the sharp ram thrust into the vitals of the great ship, tearing a fatal wound.

The *Curse of Islam* reversed its oars. It strove to back from a wound that it helped to close while it remained wedged as it was and from the danger that it might be drawn down to a common doom if it should be unable to break away.

On the grain-ship, confusion spread. There were men who crowded to clear the boat. There was a gun-crew who remained gallantly at their post, firing, as fast as they were able to load, down on to the Christian decks. The chained slaves shouted, and struggled to break their bonds.

From the Turkish poop, a green-turbaned officer ran forward, calling on all to follow the way he led. He aimed to gain the deck of the *Curse of Islam* before it would be able to draw apart, for he saw that revenge and safety pointed to the same road.

There was a time during which Angelica saw that the two ships remained locked, and were sinking, inch by inch, lower into the sea. The slaves needed no urging now, as they pushed oars in an effort to part the ships on which their lives might depend, and with the added boon of freedom in view, for they saw that the Christian vessel, if it should float, would soon pass from Christian control. There were other Turkish warships in sight, besides the three which were nearing now. At the cannon's call, they had come from Marsa Scala and St. Thomas Bay, and from the spaces of empty sea, as vultures show in the sky when a camel falls.

Angelica had no eyes for them, watching how the Turks swarmed round the prow where Francisco stood. They clambered up on all sides, and there was no relief through those whom the bowmen slew, for there would be ten others

pressing behind.

With sword and dagger, with pike and axe, Francisco and the twenty men that were his thrust and hacked to throw them back from the deck that they strove to scale; but they lacked numbers for that. Soon there was a wave of Turks that surged over the side. Pressed ever by those behind, they gained space on the deck, the Christians falling back, yard by yard, amid a clamour of blows and cries.

Captain Antonio looked at that which he did not like. He had had a plan in his mind by which he would have said that there might still be a chance of life for a fortunèd few, if the ships had parted at once. But this was thwarting it in two ways. If the Turks should win the ship there would be no hope, even though the next moment should find them moving apart.

He drew out his sword. He said to Angelica: "If we wrench free, you must drive for land. We are swift enough, if the oars ply, and the masts are not shot away. We must beach the ship. There is no chance besides that."

He ran forward along the gangway, calling to those who had been working the ship to join the strife at the bloody prow.

Angelica stood alone on the poop. She watched Antonio pause a moment in the rear of the fighting crowd, and then push in, using his sword in a cool and purposeful way, as one to whom strife was a trade that he understood. She saw Francisco also, still, as it seemed, unhurt, where there had been many who fell. His defensive armour, lightly made, as was the new fashion of war, and useless against an arquebus ball, was yet of good avail in such a turmoil as this: his sword kept his head with a well-taught skill. Yet it seemed that it must be but a short time before resistance must end, and the Turkish wave sweep forward to overwhelm. . . . And then the *Curse of Islam* drew clear of its stricken prey.

As it did so, the grain-ship sank down on its gored side till the decks dipped to the sea. There was a moment when the height of its masts sloped over those of the smaller ship, and their shrouds tangled and snapped.

On the fore-deck, the outnumbered Christians renewed their hope, and smote with a better will, as they saw that they need deal with no further foes than were already upon their board. But at the same time the foremost of the two escorting warships, whose error had brought disaster to that which they were appointed to guard, opened fire from her forward guns.

Whether it were from the wounds they gave, which, at so short a range, the *Curse of Islam* was frail to take, or whether she may have rammed her foe with such force that her own timbers had strained apart, it was plain to see that, though she might not be the first to go, she also was settling into the sea.

Angelica, standing alone on a poop from where there would have been few to heed, had she been competent to command at such a moment as that, said to

herself: "I do nothing here. It is vain to stay. I watch a strife which may turn on a single sword." She drew her own, and went forward along the gangway, beside the slaves on the starboard side.

As she went, she came to a new thing. A round-shot had struck the slave-master as he walked the planks, he being one of the few who had kept his post, as his duty was, letting the fore-deck strife go its own way. The shot flung him, a quivering corpse, on to the heads of the two slaves whom he had brought up for judgment on the morning before.

The younger man flung off a body from which the entrails were falling loose, and snatched at the master-keys that his belt bore. He was so chained to the bench that he could not reach round to release himself, but he was able to bend aside, and use them for setting his comrade free. The man, having gained his limbs, stooped to do the same office for him, as Angelica came forward along the planks. He rose from that to see her feet a yard away from his own head. With a cackle of evil mirth, he reached at them to pull her down. But he was less nimble than she. The clutching hands winced back from the sword's point, and as she pricked them she heard the shouts of the slaves behind, among whom the keys had been passed, clamouring for the freedom that they could give.

She thought: "Francis will be sped with these slaves at his back," and as her eyes met those of the man who clutched at her feet, malign with hatred for all Christian men, whose scourgings had brought him to what he was, she thrust down with a steady hand. The man drew his head quickly aside, but with no gain to his life, the thin blade driving between shoulder and neck with a force she did not scruple to use, as she had done at a former time. She had gone far since that night, but whether nearer to Heaven or Hell it might be hard for human judgment to say.

The man screamed as he sank and the sword came free; and as he did so she knew the voice. It was he, and not whom she had thought before, who had given the warning call in the dark, as they had passed under the galley's stern.

She had no time to consider that, being caught in a different grip from what she could have felt from his ageing hands. The younger slave had her sword-hand's wrist in a grasp that she could not loose. Struggling, she lost balance, and was pulled down from the plank. The memory of how she had been captured before, added to the desire she had to reach to Francisco's side, gave a frantic strength to the struggles with which she fought in the arms of the naked slave. But his grip did not relax. His muscles, hardened by the labour of the bench, were like inflexible steel. He looked at her with mocking eyes, as he twisted the sword from a hand that she could not use. She found that he could speak the Italian tongue, when he had a mind to be understood. "Why," he said, "what a writhing leopard you are."

He bore her to the great boat, and thrust her down under the thwarts. He said: "You are fool to kick. You may live if you lie still. I have a debt that I think to pay."

He drew her hands together behind her back, and bound them with a short cord, doing all in a way that was swift and sure.

As he did this, he looked down on her in a way that she did not like, and she became aware that the ruffed shirt she wore had been torn away, as she had struggled to break his hold. A bare breast made demonstration of what she was.

He cast a piece of sail-cloth over her, so that there was little that she could see. "Now," she heard his voice, "you will lie still, unless you are more fool than you look to be."

She heard the noise of the slaves crowding into the boat, with a clamour of tongues that she did not know. She supposed that he had moved away on his own affairs. She lay as still as the dead, even when she was kicked in a painful way.

She heard the oars go overside, and felt the boat lift to waves that now swept the deck. It rose, bumping against the mast, and over the raffle that strewed the deck. It was washed over the empty benches, jarred on the low bulwark of the waist, and was out on a clear sea.

There came a voice from on high in a strange tongue, to which answers were shouted back. She could but guess that they had passed under the stern of one of the Turkish ships, who had required assurance of those whom the boat held. After that the slaves pulled with a steady stroke.

## CHAPTER LVI

FRANCISCO thrust at the back of a flying man, who plunged over the prow. He looked round to find that he stood alone on a sinking deck. Above him, high out of the water, rose the grain-ship's stern. She was going down by the head, and now rose to her final dive.

He looked round on a deck strewn with the dead, and where wounded men crawled for a safety they would not find. Captain Antonio lay on his face. From beneath him, the blood spread. Francisco knelt at his side. At his touch, the dying man lifted his head. He rose on one hand.

He said: "So you live?" His eyes went down to the waist, over which the sea washed. Francisco saw that the great boat was in the hands of the ship's slaves, who were staving it clear of the mast, so that it would float free on the next wave. His eyes went to the poop, to see that Angelica was not there.

Antonio answered his thought. "They have her there, in that boat. It was he she saved." His words were faint, for which he made his excuse. "I lack blood." His head sank. Francisco thought he was dead.

The *Flooded Nile* plunged to her end, and the *Curse of Islam* leaned to the hollow grave, so that Francisco was flung roughly against the rail. He thought her about to go by the same road, but she steadied again, though she was lower than she had been before. He saw the boat tossing on the further side, having floated clear.

One of the galliots was coming close alongside to where he stood irresolute on a sinking deck, on which there was no other erect, if there were any that lived. She fired down at the foundered wreck, as though impatient to make an end. She was the second of the escorting ships, which had failed beyond likely pardon in that which they had been commissioned to do. Her captain may not have wished to go back to port with guns which had not been used.

Francisco looked at the line of the distant coast. He had a doubt that he could swim so far after the toil of the last hour. He looked at the boat where he had been told that Angelica lay, now pulling steadily for the land, and the doubt left his mind.

He stripped off the tattered shirt which he had worn for earlier disguise over his corselet of steel. He cut the corselet lacings down with his dagger's point, being hastened in what he did by a ball which splintered the woodwork a yard away. It would be a poor end to be shot there, while Angelica was the spoil of a Turkish slave.

Having cast the most that he wore, he dived into the sea that had now risen near to the height of the upper deck. As he swam, he became aware that the Turkish sharp-shooters were still making him a target to prove their skill. He dived at that, and the marksmen searched in vain for a head which was no longer above the waves. They concluded that they had shot well, and made some boasting of that, on a ship where boasting was little heard.

Captain Antonio had lifted his head again as the grain-ship plunged to her grave. His lips moved to a smile. He had not the woe of most, to whom failure comes as the companion of death.

He knew that it was not to him that the praise would be loudly paid; but there were those of the sea. He would have good words from the men who knew.

As he smiled, he thought that he spoke aloud, though it would not have been easy to hear: "The Grand Master should be content. He will give thanks to God, and to us but a short regard, or else none."

He crossed himself with a dying hand, having a faith which was sure, though to some its foundations might seem to be weakly laid. After that, he lay still. He did not stir, even when the sea washed over the deck. He was not dead, but his mind dwelt in a day which was real to him as the deck upon which he lay amid the glitter of sunlit sea. . . . He watched the outgoing ships and the sinking sun on the Genoa quay, until his mother found him and bore him in; as some will say that God is unequal to do.

But our concern is with those in whom the trouble of life was not done, of whom Francisco swam through waters that were quiet and warm, and with such purpose to drive him on as left little regard for the length of way, or the weariness that he would have felt at a lighter need; and Angelica lay where she had been thrust, in fear that she might find it no gain to draw observation upon herself, until the boat grounded on a rough beach, and she was uncovered, and pulled erect, by the same slave who had caught her and bound her hands.

Marsa Scala, at this time, was a busy place, being a back-door to the Turkish camp, at which there was much unloading of stores, both of official source, and those which the trading vessels found it good profit to bring.

Merchants' and camp-followers' tents spread widely around the few houses that bordered the narrow bay. Its waters were alive with war-galleys and merchant-vessels busily unloading into boats, if they could find no vacant space at a short quay, which had not been built for such needs.

It was stirred now by the excitement of a sea-fight of which there had been no more than a distant view, and as to the nature and issue of which it could make no more than a poor guess.

The port-officer, a grave, black-bearded man, splendid in crimson and blue, met the boat with a file of guards, who held back the curious crowd with

show of pikes that they would not have scrupled to use. He learned no more from his questions than that two ships had been sunk, of which one was a Maltese foe, the slaves of which had been fortunate to come free, as they seldom did from such loss. They did not know the name of the Turkish ship, nor had they any guess of the priceless cargo she bore.

The officer thought it a good tale enough, of which there would be detail to come. His present duty would be to provide for the escaped slaves, who would not all be of the same nation or grade, or requiring the same treatment from him. There might even be Christians among them, put to the bench for some military or criminal cause, who would find they had made no more change than to harder toil and more prodigal stripes. But each man must be examined, his veracity scrutinised, and his treatment graded thereby.

As they came from the boat he gave short questions to each, which were recorded by an officer at his side, and which would be extended and checked at a later hour. In the meantime, there would be provision made for their comfort, including clothing and food, but to say that they could go free would be beyond probable fact, which none, having a conscience at ease, would be likely to put to proof.

Angelica's captor came from the boat leading her by the rope's end which fastened her wrists, and having lifted her to the land in a way she could not resist, being so bound, and to resent would have been folly she would not show.

She had cause to be glad that the crowd were held back by the armed guard, as she heard the chorus of cries, derisive or fierce with hate, which her appearance roused, as she was led thus, wearing the trunk-hose of a man, and with her doublet so torn away as to show the lie that her clothing was.

The port-officer asked: "What have you got there?" He did not wait for an answer, for which there seemed little need. He supposed that he looked on the shameless concubine of the captain of the sunk ship, for whom, if she should prove to be of saleable sort, a different owner must now be found.

He saw something which should be profit to him, being of the perquisites of the post he held, or at least to be shared with others higher than he, with a gold piece (or perhaps two) for the slave who had brought her to land.

He called one of his train to take charge of a merchandise which showed promise of a good price to his practised eye.

The ex-slave did not loosen his grip on the rope. He looked at the port-officer as coolly as though unaware that a soiled loin-cloth was all the finery that he wore. He said: "It is help which I do not need."

The officer's dignity did not flinch. "That," he said, as one whom insolence could not disturb, coming from such a distance below, "is for me to judge."

The answer came with contempt: "So it is; and if you err you must think

that your back must pay.”

The officer mastered his first wrath, being a discreet and capable man, though he was one to make any place he held lucrative both to himself and those who gave him support. He answered: “I do my part here, in the trust I have, and those who show me contempt do not give abuse only to me, but also to Him in whose name I have authority here, to Whom I am but the dirt on a hog’s foot.”

The man who had come from the slaves’ bench looked down on him who was in crimson and blue (being some inches taller than he), and laughter lightened his eyes. “Now who,” he asked, “do you call hog by that word?”

At this question, the officer paled somewhat under his beard, seeing an implication in what he said which he had not meant, and which might be twisted into that through which a good man’s neck may feel the executioner’s sword. His reply paused. The man was a very insolent rogue, whom he hoped to send to the lash before the sun should be down the sky. But to show that thought, till he was more sure of whom he might be, was a peril his prudence did not permit.

“You misconceive,” he said, “in a strange way. I spoke of none but myself, whom I did not boast. But will you say who you are?”

“I am Prince Azov, of whom, among other things, it should be your business to know.”

The port-officer stared, letting his dignity go. It was an audacious, incredible claim. Yet, if he were Soliman’s nephew indeed, he might crush him, as a man cracks a flea, and forgets next moment what he has done. And if the man made a claim so monstrous which could not stand, his end must be swift and sure and of a nature to content his most bitter foe.

He saw that it was wiser to make mistake, if mistake he must, on the credulous side, and his answer was adroit with the skill of speech which had brought him to where he stood.

“Your Excellency’s wisdom may not deny that it is to the protection of those who are of the Prophet’s blood that to claim that honour without a proof should not be lightly allowed.”

“I can see,” the ex-slave replied, “that you are a more discreet man than you gave me cause to think at the first. Does Mustapha—is the Pasha of Egypt here? Then you shall take me to him, by whom you will find I am better known. . . . But I will have a garment which you can spare.”

The officer saw that his eyes were fixed on his own gay attire in a way which he did not venture to disregard. He surrendered it with an obeisance that hid the mingled anger and fear that confused his thoughts.

He gave a whispered charge to the captain of his guard to escort the man to Mustapha’s headquarters with all the honour due to the rank he claimed.



“Abate naught,” he said, “for it is on that that our lives may hang. But should he show lack of courage as he gets near—should he prove”—he would have liked to say ‘the knave that I hope he is’ but that discretion hindered his tongue—“should he prove less than he claims, which must be thought the more probable end, you must make it clear that I have but sent him for His Excellency to deal himself with a most impudent claim. And should he attempt to avoid, either right or left, you will deny him a yard, having no fear; for it is what, if he be that which he claims, he would be unlikely to try.”

It came from this that the Prince stood in Mustapha’s presence within the next hour, with Angelica still at his side. And that he was such there could be no longer a doubt, when the Egyptian Pasha rose to give him the seat which would put himself in a second place. For it was that which he would have done for five of all that the world held, but not more among living men.

The Pasha was resting in his own house, after the fatigues of the assault of the last day, in which he had taken a more strenuous part than his years were equal to bear.

“I am amazed,” he said, “to meet your Highness in such a way, but we may conclude it to be of the dispensation of God that one of the Prophet’s blood should be with us now, to observe the end of this pestilent pirates’ nest, which we chastise to His will, and the Sultan’s praise.”

“I am not newly arrived,” the Prince answered to this, “it having been Allah’s will that I should observe the siege from its first hour. But I may conclude from what you have said that the pirates’ nest did not fall on the set day.”

There was a hint of sarcasm in this, veiled though it might be in a courtesy of enquiring tone, at which Mustapha felt a resentment he must now show. He answered: “It has not yet come to its last pain, but its state is like to his who bleeds white from so many wounds that it is hard to pick that which may claim his death. Yet is it sure that he will die of all, if not one. . . . It will fall, as I do not doubt, at a near hour, and our travail is almost done. . . . Hassan has the Sanglea till he is near to St. Michael’s fort. As he advances, he treads it flat. . . . But will you tell me how you have come, and by what means you have been at the siege for so long a time? And will you not choose that your captive be taken in other charge, than to be led by your own hand?”

Mustapha, having had no explanation as yet, asked the first question with a suspicion that vexed his mind. He knew Soliman’s nephew to be one of a romantic repute. He would disappear at times for months, during which his own household did not know where he might be. He was supposed to wander disguised at such times, seeing the ways of the world, after the way of Haroun in the ancient tales. Had his own caprice, or the Sultan’s will (which would be much worse) arranged that he should be so present at Malta’s siege, as a secret

spy upon those who held a command to which success was not quick to come? And to denounce the errors which are so easy to find in the actions of those who fail? It was not a pleasant thought when he considered the waste of life and treasure, the blunders and vacillations which had marked the four months' struggle, against a numerically contemptible foe.

The Prince answered the last question first. He looked at Angelica, around whom he had cast, with a careless hand, a loose upper garment taken from one of the port-officer's retinue, and who now sat on the cushions beside his feet, as the rope's shortness gave her no choice but to do. He said: "She being my present wealth, I will keep her here."

Mustapha asked: "She?"

"There are pointing signs. It will be known when I further explore, as I am likely to do."

"It will be your pleasure to tell me how you have come?"

"It is soon said. I was a caught slave, at work on St. Elmo's redoubt, a week before you were here. I have toiled thus with a shut mouth, lest they should boast whom they had got, at St. Angelo's walls, which I had cause to observe that you battered well, until three days past, when I was put to the bench of an oared boat that slipped from the harbour there, and Piali was too clumsy to catch."

"It was that one, I suppose," Mustapha replied, "which came under the galleys' fire at the harbour-mouth. There was some talk that it had been sunk, which I took to be boast or lie. But we learnt on the next day (for there is not much that our spies miss) that it was for Palermo, to beg again for aid which is not likely to come."

"You have spies you trust, and they brought you that? I should say it was a tale the Grand Master gave them to tell. It was our mission to round the isles and sink a ship that was destined here. It was fat with corn, if my eyes were good when its belly slit."

Mustapha heard this with a sudden fear that his practised composure hardly controlled. His hand clutched at his beard in a sudden way.

"Is the grain-ship gone? It is evil news, if it be. For it was the most need that we have."

"Then you may suppose they knew that. For it was with a set purpose they sailed, as was clear to see."

"It is Allah's will. We must make shift to endure. . . . There was cargo of corn, and 300 sacks of the finest flour. . . . It is well that the end is near."

They were interrupted at this point by the arrival of food and wine, which Mustapha had ordered as soon as he was aware of his visitor's rank and the ordeal from which he came.

Prince Azov looked down at his captive's hands. He used the Italian

tongue, speaking the first words she had understood since she had been pulled down to his feet. "Will you have sense to be quiet here, if I loose you now?"

"So you said that I had. Was I not quiet in the boat?"

"So you were. You must surely eat, or you will be of a poor use, either to keep or to trade."

She said boldly: "We must talk of that at a better time." She felt him to be an incalculable danger, which she would be fool if she did not fear, but she did not see the cold loathing that Mustapha showed to all of her race or creed, nor would he have the special hatred that Hassan felt. He had talked of a debt which it had been his purpose to pay.

And she saw him now in an inexplicable, bewildering light. It had been strange enough when the port-officer stripped, but that he should turn Mustapha out of his own seat——!

She had had some natural wonder at that, but her mind, as she had sat beneath a flow of words that had no meaning for her, had been possessed by a more urgent doubt, and a more urgent desire.

It had been agreed between Francisco and her, when they had seen the grain-ship's approach and how near to land the event was likely to be, that they should swim for shore if they should be alive when their work was done. She had seen Francisco alive on the fore-deck as she had fought in her captor's arms. That had been near to the end. He had done his work. He would have no scruple of that. She would shut no hope from her heart. . . . But how could she bring him to know that she still lived, and was for rescue again?

Her captor made no further reply. He set her free from the rope. He saw that she was served well. He even regarded her wrists, that were swollen and numbed. He said: "It is what we all feel in our turn. They will soon heal. It is the fortune of war."

She felt that she was in the hands of one who might be less than a foe, and then her comfort turned to a sudden fear, for Hassan's voice sounded without the door.

## CHAPTER LVII

HASSAN had ridden over on hearing news of the grain-ship's loss. He supposed that he would be first with a tale that Mustapha would not welcome to hear, but which should not wait. He brought details that Prince Azov had not been able to give; but he found two there whom he had not expected to see, and that there was more to learn than to tell.

He knew the Prince by repute, of whom he thought well, as he was also esteemed by him. They met for the first time, in a very cordial way. At Angelica, he gave one glance, and his eyes did not regard her again. She would have been glad to think she was overlooked, but that one glance had been enough to deny hope. She could but wish she could understand talk which might be of much value to know, though, for a time that was long to wait, there was no sign that they thought of her.

They talked first of the grain-ship's loss, on which Hassan said that there was corn in hand to feed the army for six days, or for eight if the rations were somewhat cut. He proposed that vessels should sail before night for Tripoli and Tunis, to gather what corn they could in a quick way, and others for further ports.

They saw that the Grand Master had dealt them a shrewd, though they would not call it a fatal, blow. They had him down, as they thought, but he would bite hard to the last, like a cornered wolf.

"There is a spy," Mustapha said, "that we have not guessed. For the time of its coming was known to few." He added, stroking his beard, "It will be a good day when we watch him die." But whether he spoke of the Grand Master, or of the unguessed spy, was not easy to tell.

The talk turned to the Viceroy's promise to raise the siege, of which the latest news gave them little cause for alarm. There was some stir at Palermo, where the streets were more full than usual of militant crowds. There were galleys at Messina preparing for sea. Perhaps five—perhaps ten. Did they think to face Piali's fleet with that paltry show? It was no more than a flourish of arms which would pass the days till it should be too late by the news of St. Angelo's fall, as, there was good cause to suppose, was the intent of the Spanish King.

The Prince asked how the siege stood, after the assault of the last day, which had been intended to make an end. He mentioned the sound of a bursting mine (as he had thought it to be) which had been heard by all on the

decks of the Christian ship, as it had left St. Angelo's quay. He found it to be a subject on which Hassan was dumb and Mustapha bitterly brief. He learnt no more than that it had been the cavalier before the Castile breach which had been destroyed, and that the officer in charge, had he not perished in the event, would have lost his life in a more painful and gradual way.

For the truth was that within an hour of the great guns which had been mounted upon the cavalier being brought to bear on the breach, De Claremont, sallying out with forty men from the Arragon bastion, and leaving his own part of the wall almost bare of defence thereby, had crept through the darkness without discovery, until they had burst into the rear of the cavalier, with a fury before which the garrison had fallen, or else fled in such panic as may come from surprise in the midnight hours.

De Claremont had actually turned the guns on to the regiment which had been hurried forward to recapture the cavalier; and retired at last, after laying a train to ignite the store of powder which it contained, so that the whole cavalier had been blown to wreck and its guns destroyed, with a total loss of not less than two hundred men, including those who had been entering it as the explosion occurred.

De Claremont returned without the loss of a single man, though there might be some who had wounds to dress and who would not be of much avail on the next day; and the incident had been an ominous prelude to the great assault which had been designed for two days ahead. It had, indeed, been a vital part of that plan that the guns of the cavalier should so shatter the breach that the Turkish troops would be able to march through on a level way, and its destruction had reduced the material probabilities of success, apart from its disheartening effect upon men who were only less exhausted than those who defended the weakened walls.

Of the Thursday assault itself, which had only ceased as the sun had set the evening before, Mustapha talked, however, with more content, though it had failed to overflow the obstinate Christian walls.

He said: "They are stubborn dogs, who will sell themselves, as it seems, to the last knight, at the best price they can get; but it will be soon that there will be none who is left to slay."

He gave the spies' tales of those who had fallen along the walls, which were mainly true. For De Roubles, being already crippled with wounds, had gone down under an infidel axe as he had fought at the barricade in the Sanglea which had been built to hold back the Turks from the inner harbour, to which they reached in the next hour, and were now only prevented from attacking the shipping there by the raking fire of St. Michael's guns.

Del Formo had been fatally struck by a random arrow as he had been directing his guns to aid those who were most sharply attacked; and De

Claremont, being faced by a sudden rush from the Turkish trenches, with ladders to scale a wall which had been quiet and was weakly held, had been almost alone at his own place, with no more than a cauldron of boiling pitch with which to discourage those who would be first over the rampart edge. He had been sprinkling this in a frugal, judicious way, to gain the minute which was required by those who were running to his support, when his gorget had been driven in by a flying fragment of stone. . . .

Having made those losses their boast, the Turkish leaders came to a more domestic concern, being the lodging that must be found which would be fit for one of Prince Azov's degree, and for the retinue that his rank required.

Mustapha offered his own house, in which they then were, which was politely refused, with such sincerity as the offer deserved. He then remarked that Piali had a good villa near to Marsa Scirocco. It would doubtless be at the Prince's disposal but for the fact that he was at sea, and the offer could not be made.

Hassan saw that his turn had come. The villas within the Turkish lines which would be fit to offer for such a use would make but a short count. There were some which had been good, but were ruins now, Marshal Couppier having been active to burn when his chances came. The contents of some had been roughly used by billeted troops, before good order had ruled, during the first weeks of the siege.

He said that a tent was his own choice; but he had a villa in which was no more than a slave whom his pleasure used, who could be removed at a word. He added, with more politeness than truth, that he had already planned that she should be transferred to his own tent, where he would prefer her to be.

Azov paused in doubt of whether the offer were of no better kind than that which Mustapha had made before, which he had been expected to put aside. But Mustapha gravely gave it assent, as a fitting plan. Hassan found that he had offered that which he would be expected to yield.

Angelica, by the caprice of a mocking fate, was likely to find herself returned to the villa where she had been captive before.

The Prince went on to remark that he was without gold in hand for his instant needs, and Mustapha gave the expected reply.

Hassan, taking up the word, was adroit in allusion to the capture that Azov had made from the deck of the sinking ship. Angelica found at last that there were eyes which were turned to her.

There was value there, Hassan's words implied, which could be turned into ready coin. Azov was casual in reply. How could he price that of the worth of which he could as yet make no more than a vague guess? He had not stripped her as yet. She might prove a rich prize, or one of a meaner kind.

Hassan was casual still: but his offer was firm and fair. He lacked a

companion for his own slave. He was willing to buy. As to price, he would not quibble of that. Let the valuers say what her worth would be in a good mart, and he would add ten ounces of finest gold. He was munificent in a careless way. Mustapha, having come to a half-guess at the truth, put in a quiet word to advance the sale.

Azov said: "Well, there is no haste. I will sell to none except I give you the first call, for I see that you will buy in a free way."

Hassan hid the annoyance he felt at a rebuff he had not expected to meet.

"I will suppose," he said, "you are woman-starved, having been slaved as you have. Let me have her to-morrow noon, and you can price her to-day, whether she be virgin or no. Can I say beyond that?" And then, as Azov did not respond: "You can keep her a ten-day time, if you will, so that she be bargained mine from that hour."

Azov said: "You buy with an open hand. I would I had come with a larger choice of the ware in which you are so willing to deal. But you will pardon that I do not sell at this day."

Hassan saw that it would be no gain to say more for that time. He rose up to go.

Angelica could make no more than a vague guess of what this conversation had been, but she was content that Hassan did not take her away.

As he went, the Prince turned to Mustapha to ask: "Is he ever thus?"

"Seeing slaves to buy? Not at all. . . . But I surmise he had special cause."

"He having known her before?"

"So I think. If she be whom I suppose (but I did not see), she is one who did him a quirk, such as it could not be thought that a woman would, and whom he was at some pains to catch on a later day. But she was wanted then to buy Candelissa's son (who was hanged too soon, so that her use fell), and after that she got free for a second time."

"So it is cause of hate that he bids high?"

"It is simple guess; she having done that for which Dragut would have seen her dance on a hot floor, or peeled some skin from her back. . . . But Hassan is of a more sober control. It is hard to say what he would be most likely to do."

Azov looked at Angelica with considering eyes. He had wandered much, and had some wisdom to see the soul that the face betrays. He had supposed her to be of a wanton's trade. She had been friend to an alien slave when his need was sore, and she could have thought of no gain to come. He had seen her use her sword to a man's death in what he had thought to be a cool and competent hand. She was hard to read.

So he said; and Mustapha stroked his beard as he made reply: "The Frankish women are not as ours. They are insurgent of seemingly rule, and have the art to be lewd in a cold and impudent way."

The Prince did not debate the wisdom or observation of age. He said: “By your tale, she is hard to hold.”

“You are warned. . . . If you will, I will send her to your abode with a guard which she will not break.”

Azov thanked him for that. It was agreed that Angelica should be sent on to Le Tonneau’s villa, while the Prince would remain to bathe and rest till a cooler hour, and to have new garments supplied.



## CHAPTER LVIII

THE two girls faced one another, and the same thought came to the minds of both.

“Am I witched,” Venetia thought, “that she must find me again?”

“Is it so narrow a world,” Angelica wondered, “that we cannot go by two ways?”

Venetia was first to speak, as was likely to be.

“So you take my room,” she said, “as your habit is! I half-guessed it was you when the word came. I am to be gone in two hours, with so much of my gear as can be piled on a mule’s back. . . . You will find it a better place than when you were here before.”

The tone was friendlier than the words, and Angelica answered without thought of offence therein: “It is not of my will. I would be gone, if I might, in less time than is given you.”

Venetia did not heed her reply. She was debating within herself if she should be silent, or risk the peril of speech to learn that which she was anxious to know.

She might have had self-restraint to be still, had she not thought that Angelica was more likely to do her harm in an innocent way than if she were warned before. She asked: “Is the grain-ship sunk?”

“So it was, and our own therewith, which has brought me here.”

“Was Don Francisco in charge? Is he dead?”

“I have better hope.”

Venetia’s voice sank to a lower note: “Was it born of a slave’s word?”

“It was, thanks to you.”

“If you say that here, you will be my death.”

“You need have no tremor for that.”

“It was crazed to risk, being here.”

“It was to Malta’s avail. I should say you have bought your peace.”

“It is a peace which is somewhat far.”

Angelica made no answer to that. She might have said that she was caught in the tighter net, and much less of her own design, but was there comfort in that? Though it were true, it was best unsaid.

Venetia spoke again, following her own thoughts: “We are tangled close. It is second time I have brought you here; as I had no purpose to do.”

Angelica was not instant to comprehend. She had not thought to blame

Venetia that she was captured again. Yet she could not say it was less than true.

If Venetia had not let a slave loose, and sent that message by him, it was sure she would not be there, nor Francisco's life in a doubt which she would not own, lest she be unequal to deal with that which was round her now. Yet it was idle folly to make foundation of that for either blame or regret. Had they not dived with death as they crashed through the grain-ship's side they might have been numbered with those who had fallen yesterday on St. Angelo's shaken walls. They might——She said: "It is not your blame. You did well. And let them do to us as they may, it is a ship that they will not raise."

Venetia found some comfort in that, but much less than she would have liked to have. When she said that she had had no purpose to have Angelica caught for a second time, she put truth in a modest dress. It was sure that, had she foreseen that risk, a Ligurian slave would still have toiled in fear of a pricking blade, and with murder plotting within his heart at each time that his buttocks bled.

She had blamed herself, it may be a hundred times, for the impulse which had set him free with a word for the Grand Master from her. She had not escaped question upon his flight, and was still in doubt of whether Hassan suspected the part she played. She had been more closely watched than before during the last two days, unless fear had made judgment less, which was not likely with her; and caution had postponed the attempt of her own escape, which was now her settled design.

But if she were suspect, or had been convicted of aiding the flight of one of her own land, it might not have been beyond pardon or easy stripes. When the man had got free she had supposed that her major peril was past. Had the grain-ship come to a safe port there would have been no cause for suspicion to turn her way.

But it was sunk; and in such a way that enquiry was sure to follow as to how it had been betrayed. It would be easy to connect that with the slave's flight, and to look further from him to her, and then for Hassan to recall a confidence which he had thought it worthless to give.

That, at the best, would have been a fine edge of peril, to be trod in a wary way. But that it should have been sunk by a ship controlled by those with whom she had been in contact before! Surely ironic fate had mocked her beyond that which mortals should be expected to overcome.

She said: "That is sure; though it may be more loss to them than to Malta's gain, for it may have come on too late a day. . . . I would give ten years of my natural life to know that I shall have ten days in a whole skin. . . . But, as for yourself, you may be glad to be where you are, for it would be hard to say that you came from a better place."

“As I came from a sinking deck, I will give you that.”

“But it was not that which I meant. Did you not come from walls that are near to fall? And you must live here to know how keen is the Pagans’ hate. When they break in at the last, it will be fire and pitiless sword, and soft fortune to those who are soonest dead.”

Angelica was cool in reply: “I should say they are not yet in, and may never be.”

“Because you put your desire before reason’s rule, but I was bred in a place where those who do that are most apt to die.”

She said no more than her candid thought when she spoke of St. Angelo as a fortress already doomed, yet as she rode to face the ruler whom she had beguiled and betrayed to so sharp a loss, she saw the Bourg jail from which she had broken before as a haven of safety where she would have been glad to be.

“I am a Judith,” she thought, “of little fame, and less wit; for I have sent the head, and am still here.”

## CHAPTER LIX

So Venetia went, and Angelica was left in a house from which Hassan's servants withdrew, and which was astir with those that Mustapha sent.

She took the room for her own use which Venetia had had, and which they had shared before. No one obstructed her freedom in that or other matters within the house, but she saw that the outer doors had a strong guard; and when she had made it clear where she would sleep, a sturdy eunuch stationed himself at the door.

She had been vexed that the only clothes she had were damaged beyond repair, and disinclined to Venetia's ready offer of hers, both because they would have been of a small size, and that she doubted it being a good moment in which to go back to a woman's dress. For escape, in particular, which she must keep in front of her mind, a man's was the better wear. And how should she get Christian clothes, being captive here?

But Venetia had made short trouble of that, when she learnt her doubt.

"Why, what a babe you are in the world's ways! Is there aught that you cannot get if the gold be free . . . ? I did not mean the few coins that your pouch holds. It is for Azov to pay."

She found a Jew among the bustle of those who prepared the house for Prince Azov's use, which was more fortune than she had hoped, for it was not a place where they were common to meet, running more risks than they did among Christian men at that time (which is saying much), and having talked to him for a time in a mixture of tongues, it followed that there was choice of doublets within the hour, and much besides that would be useful to have, and no payment asked.

The dusk came, and Angelica barred her door, letting it be thought that she had gone to rest, as she did not venture to do until she had heard Azov come, and the house wake to movement and light. But she was still undisturbed and, after a time, silence fell, and she could have a confident hope that there had come an end to a day of crisis and death, through which she had come alive, as few did from the meeting ships; and so she fell asleep, putting fear from her heart, while the growing silence of night made more audible the steady monotone of the guns that did not cease to beat upon St. Angelo's falling walls. . . .

She waked to the next dawn with the fresh vigour of youth, but to the pressure of sharper griefs than she had felt amid the crowded circumstance of

the day.

In the clear light of the dawn, the hope which she had refused to loose when she slept seemed to lack solid foundation of probability. She recalled Venetia's words that she refused to face a reluctant reality when she would not admit that St. Angelo tottered toward its fall. . . . Francisco dead, and herself snared in a way from which she might find no means of further escape, nor an equal heart to attempt it again.

She was undisturbed for an hour, during which she was content to delay that which she could have no pleasure to meet, and gathered back to herself some of the fortitude which she had learnt in the last months, and which she had gone nearly to lose; and then the eunuch's hand was urgent upon the latch, and when she drew the bar, letting him in, he spoke in a tongue which had no meaning for her, but with gestures easy to understand, so that she went down, and found a meal laid in the Eastern style, for herself alone.

The man who had been a slave at her galley's bench was now too changed in his state to think of eating with her, but he came in when the meal was done, seating himself as one who had come to talk in a leisured way.

He looked at her for a time in a silence she would not break, as though he sought for that which the eyes could resolve more surely than words. He may have waited for her to speak, but when he saw that she would not be first, he asked: "You were not hurt by the violence through which you came?"

"I have bruises, but they will go. I was most injured by you."

She looked down at her wrists, which still bore signs of the tightened cord. She added boldly, her lips moving toward a smile: "You told me that you had a debt which you aimed to pay."

She saw an instant's smile in response, which he suppressed, as she thought, as though not wishing to be drawn into familiar or jesting speech.

He asked: "You had Hassan's hate?"

She could not tell how much he knew, nor in what manner it had been told. She met the sudden query in its own way: "Did he say that?"

"Not at all. You are one whom he is most eager to buy."

Her voice was beyond control in its sharp fear: "You would not do that?"

"Can you tell me why?"

"Would you give me death? You spoke of a debt to pay. It was not my word, but your own."

"Which is fully paid at this hour."

"Will you say how?"

"It was life for life."

"You would say you had life from me?"

"So I would. For the man would not have confessed."

"And you gave mine in return? I must say you did less than that. I would

have swum to land, as I should have chosen to do.”

Azov heard this with an expressionless face, hiding thought which she would have preferred to read, in his Eastern way.

“That,” he answered at last, “is beyond probable truth.”

“Yet true it is.”

“We will leave that. . . . I would hear what you have done to earn Hassan’s hate.”

“I will tell you all.”

She told him the whole tale, which was long, and he gave her no help, being silent, and his thoughts hid.

At the end she said: “If you call your debt paid, we will not cavil on that. Nor need you go short of the gold that Hassan would pay. I am not poor. You can name your sum, so that I go free.”

“I am not eager for gold. I have more than I ever need, and its worth is small. . . . You are one of more count than I first thought, and your lover dead.”

She checked denial of that. To suggest that Francisco lived might have been to turn enquiry and search toward one who might not be far.

“I can give you naught except gold. I am alien here. Will you let me free?”

“You ask more than you are destined to get. I do much if I keep you from Hassan’s hands. He is a pillar of strength to the Sultan’s throne, half subject and half ally. I cannot make him wroth for a slight cause. It is a matter of state, which you have a wit that can understand.

“It is plain that he has a fixed will that you shall not elude his power. Can I counter that? I can say you are one whom I desire for my own bed, and I will not sell. There is no answer thereto. But if I loose or sell you another way—no, it is not to be done. There have been wars with less root, if we seek the small sources from which they spring.”

“Would you take me against my will?”

“It is captive’s doom. But it is yet that which I will not do. You shall have time for your own choice. I will give you ten days, that being his own space, though he meant it another way. . . . It is time enough by all counts, for by that day St. Angelo will be down, and I, if not all, will be in bustle to sail away.”

She asked, to gain time for thought: “You say St. Angelo will be down? Can you be so sure?”

“I say what I am told. And what I saw from within the walls until four days back does not give it the lie. The spies report that a third of those who could yet stand were brought low at the last assault, and among them the best names that you had. Can such things endure? Can there be no end? The spies say that there are no longer numbers to hold the walls. We may go in when we will. But as they are still grimly resolved, the Grand Master being of fibre that will

not bend, and his knights of a close blood, Mustapha will not haste for our own men to be slaughtered anew. That was the counsel I gave, being asked as one who had seen the inside of the walls. We have guns enough, and powder we can put to no better use. For five more days we batter on ramparts that are flailed too flat, in some parts, for an ample mark—and as the month ends, we go in.”

“Then the grain-ship’s loss has been futile to change event, even to hasten the next assault?”

“I would not say that. I should say it has found the date. For there is corn enough for the next week, without pulling of belts, and after that we plan to draw from St. Angelo’s vaults, for corn is the one food of which they still have a fair store.”

“And if they should hold the wall, as they have been potent to do?”

“It is that which has passed their power. When we shall tell the troops where the food is stored——But you turn aside. Will you choose now, or must you stand till the last day?”

“By your leave, I will take the time which is the most mercy you have.”

“So I thought that you would. But I must ask you another thing. On your own tale, you are not easy to hold. Will you be fettered anew, or would you choose that your wrists heal?”

“There is but one answer to that.”

“Then will you pledge your word that you will not fly?”

“Except I am rescued by other hands?”

“By whose should that be?”

“I would be blither to know. But I would be careful of what I pledge.”

“So you should. . . . Except you be rescued by other hands, you will remain . . . for ten days. That is from yesterday, when you came. I will ask no oath, for I have found that those whose word is infirm cannot be held more surely thereby. . . . You can ask for all you will that the merchants have.”

He rose and walked out, as one who had disposed of that which would leave him free for larger affairs. He thought he had done well, and would have agreed in his heart had he been praised as one who had acted a kingly part. She was little more to him than a woman of foreign blood and alien faith, who had done him a kindness which he had tried to repay. He had a sincere and friendly desire to keep her from Hassan’s hands. He offered her protection from that, which she must buy at the natural price.

He had offered that which few would have done being as great as he was in his own world, and which he would have offered to few. He had given her time to forget the grief of her lover’s loss (which might not be much—could he tell?) and to adjust her thoughts to the idea of a new lord. If she should prefer to be sold or whipped, or perhaps flayed at Hassan’s caprice, it would but

show her to be of a thankless folly, of which he would be relieved.

This was too plain to him to require the tribute of thought, and she, being quick of wit, was not blind to his own view nor to the nature from which it sprang.

She saw herself to be secure for a few days and to have time to plan beyond that.

She was not wholly at peace with her own heart that she had pledged her word not to seek escape, but her reason told her that she had a real gain at a price which might not be much; for even if a chance of escape might come which she must refuse, it would almost surely be one which she would have missed had her word been withheld, and she would have had discomforts and indignities of restraint, the nature of which she might not exactly know, but which she was glad to avoid.

But, beyond such considerations as these, her decision had been controlled by the hope that Francisco might be alive and not far. Might she not have rescue from him? Would there not be a better chance if she were moving without control? Most of all, would she not be better placed to let him know where she was, which she had given no pledge that she would not do . . . ? It was Saturday now. It was on Friday next, the last day of the month, that St. Angelo was expected to yield. She had a day beyond that. There were many chances might be her friends. Suppose Hassan should be killed? Suppose that Francis should come? She would woo hope with a stubborn will.



## CHAPTER LX

VENETIA, expecting trouble, found, for that night at least, there was none to face. She was not transferred to Hassan's own pavilion, as she had somewhat presumptuously expected to be. He had had her there for his pleasure on single nights, but to do more would have been against the custom of the aristocracy of his own land: to have a woman in constant intimacy being considered to be against the canons of dignity and of decent living, both for himself and her.

There was a double pavilion erected adjoining his own, where she was lodged with the two negroid slaves that were hers, but though he used her for his pleasure during the next night, he said nothing of that which she feared to hear. His thought was fixed rather on Angelica than in suspicion of her, and the one remark he made on the topic which was in the wary rear of her mind was that Francisco was said to have escaped from the sinking ship, by what method could be but guessed, and to be at Notabile now.

"They are hard to drown," he said, and it was plain who other was in his thoughts; "but I suppose they will bleed to a good knife when their time is come."

But, except for that, his time and thoughts appeared to be concentrated upon the attack of the Sanglea, which he would not relax, though the siege had again become no more than an artillery duel at other parts of the line—a duel in which St. Angelo could now make but feeble reply to the Turkish batteries freely-served and outnumbering guns.

Mustapha busied himself with questions of routine, of organization, discipline and supply, and systematic preparation for what he supposed (not for the first time) would be the final assault at the month's end. And Piali, stirred to added activity by the escape of the *Curse of Islam* and its results, had established a close blockade of the great harbour, which he was now obstructing with cables and floating wreckage, and watching ceaselessly both by night and day with a score of his fastest galleys, so that it would have been hard indeed for another ship to get clear or to avoid the fire of St. Elmo's guns.

He was preparing also to launch a naval attack within the harbour at the time of the next assault, it having been resolved that St. Angelo was now so weakened and bare of men that it could do little harm to warships which might yet make such attack on its water-sides as it could not ignore. They would be added weight in a scale that already fell, and might give Piali the boast that he would have some hand in the victory of the final day.

There was the more reason for employing them in this way, as the ships were now at sea with their full crews, and with cannon remounted upon their decks, in preparation for a Christian armada which it was now plain that they need not fear. For with five ships, or with ten, which was the largest number of which they could hear as being equipped at Sicilian ports, they would have no trouble to deal.

But Hassan went on at his own work of laying flat the Sanglea, so that Marshal Couppier, falling back from street to street, from barricade to barricade, would soon be contained within the narrow space of St. Michael's fort if he should be forced to further retreat. It was a contest in which all his cunning and skill could not avoid gradual loss of ground before the well-directed attacks of the far larger forces which were at Hassan's command, and of the superior and well-served artillery on which he relied to blast his advance. Worse than that, Marshal Couppier could not, with all his care, avoid a constant wastage of men, so that the Grand Master, with whatever reluctance, had been obliged to further weaken the Bourg defence to supply his more urgent need.

Hassan, watching his colleagues seize the more spectacular positions for completing the success which was now so nearly within their hands, could yet feel some satisfaction that his alone were the present gains. The others talked of what they would do at the month end, but his corsair forces went slowly, stubbornly forward from day to day. . . .

Venetia, looking for tempest, had come to a quiet sea, and then, two days later, she ran into sudden storm, when she had thought it was overpast.

There was a message from Hassan, as the afternoon waned, that he was coming to see her in her own tent. That was in the oriental routine, which would not enter to a woman without notice before, but it was barely observed, for he gave her no time to prepare or to adjust her mind to what she might have to face. He entered on the messenger's heels, and it was clear at the first glance that he came in no friendly mood.

He spoke at once of that which had brought him there, and in a curt way, meaning to give her no time to trim the front of her false defence; but, in her own style, she was more wily than he. She had planned before how she would catch such an attack in a subtle wit.

He said: "There is tale of the grain-ship's loss. The spies tell that the warning went through that slave who had been talking to you. That is what he is plain to say. Did you tell him that, as I recall that you had it from me a few hours before?"

She saw, with an instant alertness of mind that, whether of purpose or not, he had been vague as to the statement the slave was said to have made. Had he accused her? Or had he allowed no more than that he had taken the tale,

leaving its source dumb?

But she gave no sign that she saw this, answering with an air of frankness, and as though there were no thought of consequence to herself: "It is what I have wondered myself at times, for I suppose that I might have done it without thought that there would be following harm, he being a slave as he was, and you not having told it to me (as I remember you did, you are right in that) as being a secret thing.

"But when I think, I am assured that it was not said; for we had no talk of that kind. It was of his own land, and of things that had happened there since he was slaved, which I knew to a later year. He did not ask, nor I care to speak, of things that are round us now."

"Yet you will not swear it was not said?"

"So I might, and it would be an oath that must stand, for there would be none to deny, and so I think I would do; but when I answer to you I speak in a freer mood, and it is true that I wondered at first if it could have been said in a careless way, when I heard how the grain-ship was sunk, and how the *Curse of Islam* sailed as soon as the man got into town, but I concluded at last that the word had not come from me. If it were his, he must have found it another way."

"And if he says it was you?"

"I should still say he is wrong, we having had no words of that kind."

Hassan made no answer to this. He surveyed her with brooding, unfriendly eyes. He saw that she either spoke truth, or fenced in a most skilful way, as (he said to himself) if she were in fault she would be likely to do. But in fact she had made him doubt more than firm denial would have availed. To that point, she may be observed to have come best through that bout of tongues.

Her trouble was, as she could not guess, that he did not wish to believe. He had a plan in his mind which required that he should convict, or at least impute betrayal to her.

"Well," he said, as one half-convinced but who must act in a judicial impartial way, "it is for Mustapha to deal. It shall not be said that I keep slaves who betray. You must have trial of him."

He saw her face blanch in a way she could not conceal, though she faced him with angered eyes, in which the most wrath was for her own door, that she should have made such a defence that he would not heed. "Why," she asked, with astonishment in her voice, "would you send me to death? And on so frail a charge, which you do not believe? Nor would I have a great blame had it been true, you having told it to me in so free a way. Am I no pleasure to you, that you send me thus to a cruel end, and with no cause that is worth?"

"If you said naught, should you stand in so great a fear?"

"That I should, as you know well. I shall be their sport. Will they miss

revenge for the grain-ship's loss, having a Christian with which to play?" She added shrewdly: "It must be for your shame alike, for it must be said that you told it to me, it being on that that the charge is built."

He was silent at that, not having had any purpose of putting her in Mustapha's hands. It had been a threat to bring her to the mood for that which he would require her to do. But he had been disconcerted by the quickness with which she had seen that he must accuse himself as the first cause, if he should make a public charge against her. Had he believed her guilt, and had no other purpose to serve, he would have been likely to order her death in a quiet way, and one which would give her no option of further speech, as with a bowstring about her neck.

Beyond this, he had a larger doubt than before that one so shrewd and alert would risk her life by sending such a word in a slave's mouth. But he gave no sign of his thoughts, going on as it had been his first purpose to do.

"If I do not send you to him, will you do that which you did before, with your life to win?"

She felt some hope stir in her heart at this, seeing that he held a design that he had not shown, but she thought of all he had required her to do before, and found no comfort therein.

She asked: "Can I tell that till I hear? But will you drive me to pay high for a thing that I did not do?"

"It is doubt for doubt. You may fail now, and if you do you will be tried on that charge. I give you chance to get free. . . . I will have Angelica brought to me again, and that in such way that Azov will not trace her to me, nor guess how it was planned. He must not know where she has come."

"She will not trust me again. You can see that."

"That is your trouble to overcome. . . . Can you do this, or will you go at once to Mustapha's hands?"

"I do not say but I might. . . . It would need a most subtle plot. . . . When do you want it to be?"

"It should be before the next day of assault, but not much."

"Which is when?"

"It is the last day of this month. You may betray that if you will. It is open talk."

"It is to be done of my own plan?"

"So that there be no suspicion of me, which I would not forgive."

"I will think what I can do."

"So you should. You have life to win."

He went at that word, feeling that he had done well, and having more belief in the potency of Venetia's guile than belief in the veracity of her recollection of conversations with the escaped slave. His resolution to have Angelica

trapped had been made after some talk with Azov had convinced him that she would not come to his hands in a bought way. He knew that she was lost for ever to him, and his vengeance foiled, unless he could catch her now, and his thoughts went beyond that to affairs of state, considering that Azov might come to a great power in the future days, and that it would be no gain to have a woman such as Angelica at his ear, who could have no love for the Viceroy of the Barbary coast.

But against that there was the necessity that what he did should be neither proved nor suspect, for there could be no more deadly offence, by the standards of conduct which were common to both, than to interfere with a woman within the house of another man. It was a matter which he would have hesitated to open to one of his own blood, and in which the loyalty of few would have been sufficient to persuade them to aid his scheme with a good will. He had seen that Venetia was the one chance that his household gave, and when the rumour had reached his ears of how the grain-ship had been betrayed, the plan had quickly matured in his mind, and he had gone to her before his purpose had time to cool.

When he had said that Angelica must be betrayed before the next day of assault, he had remembered that Azov had said that he would wish to take part therein, but that he might leave on a following day. He would prefer it to be little before that date, thinking that Azov could not be gone too soon after Angelica had come into his hands. He had no doubt that Venetia's mind would be fertile in devising a snare, nor did he fear that any scruple would hold her back to her skin's risk.

But when he left her, her face changed, as she would seldom permit it to do. She paced the length of the tent, which was not her way, with the look of an angry cat.

She hated Hassan at that hour with a loathing beside which her feeling for the Grand Master might be called love. She thought bitterly: "It is Judith I called myself, but they will give me another name, having some likeness of sound, but being that of a man."

But all the time, through the fear she had for herself, and her hatred both of him and that which he had required her to do, there were snares weaving within her mind, as though born without will from her.

After a time, she lay down. She lay very still, as her way was when she plotted against the constant dangers her life had known, or to catch those from whom profit came. Her hands went to behind her head. She thought long, with hard inscrutable eyes. She did not stir till the quick twilight brought one of her slaves to trim her lamps for the night. When she had gone, she rose up.

"I can go to her," she thought, "with no wonder, but certain thanks, having news that she will be glad to have." And having made that resolve, she slept

well.

## CHAPTER LXI

THE next morning Venetia, having bathed and dressed in the leisured comfort for which she had the keen love of those who have known life of another mode, rode over to Le Tonneau's villa on a good mule which Hassan had assigned to her use, taking one of her maids, for whom a mount was soon found when her will was said. She did not choose to go that distance alone, though there was enough known of herself in the Moorish camp, and of her place in Hassan's regard, both to secure her own safety therein and the quick service of all to whom she might make appeal.

She knew that it did not follow from the readiness with which such service was paid that she might not be watched by some who would have sharp orders for her restraint if she should move beyond narrow bounds; and she had a thought that there would be test in this ride, for, if she were turned, she would have learned that which might be value to know, and she would have afterwards a good defence for Hassan's ears as to where she had been seeking to go.

But, whether watched or not, she rode an unhindered way, and came to the place she sought, to find it a centre of moving life; for Azov, finding a regiment among Mustapha's army which had been recruited from his own land, and of which he was the titular head, had caused them to move their camp, so that they now lay round the house on its seaward side. They were being re-equipped and refreshed by him—to the limit of the resources he could control—to inspirit them for the coming day of assault, when it was said that he purposed to lead them in person to the victory that the hour would bring.

Venetia observed this concourse with an inward disfavour as being a likely hindrance to the plans which were forming within her mind. But she rode unchallenged to the gate, demonstrating thereby what may be done by assurance that knows its way, for it was unlikely that she should be familiar to any of the Turks who looked with curious or scowling eyes at the shameless fair-skinned woman who turned a bare face to the gaze of men, and wore a dress which was bold to discover her body's lines in the infamous Christian way.

Even at the gate, which was guarded well, she was held to no more than a short pause, after she had said who she was and whom she was there to see. The eunuch came to the call, and led her in with words which were hard, and genuflections easy, to understand.

She saw a second barrier down without trouble to her, for she had considered that Angelica might either refuse to see her of her own will, or (more probably) that she might have no liberty to decide. But she was shown to the upper floor, and so through to the belvedere where they had sat on the first morning when they had found themselves to be fellow mice in one trap.

Angelica met her there, still in her boy's clothes, with a greeting which was well enough, though not warm, which Venetia chose to observe.

"I am not one whom you love to see and you make that clear, as your manner is; but when you know why I have come, you may give me thanks in a fairer way."

"You mistake," Angelica replied, thinking that she must have shown more coolness than she had meant; "there could be few, so that they would come with a friend's voice, whom I would not be blithe to see, being mured here as I am."

She judged truly enough that Venetia would be her friend at a free choice, and would even do her any service she could, if the cost were easy to pay. But beyond that—well, she had trusted once and found it a count to high.

Venetia asked: "Have you freedom to go abroad?"

"That I have. Prince Azov is one who trusts in a large way. But, being garbed as I am, I suppose I am better here."

Venetia was puzzled as to the implications of that and hindered therefore in what she had come to say. Her quick eyes had noticed that Angelica wore a sword, which was the natural complement of the dress she assumed, but was not commonly put into a prisoner's hand. She knew also that Angelica had lost her own on the sinking ship, when Azov had twisted it from her grasp. Her poniard was still in its place, not having been taken away, but the sword must have been replaced with a deliberate consent.

She said cautiously, feeling her way: "They do not deny you arms?"

"Azov said that if I walk armed it is clear that I am here with a good right, and I should be less in jeopardy of those who may not know how I stand."

"It is of your comfort he thinks well."

She was still in a puzzled doubt. Had Angelica become Azov's mistress to their common content, so that he gave her all the freedom she chose to have? If that were so, she might have come with wares for which the market was done.

She went on: "That could but be if you walk abroad; yet you said you were mured here, so that there could be few you would not welcome to see."

"So I am, by the clothes I wear, and the face I show. I do not know beyond that, for I have resolved that I will not try."

"You would be free if you could?"

"Am I fool? But I am pledged to remain here till—till there be a new bargain made."



She remembered, none too soon, that Venetia was now the petted slave of her special foe. Had she been sent to find how she stood in Azov's regard? She checked her words, and Venetia saw that she must play the one card that she had before Angelica would further expose her own. She said: "Well, I did not come to enquire of matters which are not mine, but to bring you news you might not get in another way."

Angelica felt her heart beat with a sudden hope, which she feared to hold. "It is kindly thought," she said, "for news is welcomed to those who are cooped as I."

"It is of Don Francisco I heard." As she spoke, Venetia saw the light in Angelica's eyes, and did not doubt that she had made a vain guess the moment before, by which deducing she showed perception of the wide gulf that held them apart. She went on: "He escaped the wreck, and is at Notabile now."

"You are sure?"

"I had it from Hassan's lips. Don Francisco was there when the tale came. I cannot say beyond that."

An instinct of suspicion, which was not natural to her but was born of sufficient cause, stirred in Angelica's heart to a sharp fear: "You would not mislead on that which is much to me?"

"It was Hassan's tale. I cannot say more or less. I will swear that, if you desire."

"You told me once you would be forsworn though your oath were by Bethlehem's star, or the manger that cradled Christ."

"That was if I were snared. Being thus, I would lie my way through, if I could, though it were either by way of Heaven or Hell. So would most, as I think, though they may be less honest than I. But I tell you this as a friend, for which I thought to have a good word. . . . You may make of it what you will or else naught. I seek neither to aid nor to know."

Angelica felt that she had been ungracious in the reception of that which she took for truth, and which brought a new lightness to her own heart, which was still weighed with sufficient reason for fear. She lacked friends, of whatever kind. If she could only trust——! But she knew that she never could.

She asked: "Can he know I am here?"

"I know nothing of that. You should make the far better guess."

"Then I must suppose not."

Venetia sat as though having no more to say, or waiting for Angelica to speak again. Well, there could be no harm in questioning her. Half-deceiving herself with the thought, she asked: "You would escape if you could?"

Venetia knew that she could reply without fear, even though it should all have been open to Hassan's ears, for it would be simple to say that she had feigned, as part of the plan she had. But she looked round in a cautious way:

“There is none can hear?”

“We are alone here, as you know well. It is a place I chose, thinking you would not have come without cause.”

“I would escape, if I could. It is hateful here. I suppose Algiers would be worse in a hundred ways. And Hassan is one whom you cannot reach. He takes all, and is distant still.”

Angelica heard that which she did not doubt. There was an accent of truth in words which closed in a bitter tone, for it was partial cause of the hatred which had been in Venetia’s heart that she could not win Hassan with all her wiles. There had been times when she had nursed hope, but the narrowed distance widened again, and she looked at a stranger’s eyes, holding a cold suspicion of her which no art could foil.

Angelica pondered whether she should ask the only aid that she would be likely to get; and as she was slow to speak, Venetia went on: “But where to should we flee, with Malta near to be a Turk’s isle?”

“I shall be slow to think that.”

“Will it alter for you? It is plain fact.”

“Then is the more cause to be free on a former day.”

“Before St. Angelo fall? So it is. Do you know when that will be?”

Angelica guessed what she meant. She went as near to guile as her nature was, when she countered with: “Can you tell me that?”

“It is Friday to come. It is the last day of this month.”

“That is, if they break in; as they have been unequal to do.”

“But as they are equal now, it is wholly agreed. Hassan says the Marshal falls back in the Sanglea, street behind street, as men having no hope to prevail, but who will die in a stubborn way.”

“It is Europe’s shame.”

“So it is. But it is of ourselves we must think. I would walk streets where there is sound of the Christian tongues. . . . The Turks do not go yet beyond three miles of the inland roads. If we further proceed, there will be boats leaving by every creek. They will creep away, being unseen in the darker hours.”

Angelica, doubting whether it would be wise to expose her own hopes or fears, found that she listened to one who was content to confide in her. Venetia spoke of that which she had pondered before, and seemed to do so without reserve.

Angelica asked: “Then do you think to get free before Friday come?”

It was Monday now. It was but four days away.

“So I do. I will take the best chance. It is the day before I would choose. Would you make two . . . ? We may not come to the same chance. You must think of that. . . . I would give help if I could.”

Angelica thought: "I can but ask help that she will not give. Am I worse then than I now am? Could she betray to my loss? It is hard to see."

She saw that there was a chance, if no more, that Venetia might speak from a candid mind, and offer that which a friend could do. Should she cast her one chance aside, because it was no better than that?

"I could not join you," she said, "though the path were clear, for I am pledged that I will not escape, except rescue come."

"And how could that be?"

"There was once it was."

"You mean that Don Francisco came to your aid? It was such a thing as may be done once, but not more. And with this regiment about the gates!"

"So I fear. I but wait and pray, being closely caught. I think at times I were better bound, with no pledge. But I would be free to learn if he lived, and to let him know I am trapped here, as I must contrive that I now do."

"You would have him know?"

"If you could do that!"

"I should say it is less than hard. It is but to make talk that the spies will bear. . . . And I can take the tale in my own lips, if I get away, as I may be instant to do. . . . You think that I have bought peace with the Grand Master and Malta's knights?"

"I should say you have won reward, though I see not how you will claim, nor they pay."

"It is once that we see alike. But I will do what I can, so that it be at no more than a mean risk. It is what I owe for a wrong I did you before, which I did not wish. I may come again, or may not. But, for now, I have stayed too long. There must be excuse. I will take things from the house I forgot before."

She went in a quick way, avoiding the Judas-kiss, and by that manner may have given a better hope that she had talked from an honest mind. She took linen out of a chest for her mule to bear. She asked for a casket, for which there was hurried search, but which could not be found, having no substance outside her mind, where it had been invented a moment before. She said it was of value to her, and she might come on another day. But now she must go, for she would not be abroad when the dusk fell.

Angelica, watching her ride away, had the excitement of joy and a new hope. Thanksgiving had its customed place that night in her prayers, for which a text had been hard to find since she had come to that house for a second time.

Venetia went to her own tent, to which Hassan came at a later hour, as she had thought he would do.

She was not surprised that he knew where she had been. He asked: "Have you trimmed your plot?"

She fenced in reply: "If I do this foul thing, can I come to peace? It is poor

service that must be paid with no more than a new toil. Will you say I have served you well, both by night and day?"

"Do you talk of this as a thing done?"

"I am through the worst. She was slow to snare."

"But you have her now?"

"Can I wring the neck of a tame hen? I should say I can."

"It is as easy as that?"

"It was not at first. It is now. It can be done in three days."

"Can you tell me how?"

"Not as yet. But there is one thing on which I must ask your aid."

"I will have no portion in this. So I made it clear."

"It is but that it be talked in the Christian camps that she is in Azov's hands."

"And what avail will that be?"

"Perhaps none. But it is a point on which I would have no doubt."

"You must tell me why."

"But you said you would have no part or knowledge in this?"

"Do you ask no more? Can you contrive that she be here in a secret way, asking no more, besides this?"

"I shall need men of trust on the right day."

"That is vain to ask. I can break in without aid from you. It is violence we must not have. There is no value in that."

"Did I say they should break in?"

"But there must be no violence at all. . . . To seize a woman—even a slave—from Prince Azov's house—it could not be done. There are few I have who could be trusted for that, both to undertake and to be still on the next day. . . . And with that regiment which is surrounding the doors!"

"It will not be there."

"I will risk no talk of a woman seized, be it where you will."

"Is she that, or man?"

"It would become known if she should be ravished away."

"But if she come on her own feet?"

"You mean in a willing haste?"

"So it will be likely to be."

"Then for what do you need men?"

"That were to show all."

Hassan became silent at that. He remained as though lost in thought, leaving her unsure of what he would be likely to say. But he concluded at last: "It is naught you ask. I suppose it to be known before now, both at Notabile and in St. Angelo's walls. But that shall be made sure. . . . You have wit enough to observe my will. . . . When you ask more, there must be more that

you will be ready to tell.”

“So I will,” she said, “on a later day.”

## CHAPTER LXII

VENETIA had been slow to expose her plot to Hassan's request for the best reason of all, that it was still vague in her own mind, though its outlines were dimly lined. But she had seen that it would be useless to contrive until she had learned how Angelica was confined, and what trust she could have from her.

Now she had a night of short sleep and much thought. She did not fail to observe that when she had asked Hassan for a promise that he would use her thus for the last time he had avoided reply. Hatred stirred anew at this thought, but she was fair enough to allow in a cool mind that she was not punished without offence. For it was truly her word which had sent the grain-ship down to the sea-floor, and if it should come to proof (and who could say what the slave's chatter might be, or that he might not be caught again in the next week?) she would need all the favour that she could claim to secure her life from those she had brought to so great a loss. Even to have betrayed Angelica to his hands for a second time might seem a small thing beside that. . . . Well, to each day its own grief. She had a plot to weave now, which must leave short leisure for straying thoughts. . . . So she came to the dawn.

She set out again before the full heat of the day, riding to Le Tonneau's villa, and taking with her the same maid as before, to whom she had shown a casket which she said was a pair to that which could not be found.

"It must," she said, "have been thrust aside by those who garnished the place for Prince Azov's use, but that it is pilfered I will not think. It will be found at a thorough search."

She went with a mind filled with her own plans, which did not guess, for all the thought she had had, that Hassan might have one also which he had not discovered to her. But when he stood in talk with Azov at a later hour, as they looked down together from Mount Corradin on the ruins of the Sanglea, he said: "There is a white slave of my tents whom I value much. She was owned by one of the greatest of Malta's knights, who had made her first of his house before he came to death at my hands on the Sanglea walls, and she afterwards to my power.

"She was at your villa last afternoon, on a pretext of things she would bring away (I having kept her there till I passed it to you), but the intention was mine, that you might see if she would be one who would please your eyes."

Azov considered this, but with little wonder as to what it might mean. He said: "It was an ill chance that I was not there."

“She has gone again on the same search, if I make a most likely guess.”

“Then I may observe her before she leave.”

Azov said no more, but it was understood without words that Hassan had made another bid for Angelica’s purchase. If gold were not enough, there was to be female flesh tossed into the scale, and that such as some would think to be of a most desirable kind.

It appeared that Hassan would not rely upon one prospect alone, but must assure himself against failure with an alternative plan. So it may have been; but he may have aimed, besides that, to supply a pretext for Venetia’s presence in Azov’s house, so that suspicion might not turn subsequently to her.

Azov returned more speedily than he would otherwise have done, curiosity being sufficient spur; for he had known more of Venetia than Hassan had thought it needful to say, having had Angelica’s circumstantial account.

His education had familiarised him with the habits and appearance of Western women, which had been supplemented by experiences during the Balkan campaigns in which he had taken part, and some subsequent observations from the segregated position of a shackled slave. He was dismounting at his own gate as Venetia came out, having had an interview with Angelica of more than two hours duration, while the house had been searched for a casket which was not there.

She looked at the Prince, splendidly attired, and surrounded by the officers of the regiment which he had made his guard, with innocently provocative eyes, thinking him to be a man of whom she would have been glad to know more at a better time; and had she been aware of the proposition that Hassan had made, it would have appealed to her as a very profitable exchange.

But she did not guess that such a prize was within the rights of her own chase. She was careful, rather, that there should be no tale taken to Hassan’s ears such as would rouse the jealousy which is seldom far from the surface of the oriental mind. She remembered also that she had writing beneath her stomacher’s hem by which she would be ruined beyond remedy if it should come to the Prince’s eyes. Her own fell demurely before his, and she mounted her mule with a consciousness that she drew his regard, which became entire pleasure only when she had ridden a safe distance away.

This was at midday, and she rested with the satisfaction of work well done, and with a very active regard for that which was yet to do. When the worst heat of the day was past, she sent a slave to Hassan’s tent to enquire whether she could come to him, to which he gave prompt assent, but received her in such a manner as to remind her that the accusation under which she lay was still a cloud that he would not permit to dissolve.

“I have short time,” he said, but whether of need or policy she had a shrewd doubt; “will you say at the first word if you have brought your plans to

a final flower?"

"If I fill you two pokes where you looked for one?"

"Will you be plain?"

"Would you capture him by whom the grain-ship was rammed, and the boats sunk on a former day?"

"Don Francisco? Do you say you can bring me him?"

"Will he not come to her aid, as he did before?"

"He would not take it from you. He was hurt once. He would move further away."

"It is not from me. It is her own hand."

"Which she has trusted to you to bear?"

"It is here to see, if you will."

She passed him a letter unsealed, which he read with care.

"By what tale did you get this, she having known you before?"

"I am the one chance which is hers. . . . But I do not say it was smoothly done. There were tears at times. There were oaths to swear which I might not miss."

He read the letter again, as though being stirred with a new doubt. "What he did before," he said, "was in the cover of night, but this is to be in the full light of the day. Will he be headlong to venture that?"

"But how else would you have it to be? Could she stroll out in the midnight hours?"

"You will need no men, except at the point named. That is clear."

"But I shall. She will not go so far, except under duress. She is pledged that she will not go, unless rescue come."

"It has a weak sound."

"Yet so it is. And there is another cause of as much weight."

"You shall tell me the plan in a clear way."

"So I will, if you have turned to wish that. It is short to tell, and you may find it good if you think long. The letter gives him both place and time where he must be instant to snatch her up. She will go there with me, and such escort as we resolve, who will obey me but not her. She will go as by their duress, they having made show that they seize us both. If we should be stayed by those who suspect our flight, in such a way that we may not get past nor free, so I shall say that it was, and perhaps afterwards that I have said a false word before, having a knife more near to my back than it was comfort to be, and she will be quick to support my word, which will be fact and defence to her. . . . It will be thought that they have taken Don Francisco's gold. . . . Or if you say they will be believed, then it will be plain that we had combined in one flight, she and I, and none will suspect your part, for should you aid her in that, or else me? It would be a folly to say.



“But if we come to where she is to be met, then you take a full bag. You have Don Francisco caught, and she will be one he has rescued and you have captured again. She will be in your hand with some right, even though it be done in an open way, which is for you to prefer.”

“Will you tell me this: If I have no knowledge before, how should I be at hand to catch them after they meet?”

“It must be fortunate chance, but if you heed what the letter says you will see I have not been blind. It is a place which your troops patrol, and not those of the Turkish camp. But for that, I could have chosen a better spot.”

Hassan pondered this for a time, having forgotten the haste which he had protested before. He said: “You have planned well, and had you done no more than get this letter from her, you would have shown a most cunning art, she having known you before in the way she did. . . . There are some things that I still might ask, but I will conclude that you have not been careless of them. . . . But this letter must not go through my hand.”

“I had not meant that it should. But will you tell me how I may find one by whom it will be surely conveyed?”

Hassan gave her the name of a sure spy, with instructions of how he could be safely approached.

“I shall need gold.”

“You can have that to your will.” He unlocked a coffer. “Take your own sum, so that I know. For I keep a count. . . . But I like not those men that you will have with you at first. It is their tongues from which mischief is like to come, it may be at a far day.”

“Yet you will find it safe, if you think well. You will tell them no more than that they are to take orders from me. Can there be after-trouble on that? I am one you trust. Yet if you think them a danger for later days, we are at a place where death is not hard to find. They must be men you can spare.”

“How many do you propose?”

“I would have four. They must be enough, if we should be met too soon by those who will question what we may be, to have the front of a proper guard.”

Hassan saw that there was reason in that. If the two Christian women were to ride at large through the camp without escort, it was likely that they would soon be questioned and stopped, and that that part of the plot would fail, leaving Francisco for his sole prey; but if they rode with an escort of Moors, they would more easily pass, or could reply in a more confident way. There were still points that he might have questioned, but he saw that Venetia was as capable as himself (if not more) in the details of such intrigue, and she had brought one tangible proof of her skill in Angelica’s letter, which he would not have supposed that she would have been able to get, by whatever wile.

There was one point which he would have changed, if he could, but it was

no blame to her, for it was a matter agreed between Mustapha and him but a few hours before, and known only to them.

The great, and, as it was expected, the final storm, had been fixed for Friday the 31st. That was freely known in both camp and town. The fact that Mustapha had twice done this before, and had kept his dates, caused it to be regarded on both sides as immutably fixed, whether for hope or despair. But he had now secretly resolved to add the element of surprise to the overwhelming number of rested men who were to swarm over the ruined walls of the Bourg. It was to commence on the afternoon of the previous day. This would make it more difficult for Hassan to arrange for the capture of Francisco and Angelica when they had met, or, at least, for himself to be near at hand.

But he considered that it was a military secret of which he could give Venetia no hint, and to alter the date in Angelica's letter would be a folly that might raise Francisco's suspicions and defeat the whole plot. Finally, he observed that the time had the great advantage that it would appear additionally improbable that he should have had any part in, or knowledge of, a device fixed for an hour when he must be in command at the Sanglea front.

He passed her the letter back. "You must send this, choosing the dusk. . . . You have done well. . . . I will be with you at the tenth hour."

She understood that she was far on the way to forgiveness for that which she was suspected to have done, and to re-establish, if not strengthen, her position with him. She gave him a glance and a grateful word, by which he had no reason to doubt that she would be glad to entertain him that night in her own way. She went back to her tent.

Being alone, she destroyed Angelica's letter with a particular care, after which she went out, following the directions which Hassan had given, to seek the spy who could communicate with the Maltese lines. . . .

When Hassan passed from tent to tent at a late hour, he was addressed cautiously and from a short distance away by a voice he knew.

"You may approach," he said. "What news have you to tell?"

"Lord, there is no news at this hour. But the Giaour woman would send a letter out of the camp."

"Let it go, and in such hands that it will not fail. It is but to bait a trap."

## CHAPTER LXIII

MESQUITA sat where Francisco had met Marshal Coupplier on a former day. By appearance alone, it might be thought that the Notabile command had passed to the better man.

The present governor had a handsome, aquiline face beneath an abundance of snow-white hair. His skin was the dark olive which is usual among his race. His bushy beard was still streaked with black. The table hid the abnormal shortness of his legs, which rendered him a more formidable knight when a horse parted his knees than when he must do battle on foot, which it was known that he would be reluctant to undertake, nor was he often seen unmounted beyond his door.

His expression now was friendly and suave. There was a verbal deference in what he said which ignored the differences of age and military rank which divided Francisco and him as broadly as the table that stretched between. But his words were as resolved in substance as they were graceful in their address.

“Don Francisco,” he said, “I will not suppose that you have done me the honour of visiting me thus for the third time with other object than that which you have urged so ably before. It is one that all the instincts of knighthood would gladly grant, even to one less noble in name than you are, or less illustrious in exploit than the bright sword of your youth has already been. But I am not here, as you will do me the courtesy to agree, to gratify my own will, or the chivalrous impulses either of yourself or of those who may solicit with better right.”

“Will you,” Francisco returned, with equal deference but no less resolution beneath his words, “be patient to tell me on what grounds you reject my plea?”

“That is what I may not refuse,” Mesquita replied, as readily as though he had not set them out, with some elaboration of repetition, on two previous occasions, he being, it may be not uncharitably assumed, one who was not greatly averse from hearing sentences that himself had framed. “You come to me asking consent to release twenty of the best knights and horsemen that I yet have, with the same number of chosen steeds, that they may aid you to rescue a señorita detained in the very heart of the Moorish camp; and you assure me (which I can most lightly believe) that you have their warrant that they will be content to be so assigned.

“Now to what end should I do this? To her rescue? It is not to be thought in a sober mind.

“You say you did it before. That may skirt the edge of exact truth; but, if we allow that, shall it therefore be done again? It is of the order of things which may occur once, but not more. And there is a special folly in this design, in that we are well advised that a regiment is stationed around her doors.

“But if I should agree that you have projected that which is not beyond limit of human power, being of the realm of romances which fed our youth (to which I will not say that this war is not somewhat akin), should I therefore assent to the petition that you are urgent to make? If you think, you will say not.

“Should I not then prefer to pluck Mustapha from out his bed, or bundle Hassan up in the folds of his own tent? Either of which, you must pardon that I observe, should be as simple as to remove this lady (whose plight you will not wrong me so far as to think me slow to deplore) from the well-guarded walls of Prince Azov’s house, being in the very heart of the Moorish camp. Could it be as lightly done as you are skilful to urge, should we be content with a single spoil? We should have them both in one night.

“As for yourself, you must lose your life as you will, you being one over whom my authority does not extend; for which, if I must, I will give you a horse that I cannot spare, but I will do no more beyond that.”

“You object,” Francisco asked, as though unmoved by the lengthy eloquence he had heard, “that she is so distant within the lines?”

“And that not alone, but that she is in a well-guarded place, from which she could not be snatched away (if at all) with the speed for which the occasion would call aloud.”

“If those objections should go?”

“Which of their nature they could not do.”

“I might so word a request,” Francisco replied, “that you would be, as it were, trapped in reply, which I prefer that I should not do, both of courtesy, and having confidence in the high chivalry of the name you bear. But I will ask you only to read this letter which I have had in the last hour.”

Mesquita read the letter which Francisco passed over to him. He looked up to ask: “You believe this? How did it come to your hands?”

“It came,” Francisco was frank to say, “in a way which I do not like.”

“So it would. Will you tell me how?”

“It was by the hand of a boy with a scarred chin, being the same who brought me a note on another day, within St. Angelo’s walls.”

“Did you catch the boy?”

“That I did. But I gained naught. He denied all that I was most urgent to know, except where he is lodged in the town, which I think I have.”

“So have I. The boy is the son of a known spy. He is for sale on all sides. You may put him out of your mind.”

Francisco was silent, his mind going back to the way he had been fooled and dishonoured before. But he was free now, and his honour joined his desire to urge a risk which he could not shun.

Mesquita asked: "Do you know the hand?"

"I am most sure."

The Commander's eyes went to the letter again. He read:

"Rest content that as yet I have had no hurt, but the hours of safety are few. Hassan is eager to have me within his power, and I may not long avoid that, unless at a price that you may guess, but I will not say.

"Also, I am pledged that I will not escape, except rescue come.

"I will not hide that this is by the hand and aid of her of whom you have cause to shrewdly beware, and you must judge as you will; but we are in common attempt, and her oath is not now either by manger or star (of which you will remember that which I told you she said before), but by her own need, which is near to mine.

"If she keep faith (as she will), and if we be not foiled by contrary chance, we shall be by the fallen wall at the tank on the Tarxten road (it is two miles from here) as the sun comes to earth on Thursday, two days from when this is writ.

"There may be Moors also, three or four, who will not be friends. They will be to scatter or slay.

"When you come, it is only speed will avail, and you will know that our horses may not be good."

There was more than this, which Mesquita passed at a short glance, seeing that it was not germane to that which he must decide. He folded the letter, and turned it within his hands, as one seeking a solution he could not reach.

He said at last: "Be it for evil or good, you can have the party you ask, but I will tell you one thing, and there is one counsel that I will give.

"For the first, there are movements within the camps by which I suspect that Mustapha may make his assault a day sooner than he has said, that is tomorrow, when this attempt will be made by you. I will get word of this to the Grand Master, if I can, though it be no more than a guess. But it is no longer easy to do, for the spies lean to those who they think will win, and they judge us down, on which they go more fast than the fact, and may have made a false guess.

"And the counsel is this, that you should keep that letter concealed to your own mind, even from those who will be comrades in what you purpose to do, for though it have been both written and borne in privy and full faith (which are doubts you are cast to take), yet if a whisper stir, by whatever breath, you will be twenty dead to no gain, and she whose rescue you try more closely caught than before. Let your friends (if they must talk at all, as men will) think

Le Tonneau's villa your aim, as you have first asked them to do. Let them think that till the spurs strike."

Francisco thanked the old knight, seeing that his counsel was good, though it could have been the cargo of fewer words. He had got that which he asked, as he might have had even though Mesquita had had no further design. But, in fact, the Commander, who was both resourceful and bold, was planning that in which he and his friends would be no more than a gambit of forward pawns, either to live or die.

Mesquita knew that Mustapha's assault would try St. Angelo's strength to its last sword, and that it was urgent that he should give all the aid and diversion he could; and though the undoubtable valour of his untrained Maltese levies did not fit them to meet the professional regiments of the Turkish army in open field, yet he felt that the occasion required that he should risk more than would have been wise on a quieter day. He had a raid planned on the supply camp at Zeitun, further west than the Tarxten road, which was still closed in his own mind. Now he thought: "If Don Francisco succeed, all is well; and if he ride into ambush made, it may well be that, as they dig pits for his death, they will have less thought for our coming another way."

So Francisco and he were each of a pleased mind. And on the next day, when the dusk was near, Francisco rode boldly into the Turkish lines, with twenty comrades of hopes as bright and wills as hard as the swords they wore, and two led horses therewith.

But, for five hours before that, there had come over the hills a low murmur of customed sound, from where the Turkish regiments swarmed out from gabion and trench, and over St. Angelo's ruined and ill-manned walls, and the barricades of the Sanglea.

## CHAPTER LXIV

VENETIA came to the gates of Le Tonneau's villa, as Francisco rode from Notabile by the downhill paths which were least easy to oversee. She had an escort of four dark-skinned Moors of the Barbary coast, mounted on the desert horses that were as native to them as the swaying decks of their pirate craft. She rode a sleek mule, which they could have outpaced by three strides to two on a level ground, and there was another led at her rein.

Prince Azov's regiment had gone, though its horses remained. It went on foot to join in the storm that beat round the Bourg walls. The Prince had a design to rush a part of the bastion of Auvergne, of which his recent slavery had enabled him to observe something on the inner side.

It was a part of the wall that had not yet been a scene of assault, though it had been much flattened by the three-months' battering of the guns. From the slender numbers that must now be spread out to the length of the Bourg walls, it was unlikely that it would be held in much strength. He hoped that a sudden rush, from the covered trenches which now slanted forward almost to the counter-scarp of the half-filled fosse, would enable him to enter the town at a small loss, and perhaps give him the right to claim the honour of its surrender, even though he did not propose to disclose attack till the defenders should be hotly engaged at other parts of the wall.

So he had planned; and so it had proved to be. An hour before Venetia came to the gate, a wild horde of Transcaucasian swordsmen had burst out of the trench that fronted the ruined bastion of Auvergne. The rush was sudden and bold: the defenders few. They stood stoutly to their stations along the wall. They met the savage infidel rush with bomb and bullet, with slings and arrows and flaming hoops. They caused more slaughter to those who came than they could have endured though they had died to the last man—or woman—who held the wall. But they were too few to outface the storm. The ramparts became white with the loose-flowing garments of mounting Turks.

Stubbornly, slowly, the thin line of the Maltese knights was borne back, was slain, or was broken through. A word that the Bourg was won spread far through the Turkish host; and had the first rush been quickly supported by other ranks, it is hard to think that it would have been more than true. But it was a word spoken too soon, whatever might be the hope of a later hour.

When the Grand Master had re-distributed his weakened numbers he had made a slender reserve of the remnant of those Spanish soldiers who had been

hired from Italy when the first threat of invasion had come, and who were a separate force, not being of the Order of the Maltese Knights. Of these, they being gathered from the various posts to which they had been scattered about, Colonna could marshal no more than 130 men (of whom all but few had taken a wound) from the 800 who had landed four months before.

It was because this reserve, being centrally placed, was near the bastion of Auvergne that so few had been spared for the special defence of a position which had not commonly attracted the Turkish storm. While these died where they vainly stood, the Spaniards came at a run. The Maltese cry of *St. John*, which sounded ever when the fierce Pagan tide rose round the beleaguered walls, changed to the battle-shout of *St. James, the Close, Spain—Close, Spain*, which had chased the Moors of Granada back to the Afric shore. The keen scimitars flashed in vain against the hewing of Spanish swords. In a riot of bitter strife, the Transcaucasian horde was driven back, was chased to a wall down which men tumbled with life to buy at a bruise's cost, or were flung dead to the half-filled ditch. . . .

It was as Venetia reined at the villa gate that the news was cried that Prince Azov had stormed the Bourg. There was a flurry of talk, and of servants running out from the house for details they could not get, as Angelica came through the door. She had no cause to think she would be questioned or stayed. She had Prince Azov's permission to go loose on her parole, which she had only been slow to use lest she might come to those who would doubt her tale, and to whom she might have lacked skill of words to reply in a useful way.

The day before, she had walked a short distance upon the road, and though alone, and conscious of watchful and curious eyes, she had not been stayed. Now she would ride with one who had more freedom than she, and with armed Moors upon either hand, who must have instructions for what they did.

But those who had had Azov's first command were withdrawn on this day. The Captain of the day was unsure both of himself and of what he would be right to permit. With some hesitation, but no manners at all, he barred Angelica's way. She was at a loss, not speaking his tongue, nor he hers. She wore a sword which it would have been folly to draw. She stood in a doubt which Venetia was more equal to meet. With the assurance which her position allowed, Hassan's mistress pushed her mule out from the little group at the gates. She became vehement in strange words, yet doing all in a smiling way. She called as witness the chief of the four who were escort to her, and it seemed that he gave her support, though with a look which was short of grace, as though he might have his own doubt, and would be likely to baulk at a high fence.

But his assurance prevailed for this time, and Angelica found herself on a mule's back, in the midst of the little group, and trotting quickly toward the



west, where her freedom lay.

Venetia said at her side, low-voiced, in the Italian tongue: "We must show no doubt, but I shall be at more leisure of mind when we have come where we would seek to reach: the man in front is a surly rogue, but he has orders to do my will, which I suppose that he dare not break."

Angelica rode but a short way, as she had had Azov's consent to do, if not more, when she reined up, and said she would return; but the men closed upon her at either side, one taking her rein in his own hand, which he continued to hold, so that she must go on, unless she would use violence beyond her power to win back to a slave's estate, which none could be expected to do.

The men cursed her in their own tongue. They threatened with hands and eyes. It was clear that they had orders to take her the way that they—which was to say that which Venetia—would. From that moment, it could not be said that she had freedom of choice, for whether Venetia served her in good faith, or would betray her anew, it was certain that she would not give the men orders to let her return. Even the casuistry which was taught in the schools of that day could not have shown that she broke parole, it having been defined as at first it had. . . .

They rode on till they came to a place where there was a fork in a narrow road. They turned out to the left-hand track.

There was a sharp cry from Venetia at this. The man who was in control answered in an abrupt way, but did not alter his course.

Venetia said again: "Will you hear? You are on the wrong road."

"I am on that of which there was a word said that I did not miss."

"You were to be guided wholly by me. Those were my lord Hassan's orders to you."

Venetia's protests, and the stubborn spirit in which she had checked her mule, brought the whole party to halt, but they did not turn.

"Why," the man asked, "would you take the wrong turn? There is that here which I do not like."

"You will like it less when the Pasha gives you your pay."

"So I should, if I let you lead me the wrong road."

"Which I could not do. Do you suppose it was called aloud? It is a most secret plot. That is why you were told no more than that you must take orders from me, and while you do that you can risk no blame."

"You would take the road that is most short to the Maltese lines?"

"So I do. She is bait to show. It may fall apart if she be not there, and you may guess that your head will pay."

Angelica saw that something was wrong. She could not tell what was said. In the end, it was plain that Venetia prevailed. They turned round, and took the right, and more western road. She had won, but the man looked at her with

scowling, suspicious eyes. He was plainly in doubt, and had become wary of every yard.

Venetia saw the danger that he might be, and her mind was active as they rode on, which they did for a further mile, on a road that had little life for this day, except where some corralled horses had a troop of Spahis for guard, and with the dull thunder of the strife that raged round St. Angelo's walls ever within their ears.

The three other men had come to share the restless doubt that disturbed their corporal's mind. They looked ever ahead with most watchful eyes, but there was nothing to see. When they came to the well and the ruined wall of which Angelica's letter had told, Venetia said: "It is here we halt. You can go back if you will, for your part is done."

The men did not move. Their leader looked at her in a sullen, obstinate way. He said: "I had no orders to leave your side."

She saw that the sun was above the horizon by no more than the breadth of its own disc, and the time was short, whether to lose or win. But she showed no haste as she said: "You were to take orders from me. Must I report that you would do nothing unless it were first explained? Are you so great that you cannot obey on less terms. . . ? Yet I will tell you all, and you shall judge whether you should be speedy to go.

"We are here for bait, as I have told you before, and as the sun sinks there will be Christian lances appear on the western road, which you will observe that you cannot see far, so that they will come at the last with a short rush. If they catch you here, will you not be slain with no mercy at all? Do you want that?"

She looked to a ridge of slightly rising ground to the right, and somewhat ahead.

"It is from there, as I suppose, that ambush will burst, to cut off those who think to snatch us away. But will they show they are there till the trap is full? If you stay here, they will not come out at a quicker pace to avoid your deaths. The Pasha will say that your lives are of no account to the game he plays; and if he ask me why I had not sent you away, I must reply that so I did, but you would, not go. If your lives are of small value to you, it is to me they are less."

The man looked round on the silent emptiness of the scene, but he did not move.

"Yet," she went on, "if you choose life, you have need neither to die nor to risk blame. You were told to take orders from me, and while you do that, you can do no wrong. It was one reason for this that I should send you from peril when you had done your part, to see that we should not be stayed by those who might not believe our tale." And then, as he still stood in a sullen reluctant doubt: "You had better stay. I take back all I have said. It is less to me than a

pig's death."

The man showed no pleasure at this. He seemed as unwilling to stay for her word as he had been to depart before, and the others looked more reluctant than he. They began to bicker among themselves.

Their leader proposed, as though having found a test which would prove her faith: "If we go we must take the mules, for they will be of no use while you stay here."

She answered readily: "So you shall. There will be mounts enough, I should say, when the bout is through."

She slipped off her mule. She said to Angelica: "You must dismount. Be swift, for the minutes pass."

The men took the mules, and rode off, but at a slow pace, and with heads turned to look back.

Venetia said: "It was worth the loss of the mules to get them further apart, though I had thought to do all in a better way. While they watch, we must not dare to walk on. We must hope that Don Francisco may come, and that he will bring better mounts. But there was no speed in those beasts which was worth a tear. A good horse with a double load may be better than they."

The men did not go out of sight. They turned off the road to a rising field, from which they could get better view. They halted there, as though assured that their safety was won, and looking back for a show that they would not miss.

Angelica asked: "What are they expecting to see?"

"They know that Don Francisco is likely to come, and they suppose that there is ambush behind the ridge." She pointed to where she meant. "They think he will be cut off. When they see he is not, I suppose there will be pursuit, which should be too late, if the horses are good. It will be worse if he should not come; for, if they stay, they will take us again, which will be my death."

Angelica said, refusing a fear which was not easy to keep at bay: "He will come, if the letter reached. . . . You are well sure that there is no such ambush arranged?"

"That I swear. . . . It is two miles away. If they could look over the ridge they would see no more Turks than there are here, which it is well that they cannot do."

She spoke in a very confident tone, but, as she did so, a line of Turkish cavalry appeared upon the edge of the ridge, and came riding down in single file to the road.

Angelica began: "If you have betrayed us again——" But her voice sank as she saw that Venetia looked at the advancing horsemen with startled eyes in a bloodless face. She realised, as she spoke, that they were not advancing

directly upon themselves, and also that, if any had laid an ambush for those who were due to come, they would not have appeared as they did.

“It is what I have not contrived,” Venetia replied, but with the voice of one whose mind was on other things. “You must believe that. If we be caught, you may be no worse than before, but I am near to a hateful death.”

“It is that we shall surely be.”

So it seemed, for they saw now that the advancing cavalry had perceived them, and altered their course. They were coming directly upon them now, though at no pace, being on loose stony ground, which must be descended with care, and still some distance away.

But next moment they halted again. They now looked to the further side. They swung round more to the right, but still so that they were descending toward the road.

Venetia said: “There is rescue comes. It is that they have turned to meet.”

“He will have time to turn, and get free.”

“Which, if he have the force that you asked, he will not be faint-hearted to try.”

Angelica began to walk up the road. Venetia said: “There is short time. It were best to stand.”

Angelica saw she was right. She halted again. But she had started that which she could not stay.

The four who had been at uncertain watch had remained puzzled at what they saw. To a point, the appearance of the cavalry had supported Venetia’s tale. But they saw, as Angelica had done, that they did not act as an ambush would be expected to do. And they saw also the significance of that which she had not observed, that they were not troops which Hassan would have been likely to send.

The fact was that they were no more than a half-troop of Mustapha’s cavalry, which were on patrol duty around a rear that was thinly held. They had turned at once on seeing what looked like a Christian soldier on foot, with a woman of his own race, for it was their part to enquire of all that was not plain at a glance.

When they saw Francisco’s spears approaching fast on the western road, they turned to confront the greater menace, and prepared to charge a foe somewhat less numerous than themselves.

The four who watched might have remained still, if the women had done the same, but Angelica’s movement resolved the doubt in their leader’s mind. He rode rapidly back, with a companion at his side. That they were two rather than four who first came was an occasion to bless the mules. The one that Venetia had been accustomed to ride, having become tired of standing at gaze, or of a mood to return to her, had jerked the reins with a sudden wrench from

the hand of a man less careful of what he held than that which he was puzzled to see.

The mule ran down the road, but swerved when it was pursued, and took to the fields. Seeing it go, the other mule became restive to follow. It kicked at the horse of the man by whom it was held. The horse plunged, and it broke away.

Angelica felt a hand at her side. She looked down to see that Venetia, who stood slightly behind her, had drawn her poniard from its sheath.

Venetia said: "You have the sword. You can spare me this. I will not be seized while I live."

"Then there are two of one mind."

Angelica's sword came to her hand. Her fingers strained on the hilt. She had no softness of womanhood at that hour, but a cold resolve that her life should be dearly bought, or be still hers when the rescue came. But shamed and captived again she would never be.

The two Moors came at a gallop now. They could have ridden them down, but their purpose was to prevent escape. They had no thought to kill, nor did they expect dangerous strife.

The first had not even pulled his scimitar out, as he reined his horse back in a sudden way at Venetia's side. As he leapt from the horse, her hand came from behind her back. She thrust upward beneath his belt. She felt the hot blood on her hand as he tumbled upon her, bearing her down. She did not know how much he was hurt, nor perhaps did he, but he had become savage to kill. His fingers clutched for her throat. They rolled over, struggling upon the ground. But Venetia was cooler of wit than he, and his wound was sore. She used the dagger again, and there was no fault in the second thrust. She came up from the bloody bout, soiled with dust and gore, and her throat was an aching bruise.

The man who rode at Angelica came to ground with more care, for he saw one in a man's dress, baring a sword. He dismounted some yards away, and his scimitar shone. Angelica did not withdraw now. She was of a different temper from when Hassan had struck a lighter weapon out of her hand. All the sword-craft she had learnt in youth, when it had been no more than idle play, was her friend this hour. The swords met, and she knew in a moment's space that she was not the one who had cause to fear.

The man gave ground as she passed his guard. The next second, there was blood on her point. He backed further, being mindful to flee.

Down the road behind her sounded the thunder of hooves. She knew that a rider came at his utmost speed. She did not need to look round, not doubting who it might be.

She was aware of Venetia struggling up, and that the two other men,

having let the mules go their own way, were close upon her, for rescue or revenge of him who twisted upon the ground.

She called: "Francis, to her! To her!" But he did not heed. The lance flashed by her face as he drove it in. The horse's shoulder brushed her aside.

Francisco dropped a lance that had pierced her opponent through. He wheeled his horse upon those who were closing upon Venetia from either side. He was in time, though by no more than a second's space. His sword shone as he turned, but he offered that which they did not wait. They saw the odds change too quickly for them. They fled separate ways.

Angelica, who had run to Venetia's side, could put up a sword that she did not need. Francisco caught one of the horses whose riders had ceased to live. The second fled, and there was no time to pursue.

Angelica mounted the captured horse. Francisco gave Venetia a hand, and pulled her up to his croup. They looked up the road, and saw the Turks had the worse, and were falling back to the ridge in a ragged way.

## CHAPTER LXV

IN the quick falling dusk Francisco arrayed his troop for their backward ride. The strife had been sharp, though short, and there was a dead man to be brought away, and some too hurt to ride back without the help of a haler arm. There was a wounded, crawling Turk to be chased and stabbed, for the days of mercy were done.

He put Venetia down, that she might take one of the led horses that had been brought. There was a moment's debate as to which of two roads would be the better for their return.

The Turks they had repulsed did not fly in a panic way. They halted, and came back till they were no more than two or three hundred yards off, standing out plainly on the low ridge, with a dying sunset behind their backs.

There was a moment when Angelica's eyes were drawn to the distant view of St. Angelo's central tower, from which flashes shone in the gloom, showing that it was using its heavier guns against a foe that could be no more than a guess.

She asked: "Are they back in the castle now? Is the town gone?"

Francisco was in the mood for a cheerful view. "No," he said. "They flash more outward toward the sea. It is Piali's galleys on which they fire."

A voice said: "We should not delay. They have firearms that they are meaning to use."

He had good sight to observe that in the growing dusk, but he was not wrong. He had seen an arquebus on its tripod, against the light of the sky, and its match wink. The next moment a bullet scattered the stones.

All this had been in a short time, so that Venetia, who had stayed to cleanse herself of what dirt she could, from when she had been tumbled in dust and blood, was not yet on her horse. There was no trouble in that. She would be lithe to mount in a second's space, which she turned to do.

And as she did this, it seemed that her foot slipped. Her hands clutched the saddle, and slid down as the horse shied away, and she came to earth on her face.

She struggled up on her hands, and half rose, at which there was a scarlet gush from her side, where a bullet lay. She looked down with appalled, incredulous eyes at the sudden fountain of blood, and then her face regained the defiant lie with which she had taught it to face the world. It was a flag that she had not yet hauled down in the presence of any foe, and now Death's

victory would be less than that.

She looked at Angelica, whose hand was on her, pressing vainly an unstaunchable wound, and her lips curved to the smile that had done her service at many treacherous times: "Now should you say I have come to harbour at last?"

They rode back with Francisco's arm around a body which they would not leave for the Turks to strip, or the birds to tear, which was the closest she came to him she might have loved had their lives met along fairer paths, and the one of all she had sought to whom she had not been bare in a wanton's way.

They took, of two, the more fortunate path for their safe return, avoiding or out-pacing those who had become active to cut them off.

As she rode at Francisco's side, and the horses came to a walk on the rough side of an upward path, Angelica told how the trick had been played, being of Venetia's design, which had brought them free.

"There were two letters," she said, "that I wrote, of which the one said you should meet me as you have done, and the next that it should be at the limit of Hassan's camp, being two miles away. It was the one letter she showed to him; but the second she sent to you, and at the first place they may still be waiting to be your death.

"I was long to persuade, for I thought it a plan too subtle to reach success, but she was strong in faith she could bring it through, as she has not failed. . . . She is one for whom we should pray long, that she be not hindered from God."

They buried her in Notabile's ancient church, with more honour than came to most at so hard a time, for they said that it was by her bold device that the grain-ship had not come into port, she having been constant to Malta's cause beyond care of her own life, in which we may call them wrong; but it made no difference to her, she being past the plaudits or scoffs of men, or the snares which were spread for those who had grace and wit, and were yet called of a plebeian blood.



## CHAPTER LXVI

It was on the morning of the next day, being the month's last, that Don Garcio of Toledo, Viceroy of Sicily, held Council of War in the cabin of his own ship. The galleys were loaded with stores, and their crews aboard. Messina was thronged with troops; its streets a moving pageant of silk and steel.

The army which had been gathered for Malta's relief was of little more than 7,000 men, but it was fresh, well-appointed, and stirred by a most eager desire to achieve its end.

Ascanio della Corna, the Piedmontese, had been given command, which was a choice in which wisdom ruled, he having been most confident that the expedition would reach success and urgent that it should start.

Under him, Alvarez de Sande had command of a regiment that Naples raised; Sancho de Londono was at the head of the Milanese; Vincent Vitelli led the Sicilian troops, to which were joined a regiment of volunteers from more distant lands.

"We can sail," Don Garcio said, "at to-morrow's dawn, if we so resolve; but the wind is of contrary mood, and the seamen look at the sky with most dubious eyes.

"I do not say I would hold anchor for that, the Grand Master being at so fatal a need, but it was yesterday that I had word that the Turks were storming again, and it is a hard doubt that there can yet be strength to keep them without the wall.

"I would not sail, nor would you, on too late a day, to be perhaps scattered by stormy winds, or overwhelmed by the great fleet of the Turks, to give them a further triumph they should not have."

He looked round as though, if he could, he would have thrown decision on other heads. He felt himself as a man trapped, knowing that he had carried out his King's will, so far as it had been made open to him, and yet, if the event should need one to support the blame, he would be condemned, whether for that he did, or he did not do.

De Sande, a valiant man (as had been shown at Gelves in a former year, where he had held a difficult post after those had gone who had more duty to stay, escaping in Doria's galley at last, when it had passed by night through the throng of the Turkish fleet), but being one who had spoken caution before, was now first in a different mood.

"Why," he said, "if you must put it to us again (as I see not why you should

be careful to do), I would say that the time for doubting is done. Shall we stand and gaze for a summer wind, thinking of that storm which the Grand Master endures in so stout a way, and which we should draw to our own heads? We may get a name for the world to jeer if Malta should fall in the next days by our unneedful delay. Do Your Excellency but put us ashore, and we have swords enough to make Moslems howl, even though St. Angelo had gone down in fire.”

There was a murmur of quick assent to these words, to which Don Garcio saw that he must agree, but at that moment a page entered the room. He gave a scrap of rolled paper into the Viceroy’s hand and stillness fell on all there, for they knew what it must be.

Don Garcio looked down on two Latin words, which he read aloud in the vulgar Italian tongue: “Malta stands.”

“Chevaliers,” he said, “it is short, being sent on a dove’s leg, but it is that which we were instant to know. You may get the soldiers aboard, and we will sail with the break of day.”

As he said, it was done; and to what result was to be told within four days after that, when the Grand Master held his own Council of War, being of men who showed less of freshness and ease, and were less trimly arrayed.

He limped somewhat as he came in, for the wound he had taken had not been speedy to heal, and sank heavily into his chair. He looked round on the assembled knights, whom he had called in council before the dawn, for it was only then that they could venture to leave their posts on the broken walls. They were few in number, and most had been little known, even to the Order itself, when the siege commenced. There were those present who were commanders only in fact, or were not on the Order rolls. Of the splendid assembly who had first met in the high dignity of the Council Hall, there were few who lived, and of these Del Monte was a sick man, whose fever, from which he was still haggard and weak, may have spared him from falling more surely to the harvest of violent death.

The Grand Master’s eyes were heavy from want of sleep, for he was of an anxiety now which did not cease with the dark, so that his times of rest had become fitful and brief; and he must put his hand to all toils, so that none should say that he drove others to more than himself would do.

“Oliver,” he said, “you shall tell them the tale we have, for you can harness your words to a yoke that I might not use.”

His head sank as he spoke, giving him the look of a beaten man. As Sir Oliver went on to make the statement that they had been summoned to hear, and for some time after that, it was hard for men to judge whether he were alert to surrounding words.

Sir Oliver appeared as exhausted as he. His face had the grey look of one

whose food is little and labour much; but his voice was level and quiet, so that men were no more stirred by the news he gave than the facts must cause them to be.

“The tale,” he said, “is not good. It seems that, on the failure of last Thursday’s assault, of which we may suppose that he had waited to hear, the Viceroy gave orders to venture something for our relief.

“On Saturday the fleet sailed, with himself aboard. They came round Gozo, and from the west, thinking to land their troops on our southern shore, to avoid clash with Piali’s ships, as it was wisdom to do.

“The weather was not good, as you know. The ships were beaten somewhat apart. The Viceroy resolved that the sea was of too boisterous a mood for men and stores to be landed in a large way, which alone would have been of any avail. We need not say he was wrong, which we do not know, and there is no profit in bitter words.

“He resolved further that it would be too great a risk to remain at sea, where he might be cut off by the Turkish fleet, it being ten to his one. We cannot lightly blame him for that. He went back, and is in Messina again.

“Only Cardona did not return. Being driven apart by the storm, he made a landing in Gozo, with some hundreds of men. We may suppose that he will contrive to cross in the night, and give Mesquita support.”

He finished amid a silence in which men looked at each other as those may who, being doomed to death, have heard rejection of a final appeal. Then there came an outburst of bitter murmurs, amid which one cursed the Viceroy with fluent oaths, and was checked by Del Monte therefor. He stilled the discord with temperate words, speaking with the slowness of a sick man, but as one whose reason was clear, and who would deal justice to all.

“Chevaliers, we cannot say that the Viceroy was wrong, for it was a storm that we did not see, though we have been aware for some days that the waves rise, and that a foul wind has broken the peace of the summer skies. . . . De Garcio has had the name of a good knight, which we need not slur. . . . It is Spain’s shame, rather than his, for they were both too late and too few. . . . It may be God’s will that we die here in a knightly way, which we should be equal to do, seeing how many have gone before, who were of as much worth as ourselves, if not more.”

De Castriot said: “So it may be. Yet Cardona found means to land. Was it a time when men should look at risks with too wary an eye?”

Marshal Couppier, who had listened and watched to this point with the patience of one who is used to wait his time till emotion stills, said: “We may put Spain from our thoughts. For though we curse or condone, it will not alter of how we stand by one man or a shotted gun. We must think what is best to do, by the sound science of war.” He looked round as though weighing what

strength of arm or courage remained, as shown by those who were round him then.

His words turned the talk to more practical issues: of how they might fall back with the remnant who still endured to the shelter of the citadel walls, and that in so quiet and sudden a way that the Turks would not be crowding into the town before they could make the movement complete. They discussed water and stores, and observed that these problems were less acute now that they had fewer for whom to care.

There was no word of surrender; no suggestion of the possibility of yet making terms by which they might buy life, if no more; no question of secret flight. They sought only to prolong a resistance which had become vain by every canon of war. There was a spirit there for which any leader might thank his saints, and take courage anew. But the Grand Master lifted his head, and looked round as though upon those to whom Judas would be a natural friend.

With a sudden passion, he rose, throwing his hands apart, as though calling witness of invisible powers that the words which had been heard were not his, nor would he be partner to share their shame.

“There are those,” he said, “if I may so put it without offence, whom God Himself is not potent to save, nor His marvels teach.

“You may go backward on coward feet, giving that to His Christless foes which they have been futile to take, for you are many and I but one, but it will have no cover from me. If I die, as has happened to better men—for our Brother was right in that—it will be on walls which we have not lost, and which I see no reason to leave.”

He sat down, and his head sank again, as though he withdrew in spirit from those who had shamed their faith, and the vows they swore. There was an awkward silence, in which it seemed that none would be first to speak words which all knew that it had become needful to say.

Only Marshal Couppier sat unmoved, his eyes upon the Grand Master in a cool considering way, as though intrigued in mind rather than stirred in heart by the passion he heard, and wondering to what La Valette could be seeking to lead at last.

“Why,” he said, when it had become clear that no one else was in haste to speak, “you may curse us for foolish words (if such you hold them to be), but our bones endure. You will find, if you cut deep, that we are not so different from you. It is of dying you talk, to which we are all likely to come, but you must agree that it is not for that we are here. We are for the killing of Turks, that we may crowd a hell that is not yet full. . . . If you can show us that we can do that to the better count from those tumbled walls, where we are now but one man to five yards, if not ten. . . . ! Show us that, and it is there you can have us die. But if you say less, I suppose it is there you can die alone, if you so

choose, and we will give the Turks a more perilous climb, being that of ramparts which still remain.”

His words were not such as would have been spoken in Council four months before, but was it strange if something of the forms of rank, the courtesies of debate, had fallen from these men who so endured under the stark shadow of death?

If there were a lack of former respect, it was such as the Grand Master did not pause to observe. Rather, the cool logic that edged the words seem to bring him to a more tolerant mood, though there was no change of purpose in his reply.

“You ask,” he said, “what I would have you do. That is very simple to say. Is it only we who are worn? Are the infidels still on the outside of their own choice, or have we been equal, by the high favour of God, to repulse their utmost attempts? Do you regard that we have slain the most part of those who have come, both of the great army at first, and those who landed at later times? Or that those who are left may grow weary of wounds and death? That the autumn winds are already here? That the grain-ship was sunk, as it were by a very marvellous chance, the Most High moving even a harlot to work His praise? Should we have tried that, had we weighed all in a careful scale, as those must do who have no comfort in God?”

“You ask what we should do? I tell you, if we go back, then our deaths and our shames are sure. If the Turks win the Bourg, they will not go till the last of St. Angelo’s stones is broken or overturned, its banners down, and its knights slain.

“Then should we stay where we are? I say, no! We should go forward, not back. We should sally out, and so vex them that they will see that our spirit is so much higher than theirs as our Lord is more than the Arab dog that they make His peer.”

Marshal Couppier gnawed his lip. He said: “It has a wild sound, we being placed as we are. . . . But I am not sure you are wrong. . . . Oliver, what do you say?”

Sir Oliver answered: “I should be last to speak, being one of all who is wearing a bloodless sword. But if you will have counsel from me, I say, if the Viceroy make no further effort for our relief, then it is a desperate chance against none. For the Turks are in a force that we cannot longer endure within any walls. We must perish, unless, by a very marvel of God, we can put them in mind to go.”

De Castriot rose to his feet in a laughing way. “We have talk at last,” he said, “that a knight can hear. By Tophet’s heat, I will raid them before the dawn. Oliver, there is none but will take counsel from you. It is this night there are Turks that your words have portioned for death.”

Sir Oliver thought: “And not Turks alone,” but they were not words to be said. The Council broke up, having resolved to sally out from sundry places around the walls, and harry those that the trenches held, as though impatient to haste the flight of a beaten foe. Had not La Cerda said on an earlier day, “It is too weird for a war?”

But Mustapha, having his own belief as to which side was preferred of God, and having much the more reason to back belief as matters stood at that hour, seeing how closely he drew his bands around the throat of a choking prey, heard the news of De Garcio’s abortive attempt with no more than the cynic smile of one who observes that which his reason told him before.

It did not call for confidence in the Prophet’s aid to resolve that the end had come. Foiled he had been, it might be no less than a dozen times, and more than once when he had been sure that the crop was ripe—but this time he knew.

He had slain the calf at the first, and had foretold that it would be a harder task to slaughter the cow. But now he saw that the time had come. He need neither loiter nor hasten in what he did. He had had galleys in from Tripoli, bringing grain enough for ten days or twelve, which was more time than his leisure asked.

He fixed Saturday, September 8th, as the day when he would plant the Ottoman flag on St. Angelo’s central towers.

## CHAPTER LXVII

It was on the Friday afternoon that Angelica went to pray in the ancient church where they had buried Venetia.

She knelt there for a long time in a posture of prayer, being less either than truth or lie, for her mind wandered over many things that were past, laying them out, as it were, before Him who created all, and seeking merciful judgment on much that she could not clearly resolve.

It was the confession of one whose words to the priest would ever be brief and vague, for there are those, of whatever practice of faith, who will seek absolution from fault and failure where authority is itself absolute and understanding complete; and where the responsibility of creation lies.

She found peace in prayer, and in the dim quiet of the ancient church, which seemed as unmoved by the violence and hates of men as is the slow patience of God, though she supposed it might be for the Turks to burn in the next week, if St. Angelo should go down.

Facing her as she knelt was a great window of splendid stains, which the Grand Master, De L'isle Adam, had put in, showing John the Baptist preaching at Jordan ford; but, beside that, the windows were narrow and high, so that there was little light, except where the candles burnt, and the mural paintings which warmed the sides of the chancel and nave with tales of the ten virgins, and of the outcast widow who caught at the skirts of Christ, could only be clearly seen when the brightness of middle day was valiant against the gloom, and even then the high pillars rose to a roof that was vaguely dim.

She had given thanks to God for escape from perils to honour and life of which there had seemed to be but a slender chance, and doubly that it had been by the valour and love of him whom she thought to wed as soon as this cloud of horror and war to which she had come by a headstrong will should be lifted from off her life, if it ever should, of which she had a very imminent fear.

She could not come to absolute peace, or a clear joy, seeing the next day as that which might turn all to blackness again; and she had had a quarrel with Francisco, almost over Venetia's grave, more bitter, it had seemed, than those of the earlier days within St. Angelo's walls, because those who have come to closest accord must find it hardest to break apart, though it be for no more than an angry hour.

She had come to a place where the truth of who she was could be no less than a common tale, it having been told to all who had ridden with Francisco

to her relief, and she saw that she must be his mistress to many eyes; but if she were now mere woman in what she did, she would be that to all, and no more, which her pride would not endure in a passive way. For to what other end could she have come to this place of war?

She saw that, to keep the skirts of her honour clear, she must be equal to where she was; but she was not moved by that impulse alone, for she thought of those she had left in St. Angelo's walls, and for whom she had learnt to feel too warm a regard to be indifferent to the near peril in which they lay.

She knew that, in the same spirit of desperation in which the remnant of Malta's beleaguered knights were preparing to hold their lines on the next day, Mesquita was marshalling every man he had (and some women therewith), who were to throw aside the caution of earlier days in the endeavour to divert to their own heads some portion of the strength of the Turkish arms. They had had encouragement to this in the success of the raid which had been planned for the time of her own rescue on the Tarxten road, when Mesquita had crossed the Turkish lines near to the eastern coast, and cut off a strong outpost, which he had destroyed to the last man, and made retreat before alarm was spread to any force sufficient to close his way.

Now Francisco had volunteered, with the same comrades who had been with him before, and with some others who were to be added thereto, to act together as a cavalry troop, and to fight in the knightly style in which their youthful training had been.

They were to include none but those who could ride well, and for whom good mounts could be found, and such as were trained in the use of weapons a knight will bear, so that they would be equal to ride into the Turkish lines, not seeking a set strife, but to cause disquiet, now here, now there, such as would engage the movements of troops more numerous than themselves, while they would do all the mischief they could, as occasion came.

But she knew that it was less with any hope of success to their own arms than for relief of pressure upon St. Angelo's walls that their plans were made. It was the spirit by which a dog may spring at a lion's mouth, when his master is on the ground.

She had said that she would be one among these, and when Francisco had made excuse, she had answered with reasoned words, though with an impatience for which she blamed herself at a later hour: "Will you never see where my honour lies? Or that Malta's need is for all it has at this time, to its weakest sword? Is it not on that pledge I continued here, that I would do such part as I could, be it naught or much?"

"I may be of little skill and no strength, but it is twice I have used a sword to a man's death, and (which is more) I engaged one who yielded ground rather than I, till you rode him down. Besides that, I can ride well, and I may



know more of the roads in the Turkish lines, and of how their camps spread over the land, than any else of your friends. I do not say than you, with whom I will not compare.”

And when he would not listen to this, saying only that it was that which she could not do, being unfit, and without training in knightly arms, she said no more, but went to Mesquita himself, from whom she gained consent, using no more than few words, but such as were chosen well.

It was when she told him of this, and that she had a purpose that would not change, that they had quarrelled again in a way of which it was no pleasure to think, for she had said things which she did not mean, which it was seldom that she would do. She had asked him at last if he would have her named for such as Venetia was known to be, and something more which she would be glad to forget, having allusion to his own fault with the one who was dead, and with an implication she had not meant nor seen till the words were said.

Now she judged herself, and was aware of a double fault: for she saw that her motives had not been solely those that she had allowed to him, but that she had been unwilling that he should ride to danger she did not share (which she should have been quick to say); and that his own reluctance was born of no less a thing than his love for her (which she should have been quick to see); and, beyond questions of fault or pride, their common folly was spoiling hours which would not return, and might end at a short sum. At which she resolved that she would not rest till she had come to a way of peace; but as she rose to put this purpose to use she was aware of a trumpet that shrilled high from the western gate, and went forth to face a martial sounding of fifes and drums, and to see a regiment, still in the gay bravado of those who come to a threshold of war which they have not crossed, that was pouring into the town.

## CHAPTER LXVIII

It was after the Friday noon, and the sun had turned downward to meet the sea, when Ascanio della Corna dismounted from the back of a sweating mule at Mesquita's door.

He had had a ten-mile ride from Melleha Bay, and the Commander, who had heard a flying rumour of his coming but two minutes before, forgot the lack of length in his legs, and the dignity of the office he held, as he hurried out to meet him.

"We are in time?" della Corna asked. "St. Angelo stands?" "So it does," Mesquita replied, "being (as I should have said a moment ago) at the end of its last day. But I may revise that, if you will tell me with what force you are here. For I should say that less than an army will not avail."

"There are six thousand men whom the Viceroy now puts ashore in Melleha Bay."

"Then, if they can do battle with Turks who are three to one, if not four \_\_\_\_\_"

"We will do battle with such Turks as are here, be they most or few. I but ask that St. Angelo's walls endure till to-morrow noon, by which time we shall not be far."

"It is a pleasure to hear; for the last tale was that you had gone home after looking over the fence."

"So we did, and by whose design I will spare to say. But being landed in Messina again we had a further Council convened, at which there was talk of disbanding troops which it had been futile to bring to head; but while we were at somewhat high words there was a riot about the doors, for the soldiers clamoured to be led to Malta's relief, and must burst upon us to know that their leaders were not more coney-hearted than they. Soil was agreed, whether of shame or goodwill, that we would woo the winds for a second time.

"We left port yesterday noon, and having come southward during the night, we shaped a straight course, with a wind that was fair enough, though somewhat abeam, to Melleha Bay, where we put in, it may be three hours ago, having had no sight of a hostile sail."

"Then you have lost no time that you are here now?"

"I put ashore in the first boat, and rode here as soon as I could find a guide and a beast to bear me along, for I would know to what issue we have arrived. De Sande will overrule the landing of men and stores, in which he has more

practice than I can claim.”

“Is the Viceroy here?”

“That he is. He is in a galley which would not be easy to catch, if it should have cause to run out to sea. He will see the troops ashore, and go back; which may be less of his will than his King’s charge, that he be not tangled too closely in our affair.”

Mesquita’s lip lifted to a scorn that he had no scruple to show, for he was not of the land or legiance of Spain. “He washes hands?” he said. “It was Pilate’s choice. But that which he swills away is the honour he might have had.”

“So,” della Corna replied, “we may hope it will prove to be. But I would not boast on too soon a day. . . . Will you tell me how the Grand Master stands? Does he still stoutly endure?”

“So he does, in a way. But it had seemed for the last weeks that it is only by the slowness of those who will not be slaughtered more to hasten that which they cannot miss.

“For the Grand Master’s losses have mounted to such a sum that he can no longer array his walls. Yet, as their numbers fail, they have snapped in a fiercer way, so that Mustapha has shown no haste to put his fingers between their teeth.”

He spoke no more than the fact was, for, two nights before, when the Turks had been lying closely around the walls, as those who shepherded a close-cornered prey, and thinking only of how they could cut its throat without risk of a further scratch from its dying claws, De Castriot, creeping out with two score of his own kind, had entered a battery camp where it had seemed that no watch was set, and when those it held who were not stabbed in sleep had taken to panic flight, they ran on to the swords of another score, whom De La Rosio had led the opposite way.

Forty-seven dead had been the Turkish count in that camp when the morning came, and that was but one raid of five, though they had not all had so great a success, for the Bourg walls had been bared of men for those raids, it being aimed to make the infidel think that they had more strength than their living numbers allowed.

And on the next day there came a new proof that there was still life in those leaguered walls, when the batteries of the Bourg and St. Michael’s fort opened with rapid and constant fire, such as they had not opposed for many weeks to the hammering of the Turkish guns. For the careful storing of powder had ceased. “Now, if at all,” had been the text on which the Grand Master preached, and all the slender margins that yet remained, both in munitions and men, were being spent in the frail, final hope that they might cause the Turks to lose heart and go, while there was yet a residue of resistance left.

It might be—it was—no more than the last flicker of fire that was nearly out, but it was a proof that Malta's knights could still bite with unbroken teeth, and if it did not decide the date on which Mustapha had resolved to finish the siege, it confirmed, to his mind, the wisdom of the caution with which he moved.

The tale of dead was already more than enough. The faint possibility of relief (he thought) had faded away. Why should he hasten that which was so near to its certain end? He would drink the success which now brimmed to his thirsting lips without more cost of treasure and blood, the spilling of which had already risen to a mark which was beyond simple defence. . . .

Mesquita asked: "Do you plan surprise, or would you have the Turks know you are here?"

"I would let them know with all speed, that it may slacken strain upon St. Angelo's walls."

"We need make no effort for that. To have held it close had been a much harder thing; for the land is sprinkled with spies that we cannot catch, or whom we endure, as being useful to us. You may suppose they will hear all before night is come. . . . And yet. . . ." He paused a moment, and touched a gong, on which a page appeared at the door.

"Catch me," he said, "Juan Goe, if he be in the town, and bring him here with no slackness of foot."

The spy he named must have been near to find, for the two Commanders had sat but a short time, discussing the strength of the combined force they would be able to put into the field and other matters cognate thereto, when a small wizened man, whose lean activity did not appear to have been lessened by the grey bleakness of age which his visage showed, was led in by the page, with two armed Maltese guards at his rear suggesting that there had been little freedom of choice in the celerity with which he had come.

"Juan," Mesquita said, "I have that under my hand by which I could send you to hang when the Turks go, and your use (which is little now) would be quite done."

If the man felt any dread of the threat, it did not appear. His sharp alert eyes moved quickly from face to face, as though they could read the thoughts of those on whom they were cast, so that words were of less moment to him.

"When is that?" he asked. "Will the Turks go?" as though his mind were less concerned with himself than with larger things. He added: "I have done no wrong. I am Malta's friend. . . . What would you have me do now?"

"Here," Mesquita went on, without condescending direct reply, "is the Chevalier Ascanio della Corna, Captain-General of a Spanish army which is landing this afternoon at Melleha Bay."

The man saluted in an absent manner, his eyes bright with observation the

while. He was quick to the point: "You would have it known?"

"I would have the truth known. Neither more nor less. Listen, and I will tell you that which Mustapha should pay to hear."

He went on to tell of the regiments which had been landed, and their officers' names, as he had just had them from della Corna. He was detailed and exact. They totalled about 6,000 men (for it was not everyone who had sailed with the first fleet who had been willing to sail again, when impulse and confidence had alike declined), and this number he gave, della Corna sitting the while in silent watchful surprise. But, having finished with them, he went on to mention other troops which had come from the Spanish King, giving as much detail to these fictitious regiments as he had done before to those of substantial fact.

He added: "It was but a feint when His Excellency the Viceroy sailed round the island a week ago. He would not have approached the south coast, where good landings are hard to find, had it been other than that. It was to lull Mustapha to foolish dreams, till he could land, as he has now done, with his full force at the Bay."

The man asked: "They are to know this?" His eyes asked more. They were alive with suspicion of what he heard.

Mesquita countered with another question: "How do you say that St. Angelo stands at this hour?"

The man's eyes seemed to probe for the answer that he was expected to give.

"It is hard pressed," he said. "It is stoutly held, but there are too few to defend its walls. That is known to all."

"And it is to be stormed at to-morrow dawn?"

"That is known alike."

"Has it strength to endure?"

The man did not express any opinion on that. He appeared to regard the question as not needing reply, but as having told him that he had wished to ask. He said: "You would have the Turks warned with speed that this rescue is round their rear, so that they will be afraid to engage the walls."

"Should I tell you, except for that?"

The man did not resent the implication this question held, but he looked troubled in mind. He said: "If I should sell a false tale of so large a bulk——"

"The regiments are now marching here. Before dark, they will begin to enter the town."

Juan considered this. It was hard to say how much he believed. He said: "I will do this myself. They must have a tale that they will not doubt."

Mesquita's hand loosed his purse, but the man's head shook in dissent. "I will have pay from them, or else none. You will know whom I serve."

He went out, and della Corna said: "You think to stop the assault, even before we can have time to arrive?"

"So I do; and have little doubt it is now done. He will take a tale that cousins truth in too close a guise to be refused without proof."

"And if they know our true strength?"

"What would they do then? It is to be guessed, and no more. We may ask what should we do ourselves in the like case. They have perhaps sixteen thousand men, besides the crews of the fleet and without counting the sick."

"They could face us with such numbers as should suffice to hold us in check by the rules of war, and have enough left to enter the town, if they should not stint blood to that end."

"So it looks," Mesquita agreed, "and so Mustapha may seek to do. . . . You will see that I scheme to bring them more about our own heads."

"So you should. It is not numbers that count alone. There are men and men. I have six thousand who will go on, or else die. If it were not too like a boast, I would say I play Gideon's part. We are in more vigour of health and heart than the half of the Turks can be. We must be more fit of body, if not of heart, than are those who still live within St. Angelo's walls. We must draw all we may to our own front. You are right in that."

They returned their minds to discussion of plans for assaulting the Turkish camp, which may be left, for they were to prove as vain as are most of the detailed designs of those who will look ahead, though it be by no more than a day. And meanwhile Juan Goe sat at meat in his own house, that was in some narrow alley of the old town, and with him his three sons, of whom the youngest could be told by a scarred chin, which had not held him back from many ventures into the Turkish camp, and more than once of entering into the Bourg.

Juan Goe was not concerned for his own skin, though he carried on a most perilous trade. His position illustrated the profound truth that they are masters who serve. For, in his own way, he kept faith, he served well. Letters from either camp might be passed to him or his with the certainty that they would reach those for whom they were meant. Whether he had ever sold that to the Turks which could be used for a Christian bane was best known to himself, but it would be admitted by all that he did not peddle false news. He gave worth for the coins he took. He had become useful to both armies alike, and if he preferred either side in his heart, it was a secret he did not speak, or had not till that day.

His safety lay in his sons, as was theirs in him. For it was seldom they would be in one place, as they were now, or could be caught in one net.

If wrong should be done to one, he who acted thus would turn each of four from a useful unsure friend to an open foe, and there could be no profit in that.

Now he spoke his mind in the privacy of his own board. "Boys," he said, "there is yet a hope that Mahound may be brought to earth, and his mouth flavoured with dung. You may help in this, but you must understand that you do no more than scatter a true tale. The Spaniards have come to land in Melleha Bay, and their number is equal to that of the Turkish host, or it may be more."

He gave details, and told each of them where he was to market the news, and how to deck it in an aspect of urgent fear; and as he did so there was a sound of fifes and of throbbing drums, at which they went out to the main street, to watch the Milanese regiment enter the town, with Sancho de Londono at its head, very splendid in steel, and velvet of peacock-blue, and ostrich feathers drooping the wide-brimmed hat he wore for his forehead's ease, a chased-steel basnet hanging against his knee.

That was how Mesquita had said it would be. Juan Goe counted the regiment with careful eyes and unmoving lips. He found the number correct. He concluded that there was more truth in the tale he was pledged to sell than he had been able to think before. Might it all be true? He could not even deny that. At a later hour he slipped down in the dark to the Turkish camp.

## CHAPTER LXIX

IT was the same evening that Piali came ashore to confer with Mustapha upon the dispositions for the assault of the next day, for which it was designed to concentrate the full strength both of array and fleet.

“For,” Mustapha said, “though they be as weak as is rumoured now (which I do not doubt), yet shall we succeed with more ease, and the lighter loss, if we storm inward from every side with force that must overwhelm.”

With this purpose, it was planned that Piali’s fleet should enter the great harbour in such numbers as it had not done till that hour, and should not only use its guns, but land parries at different points, to vex St. Angelo on its seaward sides.

Hassan, who had continued from day to day his slow, ruthless advance against the barricades of the Sanglea, had now established his trenches close to the counter-scarp of St. Michael’s fort. From that position, he had driven mines which were ready to fire, with the aid of which he trusted to rush the fort, and so turn its guns upon the inner harbour and the shipping that lay therein and beyond that to St. Angelo and the Bourg, on a side where they were not fashioned to face a foe.

Mustapha’s army was to be used for no single assault, but had ladders ready for the attack of every bastion of the outer walls. It was a plan which relied for its success upon the fewness to which the defenders had been reduced. That they could resist, at whatever point, must be less than a confident hope: that they could do so as every one was beyond reason to think.

The Turkish generals did not talk of it now as of a doubtful hazard of war. Mustapha looked no longer in anxious doubt at the strength of the leaguered walls, or talked of assaults which should weaken, if they did not destroy. Rather was he (in the metaphor of his own choice) a butcher who had chosen the date when the cow should die. Does he waste thought on whether the beast’s objections will supervene?

The two leaders talked together with more amity than they often felt, seeing success so close, and the time near when they could return to their own lands, and to the plaudits that Malta’s destruction would surely bring. They would have been ready to part but that Hassan also should have been there, and courtesy required that they should sit on, conferring in the leisured manner of those to whom time is an unmeaning word, until he should appear or it be clearly resolved that he did not purpose to come.



But when he came, it seemed that courtesy was a garment he had forgotten to wear. He was abrupt to ask: "Do you sit here, as though bewitched by the Christian saints, while the earth quakes underfoot? Is there none to tell you that a Spanish army has come ashore?"

Mustapha looked to be more ruffled by the manner of this address than by the purport of what was said. He asked: "Is an army the word? Do you think I have not heard before this?"

"It is an army, as I am surely advised, of equal strength to every man that we have."

"And at what point did it land?"

"At Melleha Bay."

"Have you heard of those who were put ashore at Gozo a week ago?"

"You believe it is only they?"

"It is not where they would be most likely to land?"

Present anger, and a long-standing contempt, combined to sweep away the pretence of deference and regard which Hassan had rendered until that moment to an older man who was also his senior both in rank and command.

"Allah be your guard for the witless dotard you are! The Milanese were in Notabile streets, it is three hours ago, and Naples marching behind. There is a Spanish army put ashore this day while you have gathered your fleet to the harbour here, leaving them to land on a vacant beach." He looked at Piali, giving him, as admiral of the fleet, the edge of his last words, as he said: "We are fooled for the world to laugh."

The event had indeed, and even in itself, without the Spanish troops with which Mesquita's imagination had swelled the rescuing ranks, an aspect of prevision which its merits did not deserve.

The Viceroy's first futile attempt to land on the southern coast had been as successful in persuading Mustapha that there was no further menace to fear from him as though it had been designed to that end.

The concentration of Piali's fleet for the attack of the next day had left the seas clear for the landing at Melleha Bay as well by the operation of idle chance as though the Viceroy had foreknown it, and picked the hour.

Piali did not reply. His eyes were on the Egyptian Pasha, over whose face a look of age had passed, like a shadow of nearing death. For a moment, as his mind bent to the shock of the adverse news, coming when he had thought that the long travail of the siege, so wasteful in treasure and life and with so little as yet of honour for the great army which had dwindled before its walls, was to end at last in the fall of his insolent hated foes, the dotard of Hassan's abuse did not look to be less than an appropriate word; and, in that moment, Piali's decision was made.

With a colder, more brutal, contempt than Hassan's passion had held, he

looked at the aged general who, by the miscarriage of this military adventure, which he had himself been reluctant to undertake, had wrecked the reputation which a score of previous victories had preserved to the average limit of human life.

He said: "You have lost an army here, but the fleet remains, and it is that charge which I will not fail. I take it back to the last ship, in proof that the blunders have not been mine." He was already standing as he said this, and now he turned abruptly away. He went out, throwing back the words: "You must bustle aboard, if you would not stay to be Christian show. I sail in ten hours from now."

Mustapha sat for a moment after he had gone, with the face of a man stunned. He stroked his beard with a shaking hand.

Hassan looked at him with scant sympathy, but he had even less for the one who had gone. He had not come himself to propose flight, but to rouse his colleagues to dress their front to a new foe. Yet, he asked himself, was Piali right? He saw that, in the condition to which the Turkish army had been reduced, it was doubtful that it could resist the attack of an equal number of fresh Spanish or Italian troops, and it was so placed that defeat could not be less than an utter loss. It must offer battle, if at all, with St. Angelo at its rear, and with no retreat except to ships which there might be no leisure to board.

It would have been a great risk; and Piali might have decided with more wisdom than he would often show, even though his resolution came from no more than a moment's impatient contempt for an aged and broken man.

But, be that as it might, his decision left little for others to resolve. If the fleet should sail, it would be plain madness for the army to stay. Nor would Barbary remain for an hour, when Turkey and Egypt had put to sea.

And while Hassan considered this in a mind that was already planning details of the retreat to his waiting ships, something of manhood came back to Mustapha's eyes, as he asked bitterly: "Will you also fly from a foe that you have not seen?"

"I must go, if you go. There is no choice that remains. Will you stay here, and the fleet away?"

"It is at the moment when victory is a flower to be plucked with a light pull."

"So it is. But I ask, do you go or stay?"

"It is Piali's doing, not mine. May he be cursed to hell for this night."

"That is plain enough. Then I must not be slack in getting aboard."

He went with the word, and it was not long before Mustapha regained the self-command he had come nearly to lose; and so, putting fatigue aside and the need of rest that the aged feel, he became active to order the embarkation of troops among whom panic was near to rule, and to make such salvage of

munitions and stores, and the lighter guns, as could be in so short a time, with the advance guard of a hostile army, if not its main force, encamped not more than six miles away.

## CHAPTER LXX

SIR OLIVER STARKEY laid down his pen. He had worked long, indifferent to all outward sounds. It must be near to the dawn. He thought: "There may be those who will reach these citadel gates, or else not, we being so scattered about the great length of the outer walls; and, if they do, there may be some further defence, though it cannot greatly avail. But I should say we come to the last day."

His eyes fell on Angelica's chair, at which his mind turned a moment aside to thank God that she had gone clear of what, he thought, was about to be. Yet he would have been glad to see her again.

"She had a spirit," he thought, "that was steel and fire, such as is seldom found in a woman's frame, yet she was without envy, and slow to hate. I would give much that she come at last to her most desire."

He put on a corslet of steel, and belted a sword which, in all these months, he had drawn but once, and then to no use at all.

He had closed his accounts. His records were clear and complete. If he should die, they would be sufficient for other eyes. . . . But it was more likely they would be for the Turks to burn. . . . Such was the futile end of all mortal works. . . . Fires or decay. . . . He could not feel that he greatly cared: he was too weary for that. Rather, he had a sense of great relief that the long struggle was near its end.

"It is not a siege," he thought, "in which the praise will be most loud for those who prevail." He might, had he thought of himself, have taken some credit for that. But he thought of high deeds in which he had had no part. Now he would go out to take the place that his name required in the final strife. He felt as one who moves in a dream, which came as much from fatigue as from the exaltation belonging to such an hour. "We may hope," he thought, "that as we loose hold on life, we draw nearer God."

Being now ready to go, he became more conscious of outer things, and was aware of a low confused murmur of distant noise that came through the night, like that which sounds from within a hive where the bees are vexed. It was silenced at times by heavy fitful firing of battery guns, unlike the long monotone of the Turkish bombardment, which had become so constant that its pauses were more noticeable than itself.

Sir Oliver had a moment of doubt. Had the assault been opened before its hour? Had the Turks entered the town? Had there been default in himself that

he had worked there oblivious of outer events? He could not blame himself with reason for that. He was not in active command on a separate front. Every preparation that human forethought could make had been ordered: every commander was at his post. It was the hour that he might have claimed for his own rest that he had given to the completion of the records his office held. . . . Nor was the sound near enough to suggest that the Turks were in, unless it were at the Sanglea. . . . Well, it was vain to conjecture that. He had a place to take at the bastion of Auvergne, and a narrow space of command to which he had put his own name, to replace one who had been killed by a chance arrow the day before. . . . As he moved to the door, it opened quickly. The Grand Master pushed its heavy curtain aside, and entered the room.

“Oliver,” he asked, and his voice was vibrant with the excitement which stirred his soul, “can you loiter here . . . ? I sent to rouse you from sleep, and they said that your bed had been left unused.”

“I had much to do. Is it later than I was aware? I had not thought that there would be stress before dawn.”

La Valette stared at him in a surprise to which comprehension came. “*Have you not heard?* The Turks run! They are crowding the ships in Marsamuscetto Bay. They are like bolted rats that the dogs chase. Though it is past wit to guess what the dogs may be. It is the Lord’s angel who moves, as we well may judge; even he who fell upon the Assyrian host that was gone when the morning came. God would not suffer them to prevail who jeer the name of His Son. He has but tested our faith to the last hour, that it may be the more plain to see that our rescue is wholly His, amidst the failures of human friends.”

“There is no doubt of the fact? It is hard to hear.”

“Should I speak so for a guess? They are firing their own camps, that we may not make spoil of that which they are in too swift a panic to bear away. We should have known at a sooner hour had not the Moors made a bold show, opening attack during the night at the Sanglea, and there springing a mine by which there was loss, and a black look at the first. . . . But that is past now, and Marshal Couppier has turned their own guns upon them as they withdrew.”

The Grand Master spoke with the conviction of one who had refused doubt on the darkest day, and now came to no other event than that he had looked to see; but Sir Oliver heard in a more sceptical mood. He did not question the interposition of Heavenly Powers, but he knew that it was his part to examine causes of mundane kinds. He looked puzzled, and half incredulous of that which he was unable to understand.

“Have you thought,” he asked, “that this may be a most subtle trick to draw us out from the walls?”

It was a suggestion which disconcerted the Grand Master for a moment which quickly passed. “No,” he said, “it cannot be that. For it is done in too

large a way.”

Sir Oliver did not dispute more. He said: “We can see best from the tower.” They went up together to the high platform where the great culverins were mounted which could fire to Sceberras ridge, and looked far out over a land of dim movements and flickering fires, through a darkness which was faintly aware that dawn was paling the stars in the eastern sky.

Sir Oliver said: “So it seems. It is a marvel to see. . . . I suppose that the Viceroy has come in a sudden way.”

“In such force that they scuttle thus, without battle fought?”

“So it appears. But, if you will take counsel from me, you will issue orders at once that the walls be held and the gates barred till we see the fleet bearing away. It is Mesquita who should explore in the Turkish camp, and we, being so few as we are, should remain on our guarded walls till the doubt is dead.”

The Grand Master could not deny the wisdom of this, though he was reluctant enough, as the pause of silence showed before he replied: “I have already given orders of somewhat more courage than that, having sent out those who will explore the trenches from which we suppose that the Turks have fled. Yet I must not say you are wrong. You have been of cool counsel and sound, through all the months of this strife. I will give orders of more restraint till all doubt is done.”

La Valette spoke to others upon the tower, for it was a place to which all had come (that is to say few) who were not withheld by the strictness of the orders they had. He sent word to the commanders to hold their walls as though still expecting the rush of a hostile foe, but he did it in a sour voice, as though grudging that he should play so poor a part on a splendid day.

Sir Oliver was aware that he would be judged by the event, and if the Turks were indeed in a panic flight, he would be lightly charged with an overcaution which might ring with a timid sound. He was reminded by the corslet he wore that he had thought to spend the day in another style. If it were true that the Pagans fled, he would not only be the one man who had come through with no wound and a bloodless sword, but he would be stamped with a timidity which would be hard to refute, and which might be held to offer its own explanation of his absence from scenes of strife.

It was an unpleasant thought, though it had no power to deflect his mind from that which he knew to be the sounder practice for a garrison so few and weak as they now were.

He looked keenly over the harbour waters as the quick dawn spread, seeking signs to resolve the doubt, and as his eyes fell on St. Elmo’s fort an idea came.

He heard the Grand Master’s voice again at his side. He was saying that he was for the Bourg walls, to learn whether the trenches had been explored on

the first order he gave, and to what result. He was turning quickly away, as Sir Oliver spoke: "There is one way we can tell. If they feint, they will not loose hold of St. Elmo's fort."

"It is soundly judged. I will send a good boat to prove how it yet stands."

"By your leave, I will take the charge."

"But——" The Grand Master's surprise was natural enough, though it caused Sir Oliver an annoyance he would not show. "Oliver, if you be right, it will be sunk, it is ten chances to one. If the fort be manned, what hope can a boat have when it comes under their guns?"

"Then its approach may well be guided by one whose caution you do not doubt."

"There are a score who could take this doubt, and be better spared."

"Yet it is a favour I ask."

"Then it is one you must have. But you will know that my orders are to push back at the first sign that the Turks are still active upon the Point."

"So you may be assured that I shall be most prudent to do."

It was not more than twenty minutes later that a large boat, containing twenty men besides those who pushed on the oars, passed the boom of the outer harbour, and moved rapidly down to St. Elmo's Point.

At that time, the ships of Piali's fleet were crowding out of Marsamuscetto Bay, and passing beneath St. Elmo's fort on its further side.

## CHAPTER LXXI

NOTABILE had not sunk to sleep as the darkness fell. It had stirred ever to louder life as more troops poured through the city gates, and must be billeted for brief hours of rest, until the time came when those who had first arrived must be marshalled to march again, while the dawn was still some distance ahead.

Delia Corna, conferring with Mesquita in pursuit of a common plan, and in some doubt of what claim might be made that he was first in command, found that there would be no trouble of that, for the Portuguese leader put forward a plan of strategy of which the most part had been already in his own mind, and which would give them separate points of attack.

The weakness of the Turkish position was obviously the distance that lay between their sea-base at Marsamuscetto and their lines of siege around St. Angelo's walls, divided by the thrust of the great harbour, so that they might be cut off from retreat by an attack aimed at its head and the landward end of Scerberras ridge. It was at this point that it was agreed that della Corna should strike with all the force that he had; while Mesquita, with his less disciplined troops, was to operate on the more eastern position, which would become the rear of the Turks, as they would dispose themselves to face della Coma's attack, and penetrate, if the operations should develop favourably, to Marsa Scala, for the destruction of that subordinate harbour-base.

They could hope that the rumour that they had been careful to spread would delay St. Angelo's storm until they could reach the scene, which they planned for the first hour of the day, and after that they could only hope that the valour and quality of their ranks would avail against the greater numbers of those they met.

The military position was such that it is natural to feel regret that its tactical possibilities were not destined to be exposed, but the plans of the two Commanders went into the limbo of most earthly dreams when a rumour came through the night that the Turkish army was active to put to sea. They saw that Mesquita's device had succeeded beyond reasonable probability, or the intention with which he had sent it forth. . . .

Angelica had gone to rest in a room which remained her own amid the sudden influx into the town, but only so by the sacrifice of Francisco, and two companions of a more impersonal chivalry, who, first claiming that which they had no intention to use, had then contented themselves with the corner seats that a kitchen gave.



She was roused, while it was still night, by Francisco's voice at her door.

"You must up, if you would be riding with us, for there is tale that the Turks fly."

"*That the Turks fly?* How——? But I will be instant to come. You shall tell me then."

"I will have your horse at the door."

She dressed quickly, in haste to know the meaning of that which she did not doubt, though she was unable to understand. It was a marvellous, almost unbelievable, thing. But she had heard the note of excited hope in Francisco's voice, and her heart sang. Were they to come clear at last from this nightmare of cruel danger and dirt and blood, and the constant tale of the dead? Was faith to triumph at last, even as it faltered toward eclipse? Was there to be reward which they would not know for the fortitudes of those who had fallen that Malta's cross might endure to fly?

And her heart was light with another joy as she drew close the belt of a sword which, of itself, she had no longing to wear, for she saw that Francisco had kept, in spirit as well as word, a promise made but few hours before, after they had exchanged regrets, and come back to the contacts of lips and hands dear beyond speech to those who have not broken reserve for the consummation of love.

He had agreed that they should share the dangers of the next day, that they should keep together for loss or gain; but he might have made excuse now that they were to ride out with no more duty, perhaps, than to reconnoitre before the dawn. He might have said that he would not shorten her rest. But she came out to a narrow street that was crowded with mounted men, to find her horse already await, and to gain saddle by the light of the lantern that swung over the iron-bound door.

As the cavalcade moved away, with clash of steel and clatter of hooves, and the rustle that belongs to the motion of mounted men, she became sharply aware that it was she who had been wrong rather than he, more than, even in the frankness of her own thoughts, she had allowed it before. Let her arguments that she must still do her part in a man's way be of all the substance she claimed, it yet remained that, whether as woman or man, she had no right to be there.

She might boast of skill with a slender sword, such as one hand could control, but she was not weaponed in knightly wise. She wore no armour of proof, such as was still the use of those who were the heavy cavalry of the day. Even in Don Garcio's name, she had no proper right to the place she had been stubborn to have.

It was true that the Turkish cavalry was more lightly arrayed, but it was on the extra weight of weapons, the heavier impact of larger horses and larger

men, that the Christian knights depended to break through any who might be bold to oppose their way.

Francisco had found her a good horse, such as would be swift at a need, and with the heart to endure, but it was smaller than those that he and his comrades rode. Armed and mounted as they now were, she seemed to ride dwarfed among giant forms, with more difference than the daylight held.

“Francis,” she pressed to his side, and looked up to say, “I was wrong to come. I will give you that. The next time you ask, be it what it may, I will grant your will, and we will call it a balanced debt.”

There was a time of silence before he spoke: “Do you pledge a word which I know that you do not break?”

“So I do,” she said. “I would pay a debt which I can see that I owe.” She laughed in her quick way. “But how gravely you put your words! You must not ask for John Baptist’s head. We are in the wrong land for that, where all men swear by his name.”

“I may ask more.”

“You will not ask that I ride back now?”

“I will ask that we wed the day that the Pagans flee, as it is said that they do. I mean the day they have left the land.”

After this, the silence was hers. She said at last: “You ask much.”

“I ask more than that. I ask all.”

“I had thought to wed in our own land, in a good way. And you will regard that I am now ward of our Spanish king.”

“Well, I have asked. . . . You shall have your will, as you ever do.”

He had asked more than it was likely that he would guess, or she tell, for her own feelings warred in a doubtful mind.

She was of an instinct to take the best things of life in a slow and delicate mood, by which only their full flavour is tasted, their fragrance felt. She was not of those who will spill the cup with a hasty hand, or snatch fruit from a breaking bough. But she had been taught in the royal way that it was in keeping pledge, at whatever cost, that her honour stood. She said: “There is but one answer to that. I will keep my word.”

She reached out that their hands met in the dark, and she knew that she had come close to her most desire, as Sir Oliver prayed she should at the same hour. But after that she must have eyes and mind for that which the dawn would bring.

They reined their horses up on a lift of land where they could see far as the light grew, though it was still dim, and night had its rearward stars in the western sky. It was sure that the Turks fled.

There was a moment that Francisco sat in doubt of what he should next do. They could see the Turkish galleys, still burning their masthead lights, one by

one passing St. Elmo's Point as they put out to sea, and gathered there as though waiting further orders to go.

Francisco looked down, and his words were not such as she had been expecting to hear: "I would you had not come."

She glanced up, and his look recalled one which she had seen on his father's face, when a great purpose had fired his mind. She said: "You have a high dream, which I am not equal to share? If I were not here, what would you be likely to do?"

"I would ride for St. Elmo's fort."

There was a point in that which she was not unable to see. It would be an evil case for the Turks if St. Elmo should come again to Christian control before they should be clear of the harbour-mouth. But would the Turks overlook that? Who could guess, in the haste of a panic flight, such as it had the aspect to be? Would they think that there would be so rash an attempt to seize it before they should be clear away? It seemed a small chance of a splendid gain, and the counter that must be played was a likely death. Should she let her presence prevent attempt? Should she go back, never, perhaps, to see him in life again?

She made, with laughter, a better choice. "Well," she said, "if you ride or not, there is one who will."

She put her horse to its speed on a downhill road.

## CHAPTER LXXII

SIR OLIVER sat in the bow of the boat, which moved fast under the impulse of its Maltese rowers who looked ahead as they stood upright to push their oars, the strokes urged by the excitement of a great hope and a failing doubt.

He looked also, with eyes that were cool and keen to search for signs of that he had come to probe, but there was little to see and nothing of certain proof.

The breadth of the harbour waters was empty of any vessel, large or small, except that which was bearing him to St. Elmo's Point. The eastern side of Sceberras was quiet and bare, but there was no strangeness in that, for, except where they had established their batteries on the crest of the ridge, the Turks had been accustomed to keep to the western slope, where their movements would not be seen nor themselves exposed to the fire of St. Angelo's longer guns.

But as he came near to St. Elmo's fort Sir Oliver saw that the flight of the Turks must be something more than the fantastic dream which it had at first sounded to be. There were men moving upon its ramparts, but not as those who look out from a guarded wall. Over the counter-scarp on the landward side there were figures that leapt and disappeared, running down to the harbour beyond. An embrasure was empty, where he knew that a gun had pointed outward, and might have been trained on their own advance.

He hesitated in mind, having learned all he had come to know. By Divine Mercy or human aid, he saw that the siege was raised on what he had supposed was to be its last day in another mode. But he had a new thought. From what he saw, he supposed that the fort might be seized by a bold attempt, the garrison being in act of flight, or at least too occupied with their own fears to be conscious of his approach. He said: "Push on. I am minded to land."

So he did, and went on to the fort, taking all the men that he had and leaving the boat to its own chance. They went by a covered way to the low door through which Angelica had passed more than once before. The door stood wide and they went in, finding no life till they came out on the platform which looked upward toward the Sceberras slope. Here there were signs, such as they had passed before, that the fort had been abandoned in haste. There was a gun on the ramparts still in its place, and another overturned after it had been dragged some distance back from the parapet. Others might have been taken away, as Sir Oliver was unable to tell.

But as he went on to the further side, seeking a view of Marsamussetto Bay, where the details of flight must be bare to see, there came behind him an eruption of Turks who swarmed up by another stair than that he had used with his own men. Each was loaded with sundry gear, and in a jostling haste to be gone. They were in number more than a score, so that they somewhat exceeded those that he had, before whom, when they saw, they stopped in an abrupt astonished way. There was show of swords, and some would have come on and some backed, with excited talking among themselves.

They could not reach the western exit from the fort unless they should first brush Sir Oliver's party aside, and as they seemed irresolute for the attempt, he advanced on them, with his own men showing a better heart.

But, before they had time to close, another man came in haste from below and shouted something at which they broke apart, with cries of alarm, casting their burdens down and leaping over the wall to the fosse, as though reckless of how they fell.

The words that the men had called meant nothing to those whom Sir Oliver led, but they were plain to him, who was skilful in many tongues.

He called back, in a sharper voice than he often would, those who would have used their swords on the rear of the fleeing Turks. He said to all: "Lose no moment of time. It is life or death. Go back to the boat in the utmost haste that you may. Do not loiter for me, but push back, and say that the Turks are fled. Must I bid you to hasten twice?"

The men went in the haste he said, with a confused thought that he might have feared that the boat would be seized by a flying foe. He started quickly toward the door by which the last of the garrison had come up, and then stopped, seeing a troop of horse who came riding rapidly down the slope, and were now close to the further side of the ditch.

They had ridden hard, and had not come by a bloodless way, for their lances were reddened, or had been broken or cast aside, and there was an unridered horse that ran with a dangled rein at their rear.

He saw that about a score had swung to the left to ride down the fleeing Turks, who were scrambling out of the ditch on the Marsamussetto side, but a smaller party came straight on, with Angelica in their midst, and Francisco slightly ahead.

He shouted: "Go back! The powder is fired below." But they were not instant to understand, and it must be shouted again, while the seconds passed. When he saw that they understood, and were swinging round, with Francisco's hand pulling hard on Angelica's rein (for she would have stayed, as though to call something further to him), he ran down, seeking where the powder was stored.

He thought: "I should have had time, if they had not come. That is clear

now. But I could not tell that. I could not leave them unwarned." He supposed that each second would be his end, but had time to be glad that he had not died before he had come to know that the Turks were down, and the Cross of Malta would fly. He remembered how he had argued once that there may be a special mercy or God for those who come to death by a sudden way. He was glad that he had left his work in such form that it would be clear to another eye. His life was not much, nor would it have much praise from the tongues of men, who have more regard for the deeds of high colour and splendid sound, than for the slow untiring contrivance from which they come. But he had striven much in his own way; and he had sought to deal with an equal hand, and to show mercy at times. Did he assert his own merit to God, to whom all pleas must be folly alike, except the publican's prayer? It was strange how many thoughts may come in the last moment of life, as we run down a dozen steps, expecting each second to face the instant of rending sound which will be the end of our earthly frame. . . . There came the pain of faintly returning hope, as he knew that he had come to the place where the powder lay. . . . Three seconds should now suffice. . . . But he supposed that he might see no more than the last inch of the creeping flame as it would touch the black snake of powder that would be laid to meet it upon the floor. . . . And so he came to a place from which no danger could be, for the match had been damp, or been badly lit, and must have sputtered out, even as the Turk who was to start it had left the vault.

Sir Oliver Starkey became aware of a faintness that he must control with some effort of will, and that he was breathing hard, which may have come from the pace at which he had sought the vault.

He felt some scorn of himself, not having known before that he valued life at so high a sum, and thinking that he must have been a poor sight to the watching saints; and the more so that, if Malta were saved, he might have died in the serene knowledge that his work was not left undone, which is a comfort that comes to few.

But he gave no more time to such thoughts than there had been for those he had had before as he had descended the steps. He recovered rule of himself as he looked down on that futile match, and compared its fate with his own, remembering what he had thought that the day would bring as he had been working throughout the night.

"Well," he said, with a smile, "so it is. We are twins in this. It is one tale till the curtain fall. I neither suffer nor do."

He went up at a slower pace, but it was all in so short a time that Francisco's party had scarcely withdrawn to the distance prudence required, and turned back to look fearfully at the place which might become in the next moment a volcano of lurid smoke and of quaking sound, when they saw him on the ramparts again, signalling them to return.

“I am over-careful,” he said, as he met them when they had entered the fort, “having been withheld from the front of war. I feared that there might be laying of mine, or some fiendish snare, but I found that there was no danger at all.”

Angelica said: “We must suppose that you quenched the match,” and when he denied that, in the tone of one who would not be questioned again, she was puzzled the more; but the others had listened carelessly, if at all, their eyes being upon the sea and the Turkish fleet, of which the last vessels were now clear of the harbour mouth, so that it seemed that the seizure of the fort would bring no evident gain.

But the fleet made no motion to go. It moved in a confused way, like an unshepherded flock, the great galley which was Piali’s, and had Mustapha’s quarters aboard, lying-to in the midst, and the Barbary fleet having drawn somewhat apart on the western side.

There were reasons enough that the fleet should be in no condition to sail, for as they had loaded all in a common haste, amid the urgency of those who would not be last in leaving the land, they had taken in whatever the ox-teams had first hauled to the quays, or which could be taken into the waist of an anchored ship. It was all salvage, such as they would be loth to leave to fill the maws of the Christian dogs, and they had scrambled it in.

But as they came clear of the land, and had time to look round in a cooler way, and with daylight to aid, they found that some had too large a load, and some were burdened with troops that they could not feed, and some had little water, or none. There were Alexandrian galleys piled with that which should be put off on Byzantium’s quay, and men of Egypt on Turkish ships; and so there was much debate and barter, and clamour of tongues, and boats crossing from ship to ship.

And meanwhile, in Piali’s cabin, where Mustapha sat, and to which Hassan had come and Prince Azov with him, there was debate more fierce and violent than that which had brought decision the night before.

Hassan, whose way it was to keep cool as Piali raged, said for a third time, and in a fixed tone, without passion of gesture or voice: “It is plain what we must do. We must go back.”

“And so,” Piali replied, with a contempt that he was careless to show, “you will take St. Angelo, now that it will have been reinforced in so large a way, though you were unequal before?”

“And that I say we were not, it being in act to fall. And you must see that if we are quick to return, they will not have had time to enter the town. We shall but have drawn them down from the hills, as they must think that it has been our subtle purpose to do. If we defeat them first, for which we should be more than enough, I suppose that the Grand Master would yield, for which we could

offer terms; for he would have no more to hope, or you might say less, than before.”

Mustapha was silent, stroking his beard in the way he had, and watching a quarrel to which he could give victory to either side which would have his support at last.

“It is so,” Piali went on, “you would wreck us twice, as we dance to the tunes you play. It was but twelve hours ago that you urged us here, and now you will have us back, saying that it was on no more than a lying tale and that the next is of better worth.”

“I have told you,” Hassan replied, “that I had a tale from a false spy which outpaced the fact, though it was nearer truth than that Cardona only had come, as yourselves believed. But it is beyond truth that I urged you to put to sea or had had such purpose in mind. It was that of which you must bear the full weight, for we were forced hereto by your single resolve.”

“That is truth,” Mustapha observed, “which must be told at the right time.”

“That,” Azov gave his support, “was how I take it to be. For I am assured that Hassan went with no thought but to rouse you to make front for another foe, for we had taken counsel thereon.”

Mustapha turned to him to ask: “Then are you of equal mind that we can win all if we land anew?”

“It is chance of war,” Azov replied, “from which we were craven to sail away. There are 5,000 men, so it is said, or 6,000 at most, and they gathered from sundry lands, and not practised to fight on one field or in one command. Should we say, without trial made, that we are not equal to them?”

Piali was not burdened with wit at birth nor had he gathered overmuch in his living days, but he had enough to perceive that, if he stood out now, he was to be the target of all their blames; whereas if they should land to a new reverse, they must bear that from which his own shoulders would remain free. He said to Mustapha: “Do you ask that the army be put aland? For, if so, it is a right you have, and that which I cannot cavil to do.”

“It should be done,” Mustapha replied, “with all speed. And of how we come to be here we can talk again at a quieter hour.”



## CHAPTER LXXIII

THE Grand Master received Sir Oliver's message with satisfaction, but as no more than confirming that which he had known before. He ordered that the church bells should ring a triumphal peal, and that all but a slender line of patrols should be relieved from the walls. For the first time in three months St. Angelo became aware of itself, rather than with its eyes on an outward foe, and its plight was evil to see.

The Grand Master was quick to despatch a second boat to learn what Sir Oliver did at the fort, and why he had not returned, and on this boat he went back, knowing how many matters must need his care. He had said first to Francisco, as he stood watching the confusion that showed in the Turkish fleet: "You will take charge of this fort, which you may be said to have won, till further order is made." And to Angelica: "But you, as I suppose, will prefer to return with me, for there will be little of comfort here, either of food or in rooms where the Turks have lain."

"No," she replied; "I may come at a later hour, but for this time I will stay."

She had in mind the promise she had given before the dawn, and what it must mean to her when those ships should hoist sail for their own barbarous lands, as she supposed they would do in the next hour, and till that were resolved that she would remain at Francisco's side.

So Sir Oliver went, and she stayed to watch the restless stir in the Turkish fleet. There was a sack of dates found in the fort, of which she ate, rather than other food, which she was less willing to touch, though some did.

Francisco, who had been busy about the fort, came to her side. He said: "I would stay here, if I could, for it is pleasure both to be with you and to watch them go. But there are other things that it is needful to do, and it is idle to watch them thus, unless they threaten return, which we should be crazed to suppose they will."

"Then you can tell me," she asked, in a puzzled voice, "what Piali's galley intends?"

His eyes followed hers, and saw that the oars of the Admiral's galley were out, and it had come round, so that its bows fronted the land. From its decks, a trumpet sounded an urgent note. Faintly over the water there came a noise of shouting from ship to ship.

It came on at its oars' pace, which was not much, for it was a great ship,

and a south wind would have given but little aid, even had it used its sails to the full, which it did not try. But it was plain that it sought return, and slowly, as with a reluctance that could be felt, one by one, the other galleys followed Piali's lead.

Its meaning might not be easy to guess, but it was sure that Francisco had not come on a barren quest.

Such efforts as there had been to remove St. Elmo's guns had been on its landward side, and when it had become plain that time would not allow more to be done, there had been orders to blow it up, so that the long cannon that faced the sea were not removed, nor even disabled for instant use.

Francisco would have chosen to wait till the foremost ships were close to the harbour-mouth, and the guns could have opened at a short range. He had not shown Malta's flag, having none to hoist, and the Turkish fleet might have come close under the fort before suspecting the danger to which it drew. But he saw that he must act with a wider purpose than that. If the Turks were resolute to return, the first need was to give warning to St. Angelo, and to those whom della Corna would now be leading to its relief. It was as vital that his own need should be clear, and that St. Elmo should not be invested again while containing less than two score of defenders within its walls.

For both objects there could be no better call than the sound of its seaward guns. As rapidly as they could be loaded and trained, they opened fire on a fleet which was still a long gun-shot away.

The damage caused, if any, must have been slight, but the action was decisive in its effects. When Francisco had thought that he must soon be trusting his rampart's strength against all the weight of guns that a hundred vessels could bring to bear, he saw the whole fleet falter and swerve, as though his shots had been a signal to them to turn away, which they were docile to heed.

Piali's signal trumpet was heard again, and was repeated from ship to ship. The fleet turned, but did not linger again. With the Barbary galleys now in its van, it shaped its course to the north-west, following the line of the Maltese coast, and gathered speed, filling its sails with the southern wind, and with the flashing strokes of two thousand oars impelling its rapid way.

It was a manœuvre that puzzled most who watched it from beach or hill, but della Corna, who heard the news as he rode through the deserted camp, and was within a mile of the ruins of the Sanglea, made the right guess, and proved his fitness thereby for the place of honour he held. He turned his horse at the word, and ordered that the little army he led, which came on in exultation that its foes had scattered away, where it had been looking for blows and death, should make a forced march back by the way it came. He sent horsemen to watch the course of the Turkish fleet, and to inform him of any sign of landing

along the coast.

It may be doubted whether Mustapha would have attempted to re-enter the harbour under the fire of St. Elmo's guns, even in default of a better plan, but, in fact, they decided that which he had been debating within himself since it had been resolved to return, he being skilled, as we know, in the strategic gambits of war, which are more than strength of arm or valour of heart, and will often make them of no avail.

Piali, standing sullenly at his side on the high poop of the ship, and watching their approach to the harbour-mouth, saw the flash of the first gun, and its black outburst of smoke, and was not too dull to guess what it must mean, even as the sound followed along the wind, and the heavy shot made spray round his bows from a shattered wave.

"Now," he asked, "will you take St. Elmo again?"

Mustapha ignored the contempt that the question held. He said: "You can tell the steersman to alter course. I have resolved to land in St. Paul's Bay."

Piali stared. There was more here than he was quickly equal to comprehend.

"Why," he said, "I suppose you can do that, if you will. You can land in an empty bay."

"That is how it must be. For which end we have a very fortunate wind, which I must ask you to use, for it is on speed that our hopes depend."

"I must put you ashore at the place you choose," Piali replied, "though it were on the Sicilian shore."

Having said that, he gave the orders for the fleet to alter its course, as it was speedy to do, having guns to face if it went on as it was, and when this had been done he came to Mustapha again to ask, in his sullen way: "Am I to know what you seek to do?"

The Turkish General had no cause to conceal his plan, nor was it gain to him that Piali should be reluctant in his support. He said: "We can be there before they will reach by a landward march, even though they be quick to guess what our purpose is. Should they be slow, we may be first within Notabile's walls."

"Do we gain much, even then? Even though you should defeat them in open field, they will have St. Angelo at their back. They will retire to its walls."

"That will be what we must wish them to do."

"And we bring it down when it is strong with a ten-fold force?"

"We shall but watch that which must fall by its own weight, with no travail from us. We shall contain it, and wait the end, which I should put at a short week. Have you thought that the Italians have come by a hurried march from Melleha Bay, carrying neither powder nor food in a great store, as they could

not do?

“Either they must have landed lightly equipped, or they will have much that is still at Melleha Bay, and will be useful to us, for we must cut them off from that base. We shall be on their rear, where they had thought to be vexing ours, and it is to St. Angelo I would have them go.”

## CHAPTER LXXIV

THE day passed with St. Angelo in a great doubt. There was news at noon that the Turks were landed again in St. Paul's Bay, and were marching inland in numbers far exceeding those with which della Corna could bar their way. There was no comfort in that, and little more in a tale that some of the Turks had been reluctant to leave their ships, so that there had been some violence used in putting them forth.

What might have chanced had della Corna been slow either to think or to do is a vain guess, for he had marched back with such speed that, when he saw the first of the Turks, he had Notabile more than two miles in his rear, and had picked his front on the falling land which looks down to St. Paul's Bay; so that Mustapha must come at those who were better placed, or else stay where he was, which he could not choose.

The next tale that St. Angelo heard was of battle joined, and of righting which did not slack.

After that it would have waited with anxious ears had the Grand Master given it leisure for aught but toil. But, from the moment when he had heard that della Corna was marching back, he had been implacable, both by example and urgent words, to use the short hours which were surely theirs of freedom beyond the walls.

He had been no slower than Mustapha to see how St. Angelo would be placed if the siege should close round it again with larger forces within its walls. But he supposed that the Turks would not have fled in such sudden haste in the darker hours without leaving much spoil in the camps which would be helpful to meet his needs.

There was none of sound legs and not less than a single arm, man or woman or child, who was not hurried forth to search and load and bring in, with orders to pay no heed to rich garment or gold or gem, but to gather weapons and food, and such things only besides as would be useful to sustain the lives of those who would hold the walls, or to keep the Turks to the outer sides.

It was a toil that only slackened as daylight waned, and there came a sure word that the Turks were in broken flight, with the Christians slaying upon their rear. So it was; and such was the end of Mustapha's exploits on Malta's soil; though there had been a moment when the scale had trembled again, for Hassan, who had judged what the day would bring when he had seen how

reluctant the Turks had been to leave ship for another bout, had proposed that his part should be to protect the line of retreat with 1,500 of the best of his corsair hordes; and as the Turks fled and the regiment of Milanese came after in headlong chase, and no order at all, with Naples nearly behind and in no better array, they were taken sharply in flank by such as they had not been thinking to meet, and fell back with a bitter loss.

It was a moment which might have changed the day had the Turks been in better heart, but they had had enough, if not more, and the fact that Hassan had scattered the Milanese meant no more to them than that they could gain the beach with less panting of lungs than had been theirs for a mile before. They were glad at last to scramble into the waiting boats, with Piali's guns firing over their heads, to warn the Christians away. . . .

It was at a later hour, and darkness had covered the wrecked town and the wasted land, when Angelica stood in Sir Oliver's room, feeling as one who had come back to her own place, as from a darkness of evil dream.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Are the Turks fled?"

Sir Oliver was a tired man, but he was of a habit of life by which the body obeys, having found resistance of no avail. He said: "If you will come, I will show you that which it will be pleasure to see, and toward which you have done a part which Malta should not forget."

He led her upward to the roof of the highest tower, where it looked outward toward the sea. The wind had moved to the north-west, and the night was cloudy and cool. The stone parapet was damp to her hand from a fine rain, which had lately ceased. Far out to the east, the lights of the baffled fleet receded upon the sea.

They went down in the silence of those who feel that they have no words to equal the moment in which they live.

"You will find your room," he said, "has been left unchanged. But it has not been cleansed, for there is none living on whom such a charge could have been laid."

With the thought of that room, La Cerda's mistress came to his mind, for whom it had been ordered at first. He asked how she had died, of which he had heard no more than a careless tale. "She was buried, so I am told, as one who had been our friend, both by the news she sent in the slave's mouth and by her plotting to get you free?"

"So it was. She had more honour at last from Mesquita's hands than the Grand Master would have been quick to allow."

Sir Oliver agreed that she had not been one whom La Valette had been eager to praise.

"She might not call for his praise," Angelica said, "yet she was one he should have been laggard to judge, for they were alike in so many ways."

Sir Oliver was surprised. "It is that," he said, "I had not clearly observed. Will you expound to a duller mind?"

"It is plain to see. For they would each seek that which was worth to them with a fierce will, paying costs which they did not count, and that largely in others' woe."

"And beyond that?"

"There are other points, which you might be less instant to see."

"Or admit of one to whom a great honour is due?"

"So it is. For I suppose it is most, under God, by his stiffness of will that we are here as we are and the Turks fled."

Sir Oliver did not differ on that, and the talk died. Their thoughts went their own ways, but they were at the same point when he said, as they were turning apart: "You will be near the time when you will be casting the clothes you wear, as I suppose you will be willing to do."

"So I shall. But they have a use for one further day, which they must not miss."

She gave him no time to seek solution of that reply, but went on to the room which was hers, and had belonged to La Cerda's favourite before.

Her thoughts were still on the dead, but not now to prove that Venetia and the Grand Master had been kindred of soul. She compared herself, and the diverse issues of life which make wisdom vain, and on which the grave is the dumb comment at last. She thought: "I cast prudence aside when I came here, which I did in a most ignorant wise, while she lived with a wary heed, and with more wisdom in earthly ways. Yet is there harbour for me and for her wreck. . . . Or was she right to say that she had won to harbour at last?"

On that thought she prayed long for the dead, and after for those who lived, and for herself last, and had such thoughts that she could not sleep, both of the past, and of many things which she hoped for the future days. . . . But she fell to sleep when the dawn was near, and waked late, as did many else within St. Angelo's walls.

## CHAPTER LXXV

It was Sunday, September 9th, when St. Angelo waked to the knowledge that the shadow of death was lifted from round its walls.

The Grand Master gave order that all who had strength to stand should assemble to meet those who had so gallantly come, and at so late and vital an hour, and who had been potent for its relief; and that they should join thereafter to give the thanks that were due to God in the Convent Church, to which the most part of the knights who had come to Malta four months before did not need to arise to reach, being already laid in its vaults.

Delia Corna rode through a trodden and blackened land, past half-filled fosse and half-fallen wall, and up the street of a ruined town.

He was met by six hundred of sundry sorts, who were still able to stand. They were hollow-eyed from their sleepless toils: they were sloven of garb and beard: the most of them were maimed or crippled with bandaged wounds.

He looked round when he had greeted the Grand Master, and those who were nearest to him. He asked: "Will you say you have held the town with this remnant of men?"

"They are all here but those that the lazars hold."

Delia Corna was silent, being amazed. Then he said: "It is a most marvellous thing, for the heathen dogs must have been held out by their own fears at the last, more than by any strength that you had."

"They were held out," the Grand Master replied, "by our faith in the living God."

Sir Oliver added: "We may say that they were withheld by the valour of those who are now dead. There are eight thousand of Christian graves."

Marshal Couppier said: "They were withheld to the last hour. You had been too late in a day."

Della Corna replied: "I would claim less, having seen that which belies the settled science of war. But it is plain that you must leave here, for I can see that the town is ruin, the land waste. You have neither powder nor walls. And it is known that your treasure was spent to supply your stores when the Turks came. You would be sheep to slay if they should return their fleet with the spring, as they are most likely to do. And, besides that, you are all invalid men. You must get out the ships you have and make sail for a better land, where you can have the comfort and honour that Europe owes to those who have saved her shame."



He said no more than Mustapha would do in another voice, when he would make a boast that Soliman would prefer to accept, rather than disgrace his own arms by degrading him: "I came away, having nothing more to destroy. I left Malta flat."

La Valette said: "We do not think to remain here. We have better plans."

"The Grand Master," Sir Oliver said, "has long held that the castle was not builded where it should have been at first; yet it had seemed a great matter to move the town. But now that it is so battered about, it can be built in a better place."

As he spoke, he looked over the harbour to where the ridge of Sceberras rose, and della Corna saw the meaning behind his words.

St. Elmo should not have been a weak place apart when the Turks arrived, but the spearhead of the central strength of the Maltese knights. They should have built between the two harbours, so that they would have commanded both. But Mount Sceberras, as its name implied, was high and narrow, and too steep for a city site. He said: "You can strengthen St. Elmo's walls, and enlarge its girth, till it be a castle that none could take. But I suppose you must have your town in another place. Sceberras is too steep for the homes of men, as it is simple to see."

The Grand Master said: "Then we must be active to lay it flat."

Della Corna asked: "Do you mean that you will remain here, though your walls are down, and with so wild a project as that?"

"Shall I leave the charge I am vowed to keep? And that when the Cross is high and the Pagans flee?"

Della Corna made no answer to that. He saw in a clear light how it had been that Mustapha had remained on the outside of those fallen walls.

They went on to the church. . .

It is another tale of how the Grand Master planned a new city of impregnable strength, which men would after call by his name, and how he commenced to flatten Sceberras ridge, as he had said he would do.

The Turks had the design that della Corna had guessed, that they would come back with the coming spring; but La Valette saw the one thing that would break their plans, and struck hard and first, as it was his nature to do. He found gold in a great sum for a secret plot, and before the Turks were assembled and fitted forth, there came a night when the great arsenal at Byzantium, which was the first at that time that the world held, rose in dreadful thunder and flame, with utter loss of the thousand cannon and great stores it held, of powder, and of all manner of munitions of war; and the Turks must resign a plan for which they had little left but their naked hands.

So the great street of Valetta was cut from the stubborn rock, and its ramparts rose, and Sir Oliver found that he had still much to control, for there

were stores to be brought from far, and thousands of workmen who must be paid, and funds which must be gathered from Europe's bounds, that being hardest of all, for there were many pledges which were not kept; and there would come a day when workmen would call for their wages for which no treasure remained, and they must be paid with tokens of the Grand Master's design—for he would go on his stubborn way, though the gold were none—with NON AES SED FIDES stamped thereon, which would be redeemed on a later day.

And so La Valette would be laid with honour at last in the new church of the city which had been built in his own dream before it rose into solid stone, as must be first with all the makings of man, and as men must have been first in the thoughts of God while the earth still bubbled with liquid heat. And Sir Oliver would write—as may still be seen—the inscription that scrolls his tomb. . . .

Angelica knelt in the church where the psalm of thanksgiving rose, and was aware that Francisco was near her side.

He said, in a low voice that the music drowned, except only to her: "Do you hold your word?"

"So," she said, "you have known me do. But there is one thing I will ask. Am I shamed by the hose I wear?"

"You are one whom no shame can soil, as I should have known at a sooner day. You are as Beatrice was, who walked clean in hell."

"You will wed me, being so clothed?"

"It shall be in what habit you will."

"Then it may be in the next hour. But it shall be so done that it will be noticed of few, for it is a small thing on so great a day."

## 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.

A cover was created for this eBook from the Matteo Pérez de Alesio painting “Arrival of the Turkish Fleet” and is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Siege of Malta (Part II--St. Angelo)* by Sydney Fowler Wright]